

**RECEIVED IDEAS AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: FRENCH AS A
MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN ALGERIA**

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There is a widely held belief that the medium of instruction (MOI) in scientific fields in Algerian universities is French, although there is no policy that stipulates this. Indeed, more generally, Algeria is often considered a French-speaking community, where all Algerians are assumed to speak French. This ignores differences in the linguistic repertoire of Algerians across regions and generations. This paper argues that it is important to question some of the assumptions made about the place of French in Algeria today. This research in particular needs to focus on language use outside of big cities.

The Algerian linguistic repertoire differs from one generation to the next, and from one region to another. Differences between regions concern not only East and West but also periphery and centre. Algerians in urban centres, such as Algiers, Oran and Tlemcen, are more likely to be Francophone, while Algerians in peripheral regions are more likely to be Arabic and/or Amazigh speakers. The assumption by many outside of Algeria that Algerians are Francophones stems from the fact that the population in the central regions is more internationally mobile. International researchers also tend to be concentrated in these regions rather than in peripheral regions in Algeria for linguistic reasons and because of the feasibility of accessing institutions and conducting research.

Urban regions where French is widely spoken can also be found in the East of Algeria, such as Annaba and Constantine. However, the closer we get to the Sahara region, the less French is spoken. During the colonial period, these were not places where there was a large – or indeed any – settler population, even less a French education system. These areas have continued to be marginalised not only in terms of resources but also linguistically.

Knowledge and use of French in the linguistic repertoire of Algerians also vary across the Amazigh regions. These regions include the Kabylia in the north of

Algeria, the Chaouia region in the east of Algeria, and the Mزاب and the Tuareg regions in the Sahara. Most Amazigh regions are peripheral and non-Francophone. However, Kabylia is an exception, although it is mostly peripheral. French is deeply integrated in the Kabyle area because of the higher investment in French-language education by the French state and missionaries in the Kabylia region during the colonial period.

Differences in the knowledge and uses of French are also evident between younger and older generations. Older generations in today's Algeria are more Francophone than the younger generations. This generational gap is a result of shifting linguistic policy in the Algerian education system. During the colonial period, French was the only MOI in education, though very few Algerians had access to any education. After independence in 1962, Arabic was declared the sole official and national language. However, French remained the MOI for a number of years because the few available teachers at that time were mostly trained in French. In scientific subjects in higher education, French was further reinforced as a MOI for the first post-independence generation of Algerians who wished to attend a French university for training through academic partnerships.

The Arabisation of different parts of the education system, and notably primary and secondary education as well as humanities departments at University, took place gradually during the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, primary and secondary school education had been totally Arabised, with French taught as a foreign language. However, the application of this policy to scientific departments in universities has been frozen several times for political reasons and because of a lack of resources. As a result, French continues to be employed as a MOI in these departments as it has been since the colonial era.

Scientific subjects in Algeria are undoubtedly considered more prestigious: students with high grades in the baccalaureate exam are usually allocated university places in highly ranked science departments, such as medicine and pharmacy, where French is a MOI, whereas, students with lower grades are usually allocated in humanities departments where Arabic is a MOI. As a result, Algerian state school students who have been through an Arabophone education system, and achieved a good enough baccalaureate average to study a science subject, potentially face a linguistic challenge.

Although today's university students are mostly Arabophone, they are often judged and assessed in scientific subjects based on their level of competence – or their perceived level of competence – in the French language. This is a language which their teachers are much more likely to master. Older teachers (born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s) may well have completed all their education in French. For younger teachers (born in the 1970s and 1980s), those who are most likely to obtain a post at university will be the ones who have studied French either before or (perhaps less likely) during their studies. This means that students in regions or families where French has been maintained, and who are more likely to be from privileged families and/or from large cities, find fewer challenges in the transition from Arabophone secondary education to Francophone higher education. It can thus be argued that Francophone education contributes to elite closure, by perpetuating French-speakers' dominance in science subjects in higher education, without giving all students equal opportunity to gain competence in this MOI.

This selection strategy also applies to jobs, higher-level positions or acceptance in academic conferences in all sectors. For instance, in national or international conferences in Algeria, French is the norm for presenting research, disseminating knowledge, or even formally discussing with attendees. As an Algerian presenter, you will be asked questions in French and expected to understand and reply in this language. Speakers of other languages, particularly Arabophones, are not always warmly welcomed

Based on my research in Algerian universities, there was even a common assumption among teachers that students' low level of French proficiency caused a decline in the quality of higher education. Therefore, Arabophone students are often undermined and excluded, although they represent the majority. Having a low level of French is considered embarrassing and uncivilised, which undoubtedly carries colonial echoes. Yet, language practices in Algerian classrooms are featured with fluid and multilingual use of different languages: Darija or Standard Arabic, Amazigh and French. Darija (Algerian Arabic) can be considered a meeting point of French and Standard Arabic. Arabophone students or teachers start with Standard Arabic then use Darija for the purpose of communication, while Francophone teachers start with French then go to Darija for the same purpose.

Questions of language policy in Algeria are highly politicised. The 2019 policy pronouncements have called for enhancing the place of English in Algeria and

potentially implementing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education as a way of accessing international knowledge and science without passing through French. The introduction of EMI will not necessarily address the issues of elite closure, nor will it mean that English is used, or at least used exclusively, because actual language practices in classrooms demonstrate that on the ground, students and teachers seek ways to communicate using their full repertoires. Even though this does not entirely overcome structural inequalities, it reflects the multilingual make-up of the Algerian nation.