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This paper explores how global discourses of English as the 'international language' and the 'language of development' are reproduced, read and reconstructed in a dynamic multilingual linguistic context often defined as 'conflictual', and where languages are used to index identity and authenticity. Bringing together content analysis, corpus linguistics, geosemiotics and ethnography, I question the impact of uncritical academic discourses about 'languages in Algeria' and 'English in the world' on the maintenance of socio-political stratification in postcolonial settings. I argue that users’ contradictory discourses and practices both need to be examined and taken into account in order to understand how mobility and change (both real and imagined) are interpreted and narrated by actors.

Most studies on the Algeria linguistic context focus on the notions of rivalry, hierarchy and what counts as 'authentic', with each language considered as a separate entity imbued with heavy symbolism. English is therefore described as an external and 'neutral' language, and seen as being used as a proxy battleground by proponents of Standard Arabic to reduce the importance of French, as it is "a language without connotations of domination, without a political past and [...] a convenient way of getting the job done" (Ager 2001:21, quoted in Benrabah 2013: 87). Across Africa, even though English has historically been 'absent' from many former French colonies, policy-makers and academics have suggested that there is an exponential growth in interest in the language, from increased demand for English tuition and bilateral partnerships (Algeria) to changes in the education system (Cameroon, Madagascar) and a linguistic shift from French to English in the public sphere (Rwanda). These processes are explained as driven in part by a rhetoric of rebelling against French linguistic and cultural (neo)colonialism and existing mechanisms of elite closure, and moving towards a language which has been 'de-colonised' and truly 'internationalised' (see for example Benrabah 2013 & 2014, Dyers & Abongdia 2010, Higgins 2009, Lefevre 2015, Ounis 2012, Pearson 2014). In addition, the promotion of English over French is also expressed as symbol and catalyst of the dismantling of monolithic,
authoritarian, closed systems, not only linguistically but also by extension politically and economically (e.g. Benstead & Reif 2013, Education First 2015, Euromonitor International 2012, Mostari 2004, Taleb Ibrahimii 2006). The ‘international language’ is thus heralded as breaking down socio-economic barriers and helping to create new categories of belonging and participation. Discourses around language are intermeshed with hopes and concerns around perceived changing patterns of emigration (to Anglophone countries rather than Francophone) and immigration (from China and sub-Saharan Africa).


References:


