Why Do Minority Languages Persist? The Case of Circassian in Jordan

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Data-based analysis of the language situation among the Circassian ethnic minority group is presented in this paper. All internal, external, ethnopolitical, sociolinguistic and demographic factors influencing this situation are examined. It is argued that although most empirical evidence indicates a gradual process of ethnic language attrition and ultimate predictable loss at all levels, there are counter motivations that seem to curb this process. At a certain stage in the life of an ethnic group that has acquired some status and prestige, language may become only a symbol of distinction, identification and a carrier of heritage, without having a culture of its own or any pragmatic value; hence members like to talk about it expressing loyalty, but not necessarily to have it.

Keywords: Circassian, cultural heritage, distinctiveness, ethnopolitics, language maintenance, survival

Introduction

One of the most frequent themes of research on minority/ethnic immigrant languages has been the identification of the factors that accelerate language shift and those that inhibit it and favour language maintenance in such group contexts. This study will be informed by the models suggested by Edwards (1985), Fishman (many places e.g. 1977a, 1977b), Holmes et al. (1993), Bourhis (1979), Cho et al. (1997), Kakava (1997), Sole (1995) and Leets and Giles (1995). Fishman (in many places, esp. 1985) concludes that in most cases studied, language shift tends to occur and reach completion over the first three to four generations of immigrants and he outlines typical processes which may accelerate or constrain this language shift. In describing these processes, Fishman calls for more comparative work in other contexts to test the applicability of his principles (see also Al-Khatib, 2001; Dweik, 2000).

In this paper, the process of language shift, attrition or maintenance is investigated in the Circassian community in Jordan. The situation of the Circassian language in this ethnic minority will be described, with special emphasis on the main sociocultural and psychological factors that may determine its fate. Moreover, the interaction between the Circassians and their language on one side and with the host majority group and language on the other side will be examined to show the values this language represents for this ethnic group. Relevant methodological and theoretical issues such as the psychological, ethnopolitical and sociohistorical dimensions of ethnic identity (see Haarmann, 1986) will be raised throughout the study.
The recurrent themes will be: Circassian is still persistent, though it appears to be undergoing a gradual, albeit slow, process of language attrition, as long as the Circassians are still aware of the value of their native language and of the prestige of their ancestral cultural traditions and background; this has to be viewed in its proper ethnosociocultural context of (1) the passage of about 130 years since they first settled in the area, (2) the Circassians in Jordan, who, according to Circassian sources (see Barzaj, 1987, 1988, Biesch’a & Jaimoukha, 1998; Haghandouqa, 1985a, 1985b; Jaimoukha, 1998, among many others), have favourable conditions and distinguished social and political status, enjoy ‘unparalleled freedom of culture and expression envied by other Circassian communities in other countries’, and do not strive for national and political autonomy, (3) they have taken very advanced strides in the steady process of social, political and linguistic integration and assimilation into the majority Arab community, acquiring full Jordanian citizenship with all rights associated with this and their interests are well served, and (4) the ethnic language has lost most of its communicative needs. Despite all these factors, they (1) have managed all along to maintain, to a certain extent, their intergroup relations and preserve many aspects of their ethnic and cultural heritage through performing a variety of ethnic cultural activities which tend to mark and maintain Circassians’ solidarity and ethnic identification, and (2) still feel that their ethnic language is an integral part of their self-concept and identity. How does this ethnic identity relate to language maintenance? This study hopes to lend support to the ethnolinguistic principle that an ethnic language may have a symbolic value rather than a communicative one, and that it may mark the group off from the rest of the community.

Historical Background

The Circassians, non-Arab Sunni Muslim immigrants of Caucasian origin, were forced to flee their homeland in the second half of the 19th century, following the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and the oppression and persecution of the various Muslim groups in that area. Consequently, there was a southward emigration of Caucasian Muslim tribes encouraged by the Ottoman Sultan, Abdel Hamid. Some settled in Turkey, others in Syria and Palestine, and the rest were settled in what was known as Trans-Jordan (see Musa, 1985; Obeidat (nd)).

Ostensibly, they fled the area out of religious fear as reported by Haghandouqa (1985b) and Jaimoukha (1998). The first wave of immigrants arrived in Jordan in 1878 (see Haghandouqa, 1985b for detailed history), followed by successive waves until 1908-1912. Neutral unofficial sources (see for example, Sahawnnoh, 1986) indicate there are between 40,000 and 70,000 of them and they consist of several tribes or groups which speak different dialects of the same language, i.e. Adyghe.

The Ottoman’s motive for settling them in Jordan is subject to speculation: Shami (1982) refers this to agricultural purposes; other sources stress the security concerns. Patai (1958) suggests, besides religious considerations, strategic purposes: to act as buffer zones against Bedouin attacks. Haghandouqa (1985a: 40) maintains that ‘... the Ottoman government, when
settling Circassians considered security affairs ... in an effort to deal with the various problems it was facing in the area.' Their settlement distribution patterns, i.e. in seven areas: Amman, Sweileh, Wadi Issir, Na’ur, Jerash, Zerqa and Ruseifa, reflect in part this security and availability of water concerns (see Haghandouqa, 1985a for analysis). Furthermore, when they first arrived in the area they brought with them an organised system of administration, police force and developed methods of agriculture and craftsmanship; so around 1908, being brave warriors, the Circassians were entrusted with the safeguard of the Hijaz railroad under the leadership of Merza Pasha, who was also later entrusted by Prince Abdullah with the formation and the command of the newly formed cavalry force in the newly emerging Emirate of Jordan in 1921. This seems to have given them the first trace of power, authority and status in the area, which continued to rise with the establishment and development of the state of Jordan. Throughout their life in Jordan, many of them have occupied important government positions at all levels, e.g. prime ministers, ministers, deputies, army and police chiefs, and have always seen themselves as co-founders of the country, as they have contributed to the development and growth of the small settlements into full cities and towns. Accordingly, all along they have enjoyed full citizenship rights and duties. They have been a distinguished group of landlords with proven loyalty to the country and to the regime.

