

Multilingualism in Algeria: educational policies, language practices and challenges

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Abstract: Recent language policy developments in Algeria have attempted to promote multilingualism through encouraging foreign languages (French and English), acknowledging Tamazight as an official language and incorporating it into some regional schools. However, the competition between the official languages and the ‘foreign’ ones even in educational settings continues to (re-)shape the sociolinguistic profile of the public domain. This paper discusses these language policies, how they are reflected through language practices inside and outside the classroom, the challenges facing multilingualism, and the politics behind it. The analysis highlights the link between language practices and the lack of social justice and equal access to resources and power. Informed by onsite fieldwork, including questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographic observations, the study discusses the wide division of opinion in relation to these ideologically driven policies and socially constructed practices due to their connection to issues of identity, nationalism, (de-)colonialism, and globalisation.

Keywords: Multilingualism, language practices, policies, power, identity, nationalism, (de-)colonialism, globalisation.

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Introduction

Africa is home to about 30 per cent of the world's languages, and multilingualism has long been its 'lingua franca' (Batibo 2005; Fardon & Furniss 2003). Across much of Africa, it is the norm to speak more than two or three languages. Different groups embrace second and third languages for their usefulness in the region, such as the widely spoken Swahili in Eastern Africa, Hausa in Northern Nigeria, Wolof in Senegal, Akan in Ghana, and English in South Africa. Nevertheless, this linguistic richness is usually undervalued and disregarded by policymakers in the interest of national unity and integration. In other words, first languages are not perceived as useful because of their lack of capital in the national and global economic market, while some official languages are promoted over others, as is the case with English in South Africa. The main reason behind this is the ideology of nationalism and unity against 'threats' of regionalism and diversity. Despite the prevailing daily multilingual practices, the imported models of education, which mostly follow a monolingual agenda, led to the failure of many language-in-education planning models used in African schools (Banda 2009).

Blommaert *et al.* (2005) suggest that language is an ideological object that is used alongside social and cultural interests. In African politics, linguistic or ethnic differences are often exploited for political ends (Bamgbose 2003). The historical context and political pressures create an uneven distribution of linguistic domination and value. Therefore, how and why languages come to be practised in certain ways depends on the power relations and ideologies attached to them. Following Bourdieu's (1977) perspective, 'stronger' languages empower speakers by providing them with social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital. In other words, speaking the 'stronger' language practically or symbolically implies higher social status, better education, and more power. In this respect, language is both a negotiable commodity (Rubdy & Tan 2008) and a symbol of struggle and power (Bourdieu 1991; Williams 2000).

Given that the domain of education is one of the most crucial in creating transformations, promoting social justice, economic equality, and enhancing literacy, language policies and multilingualism pose substantial challenges (Beukes 2009). Negative attitudes towards minority, minoritised, or indigenous languages can lead to relegating them to the back seat and limiting their usage inside and outside classrooms. At the same time, using only the ex-colonial foreign language(s) can increase socio-economic differences. However, the link between attitudes, policy, and language practices is not straightforward; these are all constantly reshaped to respond to social, political, and economic needs.

Shifting the lens to North Africa, the sociolinguistic context of Imazighen is no different. Imazighen,¹ also known as Amazigh or Berber people, are the indigenous people of North Africa. They have been continuously invaded by other groups, which

contributed to a change in the linguistic profile of the region. In the case of Algeria, the successive invasions included the Phoenicians who arrived in 860 BC, the Romans in 2 BC, the Vandals in 429 AD, the Romanised Byzantines in 533 AD, the Arabs in the 7th century, and, later in the 11th, the Spanish (1505–1791), the Ottomans (1529–1830), and the French (1830–1962). Out of these colonisers, the Arabs and the French are of interest here because they largely shaped the sociolinguistic situation of present-day Algeria.

As a result of the historical, political, and socio-economic background, the language profile of Imazighen in North Africa has dramatically changed over the centuries. Their language practices, similarly, fluctuated across generation, region, gender, social class, and ideological stances. While language policy most often dealt with language as an object, subject to the ideologies of standardisation, purity, and modernity, language practice unceasingly evolved and shifted as a result of changes in power or political and economic domination, or, more neutrally, based on group solidarity and communication as a means rather than an end (Fardon & Furniss, 2003). In this paper, I discuss these processes and examine the fluctuation between language policy, ideology, and practice with regard to multilingualism. The paper addresses the following questions: What is the situation of language planning and ideology in Algeria with regard to national and foreign languages? How is multilingualism perceived in practice among both Tamazight-speaking and Arabic-speaking communities in Algeria?

