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Research Study

What is Arabic Good For?: Future Directions and Current Challenges of Arabic Language Educational Reform in France

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ABSTRACT. This article addresses the political, cultural, and educational stakes in the current public debate in France about the value of Arabic, using methods from linguistic and cultural anthropology such as ethnographic interviews and discourse analysis. The importance of these public conversations and proposed educational reforms goes beyond the scope of language instruction to entail understandings of French identity in the context of immigration, globalization, and (post-)coloniality. Competing language ideologies that align with competing political agendas frame the question of whether and where to teach Arabic in different terms. Discourses on the left attempt to secularize and legitimize Arabic by moving instruction out of mosques and neighborhood associations, where it is currently most frequently taught, and into state-run public schools. At the same time, Islamophobic discourses emanating from the right politicize any type of Arabic educational reform in France as "dangerous." However, despite these differences across the political spectrum, Arabic remains institutionally and symbolically marginalized across France and continues to be framed as a threat to the sovereignty of the Republic in both left- and right-leaning discourses within the current political field in France.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article aborde les enjeux politiques, culturels et pédagogiques du débat public actuel en France sur la valeur de l'arabe, en utilisant des méthodes issues de l'anthropologie linguistique et culturelle telles que les entretiens ethnographiques et l'analyse du discours. L'importance de ces conversations publiques et des réformes éducatives proposées dépasse le cadre de l'enseignement des langues pour impliquer l'identité nationale française dans le contexte de l'immigration, de la mondialisation et de la (post-)colonialité. Les idéologies linguistiques concurrentes qui s'alignent sur des programmes politiques concurrents posent la question d'où (et s'il faut) enseigner l'arabe en des termes différents. Les discours de gauche tentent de laïciser et de légitimer l'arabe en déplaçant l'enseignement des mosquées et des associations de quartier, où il est actuellement le plus souvent enseigné, vers les écoles publiques. Dans le même temps, les discours islamophobes émanant de la droite politisent tout type de réforme de l'éducation arabe en France comme « dangereux ». Cependant, malgré ces différences à travers le spectre politique, l'arabe reste institutionnellement et symboliquement marginalisé dans toute la France et continue d'être présenté comme une menace pour la souveraineté de la République dans les discours de gauche et de droite dans le champ politique actuel en France.

Keywords: *Arabic, language ideology, education, France, Islamophobia.*

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INTRODUCTION

On June 18, 2019, I asked a retired French educational specialist what he thought about current Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer's 2018 proposal to expand Arabic language instruction in public schools. To my surprise he said, "Public school students don't need Arabic. They need English. And as a second foreign language, they should take Spanish. Everyone in the Middle East speaks English, and Spanish allows students access to all of Latin America. What I'm saying is especially true for underprivileged students, who will get more out of English than Arabic."

The above response highlights the question that I address in my research: What (and whom) is Arabic good for? I had expected my friend to heartily support the idea of making Arabic as a second language more accessible to French children of North African heritage; he had devoted his career to reforming the French educational system by promoting dropout prevention through adult education, an issue that disproportionately affects Arabic-speaking North African heritage students. I argue that this response reveals linguistic and cultural ideologies that inform his and others' understandings of the role of Arabic in French public schools. My friend's comparison of Arabic to English, and his view of these languages' differential educational (and social) value, indicates a politicized commodification of languages (Heller, 2010). Certain languages (such as English) are supposedly "good" for business or generating capital and others, such as Spanish, are "good" for consumption including tourism (Hill, 2007). In other words, in many educational contexts, language is increasingly viewed as a type of capital within neoliberal globalization (Lo & Chi-Kim, 2012). At the same time that neoliberal pressures create an added value for English, the educational system in France has more typically valued "difficult" and non-utilitarian foreign languages such as German, Russian, and Latin that are reserved for the most elite students from the highest socio-economic background. In sum, his response to my question shows a set of language ideologies and a belief in a linguistic hierarchy in France, the organization of which is determined by different languages' perceived symbolic value or "capital" (Bourdieu, 1991). My provocative title for this article attempts to critically engage with these discourses by exposing the commonly held and widely circulated (mis)conception that there are "good" and "bad" languages and that for a language to be "good", it must be useful or utilitarian.

This article addresses the political, cultural, and educational stakes behind diverse perspectives in the current public French debate about the value of Arabic. I examine why and how reforms for Arabic language instruction in French schools have been repeatedly proposed and have repeatedly incited politicized and mediatized panic. Increasingly, Islamophobic discourses about the Arabic language—what I, along with my co-author Inmaculada García-Sánchez, have elsewhere termed "Islamo-linguistic-phobia"—disproportionately shape Arabic education discussions along with other cultural debates in France (see García-Sánchez & Tetreault, forthcoming). Although wider access to Arabic in public schools has been deemed necessary by successive Ministers of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem (2014-2017) and Jean-Michel Blanquer (2017-present), these proposals have been met with mediatized panic and vitriol.

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Currently, only 13,000 students, or 0.2%, of all middle and high school students who take a second language in France have access to Arabic ("Teaching Arabic," 2018) despite the fact that Arabic is the second most widely spoken language in France after French. Calls for reform to include more Arabic in public school offerings are framed in part as a way to redress this lack, which is especially striking considering that France encompasses the largest population of Arab heritage residents in Europe, estimated between 3-5 million, including immigrants and descendants of immigrants.

