

The Status of the French Language in North Africa

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Abstract

This study focuses on the current linguistic situation in certain North African countries and the changing status of the French language during this last year due to ideas proposed to favor the English language (Erling, 2021). First of all, the study analyses the linguistic situation of three countries, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Then, it discusses the hypothesis and the evolution of the French language in the aforementioned countries. Following that, the methodology is explained. It uses a qualitative approach that is based on the observation to reach appropriate conclusions. The next section examines the status that the French language has in the three mentioned countries to compare it with the previous year (2022). This is according to the information from the summit of *Francophonie* in Djerba (Kasri, 2022). Finally, the challenges required to improve the situation are reflected upon and relevant conclusions are presented.

Keywords: French language, North African countries, sociolinguistics, language policy, education, lingua franca

1. Introduction

This article examines the status of the French language in the last year (2023) due to several current ideas in North Africa to favor the English language as a lingua franca (Erling, 2021) and to dispose of the French language for political reasons.

The study analyzes the lasting importance of the French language in the aforementioned societies despite the current linguistic situation. The importance of the French language is due to a number of key factors such as shared history, the geographical closeness of the countries and the eternal link that exists between France and Africa due to its cultural proximity. Furthermore, there are many African residents in France, plus the commercial relations and the French companies established in Africa. Finally, there is also the audiovisual influence, and the literary and artistic productions which are broadcast in French. As much as there is a feeling of rejection of the language for political and historical reasons (Bouamama 2018), the language is part of the identity (Kerras & Baya Essayahi, 2022) and forms a significant part of daily life of French-speaking African citizens.

The proposed ideas are not official, but studying the situation before its generalization is a duty on the part of the French-speaking community. The hypothesis of the work is the following: if the French language has been present for many years in these three countries and is part of the identity of its speakers, what would be the benefit of eliminating it and replacing it with English?

Firstly, the evolution of the French language in North African countries, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, is explored. Subsequently, the current status of the language is explained based on its relationship with other languages that coexist with it and the decisions made by some politicians (Filion, 2021), as well as the influential emergence of English as a vehicular language. In order to understand this complex, albeit natural, relationship, a qualitative descriptive methodology is followed. Finally, the challenges faced to preserve a language that is part of the identity of its speakers are demonstrated, and necessary conclusions are drawn.

2. Methodology

This study follows a descriptive methodology that consists of describing the linguistic situation and the status of the French language in North African countries in order to provide information about its real situation comparing it with the status of last year transmitted in the Francophonie Summit in Djerba (2022), concerning the deterioration of the perception and status of the French language.

This is done through systematic observation. An observational investigation is carried out (García Sanz & García Meseguer 2012: 3), which consists of measuring the characteristics of the elements to be investigated so as to come up with relevant conclusions (Guevara Alban & Verdesoto Arguello & Castro Molina 2020: 4).

The reason for using the qualitative methodology is to make the facts understandable and describe the social phenomenon based on the determining features of the issue being dealt with, and it has been written in English to reach as many readers as possible. An attempt is made to understand a situation of the French-speaking societies mentioned above to transmit the information to receivers interested in preserving the French language for academic or professional reasons. Various tools (speeches and texts) are used to obtain a holistic vision that consists of relating a set of qualities and information of a specific situation (Guerrero Bejarano 2016: 4).

Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research (Bhandari, 2023) and this is the objective of this analysis.

3. The evolution of the French language in North Africa

The French language is spoken by around 321 million speakers and is the 5th most-spoken language in the world (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie March 2022: 4). French-speaking countries adopted the French language as a result of colonization in several countries (Filhon, 2021). Its consequences, as well as the duration of the colonization, varies from one nation to another. The occupation of Algeria lasted from the year 1830 to its independence in 1962. This represents a period of 132 years of colonization and therefore coexistence with the French language and culture. Tunisia was a French colony for 75 years (1881 to 1956) and Morocco for 44 years (1912 to 1956) (Azouzi 2008: 39). The relationship with France has varied throughout history and this is due to the governors and the events (Abderrahim, 2004) that have created different connections.