When they first settled in Jordan, the Circassians lived in closed homogeneous settlements and had few contacts with the natives, which enabled them to retain all their ethnic traits, including language. Up to 1948 there were areas in Amman, aside from the other Circassian settlements, which were clearly ethnically Circassian. However, this dominance started to abate gradually with the flooding of waves of natives and a flux of Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Consequently, they lost this concentration and in some cases become minorities in their former predominantly Circassian areas. Some even moved to other geographical areas following the new socioeconomic trend of housing.

Significance of Study

The Circassian situation is important to study because it is quite interesting and it may contribute a lot to the theoretical framework of language and identity. We are dealing here with an ethnic group that was forced to flee its homeland in the form of ‘collective emigration’ and settled in many neighbouring countries, e.g. Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan. Thus the situation is ideal for intercultural comparative studies. In some communities, e.g. Turkey, they have been forced to assimilate by laws and regulations; in others they have more freedom and so they still have their distinctive entity and enjoy some of their ethnic rights, e.g. Jordan (see for example Musa, 1985; Sahawneh, 1986), while in others they have already voluntarily and naturally fully assimilated and integrated and have lost almost all their ethnic features, including language, e.g. Egypt.

The Circassians in Jordan are even more interesting to study as we are here dealing with a small ethnic group which views itself as distinguished in its
history (see above). They have enjoyed a favoured status at the highest level in the newly emerging state. In addition, they have been accepted by the host community and have been in the process of full assimilation to the extent that they consider themselves as having a double, but not totally divided loyalty. This is ideal ground to test (1) Edwards (1985) arguments regarding the relation between language maintenance or loss and ethnic identity, and (2) Giles et al.’s (1977) theories regarding the vitality of ethnic groups and language behaviour.

Data Sources

Data used in this research came from the following sources.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions eliciting information about all dimensions of language use, with an open question at the end for comments (in addition to biographical information) was given to 250 randomly chosen members of the Circassian community representing the various socioeconomic categories (see Table 1 and Appendix 1).

Interviews

Complementary to the questionnaire, five older (60 and above) and five younger (in their 20s) members of the community were interviewed to get some authentic information about the historical background and community attitudes towards their language and identity. Informants were encouraged to speak freely on a number of relevant issues. They were approached in their residence through other members of the community, i.e. relaxed contexts.

Language surveys

A random sample of 50 families was chosen. The basic question asked was who among the members of the same family speak, read and/or write Circassian and to what degree of command? The responses then were recorded and tabulated in Table 7. This survey provided information about various generation groups within the same family; thus valid generalisations, regarding change across generations can be made.

Findings

Data analysis of responses to Question 1 shows that all respondents command the three skills of Arabic, with varying degrees corresponding to age and education, and that their command of Circassian in all skills is much weaker than that of Arabic. Furthermore, there are clear skill and age patterns of distribution: the majority speak Circassian but few can read or write it (see Table 2).

An important theoretical question can be raised here: are written languages more likely to survive longer than spoken ones? Circassian is mainly a spoken language (only 20% can read and write Circassian) and this will have an
Table 1  Distribution of informants by sex, age and education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td></td>
<td>0–15</td>
<td>16–30</td>
<td>31–44</td>
<td>45–n</td>
<td>0–15</td>
<td>16–30</td>
<td>31–44</td>
<td>45–n</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>97</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>251</td>
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<td>Age</td>
<td>Arabic %</td>
<td>Circassian %</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Read</td>
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<td>63</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–44</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–?</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>8–15</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–30</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–44</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–?</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
impact on its fate. The degrees reported here should not be taken literally absolute because in such contexts respondents tend to exaggerate their knowledge and subjective reactions. If someone knows a few words in the language and understands few sentences or routine expressions, he may consider himself a good speaker of the language; yet, he cannot carry on a conversation in the language. The results then can only give us indications of possible trends.

In response to the more general Question 2: Do you speak Circassian?, the majority of respondents report that they speak it with varying degrees of fluency: 50% excellent, 39% good, while only 6% weak; again, the age pattern is quite clear, as shown in Table 3.

When language skills are considered in investigating the ethnic language use, the differences are certainly significant, as is clear in Table 4. Language is used mainly in speaking but seems to be very weak in reading and writing skills.

One quick remark must be made here: as the members of this community grow older (though all are third or more generations), they tend to learn/acquire the ethnic language. Language use seems to be part of the ethnic acculturation process.

Responses to Questions 3: Where did/do you learn Circassian? and 4 regarding domains of language use: Where do you use Circassian, show that home is the main source of language learning and the main domain of language as expressed by about 95% of informants. Such a limited source may ultimately lead to the weakening of its native acquisition. When home is the only source of language knowledge and use, with the exclusion of the street and peer groups, it is more likely that outside pressure will offset home influence. Once children outgrow the institutional framework and restrictions of the family, they will abandon the language altogether, or will use a distorted form of it.

