

Preserving Mzabi Dialect Vitality: The Case Study of Mozabite Merchants in the City of Constantine



Received: 16/04/2024; Accepted: 30/05/2024

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Abstract

The Mozabite people constitute a well-known Berber ethnic group who have lived in Algeria for centuries. The Mzabi dialect is their native tongue and Arabic is spoken by many as a second language. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to look into certain parameters surrounding this case of bilingualism. It aims more precisely to check whether or not constant contact with dialectal Arabic in particular might have any effect on the use and maintenance of the Mzabi dialect and tries to figure out the underlying reasons behind it. Accordingly, data are mainly collected using structured interviews with a sample that consists of twenty-five Mozabite merchants in the city of Constantine. The investigation generated comparable results and reveals that Mozabites intentionally speak both dialects separately, depending on context and purpose. It also demonstrates that Mzabi resists change and attrition due to its speakers' deep sense of belonging to a highly conservative community.

Keywords

Mzabi;
Spoken Arabic;
Language Contact;
Speech Community;
Language maintenance.

الكلمات المفتاحية

مزابية؛
لغة عربية دارجة؛
تواصل لغوي؛
مجتمع لغوي؛
صيانة اللغة.

الحفاظ على حيوية اللهجة المزابية: دراسة حالة التجار المزابيين في مدينة قسنطينة

ملخص

يُشكّل المزابيون مجموعة عرقية أمازيغية معروفة تعيش في الجزائر منذ قرون. وتعتبر المزابية هي لغتهم الأم، بينما يتحدث الكثيرون منهم اللغة العربية كلغة ثانية. ولذلك، فإن هذه الورقة البحثية هي محاولة للنظر في بعض المعايير المحيطة بهذه الحالة من الازدواجية اللغوية. وتهدف بشكل أكثر دقة إلى التحقق مما إذا كان الاتصال المستمر مع اللهجة العربية الدارجة على وجه الخصوص قد يكون له أي تأثير على استخدام اللهجة المزابية والحفاظ عليها، كما تسعى إلى معرفة الأسباب الكامنة وراء ذلك. وعليه، فقد تم جمع البيانات بشكل أساسي باستخدام مقابلات منظمة مع عينة تتكون من خمسة وعشرين تاجرًا مزابيًا في مدينة قسنطينة. وقد أسفر التحقيق عن نتائج قابلة للمقارنة، وكشف أن المزابيين يتحدثون اللهجتين عن قصد، كل على حدة، حسب السياق والغرض. كما يوضح أيضًا أن المزابية تقاوم التغيير والاندثار بسبب عمق شعور المتحدثين بها بالانتماء إلى مجموعة محافظة للغاية.

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I- Introduction

Language contact is a complex phenomenon that can lead to significant influences and changes within linguistic communities, particularly among speakers with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These changes, whether important or insignificant, depend on various factors that either allow a language to resist or sustain attrition and variation. Among those factors is second language interference with native language for individuals who use it as an important means of communication in daily social and professional situations. Additionally, poor learning and lack of practice are principal reasons for decreased proficiency and language loss. In light of these considerations, this paper attempts to tackle different questions concerning the way a minority community is capable of preserving its native tongue and the importance it gives to maintaining this language as part of its cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Moreover, the study seeks for the most part to check whether change and attrition are contact-induced by pointing emphasis on the interference between spoken Arabic and the Mzabi dialect.

I.1. Maintenance and Loss of Minority Languages

Studies in the field of sociolinguistics introduced different concepts that illuminate language dynamics in terms of use and survival within social communities, such as '*language maintenance*' and '*language loss*'. According to King (2001), language maintenance is "the continued use of a language by a particular group" (p.3). Consequently, the effectiveness of language maintenance serves as a key indicator of the future status of a language which is, in turn, an indicator of ethnicity (Prokop, 1990).

