

University of Pannonia
Faculty of Humanities
Multilingualism Doctoral School

EVALUATION
of ZAHIA FLIH's Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Title:

**Language Maintenance and Language Shift
among Algerian Arabic Speakers in France**

Reviewer: *István Cserniczkó*

Summary of the Dissertation's Content

Zahia Flih's PhD dissertation, "*Language Maintenance and Language Shift among Algerian Arabic Speakers in France*," investigates the intergenerational language practices of the Algerian immigrant community in France. The research seeks to determine whether this community is maintaining its Arabic heritage language or shifting to the dominant French language. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach: a large-scale questionnaire survey of 344 participants across three generations, complemented by 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The participants are categorized as first-generation immigrants (born in Algeria, later moved to France) and their French-born second- and third-generation descendants. The questionnaire gathered data on self-reported language proficiency in Arabic and French, patterns of language use in various domains (home, school/work, religious settings, etc.), and attitudes toward both languages. The follow-up interviews provided qualitative insight into personal experiences with language, identity, and integration.

Across the quantitative and qualitative data, the dissertation finds clear evidence of an ongoing shift from Arabic to French among second- and third-generation Algerians in France. Arabic proficiency declines significantly in younger generations – especially in reading and writing skills – compared to the first generation. Correspondingly, use of

Arabic is progressively reduced across most domains of life for the second and third generations. For example, while first-generation immigrants frequently use Arabic at home and in community interactions, their children and grandchildren report using much more French even in traditionally Arabic-speaking domains like the family. One notable exception is the religious domain: across all three generations, Arabic remains the dominant language in religious practice (prayers, Quranic readings, mosque attendance), reflecting the special role of Classical/Standard Arabic in Islam. Importantly, the dissertation highlights a mismatch between language attitudes and language use: positive attitudes toward Arabic are maintained even by second and third generations, yet these favorable attitudes do not fully translate into continued use of Arabic at home. This nuanced finding suggests that heritage language loyalty alone is insufficient to halt a shift toward the societal majority language, especially given the ease of using French in daily life.

The qualitative interviews corroborate the survey results and delve into reasons behind the shift. Interviewees across generations described how several factors undermine Arabic maintenance: early exposure to French (often from childhood, through schooling and society at large), limited formal exposure to Arabic literacy, and experiences of stigma or discrimination that associate Arabic with outsider status. Some participants recounted feelings of marginalization in France that complicated their relationship with their heritage language. At the same time, the interviews revealed strong ties between language and identity – many first-generation Algerians see maintaining Arabic as core to their cultural and religious identity, and even younger individuals express pride in their heritage, though they may use French more often for practical reasons. Themes of identity struggles, integration challenges, and efforts in heritage language transmission emerge from these personal narratives. Parents from the first generation often attempt to pass on Arabic to their children, but their success varies. Interestingly, the dissertation notes that because many first-generation Algerian immigrants are themselves proficient in French (a legacy of Algeria's French colonial history and education system), they may unwittingly accelerate the shift by using French with their children. In other words, the very fact that Algerian immigrants arrive with knowledge of the host society's language (French) leads to more French being used at home, reducing the necessity and opportunity for children to practice Arabic.

In summary, Flih's dissertation provides a comprehensive account of how and why the Algerian community in France is undergoing language shift. Generational comparisons clearly show a trend aligned with classic models of language shift (e.g. Fishman's three-generation shift hypothesis). Yet, the study also uncovers complex dynamics specific to this context: the persistence of positive sentiment toward Arabic alongside pragmatic shifts to French, and the influence of factors like religion, pre-migration language exposure, and experiences of exclusion on language choices. The work concludes that without intervention, continued shift toward French is likely in the third generation and beyond. However, it also identifies key predictors that could support Arabic maintenance, such as using Arabic in the home and mosque, having endogamous (Algerian) marriages or partners, regular visits to Algeria, and maintaining strong proficiency in and attitudes toward Arabic. These findings not only document the current state of the community's bilingualism but also offer insights for community efforts or policies to support heritage language preservation.

