

**Arabic Intergenerational Transmission: A Systematic  
Review of the Impact of Family Language Policy  
Transmission Intergénérationnelle de l'Arabe : Une Revue  
Systématique de l'Impact de la Politique Linguistique  
Familiale**

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**Abstract**

The basic datum of the study of language maintenance and language shift is that two linguistically distinguishable populations are in contact. Hence, there are demonstrable consequences of this contact with respect to the relationship between change or stability in habitual language use, as well as ongoing psychological, social or cultural processes. Based on previous studies investigating the use and maintenance of Arabic language among Arabic speaking immigrants, this article examines through the lens of family language policy the interplay between different factors affecting Arabic intergenerational transmission. We argue that family language policies are important as they significantly contribute to the maintenance of minority languages. Moreover, this paper reviews research on the role of language ideologies, practices and management in shaping family language policies, which in turn connect in significant ways with children's language developmental trajectories and also determine future status of minority languages.

**Keywords:** Arabic language maintenance, family language policy, language practices, language beliefs, language management.

## Résumé:

La donnée de base de l'étude du maintien et du changement de langue est que deux populations linguistiquement distinctes sont en contact. Par conséquent, ce contact a des conséquences démontrables en ce qui concerne la relation entre le changement ou la stabilité de l'usage habituel de la langue, ainsi que les processus psychologiques, sociaux ou culturels en cours. Sur la base d'études antérieures portant sur l'utilisation et le maintien de la langue arabe chez les immigrants arabophones, cet article examine, à travers le prisme des politiques linguistiques familiales, l'interaction entre différents facteurs affectant la transmission intergénérationnelle de la langue arabe. Nous soutenons que les politiques linguistiques familiales sont importantes car elles contribuent de manière significative au maintien des langues minoritaires. En outre, cet article passe en revue les recherches sur le rôle des idéologies, des pratiques et de la gestion de la langue dans l'élaboration des politiques linguistiques familiales, qui à leur tour sont liées de manière significative aux trajectoires de développement linguistique des enfants et déterminent également le statut futur des langues minoritaires.

**Mots Clés :** le maintien de la langue arabe, la politique linguistique familiale, idéologie linguistique, pratiques langagières, la gestion de la langue.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On the empirical level, research on language use among ethno-linguistic minorities around the world has been quite extensive, notably in societies characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity (Wei & Lee, 2002; Clyne, 2005; Rubino, 2010). The aim of these studies is linked to the advocacy for, and preservation of, ethnic minority and immigrant languages to protect them from an unexpected shift or loss (Garcia, 2003). Likewise, a significant number of studies have been undertaken on the maintenance of Arabic language among Arabic-speaking immigrants (Othman, 2006; Martin, 2009; Sehlaoui, 2008). Drawing on

those findings, this review tries to provide a comprehensive perspective to heritage language maintenance within a family language policy (FLP) framework. Moreover, it seeks to explain how the different components of FLP, namely, language practices, language ideologies and language management lead to intergenerational transmission of minority languages with a particular focus on Arabic language in immigrant settings.

## 2. Family Language Policy Research

Over the last decade, the field of research known as family language policy has gained impetus within sociolinguistic literature and has become a field in its own right, arguably due to the efforts of Kendall King and Lyn Fogle (2008) seeking to formally define FLP. According to King et al. (2008) FLP can be defined 'as explicit (Shohamy, 2006) and overt (Schiffman, 1996) planning in relation to language use within the home among family members' (p. 907). This definition has been expanded by Fogle (2013) who went further to claim that parents' decisions about language use within the family are not always overt and explicit, including language learning and literacy practices: 'FLP refers to explicit and overt decisions parents make about language use and language learning as well as implicit processes that legitimize certain language and literacy practices over others in the home' (p. 83). In the same line, the dimension of implicit and covert language policy at home has already been emphasized by Curdt-Christiansen (2009) to include literacy practices in her definition: 'FLP can be defined as a deliberate attempt at practicing a particular language use pattern and particular literacy practices within home domains and among family members'. In any case, FLP is 'shaped by what the family believes will strengthen the family's social standing and best serve and support family members' goals in life' (p. 352). Such empirical developments attest to the continuous efforts to develop a more comprehensive framework of FLP aiming to cover more nuanced and appreciatory approaches, including the analysis of the factors and processes related to language practices in the home at different levels. Furthermore, these

redefinitions have promoted greater awareness about certain issues and contexts that have been overlooked in the past and motivate a closer analysis of the directions in which the field has been going as well as the paths yet to be taken. More importantly, FLPs are considered to be a basic aspect of children's language development (Spolsky, 2004) because these plans can generate interactions between children and family members and ultimately determine the framework for how children's language learning develops (Kang, 2015; Kaveh, 2018). FLPs lay the foundation for children's heritage language maintenance and enhance parents' efforts to manage and practice this language with their offspring. This is also true for cross-cultural marriage families who may consider bilingualism or multilingualism a crucial child-rearing goal.

### **3. FLP and Heritage Language Transmission**

FLP is conceived as a relatively newly developed interdisciplinary field of inquiry that draws on theoretical frameworks of language policy, child language acquisition, language socialization, and literacy studies (King and Fogle, 2006/2013; King et al., 2008; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009/2012; De Houwer, 2009; Gafaranga, 2010;). In line with more recent understandings of FLP, researchers have acknowledged that heritage language maintenance requires intergenerational transmission of a language as a process in which families and their policies (FLPs) play a critical role (Fishman, 1991/2001; Schwartz, 2008; Spolsky, 2004/2012). Fishman (1966b) postulates that when populations "differing in language are in contact with each other, such as in the case of immigration, changes in the habitual language use of the immigrant population induces process of language maintenance and shift" (p.424). When a family is unwilling or unable to transmit the heritage language to the next generation(s) language shift comes into play with a concomitant increase in the habitual use of the new dominant language. Such processes can ultimately lead to language loss unless proper measures towards

language maintenance or reversing language shift are taken (Fishman, 1991/ 2001). These processes take place across generations; in many families the heritage language is lost altogether by the third generation, yet, there are families who successfully maintain their heritage language and promote bilingualism. As Spolsky (2012) noted, “the loss of ‘natural intergenerational transmission’, as it was called, was recognized as a key marker of language loss, and it occurred within the family. Thus, the family was added to the state as a domain relevant to language policy, though seldom until recently studied independently” (p. 2). Pauwels (2005) emphasizes the role of family by stating that “the family is a crucial site of language maintenance... remains for most immigrants and their offspring the main domain for community language.” (p. 124). By and large, FLP research looks at parents’ role in preserving “heritage language by modifying children’s language development” (Spolsky, 2012. p. 7). The parents’ initial decision on language maintenance or shift may be strongly related to complex emotional processes. As was highlighted by Okita (2002) and Tannenbaum (2005), to the extent that home language maintenance can serve as a powerful tool for cohesion between generations of immigrants, its loss can contribute greatly to creating emotional distance between past and present.

Othman (2011) examined Arabic language maintenance within two generations in the Arabic-speaking immigrant community in Manchester, United Kingdom. The study investigated language choice patterns in interaction within first and second generation, language ability in both generations, and attitudes towards Arabic language and bilingualism. The results revealed the existence of a compartmentalization in function between Arabic and English despite some differences between the two generations. The language choice patterns indicate that

Arabic is still functional in the participant families in daily interactions, which is important for its maintenance. Another sign of Arabic maintenance within Arab families in Manchester is children's competence in spoken and written Arabic the fact that encourages them to use the language in communication since they do not struggle with it. Moreover, participants hold positive attitudes toward Arabic and make real efforts to transmit the language to the next generation. For example, parents use Arabic at home with their children and insist that children speak Arabic, they are keen to have Arabic satellite channels at home, go on visits to their homeland, etc. They also send children to Arabic schools to learn literacy in Arabic.

