

The Decline of Dialectal Arabic in the Rural Areas of Sidi Bel Abbes The Case of Mezaourou Dialect

تراجع استعمال العربية الدارجة في المناطق الريفية لولاية سيدي بلعباس لهجة قرية مزاورو نموذجاً

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Abstract

This study examines the decline of dialectal Arabic in western Algeria through interviews and expert opinions. It reveals that the use of urban dialects, French, Modern Standard Arabic, and the effects of globalisation have contributed to a decrease in dialectal Arabic use among younger generations. The research highlights the scarcity of resources and the limited attention from authorities and sociolinguists. It underscores the importance of language policies and planning to support dialectal Arabic. The study calls for urgent language revitalisation programmes, particularly in education and the media, to preserve this linguistic heritage.

Keywords: Dialectal Arabic; Language loss; Younger Generations; Rural Algeria; Language policy and planning

ملخص

تتناول الدراسة تراجع استعمال الدارجة في مزاورة إحدى قرى ولاية سيدي بلعباس غرب الجزائر، مركزة على العوامل التي أدت إلى انخفاض استخدامها بين الأجيال الشابة. توضح النتائج أن انتشار اللهجات الحضرية، واللغة الفرنسية، والعربية الفصحى الحديثة، إلى جانب تأثيرات العولمة، لعبت دوراً كبيراً في تقليل تداول الدارجة في الحياة اليومية. كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على نقص الموارد المخصصة للحفاظ على هذه اللهجة المحلية، إضافة إلى ضعف الاهتمام من قبل الجهات الرسمية والباحثين في علم اللغة الاجتماعي. وتشدد على أهمية اعتماد سياسات لغوية مدروسة تهدف إلى دعم استمرار الدارجة وتعزيز مكانتها. كما تدعو إلى تنفيذ برامج عاجلة لإحياء اللهجات المحلية، خاصة في مجالي التعليم والإعلام، لضمان الحفاظ على هذا التراث اللغوي الهام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العربية العامية; تراجع الدارجة; جيل الشباب; المناطق الريفية; السياسة والتخطيط اللغوي.

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Introduction

A wide array of cultural and historical influences has contributed to the rich and complex evolution of dialectal Arabic in Algeria. Arabic was first introduced to Algeria during the Muslim expansion of the 7th century and eventually became the dominant language of the region, giving rise to various dialects over time. These dialects were shaped by interactions with the Berber languages of the indigenous population, as well as by French and Spanish colonisation, and also by Turkish presence. Furthermore, Arabisation policies implemented by the Algerian government in the mid-20th century sought to promote the use of Arabic, further transforming the linguistic landscape of the country.

Today, the northwestern regions of Algeria are experiencing a significant loss of dialectal words, particularly among younger generations. This decline is especially noticeable in villages south of Sidi Bel Abbes, where traditional words are disappearing from daily use. The erosion of dialectal vocabulary raises concerns about the potential loss of the region's linguistic heritage, emphasizing the need to understand the social, cultural, and linguistic factors driving this phenomenon.

This study aims to investigate the reasons behind the loss of dialectal words in the western region of Algeria and to explore potential strategies for preserving and revitalizing these local dialects. Preserving the value and use of local dialects is essential for maintaining Algeria's cultural heritage and ensuring its transmission to future generations (Tadmouri, 2021).

1. Background of the study

The study on the loss of words in dialectal Arabic in western Algeria is based on the author's personal observation of the phenomenon. The author grew up in the rural village of Mezaourou, located approximately 50 km from the Sidi Bel Abbes city center, and frequently heard words used by local inhabitants that are now falling out of use or being replaced by city dialects, French, and, occasionally, English.

For example, words such as *walal* /wa'la/ have been replaced by *ghouraf* /gu'raf/, *ichira*

/i'fɪ:ra/ by *bent* /bɛnt/, *kraa* /kra:/ by *rjel* /rʒɛl/, *wahla* /'wəhla/ by *belkarch* /bel'kaʁʃ/ or *enceinte* /ã.sɛt/, *zokrom* /zo'krom/ by *loket* /'lɔkit/, *guenina* /ge'nina/ by *arneb* /'ar.nɛb/, and *khossa* /'xɔs.sa/

by *bague* /bag/ or *khatem* /'xatɛm/. These examples represent only a small fraction of tens, if not hundreds, of words and expressions that are now at risk of erosion and dialect decline. A comprehensive list of these words is included in the Appendix, highlighting both those that have disappeared completely and those facing a similar fate.

