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## Language Maintenance and Multilingual Education: The Case of the Circassian Language in Israel

Martin Isleem\*

### Abstract

*The goal of this study is to examine the maintenance of the Circassian language and its significance to Circassians in Israel. The study will also assess how this case supports theoretical notions related to the role of the school system, home and community in this process. Particularly, the study aims to challenge the theoretical notion that intergenerational transmission is the core player in the process of language maintenance. Other areas of examination include the manner in which the school system assists in maintaining the Circassian language, and under what conditions the Circassian schools would be able to reverse the process of language decay. One of the main conclusions of this study is that the official school system doesn't support the minority language as would be expected by the community, but rather prioritizes Hebrew over Circassian. However, the school staff and emerging leadership are seeking to make fundamental changes in the school curriculum to empower the Circassian language and culture.*

**Keywords:** *Minority Languages, Bilingualism, Language Change, Circassians, Hebrew.*

### Dilin Korunması ve Çok Dilli Eğitim: İsrail'de Çerkes Dili Örneği

#### Özet

*Bu çalışmanın amacı Çerkes dilinin korunmasını ve İsrail'deki Çerkesler için önemini incelemektir. Çalışma aynı zamanda bu örnek vakanın okul sistemi, ev ve topluluk hakkındaki teorik tartışmaları nasıl desteklediğini değerlendirecektir. Çalışma, özellikle, nesiller arası aktarımın dilin korunmasında oynadığı merkezi rol hakkındaki teorik fikre karşı çıkmaktadır. Bir diğer yanda ise okul sisteminin Çerkes dilinin korunmasına ne şekilde*

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*yardımcı olabilirdiği ve Çerkes okullarının hangi koşullar altında dilin kayboluşunu tersine çevirebileceğine odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın vardığı temel sonuçlardan biri resmi okul sisteminin topluluğun beklediği gibi azınlık dilini desteklemediği tersine İbranice'yi Çerkesçe'ye öncelendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ancak, okul çalışanları ve yeni yönetim Çerkes dilini ve kültürünü güçlendirmek için okul müfredatında köklü değişiklikler yapmak istemektedirler.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Azınlık dilleri, İki dillilik, Dil değişimi, Çerkesler, İbranice.

## **Introduction**

The demographic size of the Circassian community in Israel is very small. There are only about 4000 people, and the vast majority live in the townships of Kfar Kama in the lower Galilee, and Rehaniya in the upper Galilee on the Lebanese border.

Originally, Circassians are from the Northwest of Caucasus and are followers of the Sunni denomination of Islam. As a result of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the 1860s and 1870s, the survivors of this conquest were forced to migrate to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean which was ruled by the Ottoman Empire. A small community of the survivors settled in Palestine in the 1870s.

Circassians are native speakers of the Circassian (Adyghe) language, known as a spoken register that belongs to the North-West branch of the Caucasian family (Kreindler et al.). After the Russian revolution in 1917, the Cyrillic alphabet was adopted to represent the written form of the Circassian spoken language (Stern). The Circassian spoken language in Israel has been transmitted orally from one generation to another, and it was not until the late 1950s that the Circassian community in Israel learned of the existence of a written format of the Circassian spoken language, and that there are language textbooks created by the Soviet Union in standardized Cyrillic script (Kreindler et al.; Stern).

The spoken register seems to have been better maintained among the Circassian community in Israel than in other diaspora communities such as Turkey or Jordan (Abd-el-Jawad; Kreindler et al.; Bridges). There are many factors that contribute to the vitality of the spoken register among the Israeli Circassians. The Circassians in Israel seems

to have a very positive attitude toward their native language, the core dimension for cultural identity (Kreindler et al.). Another factor is that the Circassian community in Israel sets social, cultural, geographical and linguistic boundaries that separate it from the surrounding ethnic groups, Israeli-Jews and Israeli-Palestinians. For example, mixed marriages between Circassians and non-Circassians is not customary social behavior. At the same time, however, Circassians are very open to economic integration within the Israeli-Jewish sector (Spolsky and Shohamy) and because of this they value Hebrew for pragmatic reasons (Kreindler et al.).

Officially, the Israeli government welcomes the self-recognition of social and cultural particularism among the Circassian community, as well as integration within the Israeli culture. This recognition has been supported by several official policy actions. One of the major policy procedures that the community leadership requested was the enacting of an obligatory conscription law in 1958 requiring Circassian males to serve in the Israeli army alongside Israeli Jews and Druze males. By joining the Israeli army, the Circassian minority was set apart from the Israeli-Palestinian minority, and specifically from Muslim Arabs and the political ambitions of the Palestinian people. The conscription law also helped to increase the Circassians' Israeli civil status. The second major policy step was in 1977 and stemmed from the recommendations of an official committee in 1976. This committee was formed from representatives of the Ministry of Education, parents, teachers and local authority in Kfar Kama (Stern). One of the major outcomes of this committee was the adoption of Hebrew as the medium of instruction in schools in the township of Kfar Kama. The switch to Hebrew as a medium of instruction was not welcomed by all members of the Circassian community, especially older generations, while younger people were more supportive of this change (Stern).