Having said this, it is crucial in this article to emphasize the importance of looking at a sociolinguistic perspective, and not just at the historical analysis of the issue. It is true that we are talking about a colonization that has left traces and perhaps a feeling of resentment for some individuals, though this link can be considered part of history. However, we are not interested in stopping here, since the interest is about linguistics, and what we are concerned about is taking advantage of a language that has always been present and preserving it as part of the identity of its speakers.

The French language has been present and is still present in the three countries that we are centering on, namely Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. It can be considered as a positive legacy of a painful colonial past, as explained by Manzano (2007: 40): *'On peut présumer qu'avec le temps régresseront naturellement les marquages, les stéréotypes et les plaies de la période coloniale'* [We can assume that over time the markings, stereotypes and wounds of the colonial period will naturally regress]. History must be left to the accounts of historians and the countries have to move on without becoming obsessed with events whatever their nature. The French language has coexisted and still coexists with other languages in the three studied countries. First, it coexists with the Modern Standard Arabic language (official language) in all three countries. While French does not enjoy a legal status within the three constitutions, it is the essential functional language compared to the Modern Standard Arabic language, which is symbolic. The latter is an important language due to an Arabization policy that was established after independence to create its own identity (Bouamama, 2018), but its use is limited to specific fields (literature and press, mainly), and it is not used daily by all the inhabitants. The hierarchy is ambiguous depending on the interpretation that is given to it; the Modern Standard Arabic language is official, but symbolic. Despite a lack of a clear legal status (second language / foreign language), French is operative and is prominent in professional and everyday fields. Azouzi (2008) considered that the French language is the vehicular language in various fields, it is the language of communication and a language of openness to the world. The author considers it as the language of communication between the three neighboring countries and it possesses a privileged status, as explained by Bianchini (2007: 5): *"Quiconque voyage dans les pays du Maghreb se rend compte de l'univers francophone dans lequel baigne la communication de tous les jours. Il existe en fait une langue française beaucoup plus vécue que légiférée"* [Anyone who travels to the Maghreb countries realizes the French-speaking world in which everyday communication is immersed. There is in fact a French language much more lived than legislated].

In addition, a special mention must be given to the dialects, or rather, the mother tongues of the three countries (Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan). These languages are used on a daily basis by the vast majority of citizens in each country, regardless of their levels of education or their social status. They are languages that have evolved from the Modern Standard Arabic language, which many linguists call 'variation of Arabic' (Benítez Fernández, 2023); but they also have sources from several other languages, such as Tamazigh, French, Turkish, and Spanish, that have coexisted through history; and from there we can talk about the significance of multilingualism in African

countries (Observatoire de la langue française de l'Organisation de la Francophonie 2018). It is noted that this rich coexistence is reflected in the language and reflects the identity of each country (Kerras & Baya Essayahi, 2022). Here we also note that the French language (the object of our study) coexists considerably with Arabic, since the highest percentage of mother tongue combinations are based on Modern Standard Arabic and French, plus the rest of the languages mentioned above (Kerras & Baya Essayahi 2022).

The other languages that also coexist because of historical links are Tamazigh and Spanish which have varying prominence from one place to another due to historical and commercial factors, as mentioned by Kerras and Baya Essayahi (2022). Having said that, it is clear that the presence of French is far more imposing than the other languages due to its recent history and the strong bond that France unites with the North African nations (Bianchini, 2007). These factors make the French language present in daily and professional life. Scientific studies are usually taught in this language and research is usually done in French as well. Education is an important field that has transmitted French and upheld the interest of the French-speaking community to help keep the language active in the region. This can be clearly seen through the writings and research of authors who defend the legitimacy of a language that forms part of the identity of its speakers (Azouzi 2008, Kerras & Baya Essayahi 2022).

The French language is central in professional communication (Bianchini, 2007) at different levels between the countries studied as well as amongst people within the same country. The use of the language depends on several factors, such as the educational level of the speaker, their field of studies, their family environment and the frequency of use. These factors have been considered because the transmission of the French language is done through various means. These include parents and the language of use at home, school and the level of instruction, teaching and preferences, the means of communication used and the transmission of culture (cinema, theater, cultural centers). These aspects make the use of one language or another vary in the three countries. The use of French, dialect or Modern Standard Arabic can change from one user to another and there is no fixed rule amongst the countries that interest us.

