

# LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN TUNISIA: FRENCH AND ARABIC CODE SWITCHING

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*RESUMEN.* Una breve descripción del bilingüismo en Túnez: las razones por las cuales los tunecinos interambian códigos y las posibles consecuencias, sobre todo la interferencia lingüística, los problemas psicológicos, las inconveniencias pedagógicas, además de una presentación de algunas soluciones. Biculturalismo es lam aoyr consecuencia del bilingüismo, que puede llevar a la desculturización. Sin embargo, el aprendizaje y el uso simultáneo del árabe y del francés han favorecido que los tunecinos tengan grandes capacidades para aprender otros idiomas, escucharlos y pronunciarlos con toda facilidad. Dicho talento es difícil de adquirir cuando ya uno es adulto o cuando uno vive en un país monolingüe.

*PALABRAS CLAVE.* Bilingüismo, francés, árabe, Túnez.

*ABSTRACT.* A brief description of bilingualism in Tunisia: the reasons why Tunisians switch codes and the possible ocsequences, mainly the linguistic interference, the psychological problems, and the pedagogical inconveniences, as well as the presentation of some solutions. Biculturalism is a major consequence of bilingualism, which could lead to acculturation. However, the simultaneous learning and use of Arabic andr French favoured Tunisians to have great capacities to learn other languages, hear them and pronounce them easily. This talent is difficult to acquire when adults or when living in a monolingual country

*KEY WORDS.* Bilingualism, french, Arabic, Tunisia.

The current linguistic situation in Tunisia can be described as complex. In fact, it is both diglossic (classical Arabic along with other dialects) and bilingual. Diglossia refers to the uses of Arabic, a written version and another spoken version (in the form of dialects). Bilingualism, which interests us, involves the use of Arabic and French. Although it is claimed that French is less and less present in Tunisian life, it is still too important, as people switch between Arabic and French easily and frequently. French has always been considered not only as an official language, but also as a privileged one. It was the first official language during the Protectorate and the second official language after the Independence.

## 1. TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF FRENCH AND ARABIC SWITCHING

### 1.1. TYPES

The types of code switching can be identified as the following: Tag-switching, intra-sentential, and inter-sentential (S. ROMAINE: 1995). All the three types are present in French and Arabic switching. In fact, tag-switches involve an exclamation, a tag, or a parenthetical comment in French than the rest of the sentence (like switching from Arabic to say some French words (1) *sûr?* or (2) *sans blagues*. However, and according to S. ROMAINE (1995), this type should not be viewed as filling a gap, as «it would not be correct to say that these speakers code-mix or switch to fill gaps» (S. ROMAINE 1995: 143).

Intra-sentential switches occur in the middle of a sentence, for example when saying half the sentence in Arabic and continuing in French. The most typical phrases are (3) *c'est pas vrai!*, (4) *c'est pas possible*, (5) *ça m'étonnerait*. The speaker continues in Arabic and then quickly goes back to French.

As their name indicates, inter-sentential are the switches that occur between the sentences. Compared to intra-sentential switches, French is more used because the switch is longer. An example is: (6) *pas mal de fois je commence a m'exprimer en Français et puis تكلم بالعربي* (lots of times I start expressing myself in French and then continue in Arabic). This kind of switching can be thought of as «requiring greater fluency in both languages than tag switching since major portions of the utterance must conform to the rules of both languages» (S. ROMAINE 1995: 123).

### 1.2. FUNCTIONS

Tunisians switch in a single conversation mainly because their switching often involves a lack of knowledge and facility of either Arabic or French in a certain subject. This is what called referential function. It is the type of code switching of which Tunisian bilingual speakers are aware. Furthermore, «a specific word from one of the languages involved may be semantically more appropriate for a given concept» (R. APPEL and P. MUYSKEN 1987: 118). This is found especially in discourses of certain subjects where the French word is considered more appropriate than the Arabic one. Tunisians, when they are asked why they switch, they tend to say that it because they do not know the word used in Arabic, their mother tongue, or because they think that French is «more adequate» when talking about a given subject, especially a scientific or a technical one, as well as other matters concerning everyday life. Usually, Tunisians switch codes to impress the other participants in the conversation, by showing their linguistic skills. This is known as the metalinguistic function. Here, French equals the High variety (H) as opposed to the Modern Standard Arabic, which equals the Low variety or L. French, then, is more prestigious than Arabic, believing that it

