Multilingualism and Its Impact on Education in Algeria: A Study of Terms and Concepts

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Abstract

Multilingualism has become one of the main characteristics of contemporary societies due to the accumulation of cultures and the expansion of communication means. Consequently, it has become a rich field of study that attracts the attention of researchers in various disciplines, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, and language education. Therefore, this research paper aims to examine the concept of multilingualism, define its terminology, identify its causes, and explore ways to promote education in light of multilingual contexts.

Key Words: multilingualism; Arabic; bilingualism; monolingualism; language education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of multilingualism is rarely absent from any society, as it represents one of the defining features of modern communities. This is due to the interaction of cultures and the diversity of communication tools that impose linguistic plurality. Contemporary societies are characterized by the use of multiple languages. Language is a fundamental and vital element in social life because it enables communication among individuals and allows them to express intentions and purposes. As a result, individuals develop a strong attachment to language within their society, as it represents personal, social, and cultural identity and forms an essential part of individual personality.

Today, Algeria is witnessing linguistic overlap, pluralism, and competition among languages and dialects. This situation has become an important topic that attracts the attention of many researchers and requires careful and rational treatment across several disciplines, particularly sociolinguistics and language education. Discussing multilingualism in Algeria necessarily involves examining the sociological stages the country has experienced in order to trace the major historical and geographical developments that led to the emergence of this phenomenon.

From this reality, several questions arise: What are the reasons for multilingualism in Arab countries, especially Algeria? Does multilingualism occur between dialects themselves or between dialects and Classical Arabic? Does it reflect coexistence and harmony, or struggle and competition? Finally, how can education be promoted in light of multilingualism and linguistic conflict?

2. Terminological Concepts

2.1 Concept of Dualism

Linguistically, dualism is derived from a root that denotes repetition and pairing. It refers to the presence of two elements or the duplication of a single element (Ibn Faris, 1979, p. 188).

Terminologically, dualism has been defined in different ways, yet most definitions share the idea of the coexistence of two linguistic forms within the same environment. This may involve the use of one language in official domains such as education and media, while another variety is used for daily communication among individuals. It may also describe a linguistic situation in which speakers alternate between two languages depending on context, without one language necessarily being superior to the other (Al-Khouli, 1988, p. 17; Zakaria, 1993, p. 53).

Dualism is a stable and widespread linguistic phenomenon that exists in all societies. Members of linguistic communities rarely rely on a single language, as communication needs usually require the use of more than one linguistic form.

2.2 Bilingualism

Linguistically, bilingualism is derived from the concept of pairing and refers to the association of two elements within one system (Ibn Faris, 1979, p. 188).

Terminologically, linguists have differed in defining bilingualism. Some describe it as the existence of two linguistic levels within a single society, where one language is used for formal or academic purposes and another is used for everyday communication. Other definitions focus on the individual's knowledge of two languages or their ability to use both languages fluently (Al-Khouli, 1988, p. 17).

Because of this diversity, Al-Khouli proposed a comprehensive definition, stating that bilingualism is "the individual's or group's use of two languages with any degree of proficiency and for any purpose" (Al-Khouli, 1988, p. 17). Another definition views bilingualism as the coexistence of a standard language and a recognized local language within the same society (Bishr, 1997, p. 186). These definitions indicate that bilingualism involves functional use of two languages according to context.

2.3 Monolingualism

Monolingualism refers to reliance on a single language for communication, reading, and official interaction. It represents a unified linguistic space that contributes to identity construction and administrative and cultural cohesion. It is often defined as the absence

of multiple linguistic systems and the dominance of one language within a society (Chibani, 2003, p. 113).

However, pure monolingualism is rare in practice, as most societies display some degree of linguistic diversity. Many countries recognize more than one official language, while others experience extensive dialectal variation. Excessive linguistic plurality may cause social challenges, whereas linguistic unity may contribute to stability and development (Ismaili, 2017).

2.4 Dialect

Dialectology examines linguistic variation within a language and focuses on differences that arise due to social, geographical, or cultural factors. Although it was not always treated as an independent discipline in classical linguistics, it studies systematic linguistic phenomena.

Linguistically, a dialect refers to a habitual form of speech associated with a particular group or region (Ibn Manzur, 2000, p. 359).

Terminologically, a dialect is a social linguistic phenomenon shared by members of the same community. It represents a set of linguistic characteristics that distinguish one group from another, especially in pronunciation and articulation. Ibrahim Anis defined dialect as “a set of linguistic characteristics belonging to a specific environment, shared by all its members” (Anis, 2009, p. 16). These characteristics mainly concern phonetic realization and speech patterns.