The concept of language maintenance is generally approached from the perspective of minority-language speakers who, unlike majority-language groups, actively work to prevent their language from declining. In this respect, Pauwels (2004) defines the term as a state "in which a speaker, a group of speakers or a speech community continue to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with the dominant or majority language to become main/sole language in these spheres" (p. 719). Pauwels suggests that language maintenance is commonly studied in contexts where a language is either no longer in use or is gradually being replaced by another language, a phenomenon known as '*language shift*'. Generally, forms of language shift arise when members of different language groups come into frequent contact with each other. Nonetheless, Veltman (1983) notes that instances of 'language retention or 'language loyalty' occur when "all the members of the group continue to speak their mother tongue as their principal language of use throughout their entire lifetime" (p.16).

Moreover, Language maintenance is affected by several factors, notably *social* and *economic status* where minority language speakers suffer from low socioeconomic conditions and poor self-esteem, making them easily assimilated in the dominant culture. Also, economic changes are associated with modernization and entail that minority languages are spoken by individuals who struggle to adapt to the requirements of contemporary life. *Sociohistorical* and *language status* reflect ethnic identity symbols that may not be highly regarded among certain communities. In addition, *demographic factors*, such as the decreased number and geographical distribution of minority language speakers can have a negative impact on language maintenance. Other significantly influencing factors include *political* and *institutional support, cultural (dis-) similarity, mass media* and *education* (Appel & Muysken, 2006).

Persistent political, social, or economic pressures cause minority cultures to adopt the dominant language over time, making community members bilingual. The more proficient they become in the dominant language, the more the use of their native language declines. This transition from bilingualism to semilingualism and eventually to monolingualism poses a serious threat to the survival of the native language (Crystal, 2014). In other words, processes of 'language loss' or 'obsolescence' take place and ultimately lead to 'language death'. While the latter is commonly associated with the actual death of its speakers, it can also mean that a community has completely abandoned the use of the old language in favour of another more prestigious and dominant language (King, 2001).

I. 2. The Mzabi Dialect and Community in Algeria

In Algeria, Arabic, French, and Berber are recognized as the primary languages used in both formal and informal settings, reflecting the country's long colonial history and multicultural population. Algerian Arabic, is predominantly spoken in daily interactions and represents the mother tongue of the majority of the Algerian people, while Berber languages, including Chawi, Tamazight and Tergui, are spoken by various Berber communities across the country. In recent years, these languages have gained recognition and increased efforts to preserve and promote their use in education are encouraged (Kerma, 2018).

The Mzabi dialect, also known as Tumzabt, is a minor Tamazight dialect spoken in the region of the Mzab valley that is situated in the northern Sahara (Joffé, 2023). This valley is home to the Mozabites or Beni Mzab Berbers, who also identify as Kharijites, Ibadis or Ibadites because they belong to the Muslim Ibadite sect. Most Mozabites speak

local Algerian Arabic as a second language. The Mzab valley is designated in 1982 as a world heritage site for its unique urban culture shaped by historical events over centuries. Its distinctive features include the 'Pentapole' or the five Ksour: El Ateuf, Bounoura, Ghardaia, Beni Isguen and Melika (Keenan, 2023).

Despite economic, environmental and social challenges, the Mozabites are well-known across the country for their business skills. They also tightly hold onto their religious, ethnic and traditional values. According to Daoudi et al. (2019) "the Mozabites developed a culture that combines austerity, equity, democracy, efficiency, rigor, technical expertise, and cooperative work. For centuries, they have deeply preserved their distinctive cultural and ancestral values, in the name of physical and cultural survival" (p. 126).

II– Methods and Materials

II –1. Participants

A sample of twenty-five participants took part in this study. These participants are all male Mozabite merchants who basically run haberdashery, hardware and traditional clothing stores in the city of Constantine. The survey was restricted to this number mainly because there was no better option to get in touch with the merchants than individually asking for their approval and opinions, as not all of them were available to contribute in the research and are relatively not so numerous in the city. The choice of the sample was principally motivated by the fact that Mzabi is the mother tongue of each merchant and that they are daily interacting with the inhabitants of the city using the local dialect.