Critical Analysis of Research Methods

The dissertation employs a mixed-methods research design that is well-suited to the research questions. The quantitative component consists of a detailed questionnaire administered to a large sample (N=344) of Algerian-origin individuals in France. This large sample size is a notable strength, lending statistical reliability to the findings. The questionnaire was carefully designed to capture multiple dimensions of language maintenance and shift: self-assessed proficiency in both Arabic and French, frequency of language use in various social domains, and attitudinal measures. By including respondents from three generational groups (first, second, and third generation), the study explicitly addresses intergenerational change over time. The grouping of participants into these generations is clearly defined and allows for straightforward comparison across cohorts. The data analysis of the survey results is thorough – the dissertation reports not only descriptive statistics (e.g. average proficiency ratings, percentages of language use in a domain) but also employs inferential statistics. For instance, generational differences in proficiency and usage are quantified, and a multiple regression analysis is conducted to identify which sociolinguistic factors significantly predict heritage language maintenance or shift. The inclusion of regression analysis adds rigor: it enabled the author to isolate the impact of variables such as home language use, community ties, partner’s ethnicity, and trips to the homeland on outcomes like Arabic proficiency and use. This approach strengthens the argument by moving beyond simple correlations to demonstrate predictive relationships.

The qualitative component consists of 20 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with a subset of survey participants. The interview sample included members of all three generations (9 first-generation, 6 second-generation, and 5 third-generation interviewees) and balanced genders (12 female, 8 male). These interviews provide depth and human context to the numeric trends observed in the survey. The dissertation describes how interview questions probed personal experiences with language use (e.g. situations of switching between Arabic and French), identity (feelings of being Algerian vs. French), and attitudes (such as motivation to teach children Arabic). The methodology chapter details how the interviews were designed to complement the survey – expanding on issues that a questionnaire alone could not fully illuminate, such as the emotional and experiential factors behind language choices. The analysis of the interview data involved identifying common themes and illustrative quotes, which are then reported in the results and discussion chapters. For example, qualitative findings shed light on why second- and third-generation individuals, despite positive attitudes, might still choose French in daily life – reasons that include convenience, peer influence, or sometimes a desire to avoid being othered for speaking Arabic in public. This combination of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth is a robust methodological choice, aligning with best practices in sociolinguistic research on bilingual communities.

The research methods are generally appropriate and well-executed, but there are some practical challenges and limitations worth noting. Participant recruitment was done through a mix of personal networks and a snowball sampling technique. While this approach was likely necessary given the difficulties of reaching a dispersed immigrant population, it does introduce potential biases – for instance, the sample may over-represent social circles that are more connected or motivated to participate in language research. The author acknowledges that snowball recruitment tended to stay within the same generation: many first-generation participants referred others of their own age group, making it harder to recruit younger second/third-generation individuals. To

mitigate low online response rates, the researcher undertook field visits to France to conduct face-to-face data collection, an commendable effort that improved participation. These challenges are candidly discussed in the dissertation's methodology and limitations sections, demonstrating the researcher's reflexive approach to method adjustments. Another methodological consideration is the self-reported nature of the data: proficiency levels and language use frequencies are based on participants' own assessments, which can be subjective. The dissertation might have been strengthened by incorporating objective measures (for example, brief language tests, or observations of language use), but such measures are often difficult in large-scale sociolinguistic studies and were beyond this project's scope. Overall, the research design is solid and in line with contemporary sociolinguistic inquiry: it leverages quantitative data for general patterns and qualitative insights for explanatory depth. The combination of methods yields a rich, triangulated understanding of language maintenance and shift in the target community.

Engagement with International Literature

Flih's dissertation demonstrates a strong engagement with the relevant international literature on language shift, both for European Arab communities and for immigrant language maintenance in general. The literature review (Chapter 2) is comprehensive, spanning theoretical frameworks, prior studies on similar communities, and context-specific background. The breadth of literature use strengthens the dissertation by demonstrating that the author is conversant with international scholarship on immigrant bilingualism and can situate the Algerian-French case within that broader context.

In terms of critical engagement, the dissertation not only *cites* but also *critiques or contextualizes* the literature. For example, when discussing demographic concentration, Flih notes that conventional wisdom suggests a large co-ethnic community can slow language shift, yet Arfi's study showed that even a large Algerian concentration in France did not prevent shift due to prior French knowledge. Such discussions illustrate a nuanced understanding – the dissertation does not simply accept generalizations from the literature but examines how the Algerian case may confirm, contradict, or add nuance to them. The engagement with literature is therefore constructive and integrative, paving the way for the dissertation's own contributions. This level of literature integration meets the expected standard for a doctoral dissertation, showing the candidate's mastery of the field and providing a solid scholarly foundation for the research.