Keindler et al. (1995) similarly found that Circassians in the village of Kafr Kama, a predominantly Circassian village, use Circassian at home and in the village, Hebrew at school and work, and Arabic in religion and mass media. However, while Keindler et al. (1995) found that Circassian is used almost categorically among younger speakers at home and in the streets of the village, the majority of Circassians in Jordan, especially the young ones, reported that they do not use Circassian in the streets and that even at home they frequently resort to codeswitching. Older speakers complain that in many cases they use Circassian when talking to their children but the young ones reply in Arabic. Furthermore, many younger informants said that when they talk to each other they use Arabic but when talking to older members in the family they use Circassian. This shows that the ethnic language is not totally dominant in its traditional domain, i.e. home (cf. Holmes et al., 1993 for similar documented patterns).

Table 3 Do you speak Circassian?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>8–15</th>
<th>16–30</th>
<th>31–44</th>
<th>45 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (%)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Question 5 regarding interlocutors, Circassian is mainly used with family members with increasing with age: 84% with grandparents, 72% with parents, 44% with brothers and sisters, 31% with Circassian friends, only 23% with Circassian strangers and none with non-Circassians.

Responses to Question 6 regarding the relation between language use and the topic, interlocutors and setting reveal that 86% use it at family talks and gatherings. However, the frequency correlates with the topic: more when talking about family affairs and daily issues but less in talking about more formal topics, such as religion, politics and business. In addition, face-to-face interaction seems to increase the use of the language, with 40%, while only 20% use it in telephone calls. The setting is also a factor: 24% use Circassian on public ethnic occasions, while 84% do so in more private settings.

Question 8: Why do you use Circassian? is meant to show the main social and psychological motivations for using Circassian. All respondents were asked to list all the possible factors that motivate them to use Circassian. Responses show that the ethnopsychological and cultural factors are the main motivations for maintaining Circassian, as is clear in Table 5.

Language here is viewed as a means of maintaining communal (macro) values, rather than individual ones, such as personal identification, self-expression or ease of usage. It is evident that language maintenance is equated with ethnicity maintenance and identification. However, can the loss of ethnic language lead to the loss of identity?

### Table 4
Circassian knowledge in the three skills (speaking, reading and writing) for all speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent (%)</th>
<th>Good (%)</th>
<th>Weak (%)</th>
<th>None (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5
Why do you use Circassian (%)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors/motivations</th>
<th>% for each factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out of respect to Circassian interlocutors</td>
<td>47 (112/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage preservation</td>
<td>76 (183/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment and group identification</td>
<td>78 (186/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal identification</td>
<td>26 (62/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better self-expression</td>
<td>19 (46/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of your interlocutors’ criticism</td>
<td>4 (09/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easier than other languages</td>
<td>11 (27/240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other motives</td>
<td>8 (19/240)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, when the results were broken down according to residential areas, it was found that these ethnic factors are more powerful in rural areas, typically conservative with heavy Circassian concentration, than in urban areas. In general, the ethnic language is used more in these rural areas than in the more urban areas.

Although about 24% of informants express more practical motivations and report that they shift from the ethnic language as it is not practically useful in wider communication and does not help in social or job upward mobility or advancement and it is only limited to the ethnic boundaries, the majority (76%) admits that although it is not practically very useful they see it as useful symbolically and nationally. At the same time, they are keen on maintaining normal relations with the majority community and assimilating socially and linguistically. Arabic is used categorically and fluently without an accent and all ethnic clubs, societies and organisations are not exclusively ethnic.

Questions 9 and 10: How do you feel when you use Circassian and How do you feel when you use Arabic?, respectively, serve to test the community’s/individuals’ attitudes towards both languages. The results, as shown in Table 6, indicate that Circassian is mostly valued as a source of pride and collective commitment.

This lends support to Keindler et al. (1995), who found that Circassians in the village of Kafr Kama consistently ranked Circassian the highest on questions of prestige (Abstract). However, Circassians in Jordan seem to be divided in their obligation towards the two languages: 58% of them feel that it is their duty to use Arabic and 48% of them feel that it is also their duty to use Circassian. So, despite the fact that they have strong favourable attitudes toward Circassian and are concerned about its survival, they are keen on pointing out that there is no conflict between identifying oneself as Circassian and Jordanian at the same time.

To shed more light on the previous significant issue, Question 11 was asked: Do you think it is necessary for the members of the community to know Circassian? About 91% responded positively, with about 70% of them indicating a strong wish to specialise in Circassian in higher education, if available. Yet, a smaller minority take a more practical approach and believe that it is more useful to spend time learning a useful international language like English rather than wasting time learning Circassian.

Typically, ethnic languages are the first to be acquired. However, among Circassian in Jordan, Arabic is mostly acquired natively first. In some families, Circassian may be acquired simultaneously with Arabic; yet, the majority prefers to teach it to their children at a later stage.

The family survey is used to test the linguistic situation in the main locus of the ethnic language usage with the idea of getting a view of the progression of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pride</th>
<th>Duty</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Embarrassment</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circassian</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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</table>
shift and/or maintenance across generations. Roughly speaking, the results of the family sample show similar patterns of language use and maintenance, as shown in Table 7.

The age progression pattern is clear where ethnic language is being gradually abandoned by the younger generation within the same family. However, this pattern may be interpreted by claiming that the psychocultural motivations of using the ethnic language grow stronger as the individuals grow older, which is typical of acculturation processes where the young ones learn and acquire cultural norms as they grow older. How long this pattern may go on is difficult to predict.

To examine other aspects of ethnic language use, personal names in 51 randomly chosen families were studied, as names can be considered as an important culture and ethnicity carrier (cf. Abd-el-Jawad, 1986). From 291 names given to all the members of these families, only 19.7% are ethnic names. Yet, some of these are quite common among non-Circassians as well. Similarly, in many other semantic fields, including traditional ones, e.g. food and other domestic affairs, Arabic is used predominantly in these fields. The only area where one expects to find more Circassian than Arabic is in folklore. But even here, it is only the older people who use Circassian, while the younger ones tend to use Arabic more often.

