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Linguistic Ideology and Urban Differentiation in the University: A Socio-Analytical Study of Arabic and French as Tools of Symbolic Power and the Production of Academic Inequality

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how linguistic ideology reproduces academic inequalities within the Algerian university, focusing on the symbolic roles of Arabic and French. Drawing on Bourdieusian and Foucaultian frameworks, it analyzes data from 25 semi-structured interviews with professors and graduate students. Findings reveal that linguistic capital, unevenly distributed along urban and social lines, acts as a hidden filter converting pre-existing disparities into academic hierarchies. The study argues for linguistic justice as a foundation for equitable higher education.

Keywords: Linguistic Ideology, Symbolic Power, Linguistic Capital, Academic Inequality, Higher Education, Algeria, Arabic, French.

Introduction

The university is a central space for the production and redistribution of knowledge. However, it does not operate as a neutral or homogeneous domain but rather as a social field where power relations, legitimization mechanisms, and various forms of symbolic differentiation intersect. In this context, language performs more than a purely communicative function; it plays a structural role in organizing academic practice, defining standards of competence, and conferring scientific legitimacy. This makes language an active element in producing hierarchies within the academic field.

In universities characterized by linguistic duality, as in the Algerian context, Arabic and French emerge as two languages present in teaching, research, and administration. Yet, their presence does not follow a logic of parity or balanced functional distribution but exists within unequal relations where language is laden with social and symbolic connotations that transcend its instrumental dimension. The choice of a specific language for teaching or research reflects not only pedagogical or technical considerations but is also tied to perceptions of science, modernity, and academic legitimacy. Studies in the sociology of education and sociolinguistics have shown that language is used within educational institutions as an implicit sorting mechanism, contributing to the reproduction of social and cultural disparities. This occurs by linking scientific competence to mastery of specific languages and converting linguistic capital into symbolic capital that grants its holders privileges within the academic trajectory. In this framework, linguistic ideology—understood as a system of representations and beliefs about the value and functions of languages—becomes a crucial element for understanding how inequality is constituted within the university.

Urban differentiation adds an additional layer to this analysis, as proficiency in a particular language often intersects with social and spatial belonging. This makes linguistic practice an indicator of acquired cultural capital and a mechanism for reproducing disparities among academic actors. Consequently, analyzing the relationship between linguistic ideology and urban differentiation within the university allows for a deeper understanding of how symbolic power operates in the academic realm, beyond narrow technical or pedagogical explanations.

1.Problem Statement

Based on the above, the problem of this study is built on questioning the role linguistic ideology plays in reproducing distinctions and inequalities within the academic field through the unequal use of Arabic and French, and the associated representations of legitimacy, competence, and academic status.

Thus, the central research question is: How does the prevailing linguistic ideology within the university contribute to producing urban differentiation and reproducing academic inequality, through the deployment of Arabic and French as tools of power and symbolism?

This central question branches into several sub-questions:

- How is the use of Arabic and French represented in academic discourse and practice?
- What is the relationship between the language used and the symbolic status of actors within the university?
- To what extent is linguistic capital linked to social and urban background?
- How do linguistic practices affect opportunities for recognition and success within the academic trajectory?

2.Objectives of the Study

This study aims to analyze the role of linguistic ideology in shaping patterns of differentiation and reproducing inequality within the university space by exploring the representations and daily linguistic practices of academic actors. The study is not limited to describing the use of Arabic and French in the university context but seeks to deconstruct their symbolic and social meanings and understand how they are transformed into tools of power and legitimization within the academic field.

More specifically, the study seeks to:

- Uncover the representations of professors and graduate students regarding the status of Arabic and French in academic practice.
- Analyze the relationship between the language used and academic legitimacy and symbolic status within the university.
- Highlight how linguistic capital directs academic trajectories and opportunities for recognition and success.
- Understand the connection between linguistic practices and urban/social differentiation within the academic field.
- Contribute to the sociological debate on the role of language in reproducing inequality within higher education institutions.

