



“I don’t want to lose this mother tongue; I don’t want to be devaluated”¹ – Attitudes towards family languages. A qualitative study approaching personal levels

Samantha Wickremasinghe

1. Background

Research and attitude towards multilingualism have come a long way since this aptitude was considering a threat for the physical, mental and emotional development of a child. (Blocher 1909, S. 665–670). Fortunately, the importance of multilingualism, but also its positive impact on individuals, is now widely recognised. However, foreign languages are perceived and promoted differently depending on the prestige of the respective language (Oppenrieder and Thurmair 2003: 43-48). Most importantly, naturally occurring multilingualism is sometimes condemned in certain areas of life such as in the education system or other institutions, if the languages concerned lack this “prestige” and so-called *languages of origin* are stigmatised.

Two extreme positions can be defined within the multilingualism debate. On the one hand, authors such as Esser (2009) believe that there are no significant positive effects of bilingualism in terms of school performance and labour market success [sic!] . In order to integrate into the surrounding society, linguistic competences of the minority language are considered to have no usability [sic!] (ibid.).

On the other hand, a demand for an institutionalised acceptance and appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity is made, because it is seen not only as a cognitive resource but also as an asset for solving linguistic problems, and therefore beneficial for learning further languages (cf. FörMig 2009).

The following research was developed within the span of these two extreme points, in order to approach the debate from a more personal angle. More precisely, attitude towards Family Languages are examined in order to let individuals speak for themselves. Further, this study aims at finding insights and suggestions made by the interviewee to allow recommendations on how to stop institutional discrimination.

1. What are Family Languages?

Languages of origin or heritage languages generally refer to the language of the country from which a person originates. However, these terms do not work for everyone. Firstly, people speaking different languages within the family do not necessarily identify with the culture or country these languages originate from and do not consider themselves as being foreign, e.g. Turkish, Arab, Slovenian but rather as German, French or Austrian, especially from the second generation onwards of living in a country (cf. Vavti 2010). Secondly, languages of origin have a different level of

¹ Quote from the Interviewee explaining her feelings towards her L1.



development that cannot be compared to the variety spoken within a family. Similarly, the term mother tongue gives a wrongful impression of mastery of the respective language.

As a result of these inconsistently used and imprecise terms, I would like to promote the term Family Language in order to suggest a more suitable description of language spoken to a greater or lesser extent within families.

2. Methodology

The goal of my research is to find out what Family Languages mean on a personal level. More precisely, I would like to know what use, advantages and attitude towards Family Languages can be identified. My study therefore examines the benefits and challenges of growing up with and being exposed to different languages within the family.

To perform this sociolinguistic approach, theories in developmental psychology, positive psychology, applied linguistics, and language learning research were used. A qualitative study was piloted in order to test the draft questionnaire, interview and evaluation method before undertaking the final data collection. First results will be presented in this article.

The interviewee of the pilot study is a 24 years old female student born in Russia, where she learned the local language (Russian) as her L1. Her family moved to Germany when she was almost seven years old, hence she was educated in German as her L2. Her practice of the Family language evolves in parallel to its usage in daily family routines. At first Russian is the only language spoken at home, with friends and within the community. She reports that a gradual detachment from the Russian-speaking environment took place when she entered primary school. What is more, her parents' opinion towards the Family Language and its impact on their daughter shifted from the fear of not speaking Russian adequately to the fear of lagging behind her German-speaking fellow pupils. Apparently, German became the means to a good school education and thus to successful integration for them whilst Russian became less and less practised within the family.

2.1. Some results

To find out what role Family Languages play for their speakers and what might their attitude be towards them, the following categories associated with quality of life were tested:

Professional qualification, further training	Recreation and self-care	Living community	Socio-moral processes
Occupation; Work	Health	Family	Generativity
Personal Growth	Hobbies	Partnership	Spiritual development
Knowledge	Creativity	Friends	Social involvement

This is an output of the project "Learning environments where modern languages flourish" (2016-2019) of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). The ECML is a Council of Europe institution promoting excellence in language education in its member states.
<http://www.ecml.at/Learningenvironments>





To a minor extent Family Language resulted in importance for the chosen area of professional qualification. Although the interviewee works for a company with Russian clients, she is not deployed in the department handling those clients, which she regrets and hopes to change in the future. However, she considers her Russian language skills as poor which is why she attempted to improve her language skills by attending a basic course during her university studies in order to re-develop her knowledge of the written language, and grammar in general. Eventually, she dropped the course due to a lack of time. She uses all her languages, Russian, German and English, to acquire knowledge, hence she renders useful all linguistic resources available to her.

