PISSN : 2571-9904 - EISSN : 2602-7763

Linguistic Deviance as Social Resistance: Youth Speech and Delinquent Subcultures in Algeria.

Hassane Sid[1,*], Asma Lamouri [2]

[1] Research Laboratory for Media and Society- University of Cheikh L'arbi Tebessi- Tebessa (Algeria), hassane.sid@univ-tebessa.dz

[2] Department of Sociology, University of Cheikh L'arbi Tebessi- Tebessa (Algeria) asma.lamouri@univ-tebessa.dz

Received: 07 / 06 / 2026 **Accepted**: 28 / 07 / 2026 **Published**: 31 / 07 / 2026

Abstract: :
When Algerian youth say harga instead of "leaving," or guirra instead of "conflict," they are not making a linguistic mistake they are making a statement. This article takes their words seriously. It explores how the everyday speech of urban Algerian youth functions not as slang, but as a language of resistance a way of naming what official discourse cannot or will not name. The study draws on content analysis following Mucchielli's framework of youth everyday vocabulary, street expressions, and folk music lyrics, with a focus on urban Algeria, tracing linguistic shifts that emerged from the 1980s onward. Through this analysis we trace four recurring responses to social exclusion: escape through drugs, confrontation through violence, flight through illegal migration, and survival through informal trade. Each of these "solutions," we argue, is already written into the words young people choose. The paper suggests that understanding linguistic deviance in Algeria is not a matter of linguistics alone —it is a way of reading a generation that feels unheard, and a society whose institutions have struggled to respond.

Keywords: *Algeria; code-switching; delinquency; linguistic deviance; social exclusion; social resistance; youth subculture*

*Hassane sid

1. Introduction

Youth speech in Algeria has long been treated as a symptom of cultural confusion, of educational failure, of moral decline. This article proposes a different reading. The linguistic practices examined here are not signs of disintegration but of adaptation; not chaos but code. Understanding them requires us to go back to some foundational assumptions about the nature of language itself beginning with the society that produced them.

Algerian society is currently confronting a set of intertwined linguistic, cultural, and social challenges that stem from diverse historical and contemporary factors. This study offers a socio-anthropological interpretation of these overlapping dynamics, with particular attention to the ways in which linguistic deviance among youth functions as a form of social resistance. Before beginning the analysis, it is necessary to revisit a number of foundational assumptions.

First, pale linguistic research suggests that the world's languages originated from a common linguistic branch more than a million years ago. This proto-language likely developed from onomatopoeic expressions that imitated totemic animals. Over time, these sounds evolved with the emergence of primary vowels, while the remaining phonetic elements appeared with Homo sapiens roughly 45,000 years ago.

Early linguistic transformation, according to this perspective, consisted mainly of modifying initial vowels in words to shift their meaning. Such mechanisms later expanded to include the merging of two or more words into a single linguistic form strategies that many languages continue to employ today.

Second, we consider language—particularly modern languages—as a multi-functional system whose most essential purposes include interpersonal communication and emotional or aesthetic expression. We also adopt the principle that every language encodes its own worldview. This idea, associated with Sapir, Herder, Durkheim, and Benveniste, suggests that language helps structure both communicative practice and modes of thought (Benveniste, 1966; Lucy, 2001). In this sense, when institutional frameworks fail to provide youth with adequate expressive tools, language itself becomes a site of resistance and deviant adaptation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Causes of the Particular Nature of Linguistic Change in Arabic

The most recent scholar to analyze this issue in depth is Mohammed Abed Al-Jabiri, who argued that what we refer to today as classical Arabic was not simply the natural language of its time. Rather, it was a constructed linguistic model that emerged from the work of grammarians and transmitters during the codification period. According to Al-Jabiri, these scholars made a deliberate and epistemologically charged decision: they selected the language spoken by the Bedouins considered the most “authentic” as the basis of classical Arabic, while dismissing the speech of sedentary populations, which they viewed as corrupted by foreign influences and linguistic errors.