3. Standard Arabic

Standard Arabic is the language of the Holy Qur’an and the Arabic intellectual and cultural heritage as a whole. It is currently used in official transactions, poetry writing, publishing, and intellectual production (Badie Yacoub, 1985, p. 144). Arabic is one of the oldest languages in the world and one of the most widely spoken. Its speakers

are distributed across the Arab homeland. It is “that language spoken by Arabs from the pre-Islamic era until the present, through which poets expressed themselves, and which became the Diwan of the Arabs and their great intellectual record” (Belaid, 2008, p. 117). Arabic is also an official language in many countries and international organizations. It is a language of cultural heritage, and Arab constitutions stipulate its use in international forums.

Classical Arabic, also referred to as the standard or model language, is a sociolinguistic term used to describe a specific linguistic variety within a given society. It is the variety that occupies the formal domain and is adopted as a higher linguistic model due to its regularity and stability. This variety is free from dialectal and environmental features and is governed by fixed and codified rules that are socially recognized and institutionally approved (Bishr, 1997, p. 183).

In contemporary studies, Classical Arabic has been designated by several terms, including what Western scholars call “classical Arabic.” It was one of the leading international languages in the sciences and arts during the period of Arab-Islamic civilization, particularly from the third century AH. Its global dimension became evident when scientific missions from various European centers traveled to Cordoba, Seville, Granada, and other intellectual hubs to study sciences and arts in Arabic, which served as the language of instruction, research, and scientific sources.

Throughout history, Arabic has remained a language of sustained scholarly interest. While it is difficult to enumerate all that has been written about it, it is important to note that the United Nations General Assembly, during its plenary session on December 16, 1973, decided to include Arabic among its official and working languages (Abdul Karim, 2003, p. 20). This decision reflects the spread, universality, and distinctive characteristics of the Arabic language.

4. Manifestations and Causes of Multilingualism

4.1 The Concept of Multilingualism

With the overlap of languages and dialects and the diversity of linguistic systems within the same geographical space, the phenomenon known as multilingualism has emerged. Multilingualism refers to the use of two or more languages in addition to the original language, while maintaining functional separation between these languages in spoken and written communication. Types of multilingualism can be distinguished according to the number of languages acquired (Monan, 2012, pp. 140–175).

A country is described as multilingual when at least two different languages are spoken within its borders. An individual is considered multilingual when they are able to express needs and communicate effectively in more than one language. Thus, multilingualism may refer to language use, individual competence, or the linguistic situation of an entire society or nation (Klein, 2008, p. 649). Accordingly, multilingualism can be defined as the use of multiple languages within a single society. This meaning was articulated by Jean Dubois, who defined it as “the presence of two different languages in an individual or a group at the same time” (Dubois, 1973, p. 65). Michel Zakaria similarly defined it as “the linguistic state in which speakers alternately use two different languages according to the environment and linguistic conditions.”

Multilingualism also refers to the linguistic condition of an individual or group that is proficient in two languages without a clear dominance of one language over the other (Klein, 2008, p. 9). It involves the use of two distinct languages within a particular environment, as seen in Switzerland, where French and German are official languages, or in Canada, where French is spoken by part of the population and English by the majority. This phenomenon is also

present in contemporary societies and results from several factors, since it is rare to find a society with only one linguistic system. Belaid stated that "multilingualism is a set of converging or diverging languages within a society" (Belaid, 2008, p. 384).

From this perspective, multilingualism can be classified into two types. The first is social multilingualism, which is a historically inherited social phenomenon. Lewis described language change and development as a "language war," stating: "We encounter this language war in various fields, from the family to the market, and along the paths followed by languages as they spread and develop." This type of multilingualism spreads naturally among different social groups without official state approval. It emerges through contact with other linguistic communities, migration, or the presence of families that use languages different from the dominant societal language.

The second type is official multilingualism, which is formally recognized by the state through constitutional or legal frameworks, as observed in countries such as Canada and Switzerland. In Algeria, multilingualism is clearly present, even if it is not explicitly recognized by the Constitution. In practice, it exists at both social and institutional levels. Arabic, French, and English are taught in Algerian schools, and Amazigh is used in specific regions. Administrative transactions are largely conducted in French, and communication between public institutions and citizens frequently relies on it, despite the fact that effective communication requires a shared linguistic medium between sender and receiver.

