



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

### A Sociolinguistic Investigation of The Status of Shelha : An Endangered Language in Chlef- Algeria

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The world witnessed the disappearance of a considerable number of languages. The present article explores the phenomenon of language endangerment and language death among Shelha speakers in Chlef (Algeria). Its main purpose is to measure the degree of endangerment of this minority language which is spoken by an ethnic group in Chlef, as well as to gain insight into the extent of language use and language proficiency among its speakers. The data were elicited by means of a questionnaire, and both unstructured and semi-structured in depth interviews. The findings have revealed that Shelha is a moribund language in Chlef which is not used by its speakers as their only means of communication in their daily conversations, but they still use it in very limited settings.

**Keywords:** Chlef, Ethnic Group, Language Endangerment, Minority Language, Moribund Language, Shelha.

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### Introduction

Algeria is a multiglossic speech community because many languages co-exist and they are considered as part of the Algerian culture. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is regarded as the official and standardized language which is not acquired as a mother tongue, but it is learned at schools, Algerian Arabic (AA) which consists of a number of dialects or varieties which are spoken in different parts of Algeria, these varieties show variation in terms of grammar and vocabulary and this variation has a regional basis. Another language which is widely spread among the Algerians is French which is inherited after a long period of the French colonization, and Tamazight which is the national and official language of Algeria in addition to its different varieties.

The Berber are an ethnic group who are considered as the earliest recorder inhabitants of North Africa, and Algeria is considered as the second country after Morocco in terms of Berberophones. Berber or Tamazight is the native language of a considerable minority, they are divided into several tribes and each tribe has its own name and variety of speech. The Tamazight language consists of many dialects which show significant differences with two distinct scripts; Latin and Tifinagh.

The major Berber varieties in Algeria are Kabyle (the variety used in some regions such as Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia, Boumerdes and Bouira), it is considered as the largest spoken variety in Algeria. Chaoui-it is spoken in some regions like Batna, Khenchla and Oum EL Bouaqui. Mezab the variety which is used mostly in Ghardaia. And Targui (the variety used in Tamenrasset and Ahaggar). In Addition to Shelha which is rarely mentioned that it exists in some places in Algeria, more precisely in Chlef province which is the main focus of this article.

The present paper is divided into two parts; the first part is devoted to the theoretical part of endangered languages and language death. while the second part is concerned with the practical part of the study where the methodological tools are mentioned and the findings about the status of Shelha in Chlef are discussed.

### Literature Review

There are different languages used in different parts of the world with different origins. It is estimated that the African continent hosts roughly one-third of the world's approximately languages and wherever we find languages, we find language endangerment. It is stated that there is an accelerating rate of language extinction and endangerment, because most of today's languages are struggling to survive in world of diminishing linguistic diversity (Kandybowicz & Torrence 2017).

Language endangerment is a fruitful field of study that attracts many scholars and minority languages are not easily defined; They are the languages or varieties which are used in situations in which other languages are perceived as socially dominant (Limberger et al, 2020).

#### *Language Endangerment*

Many languages are falling out of use and are replaced by others that are widely used in the region because of many reasons. Many languages in the world are in danger of disappearing in the present century. According to one pessimistic view, only 600 languages stand a fair chance of surviving in the long run. (Krauss 1992). the conclusion is inescapable : languages are dying at an alarming rate all over the

world, and when a particular minority group loses its language, it eventually loses a great deal of its culture and identity. Many scholars provide several definitions for a minority speech community, and according to a definition offered by Francesco Capotorti, Special Reporter of the United Nations Sub-commission on prevention of discrimination and protection of minorities:

‘a minority is ‘a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members being nationals of the state, possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics from those of the rest of the population and show if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed toward preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language’. (Capotorti 1979).