As a result of this switch, today the Circassian school system is separated from the Arab school system, has been given new curricula, and is supervised by the Department of Druze and Circassian Education in the Ministry of Education.

The argument behind switching to Hebrew as a medium of instruction was that Circassian students would have a greater chance

of succeeding in the Hebrew-speaking high schools they attend after finishing middle school in their Circassian townships. Mastering Hebrew is also a key for academic and career success, due to the prestigious status of Hebrew and its symbolic power as the national language of Israel (Ben Rafael; Fishman; safran, 2005; Spolsky & Shohamy). It was also believed that this switch would enable the school administration to hire Hebrew-speaking teachers to fill the shortage of teaching positions in Circassian towns (Stern). However, part of the community was resistant to the switch, particularly those who live in Rehaniya, a town in which about 20% of its population are native Arabic speakers.

In 1977, the local council of the town of Kfar Kama decided to officially switch to Hebrew as the medium of instruction beginning in first grade in the primary school, while Rehaniya chose not to make that switch. In 1984 the local council of the township of Rehaniya decided to maintain Arabic as the main medium of instruction, but determined that science subjects such as biology and mathematics would be taught in Hebrew in the seventh and eighth grades. The Circassian language would be taught as a compulsory subject from 6th to 8th grade, for two hours each week (Kreindler et al.; Stern).

From the community's perspective the choice of Hebrew as a medium of instruction in Circassian schools was not enough to cause the Circassian language to lose its cultural significance and linguistic status as a medium of communication within the community. Moreover, the language has been maintained without having ever served as a medium of instruction in the Circassian schools.

It is true that maintaining the Arabic language as the medium of instruction would not assist with the maintenance of the Circassian language either, however the switch to Hebrew would be riskier and more likely to block the revitalization of the Circassian language due to the symbolic power of Hebrew and its capital in the linguistic market as the majority and national language of Israel.

One may argue that adopting Hebrew as the medium of instruction in Circassian schools is in fact a way to expand exposure to the majority language culture which may also lead to the fading of the use of the minority language.

However, Kreindler et al. (1995) argue that even though Hebrew was adopted as the official language of instruction, de facto Circassian language is used most of the time in the streets, homes and schools. This means that the language practice is what actually determines the ethnolinguistic vitality of the minority language rather than official educational policy. Scholars such as Sutton & Levinson (2001) and Spolsky (2011) argue that de facto policy that is practiced at the micro level, such as, in classrooms and homes by teachers and parents plays a more significant role than de jure policy in the maintenance of the minority language.

Fishman (1991) strongly argues that family is key for the language maintenance process, and schools cannot succeed 'without considerable and repeated societal reinforcement' (1991, p. 371) in teaching either first or second languages. The intergenerational transmission of language is expected to occur through family and is a core principle of Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). The GIDS is a continuum of 8 stages for evaluating language loss or disruption, and can provide guidance for efforts to preserve a language.

Although the use of a minority language at home is extremely important in language maintenance and revitalization, worldwide evidence shows that family efforts alone are not sufficient to carry out successful results (Kondo). The efforts of family and community should be accompanied by institutional efforts on language policy and language education if they are to support the vitality of indigenous and revitalized languages and the languages of immigrants (Hornberger). Therefore, the educational system and school play a crucial role in the process of language revitalization by promoting literacy and at the same time reinforcing oral verity and community culture at home (Hornberger & King; Hornberger; Paulston).

Another factor that is relevant to the discussion of the maintenance of minority languages is language ideology and the shared beliefs of minority members about their own language, the dominant language in the area, and other languages in society (Silverstein; Spolsky and Shohamy). These beliefs commonly are formed through a historical, political, sociolinguistic and cultural process that leads individuals to favor the use of a particular language,

as well as aspects and particular varieties of a language. In other words, the shared beliefs of minority members are influenced by macro level contexts.

Speakers of non-dominant languages often tend to favor the dominant language and the implementation of the dominant language in schools since it carries greater capital in the linguistic market. They believe that knowledge of the dominant language would open new opportunities for their children.

In this study, I seek to provide evidence from the case in Israel with regard to language practice and language ideology among the Circassian community and their role in maintaining the Circassian language. Moreover, the study aims to reveal the support offered by the school system in revitalizing the Circassian written language and maintaining the Circassian spoken language and culture, and whether or not this support is sufficient. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the overall views of the community on the maintenance of the Circassian language and the role of the educational system in this process. Another goal of this study is to offer suggestions and recommendations to the Circassian community in maintaining their native language.

