



*Intergenerational Transmission of a Minority Language Among Mixed-
Language Families: The Case of Four Kabyle-Algerian Arabic Families in
Oran*

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Abstract:

This article examines the transmission of Kabyle, a variety of Tamazight, within four mixed-language families in Oran, Algeria. Each family includes one Kabyle speaking parent and one Algerian Arabic speaking parent, offering insight into how linguistic diversity within households affects intergenerational transmission. Using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews and direct observations, the study focuses on language attitudes and patterns of language use within the family, the primary setting for minority language maintenance. The findings reveal different transmission outcomes among the families: one displays full and active transmission of Kabyle, another shows partial maintenance, while in the remaining two, the language is not transmitted. These differences result from a combination of factors, including parental attitudes and will to transmit the language, linguistic proficiency, and contact with Kabyle-speaking relatives. The study concludes that each family represents a unique case shaped by its own circumstances, showing that minority language transmission depends on the interplay of multiple factors rather than on a single determinant.

Keywords: Intergenerational Transmission, Minority Languages, Mixed Language Families, Kabyle, Oran,

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Introduction:

In multilingual societies, families play a central role in shaping how languages are maintained, transmitted, or gradually lost across generations. Within the home, daily interactions and parental choices determine which languages are used, valued, or passed on to children. In such contexts, the family becomes not only a social unit but also a key space for language continuity and change.

In Algeria, linguistic diversity is shaped by the coexistence of Arabic, French, and Tamazight, with its varieties. This coexistence creates complex dynamics in language use, particularly in urban areas like Oran, where social mobility, education, and intermarriage between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds have become increasingly common. These conditions make the maintenance and transmission of minority languages like Kabyle especially challenging within mixed-language households.

This study focuses on the transmission of Kabyle within four mixed-language families living in Oran. Using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews and home observations, it explores how parents manage language use in their households and how their decisions influence children's exposure to and use of Kabyle. The study also examines how combinations of social and linguistic factors—such as parental attitudes, proficiency, and contact with extended family members—affect the success or failure of intergenerational transmission.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

To what extent can Kabyle, as a minority language, be transmitted within mixed-language families, and how can this transmission differ from one household to another?

Literature review:

The transmission and maintenance of minority languages within multilingual societies have long been a topic of sociolinguistic inquiry. Fishman (1991), considered a pioneer in this field, emphasized the crucial role of the family as the primary domain where language continuity is ensured across generations. He argued that the success of transmission depends largely on parents' awareness of their linguistic choices and their commitment to maintaining the minority language within the home.

In the same line of research, several scholars have explored how families sustain or lose their minority languages. Researchers such as Spolsky (2004) and King (2016) underlined that parental attitudes and family language policies are central to children's acquisition and long-term use of the heritage language.

Other studies brought particular attention to mixed-language families, showing that when parents do not share the same linguistic background, the process of transmission becomes more complex. Pauwels (2005) and Yamamoto (2001) demonstrated that successful transmission in such households relies on parental cooperation and the consistency of minority language input. Later studies, including De Houwer (2007), highlighted the significance of regular exposure and emotional engagement in sustaining the minority language, while Ishizawa (2004) pointed out the supportive role of extended family members, especially grandparents, in strengthening children's competence in the minority language. Together, these works illustrate that language transmission within families depends on multiple interacting factors rather than on a single condition.

In the Algerian context, where Arabic varieties dominate public life, research on Tamazight varieties has mainly examined their sociolinguistic situation and maintenance in a multilingual context. Benali-Mohamed (2007) described the general use of Tamazight and the challenges

surrounding its maintenance in everyday life. Benhattab (2017), focusing on urban communities such as Oran, explored how factors like urbanisation and mixed marriages influence the use of Kabyle in daily interactions. While both studies provide valuable insight into the situation of Tamazight in Algeria, they remain at a societal level and do not address the family-based processes that shape intergenerational transmission.

The present study focuses on the intergenerational transmission of Kabyle within mixed-language families in Oran, adopting a qualitative approach based on four family case studies. By examining language use, parental attitudes, and interactional patterns within the home, it provides a close look at how transmission takes place—or fails to take place—within the everyday life of mixed-language households.

Methodology:

Participants:

This study **adopts a qualitative research approach** and involves **four mixed-language families living in Oran**. Each household brings together two parents of different linguistic backgrounds—one **Kabyle speaking** and one **Algerian Arabic speaking**—along with their children.

The families were **selected** for their willingness to participate and their relevance to the research objectives. They display diverse sociolinguistic profiles, providing a varied and balanced sample for the investigation.

