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# Linguistic Practices in Heritage Language Acquisition

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Edited by  
Ekaterina Protassova and Maria Yelenevskaya

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# **Linguistic Practices in Heritage Language Acquisition**



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Guest Editors

**Ekaterina Protassova**

**Maria Yelenevskaya**



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# About the Editors

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# Preface

This reprint opens to the reader a fascinating world of heritage language (HL) acquisition, exploring the various ways in which language is nurtured, sustained, and transmitted within familial, communal, and institutional settings. It seeks to illuminate the diverse strategies—both formal and informal—that parents, educators, and communities employ to foster linguistic and cultural continuity among younger generations. The subject matter encompasses the daily use of HLs in household interactions, the establishment of language policies within families, and the broader sociolinguistic dynamics that influence language retention and identity formation which is inseparably connected with language and culture.

The scope of this reprint is extensive, covering empirical studies, case analyses, and theoretical explorations that offer insights into the complex processes of HL acquisition. It aims to address the gaps in current literature by providing a detailed examination of specific scenarios and presenting concrete data to enhance our understanding of language practices in HL communities. By focusing on the sociolinguistic factors that shape language use and acquisition, this reprint contributes to the broader field of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

Due to the previously unseen mass migrations and realization of the value of linguistic diversity, the motivation behind this scientific endeavor is the pressing need to understand how HLs function in increasingly multilingual and multicultural contexts. As globalization and migration reshape linguistic landscapes, it becomes crucial to explore how communities manage these changes while preserving their linguistic legacy. The reprint seeks to offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and language professionals, providing recommendations for effective language policies and pedagogical approaches that support HL learners.

Addressed to academics, educators, language practitioners, and policymakers, this reprint serves as a valuable resource for anyone interested in the dynamics of HL acquisition and maintenance. It offers a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities associated with HL learning, providing evidence-based strategies and recommendations to foster linguistic diversity and cultural identity, dealing with constellations of languages like Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, Arabic, Circassian, English, Estonian, Finnish, German, Hebrew, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, Serbian, Tundra Nenets, and Udmurt.

By presenting a collection of studies from various geographic and cultural contexts, this reprint underscores the importance of tailored approaches to HL education and policy development. It invites readers to consider the role of community engagement, technologies, and interdisciplinary research in supporting HL acquisition. It encourages a collaborative effort to sustain linguistic diversity across generations. Through its exploration of linguistic practices, this reprint aims to deepen our understanding of the intricate relationship between language, identity, and culture in the context of heritage language acquisition.

**Ekaterina Protassova and Maria Yelenevskaya**

*Guest Editors*



## Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue Linguistic Practices in Heritage Language Acquisition

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Linguistic practices in heritage language (HL) acquisition refer to the ways in which language is used, managed, and passed on within families, communities, or institutions to help children, adolescents, and young adults learn and maintain it. These practices include a combination of both formal and informal strategies for language development and socialization. Parents and family members consistently using HL in everyday communication to help the next generations develop receptive and productive language skills, as they hear and practice the language regularly in natural contexts. Some parents would like their children to speak their heritage language but do not know how to achieve this goal and do not turn to professionals for help. On the other hand, there are parents establishing specific language policies within the family, such as using the HL at home, requiring children to speak it with relatives, or even setting rules for when to use the majority language (e.g., in school settings and public places). These decisions are part of the broader linguistic practices that guide language acquisition (Guardado, 2018; Wiley, 2007). Children are gradually introduced to language through social interactions while parents and caregivers model language use, correct errors, and encourage children to participate in conversations. These socialization practices reflect cultural values, traditions, and norms associated with the language (Caloi & Torregrossa, 2021). By participating in cultural events, celebrations, and traditions, minority language speakers, expats, and immigrants are exposed to the language in meaningful contexts, which aids in language retention and emotional connection to the community.

HL acquisition involves organized efforts, such as language classes, tutoring, or participation in cultural programs. These are more structured opportunities to learn the language in a formal setting, often focusing on reading, writing, and grammar (Bohnacker, 2022). Many multilingual persons engage in code-switching (alternating between languages within a conversation or sentence), code-mixing (blending elements of different languages), and mediation (explaining or communicating ideas, concepts, or information from one language to another in a way that makes sense to the audience), also known as translanguaging (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Otcu-Grillman & Borjian, 2022). While this may not always seem as an ideal approach, it is a common practice in multilingual environments and can influence both the HL and majority language (Blackledge & Creese, 2008; Pavlenko, 2007). The use of media in the HL—such as books, music, TV shows, and social media—plays a crucial role in exposing HL speakers to the language outside the home environment, providing additional input and context, and helping to reinforce vocabulary and grammar. For many HL learners, regular interaction with other speakers of the same language—such as encounters in community groups, family visits, or events—reinforces language skills, offers opportunities for authentic language use, and keeps a connection to their cultural identity (Johnsen, 2021).

This Special Issue is poised to address gaps in the existing literature on HL acquisition, as identified by Bauckus and Kresin (2018), Montrul (2015), Montrul and Polinsky (2021), and Polinsky (2018). By concentrating on specific situations, it offers a more detailed understanding of how HLs are acquired and maintained, presenting empirical studies and case analyses to provide concrete data and examples (cf. Brehmer & Mehlhorn, 2018; Mehlhorn & Brehmer, 2018). Furthermore, by examining the sociolinguistic dynamics influencing HL acquisition, it will deepen our comprehension of how social factors shape language practices within HL communities, complementing broader sociolinguistic research (cf. Kresin, 2017; Peterson & Sippola, 2022; Wiley et al., 2014).

Additionally, this Special Issue contributes to the study of linguistic variation and change by focusing on explicit features within HLs (Aalberse et al., 2019) and complementing broader studies of language change across communities. Through the exploration of effective pedagogical approaches, it provides practical insights for educators and language professionals working with HL learners, bridging the gap between research and classroom practice (Carreira & Kagan, 2018). By investigating the impact of policies on HLs, it offers recommendations for more inclusive and effective language policies (Kagan et al., 2021; Wiese et al., 2022), which support linguistic diversity. Moreover, by exploring the role of HLs in shaping cultural and linguistic identities, the contributors propose a deeper understanding of how language practices intersect with broader identity formation processes (Beaudrie & Loza, 2023). They also investigate the role of technology in HL acquisition, providing insights into how digital resources can be effectively used to support self-identification. This Special Issue sets out to explore the multifaceted aspects of individuals' acquisition, usage, and preservation of HLs across diverse sociolinguistic contexts, aiming to understand the complex interplay between linguistic practices and HL development in both formal and informal settings. Encompassing a broad array of topics within the realm of HL acquisition and usage, this Special Issue covers studies on sociolinguistic dynamics, language variation and change, language maintenance and shift, bilingualism and multilingualism, identity and HL use, and language policies and planning.

The study by Grasz presents the findings from an interview study on HL acquisition, transmission, and maintenance of German among German-speaking migrants in northern Finland. It focuses on the role of the German language in families, the influence of regional German varieties, and how children are socialized into the language through both informal and formal means. The thematic analysis reveals varied beliefs and practices regarding HL maintenance, with common challenges such as limited HL instruction and few opportunities for contact with other German-speaking families. Despite these challenges, many families make deliberate decisions to raise their children bilingually, with strong support for the use of German, a language considered prestigious in Finland. The study also highlights the importance of self-education and community support in bilingual upbringing, as well as the limited official support from schools and institutions in rural areas. Overall, the research emphasizes the need for tailored language education policies in peripheral regions, considering specific needs of multilingual families and broader implications for promoting linguistic and cultural identity.

The paper by Blacher and Brehmer examines how aspects of family language policies (FLPs) affect Russian language proficiency across three generations in Russian-speaking families in Germany, revealing a generational decline—with children showing the lowest levels and greatest variation—and highlighting the positive role of literacy practices and cultural ties in maintaining HL skills. This study confirms many findings from previous research on Russian-speaking families in Germany, particularly the strong loyalty these families show toward Russian as a HL and its central role in family conversations. Heritage speakers born in Germany commonly exhibit language shifts and dual language use, while

their proficiency in Russian varies widely. An important observation made by the authors of this study is the role of grandparents as essential contributors to maintaining Russian, emphasizing its emotional value and its importance for connecting with cultural roots rather than professional goals. Future research should examine the broader influence of grandparents in FLP and consider both explicit practices, like HL classes, and implicit practices, such as natural family interactions, ideally through longitudinal and in-situ methods for a more comprehensive understanding.

The article by Meng and Protassova describes the language use and integration experiences of two immigrant families from post-Soviet states in Germany, tracking four generations over nearly 30 years. Immigrants from post-Soviet states in Germany adapt to their new environment through complex language practices and professional integration efforts, with adults prioritizing job retraining while their children focus on immediate cultural assimilation. Over time, language blending occurs as Russian speakers incorporate German words, reflecting cultural immersion but raising concerns about preserving Russian. Russian–Ukrainian Germans from Kazakhstan and Russian–Ukrainian Jews from Russia approach integration differently. Despite early challenges, both groups have found stability in Germany, balancing Russian heritage with German integration and investing in their children’s future. While German has become the primary language outside the home and partly within, Russian remains among second and third generations, with younger generations achieving full integration and maintaining partial proficiency in Russian.

Edygarova emphasizes the personal and societal challenges of preserving the Udmurt language from an autoethnographic perspective, focusing on the emotional and sociolinguistic impacts of raising children in Udmurt while living abroad. The author systematizes the difficulties indigenous language speakers face, such as negative societal attitudes and linguistic trauma from mixed-language use, which can deter language transmission. Supportive personal networks and international Finno–Ugric connections play a vital role in fostering positive attitudes toward indigenous languages, counteracting historically ingrained prejudices. Writing in Udmurt, particularly through blogging, serves as both a therapeutic and empowering tool for reclaiming linguistic pride and developing new expressive styles. Overcoming a linguistic trauma involves sociolinguistic education and collective efforts to address the possible harm of monolingual ideologies, crucial for a decolonial shift in Russian society. Finally, family support is essential in sustaining indigenous language practices despite external challenges.

The paper by Berezovskaya examines the endangered status of Tundra Nenets, a Samoyedic minority language in northern Russia; the author conducted fieldwork from 2014 to 2016 in multiple Russian regions. Tundra Nenets is assessed under language endangerment criteria, considering how identity, ethnicity, and negative attitudes interplay with state politics. The personal narrative of NC, a Tundra Nenets woman, showcases the impact of discrimination on language identity, screening how stigmatization accelerates Tundra Nenets’ decline. This language, now scarcely present in schools or institutions, risks becoming a heritage language in its own territory. Although the situation is critical, language awareness, documentation, and revitalization efforts provide a possible path to preservation. Promoting pride in Tundra Nenets, fostering bilingualism, and advocating for supportive policies are essential, alongside addressing broader societal issues of respect for minorities.

Latvian families in diaspora, especially those in Finland, preserve their language and cultural identity through family strategies, community support, and institutional assistance, as stated in the article by Balodis. Focusing on a Latvian–Lithuanian family, he highlights the importance of home-language policies, such as setting rules for language use at home, and community activities like folk dancing and choirs, in maintaining HL skills. Visits to

grandparents and participation in cultural camps further reinforce these efforts, creating a living connection to Latvian culture. Local communities provide spaces for cultural exchange and language use, though accessibility is a challenge for those outside major cities. The Latvian Language Agency and other institutions play a vital role by offering resources, camps, and teacher training to aid in language preservation. The article convincingly shows that family commitment is crucial, serving as the foundation for sustaining the Latvian language and culture across generations. It is particularly effective when woven together with community and institutional support to create a resilient cultural tapestry.

The Circassian language, the HL of a small minority group in Israel, is endangered, prompting the development of targeted maintenance programs. In Israel, the Circassian Maintenance Program is crucial in primary schools, where literacy instruction in Circassian begins in the fifth grade. Schwartz and Shogen explored the role of a Circassian HL teacher, focusing on her agency in engaging students through her attitudes, beliefs, and classroom strategies, using data gathered from classroom observations and interviews. The teacher demonstrated cultural competence and adaptability and provided individualized support, encouraging student autonomy and integrating technology and reflective practices. The findings reveal that HL knowledge is a pillar of community identity, unity, and belonging, while translanguaging practices foster awareness of language structures across Circassian, Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The study underscores the need for schools to leverage students' multilingual backgrounds, establish supportive language policies, and offer professional development for teachers to create inclusive and effective HL education.

Karinen studied Finnish language and identity among Finnish Americans in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota, where Finnish is a postvernacular HL. Using ethnographic methods like participant observation, narrative interviews, and thematic analysis of material culture, this investigation reveals strong pride and attachment to Finnish identity, which shapes belonging and Finnish American identity. However, tensions around pronunciation, such as “sauna”, and Finnish last names reflect competing ideologies of authenticity and purity. Generational changes in terms like “Finlander” highlight evolving attitudes, with nationalistic and purist ideologies influencing how Finnishness is perceived. Despite concerns about the future of Finnish heritage, evidenced by the closure of key institutions, the study shows that younger generations are embracing Finnishness in new ways, suggesting an evolving cultural identity. Future research could expand to other Finnish communities for broader comparisons on how Finnish identity is maintained and adapted across generations.

Aksinovits and Verschik analyze the FLP among Estonian families in Finland, focusing on beliefs surrounding the maintenance of Estonian and the role of Estonian home-language classes offered by municipalities. Using Spolsky's three-component model of FLP, their analysis explores language beliefs, management, and practices, highlighting caregivers' emphasis on the importance of Estonian language proficiency for their children's ethno-linguistic identity. However, a gap is found between these beliefs and actual behavior, as many children do not attend home-language classes due to logistical challenges and dissatisfaction with teaching methods. The study reveals that while caregivers value maintaining Estonian, they struggle to implement this through formal education, with some relying on home activities like reading and watching Estonian-language media. Additionally, the study uncovers a lack of communication between home and school, and challenges observed in home-language class structure and resources, which contribute to the low participation in these classes. The research suggests that more comprehensive support, improved communication, and appropriate teaching materials are needed to align caregivers' beliefs with effective language management practices.

A special case of the heritage Hebrew in Nordic countries is represented by Bloch, who focused on the perspectives of Hebrew-speaking immigrant parents in Finland. She investigated FLPs and how Hebrew is used within multilingual families, looking at factors influencing parental decisions on Hebrew language transmission. Using a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach and FLP analysis, the research reveals a shift away from Hebrew towards Finnish, with many children showing low proficiency in oral and written Hebrew. Access to Hebrew education was identified as a major challenge, with only a small percentage of children receiving external Hebrew instruction. The survey also uncovered a connection between parents’ birthplace and language choices, with repatriated parents transmitting less Hebrew to their children. The findings highlight the complexities of maintaining heritage Hebrew in Finland, offering insights that could inform language policies and practices for multilingual families worldwide.

Chali and Parapatics turn toward the language policy and practices at an Ethiopian higher education institution, focusing on multilingualism. Their article demonstrates a significant gap between the official language policy, which designates English as the primary medium of instruction, and the multilingual reality in classrooms, where languages such as Afaan Oromoo and Amharic are commonly used. The research reveals that the Ethiopian constitution lacks clear provisions for multilingualism in higher education, suggesting a need for policy adjustments to better accommodate linguistic diversity. Both instructors and students frequently use local languages alongside English in daily interactions, emphasizing the importance of understanding these dynamics. The study argues that Ethiopia’s current monolingual approach to education does not address the complexities of its linguistic landscape and calls for a more adaptive language policy. Overall, the research advocates for a flexible language policy in Ethiopian higher education institutions that acknowledges and integrates the country’s rich multilingualism.

In recent years, Serbian heritage speakers have shown a growing interest in learning Serbian through online platforms, which provide flexibility and individualized lessons tailored to their needs. However, Serbian heritage learners are often taught using the same curricula designed for native speakers, despite having distinct needs and language profiles that would benefit from specialized materials and approaches, including instruction based on the CEFR levels and adapted content focused on enhancing communication skills. To improve Serbian language education for HL learners, Krstić and Stanković propose adjustments to the current curriculum, integrating three instructional models: the communicative model, form-focused instruction, and the integrative model. These models leverage heritage learners’ naturalistic acquisition of Serbian, enhancing their communicative strengths while building literacy and grammatical precision through culturally enriched teaching materials.

To promote the development of HLs in multilingual environments, authorities and families can take several steps. First, they should encourage the consistent use of the HL in various contexts. Second, they can provide a rich language environment by fostering such activities as reading, listening to stories, and engaging with the language through play and creative activities. Third, they may seek out resources and support, such as language classes, exchange groups, or cultural events, to aid language development. Lastly, they could create a positive and supportive learning environment where minority speakers feel encouraged to explore and use the language.

The current research on HL acquisition offers valuable insights into linguistic practices and strategies employed by various communities to maintain and transmit their languages across generations. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of research often focuses on specific HL communities, such as German-speaking migrants in Finland or Russian-speaking families in Germany. This specificity may limit

the generalizability of findings to other HL groups or geographic regions, potentially overlooking diverse experiences and challenges faced by different communities.

Methodological constraints also present limitations, as many studies rely heavily on qualitative methods like interviews and thematic analysis. While these approaches provide in-depth insights, they may not capture broader trends or statistically significant data that could enhance the understanding of HL acquisition. Additionally, limited access to comprehensive language resources and institutional support, particularly in rural or peripheral areas, can hinder effective HL maintenance and transmission, presenting a significant barrier for families seeking to preserve their linguistic heritage.

Another limitation lies in the gap between family language policies and institutional support, leading to challenges in implementing effective language management practices. The complex interplay of cultural identity, societal attitudes, and linguistic practices varies widely across different contexts, making it difficult to establish universal strategies for HL acquisition. Furthermore, while technology offers potential benefits for HL acquisition, its effective integration into language learning practices is not thoroughly explored or standardized, leaving room for improvement in leveraging digital resources.

Looking ahead, future research perspectives offer promising avenues to address these limitations and expand the understanding of HL acquisition. Comparative studies across different HL communities and regions could identify common challenges and effective strategies for language maintenance, providing a broader perspective on the issue. Conducting longitudinal research could yield insights into the long-term effects of family language policies and community support on HL proficiency across generations, offering valuable data on language transmission dynamics.

Incorporating quantitative analyses alongside qualitative approaches could enhance the robustness of findings and allow for broader generalizations, providing a more comprehensive understanding of HL acquisition. Research focused on policy development could lead to the creation and testing of inclusive language policies that address the needs of multilingual families and promote HL preservation in diverse settings. Exploring technological innovations, such as digital resources and online platforms, could lead to the development of innovative educational tools and methods tailored to heritage learners.

Interdisciplinary approaches integrating insights from sociolinguistics, education, and cultural studies could provide a holistic understanding of HL acquisition and its impact on identity formation, offering a multifaceted perspective on language practices. Investigating the role of community engagement and grassroots movements in supporting HL education and cultural identity could offer valuable models for other minority language groups, highlighting the importance of collective efforts in language preservation. Overall, these future research perspectives aim to deepen the understanding of HL acquisition and contribute to the development of effective strategies for sustaining linguistic diversity and cultural identity across generations.

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## Article

# Inter-Generational Language Socialization Practices of German-Speaking Migrants in the North of Finland

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**Abstract:** This paper presents findings from an interview study of practices of home language socialization and maintenance of German among German-speaking migrants in northern Finland. The focus of the analysis was on the importance of the minority language German in families, the role of the regional varieties of German, different ways of socializing children with German, and informal and formal means of German language development and instruction reported by nine German-speaking parents and two bilingual teenagers in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analyses of the data showed that there are different beliefs and practices about home language acquisition and maintenance and language socialization in the family, but also similar challenges. The place of residence did indeed play an important role, as home language instruction was rarely offered, and contact with other German-speaking or multilingual families was often very limited. Some children therefore attend German-as-a-foreign-language classes at school, which was perceived as a challenge by some of the interviewees. Nevertheless, inclusive solutions could help multilingual children, even in rural regions, maintain and develop their home language.

**Keywords:** German speakers in Finland; home language acquisition; inter-generational language socialization; language biographies; rural areas

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents findings from a study of intergenerational language socialization and the role of the home language among German-speaking migrants and their families in Northern Finland. The study is part of the research project *German-speakers in northern Finland. Language identities, multilingual practices and language maintenance*, which analyzes language biographies of migrants from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland living in northern Finland. The focus is on the regions of North Ostrobothnia, Lapland, and Kainuu, which are among the least densely populated parts of Finland.<sup>1</sup> One important question of the project is how life in peripheral regions affects language identity as well as language maintenance, learning, and use. Multilingualism and migration have often been studied primarily in urban contexts, but as Aronin et al. (2013, pp. 3–4) note in relation to what they call ‘current multilingualism’, these are nowadays inherent and prominent features of postmodern society as a whole and of many individual social communities of varying sizes. Therefore, examining areas outside of metropolitan centers can provide valuable insights into migration and integration into local communities (cf. Bijvoet & Östman, 2023) and show how complex and multi-layered multilingualism and migration can be, even in regions that are not necessarily associated with these issues (Maar, 2024, p. 14).

Various topics related to intergenerational language socialization and the role of German as a minority language in Finland play a significant role in the interviews collected during the project, particularly with participants who have children. The participants

describe different facets of family language policy (FLP) at the micro level between family members (cf. Liddicoat, 2020). Thematic analyses of the data reveal diverse beliefs and practices regarding home language socialization and maintenance within the families. In addition, the interviews also refer to the macro and meso levels of language policy, i.e., to ‘wider political, social, educational and economic forces’ (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, p. 2), and describe which resources are or are not available in their environment to support the FLP of multilingual families. Place of residence indeed plays a critical role, particularly in relation to language use outside of the family and access to formal instruction in German.

The Finnish constitution (*Suomen perustuslaki* 731/1999, 1999, 17§) grants everyone living in Finland the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Based on this law, children ‘whose mother tongue or one of their family’s languages is a language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi may participate in the instruction in his or her mother tongue complementing basic education’ (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 498). However, in practice, this right is not always implemented, as a minimum number of students is generally required to organize instruction in these minority languages, which is rarely met in smaller municipalities. While in Helsinki and other large cities children can attend German kindergartens and schools, or weekly lessons in German-as-mother-tongue are offered, in rural or peripheral areas the responsibility for the children’s language development largely falls on the parents’ linguistic choices, and German is almost exclusively learned at home (cf. also De Houwer, 2017). Consequently, some children attend German-as-a-foreign-language classes at school (if available), which some interviewees perceive as a challenge. Another key factor in home language acquisition and maintenance is part of transnational FLP, e.g., organizing extended periods in German-speaking countries.

This study focused on the following research questions: What role does the minority language German play in the families, and what practices of language socialization can be found in the families, according to the participants? What roles do linguistic varieties of German play in the language practices of the families? What informal and formal means of German language education and instruction are implemented by the families? In what way does the family’s place of residence influence language socialization and education in the minority language German?

The following section will provide a short overview of the socio-cultural background of German speakers in Finland and the institutional preconditions concerning home language acquisition. This will be followed by a brief introduction to the materials and methods used for data collection and analysis, and finally the results of the study will be presented, addressing the experiences and beliefs of the participants.

## 2. Background of the Study

According to the *StatFin database* (Statistics Finland, n.d.), in 2023, a total of 7795 people in Finland reported German as their first language in the population register. The actual number is likely to be higher if bilingual individuals are considered, but since they are not centrally registered, there are no exact figures available. Unlike in earlier periods, German speakers are no longer among the largest foreign-language groups in Finland. In 1990, they were the third-largest foreign-language group (a total of 2427 people), after Russian and English speakers (Statistics Finland, n.d.). Although the number of German speakers has more than tripled since then, the number of people in other language groups has grown more rapidly over the same period. German now ranks behind languages such as Estonian, Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Persian/Farsi, Chinese, Albanian, Vietnamese, Thai, Turkish, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Tagalog.

Although German speakers are no longer among the largest linguistic minorities in Finland, they still constitute a significant language group, not least from a historical

perspective, as they belong to one of the oldest language minorities in Finland and share several centuries of close cultural, economic, military, and private contacts (cf. e.g., Hentilä & Hentilä, 2016; Hietala, 2017; Junila, 2000, 2006; Kolehmainen, 2022; Parry, 2022; Schweitzer, 1993; Tandefeldt, 2002; Tertti, 1983; Ziemke, 1963). According to Breier (2017), Germans in Finland, similar to Fortier's (2000) studies on European migrants in the UK and Ruokonen-Engler's (2012) research on Finns in Germany, represent an 'invisible minority'. This means that German migrants generally integrate smoothly into Finnish society, both culturally and because of their appearance. Their background is not typically stigmatized, but rather is characterized by predominantly positive relationships (Breier, 2017). German migrants, or migrants from German-speaking countries, are less affected by the exclusion mechanisms and adverse social power dynamics that are often associated with stigmatization (cf. Busch, 2017), which in turn influences language policy in the family, i.e., parental language attitudes and language choices (De Houwer, 2017).

In northern Finland, i.e., in the regions North Ostrobothnia, Lapland, and Kainuu, the situation is as follows. In 2023, a total of 643 people living in these regions reported German as their first language. Most of them live in North Ostrobothnia (302 people), followed by Lapland (298 people) and Kainuu (43 people). Notably, in Lapland, the German-speaking population is not concentrated solely in the administrative and educational center of Rovaniemi; there is also a relatively large number of German speakers in the small, tourism-driven municipalities of Inari, Muonio, and Kittilä. In contrast, in North Ostrobothnia and Kainuu, the number of German speakers living outside the administrative and educational centers of Oulu and Kajaani is very low and is mostly not captured statistically. In 2023, there were 1117 children and adolescents (aged 0 to 19) throughout Finland who were registered with German as their first language. Of these, just under 100 live in Northern Finland: 45 in North Ostrobothnia, 39 in Lapland, and 7 in Kainuu. Again, it is likely that there is a larger number of bilingual children whose first language is registered as Finnish.

As previously mentioned, the Finnish constitution guarantees people living in Finland the right to maintain their own language and culture. This is also reflected in the curriculum for Finnish public schools, where it is stated that municipalities should strive to offer instruction in the children's 'own mother tongue' (here referred to with "home-language"), although they are not obligated to do so (for an overview of the history and status quo of own-mother-tongue teaching in Finland, see Yli-Jokipii, 2024, pp. 31–34). Instruction should also be available to children whose first language is Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi, to help them maintain language skills acquired, for example, during a stay abroad. Municipalities can apply for state financial support for two hours of lessons per week. The number of groups organized per language varies greatly between municipalities, and there are usually no separate groups for different age groups (Yli-Jokipii, 2024, p. 31). According to Tainio (2019), regional inequalities, also observed in other parts of education, are particularly significant when it comes to home language instruction. For example, in southern Finland, instruction was offered in 46 languages in 2017; in western, central, and southwestern Finland in 30 languages; but in eastern Finland, Lapland, and the Åland Islands in fewer than 10 languages (Tainio, 2019). There are significant differences in the minimum number of participants required to offer instruction in home languages. In some municipalities, it is four students, in others, the requirement is eight or ten students (cf. Ylä-Tuuhonen, 2023). In addition to the challenge of very different accessibility to home language instruction depending on the place of residence, research shows further challenges associated with this instruction. There is a shortage of qualified teachers, as well as limited opportunities to obtain such qualifications; the groups are very heterogeneous; the instruction usually takes place in various locations and after regular school hours; and there is a lack of suitable teaching materials (cf. Bärlund, 2020; Linderoos, 2016; Piippo, 2016; Tainio, 2019; Yli-Jokipii

et al., 2020). Despite the challenges of organizing and conducting the instruction, it is seen as an important tool to strengthen the competence in the home language and the cultural identity of multilingual children (cf. Linderoos, 2016; Piippo, 2016; Yli-Jokipii et al., 2020).

In 2022, 357 students in the spring and 360 students in the fall participated in state-supported German-as-a-mother-tongue instruction (Opetushallitus, n.d.). This makes German the twelfth largest group. There is no comprehensive overview of which municipalities offer home language instruction in which languages, but an internet search for German language instruction shows that it is primarily found in larger cities and regional centers. As a result, German-speaking families or multilingual families with German in remote regions have very limited access to home language instruction for their children and must find alternative ways to pass on and maintain the German language. This situation is also reflected in the interviews with German-speaking parents in northern Finland.

### 3. Material and Methods

The material for this study consists of nine audio- and video-recorded interviews, carried out between 2021 and 2024. Eight of the interviews come from the corpus collected as part of the project *German-speakers in northern Finland*, which currently includes 20 interviews with German-speaking migrants living in the north of Finland. The participants who took part in the interviews as part of the project were found with the help of friendship associations of German-speaking countries operating in Northern Finland and through social media groups of German-speaking migrants in Finland. The participants were informed about the objectives of the project, data protection, and the use of the collected data in a data protection declaration. For this article, all interviews with participants who have children were selected from the corpus. Additionally, one interview was conducted with two bilingual siblings born in Finland and their German parent. The individual interviews lasted between 27 min and 2 hours, with the recordings totaling 11 hours. The interviews were conducted in German, and the quotes presented here were translated by the author. The families of eight of the nine participants consist of one German-speaking parent and one Finnish-speaking parent or new partner of the German-speaking parent. Only the father of Claudia's children is also German-speaking. Table 1 below provides an overview of the adult participants, including their pseudonyms, approximate ages, length of stay in Finland, and country of origin. The two teenagers (aged between 14 and 18 at the time of the interview) were born in Finland, and they are referred to by the pseudonyms Max and Ben. Since the community focused on in this study is relatively small, the mention of specific places of residence or other details, such as exact age or occupation, has been avoided to reduce the possibility of identification.

**Table 1.** Overview of the participants in this study.

| Pseudonym | Age         | Length of Stay in Finland | Country of Origin |
|-----------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Peter     | 60–70 years | 45–50 years               | Germany           |
| Patrick   | 30–40 years | 10–15 years               | Austria           |
| Stefanie  | 40–50 years | 15–20 years               | Austria           |
| Claudia   | 50–60 years | 25–30 years               | Germany           |
| Michael   | 50–60 years | 25–30 years               | Germany           |
| Monika    | 60–70 years | 10–15 years               | Germany           |
| Marianne  | 60–70 years | 35–40 years               | Switzerland       |
| Julia     | 40–50 years | 25–30 years               | Germany           |
| Thomas    | 40–50 years | 20–25 years               | Germany           |

As can be seen from the table, the respondents represent a heterogeneous cross-section of migrants from German-speaking countries in Northern Finland. Due to the small size of the community and its heterogeneity in terms of age, country of origin, timing of migration to Finland, professional background, and family status, it was neither possible nor intended to assemble a representative sample of the community in this study. Instead, this research aimed to capture individual biographies that may exhibit various pathways of migration, which may still reveal certain similarities in some respects.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics that align with the objectives of the *German-speakers in northern Finland* project. In addition to the theme of this article, the interviews included questions about the migration history, linguistic repertoire, and language practices of the interviewees, their linguistic identity, the role of the first language German and the lingua franca English, experiences of language loss, and acquisition of Finnish (cf. also Grasz, 2023a, 2023b).

The interview as a data collection instrument is widely used in German language biography research and is frequently employed in relation to topics such as language acquisition, language practices, and identity construction in multilingual environments (cf. Busch, 2016; Franceschini, 2002; Haas, 2019). It was chosen because it is particularly suited to the project's goal of gaining insights into the individual language biographies of the participants, as well as their experiences and beliefs about their linguistic practices in various areas of their lives. The research approach for analyzing the interviews was qualitative and was based on reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Thematic analysis was chosen because it is flexible and enables a comprehensive description of the data and a theory-based interpretation of the explicit and implicit patterns of meaning within the data. The analysis was carried out according to the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). Examples from the data are used to illustrate the interpretations.

## 4. Results

The topics of intergenerational language socialization, factors influencing FLP, and learning the minority language German played a significant role in the interviews with participants who have children. Apart from one participant who had a German-speaking partner, all participants in this study have Finnish spouses. Although all participants believe that bilingualism is desirable and that it is important for their children to learn the minority language German, differences were evident in how these beliefs are implemented in daily family life and how, for example, they are supported by education outside the family.

The following section will present and discuss topics that emerged as particularly important in the interviews. First, I will address some parts of FLP, with examples of different language practices and strategies in the families and the role that German plays in the upbringing of the children. Afterward, I will address a topic of linguistic practices that becomes relevant in relation to pluricentric languages, such as German, in the diaspora: namely, the question of which variety of the language is passed on to the children in the family. Do the parents choose standard German, or do they pass on their own standard variant, such as Austrian or Swiss German, or even a dialect? In the third part of the presentation of the results, I will focus on the concrete practices of passing on the German language within the family and the role that formal education in school or instruction in the home language organized by the municipality plays in this process.

#### 4.1. Language Practices and Strategies in the Participants' Families

The role that the first language plays, particularly in the lives of first-generation migrants, is influenced by various factors. In addition to the age at the time of migration, the length of stay in the different language environment, the proficiency in the surrounding language, the size and concentration of the language community, and the prestige of the first language, the family situation also plays a significant role (see, e.g., Clyne, 2003; Riehl, 2004; Spolsky, 2021). Often, the use of the first language is limited to the private domain, i.e., communication with the family, which strongly depends on whether the partner also speaks the language and whether there are children in the family (Spolsky, 2021). Previous studies have shown that, among Germans or German-speaking migrants in Finland, the German language also has a strong emotional value and plays an important role in private communication (see Breier, 2017, 2020; Grasz, 2023b). A significant event in the lives of migrants in this context is the birth of the first child, which often triggers a process of personal repositioning in one's identity (cf. Breier, 2017). According to Breier (2020), the German language, which often shifted to the background earlier, becomes more important again, as reflected in the decision to pass it on to their children.

Although most participants in the project *German-speakers in northern Finland* consider the first language and its preservation to be important, this study also reveals a certain problematization of 'Germanness', which often manifests among German migrants and can be traced back to the fundamental shift in German national identity after World War II and the era of National Socialism (see Breier, 2017; Grasz, 2023b). Nevertheless, all participants in the interviews expressed their intention to pass on German to their children and considered it important that their children become proficient in the language. The reasons for this are pragmatic, emotional, and ideological. Key factors influencing the decision include their personal emotional connection to the first language, viewing the language as an important part of their identity that they wish to pass on to the next generation, enabling their children to communicate with relatives in German-speaking countries, and the belief that strong proficiency in the German language will provide better future opportunities for their children. For example, in the interview, Michael stated that he could not imagine speaking Finnish with his children even though he speaks the language very well and uses it in other domains.

- (1) Es war mir ganz klar wichtig, dass die Deutsch lernen, ich wollte nicht mit meinen eigenen Kindern eine Fremdsprache sprechen. Ich habe von Anfang an die Perspektive gehabt, dass es eine Bereicherung ist, zweisprachig zu sein, nicht nur weil es zwei Sprachen sind, sondern weil es eben wirklich zwei Weltbilder, zwei Blickwinkel sind. (It was absolutely important to me that they learn German. I didn't want to speak a foreign language with my own children. From the very beginning, I had the perspective that being bilingual is an enrichment, not just because it involves two languages, but because it truly represents two worldviews, two perspectives.)

With regard to beliefs about passing on the home language German to their children, changing societal attitudes toward bilingualism also became evident. For example, Marianne recounted that, in the 1970s and 1980s, she communicated with her children in German against the wishes of the children's father. Similarly, in Peter's case, whose first three children grew up during the same time, the family language quickly shifted from German to Finnish, and less emphasis was placed on ensuring that the children learned German. However, for his children born in the 1990s and 2000s, he made a very conscious decision together with his second wife to raise them bilingually (see example 2).

- (2) Das [der Wechsel der Familiensprache] hat sich dann auch ausgewirkt auf die Erziehung der Kinder. [...] Die wuchsen viele Jahre mit sehr wenig deutschem Hintergrund auf. [...] Das hat sich dann in der zweiten Beziehung mit den Kindern total geändert, denn in dieser zweiten Familie wurden immer beide Sprachen gesprochen, Deutsch und Finnisch, sodass die zweisprachige Erziehung der Kinder viel systematischer angegangen werden konnte. (It [the shift in the family language] also impacted the upbringing of the children. [...] For many years, they grew up with very little German background. [...] This changed completely with the children in the second relationship because, in this second family, both languages, German and Finnish, were always spoken, allowing the bilingual upbringing of the children to be approached in a much more systematic way.)

Similar to Peter, it was particularly evident among the younger participants that they and their partners carefully considered how to raise their children bilingually at the time of their children's birth. They sought information from the relevant literature or from other bilingual families to learn how to do this most effectively. Most families chose the 'one parent, one language (OPOL) strategy' (see, e.g., Müller et al., 2006). In this approach, the German-speaking parent uses only, or at least primarily, German with the children, while the Finnish-speaking parent uses Finnish.

Even when the desire to pass on their first language to their children is present, some participants find it challenging to create enough opportunities to use German due to the family's language constellation. If the partner does not speak German, the German language often takes a back seat, with the common language between the parents being the decisive factor. For Thomas and Patrick, this common language is English. In this situation, the OPOL strategy is implemented relatively smoothly. The fathers speak German with their children, and the mothers speak Finnish. In most other families, Finnish is the common language between the parents. In these cases, Finnish often dominates communication with the children, as is the case with Monika, Stefanie, and Julia. Monika's example is particularly interesting in this context, as her children were born in Germany (see also Grasz, 2023b) and moved to Finland without their father. Although they quickly learned Finnish in Finland, they prefer to communicate with their mother in German. Monika finds this problematic at times because her Finnish husband does not speak German and is thus excluded from the conversation. This highlights a possible conflict between different linguistic identities within a multilingual family. For Monika, using the German language is not as important, and she would prefer Finnish, which is a shared resource for all family members. However, it is different for her children, as she explains: 'Die wollen mich als deutsche Mama. (They want me to be their German mom.)'

The interviews also make it clear that linguistic practices and language choice within the family can change over time. The OPOL strategy is usually implemented relatively consistently during the early childhood phase. Later, often in connection with the children entering kindergarten or school, or with the birth of siblings, the surrounding language—in this case, Finnish—becomes more dominant and turns into the family language, which the German-speaking parent also begins to use with the children (cf. also De Houwer, 2017). Julia describes a similar process when she talks about language practices with her children:

- (3) Ich habe oft zu viel Finnisch gesprochen. Ich habe jetzt gemerkt, dass wir uns wieder mehr auf Deutsch unterhalten. Aber ich hatte das Problem, wenn ich Deutsch geredet habe und die haben dann auf Finnisch geantwortet, dann habe ich automatisch auf Finnisch gewechselt und habe das gar nicht gemerkt, weil ich habe nur darauf geachtet, was wir sagen. (I often spoke too much Finnish. I've now noticed that we're speaking more German again. But I had the problem that when I spoke German and

they responded in Finnish, I automatically switched to Finnish without even realizing it, because I was only focused on what we were saying.)

Later, Julia noticed that, as the children reached their teenage years, they began to show increased interest in German and started using it again as a means of communication with their mother.

#### *4.2. German Is Not Just German. The Choice of Language Variety in Migration*

German is a pluricentric language with three major centers—Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—where it serves as the only or one of the national languages. Additionally, German is a national language in Liechtenstein (which shares its language standard with Switzerland) and Luxembourg, a significant regional language in South Tyrol/Italy and Belgium, and a minority language in several other countries. Spatial linguistic variability, as encountered in the case of German, also impacts the use of the language in migration contexts. When the first language of one or both parents is used with the child, the question arises as to which variety of that language is being used. Even within German-speaking areas themselves, there is a pronounced multidimensional language continuum (Löffler, 2016), with significant differences in the distribution of the use of varieties, such as dialects, regional colloquial languages, or national standard varieties. The use of varieties depends, among other factors, on the region within the language area, the place of residence (city or countryside), the age of the speakers or life stages, the contexts in which the language is used, and the educational background. In the use of dialects, especially in public and semi-public contexts, a north–middle–south gradient is evident in the German-speaking area, which is also reflected in the interview data. While dialect speech is predominantly found in private settings in northern Germany and often has a low prestige function in some regions, the use of dialects and regional colloquial languages in southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is not limited to the private domain. Particularly in Switzerland, dialect use extends to all domains of language use. In Austria and southern Germany, on the other hand, one encounters a multi-tiered polyglossia without sharp boundaries among dialect, regional colloquial language, and standard language (for more on the use of regional varieties in the German-speaking area, see Dürscheid & Schneider, 2019; Löffler, 2016; Schmidt & Herrgen, 2011).

Central to the present study is the fact that dialect use is often associated with stages of language acquisition (cf. Löffler, 2016). Dialects frequently play an important role during the primary language acquisition period before children enter kindergarten or school. For this reason, the participants in the interviews were asked whether they speak standard German or a variety of it with their children. Out of the nine adult participants, five—slightly more than half—use a dialect or dialectally influenced colloquial language with their children. This applied to participants from Austria, Switzerland, southern Germany, and central Germany and corresponded to findings on the use of varieties in German-speaking regions. One participant from northern Germany also reported using this linguistic variant (northern German colloquial language but not an actual dialect) with his children. Participants who do not use a dialect with their children are those who themselves grew up without a dialect. This seems to be linked not only to the region of origin (northern or central Germany) but also to the negative attitudes towards dialects that were widespread in Germany during their own childhood and adolescence.

Regarding the choice to speak dialect or dialectally influenced colloquial language with their children in Finland, it became evident that this was a conscious decision by the participants, reflecting sometimes contradictory beliefs and uncertainties. Internal factors, such as emotional connectedness, and external factors, such as socio-economic considerations, had a strong impact on the linguistic choices of the parents (see also

Ramonienè & Ramonaitè, 2024). The main reason cited for choosing their own dialect or a dialectally influenced colloquial language was the emotional connection to this linguistic form. Dialect is often referred to as a language of immediacy that reduces distance and strengthens group bonds internally (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher, 2012; Kehrein & Fischer, 2016). This sentiment was echoed in the interviews. For instance, Michael said that it was a clear decision for him to use his colloquial language because ‘ich wollte so natürlich wie möglich mit den Kindern sprechen, nicht gestelzt daherkommen (I wanted to speak as naturally as possible with the children, without sounding stilted)’. He would have found the use of standard German to be ‘anstrengend (exhausting)’ and compared it to speaking a foreign language with his children—something he definitely did not want to do.

For Marianne from Switzerland, it was never a question that she would only speak Swiss German with her children, just as she would have done in Switzerland. Similarly, for Peter, who originally lived in a strongly dialectal region in southern Germany before moving to Finland, it was a clear decision to use his dialect with his children, saying that he wanted to speak ‘mehr oder weniger wie mir der Schnabel gewachsen ist (more or less as naturally as possible, like I always have)’. Peter believes that his children perceive the use of dialect or regional colloquial language as positive. He reported that, through this, the children feel a stronger connection to a particular region or community in their parents’ home country. Additionally, their dialectally influenced language often leads to them being perceived as ‘authentic speakers’ of German, thereby being more strongly recognized as part of a community in German-speaking countries.

Only one participant, Stefanie from Austria, consciously decided against speaking dialect with her children, even though she herself uses dialect in communication with her family in Austria and mostly with other German-speaking people. She explains her reasoning as follows:

- (4) Wenn ich jetzt mit meinen Kindern—zu selten—Deutsch rede, dann rede ich auch nicht [Dialekt], sondern dann rede ich oder probiere zumindest eher Hochdeutsch zu reden und nicht [Dialekt], damit sie auch zumindest irgendwas lernen, wo sie sich auch mit jemand anderen unterhalten können. (When I now speak German with my children—too rarely—I don’t speak [dialect], but rather speak more standard German, or at least try, so that they learn something that will allow them to communicate with others.)

This example is interesting because Stefanie views German less as a language of immediacy with strong emotional connotations and more from a socio-economic point of view as a form of capital from which her children might benefit in the future. In this regard, she perceives her dialect as inappropriate because it lacks broader regional reach. Therefore, she sees it as a linguistic barrier that might make it difficult for her children to be understood by others.

#### 4.3. Language Socialization Practices in the Families and Formal Instruction in German

As has already become evident, it is important for all participants involved in this study to pass the German language on to their children. This was also reflected in the concrete linguistic practices in the families reported by the participants. Particularly during early childhood, all German-speaking parents exclusively used their first language, German, with their children, and most bilingual families continued to follow the OPOL strategy. Common to all accounts was that the participants read German-language books to their children and consciously familiarized them with songs or videos in German. The internet now makes access to German-language materials easy. However, this was not necessarily the case for the older participants, and children’s books often had to be obtained via long postal routes or brought back from trips to German-speaking countries, which usually only

occurred once a year. In contrast to Helsinki, where there are or were German libraries, or where public libraries offer a broader selection of foreign-language children's literature, in rural or more peripheral areas, it is solely up to the parents to procure this material.

The exposure of the participants' children to the German language was primarily limited to communication with the German-speaking parent and relatives in German-speaking countries. On one hand, this contact has also been facilitated in the past 10 years by various online communication tools. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly restricted in-person meetings. The small number of German-speaking migrants in northern Finland, particularly in small communities, also makes it nearly impossible to organize contact with other children of the same age who speak German. In kindergartens or schools, the children of these families generally have no contact with other German-speaking peers in their own age. The situation is somewhat better in larger cities. For example, teenagers Max and Ben mention in the interview that they have had two bilingual classmates of the same age for some time now. They perceive this as extremely positive, as it is the first time in their lives that they can use German privately with friends in Finland. This positive experience is also reflected in the fact that they sometimes prefer to speak German with these friends rather than their stronger language, Finnish. German has become a 'secret language' for them, which they occasionally use so that their other classmates do not understand them. This indicates the important role that peers with the same home language play in strengthening the linguistic identity in that language among bilingual children. Social contact in the minority language with peers enables them to overcome the restriction of the language to the social role of the child (cf. Maar, 2024, p. 43).

Some of the participants, such as Marianne or Michael, attempted to organize regular meetings with other parents of bilingual children, where the children could meet peers to play with. In Marianne's case, this worked very well. Several Swiss German families met regularly, allowing the children to use Swiss German. In this instance, the fact that there were so few Swiss German-speaking families in the area seemed to contribute to these contacts being considered so important that even longer travel distances were accepted for these meetings. In the case of the German parents, such as Michael, these gatherings were seen more as a practical arrangement, from which no lasting relationships emerged.

Only in two larger cities in northern Finland it is possible to attend home language classes in German. Parents make use of this opportunity to varying degrees. In Peter's case, this was considered an important part of the bilingual education of his younger children, and he was actively involved in organizing and promoting this option in his community. For his older children, this option was not yet available. Julia's and Thomas' children also attend or have attended these classes and viewed it as a crucial component of their bilingual upbringing. Although, according to the parents, the children occasionally find it tiring to attend German classes in the late afternoon after regular school hours, the interviewed teenagers Max and Ben noted that, apart from the fact that at certain stages they attended classes mainly at the request of their parents, today they are very satisfied and motivated to participate in the classes. They both started lessons when they were in the third grade and at the time of the interview had been attending lessons for 5 to 7 years. They attend the same group, as several age groups are taught together. In the home language classes, they acquire skills that they would not learn at home by communicating only with their father. Ben mentioned in this context: 'Grammatik lerne ich eigentlich nur da. (I actually learn grammar only there.)' They see the German lessons as an important opportunity to maintain and develop the German language. Thomas, the father, expressed a similar sentiment, noting 'ass da Sachen gelernt werden, die ich von mir aus so nicht vermitteln könnte (that they learn things there that I wouldn't be able to teach them myself)' and that go beyond 'normalen Sprachgebrauch (normal language use)'.

Additionally, he emphasized the importance of ‘noch jemand anders zu haben, der mit ihnen Deutsch spricht (having someone else who speaks German with them)’ during the lessons. Moreover, both the father and the sons highlighted those extracurricular activities, such as theater performances or Christmas celebrations, are very beneficial. In addition, the German classes do not just involve language lessons but also, for example, geography lessons in German, which is seen as very positive.

The findings of this study align with those of previous studies (e.g., Linderoos, 2016), showing that not all parents are aware of the opportunity to participate in home language instruction. For example, Patrick and Stefanie, whose children are not yet of school age, were unaware that such classes exist in their area. Additionally, parents whose children do attend or have attended home language classes were not informed about this option by the school but learned about it through family friends or the German-Finnish Association.

For families living in small communities where no home language classes are available and where travel to the nearest larger city is too far, the question arises whether German-as-a-foreign-language classes, which are offered at least in some communities in comprehensive schools, could be an option for their children to receive formal instruction in the German language. Monika’s children attended these classes but dropped out after a short time because the expectations and demands of the class did not match. Particularly in comprehensive schools, it seems challenging for the teacher to meet the needs of both bilingual children and Finnish-speaking students who are just beginning to learn German in a way that satisfies both groups. Language education would have to be differently focused and highly differentiated to consider the different background and learning needs of pupils (cf. Bergmann, 2017). On the other hand, German classes at the upper secondary school level (for students aged 17 to 19) appear to be more attractive even for bilingual children. Peter’s, Julia’s, and Michael’s children attend or have attended these classes and are very satisfied with them. They appreciate the grammar-oriented focus of the lessons, which is often criticized by others, as they feel they can continue to develop in this area. Furthermore, they view it positively that they can achieve an official qualification through the final examination. This was also a reason mentioned by Thomas and his sons, Ben and Max, when they explained that they plan to take German as a foreign language at the upper secondary level. Additionally, aspects related to multilingual identity play a role here. Julia reported that her son, who previously showed little interest in German, developed a sense of pride in his abilities and knowledge of German over the course of the upper secondary school classes. The positive perception of his bilingualism by his classmates also played an important role in this development.

## 5. Discussion

The results of this analysis, based on interviews conducted in northern Finland with nine migrants from German-speaking countries and two bilingual teenagers born and raised in Finland, demonstrate that the German language plays an important role in families with children. While German tends to recede into the background over time for adults themselves and for German-speaking migrants without children, and while some even problematize their ‘Germanness’ (cf. Breier, 2017; Grasz, 2023b), none of the participants considered raising their children solely in Finnish to be an option. This is supported by the fact that the participants possess a tight emotional connectedness and a strong linguistic identity, and that their native language, German, generally holds a prestigious position in Finland, where its use is typically viewed as beneficial. These findings align with those of Breier’s (2017) study, which also identified the birth of the first child as a turning point when the German language becomes more significant in the lives of Germans in Finland.

All participants made conscious decisions regarding language policy within the family, decisions that in most cases were also supported by their partners, leading to minimal family conflicts. Only in Marianne's case was bilingual upbringing carried out against the father's wishes, as he held the belief that bilingualism could potentially harm the children's development. Similar attitudes towards bilingual education were also reported by participants in Breier's (2017) study on the linguistic situation of Finns in Germany. They reported some strong prejudices against bilingual education in the 1960s and 1970s (Baier, 2007, pp. 101–102). Such beliefs are no longer found among the younger participants, a change that reflects shifting societal perspectives on multilingualism. None of the younger participants reported experiencing negative reactions from their surroundings to the multilingualism within their families. These predominantly positive attitudes, which are closely linked to language ideologies (cf. Spolsky, 2009), are further reinforced by the prestige of German-speaking migrants and the German language in Finland. Finland and Germany (as well as Austria and Switzerland) have a long history of intense bilateral relations and cultural exchange. Migrants from German-speaking countries are predominantly seen as lifestyle migrants, who migrate not due to economic or similar pressures but as a result of a free choice (cf. Codó, 2018; Lawson, 2017). Additionally, German, though less so, remains a widely taught foreign language in Finnish society, where it is valued relatively highly, particularly for its economic relevance. These factors contribute to the low level of stigmatization faced by German-speaking migrants in Finland. This, in turn, affords them a degree of freedom in self-representation (cf. Breier, 2020), which also influences language practices within the family (cf. Spolsky, 2009). This freedom is evident, for example, in the choice of the German variety used with their children. Although some parents consider which variety of German will be most valuable for their children's future, their decisions ultimately seem to be based on personal preferences and emotional connections to a particular form of the language.

The study further highlights that German-speaking parents, together with their partners, actively engage in learning about bilingual upbringing and early childhood language acquisition. Knowledge of early childhood language development is regarded as a key element in bilingual education (cf. Ekinci, 2019). This engagement with bilingual upbringing takes place through both self-help and specialist literature, as well as discussions with other bilingual families. In particular, the exchange of experiences within the German-speaking community is considered very important in this regard. On the other hand, at least in northern Finland, especially in rural areas, there seems to be little to no support or guidance from officials, kindergartens, or schools. In these institutions, little to no attention was paid to the bilingualism of the children. As a result, the sole responsibility for passing on and maintaining the home language often falls on the German-speaking parent.

The role of the family is enormously important, particularly in rural areas, as it is often the only context in which the language is used. The situation is very different to the context of Breier's (2017, 2020) study of the role of German in the transcultural urban context of Helsinki, where a 'German infrastructure' exists (Breier, 2020, p. 51). Today, contact with family and relatives in German-speaking countries is facilitated by various digital applications and is used intensively by the participants. However, this was different 10 years ago, when the use of the German language, apart from interactions with the German-speaking parent, was mostly limited to annual holidays in the parents' country of origin. One major disadvantage associated with living in northern Finland or smaller communities, as mentioned by most participants, is the lack of peers. This is also emphasized by the teenagers Ben and Max, who only recently started having other bilingual classmates, which they perceive as very positive. When parents wish to organize meetings with other bilingual families, they often have to travel long distances,

which is seen as a drawback. Infrequent meetings often result in relationships remaining superficial. However, contact with age-adequate verbal patterns, roles, and identities is seen as very important for developing a stronger identification with the community of the home language (cf. Pułaczewska, 2021).

Official home language instruction is available in the regions of northern Finland studied here only in two larger cities, which parents view as a problem. German as a foreign language—if it is offered by the municipality—could be an alternative, but at least in the context of comprehensive schools, it is generally considered not particularly useful. The background and access to the German language seem to be too different between bilingual children and those without prior knowledge of German. Addressing this difference within the curriculum is likely challenging for teachers, and differing expectations among parents could potentially lead to conflicts (cf. Bergmann, 2017). Despite these challenges, smaller communities might consider whether a way could be found to address languages for which there are not enough children to organize special home language instruction, and for which qualified foreign language teachers are available in schools. A potential solution could involve partially combining foreign language and home language instruction. This would require further training and awareness-raising, but ideally, it could benefit all students, including those learning the language as a foreign language.

This study was only able to provide some insights into the different life realities of families raising their children bilingually in northern Finland. Despite the differences that emerged, many experiences common to families living outside the Helsinki metropolitan area and the more densely populated southern Finland were also discussed. The insights gained in this study can serve as a basis for further research that investigates the phenomena in more detail, over longer periods of time and on different levels (e.g., the micro, meso, and macro level, as presented by Liddicoat, 2020). The use of different methods and the focus on different actors in this process (in addition to the families concerned, e.g., teachers and decision-makers in the municipalities) can also deliver important new results. There is still little research on migration in peripheral regions in general and on issues related to the multilingual upbringing of children in these regions. It is also important to consider the varying conditions faced by different groups of migrants. This clearly represents a research gap, as questions related to the promotion of linguistic and cultural identity, as well as the constitutionally enshrined right in Finland to maintain and develop one's own language, have a significant impact on the well-being of multilingual families.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The population density is 11.4/km<sup>2</sup> in North Ostrobothnia, in Lapland 1.9/km<sup>2</sup>, and in Kainuu 3.4/km<sup>2</sup> (figures from 2024). In comparison, the population density in Uusimaa, the region around Helsinki, is 196/km<sup>2</sup>, in Pirkanmaa with the centre of Tampere 41.2/km<sup>2</sup> and in Southwest Finland with Turku 46.4/km<sup>2</sup>.

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## Article

# Influence of Family Language Policies on Language Proficiency across Generations: A Study of Russian-Speaking Families in Germany

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the influence of selected aspects of family language policies (FLPs) on language proficiency across three generations of Russian-speaking families in Germany using data from a sample of 18 families. The data were collected via questionnaires and a cloze test was used to measure proficiency in Russian. Multiple regression analysis and Dunn's test were employed to analyze the influence of the selected components of FLP and assess differences in language proficiency between family members. The findings highlight a significant generational shift in language proficiency: parents exhibited the highest proficiency in Russian, followed by grandparents, with children showing the least proficiency and greater variation in their language skills. This pattern reflects the dynamics of language practices in families where older generations predominantly use Russian, whereas children display a greater inclination towards German or enhanced bilingualism. Additionally, this study underscores the positive influence of literacy skills in both Russian and German, reading in Russian, and a positive attitude towards maintaining cultural ties through reading on Russian language proficiency. Although attendance of Russian language lessons was positively correlated with the proficiency scores of children, the statistical models were only partially successful in accounting for their overall impact on proficiency, indicating that other unexplored factors may also play a significant role.

**Keywords:** family language policy (FLP); Russian–German bilinguals; cross-generational study; language use and attitudes; language proficiency; heritage language transmission

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Theoretical Background: Family Language Policy

The exploration of how bi- and multilingualism manifest themselves in family interactions is of paramount importance for sociolinguistic studies on heritage language maintenance. The question of why some children become active and proficient users of multiple languages from an early age while others do not, despite similar exposure to the languages, continues to be a relevant topic in heritage language research. The concept of family language policy (FLP) as a special type of language policy (Spolsky 2004) provides a structured framework to address this question. Spolsky (2004, p. 5) identified three components of FLP: “[the family’s] language practices—the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties which 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”.

King et al. (2008) highlight the importance of studying FLP, noting its crucial impact on children’s development, educational success, and the preservation of minority languages. Originally, FLP was defined as “explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members” (King et al. 2008, p. 907), focusing on more or less deliberate decision-making processes within families regarding home language practices

and their impact on children's language development. Currently, research into FLP also includes the exploration of implicit and covert language practices, extending to aspects of acquiring and practicing literacy skills in the home language (Curdts-Christiansen 2013). In the same vein, Ren and Hu (2013) contribute to the study of FLP by "incorporating two hitherto disconnected fields of research—FLP and family literacy practices—to an understanding of early language and literacy acquisition in the familial milieu" (Curdts-Christiansen 2013, p. 4). Since recent research highlights the crucial connection between literacy skills and language maintenance (Hammer and Miccio 2006; Howard et al. 2014; Limbird et al. 2014; Rhys and Thomas 2013; Zhang and Koda 2018), it becomes evident that literacy plays a pivotal role in preserving and transmission of languages within families and communities.

### 1.2. *Generational Dynamics and FLP*

Over the past two decades, research on FLP has evolved through various stages (Fogle and King 2017; Lanza and Lomeu Gomes 2020), transitioning from an emphasis on children's language acquisition to a broader sociolinguistic interest in the conditions that facilitate language socialization. Numerous studies highlight the significance of the role of various generations in a family for FLP, e.g., by stressing distinct parenting approaches that may not align with those of grandparents and other relatives (Curdts-Christiansen 2009; Fogle 2012; Lanza 2004; Tannen 2006; Van Mensel 2018; Zhu and Li 2016). Families are seen as the main site of generational contact and as dynamic systems consisting of members of different generations, with each having their own perspectives on, agency in and ideas about languages (Purkarthofer 2020).

However, previous research on FLP has typically focused on the role of interactions between children and their parents in multilingual language acquisition and language maintenance (Schwartz 2020). The impact of members of the extended family, particularly grandparents, on FLP and home language maintenance has been studied much less frequently. While some studies have shown that grandparents can give negative feedback about the insufficient knowledge of their grandchildren in the heritage language, thereby discouraging them from using the heritage language in family interactions (e.g., Cho 2015), other studies confirmed that grandparents played a positive role in transmitting the heritage language to their grandchildren (Ruby 2011; Yousef 2016). Grandparents often assist in the acquisition of literacy practices in the heritage language of bilingual grandchildren (Ren and Hu 2013). A study conducted by Braun (2012) showed that the influence of grandparents as an affective factor in heritage language transmission depended on the place of residence: While grandparents residing in the host countries often spoke the majority language to their grandchildren, grandparents who still resided in the countries of origin provided an important source of heritage language input and motivation for their grandchildren to acquire the heritage language.

On the other hand, efforts in language documentation and revitalization have primarily targeted the elderly, while interest in children as developing new speakers emerged only more recently in this strand of research (Purkarthofer 2020). New speakers, as defined by Smith-Christmas et al. (2018), are social actors who use and claim ownership of a language that is not typically seen as their native one. These speakers acquire the language through formal education, community programs, or personal initiative later in life. Unlike traditional accounts of language preservation, the exchange of knowledge is not merely a one-way process from elders to younger family members; instead, it is a collaborative effort among all members of a family. Consequently, there has been an emerging interest in the concept of child agency (Smith-Christmas 2018). Following this concept, children play a crucial role as emergent speakers who actively contribute to the dynamic process of language transmission and transformation in the family. They are not passive recipients of language but are active agents in shaping their linguistic environment and practices (Said and Zhu 2019; Smith-Christmas 2018). For example, children often navigate and negotiate language use in multilingual families based on their social interactions, both within and

outside the family, thereby influencing language maintenance and shift in their immediate surroundings (Gafaranga 2010; Obojska 2017, 2018).

### *1.3. Internal and External Factors Affecting Heritage Language Transmission*

Recent research has highlighted that heritage language proficiency often depends on a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Internal factors include the child's age, the age of second language onset, and length of exposure to the heritage language. External factors encompass the parents' education and occupation, family size, and the broader sociolinguistic environment. The amount and quality of exposure to the heritage language at home and in educational settings has been identified as one of the most crucial factors for heritage language maintenance. For instance, a study conducted by Armon-Lotem et al. (2011) emphasizes the crucial role of internal, temporal factors, such as age and length of second language exposure, in heritage language development. Similarly, Rodina et al. (2020) found that both internal factors like age and external factors such as family type and the extent of heritage language instruction significantly impact heritage language acquisition. Paradis (2023) expands on these insights by emphasizing the importance of individual differences with regard to decisive factors in bilingual development. These factors include not only the quantity of linguistic input but also child-internal factors like socioemotional wellbeing and external factors like parent's proficiency in the languages. Internal factors can sometimes explain more variance in language abilities than external ones (Paradis 2023). Interestingly, the same factors that encourage the transmission of the language from one generation to the next in one ethnolinguistic group can cause a shift away from the language in another group (Karpava et al. 2018; Otwinowska et al. 2021). This highlights the importance of studying each ethnolinguistic group on its own to understand these dynamics.

### *1.4. Heritage Language Use and Attitudes in Russian-Speaking Families in Germany*

Germany has historically been a popular destination for emigrants from the former USSR, but it emerged as a primary place of resettlement during the 1990s. The considerable number of Russian-speaking inhabitants in Germany has sparked a great interest among researchers of (heritage) Russian. This includes sociolinguistic studies on how Russian is used in families and the family's attitudes towards it (Anstatt 2013, 2017; Brehmer 2021; Levkovych 2012; Meng 2001; Ries 2013). Brehmer (2021) found that while the use of Russian among adolescents is declining, particularly regarding media consumption and frequency of homeland visits, Russian remains prevalent in family interactions. Despite decreased overall exposure to Russian, there has been an improvement in both lexical and grammatical proficiency among the investigated adolescents, which can be partly explained by the consistent attendance of heritage language instruction. Protassova's study (Protassova 2018) observed that Russian-speaking children in Finland, Germany, and France use the majority language more frequently in daily interactions than their parents, leading to a higher prevalence of majority language usage among the children. This trend highlights the shift towards the majority language in various sociolinguistic contexts, aligning with the current study's focus on generational differences in language use and attitudes (see also Berend 2014; Meng 2001; Meng and Protassova 2017 for in-depth studies on generational differences and developmental tendencies in the use of languages and language varieties in Russian-speaking communities in Germany).

## **2. The Current Study**

### *2.1. Goals and Research Questions*

Using Spolsky's tripartite model of FLP as a theoretical framework, our study seeks to explore selected components of language practices, management, and ideologies among three generations of Russian-speaking family members in Germany, with an expanded focus on the role of literacy practices. Our study contributes to the field by offering a nuanced understanding of how certain components of language practices and ideologies

evolve across generations in immigrant families. By specifically examining older children, we provide insights into the long-term effects of FLP, highlighting the dynamic nature of language maintenance and shifts in families over time. Thus, the first research question (RQ1) addresses the different language preferences (as a proxy for language practices) and attitudes (as a proxy for language ideologies) regarding the Russian language, which can be found among the three generations included in the study. Following previous findings on the distribution of languages and language varieties in Russian-speaking families in Germany (see Section 1.4), we hypothesize that representatives of the three generations will differ regarding their language practices and their views regarding the importance of Russian language maintenance. Specifically, we anticipate a gradual shift, with younger generations using Russian less frequently than the preceding older generations. Grandparents are expected to use Russian most frequently, followed by their children, and their grandchildren, with the latter exhibiting the least frequent use of Russian. Second, we aim to analyze how the two investigated components of FLP—language preferences and language attitudes—affect the proficiency in Russian of all family members (RQ2). By comparing three generations, our study offers a new and valuable perspective for examining the development of patterns of language use and attitudes across representatives of these generations in real families, in contrast to studies that rely solely on synchronic cross-sectional data from different age groups. Special attention will be paid to the question of how literacy skills and single explicit language management strategies, such as participating in Russian language lessons, impact the proficiency of school-aged children in their heritage language, Russian (RQ3).

## 2.2. Participants

Our study comprises 18 Russian-speaking families residing in Germany, each consisting of three generations of Russian-speaking members, to explore the intergenerational dynamics of FLP. Our original selection criteria aimed at including families whose parents had immigrated to Germany when they were between 10 and 20 years old and, therefore, experienced a rapid change in the language of instruction in educational settings after entering Germany. At the time of the interviews, they ideally should have two children who were born in Germany (aged between 10 and 15 years) and never attended Russian-speaking educational institutions. Furthermore, we wanted to include at least one grandparent from each family who immigrated as adults and completed their whole education and primary language socialization in a Russian-speaking environment.

During the recruitment of participants for our study, several challenges were encountered, which were mostly linked to problems of finding participants willing to participate in a study on Russian in Germany in times of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences for the perceived prestige of Russian in Germany. As a result, we were forced to modify our initial selection criteria, especially regarding the age of the parent generation at immigration, with some participating parents being over 20 years old when they came to Germany. Furthermore, the intended tri-generational representation was not possible to maintain due to the unavailability of grandparents in two cases. To compensate for this, we gathered data from both grandmothers and grandfathers in three families so that the generation of grandparents is represented by 19 individuals coming from 16 different families. In four families, the fathers were either not present or refused to participate, which resulted in the fact that just one representative of the parent generation could be included in the data set in these cases. Finally, we could include just one child from 11 families due to either because the sibling was outside the specified age range or the fact that the sibling did not speak Russian at all.