### **Methods and Procedure**

This study took place in the Circassian town of Kfar Kama. The study utilized two methods in gathering the data: a questionnaire and personal interviews.

To shed light on how the Circassian community views and values the ethnolinguistic vitality of their native language and the role of the school system in this process, a self-administered questionnaire composed of 21 questions was distributed to a mailing list provided by the division of education in the town of Kfar Kama. The questionnaire included background questions such as gender, education, age, and a self-evaluation of proficiency in Circassian, Hebrew, Arabic and English in both written and spoken forms. Moreover, it contained questions concerning the importance of the Circassian, Hebrew and Arabic languages to the participants' identity and professional careers. The questionnaire also included questions intended to reveal Circassians' concerns about language loss and the role of the education system in maintaining the Circassian language.

The personal interviews were conducted in the Kfar Kama school and in the local municipality with a teacher of both the English and Arabic languages in the elementary school, and with a teacher of Circassian language and heritage who works in both the elementary and middle schools. The purpose of the interviews with these teachers was to learn about the status of the Circassian language in the school system, the challenges of teaching multiple languages to the students, their observations on students' language behavior in school, and their role as official and community agents in revitalizing and maintaining the Circassian language in the official setting of the school. In order to learn about the support of the local municipality in the process of maintaining the Circassian language in Kfar Kama, I conducted an interview with the municipal manager of Circassian education in the municipality of Kfar Kama.

## **Findings**

### ***Survey***

A total of 49 individuals participated in the survey, 34 females and 15 males. Forty-five (91.8%) of the participants are attending or have graduated from institutes of higher education, such as colleges, tech schools, teacher training colleges and universities. The study did not place limits on the participants' ages, however the age range of the participants who voluntarily participated in the survey was between 19 and 50. About 96% of the survey participants were between the ages of 19 and 42 and the vast majority of the participants were from Kfar Kama (91.8%) with only 3 participants residing outside of the town.

### ***Identity Self-definition***

In answering the question, 'how do you define yourself?' nineteen participants (38.8%) defined themselves as Muslim-Circassians, while fourteen participants (28.6%) defined themselves as Circassians only. Five (10.2%) of the participants chose the definition Circassian-Israeli, and seven (14.3%) participants chose the definition Circassian-Israeli-Muslim. Only one participant defined herself as Israeli only. Looking at these results from a different angle, it reveals that the Circassian identity component was chosen by almost 92% of the participants, thirty-three (57.3%) chose the Muslim identity component alongside



other identities, whereas only fifteen (30.7%) participants chose the Israeli identity component alongside other identities. For more details, see Table 1 below:

Table 1

*Participants' Self-definition Across Gender*

<b>Identity</b>	<b>Percent (N)</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
<b>Circassian - Muslim</b>	38.8% (19)	26.33% (4)	44.11% (15)
<b>Circassian</b>	28.6% (14)	33.33% (5)	26.47% (9)
<b>Circassian - Muslim - Israeli</b>	14.3% (7)	6.66% (1)	17.64% (6)
<b>Circassian – Israeli</b>	10.2% (5)	13.33% (2)	8.82% (3)
<b>Muslim – Israeli</b>	4.2% (2)	13.33% (2)	0 %
<b>Israeli</b>	2% (1)	0%	2.94% (1)
<b>Not clear</b>	2% (1)	6.66% (1)	0%
<b>Total</b>	100% (49)	100% (15)	100% (34)

Regarding the identity self-definition variable across gender there are clear differences between the two genders as can be seen in Table 1 above. Circassian identity seems to be an important component for both genders, however more females than males seem to identify as Circassian. Nearly 97% of females chose the Circassian component as part of their identity, while only 80% of the males chose this identity component. Moreover, the difference between the two genders seems more obvious in reference to the Muslim identity component. About 72% of the females incorporated Muslim identity in their answers, while only 46.32% of males incorporated Muslim identity in their answers. With regard to Israeli identity there is no significant difference between the genders, about 20% of males as opposed to 29.43% of females chose the Israeli identity component.