is more logical, better, and able to express important thoughts and the like. This occurs in various contexts, from a specialised conference to a public domain. Others switch to exclude the participant. One example is of the parents that speak a foreign language, when they do not want the children to understand what is being said. The children will, in their turn, exclude their parents. «If they do this too often, they find out that the children have learned the second language as well, or make up a language of their own to exclude their parents» (R. APPEL and P. MUYSKEN 1987: 118). Speakers emphasize a mixed identity through the use of two languages in the same discourse. This is called the expressive function of code switching. A conversation that is full of French and Arabic switching becomes a mode of speech by itself, and individual's switches no longer have a discourse function. An example would be commenting in French that what a speaker did or said was unconscious, by mentioning the French word (7) *inconsciemment*.

## 2. CONSEQUENCES OF BILINGUALISM IN TUNISIA

### 2.1 LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE

The influence of the French on the Tunisian dialect is very strong. It seems to be that in the modern and technical domain, for instance, the spoken language in Tunisia has started to be created on a foreign basis. These 'calques' from the French language are present in many other discourses. The aspects of the French linguistic influence can be seen at different levels:

2.1.1. *Phonetic*. This is manifest in the adoption of the French phonemes. An instance of this could be manifest in words like (8) *مرنّف*. This word, when pronounced, it contains the French consonant 'v', a sound that does not exist in Arabic. This verb means to have a rendezvous and an appointment (both things). The presence of similar French consonants is common.

2.1.2. *Lexical*. Lots of French words are present within other Arabic words. The commonest ones are those short and simple words like: (9) *merci, c'est ça, voila, c'est sûr, en principe, normalement, exactement, ça va*.

2.1.3. *Syntactic*. In classical Arabic, the verb is usually placed before the subject in the sentence, whereas in French, it is the opposite case. In modern standard Arabic (MSA), which is the case in Tunisia, all titles of articles in the press tend to come in the French order. M. RIGUET (1984: 80) mentioned the tendency of journalists or speakers to take off what is called in Arabic *أعراب* (the detailed analysis of a sentence structure) and substitute by «a more fixed functional determination of the word order». An instance is a headline taken from a Tunisian newspaper called 'الأخبار'

رئيس مجلس النواب يستلم الوزير الأوّل البرتغالي دعوة من الرئيس بن  
علي لحضور قمة 5 زايد

It has a French structure because it could have been said easily with a verb at the beginning (the usual Arabic structure). Thus, this headline reads in French as follows: *le président du parlement invite le ministre portugais, au nom du président Ben Ali pour assister au sommet 5 plus 5*.

Another feature is the accumulative presence of the adverb in the French sentence, compared to the Arabic one. Moreover, the article in French is sometimes omitted. Adjectives and prepositions are more frequent in French than in Arabic. Adverbs and pronouns, on the other hand, do not have their equivalent in Arabic (like the French relative pronoun «*que*»). Also the French verb «*être*» (to be) does not exist in Arabic.

2.1.4. *Orthographic*. Complications can result from the writing habit (the Arabic is written from right to left). Although this does not affect, as Tunisians start to learn it from an early age, other complications may result from the differences in the French graphic system, which do not correspond to the oral one. Tunisian children, when acquiring Arabic orthography, which is phonological, face difficulties in coping with different French graphs that have the same sound. Thus, the differences in Arabic and French structures lead to confusion between the two, and naturally to this variety of interference.

In addition to this interference, the learning of a second language especially at an early age, as it is the case of French in Tunisia, is viewed as a threat to the natural development of the mother tongue (L1). Indeed, at the moment when Tunisians are consolidating Arabic, French is penetrating their lives or is imposed on them by the educational system.

## 2.2 PEDAGOGICAL INCONVENIENCES

In Tunisia, if Arabic-French switching did not take place before the age of five or six (the first year at school), it is generally imposed as an obligatory choice. The creation of the French schools along with French-Arabic schools was at the heart of the duality of the educational system. The reality of the education in Tunisia, as well as in the other countries like Algeria or Morocco, is becoming more and more complex, both before and after the independence. In fact, in the colonial times, the conflict in Tunisia was more apparent where the status of Arabic and Islamic culture was not only diminished, but most of the time placed apart, vis-à-vis the French language and culture. This was manifest in the few hours dedicated to the learning of Arabic (M.DAOU: 1997).

