

Emotional Salience in Minority Language Transmission: How Minority Language-Speaking Parents are caught between Emotional and Pragmatic Needs

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Many children who have heard two languages from birth eventually speak the majority language only. In many exogamous couples, minority language transmission rests on the minority language-speaking parent's shoulders. Minority language transmission is emotionally demanding as it requires parents to balance out various needs (i.e. providing input in the minority language but also monitoring the child's majority language competence etc.) (Okita 2002). Parents associate the loss of the minority language with identity loss (Curdt-Christiansen 2009), while minority language transmission leads to positive relationships between parents and children. Consequently, parental ideas of success in transmitting the minority language need to be scrutinized (King, Fogle & Logan-Terry 2008). An investigation of how parental emotions interact with their language ideologies, practices, and management strategies will show how emotions influence the families' state of bilingualism and social-psychological well-being.

To minimize the influence of prestige difference, English-German families are studied. Both are high-status languages and due to cultural proximity, those families merely face language contact-related issues (Piller 2002). A sample of 47 minority language-speaking parents (23 in the UK, 24 in Germany) with young children of a narrow age range (mean: 2;9 years) were interviewed. In the UK, German is the minority language. In Germany, English is the minority language. A country comparison will reveal if reversing minority and majority language has an impact on parental emotions. Drawing on a mixed-method design, a qualitative content analysis was performed (Mayring 2010). The results were quantified by reducing qualitative data into themes with a clear-cut meaning which justifies frequency counts (Sandelowski 2000).

Results showed no country differences, since parents in either country were largely satisfied with their child's language proficiency, even though the minority language was the child's weaker language. However, the prospect of the child's potential refusal to speak the minority language evoked strong feelings of sadness and frustration. Minority language-speaking parents in both countries face a clash of pragmatic and emotional needs (Little 2017). Despite their desire to transmit the minority language, parents also wish to be well integrated in their host country (Kirsch 2012).

The concept of emotional salience from the field of neuroscience (Phan et al. 2004) and semantics (Lee & Narayanan 2005) explains how parents assign a different emotional value to the minority language compared to their children. The parents may transmit the minority language in its physical manifestation (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, semantics), but might fail to instill the abstract emotional value in their children. Parents acknowledge this difficulty in putting the child's well-being first, even at the risk of not fully transmitting the minority language. Parental efforts to transmit the minority language could be seen as a compensation mechanism to battle potential signs of parents' first language attrition.

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