

## The Syndrome of the French Language in Algeria

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**Abstract:** When France colonised Algeria in 1830, it was not merely economic exploitation or political domination it sought, but a comprehensive annexation that aimed at eliminating its culture. The French controlled education, government, business, and most intellectual life for one hundred thirty two years. France's colonial system imposed a harsh programme of acculturation which positioned French as the dominant language on its colonies, ousting local languages, Arabic and Berber. Profoundly de-structured by the colonial settlement, Algeria had to face a series of cultural problems relating to its national identity. A society whose true identity had been denied for a hundred and thirty years could not begin to reconstruct itself without restoring the bedrock of that identity, the Arabic language. However more than forty five years after the departure of the French colonisers, the country is still struggling to reconcile the various aspects of its personality. The discourse of identity in Algeria is the main strand of this paper. From the challenging encounter with the Western European hegemonic "Other" comes the necessity to bring forth such a discourse. In this paper, I would like to sketch broadly the status of the French language in Algeria and suggest a comparison between French Algeria and independent Algeria to see the effects of the vehicular language on this country.

**Keywords:** colonialism, Orientalism, identity

Every colonized people- In other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of his local cultural originality- finds himself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation, that is with the culture of the mother country.<sup>1</sup>

Algeria offers an ideal example for the study of the "language of the civilising nation." During the colonial era in Algeria, which started as early as 1830, France established a host of political and administrative institutions to rule beyond its borders. These had significant effects on how people worked, lived, what they learned, and how they interacted with one another. One major effect of colonisation in Algeria had been the dislocation of language. The imposition of the French language meant not only segregation, illiteracy for the great bulk of Algerian people, religious intolerance, but above all the eradication of Algerian identity and her linguistic expressions, Arabic and Berber. In this paper, I purport to examine the role that language plays in the enunciation of a culture, its capacity to chain and change. I would like to sketch broadly the status of the French language in Algeria and suggest a comparison between French Algeria and independent Algeria to see the destructive effects of the vehicular language on this country.

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove P, 1967), 17-8.

In her insightful book, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Claire Kramersch argues that foreign language learning itself contains within it the means to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Kramersch adds that it is mainly through dialogue that conflict can become a catalyst for change because it involves “fundamental realignments of value and perceptions among the participants.”<sup>2</sup> This implies that cross-cultural communication can become part of a systematic effort to change perceptions of the Other. However, during the colonial period the imposition of a foreign language not only displaced native speech, but also became the very means of ideological domination.<sup>3</sup> When France colonised Algeria it was not merely economic exploitation or political domination it sought, but an extensive annexation which aimed at eradicating its culture. In order to understand the different periods language went through in Algeria, we need to have a short glance at the country’s history.

Frantz Fanon contends that “the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man,”<sup>4</sup> historical records however show that under colonial rule, any colonised man tended to be seen as Other. The Western ratio has been formed through the negation of white and non-white peoples. And the diamond in the crown of European culture is the distinction made between itself and others through the criterion of civilisation. To the French, Algeria was home of savage people. The Algerians had therefore been presented as almost a different species at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder and were pejoratively referred to as ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians,’ hence as people lacking in all the attributes of civilisation. Thus convinced of being the best expression of humanity and that they had to project their principles and values on others, the French, like many Europeans, went on ‘producing’ others in the name of the civilising mission which they were supposed to accomplish, taking example on the Roman Empire - *Pax Romana* - a so-called model of peace and world order, a mythology of universal happiness. The French powers presented themselves to the native people as the bearers of science, rationality, progress and the enemies of religion and backwardness, hence as the agents of civilisation. As such they controlled government, business, and most intellectual life for one hundred and thirty two years. The French attempts to control the natives was more visible in the field of education. The denial to the Algerian of his cultural identity through controls of language, educational programmes and methods of instruction indeed revealed the colonialist policy in its most destructive aspect.

