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The Language of SMS: Between Gain and Loss

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Introduction :

Communication succeeded to play a great role to create a daily contact between the members of the society. Technology is one of the most important elements that make communication easy and quick. In the recent years it represented a new genre of communication that is of SMS messages. People started using SMS messages in each time and everywhere: when driving, eating, talking and even when walking at the point that sometimes they change their directions without paying attention to that. One wonders; why people are interested in this kind of communication though it seems more difficult than that is of calling somebody.

Furthermore, when reading messages it seems that this language is so difficult but it is still used by all members of the society. How comes that people could easily adapt their communication to this language without learning about its rules. In case it has got rules, what are its lexical and grammatical rules? Is it possible that these rules would have an impact of the standard languages people know? All these questions come to mind when one finds himself sending and receiving messages. It is the aim of this research work to answer about these questions that come to mind.

This work contains a general introduction and three chapters. The introduction is devoted to the aims of the research and to a brief discussion of the subject. Each chapter is provided with an introduction and a conclusion.

In order to do that, this research work will be divided into three chapters. The first one is mainly devoted to the linguistic situation in Algeria. It treats all the most useful languages and dialects in Algeria which are Algerian Arabic, Classical Arabic, French and Berber languages. As it deals with two important sociolinguistic phenomena that clarify the linguistic situation in Algeria, these are, Code switching and Diglossia. The two terms are defined by a number of linguists. The second chapter is mainly concerned with all what is related to SMS. It gives an idea about its history, aspects, components, language and creativity. The last chapter is a practical one that studies the language of SMS and links between the first and the second chapter.

The three chapters give mobile phone users a general idea that will help them to understand the language of SMS. Furthermore, it will help them to answer the questions that

come to mind when writing an SMS Message. Also, after reading the three chapters readers will understand the title of this research work that is of “The Language of SMS Between Gain and Loss”.

Conclusion:

SMS as a new kind of communication seems to be much practical. What one will gain is money and time but what he/she will lose is more expensive than that. The user when writing a message would give no importance to the rules of the language he uses. What he/she is interested in is to compose a message of 160 characters where he must explain his idea otherwise it will cost him much money. In fact, SMS whispers a major risk to Standard language.

The language of SMS is highly structured and theme focused. The character limit of the message forces the addressor and the addressee to stick to the topic. This permits a tolerance of typographical error, and the relaxation of the rules of spelling, punctuation and capitalization. The language of SMS is nearer to the spoken rather than the written variety and a feeling of psychological nearness prompts the sender of SMS to use a colloquial and informal style. This will have a great impact on the Standard Languages. Teachers at schools and universities are complaining about the use of the text message languages in academic documents by a number of students and pupils who are so influenced by this new type of communication.

Many are apprehensive of the SMS register; they think that technology is corrupting the language and the SMS culture is promoting rampant illiteracy across the globe. But dispassionate linguists believe that technology has fostered creativity among the young people using SMS for transmitting messages. This creativity can be seen even in very restricted linguistic domains of SMS. SMS is an immensely empowering, individualistic, creative medium, as can be seen from the numerous excremental ways in which people use it.

The phenomenon of SMS messaging is going to change the way we think about language in a fundamental way, because it is a linguistic singularity, a genuine new medium. Certainly, it would make its traces on language. One may wonder whether the SMS language will leave its traces and be a standard language as the other ones or it will simply be forgotten one day and considered as a dead language.

Chapter One: The Linguistic Situation in Algeria

Introduction

Algeria is considered as a complex multilingual country where four languages are highly present in its society in one way or another. Its sociolinguistic profile involves classical Arabic which is the national and official language, Algerian Arabic spoken by almost all the Algerians, Berber that was recently recognized as a national language and French which is widely used though it is considered as a second language.¹

It is necessary to stress that all of the Algerian historical background had a direct influence on its current linguistic situation. Three main periods fix the “linguistic repertoire” of Algeria: first the existence of Berbers in many territories in Algeria, second the Arabic conquest which gave birth to the presence of Arabic in North Africa and third the French colonization that introduced the French language in Algeria and changed radically the current state of language.