You could find a simple salesman from *Sidi Boussid* who knows the French language perfectly because of the frequent dealings with French-speaking tourists. You could also meet a doctor in Spanish literature from the same country who doesn't have such a great grasp of French because of the less frequent use of the language. We can list several similar examples which show that the use and mastery of the French language can vary from one speaker to another, but its general use and understanding is more than present in the three countries (Filion, 2021).

What keeps the language alive is the geographical proximity between the four countries, the shared history, but also the number of North African natives residing in France, which is partly due to language, it is evident that the initial destination of the Maghrebis is France due to the linguistic facility that they can have. Immigration to France is constant because it is the closest country culturally, and the French media have a huge presence in all three countries (Bianchini, 2007). A high percentage of African residents register as living in France, especially North Africans for the reasons discussed, and that creates a movement of people between the two destinations, which keeps the link alive, even if politicians do not have a particularly friendly attitude, to put it mildly, towards each other (Tossa, 2022). The reality is this and the movement to and from France has continued in recent times.

This movement of people, in turn, encourages commercial relations between North Africa and France due to the geographical proximity and the spoken language. Speaking French remains an advantage for North African countries that can understand each other when France does not have this advantage because they do not understand the other languages of communication of the interlocutors. It can be considered a strategy favorable to African countries. It is true that lately, and especially since the 2020-2021 health pandemic, North African countries have leaned towards Russia, China and Turkey. A major reason for that was because European countries did not consider them when it came to finding solutions to the COVID pandemic (Isilow, 2021). This has strengthened relations with other international powers, but France remains present nevertheless. The advertising posters are issued in French and Arabic, a daily coexistence that we read on the roads of the three countries (Kerras & Faber 2012).

It is important to acknowledge the number of literary productions that are published in the French language and the publishers that collaborate to transmit the language. Among others, the following authors can be cited: Kamel Daoud, Boualem Sansal, Maissa Bey, Yahia Belaskri, Karima Bennoune, Yasmina Khadra, Souad Labbize, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Siham Benchekroune, Kamal Benkirane, Nadia Chakik, Ghislaine Chraïbi, Leïla Slimanie, Wafa Ghorbel, Moncef Ghachem, Imam Bassalah, Azza Filali, Khaoula Hosni, Amina Said, Fawzia Zouari, etc. They are contemporary writers who continue to give status to the French language. African writers probably constitute the largest French-speaking community outside of France (Thibault 2022: 3).

We also cannot ignore the importance played by satellite channels to broadcast all the programs in French, to the point that the viewer may feel as though they were in France; it is a daily connection with broadcasts that have

become commonplace since the 1990s and are popular with the young and the old alike. This close relationship summarizes the sociolinguistic situation in the countries mentioned with France:

Within the Maghreb, it is likely that, similarly, speakers are motivated to code switch for practical reasons, either because of the vocabulary available to them or because of the vocabulary available to their interlocutors; for social reasons, to get closer to or to show solidarity with their interlocutors or alternatively to reflect a particular social status; or for emotional reasons. [...] Because people in the Maghreb typically speak Darija, Fusha, and French to some extent, code switching is commonplace. However, perceptions of code switching in these countries vary (Brown, 2020: 18).

It is noticeable that the French language is alive despite the conflicts that arise from time to time with France due to misunderstandings that have persisted since the nineteen fifties and sixties (Abderrahim, 2004). Such conflicts should not influence linguistic decision-making, and the strategy is to improve the educational level and maintain this language which is so rich that it is part of the identity of its speakers, as it is stated language is an important part of one's identity (Byram, 2006). Identity is reflected by the language used, as explained below:

Many linguists consider language as a crucial tool that is used for our social activities. Language has become one of the factors behind the formation of our daily identities. For instance, spoken language helps to create different identities such as regional, social, ethnic, gender, and national identity. Linguistically speaking, various ways could be taken for the construction of identity such as group labelling, naming, vocative case, through pronouns, and even via language use that includes style shifting and dialect (Minwas & Sabri, 2022: 12).

