

The Politics of Language Policy in Relation with Identity Issue in Contemporary Africa: Case of Tunisia



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ABSTRACT: This Article outlines the politics of language policies in Tunisia in relation with the issue of Tunisian identity. The Tunisian society is a multilingual one par excellence, since pre-colonialism and due to its strategic location, Tunisia witnessed several linguistic changes. This paper focuses on the policies implemented by policymakers which can be divided into three main movements: Arabization, the preservation of French and the promotion for English. Since Tunisia gain its independence in 1956, the strong presence and implementation of French language threatened the flow of the Arabization movement. With the appearance of globalization, Policy makers tried to balance between the already existed languages with English due to its importance in today's world. This paper argues that such policies, especially in the educational system, had a direct impact on the post-colonial identity.

KEYWORDS: Language policy, Arabization, Tunisian society, Francophonie, Post-colonial identity, code switching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tunisia is a Mediterranean country located in North Africa bordered by Algeria from the west and Libya from the south-east. Its strategic location made it flexible for establishing trade relations with both Europe and the Middle East. Despite its colonial history, since the independence in 1956, Tunisia has been building independent economic relations and compared to similar countries with the same limited natural resources, it has been performing fine. Tunisia is a middle-income country; it was ranked 97 out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) released by the United Nations Development Program on 8 September 2022.

Tunisia's political situation has been critical especially after the Arab spring in 2011, which started exactly on December the 17th following the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who had no official authorization to sell fruit and vegetable on the side way of Sidi Bouzid governance. This led the agents of the municipality to take over his goods. One female agent physically attacked Bouazizi after he protested which led to more anger and call for justice from his side. Due to this physical and psychological abuse, Bouazizi set himself on fire starting the first revolution in Arab world. Thousands of angry Tunisians protested on the streets of twenty-four governances to end the oppressive regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali² (SGHAIER, 2012)

Since then, the government has been facing many challenges in maintaining a sustainable economy while transitioning to a democratic regime. The revolution allowed Tunisians to practice their political rights freely and to choose who represents them for the first time. The political and economic chaos, that Tunisia lived in right after the revolution, was considered by many scholars a part of the country's rebirth as a nation. While most of the Arab leaders like to call it westernization, Tunisian former and current leaders (Bourguiba, 1984, Ben Ali 1987, Mzali 1980) view it more as a necessary modernization process aiming for social and political development (Svitlana HLADCHENKO, 2021).

The only official language of Tunisia is Arabic according to the Tunisian Constitution.

***"Tunisia is a republic; its language is Arabic and its religion Islam."* (Author translation)**

However, the competition between Arabic and French culturally and linguistically has been intense since independence in 1956. Language policies can shape language use as much as attitudes towards languages can determine future changes In the Language policy (LP) matter. This paper discusses this hypothesis focusing on the field of education while analyzing the framework of the governmental decisions and official laws that position both Arabic and French while promoting for English as the language of Globalization.

¹ This article is derived from the M.A thesis entitled "The politics of language policy in contemporary Africa: Case of Tunisia".

² The second president of Tunisia that came into power in November 1987 after a constitutional coup d'état that ended his predecessor's regime.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research focuses on the politics of language policy associating it with the post-colonial Identity through looking at different findings from previous studies in the same field. Therefore, this research utilizes official documents, political speeches, journals, books, articles, and statistics from field studies which aims to measure attitudes towards the three main languages used. Firstly, the languages policies will be analyzed through presenting the official decisions made by leaders; The focus will be on the first two presidents of Tunisia (Bourguiba and Ben Ali) since their long terms shaped Tunisian politics. Secondly, studies (example Pennington 1992, Lawson & Sachdev 2000, Aouina 2013) will be investigated for more insights on the social aspect. In this part the focus is on education, considering it an essential component in forming the individual's knowledge therefore it can have an impact on identity formation process. Lastly, Findings will be generated along with the theoretical framework to determine the relationship between Language Policy and identity in the Tunisian society.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories in this study offer a clear understanding of the evolution of sociolinguistics and contributes to the analysis of the current situation. Historical analysis is used to give these policies a clear context and root the discussion for clearer conclusions. Theories such as language policy and planning theory and social Identity theory present a possible perspective on the linguistic evolution of the Tunisian society. The political and social aspects' codependency can determine the future of LP in Tunisia.