Table 1 offers an overview of the different sociolinguistic profiles of the representatives of the three generations included in our study based on data gathered through questionnaires, which are further explained in Section 2.3.

**Table 1.** Participants of this study ( $n = 76$ ).

| Generation   | N  | Sex<br>(f/m) | Age at Testing |       | Age at Arrival |       | Country of Birth                                                                                                    |
|--------------|----|--------------|----------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|              |    |              | Average (SD)   | Range | Average (SD)   | Range |                                                                                                                     |
| Children     | 25 | 14/11        | 12.32 (2.69)   | 7–17  | 0 (0)          | 0     | Germany (25)                                                                                                        |
| Parents      | 32 | 18/14        | 44.56 (4.77)   | 37–56 | 19.06 (4.81)   | 10–33 | Russia (17), Kazakhstan (7),<br>Ukraine (3), Uzbekistan (2),<br>Azerbaijan (1), Kyrgyzstan (1),<br>Turkmenistan (1) |
| Grandparents | 19 | 12/7         | 67.91 (6.42)   | 59–78 | 43.27 (4.83)   | 35–53 | Russia (11), Kazakhstan (4),<br>Ukraine (3), Uzbekistan (1)                                                         |
| Total        | 76 | 44/32        |                | 7–78  |                | 0–53  |                                                                                                                     |

The children in our study represent typical heritage speakers of Russian since they were all born in Germany to Russian-speaking parents. They primarily communicate in Russian when at home, despite their early exposure to German: six children were exposed to German from birth or earlier than 8 months of age. The majority of the 13 children, however, began to learn German when they started attending kindergarten, ranging in age from 1 to 2 years. An additional group of six children started learning German a bit later, between the ages of 2.5 and 3 years. Thus, all children are characterized by an early onset of bilingual language exposure and can be considered simultaneous bilinguals (following the criteria discussed in Meisel 1989).

The parents in this study, constituting the intermediary generation, exhibit varied personal histories of immigration. This group encompasses 16 repatriates (i.e., people who had German ancestors in the former USSR), 11 Soviet Jews, and 5 individuals who immigrated to Germany for other reasons, such as marriage. All of the participants have lived in Germany for over 15 years. In terms of education, a significant proportion of these parents are highly educated, having obtained academic degrees from countries including Russia, Germany, and others. Specifically, 20 parents have higher education. Five of them completed their higher education in Russia, with one also studying in Azerbaijan and another in France. Four continued their education in Germany after immigration. In total, 11 parents received their academic qualifications exclusively in Germany. However, 12 parents did not receive higher education.

The grandparents in our study have lived in Germany for over 19 years, with just one exception of a grandmother who immigrated 9 years ago. Their immigration backgrounds include nine repatriates and eight Soviet Jews, along with two individuals who immigrated for other reasons, such as marriage. Regarding education, 9 grandparents received higher education degrees from Russian-speaking countries, while 10 did not obtain higher education degrees.

### 2.3. Methods

Data collection took place via the SoSciSurvey platform in individual Zoom sessions with each family member. Participants were informed about the study and invited to participate through multiple channels, including social media platforms, Russian-speaking newspapers, personal networks, and a dedicated recruitment website. To express gratitude for their participation, all of the participants received monetary compensation. Additionally, each family member signed an informed consent form, ensuring their voluntary participation and compliance with ethical approval guidelines for the study.

We designed three comprehensive questionnaires, one for each generation, which consisted of several thematic sections. In the first part, we gathered demographic information from our participants. Subsequent parts were targeted at eliciting information on the language profiles of the participants, the language practices in the family, strategies for language management, and beliefs about languages and language attitudes (see Section 2.4 for more details).

As a second step, the participants were exposed to a cloze deletion test (Luchkina et al. 2021), which was also administered through SoSciSurvey in a bimodal way, meaning that the participants could see the text and hear it read aloud by the tester, to assess their proficiency in Russian (see Section 2.4.2). Both the questionnaire and the cloze deletion test were completed orally by the participants in the presence of the test administrators to ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data collected. Due to the presence of the test administrator and the bimodal nature of the cloze deletion test, the participants did not have to write or read but could see all the questions and texts while solving the tasks. We opted for this bimodal way of conducting the cloze test in order to prevent problems stemming from varying degrees of literacy in Russian, especially concerning the heritage speaker group.

Following data collection, we employed the R 4.1.2 software for data preparation and analysis. This included generating descriptive statistics to determine basic trends in the data, as well as creating visualizations of the results.

To investigate the impact of FLP components like language preferences (as a proxy for language) practices, attitudes towards languages (as a proxy for language ideologies) and attendance of heritage language instruction (as a proxy for explicit language management) on language proficiency scores, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses. For this purpose, the scores obtained by our participants in the cloze test were correlated with the scores received from the answers in the questionnaire. For scoring the answers obtained from the participants in the different sections of the questionnaire, we implemented a scoring procedure that awarded credits for answers that highlighted the role of Russian for communication in the family. Thus, e.g., when asked about their language choice when communicating with individual family members, participants received five points for choosing the answer ‘only in Russian’, four points for ‘mostly in Russian, but sometimes in German’, three points for ‘50% in German, 50% in Russian’, two points for ‘mostly in German, but sometimes in Russian’, and one point for ‘only in German’.

To ensure comparability across participants, we scored each answer in a standardized way and compiled a cumulative score for each participant in every section of the questionnaire. The cumulative score represents the total sum of points earned in each section, providing an overall measure of language practices, preferences, or attitudes. This allowed us to directly compare participants’ responses across different sections and among family members.

The statistical analyses were crucial for identifying significant relationships between the investigated selected components of FLP and the measured proficiency levels in Russian. Furthermore, to explore differences in language proficiency among family members, we applied the Dunn post hoc test with Bonferroni correction.

#### 2.4. Factors Included in the Analysis

##### 2.4.1. Self-Assessment of Language Skills

Apart from gathering demographic data from our participants, the questionnaire included questions about their language profiles. Specifically, we inquired about the language the participants considered to be their native language, the language they know best, and the total number of languages they speak.

To obtain a nuanced understanding of their language proficiency, participants were asked to self-assess their proficiency in Russian and German. This self-assessment covered four basic language skills: speaking (including pronunciation), listening, reading, and writing. By asking participants to rate their skills in these areas for both Russian and German, we aimed to capture a detailed view of their self-perceived bilingual competencies.

##### 2.4.2. Proficiency in Russian

In order not to be dependent on self-assessments regarding the participants’ proficiency in Russian, we also administered the cloze deletion test developed by Luchkina et al. (2021) to our participants (see Appendix A). This standardized tool was designed to

specifically measure the proficiency levels of bilingual and/or second language learners of Russian, which made it suitable for providing an objective measure of the proficiency in Russian of the representatives of the different generations in our selected Russian-speaking families.

The test uses a format where words are omitted from sentences, requiring participants to select the most appropriate option from multiple choice answers provided to fill in each blank. This testing format aims to evaluate the participant's vocabulary, grammar, and contextual inference skills as essential components of language proficiency.

Although the text used in the cloze test was originally designed for readers of high school age or older, it was selected for this study to enable comparison across three generations. Given the limited availability of proficiency tests appropriate for all age groups, this choice was the most feasible for assessing language proficiency across the sample. Statistical analyses revealed no significant effect of age within the group of children, indicating that the test was suitable for participants of different ages without bias toward older children.

#### 2.4.3. Language Practices

According to Spolsky, language practices refer to the habitual selection among the varieties present in a family's linguistic repertoire, emphasizing actual language choices and preferences in the family context (Spolsky 2004). In our study, we gathered data on language practices in the investigated families via a set of questions in the questionnaire that specifically targeted the language use of every participant when communicating with the individual family members. This section of the questionnaire also included items that were directed at the participant's perception regarding the language use of other family members. This approach allowed us to gain a comprehensive overview of the language practices in the family, uncovering not only the participants' own language use depending on the interlocutor but also their perceptions of language preferences across different generational dyads of interlocutors.

Furthermore, a specific section of our questionnaire contained questions about the children's contact with Russian-speaking individuals living outside of Germany. This part of the questionnaire targeted the broader social network of Russian language use and its role in maintaining Russian among children in a diaspora context.

Additionally, we asked all family members about their language preferences in various media consumption activities, such as reading, internet browsing, and watching TV and movies. This allowed us to shed some light on the diversity of media activities of the individual family members and the families as a whole.

#### 2.4.4. Language Management

Spolsky defines *language management* as efforts aimed at modifying or influencing language practices through planning or intervention. This covers family strategies to enhance language learning and use, targeting actions to ensure that the heritage language, Russian, is maintained (Spolsky 2004). To investigate language management in our families, we asked about the children's attendance of Russian language lessons. Although this is by no means the only manifestation of overt language management, the attendance of formal heritage language instruction prototypically stands for language management efforts undertaken by families to ensure the acquisition and maintenance of the Russian language by the children (see Brehmer and Mehlhorn 2018).

#### 2.4.5. Language Ideology

Spolsky considers *language ideology* as the beliefs about languages and their usage, which are crucial for shaping language practices and management strategies in families. These ideologies can lead to a prioritization of certain languages based on cultural significance or perceived benefits, thereby directly impacting linguistic behaviors and policies at the family level (Spolsky 2004). In our study, we gathered reactions to statements from our participants which were designed to reveal their attitudes toward the Russian language.

The respective statements in the questionnaire centered around its perceived benefit for professional careers in Germany, its cultural and cognitive value, and the need for more institutional support of Russian language education in Germany. Some questions addressed only the adults in our sample, while others were tailored specifically for the children (see Section 3.5 for more details). Participants were asked to indicate their opinion on these predefined statements by using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “I totally agree” to “I totally disagree”. This approach allowed us to obtain a comprehensive view of the attitudes towards the Russian language and to compile a cumulative score, which was then used to compare the overall attitudes of the three generations towards Russian. This served as the starting point for our investigation of the potential influence of these attitudes on Russian language proficiency and maintenance.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Language Profiles and Self-Assessment in Russian and German

Our data reveal generational differences regarding the language profiles in Russian-speaking families. Children reported the highest multilingual repertoire, with a range of three to six languages spoken (Mean = 4.32; SD = 0.8). The parents’ responses showed a broader range from two to eight languages (Mean = 3.94; SD = 1.34), but a lower average number of spoken languages. The grandparents reported speaking fewer languages, ranging from two to seven different languages (Mean = 3.15; SD = 1.30). Regarding the average number of spoken languages, the answers thus reveal a gradual decrease in multilingualism from the younger to the older generations. Participants mentioned speaking primarily typical foreign languages like English, French, Spanish, and Italian, with some also indicating knowledge of Czech, Polish, Serbian/Croatian, Portuguese, Latin, Arabic or Chinese. Some participants also claimed knowledge of other languages spoken in the former USSR, first and foremost Ukrainian, but also Uzbek, Azeri, Kazakh, and Yiddish.

Table 2 depicts the native languages and self-perceived proficiency-based hierarchy between Russian and German across the three generations.

**Table 2.** Native languages and self-perceived language hierarchy by generation in %.

| Generation   | Native Language |        |                    | Best Known Language |        |
|--------------|-----------------|--------|--------------------|---------------------|--------|
|              | Russian         | German | Russian and German | Russian             | German |
| Children     | 32              | 12     | 56                 | 16                  | 84     |
| Parents      | 76.5            | 0      | 23.5               | 88                  | 12     |
| Grandparents | 95              | 0      | 5                  | 100                 | 0      |

The children’s responses exhibit a diverse scenario: more than half of them consider both Russian and German as their native languages, while 32% recognize only Russian as their native language. However, 84% of them state that they have a greater proficiency in German than in Russian, which shows that a perceived native language does not necessarily represent the stronger language in terms of proficiency. Although we did not provide an exact definition of the term ‘native language’ for our participants, we expected them to designate the language they feel the closest emotional connection to, and the differences between the answers to these two questions illustrate that our participants indeed differentiated between native and dominant/strongest language. Parents predominantly identify Russian as their native language, which, in their case, aligns with a higher proficiency in Russian. The grandparents report the strongest emotional connection to Russian, resulting in 95% voting for it as their native language, which is mirrored by the univocal response that Russian represents their stronger language. This transition from grandparents to children indicates a shift from a primarily Russian-speaking identity to increased bilingualism or a higher proficiency in German among younger generations.

Table 3 provides a more fine-grained view of the self-assessed proficiency across generations. The predefined categories of self-ratings of proficiency in Russian and German were located on a continuum from 0 (“cannot/very bad”) to 4 (“very good”). We distinguish between *literacy skills*, which cover writing and reading, and *oral skills*, encompassing speaking, pronunciation, and listening comprehension.

**Table 3.** Self-rated proficiency in Russian and German by generation on a scale from 0 to 4 (0 = cannot/very bad, 4 = very good).

| Generation   | Literacy Skills     |                     | Oral Skills         |                     |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|              | Russian             | German              | Russian             | German              |
| Children     | 1.92<br>(SD = 1.0)  | 3.56<br>(SD = 0.55) | 3.01<br>(SD = 0.62) | 3.68<br>(SD = 0.38) |
| Parents      | 3.48<br>(SD = 0.53) | 3.19<br>(SD = 0.79) | 3.68<br>(SD = 0.42) | 3.06<br>(SD = 0.7)  |
| Grandparents | 3.74<br>(SD = 0.42) | 1.84<br>(SD = 0.77) | 3.81<br>(SD = 0.34) | 1.65<br>(SD = 0.72) |

Children exhibit moderate literacy skills in Russian, while their self-assessment for literacy skills in German shows the highest score among all three generations. In the realm of oral skills, they claim considerably higher proficiency in Russian compared to the literacy skills which results in a more balanced distribution for Russian and German, although individual variation in Russian oral skills is still considerably higher than in German, which parallels the findings for literacy skills. Overall, they consider their proficiency in German, regarding both literacy and oral skills, to be higher than in Russian, which reflects the dominant position of the majority language German.

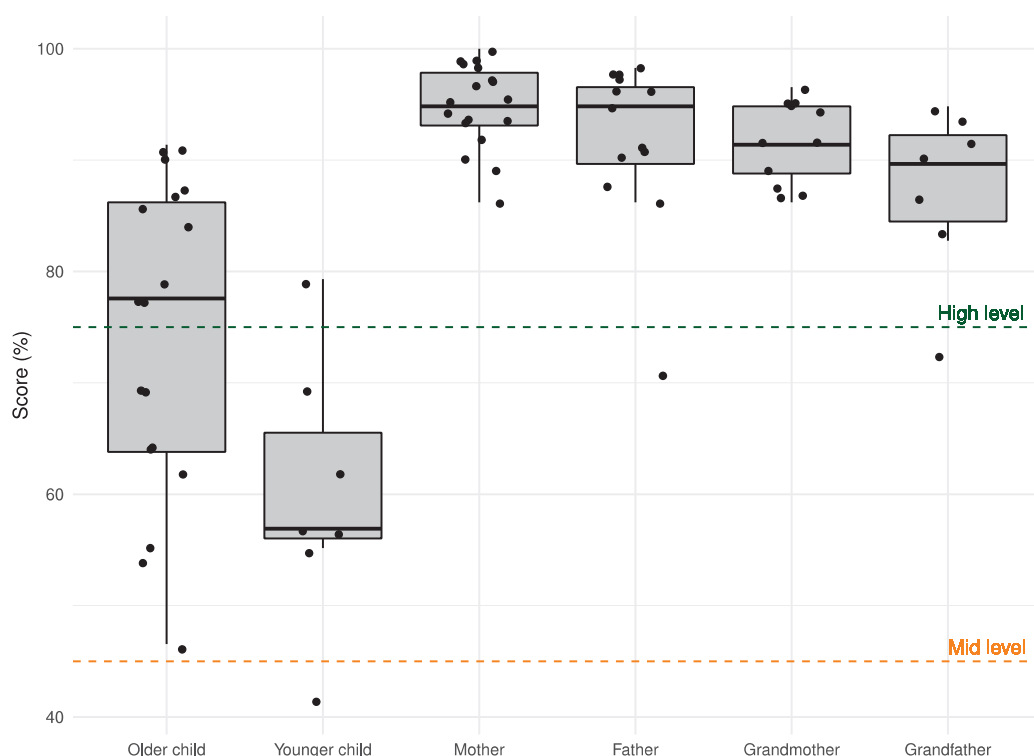
Parents claim strong proficiency in Russian for both literacy and oral skills. While their self-assessment of proficiency in German is somewhat lower than in Russian, especially regarding oral skills, it nevertheless shows an almost balanced level of skills across both languages. The higher standard deviation observed in their German language skills points to a higher interindividual variability in this group, which is different from the children’s data.

Grandparents show the greatest self-proclaimed proficiency in Russian, especially in oral communication, highlighting their deep connection to their native language. Their proficiency in German is considerably lower, which may indicate a dominance of Russian language use over their entire lifespan.

### 3.2. Proficiency Scores in Cloze Deletion Test

Figure 1 presents the results obtained from the cloze deletion test. According to the criteria employed by Luchkina et al. (2021), the scoring ranges correspond to the proficiency levels in Russian as follows: Level 4 (High) encompasses scores from 75 to 100%, while native-like accuracy is specifically indicated by scores ranging from 98 to 100%; Level 3 (Mid) spans from 45 to 74%, indicating moderate proficiency; Level 2 (Low-mid) covers the range from 20 to 44%, suggesting elementary understanding; and Level 1 (Low) includes the values from 5 to 19%, thereby denoting minimal proficiency.

Our analysis showed that all parents and grandparents, with the exception of one grandfather and one father, achieved Level 4; thus, they demonstrate high proficiency in Russian. One parent and one grandparent from different families did not participate in the test. However, only 25.8% of the parents reached the native-like accuracy threshold. Notably, parents scored overall higher than grandparents, a finding that diverges from the self-assessments where parents tended to be slightly more critical as regards their language skills in Russian compared to the grandparents.



**Figure 1.** Proficiency test scores in Russian: boxplots of family members' performance (levels: 100–75% high; 74–45% mid; under 44% mid-low).

For the children, proficiency outcomes varied considerably, which reflects the variability seen in their self-assessment data. Their scores were predominantly divided between Mid (Level 3) and High (Level 4) proficiency levels, with a single exception of one child falling into the Low-mid category (Level 2). In families where two children were included in the data collection, younger children generally scored lower than their older siblings, with one family as an exception.

The statistical analysis via the Dunn post hoc test with Bonferroni correction yielded a significant divergence in Russian language proficiency across the three generations in the families. Notably, the analysis revealed that disparities in proficiency are especially prominent when comparing the children to the older generations (see Table 4). The differences are particularly striking when both older and younger children are compared to the mothers, indicating a statistically significant divergence in proficiency levels. Moreover, children also show significant differences in comparison to their fathers and grandmothers, highlighting the special position of the children in the linguistic network of the families. Although grandparents scored slightly lower on the test, their results are not statistically significant and do not differ from those of the parents. Contrary to our expectations, the data did not indicate that parents performed lower than grandparents. Only the children's generation exhibits a significant difference in proficiency levels.

Additionally, we conducted a multiple regression analysis to evaluate the influence of self-assessments of proficiency in Russian and German on the scores of the language proficiency test (Table 5). This analysis demonstrates that self-assessments of literacy skills, notably in Russian and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in German, are strong predictors of test performance. Specifically, higher self-assessments in literacy skills regarding reading and writing are associated with better test scores. This result confirms the findings of previous studies, which investigated the relationship between vocabulary development and literacy skills in bilingual individuals and found that the growth of vocabulary and literacy skills are closely correlated (e.g., Hammer and Miccio 2006; Howard et al. 2014; Limbird et al. 2014; Rhys and Thomas 2013; Zhang and Koda 2018).

**Table 4.** Comparison of proficiency test scores by family members using Dunn post hoc test (Bonferroni correction).

|               | Father                                   | Grandfather     | Grandmother        | Mother             | Older Child    |
|---------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Grandfather   | 1.473 <sup>1</sup><br>1.000 <sup>2</sup> |                 |                    |                    |                |
| Grandmother   | 0.627<br>1.000                           | −0.897<br>1.000 |                    |                    |                |
| Mother        | −0.697<br>1.000                          | −2.119<br>0.255 | −1.333<br>1.000    |                    |                |
| Older child   | 3.917<br>0.0007 *** <sup>3</sup>         | 1.651<br>0.741  | 3.055<br>0.017 *   | 5.038<br>0.000 *** |                |
| Younger Child | 4.103<br>0.0003 ***                      | 2.306<br>0.158  | 3.447<br>0.0043 ** | 4.887<br>0.000 *** | 1.117<br>1.000 |

<sup>1</sup> Numeric values indicate the Z-value for each comparison. <sup>2</sup> The corresponding *p*-values are provided below each Z-value, with asterisks denoting their significance after Bonferroni correction. <sup>3</sup> \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01; \*\*\* *p* < 0.001.

**Table 5.** Regression analysis summary: impact of self-assessed proficiency in Russian and German on proficiency test scores.

| Predictor                             | Coefficient | Std. Error | t-Value | p-Value                |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|------------|---------|------------------------|
| Self-Assess Literacy Skills (Russian) | 6.716       | 1.971      | 3.407   | 0.0011 ** <sup>1</sup> |
| Self-Assess Literacy Skills (German)  | 4.946       | 2.586      | 1.913   | 0.0599                 |
| Self-Assess Oral Skills (Russian)     | 4.249       | 3.407      | 1.247   | 0.217                  |
| Self-Assess Oral Skills (German)      | −4.353      | 2.713      | −1.604  | 0.1132                 |

<sup>1</sup> \*\* *p* < 0.01.

A notable finding was that children rated their literacy skills lower than adults; they often described their abilities as “very bad” or “satisfactory”, in contrast to adults, who generally assessed them as “good” or “very good”. This difference prompted us to conduct a more fine-grained multiple regression analysis focusing solely on the children’s data. It turned out that the self-assessments of literacy skills in German (coefficient = 15.56; *p*-value = 0.032) significantly affected the test scores of the children.

Our analysis thus revealed that literacy skills, both in Russian and German (particularly among children), significantly predicted the results of the language proficiency test.

### 3.3. Language Practices

To gain a more comprehensive and objective understanding of language practices in the families, we incorporated responses from all family members regarding their language choices when communicating with others. As stated above, participants were asked to designate the language(s) they use when communicating with other family members and to attribute a value to their language preferences ranging on a scale from 1 (exclusively German) to 5 (exclusively Russian). The questions targeted not just the languages the family members actively choose for communicating with others but also how they are addressed themselves by others in the family. Furthermore, we asked them to designate the language(s) other family members use when talking to each other. For example, children were asked about their personal language choices when interacting with siblings, parents, and grandparents. Additionally, we gathered data on their perception of how parents communicate with each other and with the grandparents. Table 6 presents the average language preferences by generations.

**Table 6.** Average language usage in family interactions on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = only German; 5 = only Russian).

| Generation   | Communication with               |                                 |                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|              | Children                         | Parents                         | Grandparents                     |
| Children     | 2.48 <sup>1</sup><br>(SD = 0.87) | 3.57<br>(SD = 0.88)             | 4.41<br>(SD = 0.85)              |
| Parents      | 3.91<br>(SD = 0.61)              | 4.4 <sup>2</sup><br>(SD = 0.56) | 4.76<br>(SD = 0.38)              |
| Grandparents | 4.63<br>(SD = 0.52)              | 4.76<br>(SD = 0.36)             | 4.77 <sup>3</sup><br>(SD = 0.41) |

<sup>1</sup> Communication with siblings. <sup>2,3</sup> Communication with spouses.

Children exhibit a wide range of language use when communicating with siblings, parents, and grandparents. Their preferences show an overall gradual increase in the use of Russian with the older generations, starting from a balanced mix of German and Russian with siblings ( $M = 2.48$ ) to a stronger preference for Russian with grandparents ( $M = 4.41$ ). The variability in their language practices suggests that they do not have firm preferences for single languages, even when communicating with the same family member. Similar findings were reported in Protassova’s study (Protassova 2018), where children exhibited a higher frequency of majority language usage in their daily interactions compared to their parents, resulting in a higher index of majority language use among children.

Parents play a crucial role as a linguistic bridge between the generations. They exhibit a pronounced preference for Russian in their interactions with other family members. Notably, this preference becomes stronger in conversations with their spouses ( $M = 4.4$ ), suggesting a shared linguistic space in the nuclear family unit. Based on their responses to survey questions about language use with other family members, it became clear that most families support Russian language use by increasing its presence and apply the “principle of maximal engagement with the minority language” (De Houwer 2007; Yamamoto 2001). Three families seem to prefer the one parent one language (OPOL) strategy (Okita 2002), since the mothers stated that they consistently communicate with the child in Russian, whereas the Russian-speaking fathers use German. Two families promote flexible use of both languages, including translanguaging at home (Alvarez 2014), i.e., the parents conceded that they mix both languages and use them to an equal degree.

Grandparents exhibit the strongest preference for Russian across all their family interactions, with minimal variation in language choice. Whether communicating with their grandchildren, children, or spouse, the scores suggest an overwhelming use of Russian. This stable language preference among the oldest generation highlights their significant role in fostering Russian as the primary medium of communication in the family.

To sum up, a clear generational pattern emerges from our data, ranging from the children’s mixed use of German and Russian to the grandparents’ strong preference for Russian. As a next step in the analysis, we looked at the transnational aspect of language maintenance. Specifically, we explored whether children maintain contact with Russian beyond Germany’s borders. In total, 76% of the children confirmed contact with Russian-speaking friends and relatives outside Germany, spanning from grandparents to second-degree relatives. This underlines the role of transnational relationships as a factor that adds to the motivation for maintaining the Russian language in the countries of residence. Table 7 illustrates the average frequency of interaction with these individuals, depicted on a scale from 0 (never) to 5 (once a week).

Phone calls are the most frequent medium of communication with family members and friends outside Germany, yet the high standard deviation highlights significant differences in how often families engage in these calls. Video calls, facilitated by platforms such as Skype or Zoom, are less common, and their usage varies considerably across families. Surprisingly, emails and chat applications like WhatsApp or Viber are even less frequent, showcasing the limited role of these digital communication tools. Visits to and from family

members residing outside Germany are exceptionally infrequent, highlighting the logistical and financial obstacles leading to scarce direct face-to-face encounters in the context of these international family relationships.

**Table 7.** Average frequency of contact between children and Russian-speaking friends and relatives in other countries on a scale from 0 to 5 (0 = never; 1 = less than once a year; 2 = once a year; 3 = several times a year; 4 = once a month; 5 = once a week).

| Contact                             | Average Frequency |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Phone Calls                         | 2.16 (SD = 1.97)  |
| Video Calls (Skype, Zoom, etc.)     | 1.48 (SD = 1.76)  |
| Emails/Chat (WhatsApp, Viber, etc.) | 1.20 (SD = 1.76)  |
| Visiting Them                       | 0.56 (SD = 0.65)  |
| Being Visited                       | 0.40 (SD = 0.50)  |

Our analysis of media consumption activities, including reading, internet browsing, and watching TV and movies, uncovered distinct language preferences among children, as shown in Table 8. The responses, using a predefined scale from “never” to “very often”, show a pronounced preference for German across all media. While reading and internet browsing are more frequently done in German, watching TV and films exhibits a more balanced distribution. In this domain, the frequency of using Russian is clearly higher than in reading or browsing the internet, though German still remains the more frequently chosen language. These results underscore a clear trend towards German for media consumption among children, with some individual differences in the frequency of the use of Russian, as indicated by the standard deviations.

**Table 8.** Reading, browsing the internet and watching TV or movies by children in Russian and German on a scale from 0 to 4 (0 = never; 4 = very often).

| Activity              | Russian             | German              |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Reading Books         | 1.12<br>(SD = 1.17) | 2.48<br>(SD = 0.96) |
| Browsing the Internet | 0.84<br>(SD = 1.11) | 2.48<br>(SD = 1.23) |
| Watching TV, Movies   | 1.96<br>(SD = 1.21) | 2.4<br>(SD = 1)     |

The multiple regression analysis revealed no significant impact on the overall language proficiency scores, yet it showed a notable trend concerning the role of reading in Russian. Children who read more frequently in Russian exhibited a tendency towards increased language proficiency scores (coefficient = 6.98;  $p = 0.066$ ). Although not statistically significant, this trend suggests a positive correlation between regular reading in Russian and higher language proficiency among children, highlighting the potential benefits of reading for language development.

For adults, the analysis of media consumption activities—rated on a scale from 1 (only in German) to 5 (only in Russian) (see Table 9)—reveals significant findings for parents but not for grandparents regarding reading habits. Specifically, parents who read more frequently in Russian, as opposed to German, show higher scores in the language proficiency test (coefficient = 1.675;  $p = 0.03$ ).

To sum up, family communication primarily takes place in Russian. This holds even for the children, except when they interact with siblings, where both languages are used. Most children maintain contact with Russian-speaking relatives and friends outside Germany, particularly through phone calls. The multiple regression analyses were unable to prove effects of language choice and maintenance of transnational contacts on the proficiency test scores of the children. While children show a preference for German in media consumption,

frequent reading in Russian tends to improve their Russian proficiency. Furthermore, reading in Russian also has a significant effect on the proficiency test scores of the parents.

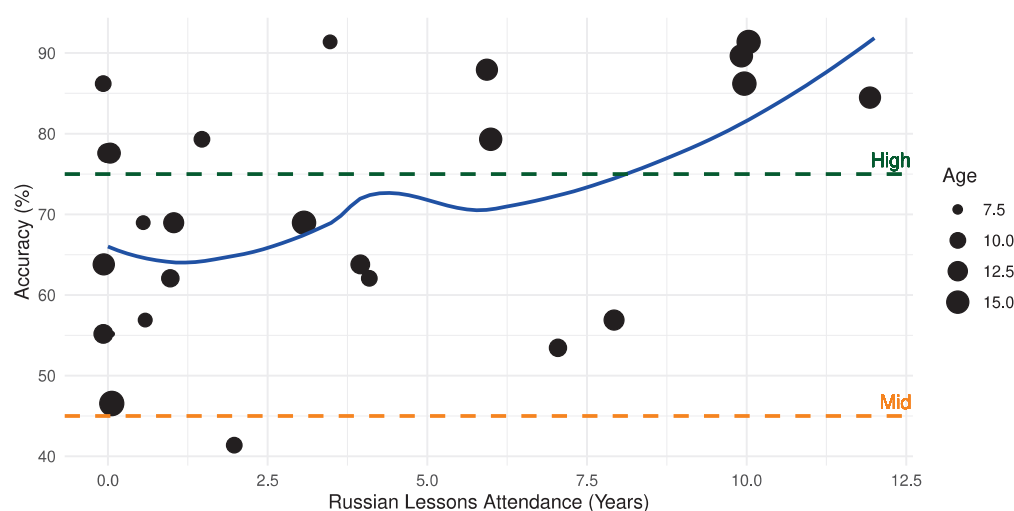
**Table 9.** Reading, browsing the internet and watching TV, movies by (grand)parents on a scale from 0 to 5 (0 = no use of the media; 1 = only German; 5 = only Russian).

| Generation   | Reading Books       | Browsing the Internet | Watching TV, Movies |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Parents      | 2.91<br>(SD = 1.35) | 2.81<br>(SD = 0.79)   | 3.34<br>(SD = 0.85) |
| Grandparents | 4.42<br>(SD = 0.61) | 3.52<br>(SD = 1.38)   | 4.11<br>(SD = 0.81) |

### 3.4. Language Management: Russian Language Education

Schwartz (2008) emphasized the pivotal role that both formal and informal educational settings play in fostering proficiency in the home language. The involvement of the children in Russian language classes, as reported by them and their parents, covers a broad spectrum. Typically, the children in our study participate in Russian language lessons for about 1 to 2 h each week, yet there is significant variation in how regularly they attend these lessons and in the overall length of their involvement, ranging from those who have never attended Russian lessons to those who have been engaged in such educational activities consistently for as long as 12 years (Mean = 3.6, SD = 3.91).

Böhmer (2016) shows in her study that bilingual children who were exposed to Russian literacy instruction perform better in both of their languages than those who did not have this kind of structured input. Through linear regression analysis, we assessed the impact of Russian lesson attendance on language proficiency scores, which yielded a positive correlation: Each year spent in Russian classes correlates with a 1.71-point score increase ( $p = 0.024$ ), signifying a substantial benefit of prolonged instructed input for developing language skills (see Figure 2). However, this factor accounts for only about 20% of score variation ( $R\text{-squared} = 0.2025$ ), indicating that other influential factors are at play. Thus, our findings emphasize an important but not decisive role of Russian language instruction for boosting proficiency in the heritage language. Moreover, the analysis reveals that age does not have a significant impact on scores, indicating the consistent effectiveness of Russian lessons across different age groups.



**Figure 2.** Impact of Russian lesson attendance on cloze test score: linear regression (blue line) and LOESS analysis, age indicated by size of the dots. The blue line provides a summary of the linear relationship between years of Russian lessons and test accuracy.

### 3.5. Language Ideologies

Language ideologies were tested by presenting statements to our participants regarding attitudes towards the Russian language and culture, which they had to evaluate by using a Likert scale from 1 (“completely disagree”) to 4 (“completely agree”). Overall, family members express a positive attitude towards the Russian language and culture across the board (see Table 10). However, the children’s views differ from those of the adults, especially regarding the role of Russian in preserving the literary heritage (Statement 2), attitudes towards literacy (Statement 7), and Russian language teaching in German schools (Statement 8). As noted in the previous sections, only a subsample of the children in our study regularly read in Russian and evaluate their literacy skills as high. Interestingly, one-third of the grandparents (31,5%) do not perceive any instrumental value in Russian for professional purposes and believe that its use negatively impacts German language skills.

**Table 10.** Language attitudes by generation on a Likert scale from 1 to 4 (1 = completely disagree; 4 = completely agree).

| Statement                                                                                    | Children                 | Parents                                    | Grandparents                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| (1) Knowledge of the Russian language can be used for professional purposes/at work.         | -<br>2.92<br>(SD = 0.81) | 3.18<br>(SD = 0.93)<br>3.90<br>(SD = 0.3)  | 2.89<br>(SD = 0.99)<br>4<br>(SD = 0)       |
| (2) The Russian language gives access to Russian culture and literature.                     | -<br>3.36<br>(SD = 0.7)  | 3.87<br>(SD = 0.34)<br>3.28<br>(SD = 0.92) | 3.73<br>(SD = 0.73)<br>2.78<br>(SD = 1.13) |
| (3) I believe that preserving the culture and language of the country of origin makes sense. | 3.56<br>(SD = 0.58)      | 3.53<br>(SD = 0.62)                        | 3.79<br>(SD = 0.42)                        |
| (4) Proficiency in Russian does not negatively affect proficiency in German.                 | 3.32<br>(SD = 0.69)      | 3.75<br>(SD = 0.44)                        | 4<br>(SD = 0)                              |
| (5) I love listening to Russian speech.                                                      | 2.64<br>(SD = 0.98)      | 3.43<br>(SD = 0.67)                        | 3.84<br>(SD = 0.50)                        |
| (6) I love speaking Russian.                                                                 | 2.56<br>(SD = 0.92)      | 3.03<br>(SD = 0.86)                        | 3.21<br>(SD = 0.79)                        |
| (7) I love reading and writing in Russian.                                                   | 3.04<br>(SD = 1.02)      | -                                          | -                                          |
| (8) Russian should be taught as a school subject in Germany.                                 |                          |                                            |                                            |
| (9) When I have children, I want them first of all to learn the Russian language.            |                          |                                            |                                            |

When analyzing the correlation between the expressed attitudes towards the Russian language and culture and the scores from the proficiency test, we obtained some interesting findings for the group of the parents, which reached significance in statistical testing. Specifically, statement 3, which expresses a belief in the importance of preserving the culture and language of the country of origin, positively influences parents’ language proficiency scores (coefficient = 8.175;  $p = 0.017$ ). Similarly, statement 7, indicating positive feelings towards reading and writing in Russian, also positively impacts their proficiency scores (coefficient = 3.813;  $p = 0.07$ ). Although not significant, the trend is evident. These findings underscore the importance of favorable attitudes towards literacy and the preservation of Russian culture and language for maintaining language proficiency in adults.

Statement 9 (Table 10) was presented only to the children in order to receive information on whether they are willing to prioritize Russian language learning when raising their own children. We received various responses concerning this item. While the regression analysis did not reveal statistically significant findings, there appears to be a trend suggesting a potential link between children’s favorable disposition towards transmitting the heritage language to the following generation and their proficiency test scores (coefficient = 8.764;  $p = 0.072$ ).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Perspectives on Russian Language Use and Maintenance in the Three Generations (RQ1)

Our study revealed commonalities and differences in language practices and preferences across the three generations: While overall the language of family interactions in the investigated families is mostly Russian, it is first and foremost the grandparents, who act as a stronghold for the preservation of Russian as a home language. They unambiguously identify Russian as their native language and consider it their stronger language (Table 2). Although they outperform their children (=the parent generation) in the self-assessments regarding literacy and oral skills in Russian, the experimental testing of proficiency in Russian revealed, on average, lower scores compared to the parents' group (Figure 1), which, however, might be an effect of more recent experiences regarding (language) testing in case of the parents compared to the grandparents. The grandparents use Russian for addressing all other family members and are addressed themselves by others predominantly in Russian (Table 6). They place a high value on maintaining Russian, because it secures access to Russian literature and culture, and show slightly higher emotional attachment to Russian compared to the other groups in our study. Last, but not least, they call for more institutional support of the Russian language in German educational settings by indicating that they would appreciate if Russian is regularly taught as a school subject in German schools (see Table 10).

Earlier in the paper, we compared the role of parents to a bridge between the two languages and cultures. They predominantly consider Russian to be their stronger and native language, although almost one-quarter of the parent sample state that they perceive both languages, Russian and German, as their native languages (Table 2). As regards language preferences, they prefer Russian when talking to their spouses and their parents (=the grandparent generation), but when communicating with their children, they also show tendencies of accommodating to the language choices of their children, which results in a higher share of German when addressing their children compared to the grandparents (Table 6). Like the grandparents, they attribute a high emotional and cultural value to Russian but even consider it to be potentially beneficial for job purposes, which is different from the grandparents.

The children in our sample exhibit a shift regarding language dominance and preferences, which is quite characteristic for heritage speakers: More than half of them consider both Russian and German their native languages, while just one-third attributes this status exclusively to Russian (Table 2). According to their self-perception, German is clearly their dominant or stronger language, which is certainly linked to the weak assessment of their literacy skills in Russian (Table 3). Nevertheless, they state that they predominantly use Russian when talking to their parents and grandparents, whereas German is the preferred language when communicating with siblings. In general, they exhibit a higher degree of dual language use in the family than the other family members (Table 6). Russian has a high emotional value for the children (apart from reading and writing), but they perceive more problems in dual language development than the other two groups. This might be one factor that contributes to the fact that their commitment to transmit Russian to their own children is not at the ceiling and shows considerable interindividual variation. Furthermore, they do not see the need for more institutional support of the Russian language in the German educational system (Table 10).

To sum up, a notable generational shift from grandparents to children can be observed in the investigated families. This observed shift regarding language proficiency and use points to the evolving sociolinguistic dynamics in immigrant families. This reflects broader trends in language shift and maintenance in immigrant communities, which have often been described by resorting to the 'cascade-model' proposed originally by Gonzo and Saltarelli (1983) and developed further in recent studies on heritage language transmission (cf., e.g., Bayram et al. 2019). These findings underscore the need for supportive policies that encourage multilingualism and cultural diversity.

#### 4.2. Impact of Family Language Policies on Proficiency in Russian (RQ2)

Not surprisingly, the proficiency in Russian among the children was significantly different from that of the parents and grandparents. Interestingly, the parents' generation scored slightly higher on the Russian proficiency test than the grandparents ( $M = 93.55$ ,  $SD = 5.71$  vs.  $M = 89.94$ ,  $SD = 5.86$ , respectively), but nearly all parents and grandparents showed a high level of proficiency in Russian. The children's results on the Russian proficiency test showed a wide range of scores ( $M = 70.21$ ,  $SD = 14.83$ ), which is a characteristic trait of heritage speakers who are commonly divided into basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal speakers according to their differences from the baseline (see Polinsky and Kagan 2007). To address the question, why some children become active and proficient users of multiple languages from an early age, while others do not, despite similar exposure (De Houwer 1999), we explored the impact of several components of FLP, specifically (i) language preferences in family communication, (ii) contact with Russian speakers outside Germany, and (iii) media consumption on differences in proficiency scores across generations. The statistical analyses performed for this study did not reveal a clear effect of these factors, especially the proportion of Russian or German use in family communication, on the proficiency levels of the children. Most families seem to employ a strategy of maximizing Russian language input (De Houwer 2007; Yamamoto 2001) and generally favor Russian as the main language for family conversations. Additionally, transnational contacts are maintained in most of the families, although they seem to be not quite frequent. The same applies to language choices for media consumption, where Russian seems to be favored only for watching TV and films, which again is related to the low degree of literacy skills among the children in this study. Parents who predominantly read in Russian rather than German tend to achieve statistically significant higher scores on language proficiency tests. Similarly, children who engage more frequently in reading Russian demonstrate notable improvements in their language proficiency scores, pointing towards a trend rather than a statistical significance. This leads to our last research question.

#### 4.3. Relevance of Literacy Skills and Heritage Language Instruction for Language Maintenance (RQ3)

Given recent research highlighting a crucial connection between literacy skills and language maintenance (Hammer and Miccio 2006; Howard et al. 2014; Limbird et al. 2014; Rhys and Thomas 2013; Zhang and Koda 2018), we included this aspect in our research design. Similar to the mentioned studies, we found that higher self-reported literacy skills regarding reading and writing correlated with increased scores in the proficiency test. Interestingly, not only literacy skills in Russian, but also in German, affects Russian proficiency scores, especially in children. This finding is in line with previous studies investigating the effect of literacy skills on bilingual language development (cf., inter alia, Böhmer 2016 for heritage speakers of Russian in Germany). One possible explanation is that strong literacy skills in any language can enhance overall cognitive and linguistic abilities, which, in turn, support proficiency in other languages as learners have developed higher metalinguistic awareness and/or are able to transfer structures from one language to the other (cf. the famous Interdependence Hypothesis proposed by Cummins 1991). Regarding the effect of heritage language instruction, we found a positive correlation between the duration of attendance of Russian language classes and enhanced general proficiency in Russian. This testifies to the vital role of formal language instruction in developing heritage language skills, with duration of instructed learning being a key factor, as has been stated already in previous studies (Brehmer and Mehlhorn 2018). This highlights the critical importance of integrating structured input from Russian language classes into the upbringing of bilingual children. Such prolonged instructed learning not only enhances their proficiency in the heritage language but also promotes the development of a balanced bilingualism. These insights have significant implications for educational policy and curriculum design, advocating for the inclusion of heritage language programs in the educational system to nurture bilingual or multilingual development from an early age.

## 5. Conclusions and Outlook

This study was able to confirm many findings of previous studies dealing with Russian-speaking families in Germany and the sociolinguistic situation of Russian as a heritage language in Germany. The result that Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany exhibit a high degree of loyalty towards their home language and try to maintain its dominant position as the language of family conversations has been indeed noted before (cf., e.g., already Achterberg 2005). The fact that heritage speakers who were born in the host country are the locus of an ongoing language shift with heightened dual language use is also a commonplace in research on heritage languages, as is the high degree of interindividual variability regarding their proficiency in the heritage language. However, in the case of the population under focus, Russian stays an integral part of their identity with first of all emotional values attached to it. Representatives of all generations agree in having a very positive attitude towards Russian, they love to speak it and listen to it, and it is an important means to stay in contact with relatives and friends in Russian-speaking countries (see Table 10). The high degree of emotional identification with Russian and its role in identity building is also evident from the interviews that we conducted with every respondent, which will be the topic of a separate study. However, grandparents, like parents and children, primarily emphasize the value of Russian for intrafamilial communication and its role as a bridge to the cultural roots of their ancestors rather than for future professional opportunities. This rather ‘backward’ orientation confirms the findings of previous studies (see, e.g., Laleko 2013; Anstatt 2017). Although this study could not confirm a significant impact of the investigated components of FLP on the Russian proficiency scores of the family members (especially the children, as they show the highest degree of interindividual variability, cf. Paradis 2023), we were able to determine the important role of the grandparents as a stronghold for the maintenance of Russian as the language of family conversations. The inclusion of grandparents as representatives of the extended family in studies on FLP goes beyond the scope of most of the studies in the field. Our results, however, reveal that they perform an important function in shaping the selected aspects of FLP in the families of our sample. Thus, an important conclusion to draw from our study is the fact that future sociolinguistic studies should definitely pay attention to language practices that go beyond the nuclear family and also include grandparents as important agents contributing to FLP. The extent of their influence on FLP is certainly contingent upon various factors, primarily the frequency of interactions between grandparents and their children and grandchildren, which is influenced by their place of residence (cf. Braun 2012). More research should be devoted to the impact of these factors on the role of grandparents in shaping FLP. Overall, the role of grandparents should, in general, not be underestimated.

An obvious limitation of this study lies in the fact that we focused on single aspects of FLP, to put it more precisely: on aspects of explicit or overt FLP (e.g., attendance of heritage language classes, language choices for communicating with other family members, values attached to Russian). Future studies should also include aspects of implicit or covert language practices and language management besides questions of literacy teaching and practices in the families, which, however, calls for other ways of data collection beyond questionnaires. Observations of real in situ practices and management strategies in family conversations allow for a more inclusive approach encompassing both explicit and implicit aspects of FLP. Furthermore, longitudinal studies on the development of FLP in the same family over time and the factors that decide about the direction of this development are badly needed, as well as studies focusing on its long-term impact on language proficiency and cultural identity of family members (see, however, Meng and Protassova 2017 for such an approach). Despite the existence of numerous studies on the Russian-speaking community in Germany, including sociolinguistic ones, there still remains much to be done.

**Author Contributions:** Both authors have contributed substantially to this paper. O.B. provided the main body of the text for the first draft and was responsible for coding of the data and analyzing it,

using both descriptive and inferential statistics. She took part in collecting the data and contributed to the materials (questionnaire). B.B. was responsible for the overall project design and also contributed substantially to the materials used for data gathering. Furthermore, he introduced smaller text passages and critically revised the whole text before publication. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (Ethics Commission) of the University of Konstanz (IRB Statement 22/2021).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets generated during the current study were collected using the SoSciSurvey platform. These datasets are publicly available in the Zenodo repository at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13880042>. Researchers interested in using the data are encouraged to follow the repository guidelines for access and cite this paper in any resulting publications.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Appendix A Cloze Deletion Test—The MC Format (English Below)

Мыши умеют петь. Поют, (1) так/или/как правило самцы, в надежде (2) завоевать/обладать/раскрыть симпатию самок. Это еще (3) в/на/с 2005 году обнаружили ученые (4) на/из/по Университета Вашингтона, доказав, что (5) мелодичным/мелодичные/мелодичных звуки, которые издают влюбленные (6) мыши/пары/ученые, отнюдь не случайные. Из (7) этих/тех/таких звуков сотканы узнаваемые музыкальные (8) мелодии/композиции/записи. К сожалению, мышинные песни находятся (9) в/на/с той части диapaзона, который (10) не/но/ни доступен для восприятия людьми. (11) Наши/их/ваши “произведения” можно уловить только (12) с/без/о помощью специальных приборов.

Мыши (13) пищат/зовут/поют очень старательно—не менее (14) тихо/плавно/затейливо и разнообразно, чем певчие (15) птицы/звери/животные. Иногда кажется, что они (16) будут/могут/учатся почти осмысленно менять высоту (17) и/а/о продолжительность издаваемых (18) произведений/сочинений/звуков. Через 7 лет в результате (19) анализа/исследования/расследования, которое провели в 2012 (20) год/году/годом американские ученые из Университета Дюка (21) в/на/с Северной Каролине обнаружили: мыши (22) способны/готовы/уверены еще обучаться пению, запоминать (23) и/а/о воспроизводить новые подслушанные мелодии, (24) и/а/о не только свои собственные (25) песни/стихи/рассказы.

Мыши могут даже петь хором. (26) Среди/Вне/Из приматов таким талантом обладает (27) иногда/лишь/так же человек. Ученые собрали несколько мышинных самцов в (28) одну/вторую/дорогую клетку, рядом—в другую—(29) поставили/посадили/положили самку и слушали, что (30) он/она/они ей споют. Через некоторое (31) место/время/расстояние самцы словно бы спевались (32) и/а/о начинали распевать хором. При (33) этом/этого/этому, основной мелодией становилась та, (34) некоторую/которую/которыми предлагал более сильный самец.

(35) Чуть/очень/совсем раньше японские ученые из (36) музея/школы/рынка экспериментальных технологий Университета Осаки (37) сообщали/сообщал/сообщили о похожем выдающемся открытии (38) в/из/к их проекте “Эволюция мыши”. (39) Иностранцы/Ученые/Учителя настолько продвинули группу мышей (40) на/вдоль/по эволюционной лестнице, что они (41) и/а/у них запели как птички. Началось (42)

всё/весь/вся с одной мыши, у (43) которой/которую/которая обнаружили вокальные (44) ноты/инструменты/способности—рассказывает главный руководитель экспериментов. (45) Теперь/Тогда/Скоро у нас целый хор— (46) почти/около/наверное сто поющих мышей.

Поющая мышь (47) получился/получилась/получилось после того, как ее предкам был (48) выдан/задан/дан ген, который отвечает у людей (49) за/от/из развитие речи. Потом (50) исследователи/родители/врачи дали этим генетически модифицированным (51) мышам/мышами/мышам свободно размножаться—то есть, (52) двигаться/двигался/двигать по эволюционной лестнице. И наконец, (53) в/на/с один прекрасный день” на свет (54) появится/появилась/появляется мышь, которая запела. Эксперименты (55) привлекают/преследуют/предлагают еще одну цель. Ученые (56) были/будут/будущие пытаются добраться до истоков возникновения речи. И (57) в/о/на мышах, по сути, моделируют (58) этот/тот/то процесс.

#### English Translation (without blanks):

Mice can sing. As a rule, male mice sing in hopes of being favored by females. This was discovered back in 2005 by researchers from the University of Washington, who proved that the melodious sounds produced by mice are indeed music-like, recognizable compositions. Sadly, the songs are produced at frequencies which cannot be perceived by human ear. The songs of mice can only be registered using special equipment.

Mice are elaborate singers. They sing as intricately as birds. In other words, they seem to have control over the pitch and length of the produced sounds. Seven years later after the original discovery, research conducted in 2012 by American scientists from Duke University in North Carolina showed that mice can also be taught how to sing and have the ability to memorize and reproduce melodies produced by others.

They can even sing as a group. In the animal world, such talent is usually considered to be found among humans only. Scientists placed several male mice in one cage, placed a female in a cage nearby and listened. After some time, males were singing as a group, in unison. At the same time, the melody produced by the strongest male was used as the main tune during the group singing.

A bit earlier, researchers from the University of Osaka in Japan reported a similar remarkable discovery in a project called “The Evolution of Mice”. The team was able to advance the singing abilities of mice such that they began singing like birds. “It all began with one mouse that demonstrated signing abilities.”-shares the lead researcher. “Now we have a large group of singing mice—about a hundred of them”.

A singing mouse was born after researchers gave its ancestors a gene which is responsible for speech abilities in humans. The genetically modified mice were allowed to procreate freely, and therefore, to evolve. Finally, one day, a singing mouse was born. Researchers pursue one other goal by conducting experiments with mice. They search for origins of speech abilities in humans and use mice to model the speech evolution process.

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## Article

# Life Trajectories of the Russophone Speakers in Germany: 30 Years of Observation

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**Abstract:** This article presents a multifaceted portrait of immigrants to Germany from the post-Soviet states. The article traces the paths of two families over the course almost of a third of a century after immigration, focusing on language use and integration into the new environment. In-depth interviews conducted at various stages of the integration process and age-appropriate tests served as research material. The content, text, and lexical analyses, as well as a linguistic biography method, were used. The research included four generations of Russian Germans and Jews in each family. Russophones in Germany have not had an easy time integrating but, ultimately, have a positive attitude toward their adoptive country. The results show that the German language became the primary means of communication outside the family and partly within the family where Russian dominates among the second and third generations. The oldest generation (great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers) were fluent in German to some extent; those who moved at the age of 20–40 learned it sufficiently for their jobs; their children studied in German preschools and schools and became completely bilingual; and the great-grandchildren were born in Germany. The younger generations have fully integrated into German society, although strong connections with locals exist among the older generations too. Proficiency in the Russian language is still maintained even among the great-grandchildren's generation, although not to the same extent as among the generation of young parents.

**Keywords:** language trajectory; linguistic integration; language maintenance; Russian-German bilingualism; institutional support; heritage language

## 1. Introduction

The late-Soviet and the post-Soviet events had an impact on every aspect of the social life, from politics and economic growth to interethnic interactions (e.g., Bassin and Kelly 2012; Belousov and Vlasov 2010; Isurin 2011; Lebedeva et al. 2021). The flow of emigration was triggered by necessity, opportunity, and motivation, led to significant sociolinguistic consequences, and has been studied in detail in numerous publications (e.g., Bloch 2024; Ovchinnikova 2022; Ryazantsev et al. 2018; Stasulane 2024). We believe it is important to show the family dynamics of multilingual adaptation to new living conditions in Germany over a long period of time—from the early 1990s to the early 2020s—using the example of linguistic practices in two immigrant families.

Hundreds of thousands of Russian Germans gradually immigrated to Germany from Kazakhstan, Russia, and other post-Soviet states (Ipsen-Peitzmeier and Kaiser 2006; Kaiser and Schonhuth 2015). Russian Germans, often referred to as Spätaussiedler (late resettlers), are individuals of German descent who migrated to Germany primarily after the fall of the Soviet Union. They were granted immediate citizenship upon arrival, benefiting from Germany's *jus sanguinis* citizenship laws, which prioritize ethnic descent over residency. This facilitated a relatively smoother integration into German society, as they were recognized as part of the German ethnic community. Despite this, Russian Germans have faced challenges

in their assimilation. Many feel a sense of disenchantment, as they often perceive themselves as not fully accepted by ethnic Germans. The Russian Germans decided to emigrate because it finally became possible and because political development in the successor states of the USSR (most Russian German immigrants came from Kazakhstan) did not appear to be promising, making hopes for the resurrection of German autonomy and prosperity within Russia elusive. The integration of immigrants into German Federal Republic's society posed social challenges and problematized much of the knowledge previously accumulated in the field of immigration studies (Struck-Soboleva 2006). Language and cultural hurdles, interruptions in the socialization process, and identity issues all resulted from the abrupt shift in the cultural environment and language community (Linchenko and Gartwig 2023). At first, there were no conceptual representations for the design of the admission system, nor were there any expectations regarding its outcomes. However, over time, the situation evolved, and newcomers adjusted their preferences and priorities accordingly (Panagiotidis 2019). Genkova (2021) shows how the social support impacted the acculturation strategies of Russians and Germans in Germany.

In parallel, Germany experienced a notable resurgence of Jewish culture, fueled by a growing population of Jews, particularly from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (Ben-Rafael 2015). Russian Jews have a different historical narrative and assimilation experience in Germany. The Jewish community from the post-Soviet states has often faced significant barriers to integration, rooted in anti-Semitic sentiments and traditional prejudices. Unlike Russian Germans, Russian Jews did not have the same legal recognition upon arrival, which complicated their path to citizenship and acceptance in German society. The assimilation of Russian Jews was further complicated by their distinct cultural and often religious identity. Many Russian Jews maintain strong ties to their cultural heritage, which can create a dual identity that is both Russian and Jewish. This duality often leads to a more complex assimilation experience, as they navigate the challenges of integrating into a society that may not fully embrace their cultural background. Soviet Jews were linguistically "Russianized" yet ethnically distinct, and these dynamics shifted post-immigration. Becker (2003) critically addresses the moral and historical discourse guiding German immigration policy for Russian-Jewish emigrants, highlighting the clash between constructed identities and the diverse real practices of the immigrants. The reversal of the moral emphasis on Russian Jews in the mid-1990s, particularly in the context of debates on forged identity papers, revealed its impact on immigrant self-situating and motivations for choosing Germany as a destination. The study also explored tensions arising from German expectations of Jewish identity performance, impacting the lives and experiences of the immigrants. Peck (2005) suggested shifting focus from why Jews choose Germany to how they live there and explored contemporary Jewish life, highlighting the complexities within the community and broader German society, touching on issues of history, responsibility, culture, and identity and hopes for a vibrant Jewish future in Germany. Geller and Meng (2020) claim that post-1990 Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union and Israel has amplified visibility in society while challenging established notions of Jewish identity in the country. Cronin (2019) analyzes the differences in the attitudes among the communities and demonstrates multiplicity of Jewish lifestyles in Germany.

At the Institute of German Language in Mannheim (IDS), a project called "Untersuchungen zur sprachlichen Integration von Aussiedlern" [Investigations into the linguistic integration of repatriates] was initiated at the end of 1992 (its results are presented for instance in Berend 1998; Meng 2001; Reitemeier 2006). Linguistic integration was defined as the acquisition of linguistic abilities that allowed immigrants to communicate effectively and comfortably with locals as well as cope with the basic duties of their new life in Germany. One of the directions was empirical studies focusing on the language learning of Russian-German children, comparing them to Russian-speaking and German-speaking monolingual children, based on their socialization situations. These children's language learning was an extension of current language skills; it was not necessarily a loss in language skills, but rather a rearrangement. This process unfolded differently for

grandparents, parents, and children, and we observed it over the course of three decades (e.g., Meng and Protassova 2016, 2022).

The research questions in this article are as follows: How do the language practices of immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in German-speaking environments evolve over time in relation to their professional aspirations, linguistic integration, and cultural adaptation? What factors influence their decisions to prioritize retraining, seek internships, and engage in linguistic blending? How do linguistic and cultural differences between Russian Germans and Jews affect their approaches to language maintenance and integration into the host society?

## **2. Theoretical Background: What Develops, What Remains, and What Fossilizes?**

Preconceptions against bilingualism often contribute to a lack of respect for the potential of growing up to be a multilingual (see Mehlhorn and Brehmer 2018; Putjata 2018). Immigrants typically maintain their native language while also learning the language of their new country, often using both languages in daily life. Children of immigrants usually become bilingual, with a strong command of the host country's language. However, they may still use their parents' language at home, albeit less frequently. It is common for their grandchildren to predominantly speak the host country's language, often losing proficiency in the ancestral language. This shift is often attributed to factors such as intermarriage, social integration, community and media influences, socioeconomic factors, and the predominance of the host culture in educational and social contexts. This three-generation model of linguistic assimilation, traditionally observed in earlier immigrant waves, applies to descendants of contemporary immigrant groups at different pace (e.g., Alba et al. 2002; Akhtar 2011; Hulsen 2000; Sevinç 2016; Wei 1994).

One goal of our project was to challenge prejudices. The study of Russian-speaking bilinguals has recently been extended to the countries beyond Europe. Venturin (2019), for example, carefully describes discrepancies between different immigrant generations using the models proposed by Ruben Rumbaut (2004) and applies them to young Russian-speaking immigrants to Australia and New Zealand. She presents the Russian speakers in Australia and specifies the relationship between language and identity, claiming that this relationship is affected by strong emotions. Hansen and Olsen (2023) studied emotional assimilation of the Russian Germans in Germany and discovered that they have a strong German identity.

Feliciano et al. (2019), utilizing qualitative interview and survey data, investigated ethnic identity development from mid-adolescence to middle adulthood among immigrant children from various countries, revealing that while ethnic self-identity labels became more stable in adulthood, their significance diminished, particularly among those born abroad, with many preferring labels linked to their origin country yet some adopting exclusively American-related labels, indicating diverse identity patterns influenced by ancestral ties and U.S. racial structures.

Although Russian in the diaspora is not the best-researched language, several significant works in the field can be mentioned (e.g., Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2007). While the study of Russian as a heritage language in the diaspora is still developing, the existing research highlights significant insights into the linguistic development of bilingual children with Russian as their L1. Some studies provide evidence of the language development of bilingual children whose L1 is Russian. Schwartz et al. (2015) compared bilingual children from various L2 backgrounds (English, Finnish, German, and Hebrew) against age-matched monolingual children and monolinguals one year younger in order to investigate noun–adjective gender agreement in Russian. In a similar study, Minkov et al. (2021a, 2021b) demonstrated that Russian-German bilinguals have better command of some grammatical rules common for Russian and German than children with another pairing language. Kupisch et al. (2022) provide evidence that German-Russian bilingual children are just as sensitive to gender assignment cues as monolingual children. Bilingual children's naming disadvantage grows as they get older in comparison to monolingual children, and

in multilingual situations, noun learning is more vulnerable than verb learning (Klassert et al. 2014). These studies demonstrate that bilingual children, particularly those with German as their L2, can exhibit a strong command of grammatical rules, similar to their monolingual peers. However, challenges such as a growing naming disadvantage and difficulties in noun learning in multilingual contexts indicate the complexity of bilingual language acquisition.

Our study also examines how family language policies and external linguistic environments shape language retention and attrition across generations. Some previous research has been dedicated to adolescents and young bilinguals. Isurin and Riehl (2017) collected reflections about integration, identity, and language maintenance in young immigrants. Tskhovrebov and Shamonina (2023) distinguish between different migrant generations' performance in Russian under the influence of German, whereas Hoops and Panagiotidis (2021) deal with their identities. All migrants became bilingual to different degrees (Brehmer and Usanova 2017). Anstatt (2011) analyzed the language of Russian-speaking youngsters in Germany in comparison with monolinguals and showed that attrition phenomena in the sphere of active vocabulary were detected in all of them without exception. Furthermore, attrition was noticeable in a variety of grammatical domains for the most part. In other cases, the amount of promised information indicated speech-avoidance behavior, and the speech speed was the same as or much lower than in younger children. With a shift in the linguistic environment during the early primary school years, attrition of the first language appears to be unavoidable. Minkov et al. (2019) and Kagan et al. (2021) demonstrated that the language policy in the USA, Germany, Israel, and Finland and self-identification processes influence the grade of language performance in L1 in L2 surroundings. These findings underscore the importance of further research to fully understand the nuances of Russian language development in bilingual and multilingual environments.

A linguistic biography (LB) is a concept within sociolinguistics that refers to the narrative of an individual's language experiences throughout their life (Franceschini 2022). A LB is a personal account of an individual's experiences with language throughout their life (Council of Europe 2024). It reflects on the languages they have learned, how they learned them, and how those languages have shaped their identity and experiences. It encompasses various aspects of language use, acquisition, and identity formation within a person's life story (Nekula 2021). An LB typically includes information about the languages spoken by the individual, their proficiency levels, the contexts in which they learned and used these languages, and the impact of societal and cultural factors on their language development (Johnstone 1999). The method to collect an LB recognizes that language is not static but evolves over time in response to social, cultural, and personal influences (Havlin 2022). By examining an individual's LB, researchers gain insights into how language shapes and is shaped by the experiences and identities of individuals within a particular sociocultural context (e.g., Favaro 2021; Weirich 2021). This approach helps to understand the complexities of multilingualism, language acquisition, language maintenance, and language shift within diverse communities (e.g., Haller 2014; Singer et al. 2022). A linguistic biography can cover topics such as the languages spoken in one's family and community growing up; the process of learning additional languages in school or through immersion; challenges faced when learning new languages; the role of languages in one's education and career; how proficiency in multiple languages has impacted one's life; feelings and attitudes towards the languages in one's repertoire; characteristics of other people's languages; and reflections on the language structure and use. An LB includes information on linguistic, cultural and learning experiences gained in and outside of formal educational contexts and promotes the development of proficiency in multiple languages.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Our study, conducted over several decades, highlights the importance of language exposure and parental attitudes in heritage language maintenance. By focusing on the

speech characteristics of the project participants, we trace their LBs. Long-term observation allows us to understand how their language practices align with the level of proficiency they have achieved in each language.

The extended family is the social unit that is most important for the linguistic integration of immigrants of all generations in Germany. In this situation, the selection of families to be observed was performed in a sporadic fashion in a Mannheim hostel, which meant that people from various social groups took part in the longitudinal study. The language competences, attitudes, and practices that Russian Germans bring with them from their home society have a significant impact on the path and outcomes of linguistic integration. By introducing cross-sections into this process and collecting linguistic data that allow the language status to be assessed at the relevant time interval, the results of an individual's language acquisition can be reconstructed. Observations of linguistic encounters, studies of electronically recorded oral communication, analyses of authentic texts, collecting self- and third-party linguistic competency ratings, and language tests were among the approaches used (Meng and Protassova 2022). The Russian-Jewish families were observed in their country of origin (three of them), followed by their time in hostels in East Germany (Protassova 2006), and, subsequently, in various environments throughout their life in Germany.

We are looking at LB interviews as linguistic interactions. Biographical interviews focus on the interviewee's life, including stations, constants, and changes, as well as the interviewee's assessment of them. The interviewer calls the interviewee's attention to his/her linguistic evolution in LB interviews. We observed the speech habits of a number of Russian German families, mostly from Kazakhstan. They arrived in the early 1990s and were accommodated in a hostel in Mannheim. The longitudinal study draws upon hundreds of interviews gathered from 10 German-Russian and four Jewish-Russian families over a span of 30 years. The Russian-Jewish families arrived around the same time but initially settled in the eastern part of Germany before later moving to the western part. The families were anonymized and are unidentifiable. No statements interfere with the integrity of their life and personality.

In addition, a C-test was administered with those Russian Germans who grew up in Germany (e.g., Mashkovskaya and Baur 2016). The C-test is a language proficiency assessment tool designed to evaluate a person's overall command of a foreign language, particularly in written form. Test-takers are required to reconstruct the missing parts of the text, which assesses their vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and reading comprehension skills.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Journey to Germany

The participants of the present study could be divided into two groups: Russian Germans, in common Russian-German parlance, *Rusaks*, and Russian Jews, known collectively as *contingent*. The former referred to the hostels as *lagerja* 'camps', apparently because of their historical experience in the Soviet Union, while the latter called their shelter *haim*, which sounds similar to the Hebrew 'life' and to the male name *Khaim*.

