

2021

Exploring Ch'timi's History, Structure, and Decline: A Field Study Chez les Ch'tis

Felix Balak

University of Central Florida, Orlando, felix.balak@knights.ucf.edu



Part of the [French Linguistics Commons](#), [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#), and the Other
[Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/urj>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Balak, Felix (2021) "Exploring Ch'timi's History, Structure, and Decline: A Field Study Chez les Ch'tis," *The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/urj/vol14/iss1/4>



Exploring Ch'timi's History, Structure, and Decline: A Field Study *Chez les Ch'tis*

By: Felix Balak

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Taoues Hadour

UCF Department of Modern Languages and Literatures

.....

ABSTRACT: This research investigated the history of the Ch'timi language and some of the differences between it and Standard French, as well as its decline and what, if anything, is being done to stop it. Ch'timi is a part of the Picard language group, spoken primarily in the north of France, and parts of Belgium. It is an endangered language, and few people still speak it to this day. This field research aims to determine how speakers of the language see it, whether they think it should be preserved, and whether anything is being done to keep it active. To answer these questions, field interviews were conducted with anonymous speakers of the language, and some of their demographic information collected. Further, background literature research was done to determine aspects of the language's culture and structure. The results of the interview research and the background research, as well as investigations of any organizations dedicated to preserving these languages, shows that very little is actively being done to preserve them and that the people themselves do not see its survival as a priority due to internal stigma, economic reasons, and the low proportion of people who still speak it.

KEYWORDS: endangered language; minor language; french; picard; ch'timi; field research

..... *Republication not permitted without written consent of the author.*

Introduction

According to the UNESCO Courier, 2465 languages worldwide are endangered, including Picard and its dialect Ch'timi, minority languages originally from and currently spoken in the north of France. Statistically, only .008% of the French population spoke any dialect of Picard in 2009 (Moseley, 2010). Ch'timi became a stigmatizing language and an obstacle to upwards socioeconomic mobility because it was mostly spoken by immigrants, miners, and factory workers, which is one of the factors explaining why it was not transmitted across generational lines (Tatsuya, 2014; UNESCO Courier, 1993). Ch'timi is on a path to extinction, as are increasing numbers of languages every year. The object of this research is to learn more about the Ch'timi language, a dialect of Picard, as it exists in the 21st century, reviewing its diachronic development, and its potential extinction using field research methods in the city of Lille and its environs.

Through both field and textual research, this paper explores the links, similarities, and differences of Ch'timi as compared to other languages of northwestern Europe, such as English, Dutch, and French. This research also examines how and if this language is being preserved for future generations, whether through familial transmission, education in schools, or other initiatives. Additionally, the questionnaire data indicates how the people of Lille and its environs think and feel about the language and its uncertain future. The greatest factors in the disappearance of a language are the size of the region which speaks it and the size of their populations: "small range and speaker population sizes are associated with rapid declines in speaker numbers" (Tatsuya et al., 2014, p. 1). The greater language of Picard, which includes Ch'timi, is only spoken in the part of Hauts-de-France called Picardie, as well as certain small regions of Walloon Belgium. According to *The Endangered Languages Project*, about 200,000 people spoke Picard in 2017 (Moseley, 2010). This sparse number bodes ill for the long-term survival of the language, especially considering that Ch'timi speakers consist of only a fraction of overall Picard speakers.

This study is informed by using literary research as primary sources from a time in which the language was still commonly spoken in the area, primarily from the latter half of the 19th century. The information

gathered during this study provided nuance and clarification on the language and the perception of it through time.