Research on the cultural and linguistic ideologies that frame Arabic language educational reform in France is particularly timely due to the current influence of right-wing Islamophobic political discourses. Whereas some, such as my friend, don't necessarily see the educational utility of Arabic beyond a heritage language, others—such as conservative, pro-nationalist French politicians—argue that Arabic itself is a radicalizing influence and therefore dangerous to teach in public schools. The importance of these public conversations and proposed educational reforms goes beyond the scope of language instruction to entail understandings of French identity in the context of immigration, globalization, and post-coloniality.

Below, I contextualize contemporary French attitudes toward Arabic by considering the educational and political landscapes for Arabic language instruction. To do so, I consider the institutional history of Arabic language instruction as it relates to France's transformation from a colonial to post-colonial power. First, I track how and where Arabic has been historically included and excluded within colonial and post-colonial French institutions to reveal how the language has been framed in ideological terms relative to this transformation. Second, I outline my theoretical framework and relevant literature. Finally, I use these historical and theoretical frameworks to critique and contextualize the current right-wing turn in French public discourses relative to Arabic language instruction. My analysis centers upon a corpus of currently circulating language policies, public discourses, and media materials about Arabic educational reform. I argue that, despite proposed liberal (left-leaning) reforms to include more Arabic in public schools, the language and presumed attendant cultural and religious ties are posed as threats to French sovereignty on the right and the left.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ARABIC IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL FRANCE

The educational landscape of Arabic language instruction in France is vast and complex, with ties to a colonial past and a post-colonial present. One of the earliest French colonial institutions in the metropole to house the instruction of Arabic was INALCO or *L'Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* [National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations]. Founded in 1795, the Institute received continued support under Napoleon after his invasion of Egypt in 1798. To this day, INALCO is one of the only French institutions where instruction in *Darija* (colloquial Arabic) occurs, including Algerian, Egyptian, and Moroccan varieties. Over the course

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of two centuries, teaching Darija within INALCO served as a way to shore up colonial knowledge and power for the French colonial administration. To wit, the oral exam offered at INALCO in colloquial Arabic maintained its status as a subject worthy of points received on the Baccalauréat until 1999, when the exam was eliminated by President Jacques Chirac (Caubet, 2008). Through its representation in the colonial-era institution of INALCO, Arabic was framed and maintained as knowledge that was validated for its use in colonial projects, including the maintenance of an administration as well as codifying knowledge about and by the colonial subject. (To further complicate matters, Arabic itself might be construed as a language central to colonizing Tamazight [Berber] populations in North Africa; however, this topic is beyond the scope of this article.)

Given France's continued dominance in the economic, political, and cultural affairs of the Maghreb, one might assume that Arabic language instruction would continue to have an outsized role to play in educational institutions when compared to other languages. In addition to its potential value for students of North African Arab heritage, Arabic is of vital importance to France's political, cultural, and economic ties to the Middle East, even beyond its colonial past and migration history. However, despite continued geopolitical stakes in the region and in the Arabic language, France, unlike other European Union countries, has not increased Arabic language instruction since the global "war on terror" fostered widespread surveillance of Arab and Muslim citizens in France and elsewhere. In fact, France has repeatedly refused to make Arabic a national priority in its policies, educational and otherwise. France was the only country in the European Union not to ratify a 1999 treaty to recognize minority languages, which would have included North African Arabic as an official "*langue de France*" [language of France] along with regional languages such as Breton and other non-territorial languages such as Romani (Caubet, 2008).

After decolonization in the 1960s, the global oil crisis in the 1970s, and the 1974 moratorium on economic migration in France, migration patterns from North Africa shifted toward *regroupement familiale* [family reunification]. An outgrowth of this change was the establishment of the ELCO program or *Enseignements en langue et culture d'origine* [Teaching language and culture of origin]. Starting in 1972 and until 2016, Modern Standard Arabic (Fusha) was taught in ELCO classes outside of the regular public school curriculum and schedule. Bilateral accords signed by a majority of Western European countries provided classes in Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Serbo-Croatian (later Croatian). Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia all signed such bilateral accords with France that allowed them to supply and pay for Arabic teachers to teach children of migrants living in France. Rather than a strategic or minority language, Arabic was framed by this program as the language of migrant labourers and their children from former colonies Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Under the ELCO program, second language instruction for primary-school aged children was framed in terms of the rights and needs of migrant parents and children who were often themselves migrants. A strong emphasis was placed on learning the language of the sending

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country with an eye for maintaining fluency in the children's anticipated return to their so-called "home" country. Thus, a national emphasis on the assumed temporary nature of labour migration shaped how second language Arabic instruction took place. ELCO was striking not only for the fact that sending nations were training, vetting, and paying for Arabic (and all ELCO) teachers. The program was also unique because, unlike programs for other foreign languages such as German, the classes themselves were not part of French public school curriculum. Instead, ELCO classes were offered after normal school hours and potentially in settings outside of a child's school. Migrant children's access to their "home" language and culture was institutionally recognized and yet marginalized.