This decision unintentionally created a gap between the Arabic spoken by people at the time and the idealized form that would later be canonized as classical Arabic. In other words, the Bedouin Mudar language became the fixed and perfected model of the language, guarded by the efforts of the codification period. Al-Jabiri describes this process by stating that “the Arabic language was first mummified and then frozen through this operation [codification]”

(Al-Jabiri, 1984, p. 78). Yet social life cannot be mummified or frozen. In response, Arabic developed its own living vernaculars—its familiar dialects—which, he argues, are linguistically richer than classical Arabic.

According to Al-Jabiri, this dynamic was already evident during the codification period and persists today. The contemporary Arab individual, he contends, faces a profound paradox: while he possesses a refined and sophisticated language for writing and intellectual reflection, this very language lacks the vocabulary needed to describe and engage with the realities of the modern world (Al-Jabiri, 1984, pp. 78–80).

2.2 Cultural-Linguistic Expressions and Their Socio-Anthropological Meaning in Algerian Society

Algerian folk music and in youth discourse since the 1980s, with the aim of interpreting the social and symbolic behaviors embedded within them and their influence on the collective subconscious of young people. We then examine an example of linguistic conflict among elites and compare its broader implications with those observed in the first sample of linguistic change.

2.2.1 Folk Songs and Transformation

Algerian folk music has undergone multiple transformations, which can be observed in two major trends:

1. The emergence of entirely new musical genres, most notably Raï.

2. The renewal of older musical forms, which began to incorporate new themes, previously unacceptable vocabulary, and unfamiliar instruments or melodies.

These transformations affected both Amazigh and Arabic folk traditions. In Amazigh music, the changes became particularly visible from the 1980s onward, with the rise of influential artists such as Ferhat, Aït Menguellet, Matoub Lounès, and others. The names adopted by musical groups during that era—such as Tagrawla (meaning “insurrection”), Aslal (“origin” or “foundation”), and Djurdjura (the symbolic mountain of Kabylia)—also reflect these cultural shifts.

This new lyrical orientation was essentially a call for resistance, aimed at protecting the Amazigh identity as reimagined by a newly emerging Amazigh elite. Such calls for resistance took multiple forms, from appeals for reconciliation to open expressions of tension or struggle. This is clearly illustrated in Karim Mesbahi’s song:

Come on, come on men

Let us found a party

Why don’t we learn

Amazigh is our identity

Unsurprisingly, these artistic shifts coincided with the rise of Amazing cultural claims during the 1980s.

2.2.2 Change and the Folk Music of Algiers

The folk music of Algiers emerged in 1927, with Cheikh Mohammed El-Anqa as its earliest pioneer. For decades, this genre remained highly consistent in its themes, vocabulary, and

melodic structure. Major changes began in the 1960s with the song Shahlet Laayani, written by Abdelhakim Grami in the classical folk style. It was performed by Boudjemaa El-Ankis, who composed its music after being inspired by the Western film Gilda, which he had watched at the Majestic Cinema. Consequently, the tune of this song diverged noticeably from that of earlier compositions.

The most significant transformation in Algiers' folk music came later, during the 1980s, with Kamel Messaoudi's release of Ana w enti ya guitara ("Me and You, Guitar"), followed by Sidali Driss's Adji tchouf ezzine ("Come See the Beauty"), among others (Boucetta, 1994).

Messaoudi's song introduced vocabulary that had not previously appeared in Algiers' folk poetry, such as tammara, djmaani chqa (from Berber), miziria (an Arabized form of the French misère), and dammar. The song conveyed a bleak and pessimistic vision, reflecting the harsh realities of the period when the specter of terrorism was beginning to affect society. Its tone was direct and unembellished, as shown in these lines:

Every tongue repeating farewell

Let the devil take the hindmost

Such examples demonstrate that even the cultural elements most resistant to change were profoundly reshaped at the linguistic, structural, and expressive levels under the pressure of deeper social transformations. From this, we may reasonably conclude that all communicative languages Amazigh, Arabic folk, or otherwise remain inseparably linked to the social and political environments in which they evolve.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The study focuses on urban Algeria and on linguistic changes in everyday youth speech that became particularly visible from the 1980s onward. It treats youth vocabulary, street expressions, and folk music as social documents through which exclusion, conflict, migration, and informal survival strategies are symbolically expressed.

3.2 Materials

The corpus consists of selected everyday vocabulary used by Algerian youth, expressions circulating in street and public spaces, and lyrics from Algerian folk music. These materials are examined as indicators of social resistance and of the formation of delinquent subcultural meanings.