Background and Literature Review

In *Langage et pouvoir symbolique (Language and Symbolic Power)* (Bourdieu, 2001), Pierre Bourdieu explores the idea that languages are not formed with specific and rigid rules, but instead evolve over time. For example, the French language is influenced by Latin. By the 5th and 6th Centuries CE, Frankish tribes invaded Gaul, integrating present Latin vocabulary into their proto-French. Over the next centuries, various influences would exert pressure on the language through war or trade, and the various French languages began to emerge. Before the advent of what is known today as Standard French (SF), which evolved from a dialect called Francien, many dialects were spoken across France. A northern dialect of the *langues d'oïl*, or Old French, was even used in some of the oldest written records of the French language, such as the "Séquence de sainte Eulalie", which was written circa 880 CE. This text has similar characteristics to more modern forms of Walloon, Champenois, and Picard (Willems & Hoffmann von Fallersleben, 1837).

Picard was commonly spoken in the northern regions of France, and in the western parts of Belgium, and has several dialects, including Ch'timi (Legrand, 1853; UNESCO, 1993), spoken by the inhabitants of Lille, Tourcoing, Roubaix, and the surrounding areas. Picard and its dialects are mostly known for their archaic pronunciation, being as they are one of the oldest forms of French. Ch'timi is also known for its unique vocabulary. For example, in Ch'timi, the first person singular personal pronoun, is "ej", pronounced like the last phoneme of "ray." This is more similar to the English "I" than the standard French "je". There are many other examples of the similarities between Ch'timi and English or Dutch, which serve to demonstrate the degree to which Ch'timi was influenced by other contact languages. Linguist Timothy Pooley (1996) gives several examples of Ch'timi with the translation into standard French (S.F.):

Picard	"I nd a grammint qu'i saissent nin in.ne séquo qu'che s'rot tout purain vi pâteo. Tchad qu'i veulent rincânter in,ne garlouzète, i pins'tent qu'ch'est du pâteo: ch'est foque don.ner des cô d'pi à la France!"
S.F.	"Il y en a beaucoup qui ne savent pas dire quelque chose qui soit tout pur vieux patois. Quand ils veulent raconter une histoire, ils pensent que c'est du patois: c'est seulement «donner des coups de pied à la France!»"
English	"There are many who do not know how to say something that's totally pure old patois. When they want to tell a story, they think that it's patois: It's only 'throwing kicks at France!'"

Table 1. Comparison of written Picard and Standard French with a sample phrase, with English gloss translation (Pooley, 1996).

This example of Picard is what Pooley defines as 'pure'; superficially different from standard French but linked to its roots (Pooley, 1996). Picard, unlike the languages of the center of France, was highly influenced by English, Dutch and Flemish. One word which remains part of the lexicon of the region, and that demonstrates this observation particularly well, is "wassingue," which means 'dishrag.' The 'g' sound is often dropped in the northern French accent, [wa.sɛ̃n], but in Ch'timi specifically, the opposite occurs, and it is very pronounced. This word takes its roots from the Dutch "wassching," meaning 'laundry,' and the Dutch influence explains the pronunciation in Ch'timi, [wa.sɛ̃g]. Beyond Dutch, several words were incorporated from English, according to the *Dictionnaire du patois de Lille et de ses environs* published by Pierre Legrand in 1853. In his *Dictionnaire*, Legrand explained that the inclusion of words from different languages occurred during the height of the first upsurge of nationalism in Europe, when people first showed academic interest in languages and cultures unique to their nations (Legrand, 1853). For example, in Ch'timi, the word "pluquer" means to 'pick at,' and is derived from the English word 'pluck.' Similarly, the word "pierrette", the stone of a fruit, comes from the French word for 'stone,' even though in standard French, the stone of a fruit is called the "noyau," or nut. Another example is how "caïère" in Ch'timi means 'chair,' pronounced very similarly to the English word 'care' (Legrand, 1853), which is a stark contrast from the French 'chaise'. According to local legend, the word Ch'timi itself was paradoxically not invented by speakers of the language, but instead bestowed by French soldiers during the first world war, referencing the fact that the soldiers from the north constantly replaced 's' sounds with 'ch' ones and used the word "mi," which means the same thing

as the English 'me' to replace the French word "moi" (Anonymous Personal Conversation, 2017).

