

Debating Arabic: Governmentality and Language Controversy in Algeria

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In this paper, I examine how discourses of language and citizenship are intertwined in Algeria. While this issue is typically approached with an eye to how different linguistic groups compete for power within the domain of language policy, I use the framework of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991) to show a more complicated picture. Specifically, I argue that political ideologies imply different conceptions of what it means to teach Algeria's official language of education, Standard Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*). While nationalist ideologies envision an Arabic education tied to Islam and/or the Middle East, neoliberal ideologies reject that model and argue for an Arabic education that facilitates creativity, individuality, and success on international measures of learning. I use this framework to analyze multiple perspectives of the social media scandal of Sabah Boudras, the Algerian school teacher who posted a video of herself in her classroom and was criticized by the country's Minister of Education, Nouria Benghabrit. Through a discourse analysis focused on narrative positioning across events (Wortham & Reyes, 2015), I show that people strategically employ these discourses about Arabic teaching to invoke different configurations of belonging to and exclusion from the Algerian national community.

On the first day of school in September, 2016, an Algerian schoolteacher, Sabah Boudras,¹ became an unexpected source of controversy through a video she posted to Facebook. In it, she recorded herself and her year-one primary school class as she led the students in chants of classroom values and the virtues of the classroom's language, Standard Arabic (which I will refer to as *al-fuṣḥā*).² After circulating widely on Algerian social media, the video took a sudden turn toward the political when during a press conference Algeria's Minister of Education, Nouria Benghabrit, called it a "disaster"³ and announced she would refer Boudras for an internal investigation for violating rules prohibiting the filming of children within state schools (Echorouk News TV, 2016). However, the explicit reasons behind Benghabrit's criticisms were quickly drowned out. Within hours

¹ Boudras was referred to in the Arabic and French press as "Ustada Sabah," using her first name and a title of respect for teachers. I do not use the International Journal of Middle East Studies transliteration conventions in referring to the name of the controversy and adopt the francophone press transliteration for ease of reading.

² In her video, Boudras uses the term اللغة العربية, literally, "the Arabic language," which refers to the standardized form of Arabic used for literary purposes and news media. I choose to refer to this register with the transliterated term *al-fuṣḥā* (الفصحى), which literally means "the most eloquent" and is a contraction of اللغة العربية الفصحى, "the most eloquent Arabic language." Although linguists have various names for this Arabic register, including Modern Standard Arabic, Classical Arabic, and Educated Spoken Arabic, I use the term *al-fuṣḥā* as it most closely corresponds to one of the primary ways the register is identified among Algerians.

³ "كارثة" This and all subsequent translations are my own. For in-text translations, the direct quotation is provided in the original language in the footnote.

of the minister's statement, her official Facebook page was overwhelmed with criticism and expressions of solidarity with Boudras. Teachers posted pictures and videos of themselves in classrooms in defiance, and a hashtag based on the phrase "We are all Ms. Sabah"⁴ was reported to be trending first in Algeria, France, and other countries (Ech Chorouk Arabic Daily, 2016). A popular rapper, Lofti Double Kanon, even made a video accusing BENGHABRIT's father of being a *harki*, a French sympathizer during the Algerian War of Independence. A *gendarme* was arrested for posting a picture with his pistol pointed toward BENGHABRIT's head.

BENGHABRIT's well-known support of multilingualism and preference for French contrast sharply with the message and style of Boudras's video, praising Arabic education. But while this incident was clearly energized by Algeria's electric politics surrounding the status of Arabic, French, and Berber, this paper seeks to highlight a different dimension. Specifically, I analyze Boudras's video and two examples of subsequent commentary, showing that they disagree on how one should embody *al-fuṣṣḥā* and its teaching in the classroom. I reflect on this controversy to ask, why can Boudras's representation of classroom language policy be read in such divergent ways? Why are there such different imaginaries of what it means to teach *al-fuṣṣḥā*? The answer, I assert, lies in an exploration of how discourses of language and citizenship are tied through projects of *governmentality* (Foucault, 1991). Specifically, state education is tied to imaginaries about what it means to construct a nation, and the linguistic performance of teachers and students serves as an icon of those imaginaries.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I situate Algerian language politics within the theoretical framework of governmentality, which draws attention to how discourses on citizenship, labor, and religion vary in how they render language as an object of instruction and learning. Though Algeria is home to far more than two such discursive projects, a useful contrast can be drawn between how nationalist and, more recently, neoliberal political rationalities have considered the teaching and learning *al-fuṣṣḥā*. In the second section, I use discourse analysis to examine the semiotic content of Boudras's video and its subsequent uptake, pointing to the specific, and varying, ways in which *al-fuṣṣḥā* is imagined as a language of Algerian citizenship.

Theoretical Framework: Language, Citizenship, and Governmentality

The central premise of this discussion is that language and citizenship are linked through historically-situated projects of governmentality, following the work of Stroud (2007, 2010) and Flores (2014). Governmentality was elaborated by Michel Foucault as a contraction of "governmental rationality" (Gordon, 1991, p. 1), referring to the practice of making oneself or others governable. In a series of lectures, Foucault offers a critical reading of the history of modern states in which he argues—contrary to liberal and Marxist thought—that the state and society emerged as concepts together as part of a cultural shift in how power was exercised, beginning in Europe in the late 18th century. In what he calls the "'governmentalization' of the state" (Gordon, 1991, p. 103), this transformation saw the concerns of statecraft move from consolidating and wielding power of the sovereign, to developing techniques for managing the behavior of people

⁴ كلنا المعلمة صباح

and populations, thereby ensuring the security of society. What constitutes security may be vigorously debated, but the cultural shifts that occur as a part of governmentalization make it difficult to question the existence of a collective with shared interests in terms of safety, health, or prosperity.

