

A Moving Target: Literacy Development in Situations of Diglossia and Bilingualism

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Abstract

The present paper analyzes the challenges of literacy development in cases of classical diglossia and bilingualism. The main argument is that the diverse levels of proficiency in the varieties present in a given linguistic market have implications for and are shaped by processes of literacy development, feelings of linguistic insecurity, and the overall outlook for educational and socioeconomic success. With a special focus on Tunisia, where diglossia and bilingualism are part of the students' linguistic reality, this paper argues that surmounting the initial marginalization of the native vernacular in favor of literacy in Standard Arabic does not seem to be enough of a guarantee for academic success since competence in French becomes indispensable as students move higher up the educational ladder. This results in a generalized feeling of linguistic insecurity and a shared skepticism about the proficiency levels achieved through the educational systems in the languages of instruction that adversely affect school success rates. The paper also shows that heritage speakers of Arabic face more challenges for language maintenance than heritage speakers of other languages that are not in a diglossic situation.

Keywords: literacy, diglossia, bilingualism, heritage language, language of instruction

Introduction

It is not uncommon in communities where two or more linguistic varieties coexist for concerns, and even anxieties, to surface regarding levels of proficiency, literacy development, and the preservation of language loyalty. In many postcolonial societies, a rivalry is observed between the community's historical languages, held as valued indices of ethnic and national identities, and the former colonial language, often perceived as the vehicle of modernity and economic development. Native competence

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in the community's vernacular is often contrasted with varying levels of proficiency in the formally learned varieties that, in many cases, contribute to educational and socioeconomic disparities. A different type of conflict is observed in immigration settings where most parents aspire to see their children develop native competence in the host country's language while simultaneously maintaining the heritage language. Be that as it may, second generation immigrants tend to develop native competence in the dominant language, but often reach varying levels of proficiency in the heritage language, ranging from restricted competence that approaches only anecdotal familiarity to native competence, depending on the personal history of each speaker. As many studies have shown (Wei & Cook, 2009), the variability in reaching balanced bidialectal and bilingual competencies in a range of settings has to do with degrees of exposure to each of the varieties available, domains of use, and formal instruction. Undoubtedly, varying levels of proficiency in the varieties present in a given linguistic market have implications for and are shaped by literacy development, feelings of linguistic insecurity, and overall outlook for educational and socioeconomic success.

The complexity of diglossic situations, such as that of the Arabic language, poses a multitude of challenges for not only descriptive linguistics but also applied linguistics and, specifically, theories of literacy development and language teaching and learning. At the linguistic level, it is not always easy to sift through the murky data to determine which features belong to the vernacular, which features belong to the standard language, and which features are shared by both. At the applied level, the issues of literacy for native speakers and the language of instruction for science and technology are the source of a continuing debate in several parts of the Arab world. In the case of heritage speakers of Arabic, issues of language maintenance and biculturalism acquire additional levels of complexity over what may be found in languages that are not in a diglossic situation. It is true that the question of what variety to teach heritage speakers, or even second language learners for that matter, is not unique to languages in a situation of diglossia. It also obtains in other cases; the issue is simply more critical in the case of Arabic (Al-Batal, 1992).

For the purpose of this paper, diglossia is understood in its Fergusonian definition, i.e. *classical diglossia* (Ferguson, 1959), and not *extended diglossia* as proposed by Fishman (1967, 2002). Elsewhere (Sayahi, 2014), I discuss the theoretical implications of distinguishing between *diglossia* as a situation of contact between varieties of the same language and *bilingualism* as contact between more genetically distant languages even in cases where there is an assumed functional distribution between them. The peculiarity of a diglossic situation offers interesting features that are important for understanding literacy development in these contexts as well as in multilingual communities in general. To begin with, there is a paradox where parents do not tend to communicate with their children in a variety that they would like to see them master fully. In the case of Arabic diglossia, parents generally perceive the standard form of the language, i.e.

the High variety (H variety) in Ferguson's definition, as the only legitimate Arabic language to be taught. At the same time, they show a much less positive attitude toward their own native dialect, a situation that I previously described as *the diglossia paradox* (Sayahi, 2014, p. 3). This refers to the fact that speakers attribute more prestige to a language that they do not transmit naturally to their children and which the children have to learn at school. In the case of heritage languages, studies have reported that parents feel considerable anxiety about their children not developing native competence in the majority's language. As a result, some parents may restrict the overall use of the heritage language and limit it to the home domain, even if they would like to see their children grow up bilingual and bicultural.

