

# Language Problems in Post-Colonial Tunisia: The Role of Education and Social Class

Christy L. Callahan

## Part I. A Review of Relevant Literature

Especially since 1956, when Tunisia gained its independence from French occupiers, the language problems of this tiny North African country have come to the forefront. In Tunisia, as in other parts of the Maghreb, such as Algeria and Morocco, the existence of various forms of the indigenous tongue (Arabic, and in some areas, Berber) has been complicated by the presence of foreign languages, namely French. Linguistic issues, in turn, cannot be separated from culture, the milieu in which language finds its meaning. On the eve of independence, Tunisia had to grapple with the question of its cultural identity as well. As a whole Tunisian society had to decide how to preserve vestiges from its past while incorporating foreign elements.

Interrelated to this same theme of cultural change is that of "modernization." In the 1960's, Western social scientists tended to view other civilizations with respect to the West's level of "development." Joshua Fishman, who focused on language problems in particular, shared this same perspective on modernity. He presented a useful model for characterizing the language problems of developing countries in the post-colonial period, which later researchers, such as R.M. Payne, have confirmed. In both of these articles, the authors note the role that social class and education play in determining successful use of language. More recent writings by experts on the Maghreb, however, have disproved Fishman's predictions of socio-cultural stability.

In a 1968 article titled "Language Problems and Types of Political and Socio-Cultural Integration," Fishman presents a model by which to classify developing nations with respect to language issues. According to Fishman, they can fit into one of three categories: "new developing nations," "intermediate," or "old developing nations." Since countries of the first type, which include East Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, lack a strong political heritage and overriding cultural traditions, language planning aims toward integration of their highly fragmented societies<sup>1</sup>. The intermediate countries such



as Pakistan and India have characteristics of the other two categories; they seek to modernize and integrate the society through the use of exoglossic languages, i.e. languages which are foreign to the country, and yet recognize the importance of indigenous regional tongues for local development and cohesion<sup>2</sup>. The third type, that of "old developing nations," consists of countries in the Near East, South-East Asia, and North Africa.

This third classification of developing nations is of particular interest for the aims of this discussion as Tunisia is part of North Africa. According to Fishman's paradigm, old developing nations have deeply-entrenched belief systems which link religion, culture, and social structure to economic and political systems. Due to this high degree of integration, in the post colonial period, their main task concerns the reconciliation of modern influences with a revered past. As far as language problems are concerned, a dichotomy exists between the classical language and a vernacular form which has evolved over the years. The long term goal, therefore, is to "recognize a Western language for transitional purposes en route to (more) widespread adoption of a modernized and simplified one"<sup>3</sup>. Whereas language politics centers around the issue of ethnicity within the new developing countries, social class plays a key role in old developing countries. In addition, public education provides access to the modernized and standardized version of the language, when otherwise the majority of the population would have acquired only the vernacular. Fishman asserts that the coexistence of linguistic variety testifies to the vigor of their cultural past. This line of argument concludes that "old developing nations can withstand much greater political diversity and unrest as a result of socio-cultural change"<sup>4</sup>. Recent developments, however, have contradicted Fishman's vision of socio-cultural stability. At the same time, the model accurately describes general characteristics of Tunisian culture and provides insight into the relevance of its language problems.

R.M. Payne's 1973 article on "Language Planning in Tunisia" affirms many of Fishman's observations. As far as societal cohesion is concerned, Tunisia is arguably the most unified of the Maghreb countries for two reasons. The first stems from the fact that the French colonized Tunisia relatively late (in 1881 as opposed to 1830 for Algeria), exerted a more superficial influence, and actually relinquished control near the time of independence in 1956 (whereas the French bureaucracy continued to dominate post-colonial Morocco). The second factor is the ethnic homogeneity of Tunisia's inhabitants, i.e. a Berber population of 1% compared to 40% in Morocco and 20% in Algeria<sup>5</sup>. Despite these factors of unity, the language situation in Tunisia is even more complicated than outlined by Fishman's model.

In his article, Payne makes reference to Mohamed Maamouri's description of the six forms of language in Tunisia. At one end of the spectrum is standard French followed by a French-Arabic mixture. Under the heading "Arabic" are four varieties: Classical Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic



(MSA), Educated Arabic (EA) and Tunisian Arabic (TA). The latter is the mother tongue of the majority of Tunisians, though many have passive capabilities in so-called Educated Tunisian (ET). In 1964, Tunisia's literate population was a mere 20% of which 13% was literate in French as well<sup>6</sup>. As Fishman pointed out, the need for universal education comes to the forefront<sup>7</sup>.