Foucault's concept of modern governmentality is "simultaneously individualizing and totalizing" (Gordon, 1991, p. 36) in that, by constructing *society* as an object of both scientific inquiry and management, disciplinary technologies developed in schools, factories, hospitals, insane asylums, armies, and so forth came to be used by the state and other institutions as objective ways of identifying normal and abnormal behavior, and intervening to encourage normality or castigate abnormality. Power for Foucault is not unidirectional, emanating from the state, but rather diffuse: Modern political rationality creates subject positions from which individuals monitor themselves and others. Importantly, as I note in the methodology below, this stance refocuses analytic attention away from states or social structure, and toward the often contradictory ways that technical expertise are taken up and applied through a range of institutions and individuals.

Governmentality studies have important implications for how we understand debates about citizenship within a nation-state framework. Flores (2013a) and Stroud (2007) draw on postcolonial theorists to connect the development of discourses of equal rights to the creation of racialized, impure *others*, within both metropolitan and colonial spaces, that needed to be purified for the sound management of society. Stroud notes that, in the colonial contexts he examines, the glaring contradictions between the supposed equality of rights-bearing citizens and the otherness of colonial subjects led to evolving and competing rationalities—often articulated in terms of *modernity* and *tradition*—that sought to draw lines of inclusion in and exclusion from the citizen community. Indeed, the post-colonial nation-state system, operating through a "culture of legality" (Stroud, 2007, p. 27), is often presumed to have settled the issue of citizenship based primarily on territoriality of birth. However, arguments over what makes a citizen good, moral, authentic, modern, or productive are vigorously debated along many of the same lines which colonial regimes sought to categorize and differentiate subjects. For this reason, Flores (2013a) refers to *nation-state/colonial governmentality*, rather than differentiating the two.

Language is an important domain through which nation-state/colonial governmentality has sought to regulate citizenship (Flores, 2013a, 2014; Pennycook, 2002; Stroud, 2007). Stroud's (2007) study of bilingualism in Mozambique argues that colonial governmentality resulted in "historical contradictions [that] have produced distinct and competing ideas of citizenship and rights throughout colonialism and postcoloniality, and... these contradictions have found semiotic expression in different notions of bilingualism" (p. 29). In the United States context, Flores (2014) connects early 19th century efforts to standardize American English with ideologies that saw labor classes as unfit for political participation. In this view, the ways in which language is imagined cannot be detached from the institutions and markets that regulate its learning and use. Within nation-states, this means that discourses about what constitutes a language in the first place, and what it means to learn it or use it, are imbedded in a broader history of power relations marked by highly interested notions of inclusion and exclusion in accessing rights and resources.

Importantly, the political rationalities that have characterized the governmentalization of states are not fixed, but rather productive of new rationalities backed by competing interests: “As governmental practices have addressed themselves in an increasingly immediate way to ‘life’... individuals have begun to formulate the needs and imperatives of that same life as the basis for political counter-demands” (Gordon, 1991, p. 5). As will be seen below, in the case of Algeria, French colonial governmentality led to the emergence of Algerian nationalist counter-discourse, among others.

Political Rationalities and Language in Algeria

In the following section, I identify two important discourses of language and citizenship in Algeria—one nationalist and another neoliberal⁵—that have rendered language as an object of teaching in different ways. While this outline omits a great deal of intermediate counter-discourses in Algeria (e.g., the Berber Cultural Movement), the broad differences sketched here are useful for understanding the differing perspectives of Boudras’s classroom video, to be analyzed below.

Nation-State/Colonial Governmentality

Algerian nationalist thought emerged in the early 20th century through various strands that would eventually come to be unified (sometimes violently) under the aegis of the National Liberation Front⁶ (FLN) during the War of Independence (1954–1962). Each strand had its own discourse of linguistic citizenship which sought to pressure the French administration to facilitate education for Algerians according to their vision.

One such articulation was that of the Salafiyya Islamic reform movement initially headed by Abdulhamid Ben Badis and institutionalized in the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema⁷ (AUMA). In the 1920s, Ben Badis and other scholars who had studied Islamic scholarship abroad began to develop a modernist vision for Islamic renewal of Algerian society and, as McDougall (2006) argues, sought to be the sole “Algerian spokesmen for the ‘authentic’ representation of the indigenous Algerian community” (p. 14). The Salafi movement considered the Algerian populace to be in a profound state of *jahliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance) under French colonial rule. They saw this manifest not only in the urban elite, who considered themselves French, but also—and perhaps most urgently—in the Sufi religious practices that dominated rural life. The AUMA saw themselves as the Algerian people’s true spiritual and moral guides, enlightening them to an Arabo-Islamic Algerian identity lost over a century of colonization, and developing a modernist pedagogical program of classical Arabic and Islamic studies aimed at purging this ignorance (McDougall, 2006, pp. 110–137). The AUMA’s motto of “Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my fatherland” (Ruedy, 2005, pp. 133–135) would come to symbolize the organization’s attempt at articulating a singular Algerian identity in terms of language, religion, and nation. The AUMA competed against other moralizing discourses—Islamist, francophone, nationalist,

⁵ I follow Flores (2013b) in defining neoliberalism as a cultural phenomenon which places an imperative on markets, institutions, and individuals to flexibly adapt to the imagined needs of global capital.

⁶ *Front de libération nationale*

⁷ *Association des oulémas musulmans algériens*

and Marxist—to represent what they considered the true linguistic and cultural identity of Algerians. Despite their contradictory articulations of Algerian identity, McDougall (2011) argues that both the AUMA and the francophone intellectuals shared a “‘salvific’ cultural politics” (p. 256) in which they viewed colonial Algeria—in particular the cultural and linguistic practices of Algerian Muslims—as backward and in need of purification through knowledge gained abroad, be it “technocratic” on one hand, or Islamic on the other (pp. 259–260). After 1954, the FLN would succeed in co-opting or eliminating each of these strains, but not without appropriating the same cultural politics and their attendant discourses of language and citizenship.