In both cases, the situation transcends the individual family unit and has to do with values ascribed by social institutions to each of the varieties and their symbolic power in a given linguistic market (Heller, 1995). This paper looks into the mechanism and the challenges of literacy development in cases of classical diglossia and bilingualism both for the native speaker and the heritage learner of Arabic. The focus will be on the situation in Tunisia with references to Arabic and, for comparative purposes, Spanish as a heritage language. Data and examples presented here are extracted from semi-directed sociolinguistics interviews and questionnaires that are part of two larger studies on language contact in Tunis and New York.

Classical diglossia and bilingualism: Ferguson's 'larger picture'

The extension of the term *diglossia* to describe all cases of functional distribution between different language varieties regardless of their genetic relatedness is not very productive in cases where classical diglossia coexists with bilingualism. Fishman (1967), in discussing cases such as that of Guaraní and Spanish in Paraguay, proposed that two languages that are being used for a different set of functions, one reserved for more formal domains and the other for family and informal communication, can be labeled as being in a diglossic situation.² Ferguson (1991, p. 223), however, restated in 1991 that this is not the type of situation he described in his original 1959 work:

My intention was that the users would always view the two as the *same* language: I excluded cases where superposed on an ordinary conversational language is a totally unrelated language used for formal purposes, as in the often-cited case of Spanish and Guaraní in Paraguay.³

²For a comprehensive bibliography of works on diglossic situations see Fernández (1993).

³ Emphasis added.

This is also the original meaning of the term *diglossia* when it was used in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to describe the Greek and the Arabic situations (Marçais, 1930; Psichari, 1928)⁴.

But, Ferguson's original formulation does not capture cases that Fishman's (1967) definition of diglossia encapsulates with regard to a set of potential situations of "diglossia with and without bilingualism." In fact, Ferguson mentions as a shortcoming of his own definition the lack of reference to what he calls the 'larger picture.' He put it this way in 1991:

[A]nother weakness that people have called my attention to was my failure to mention that diglossia is very often part of a larger picture. For example, in Lebanon, there are many who make use of the H variety of Arabic as well as their local Lebanese dialect, and in addition speak French and/or English in their daily lives. (Ferguson, 1991, p. 224)

The question remains regarding literacy development in situations where a language in a diglossic situation shares its linguistic market with another 'unrelated' language. The situation in Tunisia, and the Maghreb in general, is one that exemplifies this idea of diglossia as part of a 'larger picture.' Such is the case also of heritage speakers of Arabic in predominantly non-Arabic speaking countries. Accordingly, discussing literacy in a diglossic situation, specifically that of Arabic, should include a discussion of the role of the other languages that are available to speakers. The socio-historical situation in the Maghreb is such that discussing literacy without discussing the role of French provides an incomplete picture.⁵ Examining how classical diglossia coexists with bilingualism in the linguistic behavior of speakers is a central issue to understanding language policies, literacy development, school success, and the larger question of the sociology of language in the Maghreb and the Arab world in general.

Literacy development in cases of classical diglossia and bilingualism

The issues of Arabization and bilingualism have been central in postcolonial language planning in the Maghreb leading to ever-changing policies and an apparent situation of flux. The frequent vacillation with regard to how early to introduce French and what subjects ought to be taught in that language, as opposed to Standard Arabic, have been a hallmark of Maghrebi educational policies in general (Benrabah, 2007a; Chakrani, 2015; Daoud, 2001, 2011). A closer look at language policy in Tunisia since its independence from France in 1956 shows that two major issues seem to mark literacy

⁴ See Chapter 1 in Sayahi (2014) for a full account of the development of the term *diglossia* and its use in the Arabic and the Greek situations.