3.Significance of the Study

This study derives its significance from its analytical sociological approach, which transcends technical or pedagogical conceptions of language to treat it as an active symbolic structure organizing relationships within the university. Scientifically, the study enriches the intersection of the sociology of language and the sociology of education by shedding light on linguistic ideology as an invisible mechanism for reproducing distinctions within the academic field. The study's importance also lies in its ability to explain forms of academic inequality that cannot be understood by relying on quantitative indicators alone, through an analysis of the discourse and representations framing daily linguistic practice. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how symbolic power operates within the university, moving beyond reductive explanations that attribute disparity solely to individual differences or cognitive competence.

On a practical level, the study's results provide analytical insights that can aid policymakers and pedagogical actors in reflecting on university language policies and in promoting more just and balanced approaches to language use within higher education institutions.

4.Conceptual Definitions

4.1 Linguistic Ideology

Linguistic ideology refers to the system of social representations and beliefs ascribed to languages, often presented as natural or neutral, while in fact reflecting specific power relations and historical-social contexts. Linguistic ideology is not limited to overt discourse but operates implicitly to guide linguistic practices and justify hierarchies among languages within social institutions, including the university (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In this framework, linguistic ideology is understood as a symbolic mechanism that contributes to legitimizing certain languages, linking them to competence, knowledge, and modernity, while marginalizing others (Blommaert, 2005). Operationally, linguistic ideology is analyzed through the patterns of justification and legitimization that actors display in interviews when discussing the use of Arabic or French.

4.2 Symbolic Power

Symbolic power is defined as the ability to impose specific meanings and representations as legitimate and natural without the need for direct physical coercion, achieved through control over systems of social classification and evaluation (Bourdieu, 1991). In the university context, this power is embodied in language when a particular language is linked to scientific legitimacy and academic status. Symbolic power operates invisibly, as linguistic hegemony is accepted as self-evident or technical, making it more effective in reproducing inequality (Bourdieu, 1991). Operationally, symbolic power is measured by analyzing the relationship between the language used and academic recognition and status within the university space.

4.3 Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital is a form of cultural capital, referring to the linguistic competencies individuals possess, which can be converted into symbolic or institutional resources within different social fields (Bourdieu, 1986). The value of this

capital is derived not from linguistic proficiency itself but from the social and institutional recognition it receives within a specific field. In the academic field, linguistic capital becomes a tool of differentiation, as mastery of certain languages grants greater opportunities for success, integration, and academic recognition (Grenfell, 2011). Operationally, linguistic capital is analyzed through respondents' representations regarding the impact of language on academic trajectory and evaluation.

4.4 Urban Differentiation

Urban differentiation refers to the social and spatial disparities resulting from differences in socialization patterns and access to cultural and educational resources within urban space. These disparities are closely linked to an unequal distribution of cultural and linguistic capital, which is reflected in opportunities for integration and success within educational institutions (Savage et al., 2013). In the university context, urban differentiation manifests in varying linguistic practices and their associated representations, depending on the social and spatial background of the actors. Operationally, urban differentiation is observed by linking respondents' social background to their linguistic representations.

4.5 Academic Inequality

Academic inequality refers to the structural disparities in opportunities for success, recognition, and participation within the educational field, which are attributable not only to individual differences in competence but also to social and symbolic mechanisms, including language (Reay, 2018). Language is one of the primary mediators through which this inequality is reproduced within higher education. The sociology of education confirms that university institutions, through their implicit standards, contribute to reproducing social inequalities rather than reducing them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Operationally, academic inequality is analyzed through discourses linking language to evaluation, promotion, and recognition within the university.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, deemed most suitable for analyzing social phenomena of a symbolic nature and for observing the indirect relationships between linguistic practices and mechanisms producing differentiation and inequality within the university space. This approach aims to describe academic actors' representations of language and analyze its social and symbolic meanings within their institutional context.