Despite all reasons that have been mentioned, the French language maintains its prestige (Azouzi 2008), as detailed below, even if throughout modern history it has been adopted, defended, rejected, and questioned depending on the era.

4. The Current Status of the French Language in North Africa

We can speak about the survival of the French language in North Africa even if there were various political frictions (themes of colonial resentment, immigration, visas and the concept of otherness) throughout history. French has also survived the threat of other national, local, or foreign languages being present, among others, the official language and the dialects that have been previously described. We can add the English language that has begun to threaten the status of the French language (Manzano, 2007). Firstly, it is the vehicular language and that, in a way, opens the door to the world of technology, development and science. Secondly, it is a natural path for the language of the strongest economic, military and technological power to become the lingua franca. This is observed in all countries in the world; English has become the lingua franca used by a large percentage of speakers. In fact, higher education in various European, African and American countries is taught in English (Beyza, 2011). This is done to prepare future generations to follow the evolution of sociopolitical and geopolitical events in the current most powerful global language.

Some North African countries have adopted the same attitudes, which is necessary and interesting. However, the decisions to adopt the English language in detriment of French have been made during a time of instability between them and France (TV5Monde). There are several ideas that suggest replacing the French language with English in some fields, both educational and administrative. Some decisions are difficult to comprehend because the intention is to reduce the importance of a language that is part of the identity of its users to establish another with all the pedagogical and economic effort that is required. Establishing English as a third language is important to follow globalization, though this should not be done at the expense of the other languages, which are part of the identity of the citizens. None of the three countries currently has this capacity to invest and change absolutely everything to English. The Moroccan government has been prudent and has not given so much importance to this proposal so as to maintain a healthy relationship with France for commercial and tourism purposes (Afriki 2023).

Improving the level of English is needed to keep up with globalization, and therefore there is also a requirement to improve the quality of teaching, which is a focus of this research. It would be interesting to continue teaching or using Molière's language equally, or rather, to improve the educational system to give greater importance to language learning in general. Languages are the basis of communication in all countries, and they offer a viable opportunity for development. Language policies are not modern enough in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco due to the increase in other structural problems. Language policy remains in the background, and this is clearly justified by the lack of interest in mother tongues that do not enjoy any status in the constitutions (Kerras & Baya Essayahi 2022).

As a result of this, it can be said that the French language is present, the ideas of imposing English instead of French for political reasons have not changed at all for the moment because the language is still very active, as shown by this statistic (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie 2022: 11):

Un niveau de francophonie très élevé sur l'ensemble du périmètre et notamment en Afrique centrale ainsi que dans les pays du Maghreb*

