

# **Native Languages in Post Independent Algeria: The Case of Berber**

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## **Abstract**

*The present paper purports to shed light on the sociolinguistic picture of Berber in Algeria through providing both a descriptive and critical analysis as far as language diversity and mother tongues are concerned. An attempt has been also made to echo the case of Berber as a native language and its potential at the ethno- cultural level. With the aim of evaluating the situation of Berber, we promptly address the following questions: (i) Can diversity be regarded as a cultural richness? (ii) To what extent can Berber be able to generate positive attitudes towards learning it? (iii) What are the implications of its corpus planning?*

**Keywords:** Berber, mother tongues, language diversity, attitudes, corpus planning.

## **1. Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that Algeria is a pluralist country through the existence of three languages mainly: Arabic, Berber and French. Among the native languages, is, merely Berber (henceforth Tamazight) which belongs to the Hamito-Semitic language tree; basically descended from the Afro-asiatic group of languages alongside Arabic. Berber embodies the largest areas of the Maghreb region stretching along Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Mali and even Burkina Faso. It is worth noting that, Berber subsumes a plethora of spoken varieties. These are observed clearly in Kabyle province, Aurès in the east in addition to Mzab and Touareg dialects. As a matter of fact, studies on mother tongues in Africa have given wider currency to Tamazight. According to (Montagnon, 1998, p.21) Berber is regarded as one of the ancient languages in the Maghreb area. Yet, its standing can be even traced back to the period of the Islamic spread throughout North Africa.

As far as the Berber community is concerned, there is no accurate consensus about the exact number of berberphones. However, (Chaker, 1998) estimates that the native Berber speakers represent 30% of the Algerian population. In doing so, the largest segment of the Berber community can be numerous found in the 'Grande Kabylia' where four administrative departments are situated in: Tizi Ouzou, Bouira, Boumerdes and Béjaïa.

## **2. Diversity in Regards to Native Languages**

Language is a safeguard of human's cultural and linguistic heritage. Its existence is occupied by a number of factors. In order to reach an awarded position, it must be competitively stood in a mere living atmosphere where speakers tend to use it even for informal daily interactions. When speakers are compatible with the

motives behind its use, they sense the feeling of nationhood if the language is a national on the one hand and inedible attitudes towards ethnic and cultural distinctions on the other. To be blunt, the era of globalization so far proves a populace impact upon endangered and even indigenous languages. The 'one' world order model gives rise to the birth of hegemonic languages. As such, the neo-colonialist favouring of even English or French seems eminently to open a window of controversy.

Diversity has become a universal norm. The promotion of endangered languages is dictated to take back seat to their original speech communities. Ethnic identity represents a basic footstep towards cherishing one's own language. It seems reasonable to add that, both ancestry and language origins are directly linked to self-esteem. So, a person cannot feel the social membership without speaking the language that deciphers such a group. To this case, the linguistic market differs radically from the current situation of endangered languages. However, this makes the situation worsened if the language spoken cannot afford an access to public and business communication. The question that merits to be asked is that how people would deal with linguistic assimilation at the expense of a local language? By virtue, any language whether being a world language or an ancestral one should lead to affective communicative outcomes otherwise, it will never bore fruit.

By 1989, the constitutional reforms that had been initiated by president Chadli led to the creation of the Berber-based political party (RCD). Indeed, the reforms were purely based on the need for the recognition of Tamazight as a national language. Furthermore, the world Amazigh congress was created by the year of 1995. Initiatives for Tamazight paved the way to "raise the Berber identity consciousness" (Chaker,2001,p.137). Also, the year of 1990 witnessed the creation of the Amazigh language and culture department in Tizi Ouzo. One year later, on October 1991 a second department was installed in Bouagi (Ibid,p.138). The aforementioned political initiatives aimed at glossing out their invested efforts to honor Berber with a better position. Yet, the whole situation of Berber in education was subjected to pressures which are tightly tinged with political motives (ibid, p139). As a matter of fact, initiatives of such kind could not reach satisfactory results to preserve Tamazight as an endangered language. However, for an unstandardized language, progressive footsteps should be compatible with developed methods of language standardization. For this to happen there will be a huge need to a successful institutionalization and hence solid corpus planning. Without doubt, Berber proponents hold great expectations which can only be portrayed at the practical level. The status of any given language is bound up with either efficient or jeopardized language policies.