Curiously, according to recordings and resources on the internet and observations in Lille, the Ch'timi language from Lille, Tourcoing, and Roubaix is a different dialect from the one found in the rural villages in the area. According to Pooley (1996), the French departments of *Pas de Calais* and *Nord* have different dialects of Picard, with differences arising because of the other majority contact languages found in nearby countries. Ch'timi is especially influenced by Flemish and Walloon from the north, Norman and Francien from the south of the region, and English. Pooley found that the shift from speaking Picard to speaking Standard French was faster in rural as compared to urban areas (Pooley, 1996), which indicates that there is likely a better chance of finding fluent Ch'timi speakers in an urban city such as Lille.

One of the largest issues identified by Bourdieu (2001) about the field of linguistics is the fact that in orthodox linguistics, there is a separation between the study of the rules of grammar and vocabulary and their evolution, and linguistic anthropology. It is the division of socio- and -linguistics which Bourdieu considers a nuisance to the furtherance of the science. As an example of interdisciplinarity, Bourdieu further clarifies that linguistics must include some aspects of psychology. In his book, he discusses the habits which make up personality and society. In his opinion, language is the external expression of the interior of a culture, similar to the performativity theory of Judith Butler, in the sense that language is the performance of a culture, and how the language is constructed can be paralleled by the culture which uses it (Akşit and Varışlı, 2014). Within the context of endangered languages, these models of

a language as a performance of the people who speak it sheds light on the anthropological, educational, and economic reasons why a language like Ch'timi disappears from active use. As the speakers' priorities change from transmitting their culture and traditions to achieving economic success in a larger-scale arena like France as a whole, integration becomes more important than preservation, and the utility of the language begins to disappear, with the exception of certain words and phrases which have no parallel in standard French, like the still-commonplace "Wassingue."

Methodology

Literary research about Picard and Ch'timi from the latter half of the 19th century provided information about the origins and status of Ch'timi, and questionnaire data from present-day local speakers was gathered to gain a basic understanding of Ch'timi as a living language, its status among speakers, and to see if it truly is on a path to extinction. Field studies are an integral part of any research, including sociology and sociolinguistics. In sociology, field research is not always employed by researchers. In fact, most conclusions are made from previous data. Thus, field researchers primarily seek to collect data, compare it to previous datasets, and form new conclusions (Fera, 2020). It was determined, based on ease of access, that the urban center of Lille was the most appropriate site for this study. Six interviews were conducted with most participants well past the age of retirement, which is 62 in France. They were collected in several parts of the city, including the Grand'Place plaza in the urban center of the city; at the market of the Place du Concert; in Euralille, a mall/train station; and in cafés across the city. Two interviews were conducted through personal connections. The youngest participant is 40 years old, and the oldest is 90. All have been born in or around Lille and have spoken Ch'timi from childhood, or at least they partially understand the language. None have ever worked in fields which require them to leave the local area, or require higher education, apart from a single 40-year-old speaker.

A questionnaire (Table 2) was created to understand who speaks Ch'timi, their occupations, age, birthplace, if they communicated with family using this language, and how they used this language. Ch'timi speakers in Lille were asked these questions as part of short, conversational interviews.

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quelle langue ou langues parlez-vous ? / What language or languages do you speak? 2. Quel âge avez-vous ? / What is your age? 3. Où êtes-vous né(e) ? / Where were you born? 4. Quel est ou était votre métier ? / What is or was your profession? 5. Comment avez-vous appris le ch'timi ? / How did you learn Ch'timi? 6. Parlez-vous cette langue en famille ? / Do you speak Ch'timi at home? 7. Pensez-vous que cette langue est toujours beaucoup parlée ? / Do you think that this language is still commonly spoken? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Pourquoi ou pourquoi pas ? / Why or why not? 8. Connaissez-vous des similarités ou différences entre cette langue et d'autres langues ? / Do you know of any similarities or differences between Ch'timi and other languages? |
|---|

