



Linguistic and Cultural Peculiarities of the Algerian Society and the Identity Issue



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Abstract

This research paper aims to investigate the extent to which linguistic diversity and cultural variety affect peoples' identities while shedding light on the issue of linguistic diversity as a relatively recent phenomenon in contemporary societies. The study specifically focuses on the identity of the Algerian society, which has often been put to the test; it is Amazigh by origin and Arab after the Arabic language spread following the Islamic conquests. Later, it became Francophone during the colonial period due to the oppressive linguistic policies adopted by the French colonizers, who sought by all means to erase the identity of the Algerian people by undermining the Arabic language and replacing it with French. Consequently, Algerian society now oscillates between three languages (Amazigh, Arabic, and French). Undoubtedly, this linguistic diversity is accompanied by cultural variety, making Algeria a space where various cultures swim, intermingling and creating a unique interaction that has led to questioning the actual identity of Algerian society. Thus, the research questions arise as follows: What is the impact of linguistic and cultural diversity on the identity of Algerian society? Is linguistic and cultural pluralism in Algeria a blessing or a curse? And what is the effectiveness of linguistic and cultural diversity in promoting national unity?

Keywords

Identity;
Linguistic Diversity;
Cultural Diversity;
Algerian Society ;

الكلمات المفتاحية

الهوية ؛
التعددية اللغوية ؛
التنوع الثقافي ؛
المجتمع الجزائري ؛

الخاصية اللغوية والثقافية للمجتمع الجزائري والمسألة الهوياتية

ملخص

تسلط هذه الورقة البحثية الضوء على مسألة التعدد اللغوي باعتبارها ظاهرة حديثة العهد في المجتمعات المعاصرة وتسعى إلى دراسة مدى تأثير هذه الظاهرة على الهوية الفعلية للشعوب، وسنخصص في هذه الدراسة هوية المجتمع الجزائري التي لطالما وضعت على المحك؛ فهو أمازيغي بأصله، وعربي بعد أن وطأت لغة الضاد أرضه عقب الفتوحات الإسلامية، كي يصبح بعدها فرنكوفونيا خلال الفترة الاستعمارية جزاء السياسة اللغوية التعسفية التي انتهجها المستعمر الفرنسي؛ إذ حاول بشتى الطرق طمس هوية الشعب الجزائري فحارب اللغة العربية، واستبدلها باللغة الفرنسية وبهذا أصبح المجتمع الجزائري يترنح بين ثلاث لغات (الأمازيغية والعربية والفرنسية)، ومن هنا جاءت تساؤلات الدراسة كالاتي: ما أثر التعدد اللغوي والثقافي على هوية المجتمع الجزائري؟ وهل التعددية اللغوية والثقافية في الجزائر نعمة أم نقمة؟ وما فاعلية التعدد اللغوي والثقافي في تعزيز الوحدة الوطنية؟

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Doi:

I- Introduction:

Allah, the Exalted, has distinguished each nation by their language, and among His divine creations is the diversity of languages, cultures, and religions. The most truthful saying on this matter is found in the Holy Quran: "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may 'get to' know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware" (Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:13).

Since ancient times, there has been a pressing necessity for humans to communicate and comprehend one another. Thousands of languages have existed, such as Assyrian, Hittite, Latin, Greek, Indian, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew, and other ancient languages, extending to the most recent ones like French, English, and German. The multiplicity and diversity of languages and cultures are defining characteristics of contemporary human civilization, founded on communication among different peoples and nations—despite the linguistic and cultural barriers that separate them—aiming for interaction and integration rather than conflict and decay.

Linguistic diversity is a contemporary phenomenon, characterized by the use of multiple languages by individuals within a single community. This phenomenon has emerged in many countries around the world due to various factors that will be elaborated on later in this research paper. It has influenced the countries of the Greater Maghreb and has had both positive and negative impacts, particularly in Algeria. The identity of the Algerian people has frequently been questioned due to the prevalence of three distinct and culturally diverse languages (Arabic, Amazigh, and French). This diversity primarily stems from the pure Amazigh origins of the Algerians, prompting them to use the Amazigh language and take pride in their authentic Berber culture. Following the Islamic conquests, Algeria embraced the Arabic language (the language of the Quran), which was adopted as the official language and the mother tongue of the Algerian society, being the language of the noble Islamic religion. The Algerian community has absorbed Arab-Islamic culture with all its foundations.