The decline of these traditional words evokes feelings of unease and nostalgia for the author, reflecting the broader cultural and emotional impact of language loss. Documenting this linguistic decline is therefore essential for preserving and recognizing the language and cultural heritage of the region. This study aims to examine the factors contributing to the loss of dialectal Arabic and to explore the implications of this phenomenon for the cultural identity of western Algeria.

2. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What social, cultural, and linguistic factors contribute to the decline of traditional words and expressions in the daily speech of young people in rural areas of Sidi Bel Abbès?
2. How do young people perceive the use of lexical alternatives drawn from urban Arabic dialects, French, and English, and what impact does this have on the preservation of the local dialect?
3. How does the loss of traditional words and expressions affect the social and cultural identity of young people in rural Sidi Bel Abbès?
4. What strategies or interventions can be implemented to support the preservation and use of traditional words and expressions in the everyday speech of young people in rural Sidi Bel Abbès?

3. Methodology

This study implemented a mixed-methods approach, which involved the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the ongoing decline of dialectal vocabulary and expressions among adolescents. The research was conducted in the rural Mezaourou community, which is situated



approximately 50 kilometers northwest of the urban center of Sidi Bel-Abbes. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify 60 participants who were considered to be representative of the adolescent population in the community. To guarantee the participation of individuals from a variety of social backgrounds and environments within the community, they were contacted through local schools and community centers. The sample size was determined by the precedent of comparable linguistic studies, which demonstrate that 60 participants generate an adequate amount of data for statistical reliability and meaningful quantitative analysis. It was imperative to accurately capture the complex and nuanced reality of the observed language shift that the researcher's two-decade familiarity with this community provided a deep emic perspective (insider view). Quantitative data, such as percentages of 75% and 90%, were derived from responses obtained through structured questionnaires that were distributed to participants. The validity and replicability of the study are both substantiated by this methodological design.

4. Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to select native dialect speakers aged 16 to 35 who could offer rich and diverse insights into the phenomenon. The main sample consisted 60 young respondents (30 males and 30 females) with different educational backgrounds.

5. Data Collection Instruments

Qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-linguistic factors contributing to word loss in rural areas. Furthermore, the researcher compiled a non-exhaustive list of words at risk of obsolescence from the local dialectal Arabic, which is included in the Appendix to contextualize the study.

6. Forces Driving Dialectal Arabic Loss in Algeria

Dridi and Belkaid (2018) argue that French colonization had a profound impact on Arabic and its dialects in Algeria. The French authorities implemented policies that suppressed the use of Arabic, including establishing French as the official language, imposing the French educational system, and prohibiting Arabic in official documents and courts. These colonial policies significantly contributed to the erosion of dialectal Arabic, particularly in the northwestern region of the country. Colonial rule promoted foreign languages like French and English in schools and government, reducing the use of local Arabic

dialects in northwestern regions. This caused dialectal Arabic to weaken over time. Thus, colonial policies played a major role in this erosion.

Belmihoub (2021) notes that French has become especially prevalent among younger generations, who view it as a means of social mobility and access to better employment opportunities. Many Algerians are now bilingual in French and Arabic, and some even practice code-switching within the same conversation (Bentahila & Davies, 1983). The effects of globalization and modernization have further increased the use of English and French words in daily communication (Bentahila & Davies, 1995). Consequently, many young people perceive local dialectal words as less relevant or useful in contemporary society.