#### **4. FLP within Spolsky's Framework**

An important shift can be observed in the initial assumptions and paradigms of language policy that, traditionally, were centered around solving "language problems" of newly independent, former colonial nations (Berry, 1968; Fishman et al., 1968; Ray, 1968) toward providing insights into the dynamicity of language policies as part of social, cultural, and ideological systems (Ricento, 2000/2006; King 2003). It is within this understanding of the development of language policy that King et al. (2008) adopt Spolsky's (2004) framework, which was historically situated in the development of language planning and considers language policy being made of three components: language practices, language beliefs, and language management. As Schwartz (2010) advocates: 'research on family language policy (FLP) incorporates analysis of language ideology, practice and management, which were classified by Spolsky (2004) as components of the language policy model with respect to the speech community' (p. 172). Inasmuch as these three components are distinguished, Spolsky (2004) defined language practices as "the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire; its language beliefs or ideology – the beliefs about language and language use; and any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management" (p. 5). Most research in

the field of FLP applied Spolsky's (2004) model of language policy at the family level. Spolsky (2009) concurs that family language policy has raised considerable interest and curiosity among researchers in the past ten years, mostly in countries where ethnic minorities are found, especially as researchers seek:

... to understand questions such as: why (and how) do members of some transnational families maintain their language while members of other families lose their language? How is it that some children, growing up in a largely monolingual society, become bilinguals while other children, growing up in a bilingual environment, become monolinguals? What policies and practices do parents implement to promote or discourage the use and practice of particular languages? And how are these language policies and practices negotiated in private domains, and concomitantly, related to broader ideologies of language and language education policies? (Curd-Christiansen, 2013, p.1)

In applying this framework, a number of studies specifically following Spolsky's (2004) model of language policy (for example; King et al., 2008; Altman, et al., 2014; Curdt-Christiansen, 2013) have focused their analysis of families in multilingual settings in terms of their language beliefs or ideologies (how family members think about language), of language practices ( what they do with language); and of efforts to modify or influence those practices through any kind of language intervention, planning, or language management (what they try to do with language). (Spolsky, 2008). A more detailed discussion of each of these components is presented here.

#### **4.1 Family Language Practices**

Transmission of a language to the next generations largely depends on parental use of that language in the family. In other words, reduced exposure to a minority language results in a decrease in the child's minority language use. In that sense, the overall amount of minority language input a child receives would be one of

the most relevant factors that determine the levels of fluency he may attain in that language. Perhaps not surprisingly, the more minority language input the child receives the more productive he tends to be (Döpke, 1988; De Houwer, 2007; Quiroz, Snow, and Zhao, 2010). For instance, Lyon (1996) and Varro (1998) surmise that usually mothers tend to be children's primary caregivers and thus having a mother who speaks the minority language may be an optimal condition for minority language maintenance. Nevertheless, Al-Sahafi (2015) emphasizes the role of Arab fathers in heritage language maintenance in New Zealand by referring to "their key roles and contributions as Arab Muslim immigrant fathers in the process of heritage language intergenerational maintenance, such as explicitly setting and monitoring family language policy, establishing co-ethnic contacts, and providing Arabic materials to enhance Arabic literacy learning among their children" (p. 73). As such, language practices are the byproduct of conscious and unconscious language preferences (Spolsky, 2004). In the family context, these preferences are translated into practices, affecting children's bilingual development. De Houwer (2007) asserts that language practices of parents are crucial predictors of their children's language practices. However, language ideologies and practices in a family are highly influenced by external social forces (Spolsky, 2004) which often make it difficult to transmit the minority language to the next generations (Tuominen, 1999).

#### **4.2 Family Language Ideologies and Parents' Impact Belief**

The role that language ideologies and practices play in heritage language maintenance has been increasingly addressed in the literature particularly within bilingual families in various socio-cultural conditions, such as in immigrant contexts (e.g., Okita, 2002; Anderson, Martínez & Smith, 2003; Kendrick, Rogers, & Smythe, 2005; Zentella, 2005). Language ideologies can be defined as a set of beliefs and attitudes toward social status of bilingualism and about ways of its development in early childhood. These language ideologies include parents' beliefs and attitudes about the bilingual development of their own child in a specific social-cultural context. Parental beliefs about the value of language and multilingualism and