The results also show that the participants are consistent with their self-defined identity across age, as can be seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2

*Participants' Self-definition Across Age*

<b>Identity/Age</b>	<b>17-27</b>	<b>28-40</b>	<b>41 and above</b>
<b>Circassian - Muslim</b>	33.3% (9)	53% (9)	20% (1)
<b>Circassian</b>	29.62% (8)	23.5% (4)	40% (2)
<b>Circassian - Muslim - Israeli</b>	11.11% (3)	17.65% (3)	20% (1)
<b>Circassian – Israeli</b>	14.81% (4)	0%	20% (1)
<b>Muslim – Israeli</b>	7.4% (2)	0%	0%
<b>Israeli</b>	0%	5.88% (1)	0%
<b>Not clear</b>	3.7% (1)	0%	0%
<b>Total</b>	100% (27)	100% (17)	100% (5)

The answers across the three age groups indicated that Circassian and Muslim identities are an important part of their self-definition. Nearly 89% of the 17–27 age group chose the Circassian identity component, 94% of the 28 – 40 age group chose Circassian while all participants over the age of 41 chose the Circassian identity component. About 52% of the 17 – 27 age group selected the Muslim identity option, and about 71% of the 28 – 40 age group identified as Muslim while 40% of those over age 41 chose the Muslim identity component. The selection of Israeli identity was lower in the two younger age groups while there was a greater number of participants, 40 %, in the 41 and over age group who chose the Israeli identity option.

The results of the identity self-definition suggest that the participants highly value their Circassian ethnic and cultural identity and

at the same time a great majority value their Islamic religious identity. Yet it is clear that less than one-third of the participants value their civil Israeli identity. Females seem to be more attached than males to their Circassian and Muslim identity. The results also indicate that the attachment for both Circassian and Muslim identities grows with age, meaning that the older the participant the more the Circassian and Muslim identity are valued.

*Language Proficiency*

A large majority (81.7%) of the participants reported that their speaking proficiency in the Circassian language is at an advanced level or above. Sixty-seven percent of the participants indicated that their writing proficiency in the Circassian language is at a novice level, and only about 12% of the participants reported their proficiency in writing Circassian as advanced or higher. Comparing their native language proficiency with Hebrew and Arabic proficiency, all the participants (100%) seem to have advanced or higher speaking and writing proficiency in Hebrew. With regard to Arabic, 18.4% of the participants reported that their proficiency in speaking that language is advanced or higher, and 41% indicated the same level of proficiency in writing Arabic.

Table 3 provides a closer look at the difference between the genders and proficiency in each of the four languages:

Table 3

*Speaking Proficiency Across Gender*

Language Proficiency	Circassian		Hebrew		Arabic		English	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Novice	6.6%	0%	0%	0%	46.6%	42.4%	6.6%	21.2%
Intermediate	20%	12.1%	0%	0%	40%	36.3%	6.6%	21.2%
Advanced	33.3%	63.3%	40%	15.1%	6.6%	9%	53.3%	42.4%
Superior	40%	24.2%	60%	84.4%	6.6%	12.1%	40%	33.3%

<b>Total<sup>1</sup></b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
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One of the most important results found in Table 3 is that females reported that they are more proficient in speaking the Circassian language than males. Nearly 27% of male participants indicated that their speaking proficiency in the Circassian language is intermediate or lower, while 20% of females indicated that their speaking proficiency is intermediate. Moreover, 87.5% of female participants indicated that their speaking proficiency is advanced or above while only 73.3% of males indicated that their speaking proficiency is advanced or above.

The results also indicate that females are slightly more proficient in speaking the Arabic language. About 21% of females reported that they are advanced or above in speaking Arabic, while 13.2% of male participants reported being advanced or above in speaking Arabic. Another difference in speaking proficiency across gender is found with regard to spoken English. Nearly 93% of males reported being at a level of advanced or above in speaking English, while about 76% of females reported that they are at the advanced or above level in speaking English.

With regard to writing, particularly in Circassian and the Arabic languages, the data indicate significant differences across the age variables as can be seen in Table 4:

Table 4

*Writing Proficiency Across Age*

Language	Circassian			Arabic			
	Proficiency/Age	17-27	28-40	41-	17-27	28-40	41-
<b>Novice</b>		59.25%	76.5%	80%	55.5%	29.4%	20%
<b>Intermediate</b>		18.5%	23.5%	1%	7.4%	17.6%	60%
<b>Advanced</b>		11.1%	0%	0%	22.2%	41.1%	20%

<sup>1</sup> The total of females is 33 and the total of males is 15.

<b>Superior</b>	11.1%	0%	0%	14.8%	11.7%	0%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(27)	(17)	(5)	(27)	(17)	(5)

Although the majority of the younger age group, those aged 17 – 27 reported having novice proficiency in writing Circassian, this group is the only group that indicated a higher proficiency in writing Circassian. These trends require further investigation of the variables that contribute to this kind of change. Additionally, the two younger age groups reported a higher proficiency in written Arabic than the older age group.