Siddiqi (2014) highlights that the lack of formal education and training in dialectal Arabic has contributed to its decline, limiting transmission to younger generations. Yamamoto (2011) observes that increasing urbanization in rural areas pressures residents to abandon their local dialects in favor of French or English, which are considered more prestigious. Furthermore, the use of dialectal Arabic is often associated with lower socioeconomic status, resulting in negative perceptions and attitudes toward the language (Bentahila & Davies, 1995)

7. The Impact of Language Loss on Cultural Heritage and Community Well-Being in Western Algeria

The ongoing linguistic attrition poses a serious threat to the preservation of the unique cultural heritage of western Algeria. Nait-Zerrad (2014) reports that numerous words are on the brink of decline, signaling a concerning trend. Language loss entails not only the lexical substitution of words but also the erosion of an entire culture, including customs, beliefs, and knowledge systems (Kaplan, 2015). This loss has serious implications for the social and economic development of affected communities, as it limits their ability to adapt to change and maintain their distinct identities. M'Charek (2018) emphasizes that the decline of cultural diversity undermines community resilience and reduces the capacity to cope with contemporary challenges.

The lexical substitution of a native language can also lead to feelings of disconnection from one's community, culture, and history, which may result in depression, anxiety, and diminished self-identity



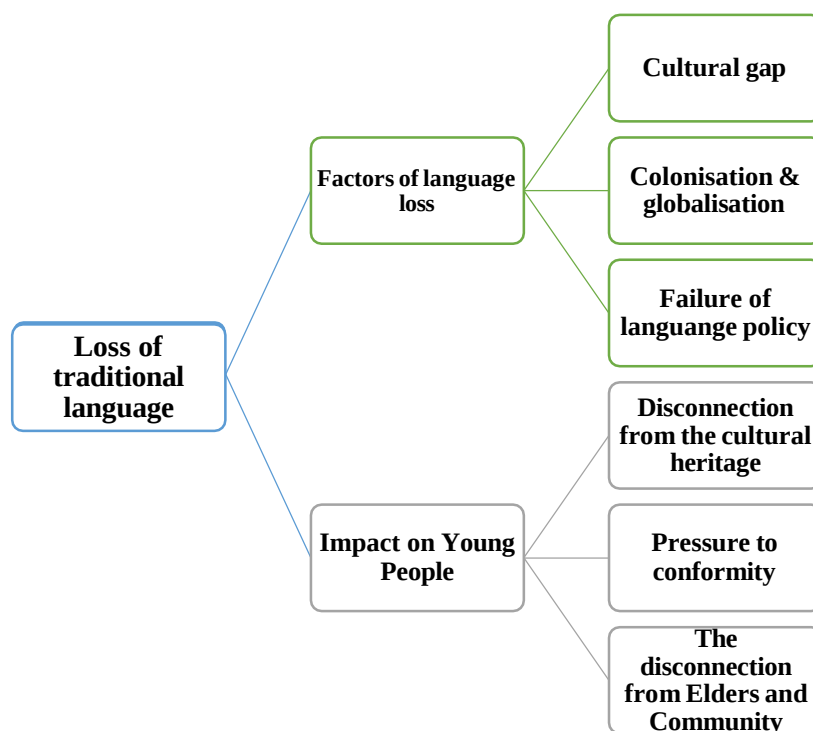
(Fishman, 1991). Language loss can create communication barriers, restricting access to education and employment opportunities (Nait-Zerrad, 2014).

In this context, the decline of dialectal Arabic in western Algeria is influenced by several factors, including increased urbanization, the dominance of standardized Arabic and French in education and media, and shifting social attitudes that favor these languages over local dialects. This deterioration carries significant repercussions for cultural and linguistic diversity, as it leads to the erosion of unique cultural identities and traditional knowledge embedded in the dialect. Furthermore, it impacts social cohesion and intergenerational communication within communities. Economically, the loss of dialectal richness may reduce opportunities for cultural tourism and local economic development tied to heritage preservation. At the individual level, the decline can affect speakers' sense of belonging and psychological well-being. Consequently, it is crucial to implement measures that prevent further language loss and promote the preservation and revitalization of endangered dialects.

8.Data Analysis

The decline of traditional words and expressions in the daily speech of young people in rural areas of Sidi Bel Abbes is a complex phenomenon shaped by multiple social, cultural, and linguistic factors. According to Boukhatem, Chachou, and Bouchareb, this loss can be attributed to a cultural gap between modern lifestyles and traditional language practices, the influence of globalization and dominant Western culture, and the inability of the Algerian education system to support the use of dialectal Arabic. These factors contribute to young people feeling disconnected from their cultural heritage and experiencing pressure to conform to the language norms of their peers or to the dominant global culture.