In summary, based on data analysis, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Circassians command the majority language skills more than they command their ethnic one.
2. Ethnic language is orally maintained in ethnic domains with community members.
3. Knowledge of the ethnic language seems to grow with the members’ age.
4. Home is the only source of learning Circassian in this community.
5. Ethnic language is maintained at the societal level more than at the individual level, and as a symbol of ethnic identification and cultural heritage more than as an interactional and communicative tool.
Ethnic geographic concentration/dispersion contributes to language maintenance.

The Circassians have a favourable attitude towards their ethnic language as they see it as a source of pride, commitment and symbol of identification.

Arabic has become vital for communicative, integrative and instrumental purposes, thus gaining dominance over the ethnic language at all levels of users, usage and domains.

In the next section interpretation of these results will be attempted in the relevant theoretical contexts, trying to isolate the main factors that are conducive to language shift and those that seem to reverse this shift.

Discussion

In talking about the shift progression in ethnic languages, Holmes et al. (1993: 8), echoing Fishman (1985), suggest that ‘the community language does not disappear from a person’s linguistic repertoire overnight. Rather, as Fishman’s model suggests, it slowly retreats from more social settings or domains as the community members are required to use the majority language with majority group members in those domains.’

The analysis of Circassian in Jordan as a language situation of a small, vital, nonterritorial ethnic group shows that its unique conditions impose on it some sort of divided loyalty and accordingly two opposing, yet justified, patterns of language behaviour. On the one hand, the members of this group opt for adopting the majority language in almost all situations at the expense of their ethnic language. Their life economic, political and social interests rest in and are served well by this majority language. On the other hand, the same members are psychologically, culturally, cognitively and socially motivated to maintain their minority language as a symbol of ethnic attachment and commitment, solidarity and cultural heritage; it represents a symbolic value, a preserver of heritage and a distinction marker. Certainly, this explains the persistence and survival of this ethnic language despite the passage of a long time.

In a study of ethnic and/or minority languages, several important issues, which may have a direct impact on the linguistic behaviour of the community, have to be considered. These include (1) demographic factors such as the number, distribution, jobs and marriage patterns, (2) institutional factors, e.g. is it an official, national or only a local ethnic language? Does the group receive fair institutional representation and support? (3) communicative factors, e.g. is there a problem of communication among groups? Is the native ethnic language needed for any form of communication? (4) status and vitality of the ethnic group and its relation with the majority one, and (5) the social changes happening to the group, e.g. urbanisation, age/generation changes.

Minority groups tend to maintain some of their ethnic features, especially language, when they are considered lower than the other groups or are discriminated against and feel threatened. Even within the same speech community, low prestige varieties of the same language may persist for some
time as a symbol of local or ethnic identification. However, when the small group enjoys a distinguished social and political status and power, its language could still persist. To understand the Circassian situation properly, a full view of the Circassian community should be provided with all the favourable and nonfavourable factors of language shift or maintenance. Among the factors that seem to shape the Circassian existence, status and probable future are the following.

**Pragmatic factors**

Circassians realise that their native ethnic language is not needed for job advancement or employment. It has no communicative function outside the domain of the local family or ethnic gatherings. It is only a *symbol* of identification and a *preserver* of cultural and ethnic heritage. Therefore, there is no instrumental motive for using or maintaining the language. These Circassians’ ‘dependency relationships’ (Fishman, 1985) make it a determining factor in language use and maintenance: the majority of the community’s social and interactional needs cannot be fulfilled by the ethnic language.

**Community awareness**

In general, the status of ethnic language may go through a period of fluctuation where conflicting or opposing factors are at play: there may be a phase of what may be called ‘resurgence’. In this regard, Fishman (1985) maintains that the ethnic language revival efforts may often begin in the third generation of immigrants. The recent resurgence of Circassian language awareness (as reported by many informants who seem to be concerned about the danger of the loss of the ‘fathers’ language’, and the younger members showing more interest and enthusiasm in learning it) is a case in point. This awareness may be only symbolic and psychological: many Circassians, for instance, express a wish that their children speak the language and some even showed a desire to study the language at college level.

**Use of ethnic language in the home domain**

Home is the main locus of ethnic language use in this community. However, many parents complain that they use Circassian in talking to their children who respond in Arabic or with a great amount of switching. Arabic is increasingly used at home, especially by younger members, some of whom are monolingual in Arabic (cf. Holmes *et al.*, 1993 for a similar case). What may determine the frequency of using the ethnic language is the individuals’ proficiency in this language. In fact, the majority of the Circassians find it easier to communicate in the majority language, i.e. Arabic, and so most of them use it in interactions with peer groups, even in the most ethnic domains, unless they are talking to elderly people, who seem to be acting as the ‘language protectors’. Even those who claim to know Circassian are neither fluent nor carry on a conversation in it, while some can understand it but cannot speak. Proficiency in the native language is required for maintaining and using it at home. Holmes *et al.* (1993: 16) explain similar trends, saying that ‘use of the ethnic language in the home by children as well as parents is
essential for maintaining language proficiency, on the one hand, while proficiency in the ethnic language is a prerequisite for such interaction on the other.’

