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# Language Ideologies and Policies at Work: Obstructing Arabic Instruction from the French Colonial Era to the Present

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes France's language policies regarding Arabic instruction, considering the historical relationship with the Arabic language and its speakers, from colonial to postmodern eras. The polemic surrounding Arabic instruction in the schools of the republic is not a nascent political development regarding minority linguistic rights, but, rather, a byproduct of ideologically motivated educational policies that aim to marginalize the role of Arabic, both within the Arab world and the French diaspora. The debate demonstrates the centrality of language ideologies in shaping France's identities, both nationally and abroad, and the maintenance of French as well as Arabic, the language of France's largest minority. France has historically promoted the dominance of the French language, including Francophonie's inception (Kasuya 2001; Vigouroux 2013) in the post-independence era and *laïcité* in modern-day France (Tetreault 2021). Analyzing current political debates in France shows that the circulating ideologies that characterizes teaching Arabic is not born in a vacuum, but, rather, it continues a legacy of contention that has characterized France's relationship with the Arabic speaking world.

*Keywords:* Arabic; France; francophonie; ideology; *laïcité*; language policy; Maghreb; sociolinguistics.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

From colonial to postmodern eras, France's historical relationship with the Arabic language and its speakers has influenced language policies

concerning Arabic instruction. The debate surrounding Arabic instruction in the schools of the republic has shed light on the role of language ideologies toward the Arabic speaking community, both within the Arabic world and in the French diaspora. I argue that the negative stance toward introducing Arabic in the educational domain is not a nascent political development regarding minority linguistic rights toward the language itself, but it is the byproduct of ideologically motivated educational policies that aim at marginalizing the role of Arabic abroad and at home.

France's polemic about Arabic instruction shows the centrality of the study of language ideologies in shaping France's conception of self, national identities, and how it positions itself *vis-à-vis* the Arab world. Of import to this study is that France has historically mobilized ideologies for the dominance of its language, including the inception of francophonie (Kasuya 2001; Vigouroux 2013) in the post-independence era and *laïcité* (secularism) in modern-day France, to articulate its position toward Arabic and its speakers. By analyzing current political debates in France, I show that the ideological battle that characterizes teaching Arabic is not born in a vacuum, but rather, stems from a continuation of a legacy of domination that characterized France's relationship with the Maghreb societies. In this section, I will focus the Moroccan situation, as a case example, and show how France has historically enacted laws and policies to undermine the teaching of Arabic.

## 2. FRENCH COLONIAL LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES AND POLICIES

France's language policy in Morocco had the aim of socially transforming Maghrebi society with the occupation of Algeria (1880), Tunisia (1881), and Morocco (1912), promoting a culturally oriented agenda and placing French education at its epicenter. The importance of French education within the colonial agenda is articulated by Bernard, who stated that, "Pour l'établissement durable de notre influence dans le pays, chaque école ouverte vaut mieux qu'une bataille gagnée" ('for the purpose of the permanent establishment of our influence in the country [Morocco], every school which is opened is worth more than a battle won', quoted in Bentahila 1983, 6). By enacting language policies where French is the primary language of instruction, France would leave a lasting imprint on Maghrebi societies. Bentahila (1983) further posits that French policy

motivated Moroccans to exchange their own customs, ethics, and social norms for new ones. While receiving an honorary degree from Harvard university in 1943, Winston Churchill expressed an imperialistic view of language stating, “the power to control language offers far better prizes than taking away people’s provinces or lands or grinding them down in exploitation” (quoted in Phillipson 2016, 134).

Modernizing Morocco called for instituting educational policies, the role of which was to promote a modern, secular society. The French nationalist vision of Morocco as a protectorate functioned as a means of reorganizing its social dynamics to serve France’s national prosperity (Segalla 2011). France established an economic system that was designed to operate, and could only function, in French (Gill 1999). The educational system was elitist in its nature (Bentahila 1983), the purpose of which was to first gain the allegiance of a group of “translators” from an elite group of Moroccans, whose function would be to “fill the lower ranks of the colonial governments and commercial establishments” (Mansour 1993, 77). These advocates played a gate-keeping role in limiting access to the French language and ensuring that its linguistic capital “received the greatest value and secured the greatest profit” (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991, 51). By implementing the above-mentioned laws, the French did not tolerate local languages and introduced a long tradition of publicly controlling language choice (Woolard 1988). France’s monolingual ideologies not only impacted local languages such as Breton, Catalan, and Alsatian German by the strict application of French in all its former colonies, but it also banned the use of local languages, which had a negative effect on education and the development of local languages. In fact, the ideology of “mission civilatrice” (Spolsky 2018) that France propagated in justifying using only French in education, according to Bokamba (1991), produced outcomes of mass illiteracy, mass withdrawals from high school, and rudimentary lingua francas.