II –2. Data Collection

A structured interview was conducted with all the participants in an attempt to check whether regular use and exposure to the local dialect has had any effect on the use Mzabi dialect. The key advantage of using this research tool is to be able to gain direct information more easily and quickly from the participants. This is particularly beneficial because the participants often requested clarifications about the questions and were typically very busy at work, lacking sufficient time to express their thoughts through writing. The structured interview is made up of fourteen pre-decided questions, six of which are closed-ended and the rest are open-ended. All the questions are interrelated and aim to gain insight into Mozabites' proficiency at dialectal Arabic, reasons of use and influences on mother tongue.

II –3. Procedure

The interview questions were formulated in Standard Arabic in order to facilitate understanding and communication with the merchants. Each participant was provided with a duplicate copy of all the questions and their answers were carefully taken down at the same time the interviews were taking place. The participants were very engaged and expressed themselves mainly in dialectal Arabic. The duration of the interviews ranged between five to twenty-five minutes as some of the merchants were interrupted by costumers or provided more elaborate responses to the open-ended questions, while others did not have much to add on their co-workers' answers. After gathering all the data, they were collectively analyzed and interpreted following a descriptive approach.

III- Results and Discussion

The findings are arranged within this section under three main titles based on the type and relatedness of the interview questions. The latter are specific to the participants and cannot be generalized because the sample is too small to be representative of all the members of the Mozabite community in Algeria with the same profile.

III- 1. Arabic Dialect Proficiency

The questions in this part are specifically designed to gather personal information about participants' command of spoken Arabic, especially that of Constantine, as well as the duration of their interactions with costumers at work. Figure 1. below demonstrates that all the merchants have rated their mastery of the dialect to be good (24%) or very good (72%) except for one (4%) who claimed it to be average as he originates from the West and has recently moved to this city. These results were justified by the participants' direct exposure to the dialect since their early childhood both at all the three school cycles and also while carrying out their businesses. It is noted that these male merchants have joined the family business at a young age to be able to take it over later on.

Figure 2. shows that most merchants (76%) have been working for more than ten years in commerce, while 24% have at least five years of experience. In Addition, it is worth to mention that the majority of merchants spend up to seven hours a day and six days a week in their busy stores, which constantly necessitates speaking in Arabic in order to sell different kinds of goods.

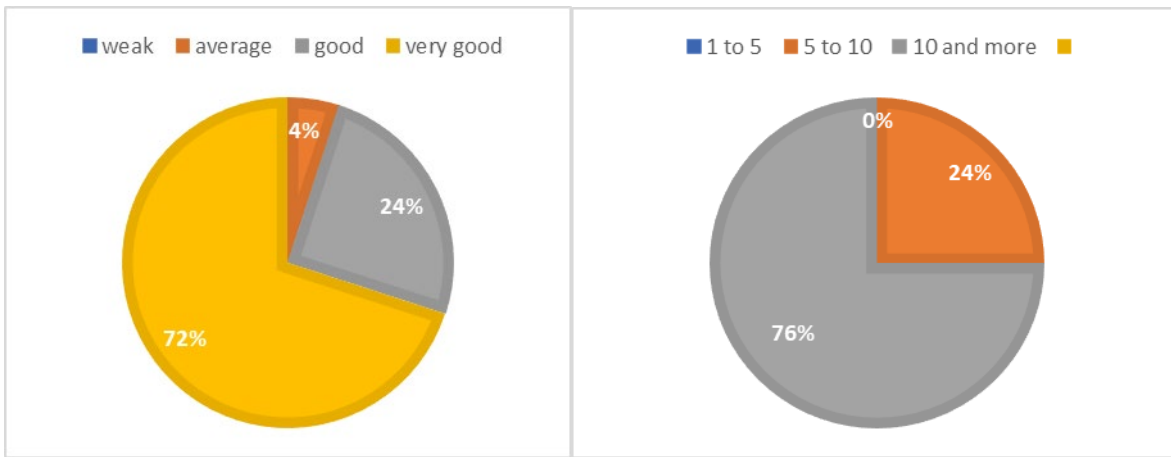


Figure 1. Mastery of Spoken Arabic

Figure 2. Duration of Professional Practice

III- 2. Reasons of Use

To gain a clear insight into the motives behind using Mzabi and Arabic codes, the questions have a twofold objective: checking the frequency of use, depending on changed settings and interlocutors, and attempting to understand how the participants perceive this linguistic experience. Table 1 provides statistical results about the purpose behind using Arabic dialect.