**Interethnic marriage**

Traditionally there is resistance to intermarriage and a preference for endogamy on the part of Circassians themselves. However, the constraint does not always hold. Many Circassian women are married to Arabs, though fewer Arab women are married to Circassians. This has contributed to increasing assimilation, which has influenced the fate of the ethnic language and attachment to it. Circassian mothers either fail or are not enthusiastic in many cases to pass their ethnic language to their Arab children, and similarly, non-Circassian mothers have neither learnt Circassian nor encouraged their children to do so. It goes without saying that those who marry from outside the ethnic group are more likely to lead in language shift and that their children be less users of the minority ethnic language and thus will gradually lose it. Interethnic marriage clearly accelerates shift to the majority language.

**Religious motivations**

Being Sunni Muslims, the Circassians share with the majority many cultural and religious values. Thus, Circassians do not have their own religious organisations or places. The sense of belonging to a Muslim nation is supposed to be parallel to or supersede all other loyalties or affiliations. This often plays down any negative attitudes towards the majority language, Arabic, or conflict between the two languages. Thus, the religious factor can be seen as an opposing factor to the maintenance of the minority language as it tends to promote the use of the majority language, Arabic being the holy language of Islam.

**Official policies**

In Jordan, there are neither official policies or restrictions against minority or ethnic communities, other than the general national policies, nor bans on their cultural and social activities. The Circassians are not discriminated against. They enjoy full citizenship rights and are considered Jordanian nationals according to Circassian sources (e.g. Haghandouga, 1985b; Jaimoukha, 1998). They are represented at all levels of government offices and occupy key positions in the army and police force and have their parliament representation. However, stressing national unity and integrity, the official policies stipulate that minority languages are not to be used officially at any level, including education, and all minority groups are required to use Arabic as the official language. To many Circassians, this is a moral commitment: being part of or associated with the higher authorities and policy makers, they have to be exemplars in executing official laws and policies.
Education

Educationally, all state as well as private educational institutions use Arabic (and in some cases English) as the official language of instruction. No minority language is recognised officially. Community educational institutions are minimal, aside from possible nurseries, kindergartens and day care centres that may be affiliated with the welfare associations and clubs. It was only in 1973 that the first private Circassian School associated with the charitable society, which was later named Prince Hamza School, was established in Amman; but even in that school, Circassian has not been the official language of instruction; it is only taught as a school subject like any other foreign language. Ironically, Circassian used to be taught in Arabic, which is also used by students outside the classrooms. This school is not even ethnically exclusive: it is open to all students from all ethnic groups. It is well documented (see Holmes et al., 1993: 14) that ‘support for the community schools is not enough on its own to prevent language shift’. These schools, if they exist in appropriate number and distribution, can contribute to language maintenance together with other factors. Thus we can conclude that the impact of educational institutions in this case is limited and minimal.

Geographical and social mobility (residential contiguity)

The once homogeneous, majority-Circassian-inhabited enclaves are now mixed, with the Circassians constituting only a tiny fraction of the population. Similarly, like all other communities in the area, the Circassians are on the move from their earlier closed settlements to more metropolitan urban centres (undergoing the ongoing process of urbanisation and modernisation). This has contributed to their gradual abandonment of their distinguishing cultural patterns, and to their steady assimilation into the mainstream culture. Socially, they have mostly abandoned their traditional jobs, such as agriculture and handicrafts, and have assumed high-ranking government positions and become army, police and security officers, businessmen, executives or landlords. For some of them, the adoption of a new set of values and loyalties to the new social class, i.e. wealthy middle and upper classes, may weaken ethnic loyalty. Jaimoukha (1998: 1) reports that ‘As a result of geographical dispersion, Circassian has ceased to be the principal language of communication among the Circassians. Only a small percentage of parents choose to teach it to their children.’ What has accelerated this shift from the ethnic language is the ‘rapid modernization of young Circassians and their participation in the socioeconomic development of Jordan has led to rapid assimilation’.

Yet, in more rural settings, they still maintain their ethnic predominance, which explains the high rating of using the ethnic language in some of these residential areas (this is in line with Kindler et al., 1995; al-Wer, 1999).

Assimilation and integration

The integration of the minority community with/in the majority community is also another important factor: do the members of the former consider themselves as integral members of the wider community and do the latter in turn also accept the minority group and recognise them. Circassians consider
themselves as Jordanians and Arabic as their national language. This ‘process of Jordanisation’, which has been constitutionally required since the emergence of the Arab Emirate of Jordan in 1926, may ultimately lead to identity erosion and language shift. The Circassians have taken an active role in this process and started assimilating into the new entity.

**Orientation to the homeland**

Prior to the disintegration of the ex-Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of the independent states, very few members of this community had contacts with homeland or had any orientation to return home. Like most other Muslim immigrant groups moving from different parts of the Muslim world during the time of the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians have settled down and taken the new places as their homeland. Very few Circassians now have expressed any desire to return home or have ever gone there even to visit. However, in the last decade following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, some sort of ‘home awareness’ has emerged and some of them have started going there regularly to visit. Yet, very few express any desire to stay there, at least at present. Thus they have no positive orientation towards homeland, as immigration had stopped in the first decade of last century and ever since then they had limited contact with the homeland until the 1990s.

**Attitudes and ethnic identity**

The positive attitudes towards Circassian and the high value placed on it in relation to ethnic identity are certainly the most conducive factors to language maintenance. Circassians feel that their ethnic language is the central factor of their cultural identity. Once language is seen as ‘“a core cultural value”, people are more likely to maintain the language longer, despite the pressures of the majority group and its culture’ (Holmes *et al.*, 1993: 16). Two relevant theoretical questions can be raised here:

(1) Do all members of the minority group have similar attitudes? The answer is, of course, negative. Collectively, however, the speech community must share similar broad attitudes and norms of interpretations, which are always in the interests and welfare of the group as a whole.