Data collection:

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** and **direct observations** conducted in the family home, which serves as the main context for exploring language transmission. The interviews explored participants' **language attitudes**, patterns of **language use**, and **will to transmit Kabyle**. They also included questions about the participants' sociolinguistic profiles to provide a clearer picture of each family's linguistic environment. The **observations** complemented the interview data, offering a valuable insight into everyday linguistic practices within the households.

Data Analysis:

The analysis was carried out in two complementary stages. A case-by-case descriptive analysis was conducted for each family, leading to the development of individual sociolinguistic summaries and interaction tables that outlined language practices among family members. This stage was followed by a thematic analysis applied across the four families to identify recurrent patterns and influencing elements behind the variation in transmission outcomes. This approach provides a detailed insight into each family individually while also drawing broader comparisons across the four cases.

Findings:

This section presents the findings from the four investigated families. For each family, we provide a sociolinguistic background and examine language use and the attitudes associated with it across three levels: between parents, between parents and children, and among children. The description is organized case by case and is based on both observed practices and insights obtained during the interviews.

Family A:
Sociolinguistic profile:

	Name/ age/ gender	Place of birth/ years of residence in Oran	Educational level/ occupation	Spoken language(s) at home/ proficiency in Kabyle	Attitudes towards Kabyle	Contact with K speaking grand-parents
P A R E N T S	Merzouk/ 58/ M	Tizi Ouzou/ 33 years	Final year of secondary school/ Trader	K, AA/ Very high	Positive	Frequent
	Dalila/ 49/ F	Oran/ since birth	Bachelor's degree in Arabic literature /Primary teacher	AA/ No proficiency	Positive	Frequent
C H I L D R E N	Mohand/ 24/ M	Oran/ since birth	Final year of secondary school/ Shopkeeper	K, AA/ high	Positive	Frequent
	Amine/ 20/ M	Oran/ since birth	2 nd year University student	K, AA/ high	Positive	Frequent
	Safa/ 15/ F	Oran/ since birth	2 nd year secondary school pupil	K, AA/ Moderate	Positive	Frequent
	Marwa/ 15/ F	Oran/ since birth	2 nd year Secondary school pupil	K, AA/ Moderate	Positive	Frequent

Inner family interactions:

	Father	Mother	Child 1	Child2	Child 3	Child 4
Father		AA	K	K	K	K
Mother	AA		AA	AA	AA	AA
Child1	K	AA		K-AA	K-AA	K-AA
Child 2	K	AA	K-AA		K-AA	K-AA
Child 3	K-AA	AA	AA-K	AA-K		AA-K
Child 4	K-AA	AA	AA-K	AA-K	AA-K	

Between parents:

Within Family A, the couple, Merzouk and Dalila, communicate exclusively in Algerian Arabic, the only language they share. Both of them express positive attitudes toward Kabyle: Merzouk, a highly proficient Kabyle speaker, is deeply attached to the language and considers it as an essential part of his personal heritage; Dalila, although not a Kabyle speaker, values her husband's mother tongue and shows respect toward it.

Between parents and children:

When speaking with his children, the father, Merzouk, always makes sure to use Kabyle. In the interview, he expressed his determination to transmit the language to his children. For him, speaking Kabyle at home is a strict rule. The mother, on the other hand, speaks to her children in Algerian Arabic, her native and most comfortable language.

The children reply to their father in Kabyle, yet with varying degrees of fluency. The two older sons, Mohand and Amine, are fluent kabyle speakers, while the younger twins, Safa and Marwa,

demonstrate moderate skills and occasionally switch to Algerian Arabic. This variation of fluency goes back to the children's differing exposure to Kabyle-speaking grandparents, as the older boys spent more time in the extended family home, whereas the twins had less contact after moving to a separate house at an earlier age. With their mother, all four children only use Algerian Arabic.

Between children:

Among the siblings of family A, both Kabyle and Algerian Arabic are used in everyday exchanges. The older brothers tend to prefer Kabyle when speaking together, reflecting their strong fluency and positive attitudes toward the language. The younger twins, Safa and Marwa, also express appreciation for Kabyle but rely more on Algerian Arabic because of their moderate competence in the minority language. This creates a bilingual dynamic within the sibling group, where the two languages coexist but with different degrees of use.

