

L'Algérie et la langue française ou l'altérité en partage, Rabeh Sebaa (2013)

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In this instructive and insightful study, Sebaa analyses the linguistic situation of contemporary Algeria. In particular, he draws an opposition between the socio-cultural prevalence of French, the former colonial language, and what he sees as the comparatively weak status of Arabic, the prescribed official language. This is explored from three perspectives: historical, which centres on the officialisation of French, and the origins of its political power; anthropological, which considers the present-day mechanisms which shape and maintain Algerian French; and psychological, which explores collective and individual attitudes towards French and Arabic language and culture.

The first chapter provides an overview of the changes made to the education system following colonisation in 1830. Whilst not dismissive of the successes of nationwide Arabic instruction in maintaining the status of the language, the chapter stresses the simultaneous emergence of an elite Francophone fringe. This engendered an early imbalance between the two linguistic cultures, Sebaa argues, and the inception of what would become a cyclic process of rejection of/desire for French, a phenomenon which the author argues remains current. This theory of linguistic replacement prompts Sebaa, in chapter two, to investigate the so-called 'lost paradigm' (p. 31) of Arabic, which he considers a result of the Francophone world view generated by the colonial education system. Moreover, given that, post-independence, Arabic was widely taught by non-Algerian instructors (many of whom came from Egypt and Iraq), the language of education developed 'exterior' associations. This re-formed attitudes towards French, which became re-appropriated by its former colonial subjects in a newly recomposed social environment. The author thus makes the significant point that, paradoxically, political *arabisation* facilitated a renewed cultural *francophonisation* in the country.

Chapter three explores this empowerment of French in a contemporary context. The crux of Sebaa's argument is that, although not an official language, French has become universal both in terms of communicative efficacy and social prestige. Moreover, the Arabic-French paradox is visible on a political level, since despite its lack of involvement with the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*, Sebaa argues that Algeria is the de facto second French-speaking country in the world: French-language media penetrates Algerian society with ease (mostly through the internet and satellite television), and even the 40% of Algerians who have not learned French at school are surrounded by the language either at work, or in the public space. According to the author, this 'interior otherness' (p. 37) galvanises the perception of French as both a foreign and a national language.

One of the book's main strengths follows in chapter four with Sebaa's hypothesis of the linguistic paradigm in contemporary Algeria. In his discussion of 'social quadrilinguism' (p. 43), the author contends that the borders between what he terms 'conventional' Arabic, French, Algerian Arabic, and Tamazight are neither politically nor geographically tangible. Furthermore, he contends that there is noticeable linguistic obscurity within the language varieties and the groups who use them. Whilst each language is subject to established connotations with specific domains (nationalism, postcolonialism, modernisation, religion, work and education, etc.), Sebaa stresses that these links are neither absolute, nor mutually exclusive. This cultural-linguistic identity obscurity is illustrated with several examples of borrowing and code mixing, which the author claims are even penetrating the written form (though his evidence is anecdotal), and may therefore constitute a new form of bilingualism in Algeria.

Chapter five revisits the historical perspective by examining how this linguistic ambiguity challenges the traditional definition of diglossia in Algeria (though Sebaa admits that the term merits critical reconsideration). The author posits that Algerian Arabic is not an 'L' form of its standardised written variant, but an altogether different linguistic phenomenon. This underscores a recurring feature of the book, namely that languages are defined more according to their speakers and social expression, rather than their structural conventions or political management. This theory is further elaborated upon in chapter six, which draws clear divisions between taught or educated (we might add institutionalised) language, and social or 'natural' language. The former can be considered a result of the political mechanisms shaping pro-Arabic language management in Algeria; the latter as the outcome of the historical power and contemporary prevalence of French, which Sebaa once again brands the unofficial universal language in the country.

Returning to the political discussion, chapter seven outlines the inconsistencies of recent language management in Algeria. It reasons that the prescription of Arabic as the single uncontested language has not only prompted 'general disarray' (p. 73) amongst the majority whose colloquial Arabic does not transfer into standardised Arabic; but also on an economic level, where imported goods displaying non-standard Arabic labelling are often destroyed or returned, and where banks, businesses, and schools are obliged to spend excessive amounts on reformulating documents to conform to the law. Exemplifying 'flagrantly incompatible' (p. 77) Arabic subtitling of French television programmes, the chapter nuances well the cultural implications of official policy, and how this shapes popular perceptions of both languages.

The book is mostly well structured, and offers a cogent analysis of the contemporary language situation in Algeria. The argument that the unanimity of standard Arabic is over-estimated by the state is convincing, and the author provides useful evidence to support the theory that this is as much due to ideological-emotional attitudes as it is to ineffective political and educational mechanisms. If there is a shortfall in Sebaa's work, however, it is that the historical perspective (explored in chapters one, two, and five) provides little critical insight into why French colonial policy was able to succeed where Algerian postcolonial policy has not yet been able. Moreover, terms such as 'natural' language (p. 63) and 'conventional' Arabic (p. 43) are at times ambiguous, and despite the introductory comparison with postcolonial contexts beyond Algiers (p. 15), this goes no further than a fleeting reference in chapter three (p. 38), and the discussion on lexical borrowings in chapter four (pp. 47-49). The book does, however, offer the pertinent observation that the language situation in present-day Algeria is as much defined in terms of a cultural opposition between the official language and the languages of everyday use, as in the political duality between 'national' and 'foreign' languages.