

An Approach to the Lingua Franca of the Mediterranean

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There are certain languages that have been created as a result of the difficulty of communication between people who speak distinct languages but have common interests. Faced with this linguistic situation, the speakers are capable of creating a specific language for these contexts in which there is a community of interests; this common communication system is known as the lingua franca. The aim of these pages is to analyse the lingua franca created on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea from the 15th century until the late 19th century. There is no intention to describe its linguistic system but to define what exactly must be understood by the lingua franca of the Mediterranean. For this it will be necessary to delimit this concept with others closely related and to present, in general terms, the social, political and military factors that helped the birth of a common communication system throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Towards the end of 1951, the lingua franca was defined as what was normally used by speakers of different mother tongues in order to be able to establish communication between them (UNESCO, 1972: 689). When using a lingua franca, the speakers of different linguistic systems pursue one objective or a variety of ends: trade, political, military, cultural, administrative or religious relations. These ends are those that justify some of the synonymous, or almost synonymous, terms of the lingua franca that form part of the bibliography of the subject: trade language, contact language or international language. All these terms have the

common denominator of forming a language created by the need to bring different linguistic communities together.

However, to better understand what a lingua franca is we must finish defining it in relation to other terms with which it tends to be confused: koine, pidgin and jargon. A koine and a lingua franca are linguistic systems shared by speakers of different vernacular languages. However, koine can be identified with one of these vernacular languages or with any of the varieties of the same language. Moreover, pidgin is an interlinguistic variety – a mixed language – which is not acquired as the mother tongue by any social group (Silva-Corvalán, 1989: 190). When pidgin is established linguistically and socially – the process of “pidginisation” –, expanding its vocabulary and making its system more complex, it can give way to what is known as a Creole language, which is acquired as the mother tongue and usually establishes itself as the national language. According to Samarin (1972), a lingua franca is a pidgin language, a hybrid or mixed language. In addition, jargon, just like koine and pidgin, is a variety of common language which is only used by determined groups or social communities.

Specifically, the lingua franca which is the object of this study was born at the end of the Middle Ages with the political and, above all, economic expansion of the main maritime cities of the Mediterranean, which would leave so many marks throughout their area of influence. A language of international communication was constructed, which developed a more

or less uniform lexicon. It seems that the base of this lingua was configured fundamentally by the presence of the Romance languages but also by Arabic, vulgar Greek and Turkish, all languages that contributed not only to the lexicon or the morphosyntax but also to the phonetics.

From the 10th century, indigenous inhabitants from different points of the Christian West established political and trade relations on the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. Because of this colonising expansion, a series of Latin states was constituted governed by western nobles and sovereigns. With this situation it was to be expected that the mark left by westerners would not only be military and political, but also linguistic and cultural. Soldiers, sailors and merchants constituted quite compact ethnic groups that even settled their own neighbourhoods. The influx of emigrants to these eastern lands continued for centuries and each group was able to maintain its Romance language of origin. This was the perfect space for the coexistence of several Romance and non-Romance languages; a space of colingualism was produced. Both the presence of mixed marriages and the need for communication between speakers of distinct vernacular languages brought about the existence of multilingual speakers, whether through the learning of the mother tongues by the colonising population or by the learning of the language of the colonisers by the native population. Simultaneously, the need for communication between the speakers of different languages also gave rise to the presence of interpreters.

In this social and geographical framework of the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th centuries a paralanguage was developed, a language of linguistic exchange created from the strong Venetian presence in navigation and trade of the East. This would be a vehicular language created by *non-natives*, derived from the Romance language adapting it to the needs of

communication (Metzeltin: 11). Simultaneously, a paralanguage of similar features was developed in other territories of the Mediterranean, varying its characterisation according to the Romance languages that came together in each place. This paralanguage, also known by the name of lingua franca, was born out of the mix between one or several Romance languages and any eastern or Levantine language. It was used for some communicative situations and was well understood and spoken by people of a certain cultural level and certain social ambits: commercial, administrative or maritime.

On the threshold of the 16th century, following political and social events, the lingua franca of the Mediterranean gradually acquired a Spanish linguistic base

This lingua franca from the 15th century until the 19th century was the product of a pidgin language, the result of which was that none of the groups that used it felt the need to learn the other's language and, therefore, resorted to less complicated mechanisms; in other words, they created a new language from a mixture whose lexical and morphological base – the base of pidgin – is the Romance component, exactly the language of the most powerful group in these relations and which varies according to historical period. On the threshold of the 16th century, following political and social events, the lingua franca of the Mediterranean gradually acquired a Spanish linguistic base. Thus, it is necessary to recall the historical events that brought about the contact between Spanish and the other languages of the Mediterranean. Algeria belonged to the Almoravids and the Almohads from the 11th century until the 13th century and, after being divided into independent tribal zones, its coastal cities carried out piracy. To counter this advance, the Spanish occupied Oran and other

cities in 1509. Faced with the affront of the attempts by the Spanish to conquer Algiers, the Algerians were protected and helped by the Greek-Turkish corsairs; however, they finally occupied the city, and the whole country was subjected to Ottoman authority.

