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Article

Towards conceptualizing 'demographic agency' in Family Language Policy: The case of Arabic-Persian bilingual families in Iran

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Abstract

This article investigates the success story of language maintenance in Arab families in Iran. Taking Fishman's (1991) emphasis on micro face-to-face interactions in language maintenance processes as our point of departure, it argues that language maintenance requires that families live in a sociolinguistic milieu in which face-to-face interactions are facilitated by demographic patterns of settlement. Despite unfavorable institutional policies towards minority languages in Iran, the specific geographical makeup of the country has historically pushed speakers of minority languages to settle in certain regions (Katouzian, 2009). Drawing on Sealey and Carter's (2004) concept of 'demographic agency', this article argues that such a demographic settlement of Arabs in southern cities and towns in Iran has given them a collective power to maintain their language, which takes the form of laissez-faire interactions in Arabic at home. The findings, based on interviews with families and recordings of interactions at home, suggest that, although parents express concern regarding their children's academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility, which requires higher proficiency in Persian, this concern does not readily translate into language practices in Persian at home.

KEYWORDS: Iranian Arabs, demographic agency, Persian, language maintenance, Iran

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1 Introduction

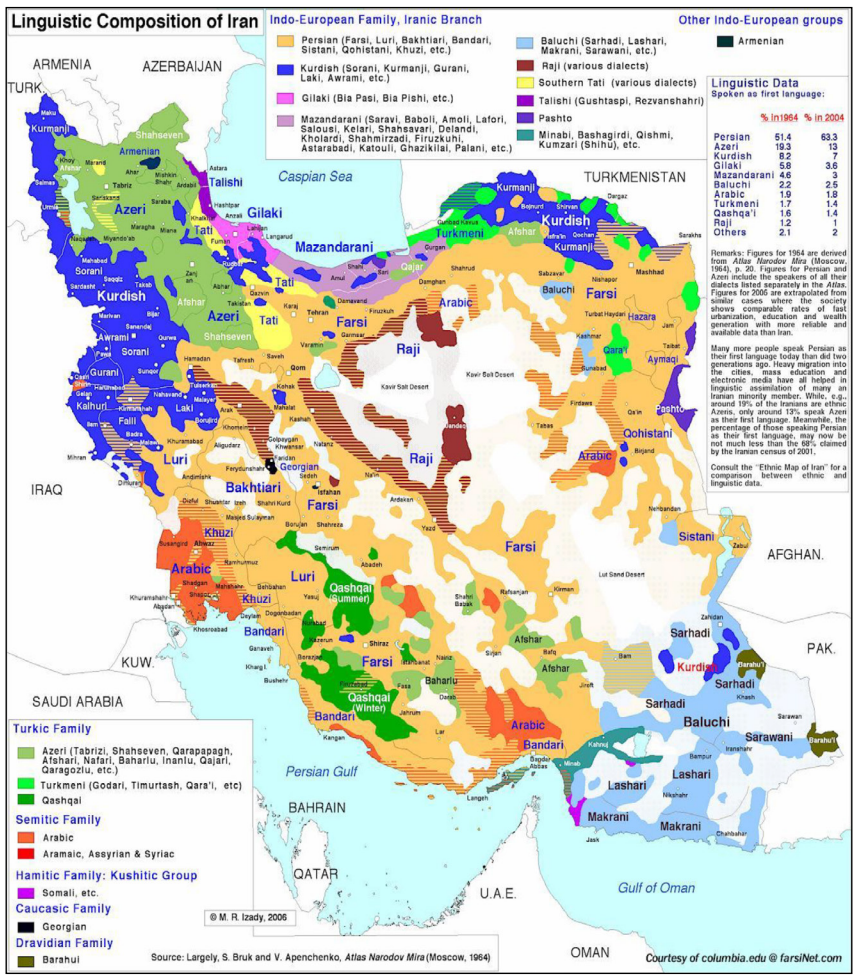
Contemporary Iran is what remains of the Persian Empire that ruled over a much larger Iranian plateau at that time. With an area of 1,648,195 square kilometers and approximately 89 million people, Iran is considered the 17th most populous country in the world today. Despite the noticeable size of the country, except for a few regions suitable for agriculture, such as the Caspian littoral, the plain of Khuzistan, and some regions in East and West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces, the country remains mostly rugged and arid (Katouzian, 2009). The two great mountain ranges, namely, the Alborz (Elburz) range in the north, stretching from the Caucasus in the northwest to Khorasan in the east, and the Zagros range, extending from the west to the southeast, and the two large deserts in the east, Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut, make up most of the country.