Family Language led to similar results in the area of recreation and self-care. The Family Language plays a moderate role, because it merely engages her in the communication about health matters with her parents. Concerns about her own health are not affected by Family Language. Hobbies and Creativity are even less affected by it, although she remembers having a Russian-speaking piano teacher as a child and still listens and enjoys music from Russia.

The area of her living community seems to be more strongly influenced, as she reports to be speaking more Russian at home. Obviously, family has made a major impact on her attitude towards Russian. She acquired her L1 through her parents and her grandmother taught her to write using Cyrillic script. Moreover, she says that she is requested to speak the Family Language and is often corrected by her family members nowadays. Her current partner does not speak Russian, nor did she ever have a Russian-speaking partner. The same holds true for her friendships at present. After being surrounded by a strong Russian-speaking community during the time at the Asylum-seekers hostel, she describes her current friends as international and therefore speaks German with them.

The strongest influence can be detected in the area of socio-moral processes. Even though her social involvement is unaffected by the Family Language, her spiritual development is mostly influenced by the Russian orthodox church and she attends masses held in Russian. Concerning her own future, she wishes to travel to Russia again. Most importantly, she plans to speak and teach Russian to her children, because she wants to continue the cultural heritage beyond her own generation.

2.2. Some more results

Since the data evaluation was carried out both deductively (testing theories) and inductively (generating theories), further categories were identified which appeared interesting for answering the research question. They can be overviewed as follows:

<i>Identification</i>	<i>Feeling of shame</i>	<i>Fear of loss</i>	<i>Language learning experience</i>
-----------------------	-------------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------------

Although the interviewee does not practise her L1 to a full extent, she wishes to incorporate Russian into her life, because she identifies with the culture. Nevertheless,



she considers herself as German-Russian. She believes that if she had had the opportunity to expand her language skills from an early age, she would now find it easier to relate to Russia.

Her ambiguous feeling towards her identity is accompanied by a sense of shame she feels when having to declare Russian as her mother tongue [sic!]. She considers her language skills as poor and is afraid to deploy her skills, for example when asked to do so in a professional context.

What is striking is the fact that she spoke of experiences of loss concerning her L1 which she moreover described as a collective fate when talking about other Russian-speaking acquaintances. She strongly emphasised that she does not want to lose her language even though she sadly admits a lot fell by the wayside already [sic].

Despite all her regrets, she acknowledges the positive effect her Family Languages had for her language learning experience. She would have liked to have expanded this effect through additional education, whether within or outside regular classes.

3. Conclusion

How can these research results now be integrated into the framework of EOL? Considering the EOL-Matrix, the parameters that lead to learning environments where modern languages flourish, remarkable parallels can be drawn.

The above results have shown that if Family Languages are not fostered institutionally, resources and cultural diversity can be neglected in order to assimilate to the surrounding society.

What can be done to prevent this? Looking at the operational dimension of the EOL-Matrix for instance, implementing **all** languages intrinsic to schools could help to foster global language awareness, not only among Family Language-speakers but also create awareness, and thus acceptance among naturally monolingual fellow students. On the ethical dimension, acknowledgement and credit for Family Languages would ensure and expand language diversity. On the experience dimension, it could help to implement a sensitive approach to languages and cultures or even lead to developing international networks. Finding ways of evaluating the naturally occurring resources of Family Languages would certainly valorise language biographies and repertoires. Finally, on the existential dimension, these changes would unquestionably enrich language repertoires according to personal and vocational purposes, use all learning fields, explore linguistic landscapes and help build multilingual environments.



4. References

- Blocher, Eduard (1909): *Zweisprachigkeit: Vorteile und Nachteile*. Langensalza: H. Beyer & Söhne.
- Esser, Hartmut (2009): *Der Streit um die Zweisprachigkeit: Was bringt die Bilingualität?* In: Gogolin, Ingrid; Neumann, Ursula (ed.): *Streitfall Zweisprachigkeit – The Bilingual Controversy*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. P. 69-86.
- FörMig (2006): *Eine falsche Front im Kampf um die Sprachförderung. Stellungnahme des FörMig-Programmträgers zur aktuellen Zweisprachigkeitsdebatte*. PDF available at <http://tinyurl.com/ydygwuyz>[16.12.18].
- Oppenrieder, Wilhelm and Maria Thurmair (2003): *Sprachidentität im Kontext von Mehrsprachigkeit*. In: *Identität und Sprache*. Gunter Narr Verlag. Tübingen. P. 39-57.
- Vavti, Stefanie (2010): "I am just a human being ...". *Ethnic Identification of Young Slovenes in Southern Carinthia*. In: *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11 (2). PDF available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/download/1409/2985> [16.12.18].