



## Diglossia in Algerian Society: A Sociological Analysis of Cultural Diversity and the Issue of Socio-linguistic Communication



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### Abstract

*This article addresses the issue of diglossia in Algerian speech, a controversial topic that sparked intellectual and social conflicts among elite thinkers and ordinary members of society. It results from French colonisation, social and institutional Francization, Arabization policies, and the integration of the Amazigh language. It is discussed from sociological and sociolinguistic perspectives to determine whether it is a factor for cultural diversity or social fragmentation. The discussion calls for language policies rooted in linguistic justice, the promotion of cultural diversity, and the preservation of the social fabric and linguistic balance.*

**Keywords:** Diglossia, sociological analysis, cultural diversity, socio-linguistic communication.

### Introduction

The linguistic map of Algeria is considered the most complex and rich model in the Arab world. It is shaped by a set of factors and dimensions rooted in historical and cultural contexts, as well as successive policies that have impacted Algerian society. These dynamics have given rise to what is known in linguistic and sociological studies as “**diglossia**”. It is a phenomenon that is not only limited to Modern Standard Arabic or the Algerian dialect, but

it also encompasses other linguistic interferences such as French and Amazigh. This adds a layer of cultural diversity to social communication that transcends mere linguistic description and delves into the very fabric of social, symbolic, and identity structures.

In Algerian society, the use of language is not confined to communication alone. Rather, it represents a form of social belonging and reflects cultural expressions. Language is a means of showcasing social capital with symbolic connotations, what **Pierre Bourdieu** referred to as *symbolic capital*. This makes diglossia linked to social and linguistic positioning, where actors try to engage in exclusionary practices or eliminate languages they perceive as competitors.

In this context, there is a need to understand this phenomenon through sociological and sociolinguistic approaches, which tied linguistic diversity within the policies of social and linguistic unity, not as an instrument of hegemony or marginalization. On the other hand, these approaches aim to free minds from the linguistic conflict and promote the coexistence of all linguistic and social components of the community.

Linguistic diversity is not a source of conflict within society, but rather an expression of its culture and its level of awareness. However, this cannot be achieved in an environment full of sectarianism, regionalism, and factional divisions, trends that have spread in public spaces and on social media platforms, reinforcing hate speech and deepening linguistic divides among citizens of the same nation.

This study seeks to answer a wide range of complex questions from a sociological and sociolinguistic perspective as these approaches share analytical compatibility when exploring the impact of diglossia on the daily life of Algerian society. It also examines the importance of promoting rational and social discourse to curb all attempts to divide society linguistically or socially. The study further advocates for building a rational system that unifies society under a common understanding, away from the politics of imposed realities. It stresses that collective identity should never be confused with personal affiliation, and language is a human expression of community unity within a shared environment. Language is not a source of self-glorification, but a social component that reflects the awareness and cultural maturity of a society.

Attempting to eliminate a language, distort it, or erase its features is unethical and uncivilized behaviour. It exposes society to unnecessary discord, as seen in the radical groups or advocates of a linguistic rupture from Arabic and its associated heritage.

In this study, we used a descriptive-analytical method as it suits the nature of the topic and allows for the extraction of as much scientific and contextual data as possible. Therefore, our research asks the following question: **What are the sociological implications of diglossia in Algerian society? And what are its effects on the process of social communication?**

## **1. Definition of Diglossia**

There are different opinions regarding the definition of diglossia which has often been confused with bilingualism by many linguists. As a result, the term diglossia has been used

to refer to bilingualism, and vice versa, leading to conceptual overlap and clear disagreement regarding the components of each concept.

To clarify the distinction between the two terms, it should be noted that the variation in language use arises either from foreign or imported languages, which has created a conflict between the mother tongue and these foreign languages, or from the dialectal branches of the mother tongue, which have generated internal conflict between different levels of the language.