3.3 Procedures

The analysis follows Mucchielli's content analysis framework (Mucchielli, 1998) and draws on Jakobson's model of communication, with attention to the sender, receiver, message, topic, and code (Jakobson, 1973). The vocabulary items were grouped according to symbolic categories and then interpreted in relation to the social conditions they represent.

4. Results

4.1 Youth Speech and Linguistic Change

The second type of linguistic transformation examined in this article concerns the mutations and renewals observed in the everyday language of young people in the Algerian capital. Our aim is to understand how these linguistic practices reflect the interaction between the fundamental elements of communication. As Roman Jakobson argues, every linguistic act is anchored in a message and four interrelated components: the sender, the receiver, the topic of the message, and the code (Jakobson, 1973).

The following table organizes the collected vocabulary into three symbolic categories: expressions used by youth to describe themselves, expressions referring to others in their social environment, and expressions directed at authority figures.

Table (1):Sample of Youth Speech

Others / Authority	Youth
Pari (Paris)	Jaggernaut (Taghut)
Australian	Kyada (leaders)
Butin	Hey boy (French)
Sabya (slave)	Lost
Hassan Bab El Oued	Echouhada (Martyrs)
A wealthy company	Harraga (clandestine immigrant)
Harga (illegal migration)	Barhuch (stubborn youth)
Visa	He is suffering
Business	Guirra (war)
—	Mahchoucha (gun)
—	Oulech smah (no forgiveness)
—	Trabendo (informal trade)
—	We are oppressed
—	He activates
—	To prepare marriage requirements
—	Zenbrito
—	Arouche (tribes)
—	Kachi (drugs)
—	Algiers' sons
—	Hebhab (loudmouth)

The Source*: Authors' own elaboration based on content analysis of Algerian youth speech, street expressions, and folk music lyrics.*

4.2 The Topic of the Message

From a theoretical perspective, the thematic core of youth communication can be inferred from several linguistic cues:

These four responses are not random; they follow the pattern that Merton (1938) identified as innovative adaptation: when legitimate pathways are blocked, individuals do not abandon society's goals; instead, they seek alternative routes toward them, including routes that exist outside the law.

4.2.1 Expressions Describing Youth Identity and Condition

Youth discourse frequently includes terms such as "I," "we," "youth," "lost," "suffering," and "oppressed." In classical Arabic, these expressions correspond to a broader narrative: "We, the adolescents, are lost, without hope; we are disregarded and underestimated."

The term "martyr," in this context, does not signify sacrifice in the traditional moral sense; rather, it metaphorically describes a generation that perceives itself as abandoned by society and institutions.

Thus, youth speech represents a simultaneous dialogue with the self and a critique addressed to society and authority. Many expressions convey explicit blame directed toward institutions. The phrase "oulech smah" ("there will be no forgiveness") illustrates this dynamic. Although this expression appeared earlier as a slogan of the Amazigh movement, it has been reappropriated by youth groups with a modified meaning.

In traditional Algerian culture, forgiveness carries a profound moral weight: refusing to forgive suggests that the wrongdoer continues to inflict harm and will be held accountable in the hereafter. As such, the phrase expresses the belief that authority persists in wrongdoing and will ultimately face moral consequences.

4.2.2 Solutions Proposed in Youth Speech and Their Symbolic Tools

A closer examination of youth discourse reveals four recurring "solutions," each reflecting a distinct orientation toward the social crisis young people experience. These responses can be read through Merton's (1938) concept of innovative adaptation: when legitimate pathways are blocked, individuals do not necessarily abandon society's goals; rather, they may search for alternative and sometimes illegal routes toward them.

Self-destructive escape through drugs and alcohol

Youth frequently invoke expressions such as:

"We are lost, oppressed, afraid, with nothing to do we will destroy ourselves with Zenbrito."

Zenbrito refers to a mixture of wine, drugs, soda, and hallucinogens.

This option reflects a profoundly pessimistic worldview: suffering is acknowledged, but the response is a deliberate transgression of social norms that prohibit such consumption.

Direct confrontation: Guirra (battle)

A second pathway is confrontation with rival groups or authority, expressed through the term Guirra (war/battle).