Originality and Novelty of the Findings

The Algerian-French case is sociolinguistically unique because, unlike many immigrant groups, Algerians typically arrive with knowledge of the host country's language (French) due to Algeria's colonial history and the continued role of French in its education system. This factor complicates and enriches the study of language shift: the traditional barriers to integration (learning the host language) are lower, which might accelerate shift, but at the same time, it raises questions about how a heritage language can be maintained when the immigrant generation is already bilingual. By focusing on this understudied scenario, the dissertation brings new insights to the field. It effectively documents how prior bilingualism of immigrants interacts with the usual generational shift pattern, offering a case where the shift may be more rapid or differently motivated than in communities that

start as monolingual immigrants. This perspective is fresh and had not been thoroughly explored in previous literature, making the study's context itself a source of novelty.

In terms of specific findings, while some results confirm established patterns (e.g., third-generation attrition of the heritage language is expected from Fishman's model), the dissertation uncovers refined, context-specific nuances that are novel. One such finding is the persistent positive attitude towards Arabic in later generations despite behavioral shift to French. Typically, language shift is accompanied by diminishing regard for the heritage language, but here the attitude-behavior gap is an interesting phenomenon: young Algerian-French individuals may *value* Arabic culturally or emotionally, yet choose French for everyday communication. The dissertation's analysis suggests this could stem from the convenience of French and the fact that even parents can accommodate French, rather than from rejection of Arabic. This insight contributes to scholarly understanding by highlighting that language loyalty alone may not prevent shift – a point that could inspire further research into what additional supports (community schools, media, etc.) are needed to translate positive attitudes into actual maintenance.

Another original contribution is the identification of specific predictive factors for language maintenance versus shift in this community, backed by statistical analysis. For example, the finding that regular visits to the country of origin (Algeria) correlate with higher Arabic maintenance is not surprising in itself, but quantifying its importance relative to other factors (like having a French spouse vs. an Algerian spouse) is quite valuable. The dissertation shows, for instance, that exogamous marriages (marrying outside the community) tend to undermine intergenerational transmission of Arabic, whereas endogamous marriages support it – aligning with but also concretely illustrating patterns noted in other studies. The incorporation of religious practice (mosque attendance) as a supportive domain for Arabic is another context-specific insight that adds originality; it underscores how the Islamic religious setting serves as a refuge for Arabic use, even when other domains shift to French. Additionally, the qualitative data provide original narratives about integration and stigma – for instance, stories of young people choosing not to speak Arabic publicly to avoid discrimination. Such personal angles offer novel qualitative evidence of how societal pressures in France influence language choices, complementing the quantitative trends.

The mixed-method approach itself contributes to the originality of the findings: by triangulating survey and interview results, Flih goes beyond surface patterns to explain *why* the patterns occur. The dissertation's discussion draws new connections, such as linking the parent generation's French proficiency to the reduced necessity of Arabic at home, a factor less emphasized in prior studies of communities where the first generation had to acquire the host language post-migration. Moreover, the study's timing (mid-2020s) means it captures a contemporary snapshot of the Algerian-French community, possibly reflecting influences of globalization and digital media (e.g., French or Arabic media consumption) that older studies did not cover. The data were collected recently and include up-to-date contexts (some participants are as young as late teens, per the sample demographics), providing current insight that updates older literature. In sum, while the dissertation confirms several known principles of language shift, it does so in a new context and adds granular, context-rich findings that advance our understanding of heritage language dynamics. The committee can be confident that this work is not just a re-statement of known trends, but rather an innovative study that illuminates a large community with fresh data and offers nuanced findings (like the attitude-use paradox and

the role of pre-migration bilingualism) that will be of interest to scholars of multilingualism and language policy.

Structure, Format, and Academic Writing

The dissertation is well-structured and written in a clear, scholarly style. The author's voice remains objective and evidence-focused throughout, avoiding informal language or anecdotal tone except when reporting interviewees' personal stories (which are clearly flagged as quotations or paraphrases from participants). Importantly, citation of sources is thorough and consistent in the required academic style. Every factual claim or theoretical assertion in the literature review is backed by one or more references, reflecting academic integrity and engagement with sources. In conclusion, the presentation of the dissertation is of high quality, reflecting the candidate's ability to communicate complex research in a clear and professional manner. It meets the stylistic and structural expectations for an English-language PhD thesis.