5.2 Data Collection Method

The study relied exclusively on **semi-structured interviews** as the primary data collection tool, given their ability to uncover representations, perceptions, and patterns of justification difficult to capture through quantitative instruments. The interviews were conducted using a pre-designed guide covering key themes related to the role of language in academic practice, its relationship to scientific legitimacy, symbolic power, academic trajectory, and social differentiation. Respondents were given ample freedom to express their views and experiences, while maintaining general guidance to ensure data coherence with study objectives, without imposing predetermined answers or positions.

5.3 Temporal and Spatial Framework of the Study:

1. Temporal Framework: The study was conducted from December 2024 to **March 2025**.

2. Spatial Framework: The study was conducted in the Department of Sociology, **University of Algiers 2**, a central urban university representing a hybrid (Arabic-French) linguistic environment and encompassing diverse social and spatial segments.

5.4 Sample Size and Composition:

Sample Size: 25 participants (thematic saturation was reached at interview number 22).

Sample Composition:

- 12 professors (5 full professors, 4 associate professors, 3 assistant professors).
- 13 graduate students (7 LMD doctorate students, 6 Doctorate in Science students).
- **Selection Criterion:** Diversity of socio-spatial backgrounds (urban/rural) and scientific discipline (social sciences/humanities).

5.4 Ensuring Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness) in Qualitative Research:

To ensure data and analysis quality, we followed these procedures:

1. **Investigator Triangulation:** Data were analyzed independently by two researchers, followed by discussion of thematic categories until consensus was reached.
2. **Member Checking:** A summary of initial findings was presented to 5 randomly selected participants to verify the accurate representation of their views.
3. **Thick Description:** Detailed contextual descriptions and verbatim quotes were provided to ensure the traceability of conclusions.
4. **Reflexivity:** The principal researcher documented his assumptions, linguistic background, and their potential influence on the data collection and analysis process.
5. **External Audit:** The team consulted a professor specializing in the sociology of language to review the analysis process and provide critical feedback.

5.5 Research Ethics:

- Prior written consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study's objectives.

- Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed by not disclosing names or identifiable information.
- Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.
- Recordings and transcripts were stored in a secure, encrypted environment and will be destroyed after 5 years.

5.6 Study Limitations:

1. **Sample Limitations:** The study focuses on a single university and department, limiting the generalizability of findings to all Algerian universities.
2. **Volunteer Bias:** Participants who agreed to be interviewed may be more aware of linguistic issues or more comfortable expressing their opinions.
3. **Recall Bias:** Interviews rely on participants' memory and personal experiences, which may be subject to temporal bias or selectivity.
4. **Researcher's Implicit Bias:** Despite reflexivity, subtle influences from the researcher's linguistic and social background on data interpretation may persist.
5. **Qualitative Nature:** The study does not provide quantitative measurements of relationships between variables, opening the field for future quantitative studies to confirm the findings.

5.7 Procedure

Interviews were conducted under conditions respecting the ethical principles of scientific research. Participants were informed of the study's academic objectives and nature, with guarantees of data confidentiality and non-disclosure of names or institutions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to analysis.

5.8 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, classifying responses according to key semantic themes, such as:

- Representations of language and academic legitimacy,
- Language and symbolic power,
- Language and academic trajectory,
- Language and social/urban differentiation.

This method allowed for uncovering recurrent patterns in discourse, observing mechanisms of justification and legitimization associated with the use of Arabic and French within the university, and linking them to the study's theoretical framework.

5.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles of scientific research. Data were handled within a general analytical framework without directing personal or institutional criticism, focusing on analyzing discourse and practice as social phenomena.

Study results

6. Language as a Field of Power: A Sociological Analysis of Linguistic Ideology and Symbolic Power in the Algerian University)

This analysis provides an in-depth sociological reading of data from semi-structured interviews with actors in the Algerian academic field, revealing how linguistic practices function as mechanisms for producing and reproducing social and symbolic distinctions. Combining Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework on symbolic capital and symbolic violence, the theory of the translation of power, and critical sociolinguistic theory, the research shows that language in the Algerian university space is not a neutral communication tool but a field of power where multiple identity projects compete: national (Arabic), colonial-elitist (French), and globalist (English). The data reveal that this conflict translates into a symbolic linguistic hierarchy that converts inherited social and geographical disparities into legitimate academic inequalities.

7. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Grounding

7.1. Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence (Pierre Bourdieu)

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is fundamental for understanding linguistic dynamics in the university. Proficiency in a specific language (French in this context) is not merely a technical skill but a form of cultural capital that derives its value from its relative scarcity and association with high-status groups. Within the academic field, this linguistic competence transforms into symbolic power—an invisible power accepted as legitimate. What participants (1, 9, 14, 11) describe as the "aura of distinction" or "symbolic status" associated with French and English is the practical manifestation of this power. Symbolic violence occurs when individuals (Participants 1, 6, 10, 11, 22) submit to and internalize this hegemony, perceiving their linguistic shortcoming as a personal failure rather than the result of an unjust social structure.

7.2. Linguistic Ideology and Hegemony (The Bakhtin Circle, James Paul Gee)

Linguistic ideology is a system of beliefs and values that link specific language forms to collective identities and socially classify them (Woolard, 1992). The data reveal two interconnected ideologies:

- **The "language-as-neutral-tool" ideology:** Promoted by technical discourse (Participants 2, 6, 15, 21, 4), which presents language choice as a purely pragmatic matter ("the language of science," "the language of the field"). This ideology **obscures** the political nature of the choice.

- **The "purity and linguistic hierarchy" ideology:** Presenting a language (French) as more "scientific" or "professional" (Participants 2, 5) is an ideological construct linking linguistic value to an imagined social value.

7.3. The Theory of Translation and Power (Michel Foucault, Boas)

Here, language is a system for "translating" privileges. As participants (3, 5, 12, 11, 7, 13) clarify, economic and social capital (affluent urban background) is translated into linguistic capital (proficiency in French), which in turn is translated within the academic field into academic capital (higher grades, publications, grants, promotions). This chain of translations is a central mechanism in social reproduction, turning inequalities into differences in "competence" or "merit" that appear natural.

8. Analysis of Findings: The Four Sociological Dimensions

8.1. Representations of Language and the Construction of Academic Legitimacy: A Clash of Models

The representations reveal a fundamental division reflecting a conflict between models of legitimacy within the academic field:

- **The Scientific-Globalist Legitimacy Model:** Represented by Participants (1, 6, 8, 12, 19, 11) and functional justifications. Language (English/French) is a means of integrating into the "imagined community" of the global scientific elite. Legitimacy here is derived from beyond national borders.
- **The National-Identity Legitimacy Model:** Represented by Participants (12, 16, 20, 22). The Arabic language carries historical legitimacy and collective identity, yet their data indicate an internal contradiction: recognizing its value while acknowledging the hegemony of foreign languages in practice.
- **The Critical-Deconstructive Legitimacy Model:** Represented by Participants (2, 13, 21, 7, 8, 10). It rejects the logic of "neutrality" and exposes how the "legitimacy" of a language is a product of historical power relations (colonialism, cultural dependency).
- This plurality of legitimacy models creates a state of "anomie" in the university's linguistic field, where there are no clear, shared rules, thereby increasing the effectiveness of inherited linguistic capital as a practical criterion for differentiation.

8.2. Language and Symbolic Power: Hegemony through Normalization

The linguistic system exercises its hegemony not through coercion but by **normalizing hierarchy**:

- **Control over Definitions:** Whoever defines what is "scientific" or "professional" (Question 6) controls the boundaries of the field. Linking French to these qualities in faculties like Law and Medicine (Participant 5) is a **discriminatory decision** that masks itself behind technical arguments.
- **The Economics of Attention and Listening:** Participants (5, 7) describe a clear dynamic where speech in a particular language generates greater interest and is heard differently. This is a dynamic of uneven distribution of expressive legitimacy, a fundamental form of symbolic power.
- **Exclusion through Terminological Monopoly:** Using a foreign language in a specialty (Participants 2, 9) creates a terminological barrier. Students lacking the requisite linguistic capital are placed in a subordinate position, forced to expend extra effort to understand the language before grasping the subject matter, as clearly illustrated by several participants.

