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From silence to speech : Dialect as a language of resistance for the Algerian diaspora in the digital age

من الصمت إلى الكلام: اللهجة كلغة مقاومة لدى الشتات الجزائري في العصر الرقمي

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes the role of language in subjectivation process. Focusing on the digital use of Algerian Darja during the 2019 Hirak movement and COVID-19 crisis. Darja, a historically marginalized vernacular, gained new visibility and political resonance online within diasporic communities. The study, drawing on sociolinguistics, philosophy of language, and critical media studies, views language as both an identity matrix and a contested space of domination and subversion. Employing semi-structured interviews, discursive analysis of digital content, and concepts like self-mass communication and digital polyphony, the research indicates that digital platforms facilitate the circulation of vernacular practices, transforming Darja into a vehicle for contestation and solidarity. This online usage fosters collective imaginaries, strengthens diasporic cohesion, and challenges linguistic hierarchies. The article demonstrates how minoritized languages can be digitally mediated to create spaces for political expression and redefined belonging. Keywords: Darja (Algerian dialect) – Algerian diaspora – Linguistic resistance – Digital media – Digital polyphony – Self-mass communication – Hirak – COVID-19

ملخص البحث

تحلل هذه المقالة دور اللغة في عملية التمثيل الذاتي؛ وتركز على الاستخدام الرقمي للغة الدارجة الجزائرية خلال حركة الحراك 2019 وأزمة كوفيد-19. إذ اكتسبت الدارجة، وهي لغة عامية مهمشة تاريخياً، رؤية جديدة وصدى سياسي على الإنترنت داخل مجتمعات الشتات، حيث تستند الدراسة إلى علم اللغة الاجتماعي وفلسفة اللغة ودراسات الإعلام النقدية، وتعتبر اللغة مصفوفة للهوية ومساحة متنازع عليها للهيمنة والتموقع الاجتماعي. باستخدام المقابلات شبه المنظمة والتحليل الخطابى للمحتوى الرقمي ومفاهيم مثل الاتصال الجماهيري الذاتي والتعددية الرقمية، خلصت الدراسة إلى أن المنصات الرقمية تسهل تداول الممارسات العامية، مما يحول الدارجة إلى أداة للجدل والتضامن. هذا الاستخدام عبر الإنترنت يعزز الخيال الجماعي ويقوي التماسك بين المغتربين ويتحدى التسلسل الهرمي اللغوي. إذ يوضح المقال كيف يمكن استخدام اللغات المهمشة رقمياً لخلق مساحات للتعبير السياسي وإعادة تعريف الانتماء. الكلمات المفتاحية: الدارجة – الشتات الجزائري – المقاومة اللغوية – وسائل الإعلام الرقمية – التعددية الرقمية.

1. Introduction

Language cannot be reduced to a mere means of communication; it must be understood as a

primary apparatus of subjectivation, socialization, and domination (Foucault, 1971; Butler, 1997; Bourdieu, 1982). It shapes our openness to the world, our relationship with others, and our access to ourselves. As matrices of the collective imaginary and social structures, languages contribute to the construction of identities while remaining the theater of incessant symbolic struggles.

From this perspective, several theoretical questions emerge: How does language structure individual and collective identities? In what ways do authoritarian regimes instrumentalize languages to impose a hegemonic version of reality? And what role do digital technologies play in the contemporary reconfiguration of symbolic relations, particularly within diasporic spheres? These questions provide the conceptual horizon of this study, while the empirical investigation will focus more specifically on the uses of Darja in digital mobilizations.

On the one hand, this work is elaborated from an emblematic constellation of social and political tensions: the Algerian Hirak, a popular uprising that emerged in February 2019 to denounce social and political injustice. While this eruption was contained, if not neutralized, in the conventional media space, it found resonance in the digital sphere through what Castells (2012) terms self-mass communication, the capacity of individuals to produce and disseminate messages globally without relying on traditional media gatekeepers. This mode of communication created a field of amplification, particularly within the Algerian diaspora. On the other hand, the study focuses on the use of Darja in calls for donations during the health crisis.