Algeria: language policy and context

The sociolinguistic profile of Algeria is characterised by multilingualism. Arabic² and Tamazight are the most prevalent languages in terms of daily use. Standard Arabic (*SA*) has been the first official language since 1963; Algerian Arabic (*AA*) is the main medium of daily communication. Tamazight (*MZG*), which acquired official status in 2016, has 11 geographically scattered varieties (Eberhard *et al.* 2019), with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility due, in part, to the long absence of a unifying writing system (Sadiqi 2011). The major Tamazight varieties and groups are: Kabyle, Chaouia, Touareg (also known as Tamahaq), Mزاب, Chenoua, Tashelhit, Tagargrent,

¹ Imazighen, Berber, or Amazigh are all widely used in the literature, but Imazighen is the preferred term among many people in Algeria. *Berber* and *Tamazight* serve as umbrella terms for the language itself. Berber belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family, which includes Semitic, Cushitic, Egyptian, and Chadic languages. Berber stretches from Siwa in Egypt to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, and from the Mediterranean coast to Niger River in the Sahara.

² The diglossic nature of Arabic is usually ignored by its speakers. People use *Standard Arabic* (*Fuṣḥa*) and *Algerian Arabic* (*Dārja*) interchangeably. Both are simply named *Arabic* (*ʿArabiyya*). Algerian Arabic, like other varieties of Arabic, is well known for having regional sub-varieties.

Temacine, Tidikelt, Tarifit, and Taznatit. Despite having represented over 50 per cent of the Algerian population in 1830 (Benrabah 2013: 24), nowadays the Tamazight-speaking population constitutes a minority of the population. Since the 1960s, and arguably before, the Arabic-speaking population vastly increased numerically and, importantly, became the governing class. However, while Arabic has gained salience as the language of nationalism and ‘unity’, French (*Fr*) continues to dominate the political and economic scenes, with a significant challenge from English (*Eng*) among the younger generation. In order to understand the current linguistic situation, it is important to shed some light on the development of language policies in the country over recent decades (before 1960, 1960–90, and post-1990). In doing so, I also briefly highlight the top-down policy of Arabisation and bottom-up policy of promoting Tamazight. Top-down policy here refers to policy decisions implemented and imposed by an executive governmental body, while bottom-up policy is mainly initiated by grassroots activism, where individuals and communities are the impetus for change.

French colonisation, lasting for 132 years (1830–1962), has had an impact on the social and linguistic situation in Algeria. Along with a strict policy of assimilation, France introduced the country to European settlement, displacing and dispossessing farmers, mostly Imazighen, to provide fertile lands to the ‘colons’ or settlers. These zones were re-populated later by Arabophones (Grandguillaume 1996; Chaker 1998). The French also used a policy of ethnic division to maintain control. They created the ‘Berber Myth’, where Imazighen, especially Kabyle, were portrayed as descendants of Europeans.³ They promoted the idea of two different ethnic groups, i.e., Arabs and Imazighen, subject to different degrees of integration into the French culture. At a linguistic level, French was the official language of Algeria in 1848 and Arabic a foreign language by law in 1938. Moreover, between 1914 and 1954, 2 million Algerians, out of fewer than 10 million, had lived in France and mastered French, of which Kabyle represent a significant number (Benrabah 2013).

By the time of independence in 1962, Algeria was left destroyed and the implications were clear at all levels. Many Imazighen were displaced into regions other than their original communities, either within Algeria itself or abroad. Their number within Algeria dropped from 36.7 per cent in 1860 to 29.4 per cent in 1910 to 18.6 per cent in 1966 (Chaker 1998: 13; Kateb 2005: 95; Valensi 1969: 29). Linguistically, Standard Arabic was declared the only official language despite the absence of qualified Arabic teachers. French was relegated to the status of a foreign language but remained the preferred working language in government and urban society. Accordingly, students

³ Kabyle is the largest Amazigh group in Algeria. In the ‘Berber Myth’, Imazighen were praised for their religious heterogeneity and flexibility in contrast to Arabs (Benrabah 2013: 27). Imazighen were stereotypically identified as sedentary, living in the mountains, and liberal as opposed to Arabs, who were pictured as nomadic, living in the plains, and Muslim (Lorcin 2014).

who obtained an education in Arabic without proficiency in French had fewer prospects in the job market (Le Roux 2017).

Economic decline, resulting from the oil price collapse in 1986, fuelled social discontent and led to the ‘Black October’ riots of 1988 and civil unrest throughout the 1990s. While many observers claim that religious and political factors are to blame for the civil conflict (1990–2000), Testas (2001) argues that there is a strong connection between economic decline—indicated by high inequality, low productivity, and unemployment—and political instability. This suggests that, while religious ‘fundamentalism’ and a lack of democracy remain significant, they were not alone the cause of the conflict. The popularity and influence of the ‘Islamist’ movement were mainly the result of the government’s inability to keep its economic promises. The armed conflict, after the military cancellation of the parliamentary elections of December 1991, won by the Islamic Party,⁴ lasted for a decade and resulted in complete socio-economic chaos. Estimates suggest that there were 100,000–200,000 victims (McDougall 2017: 291), millions of individuals displaced, and hundreds of qualified Francophone professionals forced into exile.