3.1 Language planning and planning Theory:

This theory suggests that politics are the focus of planning rather than languages. That is to say, the more hegemony a language has compared to other languages in multilingual society, the more likely it will take over various domains. (SIRLES, 1999) In the context of this research this theory can apply on both Arabic and French considering both are not the native language of Tunisia, especially with no resistance from Berber language speakers which they represent just 1% of the total population. (Gabsi, 2020)

The process also explains the choices made by individuals based on the speech communities they belong to, in which their turn established linguistics patterns through generations. The theory is constantly developed by scholars since these choices are evolving whether by intentional official policies or by random social aspects. (RICENTO, 2013)

3.2 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in an approach to understand how individuals define themselves in association with groups. It suggests that individuals derive a partial identification from their membership in social groups, and it is shaped by the social context in which they live. (Huddy, 2001)

In the context of languages politics, social identity theory is particularly relevant because it helps to explain how individuals develop linguistic identities and how these identities shape their behaviors towards those languages. By understanding the social and psychological processes that underlie identity formation, we can gain more insights on attitudes of different age groups.

4. TUNISIA'S LINGUISTIC REFORMS

4.1 Arabization

Arabization is defined as the process of promoting Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) through implementing certain policies in education, administrations, and media. This movement had a great influence on the linguistic changes that occurred within the society (HOLES, 2018)

Historically, it represented resistance and was directly related to preserving the Arab-Islamic cultural identity in the face of colonialism. (Daoud, Arabization in Tunisia: The Tug of War, 1991)

Religious institutions such as the University of al-Zaytuna and Quran Madrassas (schools) played an important role in preserving Classical Arabic and passing it to the younger generations. With Qayrawan being the capital of Ifriqiya in history (Tunisia now) and as a historical and religious capital, it attracted people from the middle east and other parts of the world, bringing the Islamic community together and allowing the language to be promoted and spread. Arabization was an ongoing process until after the independence in 1956, the first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba made several statements on how the process will be taken further. In education, He made a clear statement on replacing French staff and materials by trainees and as soon as they are qualified, all subjects will be taught in Arabic. (Daoud, Arabization in Tunisia: The Tug of War, 1991)

Following the similar strategies, Bourguiba's successor Ben Ali showed his willingness to preserve Arabic language, which he called "a mother tongue and a main component of [Tunisian] national identity" (Ben Ali, July 17, 1996). Three years after, he insisted further on his efforts towards this language stating: "As regards our identity, we have consistently endeavored to preserve its attributes, most particularly our Arabic language" (In Daoud, 2011: 17).

Related to academic field, Ben Ali's most important decision regarding this language was Arabizing scientific subjects to which is no longer just related to just teaching Religion or humanities.

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Faithful to our Arab belonging and our national language ..., one of the objectives of our educational reform is to extend the use of the Arab language from teaching the literary and human sciences subjects only to teaching scientific subjects. (Ben Ali, July 18th, 1992)

This decision was oriented more towards preserving national identity, It was a strategy proving that Arabic can also be used in sciences and technologies until level 9 in middle schools. (Hawkins, 2010)

The Arabization process had a positive impact on the public especially in preserving their heritage and Arabic-Islamic identity, however in the education system those strategies weren't as effective as it was expected. This language planning was not well studied, the continuous conflict with French language made it harder for this process to gain more attention especially in higher levels of education. (Aouina, 2013)

Daoud (2011) expressed his concern of such policies, in nurturing students with “conservative, traditionalist, less westernized mindset”.

4.2 Preservation of French

Francophonie, a Post colonial policy, was formed to promote and maintain French Language especially for former French colonies that kept economic ties with France. Francophonie was adopted by Tunisian leaders, starting from Bourguiba, as a tool of modernization. Bourguiba wanted to take advantage of French language and view it the only way to attain progress politically and economically. Since Arabization had succeeded in Promoting Arabic as a first language that help Tunisia regain it's Arabic-Islamic Identity, the use of French as “an auxiliary language” was welcomed by many Arabization proponents including then prime minister, Mohammed Mzali. (Daoud, Arabization in Tunisia: The Tug of War, 1991)