The current controversy over Arabic language instruction derives in part from re-envisioning Arabic as the language of post-colonial citizens rather than of temporary migrant laborers and their children. Over the past twenty years, ELCO classes have fallen out of favour (Durand, 2020). The idea that Arabic is a language significant for eventual return migration has shifted among migrant heritage communities toward framing Arabic as a language more appropriately taught and learned in the context of religious instruction in neighborhood associations and mosques; it is this shift that informs current conflicts over whether and how Arabic should be taught in a post-colonial France. In the case of many Arabic classes taught in neighbourhood mosques and associations, teachers, who also frequently serve as local Imams, are sent by international governments; rather than former colonies such as Algeria and Morocco, Saudi Arabia and other gulf states often fund these programs. Arabic classes that are taught in such neighbourhood contexts and outside of direct state institutional control are construed as potentially radicalizing to children in dominant French political discourse, especially when combined with programs that send and fund Salafi Imams, who adhere to a conservative form of Sunni Islam.

Whereas, at their height, ELCO students of Arabic numbered as many as 100,000, today that number is roughly half, at 60,000. At the same time, there has been a steep rise in the number of elementary school-aged children who are taking Arabic in Saturday classes either at a neighborhood mosque or association: 80,000 students now take such classes (Durand, 2020). Thus, while ELCO Arabic classes have fallen out of favour, community-led Arabic classes have blossomed, making the teaching of Arabic central to ongoing and entrenched national discussions regarding education and *laïcité* (which translates roughly as "secularism," but which I examine in detail below). Past national policies and politicized debates regarding French public schools focused primarily on excluding the Muslim headscarf in favor of laïcité (Bowen, 2007; Fernando, 2014; Scott, 2009). Now that the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf) is effectively excluded by law from public schools, current educational debates in France have refocused upon Arabic language instruction as the new "threat" to laïcité.

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RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORY

The research and analysis addressed in this article align with a language ideology approach (Gal & Irvine, 2000; Schieffelin, et al., 1998; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). As Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) argue, ideologies of language do not merely entail language but rather "envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity" that exist relative to cultural, moral, and political representations (pp. 55-56). In this regard, *discourse*, as the nexus of culture and language (Sherzer, 1987), holds a premier place in the creation, reproduction, and dissemination of ideologies of language. Through the narrative approach that I employ below, I analyze the widely circulating public discourses in French politics and media which create and sustain particular representations about the supposed qualities that Arabic possesses relative to speakers of the language and its place in public French education.

There exists an array of excellent studies of how language ideologies intersect with national educational agendas, many of which directly pertain to the present study in that they focus on minority languages in the national French educational context (Jaffe, 2013), the role of the French language in consolidating national educational mandates (Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 1995, 1999, 2007), and the relative status of Arabic in national contexts other than France (García-Sánchez, 2014; Suleiman, 2018). Research dealing with Arabic and education in France has tended to focus on the language attitudes of young Arabic speakers, rather than language ideologies within institutional contexts (Abu-Haidar, 1995; Barontini, 2013; Billiez, 1985; Boucherit, 2008; Caubet, 2008; Dabène, 1991; Taleb, 1985). Exceptions to this emphasis include recent scholarship that blends ethnography of Arabic-language schools in France with analysis of widely circulating discourses about Arabic (Evers, 2018). In addition, highly mediatized events regarding the status of Arabic have also garnered scholarly interest, such as after President Jacques Chirac eliminated the Colloquial Arabic oral exam in 1999 (Caubet, 2004) and after reforms to Arabic teaching in French elementary schools were proposed under former Minister of Education Vallaud-Belkacem (Barontini, 2017).

The research and analysis offered in the present article builds upon these scholarly contributions. My aim is to provide an analysis of the recent shifts in public discourses regarding Arabic language educational reform. Initially, educational reforms proposed in 2016 by Vallaud-Belkacem under President Hollande framed the inclusion of Arabic in public schools as contributing to Republican sovereignty through inclusiveness toward children of immigrants (Barontini, 2017). Currently, despite the fact that he has continued to pursue Vallaud-Belkacem's (unchanged) plans for reform, President Macron has publicly reframed such reforms as the exclusion of Arabic from schools (due to the suppression of ELCO) and has rhetorically aligned with right-wing Islamophobic discourses in this reframing. In President Macron's public rhetoric and in that of his administration, Arabic comes under renewed scrutiny as a supposed challenge to laïcité. In tracking these discourses and their changes over time, I explore the challenges of transforming Arabic from a "migrant" language to an "international" second

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language in the context of French public schools in relation to entrenched national debates regarding French sovereignty and laïcité.

Scholarship on contemporary French interpretations of laïcité is central to my argument and this article's contribution (Bowen, 2007; Fernando, 2014; Scott, 2009). Scott's (2009) historical analysis of laïcité frames it as the result of France's adoption of a Republican model for civic participation that eschews the clergy and nobility in favor of individual citizens' direct participation in the French state. Bowen's (2007) analysis similarly takes up this historical thread with an in-depth look at how the hijab is apprehended as a particular challenge to French laïcité. In contrast, Fernando's (2014) analysis, while also historicizing French discourses and policies relating to *laïcité*, argues for the active negotiation of laïcité by "French Muslims" as they navigate their own participation in a secular French state as practicing Muslims. It is this notion of the active negotiation and navigation of practices and discourses surrounding the concept of laïcité that I hope to engage through my analysis of discourse generated by French political and public actors such as Vallaud-Belkacem, Macron, and online posters. In their formulations and re-formulations of how Arabic might fit or not fit within a secular French school system, they actively attempt to re-negotiate meanings and symbolic values of Arabic language with respect to the concept of laïcité as integral to public schools and more broadly to French sovereignty itself.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

The research for this article was initiated during the summer of 2019 in Paris, France, through funding from Michigan State University. During a summer pilot study, I was able to conduct five in-depth ethnographic interviews with core actors who occupy distinct positions regarding this national debate, including scholars of Arabic language and linguistics, educational scholars, and migration specialists. Interviewees were located in various institutional contexts, including the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO), *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* [Higher Education in Social Sciences] (EHESS), *Sciences Politiques* [Political Sciences], and University of Paris 7 (Jussieu).