Inherently tied to the issue of language competence and education is that of social class. As Riahi put it, "le fait de parler français confère à la personne un certain prestige social"<sup>8</sup>. In extreme cases, the francophone elite elevates itself over the rest of the population, refusing to use either MSA or TA. In rejecting their native identity, they inevitably create a cultural vacuum for themselves; they are neither truly French nor Tunisian. Only speakers of French can aspire to a university education and higher positions within the government. While students may appear to be fluent with good pronunciation skills, an aspect of overall language proficiency which Cummins terms as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), they might very well, at the same time, lack the level of cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) indispensable for post-secondary achievement<sup>9</sup>.

Not only is this the case for French, which is most widely used in universities, but for Modern Standard Arabic as well. In the words of Riahi: "Par ailleurs, les réponses des élèves aux questions portant sur l'appréciation des deux langues et la réflexion sur leur condition de bilinguisme trahissent un malaise certain, car ces élèves bien qu'étant à la fin de la scolarisation secondaire, ne maîtrisent réellement ni l'arabe ni le français et éprouvent le besoin d'avoir un instrument linguistique où il se sentent à l'aise pour s'exprimer et qui leur serve de système de référence et de comparaison par rapport aux autre [sic] systèmes linguistiques enseignés"<sup>10</sup>. As a result of the educational system, only the upper echelons obtain the benefits of additive bilingualism, a stage at which knowledge of two languages no longer causes confusion, but is indeed beneficial to academic performance.

In more recent articles, researchers have made some similar observations on Tunisia's language problems. Gallissot (1986), notes that despite the fact that half the population, i.e. the younger generation, is literate, the other half consists of mostly illiterate adults<sup>11</sup>. As far as French is concerned, data collected for the beginning of the school year 1981-1982 showed that 55.6% of students at various levels (primary, secondary, and post-secondary) received instruction in French<sup>12</sup>. However, Gallissot brings to the reader's attention that in the end, education alone cannot guarantee a place in society for Tunisia's youth: "En réalite, ces chances sont familiales, c'est-à-dire fondées sur un patrimoine et sur de relations préalables dans l'appareil de l'État"<sup>13</sup>. In the words of Aziz Krichen, "la mobilité (sociale) par l'école, c'est fini"<sup>14</sup>. These statements sharply contrast Fishman's optimism when he stated that "as each generation arrives at the modern school and in the modern work-arena . . . its language repertoire is *expanded* by the addition of the modernized variety without any intended displacement"<sup>15</sup>. The fact that



Tunisians have *not* mastered the languages taught to them at school<sup>16</sup>, goes against this assumption.

Furthermore, Fishman's conclusion that linguistic "flexibility" would prevent societal upheaval has simply not been the case. During the nationalist movements of the 1950's, modernism was a uniting thread. By 1970, however, divergence in public thought rose to the level of a "crisis of ideals". As Gallissot points out: "*la revanche sur la modernité s'attaque à la mixité, dénonce l'impureté étrangère et la perversion occidentale. Mais cette réaction est peut-être un aveu de désarroi, une attitude qui cache mal sous un combat culturel, le trouble des jalousies sociales inavouables*"<sup>17</sup>. This last observation alludes to the importance of examining the issue on an even deeper level—that of the family.

## Part II. Socio-Economic and Educational Factors: A Case Study

In the previous discussion, the authors referred to characteristics of groups of nations or to Tunisia in particular. However, when it comes right down to it, language use is a phenomena which, at the base, takes place not only in more formal settings such as the school, or via the mass media, but in a casual, person-to-person manner. The first place a person is most likely to come into contact with language is in the family setting. Parents pass on their native tongue to their children at the same time that they influence the way their children will look at the world. The mother tongue allows a child to communicate with members of the same linguistic group and fosters a sense of belonging to that group. In this sense, culture and language cannot be separated. As far as bilingual children are concerned, another set of beliefs and customs can equally become a part of their existence as a result of contact with a second language/culture. In later life, the extent to which they have developed certain linguistic capacities and cultural awareness as a child will determine later prospects for adaptation to other systems and possibly, greater socio-economic advantages. And again, this all depends on the position and education of the parents.