While this geographical information may seem irrelevant, or thought to be at best merely 'background information', to sociolinguistic studies of Family Language Policy (FLP) and its impact on language maintenance and shift (LMS) processes, in this article we argue for the salience of geography and its impact on demographic settlements, seeking to conceptualize it in FLP and LMS scholarship. Historically, as a result of such a peculiar geography, Iranian peoples with their specific languages and cultures such as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Baluchis, Mazandaranis, and Gilaks have concentrated in regional settlements (see Map 1). Taking a realist social approach in FLP (Mirvahedi, 2021), we argue that the specific settlement pattern of minority languages in Iran, i.e., not dispersed and close to their co-ethnics across the border, rather than being merely 'background information' (Williams, 1992), has a real impact on language ideologies and interactions among parents and children at home. With a focus on Iranian Arabs who have historically settled down in the plain of Khuzistan in the southwest cities and towns, we explore the sociopolitical, economic, linguistic, and as well as, as we argue here, geographical and demographic realities, in relation to families' laissez-faire choice of language at home. We will shed light on the families' language ideologies and practices and illustrate how living in a close-knit social network of fellow Arabs across generations turn their ideologies and practices into an everyday, laissez-faire norm, facilitating language maintenance. In doing so, while we seek to contribute to theory in FLP scholarship, we also fill a critical gap in FLP and LMS studies by focusing on Arabic-Persian bilingual families in Iran. Although there have been some scholarly studies of FLP and LMS in other communities such as Azerbaijanis (Mirvahedi, 2017; Mirvahedi and

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Jafari, 2021), Kurdish (Rezaei and Bahrami, 2019), and Turkmen (Mirvahedi, Rajabi, and Aghaei, 2021), the Arab community in this part of the Global South remains extremely understudied.

In the following, we first delineate the theoretical underpinnings of the study, arguing for the conceptualization of geographical and demographic settlement in FLP and LMS scholarship. Then we explain the sociolinguistic affordances and constraints Arab families in Iran encounter by describing the national and institutional policies in the country. Against this backdrop, the methodology and data analysis are presented. We will end with some concluding remarks.



Map 1. The geographical and linguistic make-up of Iran.

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2 Demographic agency in FLP

Language maintenance and shift scholarship owes a great deal to Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) that has served as a seminal evaluative model of language vitality. Fishman was among the first to draw attention to the significant role of family in language maintenance, cogently arguing that without face-to-face interactions and small-scale social life in a minority language at the family and community level, the language cannot be maintained even though it is supported in institutions such as school, media, and so on. This would be like, as he put it, 'blowing air into a tire that still has a puncture' (Fishman, 1991: xii). The critical role of socialization through and into a minority language (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2017) at home was later emphasized in (family) language policy scholarship (Spolsky, 2012), suggesting that the 'real' language policy (Spolsky, 2009: 9) that has a real impact on the children's linguistic development is the one that is 'practiced' (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012). Empirical studies of parent-child interactions also testify to the salience of the quantity and quality of exposure a child receives to a language day by day from the parents (Döpke, 1992; Lanza, 2007). Addressing the question of why children growing up with two languages might not end up speaking a minority language, De Houwer (2007, 2015), for example, argues that policies such as 'one-parent, one-language' policies or introducing both minority and majority languages from birth at home may not provide the child with an adequate exposure to the minority language. In such a Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) setting, the child hearing the minority language from only one parent is unlikely to develop a harmonious bilingualism in two languages (De Houwer and Bornstein, 2016).

While both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic studies have amply attested to the importance of language socialization through and into a minority language at home, theoretical developments in addressing the questions as to what conditions promote or constrain such practices in the family remain scarce. In other words, what sociopolitical, economic, linguistic, and also geographical and demographic realities – as we argue here – should be in place so that all family members' laissez-faire choice of language at home is aligned in developing proficiency in a minority language?

To address the question, we apply Archer's (1995, 2000, 2003) realist social theory in which human practice is viewed as the source and origin of social life and social world. Cultural practices such as language use is thus taken to emerge from human action. But we do not see human action, or agency, as either completely a matter of 'free will' or 'totally determined and formed'

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by a social structure. Rather, agency emerges in response to and interaction with the social structure. Advocating an analytical separation of structure and agency, agency and structure are both considered to have real, distinct, and emergent properties that are mutually irreducible. Working within this school of thought, we seek to argue how, under certain circumstances where minority languages are not institutionally supported and thus families alone have to shoulder the responsibility of raising their children bilingually, patterns of family formation and settlement facilitate certain language practices that could have a real impact on language use and maintenance at home. Drawing on Sealy and Carter's (2004) 'demographic agency', we illustrate here how such an agency could be influential in giving families a competitive edge against detrimental forces outside the home, such as monolingual educational policies. As Sealey and Carter (2004: 11) argue, 'people collectively can exert an influence simply by virtue of their numbers' and 'this cardinal power of agency' does not necessarily depend on only 'the property of self-consciousness'. In other words, in such communities, language ideologies and practices can take a specific form because, rather than being conscious decisions, they have been 'accumulated and learned during biographically phased processes of socialization' (Blommaert, 2019: 5).