Table 2. Questionnaire used to interview Ch'timi speakers.¹

Results

The data collected from the interviews have notable patterns despite the very small sample size. Only one of the speakers interviewed was a woman, and the majority spoke no other language besides French. None mentioned speaking Ch'timi at home in any significant way. All speakers were born in Lille or Roubaix, which is very close to Lille. Additionally, all the speakers but one had careers which did not involve leaving the area or pursuing higher education. The results of the interviews show that none of the interviewees spoke Ch'timi at home or thought that it was worth teaching to the next generations in formal settings like schools, and barring the outlier, none believed it had any historical value. The 40-year-old male participant's father had made a concerted effort to teach him the language, which he rarely spoke, mostly due to lack of fellow speakers. His family was not raised in the area and did not speak the language at home. He said it was exceedingly rare, even in his generation, for children to be taught anything

¹ This questionnaire is based on principles explained in "Why do field research?" (Reyes-Garcia & Sunderlin, 2011)

Speakers Interviewed	Age /Sex	Birthplace	Profession	Spoken At Home? (Y/N)	Number of Languages Spoken
1	87 / M	Lille	Café Owner	N	2
2	84 / M	Lille	Factory Worker (Coal)	N	3 (Eng)
3	90 / F	Roubaix	N/A	N	2
4	82 / M	Lille	Factory Worker (Textiles)	N	2
5	88 / M	Lille	Shopkeeper	N	2
6	40 / M	Lille	Engineer	N	3 (Eng)

Table 3. Demographics of Interviewees

more than a few words of the language. When asked if they thought people should be teaching Ch'timi to their children, one speaker responded that "people no longer use it, it's too regional, and intellectuals don't speak it." Another participant responded that "only the people [factory workers, farmers, and lower income people] spoke the language. It's over now." Several of the speakers interviewed said that the language had been influenced by Dutch and English, but also mentioned that it was much more like French than either language, which was corroborated by my research. Overall, I was able to discover that most people in Lille did not speak the language, and those who did had not transmitted it to their children or did not intend to. The vast majority of people in the region who speak Ch'timi know at most one or two words, and vanishingly few speak it fluently.

Discussion

Studying endangered languages presents unique difficulties, collecting information about a language and finding speakers for languages in decline or languages with small speaker pools can take a long time, which

proved problematic as this research was limited to a single semester. Endangered languages are also more difficult to research because researchers must both observe the language and preserve it. Field research in linguistics generally includes conversation with speakers of the language being studied. If the language is a common one, it is sometimes even possible for the researcher to learn the language. In the case of minority languages or languages in decline, this option is not available to researchers, as it was in the case of Ch'timi, which is already nearly extinct. Major languages contain their lexicons in the living memory of the people who speak it, but as speakers of Ch'timi become less and less common, words and phrases are being lost with those who remember them. As researchers record this information, they also collect reflections of the culture from which it originated. In this sense, sociolinguists are also cultural anthropologists, studying the culture to understand the lexicon and subtext only comprehensible through the lens of the culture. Certainly, no single research will change the destiny of an entire language, but this research seeks to shed some light on Ch'timi, a language in critical danger of disappearing entirely

(UNESCO Courier, 1993). Young people especially have less motivation to learn these languages than their parents did, and parents do not see the need to have them learn a language that is so rarely spoken, and thus do not speak it at home. This is one of the principal reasons that languages are lost (Tatsuya et al., 2014), especially if they are not spoken at work or school environments, as is the case with Ch'timi since the official language of France is standard French.