The motto of the *Ecole Coloniale* was ‘épousez le pays’<sup>5</sup> and Jules Ferry, a staunch defender of colonialism during the second colonial empire and Minister of Public Instruction in the 1880s, was a fervent believer in this approach. Ferry’s impact on the French schooling policy in Algeria has been so strong as to appear indelible. In a Parliamentary debate on March 30th 1885, he justified his policy in terms of France’s civilising mission:

There is a second point I wish to refer to. It is the humanitarian and civilising question [...] The superior races have a right in relation to the inferior races. I say they have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilise the inferior races.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Claire Kramersch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 232.

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture: Discussing Post-Colonial Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 152.

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove P, 1961), 26.

<sup>5</sup> “Espouse the country”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M Chaulanges, A-G Manry, R, Sèves (eds) (1978), *Textes Historiques 1871-1914*, p. 140.

Ferry believed that the school was to be the most pacific and effective tool for transforming a society and evoked the idea of the progressive “civilisation” of the school through the teaching of the French language to the indigenous people.<sup>7</sup> This triggered a whole new orientation in education that is a re-structuration of the Algerian school along French lines and the eradication of the Arabic and Islamic roots of the conquered land in order to produce a man free from culture, easy to manipulate. The French indeed viewed their conquest as a crusade against Islam because they believed that it constituted a hinderance to their policy of acculturation or as they termed it, assimilation of the Algerian people. Henceforth, France imposed a harsh programme of acculturation which positioned French as the dominant language on its colony, ousting local languages, Arabic and Berber.

Ferry’s creation of a free, secular and compulsory education proved extremely pernicious to overall education for Algerians who previously relied on Koranic schools to learn reading and writing: Arabic was taught in the Koranic school known as the ‘Medersa.’ The separation between mosque and school as re-defined by the French reflected a radical division. Severe restrictions were placed upon education opportunities for Algerian children. Not only did the state confiscate the *habus* lands, the religious foundations and the main source of income for religious institutions including schools, but the French colonial officials also refused to allocate sufficient funds to finance schools and mosques while more than five times as much was spent for the education of Europeans. Land spoliation left the Koranic schools with no source of income. Consequently many closed in the first decades of the colonial era. As a result of the dismantling of Muslim schools, less than five percent of Algerian children attended any school, which worsened with time as one generation disabled the next.

Furthermore when the new Emperor Louis Bonaparte, or Napoleon III came back to military control to Algeria in 1852, he was shocked by the self-serving attitude of the colon leaders and called it a day. Napoleon III, whose ambitions were to be seen in the Imperial Decree of 1857, declared that Algeria was not

strictly speaking a colony, but an Arab kingdom. The natives and the colonists [had] an equal right to [his] protection and [he was] no less the Emperor of the Arabs than the Emperor of the French.<sup>8</sup>

He thus set up an Arab Kingdom (*royaume Arabe*) and declared himself the King of the Arabs. To further his plans for the Arab Kingdom, Napoleon created the mixed school which he believed could work as a preparatory institution leading to a peaceful co-existence of French and Arabic, though it was not clearly stated in terms of a bilingual education. This resulted in the creation of imperial colleges which produced the first generation of the Algerian bilingual elite, including Muslim administrators, interpreters, bilingual teachers and

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<sup>7</sup> Speech published on Tuesday July 1st, 2003 by the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme- Section de Toulon in “la rubrique histoire et colonies.” “Transformer les jeunes indigènes en sujets fidèles et obéissants de la France, en leur faisant connaître notre langue et en leur inculquant des notions d’histoire et de géographie destinées à leur donner l’idée de la grandeur et de la civilisation de leur nouvelle patrie.” Transform the young indigenous into faithful and obedient subjects by teaching them our language, history and geography to give an idea of the extent of the civilisation of our country (Trans..Mine).

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Magali Morsy, *North Africa 1800-1900: A Survey from the Nile Valley to the Atlantic* (New York: Longman, 1984), 160.

quadis<sup>9</sup> whose main task was to deal with Muslim jurisdiction and matters. This constituted the first step in the French policy of assimilation, making of the traditional Medersa, an Arabo-French school. These first schools were meant to train a bilingual elite which would act as buffer between the French and the natives. Further methods of training Algerian natives to become teachers in 'Ecoles Normales'<sup>10</sup> as well as teaching material and syllabuses were at the heart of social reforms. This type of bilingual education along with some 'écoles indigènes,' and 'écoles gourbis'<sup>11</sup> paved the way for the final stage of the fusion of the two educational systems.