As any mother tongue, Berber language advocates have never ceased their calls to integrate their language into the educational system. In order to preserve a language, it should initially gain ground in the educational system. By 2005, Berber was included with 3hours of instruction per a week (Benrabah, 2007b,p.77) as a subject of instruction. It is worth mentioning that Berber was firstly introduced in 2005. However, teaching Tamazight has not yet reached the entire territory of Algeria especially in non-Kabylian regions.

### **3. Berbers' Call for Recognition**

Through re-considering the linguistic situation of Algeria bearing in mind its cultural diversity, Albirini

(2016, p.7) highlights:

Language attitudes are an integral part of the study of language and key to understanding an important dimension of its sociolinguistic context, namely, the common beliefs about the language varieties used by speakers in a given speech community.

It is not erroneous, though, to maintain that language which has not gained a wider communicative dimension is a useless one. In parallel, given to a language is triggered by the factors that exist within its environment. Tamazight speaking community as an instance has launched a campaign for legacy and mere sovereignty. Therefore, the language has been able to stand alongside Arabic at the constitutional level.

Since Berber is a native language of about ¼ of the population (Chaker, 2004) it is indeed legitimate to raise the demand for its recognition. However, this struggle has been a plight for berberphones in particular. On March 10th, 1980, the Algerian authorities banned a lecture of the novelist Mouloud Maamri. This event had been leading to massive riots by demonstrators whereby they called for a linguistic and cultural recognition. Since all decrees and ordinances stood in favour to Arabization, it was merely “accused” of trying to exclude the Berbers, who at last prefer French to Arabic. (Djité, 1992,p.22). The Arabization policy had increased tensions between arabisants and berberphones as far the language dominance is concerned. This was an opposition against ethno-linguistic plurality. Berbers’ aspirations towards their language were sacred. Yet, while these ambitions were loudly raised, in 2002, Tamazight was finally made ‘national’ language.

المادة 3: تمازيغت هي كذلك لغة وطنية

Article 3: Tamazight is also a national language.

Despite its categorization as a national language, Berbers have never ceased their adherence towards Tamazight. At last, it has been institutionalized as an official language besides Arabic in 2016. As stated below:

المادة 4: تمازيغت هي كذلك لغة وطنية و رسمية

Article 4: Tamazight is entitled national and official.

The Berber culture is rightly so perpetuated to be a fundamental element of Algerian identity as cited in the constitutional amendment of 1996.

Integrating the mother tongue within the educational domain is prone either to developing the sense of belonging to one’s own culture or yielding to intolerance towards other languages. Children may feel trapped between intermingling case of the “native language” and the supposed learnt language generally referred in this context to Standard Arabic (henceforth SA).

Benbouzid, one of Algeria’s ministers of national education is among the pros of Berber whereby it has been introduced in both BEM exams by the year of 2007 in addition to including it in the Bacallaureate examination a year after. It should be assumed that the political discourse intended to forsake the status of Tamazight at schools remains a bone of contention. Nevertheless, the problem raised here centers around the problematic tinged to Berber as being a dialect and not a standard language. Attitudes towards Tamazight may not solely change to positive if it is only displayed through road signs and administrative ones. A well-designed careful corpus planning can effectively enhance the image of Tamazight as a “language”.

Political decisions in regards to languages are a question of power of decision-makers to either promote or

sideline a given language. The linguistic scenery is shaped by the quest for decreeing the status and uses of languages which may negatively respond to the population sociolinguistic aspirations. Since languages are human means of social interaction and everyone self-identification of both identity and culture, we can point out that Tamazight has been awarded little currency compared to Arabic or even French. If we go by the fact that minority languages are affected by stigmatization, at a practical level, Berber proponents, those who belong to the elite class solicited their battle towards recognition by increasing publications and hence readership. The majority of Berber writers favoured to choose French as a medium of expression. Chaker (1997:p82) asserts that

Il est certain que l'influence française a été particulièrement forte en kabyle-y compris chez les nationalistes kabyles qui rejettent plus tard la tutelle coloniale mais qui empruntent tous les traditions républicaines française.