⁵ I recognize that Berber languages are another important player in the sociolinguistic situation in the Maghreb, but the focus here will be on literacy development in Tunisia where Berber is still totally marginalized in the educational system.

development there under diglossia and bilingualism: 1) a lack of continuity in the language of instruction across the curriculum; and 2) a linguistic insecurity and skepticism about achievable levels of proficiency in both Standard Arabic and French.

Lack of continuity in language of instruction

Unlike with speakers of more unified historical languages, a major challenge for Arabic-speaking children at the onset of their schooling is that the language in which literacy is developed is not the native vernacular that they acquire naturalistically at home. Tunisian Arabic, like other Arabic dialects, is not standardized and there are no materials for its teaching or learning, except for some very limited resources for nonnative adult learners. While it is true that linguistic variation, as determined by a myriad of internal and external factors including style, is inherent to all languages, the differences between the H variety and the L variety of Arabic are much more substantial, as is clear to any Arabic speaker (Ferguson, 1959b; Holes, 2004; among many others). There is a large discrepancy at the lexical level that affects even the basic vocabulary, for example the words *garzu:ma* (Tunisian Arabic) vs. *halq* (Standard Arabic) 'throat', as well as at the morphosyntactic and phonological levels. Examples of the latter include the use of the genitive exponent in the expression of attributive possession in the dialects and its absence in the Standard form and some phonotactic rules that set both varieties apart such as the preference of Maghrebi Arabic for initial complex consonant clusters. It is not the purpose of this paper to describe the differences and similarities between vernacular Tunisian Arabic and Standard Arabic, but it is fair to say that the differences are substantial (Sayahi, 2011a). It is also fair to say that, at least officially, Tunisian Arabic is at the margin of the educational system, except perhaps for tasks of class management at the instructor's discretion.

As Maamouri (1998) indicated, levels of educational achievement are conditioned from early on by the acquisition of a different linguistic system than the native one. Speakers who fail to develop the required competence will see their progress in other subjects hindered and their education as a whole truncated. The diglossic situation of Arabic has also been signaled as a major factor behind the overall low literacy rates across the Arab world (Haeri, 2009; Saiegh-Haddad & Joshi, 2014). Nevertheless, for those who develop the required competence in Standard Arabic not all is said and done. A bigger issue for school success in Tunisia seems to be the abrupt switch to French as language of instruction in a number of subjects as students move up the grades.

The reason for the maintenance of French in the first place and the decision of what parts of the curriculum to be delivered in it has to do with the perceived importance of that language by policymakers and a large part of the public as well. A historical perspective on why French was maintained immediately after independence is offered by Mahmoud Messadi who served as Tunisian Minister of Education from 1958 to 1968:

Le Français a encore un rôle important à jouer dans certains pays du Tiers Monde. Nous appartenons aux pays en voie de développement et nous devons rattraper notre retard sur les pays industrialisés. Pour cela nous disposons du Français qui est à la fois une langue de travail et une langue de culture. Pour nous, il s'agit moins d'apprendre une langue étrangère que d'utiliser un instrument qui nous permettra de franchir les siècles de retard qui nous séparent du monde développé. Il nous permettra d'accéder à la modernité. (Messadi 1967, cited in Belazi, 1991, p. 53).⁶

The same stance can still be gleaned from the current description of the objectives of the French language curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education (2015):

Etant la première langue étrangère étudiée par l'élève tunisien, le français devra contribuer à sa formation intellectuelle, culturelle et scientifique. Il sera pour l'élève un moyen complémentaire pour:

- communiquer avec autrui;
- découvrir d'autres civilisations et cultures et se situer par rapport à elles;
- accéder à l'information scientifique et technique.⁷

Currently, French is introduced as a subject in the third year of elementary school, and continues to be taught as a subject throughout the elementary, middle and high school stages. When it is first introduced, French is taught for eight hours per week, which is the same amount as Standard Arabic. But, as students reach what would be seventh grade through ninth grade (known in Tunisia as the *deuxième cycle de l'enseignement de base*), French starts to adopt a more crucial function than that of a simple foreign language and becomes a language of instruction. At the beginning of seventh grade, computer science is introduced as a subject and becomes the first to be delivered in French.⁸ But math, science, and technology continue to be taught in Arabic.