Within this transnational circulation of discourses, the use of Darja, a dialect long confined to domestic intimacy or marginal orality, acquires a new density. Invested as a medium for political enunciation, this minoritized language actualizes itself in the digital sphere as a mechanism of symbolic subversion and identity affirmation. In this sense, Darja functions as a “semiotic war machine”, a linguistic device that disrupts dominant codes, resists institutional hierarchies, and opens alternative logics of contestation and belonging.

The diaspora here is not a mere audience but a laboratory of discursive innovation: it amplifies local struggles, reframes them in transnational terms, and re-injects them into the homeland with renewed intensity. By occupying the position of both relay and creator, the Algerian diaspora contributes to shaping a hybrid political space that circulates across borders. Within this context emerges what we call connected Darja: a digitally mediated form of the dialect, characterized by transliteration practices (Arabizi, Latin letters, numerals), hybrid borrowings (from French, English, and Modern Standard Arabic), and expressive innovations specific to online platforms. This connected Darja condenses the diasporic experience of mobility and digital creativity, while simultaneously grounding itself in cultural intimacy.

Following this line of thought, our reflection aims to understand the online use of Darja as a form of contestation during the Hirak, but also as a device for appeals to solidarity, notably through donations, during the health crisis. This study revolves around the following questions:

- How does Darja occupy digital spaces to express a contestatory voice within the framework of the Hirak, both inside Algeria and across its diaspora?
- In what ways does this vernacular language participate in the construction of a collective imaginary around solidarity in the times of crisis?
- How does this digital use of Darja reconfigure relationships to language, political action, and social identity in a transnational perspective?

We formulate the following working hypotheses:

- H1. Darja, historically marginalized, invests digital spaces as a language of contestation, bypassing the official language and enabling a popular form of political enunciation.

H2. Its use in appeals to solidarity fosters the emergence of a shared imaginary based on cultural proximity and affective bonds, strengthening cohesion within the diaspora and with the homeland.

H3. The digital appropriation of Darja reconfigures political and identity relations by legitimizing plural forms of belonging and by situating the diaspora within a transnational space of mobilization.

H4. The diaspora functions not only as a relay but as a laboratory of discursive innovation, amplifying local struggles and reframing them in transnational terms.

This study adopts a qualitative and inductive approach, grounded in semi-structured interviews and discursive analysis. Thirty-five interviews were conducted between January and February 2024 via WhatsApp, each lasting an average of two hours. The participants were selected through purposive sampling (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021), with the aim not of statistical representativity but of capturing the critical density of diasporic trajectories. The interviewees included teachers, journalists, lawyers, activists, and academics, aged between 30 and 70, based mainly in France and Canada. All were involved in digital practices linked to memory work or political mobilization, including participation in the HIRAK from abroad, content creation, and engagement in activist or civic collectives.

The material was analyzed inductively through three stages: (1) exploratory reading to identify recurrent themes, silences, and tensions (Dey, 1993; Braun & Clarke, 2006); (2) thematic coding, grouping data into transversal categories such as critique of educational institutions, re-elaboration of national memory, and digital emancipation practices (Blais & Martineau, 2006; Charmaz, 2006); and (3) constant comparison to identify discursive constellations and contradictions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Limitations and reflexivity. The study faces methodological limitations, including self-selection bias (participants tend to be the most visible, politicized, or literate), limited geographic scope, and the constraints of online interviews (loss of embodied interaction, dependence on digital mediation). The analysis should therefore be read not as a statistical generalization but as situated narratives reflecting singular subjectivities. The research follows a critical constructivist stance (Bourdieu, 2001; Charmaz, 2014): meaning is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee, and reflexivity was maintained throughout the process via systematic anonymization, informed consent, and the researcher's reflective diary.