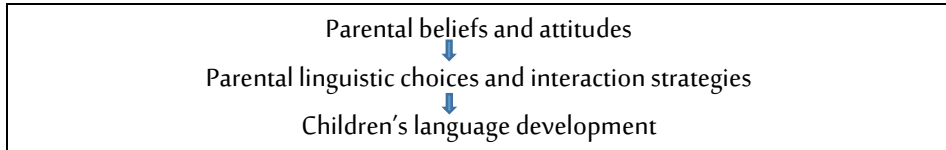


parents' own roles in the process of language transmission can shape their language ideology, which, in turn, can have a substantial effect on parents' linguistic behavior (language practice and management) toward their children (De Houwer, 1999; King et al., 2008; Spolsky, 2007). More specifically, these beliefs could impact parents' decisions about the language trajectories of their children and determine the maintenance or loss of the heritage language. Positive attitudes toward the use of Arabic and bilingualism is a common finding in most studies on Arabic intergenerational transmission (Clyne & Kipp, 1999; Martin, 2009; Rouchdy, 2013). Martin (2009) carried out a research on the Arabic-speaking community in the USA. She explored the language practices and attitudes of ninety-four Arab-American parents toward Arabic and examined these practices and attitudes in relation to perceived societal racism. Results indicate that parents hold positive attitudes towards Arabic and engage in various language practices that promote the maintenance of Arabic in their families. They encourage their children to speak Arabic at home to maintain their Arabic cultural heritage. She found that the Arabic language was used for socializing among Arabic speakers as well as in their religious practices. Her findings also show the role of religious school classes in teaching the language and the Qur'an, and racism is not significantly associated with the parents' language attitudes or language maintenance efforts.

Furthermore, De Houwer (1999) draws on a three-tier model from developmental psychology to illustrate the relationship between beliefs, practices, and outcomes (see Figure 1) in child bilingualism. De Houwer (1999) suggests that both parental attitudes and impact beliefs influence parents' linguistic choices and interaction strategies, which in turn affect children's language development. As such, positive attitudes towards the two languages being acquired by the child and to early child bilingualism are a basic and necessary condition for active bilingualism. Yet, they are an insufficient condition on their own. She argued that parents need also to have an impact belief regarding their roles in their children's

language development. Parents' impact belief provides the necessary support for the development of active bilingualism.

**Fig.1. Relationship between parental beliefs/attitudes and children's language development**



**Source: De Houwer (1999, p. 86)**

The figure shows that parents' attitudes toward languages and their beliefs about children's language acquisition have an impact on their communication strategies with their children. The choice of parents eventually affects the styles, variety, and language use of their children (De Houwer, 1999). Hence, parents' beliefs and attitudes play an important role in forming the language input environment for bilingual children (De Houwer, 1999/ 2017). Likewise, Curdt-Christiansen (2009/ 2012/ 2018) maintains that the decision-making process for children's multilingual development and educational achievement is connected to parental beliefs and goals. Besides, it is worth noting that language ideologies are often considered as the hidden power or strength in language practices and policy, and they are accordingly "the mediating link between language use and social organization" (King, 2000, p. 169). This is the process whereby language ideologies are negotiated within a family or community and reflected via language practices. In fact, language ideologies are key to heritage language development given that they inform FLPs, which in turn shape the language use patterns of parents. Nevertheless, parents must have an impact belief regarding their roles in their children's language development. Without an impact belief, there would be insufficient support for the development of active bilingualism.

The disparity between language ideology and language practice may be attributed to parents' lack of 'impact belief'. A concept introduced by De Houwer (1999, p.83) to describe the parents' conviction of their ability to 'exercise some sort of control over their children's linguistic functioning'. Parents undoubtedly

affect children's language development intentionally or without any deliberate intention. Nevertheless, parents' interaction strategies may contribute effectively to their children's acquisition of the heritage language when they are deliberate and explicit; particularly in migrant contexts where the heritage language typically receives less support (De Houwer, 1999; Pérez Báez, 2013). A strong impact belief demonstrates parents' awareness of the active role they play in their children's bilingual development. As well as, their caution about their language use as they know that it has a direct effect on what their children will learn to say. As Sehlaoui (2008) notes "heritage language preservation starts at home. ...I make sure that my children speak Arabic at home and communicate with me in Arabic, which costs time, effort, and money." (p.287).