At the end of ninth grade, students move up to high school where they take a common core curriculum in tenth grade, known as the *premier cycle général de l'enseignement secondaire*. This is the last common core curriculum before students are directed into different specialized tracks in high school. At this stage, several subjects are taught in French: Math, physics, chemistry, life sciences, biology, and technology. At

⁶"French still has an important role to play in some Third World countries. We belong to developing countries and we need to catch up on industrialized countries. For that we have French which is both a language of work and culture. For us, it is less about learning a foreign language than to use an instrument that will allow us to cross the centuries of delay that keep us apart from the developed world. It will allow us to access modernity" (my translation).

⁷ "As the first foreign language studied by the Tunisian student, French should contribute to his intellectual, cultural and scientific training. For the student, it will be an additional means to:

- Communicate with others;
- Discover other cultures and civilizations and position himself in relation to them;
- Access scientific and technical information" (my translation).

⁸ At the same time English is introduced and remains a foreign language class throughout the system.

the same time French language classes are dropped to five hours per week, still the same as Arabic. By eleventh grade, students are separated into one of the following streams: humanities (*lettres*), math, economics and business administration, computer science, experimental sciences, and technical sciences. At this stage, Arabic as a language of instruction is severely reduced in all non-humanities sections. With the exception of history and geography and Arabic classes themselves, all subjects in the science and technology streams are in French. This takes place seven years after French was first introduced as a foreign language and four years after it was used as language of instruction for the first time in computer science classes. In addition, Arabic as a subject gets reduced to two hours per week for the non-humanities students.

Students in the humanities section, on the other hand, continue with five hours of French per week, exactly like English, but they do not take any other subject in French. For them, French is no longer a vehicle of instruction but reverts to a status of a *foreign* language, while for all other students it becomes the principal vehicle of instruction. This results in a phenomenon that I will call here: *stratification by language of instruction*. By this I mean that students' language proficiency and attitude towards Arabic and French, and by consequence their social mobility outlook, are conditioned not only by what track they are following starting from the age of 16 but also by the language in which content is delivered. In a country such as Tunisia where access to French is equated with higher education and better chances for social mobility, a sector of the student body is denied any benefits that having the curriculum partially delivered in French may bring to them later on as they access higher education and enter the job market.

What is important about the switch in language of instruction in the first year of high school is that performance in the subjects taught in French, the scientific ones which will determine in what section student will be placed and what type of higher education they will have access to, can be conditioned by the competence previously developed in French. As a result, for many students, literacy development in Standard Arabic and its use as a vehicle of instruction for years before high school become inconsequential. By the last year of secondary education, Arabic, which for the first nine years was the dominant language of instruction and where literacy was developed earlier on, is pushed to the side. For a second time, students see their strongest language marginalized.

Before the reforms that installed the current system started in 2002 (de Bouttemont, 2002), French as language of instruction was used in more subjects even earlier in the educational system. Students finishing elementary school were thrown into a secondary educational system that consisted of three years of common core before being placed in different streams, including humanities, math, technology and sciences. Starting with the first year in secondary school, the *première année secondaire* then which would be seventh grade in the current system, math, technology and natural sciences were taught

in French. Math would have been until then taught in Arabic at the elementary school level and the national exam of access to high school, the *concours de sixième année primaire*, was in Arabic. That is, French was introduced at fourth grade and by seventh grade math and other science subjects were taught completely in French. This change seemed to have conditioned many students in their performance in math and sciences. A switch in the language of instruction that is not mitigated in any way may lead to school failure and it is in fact reflective of the current system.