The presence of the Spanish in the North African baths of the kingdoms of Algiers, Tunis and Salé was the perfect situation for the formation and later development of the lingua franca

On the linguistic situation of the city in the second half of the 16th century, Fray Diego de Haedo, in his *Topographia e historia general de Argel* (1612), distinguishes five linguistic communities, formed by Turks, apostate Christians, captive Christians, Jews and Moors. Among the captive Christians were the Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italians. Each one of these communities conserved the mother tongue used so that the members of the same community could communicate with each other. However, it should not surprise us that they were able to understand and speak the language of their masters – after five or ten years or more of captivity. It was not only among the captured Christians that the learning of second languages or the start of the creation of the lingua franca took place. The presence of the Spanish in the North African baths of the kingdoms of Algiers, Tunis and Salé was also the perfect situation for the formation and later development of this lingua franca. For example, in the baths of Fez, Tétouan, Vélez de la Gomera, Algiers and Constantinople speakers of many languages from numerous and varied geographical areas met.

However, of the colingualism which emerged between the five communities in the city of Algiers mentioned by Fray Diego, only three languages stand out, those that became common languages which allowed members

of distinct communities to communicate. First is Turkish, spoken by the Turks, the apostate Christians who had relations with them, the Moors and by captive Christians. Second, and together with this language, is the *morisco* language, which was not only used by the *moriscos* (Muslim converts to Christianity), but also by the Turks and Christians who had contact with them. And, lastly, comes the common language of everyday relations between slaves and masters, captives and redeemers, merchants and buyers, Muslims and Christians; this is the lingua franca, which responds to the language and Christian way of speaking. With this language, communication with the Christians was easier, given that it was a mixture of several Christian languages, whose terms were mostly Italian and Spanish, in addition to some Portuguese. It should be added that the Lusitanian influence was because of the colonial policy that the monarchy of Portugal applied to Morocco; for this reason, the presence of a great number of Portuguese in Tétouan and Fez persisted until the defeat of King Sebastian in Alcazarquivir, in a crusade against Morocco.

The use of this lingua franca was general due to the constant presence of Christians. In this way, even native children and women of North Africa used it or, at least, could understand it when spoken by Christians. Moreover, it should be noted that learning could also be developed in distant lands, as in the case of the Turks who were captive in Spain, Italy or France, as well as a large number of apostates and Jews who were in Christian territory and could speak three languages: Spanish, Italian and French. Captives and travellers throughout the 17th and 18th centuries testify that the designation of lingua franca, of eastern origin, could have been taken to Algiers by the Greek-Turkish corsairs when they went to the aid of the Algerians and ended up holding the hegemonic power.

Following the creolist Robert A. Hall (1966), the alleged lingua franca of the 19th century

was a French pidgin. When France embarked on the conquest and consequent colonisation of Algeria in 1830, it was in the old pirate states of Tripoli, Tunisia and Algeria where the lingua franca widely used throughout the 19th century was developed. In this way, the linguistic consequence was quite clear: the lingua franca, until that time based on Italian and Spanish, changed its base, became Frenchified, acquiring the denomination of *sabir*. As a counterpoint to its birth and evolution, we see that the decline of this last Mediterranean lingua franca and its later disappearance must be situated in the late 19th century and early 20th. It is notable, for example, that in Algeria the dissemination of French, irregularly learned by the North Africans through the French themselves, was a decisive factor for the disappearance of the lingua franca spoken in Algiers. The process was not so much a substitution of the lingua franca by an interlanguage, French or Arabic, but that the Algerians stopped learning the lingua franca because of the growing Frenchifying of the Arab community.

In short, the lingua franca of the Mediterranean was born out of the linguistic levelling of the different languages that coexisted in the Mediterranean basin. This lingua franca was the result of a pidgin whose formation, simplification and evolution was due to the situation of constant interference to which it was subjected throughout its ongoing creation, as well as to its limited dominions and its interlinguistic contacts. In this way, we discover a Mediterranean linked not only by the same waters, but also by a single language: further proof of the different twinning established in the course of the life of Mare Nostrum.

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