However instead of promoting equality with the French settlers as propounded by Napoleon III, the French government went so far as to pass a law in the 1930s which classified Arabic as a foreign language,<sup>12</sup> and prohibited its use in schools and official documents. And despite all efforts to make room for Arabic, French remained the dominant language and as such weakened the status and prestige of the Arabic language.

This French acculturation seriously backfired. The feeling of being deprived of their heritage united the Algerian population against both French power and the French language for the safeguard of Islam and the Arabic language. The closing down of the Koranic schools together with the ordinance gave rise to violent reactions, most conspicuously by the Group of Scholars (*Jamaat Al-Ulama*) under the leadership of Ben Badis. This group succeeded in inculcating the concept of Algerian identity in an entire generation, specifically the generation which took charge of leading the country in the wake of the War of Independence. Within a generation or so a new class of well-educated Algerians called the *évolués* emerged. It was in this privileged group of Algerians deeply impregnated by French culture that a new Algerian self-consciousness evolved.

## 1. Going French: The Other I

The colonised man, says Fanon, is "elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother's cultural standards."<sup>13</sup> Fanon's analysis, largely based on the Lacanian conceptualization of mimicry as camouflage,<sup>14</sup> focuses on colonial ambivalence. In Lacan's formula, 'desire' is the desire of the Other, and desire in all human beings is closely bound up with identification. When the Other is white/European, the colonised subject's desire is to be desired as white/European. Ultimately, the Algerian intellectuals depended upon their ability to imitate the ideology, speech and manners of the French. In their anxiety to obtain recognition from the French coloniser, the Algerian subjects had been constrained to

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<sup>9</sup> A quadi is a man of law.

<sup>10</sup> Training Schools for teachers.

<sup>11</sup> Indigenous schools. A gourbi is a small and precarious dwelling.

<sup>12</sup> Centre d'archives d'outre-mer B. 3058, Plan d'études et programmes de l'enseignement primaire des indigènes en Algérie (août 1898), Alger, typographie Adolphe Jourdan, (1900), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove P, 1967), 17-8.

<sup>14</sup> In Lacanian terms, this "camouflage," is like mimicry. "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare." Jacques Lacan, "The line and light', Of the Gaze." Cited in Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry of man,' *The Location of Culture: Discussing Post-Colonial Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 121.

impersonate the image of the coloniser and emulate certain parts of the dominating culture in order to survive in that space within which they existed. And to “be” the Frenchman was above all to speak as he does. Hence, the French language became an object of desire and identification.

But in reality, the desire for Europe, the mimetic drive, itself had the opposite effect of splitting the ego because identification with the coloniser could never be total for two reasons: As Fanon has explained, subjected people can never totally free themselves from their acceptance of the coloniser’s view of them as inferior: the more they identify with Western values, the more they reject their owns. By adhering to the French language, the Algerians had been more deeply confirmed in their original feelings and prejudices, and more thoroughly kept under the influence and direction of the French coloniser. This colonial mimesis not only moved them away from their cultural traditions, but had also effectively split their identity: This implied “a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing part [...]” Concurrently, the colonised man found himself “for ever in combat with his own image.”<sup>15</sup> This is the ambivalence at the root of the mimetic drive. This ambivalence produced in the Algerian “a state of permanent tension in which taking the Frenchman’s place had been as much an act of aggression as of emulation. This desire to substitute himself for the settler is described by Bhabha in terms of the split identification. This mask is not a neat division: “it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once.”<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Bhabha describes this “third space” as the ‘unhomely,’ in Freudian terms, and suggests that what is involved in the construction of a hybrid identity is “an estrangement sense of relocation of the home and the world - the unhomeliness - that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.”<sup>17</sup> This “third/liminal/interstitial space” is an ambivalent and hybrid space.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of this displacement, the Algerian colonised man suffered a particular kind of alienation which involved imitating and identifying with the French Other hence losing any autonomous perspective on reality. Given this mutilation, it is not surprising that the mimetic drive tends towards the destruction of the ego’s defenses. By forcing the Algerian people to abandon their own language and adopt his language, the French coloniser stripped the native country of its very soul. While the mimetic drive was in the first instance a strategy for escaping from the Frenchman’s stereotype of the uncivilised man, “by acquiring the thought-processes and values of his adopted tongue,” however, the Algerian subject like any other colonial subject, became “alienated from the values, or from the language of the masses,”<sup>19</sup> as Ngugi has it. The cultural transformation the Algerian society underwent during the colonial period ultimately left the Algerians struggling for a sense of themselves, a positive self-identity. With this colonial heritage, it is not hard to understand why the question of language has been so central to the postcolonial experience.