This is exactly the same case of Shelha speakers in Chlef (one of the 58 provinces of the Algerian country) where dialectal Arabic is the dominant language. Thus, the languages used by such groups of people are at risk of becoming endangered languages. Endangered languages are defined as the languages used by minority communities. It is quite common in all the definitions that an endangered language is a language that is at risk of losing its speakers. According to the *Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation* (2010), an endangered language is the language which is likely to become extinct in the near future. This point is sustained by Crystal (2000), saying that a language is dead is the same as saying that a person is dead, for him a language dies when nobody speaks it anymore.

***Types of Language Death***

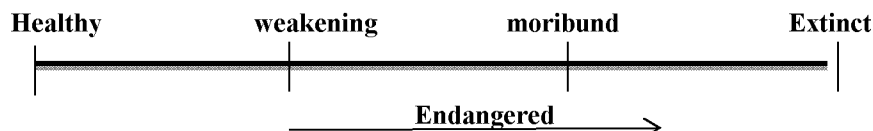
Compbell and Muntzel (1989), stated that language death may occur in one of the following ways:

- Gradual language death
- Radical language death
- Sudden language death
- Bottom to top language death

***Degrees of Language Endangerment***

Tasaku Tsunado (2005), identifies four degrees of language endangerments as it is shown in the continuum:

Healthy (strong), weakening (sick), moribund (dying), dead (extinct). And endangered languages includes both weakening and moribund languages.



**Figure :** Tasaku Tsunado’s continuum of Degrees of Language Endangerment.

The sociolinguistic situation in Algeria is very complex, as many languages co-exist in this country, and the dialect used by its inhabitants is deeply influenced by foreign languages like the case of Spanish in the west of Algeria, and French which had a great impact on the Algerians themselves and on their spoken varieties. Before, Algeria consisted of forty eight provinces most notably Algiers,

Constantine, Annaba and Oran. But recently ten regions were declared as provinces. Thus, Algeria now consists of fifty eight provinces (in Arabic 'wilayas'). Ten provinces have been added in December 2019 after declaring the new administrative division of Algeria.

#### *Algeria's Identification Card*

- **Name:** Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria.
- **Short form:** Algeria.
- **Capital:** Algiers.
- **Term for its inhabitants (Nationality):** Algerians.
- **Head Of State And Government President:** Abdelmadjid Tebboune, assisted by **Prime Minister:** Ayman Benabderrahmane
- **Population :** (2021 est.) 45,258,000 inhabitants
- **Religion:** An Arab-Islamic country.
- **Official Language :** Arabic and Tamazight (Berber)
- **Other existed Languages and varieties:** Modern standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Berber varieties, French and few languages like English and Spanish.
- **Monetary Unit :** Algerian Dinar (DA)
- **The flag :** 

#### *Types of bilinguals in Algeria*

The different types of bilinguals that can be distinguished in the Algerian speech community are:

##### *Educated bilinguals*

People who are able to speak, write and respond in both Arabic and French (i.e they are bold enough in both languages). They are highly competent in French, and they use it without any difficulties to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between them and a French native speaker.

##### *Semi- educated bilinguals*

People who are able to understand French, and whose discourse is full of the interference of French words, and phrases but they are not fluent in French language. (i.e those people are not able to respond fluently in this foreign language).

##### *Uneducated bilinguals*

It is the case of illiterate people who can neither read nor write. they use some French words in their speech because they acquired them from other people through their interactions, and in many cases they don't pronounce them in the right

way. Thus, French is used everywhere in Algeria and the situation differs from one person to another depending on the degree of fluency which is not the same for all bilinguals. Education is one of the most important factors which leads to bilingualism which is a sociolinguistic Phenomenon that characterized the Algerian society.

#### ***The Berber dialects in Algeria***

There are several dialects of Berber language in Algeria, the major Berber groups are the Kabyles in the mountains of East Algiers, the Chaouia of the Aurass south of Constantine . The Mزاب of the Northern Sahara region which are smaller groups, and the Tuareg of the southern Ahaggar. Many researches are conducted about these Berber dialects but no attention is given to Shelha which is one of the Berber dialects which exists in Chlef province.