Family B:

Sociolinguistic profile:

	Name/ age/ gender	Place of birth/ years of residence in Oran	Educational level/occupation	Spoken language(s) at home/ proficiency in Kabyle	Attitudes towards Kabyle	Contact with K speaking grand- parents
P A R E N T S	Said/ 45/ M	Tizi ouzou/ 25 years	Bachelor's degree in journalism/ journalist	F, AA/ High	Positive	Rare
	Meriem/ 39/ F	Tlemcen/ 20 years	Doctor of dental surgery/ Dentist	F, AA/ No proficiency	Positive	Rare
C H I L D R E N	Mehdi/ 12/ M	Oran/ since birth	3 rd year middle school pupil	F, AA/ No proficiency	Neutral	Rare
	Lydia/ 10/ F	Oran/ since birth	1 st year Middle school pupil	F, AA/ No proficiency	Neutral	Rare

Inner family interactions:

	Father	Mother	Child 1	Child 2
Father		F-AA	F-AA	F-AA
Mother	F-AA		F-AA	F-AA
Child 1	F-AA	F-AA		F-AA
Child 2	F-AA	F-AA	F-AA	

Between parents:

In Family B, Said and Meriem conduct most of their conversations in French, in addition to a regular use of Algerian Arabic. The parents hold favorable views toward Kabyle, though the language is absent from their daily exchanges. Meriem has no knowledge of Kabyle, while Said, who is fluent in the language and values it positively, does not attempt to use it at home. Their preference for French stems from their high educational background and the professional environments to which they belong.

Between parents and children:

With their children, Said and Meriem use French as their main language of communication, together with Algerian Arabic in everyday interactions. During the interview, both parents explain that they consciously promote the use of French, which they view as essential for their children's education and future opportunities.

The children respond to their parents in both French and Algerian Arabic, but show a clear preference for French. Kabyle is entirely absent from their interactions, a situation that reflects the family's rare exposure to the minority language.

Between children:

When speaking with one another, the children of Family B mainly use French, which dominates their conversations, play, and daily exchanges. Algerian Arabic also appears naturally in their speech but remains secondary. The dominance of French reflects their early and continuous exposure to the language in nurseries and private schools, where it receives particular attention. Kabyle, however, is excluded from their speech, as they are unfamiliar with it.

Family C:

Sociolinguistic profile:

	Name/ age/ gender	Place of birth/ years of residence in Oran	Educational level/ occupation	Spoken language(s) at home/ proficiency in Kabyle	Attitudes towards Kabyle	Contact with K speaking grand- parents
P A R E N T S	Kamel/ 50/ M	Oran/ since birth	Bachelor's degree in Law/ Police inspector	AA/ no proficiency	Neutral	Occasional
	Samia/ 46/ F	Oran/ since birth	Bachelor's degree in Economics/ Bank	AA, K/ high proficiency	Positive	Frequent
C H I L D R E N	Hayet/ 20/ F	Oran/ since birth	2 nd year University student	AA/ passive proficiency	Positive	Frequent
	Ikram/ 18/ F	Oran/ since birth	1 st year University student	AA/ passive proficiency	Positive	Frequent
	Ines/ 16/ F	Oran/ since birth	2 nd year Secondary school pupil	AA/ passive proficiency	Positive	Frequent

Inner family interactions:

	Father	Mother	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3
Father		AA	AA	AA	AA
Mother	AA		AA-K	AA-K	AA-K
Child 1	AA	AA		AA	AA
Child 2	AA	AA	AA		AA
Child 3	AA	AA	AA	AA	

Between parents:

The parents, Samia and Kamel, rely mainly in Algerian Arabic for their daily communication, as it is the language they have in common. Samia, a fluent Kabyle speaker, shows very positive attitudes toward her mother tongue and expresses a strong wish to transmit it to her children. Her husband, however, shows little interest in the language and does not engage with it, which limits its presence within the household.

Between parents and children:

Algerian Arabic predominates in the interactions between the parents and their children in Family C. While the father speaks to the children exclusively in Algerian Arabic, the mother occasionally includes some Kabyle words or short expressions when addressing them, reflecting her attachment to the language and her wish to expose her children to it. The children respond in Algerian Arabic but demonstrate some understanding of Kabyle. The mother explains that this partial comprehension results from their regular contact with their Kabyle-speaking grandparents and from the fact that the children spend more time with her while their father is often away for professional reasons.

Between children:

Among the siblings, Algerian Arabic is the primary language used in daily interactions. Some isolated Kabyle words, borrowed from their mother or grandparents, occasionally appear in their speech. Although Kabyle is not actively spoken, the children show clear receptive knowledge of the language, reflecting a situation of passive bilingualism.