After nearly a century and a half of the French colonial dominance, the French language became widely used in the Algerian society, making it a Francophone community par excellence. Given that language is a fundamental element of cultural formation—due to its significance in the linguistic framework of any society—it has become crucial to examine the impact of linguistic and cultural plurality on the identities of communities. Accordingly, this research paper aims to study the phenomenon of linguistic diversity and cultural variety in the Algerian society and their relationship to the issue of "identity". The paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What is the impact of linguistic and cultural diversity on the Algerian society identity?
- Is linguistic and cultural pluralism in Algeria a blessing or a curse?
- To what extent has linguistic and cultural diversity contributed to enhancing national unity?

II– The Concept of Linguistic Diversity

Language is a medium for communication and interaction among people, growing and evolving within society. It is one of the most important manifestations of civilization for peoples and nations, opening avenues for acquaintance and understanding. Communication among humans cannot possibly exist without it¹. The linguist Edward Sapir defines language as a purely human means of communication—rather than instinctual—used for expressing thoughts, emotions, and desires through a system of symbols conceived by understanding². This system is supposed to be unified and shared among the members of a single community. The essence of linguistic beings is linguistic uniqueness, where children acquire a language referred to as the "mother tongue", the one they first speak, which then develops as their linguistic abilities evolve with their age. They also develop a kind of attachment to that language, as it becomes an integral part of their actual identity.

The rapid pace of technological advancement has compelled people to acquire more foreign languages to keep up with the modern civilization. This has resulted in the emergence of what is known as linguistic diversity, which has become a central focus for research in various fields such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, language teaching, and translation. This diversity can be a double-edged sword, as it has both positive and negative effects. While it may serve as a means to keep pace with the scientific and technological progress of the era, it can also negatively impact national and cultural identity, influencing educational curricula and the linguistic levels of education³.

Linguistic diversity is a term established by scholars in the field of general linguistics, specifically in sociolinguistics. In Arabic, it is referred to as "*al-ta'addud al-lughawi*" and in French as "*Diversité linguistique*"

Al-Oraghi defines linguistic diversity as the coexistence of diverse national languages within a single country, whether in a hierarchical arrangement featuring prominent languages like Arabic alongside colloquial languages⁴. In other words; it entails the presence of several languages in one community, with one of these languages being official while the others are used in the daily lives of individuals. This aligns with the definition articulated by the linguist Jean Dubois in his dictionary, where he states that a speaker can be considered multilingual if they use several languages in a single community depending on the type of communicative situation (within their family, in social

relations, in interactions with administration, etc.). We can describe a community as multilingual when several languages are used in different types of communication⁵.

It is worth emphasizing that this term has not yet been precisely defined. Linguistic studies use various terms to denote the same concept, referring to it using different terms such as: linguistic diversity, bilingualism, linguistic plurilingualism, and even language interference in some contexts.

III- Manifestations of Linguistic Diversity

III. 1. Bilingualism

The concept of bilingualism has often been a subject of debate among researchers and scholars in the field of linguistics. Some define it as the coexistence of two distinct language levels within a single language, in other words, a simple colloquial language used by ordinary people, alongside a prestigious language used by scholars, writers, and cultural figures. This definition has been presented by Jam'an Abdul Karim, who states: "Bilingualism has been established to mean the presence of two types of language use within a single linguistic group, one being formal and the other colloquial, with each serving a social function that the other does not fulfill"⁶.

Others define bilingualism as the use of two distinct languages: one national and the other foreign. This definition was proposed by Saleh Belaid, who asserts that bilingualism is the usage of two language systems simultaneously for expression or explanation, representing a transition from one language to another⁷. This is the most common definition in linguistic circles, as there is a general agreement that bilingualism involves an individual's ability to speak, read, and write in two different languages with equal proficiency, enabling them to express their thoughts in a language other than their mother tongue. Psychologist Renzo Titone defines bilingualism as "an individual's ability to clarify an idea and express it in a second language by respecting the concepts and structures unique to that language"⁸.

In short, we can say that bilingualism means an individual's mastery of a second language alongside their primary language, and their ability to use it with ease and fluency for expressing their thoughts across various areas of life.

III. 2. Diglossia

The main point of contention among scholars in the field of sociolinguistics regarding linguistic diversity revolves around the distinction between the terms "bilingualism" and "diglossia". There are no objective criteria upon which to establish a definitive concept for these overlapping terms. Some argue that they refer to the same concept, while others consider them completely different.

Diglossia, according to the French linguist William Marcy, is defined as the competition between a written literary language and a socially spoken colloquial language⁹. This implies the existence of two coexisting languages within a single community, where the first language is formal and standard, used in literature and educational institutions, while the second is less prestigious. Michel Zakaria defines it as the linguistic situation of a person or group of individuals who are proficient in two languages without necessarily having a distinctive speaking ability in one more than the other. Alternatively, it can be understood as the linguistic condition where speakers alternately use two different languages simultaneously, depending on the environment and linguistic circumstances¹⁰.