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<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 41; Bhabha, *The Location*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> *The Location of Culture*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> The term, ‘ambivalence,’ has been first used in psychoanalysis. It refers to the presence of contradictory feelings such as love and hate and has become a major symptom in case histories of schizophrenia. This ambivalence of hybridity is determined by the power relationships within the colonial scenario.

<sup>19</sup> Wa Thiong Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language* (London: James Currey, 1989), 72-3.

## Hybridisation, Mimicry and their Implications in the Context of Post-Independent Algeria.

De-colonisation implies not only the rejection of the deleterious ideas from the West, but also the freedom of the oppressed from the shackles of the oppressor as well as the creation of “new men,”<sup>20</sup> as Fanon has it. One of the main forms of opposition to cultural imperialism has been the quest of the self for its moorings and the restoration of cultural identity. But the recovery of the “real” self, as Trinh, T. Min-Ha explained, “requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not I, the Other.”<sup>21</sup> This implies an “ablution of language”<sup>22</sup> because a language is not merely a medium of communication but also the repository of a cultural tradition, a way of living and of expression which helps to convey a sense of identity upon its native-speakers. Speaking one’s language, Fanon explains:

means to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization [...] a man who has language [...] possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. Mastery of language allows remarkable power.<sup>23</sup>

The Algerian society whose true identity had been denied for a hundred and thirty years could therefore not begin to reconstruct itself without restoring the bedrock of that identity: the Arabic language. After independence, educational reform was high on the agenda of the Algerian government. As a reaction to French cultural and linguistic imperialism, policy-makers strongly defended school as a means to free the so-called benighted Algerians from French assimilation. Their goal was to turn the clock back and reverse the impact of over one hundred and thirty years of enforced French language by reviving Islamic cultural values and establishing Arabic as the national language. But how to effect this “ablution of language” when as a legacy of colonial acculturation, a great number of Algerians, whose aim was to restore their own culture, continued to express themselves in the language of their erstwhile masters?

Paradoxically the generalised use of French began to develop. To explain this paradox, it should be noted first that most teachers and administrators were exclusively educated in French. Second, like any newly independent country, Algeria still depended on the former metropolis which used every means to perpetuate its domination. Within a short time however, the Algerian nationalist leaders called for the promotion of the Arabic language. Arabic was to elbow out the French language that had pervaded all walks of life. The result was a controversy which opposed the Francophones to the Arabophones. The former viewed French as the language of modernity, science and technology. For the latter however, French was the language of the enemy, hence the negation of the Algerian identity while Arabic is the language of the Koran and Islam.

The group most actively promoting Arabisation after independence in 1962 consisted of Algerian cadres educated in Koranic schools (Medersas) and intellectuals from the Arab

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<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 36-7.

<sup>21</sup> Trinh T. Min-Ha, ‘Not you/Like you: Postcolonial women and the interlocking Question of identity and Difference,’ in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-7.

<sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove P, 1967), 17-8.

universities, often with a religious or literary training, anxious to find their own place in an overwhelmingly French-speaking setting. It was Ahmed Ben Bella, the first Algerian President,<sup>24</sup> (1962-65) who immediately after his release from French custody in the spring of 1962, proclaimed his adherence to Arab nationalism in French: “Nous sommes des Arabes!” (We are Arabs!) hence initiated the policy of linguistic Arabisation in the country. Arabisation had also been presented as a conflict with France, and even with those Algerians who use French in their working or private lives denounced as members of the party of France (*hizb fransa*).