Even though Algeria had not yet been accorded the legal status of an independent nation, clearly the project of nation-state/colonial governmentality was already under way. While many French and even some Algerian intellectuals denied that Algerian society had any history prior to French colonialism, the AUMA and the FLN produced a counter-discourse which forcefully asserted its rights and its religious and cultural unity. A clear example of the productive nature of Foucauldian power, this counter-discourse lent itself to rapid uptake of nation-building disciplinary technologies, especially immediately after independence in 1962.

The effects were felt in the domain of language education. Prominent leaders of the postcolonial state saw *al-fuṣṣḥā* as their language, even as they and most other Algerians were educated primarily in French. Benrabah’s (2004, 2013) comprehensive histories of state language policies describe an increasing radicalism on the part of the state in the first decades after independence. Ahmed Ben Bella’s presidency (1962–1965) generally empowered those in favor of “Arabization,” or a gradualist transition from French to Arabic (Benrabah, 2004, pp. 53–54), and acknowledged the enormous logistical challenges of expanding education in a language that few Algerians had mastered. Nonetheless, not even the gradualist vision during this early period tolerated a role for the Algerian colloquial Arabic or Algeria’s minority languages, a position which contributed to the rending of the wartime alliance of Kabyle and Arabophone leadership.⁸ The government imported Arabic teachers from Egypt and Syria, under the logic that, by the nature of their nationality, they would be prepared to teach Arabic to Algerians (Benrabah, 2013, pp. 58, 62). Following the 1965 *coup d’état* and the ascendance of Houari Boumédiène’s presidency (1965–1978), proponents of more rapid and radical “Arabization” (a process of cultural transformation beyond only linguistic accommodation) became increasingly influential of language-in-education policy (Benrabah, 2013, p. 57–59). Boumédiène further accelerated this process in the early 1970s, as he promoted a program of cultural transformation (1971 was dubbed “the year of Arabization”) to marginalize leftist and Berberist opponents (Roberts, 2003, pp. 11–13).

⁸ Kabyles are one of several Berber linguistic groups in Algeria. For example, in 1962 Ben Bella eliminated the department of Berber Studies at the University of Tizi Ouzou in Kabylia, viewing an emphasis on any identity outside the purview of the FLN to be an affront to national (read Arab) unity (Benrabah, 2013). Partly in response to these mounting tensions, Hocine Ait Ahmed, a Kabyle member of the FLN’s founding *Neuf Historiques*, staged a rebellion in Tizi Ouzou against Ben Bella. Ait Ahmed’s Social Forces Front (*Front de Forces Socialistes*, FFS) was quickly subdued and he fled the country, but it was the first in a series of demands of the Berber community for recognition.

Crisis of the State and Neoliberal Governmentality

From the 1970s into the late 1990s, the Algerian state continued to Arabize sections of primary, secondary, and tertiary education as was politically expedient and practically feasible. This period was also marked by the proliferation of counter-discourses that challenged the FLN's premise of Algeria's linguistic, religious, and cultural unity, and especially, the state's position as its guarantor. This was epitomized in the cycles of violence between Islamists and the state in the 1990s, but also notable in the successful demands of various Berber communities to ensure local control of their education. Instead of analyzing each of these projects and their corresponding political rationalities, I focus in this section on a more recent shift in discourse emanating from the highest levels of the state, notably the presidency and the current minister of education, Nouria Benghabrit.

The ascent of Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the presidency in 1999 brought the conclusion of the armed conflict that had profoundly shaken Algerian society. Bouteflika's approach to language policy and language use was also a significant departure from the state Arabism that had dominated before (Benrabah, 2004, 2013). Bouteflika, a former diplomat who had spent much of the post-Boumédiène years abroad, spoke in French unapologetically. Though rebuked, he shunned his critics, publicly recognizing the influence of French culture on Algeria and notoriously stating: "For Algeria, I will speak French, Spanish and English, and, if necessary, Hebrew" (Benrabah, 2004, p. 28).

At the same time, Bouteflika's discourse emphasized a need to improve the quality of the education system, claiming that Algerian youth "master no language"⁹ (Métaoui, 2011; see also Benrabah, 2013, p. 77) in the country's Arabized public schools. Bouteflika charged an evaluative body, the National Commission for the Reform of the Educational System¹⁰ (CNRSE), with developing recommendations for reforms. The CNRSE strategy focused mostly on a menu of reforms that echoed global discourses on educational quality at the time: upgrading the quality of instruction by requiring higher teacher certifications; reforming curricula to focus on learner-competencies; restructuring primary school years to improve the efficiency of teacher distribution (World Bank, 2007, p. 135). Controversially, the report recommended a reversal on several key aspects of the 1990s Arabization laws, including teaching secondary science in French and introducing French sooner. These provisions were firmly rejected by both FLN conservatives and Islamists, even provoking a *fatwa*, or religious ruling, against bilingual education. After significant pressure, the government suspended the reforms in 2001 (Benrabah, 2013, p. 159).