This project is exploratory and preliminary in nature, due to the constraints of time and budget, and to the extreme difficulty in finding a fluent Ch'timi speaker. Based on the literature review and the interviews, it is reasonable to assume that Ch'timi is on the road to extinction. The few remaining speakers are not interested in conserving it and take few or no measures to pass it to future generations. Certain local organizations, such as *La Renaissance du Lille Ancien*, preserve documents, images, and cultural artifacts of the region to provide an archive of Lille's history, but there is no national organization in France dedicated to the preservation of Ch'timi. Several popular books have been translated into Ch'timi, notably comic books such as *Astérix et Obélix*; however, they are rare to find and specifically aimed at children and locals. They are also easily found in standard French, and thus present very little interest to younger readers. According to a staff member at the "Furet du Nord," the largest European bookstore selling these novelty Ch'timi books, they are primarily purchased to occupy space on bookshelves and start conversations, rather than to be read, which could be a contributing factor to its disappearance (Anonymous Personal Conversation, 2017). The film *Bienvenue Chez les Ch'tis*, created by Dany Boon in 2008, includes spoken Ch'timi in scenes of situational comedy, but not in monologues or conversations between principal characters (Boon, 2008). Boon himself admitted that people south of Paris had an "apocalyptic" view of the North (Unifrance, 2008, p. 6), which encouraged him to make the film, with a goal of showing the rest of France the unique language and culture of the North. Analysis of Google searches for "Ch'timi" and related searches shows a spike in interest at the time of the film's release in 2008, but by early 2009, the search volume had returned to previous levels (Google Trends, 2021).

Online, several groups work to preserve Picard, the largest being *Wikiversity*, which works to keep the language recorded, if not spoken, by collecting vocabulary, pronunciations, and writings in Picard. Using

this resource, I was able to pronounce certain words in a way that interviewed speakers agreed was competent for Ch'timi as well, indicating that it can be used to preserve the lexicon as well as the phonemes of the language. The researchers who created the site are clearly interested in preserving languages, as it is far from the only language so preserved. This is a ray of hope for the language, that it will be at least somewhat sheltered on the internet, in a place where passionate people would be able to glean a piece of their culture. Additionally, certain organizations are attempting to preserve Picard by teaching it in schools and organizing events to promote its use, (Najibi, 2014). Unfortunately for the long term, studies on Ch'timi specifically are exceedingly rare, as are speakers of Ch'timi. Despite the effort of certain local and online organizations which preserve parts of the language and local cultural institutions, it is unlikely for Ch'timi to ever return to everyday common use. A further study could attempt to use the information collected by other organizations in Lille which preserve cultural artifacts from the region, including information on Ch'timi. The only such organization which responded to queries during this research refused to pursue a line of dialogue.

Languages are always difficult to study because they are fundamentally fluid, notably since the beginning of globalization. In fact, many languages have influenced French in recent years, such as English or Arabic, often via the slang spoken by young people (Heller & Duchêne, 2007). Certain languages, including French, are maintained by specific governmental councils of linguistics like the Académie Française to reduce linguistic variation over time, to various degrees of success. Linguistics is the study of the functions of languages' grammar, and sociolinguistics is the study of society through the lens of linguistics, particularly insofar as the representations of one language compared to another. All sciences, and more broadly, all culture, literature, politics, music, and every aspect of human society, is based at some level in language. It is the difference between a *moist cake* and a *wet cake*, a *thin person* and a *skinny person*. These tiny differences in implication and subtext between synonyms can change the phrase completely. In the same way that it is possible to learn about a person based on their word choice, it is possible to learn about their culture by the language they speak. Economically and industrially speaking, Hauts-de-France is no longer a strong part of the overall country's economy, and people place a higher emphasis on skills needed to get well-paying jobs, such as English and mathematics, over a part of their culture that few even remember today. The unique thread of

Ch'timi in the tapestry of the French linguistic tradition is fraying as the cultural focus of the nation concentrates on Paris. However, in the information age, it is possible that a passionate person could find information on the language, which means that even if it is not spoken, it can still be preserved. Based on the combined lack of government organizations preserving the language, lack of education in the language, and lack of interest in maintaining it among the general population, outside of certain amateurs and linguists, it seems that by and large speakers of Ch'timi are not interested in the preservation of the language and think that it would be better left to history.