Table 1. Purpose behind use of Arabic dialect

	Frequency	Percentage
Formal interactions	03	12%
Informal interactions	00	00%
Both	22	88%

Just three participants (12%) stated that Arabic is used for work purposes and within formal contexts only; while all the rest (88%) specified that they use it for work and also to build and maintain social relationships. Following this question, the participants were asked about how they felt concerning the need to switch codes and whether they enjoyed speaking in Arabic. The replies reflected positive attitudes towards this linguistic phenomenon as most comments shared that it was very beneficial and enjoyable to speak the local dialect for all the advantages it offers, such as easy communication with customers at work, interaction with people at different levels and acquisition of linguistic and cultural competence.

Moreover, answers were collected based on a Likert frequency scale in order to check the extent to which Mozabites converse in Arabic with in-group interlocutors and to what extent. As shown in Table 2, the majority (80%) of the interviewees attested that they never address Mozabite interlocutors in Arabic, as opposed to a minority (20%) who use it sometimes.

Table 2. Frequency of the use of Arabic with Mozabite interlocutors

	Frequency	Percentage
Often	00	00%
Sometimes	05	20%
Seldom	00	00%
Never	20	80%

To support their answers, the respondents attested that they refrain from using Arabic to communicate with members of their community for reasons of simplicity and social identification. They explained that since Mzabi is their mother tongue, it feels more natural to use it in intimate and casual conversations with family members and friends. Consequently, this has a direct impact on strengthening the social and cultural bonds within their ethnic group.

Furthermore, participants who occasionally use Arabic with members of their speech community described two main situations. First, with their friends and just for fun, for the younger ones. Second, with their children when they help them with studies, as the new school curriculums are for the most part designed in Arabic and require parental support.

III- 3. Influences on Mother Tongue

In relation to possible influences on the use and maintenance of Mzabi as a result of regular contact with Arabic, the questions explored three main levels: the existence of any linguistic similarity between the two codes, participants' perceptions of their own experience in this respect and whether this situation is admitted to cause a threat to the survival of this ethnolect.

According to the returns in Figure 3., there seems to be no tangible relation between Mzabi and spoken Arabic, only for some borrowed words that have no equivalents in Mzabi (like /DHRĀ ĪA/ 'the traditional bride's veil') as well as modern day technical vocabulary that has unspecifically infiltrated most world languages, such as home and electric appliances.