In this section, we will present the fieldwork conducted with two families, using the experiences of other families as background to enrich the overall picture. After leaving the hostel, the first one, the Steiners, a Russian-German family, moved to the western part of Germany; the second, a Jewish family, originally from Moscow, today live in Bonn. The Steiners' biggest problem in the hostel was that their baby girl was constantly sick. Grandfather Steiner spoke fluent German or, rather, a dialect he learned at home as a child. His son, however, had to attend a language course, *Sprachkurs*. This word was also Russified and shortened to *shprakhi*. Because of the baby's ill health and various household duties, the mother of the family had little opportunity to study. The second family, the Weiners (Russian Jews), relocated to the eastern region of Germany with their daughter, a middle-school student before emigration. The grandfather arrived later and settled down in West Germany. From his youth he, a WWII veteran, could speak some German and never

was shy to use it openly. The parents were concerned about the girl's integration into a new school. They all started learning German before emigration. Trying to consolidate their daughter's knowledge of Russian and understanding and appreciation of Russian culture, they read and re-read the Russian classics together with her. Despite differences in the physical locations of the hostels where the two families resided, the jargon they acquired and employed was lexically similar. In everyday conversation, members of both families referred to themselves as Russians, and Russian Germans also called themselves *Rusaki*.

Mixed ancestry can significantly influence the educational attainment of third-generation immigrants, often leading to distinct outcomes compared to their peers with single-ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Hunkler and Schotte 2023). In both cases, some of the ancestors were Ukrainians. Thus, the families reacted in similar way to the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine.

The situation of communal living in a hostel presupposes that people get to know each other. They visit each other, discuss common problems, and constantly give useful and sometimes useless advice to each other, especially in issues related to bureaucracy, paperwork, and legal regulations, as well as job hunting and buying their first cars in Germany. They exchange information as to which stores are the cheapest and share impressions of the "Russian" food stores where one can buy goods unavailable in German stores but essential for keeping a familiar diet and cooking favorite dishes. Ultimately, time spent in the hostel is a vital step toward integration. From old-timers, newcomers learn vocabulary related to bureaucracy: *auzidler*, 'resettler' (from the German *Aussiedler*); *sotsial* or *sotsialamt*, 'social bureau' (Sozialamt); *arbaizamt*, 'employment office' (Arbeitsamt); *kindergeld*, 'child benefits' (Kindergeld); *anmeldovat*, 'sign up, register' (sich anmelden); *tsojgnisy*, 'certificates' (Zeugnisse); *shtojery*, 'taxes' (Steuer); and *termin*, 'appointment' (Termin). Such items are learned through their use in the Russian speech of individuals who have lived in Germany for some time, rather than directly from German.

The spheres of language borrowing are related to the idiosyncrasies of integration: first and foremost, one must be able to name official organizations (such as kindergartens, schools, clinics, divisions of the municipalities) and items issued or processed via them, as well as registration processes. They also learn the vocabulary needed for shopping. Because pronunciation and understanding of oral speech are still an issue, some people twist German words and rearrange their elements. The frequency and invariance of such words reveals several things at once: these are new realities to adjust to; you cannot translate them into Russian because it would be unclear what you are talking about; this is a sign or a marker of the beginning of integration. Long and cumbersome words are frequently abbreviated, which makes communication easier. Many borrowed words contain parts that can then be used in other contexts. Immigrants intersperse their Russian speech with local toponyms, German conversation formulas, interjections, names of foods and other words frequently used in everyday conversations. For instance, various new forms are derived from the word *Tschüs!* 'Bye!' turning it into a noun in the plural and verbs: *chiusiki*, *chiuskat'*, and *perechiuskat'sja*. Some people have a habit of adding the German diminutive suffixes *-chen/-lein* to all nouns in a sequence, even to Russian, or Russian diminutive suffixes to German words, like *fraushka* and *herrushka*. Before the adoption of euros, some people referred to German money as *pfenishki*, while today they use *ojriki*, euros (both are endowed with Russian suffixes combining diminutive and endearing meanings), while others still use *rubles* and *kopecks* when counting money or discussing prices.

The syntactic constructions of the Russian language are also influenced by the interference with German or the desire to express the thought in a simple, understandable way: *после солнца*, 'after the sun'; *строить снеговика*, 'build a snowman'; *рад за это*, 'happy for it'; or *уже пришло время к тому, чтобы спать*, 'it is already time to go to sleep'. Such structures are not a direct translation from German; instead, they emerge from hypothetical combinations, implying that such a structure is easier to apply in the language in which their thought would be formulated (compare to semantic primitives by Wierzbicka 2021).

Academic subject labels borrowed from German (like mathematics, chemistry, and biology) have become popular among young people. The names of discos are frequently employed in youth slang. One of our interviewees confessed that “Because you hear it all the time, swear words are the first ones you learn”. All narratives and discussions connected to Russia by “native” Germans are treated with special sensitivity (conversations, arguments, condemnations, and memories), and such situations are vividly recalled. Every now and then, the name of Hans the watchman, the sole “true German” whom the residents see on a daily basis, appears in conversation. “He likes to *betroit*’ [from German *betreuen* ‘supervise’] us”, says one respondent (borrowed words are pronounced in a Russian way).

Children begin to attend kindergarten or school, and they serve as conduits between the family and the dominant society. Myths about the German educational system are passed down from one generation of the residents to the next. School gives the following first impressions: it is like work, it is rare that youngsters think of the lessons as a means to learn something that inspires and excites them, and it is gloomy. The “good news” is that everything is very orderly and rigorous, and the lesson lasts exactly the amount of time specified in the rules. Unfortunately, if teachers do not make a particular effort to encourage communication between the novices and their classmates, friendships and even simple dialogues with peers rarely emerge. Some young people claim that during their first two years at school, they never spoke to anyone at recess except their Russian-German co-ethnics. If the school has Russian language teachers, newcomers instantly establish a special relationship with them. Later, more and more friends are “true” or “local” Germans, yet friendships with other “Russians” who speak German fluently but whose culture is much closer to their parents’ homeland traditions lasts for years. However, the communication is primarily in German, with some Russian words and references to family culture interspersed.

In the dorm, many conversations circle around romances with refugees and displaced persons from other nations, such as Poland, Romania, and countries of the former Yugoslavia. Love stories and new friendships emerge and are discussed; these new relationships are attractive by the novelty of multicultural connections, some sort of “restitution” for the lost multiethnic homeland. Adolescents miss friends who have remained in their homeland. They mature faster than their peers, because they have more responsibilities at home, e.g., they often have to act as translators and interpreters for their parents, because they pick up the new language faster than adults. Naturally, it is very hard for them to carry out these tasks because their lexicon in German covers topics studied at school but has little to do with legal, bureaucratic, medical, and other issues; moreover, their parents do not understand that special training is needed to translate properly. In families in which education is a high priority goal, children are often told that they must study hard in order to find decent jobs and make good careers. Later, it becomes prestigious to marry a “true” or “local” German, although a lot of young people find spouses in their in-group.

Russian Germans start attending church and switch to the local annual cycle of holidays, although some of the Soviet festive traditions persist. Those who arrived in the last 20 years are familiar with the new or re-established Russian holidays, but few are liked as much as the New Year and Easter. The Jewish religion is the central theme of *Haim*, although many were completely ignorant of Judaism or the Jewish way of life before arrival in Germany. For the Russian Jews, Christmas was first associated with the Soviet New Year; later, some started observing Jewish holidays, but there are also those who give tribute to all three calendars: German, Jewish, and Russian.

Tags, interjections, introductory words, and stable phrases: such as *doch*, ‘still’; *tut mir leid*, ‘sorry’; *Gott sei Dank*, ‘thank God’; *normalerweise*, ‘usually’; and *wieso*, ‘why’; are words that speakers enjoy using because they add color to their speech without requiring deep knowledge of the language or grammatical consistency. “And everything else *dazu*”, ‘in addition’, is an example of how the Russian construction comes to rely on the German word. Short and expressive German communicative words are swiftly assimilated, such as *gut*, *schön*, *ja*, *nein*, *Danke*, and *bitte*, which are readily inserted into the Russian speech.

Borrowed words are sometimes encountered with translations or descriptions, such as “After school, this, *raukhepause* [should be *Raucherpause*], smoking break, that’s it”, or “The automobile had to be *otshlepit*’ [from German *schleppen*, ‘drag’], towed, in short, dragged away”, which has a humorous effect because it is a homophone of the Russian “spank”.

Life in the hostel unfolds in front of everyone’s eyes; talk, gossip, and stories abound. The inhabitants visit each other at any time of the day and often spontaneously without prior arrangements, as it is common in Russia. They may drop in for a short chat or stay for hours. *Haim* is a relatively restricted environment, in which people from various parts of the former Soviet Union—Armenia, Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan—as well as from Poland, Rumania, Somalia, and others, not all of them Jews, coexist, each bringing their own customs, language variants, way of thinking, cuisine, patterns of hospitality, etc. Getting to know each other, tenants try to figure out how different families bring up their children, how they spend their leisure time and manage their economies: how much they spend and how much they save. Neighbors start going out together, visiting restaurants and nightclubs; they also do sports together, playing football, volleyball, or other team games. At first, the mixture of food smells is overwhelming, because everyone still uses familiar recipes, be it pies, shish kebabs, mayonnaise salads, or cream and custard cakes. Almost every week someone has a birthday, and neighbors are frequently invited to join celebrations.

The hostel is a birthplace of immigrant folklore. There are legends about some personalities whose fate gave unexpected twist in Germany. They may have left the hostel a long time ago or never even lived there, but the tales survive and are gradually enriched with fantastic details. There are hilarious stories about pitfalls awaiting migrants in the first period of adjusting to their new country. Many of the inhabitants get nicknames, e.g., a short man is called *Minimal* after the name of a supermarket chain. In general, tenants like Germany, Germans, and the German way of life. They sometimes repeat the maxim pronounced by one of them: to live here feels like being tourists who sometimes travel abroad to visit department stores.

In the first years, a lot of talk is devoted to the acquisition of German. There are discussions about difficulties of grammar and pronunciation. Methods of learning new words are shared and compared. Linguistic terms are explained, and observations about different accents, standard language vs. dialects are made (colloquial German vs. *hokh* German, Hochdeutsch, or literary German). Russian Germans are often astonished to discover that their parents, who have maintained their dialect, talk “incorrectly”. They delight in recognition when they hear a word they remember from infancy but have completely forgotten as it is not used in the speech of native Germans or in the language courses (e.g., *Stiefel*, ‘boots’). When they find their vocabulary in German is insufficient to express themselves, they insert Russian terms or symbols of reality; in fact, a few years after arrival, when attrition takes its toll, they are confronted with the same problem when they speak Russian and often insert German words to substitute for the forgotten Russian ones. The majority of Russian Germans and Jews follow the same strategy: instead of sitting in class, which is particularly tough for men, they prefer to go back to their occupations as soon as possible. When they observe youngsters making rapid progress in language learning, they conclude that environment is everything and communicating with German speakers at work will teach them better than any course. Nevertheless, Russian-speaking academics feel that they need to learn as much German as possible.

After moving from the hostel to an apartment, émigrés acquire vocabulary related to their “own” (or rather rented) home: (*shlafzimmer*, *tapety*, *tepih*, and *shild* or ‘bedroom, wallpaper, carpet, and sign’). They learn the related slang: *warm* cost of the apartment, where ‘heating’ stands for all communal services vs. *kalt* cost, where ‘cold’ connotes rent alone. After getting a job, the terminology of work enters their lexicon (the correct German terms would be written with capital letters, but here they are used with Russian pronunciation, including a false stress, that is why they are written in a different way): to work *fest*, ‘permanently’; to get a *kundigung*, ‘Kündigung, to be fired’; to write a *beverbung*,

‘Bewerbung, job application’; to do *urlaub*, ‘Urlaub, to be on vacation’; and many others. Through personal experience, some people are unfortunately well versed in medical and legal jargon. Speech is enriched by deciphered pieces of advertisements or accidentally picked up words and phrases: *Wo ist meine schlanke Linie?* or ‘Where is my slender line?’—an expression meaning that the speaker would like to take care of how she looks; *Weil ich es mir wert bin*, ‘Because I deserve it’; and *Informieren Sie sich kostenlos und unverbindlich*, ‘Get free and non-binding information’. These and similar speech clichés are remembered because they are frequently repeated or because they were delivered with good pronunciation, in the advertising of desired goods, or in an emotionally colored context.

The time spent in the hostel was both stressful and rewarding for the young Steiner family. For the first time in their lives, they lived in an apartment that they did not have to share with others. They were eager to begin a new life in a new place and were not afraid of challenges. The daily struggles, disenchantments, and dilemmas of the first years seemed to be over. They would not like to repeat the experience of adaptation, but now they recall how difficult it was without sadness. The Weiner family remember their time in the hostel as being unlike anything else, like a trip to another nation, an experiment in a container, or a voyage to a deserted island as in popular TV reality shows. While traveling around the country, if they find themselves close to the hostel, they stop by and experience bizarre, melancholic, and emotional sensations, as if this were the spot where they spent their childhood or the house where they were born. The location of the hostel was not as pricey back then as it is now, but its value for them is different: it is the site of a one-of-a-kind experience not to be forgotten. Despite these nostalgic feelings, like the Steiners, the Weiners would not like to go through the experience of living in the hostel again. They note that, packed with events and new encounters and impressions, the period of living in the hostel appears to be longer than the actual time spent there. Both families eventually settled down, and they like their new homes arranged according to their tastes.

Our interviewees, the Steiners and the Weiners, moved out of the dorm into rented apartments. They told us that they were in touch with their former neighbors in the first year after moving: they continued to meet up, went to visit acquaintances in other towns, and learned about the fate of their former neighbors through them because these were their communities of practice during the socialization period. However, those who do not live nearby usually lose contact two or three years later. Perhaps this is due to a rejection of one’s own image as a novice, a “white crow” who by chance finds herself/himself in a group of people who are educationally distant or do not share values. As *émigrés* become better integrated, their social networks are changing and so are their allegiances and identity. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many Russian-German *Aussiedler*, in particular, display pro-Russian attitudes and are rather hostile towards Ukrainians. However, in our cases, old acquaintances were refreshed and both families helped Ukraine through their re-established network.

Even many years after migrating, learning a language remains a challenge; some people find it easier to grasp spoken language, while others find it simpler to do exercises. After 5–8 years, the attitude towards the adaptation time changes entirely: some view it as a particular phase of their life, full of hopes and expectations but also disappointments. It was akin to being on probation, a period full of bitter moments when you wished you could go back. Others, however, remember it as the longest pleasant time of their life. The number of interactions with first acquaintances dwindles, while connections with pre-emigration friends and family who are now dispersed across Germany are being reestablished. Regular visits to relatives and trips abroad become routine.

A major aim in terms of language is to find individuals one feels comfortable to speak to. These individuals need to understand the problems of expressing oneself in a language which is not your own. They should be patient and willing to listen to accented and fractured speech, ask questions to clarify the meaning of their interlocuter’s message, and correct mistakes but without humiliating him/her. It is not always possible to find such conversation partners, and as a result, some *émigrés* are too ashamed of their poor

command of German which hinders their occupational and social integration. New neighbors, work colleagues, and friendly elderly people become those with whom one can try speaking in German.

The expatriate families lived in their home country in a multicultural environment and then moved to a bilingual and multilingual setting in the host country, with Russian and German being the most essential languages for them. Those who had a profession before emigration usually want to return to it. Retraining and reintegration into the labor force remain the major goals for the educated. A common dream among them is to find a position as an intern, even if it would mean volunteering. This is seen as a chance to acquire new skills and improve one's language by learning relevant terminology. Language-learning reflections, as well as continual irritation at the sluggish pace of obtaining the requisite abilities, play an important role in everyday communication.

Those who found jobs requiring manual labor communicate primarily with immigrants from different backgrounds who use contact varieties of German that consist primarily of ready-made formulas. Their vocabulary is rather limited, since the native Germans they mostly talk to are not well educated. However, their professional lexicon and other language skills required for the job are excellent. They do not speak literate German but local dialects. After they acquire the clichés needed to carry out their tasks at work, their progress in the language stalls. If their job requires the use of written German, their language gradually becomes standardized. Their proficient-in-German children who once admired the ability of their parents to communicate with the locals now make fun of their bizarre German. Some individuals may still face judgment regarding their original German identity based on their family names and physical appearance.

Living in a German-speaking environment has an impact on the Russian language that is used by immigrants from the post-Soviet states. They grow so accustomed to inserting German words and phrases into conversations that they consider it an anomaly if their interlocutors do not code-mix: "Do you speak German at all? Why don't you try it? Just one word?" On the other hand, some Russian-German interviewees admitted that their Russian had become rusty, and they were unsure whether they would be able to maintain it. They observed that what happened to their ancestors' German in Russia was happening to their Russian in Germany (on their linguistic abilities, see also Meng and Protassova 2023a, 2023b).

When comparing the attitudes of Russian Germans and Jews to the role of German, the former feel that learning German entails using it all the time and everywhere, speaking it, and not distinguishing oneself from the locals. If they switch to Russian, it means nothing; in principle, they are able to ignore it; the way of life is primarily concerned with matters within a small and large family and circle of friends, preferably with native German involvement. The Jewish families want to master all the registers of literary language, to immerse themselves in a life similar to that at home (but not identical with it). All necessary information should be there, especially in the professional field, which includes active contacts beyond one's immediate environment. They are eager to maintain the way of life and language of the homeland. Some changes are inevitable, but they should be based on one's own ideas of the quality of life and not be overinfluenced by the worldview of the locals. Extensive social networks are kept up to date and function as a safety net.

There were ups and downs in the families we closely observed: the Steiners had a second child; both parents found jobs but for poor pay. They adjusted their way of life in an attempt to emulate the locals. The lifestyle of the family remained the same as it had been in Moscow before the departure. In the Steiner family, all children are now adults with families of their own. They received professional education and are employed. Other families moved out of their rented apartments into their own apartments or houses, often with small gardens, which was their dream. The father of the Weiner family has retired, and his daughter has married a man from Russia and started a family, now with a child of her own. The daughter's husband is well-established in the IT sphere although he learned

German as an adult. As an amateur football player, he quickly integrated and found a lot of friends with whom he speaks German. The daughter works remotely.

In Russian-German families, siblings who grew up in Germany predominantly use German with each other and both languages with their relatives. However, half of them struggle with written communication. Not all of the young adults are familiar with the Russian alphabet or are able to read it. These issues have been discussed in some of our previous publications. In the family we are considering, the German grandfather taught his grandchildren to read and write in Russian. In the Russian-Jewish family, the daughter sometimes uses Russian at work, while the granddaughter attends a bilingual daycare center. Nevertheless, at least half of their daily communication occurs in German.

Being able to create the local history of their life was crucial for the participants in the project: today they speak eagerly about moving from one apartment or house to another until they found what was suitable. They enjoy showing photos of their trips across the country and overseas, and they are proud to tell stories about reunions with old friends and people visiting them on special occasions. All families have wedding albums of their children, and they are proud of becoming grandparents. They feel similar to others who must recount a story of hard work and extensive study before achieving visible results.

#### *4.2. General Assessment of Language Abilities*

The young Russian-German participants were asked to complete a C-test. Spontaneous explicit accounts of participants' German acquisition, spontaneous assessments of their own German abilities, and spontaneous reports of other people's assessments of their German-speaking abilities were already known. The availability and usage of their German was a source of practical evidence. The C-test measures general language proficiency and is widely used in Germany (e.g., Grotjahn 2010). As mentioned before, the C-test is a valuable language assessment instrument, offering insights into language proficiency while being adaptable for various educational and research contexts. C-tests with participants and local Germans who belong to the same educational and professional level reveal that both groups do not differ statistically substantially on their respective levels of performance, as shown in Meng and Protassova (2022).

All participants have good general oral German skills after residing in Germany from their childhood on, allowing them to function securely and confidently in everyday and professional situations. In ordinary conversations, native speakers are frequently credited with "full mastery" of their original language. Persons with a migratory past are sometimes considered less fluent in the majority language than people without a history of migration. This does not have to be the case, however, as our findings demonstrate. Within each of the two samples, German abilities span a wide but comparable range.

During the Russian-language interviews, the phonic design of our participants' comments is predominantly target-language Russian; they speak like people who learned and practiced Russian in a Russian-speaking environment. However, most reflect German phonic influences, albeit to varied degrees. They are essentially non-existent among individuals who learned Russian almost completely in a Russian-speaking setting until early primary school age, or among those whose one parent is Russian. Almost everyone seems to have effectively adopted the word accent, which is quite changeable in Russian. Surprisingly, the discursive qualifications examined are all the same. All participants keep track of their comprehension progress and are able to discriminate between what they understand and what they do not, as well as support the resolution of comprehension issues using various ways (e.g., Meng and Protassova 2020). They contribute to the conversation using interjections and particles. All subjects can follow simple, everyday language question-and-answer sequences, though most of the time only in bilingual mode. Not all participants have the skills necessary to construct complicated utterance chains, give them a unified structure, and design them in a listener-friendly manner. In all areas, there is a significant disparity between receptive and productive ability in the area of semantic qualification. Even though our subjects are capable of comprehending a wide range of words and word

combinations, they are unable to apply them directly to the creation of their own conversation contributions. Furthermore, their vocabulary must be differentiated and expanded beyond the scope of everyday linguistic subject areas. The basic structures of nominal and verbal inflection, as well as the usage of verbal aspects, are usually present and available in the sphere of morphological-syntactic qualifying, although some uncertainty is expressed in irregular forms. Almost none of the participants have sufficient literal Russian language qualifications. Some individuals have learned the Cyrillic alphabet through personal or familial efforts, or through occasional exposure to non-systematic lessons. None of these individuals received native-language training, including native-language literacy.

After analyzing the data, Meng and Protassova (2022) concluded that language skills serve important purposes in communicating with partners in various ways. These skills allow for the transfer of knowledge, the coordination of activities, and the expression of sentiments in the respective language, and they are able to do so because they embody the individual appropriation of the language's socially constructed linguistic forms of action. Written language abilities, such as reading and writing in Russian, are not considered as important as oral communication. The results of the longitudinal study, in which Meng and Protassova, together with around 70 other people, have lived through life's ups and downs for more than a quarter of a century and witnessed the growth of about 25 children, are unprecedented. It will be impossible to replicate such a study due to the complete change in economic, political, and communicative circumstances. The socioeconomic situation in Germany and the rest of the globe has changed dramatically; the Soviet Union, where the participants grew up without access to the Internet, no longer exists. The knowledge obtained in the reception of newcomers and guiding and observing the acquisition of second languages contributes to a researcher's growing interest in studying linguistic integration. Nonetheless, achieving balanced multilingualism and life-enriching multiculturalism remains a challenge.

## 5. Discussion

Studies have previously shown that the rate of language shift can vary among different ethnic groups (e.g., Hochman and Davidov 2014; Sevinç and Backus 2019; Tran 2010). The third-generation groups often grapple with their identity, balancing their ethnic heritage with their integration into the host society. Studies suggest that feelings of belonging and identification with either the ethnic group or the mainstream society can influence language use. The experiences of the third generation reflect broader trends in ethnic integration and identity formation. While the three-generation hypothesis remains a useful framework for understanding language loss among contemporary immigrant groups, the outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and economic factors that can lead to varied experiences across different communities. The complex interaction of various integration factors is specifically illustrated in the chapter by Isurin (Isurin and Riehl 2017, pp. 135–57) in relation to different groups of immigrants—of Russian, German, and Jewish origin. However, they arrived in Germany significantly later and in a different political context than those we studied over an extended period.

Let us give an example. MG (anonymized), who is a Jew from Ukraine, is the owner of a Russian private school. She enumerates motives for studying Russian in Germany (noted in 2018):

- Grandparents are the most fluent ones in this language [Russian]. Children can easily explain themselves to the parent generation in the language of the environment, yet communication with grandparents becomes superficial if, by the age of 10, children can only manage to express themselves in 'baby talk' while grandparents speak an awful "emigrant" language [English or German]. This impedes intergenerational communication and impoverishes children by removing a whole layer of necessary family experience from them, not to mention the discomfort of grandparents' who would like to communicate with their grandchildren in a deeper and more subtle way than just inquiring "aren't you hungry?" or "have you washed your hands?"

- Great Russian literature, and similar things. This is the most ambitious plan for a Russian émigré parent. Few parents manage to reach the point when their children's Russian is sophisticated enough to read Tolstoy in the original, but some do.
- While almost everyone today agrees that bilingualism is beneficial, we can only genuinely guarantee this sort of bilingualism with our native language as a component. No amount of instruction can compensate for the absence of an environment.

MG emphasizes the importance of preserving the Russian language among the younger generation of Russian-speaking families in Germany. She highlights several key motivations for learning Russian: maintaining meaningful communication with grandparents, accessing the rich cultural heritage of Russian literature, and fostering genuine bilingualism. MG argues that without the native language as a foundational component, children risk losing a vital connection to their family's cultural and linguistic heritage, which can lead to a diminished intergenerational bond and an impoverished sense of identity. Not all families are aware of how they speak, whether or not they should mix languages, or whether they will need to help their child with learning to read or if it will happen naturally. This is a difficult task for families who are simultaneously dealing with everyday problems, striving to master the German language, and participating in the labor market. The achievements of the families could be higher, but they are relatively good for their conditions (cf. Bucca and Drouhot 2024; Pivovarova and Powers 2019; Zhao and Drouhot 2024).

Teaching Russian as a foreign language in Germany is a common practice in the education system. Russian is offered as an optional foreign language in some secondary schools and universities, often only as a third language option (after such language as English and Romance languages). The curriculum for Russian language classes includes grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and listening comprehension. There are also language schools and private tutors who offer Russian language classes for people who are interested in learning the language or in language maintenance (Bergmann 2014, 2021; Witzlack-Makarevich and Wulff 2017). There is a developed infrastructure in Russian and the possibility to communicate in various everyday situations (Brehmer 2021; Ritter 2021).

Despite the fact that more than 30 years after their arrival in Germany, German has become the dominant language for all of our study participants, Russian remains an intrafamilial language, especially in communication with relatives who have not yet learned German or who still live in Russian-speaking countries. Our participants felt that while German would be the most important language for their children, knowing other languages, such as Russian, would also be advantageous. The majority of individuals in the study alternate between a bilingual Russian-German mode and a monolingual Russian mode (see Grosjean 2013). This means that there are moments when they more often shift between Russian and German, and phases when they use more monolingual Russian.

In our case, both Germans and Jews seem to retain their ethnic identity. However, Russian Germans expected to be accepted in Germany as Germans, but those around them partly imposed a Russian-speaking identity, which persists to some extent in the third generation. Russian non-religious Jews maintain the Russian language partly because it is a part of their culture and identity. In both cases, the language is perceived as potential capital, and the presence of Russian-speaking relatives and friends highlights its practical value.

## 6. Conclusions

The language practices among immigrants from the post-Soviet states who now live in German-speaking environments are influenced by their professional aspirations, linguistic integration, and cultural adaptation. This process occurred in diverse ways for grandparents, parents, and children. Many adults seek to return to their previous professions and prioritize retraining and reintegration into the workforce. Some aspire to internships, even if unpaid, to improve their language skills and learn relevant terminology. Children's pursuit of happiness is not postponed; they strive to be themselves here and now. Living in a German-speaking environment leads to a blending of languages, with

individuals inserting German words into their Russian conversations. This linguistic fusion reflects their immersion in the local culture but also raises concerns about maintaining their native language.

Attitudes toward their time in hostels evolve over years, with some recalling it as a phase filled with challenges and others reminiscing about it fondly. As connections with pre-emigration friends and family are reestablished, social networks become vital support systems. Language use differs between Russian Germans and Jews, with the former emphasizing integration and the latter seeking to preserve their language and way of life from their homeland or accepting entrance into the Jewish community of practice.

More than 30 years after immigrating, the participants' German is strong, and Russian serves as a means of communication with relatives and friends outside the country. There are moments when they more often shift between Russian and German, and phases when they use more monolingual Russian. Those immigrants who arrived as children sometimes become balanced bilinguals, while those who migrated as adults have become functional bilinguals, coping with their second language in everyday situations.

Russian Germans identify with their German heritage while also maintaining aspects of their Kazakhstani, Russian, and Ukrainian backgrounds. Russian-Ukrainian Jews maintain a distinct Jewish cultural identity, which was reinforced through the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. Both groups share a Russian heritage; their assimilation processes in Germany are shaped by differing legal statuses, cultural identities, and societal perceptions, leading to unique experiences within the broader context of immigration and integration.

For families like those in our study, their life trajectories were both stressful and rewarding. They now reflect on the 1990s with nostalgia but would not want to relive this experience. Despite challenges, they have settled into their new homes and lives and invest time into their children and grandchildren. Those engaged in manual labor often communicate with immigrants using contact varieties of German, while their language proficiency may stall if they do not need to use written German. Ups and downs are part of the families' experiences, with some facing job losses and relocations, while others achieve stability and success in their adoptive country. Integration involves overcoming linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic challenges while striving to build a better future. The interaction of various factors underscores the exceptional contributions of our longitudinal research in understanding the long-term dynamics of heritage-language maintenance and bilingualism.

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## Article

# Maintaining the Indigenous Udmurt Language beyond the Community: An Autoethnographic Analysis

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**Abstract:** In this article, I emphasize the importance of maintaining and transmitting indigenous languages to the next generations, and I explore the motivations and difficulties of indigenous language speakers to do so when living far away from their native language community. The article is an autoethnographic analysis that amplifies the insider's perspective and reflects on my own thoughts, perceptions, and emotional reactions regarding my language use practices. Specifically, I analyze the use of the Udmurt language with my children and the process of writing a blog in Udmurt. As a researcher of the Udmurt language, I use my previous sociolinguistic studies in the analysis and place it within the broader context of indigenous peoples from Russia. Indigenous languages often involve the use of multiple languages simultaneously, including language mixing, which is entirely natural. In societies with a monolingual language ideology, such practices are seen as signs of linguistic incompetence, leading to feelings of shame or inferiority among indigenous speakers. This negatively impacts the preservation of indigenous languages. Raising sociolinguistic and emotional awareness about how indigenous languages function and sharing personal experiences, including negative ones, can help overcome these challenges.

**Keywords:** indigenous languages; Udmurt language; autoethnographic analysis

## 1. Introduction

As of today, there are approximately 7000 languages in the world, with the majority being indigenous and at risk of extinction (Eberhard et al. 2024). In recent years, there have been a significant number of scholarly publications emphasizing the importance of preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages that are facing disappearance (e.g., Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Hinton and Hale 2008; Zamyatin et al. 2012; Pasanen 2015). Nevertheless, the importance of maintaining indigenous languages is not an evident fact. Many language communities face challenges in passing their languages on to the next generations. This issue is particularly acute for most Finno-Ugric languages spoken in Russia, where many peoples struggle with language transmission, and some languages are highly endangered (UNESCO 2003). As a rule, an indigenous language is maintained within its natural linguistic environment, where the majority of the language community resides together and continues to use the language, or the speakers themselves or their surrounding communities have a clear conscious stance on language preservation (Pasanen 2015).

The main objective of this paper is to reflect on the process of maintaining an indigenous language from an insider's perspective and to discover what allows the speakers of indigenous languages to maintain their native languages while living in emigration and far beyond their native communities. In particular, I use the method of autoethnography to reflect on my own thoughts, perceptions, and emotional reactions regarding my language use practices. Specifically, I analyze the use of the Udmurt language with my children and the process of writing a blog in Udmurt. As a researcher of the Udmurt language, I use my previous sociolinguistic studies in the analysis and place it within the broader

context of indigenous peoples from Russia. In the autoethnographic analysis, I discuss the following questions: What influenced my decision to speak to my children in the Udmurt language and write a blog in Udmurt while living far from the language community? What difficulties arose in the process of transmitting the language to my children, and what are these difficulties related to? What helps to overcome these difficulties? How can the practice of writing influence the preservation of an indigenous language? What do my experiences have in common with those of other indigenous peoples living in Russia?

The method of autoethnography is important for studying indigenous peoples (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 16). Research on indigenous communities has often been conducted within colonial frameworks, treating them as mere objects of study and ignoring their agency. Since the 1970s, indigenous studies have worked to decolonize research methodologies (Smith 1999; Denzin et al. 2008; Kovach 2009; Bagele 2012; Virtanen et al. 2021). These efforts emphasize the importance of using indigenous methods and ethics, involving indigenous researchers and participants, and incorporating personal experiences and traditional knowledge into academia. This approach helps restore the voices of unrepresented indigenous peoples.

In this study, I identify the Udmurt language and people as indigenous. However, according to Russian legislation, the Udmurt people do not have this status. The official definition set by Russian legislation grants indigenous status only to communities with populations of less than 50,000. Nevertheless, within the broader international context, the Udmurt people may be viewed as indigenous, given their continued practice of traditional ways of life.

While decolonial methods in the study of indigenous peoples are actively discussed worldwide, this topic is new in the context of the indigenous peoples of Russia. Generally, the peoples of Russia are studied within definitions and research traditions established during the Soviet era. Indigenous scholars, educated within the Soviet and post-Soviet systems, actively research their own ethnic communities and languages, but often they do so from an external perspective, leaving their personal experiences and emotional insights out of their scientific research.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Udmurt scholars noted the unhealthy state of the Udmurt community, characterized by feelings of “inferiority” and “second-class status”, “isolation”, “shame in speaking the Udmurt language”, “unwillingness to pass the language on to children” (Nikitina 1992; Razin 1994; Grishkina 1994; Klestov 1998), and so on. Some of the Udmurt scholars attributed these feelings to aspects of ethnic psychology, which explains these issues by the psychological characteristics of the Udmurt ethnic group (Klestov 1998; Shklaev 2003).

Such negative feelings and attitudes particularly negatively impact the process of preserving and transmitting the language to future generations (Klestov 1998). However, there have hardly been any studies so far that have examined these issues from the insider’s perspective, using concrete examples from one’s own life or the lives of people close to the author, and described this experience based on scientific methods.

This article offers an autoethnographic analysis of my personal experience in preserving, studying, and writing in the Udmurt language. Researchers note (Ellis et al. 2011; Anderson 2006) that the method of autoethnography embodies, theoretically, an insider’s perspective; it enables a reflective rethinking of the emotional side of the studied process and connects lived experiences within a broader sociocultural context. Thus, my personal feelings of “inferiority” or “difficulty in passing the language on to children” can acquire a broader societal context, shaped by social factors rather than merely my personal experiences or my individual and ethnic psychological characteristics, as suggested by ethnic psychology theory.

The structure of the study is as follows: in the Section 1, I provide the general context of the study, namely the relevance of preserving indigenous languages and the need to examine this process from an insider’s perspective. The Section 2 provides general information about the indigenous Udmurt community and language, including Udmurts

living beyond the community. In the Section 3, I describe the main theoretical principles of the autoethnographic method, which form the basis of the analysis. The Section 4 presents the actual autoethnographic analysis, where I delve into my personal experience of preserving and transmitting the Udmurt language within my family, as well as analyze my experience of writing a blog in the Udmurt language. Finally, in the Section 5, I discuss my personal experience in a broader context, including scientific and theoretical contexts, and draw conclusions.

## 2. The Udmurt Community and Language

### 2.1. General Information

The Udmurt language belongs to one of the largest branches of the Finno-Ugric language family, namely the Permic branch which also includes the Komi languages, and it is spoken in the area between the rivers Vyatka and Kama on the southwestern side of the Ural Mountains in Russia. Today, there are approximately 386,000 Udmurt people, and among them, there are approximately 265,000 speakers of the Udmurt language (Census 2021).<sup>1</sup> The official numbers show that over the last ten years, the number of speakers has declined by around 100,000 people (Census 2011; Census 2021; Lallukka 2024). Even though the results of censuses are doubtful, it is evident even without numbers that the language situation is rapidly deteriorating. When I was in school in my village at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the whole school was Udmurt-speaking (outside of classes because school instruction was in Russian) and so was the entire village population. Today, after 30 years, the Russian language dominates among schoolchildren, and the Russian-speaking population of the village is growing fast as well.

Most of the Udmurt people live in the Udmurt Republic. This was established as the Votyak Autonomous Region in 1920 following the Bolshevik Revolution, and the early years of the Soviet state saw the official promotion of the Udmurt language and culture. It was during this period that the modern Udmurt literary language was formalized (Vakhrushev 1975; Karakulov 2006; Edygarova 2022). However, in the 1930s, much of the Udmurt intelligentsia suffered repression, and moreover, linguistic russification began, leading to a prohibition on language purism throughout the Soviet era. New vocabulary in Udmurt was forcibly borrowed from Russian (Tarakanov 1998; Edygarova 2022). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new wave of language purism emerged in response to the earlier restrictions, yet the modern standard language became increasingly unfamiliar to many Udmurt speakers (Edygarova 2013, 2014). Today, while efforts have been made to purify the literary language, spoken Udmurt is, as a rule, mixed with Russian (Edygarova 2018; Pischlöger 2016, 2021).

In 1995, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Udmurt language obtained the status as an official language of the Udmurt Republic (Krasil'nikov 1998). This was a sign of cultural and linguistic renaissance after the strict control and discriminative policy of the Soviet Union (Alpatov 2000; Zamyatin 2022; Vasiljeva and Voroncov 2008). Despite its official status, the language situation today is dramatic. In particular, the use of the Udmurt language in public sectors is very restricted (Casen 2013). Even though there are official instructions to translate all official names and signage of state organizations into Udmurt, it is impossible to receive any public services in the Udmurt language, except in villages where the language is still used. The use of Udmurt is mainly restricted to small sectors that are intended for the Udmurt language and culture (Casen 2013, p. 5).

The Udmurt language is taught as a school subject, but there is no school instruction in Udmurt. It is impossible to learn mathematics, biology, or history in the Udmurt language. Until 2007, the teaching of the Udmurt language was regulated by the regional government, but since that year, it has come under the responsibility of the municipalities (Zamyatin 2012; Protassova et al. 2014). As Protassova et al. (2014, p. 24) notice, due to discriminatory policies, many parents do not want their children to study their native language in school because bilingualism is seen as disadvantageous to them, and knowledge of the native language is deemed useless.

Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there have also been positive changes. In particular, among people born after the dissolution, there is a more positive attitude towards the Udmurt language (Bulatova and Protassova 2010), as well as creative activities aimed at popularizing the Udmurt language and culture (Casen 2013, 2014; Pischlöger 2016, 2021). The Udmurt language is also actively used on social networks and the Internet, and the peak of its popularity in the Udmurt Republic occurred in 2012 when the Udmurt group Buranovskiye Babushki took second place in Eurovision (Pischlöger 2021).

## 2.2. The Udmurt Language beyond the Community

There are several large Udmurt communities that live outside the Udmurt Republic. Some of them reside in their traditional territories, which were not included in the Udmurt Autonomous Oblast when its borders were defined in the early 1920s. Among them are a big community in what is now Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and the Perm and Kirov Oblasts. There is a small community in the Sverdlovsk region, as well as new Udmurt communities in Siberia, e.g., in the Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk regions (Khristolubova and Vladykin 1997, p. 29; Lebedeva 2008; Anisimov et al. 2020; Pchelovodova and Anisimov 2021). There are also diasporas in bigger cities of Russia, e.g., in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and they organize some cultural activities, including providing non-regular courses of the Udmurt language.

Some researchers, as well as my personal observations, indicate that the linguistic and ethnic identity of some Udmurt communities living beyond the Udmurt Republic is stronger. As Toulouze (2017) notes, the situation with the Udmurt language is better among Udmurts living in the territory of Bashkortostan than in the Udmurt Republic. According to Toulouze, the multilingual situation and positive attitudes toward multilingualism in the Republic of Bashkortostan contribute to a better status for minority languages in Bashkortostan, which is not the case in the Udmurt Republic.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, partnerships between Russia's Finno-Ugric peoples and other countries flourished. Many new programs and grant foundations were established. Specifically, active teaching of the Udmurt language began in Finland (Salminen and Jefremov 2008) and in Hungary. There is non-regular teaching of Udmurt in Estonia as well. As a result of programs for educational exchanges, many young Udmurt people came to Europe and eventually started families and settled in Europe. Today, there are communities of Udmurt people in Estonia, Hungary, Finland, and Germany. Probably the biggest and most active community is in Estonia, which has an organization of the local Udmurts called *Oshmes* (meaning 'Spring'), two musical groups, and other cultural activities devoted to the Udmurt language and culture.

I myself was also a beneficiary of such Finno-Ugric programs and studied at the University of Tartu on a scholarship for five years. In 2010, I came to Helsinki for an internship under another Finno-Ugric program, and I have been living in Helsinki ever since. I also began writing this article during a Kindred Peoples Fellowship awarded by the Finnish National Agency for Education. In Finland, I have my own Udmurt-speaking network. There are probably some twenty Udmurt people in Finland in different places; my personal networking consists of around ten people. I also have strong contacts with the Udmurt people from Estonia since I studied there. Furthermore, I also communicate with the Udmurt people from everywhere in Europe, with whom I had contact already when I still lived in the Udmurt Republic.

## 3. The Theory of Autoethnography

The theory of autoethnography focuses on an individual's experience and studies it in the broader social and cultural context. The method involves not only a rational and detached approach to the object of study but also integrates the intimate and emotional experiences of both the researcher and the subject being studied (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 21; Denshire 2014). Thus, the present study examines the problem of indigenous language

transmission from an insider's perspective, relying on personal experience and considering the subjectivity of the research process.

The positionality and values of the researcher become crucial in autoethnography, as the social status and characteristics (such as gender, class, religion, etc.) of the researcher can influence their perception of the object of study (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 4; Anderson 2006, pp. 379–82). According to Anderson (2006, pp. 379–80), in analytic autoethnography, the researcher should be a complete member of the social world under study in order to approximate the emotional stance of the people they study (see also Adler and Adler 1987, p. 67). Other researchers also note that autoethnography delves into the insider perspective or examines societies from within. The notion of an insider traditionally aligns with being native to a culture, yet non-natives can also adopt an insider's viewpoint (Reed-Danahay 2021). These discussions encompass questions of identity, self-perception, voice, and authenticity, as well as experiences of cultural displacement and exile.

Anderson proposes that the researcher's role in analytic autoethnography should be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text, but also the researcher should engage in dialogue with "data" and "others" (Anderson 2006, pp. 383–86).

Finally, Anderson defines one more important parameter in autoethnography, namely the commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006, p. 378). The researcher notes that it is not only documentation of personal experience and giving an "insider's perspective" that is valuable for study but also connecting this experience with a broader theoretical context (Anderson 2006, p. 378).

Deborah Reed-Danahay (2021, p. 2) defines several types of autoethnographic studies: (1) native anthropology, i.e., studies "in which people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group"; (2) ethnic autobiography, i.e., the study of "personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups"; and (3) autobiographical ethnography, i.e., the study of the researcher's "personal experience into ethnographic writing". The present study covers all types of autoethnographic studies that Reed-Danahay proposes:

(1) The framework of native anthropology takes into account my background of being a native member, a parent who transmits her native language to her children, and representative of native researchers of an Udmurt-speaking community. It must be noted that being a native scholar does not automatically mean being an expert in native culture and ethnography (e.g., Silan and Munkejord 2023). This corresponds to the term from Anderson of "a complete member in the social word under study" (Anderson 2006, p. 379), which means a deep involvement and understanding of the studied group.

I conduct the autoethnographic analysis primarily from the perspective of a member of the indigenous Udmurt people. I was born and lived in traditional Udmurt villages Gondyrvai and Poroz from the Sharkan district of the Udmurt Republic until I finished secondary school. During this time, my dominant language was the variety of Udmurt spoken in my village community. I learned literary Udmurt through Udmurt language and literature classes, reading, and later while studying at the Faculty of Udmurt Philology at the Udmurt State University. I also learned Russian, as it was the main language of the school instruction, as well as most television and radio broadcasts and books. By the time I finished secondary school, I was fully bilingual. This linguistic experience has influenced my language practices in communicating with my children (see Section 4.1).

In this analysis, I also take on the role of a parent transmitting my indigenous language while living outside the language community, and I examine my perceptions and emotional reactions to different language practices and forms of communication with my children.

Furthermore, I conduct the analysis from the position of an indigenous researcher. I studied Udmurt philology at the Udmurt State University. After graduating, in 2005, I began doctoral studies at the University of Tartu, where I researched Udmurt morphosyntax. Since 2011, I have continued my scientific career as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, studying language variation, language attitudes and language ideologies, and the history of the Udmurt and Komi languages.

(2) In the analysis, I utilize texts that I wrote between 2019 and 2022 and published on my personal blog. The majority of these texts are written in Udmurt and cover various genres such as popular science articles, two interviews, literary fiction, travelogues, and recipes. Specifically, I analyze how these texts reflect the evolution of my internal narratives regarding the Udmurt language, as well as which language forms and styles I use in my texts and how the use of different styles affects my perception of the text, including emotional perception.

(3) The analysis also applies the framework of autobiographical ethnography, where the focus is on my experience as a researcher, particularly as a linguist. In the paper, I analytically and reflectively approach my choices of language and ethnic identities and the changes they have undergone. I focus more on events in my life that were important in the sense of linguistic choices, decisions, and attitudes. The ways in which I perceived, cognitively recognized, and reacted emotionally to these events have influenced my choices. Ellis calls these live events “epiphanies” and defines them as “remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life; times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience; and events after which life does not seem quite the same” (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 6).

#### 4. The Autoethnographic Analysis

In this section, I analyze two processes: (1) the preservation of the Udmurt language within my family, specifically focusing on the language use with my children. My attention is not on specific language practices and strategies, but rather on my personal feelings and perceptions, including my emotional responses to usage of the Udmurt language. (2) The second process is writing a blog in the Udmurt language. I view this process as a positive example of how an individual can not only preserve but also develop and experiment with their native language, regardless of vocabulary and functional restrictions and their location far beyond the community.

##### 4.1. *Udmurt as a Family Language*

As Protassova et al. (2014, p. 24) conclude, bilingualism among the Udmurt and other minority populations in the Volga region is not regarded as advantageous. Transmission of the native language is seen as posing a threat to the child, or parents fear that because of the native language, the child will not learn to speak Russian well enough and will not succeed in school (Protassova et al. 2014).

As I mentioned earlier, within the Udmurt community there are many negative attitudes towards the Udmurt language and its transmission to children. In particular, the Udmurt language lacks prestige. Additionally, the native language often evokes a sense of shame, as it is associated with rural life and a lack of education (Nikitina 1992; Razin 1994). This phenomenon is common among many representatives of ethnic groups in Russia. For example, a Tatar (Rasuleva 2024), a Nenets (Neseine 2024), and a Dolgan (Bolshakova 2024) have spoken about feeling this sense of shame.

Negative attitudes are more common among the elder generation who were born and grew up during the Soviet era (Protassova et al. 2014), while among the younger generation, especially those who were born after the fall of the Soviet Union, there are more positive attitudes (Bulatova and Protassova 2010).

Therefore, when parents decide to speak the Udmurt language with their children outside the traditional village, it always attracts attention as a rather abnormal, exceptional phenomenon. For me, it was also a conscious decision. In particular, I saw the experience of my friends, mainly residing in Estonia, who deliberately communicated in Udmurt with their children.<sup>2</sup> In this network, speaking Udmurt with one’s children became a sign of being an educated Udmurt living abroad. This practice has become popular primarily among students who have studied Finno-Ugric languages and have often participated in international exchange programs or immediately went abroad to study through Finno-

Ugric programs. Today many of these individuals live abroad and bring up their children in Udmurt. I also belong to this category of parents.

There are also other categories of Udmurt-speaking parents, mainly living in Udmurtia, who consciously transmit the language to their children. Most of them belong to the younger generation born after the fall of the Soviet Union. For example, the Bilingva community and the non-profit organization Anykaj organize language activities for parents and children.

I was already living in Helsinki when my two children were born. My husband is French, so we decided to use the strategy of “one parent–one language” with our children. This language strategy involves one parent speaking to the child only in one language, while the other parent speaks in the other language (Barron-Hauwaert 2004). The children started attending daycare early, at the age of one. As a result, they began speaking simultaneously in three languages: Udmurt, French, and Finnish. Throughout their time in daycare, all languages developed roughly equally.

After maternity leave, I continued working as a researcher and conducted sociolinguistic studies on the Udmurt language. Therefore, as a linguist, I was interested in observing how my children’s languages were developing. In fact, among the languages spoken by my children, Udmurt soon began to lag behind the other languages. I myself also began to use Finnish more often to explain more complex things. Additionally, in our family, I took on the role of communicator in Finnish with the children’s school and other institutions because I spoke Finnish better than my husband. Usually, when the whole family is together, we speak French. I am proficient enough in French, but I make mistakes when speaking. When I speak Udmurt, I mainly address the children. The younger one responds in Finnish. In communication with their father, the children always use French and in communication with each other, they use Finnish. I decided not to speak Russian with my children in early childhood and planned to teach them Russian later.

At times, I felt hurt that in our family, Udmurt remained the weakest language. I often felt a sense of loneliness when I spoke Udmurt with my children. Negative feelings also arose when I participated in events on bilingualism for Russian-speaking families living in Finland. On one hand, I understood that there was insufficient language material available in Udmurt, and as the children grew older, suitable material became even scarcer. The main Udmurt-speaking environment for my children was my parents, sister, and brother. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I would visit my family once a year. After the lockdown was enforced, communication was over the phone, which cannot replace live communication. On the other hand, I understood that my children would never engage in discussions on complex topics solely in Udmurt, as modern Udmurts (including myself) use either Russian or a mixed Udmurt–Russian language for such conversations.

My background as a sociolinguist helped me to cope with some struggles. For example, I understand that the limited use of the Udmurt language, primarily in education—specifically, the fact that essential subjects are not taught in Udmurt at school—results in us possessing an insufficient vocabulary and lacking practice for discussing more abstract and complex topics in Udmurt.<sup>3</sup> This became one of the reasons why I started writing a blog: I wanted to develop my language skills to speak smoothly in Udmurt on any topic. Moreover, my goal was to bring the form of the Udmurt language as close to colloquial speech as possible: I tried not to use too many neologisms, and at the same time I also avoided using too many Russian borrowings unnecessarily. I also decided to use, with my children, forms from my native dialect, though as an educated Udmurt philologist, I also use many forms from other dialects and the standard language.

It can be said that the Udmurt language with which I communicate with my children, is our own unique Udmurt family language, something that only we speak. For example, similarly to Western etiquette, I tell my children Umoj bab! ‘Good night!’ (lit. ‘Sleep well!’); in this phrase, bab is the imperative form of the verb babynty, which means ‘to sleep’ in Udmurt children’s language. Sometimes I translate the names of foods into Udmurt, such as translating Finnish suklaatyyny, literally ‘chocolate pillows’ and referring to a

type of breakfast cereal, directly into Udmurt as *minder* ‘pillow’. Sometimes, I also invent my own words, e.g., *zibon* ‘button’ (derived from the verb *zibyny* ‘to push’). When my children communicate with Udmurts from different dialect areas, I have to translate some words into our family’s Udmurt. When my children communicate with their Udmurt grandmother and grandfather, I also have to remind my parents that there are Udmurt equivalents for Russian borrowings; for example, the following words in my family from the Udmurt Republic are used regularly in Russian when speaking Udmurt: *berjoza* ‘birch’, *jozhik* ‘hedgehog’, and *jolka* ‘fir tree’. I remind them that in Udmurt and in our native dialect, there are words like *kysz’pu* ‘birch’, *tchushjal* ‘hedgehog’, and *kysz* ‘fir tree’.<sup>4</sup>

Often, speaking only a minority language without knowledge of the dominant Russian language can lead to difficulties for my children in communicating with their cousins or the children of my close friends who have limited or no knowledge of the Udmurt language. Communication difficulties without knowledge of Russian can also arise in Udmurt-speaking environments. My children know Udmurt numerals well (the result of board games). However, some Udmurts primarily use composite numerals in Russian. Once, my eldest son went to the store in my native village to buy ice cream. The Udmurt-speaking saleswoman stated the amount in Russian. The child asked her to say it in Udmurt. The saleswoman replied that she did not know the Udmurt names of numbers.

Furthermore, in my research (Edygarova 2016), I describe the Udmurt people as living in a culture of the standard language (e.g., Milroy 2007). This is a linguistic culture (this term is from Schiffman 2006) or language ideology (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994) characterized by monolingualism, where typically only the standard variety of the language is considered legitimate, and one must master this standard variety perfectly, without any accent or grammatical errors. Such an ideology views the use of mixed varieties or non-standard varieties (e.g., dialects and slang) as linguistic incompetence on the part of the speaker. This ideology is typical of Russian-speaking, French, and Finnish language cultures.

I believe that in the context of preserving indigenous languages, monolingual ideologies can negatively impact the desire to transmit one’s language to one’s children. After attending in Helsinki some bilingualism events that had a monolingual approach to bilingualism (e.g., a strict separation of two languages), I began to think that if I spoke to my children in Russian instead of Udmurt, I would have more opportunities and it would be much easier to transmit the “full-fledged” form of the language to them. However, indigenous languages teach us that languages cannot exist in isolation from each other, and multilingualism is a completely normal and natural state for them. It is important to understand and remember this when we pass on our indigenous language to our children, especially when we as parents ourselves grew up in a monolingual and standard language culture and from childhood, we experienced negative reactions to our ‘incorrect’ accent or grammatical mistakes when speaking the dominant language.

Another important factor that helps me cope with these difficulties is considering emotions. In isolation, with limited media and educational resources, and limited interaction with native speakers, it is challenging to maintain children’s speaking of a language. Additionally, as children grow older, communication becomes more difficult because I lack the words for full interaction with them when speaking about more abstract and complex issues. This causes an emotional burden, particularly feelings of failure in language transmission, a sense of incomplete language proficiency, shame that I cannot maintain the language at a high level, fear that my children will experience similar negative feelings, and so on. Additionally, I have noticed that I have many unconscious negative attitudes and feelings towards the Udmurt language, which unexpectedly surface in various circumstances and which I acquired at different periods of my life. These feelings are deeply rooted in the body, with strong reactions occurring suddenly and unconsciously. For instance, once when my children were in a playground in Izhevsk, I started to loudly chide them in Udmurt, as I sometimes do in Helsinki. Suddenly, I sensed that everyone in the playground stopped and stared at me. My mind and body reacted automatically as if paralyzing me and disconnecting me from reality. I felt a mix of shame, fear, stress, and anxiety. My entire

body signaled that it was unsafe to speak this language in that particular place. Later, I reflected that such a reaction is related to a traumatic experience with the language used at my earlier age.

I frequently experienced these feelings when my children were small and sometimes still experience them. However, I did not initially connect them to the social and cultural context of the indigenous language, attributing these feelings instead to my own psychological weaknesses. At one point, I started feeling unwell. Thus, I made a decision to learn more about emotions, including putting my own emotions in Udmurt down on paper. I particularly focused on learning names and expressions in Udmurt. Through writing and learning about emotions, and publishing texts about these experiences on my blog, I realized that growing up in an environment where the Udmurt language was not valued and was more associated with feelings of shame and “inferiority”, this linguistic experience had become an emotional trauma for me. A scientific and rational approach was not enough to overcome unhealthy emotional reactions. I had to engage in a lot of emotional and physical work to somewhat rid myself of these unhealthy reactions. Additionally, one of the important realizations was that the main problem lies not in my personal or ethnic psychological characteristics, but in the unhealthy sociocultural attitudes that exist in modern society, not only among the Udmurts but also among the dominant or Russian-speaking community and in the overall discriminatory and colonial attitudes and settings towards indigenous or minority peoples of Russia.

Aneta Pavlenko, in her book *Emotions and Multilingualism* (Pavlenko 2005), provides examples where intense emotional upheavals can cause a person to abandon their native language, as the language becomes a strong emotional trigger for the trauma. David Crystal (2000) notes that the phenomena of collective poor well-being and language loss are interconnected, and they are typical for many indigenous peoples. In this context, it can be argued that for members of indigenous communities, language trauma is more likely a collective trauma (Alexander 2004, 2010), which can primarily be healed collectively by rethinking the past of the language community and redefining the current cultural and social status, attitudes, and ideologies of both minority and dominant societies. I believe that the monolingual attitudes and ideologies of the majority of societies, including the international or global world, not only fail to improve the well-being of indigenous peoples but do not contribute to linguistic equality in the world as a whole.

#### 4.2. Writing a Blog in the Udmurt Language

In 2016, Udmurt became the most popular and frequently used language on the social network VKontakte among the non-Russian languages in Russia (Pischlöger 2021, pp. 91–92). Specifically, there are numerous groups in the Udmurt language on this social network, as well as the use of Udmurt on personal pages and in comments. In 2021, Pischlöger also described the presence of many blogs in the Udmurt language (Pischlöger 2021, pp. 92–96). I started writing my blog Shumpoton ‘Joy’ in the Udmurt language in 2019. One of the main reasons I started writing the blog was to speak about emotions in the Udmurt language and with the Udmurt people. Through writing, I was learning to speak about feelings and to express them through my native Udmurt language, especially in communication with my children. I decided to write down my feelings on paper. In the beginning, this felt very strange, and moreover, I used a mixed Udmurt–Russian language, which triggered feelings of being an “inferior” and “undeveloped” speaker. However, later I became more fluent in writing and found a balance between “pure” and “mixed” language forms, and I understood that the “living” language is important for emotional ties with the language. I wrote my first blog post about this process and titled it Udmurt kyl no emocios jake kyz’y Udmurt kyl mone burmytiz ‘The Udmurt language and emotions, or how the Udmurt language healed me’. In this text, I spoke about how I was learning the names of emotions in Udmurt and how it helped me to better understand my physical reactions and the body.

Another of the main reasons I started writing a blog was to enhance my proficiency in Udmurt. I aimed to engage in discussions with my children about abstract and complex

topics, much like my husband does in the French language during our meals together. However, I realized it was extremely challenging for me to express these ideas in Udmurt because I had never discussed such matters in the language before. The most difficult part was finding the right words, as these discussions typically occur in Russian, and Udmurt equivalents exist only in the written form, which I preferred not to use when speaking with my children. Moreover, my children were unfamiliar with Russian words when I used them. Thus, I believed that active writing would aid me in improving my spoken fluency. Thus, I wrote popular science texts primarily about language and emotions. Additionally, I have written recipes for my favorite dishes and about my travels. I have released two interviews with Udmurt women living in Europe. We discussed how ethnic identity changes when living in large European cities.

In the writing process, I deliberately used different varieties of the Udmurt language that I have studied in my academic work (Edygarova 2013, 2014, 2016, 2022). I was interested in knowing how they could be applied in different genres and how language forms affect the emotional perception of both the writer and the reader. In blog texts, I prefer to use forms from my native dialect and sometimes even mixed forms over neologisms. Using only pure forms and neologisms gives me the feeling that I am using *langue du bois* or ‘wooden language’, which lacks an emotional connection for me. I also realized that when I write about complex issues in a simplified way in the Udmurt language, I understand these things much better.

In my blog, I also publish fictional texts where I conduct various linguistic experiments, e.g., using mixed varieties, using only my native dialect, using more ‘purified’ language with many neologisms, and using taboo words and expressions. In one fiction story, I mainly employ my native dialect and mixed Udmurt–Russian speech, as used by my family from an Udmurt village. The language of this text turned out to be the most emotionally close and alive for me. Thus, when I write texts in different genres, as well as, for example, literary texts on various topics, I can apply different styles of language, namely using dialects and bilingual forms alongside a pure and more standard version, which is a rich and valuable artistic tool for a writer. In the comments left on my blog posts, I have received feedback from readers stating that the language style I use is “light” and “alive” which makes the texts even more interesting.

In the fictional stories, I also described language situations that clearly and simply illustrate the sociolinguistic situation of the Udmurt language. In an early fictional text, the main character—an 11-year-old boy named D’urik—describes how his linguist mother tries to teach her children a pure Udmurt language, but when she becomes tired, she automatically starts using Russian words. The boy’s parents speak different dialects, and his younger brother speaks more in Russian or in a mixed Russian–Udmurt language, something he is accustomed to from going to a daycare in the city.

In addition, I have written several texts that can be considered decolonial writing (Mignolo 2011; Ruiz and Baca 2017; Lee 2023). Decolonial writing focuses mainly on overcoming and healing trauma which is widely discussed by postcolonial writers. To decolonize writing means not only to let “grammatical mistakes” stand but also to open a new perspective on the world deeply embedded in the local forms of knowledge. Using non-standard language varieties in the writing process, including mixed varieties (e.g., Udmurt–Russian), can also be regarded as a decolonial strategy in writing (Lee 2023). “To an Udmurt Woman” is one such text, where I write about how the Udmurt woman evaluates herself through external eyes and parameters defined by dominant cultures and societies, and therefore almost always perceives herself as “worse than others”.

Since 2019, I have published 24 blog posts. Since the first publication, the blog has garnered over 13,000 total views, primarily from Russia and through the social network VKontakte. The main audience of my blog is women aged 35 and older, predominantly living in rural areas. My texts have become quite popular, and three of them have been published in periodicals in the Udmurt Republic. The most popular post became the Russian-language text *Nastojashchij udmurtskij jazyk* ‘The Authentic Udmurt Language’, where I write about

the sociolinguistic features of the Udmurt language, the connection between the indigenous language and the territory where people live, and how the native language, emotions, and the body are interconnected (see English version in Edygarova 2024b).

The process of writing in Udmurt has brought me many positive feelings such as joy, happiness, and relief. Ellis et al. (2011, pp. 25–27) are right in saying that writing has a therapeutic impact. By sharing my experiences and knowledge, including negative ones, I received positive feedback and gratitude from readers, which gave strength and significance to my writing and in general to my experience and work.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I have written four posts, but I stopped writing after that. Due to the intensifying military propaganda, interaction with readers became difficult or even impossible.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this paper is to reflect on the process of maintaining an indigenous language from an insider's perspective and to discover what allows the speakers of indigenous languages to maintain their native languages while living in emigration and far beyond their native communities. In particular, I use the method of autoethnography to reflect on my own thoughts, perceptions, and emotional reactions regarding my language use practices.

Looking at the broader context, it could be said that personal networks play an important role in transmitting different language practices as well as in giving new values and positive meanings to practices that had negative traits earlier. One of the main factors that influenced my language choice was my personal network of people who made a similar choice in communicating with their children while living abroad. One of the main characteristics of these individuals is higher education and subsequent international contacts with Finno-Ugric educational institutions and cultural organizations. I believe that such international Finno-Ugric cooperation allowed them to perceive their native language and culture differently. In this context, these languages became valuable against the backdrop of the discriminatory policies of the Soviet Union. This phenomenon is more typical of people who went through higher education in the 1990s and early 2000s. From my observations, the situation changed when it was people born after the collapse of the Soviet Union, who grew up in a more Udmurt-positive environment, who now became parents.

Another factor is the use of the language in a different, non-traditional environment and community. In my case, it is the use of the language while living in Finland. In an environment where there are historically developed negative attitudes towards the use of the indigenous Udmurt language, e.g., in urban or "non-Udmurt" settings in Izhevsk, the use of the language creates a sense of danger for speakers. However, using the language in an environment where such attitudes do not exist does not cause the same emotional tension. Another example is Bashkortostan, where positive attitudes towards multilingual practices contribute to better preservation of the Udmurt language among Udmurts living in the Republic of Bashkortostan.

Nevertheless, negative attitudes towards the language within the linguistic community, included negative reactions to mixed or 'incorrect' language use from both indigenous speakers and speakers of the dominant language, consciously and unconsciously absorbed from early childhood by indigenous people, can cause linguistic trauma and lead to unconscious unhealthy emotional and physical reactions later in life when speaking the language, e.g., with children. This can happen whether one lives in the traditional environment or outside traditional community. This is also why many parents refuse to pass the language on to their children, as they want to protect their children from such experiences. This fact means that in the process of transmitting and preserving an indigenous language, psychological work on negative attitudes and emotional burdens, which many indigenous language speakers carry, plays an important role alongside sociolinguistic education. Such work can be carried out within the framework of cultural or collective trauma, as defined by Alexander (2004, 2010), in particular, through collective efforts to reconsider and change

negative language attitudes and monolingual ideologies among the entire population of the Udmurt Republic.

As Ellis et al. (2011, pp. 25–27) note, another effective way to ease the emotional burden is writing, which has a therapeutic effect not only for a writer but also for readers. In particular, writing can give a voice to underrepresented indigenous speakers and restore subjectivity. This is evident in my blog writing. Additionally, writing helps me to develop my native language, practice different styles of the Udmurt language, and enrich myself spiritually.

Finally, the support of my family, husband, and children is the main factor that allows me to preserve my native language anywhere in the world and helps me overcome any difficulties.

Sociolinguistic and emotional–psychological education in the process of preserving indigenous languages is highly relevant in the context of Russia’s languages and peoples. In this article, I describe how the Udmurt language serves as a trigger for feelings such as fear and shame, which were formed due to the negative attitudes toward the Udmurt language in the public space of Izhevsk and the Udmurt Republic. This region and the Udmurts are not unique in facing these challenges. Other representatives of Russia’s indigenous peoples have also expressed their negative experiences concerning the usage of their native languages (Rasuleva 2024; Neseine 2024; Bolshakova 2024). This issue affects the peoples and languages throughout Russia, making it a problem for Russian society as a whole. Many negative linguistic attitudes towards non-Russian peoples and languages in contemporary Russia can be traced back to the language and ethnic policies of the Soviet Union, which are still insufficiently studied (Alpatov 2000; Zamyatin 2022; Edygarova 2024a). It is now important to rethink this experience and develop a decolonial movement throughout Russian society. Decolonial writing is one of the important measures in this process.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The numbers come from the last census, which was organized by the authorities of Russia in 2021 during the pandemic. These numbers have received a great deal of criticism and are regarded by some experts as unreliable (Raksha 2023; Lallukka 2024).
- <sup>2</sup> I discuss this experience in my blog post *Kyshnomurt badzym gorodyn: Olja ‘A woman in a big city: Olja’*.
- <sup>3</sup> I wrote an article on this issue on my blog, *Nastojashchij udmurtskij jazyk ‘Authentic Udmurt language’*.
- <sup>4</sup> I described the moment when the grandmother uses Russian borrowings and her daughter corrects her in the story *D’uriken et’e no Kuz’o. Pumis’kon ‘Dyurik and a little brother: a meeting’* published on my blog.