FLP literature has shown that linguistic decisions and practices at home take place at the confluence of different competing discourses (Mirvahedi and Macalister, 2017), becoming informed by both family-internal factors such as intimacy and family-bound affection and emotions (Sevinç, 2018) as well as home-external forces such as educational and other institutional policies (Canagarajah, 2008; Van Mensel, 2018). In this competition, as we show in this article, demographic agency – how a family is formed (Vorobeva, 2021; Altinkamis, 2022), and where the family lives, such as in a concentrated community with a close-knit social network where they regularly meet other speakers of their home language (Mirvahedi, Rajabi, and Aghaei, 2021), can tilt the balance towards a minority language. Obviously, if both parents come from the same linguistic and cultural background and live in a city, town, or village where everyone else shares the same language and culture, the odds of passing the minority language to the children would be extremely high. Focusing on the case of Arabs in Iran, we show how the demographic agency of minority language speakers help them to successfully maintain their language against all odds. In what follows, we describe the sociolinguistic milieu in which Arab families live in Iran, shining a light on the structural affordances and constraints they encounter in maintaining their language. We will then present our data and

analysis showing how family configurations and their placement in their specific geographical location make it possible for them to overcome such structural constraints.

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3 Research setting

3.1 Iran

Iran, as briefly noted above, is a multilingual and multicultural country located in the Middle East. Although there are no official statistics on the ethnolinguistic makeup of the country, the population is estimated to be made up of Persians (51 percent), Azerbaijanis (24 percent), Gilakis and Mazandaranis (8 percent), Kurds (7 percent), Arabs (3 percent), Lurs (2 percent), Baluchis (2 percent), Turkmen (2 percent), and other groups (1 percent) (Tohidi, 2009).

Despite the rich multilingualism brought about by the historical presence of these regional and minority languages in the country, however, non-Persian languages under the influence of Persian nationalism over the past two centuries have not found their way into the official domains of language use (Soleimani and Muhammadpour, 2019). The declaration of Persian as the only official language of the country over the 1905 Constitutional Revolution triggered the one-nation/one-language policy, which was later used to repress non-Persian languages and identities during the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979) (Mirvahedi, 2019). While Persian nationalism is still the dominant ideology, some supportive language policies have been in place since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Islam's discourse on equity and equality led to Article 19 of the Constitution disapproving of any discrimination based on color, language, and race (Paul, 1999):

> All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; and color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.

In order to address the question of equality and equity with respect to linguistic and cultural diversity, Article 15 of the Constitution was also included in the Constitution:

> The official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as textbooks, must be in this language and script. However, the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.

Despite the supportive tone of the articles above, non-Persian languages have not, however, received substantial institutional support. The languages have not

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been used as a medium of instruction or taught as a subject at schools (see below for the exception of Arabic). Consequently, speakers of minority languages find it difficult to read and write in their languages (Mirvahedi, 2017; Mirvahedi and Jafari, 2021; Mirvahedi, Rajabi and Aghaei, 2021), which has also led to the predominant use of Persian in public spaces in the regions where the communities live (Mirvahedi, 2016). What has ensued is that all non-Persian languages exist in a diglossic situation: Persian serves as the language of higher official domains and institutions, and minority languages function as the medium of intragroup interactions and marker of ethnic identities.

3.2 Arabic in Iran

Of all the non-Persian languages in Iran, Arabic stands out for several reasons. First, the Persian language and literature has been heavily influenced by Arabic since the Arabs' conquest of Persia in the seventh century that brought the Sassanids' rule to an end and introduced Islam and its language, Arabic, as well as its script to the people. This linguistic proximity between the two languages, coupled with a shared script used by Arabic and Persian allows a typical literate Iranian to read Arabic texts even though it may take extra effort and time and he/she may not understand the meaning. This is not, however, to suggest that all literate Arabs in Iran can easily read Arabic texts, especially because the Arabic vowels are different from those found in the Persian language. Second, while the speakers of Arabic – like other minority communities – experience similar constraining conditions noted above, Arabic is highly respected by the state as the language of Islam and marker of the Islamic identity. As such, Article 16 of the Constitution specifically seeks to ensure that every Iranian learns some Arabic:

> Since the language of the Qur'an and Islamic texts and teachings is Arabic, and since Persian literature is thoroughly permeated by this language, it must be taught after elementary level, in all classes of secondary school and in all areas of study.