The promotion of the Arabisation policy gained momentum under Algeria’s second president, Houari Boumedienne, (1965-78) who adopted a more radical approach. In 1968, he imposed Arabisation on the civil service, ordering bureaucrats to learn enough Arabic to work in the language within three years. Much the same happened in education, where Arabisation intensified after 1970 under the influence of Abdelhamid Mehri, Head of primary and secondary education. Higher education resisted for a while longer before it too was drawn into the reform.

During the 1990s two laws were enacted : law no. 91-05 of 27th December 1990 advocated the arabisation of all administrative offices and schools by 5 July 1992, and higher education institutions by 5 July 2000. Another law on the generalisation of the use of the Arabic language was voted by a rubber-stamp assembly, the National Transition Council (Conseil national de transition) on 17th December 1996. It ostensibly aimed at displacing French dominance. Its main stipulation was that by 5 July<sup>25</sup> 1998, or to the latest year 2000 in the case of higher education, all public administrations, institutions, enterprises and associations of whatever nature, were to use the Arabic language in all their activities, including communication, administrative, financial, technical and artistic management. The act also specified that the use of any foreign language in the deliberations and discussions of official meetings was prohibited. Government offices, companies, political parties and associations had from then on to conduct all their business in Arabic. This however posed a direct threat to the identity of the second section of the Algerian population, the Berbers. Both Tamazight (Berber)<sup>26</sup> and French are spoken by large numbers of Algerians as first languages.

Henceforth, the language issue provoked the most extreme passions in Algeria. Berber anger swiftly turned against the state and its Arabisation policy. Paradoxically, the Kabyles who played a prominent role in the resistance against the French during the Algerian War of Independence viewed the rising tides of Islamism and Arabisation as a threat to Kabyle cultural specificity. The two parties enjoying the largest Kabyle following are the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD). The parties’ views over the language question differed in a myriad of ways.

The segment of the Kabyle population represented by the FFS remained adamant: while the teaching of French had to be maintained in order to keep abreast of scientific and

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<sup>24</sup> Upon arrival with his former prison companions at Tunis airport where they were awaited by President Bourguiba and the Tunisian government, Ahmed Ben Bella stepped to the microphone and with great vigour proclaimed “Nous sommes des Arabes!”

<sup>25</sup> I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the importance of the date of July 5<sup>th</sup>. It was the date Algeria got her independence.

<sup>26</sup> They are commonly referred as ‘Kabyles.’

technological developments, it was not to be privileged over the two local languages, Berber and Arabic. However, the RCD actively sought support from the Francophone community. An alliance emerged in Algeria demanding the maintenance of French as the basic language of the state alongside Arabic and Berber. The argument was that French is the language of progress. Though the alliance was regarded as the best way to effectively neutralise the Islamist trend, it would perpetrate links with France hence indirectly allow the former coloniser to continue its domination.

And the circumstances of the assassination of the Kabyle singer, Matoub Lounes, which coincided with the date fixed by the Algerian government to implement the Comprehensive Arabisation law on 5 July, unleashed a wave of protest and sparked widespread dissent from the Kabyle minority in Algeria and among Kabyle immigrants in France who were faced with their two arch enemies, Arabisation and the Islamist movement. The singer's death reinforced the demands and plans of the RCD at the expense of the FFS, particularly on the issue of Arabisation and the recognition of the Berber language as one of the official languages of Algeria.

Although many Kabyles believed that the government could not meet the aspirations of Algerians for more social justice, not just in Kabylie, but throughout the country, the Head of the Algerian State, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, tried to create a space for tolerance, openness, efficiency and respect for differences, the true framework for democracy. On May 2, 2001, the Algerian President issued a public appeal at the Club des Pins Convention Centre in Algiers to end the violence that had racked the Kabylie region and to promote dialogue and consensus-building. To restore a unique national identity, the Algerian President agreed to demands on the Berber Language as a national language. But the ideologues of Arabisation argued that recognising Berber as an official language would undermine Arabic and leave French as the only language that Algerians have in common. They were also convinced that behind the Kabyle protests lurked an unpatriotic desire to perpetuate French dominance. I allowed myself this digression about the Berber language to show that since independence the linguistic struggle between the two sections of the Algerian population, Arabs and Berbers, reflects the way in which Algerian identity was cleaved in half by years of French colonial rule, and then again by forced Arabisation which sought to cleanse the Algerian minds from the effects of the vehicular language.