Mzali represented Tunisia in its first Francophonie summit meeting held on February 17-18, 1986, in Paris, France. He stated that French will help Tunisia get access to science and technology and keep it open and up to date with the world. Such access to modernity was meant to widen the cultural aspect of its people and grant them double access to opportunities among the Francophone countries and worldwide. (Daoud, Arabization in Tunisia: The Tug of War, 1991)

The use of French language actively in the Tunisian society during colonization, had introduced Tunisians to the concept of the language and its future benefits. It was spoken mainly by the elite and intellectuals, which paved the way to its emergence into the education system. The French leaders established language schools to teach their language during colonization, and rapidly these schools were known as institutions of high-quality education. This had encouraged the locals to sign up their children to insure access to quality education. An opportunity to upgrade Francophonie strategies had presented itself and the presence of the language became more powerful within society. In 1989, Five French-middle pilot schools were established in almost every part of the country. Graduates with academic excellence from these schools had the chance to pursue their education in France, this strategy had created a competitive environment that played a role in favor of French language to be spread more and maintained in the most important sector of the country. (Daoud,2011)

French in education is the language of science, mathematics, and technology. Unlike Arabic that was shortened on literature and grammar, French took over the middle school and high school scientific subjects and still until the present day the first language when it comes to higher education minus the foreign languages' studies.

The use of formal French in the administrative system also played a major role in maintaining the language and determine various opportunities for many governmental employees. Although some leaders, like Moncef Marzouki³ tried to replace the whole system with Arabic as an advanced process of the Arabization movement, none of these trials were successful.

4.3 Tunisian Arabic and Code-Switching:

Code switching (CS) is a linguistic phenomenon used in bilingual or multilingual societies. It's the act of alternating between two or more languages within the same conversation. CS is used worldwide, It resulted discussions and debates in sociolinguistics. Researchers, like Poplack, 1997, Gibbons, 1987 and Milroy and Muysken, 1995; Eastman, 1992 have been studying CS, words borrowing and loan words and arguing whether they are the same concept in bilingual societies or they can be differentiated and not to reflect same linguistic behaviors. While this is not the issue to be discussed in this chapter, it can help us in understanding linguistic choice in association with Tunisian Arabic (TA) and the embedded effect of French (F) specially on the daily communicative Level. TA is a very receptive dialect it borrowed words from three main languages: Arabic, French and Berber. These can be viewed as the basis of TA despite having many loan words from other languages like Turkish, Italian Spanish etc.

In the context of CS within the Tunisian society Lawson & Sachdev (2000) presented a detailed study that occurred in two different settings; universities and the streets, to compare the insights and the percentage of CS use. In the university setting they used Matched-guise research⁴ to determine attitudes in a formal environment. Results showed that attitude towards CS when used by

³ Tunisian Politician who was the fifth president of Tunisia from 2011-2014.

⁴ Matched-guise technique (Lambert et al., 1960) used to generate participants attitudes towards languages or dialects after listening to different voices (guises) speaking different languages. Participants are usually not aware that the voice of person speaking is the same in all languages. That helps control variables such as voice quality.

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male and female speakers were not positive or desirable compared to the other languages in use (Modern standard Arabic, French and English). However, another interesting conclusion was drawn from this technique; TA rated higher when used by male speaker whereas for female speaker French was more favorable. This can further support the argument of viewing French as a more prestigious language and has a direct relation with the social status. (Sarah Lawson, 2000)

The findings of this study showed that the Tunisian society is using CS not only between TA and F but also with MSA and English. The main findings of this study suggests that when TA with low percentage of CS are used more with Arabs (ingroup) , it is more likely to show solidarity and pride of the Arabic. In some cases where CS to French was used, it was interpreted as a differentiation tactic since the later language reflects socio-educational competence and 'covert prestige' (Trudgill, 1974) especially for women who tend to code switch more than men.