Since 1962, the regime in Algeria had used language as ‘a proxy for conflict’ (Benrabah 2013), and the school was a ‘fertile ground for linguistic wars’ (ibid.: 54). This situation was the result of deliberately placing languages in a hierarchy to represent different capital and ideologies. Tamazight was associated with regionalism and portrayed as a threat to national unity; Algerian Arabic was pictured as a combination of French and Arabic that is inadequate for education; French was a symbol of both colonialism and mobility, while Standard Arabic represented Islamisation, de-colonisation, and nation-building (Jacob 2020). Education was used to disseminate these narratives and served as a facilitator for upward mobility, appropriation, and legitimisation of language (Standard Arabic), religion, and behaviour (Rouabah 2020). Immediately after independence, a top-down approach of Arabisation, brought about by an authoritarian regime, was implemented with complete disregard for methodology, context, and popular sentiments. The main objective of the policy was to transform schools from a French-based educational system to an Arabic-based one, without any consideration of Tamazight. The process has an impact on media, public sphere, and the workplace. Le Roux (2017) critiques the Arabisation approach and argues that opting for multilingualism would have ultimately advanced education in Algeria. In fact, Arabisation has remained virtually non-existent within higher education in scientific and technical specialties such as medicine, science, and engineering (ibid.). In these fields at the university level, French has generally remained the language of instruction and research.⁵ Despite the continuous efforts to ‘arabise’ these disciplines

⁴ The party called for Islam as the law of the government, Arabic its sole language, and it promised complete economic change.

within higher education, implementation has continued to be a challenge as there is a high demand for proficiency in French to access the job market. [Chaouche \(2005\)](#), in a study in the second largest Algerian city, Oran, found that a significant majority of university students felt that teaching in Algeria should be bilingual in Arabic and French (35 per cent) or multilingual (46 per cent) and that Algeria is in need of a multilingual reform (49 per cent).

With regard to Tamazight, its place in Algerian politics was noticeable. After banning a lecture by the Kabyle activist and author Mouloud Maammeri on Tamazight poetry in Tizi Ouzou, a Berber civil disobedience movement began in Tizi Ouzou, then spread throughout the country in March 1980. Demonstrators had two main demands: a change to the status of Tamazight and the use of Algerian Arabic instead of Standard Arabic. They called for ‘Tamazight di Lakul’ (i.e., Tamazight in school) and ‘Le berbère et L’arabe parlé = langues officielles’ (i.e., Berber and spoken Arabic as official languages) ([Gordon 1985](#): 138). The police crackdown on striking students caused more than 30 deaths and hundreds of casualties. The event became known as the Berber Spring. Kabyle people, however, continued to resist. The school boycott for the whole academic year (1994–5) touched all levels of education from primary through higher education programmes and persisted, despite some opposition, until President Zeroual passed a decree to create the *High Commission for Berber Affairs* (HCA) in order to promote Tamazight as part of the Algerian identity. Accordingly, a pilot programme for teaching Tamazight in secondary schools, after having already established two departments for teaching Tamazight language and culture at a university level, was launched in the Kabyle region. In contrast, other Berberophone regions received little attention because of the apparent lack of interest among its speakers in the territory and the lack of instructors and materials. In April 2001, a *gendarme* shot dead a young Kabyle, and a social explosion burst out against discrimination and injustice. Consequently, around 123 protesters were killed and hundreds wounded within a month ([Benrabah 2004](#): 104). This has come to be known as Black Spring. Before parliamentary elections were due in spring 2002, and to ensure Imazighen’s participation in the electoral process, President Bouteflika named Tamazight as the second national language on the 7th of April. Not long after winning the elections, he announced that, while Tamazight had been declared a national language, Arabic must and would remain the only official language (Liberté, El-Watan, sep. 2005, cited in [McDougall 2010](#): 31).

Despite the lack of political will and support, Tamazight was announced as an official language in 2016. Nevertheless, the issue of writing Tamazight has been a subject of continued controversy. Three scripts are used for its writing: Tifinagh, Arabic,

⁵ The language policy for higher education in Algeria maintains using SA for literary disciplines and French in scientific and technical ones, with a recent plan to shift from French to English. However, the plan is still debatable.