In this context, Abbas Al-Masri and Imad Abu Al-Hassan explained that the concept of 'aliziwdia' corresponds to the term "Diglossia", while 'althonaia' corresponds to "Bilingualism." However, when both terms are translated into Arabic, they appear to have the same meaning. Diglossia is composed of a Greek prefix "di-", meaning "dual" or "double"; the root "gloss", meaning "language"; and the suffix "-ia", which denotes a state. Thus, it is a dual or doubled linguistic state, which is equivalent to bilingualism. Bilingualism consists of the Latin prefix "bi-", meaning "two" or "double"; the root "lingual", meaning "linguistic"; and the suffix "-ism", which indicates a specific behavior or condition. The resulting translation is: a dual or doubled linguistic behaviour, also appearing to suggest bilingualism (masri & Imad, 2014, p. 40).

Ibrahim Kaid added: If we try to define each of these two terms and trace how they emerged, we find a difference in how they are defined by Western scholars, which has resulted in confusion among our scholars. The term 'diglossie' first appeared among the French, introduced by William Marçais, who coined the term 'la glossia' in 1930. He defined it as "the competition between a written literary language and a widely spoken vernacular language." Since there was no English word with this same meaning, the term 'diglossia' was coined to express the same concept. However, most other European languages use 'diglossia' instead of 'bilingualism'. In 1959, Charles Ferguson introduced the term 'diglossia' into English to refer to two distinct forms of usage within the same language. It is a competition between two varieties of a single language, each occupying a different social function. One is used in everyday life, while the other is used in formal settings and official institutions. (Mahmoud, 2002, p. 55)

## **2- The Reality of the Arabic Language in Algerian Society**

The history of the Arabic language in Algeria is linked to the Islamic conquest around 82 AH. With the adoption of Arabic—the language of the Holy Qur'an—the Algerian tongue was enriched by it, and Arabic became the primary language of the Algerian people.

When French colonization began, it employed all means to eliminate the Arabic language, where it classified it as a foreign language in its land and among its people. It aimed to render the Algerian people ignorant and strip them of their identity and character, as the French knew the power of the Arabic language. So, eliminating it became one of their top priorities. The French Minister of Education in 1897, "Alfred Rambaud", stated: "We must ensure the dominance of our language and instill in the minds of Muslims the ideas we ourselves hold

about France and its role in the world, replacing ignorance and narrow-minded preconceived notions.”He was clearly referring to Islam and the Arabic language.

Although Algeria gained independence, the legacy of France persists to this day. The French succeeded in imprinting the Algerian speech with its words; especially in major cities where Algerians’ daily language has become a linguistic hybrid of Arabic, Algerian dialect, Tamazight, and French.

This is clearly appeared nowadays as **Malek Bennabi** said, “The defeated is always enamoured with the civilization of the victor.”The late Algerian president **Abdelaziz Bouteflika** once angrily addressed the language of communication among Algerians, saying:“I can’t tell what language Algerians are speaking—it’s neither Arabic, nor French, nor Amazigh. It’s a rejected, hybrid speech that we can barely understand.” He furiously commented on a widely used word in Algerian colloquial speech—“**MATIGZITICHE**”—saying:“Explain this word to me—what does it mean?”

Among the greatest revolutions in the twentieth century are the Vietnamese the Algerian ones. The Vietnamese people followed the advice of their leader, Ho Chi Minh, who urged them to preserve the purity of their language just as they would preserve the clarity of their eyes. After more than fifty years of Algeria’s independence, we find that many Algerians today prefer the French language over Arabic. (douaouda, 2020, p. 93.94.95)

Many Algerians do not view French as a language for acquiring knowledge, but they associate development and civilization with using the language of Molière. Mastery of this language has become a fundamental requirement for employment in many administrations, while Arabic is outdated and obsolete. Moreover, they attempt to instill this mindset across Algerian society. For example, Algerian dialects; especially in rural areas and southern cities, remain relatively close to Modern Standard Arabic. However, they have undergone visible or subtle changes that are not easily detected by the listener unless one reflects deeply, ignoring the French influence that has crept into them.