#### ***Shelha***

In addition to the previously mentioned Berber varieties there is another Berber variety which can be found in the Atlas Mountains and Ouarensis on either sides of the Chlef River Valley. Shelha is also known as ‘Shenwa’ for some people, it is spread in Tipasa and Chlef (in some places like Beni Haoua, Bira and Zeboudja).

#### ***Chlef Province***

Chlef is the capital of Chlef Province, it is one of the fifty eight Algerian provinces which is located in the north of Algeria, 200 kilometres west of the capital Algiers. Chlef is bordered to the north by the Mediterranean Sea, and to the south by Tismilt, while to the east it is bordered by Tipaza, Ain Dafla and to the west by Mostaghanem and Ghelizan.

The province was called before as Al- Asnam. It witnessed an earthquake in 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1980, It was a devastating earthquake that destroyed a great part of the city of El Asnam and also many villages around the city (i.e about 80 percent of the city). And since 1980 the province was given its present name ‘Chlef’, which is derived from the name of the longest river in Algeria.

Chlef is one of the warmest regions in Algeria with an average daily high temperature of 30 degrees centigrade, it is warm to hot at temperature continuously above 30 degrees up to 50 during summer. Chlef is divided into 13 districts (daïras), which are further divided into 35 communes or municipalities.

Chlef is well-known for the national public museum which occupies a strategic location near the city center, where a collection of Romain and historical artefacts are preserved. It represents the heritage of Chlef. In Addition to ‘The martyr Abdelkader Dahnan mosque’, in Arabic ‘مسجد الشهيد عبد القادر دهنان’, which is well-known in the region as the Saudi mosque. It is located in the center of Chlef. This mosque was built by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a gift after the earthquake of El –Asnam in 1980, this is why it is characterized by an Islamic architecture with a touch of unique Saudi heritage.

#### **Data Collection**

Different data collection techniques have been employed in this sociolinguistic research. And different types of communication tools were used such as mobile phones, face book, and face to face interviews. The data were collected by means of interviews, a questionnaire, and personal observations.

**Setting and population**

The participants involved in this research work are from Chlef City, from the following places (Beni Haoua, Zeboudja; from Boughalia Maamer Secondary School during the celebration of Nayer)

**Recordings**

The primary research tool in this qualitative study involved unstructured interview, it was conducted with Mahfoudh Boutaibi who is known as Mahfoudh Ouhouwa (because he is from Beni Haoua, the president of the cultural association Tifaouine), the interview was tape recorded in the Algerian Spoken Arabic. It was conducted as the primary source of information, and it was useful in forming the questionnaire.

**Questionnaire**

To conduct this research, a questionnaire was used as another tool to enhance the validity and reliability of the collected data, and it is also useful to enhance the conformability through available full details. The questionnaire was designed to include both open ended and close ended questions, and they were written in Modern Standard Arabic to be handed to a sample population of 204 informants of different ages, different levels of education and different occupations.

**Results and Discussion**

Tables 1 and 2 represent the socio-biographical characteristics of the informants (i.e gender, occupation and educational background).

**Table 1 : Distribution of the sample by gender**

Gender	The number
Males	112
Females	92
Total number	204

**Table 2 : Distribution of the sample by occupation**

Occupation	Teachers	Sailors	Lawyer	Housewives	Students	Pupils	Carpenters	Traders	Drivers	Policemen	retired	Other occupations
The number	11	06	01	18	12	38	05	17	11	04	41	40

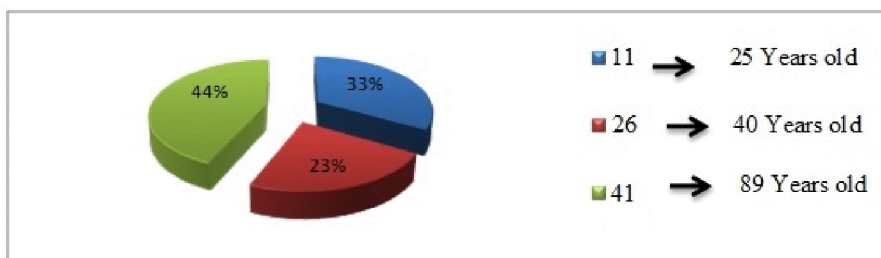
**The Status Of Shelha**

**Shelha in Chlef**

Modern Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic and French are used in Chlef in addition to Shelha which exists in some regions there like Beni Haoua, Wadi Qossin, Breira, zeboudja, Bannayria, and a few places from the Tennis area.

