

What Future for Berber Languages in Algeria?

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ABSTRACT

After Algeria wrenched its independence from France in 1962, the government newly formed decided to achieve Arabization. Standard Arabic became thus the official language of Algeria and the complete Arabization of all public institutions was voted in January 1991.

Actually, the Algerian linguistic situation is one of multilingualism where Algerian Arabic (regional varieties), Tamazight (Berber languages) and French are daily used according to circumstances.

The first section of the present paper considers the linguistic situation in Algeria and raises, through the Berber issue, the question of minority language rights and identity in a country that slowly starts recognizing its diversity.

Keywords: Language policy, arabization, algeria, minority language, Berber, multilingualism

1. INTRODUCTION

Immediately after independence, the Algerian Government called for a rapid Arabization – the substitution of the use of French with Arabic – so as to rid the country of French, the language of colonialism and oppression.

As a matter of fact, Arabization as it had been implemented in Algeria answered a clear ideological aim; indeed, this choice corresponded to the legitimate desire to break off with the French coloniser and the wish to affirm a previously oppressed arabo-islamic identity. However, such a language policy implied the rejection of the native languages from the national and official scene.

The Berber language – Tamazight – which is spoken by approximately 25% of the Algerian population, is not recognized as an official language of Algeria, yet in April 2002 it obtained the status of national language.