Based on the above-mentioned definitions, we can say that a bilingual person is someone who speaks or, more precisely, use two languages, demonstrating complete proficiency in both as if they were their mother tongue. This corresponds to the definition provided by Mohamed Ali Al-Khouli, who states: "Bilingualism means the use of a language by an individual or a group with any degree of proficiency, in any of its language skills, for any of its purposes"¹¹.

Indeed, the term "bilingualism" is intertwined with "diglossia" and they are so closely related that they almost overlap. We will attempt to clarify the similarities and differences between them through the following table¹²:

Diglossia	Bilingualism
- The use of two different languages by a community that do not have a single linguistic system (Arabic, French) (Arabic, English).	- The use of two languages for expression that belong to a single language and unified system (Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic).
- The speaker's transition from Arabic to French or English represents a shift from one linguistic level to another belonging to a different language.	- A bilingual speaker can adhere to one level of expression. - The transition from Modern Standard Arabic to colloquial Arabic, or vice versa, is the use of a pattern of Arabic (one of the language levels).
- It can be individual or collective.	- It is collective

IV- Causes of Linguistic Diversity in Algeria

A community is described as "multilingual" when multiple languages coexist within it. This interplay within a single society results in considerable overlap and blending that profoundly impact on the social fabric. The different languages intermingle, creating multiple linguistic levels that become so commonly used that it is difficult to identify the original language of that community. A prime example of this linguistic situation is the case of the Algerian society, which, like several other countries, has long had its identity put to the test due to its linguistic diversity and cultural variety. Indeed, this linguistic phenomenon did not arise voluntarily in Algerian society nor was it a conscious choice; it has been caused by a series of factors that can be summarized as follows:

IV.1. The Colonial Movement

The Algerian people endured the atrocities of French colonialism for a century and a half (1830-1962). This colonization had a profound impact on the cultural, social, religious, and even ideological fabric of the Algerian society. What we can be affirmed today is that these effects are still present. From the moment the brutal colonizer set foot on the land of the martyrs, it sought to establish its influence and complete dominance over this country, adopting various oppressive policies to erase the identity components of the Algerian people. One of its initial goals was to eradicate the Arabic language and impose education in the language of Voltaire (French). Consequently, a generation emerged that spoke and mastered French as if it were their mother tongue. The Algerian novelist Rashid Boudjedra, confirmed this by stating:

"Il n'y pas eu de difficultés spécifiques. Il y a eu tout juste une satisfaction, peut-être d'amour-propre. Mon père m'a envoyé tout spécialement en Tunisie pour apprendre l'arabe, donc j'ai payé cher cet apprentissage de l'arabe dont l'enseignement a été banni en Algérie par la colonisation française. Il y a eu donc une grande satisfaction, comme lorsqu'on réalise un désir, un vieux rêve. Il s'agit aussi d'un acte politique : dire, revendiquer et assumer sa différence"¹³.

Based on this statement, it becomes evident that the Algerian people were deprived of learning their own language—the very roots from which they spring and the origin to which they belong—and were forced to learn in the language of the colonizer. They became proficient in it and steeped in a purely French culture, manifested in attire, lifestyle, and modes of thought. This turned the Algerian society into an identity-stripped community influenced by everything "French". All of this came at the expense of the Arabic language and the Arab-Islamic culture, which remained marginalized for a long period of time.

IV.2. Migration

The world today is witnessing a rapid pace of economic development that has disrupted the balance among different countries, dividing them into developed and developing states. Economic progress has emerged as a criteria by which a country's degree of integration into modern civilization—of which the economy is a cornerstone—is assessed. There is no doubt that in recent years, developed Western countries have experienced a large demographic influx. The total number of international migrants reached 281 million in 2020¹⁴. Developed countries (especially European ones) receive migrants from all over the world—those who migrate legally or illegally—seeking a better standard of living, fleeing war, poverty, or persecution. They see "migration" as a path to success and a window opening onto new horizons for a promising future, after all avenues of success have been cut off in their homelands. They arrive carrying their cultures and languages, interact with the people of the host countries, and a new world emerges that brings

together diverse realms of language, culture, customs, and traditions. Tongues intermingle and cultures cross-fertilize in the service of communication and complementarity rather than discord and erosion.

