

Hostility and Controversies upon Recommending the Teaching of a Standard Variety via a Colloquial Variety at Primary School Level: The Case of *Darija* in Algeria

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ABSTRACT: In 2015, speculations have raised to debate recommendations suggested, among others, at the Algerian National Conference on the Evaluation and Implementation of School Reforms to recommend the teaching of Standard Arabic through Algerian Colloquial Arabic –*Darija*- at primary school level. Since independence, in 1962, Algeria has witnessed an Arabization policy whereby the Arabic language was imposed as the sole official and national language at political, economic and most importantly education level. The aim of this work is to shed the light on the pedagogical and socio-linguistic motives nourishing the possibility of implementing a vernacular variety– which has no morpho-syntactical and phonological representation - as a vehicle for knowledge transmission, literacy and education in the Algerian primary school level. Focus will also be put on highlighting emerging vectors of controversies and hostilities against the project that are deeply rooted in the historical, political and identity-based reality of the country.

KEYWORDS: Speculations, Algerian Colloquial Arabic, The *Darija*, the Educational System, Algeria

1. Introduction

It has become well established to say that Algeria is characterized by an ideal of unilingualism which nourishes a language ideology based on favoring the sole use of Standard Arabic in the political, legal, social and economic spheres. It is also well known that Berber language varieties, dialectal Arabic and French are, to varying degrees and in different ways, consistently denied by official discourse. It is not possible, within the framework of this article, to draw up a complete picture of the situation of languages in Algeria; the few indications that follow will only make it possible to lay the necessary steps to understand the context of teaching Arabic in the country.

In fact, the functional distribution of Arabic in Algeria is organized around two preponderant language embodiment: the standard language body versus the Dialectal body. In Algeria, as in all Arab countries, dialectal Arabic – commonly known as Darija or Darja - is the one spoken at home. The Darija is a spoken and an unwritten variety with no available codified material or prior and settled morpho-syntactical or phonological representation as compared to Standard Arabic which is a rich and well established language at the morphological and phonologically levels; that is enjoyed in religion, education and in the official discourse. Algerians learn classical Arabic in their first year of primary school and study it until they sit for the baccalaureate exam but they acquire Algerian Arabic as their mother tongue.

2- Darija ...in Harmony with Society but not with Education

Darija represents for most Algerians a vehicle of a rich and varied Algerian popular culture. The sphere of social networks and telecommunications is not left behind with tweets, Facebook messages and SMSs fully written in Darija. No one can deny the impact Darija is having on the evolution of the linguistic landscape in the country.

However, Darija has low prestige in Algeria. It is still qualified as the language of the street and Algerian houses. It is seen as an improper or vulgar form of Classical Arabic, tainted by a long history of borrowing from French, Spanish, and Tamazight. The negative attitudes towards Darija can be explained as a way of preserving the purity of Classical Arabic.

In fact, education is an exceptionally influential tool in shaping language attitudes. The adoption of a language in school can legitimize a language, encourage its perception as a language that carries a manifest benefit, boost and reassure young children to adopt

it. The stigmatization of Darija is apparently accentuated by the fact that it is not a language of education: it is neither the language of instruction nor a written language.

3- In the Beginning

Since July 2015, the “rumor” to implement Darija in education stirred the media lantern and that of social networks. This research is born from a reflection on a propagated rumor about what if *Darija* is to be used to gently introduce and backup the teaching of Classical/Standard Arabic - the national and official language of the country- in the very early educational stages at primary school level.

According to an interview with Algerian Education Minister Nouria Benghebrit on Algerian Echourouk News TV, she put into question a national problematic which, according to her, hinders the teaching/ learning of Standard Arabic during early stages as most Algerian children grow with very limited if not scarce presence of standard Arabic around them: very few children grow up speaking it, so they often feel lost on their first day of school. Ms. Nouria Benghebrit advocated the introduction of Darija at the primary school and the main argument behind the project is to reduce pupils' frequent school failures due to the difficulties stemming from the teaching and learning of Standard Arabic.

The minister also emphasized that the use of local dialects in schools is not intended to snatch Classical Arabic position as Algeria's official language. Instead, teaching in Darija will be an attempt to bring knowledge closer to pupils in preparation to teach them Standard Arabic at later stages. Algeria, through the minister's ambitious project, sought to embark on a promoting reform of its education system, aiming on the one hand to generalize a smooth learning of Standard Arabic via Darija and on the other hand to modernize curricula and teaching practices.

The teaching of Standard Arabic using Dialectal Arabic in this very sensitive stage of education as suggested by the Algerian Minister of National Education has provoked a gigantic avalanche of criticism describing the proposal as an “*unacceptable heckling*”.

4-Controversies and Hostilities

The desire to introduce a dose of Arabic dialect in school education in Algeria triggered a revolt of purists and conservatives against the Minister of Education. Social media, parents, education unions and even ministers, politicians and parliamentarians raised controversial debates and went beyond that in fighting the minister's reported

suggestions. Those against the project saw it as a “*Violation of the Constitution*”, “*attack on national unity*”, and “*betrayal of the oath of martyrs*” of the war of independence: what was supposed to be a pedagogical affair took on a political and ideological turn.