The impetus behind gathering link with the French language by Kabylisians lies with the fact of considering such a language as a tool of expression despite being the language of the enemy.

#### **4. Corpus Planning: Issues of Standardization**

In spite of the officialisation of Tamazight, there is an absence of an elaborative corpus planning. This language has not yet found an adequate transcriptive system. Scholars have initiated its codification process. Two interesting pieces of work have been introduced by Mouloud Maamri (Tajerrunt n tmaziyr (tantala taqbaylit) in 1976 and also *Almawal* which is basically a twofold dictionary (Berber/French, French/Berber). Maamri is the first linguist who effectively reproduces a systematic grammar. Afterwards, he re-published (*Précis de Grammaire Berbère*) in 1986. A considerable number of initiatives have been launched, to name but a few, the Berber Academy of Cultural exchange and Research (henceforth ABERC) in 1967. Two years later, it became the Agraw Imazighen under the leadership of Mohand Arab Bessaoud. Additionally, the high commission of Amazighité (HCA) has been created during the presidency of Liamine Zerwoual (1994-1999). It aimed to promote Tamazight language and culture.

Wardhaugh (2006,p.359) contends that "if a community with a minority language wishes to keep that language alive , it is allowed to do so but at its own expense'. Despite the recognition of Berber as an official language by the Algerian institution in 2016, corpus planners are faced with the thorny issue of standardization. In order to make Berber in par with Arabic, this requires huge efforts at least to make a second selection of its writing script. The problems here center on ideological bases. Nevertheless, no official will towards the adaptation of one definite script has been notified so far. Additionally, Abdelrazak Dourari, a director of the national teaching and linguistic center for Tamazight (CNPLET) advocates the use of Arabic script. This may be due to the fact that the greatest majority of Algerians are arabophones. Within the same line of thought, Kamal Nait Zerrad argues that arabophones would better be tolerant towards Berber only if the Arabic script is used. Unquestionably, the official recognition of a minority language without a census about its corpus planning will spell failure over it and hence curtail the ground of codification enterprise. It's relevant to recall (McDougall,2003,p.8) words who maintains that the dynamic versions of Kabyle political life and community organization- whether in explicitly political and partly apparatus, more diffuse cultural orientations and demands on, yet more broadly , the enactment

of Kabyle community itself is explored in three arenas; the local, national and transitional whose complex interrelationships are delineated.

The obstacle perhaps today for Berber is the issue of standardization that is still far-fetched. The problematic goes back to the type of script to be selected. Berberphones prefer the use of either Tifinagh or Latin. On the counter part, Berber arabophones find the Arabic script more convenient. According to (Tilmatine & Suleiman, 1996) there are twelve variants of Tifinagh distributed over the Berber groups. (Grandguillaume, 1996.p17) affirms that

The daily spoken languages in the Maghreb are not written, but they are exclusively oral. These are regional dialects either Arabic or Berber. They have been put into an opposition, principally with Arabic dialects with an essentially written mode. (Or orally limited to both scholarly and religious uses) called classical or literary Arabic. This opposition is universal in the Arab world. (Author's translation)

Arabic advocates believe that both Berber and Arabic share similar characteristics as far as the writing system is concerned. They mostly go further to argue that while the Algerian society is mostly arabophone, choosing the Arabic script would be undoubtedly a great option especially for learners at schools. On the contrary, many scholars suggest the use of Latin script. For them, Tamazight needs to be internationally known and therefore only Latinization could make it possible. The process of Latinization is said to be firstly introduced by Jean Michel de Venture de Paradis, he opted for the Latin alphabet to transcribe Kabyle and Chleah varieties. To mention, the Latin script is widely used in the regions of 'great Kabylia' unlike the Arabic one which is dominant in areas such as: shawiya, batna and khenchla. Ideology is what makes the process latent in nature. What is of paradox is that those who desire the choice of Latin script are majorly francophone elites.