This general interaction of socio-economic and educational factors applies in the case of actual families. The Gharbi family lives in a village near Sousse, one of the larger cities in Tunisia. After their own definition, they are a "middle class family." During the school year, the father, Hedi, works as an administrator in a vocational school. For the purposes of his career, he has had to master the various registers of French, not only to passively understand what is going on around him, but to effectively communicate his ideas with others within a highly-regimented francophone environment. On the other hand, his wife Myriam has only BICS which she uses especially during the summer when she makes show costumes for a hotel in the area. In her everyday life, she uses dialect to communicate with family, friends, and



merchants at the *souk* (open market). Salouah (21 years), is the oldest of four children. Her command of French has been crucial for her academic success; she is a third-year engineering student in a French-dominated system. Her 19-year-old brother, Imed, was successful at entering a merchant marine school, despite his inability to express himself in French for literary or philosophical purposes. (And, incidentally, cannot read Classical Arabic either). In fact, his only reasons for reading French seem to be related either to required school subjects or to television viewing. Abdel Hamid (13 years) speaks fluent French but does not have an entirely grammatically sound command of the language. At four years of age, Walid, who has frequent exposure to French via television, relies on his sister to read him stories from a children's books written in Arabic. The Gharbis, while they have a modern television set, own but a handful of books.

The varying degrees of language competence within this family suggest that social mobility is slowly being afforded to women more and more as they have access to the educational system. Actually, Salouah's father himself has had a great influence on her opportunities. He has refused to accept offers for her hand in marriage, even though the typical girl from that village would have already been married by the age of 19. Instead he continues to support her financially (she also has summer jobs) so that she can have a brighter future. The prospects for the male children are positive as well. However, it is easy to understand why their sister might very well end up outperforming them academically. Traditionally the boys are free to roam about and get involved in all sorts of trouble, while the girls have to find some form of entertainment at home, which could easily be reading. This is generally true in the Hamady family, as well.

In the small seaside village of Selektia lives the Hamady family. They differ from the Gharbis in several ways. As far as standard of living is concerned, they don't live in relative luxury, though the fact that they have an adjacent garden and rent out the top floor of their house in summer sets them apart. As the village French teacher and an award-winning poet who writes in French, Chabaâne Hamady earns enough money to be able to travel to France from time to time and to support his family of five children without his wife's extra labor. Though traditional in most respects, her knowledge of English (however limited) and Western facial features make her unique. Wided, their oldest daughter, hopes to become a French teacher like her father. What is remarkable is the eloquence of the two oldest daughters in French. This simply comes from the fact that they never watch television but instead study hard and benefit from the influence of their father, who has been known to spontaneously recite poetry. All in all, while the Hamady children do not have enormous material advantages, they have linguistic assets due to merely *cultural* factors.

In the very same village, across the street from the Hamadis live relatives of the Gharbis. This diametrical opposition on a practical level is symbolic of the underlying tension between the two families. When one of the



Gharbi daughters got married, the Hamady females were invited to take part in the festivities. Wided was dressed in the traditional costume which indicated that she was of marrying age and sat next to Lamien (the bride) as a sign of good rapport between the two. Despite superficial similarities in dress and everyday activities, the two girls would embark on very different paths afterwards. Lamien would go to live in France with her new husband (who happens to be her father's cousin) while Wided would continue her studies. Accordingly, just as each had reached different levels of proficiency in French, each would have different uses for the French language in their future lives. In France, Lamien would remain largely separated from the French culture, and indeed raise her children in her own tongue. For Wided, the French language is an integral part of her existence. She is concerned by the slightest grammatical slip-up. To her, the French people do not merely represent better economic opportunities, but a valued culture in itself. Their culture and way of looking at the world become her own. The same is true for her father.

This is perhaps why Chabaâne Hamady, though he is always cordial, does not associate with the neighbors across the street. They all live in Selektia, yet they really live in different worlds. In thought at least, the Gharbis seem to stay within the boundaries of their Islamic and Arab culture. And when they try to get glimpses of the outside world, they still keep the view that they have passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, when the Tunisian poet looks out into the ocean, he is not only reminded of the beauty of his Tunisian heritage, but acknowledges another reality—that of the French. If such a contrast can exist between two families from the same village and same social class, it is not surprising that deep cultural divisions are present on a national level.

### Part III. Toward An Assessment of Tunisia's Language Problems

The existence of a "double culture" is one of the many effects of the French colonization of Tunisia. In her article on the social effects of Arabization, Souriau offers the following insight: "Cette reproduction d'un dualisme sans possibilité de synthèse—et dans la référence obligée au modèle occidental—c'est peut-être cela aussi le néo-colonisme"<sup>18</sup>. Souriau's description can be compared to Tipps' conception of 'cultural imperialism', "an imperialism of values which superimposes . . . Western cultural choices upon other societies, as in the tendency to subordinate all other considerations (save political stability perhaps) to the technical requirements of economic development"<sup>19</sup>.