This work, therefore, engages in a critical reflection on emerging forms of linguistic subjectivation in the digital age. It explores how minoritized languages, informal language practices, and communication technologies reshape the relationships between language, power, and identity. From the diasporic margins of a globalized world, connected Darja, the use of Algerian vernacular in digital networks, often hybridized with French, Arabic, or English, and shaped by the stylistic codes of social media, emerges as a means of political expression and a re-composition of the social bond.

2. Language, Speech, and Identity: A Symbolic and Social Matrix

In the humanities and social sciences, it is essential to rigorously distinguish, with conceptual precision, language (*langue*) as a universal human faculty from speech (*parole*) as a historically configured, socially instituted system of signs. Language refers to an ontological disposition, an innate capacity for signification, while speech is forged through history, power relations, and symbolic power structures. This distinction, formalized by Ferdinand de Saussure, defines speech as "a social product of the language faculty and a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable the exercise of this faculty in the individual" (de Saussure, 1916, p. 25).

The Saussurean dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* frames language as a symbolic structure, not merely a communicative tool but a matrix of identification, engagement with alterity, and subjectivation. To study speech is to interrogate the very conditions of possibility for accessing meaning, the 'Other', and the constitution of the self in the social sphere.

Language is not a neutral designatory instrument but a formative force of thought: each speech system's internal structure shapes perception, imagination, and world-making (Sapir, 1929 ; Whorf, 1956). As Wilhelm von Humboldt (1999) posits, reality is never an apprehended raw but through singular symbolic mediations, inaugurating the view of language as a cognitive-cultural matrix wherein each tongue engenders an irreducible worldview (*Weltanschauung*).

However, language is not merely a cognitive structure: it constitutes a "total social fact" (Mauss, 1925), permeating practices, institutions, and forms of life. In Habermas's conception, it is the medium through which the possibility of mutual understanding is opened (Habermas, 1987, p. 37). His example of the call for help is illuminating: when the tribal chief shouts "Attack!" this utterance is not reducible to factual information; it functions as a communicative act that actualizes the normative expectation tied to the chief's social role and, in return, calls for actions in accordance with the roles of the tribe's members. The interaction is therefore regulated by social and status-based norms.

This normative and status-based dimension of speech shows that, far from being reducible to a propositional structure, language is rooted in perceptual and practical experience, as Mead had already emphasized, for whom action precedes the emergence of objects and constitutes the cognitive foundation for the formation of propositions (Mead, cited in Habermas, 1987, p. 37). Yet, if language makes mutual understanding possible, this dialogical function unfolds within a space saturated with inequalities. As symbolic capital, it operates, in Bourdieu's terms, within a hierarchical social space, a "linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 64), where every utterance is invested with value, evaluated, and ranked according to the social position of its speaker. Speaking, therefore, always already means positioning oneself within an economy of meaning structured by power relations.

In this perspective, Basil Bernstein (1971) emphasizes that forms of language can "initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationships with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance" (p. 76). Furthermore, he argues that "each code possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities," but that society may "place different values on the orders of experience elicited [...] through the different coding systems" (p. 135). Language is therefore not to be conceived as a neutral medium, but as a mechanism of differentiation that distributes positions, shapes social trajectories, and constitutes one of the primary arenas in which inequality is enacted.

In parallel, language presents itself as the locus for the institution of the subject. It transmits a collective memory, what Sapir (1921) described as "the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations" (p. 236), saturating the symbolic space with values, affects, and cultural landmarks, and embedding the individual within a history and a culture. For Erving Goffman (1959), speech is a stage for the presentation of self, a performative arena where identity is elaborated through interaction with others (pp. 2-3). At the same time, language is a field of forces: traversed by heteroglossia, the conflicting coexistence of heterogeneous social discourses, grounded in diverse positions, temporalities, and ideologies (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272), it forms a polyphonic fabric (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6) in which voices, narratives, and worlds contend with one another.