Regarding the participants’ satisfaction with their speaking and writing proficiency in the three languages, Circassian, Hebrew and Arabic, nearly 51% of them are not satisfied at all with their speaking proficiency in the Circassian language. Nearly 83% indicated that they are not satisfied at all with their writing proficiency in the Circassian language. These results regarding satisfaction with their speaking proficiency in the Circassian language differ from previous results regarding language proficiency in speaking Circassian. This is due to the fact that the self-evaluation of proficiency is a subjective measure that is based on functional skills.

Satisfaction with Hebrew proficiency in both writing and speaking was high among the participants, with nearly 90% of them stating that they are satisfied to a large extent with their speaking proficiency, and nearly 92% expressing the same satisfaction with their writing proficiency in the Hebrew language.

A majority of participants reported dissatisfaction with their language proficiency in both Arabic writing and speaking. Nearly 63% of the participants reported that they are not satisfied at all or are satisfied to only a small extent with their writing proficiency in Arabic, and 51% of the participants expressed the same dissatisfaction with their spoken Arabic proficiency.

This dissatisfaction with the proficiency of both the Circassian and Arabic languages suggests that the Circassians value these languages for their intrinsic cultural and religious value as they expressed in response to the identification question, with the Circassian language

being their most important cultural signifier, and the Arabic language being their medium to access the Quran, the holy book of Islam.

Although their language proficiency levels vary among the Circassian, Arabic and Hebrew languages, the significance of each language depends on the cultural and economic value of that language. About 75.5% of the participants indicated that their native language is very important in preserving and shaping their identity, while only 24.5% indicated that Hebrew or Arabic are very important for the same reason. Nearly 63% of the participants consider Hebrew an important or very important language for their career, while approximately 14% of the participants perceive the Circassian language as important or very important to their career. Only 8% found Arabic to be important or very important to their career. These results were anticipated due to the hegemony of Hebrew as the national and majority language in Israel.

With regard to language behavior in the home, 90 % of the participants reported that they use the Circassian language exclusively at home, while 10% of them indicated that they use a mixture of the Circassian language and Hebrew insertions.

#### *The Role of the School*

The participants were asked to express their opinions on whether or not the Circassian school fulfills the needs of the community, and whether the local schools assist in maintaining the Circassian language. Nearly 71.5% of the participants stated that they do not believe that the school fulfills the community's needs, and about 41% of them report that the school doesn't help at all in maintaining the Circassian language. Approximately 33% of the participants stated that the school helps to some extent but does not do enough. These results indicate that nearly 75% of the participants believe that the local school doesn't meet the community's needs and expectations in preserving the native language.

#### *Language Loss*

The questionnaire included two questions addressing the issue of language loss and how to interrupt this process. The vast majority, 91.83% of the participants, expressed concern over losing their native language, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

'Yes [I am concerned], [the Circassian] language is disappearing, we are witnessing kids in Kindergarten who know how to count to ten in Hebrew, but not in Circassian.'

'Yes [I am concerned], it is hard to preserve a language without knowing how to read and write it.'

'Yes [I am concerned], language is used only in speaking, and for a long time the spoken language has been influenced by Hebrew and Arabic (particularly, from Hebrew they use it more at work and studying [education]).'

'Yes [I am concerned], the vocabulary is limited and doesn't renew, [this] leads us to incorporate in our speaking more and more languages that are more developed.'

Regarding the question of how to combat the language loss process, the participants stated that they believe that the work should be done in three venues: the educational system, at home and in the community. The following are some examples of what the participants suggest:

'There is no way without giving up something. In my opinion, Arabic is the most irrelevant among the languages, since the rest help us to integrate into the Israeli and global community better than Arabic does.'

'To invent new words and teach them.'

'[to have] a TV channel with shows in Circassian for all ages...'

'To teach language lessons on Saturdays [the weekend break].'

'Comprehensive Circassian language teaching, to an extent that writing will be in Circassian. For example, books, messaging on cellphones are part of our lives, these are all now done in Hebrew.'

'To build curricula that focus on teaching the Circassian language from kindergarten. To establish the mother tongue [first] then from there to develop other languages.'

The overwhelming concern about the loss of the Circassian language demonstrates the importance of the language for Circassians and its centrality in their cultural identity.

A majority of the participants (61.22%) stated that the school must play a larger role in combating the language decay process, particularly by teaching writing and reading in the Circassian language. The fact that the majority sees school as their optimal resort may indicate that

the intergenerational transmission of the spoken register is not sufficient to combat the language decay process, and it also indicates the Circassian community is aware of the importance of knowledge of the written register to reverse the language loss process.

## **Interviews**

### *Interview with a Teacher of Arabic and English*

In describing the Arabic language curriculum, the teacher indicated that the students spend five hours a week learning Arabic beginning in the first grade. Recently, the Ministry of Education assigned a new Arabic book series titled 'Our Arabic Language.' Because this book is designed for native students of Arabic, the text's vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural content present a tremendous challenge for Circassian students.