Despite this setback, the presidency has maintained, and incrementally implemented, a more pluralistic vision for language in education policy, centered on a discourse of improving quality. Benghabrit's tenure, which began in 2014, has been emblematic of these efforts. A Sorbonne-trained sociologist, Benghabrit ran a reputable research center in Oran before being tapped for the post. She is known for her preference for French in public discourse, spurring critics to circulate YouTube videos mocking her lack of eloquence in Arabic. Her push to transform Algerian schools—in accordance with the CNRSE—has focused on

⁹ "Ils ne maîtrisent aucune langue"

¹⁰ *La commission nationale de la réforme du système éducatif*

teacher qualifications and curricular reforms for language education, which has led to bitter confrontations with Islamists and conservatives (Alitat, 2016; Meddi, 2016). When the leader of Algeria's largest Islamist party, the Movement for a Society of Peace, called her a "real danger to future generations"¹¹ (Dasa, 2016) and accused her of being behind an attempt to "French-ify the education system"¹² (Bouwasta, 2016), Benghabrit responded, "our main enemy today is mediocrity"¹³ (Meddi, 2016). Benghabrit has also described the education system as "producing parrots"¹⁴ (Alitat, 2016).

Discourse on mediocrity dovetails with a larger current of francophone Algerian intellectuals that sees Arabization as partly responsible for the violence of the 1990s that persecuted them (Alitat, 2016). From 1992 to roughly 2002, Algeria was the site of cyclical violence by armed Islamist groups that rejected the military's seizure of power and clandestine government agencies that resulted, by some estimates, in nearly 200,000 civilian deaths (Roberts, 2003). Francophone academics, intellectuals and journalists were particularly targeted and many were either killed or fled the country. For many of those that survived the 1990s in Algeria, what they see as Islamic fundamentalism is an unequivocally dangerous and pathological ideology.

Talk of improving education quality belies its own ideology of language and education. It partakes in a global shift in the political economy of education reform, away from ensuring universal access and towards fostering competitive workers in globalized labor markets (Mundy, 1998). Beginning in the early 1980s, post-colonial governments began to fall into debt crises as the commodity prices upon which their economies were dependent collapsed. Algeria was one of the many Global South countries to enter a debt management relationship with the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s, which capped off a longer-term effort by the Chadli administration (1978–1992) to undo the state-led socialist program erected by his predecessor Boumédiène (Evans & Phillips, 2007). The implication for education was that precisely as the cohorts of Arabized students were swelling, the government ceased to guarantee their employment (Gafaiti, 2002). Discourse about education quality—namely that pedagogy must be of a particular nature (usually described as learner-centered)—emerged worldwide partly as a proposed solution to this problem (Heyneman, 2003; Ginsberg & Megahed, 2008).

The co-emergence of a political economy of austerity and a discourse on educational quality parallel Flores's (2013b) discussion of neoliberalism, namely the "corporatization of society" accompanied by "the corporatization of the individual subject" (p. 504). Because formal education is the site of individual subject formation *par excellence* within the nation-state framework, the ability of schooling to foster what Flores, citing Foucault (2008), calls an *enterprising self* gains increased prominence. In turn, it shifts the onus of remedying unemployment away from the state and toward teachers and students, while downplaying the forces (like corruption and a history of colonialism) that structure the current labor market. Moreover, it assumes a causal relationship between types of teaching (learner-centeredness), leading to skills (language mastery, creativity, problem-

¹¹ "[إنها] تمثل خطرا حقيقيا على الأجيال"

¹² "فرنسة المظلومة التربوية"

¹³ "Notre ennemi principal aujourd'hui, c'est la médiocrité."

¹⁴ "elle produit des perroquets"

solving) and then to employment opportunities (with global companies) with little evidence behind each supposed connection (Alexander, 2008).

The implications of this ideology are evident in Bouteflika and Benghabrit's characterization of Algerian youth as linguistically inadequate (i.e., youth "master no language"). Unlike the plurilingualism ideology that Flores examines—one that advocates for a repertoire- or skill-based view of language—the quality paradigm views competence in terms of whole languages (French or Arabic), which good citizens should be able to speak purely. Thus, Benghabrit also relies on standard language ideologies to engage in a similar process of creating "hierarchically ranked approximations of belonging to and exclusion from" (Rosa, 2016, p. 163) the Algerian political community.

Methodology

Governmentality provides a theoretical link between language, education, and citizenship. Language education—especially in compulsory state education—is not a neutral act, but rather tied to political rationalities that arrange belonging to and exclusion from the national community in different ways. In what follows, I analyze the Ustada Sabah controversy to show how these political rationalities yield different understandings of what Arabic is and how it should be taught.

The frame of governmentality orients us to "the operation of discourses, educational practices, and language use" (Pennycook, 2002, p. 19) rather than social structure and explicit policy. For Foucault, power operates in a diffuse, relational network rather than emanating from a single actor. The implication is that social structures like the state, language, or nation do not have essences that carry over from one interaction to the next. Rather, they are continually reproduced within interactions through reference to discourses of legality, language, and national community. The "'governmentalization' of the state" (Gordon, 1991, p. 103) is a process by which such discourses are increasingly directed at the individual in a way that makes them appear natural. Despite this, contradictory discourses often allow individuals to believably position themselves and others differently vis-à-vis the state, a language or the national community.

To examine how this plays out in Algeria and the Ustada Sabah controversy, I employ a form of discourse analysis developed by Wortham and Reyes (2015) for analyzing how speech events (like Boudras's video and Benghabrit's criticism) are characterized in subsequent discourse to achieve social effects (such as claiming the right to speak for Algerians). They draw on a distinction between the *narrated event* (i.e., the topics of conversation) and the *narrating event* in which participants attempt to achieve some social outcome (e.g., winning an argument, exclusion or inclusion, etc.) through their characterization of the narrated event. This distinction builds off the observation that narration never occurs in a social vacuum, but rather has "interactional as well as representational functions" (Wortham, 2000, p. 158). For this reason, acts of narration are inevitably shaped by how narrators attempt to socially position themselves and others in the moment of speech. This is manifest in how narrators choose both to structure and to enact the past events they reference. A critical subject of investigation, then, is how people play with the ambiguity of signs and language—how they can index or point to multiple meanings—to characterize past events or narratives in a way that suits their immediate goals.

