

Language Attitudes and Ethnic Language Loss in Algeria: The Case of the Chaoui Variety Among Young Users in the City of Oran

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Abstract—This article surveys language use in the city of Oran, Algeria. It aimed to study the language attitudes of a small community of Chaoui speakers towards their language with the other languages spoken in the city, namely Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, and French. The results showed that though the Chaoui speech community is still emotionally attached to its ethnic language and considers it part and parcel of its identity, the Chaoui language is clearly witnessing a decline, which might eventually lead to death. The other languages, however, maintain themselves thanks to tight domain division, whereby Standard Arabic is used in official and formal situations, French, in the sciences, and Algerian Arabic, in informal interpersonal communication. The study concludes by stressing the role of schools in maintaining the country's ethnic languages to allow them to survive outside their regions.

Index Terms—Chaoui language, Chaoui speech community in Oran, language use and attitudes, language maintenance and loss, Algeria's language

I. INTRODUCTION

For many reasons (historical, political, social, and others), language has become a strong identity marker in present-day Algeria and a major issue for both government language planners and the various speech communities in the country. Like most African countries, Algeria has a long history of colonialism, which brought the use and spread of French as a dominant language in the intellectual sphere of the elite, disturbing the old distribution of local languages derived from Berber and Arabic and threatening their development and even existence in some cases. After independence, the government promoted Arabic with a nationalist, monolingualist ideology, which has not succeeded in halting the hegemonic influence of French. However, one direct effect of this policy is the side-lining of local languages, including all the varieties of Arabic and Tamazight, or Berber, the ancestral language of the country.

Whereas some scholars regard the country's language diversity in positive terms as a source of cultural and intellectual richness, openness, and tolerance, the unbalanced distribution creates a problem in the survival of ethnic minority languages – in what sociolinguists call “language maintenance and loss” (Dorian, 1982) and “language shift” (Gal, 1979). The present article intends to engage this problem through a study of the attitudes of a relatively small language community of Chaoui people, living in Oran, a major urban city in northwestern Algeria.

Chaouis are mostly located in northeast Algeria, as shown in Appendix One, and the Chaoui region extends along a vast area of mountainous territory. The group surveyed in this study are all second-generation migrants, whose parents left their ancestral homeland for various reasons to settle in Oran. They belong to a category of people called the “linguistically stranded” (Mugane, 2003). Their attitudes towards and the uses of their native tongue reveal a persistent shift whereby the Chaoui language is losing ground both in interpersonal relationships outside the home and within the family unit itself. To what extent this shift in language use threatens the existence of the Chaoui language in Oran constitutes the research objective of this article.

A. Algeria's Languages

Two main ethnic ancestries compose the Algerian people, the Berbers and the Arabs. The Berber group is made of a number of regional ethnic communities, comprising the Chaoui, Chelha, Chenoui, Kabyle, Mzabi, and Tergui, with each speaking their own variety of Tamazight. However, at school, where Tamazight has recently been introduced as an optional language class, all these communities learn the official language, Standard Arabic (SA), French as the first foreign language in primary school, then English as a second foreign language in middle school. However, in the rest of the population, the majority speak a variety of non-codified Arabic, called Algerian Arabic (AA), reshaped by borrowing from various other languages with which it intersected in the past, including Turkish, Spanish, French, and even English.

In the intellectual sphere, the scientific and cultural elites of the country use French and consider it “the language of modernity, techniques, the language of social promotion, the language of opening on the world” (Ibrahimi, 1995, p. 108). The elite groups' use of French is similar to the rest of Africa where educated people in former colonies speak

English or French as well as one or more African languages (Thomason, 2001). In the case of Algeria, in addition to French, people speak a variety of AA and/or a Berber variety.

The coexistence of many languages in Algeria and their distribution among various ethnic, social, geographical, and professional groups create a multilingual context, which is not without inducing power conflicts in situations. The configuration of languages shows that AA and Berber varieties are excluded from school and university learning, and priority is given to SA and French, which yields prestige and power as the languages of public administration, law, high culture, and intellectuality. In other words, the multilingualism of Algerians fosters a triglossic situation wherein competition between dominant and minority languages threatens ethnic languages' existence. This threat is particularly posed to small ethnic communities living outside their ancestral homeland, such as the Chaoui migrants living in Oran.