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## Article

# Tundra Nenets: A Heritage Language in Its Own Land? Linguistic Identity and Language Loss

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**Abstract:** Through fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Arkhangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Krasnoye, and Saint Petersburg, this paper investigates the endangered status of Tundra Nenets, an underrepresented and understudied Samoyedic minority language in northern Russia. Criteria for assessing language endangerment are applied to Tundra Nenets while also taking into consideration the interplay between language identity, reactive ethnicity, negative attitudes, and state politics. The personal story of NC, a Tundra Nenets woman, serves as a case study and exemplifies the impact of decades of marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination on the cultural and linguistic identity. NC's narrative illustrates how negative attitudes are exacerbating the decline of Tundra Nenets, further threatening its survival. Because of its absence from schools and institutions, Tundra Nenets seems to be turning into a heritage language in its own homeland. This paper studies the complex interplay between identity, language, and societal pressures, illustrating the broader challenges faced by the Tundra Nenets and other minority communities in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage. While the situation remains dire and political action is called for, efforts in boosting language awareness, documentation, and revitalization offer potential pathways for the preservation of Tundra Nenets, drawing on successful examples from other endangered language communities.

**Keywords:** Tundra Nenets; Samoyedic; language loss; language endangerment; fieldwork; ethnographic method; reactive ethnicity; language preservation; language documentation; Russian–Nenets bilingualism; heritage language

## 1. Introduction

The Tundra Nenets (henceforth, TN) people belong to the so-called *korennyye malochislennyye narody Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* (abbreviated as KMNS; Engl. indigenous minority peoples of the north, Siberia, and the far east of Russia), a small-numbered indigenous people of the north. The TN people constitute the largest group amongst the KMNS. According to Eberhard et al.'s (2024) *Ethnologue*, their population consists of 24,500 speakers (2020 census), though their ethnic population is much higher overall, at 49,600 (2020 census). Despite being the largest KMNS language in Russia, TN is classified as being threatened. The language use can be described as follows:

“In Siberia most young people are still fluent in the language. On the European side, very few children learn it; young people tend to prefer Russian [...] and most speakers are middle-aged or older (Salminen 2007). Some young people, all adults, a few to half of children speak Nenets. Positive attitudes [...]” (Eberhard et al. 2024 via Salminen on language use)

In my fieldwork on TN in Arkhangelsk, Naryan-Mar, Krasnoye and Saint Petersburg between the years 2014 and 2016 a rather bleak picture emerged. I worked with a total of 20 speakers in this period. The speakers originated from the Kanin Peninsula, the Kolguev island, from the Nenets Autonomous Okrug (NAO), as well as from the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YaNAO). The “positive attitudes” towards their own identity

and language could only be detected in young students of the Saint Petersburg Herzen University who were from YaNAO, i.e., the Siberian side. In Naryan-Mar and Krasnoye, where all of my consultants were elderly or middle aged, the threatened status of the language was palpable. Though *de jure* both TN and Russian are the official languages in NAO and while the Russian Constitution has been translated into TN, politicians and officials *de facto* rarely speak the language even if they are of TN origin.

After introducing some key concepts relevant for the paper in Section 2 and elaborating on TN as an endangered language in Section 3, I will focus on one personal story as a case study in Section 4. This story was told in the native Tundra Nenets language by one of my consultants (anonymized as NC). The narrative could, in some respects, be taken as exemplary. It shows which effects years of marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination have on an individual's cultural and linguistic identity. As TN is an endangered language, as illustrated in Section 3, the negative attitudes of its own speakers are catastrophic for the future of the language and the TN community as a whole.

The research questions this article strives to answer are as follows: How do the criteria of endangerment (Kibrik 1991) apply to TN? What role does “reactive ethnicity” (Schnell 1990; Weilenmann 2000; Diehl and Schnell 2006) play in the construction of language identity of the Tundra Nenets speakers? What is the effect of negative attitudes on language status and how can this effect be alleviated? And, finally, what is the role of language policy in this process?

## 2. Setting the Stage

Language is commonly considered a central aspect of people's identity and has been closely linked with the concept of personal power (Beck et al. 2019). Te Huia (2015) cites Kāretu (1993), a revered Māori language expert and advocate. Kāretu explains: “...for me language is essential to my mana [power]. Without it, could I still claim to be Māori? I do not think so, for it is the language which has given me what mana I have and it is the only thing which differentiates me from anyone else.” (Kāretu via Te Huia 2015: 19). This example illustrates that people create their identities with the help of their language or, in a multilingual setting, languages. This means that, by losing their language, people could also lose their culture and their sense of identity. Negative attitudes towards one's own language and culture are found in minorities (see, for instance, the paper on Udmurt by Edygarova 2024 in this special issue) with negative attitudes being more prevalent among the elder generation who were born and raised during the Soviet era (Protassova et al. 2014). This stigmatization seems to be a widespread problem in Russian society as a whole, as other indigenous people have also expressed grievances about being marginalized and discriminated against (Nikitina 1992 for Udmurt; Rasuleva 2024 for Tatar; or Neseine 2024 for Nenets, to name but a few). It will become clear in Section 3 how Soviet and current policies in Russia influence the linguistic and cultural identity of the Nenets consultants I worked with. As linguists, we can help to preserve languages by raising language awareness and by documenting and reviving languages. Many linguists all over the world who do fieldwork combine their efforts to preserve languages with their research. Written materials and appropriate infrastructure (e.g., kindergartens and schools where the (endangered) language is spoken, and teacher training) help to preserve languages (cf. e.g., the DoBeS or Wōpanāak Language Reclamation Project, mentioned in Section 5). However, these efforts are not sufficient without favoring language politics, which will be discussed in Section 5.

A concept which will also become important in NC's story in Section 4 is that of “reactive ethnicity” (Schnell 1990; Weilenmann 2000; Diehl and Schnell 2006 a.m.o.). This refers to the phenomenon in which members of an ethnic group strengthen their ethnic identity in response to perceived threats or discrimination from the dominant culture or other groups. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) assert that a common response of young Europeans to their minority status is to alleviate tensions by means of assimilation. A second strategy “may lead to the rise and reaffirmation of ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness” (2001: 152).

Reactive ethnicity often arises as an identity defense mechanism when individuals feel that their ethnic identity is under threat. This threat can be real or perceived and often stems from the experience of marginalization, discrimination or cultural erosion. Cultural reaffirmation is also a common characteristic, where, in the face of external pressures, groups may place a greater emphasis on preserving and promoting their cultural practices, languages and traditions.

### 3. Tundra Nenets and Its Status

TN belongs to the Samoyedic group of the Uralic language family, which further includes the Forest Nenets, Tundra Enets, Forest Enets, Nganasan and Selkup. Other Samoyedic languages, such as Mator, Kamassian and Koibal, are extinct. According to Nikolaeva (2014), the territory of the Tundra Nenets has been expanding in the past millennium, both in the east and the west. The traditional way of life has been based on hunting and reindeer herding. Nikolaeva characterizes the administrative TN territory as including the Nenets District of the Arkhangelsk Province, parts of the northernmost regions in the Komi Republic, several regions of the YaNAO in Tyumen Province, and most of the Ust-Yeniseisk region of the Taimyr District in the Krasnoyarsk Region. In the west, the territory includes the Kanin Peninsula and the tundra of Malaya Zemlya. In the east, the TN area reaches the Yamal peninsula and the delta of the Yenisei River. Salminen (1998) notes the recession of the territories on the European side because of the extremely strong Russian influence, but also because of the prevalence of the Izhma Komi who have immigrated to the Nenets area. In addition, because of nuclear experiments beginning in the 1950s, the inhabitants of Novaya Zemlya were resettled to urban areas. This led to the loss of the TN language and traditional culture in these areas. Salminen concludes that “many if not all forms of European Nenets must be regarded as moribund” (Salminen 1998: 518).

#### 3.1. Fieldwork on Tundra Nenets

Between 2014 and 2016, I worked with a total of 20 language consultants who spoke different subdialects<sup>1</sup> of TN: the Kolguyev, the Kanin, the Yamal as well as the subdialects of Malaya and Bol’shaya Zemlya. These subdialects are mutually intelligible and exhibit relatively little diversity according to Salminen (1998). However, there is still some variation, especially in the phonology and the lexicon. Eighteen of the consultants were female, two were male. The age of the participants ranged between 19 and 77 years at the time of the interviews. The median was 45 years. All participants were bilingual Nenets-Russian speakers. We used Russian as our language of communication. Some of the consultants, especially those who were reindeer herders and had led a nomadic lifestyle until schooling, were exposed to Russian only after the age of six or seven. Some of these consultants were children of reindeer herders who were taken from the tundra to attend boarding schools in bigger cities (which was, and still is, a common practice for nomadic indigenous peoples in Russia). The young student consultants from Saint Petersburg were mainly representatives of the Yamal subdialect, the older consultants in Naryan Mar and Arkhangelsk spoke the subdialects of Bol’shaya Zemlya, Malaya Zemlya, the Kolguyev and Kanin. The following map (Figure 1) shows the areas in which TN is spoken (the shaded orange areas) and the locations marked by stars indicate the loci of my fieldwork. The story that will be presented in Section 4 was recorded during the first of my two trips to Naryan-Mar, the capital of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.



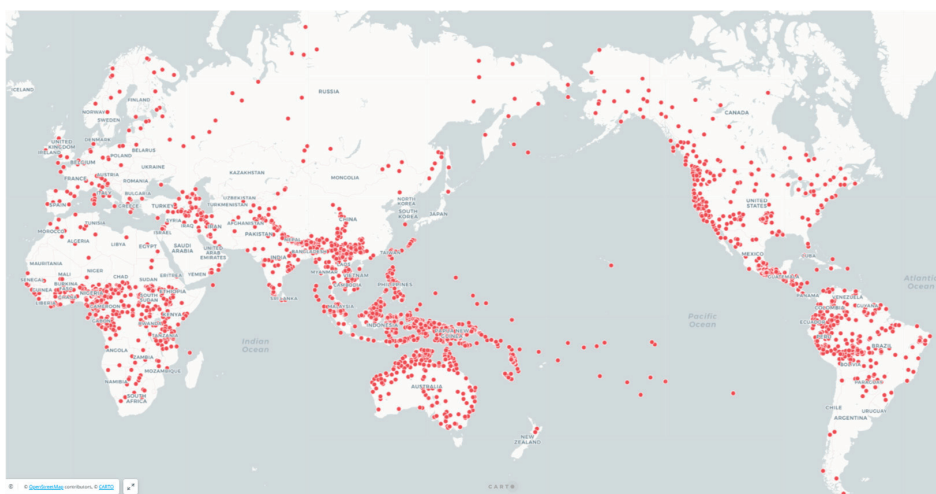
The shading indicates the regions where Nenets is spoken.

Map: Kinga Kuti, Polina Berezovskaya • Source: Ethnologue • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 1.** Fieldwork locations.

### 3.2. Tundra Nenets Status as an Endangered Language

According to UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley 2010), at least 43% of an estimated 6000 languages are in danger. At the same time, only 23 languages account for more than half the world's population. Eberhard et al. (2024) have given a higher number of existing languages overall—indicating that there are currently 7164 languages in the world. However, this number is constantly changing as we learn more about these languages. Furthermore, many languages are endangered and are disappearing at a very quick pace. According to *Ethnologue*, the absolute numbers look as follows: 3170 languages are endangered (or about 44%, similar to the UNESCO numbers in 2010). In Figure 2, each known endangered language is represented as a pin in its primary location.



**Figure 2.** Endangered languages (Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages-endangered/>) (accessed on 12 November 2024).

It is estimated that half of the world's languages will die out within the coming one or two generations. The full extent of the loss that we are experiencing today becomes clear in the words of Yaron Matras: "... a full and comprehensive documentation of today's languages, living and moribund, offers a sample of linguistic diversity on a scale which, as a result of the ongoing massive decline of languages, we shall never be able to witness again" (Matras 2005: 226). It is evident that the preservation and documentation of living languages is of high importance not just in the scientific, but also in the political, social and personal domains.

As stated in the introduction, the number of TN speakers is 24,500 according to *Ethnologue's* 2020 census. Chrystal (1993) reports similar numbers, namely around 25,000 speakers (Chrystal 1993: 304). In absolute numbers, and at first glance, the situation looks quite positive. TN is the largest language of the KMNS group. This might make one wonder why Tundra Nenets is still considered to be a threatened language. However, the overall speaker numbers are dramatically declining, as will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.3. This state is not unique to TN, but also applies to other KMNS languages and to other minority languages in Russia. In a recent paper, Pakendorf (2024) describes the KMNS as comprising languages that are in danger of being lost by the end of the century. She attributes this state of endangerment to the Russian colonization of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries and, most importantly, to the impact of Sovietization, citing Sablin and Savelyeva (2011) and Grenoble (2024).

In order to obtain a more profound understanding of the degree of endangerment of TN, and to be able to understand the personal story in Section 4 in a broader political, historical and socio-linguistic context, I will apply Kibrik's (1991) criteria for language endangerment to TN.

### 3.3. Applying Kibrik's Criteria for Language Endangerment to TN

According to Kibrik (1991), the criteria for endangerment include the following. (a) *The size of the ethnic group and the number of speakers in that group.* It is clear that the smaller the number of speakers, the greater the threat of the respective language's extinction. (b) *The age groups of speakers.* If there are speakers from every age group, then the language is more likely to survive. (c) *The ethnic character of marriages.* Kibrik establishes that it is most favorable for the preservation of a language if there are marriages between members of the same language community, while mixed marriages often lead to a switch towards the more socially prestigious language. (d) *Upbringing of preschool-aged children:* If children are brought up within the family, this is assumed to facilitate the use of the ethnic language. However, if children are brought up outside the family, the loss of the origin language becomes more likely. (e) *Location of the ethnic group.* Kibrik has emphasized that living in an ethnic group's native homeland is important for preserving its language (even if, as in the paper on Udmurt by Edygarova 2024, a higher educational level can help preserve the native language among the diaspora outside of the homeland). (f) *Language contacts of the ethnic group.* Clearly, the more contact there is with other cultures and languages, the worse it is for the viability of the endangered language to survive. If the ethnic group lives in close proximity to speakers of more prestigious languages, the preservation of their language is more compromised. (g) *National self-consciousness.* A strong sense of national identity may block the consequences of many negative factors. (h) *Instruction in the language at school.* Quite clearly, a necessary tool in preserving the language is to teach it at school. (i) *State language policy.* Depending on the current policy of the state, a language might have more or less chances of surviving.

In summary, a low absolute number of speakers, language contacts, the disruption of intergenerational language transmission and state language policy are all criteria for endangerment. In line with this, Eberhard et al. (2024) state that a language becomes endangered when its users begin to teach and speak a more dominant language to the children in the community.

Let us analyze these criteria for TN. This analysis will also help us contextualize and understand the personal story that will be recounted in Section 4.

- (a) *The size of the ethnic group and the number of speakers in that group.* Burkova (2016) reports growing numbers of the Tundra Nenets ethnic group with 32,190 in 1989, 39,302 in 2002 and 42,640 in 2010 (Burkova 2016: 316). However, the number of those with mastery of the native language is receding. While in 1989 approximately 78% spoke Tundra Nenets, the number decreased to 68% in 2010 and to only 44% in 2010. In absolute numbers, approximately 27,000 were speaking TN as a first or second language in 2002, while only 18,597 are reported to speak the language in 2010 (Burkova 2016: 317–18). The Russian legislation attests to the status of the Nenets as an indigenous people<sup>2</sup>. Though, as already mentioned, Nenets is the strongest of all the Samoyedic languages, and though it enjoys the status of an indigenous language, it is endangered and experiences a constant decline.
- (b) *The age groups of speakers.* There is a difference in this respect between the European and the Siberian sides—in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region, many young people are still fluent in the language, while, sadly, on the European side, e.g., in the NAO, very few children learn it, even while it is taught at schools, albeit only as an elective. According to Salminen (1998), most speakers on the European side are middle aged or older. During my work in Naryan-Mar and the settlement Krasnoye, I was only able to find proficient middle aged and elderly speakers. The young speakers I worked with in Saint Petersburg’s Herzen University were all from the YaNAO i.e., the Siberian side.
- (c) *The ethnic character of marriages.* Of the twenty consultants I worked with, five were or are married to Nenets spouses. Six of the consultants did not have a partner or a spouse yet (mostly since they were still students and too young at the time of my fieldwork). Even those married to Nenets spouses did not live monolingually with Nenets as their sole language of communication. Most of them spoke either Russian or used code-mixing and code-switching between Russian and Nenets in home communication. When asked about their family language use, several consultants repeatedly remarked that it was forbidden to speak Nenets during Soviet times. With my consultants, the switch to the more prestigious language can be observed even in marriages of members of the same community. This prohibition was so internalized that it has permeated even the private milieu, i.e., the family and the marital domain. My other consultants were in mixed marriages with either Russians or Komi.
- (d) *Upbringing of preschool-aged children.* In this respect, the location and way of life of my consultants played a huge role. The kids who pursued a nomadic lifestyle growing up in the families of reindeer herders all spoke Nenets and had spoken almost exclusively Nenets until they had reached school age. Those who grew up in urban areas with more contact with Russian were not taught TN, even within their own families, especially during Soviet times when use of the TN language was stigmatized and forbidden. What is particularly striking is that even the most proficient speakers among my consultants, and my primary consultant herself, who is an important advocate for the Tundra Nenets language in the community, did not teach their children their native tongue. When asked the reasons for this, they responded that one was mocked or excluded for speaking Nenets in public and that this would not be advantageous for their children growing up.
- (e) *Location of the ethnic group.* According to Salminen (1998), the TN area has lately been receding on the European side. Because of nuclear experiments since the 1950s, but also because of proximity to central Russia, a longer period of co-existence with Russians nearby, earlier industrial exploration of the territory, more urban centers, etc., the inhabitants on the European side were relocated to urban settlements on the continent, which effectively led to the loss of native language command among the Nenets population. This gloomy picture of the European side can be confirmed by the situation of my consultants during my fieldwork. One of my consultants

reclaimed her homelands at Varandey after spending several decades in Naryan-Mar and other parts of NAO. The settlement Varandey was founded in the first half of the 1930s as a settling base for reindeer herders. In the 1990s, she and her family were resettled from “Staryj Varandey” (‘Old Varandey’) which used to be a Nenets settlement. There, Nenets people lived their traditional lifestyle engaged in reindeer herding, fishing, collecting cloudberries, etc. The Russian government subsequently moved the inhabitants to “Novyj Varandey” (‘New Varandey’), apparently because the Barents Sea had begun to flood the lands. As a result, people from Old Varandey were resettled to New Varandey. After losing their homes, many of the inhabitants decided to leave for good in hopes of a better life. Soon after, an oil platform, the “Varandeyskiy terminal”, was built close to Old Varandey. This type of resettlement has happened repeatedly to Russian minorities. Sablin and Savelyeva (2011) write about how the destruction of reindeer pasture and river pollution as a consequence of oil and natural gas production and transportation affects the Nenets people and also the Khantys and Mansi peoples. This makes these regions unsuitable for the traditional activities of the indigenous people. The resettlements lead to a disruption of the original way of life and ultimately to a gradual loss of culture and language. Helinski (1997) calls these “endocentric activities of the colonisers”, which force the native population to move away. This destroys traditional “ecological niches”, i.e., the archaic way of life of the minority. Sadly, this amounts to a rather subtle invasion into the lives of the indigenous people, one which gradually but systematically leads to the decline of their traditional culture and language.

- (f) *Language contacts of the ethnic group.* Russian is the most influential presence in terms of language contacts in all Nenets areas. The Russian language and culture are dominant in most spheres of life, in particular in the professional, institutional and educational spheres. Again, this influence is more pervasive on the European than on the Siberian side. Salminen (1998) points out that immigration of the Izhma Komi to the Nenets areas leads to their dominance in economic spheres. Salminen’s “survival forecast” for the Siberian side is much brighter. There, a wide-spread multilingualism has traditionally been favored over the domination of a single language. In the Ob’ area, the indigenous Tundra Nenets and Northern Khanty communities live together with Komi, Tatar and Russian immigrant groups. Tundra Nenets has even been used as a lingua franca in the more eastern areas, gradually supplanting other vernaculars. Nevertheless, the TN language can be seen as compromised, as the pervasiveness and omni-presence of the Russian language is so powerful.
- (g) *National self-consciousness.* Much of the Nenets’s national self-consciousness must have been weakened if not destroyed during the Soviet era. According to Salminen, Russification policies and the massive influx of Russian-speaking colonizers nearly eliminated both the multilingual tradition and the interethnic use of Tundra Nenets, leaving room for the native language only in home communication and as part of the traditional economy based on nomadic reindeer breeding. The deliberate alienation of children from their native language and culture through the Soviet schooling system is also deeply felt among the Siberian Nenets, so that Nenets homes could not avoid Russification. These politics have led to a decline in language use which has also contributed to the destruction of the national sense of identity. The differences in rights and privileges between “titular” ethnicities, i.e., the Russians, on the one hand, and minorities on the other, also leads to a decline in the reputation of the Nenets identity and creates an “artificial hierarchy” (Sablin and Savelyeva 2011). The hierarchy is artificial in the sense that, if the rights between “titular” ethnicities and minorities were distributed in a fair and equal way, this hierarchy would not even exist. Helinski (1997) even goes as far as to say that “exocentric” activities, which are often disguised as a way to raise the social prestige of indigenous minorities, such as “indigenization” of the administrative staff, are in reality aimed deliberately at transforming the native societies and cultural traditions. All of these factors, of course,

erode the Nenets national identity and contribute to negative self-identification with one's own minority culture.

- (h) *Instruction in the language at school.* During Soviet times, Russian was elevated to the status of a “unifying Soviet language” (Pakendorf 2024) which led to the Russification of the education system. Pakendorf also writes about the school reform of 1958, which effectively put an end to the use of languages other than Russian as a language of instruction. Today, TN is used in a very limited manner, i.e., only as an auxiliary tool in preparatory and first grades, and often in cases where there are children in the class who have a poor command of Russian (Burkova 2016). On the Siberian side, even in YaNAO, the Tundra Nenets language is only taught as an elective, with significant cuts made to the number of hours and number of teachers in recent years. This has led to a constant decline in the formal instruction of Nenets at schools, as less and less children are interested in learning the language. Some of my student consultants from Herzen University were studying Nenets to become language teachers in their native language. However, several of them did not pursue the profession back home due to a lack of positions at schools and few opportunities for career advancement. One of my female student consultants founded a nursery for Nenets children back in her tundra to try and teach small children their native culture and language. These initiatives are laudable and important but will hardly have a strong impact on the overall state of the language. In NAO, on the European side, where I also worked with a language teacher of Tundra Nenets as my consultant, recent cuts in the teaching of the language as an elective also do not leave much hope for a better future of formal instruction of the language at schools. With the gradual disappearance of TN from schools, young TN speakers will soon become heritage speakers of the language in their own homelands. TN will then become a language that can only be acquired in the family milieu. It will be hard for these heritage speakers to transmit their language to generations to come.
- (i) *State language policy.* Though the Nenets people nominally live in their regions, such as the NAO or the YaNAO, the Russification of the education system during Soviet times, the establishment of boarding schools and kindergartens where Russian was spoken, the forced relocations, and other factors already mentioned, led to a decline in language use. I want to emphasize the detrimental role of boarding schools, where most Nenets children were sent during Soviet times and where they were forbidden to speak their native language. This was also the experience of the older participants of my fieldwork. Though the constitution and other legal documents are translated into Nenets, what is the use if fewer and fewer Nenets people can understand or speak the language? As a whole, the language policies of the Soviet Union and of the current Russian government have not contributed to the preservation and revitalization of TN and other minority languages. Resettlements due to the installation of oil or hydropower stations have triggered a decline and further endangerment of the minority languages. Neseine (2024) summarizes this as follows: “It is so strange for me that these companies [Russian gas and oil companies], on the one hand, destroy the conditions in which the people's lives are possible, and on the other hand, sponsor the programs of restoring and reviving what they are destroying.” This seems a rather subtle and hypocritical tactic, one which cannot be easily discerned and understood, but which contributes to the decline of the Tundra Nenets culture and language.

#### 4. Materials and Methods: Personal Story

In this section, I will first describe the ethnographic method that I used in my fieldwork in Section 4.1. before presenting the case study in the form of the personal story of my consultant, NC, in Section 4.2.

#### 4.1. The Ethnographic Method

The bulk of my fieldwork on Tundra Nenets was conducted in formal semantics. For my semantic fieldwork, I used the gold standard of elicitation techniques for linguistic fieldwork (cf. Matthewson 2004, [2005] 2011; Chelliah and de Reuse 2011; Bower 2015 a.m.o.), i.e., corpus examples, translation tasks, truth value judgment and acceptability judgment tasks. However, during my fieldwork trips, I quickly noticed the politically, socially and linguistically precarious situation of my consultants. Their stories and lived experiences touched me profoundly. I found that the sociolinguistic situation merited particular attention and started using the ethnographic method (Gold 1997; Dutta 2016; Okely 2020) in addition to my purely linguistic work. As I recorded most of the interviews with my consultants, I gathered abundant material that contains many conversations between me and my consultants, or between the consultants in group sessions. Gold (1997) discusses the main phases of ethnographic study, including gaining access to the field, building trust with participants, and collecting data in natural environments. The ethnographic method centers on understanding social phenomena through immersive observation and direct interaction with subjects, aiming to capture the nuances of social interactions and cultural patterns within communities. The ethnographic method enables researchers to study communities and society from the point of view of their members. Ethnographers become deeply acquainted with the experiences and views of their project participants, which helps them not to rely on preconceived framework data gathering and analysis. It is through the interaction with the participants that the ethnographer creates an analytical framework for understanding the subject matter of his/her study (Okely 2020). According to Dutta (2016), the ethnographic method creates space for voices that are systematically silenced or subjugated, which makes it particularly suitable for the situation of the Nenets people.

More concretely, as part of the ethnographic method, I used the form of semi-structured interviews (Karatsareas 2022), in which I was guided mostly by linguistic questions. I would prepare a questionnaire or questions in advance and would then record my session with the consultant. During the session, conversations on different topics (sometimes evoked by the linguistic material provided) would emerge. This led to conversations on topics that developed around questions of family background; the personal, political, and linguistic situation of the consultants; and their hobbies and culture. I asked open-ended questions that prompted participants to develop their thoughts and ideas and to express their views on the subject matter from their individual perspective. The interview data collected in this way were then transcribed and analyzed, just as in the following case study in the next subsection.

#### 4.2. A Case Study: The Hard Route to Education of a Nenets Girl During Soviet Times

For the story presented here, I first recorded the audio precisely while the consultant, NC, told her story in her native Tundra Nenets language. Next, using the recording, I wrote the story down on a step-by-step basis with the help of the consultant, already starting to translate it into Russian. As a last step, the story was transcribed and fully translated. The original story in Tundra Nenets can be found in Appendix A. Information on NC's biography that goes beyond that found in the Appendix A was collected during other semi-structured interviews and conversations with the consultant.

I will give some background information on NC, her origins and her life. NC was born in 1937 in the "malozemel'skaya tundra", i.e., tundra in Malaya Zemlya close to Nel'min Nos. She also lived in Naryan-Mar, the capital of NAO, where I met her and worked with her for approximately three weeks. Her native language was TN, with both her parents being Nenets. NC described herself as having been mischievous and rowdy as a child, which placed her in much trouble with her parents. She was raised monolingually in Nenets until the age of seven. She contracted tuberculosis in her youth, but survived it. Unfortunately, she did not completely recover from the illness, some effects of tuberculosis on her health were never overcome and she coughed a lot during our sessions. She became

a zootechnician. NC was married to a Russian citizen of German origin, i.e., she was part of a mixed marriage. During Soviet times, she held an important position as the head of a *kolkhoz*,<sup>3</sup> in which she apparently took pride. We spoke Russian with each other. Interestingly, the prosody of her speech in Russian sounded rather Nenets, which indicates the dominance of Nenets in her language use. NC was active within the Nenets community in Naryan-Mar and founded a folklore group, where she especially welcomed young people. Unfortunately, NC passed away not long after our first and last encounter making these data even more valuable to me.

As a child, and like many other Tundra Nenets kids, NC attended a boarding school away from her family. After finishing six grades there, she became sick, probably contracting tuberculosis. The boarding school issued a document prohibiting her from attending classes due to the disease. She then returned to the tundra, where her mother lived. Her mother was apparently very pleased, as NC had matured and she wanted NC to return home and marry (at age 14). This made NC think about leaving her tundra and continuing her education somewhere else. She asked a friend of hers to join her and suggested going to Salekhard<sup>4</sup>. NC wanted to become a medical doctor. She dreamed of treating and curing people.

The obstacles that the girls encountered on their trip were immediate. First, the director of her boarding school refused to give NC her transcript of grades. After a teacher intervened and they saw that NC had good grades during her six years of boarding school (achieving fours and fives, with five being the best grade in the Soviet system), they finally took pity and issued NC her transcript. As the steamboat left for the desired destination only once a week, on Saturdays, the girls had to wait for a couple of days until they were able to leave. They stayed in a flat belonging to a Russian lady. At some point, they realized that their money had been stolen from the flat while they were away in the village and had left all their belongings, including the money, in the flat. When NC asked her friend “what shall we do now?” in response she heard: “go back home”. However, NC would not give up. She checked the newspaper *Naryana Vynder* (‘Red Tundra Dweller’) for job postings and found a posting for chopping and carrying wood. Though NC suggested that they could carry the chopped wood to a designated place instead of chopping, they were laughed at by Russian wood workers for wanting to do the job in the first place and for being too thin and allegedly not physically strong enough to chop wood. The resourcefulness of our protagonist did not subside and she checked the newspaper for postings yet again finding one for a job stacking wood in an orphanage. At their destination, they met a Russian woman who worked in the orphanage. As the wood would not arrive for another week, the woman decided to help the girls by asking her boss to offer them a knitting job, where they worked for a week and ultimately earned 25 Rubles each. At the time, this was enough money to reach Salekhard, which both girls finally managed to do. Upon arrival, NC’s friend went directly to the so-called *техникум* (Rus. *technicum*, i.e., ‘technical college’), while NC headed to the *медучилище* (Rus. *meduchilizhe*, i.e., ‘nursing school’). She headed to the director and asked to be enrolled as a student. The answer was negative as, by then, she had missed two out of the four obligatory exams that applicants had to pass in order to be admitted to the studies. This effectively killed NC’s dream. Even then, however, she did not give up and went to the director of the same technical college that her friend went to. They were both admitted and provided with accommodation. As a result, NC graduated from that technical college and became a zootechnician.

Turning to the analysis of NC’s story, it becomes painfully apparent that her dream of becoming a doctor crashed, to a major extent, because of external circumstances, but also apparently because of her Nenets origin. In order to obtain the education she wanted, NC had to leave her tundra. The disconnect from her original way of life is palpable here, even if it started much earlier, for instance when NC was sent off to the boarding school in the first place. As the girls did not have any connections, such as family or friends in the village, they needed to find a place to stay. This led to an unfortunate chain of events. If NC’s money had not been stolen from the flat at which she stayed with her friend, they

could have arrived in Salekhard on time for the exams. Unfortunately, without proper resources, support of their families and finances, both girls were at the mercy of the good will of strangers, which finally determined their fate. NC never had a chance to fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor even though, according to her, some of her ancestors were rich and had a reputable background. Specifically, NC told me about one of her ancestors on her mother's side who was kicked out of his "chum" (a type of yurt used by nomadic Uralic reindeer herders) by his stepmother and managed to survive in the cold thanks to the frozen berries he picked. He was then taken in by a rich family who treated him as his own offspring. On the mother's side, there was another ancestor, a Russian orphan from the village Khoskovo carrying the name Khoskov. He was NC's grandfather on the paternal side. This means that NC's father's name, her own maiden name, was Russian. NC's grandmother, however, despised this family name, as it was Russian and any connection to Russians was considered shameful. She did not want anyone in the family to even mention that Russian family name and called it "nenezkiy ozor" (Nenets disgrace). The stigmatizing within the Nenets community appears to have been quite strong. When people wanted to harm or hurt the grandmother, they would say to her "haven't you forgotten, *babka* (Russian for 'old woman'), what the name of your son-in-law is!" Interestingly, this exclusion of the *other* and the demarcation of one's own ethnicity might be important for the preservation of a minority's own identity. Negative attitudes towards Russians and identification through language is also what Neseine (2024) thematizes in her article. She reports that, among the members of the Nenets community, she is not considered "fully Nenets" and is sometimes even called "Lutsa", which means Russian. In her search for the answer to the question of why Nenets people considered her Russian despite her being Nenets, she came to the conclusion that one reason would be her lack of knowledge of the Nenets language. She muses that "Lutsa" must be a term that includes the following connotations: "[Lutsa are] those who bear the imperial code: they understand Russian language and absorb Russian laws and traditions, those who are able to adapt to living outside the tundra but would not survive in a nomadic camp." Neseine thus recognizes language as a strong identification factor. She writes "in my childhood, I didn't think Nenets language would be useful in real life. But when I grew up I discovered why I felt so strange during reunions with my tundra's relatives. It turned out, they communicate to each other and to my mum in the native language and my brain apparently rejected this fact due to the hostility towards Nenets that was spread in the village." It is clear that negative attitudes are present both on the Nenets and on the Russian side with respect to each other and within the community of the minority language itself.

NC has surely adopted at least parts of the Nenets identity, where being Nenets also meant speaking Nenets. However, NC's Nenets identity must have been compromised and attacked during the Soviet era, especially when she was placed in a Soviet boarding school. As already mentioned, NC was the chairwoman of a *kolkhoz*, which shows that she managed to attain a respectable social status during Soviet times. This stands in stark contrast with her Nenets identity, as the same Soviet system that allowed her to somewhat climb the social ladder also repressed her community of origin. On several occasions, she explicitly stated that it was forbidden to talk Nenets in her boarding school and that if she persisted she was derided and humiliated for it. She also said "we Nenets people were always considered to be *люди второго сорта* (Rus. *lyudi vtorogo sorta*, i.e., 'second rank people'). This was especially true during Soviet times. In line with these personal experiences, Pakendorf (2024) emphasizes the detrimental effect of the boarding school system, where children from northern minorities were taken away from their families and placed in boarding schools in which the medium of instruction was Russian and where students were forbidden to speak their home languages.

A painful incident, which must not have been a unique instance in NC's life, occurred when NC, another consultant and I were walking the streets of Naryan-Mar. On our way, we encountered a couple of young Nenets boys. Apparently, they used to be members of NC's folklore group. NC greeted them in a friendly manner in Nenets by saying

“Лакамбой!” (*Lakamboy*, meaning “Good day!”). They ignored the greeting and just walked past us. It occurred to me that they were ashamed of answering in Nenets in front of a foreigner (me) and chose to ignore NC. To receive this type of pushback, especially within her own community, into which she had invested so much of herself with the folklore group, must have been devastating and detrimental to NC’s identity as a Nenets woman. NC’s initiative in creating a folklore group can be seen as part of her reactive identity (cf. Schnell 1990, Weilenmann 2000, Diehl and Schnell 2006 from Section 2). NC made an effort to strengthen the community and reaffirm cultural values despite decades of marginalization and discrimination. However, incidents like this must have persistently eroded her reactive identity. The fact that the Nenets adolescents did not respond to NC’s greeting also ties back to Kibrik’s criteria for endangerment of a language. If young people do not speak or refuse to speak the language, it naturally cannot be transmitted to future generations and is thus in danger of extinction.

Considering this conflicted and stigmatized identity, my last encounter with NC and her words will not seem so surprising anymore: After working together for some time, we met up in the local library to finish writing down her story. I also brought the reimbursement for the sessions<sup>5</sup>, as NC wished to be paid at the end and not after every individual session. After finishing our fieldwork session, NC was about to leave. When she almost reached the door of the library hall, she turned around to me and suddenly said “Why are you actually doing all of this? Why bother with Nenets? All of this is of no use! Our language will die and we as a people will also die anyways!” On a personal level, I was rather stunned, sad and offended to hear her say this after the valuable work we had undertaken together on her native language. I responded that I cared about the Nenets language and culture and, though I was primarily investigating the grammar and semantics of Tundra Nenets, it was apparent to me that my work also had an element of documentation and some corpus building (such as the very story that was told in this section). On a more objective and analytical level, however, NC’s reaction can be explained as follows: after being treated the way she was throughout her life, i.e., being marginalized, looked down upon, not receiving the education she had wished, etc., the bleak outlook she had for the future of her people is not surprising. As we have seen in Section 3, Nenets is clearly an endangered language, but so is the ethnic identity and the whole existence of the Nenets people.

## 5. Discussion

I will now return to the research questions raised in the beginning of this paper. Kibrik’s criteria of endangerment were discussed in detail in Section 3.3. These were subsequently applied to TN, making it apparent that TN is an endangered language. Despite being the strongest KMNS language in terms of numbers, TN is endangered. The reasons are manifold, ranging from school instruction where TN is not mandatory to Soviet-era language policies which resulted in the stigmatization of TN and its exclusion even from the family milieu. A divide can be observed between younger speakers in Siberia’s regions, such as the YaNAO, and speakers on the European side (e.g., in the NAO) — there are more young speakers of TN on the Siberian than on the European side. While the upbringing of children is still traditional in nomadic settings, children in urban areas often do not learn the language within their family anymore in all regions. TN is only taught as an elective in schools, with decreasing interest among students leading to further language decline. In terms of language contacts, Russian clearly dominates in all spheres of life, affecting and minimizing TN usage. I consider the current and Soviet state policy to be the strongest reason for the rather deplorable language state; environmental damage by oil and natural gas platforms, forced relocations and educational Russification greatly disrupted the life of the community, thereby forever changing the traditional way of life, and weakening the ethnic self-consciousness. This has resulted in assimilation with Russian society. Climate change, which leads to the mass death of reindeer due to global warming, along with globalization and digitalization, are also sure to be contributing factors. A detailed study

of these circumstances, however, was not the focus of this article and must be left for future research. Overall, the discussed factors collectively endanger the Tundra Nenets language, culture and identity.

NC's biography can be taken as an example of how language identity is formed and changed throughout life. We can see how being marginalized influences not only the personal biography, but also the language identity and further transmission of the language to future generations. Despite her resourcefulness and determination, NC faced numerous obstacles, including being denied education opportunities and experiencing discrimination. Her experience highlights the challenges of maintaining Nenets identity and language. NC's efforts to strengthen her community through cultural activities like forming a folklore group reflect her reactive identity, a response to decades of marginalization. However, the lack of support from younger generations and the internalized stigma contributed to her pessimistic outlook on the future of the Nenets language and people. This narrative illustrates the complex dynamics of language identity among Nenets speakers.

Finally, let us turn to the research question regarding the effect of negative attitudes on the language status and which measures can be taken to alleviate this effect. Negative attitudes towards the Nenets language have profoundly detrimental effects on its status and vitality. The stigma attached to speaking Nenets discourages elder speakers from passing it on to younger generations. However, the older speakers are crucial for language transmission. This reluctance directly undermines the key factors for language vitality identified by Kibrik, such as ethnic self-consciousness and transmission of the native language to Nenets children, all of which are vital for the survival of minority languages. The decline in language use among young people, particularly in the European regions, signals an impending risk of language extinction. While there is some hope that the language might survive longer in Siberian regions, the centralistic language policies in Russia and the long-lasting damage inflicted during the Soviet era continue to pose significant threats. To alleviate these effects, it is essential to promote positive attitudes towards the Nenets language, encourage intergenerational language transmission, and implement supportive language policies at both regional and national levels.

What are, then, the possibilities and chances of preserving and revitalizing TN? Beck et al. (2019) suggest that, as a field, linguistics can promote (i) language awareness, (ii) language documentation and language preservation, and finally (iii) language revitalization.

(i) In terms of language awareness, linguistics can communicate to society what language is and what it does for society. Every language is its own miracle, full of different structures and possibilities. This applies equally to creoles, Kiezdeutsch<sup>6</sup>, "exotic" languages, and minority languages as much as it does to any other language. Supporting bilingualism and multilingualism is one of the ways to aid endangered and minority languages. Ideally, this should start in early childhood, as speaking more than one language is also an advantage linguistically, cognitively and socially (Lee 1996; Sanz 2000; Marian and Shook 2012, and many others). Given that Russian is the dominant language in the Russian Federation, TN has a better chance to survive if Nenets–Russian bilingualism is promoted. Helimski (1997), on the other hand, points out that bilingualism is only favorable for Nenets if (a) there is a nucleus of monolinguals and (b) if both languages in question have the same social prestige. As Russian is always dominant, this kind of bilingualism is almost exclusively unilateral. This brings TN into the situation I addressed before, where it is in the state of becoming a heritage language in its own country. This further underscores the idea that a positive view on bilingualism could prompt more parents to raise their children with TN and Russian. As discussed in detail above, language identity plays a huge role in the process of language loss; people create their identities with the help of their language(s). This, however, does not imply that there cannot be a lingua franca. Two or more languages can be maintained at the same time, and multilingualism can be put to much greater use. Promoting language skills offers a chance for a more stable social identity, a factor that would strengthen TN.

(ii) Language documentation and preservation are also important for endangered languages. An example is the Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen/Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS), a central archive of language data, photos, audio and video recordings which documents languages and cultures. It has over 60 language documentation projects on endangered languages, including Enets and Forest Nenets. It provides long-term accessibility of materials and availability to researchers and the public. Another resource is NorthEuraLex (Dellert et al. 2020). This is a large-scale lexicostatistical database within the EVOLAEMP project. The current version, 0.9, includes a list of 1016 concepts spanning 107 languages of northern Eurasia, with an emphasis on Uralic and Indo-European languages. This database also includes TN and therefore serves as another source of documentation. Another current initiative regarding TN is an online dictionary which the Northern Arctic Federal University and the Nenets People's Association, "Yasavey", have been developing since 2023, with support from the administration of NAO. More information can be found on the website of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON). Moreover, the newspaper *Naryana Vynder* which has figured in NC's story, offers a page in the Nenets language which gives journalists and the Nenets public an opportunity to promote their language and contribute topics of relevance to their people. In YaNAO, the newspaper *Naryana Ngerm* ('Red North'), the only newspaper entirely written in TN, is published once a week. It is important to emphasize that the resources provided here are by no means exhaustive. The interested reader is directed to the website <https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/en/node/150> (accessed on 23 October 2024) and Burkova (2016) for further resources.

(iii) Though TN is still a living language, there is no doubt that all vitalization efforts are extremely valuable in order to maintain and improve its situation and avoid its extinction. According to the website of the Russian Academy of Sciences on Minority languages of Russia (<https://minlang.iling-ran.ru/en/node/150> accessed on 23 October 2024), there are only few online resources in TN so far. However, work is underway to create the electronic encyclopedia Wikipedia in the TN language: [https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/yrk/Main\\_Page](https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/yrk/Main_Page) (accessed on 23 October 2024). Furthermore, there are several communication groups on the social media platform VKontakte and Drugvokrug.ru. The YouTube channel "Etnograficheskaya Ekspeditsiya Nastoyazhije Ljudi" ('Ethnographic Expedition Real People') promotes language learning and documents the lifestyle, culture and traditions of indigenous communities in Russia. For other languages, examples of successful (re)vitalization efforts include the Wôpanâak language (Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project with Jessie Little Doe Baird and Norvin Richards) and Mohegan (Mohegan Language Program, with grammar by Stephanie Fielding), where the creation of lessons, dictionaries, online learning materials and grammar have played a major role in the revitalization process. These are all measures that are, and can be, taken in order to alleviate the effect of the endangerment of languages at risk, such as TN.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by the Tundra Nenets language and its speakers illustrate the complex interplay between identity, language use, and external pressures, such as historical marginalization and ongoing cultural assimilation. The case of NC highlights the impact of negative attitudes on language vitality and the difficulties of maintaining a minority language in the face of dominant linguistic and cultural forces. However, the promotion of TN through language awareness, documentation, and bilingualism offers a path forward. The future of TN rests not only on such efforts but also on fostering a sense of pride and value in the language among younger generations. Promoting positive attitudes, encouraging intergenerational language transmission, and implementing supportive language policies at both regional and national levels have been identified as crucial strategies for preserving TN. Of course, all of these (linguistic) efforts will not bear fruit without addressing a bigger societal problem reflected by Soviet and now Russian language policies; namely the lack of respect and marginalization of minorities and indigenous communities in general. This problem should be first recognized and then addressed by societal actors so that the Tundra Nenets and many other communities have a chance of survival. In this

way, the hope is that, many centuries from now, we will still be able to witness the wealth of linguistic, cultural and ethnic variety in Russia.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical approval was not required for the study, since my fieldwork did not involve any invasive methods. I used linguistic fieldwork methodology and the ethnographic method conducting interviews with native speakers of Tundra Nenets. Each consultant provided informed consent by completing a consent form prior to participating in the interviews. As the nature of the work did not involve any procedures that could affect the participants' well-being, it was exempt from ethical review. The fieldwork was approved and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), ensuring that all procedures adhered to the standards of professionalism and oversight in place at the time of the research (2014–2016), which may differ from today's requirements.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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## Appendix A

Recording made on: 19 April 2014 in Naryan Mar

Language consultant: NC

Left side *in italics* for object language: TN original text

Right side after dash: English translation

1. Мань школа интернатхан тоходанамазь.—I studied at a boarding school.
2. Тикы школахана мат' класс ёльцем, нараняна едернам.—I finished six grades at this school; I got sick in the spring.
3. Падартув та" таяна пады нерня нин тоходаңгу.—They gave me a paper which said that I could not continue (school).
4. Ыацеки тоходанвась хэбто мань хаим, небыңан хаим.—When the other kids left, I stayed with my mother.
5. Тас по" хойхана небыңан илем.—For a whole year, I lived in the tundra with my mother.
6. Мань лэв ыаркарка небыв маймби.—My mom was happy, since I matured (lit. got taller).
7. "Ыяна саванё": Хойхана хаин!—"How good that you stayed in the tundra!"
8. "Хойхана иляңгун сит хойпа митам".—"You are going to live in the tundra and I will get you married."

9. Мань тикена вадамда намдба'н сит хайпа митам.—I heard the words then that I will be married.
10. Иб ядэрҗга мам няна" вэванё": Хаян еримдам".—In my mind I thought that this was really bad: I am going to get stuck in the tundra.
11. Ихнян мам: эрёняна җацеки" тоходанванзъ ханта.—In my mind I thought: In autumn, the children will go back to school.
12. Мань ханяхава" тоходанванзъ хэба"н тара.—I have to leave and go somewhere to study.
13. Сянако неб хом.—I went to a friend of mine.
14. Нянда мам: тоходанван" нинхарва?—I said to my friend: "Do you want to study?"
15. Пыда ма: ханя хантани?—She said: "Where will we go?"
16. Мазён мам: "Салехардан хэбцунь".—I respond: "Let's maybe go to Salekhard."
17. "Мань Салехардана медикҗе тоходам, хибяри савумдамдаҗэ тоходам."—"In Salekhard, I will study to become a medic and will learn to treat people."
18. "Пыдар җгани" хуня" хантанда"?—"And where will you go to?"
19. "Мань техникуман хантам."—"I will go to technical school."
20. Ти мани" март хаянь.—And so we left for the town.
21. Март тонь, мань школахан директопт' хаям.—After our arrival in the town [most probably the town where NC's boarding school was], we went to the director.
22. Пыда ма' н'ив: „җамгэ?".—He said to me: "What's the matter?"
23. "Мань тоходанвазъ Салехардан' хэван харвам."—"I just want to study in Salekhard."
24. "Валкада табльм" (си"ив класе җиҗга).—"I only don't have my transcript (There are no 7 grades)."
25. Мат' класс си"вимдей классда пеля.—I finished six classes and half of the seventh.
26. Си"ив класс җэбта тара, мань янгу.—I need seven classes, but don't have them.
27. Мань авнанда пилибт' сававна тоходансетым.—I actually always studied well.
28. Тет та самлянг җесьты.—I had 4 s and 5 s as grades. [with 5 being the best grade in the Russian school system and 1 being the worst]
29. Манэц тара журнал туюхуҗа.—The director had to look it up, he opened the journal with the records.
30. "Эйя манэц тара! Няневна сававна тоходанвэн."—"All right, I have to look it up! In fact, you studied well."
31. Тохолкодав җямды.—My teacher was sitting there.
32. Пыда ма: "Табель тамда септа хани."—She said: "Let's issue her a transcript."
33. Тад тикехед хэванзъ мэнесь.—After this, we were planning to leave [for Salekhard]."
34. Квартирахана илень хабенихана.—We lived in a flat of a Russian woman.
35. Параход неделяхана җопой лэва хан"җга.—The steamboat only left town once a week.
36. Март ядэрмазъ хэсьтынь.—We went to the town to take a walk.
37. Субботам җатень.—We were waiting for Saturday.
38. Җамгэ' ринь патерана хавсятынь.—We left our things in the flat.
39. Таяна есянь" хаянь".—We left our money there.
40. Пэвсюмб җямгэринь маҗэ" җань, есянь яңгувы". Талевыдо.—In the evening, we checked our things, the money was not there. It was stolen.
41. Няхан мам" теда" хырканы җэгунь.—I asked my friend what we should do now.
42. Пыда ма: "Пуня" мяканы хэхэнь".—She answered: "Go back home."
43. Мань газетам' Нарьяна Вындер там.—I brought the newspaper Naryana Vynder.
44. Санаторий школа хэвхана пи пилембада" манзара.—Close to the sanatorium school, there are woodworkers.
45. Пям пилемби" онтабидо.—They are chopping and stacking the wood.
46. Тая хэхэнь мазравась.—We were going to go and work there.
47. Пям онтмба тара.—One has to chop the wood.
48. Тая" хаянь, луца" писиҗга.—We went there, the Russians laughed.
49. Мани" м: "Атгэ тара?"—They are asking: "What do you want?"

50. Луца" ёльце писиңга.—The Russians laughed very much.
51. Аркадь нидиңга, саць тырабэдь, ханцер мазравуди".—"Such petite and very thin girls, how are you going to work?"
52. "Пям пэць я"амгуди".—"You won't be able to chop wood."
53. Мань мам: "Лядпэй пи онатамбгунь."—I respond: "We will stack the chopped wood."
54. Аркатадо ма: "Сид" ди нива" маэңгу." , тикихэна ных' тара."—The supervisor said: „I won't hire you, male power is needed here."
55. Хаянь", мазьями яңгу.—We left with no work.
56. Няхан мам: "Пуня" хэхэнь, почтан туюхонь."—I said: "Let's go back to the post office."
57. Почтахана газетам мэм.—At the post office, I took another newspaper.
58. Таяна пады: Качьгортхана евако җацеки харад тәне.—The following was written there: In Kachgort, there is an orphanage.
59. Евако җацеки харадхана газетахана объявления тани.—There was an announcement in the newspaper about this orphanage.
60. Пилебэй пи җонатась тара.—Chopped wood had to be stacked.
61. Сидя хибяри тара. Тая хэхэнь.—They needed two people for the job. We went there.
62. Җацеки харадан тэвынь, пикуна хабени халатана ядарҗга.—When we arrived at the orphanage, a Russian woman was walking around the street in a dressing gown.
63. Мань ихинян мам: "Техничка Завхоз җэдаки, таяна хаень."—I thought in my mind: "It is probably the head housekeeper, let's go address her."
64. Мань мам: "Мазьядами пюрҗгань."—I said: „We are looking for a job."
65. Газетам манэлабтам", туюкона пады: пи җгонэтамбда тара.—I showed her the newspaper where it was written that there were looking for workers to stack wood.
66. Пыда ма: "Амгэ манзараван харвадь?"—She asked: "Why do you want to work?"
67. Мань" : "Салехардан' тоходанавазь хэван харвань, есядами" тара, есянь" квартираханань' талевы."—We responded: "We are planning to go to Salekhard to study, but our money was stolen from the flat."
68. Ма"нив: "Неделя" пятада ни та."—She responded: "The wood will not be delivered for another week."
69. Хэвадь мэнизь, хабени манив: "Ервхан хантам, пыда ха" мэлись."—We wanted to leave, but the woman said: "I'll go to my boss and will see what she says."
70. Ерванда ня" сидтэ тарпяха.—The woman came out together with her boss.
71. Сидни хаңгаха.—They called us to them.
72. Ервада ма': "Неделя" манзрагуди". Җацеки җямгэри сэдурпаңгуди."—The boss said: "You will be working here for a week. You will mend children's clothes."
73. "Саванё, седура пир" җгани."—"Good, we can sew."
74. Недели ямбан мазрани. Хуб хасую часан', товсьтынь.—We worked for a whole week. We came at nine every morning.
75. Сидни' хув җоласьты', яле җоласьты', пэвсюмб җоласьты'.—We were fed in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening.
76. Неделя ваерана, җаркта сидни' хаңга.—The week went by and the boss called us.
77. Ма"нив: "Теда есядамди' татам. То" ни" сидяю' самлянг севкой ня"мани."—She said to us: "I will now give you your money. Each one gets 25 Rubles."
78. Тамальги пона сидяю самлянг еся саць җока.—Back in those days, 25 Rubles was a lot.
79. Ти субботахана хаянь. Салехардан хаянь.—That Saturday we left. We left for Salekhard.
80. Салехардан тэвынь, тэвмахадань нявх техникуман хая, мань медучилищен хаян.—When we arrived in Salekhard, my friend headed to the technical college, while I went to the medical college.

81. Директорт хаям. Мам: “Тюкона тоходанван харвам. Медичкам нэван харвам.”—I went to the director and said: “I want to study here. I want to be a medic.”
82. “Тюкохона т’ет’ экзамен’ мипа тара. Пыдар сидя экзаменан’ опоздаян.”—Here, you have to pass four exams. You are late for two of the exams.”
83. “Тики экзаменад’ мить я”амгуд. Њадебянда сит нива маэңгу.”—“You won’t be able to pass these exams. This is why I cannot accept you.”
84. Ихинян мам: “Хуркавам нэбцум?”—I replied: “Well, what can I do now?”
85. Техникуман хаям. Няв техникуман тоходанвась мэвэдо, иле нигдамда ми”мы.—I went to the technical college. My friend had been accepted there, they gave her accommodation as well.
86. Мань директорт хаям. Директор ма’нив: “Сит тоходанвась маэгува.”—I went to the director. The director told me: “We will accept you to study here.”
87. Подготовительное отделения хаям.—I joined the preparatory program.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For clarification, I distinguish the two dialects of Nenets: the dialect of Tundra Nenets and the dialect of Forest Nenets. Within the Tundra Nenets dialect, there are different subdialects (Rus. ‘govor’) which I am describing here.
- <sup>2</sup> In Russia, only languages with numbers lower than 50,000 are granted the status of an indigenous language. The criteria for inclusion in the group of indigenous people in Russia are small population size, specificities of the traditional culture, and a traditional lifestyle of nomadic or semi-nomadic reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing (*Severnaja Enciklopedija* 2004: 421).
- <sup>3</sup> During Soviet times, a колхоз (/kolkhoz/) was a collective farm.
- <sup>4</sup> The city of Salekhard is located in the Yamalo–Nenets Autonomous Okrug. This is approximately 700 km away by air from Naryan-Mar, which would become the starting point of the trip for both girls.
- <sup>5</sup> As it is common to pay consultants for fieldwork just as if they were participants in an experiment in Germany, I wanted to uphold this and reimbursed my Nenets consultants with the hourly rate of those times.
- <sup>6</sup> Kiezdeutsch is a variety of German which is spoken primarily by young people in urban areas like Berlin. A high percentage of the youth speaking Kiezdeutsch are multilingual and have an immigration background. It is regarded to be a multiethnic language. In 2006, the term was used in an essay by Heike Wiese and subsequently became established.

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## Article

# Preserving the Latvian Language Abroad: Personal Narratives and Institutional Support

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**Abstract:** Despite the widespread distribution of Latvians globally, the importance of heritage language for cultural connectivity remains underexplored. This study explores the preservation of the Latvian language among diaspora communities, employing linguistic autoethnography, participant observation, and communication analysis to examine the interplay between individual experiences and institutional support in maintaining cultural identity. Drawing from the author's bilingual Latvian–Lithuanian background and based on the example of a mixed Latvian–Lithuanian family living in Finland, the study highlights the role of the family strategy in using languages at home, the role of grandparents, as well as heritage tourism, music, and arts in strengthening cultural ties. Through linguistic autoethnography, the article captures the essence of personal and collective efforts to sustain the Latvian language. Participant observation in diasporan activities and analysis of communicative practices reveal how diasporan Latvians actively engage in preserving their linguistic heritage. The Latvian Language Agency's initiatives, including supporting language schools abroad, publishing educational resources, and organizing summer camps, are critically examined. The study advocates for a unified approach that combines personal commitment and structured support, emphasizing the crucial role of both in the vibrancy of the Latvian language abroad.

**Keywords:** Latvian diaspora; language preservation; cultural identity; heritage tourism; bilingual upbringing; participant observation; communication analysis

## 1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving tapestry of global migration and cultural exchange, the preservation of heritage languages stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of human communities. This article explores the multifaceted efforts of maintaining the Latvian language outside its native borders, a pursuit that intertwines the personal with the collective, the local with the global. This exploration is not just about linguistic preservation; it is a narrative of identity, cultural continuity, and the intricate dance between adaptation and retention.

The history of the Republic of Latvia and the formation of diasporas in connection with it are very close intertwined. Not delving into details of the history of the country, it is useful to mention briefly such facts as during World War I and the Russian civil war, around one million of Latvia's residents moved to other territories (mostly in Russia); in 1918, the independent Latvian state was created, and over the next 10 years, around 300,000 people returned to Latvia (Hazans 2019, p. 39); World War II and the occupation by Germany from 1941 to 1945 must also be mentioned, as well as the Soviet occupation in 1940–1941 and from 1945 till 1990. In the last year of the Second World War, about 170–180,000 Latvian residents went west across the Baltic Sea to neutral Sweden (about 5000), and the great majority south—to Germany. After the war, according to some estimates, 120–150,000 refugees in the Western occupation zones decided to stay in Western countries and, over time, began to consider themselves exiles (Plakans 2024). The next stage—the 'great dispersion' of Western Latvians—began in 1946. By 1951, the vast majority of Latvians had left Europe;

the main destinations were the USA (about 45,000), Australia (about 21,000), and Canada (about 13,000) (Plakans, Idem). After the restoration of the independence of Latvia, a new wave of emigration—especially starting from 2006 to 2007—from Latvia to the countries of the European Union, led to the concept of diaspora in official discourses regarding all Latvians living abroad.

There are groups of Latvian people living in various countries outside of Latvia itself. These communities may vary in size and composition, but they typically consist of Latvian expatriates, descendants of Latvian immigrants, or individuals with strong ties to Latvian culture and heritage (Meija 2005; Pranka et al. 2021). According to the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, more than 420,000 representatives of the Latvian diaspora live, study, and work outside of Latvia. The Latvian diaspora includes compatriots who left the territory of Latvia in several waves of emigration since the end of the 19th century, including Latvian nationals who left during the recent emigration and who maintain ties with Latvia. Currently, the largest Latvian communities live in Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Australia, Russia, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, Israel, Norway, and Spain, as well as other countries in the world (MFA n.d.).

This article investigates the importance of preserving the Latvian language among diaspora communities, supported by both personal experiences and institutional efforts. Rooted in the author's bilingual upbringing with Latvian and Lithuanian influences, the narrative underscores the importance of linguistic heritage in shaping individual identities. Through stories from various individuals, the article highlights efforts to retain the Latvian language across generations. Complementing these personal stories, the role of the Latvian Language Agency is explored. The agency actively supports small Latvian language schools abroad, publishes a range of teaching aids and study books, and organizes summer camps for both teachers and children. Emphasizing its contributions through these initiatives and its educational manuals and resources, the article advocates for a harmonious blend of personal commitment and structured support to ensure the Latvian language's continued vibrancy abroad.

There are many studies on Latvian communities around the world, on the migration after World War II and when in exile at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century (Jaunzems and Brown 1972; Putniņš 1979; Kalniņš and Dreifelds 1990; Priedkalns 1994; Dreifelds 1996; Gilbert 2002; Beķere 2018; Hazans 2019; Kaprāns 2019; etc.), and the situation of the language's preservation, highlighting the role of ethnic schools (Feather and Rudzītis 1974; Koroleva et al. 2021). The research always paid attention to the festivals of singing and dancing and their importance in preserving identity as a way of returning to the motherland (Carpenter 1996; Ekmanis 2016). Among other hints, it was mentioned that heritage tourism has the potential to bolster indigenous language and culture, as visiting the country of your ancestors offers the opportunity to learn the language, contribute to the upkeep of historic sites, and engage in research and dissemination of the country's history (Kaupins et al. 2009). Music, especially choral, and visual arts play a crucial role in forming a cultural identity (Grizzard 2019; Pourchier-Plasseraud 2015). Latvian educologists have also studied and described the difficulties and specifics of learning Latvian as a second language (i.e., Laiveniece 2016; Laiveniece and Lauze 2017; Tomme-Jukēvica 2020; Markus et al. 2023).

My personal experience, growing up in a Latvian–Lithuanian bilingual family, offers a unique perspective on this complex interplay. Children have a significant influence on language practices at home, often acting as language managers within families. This dynamic is evident in various contexts, including my own family, where our children, growing up in an international environment, play an active role in maintaining linguistic diversity. The practice of the home language in Latvian diaspora families starts with the parents' belief that they are responsible for their children's competence in their heritage language, eventually evolving into a belief in the value of the native language and other languages. Parents employ various language management strategies in communication with their children, such as consistent use of the native language and expecting the children

to respond in the same language, illustrating a strategic balance between multiple languages within the family unit. This reflects the complexity of family language policy, which involves both conscious and unconscious planning of language use within families to maintain the Latvian language among their children in diverse linguistic environments (Martena 2023, pp. 85–6). According to Bissinger (2021, p. 30), who conducted research on Lithuanian family language use in Sweden, children’s activities significantly influence language practices at home. Children have a remarkable capacity to act as language managers within families. This observation is also true for my family, where our four children, growing up in an international environment in Finland, play a similar role.

## 2. Material and Method

The foundation of heritage language preservation most often lies within the family unit. As it is said in the theoretical literature, the family plays a crucial role in maintaining the Latvian language and identity. Parents are particularly significant in their children’s language learning and in recognizing the worth of the Latvian language (Pranka et al. 2021, pp. 38–39). In bilingual families, such as mine, where one parent is Lithuanian and the other Latvian, language policy at home plays a crucial role. Autoreflexion, a process of self-examination and conscious decision making about language use, is vital. Families must deal with the complexities of imparting multiple languages to their children, ensuring that each language finds its space and relevance in daily life. The dynamics of language policy within a family can significantly influence the linguistic proficiency and cultural identity of its members. Circumstances have uniquely aligned such that Lithuanian–Latvian bilingualism can be passed on to the third generation. We regularly keep selective diary records of the speech of all four children in our family and sometimes record them on video. Additionally, the inclusion of other languages (English, Finnish, Russian) makes our family even more multilingual.

In my research, I analyse language policies of language maintenance as offered by specific societal institutions. In addition, I rely on methods of linguistic autoethnography (e.g., Adamson and Muller 2024; Filipovic 2019), participant observation (e.g., Tusting 2020), and communication analysis (e.g., Mustajoki and Baikulova 2022; Weigand and Kecskes 2018). My linguistic background and involvement in multilingual everyday family conversations allow me to explore my own experiences with language, culture, and identity, using personal narratives, observations, and reflections as data. It involves analysing how language shapes individuals’ perceptions, behaviors, and interactions within various social contexts.

These methodologies allow for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, family interactions, and the broader societal context of language maintenance. The collected material includes detailed personal narratives and autobiographical reflections, offering insights into my own experiences growing up in a Latvian–Lithuanian bilingual family. These narratives highlight the complexities of language policy and maintenance within a multilingual family setting. Observational data from everyday family interactions are documented, providing real-time examples of language use and management strategies employed by family members. This includes how parents and children employ and balance multiple languages in their daily lives.

All family members agreed to participate in the study, contributing their perspectives through interviews and reflective discussions. These data capture the diverse experiences and attitudes towards language maintenance and use within the family. The material includes an analysis of various language management strategies used by parents and children. This involves examining specific practices, such as the consistent use of the heritage language, responses to language shifts, and the role of children in reinforcing language use. Communication analysis methods are applied to study interactions within the family, focusing on how language shapes perceptions, behaviors, and social interactions. This includes examining the influence of societal institutions on family language policies and maintenance strategies. The study employs linguistic autoethnography to explore how language, culture, and identity intersect in my own and my family’s experiences. This

method provides a rich, first-person account of the challenges and strategies involved in maintaining heritage languages in a multilingual environment. Through these comprehensive methodological approaches and diverse data sources, the research provides important insights into the dynamics of heritage language preservation within bilingual and multilingual families.

### 3. Ethnic Identity in Multilingual Migrant Families

In the realm of social sciences, the intricate relationship between identity and various attitudes and behaviours stands as a central theme. Researchers focusing on identity (Ekmanis 2016; Hazans 2019, etc.) highlight its dynamic nature, emphasizing how it evolves and varies throughout an individual's life. This is particularly evident in the context of migration, making identity formation among migrants a subject of keen interest for sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists. In our modern world, characterized by rapid global processes and advanced technology, information can be accessed globally within seconds. People can relocate to a new country, immerse themselves in a different language, and adapt to a completely new cultural environment in a matter of hours. Such transitions often prompt individuals to reflect on their sense of belonging and identity. They find themselves contemplating the commonalities and distinctions between 'us' and 'them', and where the line is drawn between 'our people' and 'the others'.