Spolsky (2018) maintains that the French, much like the case in Portuguese colonial expansion, advocated the need for requisite mastery of the French language for attaining full citizenship status, assuming the superiority of the French language over the other languages of the occupied territories. The ideology of the civilizing mission stems from the conviction that French is the de facto language for universal reason (Kasuya 2001), and it has an inherent civilizing nature. Using the ideology of *la mission civilatrice*, the French mobilized their linguistic resources and continuously attempted to control the educational market,

which guarantees an exclusive dominance of French and thus, its ‘value’ in different linguistic markets. The goal of *la mission civilisatrice* was to rearrange the social order of Moroccan linguistic market to allow French to secure the accrual of enough economic and cultural capital to facilitate its nativization in the Moroccan milieu as a national language.

The French established their linguistic dominance through language policies, used as a “tool of ideological control” (Mansour 1993, 120), to inject French, as a newly transplanted code, with the highest value in the Moroccan linguistic market. The policies served to persuade the indigenous population, viewed as “passive objects of literacy” (Fabian 1986, 77), that their local languages are inherently deficient and inferior and, therefore, French language acquisition is necessary to embrace modernity and for global access. However, during the colonial era, Arabic came to these assumptions maintaining the continuation of Arabic as the language of erudition through the establishment of Arabic-taught schools, operating parallel to the French-taught schools, which gave wider educational access to the public and, consequently, gained a wider resonance among them (Payet 1957).

Following France’s contact with Arabic speaking populations in the Maghreb, Arabic was seen as a challenge to colonial expansion. France took measures to undermine Arabic and its speakers, maintaining the French language through creating the ideology of francophonie and developing an association with the francophone ruling elite in the former French colonies, thus increasing the visibility of French as an exogenous code and allowing it to maintain presence a century later.

### 3. FRENCH LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES IN POST-INDEPENDENCE MAGHREB

Following Morocco’s independence, although French colonials departed and Morocco instituted Arabization policies, Moroccans did not gain control over their destinies. On the contrary, a system of privileges, that was French in its engineering and Moroccan in its implementation, continued. The intention of the Arabization policy was to (1) balance the asymmetrical relationship between the former protectorate and France, (2) be a means of restoring Morocco’s pre-colonial linguistic structure and national identity, and (3) reverse linguistic and social asymmetries created by French colonization. The postcolonial government of Morocco was at odds with its postcolonial realities. While the prestige

of French is conferred on its speakers from the central political power in Paris and its use in the colonies, the prestige of Arabic is conferred on it by a global community and the twenty-two Arabic speaking states for which it serves as the official language. However, Morocco also expressed the need to maintain French as necessary for nation-building purposes and for promoting its image as a modern state.

The Moroccan government adopted the Arabization program as a nation-building tool, and the newly independent state used education as its epicenter to promote a modern and secularized Morocco and to attempt to compensate for its continued reliance on French. Morocco began “an ambitious ‘Arabisation’ program by gradually substituting Standard Arabic for French in areas where French speakers still had a monopoly” (Gill 1999, 125). The Arabization program’s goal was to restore the position of Arabic in Morocco’s post-colonial context, which was a political move that maintained class stratification by allowing the elite class the privilege of acquiring foreign languages (Grandguillaume 1983; Chakrani 2017).

In the post-independence era, France mobilized another form of ideology to sustain its influence in the Maghreb. This era marked France’s retooling its language ideology to sustain different type of relationship with the Arabic speaking community. Kasuya (2001) argues that the ideology of francophonie emerged due to the loss of Algeria and its colonies that France sought to make part of its undividable territory. The emergence of this ideology is driven by the same hegemony “not in the military and political sense, but the cultural and linguistic sense – and that France tries to compensate for its loss of international status with the *defense et illustration* of Francophonie” (Kasuya 2001, 247). The French language’s establishment and dominance have always been articulated in ideological terms of insecurity, giving rise to francophonie, through which France maintains the strength of its language against the backdrop of the increasing dominance of English (Vigouroux 2013). Against the mounting dominance of Anglophone countries around the world, this framing was carried out through political ties with and economic incentives for ruling elite in the Maghreb and elsewhere in France’s former colonies (*ibidem*). In fact, only affluent Moroccan families were allowed access to French taught schools since the colonial era. France sees in building loyalty with the ruling elite and a closed circle of families a guarantee for continuation its presence in the Maghreb. These economic incentives are maintained through the belief in belonging to a universally shared culture while it excludes who do not com-