In his critique of modernization theory, Tipps addresses the assumptions which underlie the modernization paradigm, which gained popularity in the post-Second World War era, as social scientists were trying to under-



stand the rapid changes taking place in 'underdeveloped countries' <sup>20</sup>. Drawing on the positivist, empirical traditions of the previous century, these researchers took on much of the theoretical groundwork of their counterparts in the natural sciences; they compared societal change within the nation state (also a 19th-century Western development) to the linear maturation process of biological organisms. Under the guise of scientific objectivism, hidden ethnocentric presuppositions were actually the motivation of their studies in some cases. Developing countries either "measure up" to Western standards or they do not; either a society is "modern," "advanced," "civilized," like the West or it is "traditional," "backward" and "barbaric." This position assumes that the Western way of life should and eventually will be adopted by all societies. This has clearly not been the case as the 20th century draws to a close.

As was discussed in Part I. of this paper, Fishman was one of those social scientists in the 1960's who was convinced that other societies would follow the pattern of the prosperous, advanced West. The trouble with his model, and the modernization paradigm in general, is that it tends to oversimplify the characteristics of societies, and fails to take into account factors which actually lead to cultural divergence. Moreover, it is this very narrow-mindedness which has served to polarize "developing" nations into camps of traditionalists versus modernists.

Instead of simply measuring a certain culture with respect to the standards of other cultures (which unfortunately is still a major preoccupation of social scientists), a new perspective is in order. It would appear more sensible to acknowledge the inherent values of a given culture without imposing rigid and necessarily ethnocentric ideals. In this manner, a culture can have its own unique beliefs and traditions without being labeled "abnormal" by researchers who seem more interested in obtaining "statistical significance" than exploring the richness of the human experience. In the long run, such a radical change in perspective can only foster greater awareness and tolerance of cultural variations.

## Notes

1. Fishman, Joshua A. *Language Problems and Types of Political and Socio-Cultural Integration: A Conceptual Postscript*. Tunis: International Conference on Second Language Problems, 1968. ERIC ED 025 739, pp. 1-3.
2. *ibid.*, pp. 5-7.
3. *ibid.*, p. 4.
4. *ibid.*, p. 5.
5. Payne, R.M. (1979) "Language Planning in Tunisia." *Studia Gratularia*, p. 212.
6. Gallagher qtd. in Payne, p. 214.
7. p. 6.
8. qtd. in Payne, 215. ('The fact that a person can speak French allots him/her a



- certain social prestige.') Note: Quotes in parantheses are translations done by author.
9. qtd. in Larsen-Freeman, Diane and Long, Michael H., *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1991, p. 39.
  10. qtd. in Payne, 214. ('Incidentally, the answers the students gave concerning their appreciation of the two languages and their thoughts on their bilingual situation reveal a definite malaise. Even though these students are nearing the end of their secondary education, they do not truly master either Arabic or French, and feel the need for a linguistic instrument in which they can express themselves comfortably and will serve as a system for reference and comparison with respect to the other linguistic systems taught.')
  11. Gallissot, René. "Les limites de la culture nationale: enjeux culturels et avènement étatique au Magreb." p. 52 in Jean-Robert Henry (ed.), *Nouveaux enjeux culturels au Magreb*. Paris: CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifiques), 1986.
  12. Santucci, Jean-Claude. "Le français au Maghreb. Situation générale et perspectives d'avenir." p. 147 in *ibid*.
  13. p. 53. ('In reality chances [for success] are familial, that is to say, based on inheritance and on preexisting relationships in the framework of the State.')
  14. qtd. in Gallissot, p. 53. ('(social) mobility through the school system is over')
  15. p. 4.
  16. Payne, p. 214.
  17. p. 48. ('The backlash against [this definition of] modernity attacks [social] heterogeneity, denounces foreign impurity and the perversion of the West. But this reaction is perhaps just a confession of [social] unrest, an attitude which tries to hide its unspeakable social jealousy [of the West] under a thin cloak of cultural combat.')
  18. Souriau, Christiane. "L'arabisation au Magreb. Itinéraire d'une recherche sur les effets sociaux des rôles des langues." p. 97 in Jean-Robert Henry (ed.), *Nouveaux enjeux culturels au Magreb*. Paris: CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifiques), 1986. ('This persistent dualism without prospects for synthesis—and necessarily linked to the Western model—is perhaps itself a form of neo-colonialism.')
  19. Tipps, Dean C. (1973) "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15:2, p. 210.
  20. *ibid.*, pp. 200–207.