Conversely, weak impact beliefs reflect parents' conviction that they have little control over their children's language development. Chumak-Horbatsch (2008) argues that a parental impact belief "is accompanied by strategies such as home language rules and praising/punishing children's language behaviour" (p. 5). Kulick (1993), for instance, describes how parents in Papua New Guinea explain their children's monolingualism as an outcome of children's own will and innate personality, placing 'blame' for language shift on the children themselves rather than family and community language practices. Also, the way children position themselves towards language maintenance widely influence their actual performances. For example, Al-Sahafi (2017) examined the attitudes of bilingual Arab immigrant children to their languages and bilingualism. In general, the voices of these children suggest that they have positive attitudes towards Arabic, English, and bilingualism in Arabic and English. Despite their awareness of their inferior Arabic skills and preference for using English, nine of the study's child participants described Arabic as the "first," "main," or "original" language. "Arabic maintenance was regarded as important for maintaining contacts with parents and extended

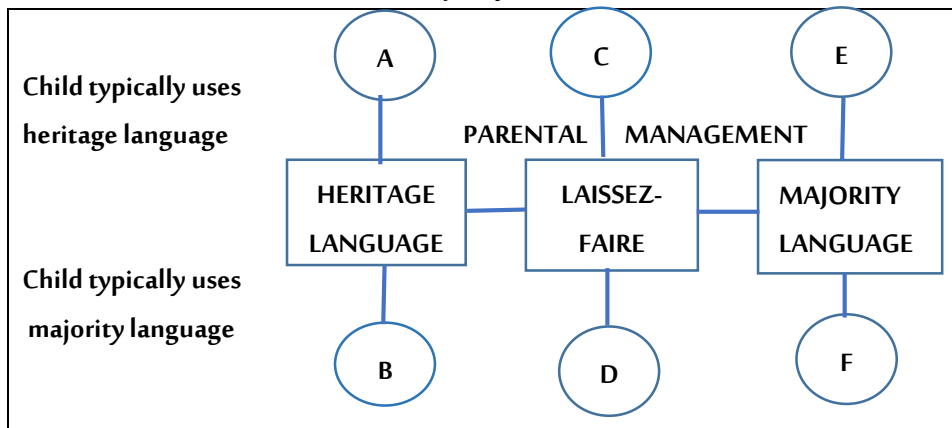
families overseas and preserving religious identity through reading the Qur'an and performing daily prayers" (p.30).

### **4.3 Family Language Management**

Family language management refers to "efforts to control the language of family members, especially children" (Spolsky, 2007, p. 430). It involves parents/caregivers' attempts to determine what language the children should use in order to enhance their language learning. Such efforts include travels to the country of origin, enrolling children in home language classes, visiting heritage language speakers (e.g., relatives) and, importantly, using the target language in interactions with children (Spolsky, 2004, p. 8). As Al-Sahafi (2015) argues "setting and enforcing family language policy in the form of using only Arabic in the home reflects one of the ways the participants respond to their role in the process of heritage language maintenance, which seems to be implemented more successfully in parent-child interaction than among the children themselves" (p.80). He further adds "it is important that the parents provide a communication-rich Arabic language environment for their children. For example, families can make use of modern communication technology such as the Internet [...] to maximize the children's exposure to up-to-date uses of Arabic" (ibid). Three major tendencies can be distinguished in the data on family language management in different contexts: explicit management, implicit management and laissez-faire policies. First, explicit management that Spolsky (2009) explains as "verbal requests or interventions commanding the use of a particular language" (p. 25). Such strategy has proven quite fruitful in the transmission of the heritage language (Kasuya, 1998; King et al., 2008). For example, Kasuya (1998) carried out a study on families living in the USA, who wanted to raise their children acquiring both Japanese and English through the OPOL<sup>ii</sup> strategy. Replicating Lanza's (1997) study, Kasuya sought to examine the efficiency of parental discourse strategies by looking closely into the relationship between parental response types and children's subsequent choice of language. Her study reported that explicit strategies (i.e., those explicitly requiring the child to use Arabic such as the use of instruction or correction) are more effective in eliciting the

children's appropriate use of Arabic compared with implicit strategies (i.e., those which do not strongly require the child to produce Arabic such as repetition or moving on). Then, explicit strategies are likely to be associated with implicit management, i.e. child-directed activities supporting this management. Moreover, controlling the home language environment, selecting children's peers, allowing or forbidding TV and computers are examples of explicit language management strategies. In situations where a family member dislikes the language use of another member, they might initiate organized language management by, for instance, consciously discouraging specific language use patterns or by giving explicit instructions (Spolsky, 2009).