Family D:**Sociolinguistic profile:**

	Name/ age/ gender	Place of birth/ years of residence in Oran	Educational level/ occupation	Spoken language(s)at home/ proficiency in Kabyle	Attitudes towards Kabyle	Contact with K speaking grand- parents
P A R E N T S	Mohamed/ 37/ M	Oran/ since birth	Final year of middle school/ Taxi driver	AA/ No profeciency	Neutral	Occasional
	Nawel/ 34/ F	Oran/ since birth	Final year of secondary school/ Housewife	AA/ Low	Positive	Occasional
C H I L D R E N	Yasmine/ 13/ F	Oran/ since birth	3 rd year Middle school pupil	AA/ No profeciency	Neutral	Occasional
	Younes/ 11/ M	Oran/ since birth	1 st year Middle school pupil	AA/ No profeciency	Neutral	Occasional
	Maram/ 9/ F	Oran/ since birth	3 rd year Primary school pupil	AA/ No profeciency	Neutral	Occasional

Inner family interactions:

	Father	Mother	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3
Father		AA	AA	AA	AA
Mother	AA		AA	AA	AA
Child 1	AA	AA		AA	AA
Child 2	AA	AA	AA		AA
Child 3	AA	AA	AA	AA	

Between Parents:

In this household, everyday communication takes place entirely in Algerian Arabic, the most comfortable language for both Nawel and Mohamed. Nawel holds very positive attitudes toward Kabyle and expresses a strong wish to use it within her family. However, her limited proficiency in the language prevents its use at home.

Between parents and children:

Algerian Arabic predominates in the exchanges between the parents and their children, functioning as the family's common language. During the interview, Nawel expressed her desire to transmit Kabyle to her children, yet she admitted that she does not feel confident enough to use it with them because of her limited proficiency. The children, in turn, respond to both parents exclusively in Algerian Arabic, showing no use of Kabyle in their speech.

Between children:

Children in Family D communicate exclusively in Algerian Arabic, which is also the language used with their extended family. Kabyle is entirely absent from their exchanges as they have not been exposed to it, and therefore feel unfamiliar with. This can be seen as a clear situation of language shift within this household.

The findings reveal that each family presents its own linguistic and social situation, which shapes the way languages are used within the household. These specific situations lead to different language practices and, consequently, to varying outcomes and levels of transmission of the minority language.

Discussion :

The study further indicates that the diverging transmission outcomes result from a combination of interrelated social and linguistic factors unique to each household. The following discussion explores these factors, their interaction and dynamics, and relates them to insights from previous studies.

1. Parental attitudes and will of transmission:

Parental attitudes and the will to transmit the minority language emerged as key elements shaping the linguistic outcomes observed in the studied families. Across the four households, the Kabyle-speaking parents display positive attitudes toward their mother tongue, though the strength of their will and the extent to which it translates into practice vary considerably.

In Families A and C, the Kabyle-speaking parents express both strong positive attitudes and a clear determination to transmit the language. In Family A, the father's attachment to Kabyle and his determination to preserve it are reflected in his consistent use of the language with his

children, which has fostered a natural familiarity with Kabyle within the household. In Family C, the mother shows similar appreciation and affection for her mother tongue and introduces it regularly in conversations with her children whenever possible. These examples show how strong parental will, supported by positive attitudes, encourages the successful transmission of the minority language. As Schüpbach (2009) emphasizes, emotional commitment and pride in a heritage language play a decisive role in its maintenance across generations. Likewise, Spolsky (2012) argues that a coherent family language ideology, rooted in positive attitudes, is central to the continuity of minority languages in bilingual households.

On the other hand, in Families B and D, positive attitudes do not necessarily translate into action. In Family B, the father values Kabyle but gives priority to French as the language of education and social advancement, which limits his engagement with the minority language at home. In Family D, the mother expresses her desire to transmit Kabyle to her children, yet this intention remains unfulfilled due to her limited use of the language. These cases illustrate what Okita (2002) describes as attitudinal dissonance, where favorable dispositions toward a language are not matched by consistent linguistic practice. This observation aligns with King and Fogle (2006), who stress that positive attitudes alone are insufficient to ensure intergenerational transmission unless they are reinforced by active and sustained use in family interactions.

Overall, while positive attitudes toward Kabyle are shared across the four families, only those combined with a strong and continuous will to transmit—manifested in regular language use—lead to successful transmission.