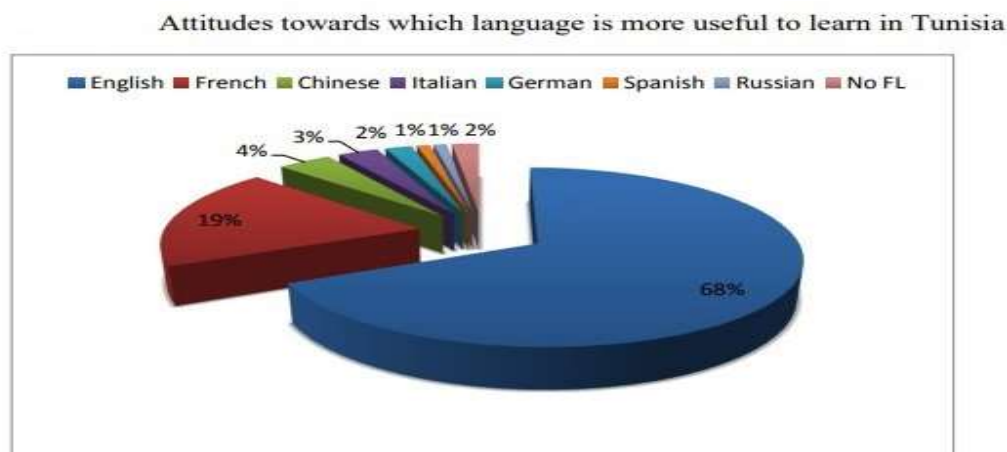
5. TUNISIANS ATTITUDE TOWARDS LANGUAGES

5.2 General Attitude

Attitude in the context of this paper is “potentially an evaluative stance that is sufficiently stable to allow it to be identified and, in some sense, measured” (Garrett, Coupland, and Williams, 2003: 3). Tunisians’ attitude towards French ironically changed after independence in the favor of French culture. The colonizer’s language was viewed as the window to modernization. while Arabic represented traditional values and authenticity, French was the one leading to progress. This attitude was mainly of intellectuals as mentioned the decolonization process was followed by social resistance to French by certain groups and especially students at that time who understood and studied French but refused to use it in conversations⁵. However French remained until today a prestigious language, those who wish to actively participate in society must be fluent with a solid background knowledge of the language. It has a great deal to do with social hierarchy, especially within the upper middle class. It is observed as well that it’s used among women more than men in public, most of them use standard metropolitan French⁶. In the study of Stevens (1980) he reported that even some Tunisians claim to have better service when they use French to order in restaurants or to check in hotels as much as it is used in situations where the speaker wants to express. (Stevens, 1980)

Tunisians’ attitudes towards languages usage can be divided as follows; some see Arabic stand in the way of modernization, so they prefer French, and they try to maximize its usage, while the others’ views this obsession with French in relation to modernization threatens the authenticity of the national culture. Nevertheless, according to the study of Aouina (2013)⁷ globalization is affecting the linguistic preferences of the Tunisian society, younger generations are now aware of the importance of English in their academic life and future careers. Results presented in Table 1 below, represent the perspective of Tunisians during a ‘Vox pop’⁸ conducted on 100 participants in random settings (in Coffeeshops, streets, social event etc.) to measure which language is more useful to learn.

Table.1:



⁵ This example was mentioned by Paul Stevens in his article “Modernism and Authenticity as reflected in Language Attitudes: The Case of Tunisia.

⁶ Parisian accent that usually women in Tunisian society use. It is more prestigious due to its Guttural R pronounced in the back of the vocal tract.

⁷ Globalisation and Language Policy in Tunisia: Shifts in Domains of Use and Linguistic Attitudes. A Dissertation Aouina H(2013). The author presented this part of the research in the fifth chapter entitled “Public Language Attitudes in Tunisia”

⁸ “Vox pop” is a Latin phrase that is translated to “Voice of the people”. The survey is used to measure the opinion of the majority of people on a certain matter.

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Aouina insisted on the diversity of the participated group; different age group, different academic background, both genders were present with percentage of 70% male and 30% female. Options were not given in the questionnaire; the respondents were asked to suggest the most useful language and give one reason why they chose it. As shown in table.1 a majority of 68% thought that English is the most useful whereas 19% thought that French is. Three main reasons were given following the choice of English; first it is the international language, second it is the language of science and technology and third it is the main language of communication worldwide. It is important to mention that some participants chose English over French because they did not think they need to learn French as it is already the second language of Tunisia. (Aouina, 2013)

The general attitude generated from this part of Aouina's study suggests a change occurring in the society towards languages compared to the study of Stevens (1980) in which attitudes towards French were more positive while English did not yet secure a hegemonic position within the society.

