Sociolinguistic Studies

ISSN: 1750-8649 (print)
ISSN: 1750-8657 (online)

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.26214 - Tuesday, November 18, 2025 3:36:38 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

Foreword

The nexus of Family Language Policy

Lyn Wright

Three decades of research on reversing language shift, bi- and multilingual parenting, and Family Language Policy (FLP) have demonstrated that, while parental language practices and ideologies are important factors in determining children's language competencies and outcomes, parents do not exist in a vacuum. Family language policies are influenced by a myriad of sociohistorical and relational processes that are examined in depth in this special issue. The articles here capture the reality of the complexities of FLP by examining family-external factors such as the COVID-19 lockdown, access to digital communication, geography and community, migration histories, national language policies, and family structures among others, to explain the particular family language policies present in communities around the world (from Iran to Cyprus to Northern Ireland) and their effects on children's language outcomes and family members' linguistic experiences.

The studies in this double issue point to the ways in which FLPs are situated in time and space and how they serve as a means for constructing belonging in transformational times as family members use more or less of a heritage language, or use it in different ways, in response to the sociohistorical context. In this sense, the notion of a 'regime' becomes relevant. A regime, according to Costa (2019), 'can be understood as a spatial and temporal set of practices, either physical or symbolic, through which rules are established to determine an inside and an outside' (p. 2). Conceptualizing the family as not just a space in which language policies are enacted, but rather a regime of language policy

Affiliation
University of Memphis, United States
ewfogle@memphis.edu

SOLS VOL 18.1–2 2024 7–10 https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.26214
© 2024, University of Toronto Press

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.26214 - Tuesday, November 18, 2025 3:36:38 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

where practices demarcate inclusion and exclusion, allows other family processes, such as relationship building, fostering child autonomy, and constructing family identities, to play a central role in understanding who speaks what language to whom, when, and why (cf. Wright, 2020).

One important contribution of the studies in this issue is the way that the authors position parents in particular in relation to wider community and national discourses. The studies contained here examine parent agency, activism, and in some cases, collectivism, as important resources for protecting and maintaining heritage languages at home. In addition, two of the papers in this issue consider the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on heritage language use, demonstrating the nourishing time of connection that family members found outside their normal institutions such as work and school.

In a fascinating study of Ndebele families in Zimbabwe, Maseko examines how parents take over responsibility of teaching the Ndebele language in the absence of schooling. The pandemic provided Ndebele parents the agency to counteract the external regimes of language and teach Ndebele through a 'Ndebele lens'. Ringblom, Ritter, and Zabrodskaja's contribution on Russian-speaking families in three European contexts – Germany, Sweden, and Estonia – also found the pandemic lockdown to be a fruitful time for heritage language maintenance and use. For children living in Germany and Sweden, online communication with grandparents and family members in Russia increased in part because travel to visit Russian-speaking relatives was impossible, and children sought out Russian-language entertainment on YouTube (sometimes even teaching themselves Cyrillic for this purpose). For those living in Estonia, the use of Russian was even more prominent with bilingual peers in the community.

Family relationships are shaped by and shape family language policies, as Said demonstrates in her study of Arabic-speaking intergenerational families living in the United Kingdom. The presence of grandparents in these families provided opportunities for children to learn the family dialects in ways that complementary schools or even parents couldn't provide, and this learning intersected with the relationships that develop among family members. Dialect acquisition is also the subject of Ramonienė and Ramonaitė's article on Lithuanian maintenance in diasporic communities. They show how the different waves of emigration from Lithuania correspond to dialect use, with the latest wave of the 20th-century emigres preferring standard Lithuanian to the regional dialects. Here, the attitudes toward dialects within the diaspora itself are a constraining factor on language maintenance and point not only to the historicity and complexity of FLP but also to the role fear of discrimination plays in parents' FLP choices.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.26214 - Tuesday, November 18, 2025 3:36:38 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

As in Maseko's study, the parents in Nandi's study of Hindi-speaking parents in Northern Ireland take a more activist stance to maintaining Hindi, a language that does not enjoy the same positive attitudes as Irish or Scotts-Gaelic in the discourses of bilingualism in the Northern Irish context. These parents draw on 'resource' and 'rights' discourses (Ruiz, 1984) to defend their language maintenance plans and practices. Parental agency and activism are high in Garcia Ruiz, Manterola, and Ortega's investigation of the maintenance of Basque in Spain. Parents in this study prioritized Basque through their selection of Basque-medium school and home use, but their positive attitudes toward functional multilingualism further allowed them to maintain Basque. Mirvahedi and Nawaser's paper on Arabic-speaking families in Iran further demonstrates the role community plays in family language maintenance. They draw on the concept of 'demographic agency' or the solidarity of a community in using the heritage language to support individual family language policies. In this study, as in many of the others in this issue, Mirvahedi and Nawaser note that Arabic is important to the 'belonging and acceptance' that unites people in the community 'with a sense of pride and affinity.'

Finally, Karpava's study of heritage language attrition or incomplete acquisition of second-generation immigrants in Cyprus concludes, across a variety of families and languages, that there is a close link between family language policy and heritage language development even when controlling for other factors such as length of residence and language dominance. These findings add evidence to the original claim that having an explicit FLP is a key to children's bilingual outcomes (cf. King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry, 2008). Every family represents its own nexus of histories, practices, and discourses that shape the language policy regime. The trends illuminated in this special issue point to the importance of parental advocacy and resistance, children's curiosity and engagement, and like-minded communities that support the family language project. As we move into the middle of the 21st century, these studies foreshadow a multilingual, digitally networked future in which individual, family, and community language practices and identities create contexts of belonging and care.

About the author

Lyn Wright (University of Memphis, United States) is an applied linguist with interests in bi- and multilingualism, language policy, and language learning and teaching. Her research investigates the ideological, interactional, and affective aspects of language development through language socialization and discourse

analytic approaches. She has published on topics of family language policy, language and kinship, sexuality and language learning, and engaged learning in TESOL teacher training.

https://utppublishing.com/doi/pdf/10.1558/sols.26214 - Tuesday, November 18, 2025 3:36:38 AM - UVI-FFT IP Address:193.146.45.80

References

Costa, J. (2019) Introduction: Regimes of language and the social, hierarchized organization of ideologies. *Language and Communication* 66: 1–5.

King, K. A., Fogle, L., and Logan-Terry, A. (2008) Family language policy. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2(5): 907–922. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2008.00076.x.

Ruiz, R. (1984) Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal* 8(2): 15–34. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464.

Wright, L. (2020) *Critical perspectives on language and kinship in multilingual families*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

(Received 30th April 2022; accepted 15th May 2023;
final revision received 20th June 2023)