Areas for Improvement

- **Limited Representation of Younger Generations:** The second- and third-generation sub-samples are smaller (79 and 44 individuals respectively, versus 221 first-generation), which may limit the granularity of analysis for those groups. The author acknowledges that reaching more third-generation participants was challenging due to demographic realities. Future studies could strive for a more balanced sample, possibly by specifically targeting younger respondents (e.g., through schools, youth organizations) to ensure their perspectives are as statistically robust as those of the first generation.
- **Sampling Method Bias:** The use of **snowball sampling**, while pragmatic, led to a bias where many recruits were from the same generation or social circles as the initial contacts. This method may over-sample tightly knit networks and under-sample more isolated community members. It also resulted in the interview sample being skewed toward first-generation participants. An area for improvement would be to diversify recruitment strategies (for example, combining snowball sampling with targeted outreach in community centers, mosques, or social media groups popular with the youth) to reduce network bias.
- **Incomplete Exploration of Code-Switching:** The dissertation intended to examine code-switching as a factor in language shift (a questionnaire section was devoted to this) but ultimately did not analyze it quantitatively due to insufficient data on that aspect. The discussion of code-switching remained largely qualitative and inconclusive. Since code-switching is a common phenomenon in French–Algerian communication (many Algerian dialect speakers mix French and Arabic), a more detailed analysis here would have been valuable. Future research could incorporate conversational recordings or targeted questions to capture code-switching frequency and contexts, allowing a deeper understanding of its role in the gradual shift.
- **Generational Categorization Nuances:** The study uses a clear-cut generation categorization (first = born in Algeria, second = born in France to at least one Algerian immigrant parent, third = at least one grandparent born in Algeria). One

minor critique is that within these broad categories, there may be diversity (e.g., age of arrival for first gen, or mixed heritage individuals in second/third gen). The analysis treats generations as fairly homogeneous groups. A more nuanced breakdown – for instance, considering **age of arrival** among the first generation (which ranged widely, some came as children vs. others as adults), or distinguishing third-generation individuals with one vs. two Algerian-origin parents – could reveal interesting intra-generational differences. This is a potential area for more fine-grained analysis, though the dissertation does note partner ethnicity and other factors, which partially addresses this concern.

Fulfillment of University Requirements for Doctoral Theses

In evaluating whether the dissertation meets the formal and scholarly requirements set by the University of Pannonia for a PhD thesis, the answer is unequivocally yes. First, the content of the dissertation represents an original research contribution, which is a fundamental requirement for any doctoral work. The candidate has identified a specific research gap (language maintenance among Algerians in France) and has addressed it through empirical study, thereby adding new knowledge to the field. The dissertation is of appropriate scope and depth for a PhD: it encompasses theoretical groundwork, a substantial data collection effort, and detailed analysis, demonstrating the doctoral candidate's capability to carry out independent research. The work shows the candidate's proficiency in applying research methodologies, from designing instruments to executing statistical tests, which satisfies the methodological training expectations of the doctoral program.

In conclusion, by all indicators – originality, depth, quality of writing, adherence to format, and ethical integrity – this dissertation meets the standards and requirements of the University of Pannonia for a PhD thesis. It stands as a competent piece of scholarly work that embodies the level of accomplishment expected of a doctoral candidate. The research has been carried out and presented in a manner that is fully compliant with academic norms, thereby qualifying it for consideration for the award of the PhD degree.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, *“Language Maintenance and Language Shift among Algerian Arabic Speakers in France”* by Zahia Flih is a comprehensive and well-executed doctoral dissertation that significantly contributes to our understanding of heritage language dynamics in immigrant communities. The work's strengths – in its choice of topic, methodological rigor, engagement with literature, and clarity of presentation – far outweigh its few limitations. The dissertation provides valuable insights into how a large Arab diaspora in Europe negotiates language choices across generations, blending quantitative evidence with qualitative depth to present a nuanced picture of language shift. It meets the academic standards expected for a PhD in its field and adheres to the formal requirements of the University of Pannonia.

As the official reviewer, I am satisfied that the candidate has demonstrated the requisite scholarly competence, originality, and critical insight to merit the doctoral degree. I find the dissertation to be a solid piece of academic work, with only minor improvements possible, none of which detract from the overall quality of the research. Therefore, it is my recommendation that the dissertation be accepted. If the candidate successfully defends

this work in the public doctoral defense, I fully support the awarding of the PhD degree to Zahia Flih.

Berehove/Beregszász – Veszprém, September 20, 2025



István Csernicsekó