**Language use:**

The informants were divided into three groups As it is presented in figure 1



**Figure 1 :** The use of Shelha dialect in relation to the users' age

1) From 11 to 25 years old:

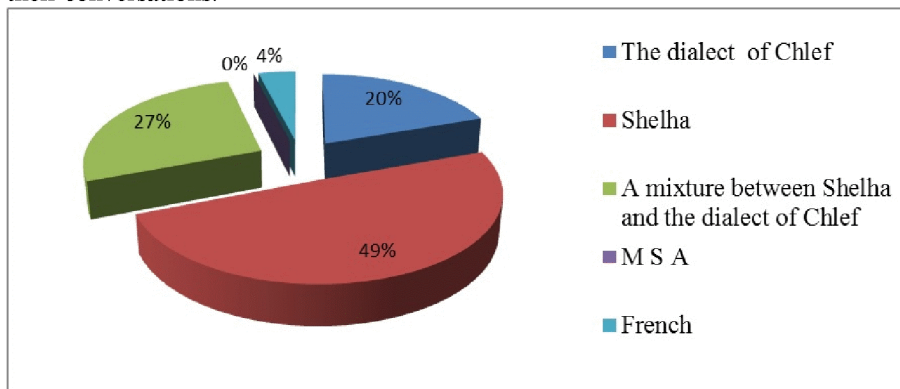
The majority of people who belong to this group use Algerian Arabic in their conversations and they rarely use Shelha because they are either children and they are not yet bold enough in Shelha or university students who find themselves obliged to use Algerian Arabic to interact with people out of the region of Beni Haoua.

2) From 26 to 40 years old:

The illiterate people in this group said that they use Shelha in their daily interactions more than AA whereas the rest tend to mix between Shelha and AA because they interact more with the other people of the City (i.e non Shelha speakers) since they work out of the town.

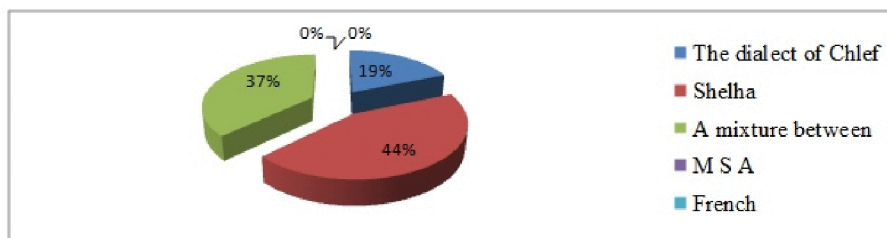
3) From 41 to 89 years old:

This group can be classified as the first group who uses Shelha more. They rarely use AA especially those whose age is between 60 and 89, they use only Shelha in their conversations.