mand the language from the decision power in Morocco (Cohen 2004; Chakrani 2021). France still engages in the production of an elite class in its school. In France, the Maghrebi foreign student population totaled 24,000 in 2015, or half of France's foreign student body at that time (Viguiet 2020, 156). The French government views them with ambivalence; while they are seen as desirable for French influence in countries such as Morocco, their permanent settlement in France is viewed unfavorably by the locals.

Studies on the elite class have hinged on establishing linguistic norms through “elite closure”, a practice that diverges linguistic practices away from the masses and supports educational policies that reinforce the boundaries of social disparities between elites and the rest of the speech community (Myers-Scotton 1990). France fulfilled its linguistic hegemony through education by enacting policies aim to the acculturation of an elite class with socioeconomic ties and incentives to solidify French presence in the Maghreb. The current educational system reinforces linguistic asymmetries delimiting the majority of Arabic taught students and limiting their potential for socioeconomic mobility (Chakrani 2017).

By constructing Arabic taught schools, implementing Arabization challenged the colonial power, the French language, and its language ideologies. Throughout the Arab world, the Arabization process has reinstated Arabic in an attempt to reverse the impact of French domination in key social spheres. However, several factors inhibited efforts to modernize Arabic and its current role in the Arab world, such as (1) conflicts between neighboring countries such as Morocco/Algeria and Syria/Lebanon (Cheikh 2010), (2) the ideological miscalculations of Arabic language academies, and (3) prevalent regional linguistic ideologies (Shiri 2002; Chakrani 2015).

Viguiet (2020) argues that although the French educational system confined Moroccans' educational choices to France, French educational policies have deepened the reliance on the French language as “they shape knowledge, hopes, and belief systems, form enduring worldviews, and rely on durable stocks of human resources” (*ibid.*, 70). Through the forces of inertia, change can only occur on an incremental scale. English emerges as a strong contender in these countries, challenging the long-held assumption that global access can only be accomplished through the French language.

The beginning of independence also marked a new era of exploitation between France and its former colonies, this time in the diasporic



contexts. In the following section, we will discuss how language ideologies and policies affect language instruction in the French education system, placing language at the center of the ongoing ideological battle to define French society.

#### 4. MODERN FRANCE'S POLICIES AND IDEOLOGIES TOWARD ARABIC

While Maghrebis' relationship with French colonialism dates to the 19th century, successive waves of Arabic speaking immigrants into France occurred in separate phases, starting with recruiting Arabs to participate in the French army in WWI and in the liberation of France in WWII. An increased demand for labor in France during post-WWII reconstruction intensified migration in the 1950s, reaching a peak in the mid-1970s (Ennaji 2010).

With the establishment of the Maghrebi community in France, the need to teach the Arabic language arose, given that Arabic speakers have become the largest minority group in France and that Arabic is the second most widely spoken language there. This new reality has given rise to new language ideologies of *laïcité* (secularism), communautarisme (communitarianism), and framing Arabic as a “literary language”. This gives us an introspection on the “metamorphosis of ‘colonial unconsciousness’” (Aldrich 2002) that reveals itself when considering Arabic institutionalization within the French educational system. The French language could not compete with Arabic in France's former colonies (Salhi 2002). However, two current developments have intensified linguistic insecurities, namely, the worldwide increase of Arabic instruction and the transformation of French denizens into bilingual French-English speakers by introducing English in primary education. This gives rise to polemics of teaching Arabic in school and debates about national identities.

Throughout French history, introducing Arabic in the school curriculum in France and the Arab territories is tied with expansionist ambitions, establishing dominance in the Maghreb and elsewhere. In the Algerian case, for instance, Messaoudi (2006) argues that Arabic instruction established its foothold with the Egyptian Expedition and was instrumental in the conquest and settlement in Algeria. Messaoudi (*ibidem*) further maintains that the interpreters recruited for the Algeria expedition comprised of Eastern Christians who served in Egypt from

1798-1801, French students enticed with the romantic idea of enlightening the East, and some Maghrebis, many from Jewish families and *Jeunes de langue* (children of consular families established in the Middle East).

