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Theorizing the Linguistic Split in Algeria: The Case of Francophone Berber Intellectuals

This paper analyzes the predicament of Algerian intellectuals on the eve of the country's liberation from 132 years of French rule. Writing almost exclusively in French to a nation that mostly spoke Arabic and Tamazight while counting in their ranks an unusual number of Berbers compared to the makeup of the country, Algeria's literary milieu could seem at first to align perfectly with the Deleuzian and Guattarian definition of a minor literature—an ethnic minority within a linguistic minority finding ways to summon a missing public and to channel national consciousness within a language that was and was not their own.

This narrative, seductive as it might be, goes against one of the central tenets of the Algerian state project. The goal, in 1962, was not to *relate* to the alien world formed by the major colonial society, but to *produce* an entirely new type of subject, and one whose definition hinged on a crucial choice: to decide whether French along Arabic and Tamazight could, and should become, an entirely Algerian language, or whether it should remain entirely foreign.

The intellectuals' majority-minority—Francophone Berbers such as Kateb Yacine and Mouloud Mammeri—generally pronounced themselves in favor of the former position, while most in the seat of power chose the path of Arabization, which would ultimately triumph. While this position might seem typical of the subaltern intellectual forged by domination without hegemony, this paper argues that the very existence of this small elite, as well as their positive view of multilingualism, cannot be accounted for without writing the history of how they were targeted under colonial rule *as a minority* by forms of colonial hegemony rooted both in ideology—the myth pitting the “good” Berber against the “bad” Arab—and in policy—French schools opened for the Berber population specifically.