and Latin, each motivated by different political and ideological reasons. Many Kabyle speakers prefer the Latin script for Tamazight as they perceive it as ‘simple, good, most accommodative, and scientific’ (Rouabah 2020), but this script is used recursively as a link to French and colonialism. It remains, however, the preferred orthography among all teachers of Tamazight and the one currently used in classrooms. On the other hand, Touaregs advocate for Tifinagh as they have maintained its use over the centuries. Many activists and parents similarly argue for preserving the authenticity of the language and a ‘full’ revival of its distinctiveness. Some of the younger generation (i.e., students in governmental schools) and politicians advocate for the use of the Arabic script for Tamazight, which they claim sustains unity in the region. The script, for them, indexes the language and, by extension, Muslim identity (ibid.), similar to the case that has been described in Kenya where piety is linked to language and understanding of the Quran that is in return strongly attached to purity (Parkin 2003). The choice of the script remains vital in language planning at school. Yet, the ‘choice model’ followed by the government falls short in responding to the conflicting interests of programme managers, school directors, teachers, parents, and students. Errihani (2006) argues the choice of the Tifinagh script in Morocco is similarly ideological and not practical due to the lack of pedagogical training, whereas Mostari (2009) claims that the preference for the Latin alphabet by Algerians, for both Tamazight and Algerian Arabic, makes clear the importance of French in the society.

Another problem facing the revival of Tamazight is standardisation, a process linked to the movement calling for identity differentiation (Soulaimani 2016). Although standardisation offers some benefit for using a unified Tamazight language in classrooms, the process enforces homogeneity over a language that is inherently diverse and variable (Milroy 2001) and, in some cases, favours one variety over another (such as Kabyle, for example, over Chaouia or Tamahaq), which leads to further regional conflicts. Unifying linguistic components of these different Tamazight varieties presents a case of linguistic erasure, a process that ‘renders some persons and activities invisible’ (Irvine & Gal 2000: 38) by undermining the local intimate qualities of mother tongues. Likewise, El-Aissati, Karsmakers, and Kurvers (2011) consider the gradual introduction of a standardised form of Tamazight in Moroccan schools a serious challenge due to the difficulties inherent in combining the different varieties.

The status of French and English, as foreign languages, is as conflicted and rivalrous as the status of Arabic and Tamazight, the national languages (Zaboot 2007). To understand how French and English are framed with respect to multilingualism in Algeria, it is important to briefly explain their history of use. Since 1962, eliminating French has continued to be challenging, and the elite, who were promoting Arabisation for the public, maintained its use as an operational medium for science, economy, upward mobility, and education (Ahab 2012; Benrabah 2013; McDougall 2011). This policy ensured the maintenance of the elite’s social inequality and power,

leading to ‘a crisis of legitimacy’ (Holt 1994: 40). Nowadays, French is taught in schools, starting from grade 3. It is still the main medium of scientific research and a necessary badge for the job market, social mobility, and administrative services. Urbanisation, Benrabah (2005) argues, further favours its spread over Arabic, and therefore upholds its privileged position in the linguistic market. On the other hand, English is rarely used outside schools. Despite this, English has recently been gaining a large audience, especially in the oil industry, computing, and scientific documentation, but also as a linguistic agent of promoting peace (Belmihoub, 2012). Benrabah observes that ‘the more Algeria became arabized with Arabic displacing French as a medium of instruction, the more demands for English increased’ (2013: 90). In other words, despite representing colonisation, French still carries stronger economic and social capital in Algeria, and because Arabic alone cannot serve all the academic and professional needs of its people, there is a need for another foreign language, English in particular, for both de-colonisation and globalisation (Benrabah 2013). In 1993, the ministry of education made it possible for parents to choose between French and English for their children in primary school. However, this top-down educational intervention failed the same year; more than 73 per cent of parents and 52 per cent of teachers preferred the maintenance of French, and the total number of pupils who chose English between 1993 and 1997 was less than 2 per cent (Benrabah 2013).

In summary, the above section contextualised and discussed the development of language planning in Algeria before and after independence. It highlighted the ideological stances behind the top-down language policies and how language and identity issues were used as divisive tools for Algerians, mainly through schools. The ongoing linguistic conflict reflects three layers of tension: Tamazight and Algerian Arabic vs. Standard Arabic, Standard Arabic vs. French, and French vs. English. Linking Arabisation with Islamisation, Tamazight with regionalism and separation, French with colonialism and the job market, and English with globalisation has generated extensive debate around the contradictions between language policy and practice. For instance, whereas the language-in-education policy across primary, middle, and secondary schools maintains its support for the usage of Standard Arabic as a medium of instruction, higher education and mobility demand the usage of French. These top-down policies serve to enlarge the social class gap and are continuously challenged by students through their usage of Algerian Arabic or preference of English over French, for example. These attitudes and practices are further illustrated in the sections below.