As the teacher noted 'It is impossible to follow the texts in the third grade since they become harder and suit native speakers of Arabic. Therefore, in third grade I do not systematically use the Arabic textbook, I select and adapt, I also incorporate external materials from different resources. These changes and pedagogical decisions are made locally and accepted by the majority of the Arabic teachers' team in the school.'

Although the Arabic language is an important language for Circassians as Muslims, the teacher argues that adding Arabic to the Circassian curriculum of languages is very confusing, demanding and imbalanced. The introduction of the native language is only begun in the sixth grade for two hours weekly, whereas Arabic, Hebrew and English are introduced at an earlier stage for 5 to 6 hours weekly. The fact that Arabic, Hebrew and English are taught in textbooks that are designed for native speakers requires teachers to adjust their texts by reducing their length or rewriting them in a simpler language and vocabulary that fit non-native speakers' aptitudes. Additionally, the teacher pointed out that Arabic is more challenging to teach and learn than Hebrew, since Hebrew is used more and is the medium of instruction in the sciences and humanities. Another challenge of teaching Arabic that the teacher mentioned, but which is beyond the scope of this study, is that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the only



variety introduced to the Circassian students, meaning that spoken Arabic, the everyday language of the Israeli-Palestinians is not part of the Arabic language curriculum. This decision carries out multiple complexities and challenges reflected in a higher level of difficulty of the reading texts, listening materials, grammatical structures and cultural nexuses.

Asked what changes she would recommend be made to the current curriculum of languages in the Circassian schools, the teacher stated that there should be more weekly hours devoted to the native language, and it should be taught from first grade. Moreover, she believes that the Circassian language should be given the same number of hours as that of Hebrew by delaying the introduction of the Arabic language to the third grade or higher.

*Interview with Circassian Language and Heritage Teacher*

In Kfar Kama's schools there is only one Circassian language teacher. The current, newly appointed teacher (since 2014) of the Circassian language holds a graduate degree in pedagogy, and has formal training in the Circassian language. She is among a few locals who studied abroad from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Adygea, Caucasus. During her stay in Adygea, she was assigned to study in a special group with intensive learning materials on the grammar, literature, culture and ethics of the Circassian community.

The new teacher seems to be very motivated and has begun to make substantial improvements in the proficiency of the Circassian language among the students and the entire community. She stated 'I decided to work and make changes without looking back, I am very motivated and hopeful that I will be able to make the change.' Yet, the current situation appears to be challenging as she describes it, 'the Circassian language is in the bottom of the order' and 'the kids do not fully master any of the languages.' The learning goals of the languages curriculum in the Circassian schools are 'irrational since the expectations are to teach Circassian kids languages as native speakers of each language. This mission is impossible.'

In combatting such a challenging situation, she points out that a new local leadership embodied by the election of a new mayor, has joined in the efforts to develop local and public programs for the entire community. These efforts are geared toward teaching the Circassian

language in a systematic form from kindergarten to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Along with this program, there are plans to build training programs for teachers that will train them in the standardized script of the Circassian language. The mission is to change the imbalance in the curriculum by increasing the presence of the Circassian language and adding extra weekly teaching hours for Circassian language.

The echo of the new plans can be seen in the Circassian language classroom. The teacher for the Circassian language has started to implement new methodologies, such as creating learning materials that fit the students' learning needs and support their local culture and dialect. For example, the new curriculum for kindergarten incorporates teaching Circassian numbers and counting in the Circassian language, and introducing the names of the weekdays and months for which Hebrew is usually used in these contexts.

As opposed to the previous staff's language teaching methodology, the new teacher refrains from using exported formal learning materials from Adygea, since these materials are geared toward teaching the Russian language and culture.

One of the methods used by the teacher is to develop voice and recorded resources of written assignments. The availability and use of these resources in voice format would enable the parents, who do not know the written format of the language, to help and to supervise their children's learning performance.

The teacher emphasizes that the locally initiated efforts are not in opposition to the general education policy of the Ministry of Education, but rather would complement the Ministry's annual programs that aim to promote diversity and support of the local culture. The Ministry of Education's programs have general goals that are far from making significant changes in language use and revitalization among the Circassian community. However, this teacher believes that the Ministry of Education would not oppose implementing the evolving efforts initiated locally by the mayor and a group of educators.

Looking to the future, the Circassian language teacher expresses a positive outlook regarding empowering the native language among the students, 'I expect to see changes within 5 years. I already see some positive changes, for example students of 6<sup>th</sup> grade this year are

learning the materials of 7<sup>th</sup> grade of the previous year and so on. Since the students know the spoken language, their progress will be rolling in bigger steps toward higher levels.'