In addition to ethnographic interviews, this article analyzes a preliminary corpus of public texts, policies, and media materials collected online from 2019 to 2020 that address Arabic educational reform in France. This data collection and analysis focuses on the shifting public discourses and fractured politics surrounding the Arabic language and the role it has to play in French education. In my selection of texts, I attempted to select an array of posts and materials that provide a spectrum of right leaning and centrist political views emanating from dominant French political discourse. Although not necessarily representative of all political discourse regarding Arabic language reform, the texts that I have chosen represent views that widely circulate in both print media journalism and online platforms (tweets, memes, FB posts). By looking at how particular discourses about Arabic are produced across these types of media, I hope to show how dominant

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discourses about Arabic as a perceived threat to French sovereignty are produced and circulated.

In my treatment of the above interviews and the corpus of media materials, I largely employ a narrative approach to analyze how contemporary political and online discourses produce and circulate language ideologies surrounding Arabic language educational reform in France. Within the field of linguistic anthropology, such a narrative approach is often used to analyze and discuss how ideologies are produced through and by national institutional discourses (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). My narrative approach draws upon linguistic anthropological methods for analyzing ideologies pertaining to public discourse (Bauman & Briggs, 2003). Following Bauman and Briggs (2003), I employ the notion of intertextuality as a means to analyze historical and politicized discourses, such as laïcité, which authorize particular constructions of language and education. My methodological aim is to analyze how particular ideologies regarding Arabic track across public texts, including political rhetoric, educational policies, and online discourses. As Falconi and Graber (2019) note in the introduction to their recent volume on narrative approaches within linguistic anthropology, our current moment is one in which we "need to rethink the lines that we as scholars draw around particular genres of discourse and communication" (p. 20). Accordingly, in my analysis of the shifting ideological discourses in the national debate regarding Arabic language education, I employ an intertextual approach to analyze the productive intersections between official French political discourse and public online texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the following sections, I analyze the discursive framing of Arabic educational reform from three distinct, yet related, political vantage points. First, I analyze educational reforms as well as attendant political rhetoric emanating from the Arabic language education program *Enseignements internationaux de langues étrangères* [International Teaching of Foreign Languages] (EILE) proposed in 2016. Second, I analyze President Macron's political discourse relating to these reforms in 2020 that he issued as part of his campaign against so-called "Islamist separatism" (Durand, 2020). Third, I analyze extreme right-wing political rhetoric and online discourse that cast the above Arabic language educational reform, as well as Arabic more generally, as threats to French sovereignty.

New Policies and Discourses Attempt to Legitimize Arabic in a Post-Colonial France

Legislation proposed in 2016 by then Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem under French President Hollande and continued under President Macron has attempted to politically transform and re-brand ELCO as the EILE program: *Enseignements internationaux de langues étrangères* [International Teaching of Foreign Languages]. Along with attendant reforms that I discuss

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below, this name change—toward framing languages as "international" rather than having a (migratory) "origin" and eliminating "culture" altogether—demonstrates a larger attempt to shift public discourse and opinion toward valorizing and validating Arabic language instruction as integral to public school curriculum rather than anathema to it. Some of the major changes to EILE that align with the shift toward Arabic as an "international" rather than heritage or migrant language include the following: Language teachers are still recruited from other countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, but are required to: (a) speak French, (b) abide by and show understanding of and commitment to French cultural values including secular education, and (c) be integrated into and approved by the French national educational system (Durand, 2020). Thus, first under Holland and then Macron, EILE was touted as the "solution" to the "problems" associated with both ELCO Arabic classes and private Arabic classes in mosques and suburban associations; in so doing, Arabic is re-framed institutionally and symbolically as laïc [roughly, secular] in order to fit the integrationist and assimilationist projects of the French state.

Rather than a threat to French sovereignty, the contemporary EILE program posits that the location of "secular" Arabic within French public schools will serve to prevent religious extremism and cement pro-Republican values. Notably, attention to the "home" culture from the sending country is excised and cast as a liability rather than a strength. In a sense, the "foreign" language (re-categorized as "international") is even subordinated to French in that the teacher (while still recruited internationally) must be fluent in French. Not only is the sending culture absent from the curriculum, the recruited teachers in the EILE program are required to conform to French cultural standards by demonstrating a knowledge and commitment to laïcité. Institutionally as well, these teachers are fully vetted and vested by the French national school system and are now employees of the state who are paid by France rather than sending countries.

The new EILE program emphasizes a focus on the introduction of a secular and deracinated Arabic into French schools such that the language becomes less about migrants' return and heritage and more about being recast as public school curricula and integral to national *French* education. The role of international languages in the new EILE program thus does not pertain to cultural maintenance so much as to fulfilling curricula of the French (European) school system, which requires two foreign languages during secondary education. Thus, left-wing and centrist French politics have shown an evolution regarding the topic and emphasis on Arabic in public French schools regarding its purpose and framing. And yet, an emphasis in this reframing is still one of threat—that unless institutionally contained and secularized, Arabic language and attendant cultural and religious ties are posed as threats to French laïcité and sovereignty.