Thus, to engage speech in its complexity is to recognize it as the symbolic-social matrix of identity. Identity does not precede utterance: it is constructed in and through language, at the intersection of norms, discourses, and power relations. To speak is to go through a structured space of differentiation where inclusion/exclusion converge. Identity, far from an essence, is a rational becoming, shaped by linguistic practices and interactions. To theorize language is, therefore, to interrogate the conditions of the subject's emergence, visibility, and agency (*pouvoir d'agir*) within the social world.

3. Language and Totalitarianism: Propaganda, Censorship and Legitimation

In authoritarian regimes, language is a central instrument of power. It is cosmeticized, instrumentalized, codified to entrench authority, erase dissent, and control collective imaginaries. Whether through the development of coherent propaganda or the implementation of censorship mechanisms, language governs political reality. Within the scope of this article, we examine the relationship between language, ideology, and totalitarianism in two stages: first through a global reflection on language as an instrument of symbolic legitimation in totalitarian regimes, then through the Algerian case, where rigorous media control coexists with forms of linguistic resistance, particularly through Darja.

3.1 Language, Ideology and Legitimation in Totalitarian Regimes

Major historical transformations stemming from ideological conflicts have reshaped our relationship with language, consecrating it alternately as a mechanism for paradigms of "cultural hegemony" (Gramsci, 1983) or as a vehicle for subversive emergences. The tensions inherent to nationalism have conferred upon the national language an exalted status, embodying collective identity and political sovereignty. This ideological inscription leads to the establishment of linguistic policies that privilege dominant codes, thereby weakening linguistic plurality and compromising principles of social inclusion.

At the heart of ideological confrontations, Language emerges as a battlefield, shaped by forces of legitimation and control. Under totalitarian regimes, it transforms into a lever of domination, orchestrates propaganda, and "shapes public opinion" (fait opinion, Champagne, 1990) through mass media. Fascism and Nazism illustrate this linguistic takeover, where extremist ideology materializes in leaders' discourse, consolidates their grip, and legitimizes repression. In the architecture of totalitarian power analyzed by Hannah Arendt (2002), propaganda is a vector for constructing reality: it does not conceal truth but tends to abolish it by forging a coordinated fiction, deemed the only legitimate version by the masses. This ideological saturation of discourse shapes the very frameworks of intelligibility, annihilates plurality of perspectives, and confiscates the individual's capacity for judgment (Arendt, 1951; Gramsci, 1983).

3.2 Censorship, Media Control and Linguistic Resistance in Algeria

To maintain their hold on power, despotic regimes control media channels and silence all dissenting voices. The censorship of print media and the eradication of independent radio and television outlets are all devices aimed at monopolizing public discourse. This discursive monopoly establishes a single hermeneutic horizon, stifles the plurality of voices, and hinders the emergence of ideological alternatives capable of destabilizing the established order. This "political economy of discourse," in Foucault's sense, makes power a producer of truth: "truth is a thing of this world[...] each society has its regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Official discourse does not merely seek to erase otherness, but reconfigures it within a system of representation that naturalizes the existing order.

In the Algerian context, this discursive lockdown manifested in media coverage of the Hirak social movement, ignited in February 2019 to denounce social and political injustice. This "heavily slanted coverage" (Dziri, 2020) relied on mechanisms of disinformation, manipulation, and systematic denigration of protesters. The Hirak was reduced to "sporadic gatherings" and "orchestrated agitations" within a logic of meaning domestication aimed at hollowing the movement's significance. The Algerian regime has historically enforced rigorous control over print, radio, and television media (Gafaïti, 1999; Sarnelli & Kobibi, 2017; Hamzaoui, 2019), neutralizing dissident voices and imposing a univocal narrative of reality.

Yet, the vitality of Darja on digital platforms, chanted in stadiums and streets, testifies to the persistence of an unsubdued popular voice. This fluid, creative, polysemic language of the people reinvents spaces of contestation and identity affirmation against the instrumentalized language of power.

4. Digital Darja: Discursive Practices and Stakes in the Diaspora

Through digital spaces, Darja occupies new territories of enunciation, where relationships with language, identity, and politics evolve. Far more than an informal use, it serves as a diasporic expression, a space for contestatory speech. Here, we examine the discursive forms it takes in connected exile, situated between communicative practices and the stakes of political visibility.