In recorded interviews that I carried out in Tunis (Sayahi, 2011b, 2014), many students who went through that change claimed that the language of instruction was behind their loss of interest in math and why they struggled through high school in general. While those with French-speaking parents or older siblings, or with the economic means for private tutoring, might have had additional support to navigate the switch, in many cases, it was a turning point for the worse for large numbers of students. In (1), the speaker shows how the switch in the language of instruction meant that he went from a strong student in math to a student performing poorly overall. The same opinion is reflected in (2) where the speaker clearly affirms that he performed poorly in anything that was taught in French. Many of these students, if they managed to navigate the first three years of high school, were directed to the humanities track where French was not used significantly as a vehicle of instruction, or to professional training programs.

(1)

l-math kɛ:n min l-hsɛ:b bi-l-ʕarbikuntfihtayya:rawaqittbadil li-l-françaiswuzɛ:t l-A wu l-B wu l-C wul-wɛ:hid première année secondairewaqthaça y est

'Math changed from math [in Arabic], I was excellent, to French and there came A, B, and C and stuff, the first year of high school. At that time it was all finished for me.'

(Sayahi, 2014, p.97)

(2)

kɛ:nzi:tnaʕrif l-françaisxi:r raw salliktha bi-l-gdɛ:mɛ:lafnu:wa . . . haʕafransi:skafbalɛ:

'Had I known French better, I would have done much better of course . . . I did very poorly in anything that was in French.'

(Sayahi, 2014, p. 98)

In a way, literacy for these students is a moving target. Developing literacy in Standard Arabic was not a guarantee for success beyond the elementary school once French morphed from being a foreign language to being the vehicle of instruction of the subjects that weighed more heavily. This relegated many students, among those who did not drop out altogether, to choosing the humanities track where the scientific subjects taught in French gradually lost their weight and those taught in Arabic saw it increased, culminating with them choosing tracks in the university that most often had little French. As Maamouri (1998, p. 16) argued, the obligation to master French is indeed one of the reasons for lower levels of achievement and the high drop-out rates in Tunisia.

Across the Maghreb the value of French continues to grow as, even at the higher education level, anything related to science and technology is taught in that language. In Tunisia fields such as engineering, medicine, economics, and so forth, are all taught in French. In Algeria, Benrabah (2007b) describes an increase in private schools teaching French to mitigate the even bigger fracture between an Arabized high school education and a francophone higher education there. Aware of the future prominence of French in the educational trajectory of their children, some Tunisian parents are now trying as early as the first year of elementary school to give them an advantage through private tutoring in French or even deciding to send their children to private schools where French is taught from first grade. Private schools at the elementary level have, in fact, increased significantly over the last five years from 102 schools in the year 2009-2010 to 191 schools in the year 2013-2014 (Tunisian Ministry of Education, 2014).

The impact of the change in language of instruction observed here is at some levels reminiscent of what happens in the case of immigrants who move from one educational system in one country to another system in a different country (Martín Rojo & Mijares, 2007). This is the case for large numbers of school-aged children who arrive in the United States from Spanish-speaking countries. In my interviews with Dominican-Americans in New York who arrived in the United States between the age of 6 and 12, several raised the issue of linguistic adaptation as a major hurdle for them to overcome. Caught between the dreaded ESL program, highly stigmatized by fellow students, and their limited ability to fully follow classes in English, many of these students struggled. In (3), a student who arrived in sixth grade in New York City describes how the change in language of instruction became a serious obstacle because her accent and her overall competence was not the same as the other students. She would not participate in class even if she knew the answer for fear that the teacher or the other students will judge her English.

(3)

Yo pasé por eso. Súper intimidante. Te sientes, aunque quieres hablarlo no te atreves porque te da vergüenza, vergüenza que los otros se rían, [...] Para mí fue súper difícil poder pasar el grado. Honestamente yo no entendía mucho porque era demasiado, la maestra, los alumnos, la vergüenza, era mucho.⁹

While these speakers are surrounded by English and opportunities continuously arise for a faster competence development, it is further proof that change in the language of instruction, even when difficulties are mitigated with remedial classes, can jeopardize the educational trajectory of students.