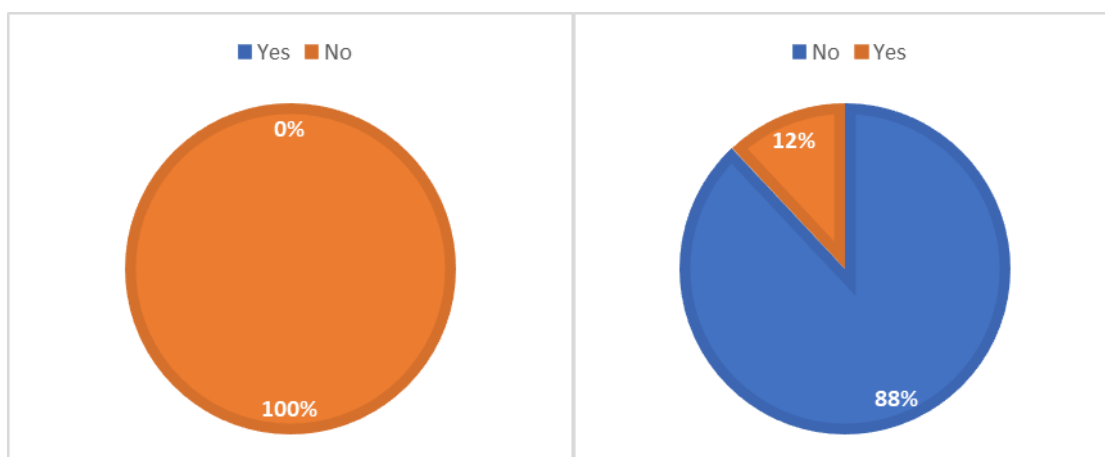


Figure 3. Relation between Mzabi and Spoken Arabic

Figure 4. Influence of Spoken Arabic on the Use of Mzabi

Concerning the impact of daily interaction with the locals on mother language use, the returns were very negligible as demonstrated in Figure 4. The examples of the little effects that reportedly may exist would be in the accent, word similarities and an occasional sub-conscious tendency to switch codes. This is justified by the fact that Mozabites speak Mzabi exclusively at home as, in most cases, couples are married with in-group members which means that both parents speak the same language with their children. Also, family relations are quite tight and regular visits between relatives and hometown community members are sustained. Therefore, all the participants felt little concern about the future of their native language and predicted that it will survive as long as they are still committed to transmitting it to younger generations and resisting different kinds of outside influence.

IV- Conclusion

The study at hand attempts to explore language change and maintenance in relation to the influence of social and linguistic contact with spoken Arabic on the use of Mzabi dialect. According to the obtained results, the study concludes that constant exposure and switching to spoken Arabic did not have any significant effect on Mozabite merchants' linguistic practices, and that they intentionally speak both dialects independently in different contexts and for different purposes, basically because they belong to a highly traditionalist and tight-knit community. Mzabi can hence be said to resist extinction and external influences for so long because of its speakers' deep attachment to what it symbolizes for them in terms of social identity and group membership and because it is part of their cultural and historical heritage.

- Appendix

Structured Interview Questions

سنكون جد ممتنين إذا قمتم بالإجابة على هذا الاسئلة والتي تركز على بحث حول ثنائية اللغة عند عينة من الأفراد المزابيين في مدينة قسنطينة. المقابلة تهدف أساسا الى استكشاف مظاهر التعايش اللغوي في سياق متعدد اللغات. لكم جزيل الشكر.

1- منذ متى تتعامل مع الزبائن القسنطينيين؟

5-1 سنوات 10-5 سنوات 10 سنوات فما فوق

2- كم عدد ساعات وأيام الأسبوع التي تمضيها في العمل؟

.....

3- كيف تقيم مستواك في تكلم العربية الدارجة لمدينة قسنطينة؟

ضعيف حسن جيد جدا

4- مهما كانت الاجابة، الى ماذا يرجع ذلك؟

.....

5- ماهي الغاية من تكلم هذه اللهجة؟

تفاعلات رسمية تفاعلات غير رسمية كلاهما

6- هل تستمتع بتكلم هذه اللهجة وبكونك تتكلم عدة لغات؟

.....

7- ما مدى تحدثك بهذه اللهجة مع الأفراد المزابيين؟

غالبا أحيانا نادرا مطلقا

8- مهما كانت الاجابة، الى ماذا يرجع ذلك؟

.....

9- هل توجد علاقة لغوية بين لغتك الأم واللهجة العربية أو القسنطينية بصفة خاصة؟

نعم لا

10- إذا اخترت نعم، ففيما يتمثل ذلك؟

.....

11- هل تعاملك اليومي بهذه اللهجة أثر على استعمالك للغتك الأم؟ (مثلا: استعارة كلمات أو عبارات ...)

نعم لا

12- إذا اخترت نعم، فأرجو تزويدنا بأقصى قدر من الأمثلة:

.....

13- إذا اخترت لا، فإلى ماذا يرجع ذلك؟

.....
.....
14 - في رأيك، هل اللهجة المزابية مهددة بالاندثار؟
.....
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