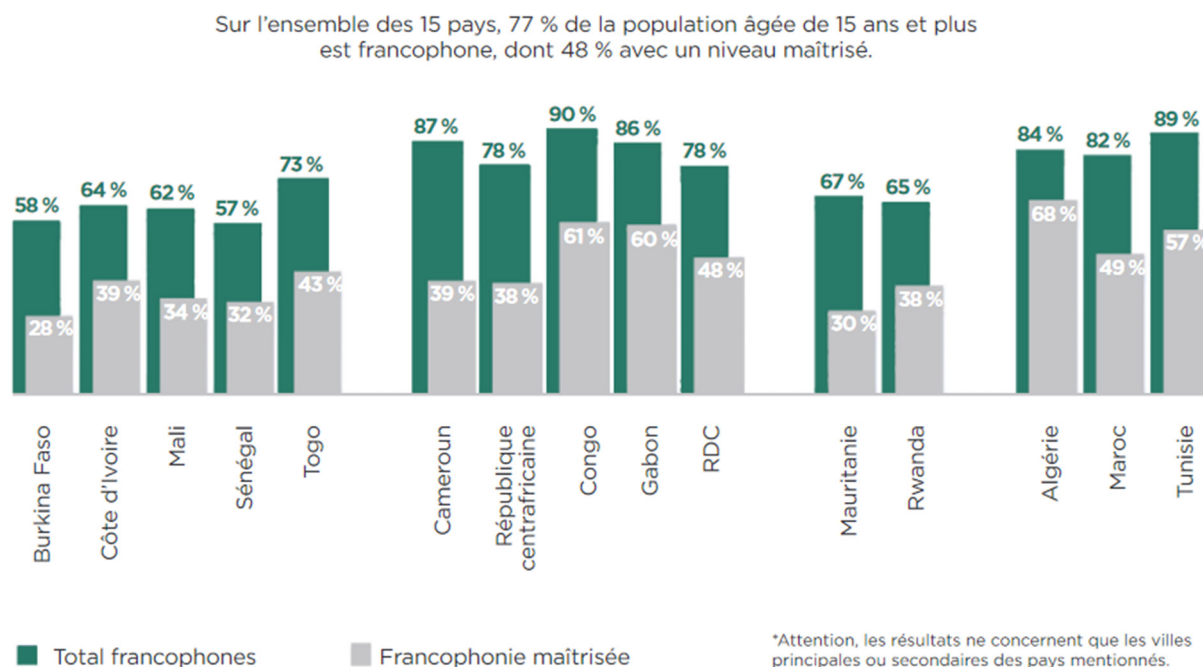


Figure 1. French as an active language

In fact, on the occasion of professional trips to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, it has been realized that the most commonly used language is French (orally, in writing, on posters, the media, hotels, directions, etc.) and it takes time for English to replace it.

However, it is necessary to make an effort on the part of the French-speaking community in each country to preserve this richness that allows us to open up to the Western world together with the English language and not to the detriment of one of them. The people shouldn't be deprived of a language that is part of their cultural baggage; do they need to add another language whilst being swallowed up by globalization.

The topic addressed has been described by other authors (Brown, 2020; Kerras & Serhani, 2021) considering the complexity of decisions regarding the use and status of French. Azouzi (2008: 39), for example, uses the locution '*la langue française continue, contre vents et marées, à jour d'un statut privilégié*' [the French language continues, against all odds, to enjoy a privileged status]. It is understood that the language survives despite several decisions made after the countries gained independence from France. The same author Azouzi (2008: 39) uses another expression to help the reader understand the complexity of the status of the language: '*chasser le natural, il revient au galop*' [the leopard doesn't change its spots], which means that we always come back to our first tendencies even if changes are imposed. Manzano (2007) considers Francophonie between '*affirmation et recul*' [affirmation and retreat]. Many francophones transmit their deepest feelings in French (Kerras & Baya Essayahi 2022) and that shows that the language is part of the cultural baggage of these speakers. It is not the case of English – not yet, at least. The use is more restricted to specific fields when talking about technology, television series, or movies and the percentage of speakers is still exclusive.

There have been many attempts to encourage the use of English instead of French, which has been commented on in various press articles, such as African Manager (2023): '*L'Algérie décide de remplacer la langue française par l'anglais dans les universités, dès septembre*' [Algeria decides to replace the French language with English in universities, from September]; DirectInfo (2016): '*L'anglais remplacera le français comme 2ème langue d'enseignement en Tunisie*' [English will replace French as the second language of instruction in Tunisia]; Afriki

(2023): '*Un passage du Maroc à l'anglais entraînerait une régression économique et sociale durable*' [switching into English in Morocco would lead to lasting economic and social regression].

We can affirm that the aforementioned societies enjoy multilingualism, which is the presence of several languages in the same territory (Bikandi, 2012: 66). In this case, the speakers have knowledge of the following languages: Modern Standard Arabic language, a dialect and French. We can also consider them plurilingual because they can use other languages. Plurilingualism is defined as a phenomenon of individual order, it is the individual's ability to use more than two languages (Bikandi, 2012: 67). This is the case of a Moroccan from Tangier, for example, who uses Modern Standard Arabic language as their official language, a dialect as their mother tongue, Spanish as a language present in this region, Tamazigh as another mother tongue, and French as a language of use in Morocco. While a Moroccan from Oujda could use the same languages except Spanish due to historical and geographical factors.