4.1 Emergence and Communicative Function within the Diaspora

The advent of the Internet marks a decisive turning point in the history of communicative practices. Whereas traditional media enforced a unidirectional model, from center to periphery, from institution to citizen, the digital age inaugurates a horizontal and decentralized configuration of informational flows. This shift is what Manuel Castells conceptualizes as “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2012): the individual, once a passive recipient, simultaneously becomes producer, broadcaster, and recipient of the message.

Web 2.0, grounded in interactivity, participation, and immediacy, destabilizes traditional discursive monopolies. It breaks with the centralization of media language to establish a polymorphic space where voices long marginalized can be heard. In the face of this mosaic of digital voices, authoritarian regimes, despite their efforts to control discourse, struggle to contain the proliferation of counter-narratives across blogs, podcasts, forums, and alternative channels.

This new communicative arrangement is as much technical as it is political, symbolic, and linguistic. It enables the delegitimization of dominant narratives while opening a space for linguistic intervention, satire, and subversion, practices that disrupt the relationship between language, power, and truth. In this context, vernacular dialects, once relegated to the private sphere, achieve unprecedented visibility. As several scholars have shown, official language policies in Algeria have historically prioritized Standard Arabic and French, relegating the Algerian dialect to informal and often stigmatized spaces.

Within the Algerian diaspora, the use of Darja in online videos during the health crisis demonstrates a deliberate communicative rationality. The choice of a vernacular language rich in affect facilitates shared intelligibility and fosters a sense of proximity. On this matter, Abid, 39 years old, residing in Canada, states:

“During the health crisis [...] we thought about how the videos would be received before we made them [...] we used Algerian dialect because that’s what Algerians understand [...] That way, all Algerians will know what it’s about” (Interview, January 8, 2024). This testimony illustrates how the diaspora, through its strategic use of Darja, functions as a mediator between homeland and host society. By amplifying local voices across digital networks, it ensures that the discourse of protest and solidarity circulates beyond Algeria’s borders, acquiring transnational visibility.

This account is more than a media anecdote; it reveals the logic underpinning diasporic language. Through the choice of darja, a collective subjectivation emerges. It is not merely a language that is being mobilized, but a shared memory, a corporeal echo of speech, a form of presence to oneself and others that eludes state-sanctioned legitimization. Speaking Darja here is not an act of translation, it is an act of institution. Language becomes a gesture, a performative act of political significance, where intelligibility is no longer dependent on normativity: it is the event of recognition, a space where otherness appears within the fragmentation of exile.

What Abid enacts is a form of resistance immanent to the epistemology of power, resistance to the economy of logos that disqualifies minor forms of speech in the name of transparency or universality. By favoring the language of everyday life over the institutional register, he reshapes the domain of the sayable, extracting from invisibility a polyphonic mode of thought. Darja becomes the locus of political performativity where enunciation itself displaces subjectivities beyond the traditional designations of citizenship or nationality. This singular use of language affirms not only the capacity to destabilize discursive order, but also to inhabit the interstices of language in order to cultivate a new scene of the communal.

4.2 Political and Identity Stakes of Digital Darja in the Diaspora

The use of dialect in donation appeals also reflects a strategy of emotional engagement grounded in a shared cultural bond. The choice of familiar language seeks to strengthen identification and elicit empathy. As expressed by Lamine, 46, residing in Canada:

“Seeing our donation appeals in our Algerian dialect touches me deeply [...] It shows that our organizations value our linguistic identity and cultural connection, which strengthens my desire to contribute” (Interview, January 18, 2024). Here, the diaspora does not only reaffirm its cultural identity; it assumes the role of an amplifier of collective affect. Donation campaigns circulated from Montreal to Paris and Brussels, making diasporic spaces laboratories of solidarity, while simultaneously feeding back these discourses into Algeria through digital platforms.