As the tone of this constitutional Article suggests, Arabic is required to be taught in the education system to equip the people with the skills needed to read the Qur'an. In other words, Arabic is viewed as functioning as a liturgical language and the marker of a religious identity, rather than a language of/for communication. Arabic is thus taught as a subject using a traditional grammar-translation method. As a result, students may typically develop just enough proficiency to read Arabic texts and may not even understand the meaning. For the 2 or 3 per cent of Iranians whose first language is Arabic, the situation is not very different. Because the variety of Arabic taught at schools is the Standard Arabic and differs from the variety of Arabic they use in their daily lives, teaching Arabic

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at schools may not readily contribute to their communicative proficiency if they do not happen to have developed that before and outside the school, at home, and in the community.

Thus, despite Arabic enjoying some institutional advantages in Iran, the diglossic nature of the language (see also Said, this issue) on the one hand and the broad negative attitude to Arabic and Arabic learning at schools and universities (Rasouli, 2005; Khaghani, Liaghatdar and Pakizehkhoo, 2006; Rezaei, 2022) on the other, such institutional support does not translate into actual communicative benefits to Iranian bilingual Arabs. The failure of policies can be associated with, among other things, the Arab invasion of Iran in the seventh century, the devastating Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the political and cultural tensions between Iran and the Arab countries such Saudi Arabia, the *boring* and *old-fashioned* method of teaching in schools and universities, its irrelevance to the children's upward social mobility, and so on (Rezaei, 2022). This means that, despite the institutional support it has been given (at least the Qur'anic form of the language), Arabic has failed to gain wider acceptance in the country. Nonetheless, it is widely revered and accepted among Iranian Muslims who view it as essential to their faith and religious practice (Rezaei, 2022).

It must be stressed, however, that Iranian Arabs do not necessarily share such negative attitudes toward their language and Iranian national identity. In fact, with the province of Khuzestan bordering Iraq, the Khuzestani Arabs fought alongside their non-Arab Iranian comrades in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. This suggests that Arabs embrace their Iranian identity while not taking an attitude of opposition to Arabic. The war resulted in millions of casualties, many of whom were Khuzestani Arabs. Cities such as Khoramshahr, Abadan, Hoveyzeh, and Shadegan were left nothing but ruins. To date, these cities have not been fully rebuilt, and the façade of their buildings are reminiscent of the war. Despite such heavy casualties and losses on a national scale by an Arab force and a resulting nationwide negative attitude toward Arabs and Arabic (as depicted, for instance, by Iranian war movies), the Khuzestani Arabs did not dispense with their ethnic identity and language. This is evident by the noticeable presence of the Arabic language and culture across the province.

3.3 Iranian Arabs

Arab settlements in Iran preceded the Arab invasion of Persia and the destruction of the Sassanid empire by centuries (Bosworth, Morony, Elton, Pierre, Bernard, and Ramazani, 2020; Leitner, 2020). One such example is the settlement of the Banū Tamīm tribe in Khuzestan. In fact, many Iranian ethnic groups, as nomadic tribes, raided, wandered, and finally settled in many different parts

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of Iran. The Arabs were one of these ethnic groups (Yarshater, Fisher and Gershevitch, 1983). After the rise of Islam, however, many Arab tribes spread across the southwestern part of Iran (Leitner, 2020). To date, Arabic has managed to maintain a foothold in this part of Iran centuries after the Arabs' arrival in Khuzestan and spread across the region.

Today, Iranian Arabs are mostly located in Khuzestan province in the southwest (bordering Iraq), one of Iran's 31 provinces. Even though there are no exact figures regarding the population of the Iranian Arabs (Leitner, 2020), they are approximately deemed to comprise 3% of Iran's total population (Tohidi, 2009). A few of Khuzestan cities with considerable Arab residents are Ahvaz, Abadan, Khoramshahr, Susangerd, Hoveyzeh, and Shadegan, to name just a few.

It is worth mentioning that the Arabs are not the only ethnic group in Khuzestan. Other groups such as Lors and Bakhtiaries live alongside Arabs in many different parts of the province. Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan, is one example of Arabs coexisting with other ethnic groups. But there are some cities that are predominantly populated by Arabs, with little or no residents from other groups. One example is Shadegan.

Arabs and non-Arabs in Khuzestan work in a wide array of jobs. While the former group is generally thought to be blue-collar workers (with a small number working as white-collar workers or holding administrative positions), non-Arabs are assumed to be mostly white-collar workers (Elwell-Sutton, De Planhol, and Nejatian, 2020; Leitner, 2020). Many rural Arabs work as farmers, mainly operating palm tree farms or growing seasonal products such as wheat, rice, beans, okra, Armenian cucumbers, etc. Urban Iranian Arabs work in a wide range of jobs from salespersonnel, shop owners, security guards, and drivers to office workers, cashiers, bank clerks, and so on.

As mentioned above, there are no exact and representative figures about Iran's ethnic groups. However, their shared social patterns reveal a great deal about them. As is the case in this article, Arabs customarily engage in intraracial, intratribal, or intrafamilial marriages. It is worth noting that these types of marriage are not exclusive to Arabs. Other non-Arab ethnic groups in Iran widely engage in endogamy (e.g., see Mirvahedi, Rajabi, and Aghaei, 2021). This factor can play an important role in family language policy and home language maintenance or shift (Okita, 2002).