IV.3. The Educational System

Since independence, the Algerian government has spared no effort to advance the education sector through a set of reforms aimed at developing its schools, starting with an insistence on eliminating the French language left by colonialism. Thus, at the very first school term after independence, in October 1962, a decision was issued introducing Arabic into all primary schools for seven hours per week¹⁵, alongside teaching French as a non-official foreign language.

The linguistic reality in Algerian schools may appear balanced on the surface: students now receive instruction in Arabic throughout the three educational stages—primary, middle, and secondary. However, the reality is different. Students study all curriculum subjects in Arabic, while also taking French and English as foreign languages. After completing secondary school, many find themselves in university programs taught exclusively in French. This raises numerous issues that can hinder their academic path, as they oscillate among three languages (Arabic, French, and English), in addition to the colloquial dialect (*darja*), which they have even begun to use with their teachers in class. This multilingualism has negatively affected them: most students struggle significantly with all the three languages and do not master any one of them. This aligns precisely with what al-Jāhiz stated about the impossibility of mastering several tongues simultaneously. He asserts that it is impossible to master multiple languages simultaneously because each language would interfere with the other, resulting in a lesser command of both compared to mastering a single language. He argued that when an individual speaks two tongues, they have "done injustice to both" because each language pulls and interferes with the other. This interference would prevent the individual from achieving the same level of mastery as someone dedicated to a single language¹⁶.

Regrettably, this is the state of our students in Algerian universities today: they do not master the languages they use—even those specializing in languages. Worse still, this shortcoming extends to Arabic, their mother tongue. Instead of working to improve their language proficiency, we find them speaking a strange hybrid idiom mixing three languages—neither Arabic, nor French, nor English. Here the negative effects of multilingualism are clearly manifested, transforming it from a commendable blessing into a deplorable curse.

V- Manifestations of Cultural Diversity in the Algerian Society

Culture is the gateway to the essence of any society—the mirror reflecting the life of peoples and the image expressing the identity of communities. The British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

The American scholar Marvin Harris defined culture as a taught set of ideas and actions displayed by members of a group. More broadly, culture is a cognitive and value framework governing social behavior; it is a coordinated system of meanings and symbols through which social interaction occurs, while the social system is the pattern of interaction itself. It is the web of meaning through which man interprets his experience and is guided in his actions¹⁷.

This means that culture comprises the principles governing an individual's behavior in society, through which his interaction with fellow members—who share with him the values, norms, customs, and traditions that shape their identity—appears. This makes culture purely social in nature; we cannot speak of culture in isolation from society. Since language is the medium through which members of a society communicate, the relationship among language, culture, and society becomes inseparable.

It is beyond dispute that language is the cultural vessel of its speakers. Therefore, multilingualism necessarily carries cultural diversity within it. Societies whose members use several languages are rich in multiple cultures. This is the case in the Algerian society, which has long been open to the "Other," influencing and being influenced, embracing otherness in full. This openness has fostered a remarkable cultural diversity. But what do we mean by cultural diversity?

The concept of cultural diversity refers to the multiplicity of cultures among members of a single society that is open to the cultures of other societies for the sake of acquaintance and dialogue, benefiting from others' expertise and experiences so that cultures complement one another. Tolerant societies then emerge that recognize and accept the Other in all his differences. Algeria—like many countries—offers a

living model of cultural diversity: many civilizations have passed through Algeria since ancient times, and people of different nationalities settled in the Amazigh land of Algeria. They intermingled and coexisted with the original inhabitants, resulting in linguistic plurality and cultural diversity characterized by openness and tolerance.

Algeria is often considered a “continent” of its own because of its rich cultural heritage, which varies from east to west and from north to south. Culture manifests in its most beautiful forms across the entire country. In the east, customs, traditions, and musical styles differ from those in the west; the lifestyle of northern inhabitants is entirely different from that of the enchanting south. Traveling between Algerian provinces is like passing through different worlds; each region tells stories and reflects lives lived on this pure land from prehistoric times to the present.

In short, cultural diversity enriches societies and paves the way for their openness to others. Contrary to what some might imagine, it actually strengthens national unity by rejecting all forms of racial discrimination. Cultural diversity in Algeria is a compelling reality, reinforced by the pages and phases of history of which Algeria has been an integral part, and affirmed by the Algerian character’s acceptance of the Other. This diversity has helped Algeria define its identity and civilization and export its culture to others¹⁸.

VI- The Identity of the Algerian Society amid Linguistic Plurality and Cultural Diversity

The concept of identity has always been linked to human existence, forming a central subject in ideological and anthropological studies because of its importance in affirming the existence and being of societies amid linguistic, cultural, political, and economic pluralism.