The field sites of the study

As mentioned earlier, this paper examines language planning and language attitudes as well as linguistic practices among Tamazight-speaking and Arabic-speaking

communities in Algeria. To that end, it utilises sociolinguistic interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations. The study is informed by onsite fieldwork between August 2017 and November 2020 in multiple settings in East Algeria, including educational institutions in Berber- and Arabic-speaking regions. These were four governmental middle schools (i.e., grade 6–9, ages 12–16) where Standard Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English are all taught as subjects, while Arabic is still the main medium of instruction in other subjects such as science or history. The cities under examination are Batna, a majority Berber Chaouia community with some Arabs, and Setif, a majority Arabic-speaking community with some Kabyle and Chaouia speakers. Empirical data were gathered based on observation both inside and outside classrooms (25 hours), group and individual interviews mainly with parents, teachers, and students of different educational backgrounds (55 participants), and questionnaire surveys. The surveys were distributed both face-to-face and online to more than 450 respondents, including students, teachers, parents, activists, and members of the public.⁶ The main questions in the survey and interviews centred around: language usage in families, schools, and public domains; language attitudes and issues of identity and language policies; and the effects of some political, historical, and socio-economic processes on language use and multilingualism in the region.

The school community is ethno-linguistically diverse and multilingual. Arabophones, Francophones, and different Imazighen work together to teach Arabs and Imazighen (mainly Chaouia and some Kabyle). Nonetheless, each of them comes with certain linguistic preferences and ideologies. Teachers—as policy actors—are central in reproducing or challenging inequalities, subordination, and exclusion through the implementation of policy, challenging or transforming the official discourse (Valdiviezo 2009). While the government introduces these policies, the teachers guide and control their use in the classroom. Their opinions and practices are important in shaping the local understanding of social structures and contesting the traditional linguistic hierarchy. Therefore, Heller and Martin-Jones (2001) rightly identify classrooms, in multilingual settings, as significant sites for the (re)production of cultural identity and social inequality. Failure to accept multilingualism and diversity would have dramatic effects on the community.

Monolingualism in schools

Education generates social control through its legitimacy (Williams 1992), particularly with regard to arguments relating to ex-colonial, official, national, minority, and

⁶ Some of these data were part of my PhD fieldwork (Rouabah 2020).

indigenous languages. The role of school is vital because of its consistent use and misuse of language(s) as ‘ideological constructs’ (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 2013: 508). This section discusses language practices at school and the reasons behind these practices.

In terms of preference, when asked ‘*Which language would you prefer to be used as a medium of instruction in your local school?*’, the questionnaire data show that SA and AA were the most favoured languages mainly by middle-school level students, but also their parents (see Table 1). English, interestingly, scored higher than French and Tamazight, for reasons to be discussed later.

In terms of the reported language use at school (see Table 2), the questionnaire data reveals that the usage of Tamazight varieties and foreign languages is not viewed as important, whereas Arabic is overwhelmingly used by almost 80 per cent of the respondents. SA is the most widely used language (40 per cent), followed by AA (38 per cent), with only a minor difference between the two. Despite the fact that language-in-education policy only supports the usage of SA as the medium of instruction, AA is actually challenging SA and expanding into the school domain, which traditionally marginalised local varieties.

Despite the varied attitudes towards AA, almost everyone agrees it is central to Algerian identity. The attitudes of the respondents ranged between impurity, also reported previously by Benrabah (2007), uniqueness, flexibility, and creativity. The views of Ahmed and Lynda presented below reflect common narratives among young people.

Dārja [AA] has become more like the real official language. They took Standard Arabic, changed it and added some French to it and created this Dārja. The majority of Algerians know nothing in Standard Arabic, whether we are speaking about lay people or politicians and the elite. Schooling is in Dārja, everything is in Dārja. (Ahmed)

Dārja [AA], for me, is Arabic and French. It is both languages in one. It is an alien dialect. I do not know if I consider it a language in the first place. It has no history, but it is uniting us. I like it, as it is simpler than the standard. (Lynda)

In the classroom context, a puristic attitude in favour of SA still prevails. Students report being constantly reminded of the inferior position of AA. For teachers, particularly of Arabic, SA represents not only beauty and prestige but also religion. SA is portrayed as ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ due to its relation with Islam (see also Daoudi 2018). For a long time, SA has been perceived as the symbol of nation, unity, urbanity, and education. These values have been promoted by the state through media and school.

Table 1. Preferences for the medium of instruction.

Language	SA	AA	MZG	Fr	Eng
Preference	30%	30%	15%	8%	17%

Table 2. Language(s) use at school.

Language	SA	AA	MZG	Fr	Eng
Use	40%	38%	12%	8%	2%

Haeri (2003) comments that people in Egypt feel they are custodians of the language rather than its speakers. Despite this strong position, the use of SA at school is steadily decreasing in the face of AA. Moreover, while Arabic might be ‘glorified as an object, it is not always valued as a tool’ (Davies & Bentahila 2013: 89).

