

Towards the Arabisation of Algeria

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ABSTRACT: *The Algerian linguistic case differs from the other Arabic-speaking nations' situations in terms of the coexistence of a number of languages and varieties. Throughout history, Algeria has been colonised and visited by diverse people with divergent cultures, origins and tongues. In fact, after winning its independence in 1962, the authorities started immediately thinking about restoring their identity through the imposition of Arabic as the sole official and national language of the country and Islam as its only religion. Right after the implementation of this policy, various sides made a fuss and expressed disagreement, including the Francophones and the Berberophones. It is noteworthy that despite all the obstacles that the Arabophones have faced and in spite of language competition and the appearance of an international tongue like English in an era of globalization, Arabic remains an official language that one can find in interesting domains and sectors, viz. administrations and education as well.*

KEYWORDS: Algeria, History, Colonisation, Arabisation process, Arabic.

Introduction

Algeria is considered as a unique nation among the other Arabic-speaking countries around the globe. It is best known for its linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity due to the complicated history it went through. In fact, this is a theoretical research that gives a brief glimpse of what historically happened in this area. Yet, it shows the various factors that have helped it to turn into such a remarkable nation. Indeed, it provides essential information about the previous dwellers and the different people, with diverse origins, who visited it. That is, this paper depicts those people's contributions in forging the Algerian society and shaping its language use as well. Besides, it displays the various steps that have essentially been taken for its Arabisation. Then, among many other languages, Arabic has

become of gigantic importance being considered as an official and national code by the Algerian authorities. What is noteworthy to mention is that Algeria has gone through several periods throughout centuries. It was invaded by divergent people who came from various places. This evinces that history forged this North African country. In this paper, this nation's history will be divided into three periods, vis. before 1830, from 1830 to 1962 and after 1962. These two years have been chosen as markers owing to the fact that they represent sequential events that happened in this country. The former symbolises the arrival of the French coloniser who ruled it for more than a century. The latter is the year when Algeria won its independence and started a new life as a free nation.

1. Algeria before 1830

Denver confirms that the original dwellers of Algeria were the Berbers. The Romans gave them this name while they called themselves Amazigh which means "free men" (Denver, 2013, p23). According to Oxford Business Group (2010, p9), through the millennia, Berber people witnessed different invasions on the grounds that Algeria was occupied by different people who crossed North Africa while heading to Europe and the Middle East. Before the Arabs ruled the country in the seventh century, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Vandals, Romans and Byzantines had had control over it. Indeed, this had an impact on Berbers' language. It is worth mentioning that the arrival of the Arabs served as a significant factor helping the Islamiation of the majority of the country when they brought Arabic. In fact, Beni Hilal were the tribes who had spread this language in less than three centuries. They arabised the largest part of the region both linguistically and culturally (Camps, 1995, p1). Then, in the sixteenth century, the Ottomans seized the majority of the area after the Spanish trial to settle in some parts of North Africa (Oxford Business Group, 2010, p9). This bird-eye view evinces that Algeria has been fragmented and suffered from political instability.

2. Algeria from 1830 to 1962

During this period, Algeria witnessed one of the cruellest kinds of colonialism that affected their culture, language and identity. Oxford Business Group (2010) explains that after the Ottoman Empire, the French were the next outlanders who cruelly annexed Algeria in 1830. Yet, the coloniser settled in Algeria on the pretext that the latter was considered as an inseparable portion of France even though it was not the fact in reality (ibid). Interestingly, French officials targeted school and considered it as a weapon to rid Algeria of its language, religion and identity. To elucidate this point, Gordon (1962, p7) argues that “when the Portuguese colonized, they built churches; when the British colonized, they built trading stations; when the French colonize, they build schools”. This implies that the French government fully intended to make a change by means of education; they thought that this might help to seed fruitful trees which are rich in French language as well as their identity that represents their supposedly superior culture. In the words of Albuyeh (2013, p177), few years after the colonisers settled in Algeria, the head of the state emphasised the momentousness of “the Frenchification Policy”. Their ultimate goal was to propagate the use of French progressively in the region. This led to the eradication of the coming generation’s national identity, indoctrinating them with new ideas and a new cultural values rooted in this new language. That is, they wanted to brainwash them and to plant the French culture in their minds (ibid). Since the aforementioned policy was implemented throughout the whole colonial era, it stood as a chief obstacle preventing Algerians from learning Arabic.