2. Mixed-language parenting and parental proficiency

The linguistic composition of mixed-language families strongly shapes how a minority language is maintained or lost. Across the families examined, the transmission of Kabyle largely depends on the proficiency of the Kabyle-speaking parent and the extent of collaboration between partners. When the minority-language parent is confident and consistent in their use, transmission becomes more likely; when proficiency is limited or the non-Kabyle parent does not participate, the process tends to weaken or fail.

In Families A and C, both Kabyle-speaking parents demonstrate sufficient competence in the minority language and make deliberate efforts to use it with their children, though with differing results. In Family A, the father's fluent command of Kabyle, combined with the supportive attitude of his non-Kabyle wife, ensures that the language remains actively spoken at home. This case exemplifies what Pauwels (2005) identifies as the importance of cooperation within mixed-language couples, showing that shared commitment strengthens the transmission of a minority language.

In Family C, the mother's strong proficiency allows her to introduce Kabyle into everyday interactions, despite her husband's neutral attitude and limited involvement due to his frequent absences. This example supports De Houwer (2007), who emphasizes that consistent parental input from even one caregiver can sustain minority-language exposure within the household. Together, these two families illustrate that when the proficient parent either benefits from partner support or maintains steady use of the minority language independently, transmission is more likely to succeed.

In contrast, Families B and D reveal how limited proficiency or disengagement can hinder transmission. In Family B, the Kabyle-speaking father, despite full command of the language, favors French together with his wife, perceiving it as the language of opportunity for their children. In Family D, the mother's low proficiency and her husband's disinterest result in the

exclusive use of Algerian Arabic. In both households, Kabyle disappears entirely from family exchanges, confirming Yamamoto (2001), who argues that in mixed-language settings, when one parent lacks linguistic ability or motivation and the other remains neutral or detached, the minority language quickly loses its role in family communication.

3. Contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents:

Intergenerational contact plays a central role in sustaining minority languages within families. Grandparents often act as important linguistic and cultural mediators, offering children meaningful opportunities to hear and use the heritage language in natural settings. The degree of interaction between children and Kabyle-speaking grandparents thus emerges as a major factor influencing language transmission across the studied households.

In Families A and C, regular contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents considerably strengthens the process of transmission. In Family A, the children spent their early years in an extended household where the grandparents communicated exclusively in Kabyle, which reinforced both their comprehension and active use of the language. Similarly, in Family C, frequent visits to the maternal grandparents provided the children with additional exposure and opportunities to engage with the language. These cases align with Ishizawa (2004), who found that consistent intergenerational contact greatly enhances children's maintenance of a minority language through repeated and emotionally rooted interactions.

Conversely, Families B and D illustrate how limited or absent contact can lead to a decline in transmission. In Family B, the grandparents live far away and encounters are infrequent, while in Family D, the children grow up mainly surrounded by their father's Arabic-speaking relatives. The reduced exposure to Kabyle-speaking family members limits both input and motivation to use the language. As Guardado (2002) observed, when children's opportunities to interact with heritage-language speakers are restricted, the minority language gradually loses its everyday function and emotional significance.

Summary of Discussion:

The following table summarizes the main findings of the discussion section, highlighting the level of transmission, observed outcomes, and the influencing factors that shaped language practices across the four families.

	Level of Transmission	Linguistic Outcomes	Influencing Factors
Family A	Full transmission	Balanced bilingualism: fluent use of both Kabyle and Algerian Arabic among the children	positive attitudes, Strong fluency and parental determination, supportive non-Kabyle parent, regular contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents
Family B	Failure of transmission	Children fluent in French and Algerian Arabic, with no use of Kabyle	Lack of will to transmit, parental preference for French, rare contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents
Family C	Partial transmission	Passive bilingualism: children understand Kabyle but rarely use it	Regular contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents
Family D	Failure of transmission	Exclusive use of Algerian Arabic, with no presence of Kabyle	Mother's limited proficiency in Kabyle, rare contact with Kabyle-speaking grandparents, regular contact with Algerian Arabic extended family

Conclusion:

The present study shows that the transmission of a minority language within mixed-language families depends on several elements that work together rather than on a single factor. These elements differ from one family to another and explain the variety of outcomes observed, from full transmission to partial or failed cases. Mixed-language families, while often perceived as an obstacle to minority language maintenance, can still make transmission possible when certain conditions are met. When parents show real commitment, have enough competence in the language, and create regular opportunities for exposure, the transmission of the minority language remains achievable. In this sense, mixed-language families, although diverse in their situations, can still provide a space where a minority language continues to exist, as long as favorable linguistic, personal, and social conditions are present.

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