### **3. Language of Communication in Algerian Society**

Algerian society is characterized by the diversity of its daily communication languages across different age groups and life situations. Classical Arabic is used by specific categories: teachers, educators, intellectuals, and religious scholars and mosque imams. It is the language of political figures and high-ranking officials during their formal speeches or media interviews. This language should be specific, purposeful and simple to meet the needs and

objectives of communication with society. It is carefully structured to ensure the message is understandable to the audience and to effectively convey the intended ideas to the targeted group. In contrast, Algerian Arabic dialect holds a prominent place in society and it is used in nearly all contexts, including markets, homes, public places, streets, and even occasionally in press interviews. French language imposed itself during the colonial era when France attempted to erase the Algerian identity, with a particular focus on combating the Arabic language by all means. (mis, 2021, pp. 646-647)

It is true that linguistic diversity in communication enriches public life and influences the way of interaction. However, it is not always a cultural space for knowledge exchange or a tool for developing social and human relations. It can be a means of arrogance and self-imposition if society lacks the intellectual resilience needed to accept others' languages, cultures, customs, and traditions. In such a case, the speaker of Standard Arabic should not seek to exclude the speaker of colloquial Arabic, nor should the colloquial speaker exclude the French one, nor the French speaker exclude those who speak Amazigh, Tergui, Shelhi, or other languages. Thus, diversity becomes a form of contradiction rather than a difference. True diversity reflects a society's philosophy of embracing multiplicity as a qualitative addition that grants the community flexibility and adaptability in its social interactions.

Recently, we have witnessed a wave of fabricated conflicts targeting the linguistic foundation of Algerian society. Certain parties have attempted to spread the idea of division among Algerians, turning the matter into historical debates and controversies that are entirely unfounded and baseless. These conflicts aimed at fragmenting society into linguistic minorities, which could lead to serious consequences. We speak Arabic, Amazigh, Tergui, Mozabite, and many others that have coexisted for thousands of years. There has never been any form of negative social friction among them; rather, they have lived in social peace.

#### **4. The Social Nature of Language: From de Saussure to Voloshinov**

Ferdinand de Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics* was compiled posthumously and published in 1916. Within a decade and a half, it became a foundational text in structural linguistics. Saussure declared that language is a "social fact," and the social "force" works powerfully to maintain the cohesion of the linguistic system, to the point that the individual cannot change the language. However, change can occur in speech (*parole*), and if such change is eventually accepted by the social group, the system evolves into a new state or language.

An example of such change can be seen in the word “social” itself. According to Saussure and based on its Latin origin, this word signified a tightly-knit bond. It is anything that makes individuals act similarly. His assertion that language is a social fact is linked to his belief that every member of the speech community possesses language in an identical manner. However, the word “social” was already being used during the second decade of the twentieth century in the speech of many people with a different connotation that was contradicted Saussure’s idea. It was associated with specific subgroups within a collectivity. By the second half of the century, this newer meaning became the dominant one.

Linguistic signs are inherently ideological in nature. Social existence is not only reflected in them but also determines the degree to which its rays are refracted through them. A sign is not like a polished mirror, but rather a mirror with a fractured, irregular surface shaped by the conflicting social interests within a sign community—in other words, by class struggle. This view makes language central to the “base”—a Marxist declaration that does not separate language from politics and suggests the impossibility of fully distinguishing between the two. Linguistic creativity cannot be understood independently of the ideological meanings and values it carries. This is why we are inclined to use the term heteroglossia. (Harraki, 2007, p. 63.64.66.67)

A unified language is not a given; it is always an assumption. At every moment in its linguistic life, it stands in opposition to the realities of heteroglossia. Yet, it asserts its actual presence as a force that overcomes this diversity, imposing specific constraints on it. This tension forms class struggle which is connected to voices and signs. Voloshinov died in the 1930s, and his writings—as well as those of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975)—fell into obscurity until they were rediscovered in the 1960s. Since then, later Marxists, post-Marxists, and even non-Marxists have independently embraced their innovative ideas. When their works translated into French and English, they appeared entirely contemporary despite being buried in obscurity for forty years.