Diagram: Loss of Traditional Language



9. Results and Findings

The study conducted in the rural neighborhoods of Sidi Bel Abbes, revealed that certain words and expressions are being substituted with either dialectal Arabic words or expressions used in the city center, or replaced with French and even English words or expressions. This shift suggests a loss of a significant amount of the rich linguistic heritage of the region and a departure from traditional linguistic practices.

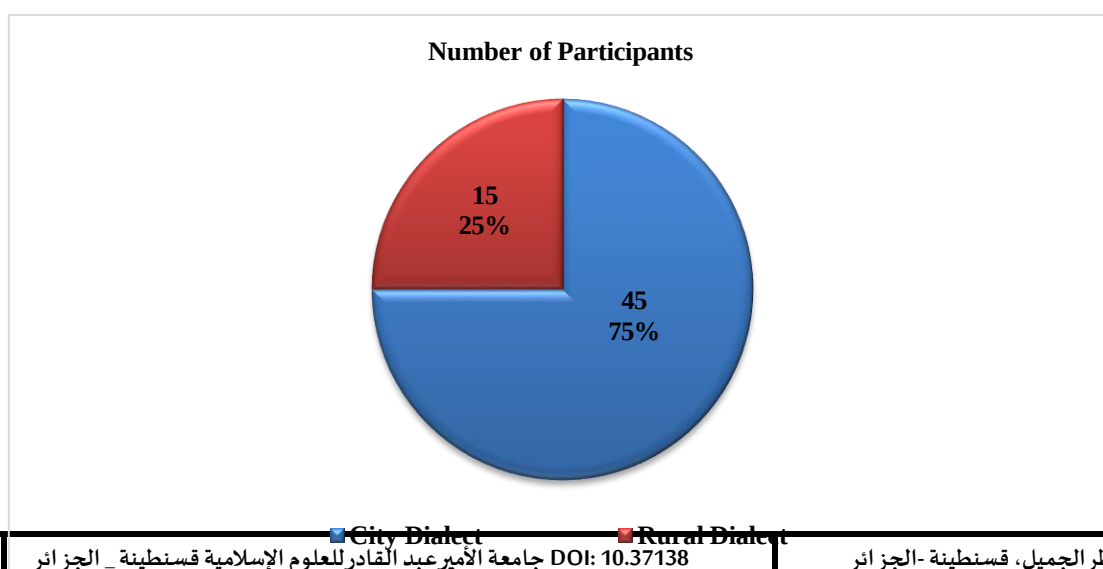
1. Dialect Preference: Urban vs. Rural Dialect

The analysis indicates a pronounced preference for the urban dialect among young participants. 75% favored the urban form of Arabic, reflecting its higher social prestige and association with modernization. In contrast, only 25% continued to use the traditional rural dialect, demonstrating the ongoing shift away from local linguistic heritage.

1/- Number of Participants Preferring City Dialect and Rural Dialect

Table 1: City Dialect vs. Rural Dialect Preference

Dialect	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Urban Dialect	45	75%
Rural Dialect	15	25%



2. Gender-Based Preferences for Traditional vs. Modern Words

The participants were analyzed based on their preference for using traditional Mezaourou words or substituting them with urban Arabic dialect, French, or English words.

Table 2: Gender dialect Preference among Study Participants

Gender	Number of Participants	% Preferring City Dialect	Number Preferring City Dialect	% Preferring Rural Dialect	Number Preferring Rural Dialect
Females	30	90%	27	10%	3
Males	30	60%	18	40%	12
Total	60	75%	45	25%	15

The findings reveal a clear gender difference in dialect preference. Among females, 90% preferred using city dialect or modern words, while only 10% used traditional Mezaourou words. Among males, 60% favored city or modern alternatives, and 40% continued using rural dialect. Collectively, 75% of all participants preferred modern words, highlighting a significant shift in language use.

Key Observations:

- Young females are more likely than males to adopt urban or foreign linguistic forms.
- The rural dialect is maintained primarily by those residing with older generations who reinforce its daily use.