4-1 An Attack to National Identity and Unity

When French widened its dominance in the Algerian territory, it aimed at a generalization of the use of the French language. Thus, the number of the Koranic schools was reduced and the Arabic language was suffocated and dismissed as a backward language. A French law of 1938, then, declared the Arabic Language a foreign language in Algeria. As a result, education was oriented towards French, while Standard Arabic was cut off from contemporary technological and scientific developments limiting the field of its use mainly to religious contexts, and Darija was conserved for everyday conversation.

After independence in 1962, nationalists pushed Arabisation to undo 132 years of French indoctrination; the purpose is to deploy the Arabization education policy and attempt to remove the French language in favor of Arabic. Ahmed Ben Bella, the first president of the Republic, in his first public and official address, unequivocally establishes the framework in which must be defined Algerian identity: “We are Arabs and Arabs, ten million of Arabs”. [...] there is no future for this country except in Arabism” (speech of 5 July 1963).

The most important Law is undoubtedly Law n° 91-05 of January 16, 1991 generalizing the use of the Arabic language, modified later by the law of December 21, 1996. It aimed at excluding the use of French and any other language by stipulating that public administrations, institutions, enterprises and associations, whatever their nature, are required to only use the Arabic language in all their activities such as communication, administrations, financial, technical and artistic management.

The Arabization education policy which attempts to remove the French language in favor of Arabic continued to foster Algerians’ thirst to the language which symbolizes identity and independence. Arabization was implemented along two directions, one being nationalist and the other religious. Arabization meant for some people an OBLIGATORY decision even if they knew that it will lead to a linguistic failure. Benrabe (1999) said that Arabization will not succeed but in any case it must be done. The Algerian Islamist parties, to react to the rumors, issued a joint statement on July 29, 2015 in which they denounce “*a dangerous precedent case in the history of education in Algeria (...) likely to make explode national identity and unity.*”

It is because national identity, in Algeria, is composed -according to the constitution and laws- by Islam, Arab affiliation and Berber affiliation, Ms Benghabrit's project and the language issue in particular have raised endless polemics and have been judged as a violation to the foundations of national identity and unity.

4-2 An Attack to the Nation

'The Arabic language is a red line that the Ministry of Education and no one else should reach.' This was said by the spokesperson of the National Union of Education and Training Personnel (UNPEF) Sadek Ziri who considered that the teaching of the Darija in the compulsory cycle would be returning backward. Sadek Zirir saw the project as an attack on the foundation of the nation. He added saying that if there are efforts to be made in this direction, it would be with the Tamazight language which should be generalized in all the schools of the national territory. It would also make sense to do the same for English, which needs to be improved and encouraged (July, 2018) . Yacine Boudhane (September 18, 2015) further stipulates:

"Supporters of Standard Arabic believe that teaching in dialect "threatens the fundamentals of the Algerian nation and puts its unity at risk." They also raise a fundamental question, asking which dialect the ministry would choose for the new language of instruction out of Algeria's dozens of local dialects. Favoring one dialect over another for schooling could produce serious social divisions and in turn threaten the unity and solidarity of Algerians."

A parliamentary group asked for the "immediate departure" of the Minister of Education who, according to them, "*crossed the red lines by infringing the foundations of the Algerian nation and society*".

4-3 An Attack to the Sacredness of the Arabic Language

Algerian Minister of Tourism Amar Ghoul has opposed Ms Benghabrit's proposal. He reacted to the controversy during a meeting on July 31, 2015 during which he argued,

"...this file is closed since the Minister said that she did not declare this and if she had declared it, the initiative must imperatively go through the government council."

Mr Ghoul warned the Minister of Education stipulating that the Arabic language is sacred and is preserved by the constitution and that for him Islam, the Arabic language

and the Tamazight are red lines, national constants, and Novemberist principles that Algerians would safeguard and defend fiercely. Islamic currents also opposed the project in the name of the sacredness of Arabic: the language of the Koran. According to a statement issued by the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, “*The Arabic language is one of the pillars of Algeria’s cultural identity, and we cannot bypass it under any pretext whatsoever.*” From the outset, the project is denied and seen as a germ of division threatening a national unity based on Arabic and Islam. Any reference to Darija in education is then instrumentalised to serve foreigners and neo-colonialism.

5-Conclusion

By using the mother tongue in education, we develop a significant part of the brain, argues Nouria Benghebrit citing neuroscience specialists. Not only Benghabrit but also many specialists in language sciences (speech therapists, linguists, psychologists, sociologists, etc.) are unanimous in saying that mother tongue is very important for developing cognitive abilities, socialization and especially belonging to the same nation. In reality, Algerians are disoriented. It is not the daridja that disturb them but rather their sense of identity, belonging and unity that they would strive to preserve. Thus, the choice of the language of instruction, which must be scientifically determined by specialists and experts, should not fall in the hands of politics and ideology.

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