

Identity and the Plurality of Educational Languages in Algeria

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Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between identity and the plurality of educational languages in Algeria within the broader context of globalisation and historical linguistic tensions. It explores how language policies, postcolonial dynamics, and competing ideological currents have shaped the country's linguistic landscape, resulting in an enduring identity crisis in the educational sphere. Through an analysis of Arabisation efforts, the persistence of French, the recent rise of English, and the sociocultural role of Tamazight, the article highlights the absence of a coherent linguistic strategy capable of reconciling national identity with linguistic plurality. The study argues that safeguarding identity requires rational, inclusive language planning that strengthens the mother tongue while embracing multilingual competence. This study concludes that effective linguistic policy must transcend ideological polarisation and contribute to cultural and linguistic security for emerging generations.

Keywords

Identity; linguistic plurality; Arabisation; language policy; higher education; globalisation; cultural security; multilingual competence.

Introduction

The Maghreb in general, and Algeria in particular, is experiencing a historical phase marked by profound political and cultural transformations, raising numerous questions about major cultural frames of reference and the unsettled linguistic management caught between the demands of globalisation and the requirements of national identity. The Algerian university is witnessing instability in the concept of identity embodied by the unifying language, reflected in the shift from linguistic duality to linguistic plurality. All of these factors reinforce a state of linguistic indecision, contribute to identify disturbance, and affect students and the university system. This study primarily examines the policy of linguistic management within the higher education system and its impact on

representations and recognition of identity among both students and lecturers. It appears that the Algerian student is living in a state of rupture between an Arab-Islamic identity and the dominance of the French language and, more recently, the English language within higher education across most disciplines, a contradiction within a system in which the mother tongue has no place. The linguistic policy adopted in Algerian higher education fails to account for the sociocultural specificities of Algerian learners, resulting in a form of forced linguistic plurality. Or is it merely an identity disturbance and a split between authenticity and modernity, a shift towards a dynamic concept of identity that may lead the Algerian university out of ideological domination towards a form of linguistic rationality that would allow it to reach a conception of modernity?

The importance of this article stems from its engagement with one of the most crucial pillars of the higher education system: the policy of linguistic management in relation to linguistic and cultural plurality. The research significance of this topic also derives from its position within a series of contexts:

- It comes at a time when international scientific institutions are warning of the grave danger threatening the Arabic language owing to its lagging behind scientific developments, its weak presence as a global communication language, and the inability of Arab states to formulate and implement joint and effective language policies.
- Maghrebi educational systems have entered a phase of linguistic plurality and an era dominated by global languages, in addition to the erosion of cultural boundaries in a world in which identity is no longer inevitable but rather a choice.
- The Algerian higher education system has entered a decisive phase following recent reforms that introduced the English language alongside French and Arabic in university education. Can the plurality of languages of instruction, therefore, be regarded as a central issue in the debate on the relationship between identity and the languages of education?

Through this article, we seek to move the discussion on identity and language from the realm of ideology to that of scientific approaches and to link this linguistic plurality to the question of democracy and cultural diversity, thereby connecting the university to society.

Our research raises the following questions:

How does linguistic management at Algerian University contribute to balancing the plurality of languages of instruction with the preservation of identity?

Does the Algerian higher education system seek cultural openness through a new educational context characterised by a shift towards globalisation?

Theoretical concepts and operational definitions:

– **The Unifying Language:** A language occupying a central position within a multilingual linguistic system, assumed to be both a national and an official language. It possesses cultural and political centrality and serves as the language that unites people across disciplines, functioning as an instrument of shared communication and comprehensive understanding. It is "the official and unifying language, endowed with numerous privileges on the basis that the unifying language, being the official language, is beyond dispute in its priority or in the service accorded to it. "¹ It is also the principal language of education, or the language with the most central role within the educational process.

– **The linguistic gap** refers to the divide between developed and developing countries in terms of access to information through modern means, particularly the internet. It also refers to a language's lag behind established standards in scientific development and to its role as a medium for knowledge-based communication across the web. A language that fails to keep pace with such development may be at risk of extinction.