*Interview with the Head of Education in the Municipality*

The head of education in Kfar Kama's municipality is a local Circassian who grew up in the area and received her graduate education in Jerusalem.

As the head of local education, she believes that the main goal of the current education system is to empower the Circassian identity and language. As she stated:

'In the past the emphasis was on achievements, but now with the help of the school, teachers and the mayor of the town the main goal is the preservation of the Circassian identity and language. 'The more that you invest in your native language the more that you will become a fast learner of other languages, and it reduces confusion among the students.'

The head of local education admits that changing the current situation is very challenging, especially when Hebrew dominance is valued by the majority of the town and is clearly the key for economic and intellectual success in Israel. There is also a significant shortage of resources and materials, for example only one qualified teacher for the Circassian language and a severe lack of the type of textbooks and learning materials that match the students' needs.

Despite the challenges, the process of empowering the Circassian identity is already taking place in a number of ways. Schools have started to introduce the Circassian alphabet at the kindergarten level, something that hasn't been done before; summer exchange programs between Kfar Kama's community and the Circassian community in Jordan; and a summer camp in Turkey for Circassian students.

As a local municipality that acts as a mediator between the local schools, the community and the Ministry of Education, the head of education has demanded the creation of a new steering committee to discuss the schools' curricula with regard to the teaching of languages. The main goal is how to increase the visibility of the Circassian

language. The municipality and the new mayor managed to create another local steering committee that aims to incorporate Circassian history in the Kadouri high school curriculum for Circassian students.

## **Discussion**

This study has examined three main areas: the significance of the relationship between language and identity, evaluation of the state of the maintenance of the Circassian language, and the role of the education system in supporting the process of maintaining the Circassian language in Israel.

### ***Language and Identity***

The findings of this study support the findings of other studies in that the Circassians are very proud of their ethnic identity, and value their native language as the central factor of that identity (Abd-el-Jawad; Kreindler et al.). Although Islamic identity is an important component of the Circassian identity, Arabic seems not to be a proxy for their religious identity. Hebrew, on the other hand, seems to be an important language for professional careers, meaning the identification with Hebrew is based on economic reasons. In this case the Circassians in Israel behave in the same way as other non-Hebrew speaking minorities toward Hebrew (Amara; Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, & Trumper-Hecht; Isleem).

The findings of this study reveal that there are differences between genders regarding identity. Circassian females reported being more attached to the Circassian component in their identity as well as reporting a higher proficiency in the Circassian language than males. These results conform with other studies that also showed an expectation for women to be the carriers of culture.

### ***State of Language Maintenance***

The findings of this study provide evidence that the intergenerational transmission of the spoken Circassian language is no longer sufficient in maintaining and reinforcing the language. There is recognizable decay of the intergenerational transmission of basic and everyday linguistic skills, such as counting or knowing the weekdays or

months in the native language. Or as one participant reported, the vocabulary of the language is limited and does not renew, which has led them to incorporate Hebrew as a live language.

The Circassian community ascribes a symbolic value to their native language as a core factor of the Circassian cultural identity, an important factor in resisting the pressure to accept the symbolic power of the majority language (Holmes, J., Roberts, M., Verivaki, M. and Aipolo). However, there is a significant concern among the participants of this study about the fading process of their native language and the increasing use of Hebrew at the expense of the native language. The findings of his study confirm the language power relations and pragmatic forces that increase the symbolic value of Hebrew and its use. The majority of the participants consider Hebrew an important or very important language for their careers, while approximately 14% of the participants perceive the Circassian language as important or very important to their careers. Several factors figure prominently in this finding, one being that Hebrew is considered to be the key to success for academic achievements or career; Hebrew is also the means of communication with neighboring Israeli-Jewish townships; and Hebrew is the language of the high school where most of Kfar Kama's students continue their studies. However, at the same time about 75.5% of the participants reported that their native language is very important in preserving their identity. These results clearly show the deeply-rooted and pressing dilemma placed on the Circassian community. On one hand there are economic and sociolinguistic forces pushing for the privileging and prioritization of Hebrew, while on the other hand Circassians are always mindful of the role of their native language in preserving their cultural and ethnic identity.

### ***The Role of the local Schools***

The findings reveal that the local school system in its current state is one of the primary factors contributing to the fading process of the Circassian language. The Circassian school system, as has been described by the teachers and the survey's participants, elevates the symbolic value of Hebrew by giving it primacy as the medium of instruction in Kfar Kama's school, as well as by giving it the largest number of weekly teaching hours.