4.2 Reasons for Multilingualism and Its Manifestations

Multilingualism is considered one of the major challenges facing Arabic language education in Algeria. Algeria is classified among multilingual countries, as it includes several languages and dialects. This multilingual situation did not arise randomly or arbitrarily; rather,

it resulted from a set of interconnected causes. These causes are largely similar across Arab countries, as they have experienced nearly the same historical and social conditions. The Algerian linguistic environment is characterized by diversity due to several factors, foremost among them the historical factor. Colonialism, in its various forms, represents the primary cause of this phenomenon, as the language of the colonizer is foreign to the colonized population. The long duration of colonial rule led to sustained linguistic contact and interaction, as well as the marginalization of the official national language, as occurred in Algeria. The extended occupation period (1830–1962) was marked by systematic efforts to weaken the Arabic language, isolate it from public life, and distance it from global engagement. One of the earliest directives issued by the French colonial leadership stated: "Teach our language and spread it until we rule Algeria. If our language rules Algeria, we have ruled it for real" (Segun, 1994, p. 26). As a result, Arabic was treated as a foreign language in its own country (Lahouil & Hosni, 2014, p. 113; Anani & Barhouma, 2007, pp. 206–207).

Colonialism did not merely represent political domination through the removal of national sovereignty; it also involved cultural erasure and intellectual alienation. During more than 132 years of occupation, the use of Arabic declined sharply because French became the sole official language of administration, education, and economic and political management, a status that was not subject to debate (Anani & Barhouma, 2007, pp. 206–207). Consequently, a linguistic conflict emerged in which Algerian individuals were confronted with two cultures and two languages, leading directly to the rise of bilingualism.

Migration is another influential factor contributing to multilingualism. Its impact closely resembles that of colonialism, as it results from continuous contact between immigrants and the host population, particularly when migrant communities preserve their customs and linguistic practices. In many cases, such communities

succeed in spreading their language within the receiving society (Segun, 1994, p. 26). Migration is often motivated by economic factors, such as employment opportunities and improved living conditions, especially in developing countries like Algeria, which suffered the consequences of colonialism, poverty, hunger, and disease. These conditions prompted large-scale migration toward European countries, particularly France, where the Algerian community constitutes a significant presence. Other motives include cultural reasons, educational pursuits, study visas, and even illegal migration, which has increased in recent years. All these forms of movement generate linguistic contact that manifests as linguistic overlap, bilingualism, or multilingualism.

Educational and pedagogical factors also play a central role in the spread of multilingualism and represent one of its most critical causes. Had education at all levels been conducted exclusively in the mother tongue, Arabic would have developed more effectively, and the influence of foreign languages would have remained limited (Lahouil & Hosni, 2014, p. 113). However, the higher education landscape in many Arab countries contradicts this principle. Several academic disciplines, particularly scientific fields, are taught in foreign languages, mainly French. This situation compels students to adopt bilingual practices, especially in the use of technical terminology. In many cases, the absence of Arabic equivalents forces students to use foreign terms without attempts at Arabization (Anani & Barhouma, 2007, pp. 206–207).

As a result, students are required to learn and master foreign languages in order to comprehend lectures and academic materials and to build a balanced linguistic repertoire. Consequently, Algerian families often seek to expose their children to foreign languages from an early age, especially French, by relying on various means, including

private foreign-language schools, and investing financially in this process.

Economic factors further contribute to the emergence and reinforcement of multilingualism through trade exchanges and joint industrial projects involving foreign partners. Louis Jean Calvet noted that “industrialization movements in many countries require the employment of workers from different nationalities, which indirectly imposes their languages during interaction, in addition to international trade” (Calvet, 2006, p. 27). Migration and travel play a significant role in expanding this linguistic situation, as societies become home to foreign minorities carrying diverse cultures and languages. This phenomenon is evident in contemporary Algeria, particularly after its integration into the global economy and openness to foreign investment, where interaction with workers of various nationalities, such as Chinese laborers in construction, has become common.

Psychological factors may also contribute to the spread of multilingualism. Many members of Algerian society tend to favor foreign languages, especially French. This tendency often results in hesitation and insecurity when using Arabic, influenced by discourses that portray Classical Arabic as outdated or incapable of expressing modern civilization. Consequently, students of Arabic may experience frustration, while those studying foreign languages often display pride when using foreign vocabulary, viewing it as the language of power, progress, and the developed West. In contrast, Arabic is sometimes perceived as the language of weak or underdeveloped nations, or this perception may stem from the political and economic weakness of Arab countries themselves (Lahouil & Hosni, 2014, p. 112). This inferiority complex reinforces the belief that Arabic is suitable only for literature, religious studies, and Sharia disciplines.