(2) Is there a horizontal relationship between attitudes to language and ethnic group membership? Despite the strong emotional, national and nostalgic attitudes, very little is actually done to translate these into realities. This is typical of the situation in subjective reaction tests where people may strongly believe in something and have strong feelings towards it, but in reality they do not do it themselves. Anderson (1979) rightfully maintains that despite their very positive attitudes towards their mother tongues, not all ethnic group members favour its usage. One valid theoretical claim can be emphasised here: language may act as a defining characteristic of ethnic group membership, but it is not always possible to equate language with membership. In some cases, a separate ethnic identity is maintained, even though the distinctive
language may be lost. Awareness of ethnicity is not always accompanied by language distinctiveness (see Dorain, 1980, 1994).

Another issue arises here, namely, how intergroup relations affect their attitudes towards language and influence ethnic language awareness. The relations between the Circassian and the Arab groups are generally favourable: there is mutual respect and acceptance among all groups, without noticeable hostile attitudes or negative feelings, no degradation or superiority on the part of the majority or inferiority, marginalisation or subordination among the minority group members, and no overt desires to create ethnic boundaries or distinctiveness. In case of cultural differences, the two groups do not seek to accentuate these differences; it is true that the Circassian language is not granted an official status; yet, the Circassians themselves are officially recognised and they enjoy considerable social, cultural, political and economic rights that the majority group may not enjoy. Because of this, they rarely show any form of autonomy, separation or independence movements or even a desire to return to their native homeland.

Probably, the outcome of all the previous factors is a gradual and steady process of assimilation. Biesch’a and Jaimoukha (1998: 1) maintained ‘the Circassians in the Diaspora, having been divorced from their original culture for more than a century, have undergone tremendous linguistic and cultural assimilation in their adoptive societies.’ This will ultimately lead to the weakening of language as a component of ethnicity. In this regard Ross (1979: 6) states that ‘... A requisite for assimilation is the adoption of the language of the dominant group.’

Generally speaking, the majority, if not all, of the Circassian population have already assimilated with the mainstream where Arabic is the main language. Other than family pressure, children are not highly motivated to learn Circassian. Serious efforts are exerted by parents to motivate children to learn it, but such efforts are not very rewarding despite any contrary claims. The absence of institutional instruction, official policies and daily use of the language outside home has laid the responsibility for teaching the language and maintaining it on the shoulders of the family through oral tradition. Such family efforts will not be adequate to protect language from decline or to be taken seriously by the children. In other words, the young generation has more competence in Arabic than in their ethnic language. It is reasonable then to predict a language shift.

It is true that all these environmental, demographic and attitudinal factors are important, but the ethnic groups’ value systems, cognitive views, psychological needs, and positions and status are equally important to consider (cf. Fase et al., 1995).

Based on the analysis so far, one can deposit transitional constructs/systems encompassing their own basic language patterns and norms and representing simultaneously both the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions. These include (1) Pattern 1: monolingualism where Circassian dominates. Historically, at the early stages of the Circassian settlement in Jordan, they used Circassian for quite sometime both symbolically and communicatively. (2) Pattern 2: there is a transitional stage of bilingualism.
The subsequent generations, i.e. those who were born and raised in Jordan were mostly bilingual or multilingual speakers. However, some are only monolingual speakers of Arabic, and hence the beginning of Stage 3. (3) Monolingualism in Arabic: the ethnic language is going through a stage of decline and may ultimately disappear over generations. It is receding to very limited domains and surviving psychologically rather than physically. Yet, the shift could be arrested at any stage and we may end up having a ‘stable situation’ of bilingualism.

Linguistically speaking, for an ethnic language to survive in a community, it may be more feasible to be (1) documented, not only orally passed, (2) standardised, or having a variety acting as a standard reference point, (3) institutionally supported, and (4) in contact with the native language in its native homeland. Languages maintained through oral tradition may be abandoned until they die out or diverge extensively until they become mutually unintelligible. Ultimately, using them may grow more and more difficult and impractical to the extent that this may cause a possible breakdown in communication (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak, 1994). The majority of Circassians are illiterate in their language. In addition, Circassian does not have a documented standard, even in its homeland before the Circassians came to Jordan. The Circassians belong to various tribes, each of which used to have its own variety, lacking a unified standard variety (see Colarusso, 1975 for a language profile in these areas). In the absence of any formal or even private language institutions, which are concerned with the preservation, teaching and standardisation of the language, one can easily predict the ultimate future of such a language.

More importantly, native language is weak at home. The Circassian language(s) in the native homeland were marginalised under the domination of the former Soviet Union. The policy of Russification, according to Landau (1996), has weakened the position of local and ethnic languages in the different parts of the former Soviet Union. Even after the dissolution, the newly emerging states have not yet recovered from the previous policies or succeeded in developing or adopting clearly defined national language policies. ‘Russian is still the only language that many of the ethnic groups [...] have in common’ (Landau, 1996: 135). Bridges (1995: Abstract) states that in the Adyge Republic ‘70% of the population are still Russian-speaking, with less than 0.1% claiming to speak Adyge (or Circassian)’. As native language has almost disappeared in the centre, how about the peripheral areas? The simplest linguistic principles assume that if languages suffer in the centre, most likely their varieties will suffer in the periphery. We can also add that if a language does not develop (i.e. is trapped or arrested) and flourish in the centre, the peripheral varieties will certainly suffer and will be threatened and they will lack a frame of reference.