Tamazight, on the other hand, indexes rurality, illiteracy, and secularism as well as lack of opportunities (Rouabah 2020). It is mostly viewed as a ‘competitor’ for Arabic and a ‘colonial project’, similar to Almasude’s (2014) and El-Aissati’s (2005) findings in Morocco. The long history of discrimination of Tamazight is evidenced by ongoing major challenges for its use in schools at status, corpus, and acquisition planning levels. Many parents openly expressed their lack of enthusiasm about the value of teaching their children Tamazight because of its low social and economic capital (see Errihani 2006). Khelkhal and Touati (2018) reported that, except for teachers of Tamazight, all other teachers expressed a clear rejection of teaching Tamazight. These attitudes strongly influence identity perception. Most young Imazighen perceive themselves as Arabs. The following quotes by three teachers not only identify the crucial role of schools in linking Arabisation with Islamisation but also illustrate how they systematically generate a ‘false’ identity and perception in the community.

Tamazight is a political project. It is the reason behind ethnic, regional and religious conflicts. (Musa)

The majority perceive themselves as Arabs or at least convince themselves so. ... Religion is becoming their identity. There are few who know they are Imazighen! (Moudi)

Tamazight is a mere symbol. It means nothing to me. I started to hear about it only recently with politics. (Mira)

These extracts demonstrate the strong tension between Imazighen activists calling for the promotion of Tamazight and the Arabic-speaking group (both Imazighen who were arabised through school and family socialisation, and the Arabs). Considering that the communities under investigation are ethno-linguistically mixed, the pressure of the second category’s opposition to teaching Tamazight in schools is strong and continues to feed into negative attitudes towards using Tamazight inside and outside educational institutions. This hinders the progress of language revitalisation efforts and full access to Tamazight education and literacy.

Interestingly, when participants were asked about ‘*the current official languages in Algeria*’, few people considered Tamazight as ‘official’ (10 per cent), an equal score to French. The lack of institutional support for Tamazight and its low presence in media and schools reflects its continuous marginalisation, even as a national official

language. Participants, surprisingly, also selected AA as an official language, with 25 per cent responses second only to SA (55 per cent). This choice was justified by the dominance of AA in public, schools, media, and workplace. For participants, the increasing usage of AA even among politicians, to compensate for their low competence in SA compared to French, is sufficient for perceiving AA as a second official language instead of Tamazight.

Contrary to teachers in The Gambia who regularly use local languages in the classroom for pragmatic and pedagogic needs (McGlynn 2013), teachers in Batna and Setif consider the use of Tamazight or Chaouia by their students as a sign of disrespect. Many students were discouraged when using it in my presence; others were penalised. Language, hence, is used to impose authority and enforce ‘respect’. Teachers’ shaming of students, particularly boys, when using their mother tongue is reflective of the imposition of this attitude (see an example of such classroom interactions below). By reproducing the perception of Arabic as the language of power in the classroom and reinforcing the low status of local languages, teachers are imposing a monolingual language-in-education policy on a multilingual community. Students, accordingly, internalise such values associated with each language within the school system but sometimes make them explicit, too. In many instances, I witnessed young individuals (mostly students) mocking their Tamazight-speaking parents or grandparents for their accents or perceived ‘mistakes’ in Arabic.

Teacher (in SA): So, what does this text imply? What does unify you as Algerians?

Student -1- (in Tamazight): many things, like koskous and misery and ...

<Students laugh>

Teacher (in SA): You better behave yourself. When you answer, you use SA. Next time, you will leave the class. The question is clear. There are important elements for Algerian identity. Think about Arabic for example.

Student -2- (in AA): I thought Tamazight is our language, sir!

Teacher (in SA): It is your language in this region, but not the language of all Algerians.

With regard to English and French at school, their usage is very limited outside of their respective classes. Students, as well as teachers, report strong negative attitudes towards French and the increasing positive perception of English. When my questionnaire participants were asked about which language they would prefer to be removed from school as subjects and potential mediums of instruction, French topped the list (40 per cent), followed by Tamazight (15 per cent). The rest (45 per cent of respondents), however, responded that they would like to maintain all current languages. While Arabic and English are portrayed as instruments of de-colonisation and globalisation, French is seen as linked to brutal colonialism (Benrabah 2013). In the same line of thought, when asked which language they assume would be dominant in the future in Algeria, the majority named English (52 per cent), while Arabic and French

only scored (15 per cent). The following quotes represent the frequently reported perceptions.