The current curriculum of the native language seems to suffer the most in comparison with the other three languages taught in the school: Hebrew, Arabic and English. These three languages are taught five to six hours weekly and each is taught using textbooks and materials that are designed for native speakers. The Circassian language is only taught from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grades and for just two hours weekly. Despite the cooperation of the school administration with the linguistic and cultural aspirations of the local community, the curriculum of the native language suffers from severe obstacles: there is only one qualified instructor teaching the Circassian language and heritage, and there is a lack of textbooks and materials, with most of the teaching materials being locally produced and supplied by the teacher. And although not commercially produced, these materials are carefully processed to fit the students' local cultural identity and linguistic needs. It can be concluded that the current state of the language curriculum in the Circassian school places the native language last in its learning priorities and makes Hebrew its top priority. The current state of the language curriculum in the Circassian schools is a faithful representation of the language power relations in Israel.

One may also conclude that that the current state of the Circassian school curriculum is one of an imposed top-down language education policy that prioritizes Hebrew, the national and official language of Israel. The study reveals that during the 1970s the younger generation took an active role in implementing what we see in schools today. They believed at that time that the switch to Hebrew would not replace their native language as a speaking register and means of daily communication.

Currently, the new local leadership seems to have parted ways from the previous leadership's pedagogical beliefs and are demanding a reevaluation of the role of the school in revitalizing the native language. The new local leadership is bringing the current language education policy into the public arena, opening up discussion and supporting new educational initiatives that aim to empower the native language and culture. The study's sample from the community, teachers and the local municipality seem to believe that the Circassian schools are still the major means of combating the language decaying

process that has been accelerated by the lack of intergenerational transmission of the native language. The impact of the emergence of new leadership with new attitudes can be seen in a number of venues. On the educational level, there are remarkable pedagogical successes by the language teacher, who has started to introduce the Circassian alphabet, numbers and names of weekdays for kindergartens, and to create booklets for future use designed by the students. On the community level, the new local leadership has managed to create two local steering communities, one to rethink the language education policy in schools and the second to incorporate the topic of Circassian history into the Kadouri high school curriculum in the neighboring Jewish township.

### **Conclusions**

This study aimed to examine the maintenance of the Circassian language and the role of the education system in this process. The study reveals that the transmitting of the spoken register of the Circassian language within the family domain is insufficient to prevent the process of language decay.

Additionally, the study shows that local schools in their current state are not supporting the maintenance of the Circassian language as the community expected. In fact, the current Circassian curriculum empowers the other languages, Hebrew, Arabic and English at the expense of the native language.

Nevertheless, the study shows that there is a wide consensus among the participants that the role of the schools is crucial in maintaining the language of the Circassians, since this is the only venue where the students can learn how to write in their native language, a skill that their parents are lacking and therefore unable to transmit to them. Arguably, maintaining both the spoken and written script of the language would increase the chances of a minority language to survive.

The study reveals that the new local leadership has shown strong resistance to the official language policy that was formed at the request of local demand in the 1970s and is now used in the Circassian school system. The resistance of the new local agency to the school language policy indicates an explicit rejection of the symbolic capital

of the official languages, Hebrew and Arabic at the expense of the native language.

These bottom-up efforts, led by local Circassian educators, are moving in the right direction and have proven to be beneficial in transforming official policies to fit local teachers' teaching beliefs and language ideologies in promoting the minority language (Menken & García; Ricento & Hornberger). To increase the chances for success in halting the language decaying process, our recommendations are that these efforts should be horizontal, meaning they should address the visibility and use of the native language in every possible venue.

The new measures promoted by the local leadership toward the maintenance of the Circassian language in schools are heading in the right direction, yet there are many other venues that may also increase the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Circassian language. Among these are the creation of mechanisms that aim to change the language education policy in the Circassian schools by ultimately making the Circassian language the medium of instruction, and convincing the local community of the benefits of this change; involving older generations in the process of revitalizing lost vocabulary; teaching school teachers and community members the written script of the native language; training community members in the historic homeland to become teachers for native language, history, literature and culture; increasing the visibility of the language in the town's landscape by creating road signs in the Circassian language, and having local newspapers, radio and TV channels create children's programs in the Circassian language. Finally, strengthening the social and cultural ties with the communities in Caucasus, Jordan and Turkey by building long term exchange programs for students would be invaluable in revitalizing the native language.

#### *Limitations of the study*

This study is potentially subject to several limitations, one of them being the gathering of the data by using a mailing list. This mailing list included only higher education students and graduates and did not include other sectors of the Circassian community that would have better represented the entire community's perspective on the state of the native language, particularly, the older age group. Yet I do believe



that this pool represents to an extensive degree the opinion of the general Circassian community.

The second limitation of this study is that the data concerning the use of the Circassian language at home did not include contexts and themes where the language is used in the home and how the community perceives and deals with vocabulary loss and missing equivalents of native language to modern concepts and phrases. However, the participants did provide some of these details in their open-ended questions.

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