



What is the future language policy in Djibouti?

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Résumé

Suite à l'indépendance du 27 juin 1977 la République de Djibouti a déclaré la langue du colonisateur, à savoir le français, langue officielle. Puis, le 4 septembre 1977, elle a adhéré à la Ligue Arabe et adopté officiellement sa langue. Aujourd'hui, le français est remis en question par l'arabe qui est aussi la langue de la religion de l'Etat, l'anglais qui domine le marché du travail, ainsi que l'afar et le somali, langues nationales, qui sont de plus en plus utilisées dans toutes les situations. En outre, le déplacement de nombreux réfugiés de la région a permis l'émergence de langues régionales comme l'Amharique et l'Oromo. La présence et le contact entre toutes ces langues ont introduit de nouvelles pratiques linguistiques. Cet article s'attache à établir la place exacte du français dans ce nouvel espace varié.

Mots-clés: Djibouti, politique linguistique, langues régionales

Abstract

Following the independence of 27 June 1977, the Republic of Djibouti made the language of the coloniser, namely the French, the official language. Then adheres on 4 September 1977 to the Arab League and officially adopt its language. French is now challenged by Arabic that is the language of the state religion, English that dominates the labour market, and Afar and Somali, national languages that are

increasingly used in every situation. The displacement of many refugees from the region has allowed for the emergence of regional languages such as Amharic and Oromo. The presence and contact between all these languages introduced new linguistic practices. This article attempts to establish the exact place of French in this new varied space.

Keywords: Djibouti, language policy, regional languages

Introduction

This research deals with the changing nature of languages in contact, and how they are used in the Horn of Africa and specifically in the Republic of Djibouti. In the introduction, an overview of the languages in Djibouti is provided, and particularly how was the domination of French which has been supported by the colonial system. French is the main educational language from primary to higher secondary schools and in most graduate courses at the university level. How it has supplanted national languages is explained later below.

The first part presents the linguistic landscape and different languages spoken in the region and the main goals of the study. Then a previous study that is considered an important foundation stone on Djibouti languages is presented to explain the reason for undertaking this new one.

Secondly, the research addresses the challenges faced by all languages spoken in Djibouti and the problems that arise from the popularity of English, a newcomer that seems to put French in difficulty. English is the language of growing foreign companies and the lingua franca for refugees from neighbouring countries.

The study's methodology and design will be presented below before presenting a provisional conclusion.

1. Background

The backdrop for this study, the Republic of Djibouti, which occupies an area of 23, 200 km² and hosts today 800,000 inhabitants, was born in the obscurity of the night of the 27th June 1977. The last French colonial manoeuvre consisted in turning off the power of the electricity plant to reduce the impact of the handover humiliation. The handover happened just before midnight when France's colours were brought down and replaced for the first time by the Djibouti flag.

The songs, dances and other expressions of liberation were mostly conveyed in local languages. French was only spoken inside the parliament where foreign delegations were attending the ceremonial declaration of independence.

Djiboutians were liberated also from the authority that was enforcing and maintaining a language that had no links with their culture and languages. From that day, the primacy of French over local languages started progressively and slowly to decline. However no planned measures were taken against or in favour of local languages. The government has not given its position on these languages but clearly stated that French was the official language.

Djibouti felt liberated from everything that represented France domination, even from the imposed colonial language. The reason for the decline of French was that people were speaking local languages as there were no restrictions; even the government was communicating and responding in their languages. Since the independence, French in Djibouti has indeed been facing a number of challenges.

2. Current challenges

Seven languages are spoken in Djibouti : (1) five regional languages, three of which are seen as national, Afar, Arabic and Somali, and two spoken by Ethiopian communities and temporarily displaced immigrants, Amharic and Oromo, and (2) two Western foreign languages, French and English, mostly used in the educational and business domains respectively. Arabic is the language of Islam, the religion of the State, and it is used also in everyday life unlike English that is taught from secondary school onwards. Among those seven languages, only two, Arabic and French, have an official status. Then the two main National languages, Afar and Somali, have no official recognition despite being used in every situation and sometimes dominating others in administrative and government matters.

The main challenges for the French language come from Arabic and English. Arabic has the same official status as French and, as the language of Islam that is practised by most inhabitants, is claiming supremacy over all other languages. English has proved to be profitable for its users as it flourishes in the business domain and attracts more individuals into learning the language.

2.1. Arabic efforts towards supremacy

The first serious challenge for French came from Arabic which became an official language immediately after Djibouti joined the Arab League on 4 September 1977.