Identity is defined as a set of social and cultural characteristics shared by individuals, on the basis of which one group can be distinguished from another. It is also defined as the set of affiliations to which an individual belongs and which shape his behavior or self-perception¹⁹.

This means that identity is “specific” to a particular human group, determining individual belonging and revealing interactions with fellow members. It consists of mental representations engraved in each of our consciences, coexisting within individuals and social groups. Although identities may appear outwardly contradictory and seem particular to some rather than others, they govern the perceptions we form of others, of ourselves, and of our relationships with others²⁰.

The greatest challenge the French colonialism left to the Algerian people is the question of “identity.” Throughout its occupation, it sought to obliterate Algerians’ national identity. Its first steps involved attempting to stir internal conflicts between Arabs and Amazigh, then pursuing a policy aimed at destroying Arab-Islamic culture by eradicating Arab-Islamic cultural heritage. Cultural centers were demolished—evidenced by the words of the nineteenth-century Governor-General of Algeria, the Duke d’Aumale, who said: “We entrenched ourselves in Algeria, seized the scientific institutes, and turned them into shops or barracks”²¹. All of this was intended to demolish the pillars of the Algerian national identity—Arabism, Amazighity, and Islam—and instead entrench policies of Christianization and assimilation.

Subsequently, the Algerian youth were deprived of learning Arabic, and instruction in French was imposed in order to create a new generation ignorant of its true origins and saturated with French culture. This indeed came to pass: a generation emerged with a blurred identity, French in culture, integrated into French society, conquered culturally and intellectually, as France sought to implement its project of “the Francization of Algeria” and uproot the fundamental components of Algerian society. A French report in this regard stated the intention to acquaint Algerian youth with the “colonizer’s” civilization, traditions, and knowledge so that they would become useful elements and intermediaries between their coreligionists and the French.

Linguistic plurality and cultural diversity are closely linked to the identity crisis in Algeria. The Algerian individual finds himself torn among three linguistically and culturally distinct worlds: split between his mother tongue, which he was raised upon; the colonizer’s language, which was imposed upon him and adopted him to become the tool he uses to express his thoughts and feelings; and—since language shapes the thinking patterns of its speakers, as Julien Green²² observed—the Algerian’s way of thinking has clearly changed, embracing ideas disconnected from his cultural and religious frame of reference. Worse still, this language has continued to expand and sink its roots—even after independence—into the depths of Algerian society at the expense of Arabic, to the point that it has become a “standard” of sophistication and urbanity, and a badge of culture and civilization. This has deprived Algerians of their true identity and made

them cling to a foreign language and culture that invaded their minds and distanced them from their true origins. Even the ancestors' tongue, Amazigh, lost its status and is still struggling to survive; its use has become largely confined to Kabylia, despite the Algerian state's earnest efforts to revive it and encourage its use as an inseparable part of the Algerian people's identity.

Despite all this, linguistic and cultural diversity remains a double-edged sword. It enables members of society to form social relationships that contribute to national development, preserve cultural heritage, and bring it out of its shell, promoting it beyond national borders—especially through literary works. This is what happened with Algerian Francophone literature: by writing in French, authors affirmed that the Algerian people still exist—contrary to the wishes of those who say otherwise—and that they possess all their cultural, religious, and social components. They wielded their multilingual pens as weapons to defend their country's sovereignty, as a means to assert their existence, and to affirm their affiliation with the language representing their roots and origin.

Moreover, cultural diversity is an important economic resource. Algeria possesses forty cultural assets that can be leveraged as a source of economic revitalization, whether in industry (traditional crafts), trade, or tourism (archaeological sites).

VII- Conclusion

In sum, linguistic plurality and cultural diversity in Algeria are riches that should be effectively invested. They are an elevated state and a positive condition for both individuals and society. They contribute to openness to the "Other" and help build bridges of communication with other societies. They also encourage the country's advancement culturally, intellectually, and even economically—provided this does not come at the expense of the Arabic language and Arab-Islamic culture, which should receive the lion's share of attention and appreciation as the core of the Algerian people's true identity. Work must be done first and foremost to develop the national language so that individuals can enjoy a stable identity, far from cultural alienation. This should be achieved by controlling educational curricula, which must be systematized and kept from randomness, giving priority to teaching Standard Arabic at all educational levels. This would help instill moral, social, and religious values and preserve cultural heritage, while also encouraging the study of foreign languages and providing the conditions for their advancement and use to keep pace with the tremendous technological progress the world is witnessing today. In this way, the impact of linguistic plurality and cultural diversity will be positive, aiming at complementarity and communication, far from exclusion and conflict for survival.

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