These practices underscore the importance of recognizing heteroglossia as the foundation of all discursive creation within the diaspora. By valorizing darja, the diaspora renews its relationship with its culture of origin, reinforces its sense of belonging, and maintains a form of responsibility toward its homeland.

By way of comparison, the Tunisian diaspora provides a striking example of the digital sphere’s capacity to generate an alternative public space through the experience of the website Takriz. The study conducted by Romain Lecomte demonstrates a singular form of “cyberdissent” (Lecomte, 2009, pp. 201–202), in which subversion represents a mode of being confronted with censorship and the frozen speech of power. Through the use of deliberately irreverent, ironic, and corrosive language, Takriz does not merely denounce: it deconstructs, destabilizes, and symbolically reconfigures the field of political speech. Through humor and its critical vocation, a new form of agile and transgressive critical reason emerges, opening the way to the reconstruction of democratic debate in digital exile.

4.3 In the Flow, the Voice: Toward a Politics of Insistence

In the ebb of exile and the dispersal of voices, language does not simply survive, it persists. It does not express; it occurs, it materializes in the digital instant as a gesture of emergence. Herein lies the full potential of mass self-communication: a direct expression freed from institutional validation or centralized mediation. In this digital space, anyone can, through a simple act of enunciation, project their voice beyond physical and symbolic borders, bypassing traditional channels of media power.

What is verbalized in Darja is not a community already formed and rooted in origin, but a community in suspension, an ephemeral being-together that only coheres in the very act of speaking. Rather than seeking normativity, it explores dissonance. Rather than enforcing homogeneity, it enacts a polyphony in motion. Through the repetition of these fragmentary linguistic gestures, through the insistent use of a vernacular language within a globalized space, a new political scene begins to take shape.

In digital spaces, speech does not seek so much to convince as to persist, to resonate in the ephemeral, the unstable, the shared moment. Darja becomes more than a minor discursive tool; it becomes a site of digital self-affection, where language turns simultaneously toward self and other, beyond any

mediation or authority.

Language thus becomes a site of exposure: it reveals diasporic subjectivities that no longer aspire to universality but to listening. In doing so, it escapes the grammar of power and becomes available to another political scene: one in which visibility is no longer granted by institutions, but generated by the circulation of narratives and gestures themselves.

This is not the language of the State, nor that of the expert. It is a language without guarantor, without transcendental foundation, yet one that, in the flow, invents its own consistency. It does not form community through identity, but through the infinite act of calling, to be heard, even for a moment. Therein lies, perhaps, the most political gesture of this language in the age of mass self-communication: to bring forth a presence where exile had promised only silence.

This insistence is not confined to exile. By projecting vernacular speech across borders, the diaspora expands the public sphere beyond national boundaries, forging a transnational arena where Algerian voices resonate collectively, irrespective of geographic location.

5. From Wooden Language to Liberated Speech: Digital Polyphony as Subversion

The digital revolution has overturned the regimes that legitimize public speech (Castells, 2012 ; Van Dijck, 2013). Where once institutional, technocratic, or propagandist language, “wooden language”, dominated, today we witness the emergence of multiple, spontaneous, and subversive discursive forms. This section analyses the contemporary mutations of enunciative spaces, situated between ideological control and expressive liberation. The digital realm transforms discursive power relations to such an extent that it permits the flourishing of popular polyphony, exemplified in the Algerian case by the emergence of Darja in political struggles.

5.1 Institutional Wooden Language: Mechanisms and Functions of Official Communication

According to a well-established critical tradition, wooden language (*langue de bois*) relies on a set of rhetorical devices intended to obscure reality, neutralize social conflict, and manufacture consensus through abstraction or generality. It is characterized by “stereotyped formulas, discourse smoothing, and systematic conflict avoidance” (Delporte, 2011). Its aim is not to inform, but to defuse. This form of language produces a sanitized representation of the social world, wherein responsibilities are diluted, oppositions are silenced, and terms are stripped of their critical force.