Arab countries and their national newspapers have been questioning the linguistic policy of Djibouti concerning Arabic. They are very critical about the lack of progress in administration and government matters on the use of Arabic despite huge investments by Arab organisations and countries in linguistic, cultural, religious and economic needs.

However, in the administration, Arabic is used on letterheads stating the republic and government names only because the majority of civil servants do not write or read it. The obligation for civil servants to be fluent in French was withdrawn in 1995 by the current president who introduced and imposed a quota to every ministerial department of Arabic speakers that do not understand most of the French they hear. These civil servants communicate in national languages publicly at the place of work even though French and Arabic are the official ones. One may ask how it is possible that civil servants are not fluent in both official languages. In order to comprehend this situation one needs first to know that Arabic educated civil servants went to Madrasa where students are taught mainly Islamic religious studies and its language. The Madrasas are private and independent however the National Education and Vocational Training ministry recognises, endorses and delivers their baccalaureates without organising the marking of the exams or participating to it. The second things one needs to know is that the majority of these civil servants from Arabic background known in Djibouti as the “Arabophones” were born and grew up in Ethiopia or Somalia and did not have the opportunity to access public schools.

The Higher Education and Research, the National Education and Vocational Training, the Foreign Affairs and the Islamic Affairs, Culture and Waqf¹ (religious endowment) ministries use special teams to correspond officially in that language with their Arabs counterparts. Arab governments are supporting

¹ An endowment made by a Muslim to a religious, educational, or charitable cause.

Arabic politically and financially to fully take its official place and cover educational and administrative needs. In most primary and secondary schools, Arabic is taught for two hours a week mostly by unqualified teachers directed by unstructured pedagogical teams that operate loosely inside the ministry of national education.

At the university of Djibouti there was no an Arabic department until 2013 after the visit of the Head of the Holy mosque of Mecca who left the country disappointed by its lack of teaching the religious language. For Arab countries, Djibouti is one of them and, therefore, Arabic should be the first and foremost spoken language. They do not comprehend why Arabic has not taken over primary education and not achieved its share of at least 50% in teaching timetable across the secondary schools after thirty eight years of presence as an official language.

Arab countries have used the opportunities offered indirectly by France to educate more students in their universities. France has tightened student visas for young Djiboutians wishing to further their education at French universities giving additional opportunities to Arabic and English. Students are driven towards other countries with better visa delivery facilities and therefore need to learn other languages.

The French cooperation services have withdrawn their teaching staff from the Djiboutian education system several years ago and reduced their offer of French university places as their budget has shrunk to cover only few postgraduate studies programmes.

The government of Djibouti adopted a new initiative on its scholarship program that has stopped financing undergraduate students attending foreign universities. Postgraduate scholarships are offered for the five best students in most areas of studies from Djibouti University. More and more are studying Arabic at undergraduate level, fewer and fewer are studying in French outside the country as France refuses to issue visas to privately-funded students. The majority of undergraduate Djiboutians studying in French are in Senegalese and Moroccan universities.

Unlike France, Arab countries willingly accept and educate an increasing number of Djiboutian students in their universities. According to the Pan-Arabic Policy, more than 5000 Djiboutians are educated in Arab countries thanks to Djibouti's membership in the Arab League and to religious reasons.

2.2. English in sure progression

Challenges and pressures on French had been growing until recently when they came up repeatedly in the media.

The questioning journalists are sensitive to the circumstances through which Djibouti evolved and the discrepancy in language policies between the country and the rest of the region. It seems to them that the government of Djibouti - by maintaining French as an official language - is fighting against the odds and will one day be overwhelmed by English, the global lingua franca. The media are waiting for the day when the government will announce that the educational role of French is taken over by English or Arabic.

Some examples of the language-related problems concerning French that the president of Djibouti frequently faces are well illustrated by these interview extracts.

The president of Djibouti gave the following statement to journalist François Soudan of *Jeune Afrique*, on 11th April 2004. The question regarding English language was:

“Djibouti est un État francophone, entouré de pays où l'anglais est la langue de communication principale. Cela ne pose-t-il pas problème?”²

President Ismael Omar Guelleh answered:

“Assurément. Cette singularité renforce notre enclavement. Le système de traduction simultanée d'une organisation régionale comme l'IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development), dont Djibouti est membre, n'est ainsi financé que pour nous. Nous devons donc absolument renforcer

²“Djibouti is a francophone State, surrounded by countries where English is the main language of communication. Is this not problematic?”

l'apprentissage de l'anglais. Les Américains et diverses fondations nous y aident. L'avenir de Djibouti passe aussi par là”³

There are two language-related issues that can be identified in the answers. The first is the fact that speaking French is insulating Djiboutians and isolating them from any further interactions with their neighbours. Even communicating with their neighbours is done through translators and interpreters during regional meetings. The second one is about learning English in order to communicate directly with the neighbours, a path according to the President where the future of Djibouti lies.