For example, in 2019 public discussions about the reforms to Arabic language instruction, Jean-Michel Blanquer, current Minister of Education, claims to want to give "prestige" to Arabic due to its role as a "great literary language" (Bubola, 2019). While this is an admirable goal, especially in a symbolic educational market (Bourdieu, 1991) that devalues Arabic as having

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any value whatsoever, the type of prestige granted here is reminiscent of Evers's (2018) argument that the French state and state-sponsored school programs engage in "linguistic gentrification" (pp. 438-439) in the ways that they market and revise Arabic for school consumption. At issue here is how to make Arabic "laïc" in ways that validate the language—it is not by accident then that Blanquer's claim that Arabic holds (secular) world literary value elides its many types of particularized literary values, including its connection to the Qur'an as a specific and non-secular literary tradition.

On the left, then, incorporating a "gentrified" Arabic (Evers, 2018) within educational institutions involves taking control of Arabic, rendering it laïc. This transformation is then posed as the "answer" to the (supposed/posited) "problem" of its assumed role in radicalizing young Muslims or would-be converts. For example, Blanquer's discourse is echoed by other educational and political officials such as the Minister's spokeswoman, who claimed that the goal is "*secular* [emphasis added] curriculum rather than the one offered by associations, which can drift toward radicalization" (Bubola, 2019, p. 9). Similarly, Claude Monet High School principal Marianne Cossé announced, "Offering *secular* [emphasis added] Arabic classes in public school prevents the language from becoming the hostage of religion or extremism" (Bubola, 2019, p. 9). The significance of these fraught public discourses and contentious proposed educational reforms goes beyond the scope of language instruction to entail ideological understandings of secular French identity in the context of immigration, globalization, and post-coloniality.

Proposed reforms impose the notion of a laïc Arabic because stating this as an educational goal allows officials to claim that they are attempting to rescue students from the supposedly religious form of Arabic being taught in suburban mosques and neighbourhood associations. This ideological distinction between laïc (secular) and "religious" Arabic is not usually a distinction that speakers make. Rather, speakers of Arabic would call all written forms of Arabic Fusha, whether modern or classical, and all colloquial or dialectal Arabic, Darija. In contrast, in French linguistic scholarly parlance as well as in the ideological political framing of Arabic, *l'arabe laïc* refers to Fusha and *l'arabe classique* [Classical Arabic] to "religious" (Qur'anic) Arabic. According to Dr. Dominique Caubet (personal communication, March 7, 2020), the so-called arabe laïc [secular Arabic] to which the above political discourse refers is the form of Arabic condoned by the bureaucratic educational official, *Inspecteur d'Arabe* [Inspector of Arabic]. By claiming that public schools will teach Fusha, a supposedly "secular" form of Arabic, political and educational officials in France make an ideological distinction between Fusha and Classical Arabic that posits, erroneously, that Fusha is devoid of religious and cultural context. Other scholars and politicians, such as socialist Jack Lang who has written extensively on the topic and who currently serves as Director of *l'Institut du Monde Arabe* [Institute of the Arab World], relate Fusha to pan-Arabism and the Nahda period in the 19th century during which, through Arabic language reform, Arab Nationalism was forwarded as a means for Arabs to unite regardless of religious background. Thus, Fusha, which is claimed as culturally and politically tied to Arab Nationalism rather than Islam, is posited as compatible with French laïcité.

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Whereas left-leaning leaders such as Lang attempt to reframe Arabic as having value as a secular world language in addition to its role as a heritage language, conservative and nationalistic French politicians argue that Arabic itself is a radicalizing influence and therefore dangerous to teach in public schools (Barontini, 2017; Battaglia, 2020; Bubola, 2019). Increasingly, these discourses disproportionately shape Arabic education discussions along with other cultural debates in France. As I will explain below, even centrist politicians such as President Macron currently participate in extremist right-wing discourses regarding the supposed threat of Arabic to "radicalize" students in his attempt to re-frame proposed educational reforms as acceptable to right-wing politicians and their base.

"Double-discourse": Right-Wing Rhetorical Spread Regarding Arabic Educational Reform

While the reforms to revamp ELCO as EILE were proposed in 2016 under former Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem and former President François Hollande (2012-2017), these reforms continued to be implemented under the new Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer when President Emmanuel Macron took power in 2017. Macron's public discourse regarding Arabic language reform demonstrates evidence that collusion between the extreme right-wing and online hate groups is driving policy, or at least the ways that policies are framed discursively. I draw from public political rhetoric issued by French officials, politicians from right-wing and centrist perspectives, and widely circulating tweets, memes, and social media posts that address Arabic language reform during the period of 2017-2020. Below, I analyze the discursive framing of Arabic as a central focus for new forms of Islamophobia, or "Islamo-linguistic-phobia" (García-Sánchez & Tetreault, forthcoming).

On February 18, 2020, during a press conference in Mulhouse that was explicitly touted by the French President to "present measures against 'Islamic separatism'" (Durand, 2020, p. 3), Macron publicly promised to end ELCO classes completely as soon as the start of school in September 2020. Not only were such plans already in place, but Macron also appeared to omit half of the equation during his speech, which was that EILE classes, paid for by the French government and offered as regular curriculum, would replace ELCO classes. Macron's approach has been to shape his message regarding Arabic language classes in terms that emphasize the suppression of ELCO (and thereby suggesting the suppression of Arabic) as opposed to reform through EILE, even though both processes are concurrent. In doing so, Macron also appears to claim the initiative to ban ELCO classes as his own, although this shift was already in the works under Education Minister Vallaud-Belkacem as early as 2016.