Arabic instruction in the colonial enterprise was a means through which France sought to dominate Arabic speaking communities in the Mashreq (East) and the Maghreb (West). France's ambitions as an empire began with the *Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales* (INALCO; National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations), which was originally established in 1795 as the *École spéciale des langues orientales* (Special School for Oriental Languages). The Maghrebi move to France brought exigencies for Arabic language instruction. García-Sánchez and Tetreault (forthcoming) argue that that period saw the introduction of the national program *Enseignements en Langue et Culture d'Origine* (ELCO; Teaching the Language and Culture of Origin), which included languages such as Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Serbian, and Turkish. Considering this program, the French state articulated its need for Arabic instruction to address a temporary migration.

This vision was also supported by the Maghrebi states that sent Arabic instructors to help prepare children of immigrants to integrate back to their parents' countries of origin. Such policies were also implemented across the Mediterranean. In fact, the late Moroccan King Hassan II, who was often criticized in Morocco for carrying a pro-French agenda (Viguier 2020) and impeding the implementation of Arabization (Hammoud 1982), also articulated this vision of Arabic. King Hassan II stated that he discouraged Moroccans from political participation in France and saw in them a community bound to return. This, of course, does not match the reality, as most expatriates were bound for permanent immigration. Language policies and lack of political participation did not help to equitably address questions of language and identity in educational settings, nor the need to promote minority linguistic rights.

The politics of framing Arabic as a transitional language did not change course until the inception of the Francois Holland presidential election and the appointment of Najat Vallaud-Belkacem as the first woman to serve as the Minister of Education, Higher Education, and Research. Tetrault (2021) argues that the leftist and centrist parties pursued an assimilationist approach to Arabic language instruction. The Minister of Education saw a way to mainstream the presence of Arabic by institutionalizing its presence in education and allowing all students the option to pursue Arabic studies in secondary and high schools.

Socialists adopted a much more lenient approach than the right-wing parties. Yet, this approach was still guided by the ideology of *laïcité*.

According to Balibar (2004), *laïcité* and the neutrality of public education is expressed in contradictory terms. Inside the school, *laïcité* should be interpreted as a schools' neutrality in which the learners must suspend their private existences, identities, "social belonging, beliefs and ideologies in order to facilitate the entrance of individuals into the 'political' sphere, citizenship" (thus, identity of citizenship), a space which is itself not neutral. The ideology of *laïcité* serves

first, attempts by the French state to extend central control over peripheral spaces by promoting a nationally uniform standard for expressing minority identities. Second, the agency of the peripheries in this process. Rather than being passive recipients, they have been instrumental in struggling over how *laïcité* is to be practiced across space and over time. (Lizotte 2020, 2)

The school is asked to carry out a neutralization or constitute an additional neutrality between two *non-neutral* "spaces" – what we call "private" and "public" (Balibar 2004, 357). These private and public spaces are in a constant ideological tug of war. For Arabic heritage learners, Arabic is deprived of the very ethnic, cultural, and religious references embedded within language use; likewise, foreign language learners of Arabic are unable to understand and access the modes of reference represented in language use. The school then engages in decoupling the language and heritage learners from their cultural milieu.

This explains the policies' lack of appeal within the Arabic speaking community, who send their children to learn Arabic in mosques and cultural associations. Currently, there are only 14,900 students registered in Arabic class in the French secondary and high schools representing on 0.3% of students in secondary education (Galopin 2020). The Left defends Arabic instruction and its presence in the school system based on the need for learners to acquaint themselves with Arabic as a "literary language" (Bubola 2019). This demonstrates that Arabic is framed as belonging to the domain of the cultural (Chakrani 2013), which means that it is not designated to represent the modern construction of France. In fact, Jean-Michel Blanquer, the French Education Minister since 2017 from the new *La republic en marche* (LREM) party, which formed a coalition from the Left and the Right, states that by introducing Arabic in school, we inject prestige into the language.