However the linguistic policy pursued ran into the hard barrier of practicability mainly because of all Arab countries subjected to European rule, Algeria absorbed an extremely heavy colonial impact. One of the most obvious problem which came to the fore after independence was that the great bulk of the Algerian population, including those in top positions had been educated in French and did not master Arabic. Further hinderances include the lack of resources to make for a complete switch, the absence of qualified Arabic teachers, and the continued preference for French as the working language of the urban society. Also, the fickle disposition of the people, in youth as in older years, for a sudden change incapacitated them from learning; and no time had been given to the instructor to master the language he had to teach in. Concurrently in the early 1970s, secondary students who studied exclusively in French found themselves culturally confused as they had been faced with total arabisation of the programmes overnight. The same students found themselves plunged again in French programmes at university. Here lies the core of the crisis of the educational system in Algeria. Indeed, although Arabic does dominate the curriculum, a great part of university



instruction remains yet in English and French, prompting a major debate. Islamic studies and Arabic literature are the only completely arabised disciplines. In scientific streams, French still holds an undeniable prestige as the key to quality reading material and instructors. At this juncture, it is worth discussing the effect of this educational system on the Algerian students and teachers.

In Algeria, students and teachers alike are divided over the issue of arabisation. I investigated the matter in some universities, the University of Technological Sciences of Bab Ezzouar (USTHB), the University of Languages at Bouzaréah, the Faculty of Medecine, the Department of Interpreting and Translation, and The Teacher Training School at Bouzaréah (ENS). In the four first institutions, the students interviewed emphasised the necessity of maintaining contact with the developed West through use of the *lingua franca* in order to effect a transfer of knowledge while the students at the ENS, for the most part Islamists, stressed the necessity of rejecting the Western cultural and societal model and viewed the continued use of the French language as “inappropriate and dangerous” for Algeria.

Moreover, some USTHB and medic students also believe that the new Arabised students are different from all the others and that Arabisation has changed students’ attitudes and mentality. These Francophone students likewise stressed the wide gap between them and the Arabophones because the latter are “more conservative, narrow-minded on many an issue,” as one of the students pointed out. It also soon became obvious to students who obtained an exclusively Arabic education that their prospects to gain employment were bleak without facility in French, a fact that contributed to general public skepticism about the arabisation scheme.

The teachers interviewed for their part, all noticed a difference between the Arabised group and their predecessors. They all pointed out to the serious drop in the level of student competencies in all domains. While the switch in languages at university level causes great difficulties, instructors feel that linguistically the new students are much weaker in French without however being competent in Arabic. School education has been conducted in Arabic for some years now, and generally speaking, younger Algerians master neither the Arabic language nor French (or English). The new breed of students we are getting now is what I would call trilingual illiterates. This drop in student level can be attributed in part to the overburdened school system, the lack of adequate materials and conditions; to overcrowded classes; and in part to Arabisation which ended up in total confusion because of the damages caused by the French language.

Furthermore, the drop in students’ academic preparation, especially their analytical skills, causes the Arabised students to become easy prey for simplistic discourse and the Islamist movement. Also the Arabisation of education has had direct effects on individuals’ cultural orientation. The Arabic language while perfectly capable of serving as a medium of modernity does not do so because it serves as a highly charged religious symbol. Faced with this tidal wave casting doubt on its legitimacy, the regime is trying to restore its fortunes with some reforms in the educational system.

Also, the linguistic policy pursued in Algeria has always been primarily dictated by political objectives. Until President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s investiture in 1999, there has been no continuity. This has had the unfortunate consequence that the students are bewildered, the

teachers desperate. In the absence of a symbolic enclave of government, which like the keystone of an arch would hold the entire edifice together, each individual not only feels threatened, but is threatening the whole future of the country and this disunion increases their feeling of otherness.