In this regard, Patrick Charaudeau and Dominique Maingueneau define wooden language as a “stereotyped language specific to political propaganda, [a] rigid manner of speaking that uses clichés, formulas, and slogans, reflecting a dogmatic stance disconnected from lived reality” (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002, p. 7). Their approach sheds light on the dogmatic and disconnected nature of this discourse, designed to impose a closed and self-referential symbolic order.

Within the epistemic framework engaged by this strategy, George Orwell’s critique serves to unmask the phenomenon: Orwell denounces the way in which political language is designed to “make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” through the use of abstract, vague, or technocratic formulations. This linguistic strategy, which he describes as an effort to “give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (Orwell, 1946), aligns with the logic of wooden language, understood as a form of ideological neutralization of discourse aimed at rendering any questioning of the established order unthinkable.

5.2 Digital Media and the Subversion of Speech Regimes

As previously mentioned, the digital sphere disrupts traditional speech regimes. Where official discourse, emanating from state institutions, mainstream media, or political elites, relies on a normative

wooden language, digital spaces offer a counter-discursive arena: fragmented, horizontal, and potentially subversive.

In this context, the concept of the “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1990) can be mobilized to designate these parallel spaces in which historically marginalized groups—migrants, racial minorities, construct alternative narratives, redefine their identities, and challenge the dominant norms of the traditional public sphere. This phenomenon corresponds to what Jürgen Habermas identifies as a mutation of the public sphere, marked by growing tension between vertical logics of discourse production (elitist, institutional) and the horizontal logics of participatory exchange stemming from digital technologies.

Habermas’s model maintains that democracy retains an epistemic dimension, provided certain structural conditions are met, namely, the relative autonomy of the media system from its political and social environments, and the existence of a feedback loop between elite discourse and civil society.

However, in totalitarian regimes where public speech is monitored or censored, digital platforms become alternative spaces of expression in which citizens circumvent traditional circuits of political communication. This dynamic contrasts with mechanisms of ideological control and introduces forms of spontaneous deliberative legitimation, even outside institutional frameworks.

The “digital public” (Habermas, 2006, pp. 414-416), although fragmented into discursive bubbles (a phenomenon exacerbated by algorithmic logic), constitutes a terrain for contestation and the production of critical knowledge. It is not necessarily an ideal space for rational deliberation, as prescribed in normative deliberative theory, but rather a plural and dynamic arena where heterogeneous discursive practices emerge, breaking away from traditional channels of legitimation.

In totalitarian or weakly democratic contexts, the digital sphere exceeds the function of a mere communicational tool: it becomes a mechanism for subverting dominant speech regimes, through the co-production of narratives that redistribute the relations between truth, power, and legitimacy.

5.3 Liberated Speech and Digital Polyphony: Contestation and Subversion through Darja

Within the fluid horizon of “digital culture” (Cardon, 2019), an unprecedented form of discursive plurality is emerging, driven by ordinary subjects navigating the margins of the public sphere. We propose the term digital polyphony to describe this emerging dynamic, a world where speech, freed from hierarchies, emerges through spontaneity, linguistic innovation, and irreverence.

The notion draws inspiration from bakhtin’s literary polyphony, reimagined in the context of participatory digital media (Bakhtine, 1981 ; Couldry, 2010). Although still under-theorized, this concept aligns with dialogic traditions of modernity, notably that of Mikhail Bakhtine (1978), for whom every utterance is already in tension with other voices. Digital polyphony, far from being a mere communicational phenomenon, reflects a reversal of discursive regimes: it is profane speech which, through its multiplication, subverts the authority of institutionalized statements and reinvents, through play and disorder, the very conditions of collective enunciation.

In this context, Darja (Algerian Arabic) becomes an instrument of popular contestation. Energized by the momentum of the Hirak movement, the digital sphere was transformed into a space of linguistic effervescence, where new forms of political enunciation were forged: the détournement of slogans, incisive hashtags, dialect-based memes, and satirical videos.