The human tools of this battle are:

Arouche (tribal groups)

"Sons of Algiers" (local territorial identities)

The material tools include:

Mahchoucha (firearm)

Hebhab (a loud, provocative individual)

This option represents the most dangerous attitude, suggesting that violence becomes a symbolic or practical response to social frustration.

Harga: illegal migration as the only escape

The third proposed "solution" is Harga, the act of clandestine migration to Europe.

This reflects the belief that life in Algeria has become intolerable and that hope lies exclusively abroad.

Obstacles to this migration are reflected linguistically:

Authority: lack of access to foreign currency, administrative barriers

Europe: restrictive visas, fortified borders

Thus, expressions such as devise, visa, Australian, Paris symbolize not destinations alone but an entire imagined horizon of opportunity denied to them.

Pragmatic defiance: illegal trade and survival strategies

The fourth option offers a more "optimistic," yet still extralegal, pathway.

Youth discourse suggests a survival program:

one must be tough or stubborn (barhouche),

remain active,

engage in trabendo (informal or illegal trade),

and build alliances with powerful smugglers.

In classical phrasing, this corresponds to: "To improve one's life, one must be strong physically and morally, work in informal markets, and rely on loyal, influential intermediaries."

Yet this strategy, too, relies on circumventing state law.

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications

These youth speech samples—whether isolated or interconnected—reveal that Algerian society is experiencing a profound linguistic rupture within its younger generation. This is close to what Cohen (1955) described as subcultural formation: when a group shares the same frustrations, exclusions, and blocked horizons, it does not simply suffer in silence; it builds its own value system, its own codes, and its own language. This rupture reflects a deeper social fracture between youth and the formal institutions governing them. From the perspective of young people, this divide cannot be bridged through classical discourse or legal frameworks.

In the next section, we will examine the methods through which the younger generation constructs its own linguistic practices and communicative codes.

5.2 Youth Linguistic Change Techniques

It is essential to recognise that the linguistic practices emerging among Algerian youths do not correspond to the traditional forms of argot found in other societies, such as argot in France. The differences are significant and can be observed across three dimensions:

Table 2. Youth Speech and Argot

Youth Speech	Argot
Uses words spoken by all members of society.	Contains highly specific vocabulary used primarily by marginal groups such as beggars.
Does not deform words; there is no intention to create secrecy or linguistic isolation.	Relies on deformation of words to produce expressions unintelligible to outsiders.
Uses expressive and allusive words for symbolic effect.	Contains limited but semantically rich technical vocabulary.

The Source*: Authors' own elaboration based on content analysis of Algerian youth speech, street expressions, and folk music lyrics.*

In Becker's terms, words such as harrag, trabendo, and zenbrito do more than describe reality; they also construct it. To name oneself a harrag is to accept a label and, in accepting it, to build an identity around it. Language here is not merely communication; it is self-definition through deviance (Becker, 1963).

The symbolic system of youth speech is oriented vertically: it is a bottom-up discourse that constructs an implicit alliance between symbols originating from different, sometimes opposing ideological spaces.

5.2.1 Modernist paradox and Amazigh references

- pouvoir assassin → "the authority is a murderer"
- Arouch → tribes
- Oulech smah → "no forgiveness"

5.2.2 Islamist references

- Taghut (Juggernaut)
- Mahchoucha → firearm
- Hebhab → loud, boastful person

5.2.3 Symbols emerging from street culture, stadiums, and public spaces

- Drugs
- Zenbrito
- Harga → illegal migration
- Guirra → conflict/war
- Trabendo → informal/illegal trade.

In Becker's terms, words such as harrag, trabendo, and zenbrito do more than describe reality; they also construct it. To name oneself a harrag is to accept a label and, in accepting it, to build an identity around it. Language here is not merely communication; it is self-definition through deviance (Becker, 1963).

A close reading of these expressions reveals that their emotional force is largely drawn from Arabic roots particularly words referring to suffering, oppression, loss, and martyrdom. However, in the youth context, the notion of "martyr" has shifted entirely: it no longer implies sacrifice for a noble cause but rather expresses social abandonment. The term is therefore re-appropriated to create a symbolic reversal that prevents the authorities from monopolising its moral aura. This technique reflects a deliberate effort to generate a linguistic and symbolic confrontation.