English is the future. It is the language of liberation and end of colonialism that lived with us for so long. It is the language of research, technology and power. (Sam)

I hate French. It is beautiful but it carries bitter memories of the coloniser and France. I prefer English, it is easier and more practical. It is the language of the globe. (Hana)

Yet, the possibility of English superseding French in the Algerian linguistic market largely depends on future socio-economic reforms. Many middle-aged and elderly people, as well as the elite and Kabyle speakers, believe French should be maintained, as SA fails to meet the young people's aspirations for industrialisation, science, and mobility (Benrabah 2007). In a study in the Kabyle region, 83 per cent of the youth showed a preference for French as the language of future opportunity, while associating SA with dictatorship and oppression (Zaboot 2007). Algeria's hydrocarbons and energy industry, the backbone of the Algerian economy, creates the highest demand for English education in the country. Meanwhile, media, information, and communication technologies, as well as public educational institutions, still provide limited exposure to English and French, which continue to dominate the private education sector, with less access for the majority of people. A high demand for opening the economy to the international market and foreign investments might be the only way for English to gain stronger ground in Algeria.

Multilingualism outside schools

Contrary to many majority groups, language tends to be perceived as key to identity and group solidarity among minorities (Bhat 2017; Romaine 2013; Sallabank 2010; Williams 2008). Language choice in multilingual societies thus represents a link between history, social organisation, and an aggregation of identities. Despite the English-only policy used in Malawian universities, for example, teachers and students were in favour of multilingualism and the use of both English and Chichewa (Reilly 2019). Similarly in Algeria, the majority of participants were supportive of multilingualism, both in higher education and public life, and saw it as an empowering way to understand each other and to further enrich the Algerian identity. When asked if they prefer having one language that unifies all of them, interviewees favoured diversity and argued that every language has its own domain of significance and value:

The world is diverse by nature, we should learn more. All languages are good and each one has its own value within its space. I use Berber at home, but Arabic in public and French in the workplace. And to communicate with the world now, we need to speak English. (Sara)

When asked ‘*Which language do you need for the job market nowadays?*’, AA topped the list (47 per cent), followed by an equal choice of French and SA (20 per cent), while English was limited to 10 per cent of respondents (Table 3). Despite the positive attitudes towards English in general, most respondents are aware of the current limitations of its use in the job market.

For the language of technology in Algeria (Table 4), French scored the highest as the dominant language for sciences and technological devices (45 per cent), with a slight challenge from SA and English. On the contrary, the usage of Tamazight remains very limited in practice, particularly when not among intimate networks or at home.

However, the persistent presence of SA here can be misleading. Errihani (2008) argues that the choice of Standard Arabic as a useful language in public is simply the result of either feelings of loyalty to the Arab ethnicity or feelings of guilt associated with people having abandoned Arabic in favour of French. Participants usually feel that the promotion of it, even when not spoken by many, is part of defending and asserting Muslim identity. This apparent conflict between the will to have economic capital through French usage, as Errihani (2008) observes, and the feeling of responsibility to publicly support Arabic, transcends the individual level to be part of the government’s discourse promoting Arabic and implicitly using French.

The lack of capital associated with Tamazight is also linked to numerous factors. Language policies are not enough to change the status of the language in public and improve the economic situation of Imazighen or alter the attitudes of the Arabic-speaking majority. In fact, many parents compare teaching Tamazight to the early policy of Arabisation, symbolising lack of training and opportunities in the future, as it targets those speakers in rural areas, while urban dwellers send their children to private schools to learn foreign languages instead (see also Errihani 2008 and Buckner 2006). One Amazigh parent stated:

my children are not for experiments; the state wants us to teach them Tamazight while they send their kids to learn French and English; they want us to remain poor and illiterate. If they really wanted to promote it, they would have implemented it in all schools. (Salim)

As far as English is concerned, its perception as a ‘neutral’ language and a ‘decolonial’ tool to renew social and political hierarchies is clear (Jacob 2020), an opinion that is usually shared by both its users and non-users. This explains why its spread and promotion is seen as a positive step and an opportunity to overcome the previous colonial

Table 3. The language of the job market.

Language	AA	SA	Fr	Eng	MZG
Percentage	47%	20%	20%	10%	3%

Table 4. The language of technology.

Language	Fr	SA	Eng	AA	Tamazight
Percentage	48%	21%	21%	8%	2%

rules and policies, and subsequently overcome the ‘crisis’ of French. Language planning is political, but its ideological and psychological impact is also strong. At the level of the individual, English is signalled as a solution to all economic, political, educational, and social failures (Millani 2000). Yet, the implications of these narratives and attitudes are complex in practice.

In general, participants practice code-switching and translanguaging depending on the domain (e.g., home, market, workplace, hospital, or administration) and the addressee (educated or uneducated, old or young, urban or rural, male or female, etc.). When asked what language they mostly use in public, the overwhelming majority (80 per cent) recalled that monolingualism is an obstacle and exhibited use of both Algerian Arabic and Amazigh varieties (Chaouia or Kabyle), and sometimes French. One participant, Aisha, for instance, attributes the complexity of the answer to this question to the surrounding context, educational background of the speaker, and their socialisation patterns. She adds ‘we don’t use one language all the time, we can’t. It is always changing depending on where you are, what for and to whom you are speaking; we mix languages. That is what we do. I might be speaking Arabic for a minute then shift to French then back to Berber’. Surely, as language attitudes shift and other major language policies are enforced, language practices in education, workplace, and public will take another track.