Right-wing discourse propagates fears of introducing Arabic into education which are linked to the media discourse of propagandized

fear, similar to constructing the fear of the Russification or Chinafication of the French society. An anxiety is emerging within right wing French society that has resulted in the rise of what García-Sánchez and Tetrault (forthcoming) term ‘Islamo-linguistic-phobia’, an increasing discourse that conflates radicalization with language instruction. This discourse has become part of quotidian French media that scapegoats the Muslim community and Arabic instruction for the societal ills, such increasing unemployment and the prohibitive cost of living. This discourse, much like the political rhetoric in the US, has intensified in presidential campaigns and is being normalized among mounting socio-economic anxieties. This threatens French social cohesion, as politicians view national plans to introduce Arabic in school with mistrust. France’s right wing, known for an extremist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim stance, presents Arabic as a language in terms of communitarianism. This means that Arabic should be viewed as the language of a minority and does not need to be introduced in school. At the heart of this stance is the institutionalization of Arabic as a code in the educational domain, which we see in the quote by the current Secretary of the Republican party:

La langue fait la nation. La langue de la République, c’est le français. Elle est belle, porteuse de liberté et d’émancipation. Apprendre à l’aimer, c’est apprendre à aimer la France. Institutionnaliser à l’école l’apprentissage de la langue arabe est une lâcheté et une faute. (Pradie 2020)

*Translation:* Language makes the nation. The language of the republic is French. It is beautiful and it represents freedom and emancipation. Learning to love it is learning to love France. Institutionalizing the learning of Arabic in school is a coward act and a mistake.

The ideology framing Arabic in terms of communitarianism aims to dislodge Arabic from its position as a global language making it, thus, a marginal language whose speakers do not deserve its introduction in school, a strategy to curb the maintenance of Arabic within France’s borders. The presence of Arabic and its institution in the educational domain is highly contested because it confers economic capital on the language and overt prestige on its speakers, making Arabic a marketable commodity in the French educational sector.

This debate is framed also in terms of the newly enacted law of supposed ‘Islamic separatism’ by France’s current president, Emanuel Macron, which is manufactured in relationship to the secession of the Muslim community from France. Macron ran on a presidential cam-

paign that conflated Arabic instruction and the need to dislodge it from mosques and neighborhood associations, claiming that the language has radicalizing forces upon French youth (Tetrault 2021). Current government policies aim to distract the international community from mounting calls for respecting minority linguistic rights and the possibility of declaring Arabic as a national language in France, given the sizeable population of its speakers.

What emerges from debates on language ideologies in France is a vision of a nation that is struggling to define itself and is marginalizing minority communities and their linguistic rights to access languages other than French. What is central to analyzing these debates is to historically deconstruct the ideological stances. From the colonial era to the present, we see educational policies portraying Arabic as a language to be dominated. Debates surrounding Arabic language instruction in the French educational system show the importance of analyzing the ideological formation of policies and the critical role that they have played in maintaining the hegemony of the French language at home and abroad, thus undermining the cultural richness and linguistic profile of its citizens.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the interface between French and Arabic speakers, highlighting how France's historical stance toward Arabic and its speakers has been that of domination, beginning with colonial policies that aimed to undermine the Arabic language and its speakers and targeting its influence in Africa, through cultural imperialism. These policies continued in post-independence Maghreb, through enacting francophonie as an ideological tool to continue the dominance of the French language, assisted by francophone elites and institutions. Educational policies in postcolonial (or ex-colonial) countries have been motivated by economic incentives and political alliances, with France delimiting access to education in Arabic, the local mother tongue. This served to control the language of scientific discovery while claiming that Arabic is inadequate for propelling modernity.

The ideological debates surrounding Arabic instruction reflect the multiple ways that it was and is utilized to serve the colonial enterprise in and exert influence on the Maghreb. Framing the Maghrebi com-

munity's presence in France as migrants allows France to claim that the presence of Arabic within France is temporary, avoiding its institutionalization as a national language. Accordingly, France's political debates do not promote linguistic minority rights, but through the ideology of *laïcité*, aim to absorb the Arab community culturally and linguistically within the French society and under state-sponsored nationalism.

The language debate in France has taken more dangerous tone, following the rise of France's right wing that casts Arabic and its introduction into society as a threat to the republic's stability, thus politicizing the language. The French state frames Arabic instruction in terms of communitarism, which aims to undercut Arabic the increase interest in Arabic instruction. The centrality of the debate around Arabic instruction allows us to see how it aims to delegitimize the need to include France's second most spoken national language in the educational system. In essence, obstructing the institutionalization of Arabic is aimed at undermining its presence in the educational domain, which would confer overt prestige on its speakers and legitimize its presence within France. The resistance to Arabic instruction and negative attitudes toward its speakers serve to maintain century-long efforts to undermine Arabic within France's mainland and abroad.

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