

Why do minority languages persist? The case of Circassian in Jordan

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The Circassian ethnic minority group in Jordan has been part of the Jordanian community since immigrating to the area in the 1860s. External pressures of the type that might be expected to lead to language loss include ethnopolitical and demographic factors (the Circassians number approximately 1-2% in a country of 4.5 million people). Internal pressures include (a) their favorable conditions and distinguished social and political status in that they enjoy unparalleled freedom of culture and expression envied by other Circassian communities in other countries; (b) they do not strive for national and political autonomy; (c) they have taken very advanced strides in the steady process of social, political and linguistic integration and assimilation into the majority Arab community, acquiring a full Jordanian citizenship with all rights associated with this and that their interests are well-served; and (d) the majority of them realize that their language is not practically useful. Nevertheless, Circassian has survived in some ethnic, social and cultural domains. Though most empirical evidence indicates a gradual process of ethnic language attrition and ultimate predictable loss at all levels, there are counter motivations, which seem to curb this process. One of these factors is the prestige of the group within the wider community. In the case of the Circassians, this prestige is due to their wealth as landlords and their high positions in the army, police and security forces and other governmental sectors. In addition they have been trusted by the royal family and thus entrusted with some royal security jobs. It is argued that at a certain stage in the life of an ethnic group which has acquired some prestige, language may become only a symbol of distinction, identification, and a carrier of heritage, without having a culture of its own or any pragmatic value; hence members like to talk about it expressing loyalty, but not necessarily to have it. Thus the persistence of an ethnic language for longer periods of time must not always be viewed as an act of challenge to or refusal of the dominant language or culture. The community can be fully incorporated in and accepted by the majority group and can achieve a high status and prestige, yet attachment to ethnic language remains symbolic and emotionally motivated though not always a national issue, nor even a genuine local issue in the community.