Today, forty seven years after Algeria had been granted independence, things have tremendously changed but it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects of our first confrontation with France. The consequences of the long and sustained spreading of the French language and culture still maintain Algeria as a stronghold. Some of the most damaging effects of French colonialism derive from the way in which French and its cultural values have been ambivalently internalised by Algerians. Raised with French as their first language and French literature as their heritage, the Algerians' educational framework was colonialist in its main lines. Paradoxically therefore, they master the colonial legacy even more definitely than native forms of culture. The French language has so structured the Algerian's identity that it seems quite difficult to disrupt the dominant language as least for the old generation of Algerians. After more than a century of French occupation a similar-no-man's land exists between the French and the native language. The psychic battle continues to tear the Algerian apart. Against all evidence, although Arabic is a living language and despite programmes to Arabise education, native language in Algeria is still hampered by the syndrome of the French language. This situation has led to what Rachid Boudjedra, a renowned critic of French occupation, calls "social dyslexia."<sup>27</sup>

French continues to be the dominant language in business and professional circles. Ironically, it is now enjoying something of a revival. With the advent of satellite television, most town-dwellers have access to French channels. If the French language is the expression of French culture, then Algerians, and Maghrebians at large, are exposed to it more than ever before, and French cultural influence is certainly not about to decline as long as French cultural production remains more interesting and entertaining than the Arabic one.

Also over the years, the Algerian government has pushed back, reintroducing French. It is staggering that certain aspects of formal education and research are still carried in the French language and a great part of the economic and industrial sectors and press still use French extensively. Today the linguistic situation in Algeria is dominated by multiple discourses and positions. The language spoken at home and in the street remains a mixture of Algerian dialect and French words. In this case, every language has become a source of frustration: classical Arabic is still not mastered even at higher educational levels; dialectical Arabic cannot express things in writing. Contact with the French culture has left the Algerians with a vitiated language and resulted in a profound linguistic alienation. This situation condemned many Algerian writers either to silence or to exile.<sup>28</sup>

In Algeria in particular, writers who express themselves in French are met with cultural condemnation. Some critics view the adoption of the language of the colonised as the *lingua franca* in their writings as a threat to the identity of a national literature. They argue that in so doing, the colonised writer sacrifices his cultural soul and his identity and that all efforts to express his innermost feelings in a language other than the mother tongue could end only in

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<sup>27</sup> Rachid Boudjedra, *Lettres Algériennes* (Grassard, 1995), 125.

<sup>28</sup> Malek Haddad, a renowned novelist and Algerian Minister of culture since 1968, had to abandon writing because he did not have a good mastery of the Arabic language.

approximations. In *Decolonising the Mind*,<sup>29</sup> Ngugi for instance, argues that the imposition of European languages over Majority World cultures amounts to their annihilation. The use of the foreign language itself becomes a subversive practice, thereby decentering, deterritorializing. Jewish Tunisian writer, Albert Memmi, for his part, though acknowledging the work of Maghreban writers as bridge-building between cultures, underlines the corrosive aspect of French on the mother tongue. He views the use of the French language by Maghreban writers as “a linguistic drama”<sup>30</sup> For him moreover, “possession of the two languages is [...] participation in two psychic and cultural realms. Here the two worlds are [always] in conflict: they are those of the colonizer and the colonized.”<sup>31</sup> The cultural conflict suggested by this bi-cultural heritage is indeed the ultimate paradox facing Maghreban writers in their attempt to construct identity. They found themselves caught between the impositions of the coloniser on the one hand and the desire for recognition and affirmation of identity on the other.