In fact, in primary school, French was taught 21 hours a week versus 9 hours of Arabic. In addition to this difference in the hours of teaching, French was the course language of different subjects like maths, history, geography, sciences...and Arabic teaching was centred only on the teaching of the «Holy Koran» and other religious instructions. Religious schools and early *madrasa* of bilingual teaching tried to create a sort of bilingual teaching, and a sort of equilibrium in favour of the Arabic language. This was due to the many hours of French (5 hours the first two years, 10 hours the next two years, and 15 hours the last two years). The first reforms were characterized by increasing the hours of teaching Arabic (reform of 1949). After Independence, the reform of 1958 required the nationalism

and the generalization of education at least at the level of primary school. This reform was efficient, but it had its drawbacks, as there were no French classes in the first and second year of primary school, but bilingualism was still preferred (15 hours of Arabic versus 10 hours of French in the third and fourth year, and 10 hours of Arabic and other 15 of French in the fifth and sixth years). In other words, there was meant an equal sharing of the hours of both languages, but that was at the expense of Arabic. French was kept the vehicular language of maths, drawing, and physical education. This reform, whether consciously or unconsciously, maintained the conflict and unequal bilingualism and biculturalism. This implicit biculturalism and distribution of roles of the Arabic and the French languages has always been the major source of difficulties for students, and an embarrassing situation for political leaders and educationalists. Lots of students were behind and many gave up.

In secondary school, on the other hand, we can speak more or less of equilibrium in the hours of French teaching. It was not a total one, because scientific disciplines were still taught in French in addition to the hours of French. The result was a privileged status of the French language. Tunisians students, most of the time, are thought to be *semilinguals*. «Somebody is semilingual when he or she speaks two languages but both at a lower level than monolingual native speakers» (R. APPEL and P. MUYSKEN 1987: 107). They know less of each of their languages than monolingual children; especially their vocabulary in L1, which is limited, compared to children speaking only one language and we can compare them with other Arabic countries (in the Middle East, for instance). Thus, many know classical Arabic and French only partially.

One could expect that the extended education of the Tunisian child produces an effect of overvaluing of the French language in comparison with the Arabic language. But viewing this differently and considering the efforts made after the independence to modernize and promote the teaching of Arabic as a national language- normally as a unique official language, with the increase of the hours in the schedules of the teachers that teach only Arabic, one can observe that there is an overvaluing of Arabic in comparison with French.

### 2.3. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

2.3.1. *Biculturalism*. The relation between culture and language is one of the most difficult relations to define, because it is hard to decide which of the concepts should be considered to be the first. That is to say, the question is whether the access to a given culture necessarily implies the mastery of the corresponding language, or it is the acquisition of a particular language that leads to the access to the corresponding culture. The contact between cultures not only modifies the receptive culture but also causes social transformations, of course depending on the nature, intensity, and duration of this contact. Tunisian bilinguals may feel like foreigners in their own country, and may also feel a kind of pressure from the rest of the Arabic world. A deep feeling of trouble that gives rise to what C. FITOURI called *le malaise* (1983: 73) felt by every Tunisian bilingual torn between the preservation of tradition and the need, sometimes the quest, of modernity. This state of cultural disorientation is the source of all tensions that bicultural individuals live.

2.3.2. *Conflict of cultures.* Tunisians, seeing the backwardness of the Arabic culture compared to the western one; at least in the way perceived by the European cultures, took the French culture for granted and began to swallow it seeing in it the unique means to progress and detach from their Arabic and Islamic culture, traditions, and lifestyles. This attitude is apparent in different levels of the social life, in the family, at school, and in other institutions. All this has to do with the feelings of unsettlement that some Tunisians have been suffering whether in their individual or social lives.

Tension usually accentuates when starting to go to school being the source of diffusing the French culture and amplifying what we call *acculturation*, a phenomenon that characterizes the young generation.

2.3.3. *Biculturalism or acculturation.* The gap between the Tunisian Arabic and Islamic culture and the French one is huge to allow us to speak about a beneficial mutual cultural exchange. In this context, biculturalism and bilingualism are not enriching, regarding the fact that they usually engender acculturation. C. FITOURI (1983: 47) claimed that: «the intermediary language between Arabic and French that uses the educated category of the population explains the ambiguity produced by the acculturation». The huger the gap is, the more the phenomenon of acculturation is traumatizing and the conflicts become more and more tensional. Thus, Tunisians are living a state of dissociation. A good example of this is found in schools, as «these schools are the source of diffusion of acculturation» (C. FITOURI 1983: 29). In fact, Tunisian schools, characterized by biculturalism, do nothing but increase the states of tension among the youth.