In French politics such a move is often called a "double discourse," meaning that an utterance has an element of embedded truthfulness that is misrepresented on the surface for ideological effect, thus creating a "double" message: A truth wrapped in a lie. Here, the willful misleading emphasis is upon the suppression of (ELCO) Arabic classes while the actual policy is to actually

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include more Arabic classes (EILE) in regular French school curriculum. Thus, this "double discourse" allows Macron to manage and redress the French right-wing's highly negative casting of him as in the pocket of Muslim extremists, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below, which circulated on the internet.

Figure 1: Islamophobic Meme of Macron as a "Useful Infidel."
Source: https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-HDdIKGW-xD0/W-wGiqJEWfI/AAAAAAAAD5Q/R18yduLi9-0PP0xnHI9fy0t6YKl7S9n5wCLcBGAs/s1600/france-eurabia.jpg. In the public domain.

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President Macron is walking the dangerous line of engaging in reform while feigning the suppression of Arabic language classes. For example, Macron explicitly framed Arabic language classes in terms of religious influence of foreign Imams in his press conference against so-called Islamic separatism. Specifically, Macron linked the elimination of ELCO to the progressive de-funding of roughly 300 foreign Imams working in France who were recruited from Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey (Battaglia, 2020). In terms of responses to Macron's announcement, Minister of Education Vallaud-Belkacem, under whom the reforms were proposed and implemented, responded with the following tweet after Macron appeared to take full credit for eliminating ELCO classes. In the tweet, Vallaud-Belkacem describes her reaction when she hears the announcement that Emmanuel Macron would eliminate all ELCO classes in Fall 2020.

> Écouter sa radio et tomber de sa chaise. Entendre le chef de l'Etat annoncer une fois de plus le « lancement inédit d'une démarche » visant cette fois-ci à remplacer les Enseignements en langue et culture d'origine (ELCO) par des Enseignements internationaux de langues étrangères (EILE)…
>
> [To listen to the radio and fall from one's chair. To hear the Head of State announce once again the "unprecedented launching of a process" aiming this time to replace Teachings in Language and Culture of Origin (ELCO) by International Teachings of Foreign Languages (EILE)…]. (Cometti, 2020)

This tweet alludes to the fact that EILE had been put into place by Vallaud-Belkacem herself in 2016 when she acquired the signatures of two countries at that time, including Morocco. The new program automatically replaced and thus eliminated ELCO rather than anything that President Macron initiated. Additionally, Minister of Education Vallaud-Belkacem, the first woman and first person of Moroccan origin to hold the post, framed the EILE reforms as a way to ensure better integration and success of North African heritage students. More specifically, Vallaud-Belkacem proposed moving Arabic language instruction into the school system as regular curricula, and away from ELCO classes where there was little federal oversight. When she proposed such changes during her tenure as Minister, Vallaud-Belkacem received scores of online vitriolic attacks as well as public attacks in print and television journalism, ultimately leading to her resignation in 2017.

These attacks attempted to discredit Vallaud-Belkacem as holding allegiances to Arabic and North African Muslim immigrants rather than to the French language and a secular French state. False accusations included the erroneous claim that the former Minister intended to *require* Arabic as curriculum for elementary school children including non-heritage (non-Arab) school children. One way that these attacks attempted to foster such views included highlighting Vallaud-Belkacem's Moroccan upbringing to downplay her current status as a French citizen and French public servant serving at the highest level in government. To this end, a widely circulating meme regarding Vallaud-Belkacem depicted two photos (Figure 2 below) showing an image of the adult Minister on the right and a falsely identified photograph of a child herding sheep on

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the left. The false image—which is not in fact a photo of Vallaud-Belkacem—depicts a rural setting that includes a seemingly impoverished child with messy hair, open-toed plastic shoes, and dirty, shabby clothing, leaning in apparent exhaustion on her shepherd's staff. The overtly racist and sexist meme was widely circulated online in an attempt to discredit Vallaud-Belkacem's authority, but ironically also as an "inspirational" message regarding her supposed victory over poverty and lack of opportunity while growing up in Morocco (which is, in fact, her birth country). The supposedly positive message that this meme encoded for some users of new media illustrates the ways that the semiotics of memes take on complex interpretations and unexpected directions when they are re-purposed in a variety of online environments (Wiggins, 2019, p. 27).

Figure 2: Meme Falsely Depicting Minister Vallaud-Belkacem as a Shepherd Girl.
Source: https://scontent.fdet2-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/100997470_301086247958424_7758511812068245504_n.jpg?_nc_cat=110&ccb=1-3&_nc_sid=825194&_nc_ohc=FoYA3G46xQcAX8n6FDr&_nc_ht=scontent.fdet2-1.fna&oh=fc12c744dc597124ff4feb2b42e01610&oe=6073F902. In the public domain.

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Despite its use as a "positive" albeit still racist and sexist meme, the above image is very much in line with other extremist viral memes and online Internet attacks that currently emanate from a variety of right-wing groups and which have largely re-shaped the political landscape of proposed educational reform for Arabic language classes. North African culture and the Arabic language are posed as backward, religious, and non-modern, whereas French culture and French language are depicted as socially evolved, secular, and modern.