This methodology is useful for the present analysis because it provides a framework for how people can strategically use the political rationalities discussed above. Specifically, the narrators discussed below invoke Algerian nationalist or neoliberal discourses in order to differently “voice” (Wortham & Reyes, 2015, p. 19) Boudras and Benghabrit as examples of social stereotypes (Agha, 2005). As I will demonstrate, these voicing strategies also have social effects in terms of how the speakers position themselves with respect to the national community and speakers of Arabic.

Analysis

Wortham and Reyes (2015) delineate three phases to their discourse analysis which I follow below. The first phase is mapping the narrated event, or identifying the “characters, objects, and events” (p. 42) that are discussed by the narrating event. For the purposes of this paper, I identify Boudras’s video and Benghabrit’s castigation as the narrated event, which is subsequently characterized as a single feud in narrating events on social media, on television, and written press. The second phase is identifying, construing, and configuring indexical signs. This phase is concerned with how people in the narrating event pick out (identify) which signs are relevant in the narrated event, how they interpret (construe) what those signs mean, and how they align those signs with others (configure) within a social and historical context. I highlight two narrating events: a television interview with a supporter of Boudras and a later opinion article reflecting on Arabic education. While these events identify similar indexical signs as relevant in the narrated event, their main actors construe and configure them in different ways. The final phase is interpreting social action, which means analyzing what effects are socially achieved by narrating events in a particular way. Does the narrator come off as an authority? A hypocrite? Are stereotypes about the narrated characters confirmed or challenged? In the case at hand, these social effects involve differently drawing the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion from the national community.

Mapping the Narrated Event

On the morning of September 6th, 2016, Sabah Boudras, a schoolteacher in a village in the Algerian state of Batna, produced a video, recorded on her phone, in which she shares her approach for values education¹⁵ (abouisraa 18, 2016; Excerpt 1). As she explains in the video, her plan for the year was to begin each day with five minutes of call-and-response questions based around classroom values, including truthfulness, cooperation, and loyalty.¹⁶

Excerpt 1

Line	Translation	Transcription
1	Boudras (B): Hello praise be to God. Welcome	السلام عليكم رحمة الله وبركاته
2	to this first broadcast directly from the school.	في هذا البث الأول من مباشر من المدرسة
3	Today was the beginning of the school year	اليوم كانت بداية الدخول المدرسي

¹⁵ مادة التربية الخلقية

¹⁶ الصدق، التعاون، الوفاء

- 4 and of course I'm with all of them طبعا انا معهم جميعا
- 5 the rascals, the sweetest rascals, that I love المشاغب انه احلى مشاغب أعزه
- 6 We expect this year *inshallah*¹⁷ to نلتقي هذا العام إن شاء الله راح
- 7 be a happy school year يكون موسم درسي موسم لي الفرح
- 8 *Inshallah* God will trust us with a year of success إن شاء الله الرب يكل بنا النجاح
- 9 We open with a set of questions مجموع من الأسئلة حتى نفتحو بها
- ...
- 10 The Arabic language is the most beautiful... اللغَةُ العربية، أغنى
- 11 Students (S): of the world's languages! لغات العالم
- 12 B: Good, the Arabic language is جيد. اللغَةُ العربية
- 13 the most beautiful of the languages of.. هي أغنى لغات
- 14 S: the world! العالم
- 15 B: This year my language will be... هذا العام سيكونُ لساني
- 16 S: Arabic! العربية
- 17 B: And we won't speak any language but... ولا نعبّرَ بغيرِ اللغَةِ¹⁸
- 18 S: The ال
- 19 B: Ara... العر
- 20 S: Arabic! العربية
- 21 B: Good, we won't speak any language but Arabic جيد ولا نعبّرَ بغيرِ اللغَةِ العربية
- 22 Ah... another question اه سؤال آجر
- 23 A language which God has given a letter¹⁹ لغَةُ حباها الله حرفا
- 24 S: Arabic! العربية
- 26 B: Good. What is the language of the people of heaven? جيد. ما هي لغَةُ أهلِ الجنة
- 27 S: Arabic! العربية
- 28 B: Good. The language of the people of heaven is جيد. لغَةُ أهلِ الجنة هي اللغَةُ
- 29 Arabic. العربية

(abouisraa 18, 2016)

The obvious characters in Boudras's video are herself and the students she leads in the call and response activity. The contours of Boudras's video as an event are inherent in the medium of a Facebook video itself, which has physical and stylistic limits on length. It also fits into a selfie genre in which Boudras's face is always present in the shot, with her students behind her. The video contains at least two distinct audiences, the students in the video and the network on Facebook. In lines 1–9, Boudras addresses the network on Facebook, characterizing the event as a "broadcast" (line 2) and explaining to

¹⁷ literally, if God wills it

¹⁸ Case endings reflect those spoken by Boudras in the video, which may not be standard.

¹⁹ Boudras is referring to a line of poem in praise of Arabic by Syrian poet Jack Sabri Shamas. She omits the word "everlasting" which appears in the poem (لغة حباها الله حرفا خالدًا), "A language that God has given an everlasting letter". Thank you to Lamia Lahrach for pointing this out.

the audience how they should interpret the subsequent performance of her and her students. In lines 10–29, Boudras addresses the students through the call and response activity. At this point, her shift in language corresponds to the change in audience. Whereas in lines 1–9 she uses a register of *al-fuṣṣḥā* reminiscent of television broadcasts, with colloquial markers (line 6: راج, “going to;” line 9: حتى نفتحو, “we open”) mixed in, in lines 10–29 she speaks in a much more formalized register, including articulating ending vowels that typically indicate one is reading a text aloud.