2.3.4. *Acculturation and modernization.* The argument that was usually given to favour this acculturation was the need to borrow and to adopt the cultural values of the west as they have proved to be efficient to build a modern state. This has favoured what we call acculturation. Acculturation is best described in the words of C. FITOURI (1983: 74) as a «real cultural illness». All cases of acculturation cause dislocation of personalities.

Arabic on the other hand was largely thought as a semi-dead language, as it is read and written but rarely or never is spoken. «While our era is that of science and technology, it refers more to our past, than to our present and still less to our future» (C. FITOURI 1983: 104).

### 3. SOLUTIONS

Language policy in Tunisia was characterized by «the *Arabization* and the promotion of MSA as the language of education, the administration and wider communication as well as maintaining French to achieve modernization and economic development» (M. DAOUD, 1997: 222).

The commitment towards Arabization can be felt in the various policies of the Tunisian state to promote and to reconsider the status of the Arabic language and culture in an Arabic country. French is to be given the privileged status and is to be considered more than any

other foreign language, but not at the expense of Arabic. By «Arabic only», what is meant is to go back to authenticity and to the implantation of the Islamic spirit. This can be fulfilled by sensitising Tunisians to change their mentality, and to be proud of their prestigious Arabic language and culture.

The Arabization at schools, for instance, was felt to be the urgent measure that should be taking regarding the influence of school years in the life of the Tunisian individual. This was not easy at all, and both French and English have been «subject to a tug of war» (M. DAOUD 1987: 214). This was since the first educational reform initiated in 1958, and particularly starting from 1976 when Arabization was more systematic. The policies taken show the great commitment to arabize the country and to be more and more independent, be it in the educational institutions, administration or other sectors. There was a list of regulations to arabize the administration issued by the Prime Minister in 1999, like the prohibition of the correspondence between Tunisians in any foreign language, as well as the Arabization of all administrative forms and databases in the administration and public agencies.

Arabization is still to be worked by within the government's administration. French, on the other hand, will remain the medium of instruction for science, technology, and business subjects in secondary education in the near future. One could think about another solution, which is substituting French by English (and this is what the majority of students and education leaders really prefer).

A total Arabization, on the other hand, does not seem to be the perfect solution because it will not achieve ultimate success if it produces a generation of unemployed people. This makes the linguistic situation in Tunisia complex, and «making predictions about language change is hazardous because language-related decisions are frequently made on non-language related grounds often too ambitious to realize» (M. DAOUD 1997: 219).

Those individuals who cannot resist the French culture and the excessive use of the language threaten the great efforts made by the government.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The simultaneous learning of two languages in Tunisia, Arabic and French, and the simultaneous use of them allow the Tunisian bilingual to have great capacities to learn other languages, hear them and pronounce them easily. This talent is quite difficult to acquire when adults or when living in a monolingual country. Moreover, this switching of codes allows the individual to be flexible and have different codes as well as a switching facility.

Tunisia has always been a place of meeting a diversity of tongues, starting from the presence of a Tunisian Arabic along with the classical version, arriving to the long lasting presence of French, which is now competing itself with English. However, regarding the fact that Tunisia is an Arabic country, and regarding the gaps between the Arabic and French languages and cultures, this situation engendered some serious problems, with which the government is still struggling, trying to take different measures to improve the situation.

Tunisia has an enviable linguistic situation compared with other countries (like Guatemala where Indians who speak 22 different languages and more than 10 dialects, do

not speak their official language at all. The cultural characteristics of the situation in Tunisia make bilingualism both difficult and fragile.

More efforts are required from both the government and Tunisians to keep the Tunisian Arabic and Islamic spirit far from fusing with the French culture and language, though nobody can deny their weight. This can be achieved through an intelligent and beneficial use of French. This is a firm position to be taken not to lose one's values, traditions, lifestyles, thus Tunisian and Arabic Islamic identity.

Personally, and as a Tunisian, I think that to be a good bilingual, one should seek the positive sides of both cultures that could be brought closer, allowing Tunisians to speak a lively Arabic that is at the same time literary. It could be a dialect, but better if it is close to the classical, because the actual linguistic situation in Tunisia does not allow us to be too ambitious to try to speak the classical Arabic.

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