Gordon believes that among the Maghreb countries, Algeria was “the most vociferous in proclaiming its Arab Muslim identity” (1978, p151). Algerians therefore were rife with stubbornness and enthusiasm to regain their language, their personality and to announce their identity as Arabs and Muslims, i.e. the creation of a new nation. All in all, Johnson (2005, p101) clarifies that after living gloomy years under the authoritarianism of the French imperialist, Algerians rebelliously constituted the National Liberation Front (FLN) and declared war on November 1st, 1954. Therefore, Algeria put an end to this terrifying history of colonialism and finally became a totally independent country on July 1st, 1962.

3. Algeria after 1962

After being under control for 132 years, Algeria won its independence and put the French yoke out. It was not easy to gain such a political and linguistic stability as it was a battlefield hosting several contenders who fought for the sake of imposing their cultures and languages in the region during centuries. Indeed, this historical presentation epitomises Algeria's cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Benrabah (2013) asserts that different languages have hitherto appeared in Algeria, such as Turkish, Classical Arabic, Vernacular Arabic, various forms of Berber, Sabir and French as well (Benrabah 2013, p23). Right after gaining its independence, an initiative was introduced by the Algerian authorities as they stepped towards addressing the problem of language in the country (Albuyeh, 2013, p177). Yet, thanks to Algeria's uniqueness in the Arabic-speaking world and among the Maghreb countries more precisely, one can consider it as a territory where language issues can be investigated.

4. The Arabisation Policy in Algeria

After the colonial epoch, Ahmed Ben Bella took control of the recently liberated Algeria as it got its independence. That is, In September 15th, 1963, Ben Bella was officially nominated as the first president of independent Algeria (Lentz, 2013, p26). With him, Algerians started looking for their authentic real identity while they seemed to find it in the Arabic language and Islam. This implies that they wanted to bring back the Algerian culture which was eradicated and lost, i.e. the government was searching for the restoration of the Algerian identity as well as the unity of its speech community by using one official and national language which is Classical Arabic. In fact, in April 1962, after being liberated from jail, the would-be president, Ben Bella, made his position crystal clear and announced "we are Arabs, Arabs, Arabs" (Benrabah, 2013, p52).

Accordingly, Kramsch believes that people's identity is closely related to the language they use. The way they speak, for instance, leads one to label them as parts of a certain speech community and this is what makes them feel proud as members of those groups (1998, p65). Additionally, to regain a country's autonomy refers not only to fighting the

coloniser and ousting him from one's land, but, as Fanon explains, it also implies "the creation of new men" (1963, p2). In this respect, this author means giving this country a new look based on a culture and a new belief far away from the colonial one.

For the purpose of putting an end to the colonialist's culture and language, Ben Bella advocated the policy of Arabization as he chose to Arabize the educational system in October 1962. All he wanted was to get rid of the French language by any means. The former Minister of Education Benhamida was in discord and advised him not to rush due to the fact that this action should be done slowly; otherwise it would perish and drive to unwanted issues. He explained that an abrupt implementation of this process of Arabization won't work well (Altoma, 1971, p699; Gordon, 1966, p200).

According to Gallagher, during the year 1962, the educational system was poor and deficient in skills or even without any competency. This is intimately related to the great number of teachers who fled the country as well as the keen desire expressed by children to join primary schools. To satisfy their needs, around 10,988 teachers were recruited by the governor as stopgaps (Gallagher, 1968, p138). Indeed, what was crystal-clear is that not all of those educators were sufficiently competent and skilful to rely on.