Similarly, the hybridization of the French verb souffrir into nsufri does not represent an admiration for the French language. Instead, it is a symbolic attempt to intensify the experience of suffering and make it uniquely theirs. Other words such as hogra (oppression) carry historical weight rooted in the colonial era, and youths reactivate them to describe contemporary inequities.

When identifying who they perceive as responsible for their plight, the young draw from multiple linguistic repertoires simultaneously:

- Taghut
- Pouvoir assassin
- Oulech smah

These expressions point to a convergence of three linguistic systems: Arabic, French, and Amazigh. Their coexistence in the same accusatory discourse indicates a shared symbolic judgment across Algeria's diverse and sometimes conflicting identities.

Interestingly, the proposed "solutions" to the crisis whether conflict (guirra), informal trade (trabendo), or migration (harga) are expressed through words borrowed from foreign languages:

guirra (from French guerre), business, zenbrito, trabendo, cachet, devise, visa, active.

Some terms function as neologisms (Barhouch, Hebhab, Harrag), while others revive older dialect expressions (Zetla, Arouch, ydir tawil meaning "to find a solution").

Overall, youth speech seems to articulate a core idea: any viable solution must come from outside the country. This discourse suggests a distancing from official national symbols and a declining emotional connection to the generation of the 1954 Revolution. Ultimately, it reflects a belief among many young people that existing institutions and ideological frameworks are incapable of resolving their problems, hence the need for an entirely new paradigm.

6. Conclusion

The youth speech analyses in this study does not display any explicit linguistic conflict between the different languages used in Algeria. Instead, it reveals a deeper extra-linguistic crisis that prevents young people from effectively expressing themselves in classical Arabica language perceived as difficult, rigid, and resistant to linguistic evolution since its codification. A similar limitation characterizes French, which lacks the strong symbolic resonance required to articulate culturally embedded notions such as chahada, hogra, or smah, concepts that are integral to local collective memory and emotional experience.

The situation is comparable for the Amazigh language, whose limited lexical expansion and restricted social domains of use do not provide youths with the expressive tools they need. Consequently, young people feel compelled to transcend these linguistic boundaries: they blend languages, selectively privilege one over another, or invent new expressions. The outcome is a hybrid linguistic system—flexible enough to capture their immediate emotional and social reactions, yet insufficient for scientific reasoning, theoretical abstraction, or sustained engagement with social reality without losing expressive depth.

From this perspective, the youth crisis highlights a broader cultural and linguistic rupture within Algerian society. Unlike the linguistic tensions observed among intellectual elites often framed as conflicts between Arabic, French, and Amazigh the youth's predicament exposes a more profound crisis: a fracture between language as a symbolic system and the lived experience it is expected to convey. This mismatch suggests that the cultural and linguistic challenges facing contemporary Algerian society stem not merely from competition between languages, but from the inability of existing linguistic frameworks to articulate and contain the new social realities experienced by younger generations.

Ultimately, linguistic deviance among Algerian youth is not a problem to be corrected it is a signal to be heard: a generation that has built its own language precisely because existing institutions have failed to speak theirs.

References

Books:

1. Al-Jabiri, M. A. (1984). The genesis of the Arabic mind. Taliaa Edition, Lebanon.
2. Becker, H. S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance. Free Press, United States.
3. Benveniste, É. (1966). Problèmes de linguistique générale. Gallimard, France.
4. Cohen, A. K. (1955). Delinquent boys: The culture of the gang. Free Press, United States.
5. Ibn Khaldun. (2015). The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history. Princeton University Press, United States.
6. Jakobson, R. (1973). Essais de linguistique générale. Minuit, France.
7. Mahmoud, Z. N. (1978). Arabic thought renewal. Echarq Edition, Egypt.
8. Mucchielli, R. (1998). L'analyse de contenu des documents et des communications. ESF, France.

Journal Articles:

9. Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. American Sociological Review, 3(5), 672–682.

Theses and Academic Works:

10. Boucetta, I. (1994). Algiers' folk song between heritage and renewal. Unpublished thesis, Department of Sociology, Algeria.

Encyclopedia / Online Sources:

11. Lucy, J. (2001). Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/03042-4