

Ideology of extinction or belief in resurrection?: A Berber guide to doctrinal hazards and dogmatic principles in language policy, language extinction and linguistic revitalisation.

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The language situation in North Africa is steeped in confrontation between ideologies, beliefs, religion, science and pseudo-science. This confrontation between two main groups of languages, Berber (or Tamazight) vs. Arabic, involves perceptions of, and beliefs about, origins, identity and political choices. At the linguistic level, pseudoscientific assumptions appertain to the status of various speech categories and distinguish between “real” languages and “mere” dialects; prestige varieties (Classical Arabic) and “vulgates” (Colloquial Arabic) as well as indigenous and “foreign” languages. Ideologically, foreign languages are themselves categorised into the desirable and the undesirable (colonial), and, concretely, lead to vigorous policies aiming to substitute English to French. The recent rise of religious extremism is also both a result and an instrument of these policies.

The area between beliefs and pseudo-science is often blurred and categories confused, unwittingly or deliberately. This is most manifest in the use of historical or comparative linguistics to advance the official ideology. While the Canaanite origin of Berber(s) is favoured by the more traditional proponents of “Arabization”, the Hamito-Semitic hypothesis is preferred by a more modernist approach which uses the “common” origin to justify the imposition of Arabic as the “national” language.

The designation of the Berbers as a minority and Tamazight (the Berber language) as a minority language, with the help of erroneous data, further establishes the grounds for the legitimisation of the official ideology common to all the states of the region. This is compounded by its success abroad, owing mainly to its perpetuation by undiscerning (western) media and biased scholarship. Dwelling on the growing dominance of ideology over sociological realities, such as the increasing amalgamation of North Africa with the Middle East in global strategies, official measures designed to precipitate (Tamazight) language extinction have gone largely unchallenged.

The beliefs supporting the ideology of extinction are paralleled by those of the endangered language communities. The backlash triggered by deliberate policies of suppression gave rise to both a symbolic calque and a reinterpretation of the official beliefs, and a revival or reallocation of beliefs in existence within the endangered language community. Myth of origins, reinterpretation of history, counter-ideology, all combine to organise resistance to extinction in a broad sweep aiming to encompass all levels of social stratification. In many areas of North Africa this has been largely successful. Resistance to extinction relied on raising the status of the endangered language. This in turn, has entailed elevating the status of the oppressed culture, hence

reinforcing the interdependent and symbiotic character of the relationship between the vehicle (language) and the substance or the message (culture revitalised).

A basic belief hitherto shared by dominant and “subordinate” cultures, the claim that Berber was “not a language” because it was not written, has, as a result of resistance, triggered the revival of the extinct Berber script, with ties to ancient Libyc and present-day Tifinagh (used mainly by the Tuareg). Its perceived status as an older writing system than the Arabic script now lends it greater legitimacy and constitutes a powerful counter-claim. At first a phonetic rather than a phonological system, the so-called “neo-tifinagh” gained respectability, widespread recognition and, eventually, official status. The revival of the script led to the (re)birth of a written literature (with the emergence of the novel and a written form of theatre) and, with the acquisition of a more subjective attitude of “renewed pride”, to a more tangible process of “modernisation” of a wide range of cultural manifestations. This more complete system extends to song, music, fashion, and draws on extinct cultural roots, or values heretofore nearing extinction, such as defunct forms of social organisation.

Beliefs have both engendered the official ideology of suppression and inflamed the endangered language community’s resistance and language revitalisation. At the same time ideology promotes beliefs as a means of reinforcing itself. This circular process involving components of the same mechanism interacts in parallel with, and in opposition to, the components of the other – adverse - mechanism which it has either triggered or resulted from. Concretely, in North Africa, beliefs and ideologies devised to lead to extinction have, conversely, produced revitalisation.