Online "Islamo-linguistic-phobia" and the French Political Far-Right

Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric surrounding Arabic, or "Islamo-linguistic-phobia," emanates from a variety of sources, including right-wing politicians. The rhetoric is exemplified in the following quote by Annie Genevard, Representative from the *Les Républicains* party, during an interview on *Sud Radio*: "I think Blanquer is making a mistake: Teaching Arabic in secondary school will not take a child out of the Koranic schools and will not solve the problems with teaching preaching [sic] in Arabic and the rise of Salafism" (Lewandowski, 2018, para. 9). The implication of her statement is that teaching secularized Arabic in school will not preempt religious radicalization via the language. Furthermore, emerging forms of Islamophobic discourses centre upon locating the threat of religious radicalization in the Arabic language itself (Barontini, 2017). Both right-wing political rhetoric and online fear-mongering collude to frame the extreme exclusion of Arabic and its erasure from public schools as the only "solution" to the "problem" of Islamic radicalization.

Such views are widely disseminated through online memes such as the above, which attempt to discredit the agents of change and reform such as former Minister of Education Vallaud-Belkacem. Common forms of "Islamo-linguistic-phobia" online involve bogus documents relating to the study of Arabic in schools in order to erroneously claim that an increased inclusion of Arabic in the school system comes at the expense of other languages (García-Sanchez & Tetreault, forthcoming). Below, a bogus French ELCO/EILE application for language classes was widely circulated as supposed evidence of the predominance and incursion of Arabic (and Turkish) into the French school system at the expense of other languages such as Alsatian German in Alsace-Lorraine ("No, German classes," 2019). As the below Facebook post shows (Figure 3), within the far right-wing spectrum of political discourse that is increasingly present in French social media, any access to Arabic (as well as Turkish) provided by the national educational system is framed as a threat. Interestingly, Turkish is the only language that will not be continued at all under EILE classes; therefore, the claim that it is "no problem" (as claimed in Figure 4) to take Turkish under ELCO/EILE is incorrect under the new guidelines for these programs, which were announced in 2017 by Vallaud-Belkacemn (Durand, 2020).

The following image reveals a photo of an application for "Alsatian" language instruction that was completed on a 2019 ELCO/EILE form. The image was posted on Facebook and was widely shared across other platforms soon after. The pro-Alsace independence site "*Elsass frei*" ("Free Alsace") posted the below ELCO/EILE application to falsely claim that, while it is now impossible

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to take *alsacien* (Alsatian German) in public French schools in Bischwiller (a community in Alsace-Lorraine), it is, "[h]owever, no problem [to take] Arabic or Turkish." The complete lack of attention to many languages listed on the form—Croatian, Italian, Portuguese, and Serbian—and narrow focus on the two languages most closely associated in France with predominantly Muslim populations, Arabic and Turkish, reveals the Islamophobic thrust of the Facebook post.

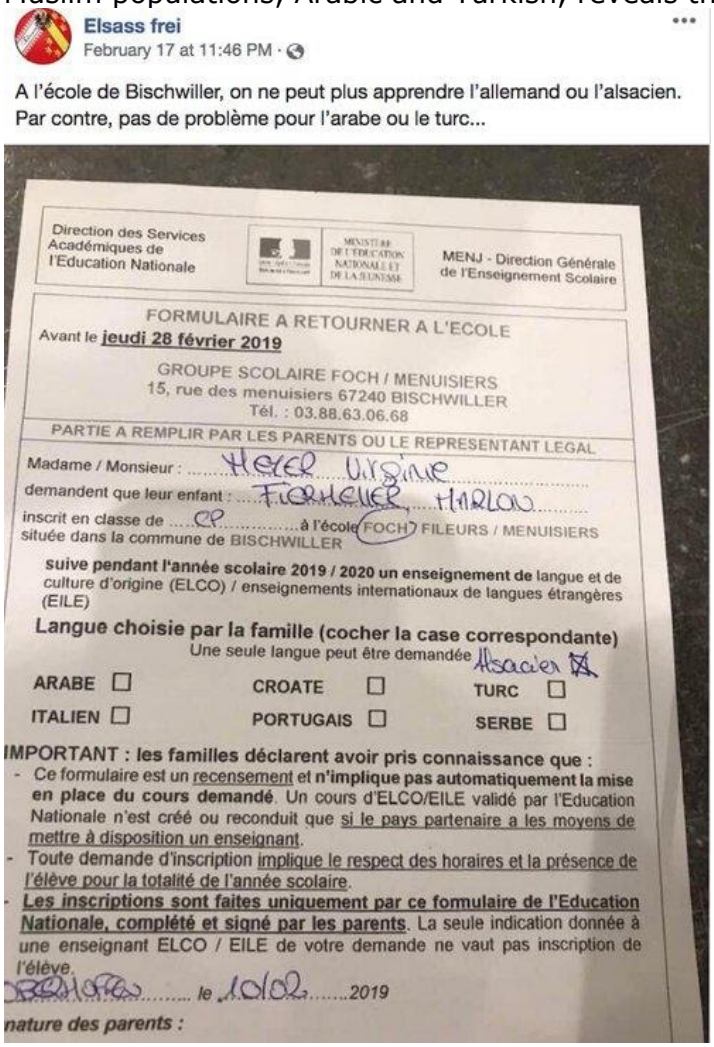

Figure 3. Application for ELCO/EILE Classes Erroneously Claiming Exclusion of "Alsacien."
Source: https://scontent.fdet2-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/51715785_2261235517425858_3554365061285806080_n.jpg?_nc_cat=107&ccb=1-3&_nc_sid=8bfeb9&_nc_ohc=p7JlfpRJX9EAX_5IF15&_nc_ht=scontent.fdet2-1.fna&oh=de0b0a8721af74766fd9f8f79d4b6771&oe=60746275