Conclusion

Considering the small sample size of this research, the speakers interviewed were happy to share their perspective on the language. Young people, immigrants from other regions or other countries, and even local people do not see the language as something that should escape the past. For the Lillois interviewed, there was little interest in preserving the language beyond the realm of a historical footnote. Over the course of this study, the data showed that there remain groups both online and in Lille interested in preserving the language as it was spoken, even with the lack of governmental support. Future research may be able to provide points of comparison between Ch'timi and other regional languages in France.

Despite apathy from northern communities in France, it is imperative to teach the minority languages in danger of extinction. Provincial capitals such as Toulouse maintain efforts to preserve local languages, but Lille and its surrounding suburbs exert little to no effort to protect and preserve the Ch'timi. The language is absent from society; it is not taught in schools, nor is it protected by any official national or regional organization. Turning a blind eye to Ch'timi and other vanishing languages is the reason so many are disappearing. Thankfully, the language is being preserved by unofficial groups, on the internet or in person, who are trying to maintain this cultural knowledge in the collective memory of the population. Even if the language becomes part of the history of France, Ch'timi will be preserved through certain words, mores, traditions, and films.

Bibliography

Akşit, G., & Varışlı, B. (2014). Academic female subject amidst Bourdieu's "Habitus" and Butler's "Performativity." T. C. Maltepe Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, *FEF Journal*, 1, 32–43.

Anonymous. (2017). Personal Conversations in Lille (France).

Bourdieu, P., & Thompson, J. B. (2001). Langage et pouvoir symbolique. Seuil.

Duriez, I. (1993). Parlons sérieusement le ch'ti c'est quoi ? Langues en danger, pensée menacée. *Courrier de L'UNESCO*, 2(2), 8–9.

Fera, N. Home (H. Callan, Ed.). <https://www.discoveranthropology.org.uk/>

Google Trends. Google Trends "Ch'ti". Google Trends chart. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&camp;q=ch%27timi>.

Heller, M., & Duchêne Alexandre. (2010). Discourses of endangerment: ideology and interest in the defence of languages. Continuum.

Legrand, P. (1853/1998). Dictionnaire du patois de Lille et de ses environs. L'Equipement de la pensée.

Moseley, C. (Ed.). UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in danger. <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>.

Lepubo, G. Département:Picard. Wikiversité. <https://fr.wikiversity.org/wiki/D%C3%A9partement:Picard>.

Najibi, H. (2014, December 5). La langue picarde en danger de disparition ? France 3 Hauts-De-France. <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hauts-de-france/picardie/somme/langue-picarde-danger-disparition-601654.html>.

Pathe. (2008). Bienvenue Chez Les ch'tis. France.

Picard.(2020).Manoa.<http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/3276>.

Pooley, T. (1996). Chtimi: The urban vernaculars of Northern France. *Multilingual Matters*.

Reyes-García, V., & Sunderlin, W.D. (2011). Why do field research? In Angelsen, A., H. O. Larsen, J. F. Lund, C. Smith-Hall & S. Wunder (Eds.). *Measuring Livelihoods and Environmental Dependence: Methods for Research and Fieldwork* (pp. 17–32). Earthscan.

Straka, G. (1965). Contribution à l'Histoire de la consonne R en français. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 66(4), 572–606.

Tatsuya, A., Sandel, B., Eager, H., Bulteau, E., Svenning, J-C., Dalsgaard, B., Rahbek, C., Davies, R.G., & Sutherland, W.J. (2014). Global distribution and drivers of language extinction risk. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 281(1793), 1–10. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2014.1574>.

Willems, J. F., & Hoffmann von Fallersleben, A. H. (1837). Elnonensia. Monuments des langues romane et tudesque dans le IXe siècle. F. et E. Gyselynck, Imprimeurs-Libraires.

Unifrance. (2008). Bienvenue Chez Les Ch'tis - Dossier de Presse Anglais. Paris; Pathé International.