Furthermore, the prints that were left by both Turkish and Spanish in the Algerian linguistic history cannot be ignored. In the late fifteenth century, Algeria became a part of Ottoman Empire which ruled most of the central Maghreb until the nineteenth century .It was governed by a “Dey” who was a Turkish governor. Despite the stay of Turkish in Algeria, their impact on its sociolinguistic profile was slight but still present in the borrowing words that the Algerians use nowadays.² Prior to the French colonization, Algeria witnessed the attendance of Spanish people in the west and the coastal areas which were known as a commercial route for Spanish, Italian, British and Levantine sea-traders. The existence of Spanish in Algeria developed a fertile process of lexical borrowing that pervaded the vernacular.³

One cannot speak about the linguistic situation in Algeria without shedding light on two important linguistic concepts : code switching and diglossia. By the former one refers to the use of more than one language or dialect within a domain or social situation. By the latter, one refers to the use of two varieties of language; one is considered as a high variety and the other as a low one. The term “diglossia” is defined in different ways by Charles Ferguson (1959: Diglossia), William Marçais (1930: L’Enseignement Public) and Joshua Fishman.

All the points that are present in this introduction will be extended and developed in the first chapter.

¹ A second language is any [language](#) learned after the [first language or mother tongue](#). However, a foreign language like the case of English in Algeria is the one not spoken by the people of a certain place.

² <http://webs.uvigo.es/ssl/actas2002/04/02.%20Zoulikha%20Bensafi.pdf>

³ http://www.shakespeare.uk.net/jllearn/3_1/mostari.pdf

1. The linguistic situation in Algeria

Arabic, Berber and French are all building a “multilingual Algeria” .For that reason, the Algerian speakers are divided into three kinds. Algerian Arabophones constitute of 72 of the Algerian people. Approximately, 27.4% of the population are counted as Berberophones, speaking one of the several varieties of Berber; whereas, 67% of the total population is recognized to have some knowledge of French. The percentage is but an approximation because there are no statistics on this topic.⁴

To have a clear image concerning the linguistic situation in Algeria one has to throw light on the four languages that are used in its territories. These are Berber, Classical Arabic, French and Algerian Arabic. As first one has to speak about their current situation preceding it by a glance at their history. Then, a sociolinguistic ‘typology’ should be provided to each language. That is to say, classify the four languages according to their political or social position that qualifies them as being official, national or vernacular.

1.1. Classical Arabic

Classical Arabic is the only formal language that is recognized as the sole national and official language of Algeria as specified in its constitution (1963). Measured by the yardstick of history, Arabic was introduced in the late seventh century and early eight century (642AD) by the great invader *Okba Ibn Nafaa*⁵ whose introduction of Islam profoundly altered the character of the area, bringing with it a new language with new sociolinguistic norms and political idioms. Though there were many obstacles that prevented the Arabic language to develop, it succeeded to remain as a vivid symbol of Arabic identity and Islamic values.⁶

1.1.1. Arabic during French colonization

Since a long time ago, Algeria was considered as the main interest of many invaders. Thus, it was occupied by people of different languages and cultures. This had certainly a great impact on its linguistic situation. Arabic as a nationalistic symbol was locked into a bitter struggle against the French language during the twilight years of the colonial era. French colonists deliberately set out to undermine the position of Arabic in the country. They

⁴ <http://ibscientific.net/jou-vol1-issue2.pdf>

⁵ Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, *les Algerians et Leur(s) Lngue(s)*, Second edition.El Hikma, 1997, p. 23.

⁶ **Ibid.**

succeeded in doing that by charting French as the official language and Classical Arabic as a foreign one. French colonial policies denied Arabic any official or educational existence. It could be taught only in Zawiyat and Medaris (traditional schools). This language used to be found in the heart of the Algerian society. Yet, it could not produce its total effect because of the colonial regime which found a kind of an obstacle in front of the development of Classical Arabic language.

After getting its independence, Algeria felt a great need to regain its identity as an Arabic and Muslim country. The Algerian leaders especially the Nationalists, soon adopted the following motto:

« L'Islam est notre religion, l'Algérie est notre partie, la langue Arabe est notre langue »⁷

(Islam is our religion, Algeria is our mother country, Arabic is our language.)⁸

For Nationalists, Arabic was considered as the best successful vehicle of communication without which Algeria would probably lose its identity and values. Within this framework, president Boumediene (1927-1978) declared (1968) :

« Sans la récupération de cet élément essentiel et important qui est la langue nationale, nos efforts resteront vains, notre personnalité incomplète et notre entité un corps sans âme ».⁹

(Without recovering that essential and important element which is the national language, our efforts will be vain our personality incomplete and our entity a body without a soul.)¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ B. Bouhania, *The Substitution of French Loan Words for Arabic Counterparts. Oran Arabic: A Case Study*. Unpublished Master Thesis, 1998, p. 26.

¹⁰ Ibid.