Making a pedagogical effort to maintain the two languages (French and English) by offering quality teaching would be a spectacular way to encourage plurilingualism. Being able to communicate in several languages, and to understand the functioning of various societies from a linguistic perspective, is enriching. The African continent is the future of the French language (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie 2022) due to the percentage of users. The literary range that spreads the colors of each country, and transmits the culture of each nation, is highly valued.

5. The Challenges

The evolution of languages in all the countries around the world has been changing with the times (Sánchez Hernández, 2001). In this case, it is about sustaining a language that has always had weight in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. It is necessary to be aware of the advantages of preserving the French language legacy, which is part of the identity of its speakers. For these reasons, the French-educational community should collaborate to train teachers and researchers. They need to be taught how to transmit the language and culture correctly, without having a feeling of reluctance. Bilingualism is a wealth and serves as a timeless weapon as well as producing interesting cultural baggage. For these reasons several efforts have to be deplored:

- Continue to train teachers in French philology (the study of language: literary texts as well as oral and written records) and transmit this background by improving the educational system and the pedagogy implemented. School is the right place to improve the linguistic level of the French language. However, parents should also be encouraged to use the language with their children from an early age to offer them the opportunity to master several languages at the same time. Researching and writing help mobilize the French-speaking community, and the level tests (DELF, DALF) that allow access to certain universities act as a tool to encourage people to study this language and keep it alive.
- Continue to encourage the French-language media to keep the language alive, and this can be done as long as there is a French presence when broadcasting. They need to reach as large an audience as possible for television programs, radio, newspapers, etc.
- The French Cultural Center (CCF) carries out various activities in addition to French classes and official exams and can contribute to keeping the language alive through cultural programs.
- There are a great deal of French-speaking authors, and it is vital that they continue to write in this language, alongside other national or local languages.
- The International Organization of *Francophonie* makes a great effort, and must carry on doing so, to connect French-speaking countries and give wings to writings in French by holding meetings every year for this purpose.
- TV5 Monde is available in French in several countries, and also communicates the local culture of our studied countries. That makes the promotion of the language which contributes to its passive (comprehension) or active use (expression).

Consequently, mastering the French language in the French-speaking space would help, according to a survey (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie 2022: 12) to: Obtain a job (67%-97% of those surveyed), to study (68%- 98% of respondents), to get information (49%-98% of respondents), to do research on the internet (53%-97% of respondents) and access other cultures (55%-96% of respondents). It is clear that this linguistic shift interferes with political and identity problems (Bouamama 2018). For this reason, it is difficult for linguistic researchers to find a solution because without the collaboration of politicians their efforts remain in vain.

6. Conclusion

The current situation of three North African countries regarding the use of the French language has been observed to compare the data from last year. It is obvious that several factors come together to address this situation. There has been a decrease in the use of the French language. This is due to the use of the lingua franca that is increasingly present in Maghrebi societies, and some voices that advocate for its officialization.

It has been perceived that the French language is part of the cultural and identity baggage of its speakers. It is a language which has been present in different fields and media until now, and the need to keep it alive and active in its current status is not valued, due to some ideas with little reflection. This means little to no effort is made to think about the linguistic loss of the French language that requires profound change in society. Implementing English alongside French is an advantage for its speakers as long as a solution is found to make correct and flourishing language planning. This will favor exchange in each country because languages are windows to development. The complementarity of the languages is very rich, avoiding hierarchies that the speakers do not agree with.

For these reasons, it is important to fight for coherent language policies, and not to change decisions every time a political problem arises between countries. This only harms the educational and linguistic level of the speakers. Education is the foundation of every society and teaching languages in a cohesive, sustainable, and practical way is favorable to improve communication between countries. If nations have priorities in their daily planning and the linguistic issues are hard to take into account, the solution would remain in the hands of teachers to educate in the most solid way possible. They should transmit their knowledge to the highest possible number of receivers to fight against this regional failure. The alternative is the individual willpower and the participation of associations to advance in North African societies.

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