**Fig.2. Model for categorising management-practice scenarios in family language policy.**



Source: Revis (2017, p. 55)

According to the above model, parental management strategies and the children's language practices are grouped together into six different scenarios. Language management is set on an axis extending from explicit management to use the heritage language, via a laissez-faire policy to explicit management to use the majority language. In terms of practices, the two categories are the children's typical use of either the heritage language or the majority language. For example, Scenario D applies to families implementing a laissez-faire policy in which the children

typically speak the majority language. Scenario A, on the other hand, represents what may be called a success scenario where caregivers apply management promoting the use of heritage language and the child typically follows this management. Since the model was aimed to describe management and practice scenarios of families within ethnic communities, it needed to provide a way to show how often a scenario was implemented within a community. Accordingly, it had to integrate quantitative information. To achieve this, luminosity of colours was used, with darker colours for a scenario revealing a higher incidence of this scenario in the community<sup>iii</sup>. Unlike the explicit types of management and the implicit types that nevertheless intentionally favour the use of a particular language are what Curdt-Christiansen (2013) refers to as 'laissez-faire policies'. In her research on Singaporean Chinese families, Curdt-Christiansen (2013) ascribed the term *laissez-faire* attitude to mothers who did not interfere with their children's language choice while providing routine homework support, their children, as a result, predominantly spoke English, a potential hegemonic language in Singapore. To a certain extent, this can be generalized when linking it to the wider context, the majority of parents do not strategically plan a policy and in reality most families lack conscious language management because it is the families' embeddedness in "history and circumstances" (Caldas 2012, p.351) that predetermines language choice. That this unsystematic language use by caregivers may not lead the children to actively take up their minority language is supported by Curdt-Christiansen's (2016, p.11) observation, supporting arguments brought forth by Ó hIdearnáin (2013), that in her data "habitual linguistic practice [...] failed to build a 'language reproduction' line". These studies show that explicit management is not always the rule as some language practices may, instead, arise out of an "unmanaged" situation (Spolsky, 2004, p. 8). Overall, descriptions of the ways in which families adopt these different management types produce diverse pictures of FLPs which "lie along a continuum ranging from the highly planned and orchestrated, to the invisible, *laissez-faire* practices of most families. Somewhere in between are found the pragmatically inspired language strategies employed by families in sociolinguistic

contexts that confront them with real choices that have real consequences for their children". (Caldas 2012, p. 352).

## 5. Conclusion

Given the central role that family plays in preserving heritage languages, the current review sought to enrich research on of intergenerational transmission of minority languages in terms of family's language use, perceptions and management. When tracing the processes of child language development and minority language maintenance, research has shown that FLP vary in terms of the type, situation, and context of the families studied, also the strategies enacted in each family to promote the transmission of the minority language. Concerning Arabic language maintenance among immigrant groups, studies revealed strong level of commitment to Arabic maintenance and transmission across generations due to parent's positive attitudes which stem from their ethnic and cultural identity. We recommend future studies to further explore the relation between FLPs and their socio-emotional outcomes on children minority language acquisition. Considering how family relations and wellbeing in a language contact situation might, in turn, influence FLP and language use and proficiency.

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<sup>i</sup> The terms heritage language and minority language are used interchangeably to mean any migrant or endangered language used by a minority group.

<sup>ii</sup> OPOL: One Parent One Language strategy, for further details see Cassie Smith-Christmas (2016) Family Language Policy: Maintaining an Endangered Language in the Home

<sup>iii</sup>The model is fully explained in: Revis, M. (2017). Family language policy in refugee-background communities: Towards a model of language management and practices.

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