Linguistic insecurity and attitude towards levels of proficiency

Often one can hear educated Tunisians claim that the youth are proficient neither in Standard Arabic nor in French. Older generations who were educated in a system dominated by French feel that the younger generations, products of a partially Arabized educational system, are not able to communicate effectively in that language the way they themselves do. On the other hand, being that Standard Arabic is a formally acquired system, it is common to hear claims that the majority of students today do not excel in its use either. The educational system and the media are often blamed for what is perceived as a precarious state for Standard Arabic. To a certain degree, there is a perception that students fail to achieve high levels of proficiency in the two languages used in the educational system. This is reflected in a shared feeling of linguistic insecurity when it comes to using French or Standard Arabic as competencies vary significantly depending on the level of education, field of specialization, and overall socioeconomic background.

In a questionnaire that I administered to 25 high school teachers of different subjects in two schools in the Greater Tunis area, the vast majority expressed concern about the state of languages in the country. In their answers to a general open-ended question "What is your opinion of the language situation in Tunisia?", none of the participants gave a positive evaluation: three said it was average, three did not provide an answer, and the rest, 19 participants, described it as being 'mediocre.'

Some of these teachers believe that the achievement level of students in general is poor and that a lack of proficiency in French affects their performance in school, as clearly put by one of them: "The student who is not competent in French will perform poorly in other subjects."¹⁰ Linguistic insecurity and a perceived lack of proficiency is

⁹"I went through that. Super intimidating. You feel that even if you would like to speak you don't dare to do so because you feel ashamed, ashamed that others would laugh at you [...]. For me it was extremely difficult to pass the grade. Honestly, I did not understand much because it was too much, the teacher, the students, the shame, it was a lot" (my translation).

¹⁰My translation from Arabic.

associated with what some of the teachers described as the appearance of 'a new language', in reference to code-switching and lexical borrowing.¹¹ One participant stated that "[there is] no proficiency in any of the languages, meaning a new language is invented that contains all other languages." This negative reaction towards language contact phenomena was reflected in the response of others as well and is often repeated in the Tunisian mass media. The previous interim President of the Tunisian Republic, the French educated physician Moncef Marzouki, has publically denounced the use of foreign lexical insertions into Arabic, or what he calls *luyaha3i:na*, on several occasions including in television interviews (Marzouki, 2014) and in an opinion piece on the Aljazeera website where he even warned about the possibility of the appearance of creole languages across the Arab world (Marzouki, 2011). In (4), a well-known Tunisian journalist, Salah Hajja, writes about what he perceives as an extreme language mixing by Tunisian youth, who allegedly intertwine several Arabic dialects and foreign languages. Although this quote is by all means an exaggeration, it is symptomatic of a national feeling of linguistic insecurity and perceived diluted linguistic identity.

(4)

لقد شاعت الصدفة أن أستمع الى محادثة عفوية بين مجموعة من الطلبة في اختصاص معين له علاقة وطيدة باللغة والفصاحة والقدرة على الاستجواب والتحرير.. وقد استمرت هذه المحادثة حوالي خمس دقائق.. فهل تعرفون كم لهجة وكم لغة استمعت إليها خلال تلك الدقائق؟! إنه عدد لا يصدق!!! لقد كان هؤلاء الطلبة وهم من الجنسين يتخاطبون بالعامية التونسية.. والعامية المصرية.. والعامية الخليجية.. والعامية السورية.. واللغة الفرنسية.. واللغة الإنكليزية.. إنه حوار يحتوي على خليط عجيب من المفردات والكلمات..

(Hajja, 2010)¹²

While nine of the participants in the questionnaire answered positively to a question whether more attention should be paid to the Tunisian dialect, the majority of them still feel it should not. Only three participants did not agree with the statement that "French should be used as the language of science and technology." In addition, all but one of the 25 participants agreed with the statement that more attention needs to be paid to Standard Arabic, with the majority claiming that the student competency level in this language is not adequate. At many levels, this positive attitude towards French but with a strong loyalty to the H variety of Arabic is a product of the existence of classical diglossia with bilingualism and the variability in levels of literacy achieved through

¹¹Poplack et al. (2014) have shown that, in fact, the majority of lone word insertions in Tunisian Arabic behave like borrowings rather than instances of code-switching.

