

LANGUAGE CONTACT IN ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT

From the beginning of modern sociolinguistics, a major goal has been the study of speech communities characterized by 'Language Contact'. The crucial point here, almost too obvious to merit stating, is that languages spoken by bilinguals are often altered such that ensuing changes differ from the results of internal processes of change within monolingual speech communities. In other words, languages spoken by bilinguals influence each other in various ways: Latin influenced the languages in the Western part of the Rome Empire; Anglo-Saxon largely impacted the pre-existing Celtic languages in the British Isles; the Cajun French population of Louisiana has been in contact with English; native speakers of Québec French have witnessed a long history of English contact, and the Algerian speech community is no exception.

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION

The actual review is devoted to understanding what has happened to languages 'in contact', i.e., spoken by bilinguals (Weinreich, 1968), and deal with contact among speech varieties that are more closely related. The present article concentrates on (1) the Algerian speech community; (2) the linguistic results in contact; and (3) the social structuring of diversity internal to the speech community.

It is undeniable that, as a result of the diverse events (historical and linguistic) that the country has gone through, the Algerian society has acquired a distinctive socio-linguistic characteristic whose particular dynamic – intra and inter-lingual variation – can clearly be attested in the way (s) people speak. Indeed, colonised for more than a century, Algeria, does not reflect the intra-lingual principles of a diglossic situation where two varieties Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Algerian Arabic (AA) are in contact but also the usual linguistic phenomena that occur when two or more languages get in contact, i.e., the use of bilingualism, code switching, mixing and borrowing. Throughout this analysis, the researcher will shed light on the components of the present-day Algerian sociolinguistic profile, with the purpose of showing the dynamic relationship between the varieties of Arabic, the Berber persistent use of French, as well as the advent of English words and technical terms as a tool for labelling the many technological devices (computing: email, boot, chat; dishes: digital, switch; mobile: Bluetooth) which are in considerable expansion.

Research into the field of languages in contact has begun as part of the largest study of diglossia which is a situation where, in a given society, there are two (often closely-related) languages, one of high prestige used in the media and I formal texts, and one of low prestige, which is the spoken vernacular tongue. Almost no one in Algeria uses the high variety (MSA) in his / her daily interactions. The other low variety (AA) is commonly used through regionally different, but allowing inter-comprehension. Ferguson (1959) explains and develops diglossia in Arabic-speaking countries. He considers the high variety as the standard one which is used in formal settings such as education and the court. Whereas the low variety is used in informal situations such as home, street or private life concerns. Modern Standard

Arabic is highly codified. It is not the spoken form of Arabic. Algerian Arabic, on the other hand, lacks the standardization attributes. Another area in the field of language contact is borrowing – involving the speaker’s importing features from other languages into their native language. According to Harmers and Blanc (2000), ‘borrowing and code switching are phenomena at either end of continuum’. Many non-educated Algerians use French words without actually speaking French. In fact, as a result of long-term contact with the French during the occupation of Algeria, a great number of words slipped in Algerian Arabic and are adopted phonologically and morphologically. Another important phenomenon in the above-mentioned topic is said to be loanwords or ‘cultural borrowed lexemes’. There are some technical terms having no equivalent in Arabic such as “parabole”, “cassette”... In any case, the outstanding feature in the Algerian society is the enormous bulk of French used in AA. Another mere phenomenon is bilingualism. A multilingual person is anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading). It is a plain fact that all Algerians use or understand at least a few words or expressions from MSA and French from their everyday interactions. This dual characterization as markedly shown through the use of both languages for different purposes or mixing them in different contexts at different levels of mastery of one language vis à vis the other. It is not an easy task describing bilingualism in the Algerian context. The alteration of all varieties of Arabic and Berber in some areas with French and their mixing has become an inherent characteristic in the linguistic behaviour of Algerian speakers. As far as French is concerned, its maintenance both in the written and spoken media results in continual exposure to it to the extent that many people use it in everyday interaction either in its own or mingled with the other component languages (MSA, AA and Berber). Unlikely, MSA is not used in a natural spontaneous way for its diglossic relation with the vernaculars in the community; whereas, French continues to hold a special position in Algeria, preserving a kind of general societal bilingualism. As far as individual bilingualism is concerned, it is said to be arising from the lack of vocabulary of particular items mostly nouns. That’s why the bilingual speaker may alter to code switching. According to Gumperz (1982), “code switching is the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems of sub-systems”. In the Algerian context where the societal bilingualism is the prevailing characteristic, due to historical factors and emigration mobility, the use of French has gone through an important process. Code switching represents a central aspect of language contact whereby bilingual speakers acquire the ability to switch from one code to another in various domains, situations and according to circumstances, rules of interaction, topic and addressee. The long presence of French in Algeria and its impact on people’s speech have resulted not only in the use of borrowed lexical items but also the appropriation of “ready-made” phrases such as ‘ça va? Ça y est?’ meaning respectively ‘Do you feel all right? Sometimes mixed with an Arabic phrase as in ‘ça va alhamdulillah’. The various kinds of switching (extra-sentential, inter-sentential, intra-sentential) are very common in the speech of many Algerians.

CONCLUSION

The many- fold aforementioned aspects characterise the linguistic situation in Algeria by a rich multiplicity of real dynamics that the Algerians should know how to take profit of in today’s context of ‘globalisation’ by knitting closer relations with the western world.

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