Arabic, alongside many other languages, is among those suffering from this gap, as younger generations have come to view it as a burden incapable of keeping up with cultural and digital advancement. They consider it a complex language for communication, even among Arab speakers, owing to its limited vocabulary, inadequate digital content, poor quality, and lack of appropriate technological tools for teaching, learning, and text exploration. Today, several Arab countries are moving towards foreign languages in higher education, particularly in scientific and technological fields. "²

– **Identity and Language:** The relationship between identity and language is one of the principal themes of sociolinguistics, as it links language to identify and connects the communicative and symbolic functions of language. Some even consider identity to be a distinct and independent function of language alongside its communicative function. Language and identity are two sides of the same coin; in other words, the human being, in essence, is nothing but language and identity, language as thought and speech, and, at the same time, a marker of belonging.³ Language, alongside religion, is regarded as one of the most significant components of identity. The *Larousse* dictionary defines identity as a fundamental and continuous characteristic of an individual or group. Social identity refers to an individual's conviction of belonging to a social group, a conviction founded upon a shared sense of geographic, linguistic, and cultural belonging and the practices that follow from it.⁴ Language plays a significant role in preserving identity: if a person loses

¹ Saleh Belaïd, *The Unifying Language*, Laboratory of Linguistic Practices in Algeria, National Book Enterprise, Algiers, 2015, 9.

² Farah Manşūr, "The Digital Divide in Arab Society and Its Impact on the Arabic Language," *Journal of the Algerian Academy of the Arabic Language*, vol. 3, no. 2, 79.

³ See Fayşal al-Ḥafiyān, "Language and Identity: Problems of Concepts and the Debate on Relations," *Journal of Tolerance*, no. 5, Muscat, Oman.

⁴ *Le Petit Larousse Illustré*, 1996, 530.

their language, they lose their identity to the point that it may be said that language is identity.

– **Linguistic plurality:** This refers to the coexistence of several languages within a single society or group through “a standardised societal multilingualism comprising at least three linguistic varieties subject to a complementary distribution based on functional differentiation... each variety occupying a specific communicative space without overlap with the others.”⁵ Linguistic plurality is a phenomenon shaped by the strategies of each state, and two general positions may be distinguished: the first advocates suppressing the expression of differences in the public sphere to preserve a unified and overarching identity; the second calls for highlighting differences in the public sphere to guarantee cultural and linguistic diversity.

– **Identity Shift:** Postmodern thought tends towards deconstructing identity as an essential concept. At the same time, contemporary social studies increasingly speak of multiple identities within the same community, such as social identity and linguistic identity. For this reason, there is a growing preference for the concept of identity recognition rather than identity itself.⁶ Today's world is witnessing the retreat of grand ideologies and, consequently, the diminishing role of the sovereign state and the decline of nationalism alongside the emergence of transnational linguistics. This leads to the fragmentation or weakening of central identities. Thus, the concept of the unifying identity or cultural unity has begun to recede gradually in favour of the notion of the right to difference and plurality.

– **The crisis of linguistic identity combines two values:** “the value of the global language, as a means of universal communication, and the value of a local language regarded by its speakers as a reservoir of cultural forms of representation.”⁷ This may lead to a decoupling of the concept of language from the concept of identity, which explains the emergence of global perspectives that tend towards what is known as the globalisation of education and its submission to the authority of the dominant language, particularly English, which has become the second, and at times the first, language of instruction in many countries around the world. Algeria appears to be following this same trajectory.

– **Dangers of Identity:** Many countries hold firmly to the idea of nationalism, which is founded on the belief in the existence of a national language. However, “philosophers of language consider nationalism as the basis of identity to be no more than a component of the myth of the nation-state; it is not an objective given but a problem in itself, as part of an ideological construct that must be deconstructed and rationalised.”⁸ The sustained reinforcement of the relationship between language and identity to the point of sanctification gives rise to a set of stereotypical models. Education may become an

⁵ *Dictionnaire de didactique du français*, 197.