Yet beyond these overtly militant slogans, digital exchanges frequently mobilized everyday idioms of solidarity and resistance, such as *karama* (“dignity”), *hogra* (“injustice”), or affective appeals like *ranam‘ak* (“we stand with you”). These vernacular expressions illustrate how Darja operated simultaneously as a language of political confrontation and as a register of cultural intimacy, weaving affective bonds that sustained mobilization across dispersed communities.

For the diaspora, digital polyphony acquires an additional significance: it transforms dispersal into resonance. By re-articulating slogans and memes from abroad, Algerians in exile not only echo but also reframe local struggles, feeding them back into the homeland with renewed intensity and symbolic density.

Far from being anecdotal, these forms of expression signal a reconfiguration of political language. They redefine the modalities of civic engagement by opening an enunciative space for plural subjectivities. They establish a new relationship to truth, no longer grounded in authority or expertise, but in lived experience, popular satire, and direct confrontation with reality.

The meme becomes a means of critical intervention: through the détournement of imagery and the fusion with incisive textual commentary, it creates a semantic short-circuit that upends established hierarchies. The amateur video, recorded in raw darja, without technical mediation, offers speech that is intimate, immediate, and liberated from the normative formats imposed by traditional media channels. The hashtag, for its part, crystallizes collective rallying cries, aggregates dispersed affective energies, and renders visible a critical mass that was previously inaudible.

Thus, the digital polyphony articulated through Algerian Darja in connected spaces is not merely a subcultural phenomenon or oppositional aesthetic. It constitutes a form of linguistic politicization, rooted in the everyday, and capable of challenging dominant discourses. This polyphony diverts the codes of power, amplifies long-silenced voices, and reframes the contours of the online public sphere. It signals a reconfiguration of the relationship between language, power, and citizenship in the digital age, where contestation is now inscribed in the plural, through words, images, hashtags, and the accents of a society seeking to reclaim its political destiny.

6. Conclusion

The emergence of digital technology is transforming discursive practices and relationships to language within the Algerian diaspora. By adopting Darja as a language of public expression, certain communities subvert dominant codes to establish a plural, situated, and performative discourse that escapes the legitimating logics of state and media authority. This linguistic choice, far from being trivial, carries political potency: it revives fragments of collective memory and resonates across physical and identity-based boundaries.

The analysis shows that Darja has functioned as a vehicle for contestation in digital spaces, enabling a popular political voice that bypasses official languages and disrupts hegemonic discourses. Its use in calls for solidarity during the health crisis illustrates how a vernacular tongue can foster affective bonds and strengthen a collective imaginary of mutual support between diaspora and homeland. Yet this politicization of language remains uneven: while activist and digitally connected segments mobilize Darja as a resource, others continue to privilege French, Standard Arabic, or disengagement from public debate.

These practices also reconfigure relationships to identity and political belonging. By legitimizing informal language practices in the digital sphere, Darja challenges established hierarchies and opens a transnational arena where cultural intimacy may operate as political capital. The diaspora does not simply relay domestic struggles but contributes to their reframing in transnational terms, even if this role is more visible in some hubs than others.

In this fragmented and horizontal field of expression, Darja emerges as a matrix of emotional engagement, subversion, and civic participation. The digital polyphony it generates reflects a shift in the political sphere, wherein expression no longer seeks conformity to a norm but instead creates a shared stage that embraces diversity and dissonance. This partial deconstruction of linguistic hegemony produces tangible effects: it strengthens cohesion within certain segments of the diaspora, lowers barriers

to political engagement by broadening participation, and contributes to a democratization of the symbolic sphere by multiplying the voices that can claim legitimacy.

As Butler (1997) argues, language is not only a medium of expression but also a performative act that contests normative structures and constitutes political subjects through speech. It is in this vibrant and decentralized circulation of Darja that a democratic horizon can be glimpsed, fragile, contested, and full of promise, where recognition is not granted but seized in the very act of speaking. Future research could further explore how these dynamics vary across diasporic spaces, how they interact with offline mobilizations, and how they compare with other postcolonial vernaculars in digital contexts.

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