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Of relevance to my broader argument in this article is the way that the xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic contours of this post move from a rather narrowly defined separatist Alsatian movement to a wider scope and general frame. That is, whereas this Facebook post originally signifies a *lack* of adherence to a unified French nation in favor of a strict adherence to a separatist Alsatian identity, the thrust of Islamophobic rhetoric regiments those languages—Arabic and Turkish—as having "less" value, despite their supposed ubiquity, than others such as Alsatian or French. The emphasis on the threat or "invasion" of Arabic then makes this image easily repurposed by French nationalists, who are undoubtedly emphatically against Alsatian separatism, but who piggyback on the Islamophobic rhetoric through widely sharing the post. And indeed, this post went viral on many sites that had nothing to do with Alsace-Lorraine. This discursive move—to repurpose the nationalistic and fascist rhetoric of a separatist group to promote French nationalism—can be considered an example of fractal recursivity (Gal & Irvine, 2000), in which an initial discursive distinction (Alsatian nationalistic exclusivity vs. French cultural inclusivity) is reproduced ideologically but in a new context (French nationalist exclusivity vs. multi-cultural inclusivity). That is, this form of racist Alsatian linguistic nationalism that within one context runs counter to culturally inclusive French nationalism, is rehabilitated and repurposed in order to argue for a culturally and linguistically exclusive French nationalism that is posed against Muslim immigrant cultures and languages (Turkish and North African Arabic).

The connection between French nationalism and fomenting fears about the Arabic language (and by extension, Arabs) as "invasive" continues to be promulgated by the right-wing party *Rassemblement National* ("National Rally" or RN, formerly *Front National*) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Holocaust denier RN Representative Alain Mondino posted on Twitter the photograph below (Figure 4) that features side-by-side French and Arabic versions of a poster issued by the Minister of Public Health advocating best practices for avoiding the spread of Coronavirus. In his commentary about the above image, Mondino claims (erroneously) that Arabic has become the "second national language of France."

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Figure 4. Alain Mondino's Incorrect Tweet and Post about Arabic's Official Status in France. *Source:* https://twitter.com/alain_mondino/status/1263783602485157889?s=20

The poster reads, "Coronavirus: How to Protect Yourself and Protect Others. Wash hands very frequently. Cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue. Use a tissue once and throw it away. Greet people without shaking hands and avoid cheek kissing." Posting the image on both Twitter

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and Facebook, Mondino comments, "I didn't know that Arabic had become the second official language of France?? No one is supposed to ignore the law but to ignore French apparently does not matter." Much as the above bogus ELCO/EILE application (Figure 3) omits vital information, such as the fact that Alsatian was never offered under these programs but is widely available in Alsace Lorraine public schools, Mondino elides many relevant facts regarding the image (which does apparently depict actual posters created by the French Health Ministry).

According to a recent electronic article in *Le Monde* regarding Mondino's post on social media, the poster on Covid health facts was translated and published in 24 languages ("Non, l'arabe," 2020). Furthermore, Mondino's interpretive captioning of the image, "No one is supposed to ignore the law, but ignoring French apparently doesn't matter…," seems to infer that to include other languages in official public health communication constitutes "ignoring French" and that this in turn constitutes breaking or "ignoring the law," and yet neither is the case. It is not illegal in France to use languages other than French to communicate official state documents. It is merely that, as the official language of France, French must figure first and foremost (but not exclusively) in public communications between the government and citizens.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the current state of public discourse and proposed reforms regarding Arabic language instruction in French public schools. The institutional contexts for Arabic language instruction in France have changed greatly over the course of two centuries of colonial and post-colonial history. During the colonial period, Arabic language instruction consisted largely of colloquial Arabic (*Darija*) that was taught and evaluated by and for colonial administrators as well as educated colonized subjects living in the metropole. *Darija* figured as codified knowledge in an oral form through potential points received on the Baccalauréat exam until 1999, when the exam was removed by Chirac (Caubet, 2004).

Competing language ideologies that align with competing political agendas frame the question of whether and where to teach Arabic in different terms. Discourses on the left attempt to render Arabic "*laïc*" by teaching Modern Standard Arabic and by moving instruction out of mosques and neighborhood associations, thus creating conditions acceptable for Arabic's inclusion in French public schools. At the same time, a rise in Islamophobic discourses from the right in France politicize any type of Arabic educational reform as "dangerous" due to Arabic's supposedly radicalizing or religious essence.

A troubling collusion is emerging between the above left-leaning or centrist policies with right-wing Islamophobic discourses. Whereas the left poses Arabic language instruction as a threat outside of public schools, extreme right-wing discourse claims that any exposure to Arabic is potentially harmful through Islamic radicalization. Recent policies and political discourses evidence the spread of these views, which cast Arabic as central to Islamic radicalization. Macron's recent framing of the suppression of ELCO classes as part of his fight against "Islamic

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separatism" is part and parcel of the mounting influence that right-wing French nationalist rhetoric has achieved of late. As seen by the wide access that social media gives to these Islamo-linguistic-phobic discourses, it would seem that the online environment is increasing this trend.

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