Djibouti is the only French-speaking nation in the Horn of Africa and is surrounded by countries that have adopted English as their official language. In that unfavourable context for French, one can wonder about the future of that language in Djibouti but also about the language(s) that may take over.

The second interview was also conducted by François Soudan on 4th February 2008, but this time the question asked to the president was from a different angle:

“Pourquoi les investisseurs français sont-ils si rares à Djibouti?”⁴

And the president of Djibouti, Ismael Omar Guelleh, answered with a bit of irritation:

“Posez-leur la question. Hormis Total et une ou deux sociétés, il n'y a personne. Résultat, la France perd peu à peu ses positions économiques, culturelles et linguistiques à Djibouti. Et pourtant, je suis francophile depuis toujours, par tradition. Mon père a été, en 1927, le premier instituteur francophone du territoire ! C'est la France qui n'est pas à la hauteur. [...] Il

³ “Certainly. This singularity reinforces our isolation. The system of simultaneous translation of a regional organisation such as the IGAD (Inter Government Authority on Development), which Djibouti is a member of, is therefore financed merely for us. We must absolutely enhance the learning of English. So the Americans and various foundations are helping us. The future of Djibouti is also happening through this.”.

⁴ “Why are French investors so rare in Djibouti?”

faut être clair : si les Français pensent ne plus avoir besoin de Djibouti, l'inverse est aussi vrai.”⁵

This second interview is the statement about France losing slowly its economic, cultural and linguistic positions as it continues to neglect investing in Djibouti. The president of Djibouti frequently repeats in his press conferences that because France, and especially French companies, is not investing in his country, unlike English-speaking companies, Djibouti people will follow their best interests and learn English instead of French.

Besides, the construction of new military bases in Djibouti and the presence of thousands of US, German and Japanese troops speaking English has brought a breeze of globalisation to the tiny Republic. All these movements of people may modify the balance of languages and these changes may possibly change the linguistic distribution in presence.

As the global language of today, English is imposing itself everywhere as the lingua franca. In recent times, English has proved to be a language of increasing importance in Djibouti. The English language has now gained ground in a way never seen before over national and official languages because of its international reputation and growing presence in the labour market.

In Djibouti, companies look for English-speaking workers and advertise for English-speaking positions while graduates mainly speak French. This linguistic problem calls for actions showing that the government is responsive, according to the president's and the prime minister's interviews with international newspapers. After language concerns were also raised by the head of the state, the Ministry of Education proposed some bold measures that are yet to be adopted and implemented, one of the most important being the teaching of all subjects in English at university level. One of the first measures was the launch in September 2013 of an English-taught engineering school attached to the University and

⁵ “Ask them the question. Apart from Total and one or two companies, there is nobody. As a result, France loses little by little its economic, cultural and linguistic positions in Djibouti. And yet I have always been Francophile, by tradition. In 1927, my father was the first Francophone teacher of the territory! It is France who is not up to the challenge. [...] It must be clear: If the French think they no longer need Djibouti, the inverse is also true.”

financed by the Turkish government. In 2014 it was followed by the opening of an English-taught Business degree course at the University of Djibouti. These brought the necessity to retrain in English some of the science teachers in order for them to teach in these classes the new language of instruction. There is a long way to go for the 31 university teaching jobs offered in September 2015, as 24 were for French teachers, 5 for English and 2 for Arabic.

Adding to the linguistic diversity in the region, recent settlement of foreign companies in Djibouti has resulted in English becoming the prime medium of communication in the business community that comprises private enterprises and international corporations, thus compelling an increasing number of job seekers to use that language.

2.3. More French or less?

The coexistence of several communities inside one small territory, exchanging not only products but also utterances and everyday interactions gives us here the opportunity to investigate different sociolinguistic notions like diglossia and language in contact.

In this multilingual context, French – language of the former colonial power – has a head start historically and seems to have a dominant linguistic position due to its official written usage in administration and education. Djibouti is known as a former colony of France where French is an official language. It has long been considered as a French territory and education in Djibouti has always been modelled on the French system. Even today, thirty-eight years after the independence, the educational policy of the Republic of Djibouti continues to imitate that of France. All subjects in primary, secondary and high schools are still taught in French. Arabic and English are taught for two or three hours a week and considered as modern languages 1 and 2. French has been used in Djibouti as a prestigious, educational and administrative language for more than one hundred and thirty years. French is still an official language today despite the difficulties it is facing from the changing socio-economic and political circumstances in the whole east Africa region.