## **5. The Conflict between Arabic and Dialects in the Algerian Family**

Starting with what “Saussure” stated about the crisis of linguistic divergence within the social group and its impact on the process of collective communication, meaning-making, and the construction of beliefs tied to language, it is worth noting that diglossia may carry social tensions that do not serve the interests of the group as much as they contribute to its fragmentation into separate units. Each unit establishes its linguistic identity and reference point, believing it the most suitable for that group. Meanwhile, another collective unit views that its language should dominate the linguistic and social scene in that community, and

seeks to impose that based on historical contexts and certain interpretations that are not free from ideologization and individualistic conceptualizations, which do not stem from consistent and practical scientific assumptions.

One of the most noticeable aspects of language use in Algeria, from a communicative and pragmatic perspective, is that any functional conversation tends to include some colloquial vernacular expressions, as well as French, Spanish, and even English words. Evidence of this lies in that many terms used in media or on social media platforms are derived from the process of Arabization, the incorporation of foreign terms into Arabic, the creation of new Arabic terminology, or the Arabization of foreign concepts, to keep the Arabic language abreast of today's technical and scientific developments. This influence has not been limited to vocabulary; it has extended to syntax, expressions, and styles due to literal translation.

The fascination with Western civilization has reached a wide extent. It has swept through all aspects of Arab—particularly Algerian—social life. This is evident in what we now commonly use in daily interactions. For example, in greetings, we say "Salut" or "Hi" instead of "As-salamualaykum"; we say "CV?" instead of "Bekhir" or "Alhamdulillah"; "Merci" or "Thank you" instead of "Shukran"; for agreement, we say "C'est bon" or "OK"; and "Désolé" instead of "asif". In Algerian society, French is heavily present in our dialect, with some changes in formulation, structure, and so on. For example, we say (fluta) or (tipana) to mean bread, both derived from French words: "flûte" meaning flute, and "tube" meaning pipe, due to the similarity in shape. (Sarah, 2021, p. 250.251)

This phenomenon has extended into our schools and universities where we say "classe" instead of "alkism", and "cours" instead of "mohadara". It has also reached the names of storefronts and restaurants like "pizzeria", "fast food", "restoro", and so on.

## **6. Diglossia or Foreign Language Domination**

The idea that foreign languages are more important than Arabic; especially in the early years of education, is deeply problematic. It is astonishing to see some learners pronounce a foreign language correctly, yet they stutter, hesitate, make mistakes, mispronounce words, and mix it with poor colloquial expressions when they use Standard Arabic. This happens because they rarely hear Standard Arabic outside the classroom; once they step out onto the street, they are surrounded by colloquial speech everywhere. Thus, it confuses them and hinders their abilities to master and control Standard Arabic.

Experiments showed that a child who begins learning a second foreign language before mastering their first (native) language will suffer negative effects in acquiring both languages. Therefore, teaching a second language after mastering the first is beneficial to the development of both. As educational experts agree, “we shape a child’s mind through the language they learn and use first before any other language. If we teach them a foreign language before their national language, it will always remain secondary in their mind, perception, mental, and psychological behaviour.”

If language is a social activity and a necessary response to the need for communication among people, it is also one of the strongest bonds linking members of a linguistic community. (Hadeef, n.d, p. 13.14) “The existence of language requires the existence of a society. This clearly shows the social nature of language. There is no linguistic system that can exist independently from a human group that uses it. Language is not a goal in itself but a means of communication between members of the human community.”