In September 1964, Ahmed Ben Bella managed to make Arabic the only language to be used in the first year in elementary schools despite the fact that some people expressed their opposition and made a fuss about it. They did not accept to enrol their children. This refusal to arabise the country was also manifested by the intelligentsia who were supporting secularism and liberation; they preferred other alternatives like Berber (Murphy, 1977, p7; Saad, 1992, p61). McDougal reveals that during this year, the political leader Ben Bella brought approximately 1000 teachers speaking Arabic from Egypt so as to achieve his goal and to give the primary school a new look with the Arabic language being stuck on its façade, i.e. to focus on Arabic as a main language (McDougall, 2011, p251). This displays that Algeria had become dependent on the Middle East since it could not satisfy the requirements of its whole population who

were in need of teachers mastering the Arabic language. In the words of Grandguillaume, since the number of instructors was unsatisfying, Ben Bella asked the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to send him educators “even if they were greengrocers” (Grandguillaume, 2004, p28). Regrettably, most of those recruited teachers appeared to be ordinary people and artisans who had nothing to do with education. What is more embarrassing is that it was difficult for Algerians to comprehend them when they spoke, i.e. their accent was unintelligible. Besides, those teachers were not familiar with what was happening in the Algerian society. During this epoch, other problems arose owing to the fact that those people coming from Egypt were fanatic and could meddle with religious affairs as most of them were members of Muslim Brotherhood (Abu-Haidar, 2000, p161; Wardhaugh, 1987, p189).

5. Arabisation vs. Arabicisation

Ibrahim (1989) exhibits the existence of two words which are “Arabization” and “Arabicization”. He points out the fact that one can sometimes replace the other; however, they are different from each other. While differentiating between these two terms, Ibrahim asserts that:

Although the two terms are used interchangeably by some, the difference between them is not insignificant. ‘Arabicization’ refers to and involves the use of the Arabic language in place of some other language. The term ‘Arabization,’ however, has a much wider application as well as a more profound implication for modern Arab society. Thus, whereas ‘Arabicization’ is a linguistic process whereby a foreign language is replaced by Arabic, ‘Arabization’ is cultural as well as linguistic.

(Ibrahim, 1989, p53)

This author clarifies that even though the two aforementioned terms are interrelated, they differ from each other. Linguistically speaking, Arabicization has only to do with language, i.e. the use of the Arabic language as a substitute to replace French for the case of Algeria. Arabisation, on the other hand, is closely related to culture, ethnicity as well as language. That is, it mainly aims at recognizing Arabic as the first

basic language of the country and bringing back the Arab identity while considering this society as an Arab one.

Algeria was arabised for a period of time but, surprisingly, right after Bouteflika's election as a leader of the country in 1999, he began tackling language issues in front of everyone. He proclaimed that the government did not succeed in implementing this policy of Arabisation. According to the Algerian newspaper *Le Matin*, the governor made it clear that "it is unthinkable ... to spend ten years studying pure science in Arabic when it would only take one year in English" (Kaplan and Baldauf, 2007, p9). The Algerian head of state yet hinted at the importance of using English and other languages, for instance, for the evolution of the country in various domains. Yet, he used both classical Arabic and French while delivering his speeches. In doing so, he wanted to show that an Algerian citizen should master these two tongues. This means that Bouteflika displayed his desire to go back to bilingualism (ibid).

Conclusion

After Algeria won its independence, the authorities have gone a long way towards its unification through the arabisation process when they have considered Arabic as the main official and national language of the country and Islam as its only religion. However, this idea was not welcomed with open arms by all the Algerian sides. Yet, there has been a struggle between the Arabophones and the Francophones. It has even led to struggles with the Berber community who stood up for the recognition of their language and identity. What is worth mentioning is that in spite of all these issues, Arabic is still without doubt the most important language being utilised in various momentous sectors, viz. education and administrations. But, as far as foreign languages are concerned, in this era of globalisation, the world has shrunk and an international language like English is gradually gaining ground and dethroning the French language that was previously considered as Algeria's sole foreign tongue due to the long period of colonisation.

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