Yet the sense of loss of language and culture generated by French education is for Maghreban writers in general, a second severing of the umbilical cord.<sup>32</sup> Using the French language thus does not signify betrayal of one’s culture, or one’s identity; on the contrary, it has helped the Algerian writers reclaim their lost heritage and secured them their own identity. It has also become a language of communion with the rest of the world as Mouloud Mammeri had it, who explained that one could perfectly be an Algerian nationalist and still write in French,<sup>33</sup> a point of view some other Algerian writers share. Though well aware of their alienation, of their uprootedness, these writers reclaim their lost heritage and defend their position as writers forced to write in French. As Kateb Yacine has pointed out: “ I write in French because France has invaded my country and holds such a powerful position there that I am compelled to write in French to survive. But though writing in French, my Arab or Berber roots are still alive.”<sup>34</sup> Rachid Boudjedra takes a similar view in *Lettres Algériennes* : “ For me, an Algerian person, I did not choose the French language . It rather chose me. It has imposed itself to me throughout centuries of tears and blood flowing during the painful colonial period.”<sup>35</sup> Actually what matters is not the linguistic medium to which a writer resorts but rather the uses to which that language is put.

The question of “how to curse in the master’s tongue”<sup>36</sup> has become the quintessential embodiment of the process of linguistic homelessness. The adoption of the coloniser’s

<sup>29</sup> Wa Thiong'o Ngugi, *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language* (London: James Currey, 1989), 26.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion Books, 1965), 106-7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Yacine Kateb, *Le Polygone Etoilé* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 181.

<sup>33</sup> Mouloud Mammeri discussed these views with Abdellah Mazouni in an interview in November 1965. Cf. Jean Déjeux, *La Littérature Algérienne Contemporaine* (Paris : Presse Universitaire de France, 1975), 207.

<sup>34</sup> Yacine Kateb : « J'écris en Français parce que La France a envahi mon pays et qu'elle s'y est taillée une position de force telle qu'il fallait écrire en français pour survivre ; mais en écrivant français, j'ai mes racines Arabes ou Berbères qui sont encore vivantes. » Cf. Kateb 'Yacine, un homme, une œuvre, un pays,' in Hafid Gafaiti, *Voix multiples* (Laphormic, 1986). Interview.

<sup>35</sup> Rachid Boudjedra, *Lettres Algériennes* (Grassard, 1995), 30-31. “Pour moi Algérien, je n'ai pas choisi le Français. Il m'a choisi ou plutôt, il s'est imposé à moi à travers des siècles de sang et de larmes et à travers l'histoire douloureuse de la nuit coloniale. »

<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* in Stanley Wells, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2nd Revised edition. Reproached by Miranda for his ingratitude towards her pedagogic gift of language, Caliban replies: “ You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse you” (Act I, ii).

language became the very weapon used by the postcolonial writer to fight off the enemy, to denounce the colonialists' projects. It is a way to challenge the representations which have attempted to fix and define the colonised. French in the Mahgreban novel, like English in the Irish or black African writings, functions as a language through which the writer seeks to create a sense of cultural specificity and difference, hence to construct a new identity out of the debris of colonialist discourse. As Assia Djébar, a Francophone Algerian woman, has it:

Writing in the enemy's language is more than just a matter of scribbling down a muttered monologue under your very nose; to use this alphabet involves placing your elbow some distance in front of you [...] This language [...] spoils taken from the enemy with whom no fond word was ever exchanged [...] Words of accusation, legal procedure, violence- that is the source of the colonised people's French [...] This language was formerly used to entomb my people; when I write it today I feel like the messenger of old, who bore a sealed missive which might sentence him to death or to the dungeon.<sup>37</sup>

The struggle between what Djébar calls "la langue marâtre" or stepmother tongue and "la langue mère," the mother tongue, bespeaks the cultural dilemma produced by colonialism.

To bring this paper to a close, I would say that living, studying and working in a different culture for so long a period of time is like Alice looking through the looking glass: there is no return as one has so changed that going back to one's original language is quite difficult. The colonial heritage has left an even deeper wound on Algeria. French culture provoked a sort of paralysis in Algeria. It has so blanked out the natives' lives that to this day, despite massive and intensive efforts at arabising, the Algerian population continues to be affected by the French linguistic impact. That this influence has continued after independence may explain the complex nature of the changes and readjustments that Algeria has been undergoing.

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<sup>37</sup> Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la Fantasia* ( Paris: Julliard, 1985), 300.

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