4 Research methodology

Attempting to present an authentic and genuine account of Iranian Arabs' experiences with language and home language management in Ahvaz, this study

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utilizes a qualitative ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis. Ethnography yields genuine data about how parents view languages and how they interpret their social status and prestige in society, which ultimately results in parents and caregivers reacting to these beliefs in terms of steering away from the heritage language or promoting and advocating its use at home.

4.1 Data collection

Using observation (self-recorded audio data from day-to-day interactions) as the initial data collection tool, which is the prominent tool for an ethnographer (Marvasti, 2004; Silverman, 2014, 2017), the researchers gained a much deeper understanding of how the micro- and macrostructures in society, which focus here on the close-knit social networks and demographic agency, affect parents' language management at home. After collecting the observational data and confirming the initial findings, the researchers made use of semi-structured interviews with the parents. The questions revolved around the parents' beliefs and practices about languages they knew. Also, some narrative questions about the parents' linguistic experiences and practices when they were children were asked as well. The data set then was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage model.

It is of paramount importance to note that one of the authors of this article would be considered an outsider and the other an insider to the community in question, namely the Arab community in Ahvaz. The different perspectives of both authors helped limit the subjectivity and biases of the researchers as well as giving a glimpse of the real social experiences of the Arab community in Ahvaz city. Therefore, since one of the researchers was in fact an Ahvazi Arab who could speak both Arabic and Persian fluently, he volunteered to conduct the interviews. In the interview sessions with the families, the researcher refrained from speaking one specific language; instead, he respected and followed the parents' linguistic preferences, and made adjustments to his language choices with regard to the comfort of the parents. It is also important to note that the families participating in this study were chosen from among the researcher's relatives' acquaintances. Thus, they were not entirely strangers as such, and, it was possible for the researcher to conduct the interviews at the families' homes where they could feel comfortable and open enough to share their views in the language of their choosing.

4.2 Participants

The participants were recruited in Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan province, and one of Iran's biggest cities in the southwestern part of the country. There were

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two reasons for selecting Ahvaz. First, according to the Iran National Bureau of Statistics (2017), Ahvaz is home to 1.2 million Iranians from different ethnic groups and languages (e.g., Persian, Arabic, Lori, and Bakhtiari), which makes Ahvaz' linguistic landscape more diverse than other cities such as Izeh (predominately Lor) or Shadegan (mainly Arab). Second, the second author who was involved in the data collection process is an Ahvazi Arab and thus profoundly familiar with the Arab community in the city as well as the social and cultural dynamics and differences of Ahvaz and its population.

Three middle-class Iranian Arab families living in Ahvaz were deliberately recruited (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, and Kitto, 2013) to participate in this study. In the selection process, intermarried couples were excluded due to their different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, in the selected families, all mothers and fathers came from families in which both parents were originally Arab and were capable of speaking both Arabic and Persian fluently. The participants were all literate parents who have the ability to read and write (at least the official language, Persian) as well as either understand or speak their heritage language, Arabic. Moreover, at the time of data collection, all families had at least one child between the ages of 3 and 12. Also, all children in these families had the ability to speak at least one language with their parents and siblings. These criteria for recruiting participants allowed for a more realistic investigation of language maintenance efforts by bilingual families in the multilingual context of Ahvaz. It is worth noting that, for confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms were used in lieu of the individuals' real names.

4.3 Data analysis

As briefly mentioned above, the data from both the interviews and the recordings were analyzed by applying a thematic analysis approach. In particular, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage model was applied in analyzing the data in this study. In other words, after becoming familiar with the data (stage one), the data were coded (stage two). Stage three was looking for themes in the data set. In stages four and five, respectively, the themes were reviewed and defined. Finally, after completing these stages, the final results were reported. The section below, therefore, presents a success story of Iranian Arabs preserving their language and identity in spite of the ruling monolingual policy enforced by the government and the wider negative attitude towards Arabic. The section is divided into three main categories (themes): parents' language practices at home when they were children, parents' language practices at school and in the neighborhood when they were children, and finally parents' language practices after forming a family.

5 Results

5.1 Parents' language practices at home when they were children

This longitudinal perspective and focus on parents' language practices is applied to report the success story of heritage language maintenance and the intergenerational transmission of the home language on a continuum ranging from parents' childhood linguistic activities to their current linguistic beliefs and behaviors. That said, all six parents involved in this project stated that Arabic was the sole language they used at home as children. In fact, some parents, as illustrated below, stated that they did not even understand or know how to speak Persian.