The transformation of a sense of belonging in the context of emigration has become a significant area of research. This is because the way individuals maintain their connection to their homeland, and how they develop new affiliations with their country of residence, greatly influences their integration success and decisions about settling permanently or returning home. Identity is a complex and ever-changing phenomenon. It is about how individuals perceive and define their relationships with the world and how these relationships evolve. Identity is a process, often more accurately described as 'identification'. It is constructed through interactions with others, constantly being shaped and reshaped. As Laura Sūna (2019, p. 184) stated, "[...] concept 'identity' is used not in an essentialist sense as something static but rather in the sense of it being an on-going process of the articulation of elements from different discourses". In addition, "the construction of cultural identity, therefore, is a continuous balance"; "[...] the individual adapts his or her identity all the time, depending on different social contexts and communication situations" (Sūna 2019, p. 185).

#### 3.1. Community Engagement and Cultural Activities

Latvian communities abroad have been instrumental in fostering a sense of cultural identity. Activities such as folk music, dancing festivals, and language classes not only serve as platforms for language practice but also reinforce cultural bonds. These gatherings are more than just social events; they are incubators for language development, as highlighted in the works of Grizzard (2019) and Pourchier-Plasseraud (2015).

Knowledge of the heritage language is seen as a crucial part of their cultural capital and an important dimension of ethnic identity and belonging. The main factors affecting the use of the native or heritage language in the emigrant community include family and conversational languages at home, close relationships and active communication with relatives in Latvia, and participation in cultural events and activities in Latvian communities abroad. Regular participation in Latvian community activities is a significant activity for maintaining the Latvian language and identity. These activities are especially active in countries like Sweden (Pranka et al. 2021, pp. 19–20). The ethnicity of a spouse also plays an important role in the use of the Latvian language within the family. In families with both Latvian parents, the Latvian language is more commonly used, while the situation in ethnically mixed families may vary. Pranka et al. (2021, p. 55) states: "Nevertheless, as the research data show, the attitude of the non-Latvian spouse to Latvian language use in the family is more tolerant in families living in the Nordic countries, especially in Sweden, than it is in other host countries". According to the data published by Mārtiņš Kaprāns (2019), the *Emigrant Communities of Latvia survey of 2014* shows that only one-half of respondents in

Great Britain speak Latvian at home; nearly one-third of respondents do not care whether their children speak Latvian (Kaprāns 2019, p. 127).

Latvian communities abroad engage in various activities to preserve their culture and foster a sense of cultural belonging and identity. A significant focus is placed on learning and using the Latvian language. This includes teaching children the Latvian language at home, attending Latvian schools or language classes, and using Latvian in daily conversations within the family. However, this is not so easy: we also attempted to find a school that could teach our older children in their native languages, but in the area of Finland where we lived, it was not possible to organize this for Latvian. Eventually, we found an option for Lithuanian.

The desire of emigrants to maintain their ethnic identity and mother tongue as a value may conflict, especially among the younger generation, with the desire to adapt to the dominant host country culture and language environment (Pranka et al. 2021, p. 38). Participation in cultural events and activities is a major way of preserving heritage. This includes singing in choirs, attending and organizing cultural events, and participating in traditional Latvian festivals and celebrations. Regular participation in community activities, where members of the Latvian diaspora come together, plays a crucial role. These gatherings often involve cultural sharing, traditional music, dance, and other forms of cultural expression. As illustrated by the example of my family, maintaining close relationships and active communication with relatives and friends in Latvia and Lithuania is crucial. This approach aids in staying connected with our cultural roots and keeping up-to-date with developments in our ‘motherland’/‘fatherland’.

Another facet of maintaining national identity could be through engaging in tourism that focuses on national heritage. The paper by Kaupins et al. (2009) explores various aspects of Latvian heritage tourism, the role of the internet in preserving cultural identity, and the impact of heritage tourism on the Latvian community. The document notes that for many Latvians, being part of their ethnic group in the diaspora means more than possessing the nationality of the place where they grew up. This strong feeling of belonging is crucial in maintaining cultural identity away from their homeland. Latvian immigrants who were displaced after the Soviet Union’s invasion and occupation of Latvia in 1941 established their own community centres in cities like Indianapolis. These centres became hubs for various Latvian cultural programs, including schools, folk dancing, choir groups, and theatrical groups, which are vital for preserving and promoting Latvian culture and heritage abroad. Latvian heritage tourism associations participate in mutual cultural events throughout the year, such as New Year’s, Easter Egg Colouring, and St. John’s Day (Latv. *Jāņi*). These events help members learn about each other’s cultures while forming long-lasting friendships, thereby strengthening the sense of community and cultural identity. The Latvian Community Centre in Indianapolis, for example, has also integrated with other ethnic groups, hosting associations like the Estonian Society, Lithuanian Society, Polish, Swedish, and Scottish Associations. This integration shows the adaptability of the Latvian communities while maintaining their unique cultural traditions. Kaupins, Ray, and Berzins suggest that there is a greater emphasis among Baltic descendants on the maintenance of heritage and language versus rediscovering it. This indicates a proactive approach to preserving their cultural identity, including folklore, nationalism, and the continuation of traditions and language (Kaupins et al. 2009, p. 59).

In Finland, the society “Laivas”—association of Latvian-Finnish families—plays a pivotal role, akin to the activities of Latvian communities abroad as detailed in the US and Sweden, in preserving and nurturing Latvian cultural values. This society unites Latvian families as well as mixed families in Finland and offers a unique platform for its members and the wider Latvian diaspora to engage with their heritage, echoing the importance of cultural and language preservation highlighted in the documents. “Laivas” addresses a critical issue in the Latvian diaspora—strengthening the sense of belonging to Latvia and ensuring the preservation of national identity and fostering cultural identity through language and cultural practices.

The concerts and events organized by “Laivas”, much like the community gatherings and cultural events in the US, serve as a nexus for the Latvian diaspora in Finland, drawing people from various regions. These gatherings are not just social events but also vital opportunities for maintaining linguistic ties, as they encourage communication in Latvian, underscoring the significance of language in cultural identity preservation. For example, the Autumn Harvest Family Festival and Pancake Baking on Shrovetide (*Metēni*). The association “Laivas” has organized summer camps for children in Finland (Loima) for several years in a row. After the 2023 camp, there were very positive reviews from both parents and children: “We want to introduce children to Latvian culture in a more interesting way, from a different angle, as well as help strengthen the Latvian language for the participants”; “It’s a great opportunity to meet and be with other families. An opportunity for children to spend time outside their usual routine. Make new friends”; “We are very, very happy to meet other friends and meet new families. This is like a fulfilled, long-cherished dream”; “The children really enjoy the activities, and they have already made friends with whom they keep in touch throughout the year”; “We miss Latvia” (translation from Latvian—“Laivas” n.d.). However, it must be added that the success of such a local society requires active and enthusiastic leadership.

Moreover, “Laivas” extends its impact through collaboration with the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in Finland, the Finnish-Latvian Friendship Association “Rozentāls-Seura”, and other organizations. This approach mirrors the strategies outlined in the article by Kaupins et al. (2009), where active community engagement and partnerships are key to effectively maintaining and celebrating Latvian heritage abroad. Such collaborative efforts ensure a wider reach and greater involvement, potentially attracting more Latvians in the diaspora, thereby strengthening their cultural bonds and identity, much like the initiatives described in the mentioned article by Kaupins et al. for fostering a sense of cultural identity among Latvian communities globally. Confirming what was said with the example of my family, we all try to participate in corpore in the events.

In Finland, the Latvian community is enriched by the presence of “Ziemeļmeita”, a choir, “Aurora”, a folk-dance group, and “MADteatteri”, a theatre troupe. These artistic groups are instrumental in sustaining social ties within the Finnish Latvian community and play a significant role in nurturing a connection to Latvia, thereby tackling a major challenge encountered by the diaspora. A major incentive for joining the choir and dance ensemble is the desire to participate in a traditional song and dance festival. My wife and I are both members of this dance ensemble, serving as role models for our children. My youngest daughter also enjoys attending the Latvian children’s dance group every Saturday, where she has the opportunity to speak Latvian with others. Additionally, the community offers “Pikku Putni”, Latvian language classes for children, further strengthening cultural ties.

In conclusion, and citing Sanita Martena (2023, p. 90), in all the families studied in the diaspora, there was a significant emphasis on the sociocultural aspect of language policy. Respondents were aware of the role of the Latvian language in both integrating into Latvian society and preserving their cultural identity. This understanding underpins the families’ decisions regarding language use and education, demonstrating the interplay between individual family choices and broader community efforts to maintain the Latvian language and culture abroad.

### 3.2. Institutional Support

Due to a range of historical and economic factors, Latvia has a significant diaspora, with estimates suggesting that over 370,000 Latvians live abroad. It is not easy to find the number of Latvians living in Finland. Some sources give the number as being more than 3600 people of full or partial Latvian descent residing in Finland (2021). Recognizing the integral role these individuals play in the fabric of our nation, Latvia has appointed an Ambassador-at-Large for Diaspora Affairs, Elita Gavele, and her responsibility involves coordinating the Latvian State’s diaspora policy across various state institutions. This policy is forward-thinking and focuses on integrating the diaspora into national affairs,

encompassing civic and political engagement, and economic and scientific advancement, and encouraging remigration (Latviesi.com n.d.).

Given Latvia's demographic challenges and the swift assimilation of its compatriots overseas, it is crucial to sustain their connection with Latvia. This is not only about preserving the Latvian language and cultural traditions among the diaspora but also about creating an environment in Latvia that is appealing for their return. The ambassador's role is pivotal in establishing and nurturing a reciprocal relationship between the diaspora and the state.

To meet these objectives and others outlined in the Diaspora Law, they developed the government-approved Diaspora Plan 2021–2023. This comprehensive document, a first of its kind, details all the tasks to be undertaken, the expected outcomes, the responsible institutions, and the necessary funding for implementation. The development of this plan was significantly influenced by diaspora organizations, whose insights were invaluable in pinpointing the needs and priorities of the diaspora.

The evolving landscape of the Latvian diaspora, marked by its shift from the era of Soviet occupation, has brought to the forefront an increasing need for support, particularly in preserving the Latvian identity, culture, and language. Their comprehensive study conducted in 2021, which included interviews with leaders of key diaspora organizations and a survey encompassing 260 groups, shed light on the current state and needs of these organizations. A significant focus of these groups is on cultural activities, language preservation, and education, with many also hosting recreational events.

Geographically, the United Kingdom emerges as the hub of Latvian diaspora organizations, followed closely by the United States and Germany. There is a notable presence of the new diaspora in Europe, contrasting with the relatively smaller numbers in South America, Asia, and Africa. In regions like the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where organizations have a history extending over 30 years, there's a noticeable decline in membership and resources, a trend less pronounced but still present in European Union and European Economic Area countries.

The challenges faced by these organizations are multifaceted. A significant concern is the lack of human resources, with most organizations relying heavily on a small pool of active volunteers. Financial constraints are another major hurdle, with a majority operating on modest budgets primarily sourced from membership fees, donations, and, to a lesser extent, Latvian state grants.

The disparity in support mechanisms between different regions is striking. While organizations in the USA, Canada, and Australia have traditionally depended on donations and bequests, those in Europe benefit more from Latvian state funding. This discrepancy has led to a sense of division and jealousy among the organizations, highlighting the need for a more balanced approach to funding.

The role of these diaspora organizations cannot be overstated. They are the linchpins in maintaining a sense of community, belonging, and Latvian identity among expatriates. In their absence, the ties to Latvia weaken, and the risk of cultural assimilation increases. This underscores the importance of the Latvian state's role in ensuring their sustainability through increased and equitable funding.

The Embassy of Latvia in Finland performs outstanding work, enjoying a significant standing among the Latvian community. It keeps local Latvians informed about all the latest news, organizes elections, and hosts meetings with notable individuals, such as Latvian historians, writers, poets, and more. Another crucial aspect of its role is organizing the celebration and reception for Latvian Independence Day, an event that draws participation from the Finnish Latvian community. This occasion serves as an excellent opportunity for making new acquaintances and contacts.

In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia and Embassy, the Latvian Language Agency, under the Latvian Ministry of Education, provides significant support for the preservation of the Latvian language for persons, especially children, living abroad. The Latvian Language Agency actively supports the promotion and learning of the Latvian

language abroad through two primary initiatives: firstly, by backing the study of Latvian as a foreign language at universities outside Latvia, and secondly, by aiding the learning of Latvian within the diaspora community.

In its efforts to bolster Latvian language learning among the diaspora, the Agency has implemented a comprehensive set of support measures. These include the development and provision of educational and methodological resources tailored to the needs of learners. Additionally, the Agency focuses on the professional development of educators within the diaspora, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to teach the language effectively.

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by returnee children and families, the Agency also offers specialized training for Latvian teachers to cater to this group. Financial support is extended directly to weekend schools that focus on Latvian language education, ensuring that these institutions have the resources they need to operate successfully.

Moreover, the Agency supports the organization of educational events in host countries of the diaspora. These events are designed to encourage both the learning and usage of the Latvian language. For younger members of the diaspora, the Agency organizes language learning camps (also several summers in Finland), providing an immersive and engaging environment for children and youth to learn Latvian.

Lastly, the Agency provides valuable guidance and advice to teachers and parents, ensuring a cohesive and effective approach to teaching the Latvian language abroad. This multifaceted support system plays a crucial role in maintaining and promoting the Latvian language and culture within the global Latvian community.

The Latvian Language Agency has established partnerships with 27 foreign universities to enhance courses in Latvian language and culture. Over time, however, the landscape has shifted. Since 2008, reforms at several universities have led to a reduction, and in some cases, a complete halt in Latvian language research and study activities. This change has resulted in a decrease in the number of universities receiving information or financial support from the Agency. Currently, the Agency's support is primarily directed towards European universities, with additional assistance extended to institutions in the USA, South Korea, and China. At present, the Agency maintains active relationships with 17 foreign higher education institutions, with the University of Helsinki among them (LVA n.d.a).

The support provided by the Latvian Language Agency encompasses a range of measures. Each year, the Agency supports the activities of eight Latvian lecturers at various higher education institutions. Additionally, it backs the organization of four–five events annually that promote the Latvian language. The Agency also offers methodological advice and information on initiatives related to the promotion, research, and teaching of the Latvian language.

Further, the Agency is involved in the publication of teaching and methodological materials and organizes experience exchange seminars for university lecturers. In collaboration with the University of Latvia, it supports the organization of Latvian language summer schools in Latvia. Moreover, the Agency facilitates the distribution of teaching materials, dictionaries, scientific literature, fiction, and methodological resources to universities, thereby contributing significantly to the global promotion and understanding of the Latvian language and culture. Thanks to the Agency, numerous textbooks and dictionaries have also been made available at the Library of the University of Helsinki.

Diaspora schools are provided with teaching materials, teachers are trained, and youth camps and exchange programmes are supported. Diaspora children are supported to learn Latvian in a distance learning environment, and Latvian language proficiency tests are provided in the diaspora.

In 2023, the Latvian Language Agency started a new tradition to thank the teams of Latvian schools in the diaspora—school leaders, teachers, and parents who enthusiastically and selflessly carry out outstanding work in the care and preservation of the Latvian language outside Latvia's borders (LVA n.d.b).

A key focus of the Latvian Language Agency is on the professional development of educators within the diaspora. This includes specialized training for Latvian teachers to effectively work with children and families who return to Latvia, ensuring they are equipped with the necessary skills and understanding to meet their unique educational needs. In addition to educational support, the Latvian Language Agency provides direct financial assistance to many weekend schools teaching the Latvian language. This funding is crucial in sustaining these institutions and enhancing their educational offerings. The Agency also supports the organization of various educational events fostering a deeper connection with Latvian culture and heritage.

The Latvian language is taught outside Latvia in approximately 103 non-formal education institutions, commonly known as weekend schools, across 25 countries. This widespread network of schools plays a crucial role in maintaining and promoting the Latvian language and culture within the global Latvian community (LVA n.d.b). Annual meetings of Latvian language teachers, supported by the Latvian Language Agency, provide a platform for sharing best practices, discussing challenges, and exploring new methodologies in language teaching. These gatherings are crucial for professional development and for maintaining a unified approach to language education across different regions.

### 3.3. *A Case Study of a Bilingual Latvian–Lithuanian Family in Finland*

My family story starts with the deportation of Latvians and Lithuanians to Siberia after WWII. My mother Laimute Balode was born there to a mixed family as half Latvian and half Lithuanian (Protassova 2005). Later, she spent much time in both countries, Latvia and Lithuania, and she also worked in Finland, teaching both Baltic languages at the University of Helsinki. In my early years, despite my mother's efforts living in Latvia to speak Lithuanian with me, her eldest son, my response leaned towards Latvian, the dominant language of our immediate environment. This preference underscores the profound impact of one's surroundings on language acquisition. However, annual summer visits to Lithuania, Vilnius, where I interacted with Lithuanian peers, marked a turning point. These immersive experiences provided a natural and enjoyable context for language learning, highlighting the importance of meaningful social interactions in acquiring a heritage language. Grandparents often play a crucial role as a sanctuary of peace, especially in mixed families, where children can either learn or enhance their language skills. However, in my case, my grandparents, who were fluent in both Baltic languages, attempted to speak Latvian with me even at their home in Vilnius. Despite my mother's efforts to communicate in Lithuanian, I resisted it as a teenager. Additionally, the bookshelf at home, filled with Lithuanian literature, did not appeal to me at that time. Thus, until around the age of 20, when I began studying Baltic languages at the University of Latvia, Latvian was my strongest language. I identified solely with Latvianness as my identity.

My family was established in Latvia, but we have been living in Finland for the past 7 years. My wife—born in Lithuania, and who studied as an exchange student in Latvia—and I use both Latvian and Lithuanian in our communication, writing mostly in Lithuanian and speaking mostly in Latvian. When we want to say something in secret, we use English, but that no longer works as our children can now understand it. Our eldest daughter, Liepa (13 years old), and eldest son, Norberts (11 years old), were born in Latvia. They attended kindergarten there, and their common language of communication was, and still is, mostly Latvian. Both are also fluent in Finnish. Liepa, in particular, is gifted with languages. She is talkative and communicates easily with friends and neighbours. This was also the reason why she quickly got used to the school and class team when we had to change schools. Language skills played a very important role in this case. On the other hand, Norberts has the opposite personality—he is highly introverted, not inclined towards languages, and thinks more mathematically. He also chooses more sports activities for his leisure time, playing football, where language skills are not so important. Consequently, his Finnish is not as strong, and he often mixes languages. Norberts himself feels his lack of language, so he speaks little and quite unclearly. To some extent, he as a teenager

feels discomfort and sometimes even an inferiority complex. The third child in our family, Paula, aged 6, who successfully attends a Finnish kindergarten, speaks a lot and fluently in Latvian, Lithuanian, and Finnish, but mixes languages much more often than other children without even realizing it and without feeling any discomfort. Our youngest son, Vilis, aged one and a half, who has been attending the Finnish kindergarten since he was 9 months old, is just starting to speak, and mostly in Finnish, although he understands all commands in Latvian or Lithuanian as well.

As a funny example from my family when talking about identity, there is a conversation my mother had with her grandson Norberts when he was 5 years old, speaking about nationality: *Who are you?—I am Latvian!—Why?—I was born in Latvia!—Who is Liepa? (elder sister)—She is Lithuanian!—Why?—She speaks Lithuanian well! My grandmother lives there!—Who is Paula? (younger sister)—She is Finnish!—Why?—She was born in Finland! (the fourth youngest brother still was not born).* This clearly shows the child's image that defines and forms the identity of a person.

Continuing the topic of language dynamics, it shifted when I started my own family. My wife, being Lithuanian, and I made a conscious decision to nurture both languages at home. This bilingual environment has enabled our children to become proficient in both Latvian and Lithuanian. We each spoke to our children in our native language, and they responded accordingly: to the mother in Lithuanian, to the father in Latvian. Initially, this seemed problem-free. However, moving to Finland 8 years ago introduced Finnish into our linguistic equation. Observing our four children—half Latvian, half Lithuanian—tending to converse in Finnish, especially in unguarded moments, prompted us to reassess our family language policy. We recognized the need to create a balanced environment where each language holds its value and space.

To counter the dominance of Finnish, we have employed several strategies. Firstly, we limit the use of Finnish at home, emphasizing Latvian and Lithuanian to ensure these languages remain active in our children's daily lives, and it works: they are communicating between themselves mostly in Latvian, and our common language around the table is mostly Lithuanian. Additionally, an obligatory part of our day is reading Latvian and Lithuanian books before night (if there is no time to read, play Latvian/Lithuanian folk-tale recordings and songs in headphones). Secondly, we have observed the phenomenon of our children losing their connection to the heritage countries. To mitigate this, we have made concerted efforts to foster friendships with Latvian and Lithuanian children during school holidays. These connections not only enhance language skills but also strengthen cultural ties. Fortunately, we have the opportunity to visit grandparents in Latvia and Lithuania from time to time, where the children are immersed in the local cultural life, including visits to museums, concerts, and folk song festivals.

Sending our children to camps organized by the Latvian Language Agency or other organizations is another crucial aspect of our approach. These camps offer a structured environment for language learning and cultural immersion, complementing our efforts at home. They provide an opportunity for our children to engage with their heritage language in a fun, interactive setting, reinforcing the language skills and cultural connections we strive to maintain. In addition, they gain new friends with whom they can communicate in Latvian or Lithuanian. For example, one such event in Scandinavia, where our family from Finland also participated, was the camp "3×3" in Bergen, Norway, in 2019, 3–8 of August, the theme of which was "Home" ("Mājas"). The camp was led by Inese Krūmiņa, and organized by Ilga Švāne and Laura Rastiņa. The activities of the camp tried to answer the questions: Where is our place in this world? How do we create this place so that our beloved people feel well, how do we create the home we come from, the home where our children grow up, where Latvian national culture meets the new home country and culture with all the pluses and minuses? How do we raise children in a multicultural environment, giving them the opportunity to inherit the best of our worlds (Camp "3×3" n.d.)?

Our journey through the complexities of raising bilingual children in a multilingual environment has been one of constant reflection and adaptation. It highlights the delicate

balance required in family language policy, especially in a diaspora context. By sharing our story, we hope to offer insights into the challenges and rewards of nurturing heritage languages and to encourage other families in similar situations to find their unique path in this endeavour.

I have previously mentioned the practice of reading books in Latvian or Lithuanian within our family. It is not an easy task, especially since their schoolmates are required to read books in Finnish as well, making it an additional ‘job’ for our children. All our relatives are aware that the best birthday gift is a book in Latvian or Lithuanian. The theoretical literature suggests that reading books in Latvian and utilizing educational materials related to Latvian history, culture, and traditions are also ways to preserve the culture (Pranka et al. 2021, p. 44). According to the same authors, literacy in the mother tongue is gradually declining, for example, “however if in 2014 every third child could read Latvian books, then in 2019 only every fourth child in emigration could do so”. (Pranka et al. Idem.). If our two oldest children read in Latvian and can answer text questions, so their reading skills are good or above average, then their writing skills are at a very low level, because they rarely write—mostly only phone messages or short letters.

However, despite our best efforts, language interference occurs almost daily in our children’s communication. Here are some examples of language usage from our family. For example, Paula, who was 2 years old, often used Finnish commands even when she spoke Latvian. Sitting on the toilet, she might chase everyone away by shouting, *Pois! Pois!* which means ‘Go away!’ in Finnish, instead of using the Latvian *Ej prom!* When Paula was 4 years old, she said: *Nesatikšu savu draudzeni Noru. Mums ir loma.* ‘I will not see my friend Nora. We have a vacation.’ (cf. in Latvian *atvaļinājums* ‘vacation’).

Paula (5 years old): *Man sāp polvis.* ‘My knee hurts.’ (cf. in Latv. *celis* ‘knee’).

Paula (5.5 years old): *Šūpini mani vahvasti!* ‘Swing me hard!’ (cf. Latv. *stipri* ‘hard, strong’).

Children talk at the table about food, also interspersing some Finnish words:

Paula (5 years old): *Ihan visus zirņus brālis apēda.* ‘My brother ate all the peas.’ (cf. Latv. *pilnīgi visus* ‘absolutely all’).

Norberts (3.5 years old): *Drīz būs kakku!* ‘There will be a cake soon!’ (cf. Latv. *kūka* ‘cake’).

Finnish words in children’s speech are applied to the grammatical system of the Latvian language:

Paula (3 years old) wants to look at pictures on the phone and says: *Mumme, es painīšu! Nē, paini tu!* ‘Grandma, I’ll press it! No, you press it!’ (cf. Latv. *spiedīšu* ‘I will press’, *spied* ‘press’).

Paula (5.5 years old): *Es visu laiku joksēju* ‘I ran all the time’ (cf. Latv. *skrēju* ‘I ran’—verb coined from Finnish root + Latvian suffix -ēju).

Paula (6 years old): *Kur ir mana pinnīte?* ‘Where is my hairpin?’ (cf. Latv. dim. *saspraudīte* ‘hairpin’; word is coined from Finnish root + Latv. dim. suffix -īte).

Paula (6 years old): *Vai tu zini, kurš ir vuosis?* ‘Do you know what year it is?’ (cf. Latv. *gads* ‘year’; word is coined from Finnish *vuosi* ‘year’ + Latv. ending m. g. N. sg. -is).

Norberts (4 years old): *Kad vectēvs mūs rokinās?* ‘When will grandfather feed us?’ (cf. Latv. *baros* ‘will feed’ 3rd p. sg. fut.; the verb is coined from Finnish root *ruokia* + Latv. iterative suffix -inās).

Sometimes children do not make a difference between genders; it is very likely that this phenomenon is from Finnish language interference:

Paula (4 years old): *Divi saulīši.* ‘Two suns’ (m. g. N. pl. dimin.) (cf. Latv. *divas saulītes*, f. g. N. pl. dimin.).

Paula (5 years old), when talking about her little brother, regularly says *Viņa* (She) instead of *Viņš* (He): *Viņa naktī bišku raudāja* ‘She cried a little bit at night’ (cf. Latv. *Viņš naktī raudāja*).

Norberts (4 years old): *Viņam vēl nav zobu, bet ir mēls* (m. g. N. sg.) ‘He does not have teeth yet, but he has a tongue (m. g.)’ (cf. Latv. *mēle* f. g. N. sg.).

If children do not know or suddenly forget a word in Latvian, they use a Finnish lexeme instead:

Paula's (4 years old) conversation with grandmother: *Skatīsimies īsu filmu. Paula: Kas ir īss? (Let's watch a short film. Paula: What is it īss?).*

Norberts (5 years old): *Mums dārziņā dod tikai terveellinen ruoka, nezinu, kā latviski. 'They only give us healthy food in the kindergarden, I do not know how to say it in Latvian' (cf. Latv. veselīgu pārtiku Acc.sg. 'healthy food').*

Children also confuse Latvian and Lithuanian words, especially after summer visits to their grandmother in Lithuania, for example:

Paula (5.5 years old): *Te dzīvo skruzdeles* (cf. Lith. *skruzdėlės* 'ants' f. g. N. pl., Latv. *skudras*), *bet tur ir viņu ļaušini* (cf. Lith. *kiaušiniai* 'eggs', Latv. *olas*. 'Ants live here, but there are their eggs.'

Paula (5.5 years old): *Man garšo tikai bulvītes*. 'I like only potatoes.' (cf. Latv. dim. *kartupeliši* dim. N. pl.).

Norberts (3 years old): *Mani bati lieli*. 'My shoes are big.' (cf. Latv. *kurpes* 'shoes' m. g. N. pl.).

Norberts (3.5 years old): *Norīu pagaršuoti*. 'I want to taste.' (cf. Lith. *paragauti* 'to taste').

Norberts (3.5 years old): *Māsiņa verks un spārdīsies*. 'Sister will cry and kick.' (cf. Latv. *raudās* 3rd p. fut.).

An interesting example is a sentence where three languages are mixed when the girl is visiting Latvia:

Liepa (4 years old): *Tajā spintā nav kutkas*. 'There is no jacket in that wardrobe.' (cf. Latv. *tajā* L. sg. 'that', Lith. *spintā* 'wardrobe' L. sg., Latv. *nav* 3rd p. praes. 'not to be', Russ. *kurtka* Gen. sg. 'jacket').

Children's statements about seeking a Latvian equivalent if they do not know it, and asking questions about words, indicate that they are developing an understanding of how languages are similar and different from each other. Their metalinguistic abilities are sufficiently developed to reason about this. They are capable of altering words from one language according to the rules of another, and vice versa.

#### 4. Discussion

The contemporary literature increasingly acknowledges that national and ethnic identity is no longer monolithic or exclusive. In a multinational and multicultural environment, or when living in a new country, it is possible for the national identity of one's country of origin to be complemented by a new, additional national identity. This evolving identity reflects the multifaceted nature of our globalized world, where individuals often face multiple cultural landscapes, shaping their sense of self in the process.

As mentioned in the extensive study compiled by Kaša and Mieriņa (2019), Latvian migrant families strive to maintain their ties with Latvia, particularly through language. Despite the challenges their children face in preserving their mother tongue, many families, like Maria and Peter who have lived in England for four and a half years with their three children, are determined to speak only Latvian at home. They believe that speaking their native language is crucial for maintaining their national identity. This sentiment is echoed by other Latvian families who view language as an integral part of their identity and are critical of those who do not maintain Latvian language use at home.

However, migrant parents face the complex task of encouraging their children to speak Latvian while also helping them learn English and adapt to their new environment in England. This balancing act aims to help children form a transnational identity. As children's use of English increases, some born in Latvia begin to forget their mother tongue, adapt English grammar into Latvian, or even refuse to use Latvian at home, particularly if they feel embarrassed or corrected.

For instance, Alise, a mother who has lived in England for four years, shared a story about her son who, feeling hurt after a misunderstanding involving Latvian, hung a note on his door stating, "Do not come into my room. I do not understand Latvian". This incident highlights the emotional complexities children face in managing multiple languages and identities. Similarly, Maria mentioned instances where her son felt ashamed to speak Latvian at school, fearing judgment from his peers.

The study also found that maintaining the Latvian language is not only about national belonging for some parents. Many find it easier to communicate in their native language and want their children to be able to converse with relatives in Latvia. Additionally, mass media and social media in Latvian play a significant role in maintaining the language and ties with Latvia. Parents try to immerse their children in Latvian media by downloading films, buying books, and encouraging them to engage with these resources, although they often need to motivate their children repeatedly to use them (Kaša and Mieriņa 2019, pp. 151–52). The above-mentioned study also notes a connection with age. Children who were younger upon their arrival in England tended to be more passive in their use of Latvian media. However, the findings indicate that despite parents' efforts, children may not engage with these media sources (Kaša and Mieriņa 2019, p. 153).

Families recognize the importance of the Latvian language for integration into Latvian society and for maintaining their identity. Interviews with families revealed a conscious effort to use Latvian as the language of communication at home and the choice of Latvian language education institutions for their children. This highlights the critical role of family linguistic attitudes in fostering or hindering children's acquisition of Latvian, pointing towards a nuanced understanding of identity that encompasses both cultural belonging and linguistic proficiency (Martena 2023, p. 93).

The family unit plays a foundational role in preserving heritage languages, with parents being particularly significant in influencing their children's language learning and appreciation for the language. This underscores the family's critical role in maintaining culture and identity. In bilingual families, even in the third generation, conscious decision making and self-examination about language use are essential. These processes help regulate the complexities of imparting multiple languages to children, ensuring each language maintains its space and relevance in daily life. Effective family language policies can significantly influence members' linguistic proficiency and cultural self-reflection. The inclusion of other environmental languages contributes to linguistic diversity. Parents' strategic balancing of languages reflects the complexity of family language practices, which involve both conscious and unconscious planning to maintain heritage languages.

The research integrated methods such as linguistic autoethnography, participant observation, and communication analysis. Through these comprehensive methodological approaches and diverse data sources, the results deliver a deeper understanding of the dynamics of heritage language preservation within bilingual and multilingual families throughout multiple generations.

## 5. Conclusions

The preservation of the Latvian language abroad is not merely an act of cultural conservation; it is a vibrant, living process that weaves together the threads of personal commitment, community involvement, and institutional support. This collaborative effort, as explored in this article, underscores the multifaceted nature of maintaining a heritage language across borders and generations. It is a journey that balances the intimate nuances of family dynamics with the broader strokes of community engagement and the strategic frameworks provided by institutions.

At the core of this endeavour are families, the primary custodians of language and culture. Their daily practices, choices, and the language environment they foster at home lay the foundational stones for language continuity. The stories of bilingual or multilingual families, presenting the complexities of imparting multiple languages to their children, highlight the critical role of family language policy and autoreflexion. These narratives reveal the challenges, joys, and triumphs of raising children who are not only fluent in multiple languages but also deeply connected to their cultural roots.

Personal experience shows that in a mixed Latvian–Lithuanian family, living in a foreign environment, in Finland, it is a challenge to maintain ties with the native land, to protect native language and cultural foundations. A positive result is possible only by following a strict language strategy at home. In addition, house rules have a very positive

effect: speaking only one language at the table, reading books in Latvian/Lithuanian every evening, or listening to texts in these languages through headphones helps to maintain the basic level of the language. It requires a great daily effort and grand patience. The personal example of one family with four children proves how important the activities are where one can meet the people of the same community in Finland—folk dance group, Latvian choir, etc. Special emphasis is placed on visiting grandparents in Latvia/Lithuania, visiting cultural events, and making new friends. Camps for diaspora of Latvians are extremely important, not only for children but also for adults, to preserve the feeling of home and native values.

Communities, both local and global, act as vital support systems, reinforcing the efforts of individual families. Through cultural events, language classes, and festivals, they provide spaces where heritage language and traditions can be celebrated and practiced. These gatherings in Finland are also more than mere social events; they are crucibles where language is actively used, learned, and passed on, strengthening the bonds of cultural identity and belonging. Unfortunately, many activities, Latvian language classes for children, folk dancing, theatre and choir groups, are located around the capital Helsinki, but families living in other regions of the country cannot easily take part in these activities.

Institutions like the Latvian Language Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs play a strategic role in this tapestry. Their initiatives, from educational resources to the language camps mentioned above and teacher training programs, provide the necessary infrastructure to support language learning and cultural preservation.

As we look towards the future, the continued vibrancy and continuity of the Latvian language hinge on this synergistic approach. It is a collective responsibility, shared by individuals, families, communities, and institutions, to nurture and pass on this linguistic heritage. By doing so, we not only preserve a language but also honour a rich cultural legacy, ensuring that it remains a living, breathing part of our global tapestry. In this endeavour, we are reminded of the power of language to connect, to define, and to endure, bridging distances and generations, and keeping the spirit of Latvia alive in hearts and minds around the world. In the effort to preserve a language in a foreign country, every element plays a significant role—from community initiatives and educational programs to institutional support. Yet, the strong position of the family not to lose ties with the native country, using and teaching the language, along with their perseverance in maintaining cultural practices, forms the cornerstone of successful language preservation. Families serve as the primary conduit through which linguistic and cultural traditions are passed to the next generation, embedding language within daily life and ensuring its continued relevance and survival. Therefore, while many factors contribute to language preservation, the family's role is the most critical, acting as the first line of defence against linguistic and cultural erosion.

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## Article

# Guardians of the Circassian Heritage Language: Exploring a Teacher's Agency in the Endeavour of Endangered Language Maintenance

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**Abstract:** The Circassian language is the heritage language (HL) of a small minority group in Israel. Since its classification as an endangered language around the globe, the focus has been put on effective maintenance programs. Changes in education methods within Circassian communities were inevitable. In Israel, the Circassian Maintenance Program is crucial in primary schools, where formal literacy instruction in the Circassian language begins in fifth grade. This study examined the agentic role of the Circassian literacy teacher in engaging students in learning their heritage language and its maintenance, as expressed in her attitudes, beliefs and knowledge and her classroom strategies. This three-month-long ethnographic data collection was conducted at the teacher's study centre "Nal" (i.e., a treasure in Circassian). Data was gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with a Circassian HL teacher to understand her attitudes, beliefs and knowledge and to identify strategies to encourage student engagement in HL learning. In general, the teacher showed expertise in the HL and authentic use of it, as well as cultural and religious competence, adaptability, and flexibility. In addition, she encouraged children's agency and autonomy and provided individualised support, integration of technology and reflective practice. The results indicated that a sense of identity, unity and belonging to the community are all held together by the pillar of HL knowledge. By engaging her students in translanguaging practices, the teacher promoted their awareness of language patterns, vocabulary and grammar in both Circassian and other languages of their wide linguistic repertoire (Hebrew, Arabic and English).

**Keywords:** heritage language; endangered language; Circassian; maintenance program; teachers' attitudes; beliefs and knowledge; teacher agency

## 1. Introduction

This case study's aim was twofold: to explore the Circassian literacy teacher's attitudes, beliefs and knowledge (hereafter ABK) about Circassian as a heritage language (hereafter HL) teaching and to identify classroom strategies that the teacher employs to engage students in learning. In this study, the Circassian language is defined as a heritage language, meaning "the language experienced in the home, although other terms are also used, such as home, minority, and community language, or also regional, indigenous, ancestral, and local language" (Ortega 2020, p. 16). Within an educational context, Polinsky and Kagan (2007) consider HL learners to be heterogeneous because of their diverse levels of competence in this language.

We begin with a brief description of the study context, which concerns the Circassian community in general and specifically in Israel. Then, we present the main assumptions regarding the Circassian language and its status in Israel, followed by the main theoretical concepts.

## 2. Context of the Study

The Circassian language is the HL of a small minority group in Israel. Circassians are native speakers of the Circassian (Adyghe) language. There is a division of the Circassian language into West and East dialects. The West Circassian dialects, Shapsug and Abzakh, are used in Israel [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circassian\\_languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circassian_languages) (accessed on 13 July 2024). Historically, Israeli Circassians are from the Northwest of the Caucasus and were survivors of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the 1860s and 1870s. They migrated to the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Today, two separate Israeli Circassian villages have approximately 5000 Circassian citizens, of whom the majority speak at least four languages. Specifically, Circassian students are a distinctive group as they are required to learn four languages for various daily purposes: Arabic for Quranic reading, Hebrew as their home country's dominant language, English for academic use and Circassian as their native tongue (Olshtain and Nissim-Amitai 2004; Reichel 2010). There is an elementary school in each of the two villages and one secondary school in one of the villages, specifically for the Circassian population.

In general, regarding the place of Circassian as an HL, compared to other diaspora Circassian communities in the Middle East and throughout the world, “the Circassians of Israel have been particularly successful in maintaining their traditional language, culture, and customs” (Rao 2020, p. 3). Thus, the preservation of their mother tongue is being instilled in Circassian children to keep it alive for future generations. The reasoning for this practice is that the Circassian language embodies an integral part of its speakers' identity, and for many years, schools focused entirely on using the language in its spoken form. Today, formal literacy instruction in the Circassian language begins only in the fifth grade. Notably, however, only after the Russian Revolution in 1917 did the Circassian community adopt the Cyrillic alphabet to represent the written form of the Circassian spoken language (Stern; Isleem 2019).

Circassian has been classified by UNESCO as “endangered worldwide”.<sup>1</sup> Overall, there are 1.5 million speakers of the Circassian language <https://en.wal.unesco.org/languages/circassian> (accessed on 13 July 2024). Regarding its Israeli context, the Circassian language is fading in the face of the increasing use of Hebrew as a socially dominant language also within the homes. The current focus of community leadership, however, is on “reevaluation of the role of the school in revitalizing the native language” (Isleem 2019, p. 109) and in promoting the Circassian Language Literacy program. This program is an integral part of the Circassian schools in Israel, especially in primary schools, where formal literacy lessons are taught from fifth grade. These schools have their own tailored curriculum that is approved by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Non-language subjects are taught mainly in Hebrew because Hebrew textbooks are used. Language subjects are taught in the target language. Any further explanations are done in Circassian.

In general, on the community level, language endangerment can be reversed if the children are motivated to learn the language with the help of the surviving speakers in specific settings. Literacy programs that contain all the components necessary for learners to master reading and writing in HL education are of the utmost importance. In turn, such programs foster ethnic identity awareness, such as self-identification and belonging and negative and positive attitudes towards one's ethnic group (McNeill 2001).

However, it should be noted that the primary school's HL teacher under our investigation in this study is “only one qualified instructor teaching the Circassian language and heritage” (Isleem 2019, p. 109). The teacher faced several challenges as she attempted to assemble an ideal program that would fit the linguistic case of the Circassian community. According to the existing program, the material taught in the HL classroom will continue to grow as students reach junior high school. However, after junior high school, students will rarely be required to operate on the acquired literacy skills in Circassian due to its irrelevance and lack of use in Israel. However, while some parents expressed concerns about potential time investment, the teacher and the school remained optimistic. They aspire for students to maintain their interest in the Circassian language, including literacy,

as an integral facet of their identity (based on personal correspondence with the teacher). Additionally, there is hope that these students will emerge as proactive contributors within the Circassian community long after their graduation (Isleem 2019).

In this complex socio-linguistic context, as educators and researchers, we view it as necessary to provide an in-depth analysis of the agency of the Circassian literacy teacher struggling to engage the students in learning a written form of their HL. Many researchers have addressed the issue of HL teaching (e.g., Kagan and Martin 2017; Carreira and Kagan 2018). However, the question of how HL teachers enact their agency during the teaching process has scarcely been researched. The present study aimed to fill this void by zooming into the teacher's beliefs and knowledge and classroom strategies aimed to engage students in HL literacy learning. Thus, the study can considerably contribute to the Circassian community and to the global struggle to maintain HL literacy.

### 3. Theoretical Background

The theoretical background addresses the main concept directly related to the study's focus: teachers' agency and HL teachers' attitudes, beliefs and knowledge.

#### 3.1. Teachers' Agency

Teachers' agency has gained prominence in literature (e.g., Biesta et al. 2015; Cong-Lem 2021; Leijen et al. 2020). The most prominent approach to focus on teachers' agency is an ecological view as an outcome of "the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta and Tedder 2007, p. 137). It defines teacher agency as actions (i.e., "something that people *do*"; Biesta et al. 2015, emphasis in original). Regarding classroom practice, teachers are the ultimate decision-makers; everything they do is filtered through their prior experiences and knowledge, in addition to their beliefs (Lyster and Tedick 2014). Hence, teaching is an incredibly personal enterprise. Moreover, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defined teachers' agency as their capacity to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations. Bandura (2008) broadened this premise by stressing that teachers' agency is not only limited to their intentions to influence reality but also demands the ability of teachers' functioning to translate vision into reality and to act upon those intentions to create a change in the system hitherto. Constant searching for how good teacher agency can be achieved is important as the enhancement of teacher agency since it is "the only sustainable way towards the maintenance of everything that is good in education and the improvement of that which needs improvement" (Priestley et al. 2013, p. 149).

Attitudes, beliefs and knowledge (hereafter ABK) are essential facets of teachers' agency (Biesta et al. 2015; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). A recent comprehensive overview of the research on teachers' agency proposes that teachers' ABK "significantly mediate the capacity to realise their agency" in classroom actions and influence the pedagogical approach (Cong-Lem 2020, p. 726).

Attitudes as a concept "come to sociolinguistics from social psychology" (Albury 2020, p. 368) and are defined as a "psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, p. 1). Thus, attitudes are subjective. They may not be verbalised until someone actually asks, nor may they be immediately available for common attention. They may be formed from random experience or be the product of deliberate thought. They may or may not obey cultural or group norms. Language attitudes refer to language policy (Baker 2006). More specifically, there is an implicit or explicit assumption that language attitudes can or should change language policy (Baker 1992, p. 97). Thus, in the context of our study, new attitudes towards the Circassian language maintenance in its written form are influenced by community leaders' rethinking of the language policy at schools or language education policy (Isleem 2019). Language policy, as defined by Shohamy (2008), focuses on decisions about how languages are used across various domains, particularly in formal education systems (Shohamy 2008). Language education policy involves managing language use in

educational settings through explicit or implicit policies (Spolsky 2017). This policy is also reflected in the curricula of educational institutions (Shohamy 2008).

Peacock's (2001) definition of beliefs revolves around individuals' psychological points of view concerning their environment. These can be subjective, i.e., they can vary from one individual to another, depending on one's judgment of their surroundings or a specific situation. Teachers' beliefs about language are a core component of language education policy and are likely to be enacted in teachers' classroom language practices (Mary and Young 2020).

Teachers' knowledge refers to their past experiences, combined with present and future plans that construct their knowledge (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In focusing on teachers' knowledge and HL teaching, it is crucial to refer to Carter and Darling-Hammond's (2016) argument that they enter a classroom not only with content knowledge of their teaching subject (e.g., science, history, etc.) but also with their knowledge of their students. This includes demographic information about their students and knowledge of their personal, cultural and linguistic characteristics (Carter and Darling-Hammond 2016). Teachers should be aware of the individual strengths and weaknesses of their learners in order to provide them with optimal opportunities to learn and succeed and to optimise students' engagement in this language learning. Specifically, since the Circassian language literacy teaching follows from students' previous exposure to literacy in Hebrew, Arabic and English, the teacher must be aware of each student's proficiency in their other languages. Drawing on this information, the Circassian language teacher may address challenges or facilitate Circassian literacy acquisition. This holistic approach recognises the interconnectedness of language proficiency and cultural identity, ensuring a more comprehensive and effective educational experience (Leeman et al. 2011).

### 3.2. *Heritage Language Teachers' Attitudes, Beliefs and Knowledge*

Previous research showed that HL teachers might be motivated to teach HL "in response to a sense that they (the students) were losing their culture" (Yamauchi et al. 2000). Thus, in the study of the Hawaiian language teachers believed that teaching this HL is "a part of a process of regaining knowledge about their culture and establishing their identity as Hawaiians" in the Hawaiian Islands (Yamauchi et al. 2000). The teachers believed they fulfil an important role in the Hawaiian language in the name of endangered language preservation and highlighted their commitment to "the future history of their language and culture" (p. 399). In another study by Hsu-Pai Wu (2011), within the context of Sunday HL Chinese school in the US, the HL teachers expressed their concerns about a lack of appropriate teaching materials and a need to create these materials by rethinking the traditional Chinese homeland textbooks within the context of a bilingual English—Chinese speaking community. They believed that the textbooks needed to include multicultural literacy materials.

Another concern was related to students' engagement in HL learning since most parents forced them to attend this supplementary framework. As a result, the students related to the aforementioned lessons as a kind of punishment.

Meaning is constructed through context and interaction, and when teachers and students share common contexts, mutual understanding is fostered (Gilbert and Yerrick 2001). However, due to the often marginalised position of HLs (e.g., Ortega 2019), it is exceedingly challenging for HL teachers to establish a significant role in its maintenance. Consequently, creating a positive learning environment becomes an uphill battle for them (Gilbert and Yerrick 2001).

### 3.3. *Heritage Language Teachers' Strategies*

These are the specific methods and techniques that educators use to facilitate the learning and retention of a HL by students who have familial or ancestral ties to that language. These strategies are designed to address the unique needs of HL learners, who

often have different linguistic and cultural experiences than traditional second language learners (e.g., Kagan and Dillon 2001).

The research shows that HL teachers use strategies such as using authentic materials from the heritage culture to provide real-world language exposure. For example, Kagan and Dillon (2001) highlighted the use of such materials as newspapers and films in the context of teaching Russian to heritage learners. In addition, it was found that applying culturally relevant pedagogy and integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum make learning more meaningful and engaging. For example, a teacher might incorporate traditional stories, holidays and cultural practices into lessons, allowing students to explore their heritage through language activities that reflect their cultural experiences (Ladson-Billings 1995). Finally, recent research shows that HL teachers apply pedagogical translanguaging as a theoretical and instructional approach that enhances language and content skills in school contexts by utilizing the learner's entire linguistic abilities (García and Li 2014). It prioritises the learner's languages and promotes metalinguistic awareness by blurring language boundaries during language and content learning (Cenoz and Gorter 2021).

This study explores the HL teacher's agency enactment in the Circassian literacy learning classroom. The study explored the following research questions:

1. What is the Circassian language teacher's ABK as examined through an interview and classroom observations?
2. What classroom strategies does the teacher employ to engage students in HL literacy learning?

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1. Research Design

We conducted a three-month-long mini-ethnographic study. In general, ethnography is aimed at exploring the cultural interactions in the lives of a community (Ejimabo 2015). Mini-ethnography was chosen because this research design was more feasible and less time and finances-consuming (Fusch et al. 2017).

##### 4.2. Participants

**Teacher**—The teacher of Circassian, Lana (a pseudonym), is the lead teacher and the developer of the Circassian Language Literacy program addressed above. Lana, who was on sabbatical during the research period, volunteered graciously to teach the participants at her study centre "Nal" (i.e., "treasure" in Circassian). The study centre caters to both children and adults in small groups, with a plethora of teachers offering tutoring services within their respective areas of expertise. Lana teaches mathematics, Arabic and Circassian literacy at "Nal". The vision behind the study centre is to promote in any possible way any Circassians who might need help with their studies. It is worthwhile noting that Lana lived in the Caucasus for four years when she was a teenager and studied in a special advanced track for language, literature, grammar and history in Circassian.

**Students**—Six fifth grade Circassian-speaking students, three girls and three boys (all participants were given pseudonyms). All the students were in the same class with Lana in fourth grade, and this year, they are being taught by a substitute teacher at school. The selected students expressed their consent, willingness and interest in participating in the study.

##### 4.3. Procedure

The study was conducted from October to December 2022. During the first stage, the teacher was once interviewed (approximately 90 min) in Circassian; then, seven lesson observations were conducted (each lesson lasting 45 min).

##### 4.4. Tools and Data Collection

Ethnographic tools such as observations, researcher journals and interviews (Fusch et al. 2017) were used in this research. To reduce observer or interviewer bias and enhance the

credibility of the data interpretation, methodological triangulation (Shenton 2004) was applied. Further elaboration regarding the tools used will be documented in the following paragraphs.

**Semi-structured interview with the teacher:** Generally, semi-structured interviews are an efficient tool for engaging participants in conversation and eliciting their understanding and interpretation of a topic (Peeves et al. 2013). The aim of the semi-structured interview with the teacher was to obtain data on the teacher's ABK as essential components of teachers' agency as well as the teacher's self-report regarding the target children's HL literacy development (see the interview guide in Appendix A).

**Observations:** The observations were conducted in two stages. First, two observation sessions were conducted to gain the students' trust and to form a relationship that would facilitate the researcher's observation (Punch 2002). The following five observations were aimed at observing children–teacher strategies aimed at engaging the students in Circassian literacy learning. While the first researcher was responsible for the study design, procedure and reevaluation of the data analysis, the second researcher acted as a silent observer, and the observations were both audio and video recorded. Research conclusions prove more credible if they result from repeated observations suggesting similar patterns of findings (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985; Shenton 2004). Continued engagement in data collection is the investment of a satisfactory amount of time in the research setting (Shenton 2004). Determining how much time is adequate depends upon the setting. Thus, the amount of time can be defined by ensuring that certain purposes are achieved (Lincoln and Guba 1985). These purposes consist of (a) studying and understanding the culture, (b) testing for misinformation presented by the researcher or the respondents, (c) building trust and rapport with informants and (d) recognizing those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being investigated. Hence, we determined the number of observations according to the needs, the research questions and issues that arose while conducting this study until all purposes were achieved (Emerson et al. 2011).

**Researcher Journal:** Researcher journals are critical in building the study's archive (Blommaert and Jie 2020). The second researcher maintained them throughout the fieldwork, during the interviews, observations and conversations with the children about their drawings. We noted every relevant detail to create a repository of knowledge to draw upon when analysing data.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

In analysing the data extracted from the classroom observations and researcher journal, we focused on the characteristics of teacher–student agentic interactions and her strategies to engage students in HL literacy learning. Then, we analysed data gathered from the interviews with the teacher. This process is explained below in detail.

As expressed in her interview and observed behavior, the analysis of the teacher's ABK and classroom strategies drew on stages of thematic analysis elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the data were recorded and transcribed. While transcribing the data, we focused on two aspects: the actual words uttered by the teacher and how the words were enunciated, such as accentuation and tone of voice. Second, drawing on the theoretical background and research questions, we employed a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis included the following phases: familiarisation with the data through reading and transcribing, generating initial codes, searching for themes while collating codes into potential themes and gathering information relevant to each one, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. Concerning the teacher's ABK, the following themes were identified: (1) attitudes and beliefs and (2) knowledge, including (a) expertise in the Heritage language, (b) a deep understanding of heritage language learners, (c) multilingual competence and (d) continuous learning and growth.

Regarding the way the teacher engaged the students with HL literacy learning, the following themes were identified: (1) creating a positive and inclusive learning environment (i.e., respect and encouragement), (2) cultural and religious relevance and pride, (3) the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy and (4) the use of storytelling to teach the HL.

#### 4.6. Ethical Considerations

The research considered ethical requirements, such as gaining the necessary institutional approvals. Furthermore, this study was particularly notable for the need to negotiate both teachers' and students' parents' consent to participate, respect participant privacy and confidentiality alongside protection of their rights and render due sensitivity to their identities, languages and cultural context.

### 5. Findings and Discussion

#### 5.1. Attitudes, Beliefs and Knowledge (ABK)

This section presents the findings based on data gathered from an interview with the teacher, classroom observations and the researcher's journal, focusing on the two research questions. Firstly, the study addressed the characteristics of the Circassian language teacher's agency, expressed in her ABK and classroom strategies. Regarding attitudes and beliefs, the HL teacher exhibited expertise in the Circassian language and its authentic use, cultural and religious competence, adaptability and flexibility. In the interview, she explained she had been adapting the program until it was satisfactory: "I have been working as a teacher for 19 years, during which I have been focusing for seven years on this program for teaching Circassian in the village".

She also encouraged children's agency and autonomy, provided individualised support, integrated technology and engaged in reflective practice. The teacher held positive attitudes and beliefs about the value and importance of the Circassian language, viewing HL learning as a means of preserving cultural identity. In the interview, Lana described how she thinks Circassian should be loved and studied to strengthen and complete one's identity: "Just as you light the fireplace in the winter and leave it on a small fire so that it continues to burn and warm the surroundings for a long time, so the love for our language should always be burning in us and warming our hearts".

Lana conveyed enthusiasm and passion for the language and culture to her students, as evidenced by her statement during the interview: "I acknowledge at the beginning of 5th grade that this is their first year in Circassian literacy and yet tell them that a miracle will happen, and everyone will be leaving as readers". She motivated the students from the beginning by showing them that they already knew at least 7 letters out of a total of 67 Circassian letters from English. That is because there is an overlapping in orthographic and phonological representation of the letters A, C, M, S, K, T and O (capitals and small letters often look the same and are distinguished by their size).

The teacher believed that a student-centred approach placing learners at the centre of the learning process was crucial for teaching languages, especially HLs. As was observed, the teacher valued and respected students' prior knowledge, experiences and individual needs and told them that everyone would do their best to progress from the level at which they had begun. Lana made sure she paid attention to each one's work. Indeed, the observations revealed that the teacher created an environment where students felt safe to take risks and actively participate in their learning. She achieved this mainly by constantly encouraging them; for example, when a student claimed he did not know how to read Circassian at all but could read an easy reading word with similar English letters (like CAKO; i.e., jacket), she exclaimed:

Hey! Didn't you say you didn't know how to read?! You fooled me! You do know how to read! And you do it very well!

This successful reading and personalised positive reaction were what the child needed to be encouraged and progress in learning the HL.

She patiently adapted her instructional strategies to meet her students' diverse needs and heritage language proficiency levels, employing various teaching strategies discussed below to cater to multiple learning styles.

Regarding knowledge, the HL teacher demonstrated expertise in the HL, knowledge of the heritage language culture and religion and multilingual abilities. During our observations, she remained calm and patient, even in the face of occasional disturbances

and reluctance displayed by some children. The HL teacher's expertise in the Circassian language was evident, as she had a deep understanding of its grammar, vocabulary, cultural nuances and socio-linguistic aspects. In the interview, Lana explained: "In the school where I studied in the Caucasus for four years, I was in a special advanced track that taught language, literature, grammar and history in Circassian".

Lana was aware of the importance of her own continuous learning and professional growth, seeking opportunities for professional development and staying updated with current research and best practices in HL teaching. She expressed her desire to continue her academic studies to assist Circassian studies in Israel to promote language education policy in her multilingual community:

Every language needs a teaching policy, but there is not one at the moment. This is one of the changes I want to make during my Ph.D. studies in the future, which will involve developing a policy for each language. At the moment, there is a mixture of languages in all subjects; for example, the Hebrew teacher speaks Circassian, the Arabic teacher speaks Hebrew, and so on. The teachers also do not know what is expected of them because there is no policy.

Thus, the teacher viewed herself as a language policymaker. As the micro-level of language education policy refers to local agents who enact their agency "in language work and establish processes through which perceived local language needs" (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech 2014, p. 237), we can define Lana as an "agent of change" (Priestley et al. 2013, p. 187) because the teacher took a personal responsibility to be an active agent within the maintenance process of the HL.

As a part of her professional development, the teacher regularly reflected on her instructional strategies, classroom interactions and student outcomes, seeking feedback to make necessary adjustments. In the interview conducted with Lana, she stated:

I don't spare anything from them; we talk, read texts, learn about our history so that they learn about their identity and know their origin and uniqueness, but I do this with different and fun teaching methods just to enable them first to "fall in love" with their mother tongue. Over time, I developed innovative teaching methods, and I study them all the time. We actually received the divisional education award for implementing innovative methods in teaching, such as play, exploration and movement. Everything that was brought to the division had been implemented in my classrooms, and I demonstrated these methods—and Circassian was not left behind at all. On the contrary, they take me as an example for English teachers in Israel to apply these successful innovative methods in teaching foreign languages.

In summary, our findings highlight the importance of teachers' ABK, particularly in HL education, emphasizing the significance of understanding students' cultural backgrounds and identities for effective teaching and language maintenance efforts.

## 5.2. *Enactment of the Teacher's Agency in Classroom Strategies*

Our second question explains how the teacher engaged students in their HL learning in an agentic deliverable way. In this study, the HL teacher utilised four key strategies to enact her agency in the heritage language classroom: (1) creating a positive and inclusive learning environment, (2) highlighting cultural and religious relevance and pride, (3) implementing translanguaging pedagogy and (4) using storytelling to teach the HL. These strategies fostered motivation in the young HL learners and helped them develop a deeper connection with their language, culture, religion and identity.

### 5.2.1. *Creating a Positive and Inclusive Learning Environment*

Lana encouraged an atmosphere of respect where all students' backgrounds, experiences and perspectives were valued. She emphasised the importance of appreciating and celebrating diversity, including different dialects or variations of Circassian worldwide.

Lana also promoted an understanding that each student's contribution to the language maintenance process is valuable. In the first observed lesson, she handed out little wooden pieces and asked them if they could guess what they were. The students guessed things like a penguin, a pencil and a ghost. Finally, one student correctly guessed that it was a broken Circassian instrument. Lana explained:

This is the Circassian musical instrument called "pkhachich". It can make music only if you put it together and tie the head with a big, strong knot. These pieces represent us, the Circassian people, who still speak the Circassian language. If we do not take care of it properly by uniting, we will break apart more and more and become dispersed. That is how our people got scattered around the world, and that is why our language is in danger of extinction. We each have a responsibility to do our parts to save it.

Another example of class observation that illustrates the sense of identity and belonging to the community is when the teacher uses an associative mediator,<sup>2</sup> a mini figure of an animal, to connect the abstract concept of language literacy to make it tangible. The students were asked to protect and attend to the mini figure by speaking to it and playing with it. They were told to bring it back the next week, safe and sound. Later, they discussed the concept of constantly watching over your language to keep it from any harm, i.e., extinction.

### 5.2.2. Cultural and Religious Relevance and Pride

The HL teacher emphasised the cultural and religious significance of the Circassian language, using it as a tool to shape the identity of younger generations and foster a sense of belonging. She incorporated culturally and religiously relevant materials, such as literature, music, art and traditions, to reflect the ethnic and cultural treasures of the Circassian community. For instance, in the first lesson, she referred to the Circassian dance and music that characterises the Circassian people and used it to add humor and fun to her lesson:

In every lesson, we will put one piece [the parts of the musical instrument that had fallen apart] into the rope, and in the last lesson, we will tie them all together. Then, we will put on Adiga [Circassian] music and play the instrument while dancing "wei wei wei" [the traditional dance].

Lana made connections between culture and religion, highlighting the value of learning the Circassian language alongside religious teachings. For example, she told the students that learning their mother tongue represents "a good deed": "Fridays, like today, are blessed days as you all know, and it is "psapa" (= "reward, or has good value in" in Circassian) to learn about the religion, read the Quran and also learn your "bza" (=mother tongue)".

By teaching about the history, traditions and values associated with the Circassian language and culture, Lana aimed to instill a sense of cultural awareness and pride in her students. The teacher emphasised the importance of preserving the heritage language and its role in maintaining customs, values and identity. Through these efforts, Lana sought to strengthen her students' sense of being proud Circassians who are connected to their religion, culture and language and even, in some way, to the homeland. She told them many stories, some of which were about herself when she was a little girl. In one instance, she told the story about her arrival at the village in the Caucasus to which her family immigrated:

Right upon our arrival, we felt like home. You know how when we travel somewhere here and then come home to Kfar-Kama [the Circassian village in Israel]. You know how relieved and good you feel? That was the feeling we experienced there too—"home".

### 5.2.3. Implementing Pedagogical Translanguaging

This strategy involved using cross-linguistic approaches to enhance language and content skills by utilizing all of the learner's linguistic abilities. Lana encouraged the use of Circassian alongside other languages that students knew, promoting cross-linguistic awareness of their entire linguistic repertoire. In the interview, Lana made clear that these lessons are always pre-planned:

I even explain to them at the beginning of the year that this is their first year in Circassian literacy and that today a miracle will happen, and everyone will be leaving as "readers"! I excite them, and I show them that they know some of the letters already, which are known in English and sometimes Hebrew. I explain to them that in the 5th grade, they are already proficient language learners, and that is how I encourage them from the beginning. For example, I write the letters A, M, S, K, T and O [the capital letters similar in Latin and Cyrillic alphabets], on the board and show them that they already know something about the [written Circassian] language. Then, I build words from them in Circassian, and they read confidently, like the word: coat/SAKO/[in Circassian].

By engaging in translanguaging practices, students became more aware of the language patterns, vocabulary and grammar in Circassian and other languages they knew. Further, one of the students proudly said about being different but unique: "We mix other languages with Adighabza (the Circassian language), and we understand each other, but strangers would never understand us, and I love that so much about being a Circassian".

### 5.2.4. Using Storytelling to Teach the Heritage Language

This strategy was a powerful tool to engage students in meaningful and enjoyable ways. The teacher selected traditional Circassian folktales, legends and historical narratives that were both engaging and representative of Circassian culture. Lana has a collection of stories that she repeatedly uses in her HL classes, such as "The Old Man and the Giant", "Satanay's Rock", "The King's Son, The Cook's Son, and the Servant's Son", "The Brave Son", "Who's the Biggest of Them All?" and "The Salt-House and the Dirt-House" (see Appendix B). These stories not only entertained but also provided insights into Circassian society's values, beliefs and history. She captured the students' attention by using expressive gestures, voice modulation, and props to bring the stories to life. She encouraged active participation by asking questions, inviting discussions and promoting critical thinking about the stories.

These strategies facilitated a unique relationship between the HL teacher and her students, characterised by a blend of roles, responsibilities and dynamics. The teacher's agency as a teacher was instrumental in the ongoing pursuit of language maintenance within the Circassian community, thus empowering students to connect with their heritage language and culture on a deeper level.

## 6. Conclusions

This study enriches the theoretical landscape by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how HL teachers' agency functions in the context of multilingual education within HL maintenance efforts. The research provides insights into how teachers can navigate linguistic diversity, particularly in the context of preserving the endangered language, Circassian. The study involved six fifth graders learning four languages simultaneously, including Circassian, which is at risk of extinction. The Circassian HL maintenance program aims to foster active engagement with the Circassian language in various methods. The study emphasises the importance of agentic teachers for successful language maintenance. Ultimately, we can assume that, by employing the appropriate agentic teachers and pairing them with students who are open to learning, excellent results may occur, and a minority language can survive.

The conclusions suggest that schools should treat students' linguistic and literacy backgrounds as valuable resources, especially when teaching heritage languages like

Circassian. By recognizing and building upon students' existing language skills, educators can create a supportive learning environment for acquiring a new literacy system, such as Circassian. This approach aligns with the trend in language education that values students' multilingual and multicultural experiences.

Moreover, a clear language policy at schools, coupled with professional development for teachers to enhance cross-linguistic awareness, can foster an inclusive and effective educational environment. This policy should encompass the goals, strategies and expectations for language education and involve input from teachers, parents and community members. It should support the maintenance and development of students' home languages, including Circassian, and be adaptable to diverse needs.

Professional development for teachers, overseen by school administrators or curriculum coordinators, should focus on enhancing language education knowledge and skills, collaboration with colleagues, participation in professional networks and engagement in reflective practice. Teachers should also stay updated with current research in language education.

Finally, developing cross-linguistic awareness in students has long-term benefits, helping them appreciate their multilingual abilities and contributing to a positive language learning experience. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of multilingualism, highlighting both its advantages and challenges.

## 7. Limitations

The study had several limitations that require acknowledgement. Firstly, as the second researcher was a member of the Circassian community, there was a possibility of bias in data collection and analysis. To mitigate this, the first researcher, proficient in ethnographic methodology, independently analysed the data to enhance credibility. Secondly, the study's reliance on a relatively small number of observation sessions could be seen as a limitation. However, the observed lessons achieved data saturation, one of the critical qualitative research criteria. While the study focuses on the HL teacher's agency and strategies in the Circassian language maintenance process, further research is needed to take an ecological approach and to investigate students' agency in interaction with the teacher's efforts. Moreover, it is important to explore the longitudinal impact of the teacher's language education policymaking in the Circassian community.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

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## Appendix A

### Teacher's Interview Guide

Teacher's agency and activism and teacher's Attitudes, Beliefs, Knowledge and personal professional experience in the Maintenance of Circassian in Israel:

Teacher interviewed: Lana

Date: 5 October 2021

Thank you so much for accepting to participate in the interview, I am interested in hearing about your viewpoints, beliefs and attitude towards teaching Circassian literacy and how that is incorporated in your job as a Circassian Heritage teacher.