The existence and survival of an ethnic group as a distinct one may depend on the ethnic boundaries (psychological or otherwise) separating it from other groups. Leets and Giles (1995: 44) maintain, ‘The minority language will additionally be affected by whether or not minority group members perceive their in-group boundaries to be permeable or non-permeable.’ Closed boundaries increase language attachment and language maintenance. The
Circassians who used to be a homogeneous concentrated group earlier last century have been undergoing a steady process of geographical dispersion, intermarriage and social mobility. The breakdown of the traditional Circassian settlements and the continuous process of urbanisation and the demographic restructuring will certainly contribute to ‘language breakdown’ too. The once homogenous community (fertile soil for language maintenance) has been turning into a heterogeneous one (fertile soil for language shift). The boundaries are also weakened by the political and institutional policies followed in the community at large. In general, the boundaries are thinning. Language shifting has permeated all aspects of life and communicative functions of the ethnic language.

However, official policies may, inadvertently, probably indirectly, motivate ethnicity and/or tribalism boundaries. In this case, language may become a strong ethnic or group marker and symbol of identification. For example, in the parliament representations in Jordan, the Circassians are given a prescribed quota in the areas they live in. They are thus treated as a ‘different’ or ‘distinct’ group, which should have its own entity. This tends to strengthen ethnic loyalty and distinctiveness. As they are treated differently, they may behave accordingly. Such policies are bound to reinforce and deepen separation and ethnic awareness and some moral commitment of the members to adhere to the group values and status. Language is but one of these distinguishing factors.

Politically speaking, the small Circassian group is a very influential and powerful group. Thus they do not have to worry about symbols of status or social achievement. On the other hand, the Circassians, being a vital group (to use Giles et al.’s, 1977 terms), are expected to give vitality to their language. ‘The more vitality a linguistic group has, the more likely it will survive and thrive as a collective entity in an intergroup context.’ (Giles et al., 1977: 308). However, most respondents admit that their language does not have any national or international vitality. It is not then a requirement for social or job mobility or prestige (cf. Giles, 1979: 259). However, this group’s vitality may often cause them to behave as a distinct group and try to employ different signs of showing this distinctiveness. The use of language can be one of these symbols of distinctiveness. To them, the ethnic language can be a distinction marker used for establishing them as a collective influential and distinguished social group.

Another relevant factor is the social structure of Jordanian society itself. The tribe is still considered a very powerful social unit in this society. So tribal affiliation is normal and the individuals often feel that their status, power and prestige may be derived from the tribe they belong to. Tribalism is persistent and often tends to control the social relations among groups despite the continuous calls for otherwise. Tribal affiliation is still significant and may provide the individual members with some sort of social status and power and some solidarity. The Circassians may find themselves motivated to have strong solidarity and some ethnic or tribal awareness. Language maintenance is but one such symbol of distinctiveness, unity and solidarity in the face of other tribes.
Ethnic conflicts may also deepen ethnic awareness. In Jordan, the Circassians are not discriminated against. They are an accepted group with no individual or collective conflicts or threats against them. Although they seem to have retained some of their traditional cultural traits, they have adopted the cultural norms of the majority. In addition, they are religiously motivated to know and respect Arabic. In general then, there are no ethnic or linguistic conflicts between the Circassians and the majority group. It is natural then that their language maintenance efforts may become weaker in the absence of any conflicts or challenges from the dominant group.

The way the minority group views itself in relationship and comparison with the majority one may be decisive in ethnic language and identity maintenance. If ethnic groups feel socially, culturally, historically and/or economically inferior to the majority, they may either tend to react negatively by adhering to their ethnic language to compensate for their inferiority, or suppress this and try to adopt the majority’s values. The Circassians do not see themselves as inferior to the rest of the community but as a superior and distinct community. They seem to use language to mark them off and express their identity as a remarkable group. Many informants reported that Circassian is a great and wonderful language and they added that they use Circassian to identify themselves as Circassians who are proud and distinguished among all groups. Thus, despite their strong conviction that their language is of no practical or communicative use, they still maintain it and are keen at all levels to keep it.

Similarly, the psychological and social nature of the majority group and their reception of ethnic groups are also important factors in determining the fate of ethnic languages. At least three patterns can be located: at one end of the scale, some communities appear to be more receptive to minority and ethnic groups (digestive); at the other end, others are less receptive, more conservative, sensitive and more aware of the existence of such groups (repulsive). In between, some societies do not absorb the ethnic groups easily, but do not at the same time impose assimilation on them or refuse them (accommodating/tolerant). The Circassians in Egypt, for instance, have almost completely melted and integrated into the Egyptian society to the extent that many Egyptians are unaware of the existence of any Circassians. Egyptian society tends to absorb minorities and ethnic groups easily. However, the Circassians in Turkey are forced to assimilate and integrate because the official policies restrict their activities and ethnic existence. Consider, for instance, section 81 of law No. 2820 on political parties (22 April 1983) (cited in Skutnabb & Bucak, 1994: 356), which states: ‘It is forbidden to claim that there exist minorities in Turkey. It is forbidden to protect or develop non-Turkish cultures and languages.’ In Jordan, minority groups are well received and treated; yet they are distinct in many aspects. Thus this distinction may continue through the use of language.

According to the concept of intergroup cognitions based on the social identity approach as proposed by Leets and Giles (1995: 43ff), individuals seek a positive social identity, a positive self-concept based on their group memberships through social comparisons between their own and other
groups. They try to achieve ‘positive distinctiveness’ for their own group in order to protect and maintain their self-esteem as group members (p. 43). According to Leets and Giles, such intergroup cognitions are among ‘the most important sociopsychological dimensions affecting language outcomes . . .’ as some may create ‘an atmosphere more conducive to minority language survival while others will, in contrast, be more conducive to minority language non-survival’ (p. 43). In the Circassian ethnic minority, this intergroup cognition seems to be one of the strong factors determining their language maintenance. Intergroup dependency and solidarity are quite important at various times, especially in their social and geopolitical circumstances.