¹² "Itso happenedthatI overhearda spontaneousconversationbetweena group of studentsina field of study that has a close relationship withlanguageandeloquenceand the abilityto interview and write. The conversation went on for about five minutes. Do you know how many dialects and how many languages I heard in those minutes?

It isan incredible number!

Those students, who were ofboth sexes, were communicating incolloquialTunisian, colloquialEgyptian, colloquialGulf Arabic, colloquialSyrian, French, and English. It was a conversation that contained a strange mixture of words" (my translation).

education and its impact on student academic and professional trajectory. In contrast, the growing positive attitude towards the vernacular has to do with its gradual encroachment upon Standard Arabic in audiovisual and social media and feelings of national pride following the Tunisian Revolution and a successful democratic transition.

Literacy development in cases of heritage speakers of Arabic

In his 1963 article, "Problems of teaching languages with diglossia", Ferguson (1963, p. 73) rightly states: "the teacher and student alike must face the fact that there is more to be learned than one language; perhaps it is not as much as two full languages, but it is certainly more than generally attempted in a single language course." Ferguson also argues that if the purpose is to reach a communicative competence that approximates that of the average educated native Arabic speaker, then ignoring one of the varieties would defeat that purpose. As mentioned above, for educated native speakers of Arabic, the native oral competence needed for everyday communication is acquired naturalistically at home while competence in Standard Arabic is developed through formal instruction. If we also take into consideration 'the larger picture' and add the role of the former colonial language in literacy development and education in general, then it becomes clear that the linguistic repertoire of an educated Tunisian, in this case, is rather complex.¹³ Additional proof of the complexity and, to a certain degree, the impact of language policy on the Tunisian educational system is the fact that it is virtually impossible for non-Tunisians and second generation Tunisian immigrants to be incorporated into the Tunisian secondary education system at a later stage, principally because of the unique scheme when it comes to languages of instruction and class management. This is the major reason why spending a year or two as a visiting high school student in Tunisian public schools is not an option for anyone who did not go through the system, specifically because of the linguistic setup. While Hispanic immigrants can send their children back for an academic year if they are competent in Spanish, Tunisian immigrants do not have that option if their children who are initially schooled overseas are not competent in Tunisian Arabic, Standard Arabic, and French.

Generally, in the case of heritage speakers of Arabic, the diglossic situation adds an additional level of difficulty to an already challenging environment for language maintenance. Similar to second language learners of Arabic, the major question is: how can we make the student communicatively competent in a language which they can use extemporaneously while, at the same time, allowing them to gain literacy skills and

¹³Of course if such a person happens to be a speaker of Tunisian Berber then an additional layer of complexity is added. Berber in Tunisia has been receding rapidly over the last few years and claims tend to situate its speakers at around 1% of the population although no accurate statistics are available.

proficiency in Standard Arabic? It would be fair to say that as they attempt to learn Standard Arabic, heritage speakers face more acute problems than, for example, a heritage speaker of Spanish taking a Spanish class.

In reality, for heritage speakers of Arabic there are multiple challenges in developing each of the two varieties that are acquired by native speakers (Rouchdy, 1992). With regards to the vernacular, little material is available to teach the native language of the parents, since these varieties are not taught in the native countries. Additionally, the challenge for developing competence in Standard Arabic is its irrelevance in the family domain and in natural conversation, even when traveling to the country of origin. Furthermore, heritage speakers of Arabic are not exposed to native competence in Standard Arabic given the way Standard Arabic is acquired in the Arab world, the functions it plays, and the varying degrees of competence that exist. In fact, equating levels of competence in Standard Arabic with levels of competence in the vernacular is not accurate (Maamouri, 1998, p. 33). Depending on their educational background, Arab speakers may have no problem understanding oral production in Standard Arabic but when it comes to communicating in it extemporaneously, there is major intra- and inter-speaker variation that is often reflected in authentic materials available to learners (Walters, 1996, 2003).

