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Article

Family Language Policy: Enriching the field and expanding the scope

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Abstract

This commentary outlines the key contributions of the issue. Addressing various language attitudes and ideologies held by family members, the commentary highlights the major themes of the collected articles, addressing important issues in the maintenance of home languages and development of minoritised languages as well as interactions between families and the wider society. In particular, it looks into why heritage and minoritised languages are difficult to maintain and develop in multilingual contexts. The commentary emphasises how families constantly interact with broader sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical contexts and outlines the agentive role of family members in accommodating or resisting language change. It highlights the key topics, theoretical contributions, and methodological issues in this issue.

KEYWORDS: Family Language Policy, immigration, parental agency, language maintenance, methodology in FLP

1 Introduction

Why do transnational families (not) care about home language maintenance? What is the status of minority language in a given society? How is language practice associated with societal power? What is the meaning of using home language(s) in transnational families' everyday life? What is the relationship between Family Language Policy (FLP) and national language policy? How do

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broader societal ideologies shape individuals' linguistic practices and contribute to the (dis)continuous use of home language? These are some of the long-standing questions that have been discussed and rediscussed in past years by scholars in the field of FLP. This issue brings together eight articles that continue the discussion of the above-mentioned questions. The authors of these articles have not only illustrated how some of the minority languages have survived decades of migration waves, highlighting the evolving and changing ideologies underpinning the linguistic practices of transnational families, they have also shown how language practices have changed, shifted, and been maintained in accordance with the ideological convictions of the individual migrants.

In recent years, the study of family language policy (FLP) has flourished. Topics within the field cover a variety of issues from why parents/caregivers make certain decisions (e.g., King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry, 2008; Curdt-Christiansen, 2016, 2018) to how languages are used and what roles they play in people's everyday life (Zhu Hua and Li Wei 2016; Palviainen and Kędra, 2020; Mirvahedi, 2021) as well as to how families manage their different languages (Lanza, 2007; Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Curdt-Christiansen and LaMorgia, 2018; Palviainen and Bergroth, 2018) in order to meet educational demands and cultural/emotional needs (Tannenbaum, 2012, 2015; Curdt-Christiansen and Iwaniec, 2023; Sevinç and Mirvahedi, 2023). Along with the diversified topics, different types of families in different geographical settings have also been included in the scope of FLP investigation (Higgins and Wright, 2022). In this issue, the authors continue with their lines of enquiry from previous research in the diversified topics to the expansion of family types to understand why and how some families maintain their home languages and others lose and shift theirs.

2 Diversified topics and geographical settings

The topics of this issue include FLP-related grassroots-level practices of the first generation of Indian migrants in Northern Ireland (Nandi, this issue), minoritised language (Ndebele) development through active parental involvement in Zimbabwe (Maseko, this issue), intergenerational language practices of Arabic speaking families in the United Kingdom (Said, this issue), New Speaker parents' commitments to their children's trilingual development in the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain (García-Ruiz, Manterola, and Ortega, this issue), maintenance of different Lithuanian dialects in the Lithuanian diaspora through three emigration waves (Ramonienė and Ramonaitė, this issue), digital and non-digital language practices in Russophone families across Estonia,

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Germany, and Sweden (Ringblom, Ritter, and Zabrodskaja, this issue), Arabic maintenance in Arabic-Persian families in Iran (Mirvahedi and Nawaser, this issue), and cultural and linguistic identities in relation to FLP and heritage language development in Cyprus (Karpava, this issue).

These diversified topics and geographical settings have enriched current research on FLP with regard to adult family members' contribution to heritage language maintenance. The authors argue that adults provide both symbolic and linguistic resources for linguistic and cultural continuity (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013).

3 FLP and other theoretical frameworks

Most of the studies in this issue draw on Spolsky's tripartite model of language policy to understand how and why minority languages are maintained. A few authors have looked into other theoretical frameworks to understand family language policy. Nandi's study of the first generation of Indian migrant families in Northern Ireland is underpinned by Ruiz' (1984) three language orientations: language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource. In understanding the agentive role of parents as language planners in families, Nandi argues that Ruiz' framework provides a theoretical understanding of the collective construction of FLP through the 'shared history, ethnic identity, and social experiences in the host society' (Nandi, this issue). In particular, he illustrates via powerful narratives by the parents how they experienced 'otherness' in the process of integration and how their ethnic languages and cultural practices were perceived as 'problems' by teachers and in schools, which severely affected the dynamics of family conversation and FLP.

Also looking at the agentive role of parents in providing linguistic resources and cultural practices for their children, Mirvahedi and Nawaser's study emphasises the concept of 'demographic agency' underlying their study of Arabic-Persian bilingual families. Demographic agency refers to families who choose to 'live in a concentrated community with a close-knit social network where they regularly meet other speakers of their home language' (Mirvahedi and Nawaser, this issue). Drawing on interviews and observational data, the authors argue that such close-knit social networks and demographic settlements can provide collective power to the minority groups, helping them to resist the pressure of the dominant language that might otherwise lead to language shift. While the framework makes sense in this study, a stronger and more thorough conceptual understanding of the collective identity and attitudes towards Arabic language may be needed in the active construction of FLP. In this regard, the authors may

consider taking into account the conceptual framework of language vitality in the discussion of demographic agency to understand the laissez-faire interactions in Arabic in these families.

Although studies of FLP have matured in recent years, most of them are based on Spolsky's (2004, 2012) language policy model. New theoretical models and conceptual work underpinning FLP are welcome. These two studies have contributed to the field of FLP from different perspectives. FLP in its implicit and explicit forms can be critical in understanding the 'official' language hegemony in everyday social and institutional contexts. New theories can offer 'new' and alternative ways to understand why some languages are maintained and others lost (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013).

4 The methodological contribution

The collection of articles for this issue used a variety of methods from traditionally designed questionnaires to semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations. In addition to interviews, for example, Said and Mirvahedi and Nawaser as well as Maseko collected ethnographic data through audio-recordings in the home. Their data were analysed from an interactional sociolinguistics perspective. While interactional data have shown to be powerful in understanding the process of language shift and language change (Curdt-Christiansen and Wang, 2018; Wang and Curdt-Christiansen, 2021), the authors of these studies may find it important to provide more details of the data sets and the details of the analytical process.

The rest of the contributing studies were conducted solely through semi-structured interviews, with exception of Karpava's study as she collected both interview data and written questionnaire data. Semi-structured interviews are a practical and useful tool in collecting in-depth data to study language maintenance, multilingual development, and social integration. While some of the data are informative and reveal or illuminate some of the challenges faced by minority language speaking families, the authors may consider providing more information about their analytical framework as well as the thematic analysis processes on which the findings were based. Without the thematic details, it can be questioned how findings represent the general emerging patterns of the data or if the findings are based on cherry-picking selective choices throughout the competing evidence.

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5 Conclusion

The articles in this issue are situated against the backdrop of a currently heightened global level of political change, transnational movement, new communication technologies, and evolving changes in the social and economic landscape as well as in digital practices. This issue contributes to the growing field of FLP research by examining how and why family lives are shaping and are shaped by public discourses and societal values. Most importantly, the authors of the articles have revealed not only under what conditions and in what situations positive or negative attitudes towards particular languages are developed but also how these attitudes have led to strategic planning and spontaneous language use at home and thus contribute to migrant children's multilingual and literacy (non-)development.

About the author

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