In this particular time in its existence, Djibouti is facing a decisive moment in linguistic choices where the old generation doesn't want to give up all its colonial past, embodied by the French language. The future is imposing itself and it is difficult for Djiboutians to comprehend the linguistic situation in which they are and find a solution which pleases everyone. A future that is impossible to guess or control unless the government takes a decision and implements an explicit language policy. All languages spoken in Djibouti may be not competing on equal grounds as some are better equipped economically and others are intrinsically related to the users historically and culturally.

There is another situation that has intensified the tendency of speakers to use national or regional languages and precipitated the decline of foreign languages. This came from the people movement on the Horn of Africa. With war and conflict⁶ everywhere in the region, thousands of people have been forced to move. The flux has created several migratory routes leading to Western Africa, America, Europe, and Asia. The majority of those who emigrated were Somalis followed by Sudanese, Ethiopians and Eritreans. These people were speaking their mother tongues but in order to communicate with each other they had to make concessions by learning foreign languages and adopting new ways of life.

During these wars and movements, stability in Djibouti attracted approximately half a million people from Somalia and Ethiopia. Half of this migrant population stayed and settled in the Republic of Djibouti. They represent approximately sixty per cent of the Djibouti population and most of them have Somali as their mother tongue.

The two leading national languages, Afar and Somali, are used mainly in every day communications even in official situations despite their status. Somali is furthermore used nowadays by members of the parliament and government in matters where official languages are required. Administrative services increasingly communicate orally with the members of the public in national languages, with French essentially and routinely used in its written form.

⁶ The Ogaden War: between Ethiopia and Somalia, the Somali Civil War, the Ethiopia and Eritrea War and the Yemen Civil War.

Bilingualism is the norm as most people speak their mother tongue plus a foreign language learned at public primary schools and exceptionally Arabic in private education for religious needs. Multilingualism is the aim of the High Education ministry which promotes only the teaching of prestigious languages such as Arabic, French and English for all graduates.

3. A previous study

Few language studies have been carried out on the linguistic or sociolinguistic situations of Djibouti. A starting point for this study is a PhD thesis “*Le français et les langues nationales à Djibouti: Aspects linguistiques et sociolinguistiques*” by Bruno Maurer (1992). Until now, Maurer’s study is the only major sociolinguistic research on French and national languages in Djibouti. The main focus of Maurer’s thesis is the description of the linguistic continuum of different French varieties in Djibouti city. It is based on a corpus collected mostly through qualitative observations and interviews. He was aware that informants’ attitudes were influenced by his presence. He carried out an in-depth study on French but omitted the country’s other main languages. According to Maurer, his lack of knowledge in these languages imposed the limitation. This prevented him from doing in-depth work on Afar, Arabic or Somali, which would be needed to reflect the linguistic situation in Djibouti.

Other circumstances that limited his study were not inherent to his person. At that time, foreigners were banned from the Northern territory because the government was fighting FRUD⁷ rebels. His linguistic inquiry was thus limited to Djibouti city. The rebellion had several consequences on the research also.

To avoid discrimination because of their tribal links with the rebels, Afars were communicating in French with other communities. For the sake of ethnical neutrality, French was spoken most of the time across communities in order to diffuse tension and unnecessary conflict. Illegal newsletters and other types of

⁷ FRUD; Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy. In French Front pour la Restauration de l’Unité et de la Démocratie

printed papers flourished, giving Maurer the opportunity to collect a much needed written corpus. Why “much needed”? Aside from the only government-owned newspaper “La Nation”, there were no well-established Francophone writers. At the time of the research, most French language teachers were from France, only 11 Djiboutians were teaching French at secondary school level.

Maurer’s research is focused on French as indicated by the title of the thesis. For instance, he initiated a list of particular words used in Djibouti that he called *djiboutismes* and said that French was deeply rooted in every aspect of Djiboutian life. English is only briefly mentioned and restricted to foreign speakers but Maurer recognised that the English presence was increasing and that its progression was a threat to the predominance of French if the linguistic situation of Djibouti did not change. He acknowledged that English, because of its global pre-eminence, had the potential to be used as a vehicular language between people of different mother tongues. Maurer concluded nonetheless that French was dominating all languages, educating the people, uplifting them in the social ladder and enlightening the country.