Discussion and conclusion

The preceding attitudes towards different languages have practical implications as to whether the language will be used, in education and more generally, or not. In the case of Tamazight, for instance, while positive attitudes contributed to the maintenance of Siwi in Egypt (Serreli 2016) and Kabyle (Bektache 2009) and Chaouia in the Massif (Guedjiba 2012), negative perceptions led to a shift towards Arabic among Touaregs in Libya (Adam 2017) and Imazighen in Tunisia (Gabsi 2011). Language practices, accordingly, are the result of decades of unplanned language policies. They reflect social injustice, hegemony, and re-distribution of power resources in the market such as education and class (Bourdieu 1990; Blommaert 2003).

Education, with its built-in judgements, only legitimises the socio-economic inequalities and biased perceptions by providing hierarchies for language use and making them appear natural (Crossley 2003). The inequalities, in this case, are mostly based on social

class, urban–rural background, and ethnicity, but are mediated by language. The school uses specific linguistic forms that only children from privileged (dominant) backgrounds have had access to in their past socialisation. Children from lower social classes who share the same habitus and language face more challenges at school and, so, have higher rates of failure (see also [Haeri 2009](#)). For instance, the school provides privileges to the Arabic-speaking majority based on the assumption that everyone speaks a variety of Arabic natively. This puts Tamazight speakers in a position of managing both AA and SA in order to be able to compete in the field of education and literacy. Furthermore, the introduction of Tamazight for Berber speakers and its poor management adds to the dilemma of learning the standard form of Tamazight along with their native varieties. Similarly, providing a monolingual arabised system at middle and secondary schools, then setting French as a medium of instruction for science at universities, places those bilinguals/multilinguals from urban settings in a favourable position.

In retrospect, the linguistic complexity in Algeria is not unique. Language contact, multilingualism, and conflict are common worldwide, including elsewhere in Africa. It is not rare to see foreign languages taking the lead while African languages are relegated to the back seat of both political and public life due to the governmental disregard for the relationship between language, literacy, and economic development (see [Blommaert 2003](#)). The most visible example is their minimal usage in national and local legislature ([Beukes 2009](#)). In South Africa, for example, 11 languages have been granted ‘official’ language status, but government functions are almost exclusively executed in English. In many cases, the colonial languages become the official languages in practice. The proclamation of languages as official, national, or regional imposes a power and status hierarchy among not only the languages but also the speakers of these languages ([Banda 2009](#)). In the Ghanaian context, the shift involves three or more languages; Ghanaians shift from one minor indigenous Ghanaian language to a major regional one and subsequently or concurrently to English ([Bodomo et al. 2009](#)). [Horesh \(2020: 23\)](#) maintains that ‘it is the speakers of the language that shape not only matters of “attitude” and “identity,” but also how the languages they speak evolve and orient toward one another’. Put differently, speakers of any language are critical for any action to take place, whether regarding identity revival or loss, multilingualism or planned monolingualism, through their linguistic practices, attitudes, and pressure on policymakers. In its early revitalisation years, the provision of Welsh-medium and bilingual education, for instance, was almost entirely the result of the strong collective pressure that parents exerted on authorities ([Williams 2014](#)). Also, the process of encouraging stable bilingualism in Irish Gaelic and English since the 1970s included promoting Gaelic outside the Gaeltacht areas and was driven by local activism and language planning ([Laoire 2005](#)).

In this article, I have illustrated the link and, sometimes, contradiction between language policies, language ideologies, and language practices in Algeria, using qualitative data and

analysis from various sources—interviews, surveys, and ethnographic observations—in an attempt to bring this issue closer to those interested in Africa. The article highlights several factors that have been responsible for the complexity reflected in today’s linguistic situation in Algeria; some are historical, while others are political and socio-economic. Officialising Tamazight and promoting English are two clear illustrations of how speech communities can affect language policy, regardless of the diverse reactions to these bottom-up changes. Despite the insignificant presence of Tamazight and English in the school domain, and the continuing support for Standard Arabic in public and French in the job market, the linguistic daily practices of individuals are characterised by inclusive multilingualism. Code-switching and translanguaging are the norm, and all languages are present in different domains for different purposes. Therefore, the Algerian state may best serve its people by encouraging multilingual practices and language versatility both in schools and outside to reduce the links between language, ethnicity, history, and politics. Enabling people to develop their multilingual language portfolios, with equal access to resources, would avoid another return to monolingualism. Language policy should blend the ‘minority’ with the ‘majority’ and the local with the international to allow the young people to correctly understand and celebrate their past while at the same time feeling equipped for their future (Bouchard 2019).

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