3. Reasons for Word Loss in Mezaourou Dialect

Participants provided insight into the sociolinguistic factors driving this linguistic erosion

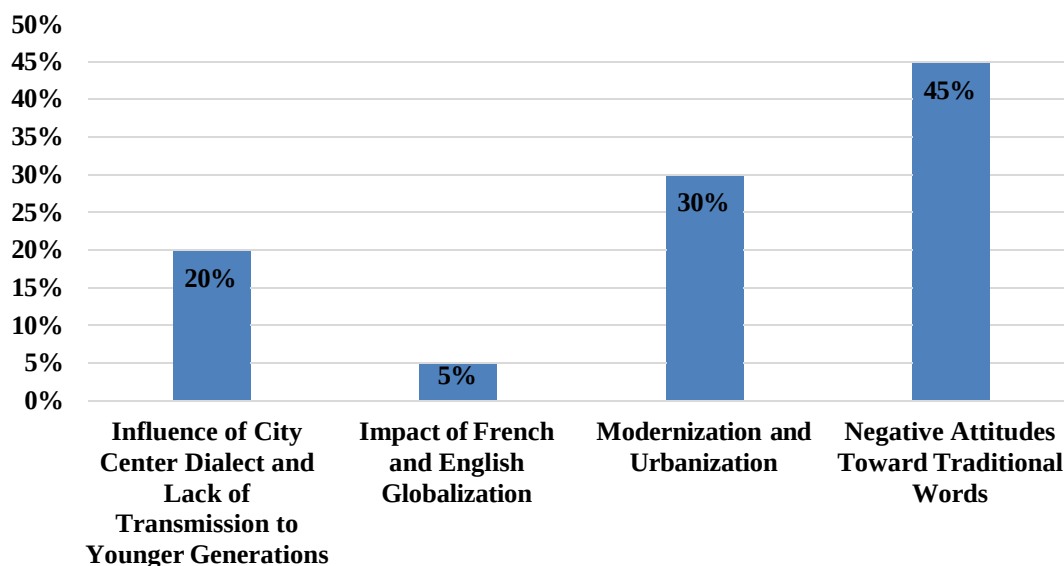
Table 3: Factors driving linguistic erosion

Reasons for Word Loss	The Percentage of Respondents Identifying Factor
Influence of City Center Dialect and Lack of Transmission to Younger Generations	20%
Impact of French and English Globalization	5%
Modernization and Urbanization	30%
Negative Attitudes Toward Traditional Words	45%

The participants identified several sociolinguistic factors driving the loss of traditional words:

- 20% cited the influence of city dialects and inadequate transmission from older generations.
- 5% attributed loss to the impact of French and English due to globalization.
- 30% identified modernization and urbanization as key contributors.
- 45% reported that negative attitudes toward traditional words play a major role.

The Percentage of Respondents Identifying Factor



Social Pressures to Conform:

The preference for urban speech is largely driven by social embarrassment. Participants who perceive rural dialect as “unrefined” tend to abandon it in favor of the city variant. Conversely, those who continue using the rural dialect often live with grandparents or elders, ensuring continuous exposure and intergenerational transmission.

4. Cultural and Social Impact of Word Loss

Table 4: Cultural and Social Impact of Word Loss

Impact	% of Participants noting the impact
The weakening of Traditional Knowledge and Customs	45%
Disconnection of the youth from Elders and Community	28%
Loss of Cultural Heritage and Identity	17%
Language shift	10%

The linguistic shift has several socio-cultural consequences:

- 45% reported weakening of traditional knowledge and customs.
- 28% noted disconnection of youth from elders and the community.
- 17% observed a loss of cultural heritage and identity.
- 10% acknowledged the risk of language shift.

This demonstrates that the erosion of dialectal Arabic is not only a linguistic concern but also deeply affects cultural continuity and community cohesion.

10. Key Findings

The study reveals a significant shift in language use among the youth of Mezaourou, with 75% favoring city dialects or foreign words, and females exhibiting the highest adoption rate at 90%. The main factors driving this loss include urbanization, negative attitudes toward traditional words, the influence of city dialects, and the effects of globalization. This linguistic shift has resulted in cultural disconnection, the erosion of traditional knowledge, and weakened intergenerational transmission.