> Hamed (F1): When we were kids, we only spoke Arabic at home. I mean we spoke a pure Arabic, and not like some people who mix Persian words when they speak Arabic. We lived in an Arabic community, and so the language we used was Arabic.
> Layla (F1): We spoke Arabic at home as well. My siblings and I didn't even understand a word of Persian back then.
> Hamed: Yes, most of the time we spoke Arabic. No not really most of the time, we only used our Arabic language.

As stated by the father in Family 1, the community and geographical setting in which they lived played a crucial role in their language practices and thus language maintenance at home. As evident from the remarks above, it seems that one main requirement for fitting into the wider community was to speak the language; and a *pure* version of Arabic without Persian words seems to have been favored by the community. The underlying assumption here is that on a seesaw battle between the wider national monolingual policy with all its socioeconomic benefits on one side and the ethnic, regional identity and belonging with all its potential hindrances (in terms of, for instance, educational and career progress) on the other, it seems that the ethnic identity has had the upper hand.

5.2 Parents' language practices at school and in the neighborhood as they were children

The education system is one of the prime places governments can enforce their desired policy, which can, in turn, lead to changes, from minor to drastic, in terms of language use at home. On the other hand, it is also a get-together hub where people of similar backgrounds can meet and form a group with shared values, beliefs, and practices. In a multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural region, this might result in social segregation between the individuals, leading them to form an intracultural, intralingual, intraethnic communities in which

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people of the same race, color, language, religion, or culture come together. In the case of the participants in this study, with the exception of one mother, all parents indicated that they were members of such groups.

> Ebrahim (F3): Back in school, we only spoke Arabic (with each other). It is only when the teacher asked us something that we would reply in Persian. In the early years of school (probably first and second grade), we didn't even understand Persian. Later on, we gradually learned the language and were able to respond to the teacher. Now it's different. Nowadays, children learn the language before they go to school. Back then, we didn't have kindergarten or preschool classes. We would gradually learn the language from first grade onwards. We even had problems communicating with the teacher if he was Persian and not Arab.
>
> Maryam (F3): Yes, exactly. We both lived and still live in a place surrounded by Arabs. Wherever we go, we see Arabs, and so we mostly speak Arabic with them.

The geographical factor stands out even more in these comments since they demonstrate a solid tie between language maintenance and society. In places with an homogenous ethnic makeup, at least in the case of these families, it appears that communal ties and comfort come before socioeconomic gains. In the context of Iran's monolingual policies, mastering Persian gives an undeniable edge. But these parents and their parents before them did not yield to the dominant state policies and maintained their language and culture. Five out of the six parents involved in this study reported that they had poor or no competence in Persian before the first grade. This suggests that they used only Arabic at home, the playground, the neighborhood, and even the school.

> Ahmad (F2): In elementary school, we only used Arabic among ourselves except when we were in class. In junior high, it was the same, but now we began to use Persian sometimes. In high school, because we had some friends from other ethnicities, we used some Persian at times; but, with Arabs, we only spoke Arabic. Up until high school, almost all my classmates were Arabs. Even in high school most of them were Arabs too.

In two somewhat different cases (one of which was vastly different from the other participants), there were some anomalies compared to the previously discussed settings. The father in Family 1 (Hamed) reported that linguistic behaviors at the school changed drastically from junior high onwards in relation to

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those witnessed at the elementary school. This drastic change was a result of moving to a different neighborhood where people from other ethnicities also had a noticeable presence.

> Hamed (F1): When I was a junior high student, we moved to this neighborhood, and everything changed ever since. I mean our surroundings changed; the situation at home remained the same. The neighborhood was not entirely Arab anymore. We had, and still have, Arabs, Lors, Turks, Kurds, Bakhtiyari, Shooshtari, and Dezfuli people here. So, we had to use another language (Persian) with them. This is the common language that we use to communicate with them.

The regional relocation of Hamed's family, as he reports, did not affect their linguistic practices at home, and Arabic remained the only language they used to communicate. This was so, despite the fact that his new neighborhood differed greatly from his early childhood neighborhood in that it was less ethnically homogenous. In fact, as was evident in the recordings, even after his marriage, he and his wife and children only spoke Arabic at home.

The divergent case in this study is Samira, the mother in Family 2 (F2). She did not display any major irregularities in terms of linguistic behavior and practices; rather, the anomaly comes from the region where she resided as a child. Samira was the only parent who lived in a neighborhood inhabited mostly by non-Arabs. According to her, there was only one Arab family in the neighborhood and that family did not speak Arabic. But this did not change the language used at her home as her family used Arabic for daily communications. As she noted, this was probably as a result of her parents' close relationships with their relatives in their former place of residence.

> Samira (F2): Before my marriage, I lived in a neighborhood with only one Arab family, and that family didn't even know how to speak Arabic. We were the only Arab family in the neighborhood, well, at least the only one who spoke Arabic. Our relatives often visited us, and we would only communicate in Arabic among ourselves. My family's neighborhood was and still is populated entirely by non-Arabs.