⁶ See John Joseph, *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*, trans. ‘Abd al-Nūr Kharāfi, ‘Ālam al-Ma‘rifa, 2007, 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ John Joseph, *Language and Identity*, 134.

instrument of control, and linguistic identity may be transformed into a means of ideological domination, grounded in the process of aligning the principle of language with the principles of the nation and state.

– The crisis of identity in the Arab educational system:

Many researchers consider the Arabic language to be the foundation of cultural and national identity, as it is "the common language among all members of the Arab nation, the solid bond that unifies the levels of identity in the Arab world... and the sole instrument through which Arabs may enter global modernity and achieve progress."⁹ The centrality of Arabic within the structure of Arab identity may also be justified by the fact that this identity is part of a broader, deeper identity: belonging to the Islamic *ummah*, which transcends states and continents.

However, the concept of Arab linguistic nationalism has waned in favour of the possibility of a new centre of identity emerging in the Arab world, modelled on the European Union and not reliant on a linguistic component. Similarly, globalisation drives changes in educational policies across the Arab world by reshaping the function and philosophy of education and shifting it from a pedagogical focus to an economic and political focus. This is achieved by stripping authority from the national language and expanding English instruction to the point that some thinkers now speak of a linguistic renaissance. English-medium education is no longer confined to scientific fields but has come to encompass the social sciences and humanities as well, further entrenching the linguistic gap in Arabic.

Moreover, researchers in the Arab world have been unable to establish a shared strategy for the Arabisation of scientific disciplines or for aligning the national language with the language of the educational system. "Arabising the sciences is a scientific necessity, and it is also a civilisational necessity for the Arab individual and their ability to transmit knowledge to members of society."¹⁰ Moreover, it deepens the unity of thought and will as a foundation for constructing Arab unity.

However, the question of Arabisation has not been resolved in most Arab countries except at the preuniversity level, whereas higher education continues to exhibit linguistic plurality. The fields of science, medicine, and engineering remain dependent on foreign languages (French and English). Many Arab thinkers argue that the failure of the Arabisation project in numerous Arab states is due to the absence of political will and to officials' and educational decision-makers' fear that comprehensive Arabisation would isolate individual Arab countries or the Arab world as a whole from global cultural and scientific development. Although countries such as Syria have succeeded to a considerable extent in linking the language of education with identity at all educational levels, including higher scientific education, hesitation persists within Arab educational

⁹ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, "Globalisation and Cultural Identity," *Arab Future Journal*, no. 228, 1998, 20.

¹⁰ Maḥmūd Fawzī al-Manāwī, *The Crisis of Arabisation*, Al-Ahram Centre for Translation and Publishing, 1st ed., 2003, 35.

circles regarding the effectiveness of Arabic as a language of instruction in scientific domains.

– The crisis of identity in the Algerian educational system:

The relationship between identity and the education system in Algeria is more acute and complex because of historical, geographical, and cultural factors, which are fundamentally linked to ethnic linguistic plurality and to the linguistic and cultural assimilation imposed upon its population during the colonial period.

The Algerian linguistic landscape consists of two written languages, in addition to the recent integration of English into various sectors, including education, as well as the vernacular dialects and Tamazight, which has recently become a written language. Consequently, the traditional identity model, which is based on the notion of a single state comprising a single nation and homogeneous people, is difficult to apply.

The issue of defining linguistic identity in Algeria raises questions about linguistic plurality, particularly after Tamazight was recognised as an official language and introduced into the primary education system. All of this stems from the absence of a strategic vision for managing linguistic plurality. The most severe criticism directed at Algeria's language policy is that it has entrenched linguistic dependence on France for successive decades by making French the language of higher education, which resulted in a conceptual duality in the status of the official language: a legal status (Arabic) and an actual status (French) for decades. Recently, however, the educational system and other sectors have sought to break free from linguistic dependence on France by gradually generalising English-medium instruction in Algerian universities, a shift that will extend even to the teaching of the social sciences and humanities.

The debate over cultural and linguistic identity in Algeria is longstanding, as the country has witnessed multiple conflicts between the Amazigh and Arab nationalist movements, between the Francophone and Arabophone currents, and between Classical Arabic and the vernaculars. However, Arabic has been a constant element in all discussions of linguistic identity.