B. Research Questions

This paper assumes, along with a number of scholars, the postulates that language is a strong identity marker (Swilla, 2005), and that it maintains itself when it is economically and socially conducive (Dorian, 1982). Power is the main reason behind language shift or maintenance (Mugane, 2003) because when languages coexist within the same community, they compete with one another (Mufwene, 2008), leading sometimes to the loss or shift of less powerful languages.

Based on the above postulates, a number of research questions were asked to a sample of Oran's young Chaouis on their use of and attitudes towards their ethnic language and the languages in the country in general: How do they represent their ethnic language? Which language do they prefer to use, in what sphere (home or public), and in what domain (media, religion, sciences)? What is the degree of their emotional attachment to their parents' language? Does it constitute an identity marker for them? The answers to those questions are likely to reveal the factors which determine the Chaoui language's loss, shift, or possible maintenance in Oran.

II. METHODOLOGY

Before presenting the survey's details, it is worthwhile to explain what language attitude means and what it involves. Attitude is defined as "a mental disposition", acting as a bridge between opinion and behaviour (Obiols, 2000). Six types of attitudes are distinguished: general approval, commitment to practice, national ethnic tradition, economic and social communication importance, family, and local, personal, and ideological considerations (Glyn, 1975). In the case of language attitude, it refers to the speaker's feelings towards the following: language variation, dialect, and speech style; learning a new language; a specific minority language; language groups, communities, and minorities; language lessons; uses of a specific language; parents to language learning; and language preference (Baker, 1992, p. 29).

The concepts of language loss, shift, and maintenance invoked in this paper are strongly linked to the language attitudes of the speakers because the feelings speakers nurture towards their own language and the languages of others have a great impact on their language use and language choice, leading to either language maintenance or language shift, and even language disappearance and death.

A. Selection and Description of the Participants

This study's informants were chosen on the basis of age, focusing exclusively on young speakers. The sample was chosen for convenience, and gender was not considered as a variable. The 22 informants were between the ages of 16 and 33 years. They were grouped into three categories representing the trends of Chaoui youth in Oran:

- High school pupils: 11 informants
- University students: 7 informants
- Public professions and wage earners: 4 informants

B. Question Groups

The questionnaire asked 19 questions. Depending on their subject and research objectives, they were grouped into the following four categories:

(a). Transgenerational Language Transition

Question 1 (what language(s) do your parents master?) was grouped with question 2 (what language(s) do you master?), and question 11 (which language(s) do you consider as your mother tongue?) to see the level of language(s) transition from the first generation to the second.

(b). Language Use Domains

Question 3 (which language(s) do you use at home?) was grouped with question 4 (which language(s) do you use at school?), question 5 (which language(s) do you use with friends?), question 6 (which language(s) do use for media?), question 7 (which language(s) do you use for politics?), question 8 (which language(s) do you use for religion?), and question 9 (which language(s) do you use for science?) to see how language is used according to domains.

(c). Language Loyalty

Question 10 (which language(s) do you like the most?) was grouped with question 16 (which language(s) do you think Chaoui people should use?), question 19 (which language(s) represent/s your identity?), and question 18 (do you consider yourself Chaoui, Arab, or both?) to measure language loyalty.

(d). *Language Preference*

Question 13 (which language(s) do you consider useless?) was grouped with question 14 (which language(s) do you consider the most beautiful?) and question 15 (which language(s) do you consider the richest?) to address language preference.

III. FINDINGS

The findings for each question group are presented below, followed by the interpretation of the results.

A. *Question Group 1: The Level of Transgenerational Transition of Language*

Language transition among Chaoui parents and their children in Oran is represented by Figure 1:

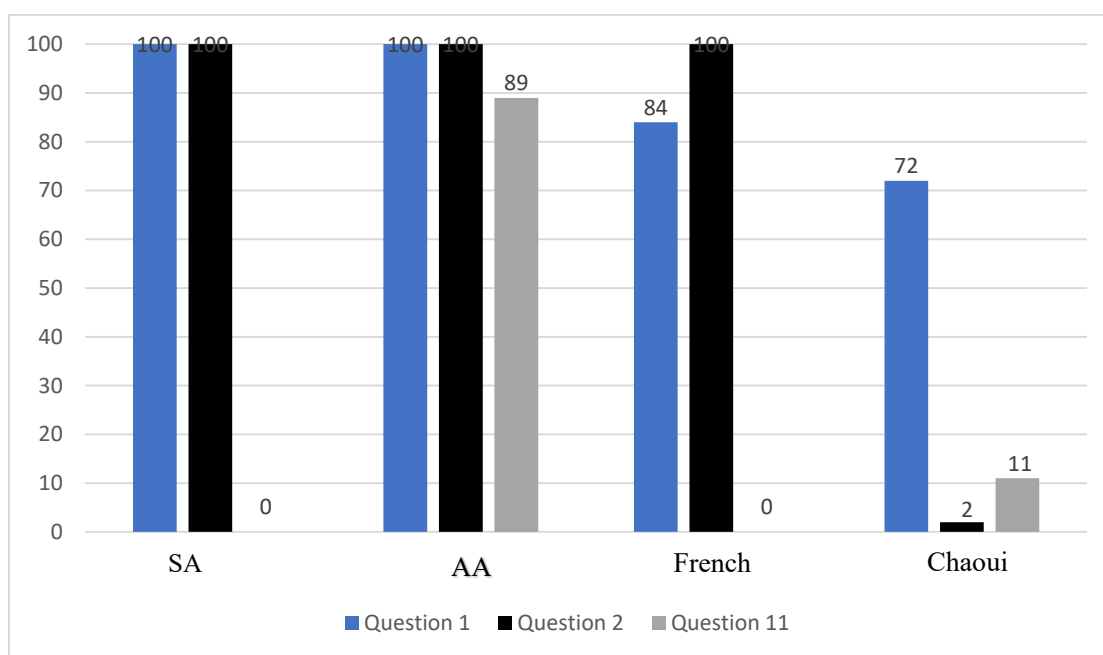


Figure 1. The Level of Transgenerational Transition of Language

SA and AA are the dominant languages among the informants’ parents because they are mastered by all of them. However, this is not the case for French and Chaoui, which score 84% and 72%, respectively. In the case of French, this is a good score, which shows that teaching it at school helps to maintain its presence within society. However, for Chaoui, it shows a loss because more than a quarter of parents have already lost its use, even if they were born in a Chaoui-speaking place.

The beginning of the loss of Chaoui among the parents is confirmed by their children in their responses to questions 2 and 11. Indeed, only 2% of them master their ethnic language – two brothers, newly settled in Oran, who came from Batna (a Chaoui-speaking area). The low score of Chaoui mastery clearly demonstrates a case of language deterioration among the speaking community of Oran, as language transmission between the first and second generations is definitely broken.

According to the respondents’ answers to question 11, the majority (89%) consider AA as their mother tongue. In fact, the latter has become the language of their socialization inside and outside the home.

B. *Question Group 2: Domains of Language Use*

This question group aims to understand where and in what situations young Chaoui speakers use their languages. The results are provided in the following figure:

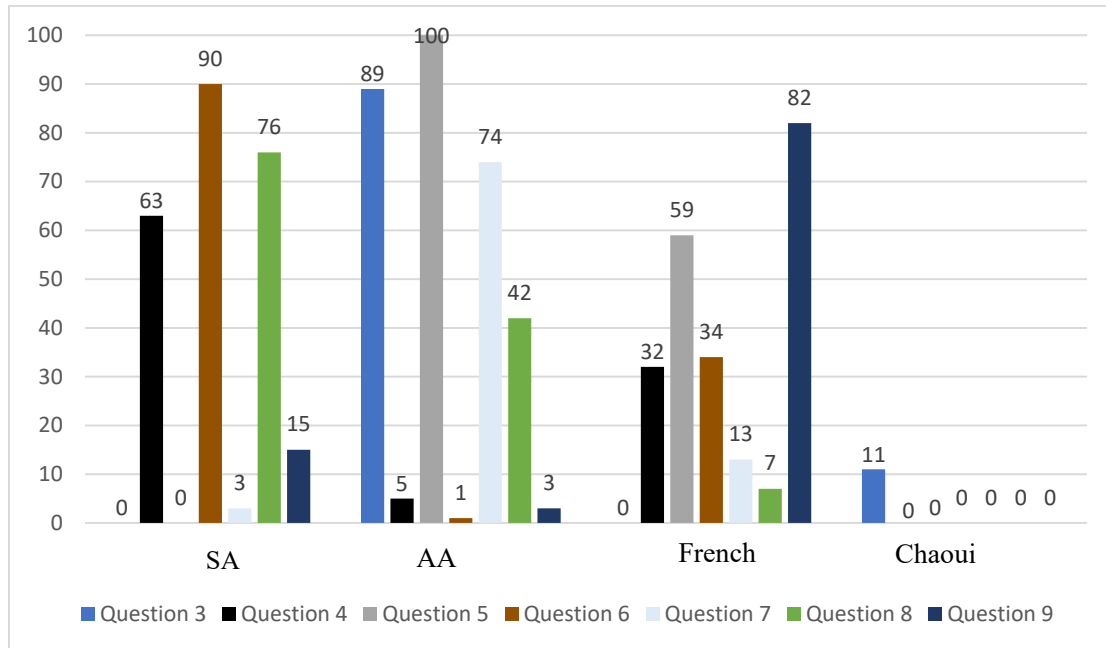


Figure 2. Domains of Language Use

The reasons behind the loss of Chaoui are found first at home, where AA dominates. Answers to question 3 (which language(s) do you use at home?) reveal that this is the dominant medium of communication by 89% of the surveyed community. Obviously, communication in the domestic sphere deals with informal colloquial subjects, just as in conversations among friends. The latter communication type is the other instance where AA dominates (100%) and Chaoui is absent (0%), further evidence of Chaoui recession.

Surprisingly, however, French imposes itself in informal conversations outside school and home because 59% of the respondents use it in their informal interactions (answers to question 5, which language(s) do you speak with friends?). If this figure indicates anything, it is the increasing growth of the former colonial language use among young generations born long after independence. Despite Algeria severing ties with France and downgrading the status of French in the education system to that of a foreign language, the language persists in the country, owing to various factors, the foremost being the education system. French is taught to students starting from their third year of primary school, thus contributing to its continued survival.

In formal situations, however, the trends are different. Illustrated by the survey questionnaire in the various contexts of media (question 6), politics (question 7), religion (question 8), and science (question 9), school seems the place where SA and French are mostly maintained. The former scores 63% since it is the language of instruction at the school level, where all core subjects (math, history, sciences) are taught in that language. For those respondents with a university-level education, 32% claim that their medium of instruction is French. Indeed, even if Algeria, nationalized learning by implementing Arabized syllabi and textbooks has not extended to higher education, where technical and scientific subjects (such as engineering, computing science, biology, agronomy) are taught in French. The privileged position of the latter is confirmed by the answers to question 9 (which language(s) do you use in science?), which constitutes 82%. SA and AA score only 15% and 3%, respectively. Only a few subjects at a university are taught in Arabic, mostly pertaining to social sciences and the humanities (such as sociology, economics and psychology), with informal digressions in AA.

In addition to school, SA finds strength and sustenance in the media. In Algeria, SA was introduced in the media in 1970, and today most TV and radio channels broadcast news and programs in SA. Arab channels, such as the Qatari Al Jazeera and the Saudi MBC, are widely watched in the country for news information and entertainment. Regarding films on Algerian channels, they are mostly American but captioned in French, what helps maintain the latter with 34% of positive answers.

Chaoui's absence in the media use (0%) is justifiable. Except for very few programs in that language, namely one news program a day, the national TV channel (ENTV) does not broadcast in that language. The other media presence of Chaoui is on the Amazigh Channel (Algerie 4), which broadcasts all its programs in the different varieties of Berber (Chaoui, Kabyle, Mzabite, Tergui, etc.). However, the program distribution among all those ethnic languages makes the share of each very small. Thus, its effect in maintaining Tamazight in general, and its regional varieties, in particular, remains poor and ineffective.