Reflecting the social makeup of the region, Samira's school had few Arabs in attendance.

> Samira: In high school, I had four or five Arab friends and we used to speak Arabic when we were together. In elementary and junior high, I didn't even see a single Arab in the school. I guess I was the only Arab there.

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Despite this perceptible imbalance in favor of Persian, Samira's parents did not surrender to the forces imposed by their surroundings and managed to preserve their language and to successfully transmit it to their children (see also Said, this issue). But this was not completely effective, and it certainly resulted in minor changes to her Arabic competence. In the recording phase of data collection, she sporadically switched to Persian or used Persian words when speaking Arabic, suggesting how demographic agency in shaping one's linguistic repertoire could work for or against a particular language.

5.3 Parents' language practices after forming a family

Being raised and socialized by parents and siblings who only spoke Arabic, all participants maintained that tradition after they formed a family and gave higher priority to maintaining their language and culture. In fact, in all three families, Persian was not used at home at all, apart from educational purposes. In present day Iran, it is indisputable that an individual with a higher command of Persian has access to, for instance, more rewarding job opportunities, high-quality education, and better social status and relationships. The parents, being all literate, are aware of this socioeconomic edge and privilege, but they all maintained that Arabic language and culture always comes first and is an inseparable part of who they are.

> Samira (F2): We always speak Arabic at home. It's only when I want to teach her [7-year-old daughter] something that I use Persian. Sometimes, when I find something valuable to learn or something that might be useful for her in school, I start speaking Persian. Other than that, we only speak Arabic.
> Hamed (F1): We believe in this: your mother tongue is your identity. Your language is who you are. So, we would like to preserve our language so that we can safeguard our identity. It is true that we are faced with the Persian language wave, even at home and especially when it comes to education, but we want to protect our language and culture to maintain our identity. So, our top priority is to preserve Arabic, then we want them to learn other languages like Persian. But, as I said, nothing comes before the mother tongue, Arabic.

This strong nexus between language and identity can be attributed to how parents were raised and socialized in a space where Arabic serves as a criterion for belonging and acceptance. In a sense, language serves here as a social 'core value' (Smolicz, 1981: 75) that brings people with similar cultural backgrounds together and unites them with a sense of pride and affinity. A value that goes

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beyond social and economic benefits, and, while acknowledging the pressure imposed by the Persian monolingual policy, it provides them with a motive to stick to who they are (see also Garcia-Ruiz, Manterola, and Ortega, this issue).

Our observation of the daily recordings of home communications also attests to this strong tie between language and identity, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of the language to the children. The children, when going through regular daily routines at home, only used Arabic to communicate with their parents and siblings. In brief, while the domain of home is not a secluded sanctum isolated from the outside world and is a space shaped by outside forces, the geographical makeup in which families find themselves has given them a demographic agency facilitating the intergenerational continuity of Arabic. It is this particular makeup that brings individuals of the same group together and unites them through language, culture, identity, and race. This makes speaking Arabic at home and in the community a laissez faire policy.

6 Concluding remarks

We began this article on the premise that language maintenance is most successfully conceived when a language is passed on to the next generation through everyday language socialization in the family, the 'gold standard of language vitality' (Sallabank, 2012: 106), making it worthwhile to examine language ideologies, attitudes, and practices of families (Pfaff, 1990; Fishman, 1991; Queen, 2003; Spolsky, 2011). This can arguably not only provide insight into the earliest stage and path of contact-induced language change, but it can also shed light on the nature of such changes (Letsholo, 2009). We also acknowledged that although home in the Fishmanian school of thought is considered to be 'an unexpendable bulwark' of language maintenance in which a language can be safeguarded (Fishman 1991: 94), language ideologies and practices of families are not immune to forces external to the home. For example, while acknowledging the significance of such forces, Lane argues that, despite the fact that the loss of intergenerational language transmission can be partly seen as a choice parents make, in reality 'they do not always have a choice' (Lane, 2010: 63). Similarly, Sicoli (2011) critiques the commonly held belief that language shift takes place because speakers 'choose' it, achieving some gain (such as socioeconomic mobility). Because actions are 'socioculturally constrained both in the possibility of their deployments and in their effects', agency emerges in social practice, rather than being the free will of an individual acting from a rational position. Sicoli further argues that, because acts changing and/or sustaining a

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society, are situated in sociocultural matrices, it is problematic to assume that agency only lies in individual action (Sicoli, 2011: 162). This, as Blommaert (2005) argues, does not mean eliminating creativity, choice, or freedom from our analysis. Rather, situating individual agency within a wider frame of constraints and affordances brings the issue of agency, creativity, and choice into sharper focus analytically.

