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Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence

Disciplines

African History | Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics | Comparative and Historical Linguistics |
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Benrabah, Mohamed. *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013, xiv + 199 pp. 978 1 84769 964 0

Addressing an audience in Beirut in 1961, as Algeria's war for independence was ending, the Algerian essayist and revolutionary activist Malek Haddad apologized for his lack of Arabic proficiency by explaining that 'the French language is my exile' (p. 137).

Haddad's comment hinted at the identity crisis that afflicted Algerians as they tried to shake off French colonialism. This identity crisis, which continues today, reflected crippling uncertainties about which language or languages Algerians should be using – most authentically, or most legitimately – to read, write, think, speak in public, study science, pray to God, or even whisper to their lovers (p. 78). The main contenders included French, the language of the colonizers; classical and literary Arabic, the language of the Koran and Islamic high learning; or colloquial forms of Arabic and Berber, which Algerians had traditionally spoken but never written.

In *Language Conflict in Algeria*, Mohamed Benrabah surveys nearly two centuries' worth of language politics and linguistic culture in Algeria, from the eve of the French colonial conquest of 1830 until 2012. He calls his book a study of 'the use of language as a proxy for conflict' (p. xiv), and examines three periods. These are, first, the era of France's colonial subjugation of indigenous Algerians (1830-c. 1954), when French rulers propagated French; second, the years of Algeria's war for independence (1954-62), when nationalists agonized and argued about the country's future; and third, the postcolonial period (1962-present), when Algerian regimes tried to fashion Algeria into an 'Arab' nation-state by promoting literary Arabic.

France is to blame, Benrabah argues, for starting the Algerian identity crisis. Before France invaded in 1830, the Ottoman Empire had claimed Algeria as its westernmost territory while ceding considerable autonomy to local Muslim elites. Against the context of this loose imperialism, pre-1830 Algeria was the site of many languages: Ottoman Turkish, literary or classical Arabic, local Arabic colloquials, Berber variants, and, on the coast, even *sabir*, a ‘medieval Mediterranean pidgin’, that blended elements of Arabic, Spanish, Provençal, and other Mediterranean languages (p. 23). But then the French showed up and used language like a cudgel. In 1897, the French Minister of Education acknowledged the ongoing effort to conquer Algeria ‘by the School’, in order to assert French language over all other ‘local idioms’, to ‘replace ignorance and fanatical prejudices’, and in the process to convince Muslims that France was superior (p. 31). The hierarchical system of French education in Algeria generated a Francophone Algerian Muslim elite while leaving ninety percent of the population illiterate by the time of decolonization (p. 48).

When France lost Algeria in 1962, the anticolonial backlash hit French immediately. Algerian nationalists began to champion Arabization – promoting literary Arabic, instead of French, in schools and government offices, while ignoring local forms of Algerian Arabic and Berber. Benrabah calls what resulted a linguistic ‘war with diversity’ (p. 51). But the postcolonial Arabizers were both zealous and sloppy. For example, in the mid-1960s, when they asked Egypt to supply the Arabic teachers that they needed for their programs, and when Egypt’s President Nasser informed them, in response, that Egypt could not meet their full demand, the Algerian envoy reportedly told Egypt to send teachers ‘even if they were greengrocers’ (p. 56). Critics of postcolonial

Arabization policies are likely to say nowadays that Egypt took the envoy at his word, by sending many culturally circumscribed Arabic teachers who sympathized with the Muslim Brotherhood (an organization that was officially banned in Egypt itself at this time). These imported Egyptian teachers, critics continue, seeded Islamism among Algerian schoolchildren in ways that bore bitter fruit during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, when discontented and underemployed 'Arabized' youth filled the ranks of the agitators while standing on Islamist platforms.

In the late twentieth century, graduates of Arabized public schools struggled to find decent jobs. The best jobs went instead to the offspring of rich and well-connected Algerians who persistently managed – despite the vagaries of government policy – to secure educations in French, thereby presenting a classic case of what sociolinguists call 'elite closure'. The result was a kind of class conflict that followed linguistic lines. By the early 1990s other language disputes were simmering, too, as some activists began to identify more vocally with Berber linguistic identities, or to assert Algerian colloquial Arabic as a vehicle of artistic expression as, for example, in *Rai* music. Meanwhile, English also gained ground. Surprisingly, fans of English included some Arabo-Islamists who regarded it as a more congenial foreign or 'world' language than the French of the colonial oppressors. English also became important in business, as the language of the Algerian oil industry.

Enough is enough, Benrabah concludes: after so many years of warring with language, Algerians must make peace with themselves by accepting multilingualism – for a start, by recognizing native Algerian forms of spoken Arabic and Berber as educational building blocks for young children in schools. From that foundation children can go on

to learn literary Arabic, French, and perhaps English. As for French, this language certainly lacks the muscle that it enjoyed in Algeria a century ago, so that its future now looks somewhat shaky. Nevertheless, French holds at least one wildcard that Benrabah does not mention: this is the substantial population of citizens and permanent residents of France who claim Algerian Muslim origins, and whose relatives, back in Algeria, may see French as a *lingua familia* and emigration opportunity that can span the Mediterranean divide.

Mohamed Benrabah commands an impressive knowledge of the Algerian linguistic and literary scene, and writes in an engaging way while illustrating his points with crisp and lively details. In this brilliant book, which sociolinguists and historians will equally appreciate, he offers a panoramic intellectual and political history of modern Algeria.

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