The most negative result concerning Chaoui is linked to religion, where no informant is found to use it as a language (question 8, which language(s) do you use in religion?). The 0% score might be surprising and might indicate that the religious feeling of this community is low. However, even if all religious sermons were delivered in Algeria in SA with digressions in AA, this is not the reason for the poor score. Actually, imams and clerics often use their ethnic language

when preaching to local communities. Thus, in the Chaoui region, sermons are delivered in SA mixed with Chaoui, and in the Kabyle region, it is mixed with Kabyle, and so on. But in Oran, where the Chaoui families do not form a distinctive community, the imams do not use Chaoui at all. Furthermore, most of the religious people serving Oran mosques do not master Chaoui. This is why they use the languages most accessible to the full congregation, namely SA, AA, and to a lesser degree, French.

C. Question Group 3: Language Loyalty

The objective of this section is to know the language loyalty of young Chaoui speakers in Oran by asking questions linked to their sense of linguistic identity. The findings are represented in Figure 3.

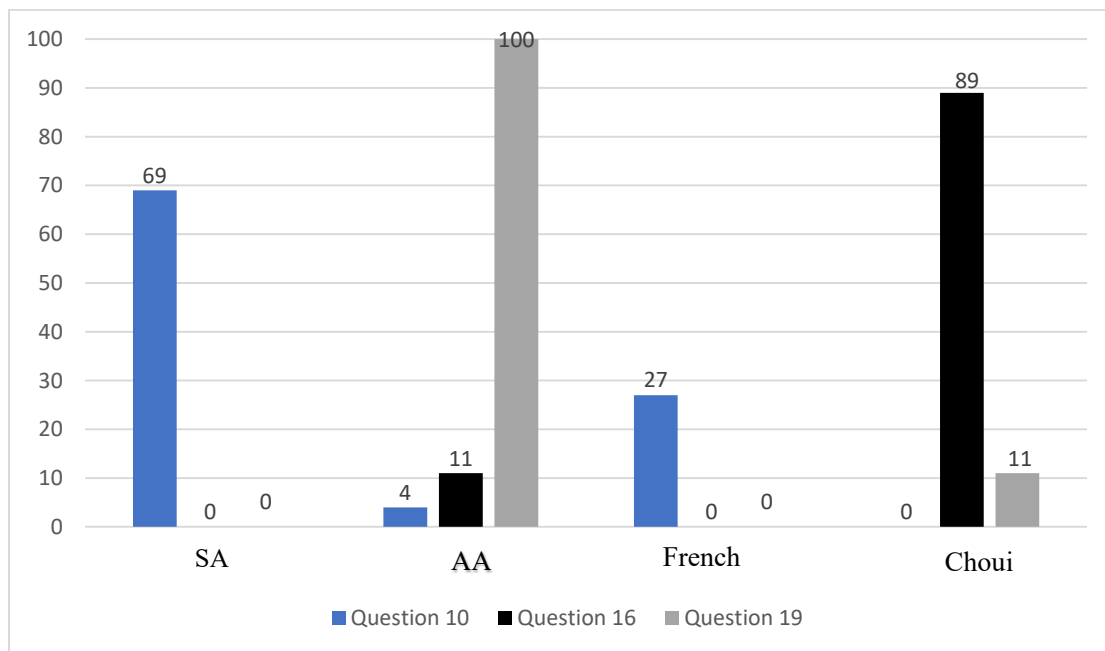


Figure 3. Language Loyalty

In terms of language loyalty, young Chaoui speakers in Oran seem to exhibit low esteem for their ethnic language. For question 10 (which language(s) do you like best?), 69% responded SA, and 27%, French. AA and Chaoui are almost equal, holding the respective scores of 4% and 0%. However, those low figures might be linked to the answers above, where SA is related to religion, media, and study, and French, to sciences and technology. This interpretation makes sense because the respondents’ answers to question 16 (which language(s) do you think Chaoui people should use?) show that they are in favour of their ethnic language. Their attitude on the issue does not correlate with their real language use because they likely never acquired it at home, except for the two brothers born in Batna.

The answers to question 19 (which language(s) represents your identity?) testify to the affective loyalty of the young Chaouis living in Oran to their ethnic language. Figures show that 69% think that it is part and parcel of their identity. However, the informants all agree that AA best reflects their language identity because it is a distinctive language of socialization outside the home and shared by the majority of Algerians. In other words, the majority of the surveyed informants feel like bicultural people, belonging simultaneously to both their ethnic minority culture and the larger Algerian population speaking AA. Their bicultural identity is steeped in a double sense of self, encapsulating local and national sentiments. It is elicited in their answers to question 18 (do you consider yourself Chaoui, Arab, or both?), where 65% respond both. This figure represents the duality of those who define their identity solely in terms of the Chaoui origin. Nonetheless, in considering themselves Chaouis, those informants might mean Berber in the larger sense of the country’s Amazigh heritage.