Addressing these challenges requires targeted efforts through education, media initiatives, community engagement, and supportive language policies to preserve and revitalize the Mezaourou dialect.

11. Preservation Strategies and Recommendations

To address the ongoing erosion of the Mezaourou dialect and ensure its preservation for future generations, several targeted strategies can be implemented. First, promoting intergenerational transmission is essential. Families and communities should play a central role in passing down traditional words through storytelling sessions, cultural gatherings, and interactive activities that engage younger generations in meaningful ways.

Educational institutions can contribute by introducing dialect preservation programs, including workshops, folklore studies, and creative projects such as poetry, storytelling, and local literature. Documentation of the dialect is equally important, and can be achieved by collaborating with linguists and researchers to create dictionaries, audio recordings, and digital archives that preserve vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural context.

Media campaigns can also raise awareness about the cultural significance of the Mezaourou dialect, promoting pride and encouraging its use in everyday communication. Community-based initiatives, such as cultural festivals, theater performances, and traditional music events, can provide platforms for active engagement and foster a deeper connection to linguistic heritage.

Finally, supportive government policies are crucial to formalize preservation efforts, while bilingual education programs can balance the influence of global languages with the continued use of the local dialect. By integrating traditional words into modern contexts, such as local businesses, signage, and media, these strategies collectively aim to revitalize the Mezaourou dialect as a living cultural tradition and ensure its transmission to future generations.

Conclusion:

This study has examined the ongoing decline of dialectal Arabic in the rural areas of Sidi Bel Abbès, with particular reference to the Mezaourou dialect. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the research has demonstrated that language loss in this context is not a random process but the result of intertwined social, cultural, and linguistic factors. Urbanization, negative attitudes toward rural speech, the dominance of urban dialects, and the growing influence of French and English have collectively contributed to the gradual abandonment of traditional dialectal vocabulary, especially among younger generations.

The findings reveal a clear generational and gender-based shift in language use, with young people particularly females showing a strong preference for urban or foreign linguistic forms perceived as more prestigious and socially advantageous. This shift has weakened intergenerational transmission and reduced daily exposure to traditional words, accelerating their erosion. As the data indicate, the loss of dialectal Arabic extends beyond linguistic change, deeply affecting cultural identity, social cohesion, and the transmission of local knowledge and values.

Moreover, the study highlights the absence of institutional support, educational integration, and systematic documentation as key obstacles to dialect preservation. Without targeted language policies and planning strategies, dialectal Arabic risks further marginalization and possible dialect decline. In this respect, the Mezaourou case reflects a broader sociolinguistic trend observable in many rural Algerian communities.

In conclusion, preserving dialectal Arabic requires urgent and coordinated efforts involving families, educational institutions, media, researchers, and policymakers. Promoting positive attitudes toward local dialects, strengthening intergenerational transmission, and integrating dialectal awareness into education and cultural initiatives are essential steps toward revitalization. By recognizing dialectal Arabic as a valuable component of Algeria's linguistic and cultural heritage, sustainable measures can be implemented to ensure its survival and continued relevance in a rapidly changing sociolinguistic landscape.



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Appendix

The following table provides a selection of dialectal Arabic words used in the Mezaourou community of Sidi Bel Abbes, along with their phonetic transcription and English meanings. These words are representative of the linguistic heritage currently at risk of erosion among younger generations.

Dialectal Arabic Words in Mezaourou at Risk of Erosion:

	Dialectal Word (Arabic)	Phonetic Transcription	Meaning in English
1	ونيسة (Ounissa)	ūnīsa	Earrings
2	إثرث (Etherth)	ithrath	Animal feces
3	أجلبية (Ejliba)	ejlība	Animals taken to market for sale
4	أسقطة (Esskitta)	esskītā	Carcass of a slaughtered animal
5	أسوكيت (Essoukayt)	essūkayt	Dry pine needles for fire-starting
6	أسياح (Essayah)	essayyāḥ	Rough dry plants as poor-quality feed
7	أحريطة (Hartita)	ḥartītā	Crepe: thin pancake
8	أروى (Erwa)	arwā	Meat broth or couscous sauce
9	أحراق (Elharegh)	el-ḥarāq	Herd of goats
10	أجدي (Ejda3)	ijdaʿ	Young male goat
11	أهيدورة (Elhaydoura)	el-ḥaydūra	Tanned sheep skin used for sitting
12	أهيش (Elhaychar)	el-ḥaychar	Remains of dry cereal stalks (straw)
13	أبرومي (Elbroumi)	el-brūmī	Whitish straw parts, low-value fodder
14	أفقيه (Elfkih)	elfqīh	Religious man with deep Islamic knowledge
15	أفلفل الأخضر الحلو (Elfloukhou)	el-flūkhu	Sweet green pepper
16	أغروطة (Elghrouta)	el-gharrūta	Cloth bag made of linen
17	أقناديز (Elghnadiz)	el-ghnādīz	Qur'an pupils / mosque learners
18	أقانع (Elkan3)	el-qāniʿ	Domestic dog
19	أكاشا (Elkacha)	elkāsha	Cotton cover for warmth
20	أقرون (Makroun)	maqūrūn	Mad or mentally unstable (informal)
21	أمتعدس (Meta3dass)	metaʿdass	Pneumonia-like symptoms
22	أمجلخ (Emjalakh)	emjalakh	Dirty or filthy person (adj)
23	أجلخ (Ejlakh)	ejlakh	Dirty or filthy person (noun)
24	أجلتية (Jeltita)	jiltītā	Petticoat / underskirt
25	أخيمة (Kheima)	khayma	Home / sometimes wife
26	أخوصة (Khossa)	khuṣṣa	Ring (finger ring)
27	أخجرانة / عكفة (Khenjrana / 3akfa)	khenjrāna / ʿakfa	Wooden walking stick for elders
28	أكراع (Kraa)	krāʿ	Foot / leg
29	أقاميلا (Ghamila)	ghāmila	Metal container or pot

30	فوفالة (Ghofala)	ghōfala	Shaggy or unkempt hair
31	فلوز (Kalouz)	qalūz	Tombour: type of frame drum
32	برحوش (Barhouch)	barhūsh	Someone who does not learn from mistakes
33	بر غطة (Barghatta)	barghāta	Traditional leather sandal
34	بورابح (Bourabeh)	bōrābeḥ	Thick woolen cloth for warmth
35	دافع (Dafe3)	dāfeʿ	Pregnant animal (sheep, goat, cow)
36	لحموم (El-hmoum)	el-ḥmūm	Trash: light black soot layer from fire
37	لرخا (Larkha)	larkhā	Young, strong cow
38	مهيدر (Mhaydar)	mheydar	Weak, unhealthy-looking person
39	ممروط (Mamrout)	mamrūt	Overfilled or stuffed
40	مقرون (Makroun)	maqrūn	Mad or mentally unstable (informal)
41	سبطة (Sabta)	sabṭa	Young girl with yellowish complexion
42	تراس (Tarres)	ṭarras	Man
43	صدام (Zdam)	zdam	Wallet
44	زّراب (Zaraab)	zarrāb	Sudden, heavy, short rain
45	زّرة (Zaara)	zārra	Very heavy / torrential rain
46	زكروم (Zokrom)	zokrom	Doorknob
47	يسهد (Yeshad)	yeshād	To walk or act slowly but effectively
48	اعكي (I3aki)	iʿākī	To sneer
49	اصرد (Issarad)	iṣṣarad	To filter or strain a liquid
50	الواغش (Elwaghech)	el-wāghesh	Untamed youth / wild ones
51	الوهس (Elwahss)	el-wahss	Unease, discomfort, weird vibe
52	الوضة (Elwdah)	el-wḍa	Soiled wool (sheep wool with feces)
53	واحلة (Wahla)	wāḥla	Pregnant woman
54	واخل (Wakhel)	wākhil	Physically exhausted and drained
55	والال (Walal)	walāl	Jar: small cup used for drinking water
56	المعاش (Elm3aach)	el-maʿāsh	Thick couscous (bercoukess)

Note: These words are representative examples. Tens, if not hundreds, of other Mezaourou dialect words are at risk of being replaced by city dialect, French, or English, highlighting the urgent need for documentation and preservation.