Looking at Algerian society, we find it speaks a mixture of French, Arabic, and local dialects. Within a single family, you might find someone Arabized, French-speaking, bilingual, and other who doesn’t master either Standard Arabic or the foreign language. It is impossible to determine the exact percentage of speakers of any one language. In any case, French—alongside many local dialects— is strongly present in post-independence Algeria. This makes Arabic and its speakers marginalized and unable to perform even the simplest functions like communicating, expressing hopes, pains, and desires. Language has a powerful impact on the life of the individual and the society. For the individual, it is a tool for communicating with others, achieving goals and fulfilling needs. It is also the means by which one expresses hopes and emotions. It provides access to reading and exchanging ideas, allows a person to give advice, offer guidance, spread values, and influence others. (Hadeef, n.d, p. 14)

## **7. Diglossia or Linguistic Deformation**

Undoubtedly, we are experiencing a real crisis in our linguistic identity. Algeria, like many other Arab countries, is witnessing a unique and complex situation. We have moved from a stage of diglossia into a linguistic deformation. So, Algerian society is exposed to “non-language”, this means a society with no clear linguistic identity to reflect its belonging, social orientations, and intellectual affiliations. More importantly, the language we use in our daily interactions is not governed by grammatical, rhetorical, or morphological rules. Rather, it is a hybridized, mixed-up language, composed of borrowed words. These words are not phonetically or morphologically adapted according to proper linguistic standards; instead,



they are distorted, hindering understanding and destroying the social function of speech, which requires clarity in both word construction and semantic coherence.

In this context, Abdel Fattah Kilito in his book "I Speak All Languages, But in Arabic" stated that "we can never free ourselves from the language we were raised within our family, the one we're familiar with and used to. Even if it lies dormant, it remains lurking, ready to emerge in every situation. Every speaker expresses themselves in foreign languages starting from their native tongue, which can be detected through a strange accent, certain words or constructions, and even through their gaze and facial expressions." (Kilito, 2013, p. 120)

## **8. Diglossia: A Sign of Civilization or a Social Crisis**

Malek Bennabire counts an incident about a conversation he had with a postal clerk. This conversation prompted him to write his article "Language and Culture". He said: "I was at a post office speaking to the clerk behind the counter in Arabic. Each time, he responded to me in French. I won't express my impressions about this conversation in front of a window in an official institution (...)." He continues: "What struck me as even more bizarre was that this same man, who was deafening me with his clumsy French, had just moments earlier addressed one of his colleagues in perfectly correct Arabic."

What disturbed Malek Bennabi was the strange contradiction in the behaviour of a postal worker who deliberately chose to respond in French, contradicting the decree mandating the use of Arabic in official settings. This is not a matter of personal behaviour or manner of communication, the issue is more complex. It raises the problem of diglossia within the Algerian cultural landscape and the conceptual disorder it has created, which has contributed to a crisis in Algerian culture. Cultural security and the preservation of national identity do not depend solely on food, political, or military security; but also on linguistic security and the unity of language.

Moreover, language forms an essential part of a society's culture and plays a fundamental role in shaping its existence. Through language, social communication takes place, the memory of a people is preserved, rituals and customs are practiced, and it serves as a vehicle for symbols used in science, art, and knowledge transmission. Language has often been used to guide national identities, as it shapes the structure of individual consciousness and it is a tool for bringing ideas and worldviews closer together. This is especially true when the society speaks a single language.

However, when language becomes a destructive tool for a society's culture as it takes on a dual form and imposes unnecessary differences, we are witnessing "the negative impact of language on culture", particularly when the language is Arabic. Unlike many other languages, Arabic is a genuine component of Arab culture. (Hadjeba, 2014, p. 95)

## **9. Diglossia across Virtual Communication Spaces**

In light of globalization and technological development, today's reader no longer interacts solely with literary texts. However, they have now become producers, readers, critics, analysts, and commentators simultaneously across various social media platforms. In this digital society, individuals are active members where they send and receive, read and write, share, listen, and speak because they see in this an affirmation of their identity, existence, ideas, and even the events they experience. They communicate through language which often differs from one interaction to another since they represent various age groups and social profiles such as experts or seekers of knowledge, all depending on their ideological, social, and cultural orientations. Whether they like it or not, the online user is a reader with multiple choices. Beyond their intellectual capabilities, other issues emerge like linguistic concerns.