#### 1. Personal information:

A. Please tell me about your professional experience. What ages do you teach? How long have you been a teacher? What levels do you teach?

\* Have you taught different age groups?

\* What subjects have you taught/are you teaching this year?

\* Have you taught at different schools? How were they different from each other?

\* What is your tenure in teaching?

\* How old are you?

\* Are you currently holding other positions at your school other than teaching? Elsewhere?

B. Why did you become a teacher? Where did you acquire your degree/s? What are you currently learning?

C. What is your personal experience with languages? What languages do you master? Have you studied them or acquired them by exposure? What is your L1? What language/s do you speak at home? Do you consider yourself bi-lingual, tri-lingual or quadri-lingual? Please explain.

D. Did you only study in Israel from kindergarten? What languages were you taught while growing up? What was the family language policy at your home? How did the different languages develop? And your other siblings? How well do you speak those languages today?

E. Would you like to acquire another language? If yes, what is it? Why?

F. Was there an experience in your life that made you change or create an opinion about languages? Did that influence the way you teach the language?

#### 2. Professional Experience:

A. Please tell me about your current school.

B. What are the children's, the community's (namely parents) and the local council's attitudes/perceptions towards teaching the Circassian language at school?

#### 3. Language/s policy at school:

A. How many students are there at your school? Teachers?

B. I am interested to know about the languages at your school, spoken by the students as well as the teachers. In your opinion, what is the percentage of students who have mastered literacy in Circassian at your school? How about the teachers? What percentage of the teachers speak Circassian? What language/s do you use in the teachers' room? In the classrooms? On the phone? At what frequency?

3. What are the dominant L1s in your school?

4. What do you think about the linguistic diversity at your school? Does it represent the whole community? Are you comfortable with that?

5. Does your initiate/participate in Circassian language maintenance/revitalization efforts/activities? If yes, please provide examples. What do you and your colleagues contribute to those activities?

6. Does the topic of multilingualism versus Circassian prioritization come up in the discussions among teachers? In what context and how often? Is it referred to as a problem or a means to be used to better teach a topic/subject?

7. Are the different languages incorporated in the classroom? If so, how? Do you use PowerPoint presentations on posters, school walls, or in the classes? Is it done effectively, in your opinion?
8. Do students share cultural experiences or their cultural backgrounds during the lessons? Please provide an example.
9. Have you also heard this from other teachers? Example.
10. Then, how does it affect societal and academic progress? Do students speak using their L1/s among themselves? When (during recess/class)? How do teachers react to students speaking other languages among themselves that are not their L1? What is your personal opinion about this?
11. What role do the parents hold at your school? Do they take part in your activities or other teachers' activities? Examples? Do they initiate any cultural activities?
12. If not, where would you like to see them contribute? Partners to what?
13. Have there been any inputs, by the school administration or other teachers, in regards to operating the Circassian literacy program at school? Parents?
14. Does your school have a language policy for Circassian?
15. If so, was there a trigger/an event that has caused that policy? Who stands behind the idea? Why? Did the Ministry of Education contribute to it?
16. What is your school policy about Circassian language maintenance and it being the language of instruction at school?
17. Who developed the literacy program? Did it require assistance from other people during its development? What do you think about the program?
18. Is the school implementing the program? Do you think it is working? Explain.
19. In addition, is there a school consensus towards work in a multilingual environment? If so, what are they? How was it reached? What is your opinion?

#### **4. Multilingualism and Circassian:**

I am interested in your opinion about multilingualism in general, and specifically about multilingual students.

1. Have you received training about multilingualism?  
If so, where and when? Was it a part of your teaching education, master's studies or after?
2. According to your personal experiences: do you think that knowledge about multilingualism is important in this day and age, and to your job specifically? What is the most relevant information to you?
3. What information about multilingualism do you need now, for your current position, that you didn't need before? How can you acquire that information?
4. Do you have any relationships or experiences with people who have immigrated from Circassian-speaking countries? Example.
5. How much do you use Circassian in the classroom? In what way?
6. Is there any cooperation with other language experts as you work on the maintenance of the Circassian language? If so, tell us about it.
7. If you could achieve any goal, what would it be?
8. What do you think needs to happen to have that achieved?
9. What do you think is the relationship between mother tongue and identity?
10. Looking back, what has made you an activist in the domain of heritage language studies?

#### **5. Experience within multilingual classrooms:**

- \* Do you have experience in multilingual classrooms?
- \* What is the difficulty in teaching Circassian to multilingual students?
- \* What are the advantages in teaching Circassian to multilingual students?

#### **6. Is there anything that you would like to add?**

## Appendix B

The story: “The Salt-House and the Dirt-House”

Once upon a time, there were two neighbors. One was an old lady who lived in a house made of dirt, and her neighbor who was an old man in a house made of salt. One day, the old lady had visitors and she made a big dinner for them. She made “ships pasta” (a traditional kids’ favorite dish) and forgot to put salt in it. So, she went to borrow some salt from her neighbor. She said: “Dear neighbor, would you be kind enough to give me some salt? I have guests and prepared food without salt”. The old man answered: “Indeed, I have a salt-house”, said the old man looking around and pointing at the ceiling and then the walls, “but, if I take some from here, there will be a hole, and if I take from there, there will be a hole, and there and there. So, I won’t be able to give you any salt, please forgive me”. The old lady went home very angry, praying in her heart that it would rain so hard that night on her arrogant neighbor’s house that it would melt. The old lady fed the salt-less food to her guests and apologised for it. That night, as the old lady slept in her cozy dirt-house, she woke up to the sound of thunder and heavy rain. She then heard knocking on her door. Lo and behold, it was the old man shivering: “Dear neighbor, please forgive me and let me in, I know I didn’t treat you right. My house has melted in this rain and I have nowhere to go”. The old lady felt sorry for her desperate neighbor and let him into her warm house.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cited from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adyghe\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adyghe_language) (accessed on 13 July 2024).
- <sup>2</sup> Associative mediator has been defined as “symbolic objects or words can play the role of signaling cues for using the tar” (Schwartz 2024, p. 237).

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## Article

# “I’m Silently Correcting Your Pronunciation of Sauna”: Language Attitudes and Ideologies in Finnish America

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**Abstract:** This study examines attitudes and ideologies associated with the Finnish language and identity among successive generations of Finnish Americans in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota, where Finnish is a postvernacular heritage language (HL). Employing ethnographic approaches including participant observation, narrative interviews, and the study of material analyzed using thematic analysis, I describe prevailing ideologies shaping perceptions of Finnishness. My findings highlight a pronounced pride and attachment to Finnish identity, which discursively and ideologically shape a sense of belonging and serve as a foundation for Finnish American identity formation. However, tensions emerge, particularly regarding the perceived pronunciation of Finnish words such as “sauna” and Finnish last names, indicating ideologies related to authenticity and purity. The evolution of terms like “Finlander” suggests generational change and reflects a history of friction with individuals not identifying as Finnish within the studied postvernacular speech communities.

**Keywords:** language ideologies; heritage language; postvernacular language use; Finnishness

## 1. Introduction

Attitudes and ideologies, much like language and identity, are ever-evolving. Current multigenerational Finnish Americans engage with their Finnish heritage differently than their predecessors. Unlike earlier generations, who were immersed in the Finnish language through church services, newspapers such as *Työmies*, and, more recently in history, the local Finnish American TV show, *Suomi Kutsuu*, today’s generations navigate their identity against a backdrop of shifting linguistic and cultural landscapes. As the active use of the Finnish language recedes into the past, cultural lexical items and phrases become the extent to which Finnish is used in daily life, with the ability to pronounce these terms according to what Finnish Americans perceive as correct being indicative of an authentic Finnish identity.

Understanding these attitudes (Garrett 2010) and ideologies (Silverstein 1979; Peterson 2019; Cavanaugh 2020; Woolard 2020; Johnstone 2010) toward language, specifically Finnishness, requires examining how members of the heritage language (HL) community express their complex mix of beliefs, perceptions, and emotions regarding the Finnish language and identity. While recent HL research has concentrated on the influence of attitudes and ideologies on language acquisition and language maintenance, examining Finnish as an HL in the United States requires a nuanced approach due to the postvernacularity (Shandler 2005) of the Finnish language. That is, Finnish in Michigan and Minnesota is postvernacular because it is no longer actively spoken as the primary means of communication in daily life, yet applications of Finnish still hold cultural and symbolic significance as HL community members continue to shape their identity and foster a sense of belonging through Finnishness (Remlinger and Karinen forthcoming). Finnish, with its largest wave of migration to the U.S. occurring in the early 1900s, faces a different reality as an HL than, for instance, Spanish, due to a smaller, less continuously replenished speaker community. In contrast to Finnish, Spanish as an HL benefits from a consistent influx of

new immigrants and a large speaker base, favorably contributing to language maintenance and transmission. In this article, the term “Finnishness” refers to that which encompasses the Finnish American identity, including semiotic manifestations associated with language, culture, and heritage.

This study builds on existing research that has explored various aspects of Finnish American language use in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, including the linguistic landscape (Remlinger and Karinen forthcoming), linguistic performativity of Finnishness (Remlinger 2016), and how Finnish has impacted and interacts with the variety of English known as the *Yooper*<sup>1</sup> dialect in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (Rankinen 2014; Remlinger 2017; Rankinen and Ma 2020). This study also benefits from Johnson’s (2018) study on Finnish language shift in Oulu, Wisconsin, a rural HL community located about 35 miles from Duluth, Minnesota. The present work distinguishes itself by being the first study, to my knowledge, to focus specifically on attitudes and ideologies of Finnish as an HL and expands on the scope of previous work by including Northern Minnesota as a fieldwork site.

The current study is particularly timely given the heightened uncertainty surrounding the future of Finnish American heritage and culture due to the gradual decline of cultural clubs and fluent speakers. The sudden closure of Finlandia University<sup>2</sup> in May 2023 has exacerbated this uncertainty, prompting concerns about the fate of key institutions vital for preserving Finnish and Finnish American culture. The university housed culturally significant entities, including the Finnish American Heritage Center, Folk Art School, and the widely circulated Finnish American newspaper, *The Finnish American Reporter*. Given these circumstances, this study is motivated by the necessity to comprehend and describe the shifts Finnish American identity and heritage amidst these obstacles.

My analysis draws on material gathered through ethnographic approaches, including participant observation conducted in May 2022 and July 2023, narrative interviews with 36 individuals, and collected photos of material ethnography. An analysis of the data reveals overwhelmingly positive attitudes and pride associated with the Finnish language and Finnishness. These sentiments are met by ideologies of authenticity and purity alongside subtle generational differences. Generational changes are evident in the way language is perceived, as seen in the evolution of terms like “Finlander”, which had strongly negative connotations for older generations but is now used neutrally or with pride by younger generations. Purist corrections are also evident, as demonstrated by the popularized expression, “I’m silently correcting your pronunciation of sauna” found commodified on mugs and t-shirts. These findings illustrate a growing flexibility in some instances and evolving cultural and linguistic perceptions in others.

This descriptive study aims to provide an overview of the language attitudes and ideologies present among members of Finnish American heritage communities across successive generations. It is important to note that the principal aim of this study is not to generate representative, quantitative conclusions but rather to focus on the need to better understand Finnish American identity and heritage, which enables comparisons to other heritage language contexts. Thus, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- (1) How do attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness manifest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota?
- (2) What discernible generational differences, if any, characterize attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness among Finnish Americans?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Language Attitudes and Ideologies

Language attitudes and language ideologies, integral components of sociolinguistic inquiry, originate from diverse academic disciplines (Garrett 2010, p. 24): language ideologies from linguistic anthropology through the works of Hymes (1977) and Blom and Gumperz (1972) and language attitudes from social psychology developed and applied through studies of language awareness (Preston 1996) and perceptual dialectology (Preston 1989).

According to Kroskrity, the difference is also visible in methodological approaches, with research on language attitudes often aiming for quantitative assumptions, while studies on language ideologies tend to adopt qualitative methods (Kroskrity 2016). While clarifying the distinction between these theoretical terms—attitudes and ideologies—is essential (King 2000), it is equally important to recognize that there is a significant overlap between them. Both concepts play a role in shaping how individuals perceive and interact with language in social settings, influencing their linguistic behaviors, preferences, and judgments. The following paragraphs aim to contextualize these concepts within the context of this work.

Peterson's work on attitudes and ideologies behind varieties of English provides definitions for understanding language attitudes. According to Peterson (2019, p. 8), language attitudes are "beliefs or judgments people have about certain social styles of language, features of a language, or varieties of a language". To illustrate this concept, consider an example observed during an informal conversation on a research trip in 2022 that prompted the present study. While discussing local ways of speaking in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, someone remarked that their partner "had to get rid of his Yooper<sup>3</sup> accent, he sounded Finnish and uneducated". This remark vividly demonstrates the tendency to make judgments or hold beliefs about the variety of English in the Upper Peninsula influenced by Finnish, associating this specific accent with social attributes pertaining to social class and education level. Garrett (2010, p. 23) explains that although controversial, attitudes can be understood through three components: (1) cognition, (2) affect, and (3) behavior. In the example above, this would correspond as such:

- (1) The belief that this variety of English influenced by Finnish is uneducated.
- (2) Feelings of discomfort or disdain toward this variety of English.
- (3) Actively ensuring that one's partner does not let this Finnish influence slip into their English.

While language attitudes center on individuals' beliefs and judgments about language varieties, language ideologies offer a broader perspective by examining societal assumptions or patterns surrounding language use. Peterson (2018, p. 7) explains that language ideologies are "preconceived notions, beliefs, and/or emotions that people hold about certain social styles, varieties, or features of a language". A prime example of a language ideology of Finnish as an HL context is illustrated by the belief that authentic Finns pronounce sauna "correctly" (see Remlinger 2018), reflecting the notion or purist ideology that there exists a single "correct" way to pronounce the word. These ideologies are prevalent within the Finnish heritage communities under study and often extend to those who do not identify as Finnish American. In other words, these ideologies can and often do extend to individuals, irrespective of their claimed identity.

Despite their distinct disciplinary origins, both the study of language attitudes and the study of language ideologies share a common goal: to uncover people's beliefs and sentiments about language, whether at an individual or collective level. The relationship between language attitudes and ideologies is dynamic and exhibits overlap. While language attitudes can contribute to the formation of language ideologies through individual and collective experiences, language ideologies also play a role in shaping and reinforcing language attitudes within a society. As King puts it, "while a language attitude is usually conceived of as a specific response to certain aspects of a particular language, language ideology is an integrated system of beliefs concerning a language, or possibly language in general" (King 2000, p. 7).

## 2.2. Situating "The Center of Finnish America"

Michigan and Minnesota are the states home to the highest percentage of the population claiming Finnish ancestry in the United States (see Figure 1), boasting numerous areas historically populated by Finnish migrants, leading Lockwood and Lockwood (2017) to designate this region as the "center of Finnish America" (pp. 115–16). Given this significance, Duluth in Minnesota and Hancock in Michigan were the focal points for this

study due to their status as hubs for Finnish and Finnish American heritage and cultural activity. Interviewees and observations were also carried out in the surrounding areas, including in towns spread out across the Western Upper Peninsula and towns spread across Upper Minnesota.

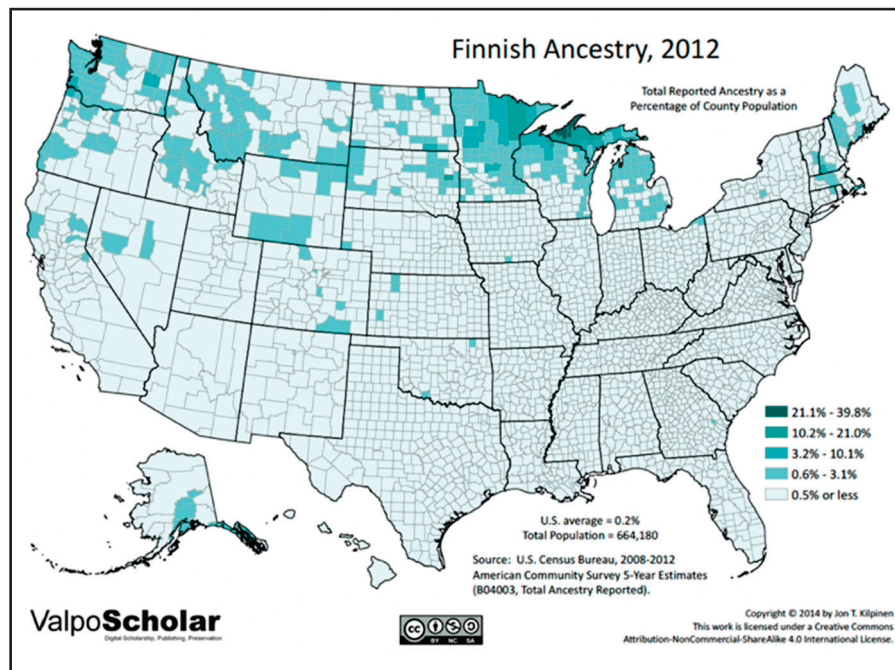


Figure 1. Map of Finnish ancestry in the United States. Source: Jon T. Kilpinen (2014).

Before diving into these geographical areas, it is necessary to give a brief history of Finnish immigration to North America. During the years spanning from 1870 to 1929, an estimated 350,000 Finns made their way to North America, with an estimated 300,000 choosing the United States as their destination (Björklund 2005, p. 8; United States Bureau of the Census 1920). Most of these emigrants came from the historical *Pohjanmaa* “Ostrobothnia” province. Nowadays, this corresponds to Ostrobothnia, Northern Ostrobothnia, Central Ostrobothnia, Southern Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, and southern parts of Lapland. Kero notes that the geographical location of Ostrobothnia influenced emigration due to its proximity and connections to other countries (Kero 1996, pp. 61–62). Drawing from passenger lists and archival records of parishes, Kero identifies several regions with significant emigrant populations during that period, including the Tornio River Valley, Kalajokki, Kokkola, Vaasa, and Kristiinankaupunki (Kero 1982, p. 21).

Even today, many Finnish Americans speculate about why their ancestors chose these regions, often attributing it to the resemblance of the landscape to their native Finland. However, these resemblances are largely coincidental. The primary reason for their settlement in these areas was the availability of jobs working in copper and iron mines and in the forest as loggers, among other jobs (Kaunonen 2009, p. 7). These Finns tended to move to what is known as the Iron Range in Northern Minnesota and the Copper Country in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. This article also acknowledges the complex role of Finns in settler colonialism. In their book, Lahti and Andersson (2022) offer a fresh perspective, portraying the Finnish presence in North America not merely as that of immigrants but that of settlers actively involved in settler colonial processes. They assert that “Finns were actively involved in the settler colonial processes, and they played a role in the exploitation of nature and replacement of Indigenous peoples”, whether knowingly or unknowingly (Lahti and Andersson 2022, p. 2).

### 2.3. Areal Focus: Hancock in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan

Hancock, Michigan, is home to the Finnish American Heritage Center and Finnish American Folk Art School, serving as focal points for Finnish cultural preservation. Until May 2023, Hancock was also home to Finlandia University, previously known as Suomi College. According to the university's website, Finlandia was recognized as the sole surviving university established by Finnish immigrants still operational in North America. Not only did the community face the closure of the university, but, shortly thereafter, *Kaleva Cafe*, a renowned Finnish American gathering spot serving traditional foods, also closed its doors after over a century of operation. A few years earlier, there was also the closure of *Kukkakauppa*, a flower shop located on the main street of downtown Hancock, which happened to be the same street where the Finlandia University and *Kaleva Cafe* were located. These closures sparked concerns about the future of Finnish American culture in the community. However, they also paved the way for change and the emergence of new ventures that embrace Finnish heritage in contemporary ways. In 2023, *Ilo*, an arts and craft store named after the Finnish word for “joy” or “happiness”, opened its doors. Shortly after, *Nisu Bakery and Café* (see Figure 2), a coffee shop featuring traditional Finnish and Finnish American products, became another Finnish-influenced establishment in the area. Opened also in 2023, *Kuusi “Spruce” Mercantile* is yet another example of a new Finnish-inspired business. Lastly, *Kukkakauppa*'s name changed to The Flower Shop, still featuring Finnish items despite a change in ownership.



Figure 2. Nisu Bakery and Cafe in Hancock, Michigan.

Additional entities in the surrounding areas have also popped up such as Kuusi Modern Mercantile in 2023 and the Copper Island Academy, a charter school that implements Finnish education practices, in 2020. The school's website homepage emphasizes its Finnish connection by incorporating the concept of *sisu*, a Finnish term that signifies perseverance, with the motto “Community, Excellence, and a Dash of Sisu”.<sup>4</sup> In Hancock and neighboring towns, Finnish culture is prominent. Finnish influence is evident everywhere, from the abundance of cars with Finnish license plates to the use of Finnish business names and Hancock's bilingual Finnish and English street signs. Personal expressions of Finnishness, such as Finnish-themed clothing, car accessories (see Figure 3), and items sold at local markets, further contribute to the pervasive presence of Finnish culture in the area. These items often express claims to Finnishness and provide context to the attitudes and ideologies held by those who embrace them.



**Figure 3.** TGIF, THANK GOD I'M FINNISH license plate.

#### 2.4. Areal Focus: Duluth in Northern Minnesota

Duluth, Minnesota, emerges as the second geographical focus of this research, with the city earning the nickname “The Helsinki of America”, as noted by Alanen in his book on The Finns in Minnesota (Alanen 2012, pp. 22–23), emphasizing its significant ties to Finnish culture and heritage. Historically, Finnish Americans from smaller communities have traveled to and from Duluth for work, fostering connections with smaller Finnish American enclaves like Oulu, Wisconsin (Johnson 2018, p. 35). The existence of direct flights between Helsinki and Duluth in the 1980s underscored the significant Finnish presence in the area and the Upper Midwest as a whole. Nowadays, Duluth has a Nordic Center, which contributes to its broader Nordic identity beyond Finnish heritage. This is evidenced by approximately one-third of the Duluth population identifying with Nordic roots, as indicated by the United States Census Bureau (2012). The city serves as a hub for prominent Finnish American figures and cultural endeavors, notable among them being the celebrated young Finnish American musician, Steve Solkela, and Cedar and Stone Sauna, a rapidly expanding sauna business founded by Finnish American Justin Juntunen.

Moreover, FinnFest USA<sup>5</sup>, the largest festival celebrating Finnish and Finnish American culture and heritage in North America, has chosen Duluth as its home base for five consecutive years. Marianne Wargelin, President of FinnFest USA, attributed this decision to Duluth’s superior infrastructure compared to smaller, historically Finnish American towns that lacked adequate logistical support and public transportation accessibility (26 March 2024). The decision to choose a location with Nordic ancestry for events such as FinnFest USA underscores a strategic approach and signifies an openness to expand beyond solely Finnish interests exemplified by the “Experience Nordic Culture” (see Figure 4) statement on the advertising poster of FinnFest. The researcher’s presence during the 2023 FinnFest in Duluth may have influenced the expressions of Finnishness observed, leading to a greater abundance of public displays compared to what may be seen on an average day. Nonetheless, Figure 5 displays a car belonging to a resident of Duluth adorned with a blue cross reminiscent of the Finnish flag, a permanent fixture that extends beyond the scope of FinnFest and performativity as a result of the festival.



**Figure 4.** FinnFest poster, “Experience Nordic Culture”. Source: FinnFest USA.



**Figure 5.** Car made to look like the Finnish flag.

The Finnish presence in Duluth and Hancock is expected to bring forth abundant expressions of Finnishness in these towns and their surrounding regions. The work of scholars described in this section made the present study possible and set the stage for further investigation. Exploring how attitudes and ideologies manifest in these settings calls for qualitative and ethnographic methods to understand how community members express their Finnish American identity, including with attitudes and ideologies, with an eye toward uncovering generational differences.

### 3. Methodology

The findings of this study are derived from participant observation, narrative interviews, and the collection of material ethnography. This comprehensive approach enabled a holistic exploration of the HL contexts under investigation. Participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Papen 2019) played a pivotal role in understanding the extent of Finnish usage publicly and the expressed ideologies within the HL community. With this method, I transitioned between the roles of observer and participant, actively engaging with the community while maintaining a passive stance when necessary. Effective listening skills and a genuine interest in the experiences and perspectives of community members were crucial for successful participant observation (Papen 2019, p. 144). This method was further enhanced by narrative interviews (Ochs and Capps 2001) that sought to capture participants’ personal stories and life experiences.

Through these interviews, this study aimed to uncover prevailing attitudes and ideologies by exploring interviewees’ experiences of growing up Finnish American, their current engagement with their heritage, and reflections on how these matters have evolved over time. Interviews were essential as they provided personal anecdotes that offered in-depth contexts to answer the research questions, enriching the understanding of observed phenomena. As highlighted by Scollon and Scollon (2003), ethnographic methods are indispensable for comprehending the nuances of semiotics and sociolinguistic phenomena,

as “only an ethnographic analysis can tell us what users of that semiotic system mean by it” (p. 160). This emphasizes the importance of employing qualitative methods like participant observation and interviews to grasp the meanings behind observed behaviors and linguistic practices. Unlike sociolinguistic interviews, narrative interviews prioritize participants’ subjective experiences and storytelling, allowing for a deeper understanding of individuals’ lived realities.

The final method employed in this study involved gathering material ethnography (Pahl 2004; Lane 2008; Karjalainen 2012), primarily through the collection of pictures. Building on the research of Remlinger (2006, 2009, 2016, 2018) and Remlinger and Karinen (forthcoming), this method highlighted the expression of Finnishness through material culture and the linguistic landscape. The expression of Finnishness extends to the home, prompting the collection of material ethnographic data beyond public expressions to include material presented by interviewees, with their permission. This approach resonates with the work of Karjalainen (2016), who emphasizes the importance of incorporating multimodal resources such as pictures and artifacts to enrich the study of heritage culture.

### 3.1. Data Collection

In June 2022, I spent two weeks in the Hancock area for a previous research study, which provided valuable insights and facilitated connections with local residents. Following this, I conducted five weeks of participant observation in Northern Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 2023. During this trip, I primarily stayed in Hancock, Michigan, and Duluth, Minnesota. Interviews were mainly conducted in these two towns and expanded to locations within approximately a three-hour radius by car. The research trip culminated at the 2023 FinnFest in Duluth, Minnesota, where I observed Finnishness on a larger scale and presented this study’s initial insights.

Interviewees were recruited for this research through a combination of personal contacts and the snowball sampling technique. Leveraging existing connections, some participants were initially identified among individuals known to the researcher. Subsequently, the snowball effect was employed, wherein these initial participants referred the researcher to other potential interviewees within their networks. This approach identified a diverse range of participants who provided perspectives on various aspects of Finnishness from different towns surrounding the main research sites, as well as a wide range of participants from different age groups. The interviewees had the choice of where to conduct the interview to ensure that they felt as comfortable as possible. Most interviewees invited me into their homes for interviews, one interview took place in a local cafe, three at FinnFest in Duluth, one on Zoom, and three at the house I stayed at in Hancock, Michigan. The question guide for the interviews is provided, refer to Appendix A. These questions guided the conversation, follow-up questions highly varied based on what the interviewee wanted to tell to the researcher.

My positionality as a semi-insider is shaped by my identity as a Finnish American. I was raised in lower Michigan, with family ties to the Hancock area in the Upper Peninsula, where my grandparents grew up and maintained a cabin where they spent time annually after moving to the Lower Peninsula. As a child, I visited the area several times, which familiarized me with the Finnish cultural importance of, for instance, sauna. While I did not grow up speaking Finnish, I became fluent after moving to Finland in 2017 to study the language. At the time of writing this article, I have lived in Finland for seven years. Moreover, my experiences living in Finland and fluency in Finnish hold significance within Finnish American communities, and this aided me in finding interviewees. This unique positionality granted me insider access to certain cultural and linguistic aspects while also positioning me as an outsider as an academic in the research setting. This dual perspective inevitably influenced the framing of the research questions and the methodologies selected. Throughout this study, I aim to maintain reflexivity and critical self-awareness, leveraging my semi-insider status to enrich the research findings while mitigating any biases that may have arisen.

### 3.2. Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to systematically examine the interview data, identifying recurring themes and patterns in participants' responses. Thematic analysis was conducted following the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) coding the data, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. In phase one, I reviewed the dataset twice before coding it in phase two, a process of labeling data to capture the meaning of occurrences. Selective coding was applied to concentrate on specific themes deemed particularly relevant to the research questions. Some examples of codes include "young people", "shame", "local identity", "older generations", "change", "correction", "correctness", "nostalgia", and "pride", among many others. The codes were then separated into themes that focused on language ideologies and generational shifts. The themes were developed by examining high occurrences in the data and ideologies that stood clearly in the data, as was the case with linguistic purism, with the example of the pronunciation of sauna, as we will see in the analysis. The findings of the thematic analysis are visualized through the use of diagrams that answer the research questions in the Analysis section. These diagrams were made on Canva. This approach enabled a focused and efficient analysis, aiding in the identification of key language attitudes and ideologies among the interviewees.

### 3.3. Participation Criteria and Participant Profiles

The primary criterion for participation in this study was that individuals identify as Finnish American or feel a strong connection to Finnish American culture and heritage, possibly through a relationship or marriage, studying Finnish, and/or residing in an HL community. In the latter case—when one did not identify as Finnish—they are referred to as non-Finn in the excerpts throughout the analysis. Some participants, for example, expressed enthusiasm to involve their partners or family members who self-identified as adopted Finns. Given this study's focus on attitudes and ideologies, the perspectives of these semi-insiders were particularly intriguing and enhanced the research. These interviewees played active roles in the construction of Finnish identity both in their personal lives and in the larger community.

Of the 35 interviewees, six did not claim Finnish ancestry, meaning the vast majority identified as Finnish American. In total, 36 participants took part in this study, spanning a diverse range of ages. The data appeared skewed toward older participants. Identifying participants from the 18–35 and 36–50 age groups was slightly more challenging. Although I conducted research in areas with higher education institutions nearby, my visits during the summer months coincided with a period when classes were not in session, and many students and families were likely on vacation. Due to the limited time available during FinnFest, I was unable to conduct as many interviews as initially projected. Many participants who were interested in participating could not find the time due to the festival's full schedule. This time constraint hindered the balance of the data. Given more time, I would have been able to interview additional participants, which would have contributed to a more balanced dataset.

During the analysis phase, data were grouped into four age categories to explore potential generational variations. Factors such as gender identity, socioeconomic status, and occupation were not considered relevant to the research objectives and, therefore, were not included in the interview questions posed to the participants. The age of interviewees was deemed relevant and is therefore reported, as there was interest in understanding potential generational differences within this study.

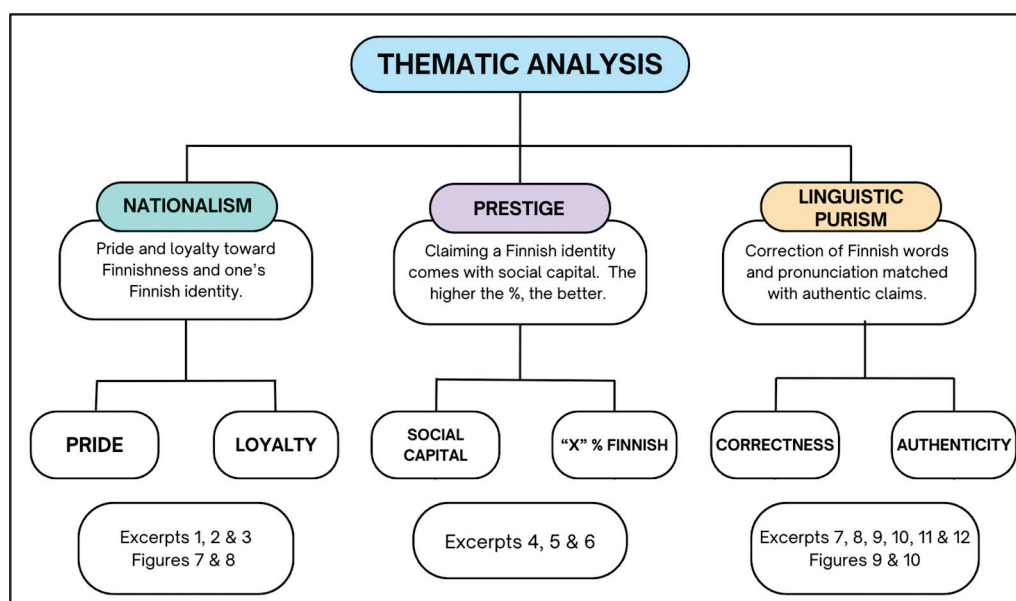
### 3.4. Research Ethics

In conducting ethnographic research on Finnish as an HL, I was dedicated to upholding the rights, well-being, and wishes of my research participants. I prioritized ethical conduct throughout the fieldwork and in the writing of this publication. Drawing on

the four “r” words of ethical research outlined by Rice (2012) and guidelines from TENK (The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity), I centered my approach on (1) respect, (2) relationship, (3) reciprocity, and (4) responsibility. I thoroughly explained the purpose of this study, the intended use of collected data, and the rights afforded to participants. I obtained informed consent, either orally or in writing, for the use of their data and the recording of interviews. I also obtained consent to take pictures of their personal items and received their permission to use them in my research. Lastly, I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time and they were provided with my contact information for further inquiries or withdrawal requests. All figures in this article are my own, unless stated otherwise, and have been taken and used with permission. Any names mentioned have also been mentioned with permission.

#### 4. Analysis

In this section, I address the main research question regarding prevailing language ideologies using a thematic analysis diagram below (Figure 6). I address the second research question regarding generational differences in Section 4.4, in which the evolution of terms like *Finlander* suggests generational change and reflects a history of friction with individuals not identifying as Finnish. My findings highlight a pronounced pride and attachment to Finnish identity, which discursively and ideologically shape a sense of belonging and serve as a foundation for Finnish American identity formation. Furthermore, the findings reveal ideologies of authenticity and purity that underscore the esteemed value placed on claiming Finnish identity, along with the social and cultural capital it brings. The following diagram answers the first research question: How do attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness manifest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota? Throughout the analysis, I interpret these findings with excerpts and ethnographic material.



**Figure 6.** Thematic analysis diagram of attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness.

The formation of a Finnish or Finnish American identity is marked by a complex interplay of attitudes and ideologies that often coexist and intertwine. As outlined in Section 2.1, distinguishing between attitudes and ideologies can be challenging, and the same holds true for the findings of this study. While the excerpts analyzed below can be categorized into their respective sections, they frequently overlap and interact with each other in nuanced ways. The following paragraphs contextualize these findings with excerpts, images, and findings from participant observation.

The pervasive presence of Finnish identity in Hancock, Duluth, and its surroundings is unmistakable, permeating the multimodal landscape. During my observations in Hancock, I was struck by the unexpected sound of the Finnish national anthem resonating through the streets, emanating from a local church. Similarly, in Duluth, I encountered a car adorned with the blue cross from the Finnish flag prominently affixed to its sides. The unmistakable emblem of the Finnish flag was ubiquitous in both locations. These manifestations underscored the significance of Finnishness and provided valuable insights into the pride and nationalistic ideology that emerges in places where the Finnish identity occupies physical and cultural space.

The most prevalent ideology encountered in this study was nationalistic, associated with a strong sense of pride in being Finnish American and a deep loyalty to one's roots and heritage. Additionally, the prestige associated with Finnishness and purist ideologies was also abundant. As mentioned previously, this study does not aim to quantify these attitudes and ideologies but rather to describe their presence, allowing for future research in the Finnish HL context and facilitating comparisons with other HL contexts. The remainder of this section delves into the findings, utilizing images, excerpts from interviews, and observations from the research sites to provide a comprehensive overview. The findings are divided to address the main research questions. That is, Sections 4.1–4.3 discuss attitudes and ideologies describing the findings visualized in Figure 6 that answer the research question: How do attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness manifest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota? Section 4.4 describes the generational differences that answer this study's second research question: What discernible generational differences, if any, characterize attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness among Finnish Americans? In the excerpts below, names and places have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity and privacy of the interviewees. Excerpts denote UP (Upper Peninsula), NMN (Northern Minnesota), and non-Finn to indicate the community the interviewee identified with. Excerpts with . . . reflect a pause in speech and [...] indicates that a portion of the text has been removed. When citing excerpts from interviews, I provide A–E in parentheses, which correspond to the age group in Table 1. For example, (C) refers to an interviewee aged 51–49.

**Table 1.** Distribution of participants' ages.

| Age Group | 18–35 | 36–50 | 51–65 | 66–80 | ≥81   | Total |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| #         | 7     | 5     | 9     | 9     | 6     | 36    |
| %         | 19.4% | 13.9% | 25%   | 25%   | 16.7% | 100%  |

#### 4.1. Nationalistic Ideologies

The term nationalism can carry significant political weight. In this study, however, it refers exclusively to the pride and enthusiasm for Finnish culture, with no exploration into its political dimensions. The presence of nationalistic ideologies tied to pride for and loyalty to (see Section 4.1.1) one's Finnish American identity was abundantly clear through the participant observations and consistently expressed in all interviews. As such, the predominant finding of this study is the profound sense of pride associated with Finnishness. Finnish Americans often do not need to verbally articulate this pride and loyalty regarding their Finnish ancestry; instead, they express it through a multitude of ways. This became evident through participant observations, as individuals consistently showcased and wore items that helped in their Finnish American identity construction. In interviews, participants brought family heritage books, wore t-shirts featuring Finnish sayings, and welcomed me into their homes with freshly baked *nisu* bread<sup>6</sup> and coffee poured into mugs from *Marimekko*, a Finnish design brand.

#### 4.1.1. Pride for and Loyalty to the Finnish American Identity

Nationalism regarding the Finnish American identity manifested in a multitude of ways, with my analysis focusing on *pride* and *loyalty*, two of the most recurring themes in this ideology. Differences between Duluth and Hancock were evident in the presence and public performativity of Finnishness. In Duluth, this presence was more transient, mainly confined to festival days and specific events. Conversely, in Hancock, the “performativity” reached a FinnFest level on a daily basis. In Hancock, it is nearly impossible to go about without encountering someone proudly displaying commodified items that express their Finnish identity, such as the *sisu* t-shirt in Figure 7. Hancock’s population is also twenty times smaller than Duluth’s and this evidently impacted the visibility and influenced my experiences during the participant observations.

The majority of public manifestations of Finnishness in Duluth were associated with FinnFest due to my time there during the festival. One of the many manifestations found included a hat (see Figure 8) referencing the practice of making *viiliä*, fermented or cultured milk, a practice that remains common among Finnish Americans in Northern Minnesota. In fact, the hat was made with a clever double meaning playing off the English translation, “cultured milk”. The hat’s designer, Steve Leppälä, skillfully utilized this linguistic subtlety, and thus the hat features the phrase *Finnish culture at its best*. This interpretation features indexical meaning (Silverstein 1979) because it is understood by Finnish Americans, and, more specifically, those in Duluth. These findings also relate to what Karjalainen (2016), who studied Finnish Americans in Seattle, describes when Finnish Americans have objects that allow them to express their identities as Finnish Americans and not solely as Americans. Karjalainen explains that these manifestations connect to authenticity (Pennycook 2007) in relation to discourse on identity and belonging.



Figure 7. *Sisu* t-shirt in Hancock.



Figure 8. “Got viiliä” Finnish culture at its best hat at FinnFest 2023.

These material expressions of Finnish pride and loyalty were echoed in the interviews conducted in both the Hancock and Duluth areas, as demonstrated in Excerpts 1 and 2, where interviewees expressed pride in claiming a Finnish American identity.

#### Excerpt 1—NMN

“[At the event,] I told them I’m Finnish, I’m English, I’m Scottish, I’m Irish, I am a lot of things but when people ask me, I say I’m Finnish. It is really [up to] what you claim and what you’re excited about”. (36A)

#### Excerpt 2—UP

“I worked at Post Office with a guy called Dan, for my whole working career until he retired first. His famous saying was, he is originally Copper Harbor, ‘you know what I’d be if I wasn’t Finnish..ashamed!’ [laughter]”. (18D)

#### Excerpt 3—NMN

“Sometimes I wonder if I am too ethnocentric. I don’t want people to think I am excluding their culture or anything else. I welcome all cultures, I really do, and try to always”. (32C)

The statement in Excerpt 1 reflects a *nationalistic ideology* that underscores *loyalty* to their Finnish heritage and the simultaneous *pride* they take in it. The speaker also acknowledged their diverse ancestral background, yet Finnish was what they most engaged with and were enthusiastic about. Excerpt 2 highlights another manifestation of *pride* and *loyalty* within the Finnish American community. The anecdote exemplifies a humorous expression of pride. The remark, “you know what I’d be if I wasn’t Finnish. . .ashamed!” accompanied by laughter, illustrates a comical yet sincere embrace of Finnish identity. This attitude is reverberated by material culture such as the *TGIF, THANK GOD I’M FINNISH* license plate in Hancock (see Section 2.3). This anecdote reflects the strong sense of *loyalty* and camaraderie among Finnish Americans, as well as their *pride* in their cultural heritage, coming together to form a nationalistic ideology.

However, it is important to recognize that such expressions of belonging may also lead to exclusion within heritage communities, where certain identities take precedence (Remlinger and Karinen forthcoming). While these comments were sincere from the Finnish American participants of this study, they also highlight the potential for exclusion within heritage communities, where certain identities may be prioritized over others. In Excerpt 3, one Finnish American expresses concern about being too ethnocentric. Their statement reflects an important first step to ensuring inclusivity in the reality of multicultural American communities. Further research with individuals who do not identify as Finnish or have close connections to the Finnish community is necessary to fully understand this dynamic.

### 4.2. Prestige of Finnish and Finnishness and Relevant Attitudes

While nationalistic ideologies related to pride and loyalty are prevalent, it appears that this has not always been the case, as I will explore in this section. I will examine the association of Finnishness with social and cultural capital and discuss its manifestations through exclamations claiming percentages of Finnish ancestry and claims of cultural authenticity. This prestige seems to have evolved over time; historically, Finns changed their last names to assimilate, and there was a reluctance to embrace Finnish identity due to social exclusion. The evolution of the term *Finlander* is an example of how the term has evolved over generations, which is discussed in Section 4.4.

#### 4.2.1. Prestige

The prestige of claiming a Finnish identity has evolved since Finns initially migrated to the Upper Midwest to work in the mining and logging industry. As mentioned in the introduction, this study was partly motivated by overhearing someone say that their partner “had to get rid of his Yooper accent, he sounded Finnish and uneducated”, which is intriguing given how Finnishness is held in high regard, while the regional ways of

speaking in these areas historically have not been considered prestigious. As Remlinger (2016) puts it, “identity and language attitudes are inseparable”, and, since the Yooper and Finnish identities overlap significantly (Remlinger 2017), this observation is particularly intriguing. In both research sites, several interviewees recounted how their ancestors changed their names to mitigate social exclusion and secure employment, reflecting the negative attitudes toward Finns during that era. This phenomenon directly relates to the term *Finlander*, a significant finding discussed in Section 4.4 due to its connection to generational changes. Contemporary Finnish Americans no longer feel the need to conceal their identity; in fact, some have actively reclaimed their Finnish last names. Prestige refers to the respect and admiration given to someone or something based on its perceived value or status. In this study’s case, the prestige that is associated with Finnishness is exemplified in Excerpts 4 and 5.

#### Excerpt 4—UP

“In my parents’ generation, it was still very common for Finns to marry Finns and Croatians to marry Croatians. However, it started to change, and many began marrying outside their ethnic group. But among Finns, if you mentioned, ‘Oh, my daughter is getting married’, or ‘My son’, instinctively, people would ask, ‘*Onko hän suomalainen tai toiskielinen?*’ Because ‘*toiskielinen*’ meant anyone other than a Finn. When my parents got engaged, my father was Finnish and my mother wasn’t. He went and told his parents, and his mother cried. My mother went and told her parents, and her mother and grandfather cried. The neighbor was there, and she was very dignified. She said, ‘Well, my daughter isn’t going to marry a Finn’. And um, she did; she married a Finn. The woman said, ‘Well, he’s an educated Finn’ [because] he had gone to Suomi College”. (D)

Excerpt 4 also demonstrates an example of language attrition—the gradual reduction or loss of language knowledge over time—where the use of *tai* “and/or” is used where *vai* “or” should have been used. Since the language has not been actively transmitted and is primarily used symbolically or for indexing one’s identity, it is understandable that words or sayings are misused or not maintained in their standard form. Other examples of attrition are the loss of umlauts on Finnish words, Anglicized pronunciations of Finnish words, and simplifications of double consonants to one, such as *Amerikka* “America” to *Amerika*, among others (Remlinger and Karinen forthcoming). During this fieldwork, I also observed a few speakers say *juustoa* “say cheese” when taking photos. The phrase “say cheese”, commonly used in English, has been American–Finnishized, as this is not used in Finland. In addition, this observation is a verbal confirmation of what Remlinger and Karinen (forthcoming) notice with the use of *juustoa*<sup>7</sup> “cheese”, which has been fossilized in the partitive form in the written use of Finnish in the Finnish American areas under study. It is interesting because the word appears in the partitive form *juustoa* rather than the nominative *juusto*. I also observed the same phenomenon with *kahvia* “coffee” and *nisua* “sweet cardamom bread”. These findings relate to what Kühl and Peterson (2018) find with morphosyntactic features in the Danish HL community in Sanpete County, Utah, where speakers add the English plural marker -s to words, despite the Danish words already featuring the enclitic plural marker -er or -r. I would argue that this is the same in the Finnish American heritage communities under study because locals were likely to say “I need to get me some *juustoa*”, where the partitive marker -a means “some”. These observations illustrate the impact of language attrition in the Finnish American communities under study, highlighting how linguistic features can change or simplify over time when a language is not actively maintained or transmitted.

Excerpt 5 provides an illustrative example of the prestige associated with Finnish cultural knowledge, as demonstrated by a teacher who was commended by non-Finnish Americans for a project where students explored various topics related to Finland and Finnish culture. This excerpt is significant because the interviewee specifically noted that non-Finnish Americans were the most appreciative, suggesting that within the local

community, understanding Finnish cultural elements was essential for full community integration and recognition at that time.

#### Excerpt 5—UP

“She would do a six-week-long series. The children would pack these backpacks, which was a paper grocery sack. They would put all the little projects in the sack. At the end, they would take them out, and they would talk about what they discovered, going to Finland in their minds, and she would have a little program at the end, and the parents and grandparents could come in. They would bring her gifts, and they would cry, bake her bread, and all kinds of stuff. In the end, she said it was really interesting. The people who were the most appreciative of it were families who had moved here, and their children were in the program. They said, ‘it helps us and helps our children understand the community’. Other teachers who had done Finnish things as well get a lot of recognition in the community for it”. (D)

Together, Excerpts 4 and 5 convey conflicting notions regarding the status of Finns in the local community of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Excerpt 4 echoes the notion introduced earlier in this section regarding education, suggesting a prevailing stereotype that Finns were generally perceived as uneducated. Simultaneously, there was historically prestige associated with marrying another Finn. This attitude was affirmed by an interviewee in Minnesota, who recalled that marrying a non-Finn was “a scandal”. However, the interviewee added that “it is no more, which is good”, noting that such attitudes are no longer prevalent, which is interpreted as a positive development toward higher inclusivity among Finnish Americans. Excerpt 5 illustrates the significant regard for Finnish culture, to the extent that schools occasionally devoted several weeks to studying Finland. The prestige of Finnishness extended beyond the Finnish community, as indicated by the teacher’s observation that non-Finns were among the most appreciative participants. These individuals recognized the social and cultural significance of Finnish heritage, emphasizing its importance in the Upper Peninsula.

#### 4.2.2. Social and Cultural Capital

The social and cultural capital associated with claiming a Finnish identity appeared to be more pronounced in Hancock than in Duluth, likely due to the higher percentage of Finns in the former. Regardless of their location, Finnish Americans often felt the need to quantify their Finnish heritage, with a higher percentage seen as more favorable. During participant observation, individuals frequently made statements such as, “I’m 30% Finn!” as a way to assert their identity. While these statements were out of a need to identify oneself, one interviewee recalled a situation where there was a comment at their workplace where someone exclaimed that another person got the job because of being Finnish, suggesting that this person’s Finnish last name also helped. This suggests a tension between those who identify as Finnish and those who do not, as well as the perceived advantage of being Finnish in terms of gaining social and cultural capital. The person who made this claim was not Finnish yet recognized the value of having the identity and having a Finnish last name. In short, locals without Finnish connections recognized the significance of Finnish names and claiming a Finnish identity. Excerpt 6 reinforces this attitude, with a comment that was a complaint by a non-Finn recited by a Finn, who recalled community members feeling that Finnishness had a higher place in the community.

#### Excerpt 6—UP

“They complained a lot.. ‘if you want any money for that, you have to give it a Finnish name’”. (D)

This comment underscores the perception that anything associated with Finnish culture holds inherent value, which can extend to influencing decisions, including in matters such as securing funding. This relates to what Shandler describes as common

in Yiddish as a postvernacular language, where they describe that “the symbolic level of meaning is always privileged over its primary level” (Shandler 2005, p. 22). In the case of this study, this means that the symbolic value of Finnish identity and cultural markers often outweighs their practical use, granting individuals with Finnish heritage certain advantages. The meaning of the business, last name, or phrase in Finnish is not as important as the fact that it is Finnish. In essence, the social and cultural capital associated with Finnish identity shapes both individual experiences and community dynamics. It influences how people perceive themselves and others, guides social interactions, and can even impact economic opportunities.

#### 4.3. Purist Ideologies

Purist ideologies deal with the perceived correctness and authenticity of language use. In this study, the most prevalent findings dealt with the pronunciation of Finnish last names and sauna, which is a Finnish American shibboleth feature (Remlinger 2018, p. 266). There were also tensions regarding what is “truly Finnish” because the Finnish American culture is different from modern Finnish culture. An interesting finding was the approximation to the standard Finnish pronunciation of words among Finnish Americans, creating three to four recognizable variants of pronunciation for words like sauna and last names such as Junttila, as presented in the excerpts below.

##### 4.3.1. Finnish American Authenticity

Due to the closure of Finlandia University and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Finnish American Heritage Center and Finnish American Folk School—two entities previously managed under Finlandia University—there were debates regarding the ideal location for the heritage center if it were to continue functioning. Advocates proposed various options: some argued for Duluth due to its strategic location, others advocated for staying in Hancock to preserve the Finnish presence and historical significance, and some suggested relocating it to Minneapolis, citing the city’s status as a metropolitan hub with better connectivity to other communities and global networks. The discussions surrounding these options bring us to the ideology of authenticity. Oftentimes, arguments in these discussions revolved around which place was the most authentically Finnish. Ultimately, Finlandia Foundation National (FFN)<sup>8</sup> decided that the heritage center should remain in Hancock, and Excerpt 7 is an example of the authentic Finnishness outwardly displayed by the town that likely aided in this decision. The FFN played a crucial role following the closure of Finlandia University in May 2023. By raising funds, the FFN successfully took over operations of the Finnish American Folk School, Finnish American Heritage Center, and North Winds Bookstore, all previously managed by Finlandia University.

##### Excerpt 7—UP

“The Finnish American Heritage Center has had interns that have come from Finland to work there. They have gone home knowing how to play the kantele, that they didn’t know how to play before. I remember seeing some of them in the Heikinpäivä<sup>9</sup> parade saying ‘oh my gosh, this is more Finnish than Finland is’”. (D)

The significance of this excerpt to a Finnish American lies in the implicit acknowledgment that authenticity in Finnish culture transcends geographical boundaries. When a Finn asserted that something was “more Finnish than in Finland”, it served as a validation of cultural authenticity and adherence to traditional practices, and, more importantly for the topic of this section, reinforced Hancock as an authentic Finnish place. Finnish Americans nowadays do, however, recognize that the Finnish culture in Finland is not the same as that in Finnish American communities, as understood by Excerpt 8.

##### Excerpt 8—UP

“For me, I think it is important to recognize people as Finnish Americans. It’s a distinct culture. And I think we do one of two things either we are constantly

trying to be even more Finnish and do everything here as it is done in Finland, which is not possible. Or else we embrace what we have figured out, we've accommodated being in America, and we have remained Finnish. For someone like me, and I know I'm not the only one, it is not enough to be American. It is simply not enough. . . it's like taking a plant and planting it in new soil under new conditions and it still can thrive". (D)

This sentiment was juxtaposed by another interviewee who did not identify as Finnish and had observed a vibrant atmosphere of innovation within traditional Finnish artistic expressions in Finland. In contrast, they perceived a more conservative approach within Finnish American artistic circles.

#### Excerpt 9—Non-Finn

"[in Finland] they are making new music, creating new things, there is a lot of improvisation and experimentation and composition happening and collaboration with other genres..just like in any vibrant arts or music scene, here sometimes.. there's.. a. I've witnessed a little bit of a box.. there is sort of these expectations [from Finnish Americans] of 'what my grandparents did' or 'I've never heard of that.. is that really so Finnish'". (B)

Excerpt 9 provides a contrasting perspective to Excerpts 7 and 8. While Excerpts 7 and 8 emphasize the importance of preserving traditional Finnish practices and values, Excerpt 9 suggests that Finnish American circles may sometimes exhibit a more conservative approach, with expectations rooted in nostalgia for past traditions. This observation implies a tension between preserving cultural authenticity and embracing innovation within Finnish American communities.

#### 4.3.2. Correctness

In exploring Finnish American identity, the concept of correctness emerged as a significant theme. At the forefront of this discussion was the pronunciation of Finnish words, with sauna serving as perhaps the most prominent example (Remlinger 2017; Rankinen and Ma 2020). Within Finnish American communities, correct pronunciation holds considerable cultural significance, as illustrated by anecdotes of frustration and humor surrounding mispronunciations of Finnish last names in Excerpts 9, 10, and 11. These excerpts shed light on a purist ideology that emphasizes the importance of linguistic authenticity in preserving Finnish heritage. Moreover, they underscore the belief that mastering correct pronunciation is not only a matter of linguistic accuracy but also a reflection of one's genuine Finnish identity.

#### Excerpt 10—UP

"The Finnish stuff that resonated with my great grandparents or even my kids. . . there are differences in the things that resonate while there are also similarities. If my kids hear someone mispronounce sauna, they will be the first to make sure that person *knows*. I mean.. I've seen them do it. . .". (B)

Excerpt 10 illustrates how mispronunciations, particularly of sauna, prompt correction from Finnish Americans, reinforcing the value placed on linguistic purity. Excerpt 11 reflects a similar attitude, where mispronunciations of Finnish last names are corrected. However, as seen in Excerpts 11 and 12, individuals with Finnish last names may not be familiar with either standard Finnish or the Finnish American variant. Given that many Finnish Americans are several generations removed from their Finnish roots and may not speak Finnish, it is unreasonable to expect them to be knowledgeable about standard Finnish pronunciation.

Excerpt 11—NMN

“I said to Professor Jussila [dʒʹusilə] ‘do you really want people calling you Jussila [dʒusiˈla]’”. (D)

This statement reflects a purist ideology regarding pronunciation. Subconsciously, knowing how to pronounce these names is seen as a marker of Finnish identity and is valued, although these pronunciations are simply an approximation of standard Finnish. One young Finnish American shared that they regularly interact with Finnish Americans in their work and that they find humor in situations when they are hypercorrected by clients with Finnish last names, as seen in Excerpt 12.

Excerpt 12—NMN

“I said Järvelä [jærvælə] and the client corrected me and said, no, it’s not Järvelä, it’s JärVELä [dʒærvæˌlæ]”. (A)

This interviewee obtained an intermediate proficiency in Finnish through study at Salolampi,<sup>10</sup> an intensive language camp. Thus, they were familiar with the language and pronunciation guidelines. They went on to explain that they sometimes had three different pronunciations for certain last names, such as *Jurmu*.

|            |                                |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| [ˈjurmu]   | Standard Finnish pronunciation |
| [juːrˈmø]  | Finnish American               |
| [dʒurˈmuː] | Non-Finn <sup>11</sup>         |

These examples are illustrative of attrition that has taken place now that the Finnish heritage is so removed, meaning that Finnish Americans are several generations down the line and no longer first-, second-, or even third-generation Finnish Americans. In addition, this anecdote reflects my findings on the pronunciation of sauna. There is the standard Finnish pronunciation, the common Finnish American pronunciation, a hypercorrected version influenced by the word “sow” to aid pronunciation (see Figure 9), and the non-Finnish American pronunciation. This hypercorrected version is a result of sow being a heteronym, a word that has the same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings.

|          |                                    |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| [ˈsauna] | Standard Finnish pronunciation     |
| [ˈsaʊnə] | Finnish American (sow-na)          |
| [ˈsounə] | Hypercorrection (sow-na)           |
| [ˈsɑːnə] | Common U.S. pronunciation (saw-na) |



Figure 9. Sauna sign for sale at FinnFest 2023.

The sauna sign for sale at FinnFest 2023 (see Figure 9) exemplifies linguistic purism, featuring a prescriptive guide on the pronunciation of sauna. This sign also illustrates the commodification of Finnish as an HL, a phenomenon also observed with the HL of

French and Cajun English in New Orleans (Dubois and Horvath 2000; Eble 2009). Such commodification of language indicates that the practice is prevalent across HL communities.

The “correct” pronunciation of sauna is indexical (Silverstein 1979) because it signifies more than just the word’s phonetic form; it also signals social and cultural identity. In Finnish American heritage areas, using the “correct” pronunciation of sauna indicates an authentic Finnish American identity and is valued. This example of sauna also demonstrates how I, the researcher, was more of an outsider than an insider in the community because I understood the hypercorrection version through the reference instead of the indexically “correct” pronunciation in Figure 9. In addition, I employ the common U.S. pronunciation when speaking English and grew up saying it that way. It is also worth mentioning that there are inevitably more ways to pronounce sauna than noted; these were the main four pronunciations recognized by the researcher. Nonetheless, sauna is a prime example of how purist correction can lead to hypercorrection.

Collectively, these examples illustrate how correctness in pronunciation serves as a point of pride and identity. Finnish Americans exhibit an approximation to standard Finnish pronunciation, with many words and names that are not quite the non-Finnish way yet not quite the standard Finnish pronunciation either. By employing this variation, individuals signal their authentic Finnish American identity. In addition, this matches with what Garrett (2010) describes regarding (1) cognition, (2) affect, and (3) behavior (23). In the example above, this would correspond as such:

- (1) The belief of Finnish Americans that there is only one way to pronounce sauna.
- (2) Feelings of discomfort or disdain toward other pronunciations of sauna.
- (3) Actively making sure to prescriptively correct someone when they pronounce sauna in a manner that does not match with what Finnish Americans consider “correct”.

In alignment with the three phases is another example: an interviewee’s mug (see Figure 10) with the phrase “I’m silently correcting your pronunciation of sauna”. This is another example of linguistic purism that has been commodified and its purchase exemplifies the behavior phase outlined by Garrett (2010). The phrase on the mug exemplifies purist ideology, implying that there is only one “correct” way to pronounce such words, and silently correcting others reflects a commitment to upholding this linguistic standard as a marker of authentic Finnishness.

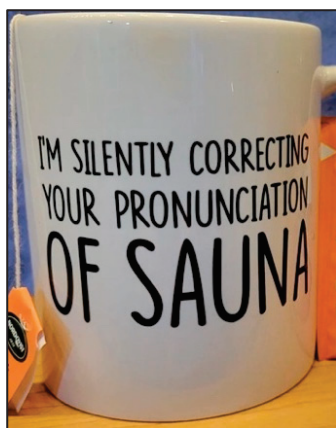


Figure 10. Mug.

#### 4.4. Generational Changes

The most pronounced generational difference was the evolution of the term *Finlander*. In regard to concerns, the older generations tended to be concerned regarding the lack of interest in Finnish heritage among the younger generations (see Figure 11). Simultaneously, there was a strong trust that the presence of Finnish culture would remain for generations to come. On the other hand, the overall attitudes among young people were inconclusive. There were mentions of concerns regarding the loss of the Finnish spoken by older Finnish

Americans and indications of concern regarding the commodification of Finnish by non-Finnish entities, but more research is needed to understand the attitudes and ideologies of younger generations. The figure below answers the second research question of this study: What discernible generational differences, if any, characterize attitudes and ideologies toward Finnishness among Finnish Americans?

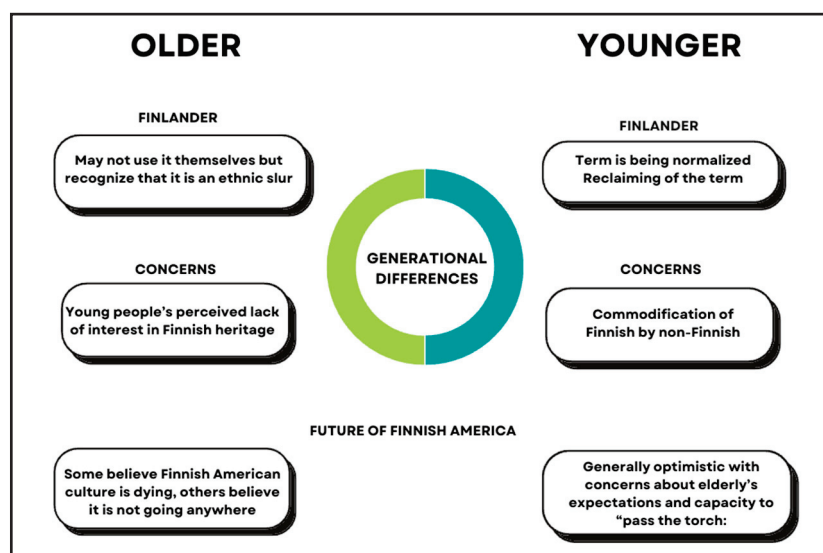


Figure 11. Mapping generational differences.

#### 4.4.1. *Finlander*: From Ethnic Slur to Reclamation

The evolution of the term *Finlander* reflects the shifting attitudes and perceptions of Finns in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota over time. Older generations recalled a time when the term carried negative connotations, associated with derogatory stereotypes and linguistic discrimination. Many recalled their parents refraining from using the term and having strong feelings toward it from a period when the term carried negative connotations, often associated with derogatory stereotypes and discrimination. In Excerpt 13, the interviewee recounted being surprised to learn about its derogatory nature from their parent, indicating a generational shift in understanding. Excerpt 14 highlights the term's linguistic and cultural discrimination and how it impacted one Finnish American's choice to stop speaking Finnish as well as its association with the *Yooper* identity. However, Excerpt 15 suggests a reclaiming of the term among newer generations, signifying a transformation from a derogatory slur to a marker of cultural identity.

##### Excerpt 13—UP

"I remember the first time that I might have used the term *Finlander* and my dad reacted—not real negatively—but he was like 'oh you know, that's kinda derogatory' and I was like 'it is?!' I had no idea, I had heard people use it. . . he was like 'oh yeah that used to be a slur!'" (B)

##### Excerpt 14—UP

"There used to be this phrase people used, 'dumb Finlander' and if you had that heavy broke [accent].. 'dumb Finlander' and a lot of times. . . same as southern, you speak a bit slower and there's a great mover where the guy says, 'Just because I talk slow doesn't mean I'm stupid', and people were embarrassed by that. I have to say I feel sad, I know that I had a very Yooper accent as a child, let off articles, and crazy things with prepositions and all that, and I lost all that, and I could recreate it but it wouldn't be authentic anymore, and I love hearing it. I grew up in a family that we had a sense of pride in being Finnish. [...] My [partner] also grew up in the U.P. and she said, 'you know we didn't embrace the

Finnishness because so many people would say dumb Finlander'. And I met a girl just last summer she was umm, I think she was 4 years younger than me. . . and her grandparents, her grandfather was born in Finland and her mother was a daughter of immigrants and her grandparents insisted that she speak Finnish. . . So, I saw her after many years, and I said "so have you kept up your Finnish", and she said "no, you know, I felt bad because I was different, and I let it go" and now she rues the day. . . and it was that dumb Finlander". (D)

#### Excerpt 15—NMN

"I would say that after 1900 is probably when they used it a lot, and definitely in a derogatory way towards Finns. I assume it had a lot to do with the blacklisting in the strikes that went on; I'm sure that's where it started. It was definitely a derogatory term for many, many years. I do not know when we started to reclaim it. I would definitely say it is a Finnish American thing; you know, you see a lot of Finnish Americans use that word as a community term for each other. It is not derogatory anymore; I don't know if I would go as far as to say that it is a term of endearment, but it is definitely a part of the identity of being Finnish American. I would say that it is definitely more claimed by people of my Finnish American generation. What I mean by that is people whose ancestors came in the late 1800s and maybe even in the early 1900s. But a lot of people who came later, their children and grandchildren, are not as apt to claim that word. My great grandmother, she was the one who actually started to teach me Finnish when I was little. Her grandfather was born in Finland, and I remember one of her last few years when she visited us at our house. It was a nice spring day, and she said a few things; one of the things I remember distinctly she said, 'I sing because I'm happy.. I sing because I'm free.. I sing because I'm a Finlander, can't you see?' and I always love thinking about that". (A)

The reclaiming of the term *Finlander* reflects a broader evolution in Finnish American identity. These generational shifts signify changing patterns in how individuals engage with the Finnish language and cultural heritage, shaping their identities on their own terms with the resources available to them. As these ways of interacting with the heritage culture continue to evolve, so do the attitudes and ideologies surrounding the preservation of Finnishness within these HL communities. Remlinger (2006) mentions the term "dumb Finlander" together with "dumb Yooper", finding that the term "dumb Yooper" is being reclaimed as well. These evolving dynamics reveal how communities reshape their identity and cultural heritage, reflecting broader societal shifts in reclaiming and reframing terms like "Finlander" and "Yooper" in a more positive light.

#### 4.4.2. "Many Times They Have Tried to Put the Lid on the Coffin and Sisu Pushes It Off"

The biggest concern among the older generations of Finnish Americans in Northern Minnesota and Hancock, Michigan, was the worry that young people are not interested in Finnish American heritage. The remaining elements discovered throughout the research came about in individual instances, not allowing for the generalization of any of these attitudes. For example, one interviewee said that the problem in their opinion was the lack of an attempt to attract the younger generations. A younger Finnish American, on the other hand, expressed concern about the commodification of Finnishness by non-Finnish entities. Another young Finnish American expressed concern about the inability of those in power to "pass the torch" and feared that this would have an impact on the future of the heritage culture.