D. Question Group 4: Language Preference

Language preferences in terms of the respondents’ thoughts on language usefulness, beauty, and richness are regrouped here. The answers are represented in the following figure:

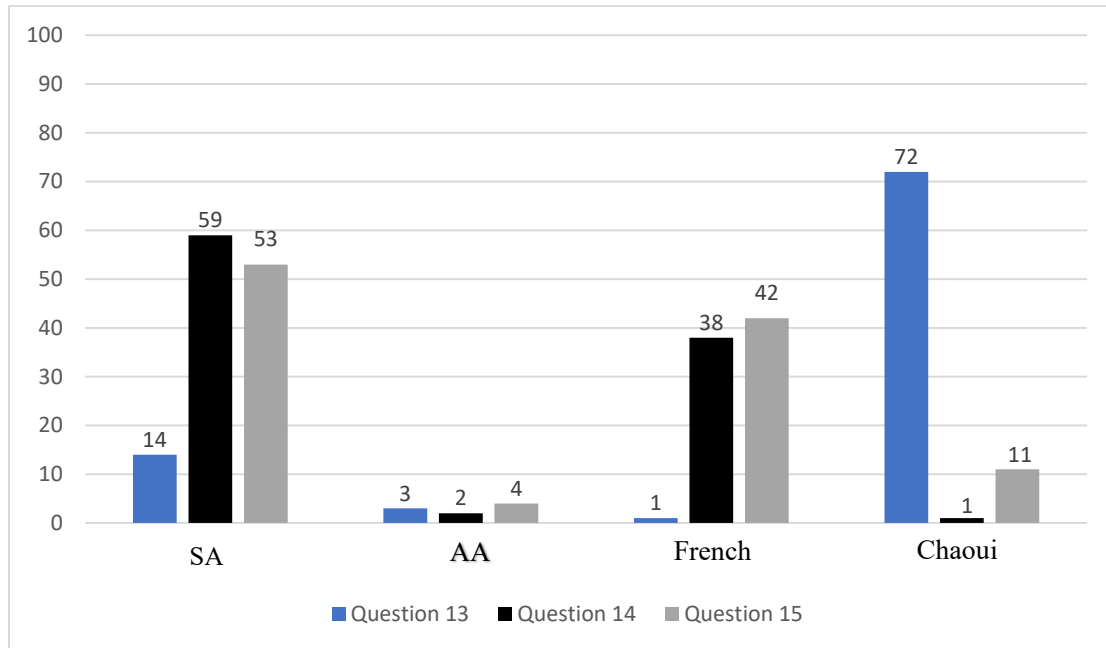


Figure 4. Language Preferences

The loyalty of young Chaouis living in Oran to their ethnic language does not translate into a language preference. In their answers to question 13 (which language(s) do you consider useless?), 72% point to Chaoui. Even if paradoxical, this is not a contradiction in itself because the informants seem to have a utilitarian view of languages. SA and French being the languages of instruction, media, public administration, intellectuality, and religion, it is natural that AA and Chaoui are relegated to the spheres of intimacy and informality. No wonder also that, due to their codification and institutionalization, the two formal languages (SA, the official language, and French, the former colonial language) are considered the most beautiful and the richest, as shown in the responses to question 14 (which language(s) do you consider the most beautiful?) and question 15 (which language(s) do you consider the richest?). SA scoring higher than French on the two questions (59% to 38% and 53% to 42%, respectively) is because it is the language of nation and religion, two strong markers that reflect the respondents' sense of identity.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that, in spite of the second-generation Chaouis' strong emotional attachment to their ethnic language, they are clearly losing it in Oran. Various factors linked to officiality and intellectuality contribute to the decline of indigenous languages, in terms of loss for Chaoui and restricted use for AA. The unequal status among languages as perceived by the study's sample of informants is fostered by sovereignty (SA) and utility (SA and French), as well as by presence in the public and private spheres and exposure to media and religion. All those factors elicit fierce competition between the four languages and lead to the disappearance of the weakest one, in this case the Chaoui minority language.