This is what makes social media users somewhat similar to literary text recipients, but these users are different in how they interact and use language which can be colloquial or classical Arabic. Individuals' use of communication tools reflects the roles they play in their ongoing and often hierarchical communication processes, whether in publishing content for public visibility, selecting communicative media content, or choosing linguistic and non-linguistic symbols when engaging with a topic or event. In the virtual society, individuals do not merely play the role of recipients; they also create the message and actively shape the communication process on social media platforms. Particularly, the language used online has extended beyond social networks and become part of everyday life. As for social needs, they cannot be fulfilled without human communication within the social environment. (Chaoui & Hanan, 2024, p. 66.67.71)

In the virtual world, social networks have created a wide space for individuals to express themselves and share their feelings and thoughts with others. Dialogues and conversations are considered the most effective forms of communication, whether conducted in formal Arabic, dialects, foreign languages, or a hybrid of all these. What matters is that the recipient can understand and interact across languages and symbols. Digital users are immersed in many languages and cultures across various fields, engaging in multifaceted and multimedia communication, with attention to relevant topics that express specific conditions and diverse situations.

Exploring the status of the Arabic language on social networks does not mean examining it as the language of religion or a marker of Arab cultural identity. Rather, it seeks to understand how the public use it, alongside other languages, dialects, and non-verbal elements such as images and symbols. All this unfolds in the context of globalization and the shift from local to global, attempting to understand how platforms like Facebook affect users' linguistic choices and their attitudes toward adopting Arabic (their mother tongue) amidst an ongoing language conflict in which Arabic is not the dominant force.

The spread of social media in the Arab world has impacted language; especially most platforms operate in foreign languages. This concern has been raised in many conferences to sound the alarm regarding these effects. (Chaoui & Hanan, 2024, p. 71) For example, a conference was held in Dubai in 2013, addressed the status of the Arabic language. In addition, various Arabic language academies have occasionally taken up the issue to raise awareness.

## **Conclusion**

A question that has always been asked throughout the years and generations, in which language we, Algerians, communicate. Which language the Algerian society finds it suitable. What language we use in our homes, streets, public offices, restaurants, shops, markets, and in communication spaces. The current state of the Arabic language in our country is in continuous decline. This does not mean that it has been replaced by other foreign languages. Rather, its people who have abandoned it either forced or dazzled by Western civilizations. If they truly knew the value those civilizations give to their languages, they would realize they are on the wrong path.

The problem is not in the Arabic language itself, for it has preserved its strength for thousands of years and will continue to do so until the end of time. This has been confirmed by many linguists, who say that Arabic will be the only language in the world from which not a single letter or diacritical mark will be lost, because it is a linguistic miracle from God. The flaw lies in those who are supposed to be its guardians—guardians of its human and linguistic components. As it is the language of religion, it is also the language of science and civilization. Anyone who reads the history of the Islamic Arab world in its golden age would

know that linguistic openness was the reason for the blending of civilizations, at a time when Arabic was the master of all world languages.

Linguistic coexistence or diglossia is a social, scientific, and human necessity, imposed by the changes in people's lifestyles and needs. This is how things should be—a reality and a practice. But our reality is dangerous as our language is neither Standard Arabic, nor French, nor Amazigh, nor Spanish. In fact, we have lost one of the pillars of strength and civilization which is our linguistic identity. Diglossia is not a problem as long as we master our mother tongue. But we have neither preserved it, nor acquired other languages. Caught between all this, the Algerian society remains lost, needing a compass to lead it back to rebuilding its foundations, which can only be completed through the recovery of its linguistic and social identity.

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