Once posted on Facebook, the video quickly spread through Algerian networks. The same day, the video’s popularity was raised by a reporter in a press conference held by Algerian Minister of Education Nouria Benghabrit. Flanked by her deputy, Benghabrit responds in a mix of French and Arabic (both *al-fuṣṣḥā* and Algerian dialect) by reprimanding Boudras (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2

Line	Translation	Transcription
1	Benghabrit (B): and we just saw on	et nous venons de voir à travers
2	ah Facebook	eh Facebook
3	now young teachers	maintenant des jeunes enseignantes
4	with a cell phone, a selfie	avec le portable en selfie
5	while speaking with their students	en train de parler avec leurs élèves
6	Deputy (D): turning their back to them	en leurs tournant le dos
7	B: turning their back to them	en leurs tournant le dos
8	a complete disaster	شي كارثة على كل حال
9	and I ask from you	وانا نطلب منكم
10	what is going to happen is	ce qui va se passer c’est qu’il y aura
11	an investigation	une enquête
12	and if the search substantiates the matter	وإذا البحت يحقق هذا الواقع
13	there will be a disciplinary commission,	il y aura la commission de discipline,
14	that’s all	c’est tout
15	we are in a sensitive sector	راحنا في قطاع حسّاس
16	it’s necessary that any person that goes into	لا بد كل شخص يدخل في
17	a given job	وظيفة معينة
18	respect the rules	أن يحترم القوانين

(Echorouk News TV, 2016)

In this event, the characters consist of Benghabrit, her deputy, the press corps, and the general public audience that would see it broadcast. Here, Benghabrit explicitly objects not to the content of the video, but its filming in the first place. She refers to the video (lines 1–7), stating that it is a “disaster” (line 7) and implying that it violates the rules of the job (lines 15–18).

There are multiple levels of the narrated/narrating dynamic at work, both within Boudras’s video itself and between the two events. For the purposes of this

analysis, I will take as a starting point a view of Boudras’s video and Benghabrit’s comments as a single narrated event—seen as a confrontation—which generates considerable subsequent commentary. Indeed, as described above, variations on the hashtag “We are all Ms. Sabah” (implying *against* Benghabrit) became some of the widest circulating hashtags in multiple countries that day (Ech Chorouk Arabic Daily, 2016). In the narrating events that I identify, Boudras’s and Benghabrit’s use of signs come to mean different things in service of different representations of language and citizenship in Algeria.

Narrating Events: Selecting, Construing, and Configuring Indexicals

Out of the cacophony of commentary on the Boudras–Benghabrit scandal, I have chosen two narrating events that achieve different social effects through their characterization of the confrontation. These include (a) a street interview by the online channel *El Bilad TV* with supporters of Boudras and (b) an op-ed article some months later in *Le Monde* by a group of Franco-Algerian intellectuals. These are not by any means representative, and indeed, the latter should be considered a minority voice. I chose them in part because of their accessibility online and in part because they are a particularly illustrative contrast in how differently-interested political rationalities can construct Arabic as an object of language instruction in different ways.

The first was published on YouTube one day after Benghabrit’s comments. In it, a reporter is stationed on the street in downtown Algiers, followed by clips of ten passersby who comment on the scandal. All the interviewees express support for Boudras except one, who nonetheless is more equivocal than supportive of Benghabrit. The interviewees seem to be selected to represent a range of social types, including men and women, different ages, those who choose to speak in French, Algerian colloquial Arabic and *al-fuṣḥā*, and even English. In Excerpt 3, an older man characterizes Boudras as “innocent” (lines 1 & 13), implying that her classroom activity was within her right (line 23) as a teacher. He also refers to her as speaking “the language of the Quran” and speaking *al-fuṣḥā* (lines 14–16). He has a long white beard (often an emblem of piety) and though he is clearly agitated (evident in his prosody), he speaks in slow, deliberate *al-fuṣḥā*, even self-correcting markers of Algerian dialect as he goes (line 4).

Excerpt 3

Line	Translation	Transcription
1	Man: This teacher... is innocent	هذ الأستاذة ... بارئة
2	and we are with her	ونحن معها
3	and this teacher didn’t... I mean	وهذ الأستاذة لم تُق ... يعني
4	I observed last year or ah last year	لاحظ العام لي فات كنت يعني العام الماضي
5	I saw on TV that	يعني لاحظ في التلفزة أنه
6	a teacher or I don’t...	أستاذة ولا ما ...
7	but in an educational institution	في مؤسسة تربوية المهم
8	they sang... created a singing video	انه قاموا بغناء بفيديو غناء

9	da... <i>wey wey</i> ²⁰ ... [Host: dancing] dancing yes	رَ ... واي واي ... [رقص] رقص نعم
10	and she didn't address it	ولم تكلم
11	and the minister didn't lift a finger	ولم تحرك ساكنا الوزيرة
12	we are saying to Madam Minister	نقول للسيدة الوزيرة
13	this teacher is innocent	هذا الأستاذة بريئة
14	and she spoke the language of the Quran	وتكلمت لغة القرآن
15	and she spoke <i>al-fuṣḥā</i>	وتكلمت اللغة العربية الفصحى
16	she said, yes! I will speak <i>al-fuṣḥā</i> .	قالت نعم! سأتكلم اللغة العربية الفصحى
17	It's a fact	هي حقيقة
18	and with students	ومع التلاميذ
19	and not in the street	وليس بالشارع
20	this is an educational institution	وبانها مؤسسة تربوية
21	meaning that this teacher	ومعناها هذا المعلمة
22	is an educator...	مربّية ...
23	she has a right to bring up a generation	لها حق أن تربيّ جيل