8.3. Language and Academic Trajectory: A Structural Sorting Mechanism

Language functions as an **invisible compass** guiding academic paths and determining life chances:

- **A Filtering Mechanism:** Language affects every stage: success in courses, opportunities for international publication (Participants 1, 2, 6, 9, 10), obtaining grants (Participants 2, 10, 11, 13), and promotion (Participants 10, 14, 15, 19, 20). It is not just one factor among many but a **condition for passage** at many critical points.
- **Institutionalizing Disparity:** When the university adopts policies of publishing or teaching in a foreign language without fair compensatory support, it **institutionalizes the privilege** of the group that already possesses the linguistic capital. This transforms social difference into legitimate institutional difference.
- **Directing Human Capital:** Disadvantaged students (Participants 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12) spend a significant portion of their cognitive and emotional energy learning the language as a **technical skill**, at the expense of investing this effort in academic creativity or deep critical learning. This constitutes a **waste of human capital** at the societal level.

8.4. Language and Social-Geographic Discrimination: Spatial and Class Reproduction

The analysis confirms that the university, rather than being a leveler of disparities, is an effective medium for their reproduction along two axes:

- **The Class Axis:** The relationship between social background and proficiency in French (Participants 3, 5, 13) is a strong causal one. By making this language a key to success, the university translates existing class inequality into future academic disparity. This is a stark example of what Bourdieu terms the "reconversion" of capital.
- **The Geographic/Spatial Axis:** Distinctions made by participants between city and countryside indicate an uneven geographic distribution of linguistic resources. The university does not compensate for this structural deficit; instead, it rewards those who arrive with accumulated resources. This creates institutionalized spatial discrimination, where belonging to a specific geography (urban/elite) becomes a symbolic resource.

3. Discussion: Multilingualism as a Metaphor for Social Conflict

These findings transcend the Algerian context to touch on broader issues in the sociology of higher education in postcolonial multilingual societies.

- **Hierarchical Multilingualism:** The research reveals that "multilingualism" in the Algerian university is not a horizontal coexistence but a hierarchical construct where languages operate in relations of domination and subordination. French occupies an intermediary position: dominant locally (against Arabic) but subordinate globally (in favor of English in technical fields). This places the user in a permanent symbolic dilemma.
- **The University as an Arena for Identity Conflict:** The linguistic conflict is an expression of a deeper struggle over the university's identity and the model of knowledge it adopts: between local belonging and global integration, between national heritage and colonial legacy. Each language carries a different societal project.
- **Linguistic Justice as a Condition for Social Justice:** The analysis concludes that achieving fairness in academic opportunities cannot be separated from achieving linguistic justice. This does not mean rejecting foreign languages but rather deconstructing the discriminatory nature of their use and building conscious language policies that compensate for structural deficiencies. The goal is to make linguistic proficiency a right attainable by all, not an inherited privilege.

9. Conclusion and Research Prospects

This analysis shows that the Algerian university space is a **living sociological laboratory** where the mechanisms of symbolic violence and social reproduction are clearly manifested through linguistic practices. Language here is both the **means and the object of the struggle**: a means for social mobility and an object for competing collective identities.

10. For future research, we propose:

- Quantitative studies to measure the statistical relationship between socio-economic background, linguistic proficiency, and academic outcomes.
- Comparative studies between disciplines (Sciences vs. Humanities) and between universities (central vs. peripheral) to understand the uneven distribution of linguistic capital.
- Critical historical studies to trace the roots of the current linguistic hierarchy in postcolonial education policies.
- Research into alternative policies, such as models of fair bilingual or multilingual education, that could transform language from a tool of exclusion into a bridge for inclusion.

The university, in the end, is not merely a mirror of society but an actor in shaping it. Its linguistic choices are not neutral administrative decisions but political and ethical choices that shape the future of social cohesion and intergenerational justice.

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