Conclusions

Language has a symbolic value for the community: they like to talk about it but not necessarily to use it. It is a cultural object retained from the old ancestry. This confirms the widely recognised sociolinguistics principle that language may become the main symbol of ethnicity, as stated by Fishman (1977a: 25). He adds that ‘language can become more than a means of communication, or even more than symbol of the ethnic message; indeed, it becomes a prime ethnic value . . .’ (p. 26). Similarly, Dorain (1980: 34) concludes: ‘so profound is the connection between language and ethnicity that it is possible to find a people using a language which few of them actually speak as a symbol of their separate ethnic identity.’

The majority of the informants’ comments indicate that their main motivation was nothing more than to preserve heritage. Language here is symbolic rather than communicative (see de Vries, 1995). The underlying general feeling seems to be simply an emotional and national one: their main concern is that it would be unfortunate if their language dies. Yet, language has never been a central issue or a subject of conflict in Jordan for the Circassians. They are content that their interests and welfare are better served by the majority language but not by their ethnic one.

In conclusion, the attachment to native language and its maintenance should not always be viewed as an act of challenge or refusal of the dominant language or culture. It may be symbolic, emotional and romantic. In fact, many Circassians reconsider this language issue and choice and emotional attachment in light of larger social, political and economic realities. They may have variable individual perceptions, with current universal processes such as democratisation, modernisation and postmodernism, urbanisation, and above all globalisation. Yet, the emotional and the human side will always exist in varying degrees in the face of these new waves of drastic transformations. The tale of Circassian in Jordan goes on. The seeds of ethnic language awareness are psychological and cognitive and are difficult to eradicate. If these seeds find a fertile soil they may grow and flourish; otherwise, they will continue in their quiet underground winter.

Resurgence of Circassian was expected following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Islamic Republics. However, nothing remarkable of the sort happened and the Circassians who are deeply rooted
in their new ‘homeland’ are unlikely to leave. The dilemma goes on: on the one hand, the majority feels that the native language is part of the cultural heritage and has to be maintained. But as this idea of homeland and old background is diminishing, then language will too. On the other hand, some realise that it is not practically useful or even necessary in a new changing world. There seems to be some sort of duality of loyalty: Circassianism and Jordanianism. The latter seems to be the stronger, and therefore there is no strong attachment to the native language in real practice despite all other claims to the contrary. In this regard, Edwards (1985: 64) notes that:

... language revival efforts can be seen as artificial when they operate in the face of historical realities ... It is not possible to bring about widespread language shift when appeal is made on the basis of abstractions like culture, heritage, or traditions. These are not of course, trivial or ignoble aspects of life, but they are not conscious priorities for most people.

Some typical reasons given by the respondents for the maintenance of their ethnic language are quite revealing, e.g. if everyone does not speak it, it will die; who has no language has no origin or background; it is a carrier of Circassian history and culture; it is the link with the past; it makes us feel proud of ourselves; it is a unifier of the community; our language guarantees and maintains our entity.

The future of Circassian is difficult to predict as long as it has ceased to be ‘an individual duty’; its fervour may fluctuate depending on the nature of relations between groups and the sociolinguistics and ethnopolitics of the whole community. If everything goes as is, Circassian is on the path of gradual loss, though it may persist for some time, as long as it remains ‘a collective duty’.

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References


Circassian as a Minority Language in Jordan

73


Appendix 1: Questionnaire

(An introductory statement and instructions)

Sex: (M) (F) Age: ____ Occupation: ________
Place of residence: ________ Education: ________

1. Language you know and the degree of knowledge in reading, writing and speaking (weak, good, excellent):
2. Do you speak Circassian? Yes____ No _____
If your answer is Yes, please answer questions 3–11.
3. Where have you learned Circassian?  a. at home  b. at a private
school  c. with a private tutor  d. from relatives ..............................
4. Where do you use Circassian?  a. at home  b. at the society/club  c. at
work   d. other places? Where ......................................................
5. With whom do you use Circassian?  a. parents  b. grand parents  c. brothers
and/or sisters  d. Circassian friends  e. other groups/people? Mention
them .................................................................................................
6. When do you use Circassian?  a. family conversations  b. when all partici-
pants are Circassians  c. When non-Circassians are present  d. when talk-
ing to Circassians older than you  e. when talking to peer group of the same
age  f. when talking on the phone with Circassians  g. on other occasions?
7. Do you use Circassian in writing? (do you write Circassian)? (yes) ___ (no)
IF YES, when ..............................................................
8. Why do you use Circassian?  a. out of respect for your interlocutors  b. to
preserve heritage  c. out of commitment  d. self-identification  e. you
can express yourself better in it than in other languages  f. out of fear and
criticism of you interlocutors  g. it is easier than other languages  h. other
reasons ........................................................................................................
9. How do you feel when use Circassian?  a. proud  b. duty  c. commit-
tment  d. embarrassment  e. other feeling ........................................
10. How do you feel when you use Arabic?  a. proud  b. duty (oblged)
(c. committed  d. embarrassed  e. other feeling ........................
11. Do you think that it is necessary for the Circassians to learn Circassian
language? (yes) ___ (no) ___
12. If there were a major in Circassian at the university, would you study
it and/or recommend your Children to do so? (yes) ____ (no) ____
Why ...........................................................................................................................
13. Do you find difficulty in using Arabic? (yes)____ (no)____
14. Do you speak Arabic fluently? (yes) ______ (no)____
15. Any other observations and comments related to the Circassian language
and its use in this community
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