4. The new study

It is very important and legitimate after more than twenty three years to review the sociolinguistic situation of Djibouti and fill the gaps in knowledge about the status of Afar, Arabic, English, French, Somali and other regional languages spoken in Djibouti. It would also be worthwhile to revisit Maurer’s conclusions while addressing the personal, linguistic and geographic flaws of his work.

Re-examining the linguistic situation of Djibouti is necessary given the evolution of all languages and particularly the last one: English as a prestigious and global language of diplomacy, trade, defence, immigration, media, films and the Internet. The present research answers the call to fill these critical gaps in knowledge and reconsider the sociolinguistic situation in the light of contemporary information. It adds another dimension by going further and looking into all languages and the linguistic policy of the country. This study will

thus look into Maurer's work, will point toward its flaws in the light of the linguistic challenges that socio-political events have generated.

Throughout the study the central research questions are:

- What functions are performed by the various languages spoken in Djibouti?
- How do the different languages in Djibouti relate to each other in official domains, education and business?
- Ultimately is French still for Djiboutians a prestigious international language that gives access to education and jobs?

5. The study methodology and design

Interesting sociolinguistic issues on the study of languages like language planning and policy, bilingualism, code switching, diglossia, and multilingualism, are considered and help clarify our research.

Researchers in the field of sociolinguistics have long used both qualitative and quantitative approaches, yet the value of analysing both types of data within a 'distinct research design' or multi-methodology has only been recognised relatively recently (Creswell = 2006: 1) This new multi-methodology offers a comprehensive and flexible approach to data collection that draws from, and often encompasses, ethnography, surveys, case studies and many methods previously tested in the field of sociolinguistics.

A combination of questionnaires, interviews and document analyses was chosen to collect the information required. Information is to be gathered in the form of questionnaires, official interviews and policy documents (qualitative). Interviews and questionnaires are perhaps the most important methods to gathering data for this research as they give valuable inside information from local respondents. The questionnaire requires information about the speaker's profession, income, age, location, education, mother tongue, how many languages spoken, and language preferences. The choice of different strata of the population is that Businessmen may prefer English, academics French and older people may favour French.

As part of the survey process, research participants have to answer several

general questions about their use of languages in educational, cultural, religious and business domains. They are asked about everyday language usage. The focus of these questions is to determine which language(s) a participant uses and practises.

A consent form approved by the Ethical Committee of Aston University about the research and its process during the data collection are presented to participants for acceptance. They are fully informed about their rights for privacy and the conditions of their participation in this research and if engaged what is expected from them and how they can leave at any stage without explanations. Answers to important questions about the people and the institution organising, funding, conducting and reviewed the research as well as their contact details for further information are on the consent form.

The form has been designed with the chosen methods in mind and participants are conscious of being questioned and interviewed for the research needs.

These mixed research methods are necessary to properly assess the hypotheses of this study. Given these methods, it is important to keep in mind that as the data is being collected in Africa, interviews and questionnaires use different fields of reference than surveys created for linguistic study in developed countries. They are collected immediately in the presence of the researcher or his representative as means of communication or transport are critical. Accordingly, the sampling for the questionnaires is illustrative of the population living in Djibouti, while the interviews are focused on the experiences of specific citizens who are either civil servants that compose official documents and instruct Djiboutians on their applications or government policy advocates that suggest revisions in procedures concerning legislation.

6. Conclusion

The future of the French language in Djibouti is being challenged as Arabic and English are invading its domains and increasing in use. Arab countries are pushing the government politically into adopting Arabic as the sole official

language while helping it massively in every domain to achieve that ultimate goal. They are using different incentive resources to conquer the heart and minds of people.

English is challenging the prestige of French by imposing several challenges and competitions to the first official language's secured domains. English is the language of the business and employment domain. That new economic trend is illustrated as English is now used to educate the future engineers and business experts of the country. Will French be able to hold on its position and fight back to regain the ground it has lost?

As these factors have come together, it is now time to scrutinise the ongoing situation that is so very important to study academically. It would be promising to look into the following hypotheses.

1. If national languages not recognised legally in the constitution are used by authorities then the domain of usage and functions performed by French is shrinking.
2. If Djiboutians are not only graduating from French universities like they used to, but are now also attending Arabic and English ones, then the new elite will not be speaking only the former colonial language.
3. If more and more people are using English to secure jobs, then French will have less influence on and prestige for Djiboutians.
4. If Arabic is intimately and culturally linked to the Djiboutians' religious identity then its prestige will never be questioned.

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