5.1 Attitudes in the Education Settings

A survey in the same study of Aouina (2013) generated the attitudes towards the two foreign languages in one of the universities by asking participants to compare between the two in the scale of effectiveness. Two statements were presented in the questionnaire: 'French is more useful than English' and 'English is more useful than French'. And then which language each one prefers. Although results can be similar when it comes to "useful" and "favourite", this test can be viewed as subjective form of the previous one. It is noteworthy to mention that usefulness in this context did not specify a certain domain or subject, respondents got to define this term by what they see most accurate.

When asking about usefulness, results show how close the percentage of agreeing on both statements. Almost half of the respondents (53.1% for F, 52.8% for E) view both languages as equally useful. Since the study was conducted in an academic setting, we can predict that the usefulness was associated with academic life. Being the language of sciences and technology in secondary school, French can be preferred over English for this specific reason. However, if we compare the status of both languages, we can notice that attitudes are changing. This is viewed also through the generational difference once again. Teachers seem to agree that French is more important as their percentage reached 79%, nearly double the percentage of students (39.5%).

Same difference was noticed in the second statement (English is more useful than French). Yet this time students supported English over French. Although the results are close, 33% of teachers disagreed, which leads us back to the generational differences.

5.3 Relationship between Language and Identity

Post-colonial identity is the product of historical process. The Tunisian identity was built through various ethnical backgrounds, the colonizer's traces and what is left from the indigenous culture. The linguistic identity is an important part of forming the Tunisian identity however it can be supported by non-linguistic identity work (Bucholtz, 2004)

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in the same study of Aouina to analyze data and to differentiate between the age groups and their personal preferences. The statement analyzed in association with identity was whether speakers identify themselves with Arabic language considering it an important component of Tunisian Arabic. Answers are taken as random choices of how they think they use the language instead of how they use it (Aouina, 2013).

Although identity can be hard to be measured or disclosed in a society that has a rich and diverse ethnical background, we can see the impact of language on Tunisians' preferences. Looking at the policies before the Arab Spring and because most of them did not notice drastic change, we can consider them successful in preserving the national identity (93.9% among teachers ,88.9% among students agreed with the statement). The group that disagreed with Arabic language being associated with their identity, according to the author, may have had a different understanding of the statement, The question did not specify which Arabic and certainly did not mention dialects. The study conducted by Lawson & Sachdev supports the importance of specifying which variety of Arabic is in question for that many Tunisians (see (Stevens, 1980)) consider TA "far from being an Arabic language".

According to the findings of these studies and associating language preferences to the actual use of languages in society, Tunisians seem to relate their identity to TA more, it is viewed as a product of many years of resistance during colonialism as much as during decolonization period. Oddly words borrowed from other languages, especially French, are not seen as a form of CS anymore. Due to the daily use of certain terms, they got blend into the Tunisian Arabic which makes it unique and even hard for other Arabic varieties' speakers. Language policies like presented in the studies above, had an impact on national identity. Its direct effect on shaping the general attitude towards languages can be the determinant of future policies. English language on a local scale offered a type of freedom to young generation. Being the most used language on social media (Kashina, 2020), communication with English rather than French felt like freedom of expression in an environment with no direct control.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was at first to measure the effectiveness of language policies and how they directly affect society's perspective on which language they identify with. Previous parts presented different studies of scholars who investigated the same issue of language policy in relation with attitudes towards languages. While attitudes and preferences cannot reflect the actual daily use, it gave a clearer picture of the linguistic situation of the Tunisian society. However, findings from various studies mentioned

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above show that identity issues are rather complicated and go beyond these policies. The results also showed generational gap when it comes to preferences and although French preserved its position against Arabic for years, it seems just a matter of years before policymakers give more attention to English in education and it may overcome the country 's primary policies. Older generations seem to hold into French more. This refusal of change in spite of the acknowledgement of the dominance of English in today's science, reflects the other side of French being not only a colonizer's language but also a part of the post-colonial identity.

A lack of clear strategies and effective follow-up is obviously affecting not only attitudes towards these languages but also future choices. The "Thug war" as Daoud (2001) described, transferred from Arabic-French war to French-English war. Efforts were made to secure the position of French yet with globalization spread worldwide, English is paving its own way and leaving policymakers no choice rather than designing a clear strategic plan for maximum use.

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