**Figure 2 :** Parents' choice of language to address each other.

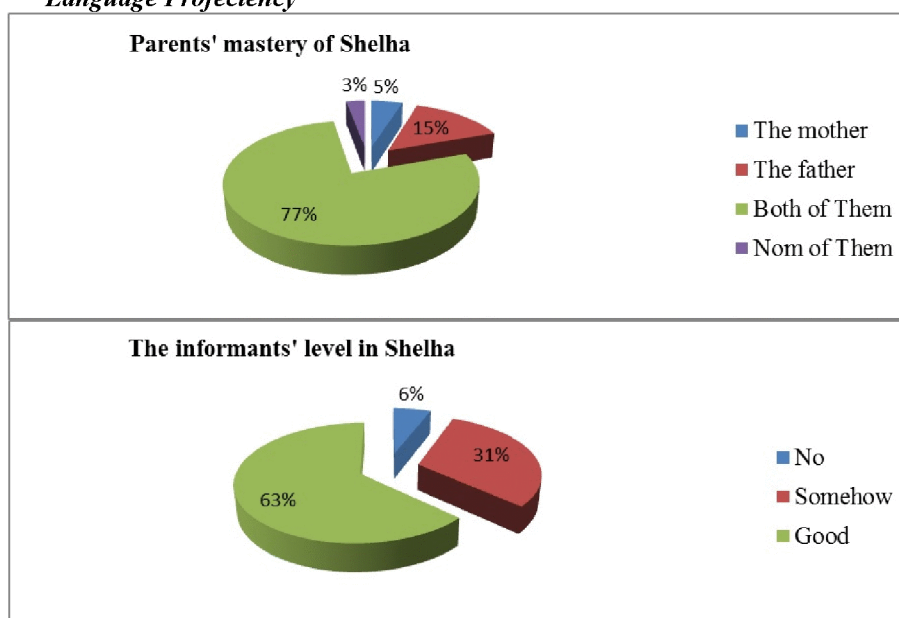
What can be noticed from figure 2 is that the dominant language which is used among parents is Shelha (49%) because it is a general trend among parents to communicate with each other in Shelha. (27%) of the respondents stated that their parents tend to mix between Shelha and the dialectal Arabic in their conversations, whereas (20%) use the dialectal Arabic. And no one mentioned the use of Modern Standard Arabic. The rest of the respondents stated that they use French in their interactions.



**Figure 3:** Parents' choice of language to address their children

Figure 3 shows that the two high scores are for the use of Shelha (44%) and a mixture between Shelha and the dialectal Arabic (37%). While (19%) stated that the dialectal Arabic is the language used to address children.

**Language Proficiency**



**Figure 4:** The informants' degree of mastery of Shelha dialect.

The findings show that the majority of the respondents (77%) stated that both of their parents master Shelha, and only (3%) said that they don't master it. While the rest declared that either the mother (5%) or the father (15%) knows Shelha.

The results obviously show that the majority of the informants (63%) rated their level in Shelha as good, only (6%) stated that they don't know Shelha. Whereas (31%) stated that their level is average.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we addressed the notion of language endangerment and language death, and we examined the status of Shelha in Chlef. Interestingly, this research has revealed that Shelha is an endangered language in Chlef because it is a minority variety spoken by a minority group in a city where Algerian Arabic is used as the



dominant language of the speech community. Shelha is a moribund language because little effort is being done by parents to encourage their children to use it to ensure the intergenerational transmission of their heritage language to preserve it from extinction. They don't use it in their daily conversations as their only means of communication, but they continue to use it in very limited settings (i.e. Home).

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## بررسی جامعه‌شناختی وضعیت شل‌ها: یک زبان در معرض خطر در الشلف، الجزایر

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جهان شاهد ناپدید شدن تعداد قابل توجهی از زبان‌ها بوده است. این مقاله به بررسی پدیده خطر انقراض و مرگ زبان در میان گویشوران شل‌ها در الشلف، الجزایر می‌پردازد. هدف اصلی این مطالعه ارزیابی میزان خطر انقراض شل‌ها، یک زبان اقلیتی که توسط یک گروه قومی در الشلف صحبت می‌شود، و همچنین درک میزان استفاده و تسلط گویشوران به این زبان است. داده‌ها از طریق پرسشنامه، مصاحبه‌های بدون ساختار و مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته عمیق جمع‌آوری شدند. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهند که شل‌ها در الشلف یک زبان در حال مرگ است و دیگر به عنوان وسیله اصلی ارتباط در مکالمات روزمره استفاده نمی‌شود. با این حال، این زبان هنوز در موقعیت‌های بسیار محدودی مورد استفاده قرار می‌گیرد که نشان‌دهنده وضعیت بحرانی آن است.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** الشلف، گروه قومی، خطر انقراض زبان، زبان اقلیتی، زبان در حال مرگ، شل‌ها.

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