(El Bilad TV, 2016)

What signs in Boudras's video allow for this portrayal of Boudras as "innocent"? Boudras leads her students in describing Arabic as "the most beautiful language in the world" (Excerpt 1, lines 10–14), and "the language of the people of heaven" (lines 26–29). Here, Boudras references a common discourse in the Arab world that sees Arabic as sacred (Boutieri, 2013; Haeri, 2003; Suleiman, 2002), and equates contemporary *al-fuṣḥā* with the language of the Quran. Haeri's (2003) ethnography of language use in Egypt demonstrates the pervasiveness of this discourse: Despite formal written Arabic having proliferated in registers with the emergence of education, journalism, media, and the bureaucratic state, the legitimacy of Arabic has often rested on its reference to Arabo-Islamic civilization generally, and Islam in particular. This has meant projects of modernizing Arabic beginning in the late 19th century (which would become the basis of state Arabization projects like Algeria's) have not only continued to reference Classical Arabic in form, but also adamantly maintain that it represents a single language. Boudras's and the man's use of the term Arabic (*al-luḡha al-ʿarabiyya*; Excerpt 1, lines 10, 12, 21, 28–29; Excerpt 3, lines 15–16) is exemplary, as it is shorthand for the specific formal register *al-fuṣḥā* which typically contrasts with colloquial Arabic, *darīja* in the case of Algeria. For Boudras, values education implies speaking this register of Arabic, as she has her students recite "this year my language will be Arabic" (Excerpt 1, lines 15–16) and "I won't speak any language other than Arabic" (lines 17–21). Thus, Boudras references two thirds of the AUMA's motto: "Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my fatherland" (Ruedy, 2005, pp. 133–135). The third is implied as she represents a state agent in an Algerian public school. For the man being interviewed, these actions model an educator (Excerpt 3, lines 21–23) doing the right thing by fostering these values in later generations.

²⁰ *Wey wey* is a specific dance that had become popular the year before.

Conversely, the man presents a configuration that shows Benghabrit to be a hypocrite, presumably targeting Boudras because she objected to the teacher's support of Arabic. He relates a story (Excerpt 3, lines 4–11) in which a video of dancing—which he implies is either frivolous or even morally suspect—is shot within a school and the minister did not react. Thus, the explicit reason for Benghabrit's opening an investigation—that Boudras filmed within a school—is called into question. Moreover, this characterization aligns Benghabrit's known preference for French and her history of confrontation with Islamists and conservatives over the religious and linguistic content of the curriculum.

The second narrating event occurred a little more than two months later, on November 22, when the French newspaper *Le Monde* published a piece by six Algerian and Franco-Algerian intellectuals titled “The Algerian School between incompetence and obscurantism”²¹ (Djebbar et al., 2016). The authors argue that the project of Arabization has been commandeered by Islamic fundamentalists who indoctrinate children through memorization of dogma that vitiates critical thinking. They decry contemporary Arabic instruction in Algerian schools as, “without content”²² and resulting in educational mediocrity: “Arabic is, for us, poorly spoken, poorly learned, because it is without content, poor and dry like a net in a Saharan river bed”²³ (Djebbar et al., 2016). In doing so, they make explicit reference to Boudras:

It is often said of the Prophet Mohammed that he preferred Arabic of all the languages because it is ‘the language of the people of heaven’. But this pseudo-hadith²⁴ is considered, even among the grand masters of Hanbali jurisprudence, a ‘forgery’. Yet this purported hadith is rehabilitated by neosalafism, which makes it the emblem of its tactical religiosity. ... It is clear that the discourse of the latter has become orthodoxy in the Algerian school, as is evident in the video put online by the instructor on the first day of this school year, 2016–2017.²⁵ (Djebbar et al., 2016)

Here, the authors paint Boudras as a different character than those who expressed solidarity with her. Boudras is configured as an “*instructrice*” (“instructor,” a lower status term than *مربيّة*, “educator,” or *أستاذة*, “teacher/professor,” used by the man in Excerpt 3 [line 12]) who channels a false and opportunistic ideology of religious zealots. Her statement “Arabic is the language of the people of heaven” (Excerpt 1, lines 26–29), repeated by Djebbar et al., is no longer an unproblematic justification for teaching the language to Algerian children, but rather represents a “forgery” contested by even the most conservative institutions of Islamic jurisprudence. Additionally, while her use of highly formal Arabic forms in the call and response

²¹ “L'école algérienne entre incompetence et obscurantisme”

²² “sans contenu”

²³ “La langue arabe est, chez nous, mal parlée, mal apprise, parce qu'elle est sans contenu, aussi pauvre et sèche qu'un filet d'oued saharien.”

²⁴ The Hadith is a diverse collection of acts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed which are important for Islamic scholarship.

²⁵ “On a bien fait dire au prophète Mahomet que, de toutes les langues, c'est l'arabe qui était sa préférée parce qu'elle est ‘la langue des gens du paradis’. Mais ce pseudo-hadith est considéré, y compris parmi les grands maîtres de l'école juridique hanbalite, comme une ‘forgerie’. Or ce même prétendu hadith est réhabilité par le néosalafisme, qui en a fait l'emblème de sa religiosité tactique. ... Force est de constater que c'est le discours de ces derniers qui tient lieu de religion à l'école algérienne, comme en témoigne la vidéo mise en ligne par une institutrice le jour même de la rentrée scolaire de cette année 2016–2017.”

activity is the epitome of *al-fuṣṣḥā* for the man in Excerpt 3, the very same activity is construed by the authors as “without content,” having children memorize ideologically charged statements without using the language to think.