#### **4.1 What Alternatives?**

(Baker, 1992, p.10) reports that 'the status, value and importance of a language is most often and mostly easily (though imperfectly) measured by attitudes to that language'. Built upon this quotation, attitudes towards a language be it foreign or native depend mostly on ideology. They cannot be revamped easily unless critical analysis is made. Berberphones, had not been pros to Arabization itself, but, rather against its imbalances that tended to favour one language at the expense of another without paying a sizable attention to the fact of diversity. At a practical level, Algeria is multilingual. We can notify that the stability of its linguistic situation has witnessed a flux of changes. Dialectal Arabic for instance is the mother tongue whereas classical Arabic is a variety that fits sophisticated and academic circumstances.

Looking at the case of France, several minority and regional languages co-existed side by side such as: Breton, Basque, Occitan, Flemish, Catalan, Corsican and Franco-Provençal (Wardaugh,2006, p.362) though, the official de facto language of the country is French. The issue of minority language survival and demands for institutionalization are not solely limited to newly decolonized state. Yet, this seems to trigger a plethora of conjectures in regards to spreading the feeling of inferiority among endangered languages speakers. (Weinstein,1990,p.14) argues that

Language policy and planning can assist efforts to change a state and society in a radical way: changing identities, replacing one elite by another in a state apparatus and altering patters of access to reflect

replacement of a dominant class or ethnic group.

As a matter of fact, the promotion of minority languages implies a breach in the linguistic form designed by planners. Basically, only one language is benefited from the privilege of being dominant throughout all walks of life. Likewise, in 1928 Atatürk outlawed any use of Arabic script as far as Turkish is concerned. (Wardaugh, 2006, p.362)

All in all, decolonized nations tend to share a common idea of returning back to their roots by selecting one “language”. This concern arises an important point to the surface which can be subsumed under the following challenge: (i) imposing the one-mold of ‘national language’ (ii) disheartening the minority by marginalizing their language. (iii) Demands for recognition become a question of dissimilation. (iv) The spread of linguistic discrimination.

It is worth to note that languages are condemned to survival, maintenance or even loss and death. As far as Algeria is concerned, Arabic at one hand has been the safeguard of the national Algerian identity meanwhile Berber runs counter to the interests of non-berberphones. Arguably, there is an equal status assigned to minority languages faced with the current situation of Berber as only a dialect. One might assume that even Arabophones dismiss the value of Algerian vernacular Arabic. Most attitudes reveal the fact that the dialect is a corrupt version that can be hardly compared to SA. It is rare to hear projects which go in favour with promoting vernaculars.

Within a globalized era, in order for a language to be persistent in front of the world changes, policy-makers would strictly stretch the contours of the way through which a language can lead to socio-professional opportunities. Endangered languages face the threat of extinction due to the hegemonic imposition of world languages. To impose a given language with whatever means is an issue that has increased in intensity and hence brought to light a new juncture away from patriotic beliefs, but, rather it is of a purely practical approach for a successful language planning.

Any language that could not reach a codified system tends to witness plentiful vagaries as far as the context it belongs to is concerned. So as for Berber to be omnipresent amidst Arabic and French, it needs first to establish a solid system of orthography and terminological dictionaries, in addition to effective language documentation. This is very challenging for a language which has not yet agreed upon a clear written mode. Linguistic corpora would give a boost to the language itself. Any language should be set on motion only if it is already taught at schools. It is hoped for Berber to adapt Tifinagh as a writing script so that it could generate positive attitudes from the non-speakers of Tamazight as they represent the majority of the whole population.

## **5. Conclusion**

Berber is recorded to be one of the oldest and authentic languages in North Africa. It has weightily become a subject of concern to the ongoing language investigations. In Algeria, despite being elevated to the status of an official language, Berber is still encapsulated within the debate of its codification. Once alerted, sufficient efforts and maintenance should be implemented so as Berber could be a language of utility for the current and future generations. The school meanwhile teaches languages to be affiliated to today’s world.

However, the fallacy that stands against Berber results from the motive behind its utility and what could learners achieve through learning it? As mentioned earlier, the native language opens windows of both cognitive and affective development besides being a means of communication. It is perpetuated to preserve the ethnic identity.

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