Amidst these concerns, the emergence of new establishments dedicated to Finnish culture signals an active effort by younger generations to integrate local Finnish heritage on their terms while honoring and celebrating their Finnish cultural roots. In some cases, this shift may be a deliberate and necessary expansion, with, for example, FinnFest's scope now reaching the wider Nordic audience. In other cases, it may reflect a desire to adapt

Finnish traditions to contemporary contexts or explore new avenues for incorporating Finnishness. Apart from the concern to attract youth and “pass the torch”, the remainder of the discussions related solely to the HL community in and surrounding Hancock. Excerpt 16, for example, discusses the new charter school in Calumet that embraces Finnish education. Excerpt 17 reflects on the transition of Suomi College to Finlandia University, and the broader evolution of Finnish American identity with it. The interviewee acknowledged the resistance to change from some individuals who were upset about the college changing its name. However, the speaker emphasized that change was inevitable and that this is no different from the current circumstances in Hancock. While some individuals resisted change, others, like the speaker in Excerpt 18, recognized the persistence of Finnishness despite inevitable transformations.

#### Excerpt 16—UP

“But there is this brand new Finnish model school that is developing, like that’s what people want to get behind, like they are looking to their Finnish roots and what is going on in Finland now and saying ‘hey, they have a great Finnish education system, what don’t we look into that?’ So, people are going to pursue what they see value. It may or may not be the same thing that their parents or grandparents [did]”. (B)

#### Excerpt 17—UP

“There were people who were upset about Suomi College changing its name, and it’s like, you know, there was no way that this was still going to be a university for Finnish Americans at some point. Even before that, it always had people who weren’t Finns after they started using English as their language of instruction in the 20s. The institution that was created in 1896 had already undergone changes within 30 years, and it continued to evolve. It continued to enrich people’s lives. I know individuals with really fascinating interethnic backgrounds because their parents met at Suomi. That wouldn’t have happened if people hadn’t diversified and branched out. We wouldn’t have a café celebrating *nisu* if there hadn’t been some sort of gap in the local dining scene that allowed for that to happen. Gaps always get filled with what is needed to be put in that spot. There is going to be something new. These occurrences provide an opportunity for new things to emerge and for the Finnish identity of this area to have new meaning for new people”. (B)

#### Excerpt 18—Non-Finn

“They may not look or sound the same as they did 100 years ago... they won’t, it’s not a ‘may’, they won’t look or sound the same as they did 100 years ago. But, they are going to continue, and through those things, language continues, and foodways continue. It is absolutely possible to remain vibrant even without institutions that we were familiar with. Moreover, I feel like it is a time of transition. I mean, the older generation is aging out of leadership, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there aren’t people who are ready to take it on—perhaps in a different way than previous generations, on their own terms. And I am seeing that in a lot of ways”. (B)

To conclude, the excerpts presented in this section shed light on the concerns surrounding the future of Finnish American heritage and culture in Northern Minnesota and Hancock, Michigan. Despite these concerns, there is tangible evidence of a proactive stance by younger generations to both integrate and preserve Finnish culture. This proactive effort is exemplified by the emergence of new establishments and initiatives dedicated to Finnish culture, signaling adaptations of Finnish and Finnish American culture to fit contemporary contexts. Excerpt 19 captures the essence of this study’s discussion section by highlighting the resilience of Finnish Americans in preserving their heritage amidst changing circumstances. The speaker recalled the possibility of cultural events being the

“last time” 50 years ago. Despite this perception, they defiantly rejected the notion of Finnish culture fading away. Instead, they cited instances where attempts to suppress it have been overcome, expressing confidence in its enduring strength.

#### Excerpt 19—UP

“In my years living here, people would often say, ‘well, it’s almost over’. I responded, ‘I don’t accept that anymore’, because I’ve seen them try to put the lid on the coffin many times. I remember when I was 16, there was a *Juhannus*<sup>12</sup> dance in Bruce Crossing at the baseball field with outdoor dancing. I attended, and eventually, I went home. As I walked up the steps near the landing at the top, I thought I’d better stand here and listen to this for a while; this might be the last time. That was in 1973. I thought that this was the last gasp, and many times they have tried to put the lid on the coffin, but *sisu* pushes it off”. (D)

### 5. Conclusions

This study revealed a diverse range of language attitudes and ideologies prevalent in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Northern Minnesota, as observed through interviews and material ethnography. Among these, nationalistic and purist ideologies emerged prominently, influencing the perception of Finnishness within these communities. These ideologies were articulated both verbally, through discourse and conversation, and symbolically, through material culture. For instance, items like mugs inscribed with phrases like “I’m silently correcting your pronunciation of sauna” reflected a purist attitude, while sentiments expressed in interviews such as “you know what I’d be if I wasn’t Finnish. . . ashamed!” illustrated nationalistic perspectives. These findings contribute to the understanding of how language attitudes shape the construction of an authentic Finnish identity within these communities.

Furthermore, the apprehension regarding the future of Finnish heritage in historically Finnish regions seems justified, given the recent losses such as the closure of Finlandia University and Kaleva Café in Hancock, Michigan. However, this study suggests that present generations are embracing Finnishness in novel ways, albeit possibly diverging from the expectations of older generations. The emergence of new establishments where Finnish Americans and locals, regardless of Finnish heritage, innovate and create something unique implies an evolving cultural identity rather than its loss. An openness to new interpretations and expressions of Finnishness signifies a positive shift in the community’s attitude toward cultural preservation and adaptation. Future research could expand to include other historically Finnish areas such as the Finnish Triangle in Minnesota and Thunder Bay, Canada. This broader scope would provide insights into how Finnishness is perceived on a larger scale, allowing for comparison, particularly in areas where Finnish identity is not sustained by national organizations, such as the Finlandia Foundation National in Hancock and the 5-year commitment of FinnFest to Duluth.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees involved in this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data collected in this study are not publicly available. The reason for this is that I informed interviewees through the consent form that their audio or video files and transcripts of the interviews (either in part or in full) would not be published without their explicit consent and knowledge.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Question Guide*

#### *Growing up Finnish American*

1. What was it like growing up Finnish American? What are some of your fondest memories?
2. Do you feel connected to your Finnish heritage? How so?
3. How would you define the term Finnish American? Do you identify with this term?
4. Did you hear any Finnish at home as a kid? Are there any words you remember?
5. What are some of your favorite Finnish foods?
6. How did you spend the holidays as a kid?
7. Have you ever been to Finland?
  - (a) Where did you go?
  - (b) What did you do?
  - (c) What motivated you to go?
8. Do you have any Finnish items that are particularly important to you?
9. How are Finns perceived locally? Has this changed since you were a kid?
10. Have you been to other areas where there are many Finnish Americans?
11. Are there any words you know in Finnish? How did you learn them?
12. Is there something you wish you knew better about Finland or Finnish American culture?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Yooper* [jupər] is the term used to refer to both the dialect and individuals who come from the *UP* [jupi], the acronym used for the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (Remlinger 2018, p. 264).

<sup>2</sup> Finlandia University, originally “Suomi College”, was founded by Finnish Lutheran immigrants in 1896. Until its closure, it was the only remaining university in North America established by Finnish immigrants (<https://www.finlandia.edu/about/heritage/>, accessed on 6 April 2024).

<sup>3</sup> The Yooper dialect has traditionally been stigmatized and associated with negative stereotypes such as being dumb and not speaking “proper English” (Remlinger 2006, p. 129).

<sup>4</sup> See the Copper Island Academy website: <https://www.copperislandacademy.org/>, accessed on 6 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> FinnFest, the legal entity being FinnFest USA, is the result of an outgrowth of community festivals occurring across the United States during the Bicentennial era, an annual festival founded in 1983. Bringing Americans together nationally, the festival celebrates Finnish culture and creates opportunities to deepen and expand knowledge about Finland and Finnish America.

<sup>6</sup> *Nisu* is a cardamon bread that is most commonly referred to as “*pulla*” in Finnish. The word *nisu* is a dialectal word that is predominant in certain Finnish American communities and is still used regionally in Finland.

<sup>7</sup> *Juustoa* means literally cheese in Finnish; however, in Finnish American communities, it refers to a type of squeaky cheese.

- <sup>8</sup> Finlandia Foundation National is the most prominent source of support for Finnish and Finnish American culture in the United States. It is also the umbrella organization for Finnish American chapters (clubs) across the United States.
- <sup>9</sup> Heikinpäivä is a Finnish American festival “commemorating the martyrdom of Saint Henrik, the patron saint of Finland, and celebrating the halfway point of winter” (see <https://www.finlandia.edu/news/what-in-the-heck-is-heikinpäivä/>, accessed on 6 April 2024). The festival was started in 1999 by the Finnish Theme Committee in Hancock. This is not celebrated in Finland and is purely a celebration started by Finnish Americans in North America.
- <sup>10</sup> Salolampi is a summer school for the intensified study of Finnish. Salolampi is one of 18 languages currently offered by Concordia College in Bemidji, Minnesota. (Source: <https://www.concordialanguagevillages.org/>, accessed on 6 April 2024).
- <sup>11</sup> Non-Finn refers to those who did not self-identify as having Finnish heritage.
- <sup>12</sup> Juhannus is the Finnish holiday that celebrates midsummer. This holiday is celebrated across Nordic nations.

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## Article

# Family Language Policy in the Estonian Diaspora in Finland: Language Ideology and Home Language Education

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**Abstract:** The article deals with family language policy (FLP) among Estonian families in Finland. The focus is on language beliefs concerning maintenance of Estonian and Estonian home language (HL) classes provided by municipalities free of charge. Using the classical three-component model of FLP by Spolsky (language beliefs, language management, language practices), the analysis concentrates on language beliefs (the importance of Estonian and HL education) and management (real actions that enable children's involvement in HL classes). The data were collected from eight Estonian families via semi-structured interviews. The caregivers have higher education and stable incomes. All participants emphasized the importance of proficiency in Estonian for their ethnolinguistic identity and the beneficial aspects of HL classes. However, we found discrepancies between beliefs and actual behavior: the children do not attend Estonian HL classes because of complicated logistics and, according to the caregivers, poor language teaching methods (this claim is not supported by any evidence). Such discrepancies between beliefs and management have been attested in various recent studies of other minorities.

**Keywords:** family language policies; language maintenance; home language teaching; Estonian; language ideologies

## 1. Introduction

The objective of the current study is to investigate attitudes to the option of home language instruction among Estonian diaspora families in Finland. The study is conducted within the framework of Family Language Policy (FLP) research.

Estonia and Finland are situated geographically close and their languages are closely related, belonging to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family. Both peoples have a history of cultural connections. The number of Estonian background migrants has increased in Finland especially due to the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 (Praakli 2014). According to recent data, 50,318 Estonian speakers constitute the second largest immigrant community in Finland, according to the Finnish Statistical Agency's database (StatFin Database 2022). However, the participation in home language classes of Estonian children is lower when compared to the activity of participation of children of other large minority origins—Russian, Arabic and Somali speakers. Thus, Estonian-speaking children participating in HL classes are in the fourth place (Teachers' Labour Union OAJ 2019; Finnish National Agency for Education 2023).

This circumstance justifies the question of Estonian-speaking parents' awareness of the options of home language teaching and their motivations to send or not to send their children to Estonian classes. The current article presents preliminary research on the topic. We pose the following research questions:

**Q1:** What are language beliefs among Estonian caregivers concerning bilingualism and home language proficiency?

**Q2:** What are the actual language management measures as far as the enrolment of the

children to free Estonian home language instruction classes (provided by Finnish municipalities) is concerned?

In the present article, the term ‘home language’ is preferred to the often used term ‘heritage language’. Therefore, we refer to ‘home language teaching’ and ‘home language maintenance’ and not ‘heritage language teaching’ and ‘heritage language maintenance’. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008), terms used to describe the field of multilingual studies are almost never neutral and always cause a discussion (quoted from Eisenclas and Schalley 2020, p. 17). The term ‘heritage language’ originates from the education literature and policies in the USA and Canada in the 1990s and was introduced to describe ‘non-mainstream languages’ (Wiley 2014).

‘Heritage language’ referred to language speakers whose ancestors lived on the territories before the establishment of the United States, as well as those who migrated to the USA later (Valdés 2001; Wiley 2014 in Eisenclas and Schalley 2020, p. 25). Gradually, the meaning of the term was expanded, and it may be used as a synonym for ‘minority language’ or ‘non-societal language’. The term ‘heritage language’ is challenged by some scholars (see overview in Verschik 2014). For example, Cummins (2005) states that the term actually includes all languages, since mainstream language speakers also have a heritage. Definitions of ‘heritage language’ vary: some scholars emphasize limited input and lesser competence than in the mainstream language (Valdés 2001; Polinsky 2008), while others refer to specific sociocultural factors, such as migration, identity, and language attitudes, rather than purely linguistic factors (Fishman 2001; He 2010). As Eisenclas and Schalley (2020, p. 27) rightfully note, the term has a connotation of orientation toward the past. In this respect, Estonians in Finland are a relatively new community (1st generation) who, due to geographical proximity, can easily maintain connections with Estonia and secure a sufficient input in Estonian; some Estonians balance between living in both countries, and so on. This is different from a prototypical situation of immigrant/indigenous minorities described in the literature.

The terms ‘mother tongue’ and ‘first language’ (L1) may be problematic as well because the language first acquired is not necessarily the language one is most competent in or associates oneself with. Affiliation and competence may change during the life span. In our case, however, it is clear that parents have acquired Estonian as L1 and demonstrate a strong emotional connection with the language. At the same time, it is their home language (one’s mother tongue is not necessarily a home language: imagine a couple who speaks the dominant language with all family members, yet one partner has a different L1 that is not used in family communication).

In the present case, the caregivers’ L1 Estonian is their home language. Thus, we believe that the term ‘home language’ is more neutral, as it refers to the language spoken in the home environment and in the present, whereas ‘heritage language’ refers more to the past. When speaking about linguistic proficiency, ‘home language’ includes a wide scale of language skills ranging from limited basic knowledge to native-like proficiency in the language (Eisenclas and Schalley 2020). In this particular study, we use ‘home language’ and ‘mother tongue’ as synonymous terms.

The article is organized as follows. First, a theoretical overview of FLP studies is presented. The FLP theoretical overview concentrates on Spolsky’s (2012) model concerning three domains: language beliefs, language management, and actual language practices of families. Socioeconomic factors influencing FLPs and the special characteristics of the sociolinguistic situation of the Estonian diaspora community in Finland are also taken into consideration. An overview of the theoretical background is followed by data, methodology, and the findings based on the interview and family conversation data. To follow up, the discussion of the findings and conclusions are provided.

## **2. The FLP Theoretical Framework**

The field of FLP emerged in the early 2000s after the realization that language policy may be conceptualized in a broader sense and not only as something designed and

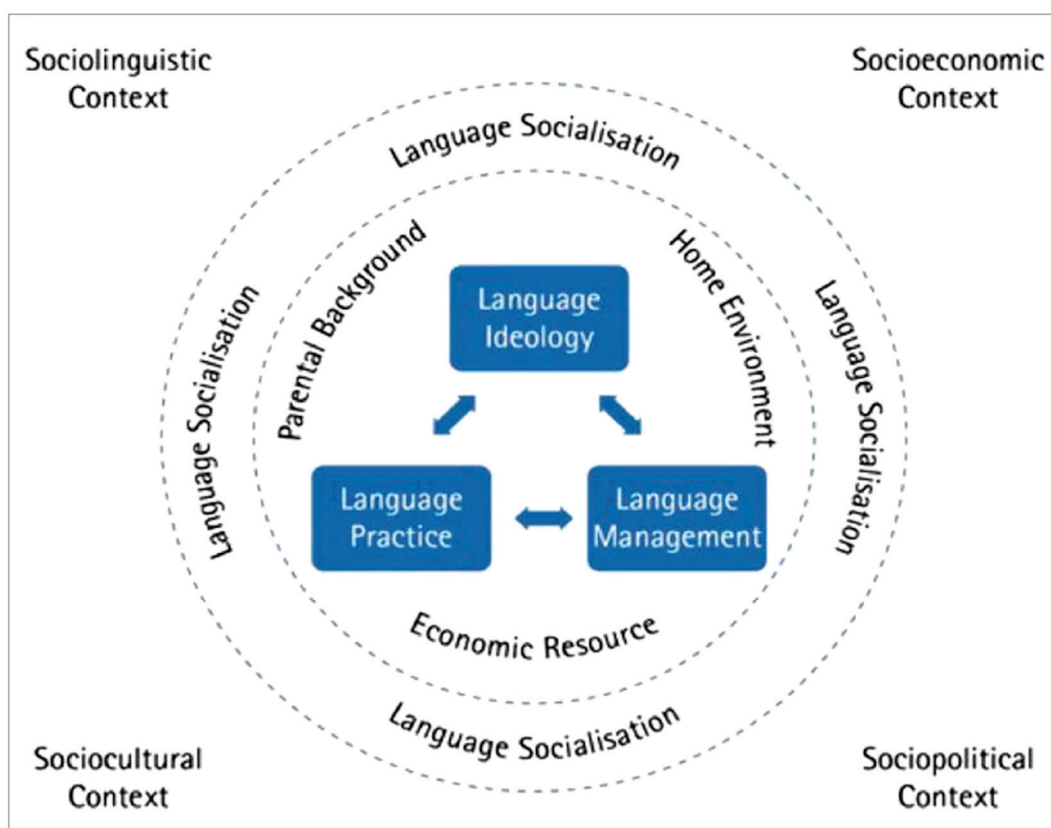
implemented by institutions. Communities and individuals make decisions concerning a particular language or languages; such decisions may be influenced by top-down institutional language policies to a smaller or larger extent or not at all; these may be general decisions (“we speak language X at home”) or rather particular ones that arise from an immediate communicational situation (“oh, she understands language Y, so I can use Y language words”). Earlier studies, such as King and Fogle (2006), King et al. (2008), Okita (2002), and Schwartz (2010), conceptualized families as a domain where language policies are designed and implemented on a micro level.

The model of language policy suggested by Spolsky (2004) has been a standard point of reference in FLP research. According to the model, language policy in general and FLP in particular consists of three components: language beliefs (language ideologies), language management, and language practices. Language beliefs, or ideologies, are ideas about language as such or particular languages, language use, who should speak what language, and so on (for instance, “monolingualism is the best”, “my children should know my language”, “one should speak only proper Estonian and not mix in words from other languages”). Language management is a broad concept that includes all kinds of measures taken in accordance with language beliefs in order to shape language practices. It may include the creation of an appropriate environment for home language usage, enrollment of children in home language classes, and finding playmates from families of the same ethnolinguistic profile. Parents may employ various strategies to manage their children’s language use, for example, rephrasing, suggesting equivalents in home language, etc., especially if they follow the so-called OPOL principle (one parent, one language), see more in (Lanza 1997) and Schwartz (2020, p. 198). According to Curdt-Christiansen (2018, p. 2), language practices are de-facto language use.

In real life, there may be discrepancies between beliefs, management, and practices (for instance, Verschik and Argus 2023). For instance, parents may hold a view that only “pure” languages should be used but, at the same time, switch between languages and not notice it. Or there may be an understanding in the family that some particular measures are necessary, such as creating more input in a lesser-used language, but this may be a difficult task due to various reasons (economic resources, geographical distance, place of residence, size of the community; the roles of some of these factors are discussed in Doyle 2018).

Based on this, it has been suggested that the FLP model as developed by Spolsky (2004) has to be considered in a broader context of sociolinguistic, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical factors. More immediate factors such as the parents’ background, home environment, socioeconomic status, and patterns of language socialization contribute to the formulation and shaping of FLP. These ideas were introduced by Curdt-Christiansen (2018) and have been widely discussed since then (see Figure 1).

In the present study, we concentrate on the language beliefs and language management of Estonian parents in Finland. Language practices remain outside the scope of this research, as we do not have access to actual language use, nor is it relevant for the current study, as we are interested in the attitudes towards Estonian HL education and measures parents take (or do not take) as far as such classes are concerned. In order to analyze language beliefs and management, we need to look at a wider context, such as the sociolinguistic situation of Estonians in Finland in general, and the more specific context of each family. Thus, the general sociolinguistic situation of Estonian speakers in Finland is presented below; other contexts (i.e., sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic), as outlined in Figure 1, are dealt with in the discussion section.



The interdisciplinary framework of family language policy (FLP).

**Figure 1.** FLP framework according to Curdt-Christiansen (2018, p. 423).

### 2.1. Sociolinguistic Situation of the Estonian Diaspora in Finland

Worldwide, the Estonian diaspora community reaches 150,000 to 200,000 people, which makes it about 15% of all the population of Estonia (Kaldur et al. 2022). The Estonian-speaking diaspora in Finland is a relatively new language community consisting of individuals rather young of age, having developed mainly as a result of intense immigration after the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (Praakli 2014). At present, Estonian speakers are the second largest (50,318) immigrant community in Finland after Russians, according to the Finnish Statistical Agency's database (StatFin Database 2022). Most members of the Estonian diaspora in Finland are described as multilingual and they identify themselves as native speakers of Estonian, which they speak with a high level of proficiency (Praakli 2014).

Kaldur et al. (2022) researched Estonian-speaking families in the capital area of Finland and noted the lack of awareness of the possible level of language competence in their children's mother tongue. Caregivers might expect their children's mother tongue level to be of high proficiency; however, the only activity relating to mastering the language at home was nothing but oral speaking and communicating with relatives, which does not provide adequate input for achieving a high level of academic skills such as writing and reading. In terms of school subject teaching and caregivers' attitudes, these skills are often divided and not combined into a general literacy term.

According to the same research (Kaldur et al. 2022), the geographically close position of the two countries influences Estonian diaspora families' language beliefs that good access to traveling and meeting relatives is sufficient for achieving good command in children's mother tongue. Due to that attitude, they tend to believe additional academic activities for mastering children's language skills are inessential. Clearly, caregivers' tendencies to overestimate the significance of oral speaking and underestimate the fact that high

command of the Estonian language by children living in Finland is achieved both by family input and academic input from the education they receive in their mother tongue.

## 2.2. Possibilities of Maintaining the Estonian Language in the Finnish Education System

Home language (HL) is a term broadly recognized worldwide; it describes the language spoken by a minority population of the country. However, in Finland, among educational authorities and in many official documents, another term is used more commonly: a person's/student's/child's own mother tongue. The same term is used to describe home language teaching as a subject in the Finnish schooling system. It is believed that referring to the mother tongue improves the position of these languages, raising them to the same line together with other official mother tongues of schools (Swedish, Finnish).

Instruction of HL started in Finland in 1970 and was applied to refugee children from Chile (Ikonen 2007). In the Finnish National Agency for Education (2014), it is stated that it is the responsibility of schools to support and develop children's multilingual and multicultural identities. HL classes are not an official subject in the national core curriculum for basic education but only fulfill the role of a "supportive subject of a national core curriculum" (Airtto and Aksinovits 2021) and they aim to provide support for general academic studies. The decision whether to enroll their children in HL classes is made by caregivers. Since the classes are not compulsory and often organized outside the general study plan of students, it is quite common for some families to withdraw their children from HL teaching. Due to the lower position of the class in comparison to other school subjects, children are not provided with a transfer from one school to another and it is seen as the responsibility of the caregivers to transfer their children to HL classes, also in situations when the class is scheduled in the middle of the working day. HL groups tend to be highly heterogeneous—students vary in ages and class levels, level of command of the language, motivation to learn, and level of support needed to proceed in academic learning.

Estonian children residing in Finland have some opportunities to maintain their home language; however, access to these opportunities is restricted by the location of the family and availability of language learning-related activities within different municipalities. Some Finnish municipalities provide free facultative home language classes two hours once a week (oman äidinkielen opetus Fin. 'their mother tongue instruction').

In addition to home language classes provided by municipalities, in the capital region of Finland, there are also available extra-curricular possibilities for children directed at maintaining Estonian (Koreinik and Praakli 2017). There is also an online option, available in Finland or any other place, called Worldwide School (Est. *Üleilmakool*), which offers different courses on Estonian language, culture, history and geography (Kirber 2020). At the moment 350 children from 34 different countries study in *Üleilmakool*. Some families choose for their children Latokartanon school situated in the capital region with a bilingual Finnish-Estonian curriculum; however, the school has faced declining interest for maintenance of Estonian (Koreinik and Praakli 2017).

There is limited research in the field of FLP concerning home language classes among Estonian diaspora families in Finland. The association of intercultural families, Familia (2022), carried out research on demotivating factors in the decision-making process concerning enrollment of children in HL teaching. Some Estonian families participated in the survey, but researching their beliefs and linguistic behavior was not the exclusive interest of the particular research. According to Familia's report, the most frequent reasons for not participating in HL teaching are logistical problems: no HL teaching is provided in the home municipality children, the quality of municipal HL classes is low and/or the teacher's qualification is low/inadequate, lack of HL teachers for certain languages, insufficient information about HL teaching provided in the municipality, highly heterogeneous HL groups consisting of children of different ages and language abilities, and late classes being challenging for children.

### 3. Data and Methodology

The information about the research was placed on Facebook groups for Estonians residing in Finland. Estonian-speaking caregivers were invited to participate in the research voluntarily. The caregivers who expressed the wish to participate in the study themselves contacted the researchers. In order to collect and map the caregivers' language-related beliefs, attitudes, and actual language management efforts, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted approximately an hour; altogether 8 h of speech was recorded and transliterated.

Ten people responded to the invitation, among whom one wanted to express appreciation for carrying out research on this essential topic. One of the potential participants withdrew their agreement to participate in the research after it was announced that the interviews were recorded.

All of the interviews were held in the Estonian language and transcribed, then content analysis was conducted, based on themes related to internal and external factors influencing management of HL education in the families. This methodology is common for FLP research.

Thus, eight caregivers participated in the research altogether. The participants were aged from 34 to 50. From each family, only one caregiver participated, representing the whole family's language-related attitudes, beliefs, and language management efforts concerning their children's participation in Estonian home language classes provided by the municipality.

Almost all participant families but one used Estonian at home. One family was bilingual with a second home language (father's language) different from Estonian or Finnish. In this family, English was also sometimes used as lingua franca for communication.

Estonian was also the mother tongue for all participants and their children, according to the caregivers' self-reported answers. There were some cases of another heritage language or ancestral background among parents (Russian, Ingrian Finnish); still, all participants stated that their mother tongue was Estonian, since it is the language they were brought up in and spoken in their childhood.

All of the participants were educated and had a vocational education or higher education. All of the respondents were employed or had a work record and experience of working in Finland. Thus, they had confident socioeconomic positions in Finnish society.

Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1 provided below.

The focus and the interaction during the interview concentrated on Spolsky's three-domain FLP model and considered two main FLP domains out of three: language beliefs and language management. The third domain (actual language practices) stayed outside the frame of the interview and was not the point of interest of the present research.

**Table 1.** Information about the participants.

| Participants | Gender | Age | Education                             | Moved to Finland | Number of Children | Children's Age |
|--------------|--------|-----|---------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| CG1          | F      | 38  | Applied higher education              | 2012             | 2                  | 10<br>18       |
| CG2          | F      | 38  | Vocational education<br>(2 different) | 2011             | 1                  | 7              |
| CG3          | F      | 37  | Applied higher education              | 2011             | 3                  | 13<br>11<br>6  |
| CG4          | F      | 46  | Vocational education<br>(2 different) | 1999             | 2                  | 7<br>2         |
| CG5          | F      | 43  | PhD                                   | 2004             | 2                  | 10<br>12       |

Table 1. Cont.

| Participants | Gender | Age | Education                                   | Moved to Finland | Number of Children | Children's Age            |
|--------------|--------|-----|---------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| CG6          | M      | 48  | MA                                          | 2019             | 5                  | 15                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | 15                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | 13                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | 11                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | One pre-school-aged child |
| CG7          | F      | 36  | Vocational education                        | 2010             | 1                  | 7                         |
| CG8          | F      | 50  | MA (two different higher education degrees) | 2012             | 3                  | 20                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | 18                        |
|              |        |     |                                             |                  |                    | 13.5                      |

From an ethical perspective, participation in the research was totally voluntary and anonymous, no personal data were included in the article, and the recordings and transcripts are not available to the public and are in the possession of the researchers. No under-aged participants were included in the research, and all answers were the caregivers' self-reported answers.

#### 4. Findings

The findings are organized following the order and the logic of the research questions. The section is structured as follows: first, everything concerning language beliefs and ideology (Q1), followed by language management measures taken by Estonian diaspora families (Q2).

##### 4.1. Language Beliefs among Estonian Caregivers concerning Bilingualism and Home Language Proficiency (Q1)

As stated above, in almost all families but one, both L1 and the home language was Estonian. In all of the interviews, a strong belief was expressed that the caregivers themselves and their children identify themselves as Estonians and their mother tongue as well as their home language is Estonian.

CG1: Meil on oma eesti mull siin. Meil on kodus Eesti lipud ja Eesti sümbolika. Hoiame au sees. Juured on ikkagi väga tähtsad. Ei näe, et eluks ajaks jääme Soome. Kunagi äkki tuleb ilus aeg ja saame tagasi Eesti minna.

'We have our own Estonian bubble here. We have Estonian flags and symbols at home. We honor it. The roots are indeed very important. I do not think that we might stay for our whole life in Finland. Maybe beautiful times will come and we can go back to Estonia'.

CG4: Oleme Eestist pärit, räägime eesti keelt ja eesti keel on meie emakeel. Eestis on meie juured ja me olemegi eestlased.

'We originally come from Estonia, we speak Estonian and Estonian is our mother tongue. We have our roots in Estonia and we are Estonians'.

Additionally, the value of Estonian language proficiency was considered as an inter-generational link, aiming to prevent generation gap between grandparents and grandchildren living in two different countries.

CG4: Eesti keelt läheb kindlasti tulevikus vaja. Meil on sugulased seal, vanaemad—vanaisad. Meie oleme väga sellest kinni, et peab teadma meie keelt—oma emakeelt, vanemate keelt. Kui oled sealt riigist pärit, siis oleks ilus osata seda keelt. Kunagi ei tea, kas äkki lähed tagasi.

'The Estonian language will definitely be necessary in the future. We have our relatives there, grandmas, grandpas. We stick close to the fact that it is essential to know our language—our mother tongue, the parents' language. If you come from that land, it is good to have language skills. You never know, maybe you'll go back someday'.

CG5: Minu laste jaoks see on vanaema juures käimise keel. Mis keeles nad siis räägiks? Ma isegi ei kujutaks ette, et nad seda ei oskaks. On oluline, et see side säiliks.

‘For my children, it is the language for visiting grandma. In which language would they communicate otherwise? I cannot even imagine that they [children] wouldn’t be able to speak it. It is extremely important that the connection would last’.

Interestingly, maintenance of Estonian as a strong basis for cultural identity was also believed to be an opportunity for future additional education and career opportunities. In several interviews, the idea was mentioned that children might go to study in Estonia later in their lives and they would need to have good academic skills in their L1 to enter a university there.

CG1: Kunagi ei tea, äkki (laps) läheb Eesti elama.

‘You never know, maybe [the child] would move to Estonia’.

CG4: Praegu on meil lihtne, kuna laps tahab Tartu ülikooli minna. Väiksena ütles, et tema läheb kindlasti Tartu ülikooli, kuna tahab arstiks saada . . . Uksed aga oleksid rohkem lahti (kui õpiks eesti keelt) ja oleks rohkem võimalusi tulevikus. Eestis oleks keelega kergem sisse saada.

‘Right now it is easy for us because the child wants to study in the university of Tartu [a university in Estonia]. When the child was small, he used to say that he would definitely go to the university of Tartu to become a doctor. Doors would be more open (if the child learns Estonian) and there would be more opportunities in the future. It would be much easier to enroll into a university in Estonia if one speaks the language’.

While emphasizing the importance of Estonian for their and their children’s identities, all caregivers also valued their children’s multilingualism and the ability to use various languages and switch between languages if needed as a positive skill. It was not asked explicitly about the purism of Estonian usage at home; however, mother tongue-related linguistic purism was often a general tendency in families of Estonian origin. The caregivers volunteered to talk about the importance of “pure” Estonian. Thus, in their view, multilingualism was positive but languages should be separated. For all of the families, except one bilingual family, it was important to keep Estonian as a home language and other languages (Finnish, English) for outside home use.

CG4: Segasõnu laps kasutab väga harva. Kui ta soome keeles ütleb, siis me ütleme, et ei saa aru, ütle palun selle eesti keeles. Kui ta ei tea, kuidas see eesti keeles on, siis ta küsib ise, mis see eesti keeles on. Ta väga hästi vahetab ära, kiiresti soome keelest eesti keelde. . . . Oleme talle rääkinud, et see on rikkus, et oskad rääkida erinevaid keeli

‘The child uses mixed words really seldom. When the child says something in Finnish, then we tell him that we do not understand, please say it in Estonian. If he doesn’t know how to say it in Estonian, then he asks himself how to express it in Estonian. . . . We have told him that it is a treasure to be able to speak different languages’.

CG6: Siis kui korteri uks läheb kinni, siis on ikkagi eesti keel.

‘When the door is shut, then it is the Estonian language’.

Nevertheless, limited use of words and phrases in other languages at home was evaluated as a normal tendency for youth and children. Children and parents themselves used words and phrases in other languages to optimize the communication process, in addition, children may engage in multilingual humor and emphasize their bilingual linguistic skills.

CG1: Noorem laps kasutab vahepeal sõnu *reppu*, *läksyt*. See on kuidagi loomulikum.

‘Our younger child sometimes uses the words *reppu* ‘schoolbag’, *läksyt* ‘homework’ [in Finnish] It is somehow more natural’.

The tendency of purism was also noticed in the situation when children are able to notice “a wrong language” and correct themselves. Thus, self-correction was evaluated as a positive trait, which was somewhat contradictory to the previous acknowledgement of bilingual skills and code-switching being evaluated as positive (for various parental strategies, see Schwartz in Eisenclas and Schalley 2020, pp. 194–217). On the one hand, the caregivers believed that languages should be separated and only Estonian should be used at home; on the other hand, they spoke in a positive way about children’s bilingual

creativity and believed that insertion of some Finnish words referring to school life is natural.

CG2: Laps tekitab uusi sõnu nt *vieraat/võõrad*. Kodus kasutab ainult eesti keelt, automaatselt parandab: ütleb “vabandust” ja parandab soomekeelse sõna eestikeelseks.

‘The child creates new words, for example *vieraat/võõrad* [cognates, Estonian *võõrad* ‘strangers’ and Finnish *vieraat* ‘guests’. At home, the child uses Estonian only, corrects herself if needed: says “sorry” and corrects the word in Finnish into Estonian’.

Acquiring academic skills such as reading and writing by children was evaluated as important. However, often it was seen as a whole system of language proficiency together with speaking. Speaking and being able to communicate with relatives and grandparents back in Estonia was still mentioned as one of the most important language skills. Reading and writing were evaluated as important too, but it was also stated that maintaining these skills required extra effort from families even if the children participated in HL classes.

CG3: Lugemine on ajaliselt muutunud. Raamatuid on meil väga palju. Olen alati ostanud, ja kingitud palju. Väiksenä oli palju lugemist ja ette lugemist. Aga kui lapsed suuremaks said, siis on raske neid raamatu juurde saada. Ja küsimus ei ole eesti keeles, aga üldse selles, et raamatute lugemine on “nõme ja igav”.

‘Reading has changed in time. We have a lot of books [at home]. I have always bought them and a lot of books were presented as gifts. There was a lot of reading and reading out loud when the children were small. But as the children grew up, it became harder to get them to read [books]. And the question is not about the Estonian language, but about the attitude that reading on the whole is “dumb and boring”’.

The caregivers’ beliefs concerning free municipal HL classes were also analyzed and the findings are presented further. Many caregivers believed that Estonian culture is strongly connected to the Estonian language and the identity of being Estonian, but teaching about Estonian culture and history was not mentioned as a popular topic in the HL curriculum. In their opinion, HL classes should rather be fun and entertaining for children and should include topics interesting for children and for teenagers. According to the participants, there are many things that can be learned through play. Learning about Estonian folk games/dances using computer games and digital devices was also mentioned as suitable content for HL classes.

CG1: Kõige paremini saab keelt suhtlemise kohta. . . . Keel käib kaasas kultuuriga—traditsioonid ja kombad. Oma emakeele tunnis võiks olla tegevus noortepärasem, mitte kuiv teooria. Uudise kokkuvõtte kirjutamine.

‘The best way to acquire a language is through communication. . . . Language is connected to the culture: traditions and customs. In an HL class, the activities could be more youthful, not all dry theory. Writing a summary on some news article’.

CG2: Tänapäeval lapsed tahavad arvutis olla. Lastele võib olla huvitav mingisugusest kuulsusest klatši lugeda. Artiklid, ristsõnad, asjad, arvutimängud. Kui teha materjalid virtuaalseks ja huvitavaks, mänguliseks, siis äkki pakub huvi.

‘Nowadays children want to be on a computer. It could be interesting for children to read some gossip about celebrities. Articles, crosswords, things, computer games. If digital teaching materials are involved and the teaching is attractive, gamified, maybe it might motivate [the children]’.

In some cases, the caregivers underestimated the importance of a two-hour HL class and did not believe it to be a game changer in the process of children’s language development since the amount of the classes was so insignificant. HL classes were evaluated rather as one additional activity for maintaining the language among many other possible activities. The system behind teaching for two hours a week strengthened by revision, reading, or writing homework at home was not seen as a framework for supporting children’s academic skills in Estonian.

CG1: Mingi hetk tuli teave, et see eesti keele õpe oli seal koolis ära lõppenud ja kuhugi mujale teise linnaossa kolinud (. . .) Ja siis meie emakeele eesti keele tunnid olid ära jäänud. Me ei hakanud enam pingutama. Ei ole mõtet rabeleda, sellest on kasu väike.

‘At a certain point, we received information that HL Estonian classes were terminated in that school and moved to some other place in the city. (...) And then our HL classes were left behind. We stopped trying. There is no point in struggling, the benefit is too little’.

In addition to the HL classes’ curriculum, the teacher’s role in motivating children to participate was discussed. The participants were not asked explicitly to evaluate the role of teachers or the lack of motivation among children to participate in HL classes. Nevertheless, quite often, the teachers’ pedagogical qualification, skills of planning classes, choosing teaching materials for the class, and personal characteristics were mentioned during the interview.

CG1 Võib olla lapsed saavad rohkem mõjutada tunni kulgu, kui õpetaja on selline avatum ja sõbralikum.

‘Maybe children can influence the course of a class more if a teacher is more friendly and open-minded’.

CG2: Õpetaja isiksus mõjutab. Kui äkki õpetaja mõjub sellise kohustusena ja õpetab kuivalt. Või ta tuleb ise niimoodi, et lapsed on põnevil ja on huvitatud.

‘The teacher’s personality makes an impact. If maybe the teacher acts as an obligation and teaches in a dull way. Or maybe the teacher enters the class in a way that makes the children also excited and interested’.

Some caregivers brought to light the importance of taking children’s basic needs into consideration. HL classes take place in the second part of the day, when children are already tired and hungry. The availability of snacks for children within the school building during late classes was mentioned as one of the motivating factors for participating in the HL teaching process.

CG1: Tahtsime panna eesti keele tundidesse, aga kohe esimesest klassist alates tunnid olid alates kella 17, tunnid olid teises koolis. Pidime organiseerima nii, et laps sinna teise kooli saada. Ilmsekseet peale pika päeva kella 5-ks on laps väsinud ja enam ei jaksa.

‘We wanted to enroll [the child] into Estonian HL class, but right from the first grade, the classes started at 5:00 p.m., the classes were in another school. We had to organize a lift for the child to get her to another school. Obviously, after a long day, by 5:00 p.m. the child is tired and can’t take it anymore’.

CG2: Lapsi motiveeriks peale tunde jääma, kui nad saaks seal mingeid snäkke.

‘It would be more motivating for children to stay after the classes if they get some snacks there [at school]’.

Since not all participants had experience with HL classes, it was instructive to learn how they explained the beliefs of other Estonian families regarding not participating in these free municipal classes. For that reason, the caregivers were asked explicitly why children from other Estonian families they know do not participate in HL classes. The participants provided the following arguments:

- Logistical and timing problems: classes take place in the evening and/or in a distant school.
- The content of the classes is not motivating enough for children to participate.
- The teacher might be a kind of “old-school teacher”, not flexible and child-friendly enough.
- Highly heterogeneous groups where children vary in age, language skills, and motivation.
- Families might have decided not to return to Estonia anymore and start building their life and the life of their children in Finland. There was even an idea that these other parents “might be disappointed in Estonia as the state and do not want to return there anymore”.
- Language shift in domestic communication: almost all caregivers expressed concern about other families that start using Finnish or bilingual Finnish-Estonian mode for communicating with their children, as a result, they do not value Estonian enough to send their children to HL classes. Caregivers participating in the research expressed their concern about these families abandoning Estonian as the language of their roots

and country of origin. However, we do not have evidence to support this claim that families whose children do not attend HL classes shift to Finnish as HL.

To sum up, Estonian diaspora families tended to have a strong mother tongue-related identity and value the acquisition of and proficiency in Estonian as extremely important. Almost all parents believed that children might need Estonian language skills in the future for education and career. Various beliefs regarding HL classes were also noted in this section.

#### 4.2. Knowledge of Scholars Fails

In this section, language management, as reported by the families, is examined and analyzed. Eight different families of Estonian background were represented in the present semi-structured interview. Data concerning this part of the research is represented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Attendance of free municipal HL classes and reasons for not participating in them.

| Caregivers | Number of Children | Children's Participation in Municipal HL Classes (YES/NO) | Reasons for Not Participating in Free Municipal HL Classes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CG1        | 2                  | No<br>Yes, but stopped going there in middle school       | Bad timing and location of HL classes.<br>The older child used to go to municipal HL classes, but in middle school, they stopped going there since the classes were dull and un motivating and there were no friends in the group.                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| CG2        | 1                  | No                                                        | Studying in a bilingual Estonian-Finnish school, Latakartanon koulu.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| CG3        | 3                  | No<br>Maybe                                               | Studying in a bilingual Estonian-Finnish school, Latakartanon koulu.<br>The youngest child might go to the classes when school starts next year.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| CG4        | 2                  | No                                                        | Logistical and timing problem: classes are organized in other schools far away, it is not possible to give him a ride in the middle of the day, and he is too small to travel alone.<br>Younger child is preschool-aged.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| CG5        | 2                  | Yes, every other year                                     | Municipal authorities would not allow attending classes of two different home languages in the same year.<br>Children go to Estonian classes one year and switch groups to another (father's) language the next year.<br>The timing and the location of the class is problematic, but the family copes with that.                                                                                                                             |
| CG6        | 5                  | No                                                        | All children study in an international school in the IB program due to the parents' international mobile employment.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| CG7        | 1                  | No                                                        | Logistical problem: The HL class is situated too far away.<br>Child-related reasons: The child is too small and has a very strict time-table due to special needs issues. It is impossible to add extra activities late in the evening.                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| CG8        | 3                  | Yes, but not for a long time                              | Logistical reason: since the class was situated in another school and, at a young age, the child was afraid to go there.<br>For the younger child, timing and logistics were also problematic, and the school schedule did not match with HL classes. When he arrived at another school, where HL classes were held, the door was already automatically locked.<br>The lack of systematic curriculum and teaching materials was demotivating. |

As apparent from the information provided by the parents, most children did not participate in free municipal HL classes for various reasons. In the eight families that participated in the research, there was a total number of 19 children. Three of the children were of preschool age and could not be considered in the present study. Two of the participants' children were already young adults, yet with experience of learning in a Finnish educational system. Among all of these children, only five had some experience with attending HL classes, four children were enrolled into bilingual Estonian-Finnish school, and four were studying in English at an international school. Below, the reasons for not participating at all or stopping participating in HL classes are listed:

- (a) Logistical problems and timing problems: the classes are organized late in the evening and/or in a distant school.
- (b) Child-oriented reasons: the child is tired late in the evening, the child did not like the classes and found them boring, the child has some special needs and extra classes late in the evening are burdensome for him/her.
- (c) An insufficient support network for migrant-background families: caregivers have to take care of everything themselves, managing work, house and family. Lack of grandparents and relatives who would partly share the management of the children was evaluated as an important factor influencing priorities in decision making concerning children's extra-curricular activities. In addition, the same factor, according to the caregivers' responses, influenced managing children's reading activities at home: reading for pleasure or reading aloud books to children.

CG1: Meil Soomes tugivõrgustik on nii hõre—vanaemasid, vanaisasid, kes võtaksid osa asjadest enda peale. Tugiisikuid on vähe. Rügame tööd.

'In Finland, our support network is so limited, [we don't have] grandmas and grandpas who would give a hand in some things. The number of support persons is small. We keep our shoulders to the wheel'.

- (d) Highly heterogeneous groups and, as a result, unsystematic teaching methodology and teaching materials that do not take into consideration the level of the child's language proficiency.

CG5: Kui grupis on kõik lapsed erineva vanusega, siis on raske igat last õpetada vanusele vastavalt ja veel teha seda huvitavalt. ... Raske hinnata õpetajate metoodilist osamist. Vahepeal tundub, et ei ole äkki nii läbi mõeldud, mis laadi näiteks kodused ülesanded metoodiliselt hakkavad olema.

'If all the children in the group vary in age, it is difficult to teach each child according to their age and to do it in a motivating way. ... It is difficult to evaluate the methodological skills of teachers. Sometimes it seems that maybe it was not quite planned how the homework assignments would work from the point of view of teaching methods'.

CG8: Eesti keele tunnid olid pettumus talle. Minul oli ka suur hämming. Nad värvisid seal. Ja need lehed, mida ta koju tõi... Mõned olid väga lihtsad, nagu lasteaia ülesanded. Ja teised olid juba rasked.

'Estonian HL classes were a disappointment for the child. I was also very confused. They painted there. And the worksheets the child brought home. ... Some of them were very simple, like kindergarten assignments. And others were already difficult'.

- (e) Deficient home-school interaction: insufficient interaction with teachers and educational authorities on the matter of teaching curriculum, teaching aims, teaching materials, feedback and evaluation, and benefits of learning HL at school on an academic level.

CG7: Ja siis ikka see, et ega täpselt ei teata mida seal tehakse. Et umbes kui ma ise ei tea mis seal toimub, siis miks ma peaksin oma last sinna sundima. Tutvustus puudub.

'And then the fact that it is actually not exactly known what is being done there [in class]. That if I myself don't know what's going on there, why should I force my child there. This kind of information is absent'.

Two caregivers mentioned that they did not feel that the authorities were interested in improving HL-related language awareness of families and, additionally, Estonian families felt excluded from general language minority communities, since neither information nor translation was ever provided in Estonian, yet it was provided in other minority/immigrant languages.

CG7: Meil kooli kaudu ei ole mitte mingit infot tulnud. Kõikides teistes keeltes (somaali, arabia, rootsi keeles, inglise keeles) tuleb infot Wilmasse, aga mitte mingil juhul eesti ja vene keeles

‘We haven’t received any information from the school. Information is sent to Wilma in all other languages (Somali, Arabic, Swedish, English), but not in Estonian or Russian’

CG8: Ei jää tunnet, et see tund on võrdväärne teiste kooli tundidega. Seda serveeritakse nii—juba kirjastiil on selline, et “Äkki teid huvitab”. Aga see peaks rõhutama just oma kultuuri ja oma keele oskust ja seda, kui oluline on see lapse arengus ja identiteedis.

‘There is no feeling that this class has an equal status if compared to other classes at school. It is served as follows: the writing style itself goes like this: “Perhaps you are interested”. But it should emphasize the knowledge of one’s culture and language and how important it is for the child’s development and identity’.

In order to discover more about actual linguistic behavior of Estonian diaspora families, the caregivers were asked about measures for supporting children’s mother tongue at home. The questions mostly concerned reading and extracurricular activities. Many caregivers mentioned watching television in Estonian and listening to audiobooks as important activities for maintaining the children’s proficiency in Estonian. Supporting reading in Estonian at home was mostly evaluated as highly important and almost all families tended to contribute to providing books in Estonian for children, whether borrowing them from a library or buying from bookstores in Estonia.

CG1: Kui laps oli väike, siis oli palju raamatuid ja oli lemmikraamatuid. Laps ei saanud nendest kunagi küllalt. Aga mida vanemaks sai, seda vähem huvi jäi. Kodus ei ole seda lugemisharjumust ei ole jatkunud. Nutiseadmed on lastele nii olulised nüüd, et raamatu lugemine ei tundu olulisena lastele. Inglise keelt oli tulnud nendel ka rohkem. Raamatute lugemiseks peab rohkem motiveerima. Endal töö ja pere asjade kõrval alati ei ole selleks aega.

‘When the child was small, there were many books and the child had favorite books. The child could never get enough of them. But the older the child got, the less interest remained. This reading habit has not been established at home. Electronic gadgets are so important to kids nowadays, that reading a book doesn’t seem important to kids. They received more English [input]. It is essential to motivate [the children] more to read books. We don’t always have time for this amidst work and family matters’.

As far as language management was concerned, all caregivers tried to support and develop their children’s mother tongue skills by providing various tools and activities, such as communicating in Estonian, buying and reading books, providing an opportunity to watch television in Estonian, and participating in extracurricular activities such as language and culture clubs and events. However, it seemed that HL classes were underestimated as an important academic activity and rated as another extracurricular activity. In addition, children were also involved in family language policy since parents took their opinions and the feedback perceived from the children into consideration in language behavior-related decision making.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The answer to Q1 (What language-related beliefs and ideologies do caregivers have?) is as follows. The caregivers of Estonian origin have a strong belief in belonging to the Estonian community and, according to their own evaluation, have a strong sense of Estonian identity and transfer it to their children at home. They highly value their mother tongue and think that it is important for their children to learn Estonian. In many cases, a

possible education or career path for their children is seen as a beneficial opportunity that opens many doors and is secured by proficiency in Estonian.

As for Q2 (What are the actual language management measures as far as the enrolment of the children to free Estonian home language instruction classes is concerned?), the interview data revealed some discrepancy between the caregivers' declared linguistic beliefs and actual linguistic behavior. Free municipal home language classes are not always seen as an option to maintain the Estonian language among children. Instead, these are mostly listed as one possible extracurricular activity rather than an essential and effective academic activity. A positive impact of systematic HL instruction on children's multilingual identity, school academic achievement in both L1 and L2, and general academic skills and cultural competencies is stated by many scholars (Cummins 2000; Ganuza and Hedman 2019; Agriidag and Vanlaar 2016; Seals and Peyton 2016; Yli-Jokipii et al. 2022). However, it seems that the common knowledge of scholars fails to meet the actual HL management realities of families in everyday life.

The sociopolitical context is that of two friendly states. Families choose a bilingual Estonian-Finnish Latakartanon school situated in Helsinki if their geographical location enables it. Some rely on the role of family and home activities, such as reading, watching programs and movies in Estonian, and speaking, to maintain children's mother tongue. The caregivers also admitted that the lack of a supportive network of relatives and grandparents acts as a barrier to the development of language proficiency in full scale. Thus, the findings differ from the findings by Kaldur et al. (2022), according to which Estonian caregivers tend to overestimate the significance of speaking and underestimate additional academic activities for mastering children's language skills. The results of the present study, in contrast, show that maintaining children's academic skills in Estonian and attending HL classes as one of the options to manage language skills are valued among caregivers. Caregivers tend to believe that those "other parents" who do not send their children to such classes are probably shifting to Finnish in home communication. However, caregivers' language beliefs and actual linguistic behavior do not necessarily match: caregivers tend to believe that maintaining academic skills are important and know well the possible tools and activities to maintain their children's linguistic proficiency, but they struggle to implement their knowledge about language maintenance.

The geographically close position of Estonia and Finland was often mentioned as one of the important factors influencing use of Estonian and the linguistic proficiency of the Estonian diaspora community in Finland. Kaldur et al. (2022) partly explained overestimation of oral skills among Estonians in Finland by the geographically close position of the two countries and good access to traveling, meeting relatives, and being exposed to the language. According to our findings, children of Estonian diaspora families are exposed to the language most of the time while living in Finland and communicating with members of the Estonian community there. Thus, they master their linguistic skills to be used as a tool for communication and preventing inter-generational gap while traveling to Estonia to meet relatives.

In relation to HL teaching, parents tend to delegate responsibility for motivating children to participate in HL classes to schools and teachers. However, the lower position of HL classes in comparison to other school subjects can definitely work as a demotivator. Lack of suitable structured teaching materials, large and highly heterogeneous groups, problematic timing, and logistics were mentioned as demotivators also in the research carried out by the association of intercultural families, Familia (2022). Interestingly, insufficient dialog between home and school and low motivation of authorities were not mentioned among the reasons for not participating in HL classes in Familia's research, but they were brought out in the present research results.

On a more general note, we discuss the results in the framework by Curdt-Christiansen (2018, see above). As far as parental background, home environment, and economic resources are concerned, all parents had stable incomes, higher education, and the home environment was safe. Based on the interviews, it was clear that the parents think about

their children's linguistic skills and try to provide reading materials in Estonian and not only rely on oral communication. At least in theory, writing and reading skills are considered to be important.

Language socialization of the caregivers takes place in the context of Estonian ethnic identity being based on Estonian language (i.e., ethnic Estonians speak Estonian as L1 and identify with this language). The parents adhere to this concept and use Estonian at home (the principle "minority language at home", except for one mixed family).

The sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts of the study differ from that in many studies where a minority is linguistically distant and comes from a geographically distant location. Estonians are one of the largest ethnolinguistic minorities in Finland, the languages are closely related, and the countries are situated close to each other.

The sociopolitical context is that of two friendly states with a long history of cultural connections and no antagonism. Although in any society there are people who dislike foreigners in general or some ethnolinguistic group in particular, the political climate in Finland does not disfavor Estonians and speakers of Estonian.

The socioeconomic context of the families in question is distinct from that of most Estonian migrants in Finland. While there was work migration from Estonia to Finland in the 1990s–2000s (mostly blue collar workers), they tended to be a rather segregated community (Sinitsyna 2024). Still, many people go back and forth between the two countries. The families in question have white collar occupations and are well integrated into Finnish society. Probably partly because of that they feel secure, they believe that their children might choose to build their life in Estonia in the future and proficiency in Estonian would enable this.

Some limitations of the present study have to be taken into consideration while trying to understand the phenomenon of discrepancy between parents' beliefs about language and language management (see some case studies like Ghimenton 2015; Verschik and Argus 2023). All of the caregivers who participated in the study were highly motivated in preserving and maintaining their children's mother tongue. All of them came from more or less equal socioeconomic conditions, were educated, and had a work record and experience of working in Finland. Participation in the study was skewed toward parents who evaluated HL positively and were more likely to act accordingly. In addition, most of the caregivers lacked experience with municipal HL classes for various reasons. This makes it impossible to make generalizations on the whole Estonian diaspora in Finland, especially concerning the reasons for not sending Estonian children to HL classes.

It would be highly desirable to carry out additional research in this field. Many beliefs of the caregivers were connected to their insufficient information about the teaching materials and the absence of suitable HL coursebooks as such, the curriculum and aims of HL classes, as well as the didactics and methodology, which can be the result of faulty or/and incomplete communication on a home school level or inadequate and deficient HL teaching organization by the municipal authorities. Thus, these areas need additional scholar attention.

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children/refugees, the participants were grown up adults only. Information about the study and invitation to participate was placed in social media. Participation in the study was totally voluntary.

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## Article

# Heritage Hebrew in Finland: Insights from Multilingual Families

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**Abstract:** This study addresses the research gap in heritage Hebrew in Nordic countries, focusing on the perspectives of Hebrew-speaking immigrant parents in Finland. The objective is to understand family language policies and the use of Hebrew within multilingual families, exploring factors influencing parental decisions on heritage Hebrew transmission to the children. Employing a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach and the FLP analysis method, the research explores language management and the dynamic use of Hebrew within families, examining factors that influence heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland. A survey of 36 families revealed a shift away from Hebrew towards the majority languages in Finland, with approximately a third of the children having poor or non-existent oral Hebrew skills. Despite the emphasis on Hebrew literacy by many parents, the reported proficiency levels were low, with slightly over 10% of children demonstrating good or excellent reading and writing skills, while 43% were entirely illiterate in the language. A third of respondents cited challenges in accessing Hebrew education, attributing it as the primary reason for the children’s illiteracy, as only 26.3% of children received external Hebrew teaching. While the connection between the birth order of the children and their heritage Hebrew skills presented diverse patterns, the survey revealed a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary communication language among siblings. A unique connection was found between parents’ birthplace and language choices, indicating reduced Hebrew transmission among repatriated parents. These insights contribute to understanding heritage Hebrew dynamics in Finland, with potential implications for informing policies supporting language transmission in similar contexts and practical application in multilingual families worldwide. Furthermore, by analyzing the dynamics of maintaining heritage Hebrew in Finland and investigating the language policies of immigrant Israeli families in the Nordic context, this study expands the theoretical understanding and contributes to the advancement of the fields of heritage languages and family language policies.

**Keywords:** heritage languages (HL); family language policy (FLP); multilingual family; Hebrew; Nordic countries

## 1. Introduction

Successful integration of children with an immigrant background is significantly influenced by the dual process of maintaining their heritage culture while living in the host country’s culture (e.g., De Houwer 2017; Fielding 2021). Family Language Policy (FLP), i.e., language policy established within a family, encompasses parental ideologies and the implicit and explicit decisions parents make regarding the languages to which their child is exposed, playing a crucial role in shaping the linguistic development of multilingual children (Curdt-Christiansen 2018).

This study explores family language policies influencing the process of heritage Hebrew transmission among children in Hebrew-speaking families residing in Finland. The study aims to answer the following questions: What are the family language policies (ideologies, management, practices) in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland? What factors influence heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland?

Examining the unique context of Finland, this research provides comprehensive insights into how Israeli parents foster Hebrew among their children, potentially informing policies in similar contexts to support language transmission in countries with few Hebrew speakers. It aims to inform policies supporting language transmission to enhance minority language speakers' well-being globally through practical applications rooted in understanding heritage Hebrew dynamics. From a broader perspective, this research offers a nuanced insight into the complexities surrounding multilingualism in immigrant families, shedding light on both the challenges and opportunities of heritage language transmission. Identifying factors influencing heritage language maintenance provides practical guidance for fostering multilingualism in diverse language landscapes.

In this article, I discuss heritage Hebrew transmission within the Finnish context. First, I explore the theoretical background of heritage Hebrew in diaspora worldwide, as well as heritage language maintenance and FLP research in families with an immigrant background in Finland. Second, I present empirical data concerning parental evaluations of their children's Hebrew proficiency, along with discussions on the roles of siblings and birth order. Next, I elaborate on parental ideologies and strategies concerning heritage Hebrew maintenance, subsequently comparing these with pan-European findings (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017). Finally, I discuss the major factors influencing heritage Hebrew transmission in the Finnish context. This comprehensive analysis underscores how the complex interplay of FLPs and external influences shape the transmission of heritage Hebrew in Finland.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Multilingual Family

A multilingual family, viewed as a sociolinguistic domain in this study, represents a unique and complex social unit where family members engage in communication through diverse linguistic practices (Lanza 2021). The relationship of multilingual families with broader social units for language maintenance is characterized by mutual influence between internal family dynamics and external socio-political and socio-economic factors. Language ideologies, family practices, and external influences interact to shape language maintenance or attrition within these families. An understanding of multilingualism in families necessitates considering the interplay of these factors, including economic, political, and social influences (Sherman et al. 2016).

Migrating families, especially highly mobile ones, face complex challenges in language practices—their management, learning, and maintenance (Duff 2015). Language decisions made by migrant families play a pivotal role in shaping intra-family relationships and influencing the learning, retention, or attrition of languages (Hirsch and Lee 2018). Such families engage in ongoing negotiations aiming at establishing shared languages; their FLPs impact cultural assimilation, connections to the homeland, and both the social and linguistic capital of all the family members (Hirsch and Lee 2018).

It is crucial to emphasize that every multilingual family possesses a unique version of multilingualism, representing a distinct identity largely shaped by their languages. While emerging from linguistic behavior, multilingualism extends beyond linguistic aspects, encompassing physiological, psychological, and social dimensions; it is not merely the knowledge of multiple languages but involves everything related to their use and learning, shaping characteristics of every family member, expressed through actions, perceptions, attitudes, and life scenarios (Aronin 2016). In this context, it is necessary to mention that immigrant children's well-being strongly relies on a dual process of enculturation (maintaining the heritage culture) and acculturation (learning the host country's culture). Maintaining the home language correlates with a stronger ethnic and cultural identity, improved family relationships, and enhanced psychological adjustment in immigrant children and youth (Fielding 2021), ultimately contributing to the well-being of both parents and children (De Houwer 2017).

The language constellation in multilingual families in most cases consists of the majority language, i.e., the language that the majority of the people in a given population use (Triggs 2021), and the minority language(s), a term that needs a more multifaceted definition. As defined by Grenoble and Singerman (2014), in its simplest terms a minority language is a language spoken by less than 50 percent of the population in a given region, state, or country, with the key criterion being the size of the speaker population within that specific geographic context. Bosma and Blom (2020) extend this definition, asserting that a minority language encompasses a group of people who are not only numerically but also politically in the minority, and whose goal is preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. Minority languages can be roughly divided into three main categories: indigenous, immigrant, and ethnic linguistic minorities (Grenoble and Singerman 2014), with Hebrew not clearly fitting into this categorization (Avni 2012). While the majority language can be acquired outside the home environment, the minority language acquisition relies more on exposure at home, with both input quantity and quality playing significant roles in the development of vocabulary and grammar in multilingual children (De Houwer 2017). In this context, the term “heritage language” (HL) is introduced to enhance precision.

## 2.2. Heritage Languages

A heritage language (HL) is an ethnolinguistically minority language acquired in contexts of early bilingualism or multilingualism, typically within the family (Montrul and Polinsky 2021; Montrul 2015). HL proficiency differs from that of monolingual or native language speakers (Protassova 2018; Montrul and Polinsky 2021). HLs are seen as “a languages of personal relevance”, distinct from the majority language (Van Deusen-Scholl 2003, p. 216). Proficiency in the HL is not the sole criterion for HL status; it serves important social and identity-building functions (Ahlers 2017). In this broader context, HL speakers’ initiatives in studying, maintaining, and revitalizing their HL, along with their self-positioning and self-negotiation, are central to their identification with their HL (Valdés 2005; Hornberger and Wang 2008). In Finland, different terms are used for HL, reflecting different perspectives: in the Finnish educational system “*kotikieli*” (home language) is used alongside the newer term “*perintökieli*” (heritage language), thus illustrating the close link between HL studies and minority and indigenous languages (Sippola and Peterson 2022). In this study, I refer to the term “heritage language” as an ethnolinguistically minority language that is acquired in a multilingual context, often within the family setting, and which holds substantial importance in terms of self-identification and fostering a sense of belonging within a community.

With multiple studies identifying parents as the primary source of HL input (e.g., Montrul 2015; Melo-Pfeifer 2015), parental decisions significantly influence the maintenance of the children’s HL. These decisions in multilingual families exhibit a spectrum of possibilities: some actively choose to communicate in the HL at home, while others, proficient in the local majority language, prefer using it with their children. Alternatively, some may refrain from speaking the HL directly to their children but utilize it in conversations among themselves. On the other end of the spectrum, some parents may decide not to incorporate the HL into their home environment at all. In extreme situations, parents may even feel compelled to communicate with their children in a language they barely know (De Houwer 2017).

HL maintenance in Finland is shaped by the unique context of the country, characterized by a multilingual society and robust language policies aimed at preserving HLs. Hebrew speakers, despite being a small linguistic minority, hold historical significance in Finland. The Jewish community, recognized as an official national minority for over two centuries, has taught Hebrew in the Jewish school of Helsinki since the early 20th century (Latomaa and Nuolijärvi 2002). In the 2023–2024 school year, the Jewish Community School of Helsinki (Helsingin Juutalainen Yhteiskoulu), a private Finnish-language school maintained by the Jewish congregation of Helsinki, served approximately 100 students from first to ninth grade, following the basic education curriculum of the Finnish National

Board of Education (HJYK 2024). It is also necessary to mention that the Jewish community of Finland, numbering around 1500 members, is concentrated mainly in the Capital region, with the majority of community members belonging to the Jewish Congregation of Helsinki. The other Jewish congregation is situated in Turku and counts ten times fewer participants than in Helsinki (Czimbalmos 2023). The relative size of the community in Helsinki and the availability of the only Jewish school in Finland may also influence the language transmission attitudes, the learning opportunities, and subsequently the actual Hebrew skills of the children.

### 2.3. FLP

Language policy at the societal level serves as the overarching framework for understanding FLP. Language policy, emerging from diverse societal beliefs about language, refers to a society's approach to linguistic communication, encompassing its positions, principles, and decisions regarding verbal expression and communicative potential (Bugarski and Hawkesworth 1992, p. 18). It addresses not only specific language varieties but also individual elements across various linguistic levels. Language policy can take two forms: explicit (Spolsky 2004), also known as official or *de jure* (Schiffman 1996), which involves formally written and stated language policies, not always aligning with actual language practices within a community, and implicit language policy (Spolsky 2004), also referred to as covert or *de facto* (Schiffman 1996), which is not explicitly stated but can be inferred from observed language practices within a community. These policies operate within speech communities of varying sizes, ranging from families to nation-states or regional alliances.

Language policy established within a family is called family language policy (FLP). According to Spolsky (2012), FLP refers to language choices and practices within a family setting. It can be either explicit or implicit. The current study primarily investigates FLPs in Hebrew-speaking families through explicit parental language ideologies, and strategies of linguistic management reported by the parents. This study also examines the external factors influencing heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland beyond parental control, taking into account that in the majority of families, the FLP is not consciously planned but is shaped by historical factors and circumstances (Spolsky 2012). While the default home language policy for many families involves speaking the mother's native tongue or both parents' languages in the case of bilingual families (Spolsky 2012), some families consciously choose to raise multilingual children, viewing this explicit decision-making regarding language use within the home as providing advantages and enhanced social capital to children (e.g., Howlett and Davis 2018), a situation clearly observed in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland.