Taking a realist social approach to examining Family Language Policy (Mirvahedi, 2021) and using the concept of 'demographic agency' (Sealey and Carter, 2004), this study was an attempt to argue and illustrate that densely populated regions or neighborhoods where speakers of minority languages live could create an environment that facilitates speaking the minority language. Unlike Lane and Sicoli who focus on the pressure created by forces external to the home, i.e. sociopolitical and economic structures that encourage people to shift to a societal, dominant language, we have shown that demographic agency brought about by the sheer number of speakers populating a region can contribute significantly to language maintenance. In other words, while under some circumstances people feel that they have no choice but to shift to a societal language, in situations where the demographic agency is strong, a communicative pressure is built in favor of the minority language. In other words, minority people find it a laissez-faire, everyday affair to speak their language at home predominantly. It is under such circumstances that child agency, which is often viewed negatively as children interfering with parents' efforts to maintain the minority language at home by resisting and/or bringing the language of school back home (Kheirkhah and Cekaite, 2018; Mirvahedi and Cavallaro, 2020), becomes a positive, contributing factor in language maintenance. In our case, for example, although Arabic-speaking children have to go to Persian medium schools, they get to socialize with their Arab friends and speak Arabic among themselves. Peer pressure, or child agency in the context of home, thus comes to work in favor of parents' efforts to maintain the language (see also Karpava, this issue).

The analysis of the narratives of the parents whose life trajectories and current language ideologies and practices were investigated provides us with evidence that demographic agency as delineated above could be a strong factor in a competitive edge over other structural forces, such as monolingual institutional language policies. All parents, except for Samira, lived their lives in neighborhoods in which they were immersed in Arabic and speaking it was a daily norm. Their reports show that while the language of education was Persian, they were socialized in Arabic at home before school and, consequently, took the home

language to school and ended up speaking Arabic with their peers. Persian was added to their linguistic repertoire over time after they fully acquired Arabic as their first language in the early years of their childhood.

Samira's case provides further evidence about the significance of demographic agency. Having lived in a neighborhood where Arab families did not constitute the dominant population, she had to use to Persian at school when communicating with her classmates and friends. Although her parents socialized her into and through Arabic at home, she ended up using Persian at school and outside the home more than other parents. Thus, today, she seems to find it easier and 'normal' to code-switch to Persian when she addresses her children. Yet, again, their current place of residence in an Arabic-speaking neighborhood provides them with daily opportunities to use Arabic with their fellow Arab neighbors and friends, ultimately facilitating passing on Arabic to children.

In sum, as Busch (2017: 343) argues, every space in which people find themselves in at different moments of their life is linguistically and socially constituted in different ways – spaces with their own 'language regime, set of rules, orders of discourse, and language ideologies – in which linguistic resources are assessed differently'. We have shown that in spaces densely populated with speakers of a minority language, which can be created by a peculiar geographical makeup of a country, the speakers of minority languages gain a certain degree of demographic agency, leading to a positive assessment of the minority language as an everyday valuable way of speaking. The children are accordingly socialized into it, ultimately leading to language maintenance.

Indubitably, and due to numerous reasons, such as the COVID-19 outbreak and its subsequent aftermath, this study could not cover a wide range of Arab families in Ahvaz. That said, future research should aim to expand the scope and include more family types from all walks of life. Moreover, due to the limited scope of this study, it could not include intermarried families as they pose unique challenges, and hence interested researchers may want to study these families' linguistic management methods at home. Last but not least, the researchers could not study Arab families from different cities in Khuzestan, which may reveal more complicated and divergent language policies due to their distinctive cultural inclinations, geographical makeup of their cities, their varied socioeconomic status, or whether or not they live and have close contact with people from Arab countries such as Iraq and Kuwait. Such studies could provide more nuanced insights into how demographic agency functions in FLP and LMS scholarship.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

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Appendix 1. Demographic data on the participants.

Family	Name	Familial Status	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Employed	Language(s)	Fluency
Family 1	Hamed	Father	42	Arab	Bachelor of Arts	Yes	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 1	Layla	Mother	41	Arab	Diploma	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 1	Inas	Daughter	17	Arab	Student	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 1	Noor	Daughter	13	Arab	Student	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 1	Amir	Son	6	Arab	No	Arabic	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 2	Ahmad	Father	36	Arab	Master of Arts	Yes	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 2	Samira	Mother	36	Arab	Diploma	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 2	Atena	Daughter	7	Arab	Student	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Basic Fluency
Family 2	Abbas	Son	4.5	Arab		No	Arabic	Fluent
Family 3	Ebrahim	Father	44	Arab	Diploma	Yes	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 3	Maryam	Mother	40	Arab	Bachelor of Arts	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 3	Mostafa	Son	15	Arab	Student	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent
Family 3	Qazal	Daughter	7	Arab	Student	No	Arabic Persian	Fluent Fluent

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