While Benghabrit’s criticism does not factor explicitly as a narrated event, the article is clearly a defense of her administration, using the same vocabulary of mediocrity as Benghabrit herself. In this sense, then, its attempt to intellectually discredit the image of Boudras as a dutiful educator mirrors the discursive work of her proponents in which Boudras’s image had been presented in large part as a criticism of Benghabrit.

Interpreting Social Action

What social action do the interviewee and the group of intellectuals achieve in their characterization of Boudras’s Arabic teaching as the work of, respectively, a dutiful educator or an incompetent zealot? The man in Excerpt 3 twice uses the first-person plural (lines 2 & 12) to include himself in an unidentified group (“We” the people? “We” a political party?) that is aligned with Boudras against Benghabrit. This “we” and Boudras, in their support of this scriptural and religiously-inclined form of Arabic, have the right to bring up the next generation of Algerians. Excluded from this community is what he characterizes as the hypocritical francophone elite (of whom Benghabrit is a stereotypical example in this characterization). Algerian colloquial Arabic and minority languages like Kabyle, Chaoui, and others, are not mentioned. As such, they may not be grounds for exclusion, but are certainly not a defining characteristic of this conception of citizenship. The role of schooling, in this view, is to expose generations of Algerian children—whatever their linguistic background—to Arabo-Islamic values through formalized Arabic.

By contrast, Djebber et al. align Boudras with a group of fanatical ideologues that is outside mainstream Islam, yet nonetheless taking over the schooling system (and Boudras’s video is presented as evidence of it). Their use of first-person plural primarily identifies the authors as group of commentators (“for us”) possessing the intellectual gravitas to diagnose Boudras’ Arabic teaching as a social problem and put it into proper context. They similarly position Arabic instruction as necessary for the health of the Algerian nation, but in this case Boudras’s teaching embodies the reasons for the country’s intellectual mediocrity. Their authority is reinforced by the fact that these academics write in French in a decidedly not-mediocre publication, *Le Monde*.

Discussion and Conclusions

These two accounts of the Boudras–Benghabrit scandal correspond to different models of ideal Algerian citizenship and what threats are preventing the education system from producing it. The man in the television interview (Excerpt 3) articulates a model closest to the nationalist discourse of language and citizenship, which sees the Algerian nation as fundamentally Arab and Islamic. He aligns the model of Arabic teaching embodied by Boudras’s video with these concepts. Much like the AUMA 60 years ago, Boudras and the man see education in *al-fuṣṣḥā* as necessary for the religious and moral cultivation of Algerian culture. He notes that as a teacher in a state institution, Boudras “has the right to bring up a generation” (Excerpt 3, line 23)

through what he recognizes as her use of *al-fuṣḥā*. Meanwhile he casts Benghabrit's hypocrisy as a threat to reproducing this type of citizenship, permitting the frivolous (dancing) while cracking down on the legitimate (Boudras's *al-fuṣḥā*). Importantly, he positions himself among the "we" that makes demands for *al-fuṣḥā* on Benghabrit on behalf of the Algerian people (lines 2 & 12), and performs that social position through his beard and careful use of the register. By contrast, Djebber et al. articulate a model that parallels a neoliberal view of citizenship, contextualized by Algeria's recent history of violence. In this case, religious extremism presents the ultimate threat to the Algerian nation and critical (i.e., secular) thinking is its antidote. For them, Boudras's Arabic teaching and its glorification are evidence of the stifling of critical thinking within schools, especially through her having children memorize slogans that they consider ideological. This contrasts with the Algerian ruling class's project of liberalizing the economy, reducing labor market reliance on government employment, and eliminating what it sees as mediocrity from the education system. They position themselves as experts, writing in sophisticated French and possessing credentials from abroad, able to diagnose Algeria's ideological problems and propose solutions (like marginalizing religious conservatives) that, not incidentally, facilitate their own ability to have a place in Algerian society.

The concept of governmentality allows us to see continuity across these bitterly opposed positions. In both cases, the type of Arabic that is taught in public schools is critical for the health of Algerian society. The "'governmentalization' of the state" (Gordon, 1991, p. 103) makes it increasingly imperative for society at large that Algerian children are able to perform a particular type of Arabic, even as parties disagree on what that looks like. Indeed, the way in which Boudras uses Arabic—whether it is considered exemplary or mediocre—becomes a tool for defining who should be included or viewed as a threat to the Algerian community. Moreover, the fact that both parties are ostensibly referring to the same standard language of Algerian schooling (viz., *al-fuṣḥā*) suggests, following Rosa (2016), that standardization is never exclusively a linguistic process. Rather, it implies a parallel social process of drawing social boundaries.

Language governmentality is not totalizing, despite the continuity evidenced here. Many Algerians reject the social and linguistic boundaries drawn by these ideologies, and find ways both mundane and artistic to transgress them (Benrabah, 2013; Ouaras, 2015). Indeed, even in the *El Bilad* TV clip, the interviewees excluded from this analysis represent a panoply of Algerian voices more diverse than the ones that formed the focus of the study. Nonetheless, the ideologies cited here are particularly powerful precisely because resources of the state and international organizations have prioritized them.

The pairing of governmentality and discourse analysis is a complement to ecological studies of language policy (Hult, 2010) in that it shows how power can emerge from diffuse networks, rather than from institutional or social structures. Indeed, in the case at hand, the Arabization policy is sustained in part by groundswell from teachers and supporters of Boudras, despite the fact that it is viewed critically from the top. Discourse analysis shows how political rationalities are not totalizing, but rather used by individuals to achieve social effects. Still, the addition of governmentality draws specific attention to how state education—and the battles over what it should constitute—are tied to social processes of regulating citizens and subjects.

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