Imitation of the West has thus become a dominant motivation and a competitive social value, contributing significantly to the spread of

multilingualism in Algeria. In response, Arabic should be strengthened, properly used, and protected from unnecessary mixing or comparison. In this regard, responsibility falls on socialization institutions, particularly the family, which plays a crucial role in teaching children the mother tongue. Language is one of the strongest bonds connecting members of a linguistic community. Its existence presupposes the existence of a social group, which highlights the inherently social nature of language. No linguistic system can exist independently of the human group that uses it, as language is not an end in itself but a means of communication among community members (Hegazy, p. 16).

In addition to these direct factors, several indirect causes have contributed to the emergence of multilingualism in Algeria, particularly those related to audiovisual and written media. Media outlets often promote multilingual practices by shifting away from Arabic toward foreign or vernacular languages, especially in advertising, to attract attention and achieve wider appeal. This situation highlights multilingualism clearly, as Classical Arabic sometimes coexists with French and, at other times, with local dialects. Media professionals frequently mix standard and colloquial language in varying proportions, depending on their linguistic competence and performance. Ultimately, multilingualism is not a feature that distinguishes one country from another but a shared phenomenon across societies, although it manifests differently depending on context and degree of visibility.

5. The Linguistic Landscape in Algeria

The linguistic scene in Algeria is characterized by the coexistence of several languages, a situation largely shaped by historical factors. Colonialism, in particular, sought to impose the French language while marginalizing Arabic, as language constitutes both a unifying and a distinguishing element and serves as a carrier of culture and thought. This process generated linguistic tensions that resulted in the

coexistence and interaction of Arabic, French, and other local dialects. Algerian society, like many Arab societies, is marked by the presence of multiple dialects and diverse modes of social, scientific, and practical communication.

According to Calvet, the linguistic situation in the Maghreb countries, including Algeria, is characterized by the unequal use of four languages performing different functions: Classical Arabic, French, and the mother tongue, which may take the form of Berber languages in certain regions or vernacular Arabic varieties elsewhere (as cited in Lahouil & Hosni, 2010). Similarly, Grandguillaume notes that in contemporary Maghreb societies, Arabic and French function primarily as written languages of culture, while the true mother tongue used in everyday communication remains a local Arabic or Berber dialect, which is rarely written (as cited in Lahouil & Hosni, 2010).

The distribution and status of these languages in Algeria vary considerably. Nevertheless, it is evident that multilingualism is a de facto reality, whether officially acknowledged or not. The Algerian linguistic situation reveals that language use is neither uniform nor stable, but rather shaped by social, regional, and institutional factors.

6. The Impact of Multilingualism on the Teaching of Arabic

Algerian society relies on a mixture of local languages and dialects that differ from one region to another. Within a single family, one may encounter Arabic, French, or hybrid linguistic practices. This multilingual reality has both positive and negative implications for education. Among its negative effects is the emergence of heterogeneous discourse, where Arabic coexists with several other languages, leading to the marginalization of Classical Arabic in schools and higher education institutions. Learners often find themselves torn between Arabization and Francization, resulting in fragmented

identities and intellectual confusion between national and foreign cultural references.

Another negative consequence is the linguistic conflict between Arabic and other languages, accompanied by a diminished sense of pride in the national language in favor of foreign languages. Furthermore, children raised in multilingual environments may experience difficulties adapting to formal educational contexts that privilege a single standardized language.

On the positive side, multilingualism facilitates communication and interaction among different linguistic groups and encourages openness to other cultures without necessarily undermining Arabic. Foreign languages also play a crucial role in accessing technology and scientific knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension and global communication. Moreover, multilingualism contributes to reducing certain forms of racial or cultural discrimination, as linguistic diversity is not inherently an obstacle to learning, given that the human element remains the primary driver of language acquisition.

7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Algeria has experienced prolonged linguistic struggles shaped by historical, political, and cultural circumstances. These struggles have contributed to a complex linguistic reality in which the Arabic language, particularly Classical Arabic, has faced noticeable decline within educational institutions, limiting its effectiveness in supporting scientific, academic, and pedagogical development. The Algerian linguistic landscape has undergone significant transformations that have directly influenced language practices and attitudes toward Arabic.

Ultimately, multilingualism in Algeria represents a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be addressed from a single disciplinary

perspective. It requires the integration of insights from linguistics, sociology, education, and cultural studies in order to define its objectives and regulate its application within society. A balanced linguistic policy is therefore essential to preserve national identity while benefiting from linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a constraint.

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