Another difficulty for the heritage learner of Arabic is that if the parents are not speakers of the same dialect, then lexical and structural differences can further problematize the natural transmission of a unified vernacular. This is so because unlike what happens in the case of Hispanics in the United States who might be exposed to different varieties of Spanish, speaking different varieties of Arabic amounts to speaking clearly distinct systems. An example would be verb morphology and pre-verbal marking in the expression of futurity. This does not necessarily amount to mutual unintelligibility, depending on the linguistic background of each speaker. However, because of language ideologies and even linguistic prejudice, some Arabic speakers find that using their native variety without some accommodation efforts is met with negative attitude and claims of incomprehension by speakers from some other dialect regions (Chakrani, 2015; S'hiri, 2002). A third related issue for parents, not specific to Arabic speakers, is the opportunity to interact with people of the same linguistic background as a way to increase exposure of their children to the heritage language. Although this obviously depends on the ethnolinguistic vitality of each group and their presence in the host country, more unified languages such as Spanish offer their speakers the opportunity to interact with nationals of other countries in their own dialects thus widening the domain of use of the home language. In fact, research on Spanish in the United States has shown that contact between speakers of different dialects results in a vitality of the Spanish language and leads to a higher degrees of maintenance and intergenerational transmission (Lipski, 2008; Otheguy et al., 2007). The inclusion of dialectal features in classes of Spanish as a heritage language is also a

strategy that proves successful in capitalizing on the competence that heritage speakers bring with them to the classroom and on which literacy in standard Spanish is built. This is again very different in the case of Arabic, where the vertical differences between the vernacular and Standard Arabic and the horizontal differences between the individual dialect groups make the use of dialectal features in a heritage Arabic language classroom a thorny issue. In fact, recent studies suggest that the initial advantage shown by heritage speakers of vernacular Arabic over second language learners disappears in advanced courses (Albirini, 2014). Still, as put by Ferguson (1963, p. 72): "The problem of teaching a language with two major forms cannot be solved by teaching only one of the forms."

All things considered, it appears that diglossia makes language shift happen even faster than in the case of non-diglossic languages. The heritage language learner is expected to develop proficiency in two systems of the same language to be able to communicate in formal and informal contexts, all under a strong pressure from the dominant language of the host country. One positive aspect for Arabic as a heritage language, nonetheless, is that everybody has to learn Standard Arabic through formal channels and that, at some levels, gives the heritage speakers the opportunity to learn from what teaching Arabic in the Arab world has to offer. Unlike more unified languages where a heritage curriculum needs to be developed. The curriculum of Standard Arabic as taught in the country of origin is an excellent starting point for heritage speakers of Arabic. Using textbooks from the Arab world for heritage speakers can be a good resource for literacy development. For example, the current Arabic textbooks that are used in the lower grades in the Tunisian system work reasonably well with heritage speakers in the diaspora. As a matter of fact, the acquisition of the standard form of Arabic could be seen as a more leveled terrain for heritage speakers of Arabic as even native speakers of vernacular Arabic have to go through formal instruction to learn it.

Conclusion

That diglossia has implications for the domains of use of the two varieties involved is well established. What this paper has attempted to show is that a situation of classical diglossia and bilingualism has implications for literacy development and overall school success in the Maghreb and for heritage language maintenance in the diaspora. Specifically, it was argued that continuing to focus on the duality of the H variety and the L variety without taking into consideration the 'larger picture' and the pivotal role of the third language could be misleading. In Tunisia, where bilingualism is also part of the students' linguistic reality, surmounting the initial marginalization of the native vernacular in favor of literacy in Standard Arabic does not seem to be enough of a guarantee for school success since competence in French becomes indispensable as

students move higher up the educational ladder. This results in a generalized feeling of linguistic insecurity and a shared skepticism about the proficiency achieved through the educational systems in the languages of instruction.

At the same time, the differences between the L variety and the H variety hamper the amount of support that a heritage speaker has to be able to develop advanced competence in both varieties. Heritage speakers of a language that is in a diglossic situation face special challenges for language maintenance. These include a lack of ethnolinguistic vitality given the substantial differences between the dialects, a lack of didactic materials in general, not only those dedicated for heritage language teaching, a difficult integration into the country of origin's educational system, and the question of which variety to teach, which, in the case of Arabic, acquires an even larger dimension.

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