The linguistic question dates back to the period following independence, when it became closely tied to the concepts of identity and belonging. The problems of identity and language of instruction are linked to language policy within a space characterised by a plurality of languages and their functions. This complex linguistic structure caused identity-based conflict in Algeria to take on a political dimension aimed at imposing the authority of language within the educational sphere.

Despite Algeria's independence and the successful Arabisation efforts undertaken during that period, the French language has continued to maintain a strong presence as a language of instruction and administration to the present day, owing to a Francophone current that ensured its persistence and regarded it as a quasiofficial language, a language

of science and progress. This created a state of bilingualism in Algeria, particularly in the education sector.

The crisis of identity in Algeria cannot be understood without returning to the colonial past and recognising the political and strategic dimension of the French language as both language and culture. The coloniser aimed to achieve domination through the guise of culture, for "the aim was not to spread the French language or culture, but to reach, through them, control over the minds and destinies of the colonised."¹¹ The dominance of French is evident in its continued status as a fundamental language in education and higher education in Algeria, despite its declining international role as a language of science. It is "as although the colonial law had been internalised, maintaining an unacknowledged yet intimate connection with it."¹² Thus, the French language may be regarded as a language of cultural alienation in Algeria.

Arabisation is a process of reclaiming identity within the educational system and other social sectors. It is a civilisational project intended to strengthen identity and develop scientific and intellectual capacities. The necessity of adopting Arabic as the official language of instruction in Algeria was emphasised, supported by the argument that underdevelopment resulted from the continued use of the coloniser's language in administration and education. Hence, the need arose for the comprehensive Arabisation of scientific and humanistic knowledge as a means of reinforcing citizenship and the foundational constants of the nation.¹³ The language of instruction in Algeria, it was argued, must be one and only one: the Arabic language.

However, the absence of training structures rendered Arabisation an improvised project that contributed significantly to the crisis in education. The failure of Arabisation became associated, in the popular imagination, with the inadequacy of the language itself rather than with the management of the Arabisation project. Many Algerian linguists believe that halting Arabisation was merely a political stance unrelated to pedagogical considerations or to the Arabic language's capacity to convey modern scientific knowledge. The Francophone current holds that Arabisation was a political choice rather than an identity or societal project and that it therefore lacked both the pedagogical dimension and the strategic planning necessary, having been replaced by an ideological approach. This choice led to the definitive separation of Arabic from the scientific sphere. Between these two positions, the dream of Arabising the teaching of the sciences in Algeria and the Maghreb was lost a step, which, had it been realised, would have helped overcome the rupture between secondary and university education, as well as recover an important component of identity. However, obstacles appear to stand in the way of this option, as the problem lies not in the language itself but in the adopted language policy. Although many countries, such as China, Japan, Germany, Malaysia, and India, have succeeded in developing their educational systems and contributing to national progress

¹¹ 'Abd al-'Ālī al-Wudghīrī, *Francophonie and French Linguistic and Educational Policy*, trans. From a chapter of his book, *French Work in the Field of Education*, Paris, 1928.

¹² Gilbert Granguillaume, *Language, Power, and Society in the Maghreb*, trans. Muḥammad Aslīm, Al-Farabi Publishing, 1995, Meknes, Morocco, 57.

¹³ See Bashīr Kāsha al-Farhī, *Language Policy in Algeria*, Dār al-Āfāq, 2004, 35.

by making the national language the primary language of instruction and the unifying language, the matter does not concern the language itself but rather the effort invested in developing it.