In parallel to the decline of Chaoui in the family domain, SA is gaining new ground and is considered the most beautiful and richest language, along with, but to a lesser degree, French. This means that the government's promotion of a national language (SA) has yielded results, and that French, formerly a colonial language, has not witnessed a significant decline since independence. The rise in the use of SA and the maintenance of French in the urban setting of Oran are achieved at the expense of indigenous languages, most dramatically the Chaoui language, which finds it difficult to survive outside its homeland, the Chaouia region.

Contrary to many studies which underscore the roles of sovereignty and formality in the maintenance of language, this study demonstrates that informality outside the home and family help in maintaining languages. AA is used at home and everywhere in the public space in Algeria, without any presence in the formal spheres of media, school, and the sciences. Nonetheless, this language competes well with the other languages and absorbs the weakest one, Chaoui. Therefore, if the latter is to be maintained, it is crucial that it is used at home and within the larger world outside officialdom.

V. CONCLUSION

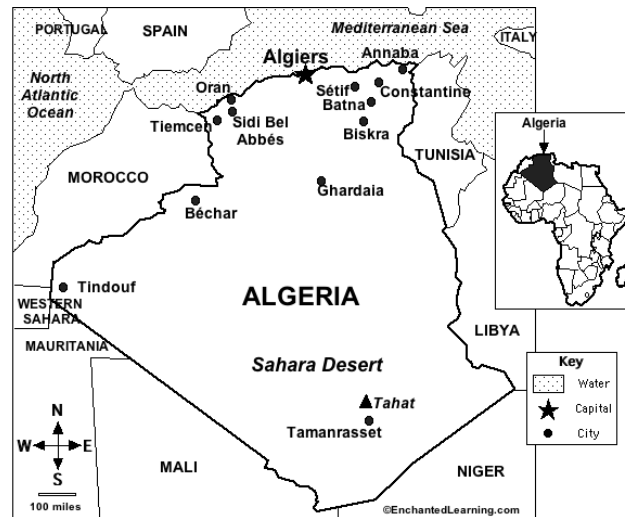
The decline in Chaoui use is most conspicuously perceived at the family level, as few members still use it within the home. Its erosion demonstrates that it fares badly away from its original homeland. As for the respondents' belief that they belong to a double culture, it is more the expression of an emotional attachment to family roots than the description of any concrete reality. In light of the different collected data, therefore, one can easily affirm that Chaoui is shrinking

and will soon become extinct in Oran. This will not be the case with AA, however, because it is a more flexible and vital language that thrives in the interpersonal domain and outside officiality and formality; in other words, AA is here to stay, whereas Chaoui is about to disappear.

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APPENDIX A ALGERIA’S LANGUAGE MAP



<https://www.enchantedlearning.com/africa/algeria/mapquiz/>



https://www.lexilogos.com/kabyle_dictionnaire.htm

APPENDIX B

The questionnaire in English:

Background information:

Age:

Place of birth:

Parents’ place of birth:

List of abbreviations:

SA: Standard Arabic

AA: Algerian Arabic

F: French

CH: Chaoui

A. Language use:

	SA	AA	F	CH
1. What language(s) do your parents master?				
2. What language(s) do you master?				
3. What language(s) do you use at home?				
4. What language(s) do you use at school?				
5. What language(s) do you use with friends?				
6. What language(s) do you use for media?				
7. What language(s) do you use for politics?				
8. What language(s) do you use for religion?				
9. What language(s) do you use for science?				

B. Language attitudes:

	SA	AA	F	CH
10. Which language(s) do you like the most?				
11. Which language(s) do you consider as your mother tongue?				
12. Which language(s) do you master most?				
13. Which language(s) do you consider useless?				
14. Which language(s) do you consider the richest?				
15. Which language(s) do you consider the most beautiful?				
16. Which language(s) you think Chaoui people should use?				

C. Language maintenance and identity:

	SA	AA	F	CH
17. Are your parents both Chaoui?				
18. Do you consider yourself	Chaoui	Arab	Both	
19. What language(s) represents your identity?				
20. Is speaking Chaoui a tool to preserve your identity?				
21. If you master Chaoui will you pass it to your children?	yes	no		

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