Nevertheless, measures must be taken that respect linguistic plurality and remove the languages of instruction from ideological impasses and social contradictions to reconcile education with identity. The concept of the unifying language must be stripped of its ideological character so that it becomes a linguistic function that does not conflict with linguistic and cultural plurality. It is likewise necessary to move away from the French model, which does not grant education the capacity to manage linguistic and cultural diversity in a way that reinforces the concept of citizenship within an identity that embraces all affiliations. Rigid approaches to linguistic identity, which are based on unilateral choices, create social insecurity. Therefore, it is essential to work towards constructing plural linguistic systems while promoting the values of modernity, dialogue, and tolerance and to regard language not only as an educational tool but also as a bearer of cultural values. Linguistic management in Algerian education should aim at what is known as "multilingual and multicultural competence, founded upon the concept of language awareness or education towards language awareness."¹⁴

The relationship between language and identity has changed in the era of globalisation; therefore, a language policy grounded in rationality must be adopted to confront cultural globalisation and achieve linguistic security in Algeria, especially among the new generation that is experiencing globalisation in all its forms. In this regard, Šālīḥ Belaïd states, "I fear for this generation and those who will come after it the risk of dissolution and of throwing themselves into the illusions of 'linguistic irregular migration' (*al-ḥarāqa al-lughawiyya*), grasping at foreign languages in pursuit of a brilliance that does not illuminate: a foreign language that leads astray and does not guide, that divides and does not unite, that belittles national languages and removes them from use under the pretext of scientific inadequacy."¹⁵

Šālīḥ Belaïd provides multiple examples illustrating the effects of globalisation on the mother tongue and describes today's shifting system of values: we live within a globalised order that continually produces changing concepts, alters methods, and places particularities in a crisis of choice between isolation from modernity and alienation under a dominant system. It is a linguistic order that drives nations towards the brink of dependence on a linguistic, cultural, and applied system that strips societies of their identity.¹⁶ The only way to counter this is to pursue the path of achieving cultural and linguistic security, which exists solely in the official national language. Globalisation, therefore, seeks to abolish the sovereignty of national languages, claiming they are backwards; they must, it is argued, be shifted towards a contemporary standardisation compatible with globalisation and be found only in languages that correspond to modern realities.

¹⁴ Muḥammad Sa' dī, *Identity: From Unity to Plurality, Afaq al-Mustaqbal*, no. 7, September 2010, 84.

¹⁵ Šālīḥ Belaïd, "Citizenship and Its Counterparts," *Journal of Linguistic Practices*, no. 11, 2012, 156.

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From this, we conclude that the preservation of identity is possible only through the construction of a language policy that safeguards the mother tongue within the linguistic plurality we are experiencing, one that inevitably affects social cohesion and national unity. Such a policy must rest upon effective Arabisation that encompasses all spheres of practical life.

Effective Arabisation does not by any means imply abandoning the teaching of foreign languages or forgoing the benefits derived from them; what is unacceptable, however, is substitution. In Algeria and the Maghreb, Arabisation faces numerous obstacles, foremost among them opponents, many of whom, through their positions of influence in administrations and university leadership, have allowed their personal interpretations to assume the status of national choices at the implementation level.¹⁷ Genuine Arabisation must begin with the Arabisation of thought itself, with belief in Arabic's official status, and with efforts to generalise its use across all institutions and settings as a scientific, national, and international language of contemporary value.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that historical legacies, sociopolitical tensions, and the pressures of globalisation shape the linguistic landscape in Algeria. The unresolved question of identity, shaped by the coexistence of Arabic, French, English, Tamazight, and local vernaculars, continues to generate instability within the educational system. Arabisation, although conceived as a means of restoring cultural and linguistic sovereignty, has suffered from inadequate planning, political resistance, and the absence of institutional structures to support its implementation. Conversely, the increasing reliance on foreign languages, particularly French and English, has contributed to a widening linguistic gap and a fragmentation of identity. To address this crisis, this study underscores the need for a rational, forward-looking language policy that strengthens the mother tongue while valuing linguistic plurality as a cultural asset rather than an ideological fault line. Such a policy must promote multilingual and multicultural competence, enhance educational cohesion, and secure linguistic sovereignty in a globalised world. Ultimately, harmonising identity with linguistic diversity is essential for reinforcing national unity and enabling the Algerian educational system to meet contemporary cultural, scientific, and societal challenges.

¹⁷ Abdelaziz al-‘Āshūrī et al., *The Arabic Language, Cultural Identity, and Arabisation Experiences*, Arab Future Series, Beirut, 2013, 275.