Spolsky (2012) argues that FLP involves three aspects within the family setting: ideologies (strong beliefs about languages, language learning, language maintenance, etc.), management (plans and approaches adopted to support a specific language policy within the family), and practices (actual use of language by family members). The current research examines the beliefs, plans, and language use within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland, focusing on understanding how different family members view and manage languages with varying statuses in the environments of the family and the society.

### 2.4. Multilingual FLPs in Finland

Previous research on FLPs in multilingual families in Finland has predominantly examined a narrow selection of immigrant languages. A rich linguistic diversity in Finland, with over 150 different first languages spoken by 8.9% of residents with an immigrant background—those whose both parents, or the only known parent, were born abroad, or whose parents' information is not included in the Finnish Population Information System (Lindén and Dyster 2023; Official Statistics Finland 2024), is supported and promoted by the national core curriculum for basic education, highlighting effective policy-level support for various linguistic groups in Finland (Eurydice 2019). However, it is challenging to acquire data on individual multilingualism in Finland, since each individual can be

assigned only one “mother tongue” in the official registration system<sup>1</sup> (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018). Therefore, conducting extensive research on FLPs across various immigrant languages is essential for gaining comprehensive insights into the complexities of multilingualism in immigrant families in Finland. The research on heritage Hebrew can potentially inform policies supporting language transmission in Finland and in countries with diverse immigrant languages, thus enhancing the well-being of minority language speakers globally.

Research on FLP within multilingual families combining Finnish with major immigrant languages like Russian (1.6% of the population, Official Statistics Finland 2022), has shown that parental ideologies include prioritizing the majority language, leading to children developing as passive bilinguals with limited balanced bilingualism (Protassova 2018), and parental management supporting a balanced language environment during preschool years, with a focus on Russian in kindergarten, and an increased emphasis on Finnish in later schooling (Moin et al. 2013). Vorobeveva’s study (Vorobeveva 2023) explored how Russian-speaking mothers in Finland shape their FLP decisions based on their emotional experiences.

Research on Estonian, the second-largest immigrant language spoken by 0.9% of the population of Finland (Official Statistics Finland 2022), has explored parental ideologies, with many prioritizing their children’s proficiency in Estonian, with English and occasionally Russian serving as vehicular languages for communication with other minority groups (Praagli 2015). Studies on HL management revealed that children played a significant role in shaping FLPs, while parents would not strictly adhere to the OPOL strategy in everyday interactions (Teiss and Perendi 2017), and there were limited opportunities for Estonian language use outside the home (Praagli 2015).

Several studies have investigated FLPs among families speaking less common immigrant languages in Finland. These studies revealed similar language ideologies, including positive attitudes towards multilingualism and the preservation of HL as essential for maintaining cultural identity (Urdu, Haque 2011; Polish, Kędra 2021; Persian, Mashayekhi 2023), as well as recognition and prioritization of English for practical reasons (Urdu, Haque 2011; Portuguese, Kumpulainen 2020). The educational management of HLs primarily occurred within the home environment, as institutional educational support was often unavailable or not tailored to the families’ needs (Urdu, Haque 2011; Indonesian, Sholihat 2020; Persian, Mashayekhi 2023; 46 immigrant languages, Nyberg 2021). In the research on 34 immigrant languages performed by Palviainen and Räisä (2023), the perceived status of the HL played a crucial role in decisions regarding its maintenance. In practice, many families experienced a shift towards using Finnish in children’s language interactions, leading to reduced HL usage among the children (Haque 2011; Palviainen and Räisä 2023; Kumpulainen 2020).

## 2.5. Heritage Language Education in Finland

In the EU, while most children speak the school language, which is often the majority language and also the main or official language in local public life, many of them also speak minority languages; however, these languages are seldom or never used in educational and public contexts (De Houwer 2017). Managing language education presents another challenge, requiring decisions on prioritizing the language of the host country, integrating previously acquired languages, or choosing English as the common language. Migrant families encounter complexities as their children are exposed to diverse languages and environments (Hirsch and Lee 2018). While family efforts to transmit HL literacy are vital for its acquisition, development, and maintenance across generations (Schwartz 2008), many heritage speakers often lack literacy in their HL. This deficiency is typically attributed to insufficient formal education in the language or limited access to such education (Lohndal et al. 2019).

Children with immigrant backgrounds in Finland, up to the third generation, are entitled to two hours of complementary basic education in their “mother tongue” or “home language” (“oma äidinkieli” or “kotikieli”), aimed at fostering active multilingualism,

with a focus on native language literacy and multiliteracy development (OPH 2022). As stated by the Finnish National Board of Education, “mother tongue” can be defined in several different ways: the language(s) that the individual first acquired or, for example, the language(s) that the person knows best or with which he or she identifies (OPH 2022).

The selection of languages offered and the minimum group size are determined independently by each city, varying between 4–12 students and “depending on feasibility” (“mahdollisuuksien mukaan”) to over 40 languages (City of Seinäjoki 2024; City of Helsinki, Education Division 2024). However, it is important to keep in mind that a consistent disparity will always exist between policy and implementation. While a governing body may advocate for linguistic minorities’ rights to mother-tongue education, it does not necessarily guarantee the realization of these rights by the minorities (Grenoble and Singerman 2014). The report from the Finnish National Education Evaluation Center (Venäläinen et al. 2022) outlined key challenges in organizing native language classes, including a scarcity of “own mother tongue” teachers, either insufficient student numbers or oversized groups with varying ages and language skills, and resource constraints. The significant shortage of native language teachers in certain languages has resulted in the employment of individuals who do not meet the teacher qualification requirements in Finland.

The survey on minority mother tongues and religions, conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office (Tainio et al. 2019, pp. 70–71), revealed that English teachers had the highest percentage of qualified teachers (88.9%). Similarly, a significant portion of Russian (79.3%), German (75.0%), Spanish (71.4%), and Estonian (54.5%) teachers met the eligibility criteria, having completed both a higher university degree and pedagogical training. However, a limited number of Arabic (20.0%), Chinese (20.0%), Somali (12.5%), and Vietnamese (25.0%) teachers fulfilled the eligibility requirements. None of the teachers for Albanian, Thai, and Kurdish met the eligibility criteria, with most or all of them lacking a higher university degree and pedagogical training.

As a consequence, some children with an immigrant background receive institutional support that does not align with Finnish educational standards, while others receive no institutional support at all for maintaining their HL, thus leaving the decision to preserve the HL and the responsibility to transmit it exclusively to the caregivers of the child.

## 2.6. Modern Hebrew in Diaspora

Modern Hebrew, whose speakers in Finland I focus on, has a multilingual and multicultural background. Originating from a diverse linguistic background, Modern Hebrew emerged as a result of intense linguistic contact and language convergence, or koineization, processes (Henkin 2020). As of 2022, modern Hebrew is the predominant language in Israel, serving as the first language for 49% of the population, and as the common language of communication for 92% of Israelis (Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). Moreover, Israeli immigrants in other countries also speak modern Hebrew, and it is familiar to heritage speakers and learners in Jewish schools worldwide (Grossman and Reshef 2020).

Measuring Israeli emigration poses challenges due to the lack of direct data on the annual number of Israelis explicitly intending to emigrate (DellaPergola and Lustick 2011). Additionally, many Israelis living abroad, even for extended periods, view themselves as temporary expatriates rather than permanent emigrants. Data on returning Israelis suggests that a significant number eventually return home after spending 5, 10, or even 20 years abroad. Currently, approximately 10 percent of Israel’s population resides outside the country. Economic factors emerge as more influential than ideological or security-related variables in explaining variations in emigration volume from Israel (DellaPergola and Lustick 2011).

Israelis who have moved away from Israel typically continue speaking Hebrew in their homes and with friends, and they often maintain connections to Israeli culture and identity (Spolsky 2016). Despite the weakness of Hebrew education abroad, they often ensure that their children learn Hebrew, thus passing down their Israeli identity to the next generation. However, a gradual shift away from Hebrew is evident, influenced by factors

such as the size of the diaspora, the higher prestige of other languages, and the level of skills and professional proficiency in the diaspora (Spolsky 2016).

Nevo and Verbov (2011, pp. 428–30) adopted an even more cautious outlook regarding the ongoing relevance of Hebrew outside of Israel. They highlighted factors contributing to its declining relevance, including changes in Jewish identity, limited focus on spoken Hebrew in educational settings, and a lack of clear objectives in Hebrew instruction. Additionally, the absence of local Hebrew-speaking teachers and a preference for other languages such as English further diminished the importance of Hebrew in diaspora education.

Recent research on the transmission of Hebrew in families living outside Israel highlighted a notable language shift away from Hebrew. A study on Israeli families in Europe, including parental FLPs, which was conducted as part of “The Israeli-European Diaspora: A Survey about Israelis living in Europe” (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017), uncovered varying attitudes among Israeli parents in different countries regarding the preservation of Hebrew language and culture for their children. For instance, in Italy, 93% of respondents considered it important for their children to speak and read Hebrew, whereas in Denmark, the percentages were 71% for speaking and 55% for reading, respectively. Regarding overall parental ideologies toward Hebrew maintenance, among the 890 Israeli respondents surveyed out of an estimated total population of 100,000 across 27 European countries, 85% emphasized the importance of their children being proficient in Hebrew. However, concerning Hebrew management outside the home, 55% of the children never attended any Israeli educational programs, while 27% participated occasionally (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017). This comprehensive study also acknowledged Hebrew speakers in Finland, yet it refrained from presenting percentages or drawing conclusions due to the limited participant pool of nine individuals (see Section 4.4).

In diaspora communities outside Europe, there is also evidence of a shift away from Hebrew. In Australia, adult Israel-born migrants used Hebrew for everyday communication in 71.4–87.4% of cases, while those who migrated as minors utilized Hebrew in less than 30% of instances (Porat 2018). In Noar’s Master’s thesis (Noar 2023), in New Zealand children in Hebrew-speaking families demonstrated higher proficiency in English than in Hebrew, despite positive attitudes towards heritage Hebrew maintenance. In Mexico, only 37% of Israelis who migrated as minors spoke Hebrew at home, with 59% using Spanish as their primary language in the household (Aizencang 2019).

In Finland, as of December 2022, there lived 946 Israeli citizens, with 547 of them being dual Israeli–Finnish citizens. A total of 511 individuals identified as Hebrew speakers, with 58 being 19 and younger (Official Statistics Finland 2023). Importantly, the language registration system of Finland permits the listing of only one mother tongue (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018), which limits the ability to determine the exact number of multilingual individuals who consider Hebrew their native or HL.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Data Collection

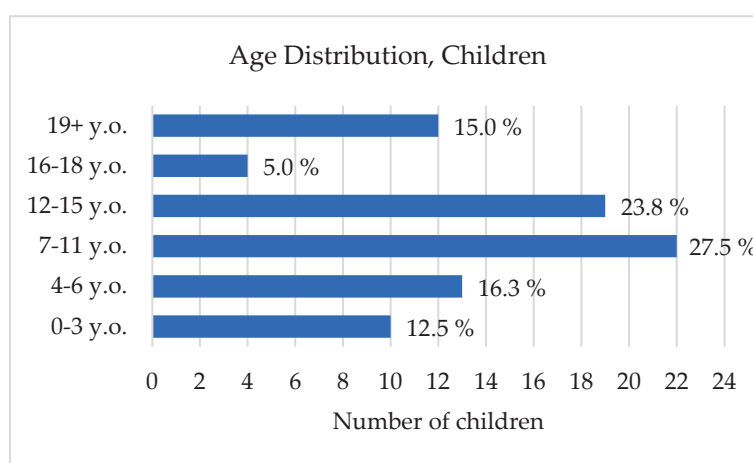
Participants were recruited through an extensive network, including the researcher’s personal connections, meetings in the Women’s Circle monthly program organized by Chabad Lubavitch of Finland, and targeted advertisements shared by administrators of six major private WhatsApp groups and two private Facebook groups.

Eligible candidates were identified as adults who had immigrated to Finland from Israel, possessed native-level proficiency in Hebrew (both Israeli-born and those who repatriated to Israel as minors), and were parents with at least one child. To maintain survey integrity, the survey targeted one parent per household, with instances where both parents responded requiring explicit notification to the researcher (observed in 2 households, involving 4 participants and 5 children), exceptions allowed based on the recognition of a limited number of Hebrew-speaking parents in Finland. The survey was available for participation in December 2023.

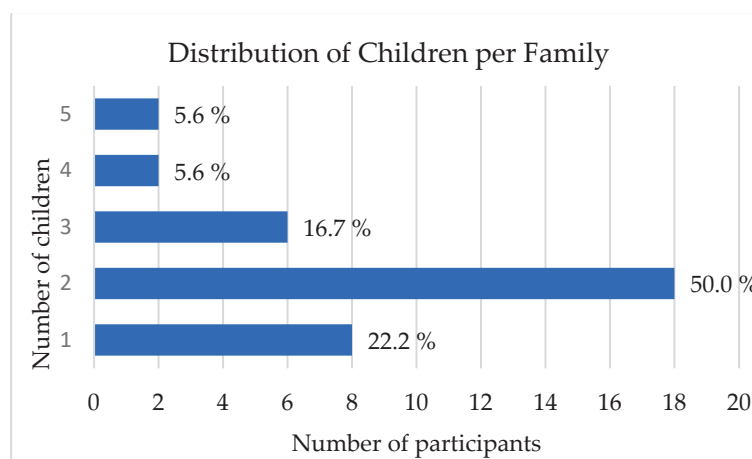
### 3.2. Participants

Out of the 36 participants, 20 identified themselves as females, and 16 as males. The mean age of the participants was 43, with a median of 41, ranging from 30 to 67 years old. The majority of participants reported having academic education, with 14 having completed a bachelor's degree, 11 with a master's degree, and 3 with a doctoral degree. Additionally, 5 participants received vocational professional education, 2 graduated from high school, and one participant left the field empty.

The participants reported a total of 80 children. However, since 5 children were assessed by both parents, as explained above, the actual number of unique children was 75. Due to the anonymity restrictions of the questionnaire, it would be problematic to identify which children were assessed twice; therefore, the data presented are based on 80 children: Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the children, and Figure 2—the number of children per family. The number of children per family ranged from 1 to 5.



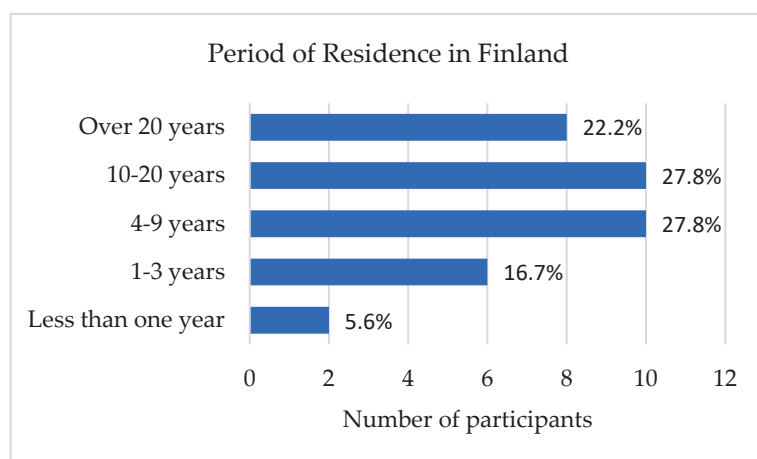
**Figure 1.** Age distribution, children.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of children per family.

Most participants were multilingual, with 27 reporting early exposure (between 0 and 8 years old) to at least two languages, and 4 participants being exposed to three languages simultaneously from birth. Among the participants, 20 were first-generation Hebrew speakers, meaning none of their parents were native Hebrew speakers. In 7 cases, one of the parents was a native Hebrew speaker, and in 9 cases, both parents. 14 of the participants were not born in Israel, with 10 born in the former USSR, 3 in the Western hemisphere, and 1 in Finland. The age of repatriation to Israel varied between 5–19 years old for these participants.

Furthermore, 7 participants used to live in another country as adults, aside from Israel and Finland, for a period of time between one and three years, with the following countries reported: Canada, USA, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Lithuania. The remaining participants had adult experience of living only in Israel and Finland. Time of residence in Finland is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Period of residence in Finland.

### 3.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire survey served as the first phase in a broader study of FLPs in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Administered via the REDCap platform, it was accessible on phones, tablets, or computers. The questionnaire comprised 20 mandatory and 16 optional questions, covering demographics, individual Hebrew usage, strategies for transmitting Hebrew to children, and parental assessments of their children's Hebrew proficiency (Appendix A).

The survey featured a mix of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, with the latter designed to elicit additional insights from participants. While the questionnaire was provided in Hebrew, respondents had the option to answer open questions in Hebrew, Finnish, English, or Russian. Time allotted for completing the questionnaire was between 5 and 10 min. The responses were automatically transferred to a secure REDCap data server, from which they could be downloaded in PDF or MS Excel format.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Family Language Practices

#### 4.1.1. Parental Assessment of the Children's Language Skills

In order to evaluate whether the situation in Finland aligned with the broader trend of a gradual shift away from Hebrew outside Israel (see Section 2.5), research participants were asked to assess their children's four Hebrew skills: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing, on a scale of five options, from "excellent" to "non-existent". Every child in the family was assessed separately. The figures below represent the distribution of the children by the level of every skill, and by the child order in the family (Figures 4–7).

Among the 80 children assessed, 60% were reported to have an excellent or good understanding of Hebrew, while 16.3% did not understand it at all, and 15% had low comprehension skills. Assessments of speaking skills revealed a slightly declining trend: 46.3% of the children exhibited good or excellent oral skills, while 22.5% did not speak Hebrew at all, and an additional 11.3% had low speaking proficiency.

In terms of literacy, there was a significant decline, with only 12.5% able to read on a good or excellent level, 15% with low Hebrew reading skills, and 38% who did not read Hebrew at all. Writing in Hebrew presented a challenge for the majority of the children,

with only 10% able to write on a good or excellent level, 17.5% with low Hebrew writing skills, and 43% being completely illiterate in Hebrew.

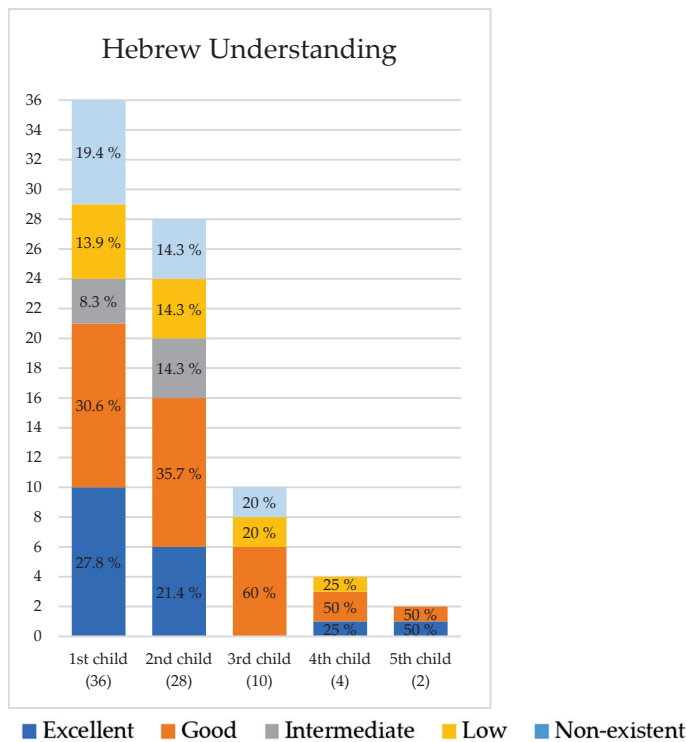


Figure 4. Hebrew understanding assessment.

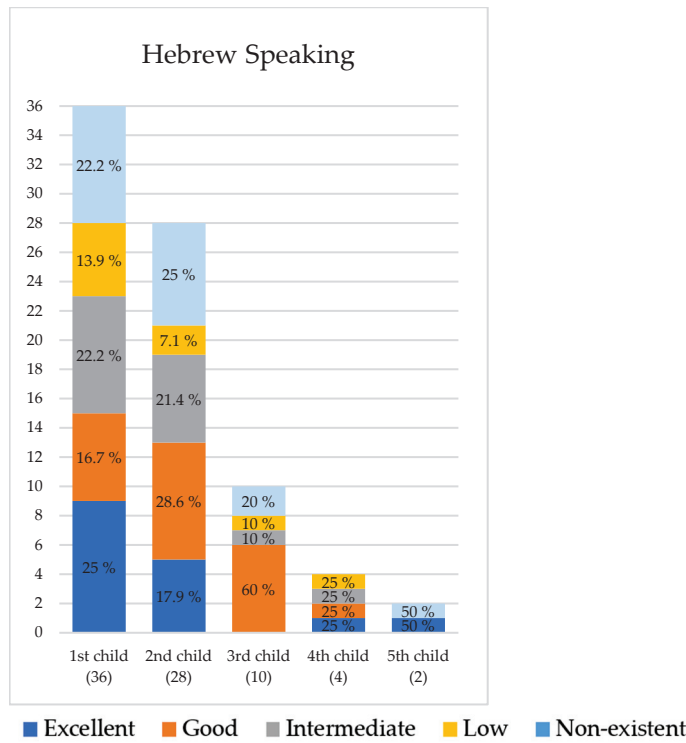


Figure 5. Hebrew speaking assessment.

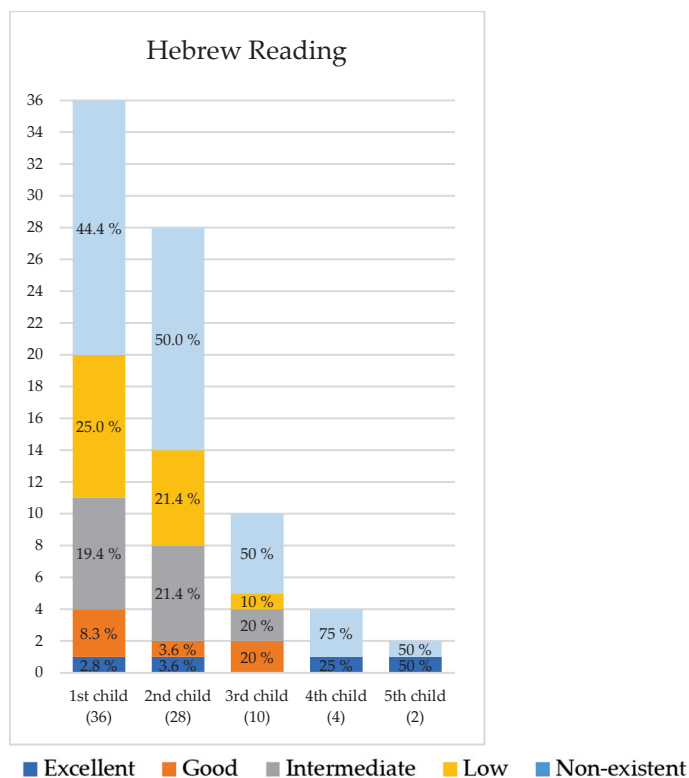


Figure 6. Hebrew reading assessment.

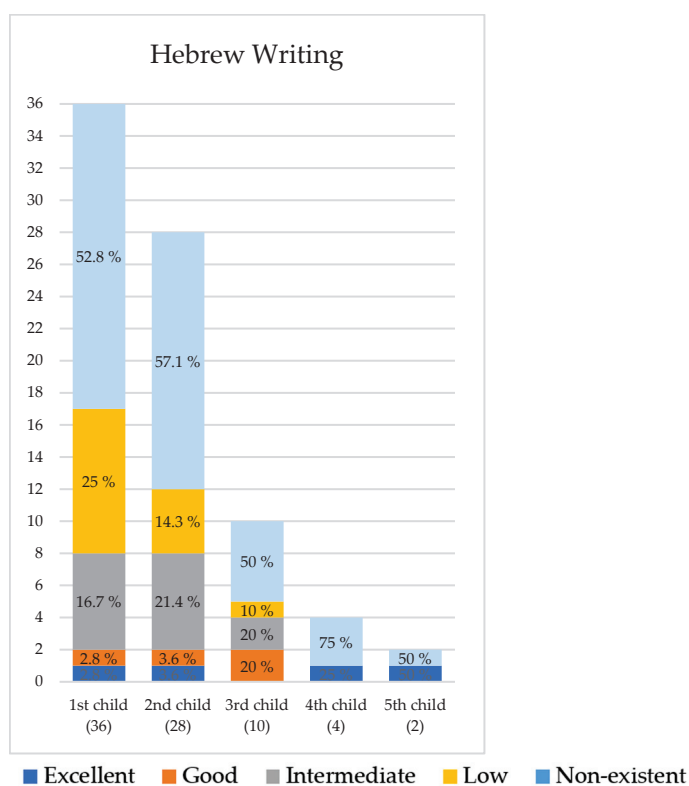


Figure 7. Hebrew writing assessment.

#### 4.1.2. Birth Order

Research on the impact of birth order on language development in monolingual children shows mixed results, with some studies suggesting first-born children have better

language skills (e.g., Berglund et al. 2005; Zyrianova and Chertkova 2011), while others find the reverse pattern (Oshima-Takane et al. 1996), or no relation at all (Lu et al. 2022). For bilingual children, birth order may influence language input, with older siblings potentially playing a significant role (Keller et al. 2015), providing more advanced language input compared to mothers (Bergroth and Palviainen 2016).

The connection between birth order and HL skills in children with an immigrant background is still unclear (Keller et al. 2015), showing variations in different domains of HL (Armon-Lotem et al. 2021). Some studies suggest older siblings generally have better HL skills (Bridges and Hoff 2014), while others indicate first-born children may initially have higher proficiency, but having older siblings can enhance conditions for HL acquisition (Tsinivits and Unsworth 2021; Armon-Lotem et al. 2021).

In order to understand the trend in Hebrew-speaking families, I first present the Hebrew level by the order of birth of all the children in general, and then compare Hebrew skills between the siblings in the 28 responses of parents to 2 or more children.

Out of the 36 first-borns, 58.4% had either an excellent or good understanding of spoken Hebrew, while 19.4% did not understand Hebrew at all. In terms of speaking, the results showed a slight decrease but still coincided to a large extent with the first children's ability to understand Hebrew: 41.7% of the children were reported to have either excellent or good spoken Hebrew; 22.2% did not speak Hebrew at all. The responses regarding the level of written Hebrew already within the first children showed significant attrition of the reading and writing skills: while 10.1% and 5.6% had excellent or good skills in reading and writing, respectively, only one first child was reported to have excellent both reading and writing skills. A total of 44.4% of the first children did not read Hebrew at all, and 52.8% did not possess the skill of writing in Hebrew.

Responses regarding the second children (28) showed oral Hebrew skills similar to first-borns, with 57.1% understanding Hebrew either excellently or well, and 14.3% not understanding it at all. Regarding speaking Hebrew, the numbers were 46.5% and 25%, respectively. Concerning reading and writing, one child was reported to excel in both skills (from the same family where the elder sibling excelled in both skills, with the family having lived in Finland for a period of less than one year), one more had both skills on a good level, making it 7.2% of the second children. Half of the second children were completely illiterate in Hebrew (no reading skills in 50%, no writing skills in 57.1%).

The responses regarding the third children (10) indicated a decline in overall Hebrew level—no third child was reported to have excellent Hebrew in any of the four skills. A total of 60% of the third children had good understanding and speaking skills, while 20% did not speak or understand Hebrew. The Hebrew literacy level of 20% of the third-born children was estimated as good, and 50% of the third children were completely illiterate in Hebrew. Among the four fourth children, all of them were able to understand and speak Hebrew to some extent, whereas reading and writing were excellent in 25% of the cases, and non-existent in 75%. In the two families with a fifth child, one child was reported to excel in all four skills, and the other one could understand Hebrew well but did not speak, read, or write due to their young age.

For comparing the trends between the siblings in each family, I grouped understanding and speaking under “oral skills” and reading and writing under “literacy”. Out of the 28 participants with two or more children, 35.7% (six cases with two siblings and four cases with three siblings) reported each child's Hebrew skills equal between the siblings across all domains. In three out of these cases, Hebrew level was reported as non-existent, and in the remaining instances, the children's proficiency ranged from intermediate to excellent. Notably, 40% of the latter exhibited comparable levels of oral and written proficiency, while 60% had reported literacy levels lower than oral proficiency.

Five responses (17.9%) indicated similar oral skills between 2 and 4 siblings, whereas their Hebrew literacy levels varied. In 80% of these cases, the older siblings were partially literate in Hebrew, while the younger ones were entirely illiterate; however, it is important to note that half of these 80% involved very young siblings, aged 1–3 years old, whose

literacy skills could not be taken into account. In the one instance remaining, only the youngest among the three siblings had some literacy in Hebrew, and the other ones were completely illiterate, while all of them exhibited good oral understanding and intermediate speaking skills.

In the remaining 13 cases, 53.8% reported higher oral Hebrew proficiency among the older siblings, while the remaining 46.2% displayed the opposite trend. Among these 13 cases, 10 (76.9%) reported the children's Hebrew literacy as either low or non-existent. In the cases where families had four or five children, at least two in each family were literate in Hebrew at an intermediate to excellent level. However, the pattern varied—in two families, the older siblings had similarly high levels of written Hebrew, while the younger ones were reported as illiterate; however, upon examining the ages of the younger siblings, it became evident that they were all under school age, so their literacy could not be considered. In the third family, oral proficiency was higher the younger the children were—from low for the adult child to intermediate for junior high school-aged children, and excellent for primary school siblings.

The survey findings regarding the connection between birth order and HL skills in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland presented diverse patterns, affirming previous research claims about the unclear connection between these two factors. The complex and varied outcomes emphasized the necessity for more extensive and diverse research to better understand the nuanced relationship between birth order and HL skills in children with an immigrant background.

#### 4.1.3. The Role of Siblings in Heritage Hebrew Transmission

The languages used between siblings often vary from the languages used in interactions between children and parents (Caldas 2012). The role of parents in transmitting the minority language to the children should not be exaggerated, since siblings often play a more significant role in shaping each other's language dynamics, influencing language choices and policies, which can lead to changes and adaptations in response to various factors such as school language, friends, and the social environment (Bergroth and Palviainen 2016).

While older siblings generally have a positive impact on the younger siblings' development of the environment language, this communication often leads to a shift away from the HL (e.g., Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014; Rojas et al. 2016). Older siblings often use the environmental language more frequently with their younger siblings, resulting in more advanced environmental language development (Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014; Greek in the Netherlands, Tsinivits and Unsworth 2021), while the absence of a school-aged older sibling is associated with greater proficiency in the HL (Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014).

In the context of HL maintenance, the siblings' language choices, primarily in the environment language and occasionally in the HL, not only influence family interactions but also play a role in contributing to generational language shift. Even when engaging in activities that address their HL, like helping each other with language tasks, the siblings tend to blend elements of the HL into the dominant language (Farsi in Sweden, Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2018; Greek in the Netherlands, Tsinivits and Unsworth 2021).

The survey revealed a similar trend in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland, indicating a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary communication language among siblings. Among the 28 respondents with two or more children, 11 families reported Finnish as the only language of sibling communication. Notably, this language preference correlated with the duration of residence in Finland, with 81.8% of respondents residing for over 10 or even 20 years, and 18.9% having resided in Finland for 4–9 years.

Hebrew was identified as the main language for sibling communication in three households, encompassing families with varying durations of residence in Finland—less than a year, 4–9 years, and over 10 years, respectively. Russian was reported as the main language among siblings by four respondents, with all cases corresponding to families with substantial periods of residency in Finland: between 4 and 9 and 10 and 20 years. In

three cases, siblings were reported to interchange between two languages: Hebrew–Finnish and Russian–Finnish, with both families having resided in Finland for 4–9 years; the third case involved English and Russian, with a residence duration of 1–3 years. Furthermore, in three additional cases, children used three languages for daily sibling communication, including Hebrew, Finnish or Swedish, and either Russian or English. These cases were reported by families residing in Finland for 1–3 years, 4–9 years, and over 20 years.

To generalize, when discussing the usage of Hebrew among siblings, it served as either the only or one of the everyday languages of communication in 8 households, constituting 28.5% of families with two or more children who responded to the question on the main communication language(s) between siblings. Finnish was the only or one of the everyday languages among siblings in 17 families and Swedish was reported in one family, indicating that, in two-thirds of the cases, the siblings used one of the languages of the environment in their communication. Russian followed Hebrew, being reported as the sole or primary language for sibling communication by 25% of the participants. Both languages demonstrated comparable endurance in relation to the time of residence in Finland.

Although it is challenging to make generalizations based on the results of four families with four or five children, it must be pointed out that the study results contradicted the statement by Keller et al. (2015) that having more siblings in the family is linked to the children's lower proficiency in the HL.

To conclude, the findings indicated a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary language of communication between siblings, with this shift strongly linked to the duration of residence in Finland. Notably, Hebrew as the HL faced challenges, with its prevalence decreasing over time. While Hebrew remained a significant language in some households, the data indicated a decline in its everyday use among siblings. This highlights the potential for language attrition, especially in families with an extended period of residence in Finland.

#### 4.2. Parental Ideologies

Language ideology, according to Schiffman (1996), involves cultural assumptions and implicit policies about language, correctness, and preferred modes of communication. Language ideologies not only concern language use, but also imply knowledge about the rest of social life, entailing ideological positions that manifest in many social actions, often in contradictory and controversial ways, and have far-reaching consequences (Gal and Irvine 2019). Even in the absence of explicit language policies, implicit policies persist, reflecting societal beliefs regarding language use and standards, while dismissing explicit rules or denouncing "standard" languages as myths does not eliminate the cultural assumptions embedded in these concepts; an implicit language policy always exists.

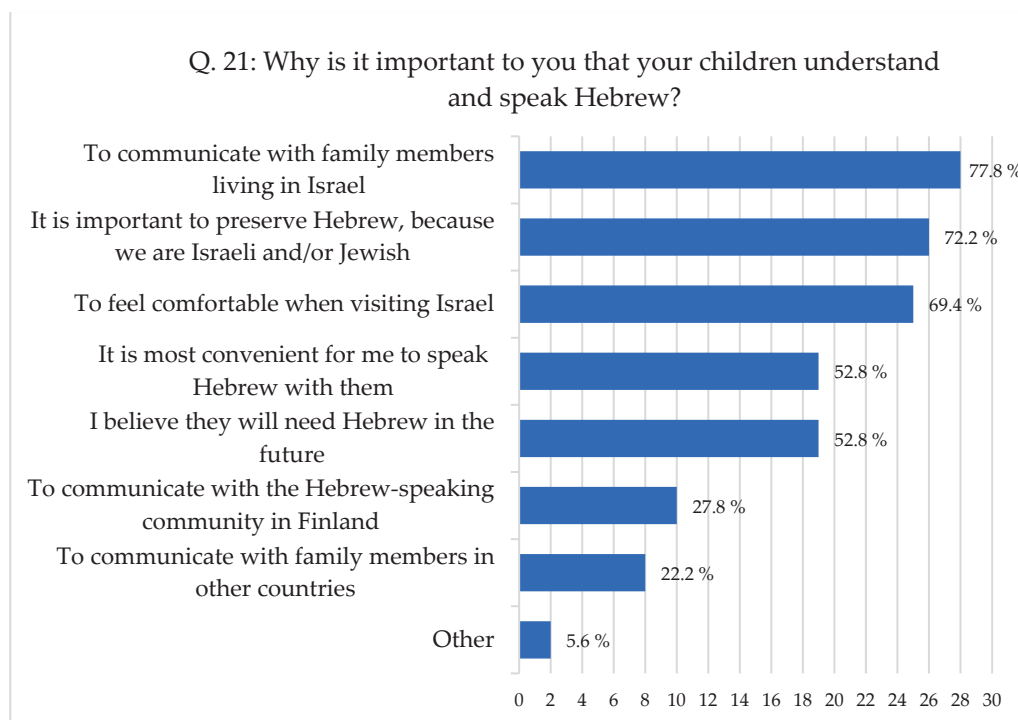
Parental language ideology has a strong influence on the FLP formation, since the parental attitudes to multilingualism, beliefs on the importance of some languages over others, or beliefs about the importance of maintaining HLs, etc., have a direct impact on the children's language skills. This section examines the parental ideologies on heritage Hebrew maintenance, the importance of other languages to their children, and their attitudes toward their children's multilingualism.

All participants, except for one, emphasized the importance of Finnish or Swedish as essential languages for their child(ren). The exception justified their response by stating

(1) *"We are not sure that we will stay in Finland".*

Indicating recent relocation to Finland within the past year. On the other hand, this participant did acknowledge the significance of English for their children separately. The overwhelming majority (93.4%) of participants affirmed the importance of their children's oral Hebrew skills, as indicated by their positive responses to questions regarding comprehension and speaking abilities in Hebrew. This emphasis on Hebrew proficiency appeared to reflect a strong connection between the language and identity, with 72.2% of respondents having cited Israeli or Jewish heritage as a reason for prioritizing Hebrew maintenance, or in 52.8% of the responses the personal convenience of the parents reporting it was the most comfortable way for themselves to speak Hebrew at home (Figure 8). Exam-

ple (2) highlights parental internal conflict regarding language preferences—the speaker acknowledges feeling more comfortable communicating in English due to habit, but at the same time recognizes the significance of Hebrew as their native language and holds the ideology that speaking it will foster a stronger and more authentic connection with the child. This sentiment reflects the role language plays in shaping our sense of identity, cultural connection, and emotional intimacy.



**Figure 8.** Importance of Hebrew oral skills.

- (2) *“I don’t know if I’m necessarily most comfortable talking to him in Hebrew, I’m more used to communicating in English these days, but Hebrew is my mother tongue so I believe that the relationship between us will be better and truer if I speak to him in my mother tongue”.*

Additionally, 52.8% of participants believed that Hebrew would be necessary for their children’s future. However, opinions regarding literacy in Hebrew were less uniform, with 77.8% considering it important for their children to read and write in Hebrew.

Raising children proficient in two languages is a prevalent FLP among parents actively making language choices for their children. The paramount factor influencing the parents’ FLP is overwhelmingly their personal experiences (Caldas 2012). Consistent with this, survey participants overwhelmingly expressed positive attitudes toward their children’s multilingualism in general. Alongside the 93.4% who considered it important to maintain their children’s oral Hebrew skills in Finland, 79.4% wanted their children to be bilingual in Hebrew and Finnish/Swedish, with the explanations often linked to three main reasons: preserving Jewish legacy in Finland (examples 3 and 4):

- (3) *“For a feeling of calling, for Judaism and Israel”.*  
 (4) *“They have Israeli roots and that is part of their identity”.*

Feeling a sense of belonging to both countries (examples 5 and 6), with Example 5 demonstrating a multi-faceted approach to preserving Jewish legacy, where language serves as a bridge between cultural integration and ancestral heritage.

- (5) *“This is very important. Finnish because they live in Finland, and it is important to know the language of the country you live in. And Hebrew because we are Jews, and it is the language*

*of our ancestors. We live in Finland so it is important that they learn the language and maybe one day we will live in Israel so it is important that they also know good Hebrew”.*

- (6) *“In order to communicate with family members in both countries as well as feeling a double identity”.*

Additionally, facilitating communication (examples 7 and 8):

- (7) *“Opens options in life”.*

- (8) *“The two languages have a different communication audience”.*

A substantial part of the parents wanted their children to be multilingual in additional languages, with 58.3% specifically indicating English, which supported previous research on the prestige of English in Finland (e.g., Leppänen et al. 2011; Kontoniemi and Salo 2011). Language prestige and status play a crucial role in shaping FLP, while high-prestige languages, like English, enjoy greater appreciation, making them a more appealing and natural choice for families to adopt. Since 2000, English in Finland has evolved into a medium of instruction at all education levels. About 60% of Finns, particularly younger generations, are fluent in English largely due to formal education (Leppänen et al. 2011). Finland aims for “mother tongue plus two” proficiency, with English being a primary additional language (Kontoniemi and Salo 2011). The National Core Curriculum underscores English as a lingua franca, aligning with global communication principles (Zilliacus et al. 2017). English exposure through mass media has made it widely understood, and visible in commercial advertising (Leppänen et al. 2011). Attitudes toward English proficiency do not directly correlate with social exclusion but may signify detachment from an urban, international, and multicultural society (Leppänen et al. 2011).

A notable number of survey participants underscored the significance of English in their children’s linguistic development. While 8 participants (22.2%) indicated that English was either the sole or one of the languages acquired from birth, currently, 14 participants (38.9%) used English as a primary means of communication within their families on a daily basis. This included one participant and their spouse, both raised in English-speaking countries and exclusively using English at home, as well as 13 participants who integrated English alongside other languages. Furthermore, in 5 cases involving 17 children, English served as one of the languages of formal education. As mentioned above, 21 participants (58.3%) expressed aspirations for their children to excel in English in the future, citing its importance as a global language for both academic and professional endeavors:

- (9) *“English, because English is already needed in most of the good professions, and in the future even more”.*

- (10) *“English and Chinese, the two main languages for international success”.*

While English emerged as the primary additional language, Russian (19.4%) and Swedish (8.3%) were also mentioned by a number of participants. Russian was typically selected due to it being the native language of one parent or for communication with relatives, while Swedish was chosen as the parental language and Finland’s second official language. Regarding Russian, two respondents mentioned in an open-ended question that while Finnish was undoubtedly important, when faced with the choice between Russian and Hebrew, they prioritized Russian. One participant stated that besides Hebrew and Swedish, mastery of additional languages was not crucial, while 5 participants (13.9%) emphasized the importance of acquiring every new language.

- (11) *“Nothing specific, but I’m glad they’re trying to learn additional languages”.*

- (12) *“I wish him to learn many more languages”.*

From the above, I conclude that while all but one participant had positive ideologies about Finnish or Swedish as one of the main languages for their children, the majority of parents also had positive ideologies about the necessity of oral communication in Hebrew for their children, with still significant, but lower ideologies concerning Hebrew literacy. Furthermore, all the participants had a positive attitude towards bilingualism or multilingualism within their children. While the ideologies on which languages were more

important for the children, and reasons for choosing the languages for children varied, no participant showed a desire for their child(ren) to be monolingual, and neither showed concern about the disadvantages of multilingualism.

#### 4.3. Parental Language Management

The linguistic input children are exposed to is one of the main determinants of whether language shift or language maintenance occurs (Spolsky 2004; Schwartz 2008). This section includes parental management of activities aimed at maintaining the input of multiple languages within the children, i.e., the languages parents use in everyday communication at home (with the spouse and the children), the possibilities they find for their children to communicate in Hebrew outside the home, and languages of formal and informal instruction for the children.

A total of 10 respondents (27.8%) reported adhering to one language policy at home, with 4 cases being Hebrew, 3—Finnish, 2—Russian, and 1—English. An additional 12 participants reported two languages being used at home, when in 9 of the cases Hebrew was one of the two. All the rest, 38.8% of the respondents, communicated in three or four languages, with Hebrew being one of them in all the cases. In other words, parental language management at home included Hebrew on a daily basis for 75% of the respondents. However, when divided into communication with the spouse or with the children, the results showed a different pattern. While 22.2% never communicated with the children in Hebrew, and 77.7% did it on a permanent basis, with the spouses 33.3% never used Hebrew, and used it on a regular basis—52.8%. Nevertheless, 5 out of the 12 participants who never used Hebrew with their spouses, used it regularly with the children, and 3 out of 19 participants (15.8%) who used Hebrew as the main language of communication with their spouses, never used it with the children, which shows thoughtful decisions concerning heritage Hebrew transmission. 13.9% of all the participants never used Hebrew either with the spouse or with the children, explaining this decision by either the convenience of speaking to the children in other languages, such as Finnish or Russian, or challenges in establishing efficient linguistic management:

- (13) *“Good question, I’ve been trying to answer it for several years. Apparently, it doesn’t happen because of wrong prioritization of tasks”.*

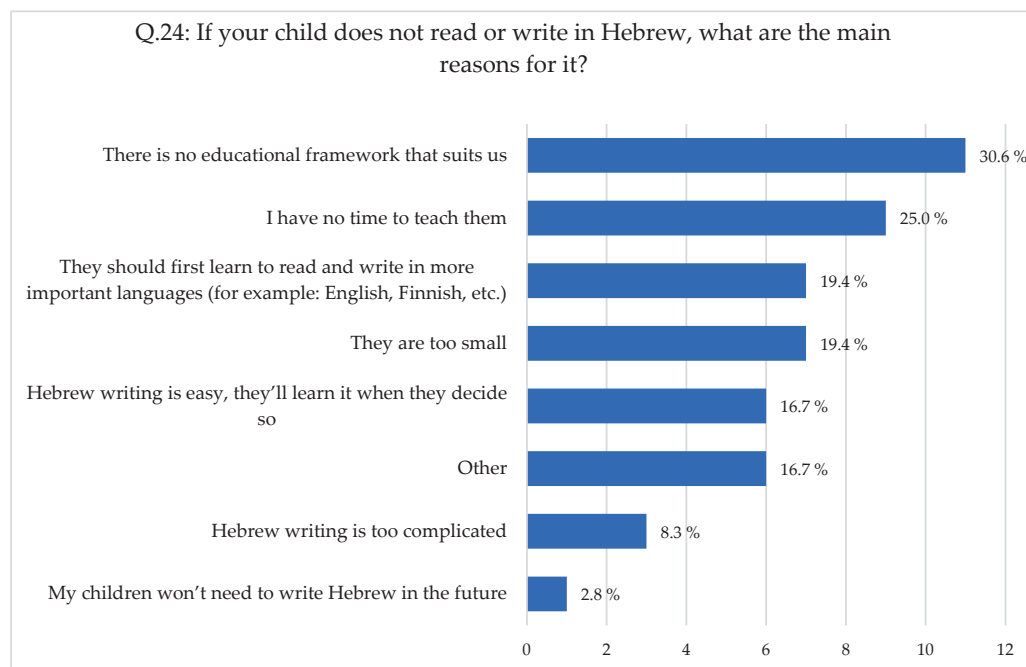
Regarding the use of spoken Hebrew outside the home, the parents’ responses were divided almost equally, with 55.6% responding that their children did not communicate in Hebrew outside the home, and 44.4% that they did. The examples of communication in Hebrew included extended families, such as the children’s grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins both in Israel and in Finland, friends, and the Jewish school and daycare, with the latter discussed in the next section.

#### Heritage Hebrew Education Management

According to official statistics in 2022, slightly over half (25) of all school-aged children registered with Hebrew as their native language (49) attended Hebrew complementary classes (Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) 2020). However, it is important to note that a vast majority of all Hebrew-speaking children in Finland are at least bilingual, and some parents due to the limitation in the system allowing registration of only one “mother tongue” (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018), opt to register their children with other languages, such as the language of compulsory education or English (as seen in the personal case of the researcher and several other families). Therefore, the actual Hebrew native language classes attendance percentage is impossible to determine precisely, but it is significantly less than half.

In the survey, Hebrew as one of the languages of formal education was reported by 4 participants, counting 12 children, while 4 other participants with 9 children reported their children to receive other kinds of Hebrew tutoring such as own mother tongue classes, classes provided by the community, or private lessons, making it 22.2% of the responses and 26.3% of the 80 children assessed in the survey who received external Hebrew teaching.

Nevertheless, the conclusions on the lack of classes or non-compliance with the Finnish education standards, as well as on the feeling of own responsibility for transmitting Hebrew literacy to the children, were supported by responses to the question addressing challenges hindering the maintenance of Hebrew literacy among children (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Challenges in Hebrew literacy maintenance among children.

The primary explanations included the absence of a suitable educational framework (cited by 30.6% of respondents) and the parents' personal lack of time to teach written Hebrew to their children at home (25%). Some parents elaborated on this:

(14) *"Because of moving to Finland".*

(15) *"He reads well. The writing will come when he needs it".*

A number of answers to the question about Hebrew literacy management also reflected the presence of well-thought management strategies within the participants, as well as planning of various possibilities in the future:

(16) *"It doesn't matter for me now. I would like them to decide if they need to learn Hebrew. If my kids reveal the interest for learning Hebrew, then I will do my best to help them to do so".*

(17) *"Their life is here (in Finland) and there and they might want to come back (to Israel)".*

As we see from the above, the management of Hebrew transmission within the survey participants involved various strategies. While many parents prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, they admitted challenges arising in terms of external Hebrew education. Some parents demonstrated thoughtful planning for Hebrew literacy development by providing Hebrew education for the children, while others deliberately decided to support other languages while allowing children to make their own decisions regarding Hebrew.

#### 4.4. Finland vs. Pan-European Patterns

The aim of this section is to compare the patterns within the Hebrew-speaking community in Finland to the broader pan-European pattern described in Dimenstein and Kaplan's (2017) study on Israeli families in Europe aimed at investigating their level of engagement within their social networks and local Jewish communities. Despite gathering a substantial number of responses—890 in total out of approximately 100,000 Israelis permanently residing in Europe—only 9 responses originated from Finland. I conducted a comparison between the results

presented in the “Raising Children” section (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017, pp. 33–37) and the responses to questions 3, 9, 19–23, and 27 provided by the survey participants in Finland (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Finland vs. Pan-European patterns.

|                                                                                 | Dimenstein and Kaplan (2017) | Finland 2023 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Importance of the following to the children, parental ideologies:               |                              |              |
| Speaking Hebrew                                                                 | 85%                          | 93.4%        |
| Hebrew literacy                                                                 | 79%                          | 77.8%        |
| To nurture the Israeli and Jewish components of their complex identity          | 65%                          | 72.2%        |
| Do your children participate in any Jewish and/or Israeli education frameworks? |                              |              |
| Jewish day school                                                               | 14%                          | 11.1%        |
| Occasional activities                                                           | 22%                          | 11.1%        |
| None of the above                                                               | 58%                          | 77.8%        |

Regarding parental ideologies, the percentage of respondents from Finland who considered speaking Hebrew important for their children was higher compared to the Pan-European average, whereas the significance of literacy appeared to be nearly equal. As for parental linguistic management, namely, the children’s external exposure to Hebrew, similar proportions of children were reported to attend Jewish day schools in both Finnish and Pan-European surveys. However, participation in occasional activities was significantly lower in Finland, where almost 80% of children did not participate in any Jewish or Israeli activities, contrasting with the 58% reported in the Pan-European survey.

Dimenstein and Kaplan’s (2017) study also examined parental education levels and their perspectives on their children’s oral and written Hebrew proficiency, as well as the importance of nurturing their Jewish or Israeli identity. While over 70% of respondents consistently emphasized the importance of both spoken and written Hebrew for their children, those with doctoral qualifications notably assigned lower importance ratings to various aspects related to transmitting Jewish values and culture. These aspects included their children’s connection to Jewish traditions and heritage, as well as fostering their affinity with Israel. In the present research, drawing conclusions based on the responses from participants with a doctoral degree proved challenging due to the limited sample size (three responses). However, slightly over half of participants with a graduate degree expressed the importance of a Jewish or Israeli identity for their children, while in all other education groups, the proportion exceeded two-thirds, aligning closely with responses from the pan-European survey. Regarding spoken Hebrew, trends observed in the Finnish results mirrored those in the Pan-European survey. However, in Finland approximately 60% of participants with vocational education considered literacy as unnecessary for their children (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Parental education level and their attitudes towards Hebrew maintenance.

| Dimenstein and Kaplan (2017)                                    |       |        |         | Finland 2023 |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|--------------|--------|---------|
| How Important to You Are the Following Goals for Your Children? |       |        |         |              |        |         |
| Parental Education                                              | Qr1 * | Qr2 ** | Qr3 *** | Qr1 *        | Qr2 ** | Qr3 *** |
| High school                                                     | 84%   | 86%    | 75%     | 100%         | 100%   | 100%    |
| Vocational education                                            | 88%   | 73%    | 65%     | 80%          | 40%    | 80%     |
| Undergraduate                                                   | 82%   | 76%    | 62%     | 100%         | 78.6%  | 78.6%   |
| Graduate                                                        | 84%   | 79%    | 67%     | 90.9%        | 72.7%  | 54.5%   |
| PhD                                                             | 88%   | 90%    | 62%     | 66.7%        | 66.7%  | 66.7%   |

\* Understand and speak Hebrew; \*\* Hebrew literacy; \*\*\* Jewish and/or Israeli identity.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Summary of Findings

Positive attitudes towards multilingualism were evident, with all the parents expressing a desire for their children to be bilingual or multilingual. Parents emphasized the importance of mastering the languages of the environment for their children, alongside a strong focus on heritage Hebrew maintenance. The overwhelming majority of parents reported the significance of oral Hebrew skills, citing reasons such as cultural significance, present or future utility, and a sense of belonging to Israeli or Jewish heritage. While there was a positive attitude towards the children's Hebrew literacy among many parents, challenges such as limited educational opportunities and personal time constraints were acknowledged. English emerged as a prestigious language, reflecting broader societal trends favoring its acquisition for personal and professional purposes. Additionally, Russian held significance for some of the parents with Russian heritage or family ties, which reflected the diverse linguistic landscape within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. While Hebrew was prioritized for its connection to Jewish identity, Russian was valued as a means of communication with relatives.

Parental language management at home varied, with Hebrew commonly used alongside Finnish or other languages. The parental management of heritage Hebrew transmission involved various strategies, including language use at home, seeking external Hebrew education opportunities, and communicating with other Hebrew speakers. Many parents prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, with 75% of respondents incorporating Hebrew into their daily interactions. However, challenges arose in terms of both formal and informal Hebrew education, with only 26.3% of the children receiving external Hebrew teaching.

Family language ideology reported by the parents may not always align with family language practices (De Houwer 2017; Fishman et al. 1985; Kopeliovich 2010; Spolsky 2004). Thus, investigating the correlation between parental language ideology and language management strategies in the family is crucial to understanding its impact on the children's HL knowledge (Schwartz 2008). In terms of parental language practices, the survey revealed various approaches among participants in managing their children's multilingualism, which did not always fully align with their stated language ideologies. While many parents' ideologies prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, they faced challenges in providing sufficient input of Hebrew to the children.

The findings indicated a disparity between the importance of their children understanding and speaking Hebrew and the language practices within the families. While 93.4% of the participants claimed that oral proficiency in Hebrew in their children was important for them, 31.3% of children were reported to have a low or non-existent understanding of Hebrew, and 33.8% of the children spoke Hebrew at a low level or did not speak it at all. A total of 16.3% of the children (13 out of 80) did not possess any Hebrew skills.

Literacy skills showed a significant decline, with only 12.5% able to read well and 10% able to write on a good or excellent level. Birth order analysis revealed mixed trends, with first-borns generally exhibiting higher proficiency initially, but the connection between birth order and Hebrew skills was complex, influenced by factors like sibling interactions, age, and duration of residence in Finland. Siblings played a significant role in shaping language dynamics, with Finnish emerging as the only language of communication in 39.3% of families with two or more children, correlating with the length of residency in Finland. While Hebrew remained significant in some households, its everyday use declined over time, highlighting the challenge of heritage Hebrew attrition.

The results showed a discrepancy between the parents' ideologies regarding the necessity for their children to be literate in Hebrew and the language management and practices in the families. While Hebrew literacy was considered important within 77.8% of the participants, and taking into account the fact that 9 children were aged 0 to 3 years, 13 were aged 4–6 years, and not taking into account their literacy skills, of the remaining children aged 7 years and older, not many children were reported to be literate in Hebrew.

on an excellent or good level—out of 58 children, 9 for reading (15.5%) and 7 for writing (12.1%). A total of 25.9% of the children aged 7 and older were completely illiterate in Hebrew, and in 10.3% of the cases, the children were able to read basic Hebrew on a low level but did not write it at all.

The analysis of patterns within the Finnish Hebrew-speaking community compared to the broader Pan-European survey responses (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017) revealed largely similar trends. Finnish parents displayed a slightly greater emphasis on speaking Hebrew for their children compared to the Pan-European average, while responses on literacy importance were similar. Attendance rates in Jewish educational frameworks were comparable, while participation in Jewish activities notably lagged in Finland compared to Europe. This finding may signify a heightened risk of heritage Hebrew attrition within the Finnish setting, since language socialization within the HL-speaking community, including both communication within the community and educational support with HLs, plays a vital role in promoting the ideologies associated with the HL. These ideologies, in turn, shape individuals' attitudes towards HL use, motivation to maintain the HL, and their sense of cultural identity (King 2001; Duranti et al. 2012).

### *5.2. FLPs of Hebrew-Speaking Parents in Finland*

The first research question focused on exploring the FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Survey results revealed several aspects of these FLPs. Firstly, parents acknowledged the significance of the official languages of Finland, primarily Finnish but sometimes Swedish, recognizing their societal importance for the children. Emphasis on the significance of oral Hebrew proficiency, often linked to Jewish identity, cultural heritage preservation, communication facilitation, and perceived future necessity, also proved to be notable. Despite this emphasis, the practice showed less uniform results, as evidenced by 22.2% of respondents who never communicated with their children in Hebrew. Additionally, Hebrew served as either the only or one of the everyday languages of communication in only 29.2% of families with two or more children, and in 55.6% of cases, children did not communicate in Hebrew outside of the home.

Despite the majority of parents expressing positive attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew literacy for their children, the actual levels of Hebrew literacy among the surveyed children were notably lower. While over three-quarters of respondents considered it important for their children to read and write in Hebrew, the survey findings indicated significant challenges in achieving this goal. Only a small percentage of children demonstrated proficiency in reading and writing Hebrew, with the majority either lacking these skills entirely or showing a low proficiency level. Several factors were reported to contribute to this disparity. First, the limited availability of Hebrew education programs, both within formal schooling and extracurricular activities, was reported to pose significant challenges to implementing effective Hebrew literacy instruction. Second, parental time constraints and competing priorities also impacted the promotion of Hebrew literacy—a quarter of the parents cited personal lack of time as a barrier to teaching written Hebrew to their children at home. Additionally, parental beliefs on Hebrew language instruction and the future needs of the children negatively affected the children's Hebrew literacy.

Furthermore, the survey indicated that all the parents held positive attitudes towards bilingualism or multilingualism, with a majority expressing a wish for their children to be bilingual in Hebrew and Finnish/Swedish. Additionally, a substantial number of parents also expressed a hope for their children to excel in English, reflecting both its global status as a lingua franca and its prestige in Finland. Interestingly, Russian also held significance as an HL for almost 20% of the respondents, either due to being the native language of one of the parents or for communication with relatives.

Overall, the disparity between parental ideologies on Hebrew literacy and the actual proficiency levels among children underscored the complexity of language maintenance in multilingual contexts. With concerted efforts to provide comprehensive support for Hebrew literacy development, such as providing external educational programs and resources for

the caregivers for home-based language learning, it may be possible to narrow the gap between parental ideologies and children's Hebrew practices.

Regarding Hebrew management at home, Hebrew was used on a daily basis alongside other languages by a majority of respondents. However, some parents did not consistently use Hebrew with their spouses or children, indicating varied approaches to language management at home. Furthermore, approximately half of the respondents reported that their children did not communicate in Hebrew outside the home, while the other half reported interactions in Hebrew with extended family members, friends, and activities provided by the Jewish school and daycare in Helsinki.

Research findings suggested that over half of the Hebrew-speaking parents were successful in creating language management strategies conducive to the development of oral language skills among their children. These findings underscored the essential role of parental input and exposure in fostering language acquisition of HLs in a different environment language. On the other hand, the survey revealed a significant lack of literacy among children in Hebrew-speaking families. Only a small percentage of children were able to read or write Hebrew on a good or excellent level, with the majority exhibiting limited or non-existent literacy skills. This gap in literacy proficiency underscored the need for comprehensive language support and intervention. While parental involvement and support play a crucial role in fostering HL development and proficiency among children (e.g., Montrul 2015; Melo-Pfeifer 2015), the importance of collaborative efforts between families, educators, and community stakeholders in promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity is vital.

English and Russian languages also proved to play a role in the language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. English, being a *lingua franca* in Finland (Leppänen et al. 2011), was cited by slightly over a third of the participants either as the primary or one of the family languages, often chosen for communication with non-Hebrew-speaking spouses or due to its perceived importance for the children's future. In three cases, English was utilized as one of the languages between siblings. Russian, the major immigrant language spoken by 1.6% of the Finnish population as a first language (Official Statistics Finland 2022), played a significant role within Hebrew-speaking families as well. It was reported as the only or one of the family languages by a third of the respondents, while in a third of these families, Russian was used as the primary language of communication among siblings, despite the substantial time of residence of these families in Finland. This number surpassed the number of families where Hebrew was the only language of communication between the siblings, indicating the complexity of language choices within these households. This variation can be attributed to several factors, including the notable discrepancy in the sizes of the two linguistic communities, the accessibility of formal and informal Russian education (Viimaranta et al. 2019), and, naturally, parental beliefs regarding the significance of various languages for their children.

### *5.3. Factors Influencing Heritage Hebrew Transmission*

The second research question inquired about factors that influence the maintenance of heritage Hebrew among Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. A multitude of factors influence the maintenance of Hebrew in Finland, revealing the complex interplay between societal, familial, and individual factors shaping the linguistic landscape. A comprehensive examination of these factors revealed both challenges and opportunities in transmitting Hebrew language skills to children in Finland. This section describes the most prominent factors that appeared in the survey responses.

Parental language ideologies and attitudes regarding the importance of Hebrew maintenance played a significant role in shaping their efforts to transmit the language to their children. While there was a strong emphasis on the significance of oral Hebrew proficiency, with the main reasons being preserving Jewish identity and facilitating communication, there were noticeable gaps between the perceived importance of Hebrew literacy and the actual proficiency levels among children. Parents generally valued Hebrew literacy;

however, challenges such as time constraints and competing priorities often hindered their abilities to prioritize Hebrew literacy development.

Language practices at home, including the languages used between family members, played a crucial role in language maintenance. Within many families, Hebrew was frequently integrated alongside other languages in daily communication; nevertheless, there were variations in language management strategies among families—while some parents consistently used Hebrew with their spouses and children, others decided not to do so. Siblings also played a significant role in shaping each other's language development and language choices, with a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary language of communication among siblings, particularly correlated with the duration of residence in Finland. Additionally, sibling interactions showed various patterns depending on the siblings' birth order. The shift away from Hebrew as the primary sibling language contributed to challenges in Hebrew maintenance and in some cases to its attrition.

The extent of Hebrew communication outside the home, including interactions with extended family, and friends, and participation in Jewish or Israeli activities, also proved to influence Hebrew maintenance. While some children engaged in activities that provided opportunities for Hebrew language use, others had limited exposure to Hebrew outside the home, contributing to Hebrew attrition.

Regarding institutional support with HL maintenance, Finnish policies strongly support complementary education in HLs; nevertheless, there are challenges in implementation (Venäläinen et al. 2022), including teacher shortages in certain languages and logistical constraints. Consistent with this, a substantial part of the participants underscored challenges in accessing educational programs in Hebrew.

Finally, and of paramount importance, the influence of other languages significantly shaped the management of heritage Hebrew. Finnish (and in some cases Swedish), as the dominant environment language, is essential for cultural integration and societal integration in Finland. Given its role as the primary language of instruction in Finnish schools, the emphasis on Finnish education may limit the time and resources available for Hebrew language development. English, as a global lingua franca and a prestigious language in Finland, proved to hold significance for many Hebrew-speaking families, with a substantial number of parents expressing a strong desire for their children to excel in English, and in several instances, prioritizing it over Hebrew due to its perceived importance for the children's future opportunities. Additionally, Russian has been shown to have a considerable impact on language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families. With a substantial presence in Israel, spoken by approximately 15% to 20% of the population (Dovrin and Admon 2022; Perelmutter 2018; Kopeliovich 2010), and reported as one of the everyday communication languages by a third of the survey participants, Russian also shaped the language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Russian was mainly used either because it was one of the native languages of a parent alongside Hebrew, or due to communication preferences within the extended family.

In considering the broader context, it is noteworthy to mention a significant sociopolitical factor that was neither addressed in the survey nor reflected on by the participants but holds relevance to the discussion. The recent surge in antisemitism in Finland following 7 October 2023 (Czimbalmos et al. 2023; Hanhivaara 2023; Jäärni 2023), aligns with existing data indicating that 15% of Finns openly expressed antisemitic attitudes (Tuori 2022) can potentially hinder the intergenerational transmission of Hebrew as an HL and impact the implementation of FLPs. Similar concerns have been observed globally, with numerous incidents reported by prominent news outlets of individuals being targeted for speaking Hebrew in public (e.g., Lynn 2023; Dayan 2023; Howe 2024). Additionally, there are concerns regarding the safety of speaking Hebrew publicly in Nordic countries, as evidenced by advisories from Jewish congregations, such as the recommendation by the Jewish congregation in Gothenburg to avoid displaying Jewish symbols in public or speaking Hebrew openly (Radio Sweden 2023).

Overall, a combination of parental attitudes and beliefs, language practices within the home environment, external exposure to Hebrew, educational support, and the influence of other languages were the main factors contributing to the maintenance or attrition of heritage Hebrew among Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Efforts to address these factors comprehensively are necessary to promote the successful transmission of heritage Hebrew in Finland.

## 6. Conclusions

The data in this study were derived from a sociolinguistic survey aimed at understanding FLPs within a specific linguistic minority group, namely Hebrew-speaking families with children in Finland. It offered a focal perspective on the language ideologies, management strategies, and everyday language practices of this minority language community. The study highlighted the complex interplay of factors influencing the maintenance of heritage Hebrew in Finland. While parents expressed strong positive attitudes towards multilingualism and the importance of Hebrew proficiency for preserving cultural identity, challenges such as limited educational opportunities, time constraints, and competing language priorities impacted the transmission of Hebrew language skills to children, with a notable disparity between parental ideologies regarding Hebrew literacy and the actual literacy levels among children. Family language practices, sibling interactions, and exposure to Hebrew outside the home further shaped the family language dynamics. To ensure the successful preservation of heritage Hebrew in Finland, it is imperative to foster collaboration among families, educators, and community stakeholders in offering comprehensive support for language development.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that the current survey was exploratory in nature, serving as the preliminary phase of a larger study on FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. While it captured insights from a substantial segment of Hebrew-speaking parents in Finland, it is essential to recognize that multilingual families are highly diverse, each embodying a unique variety of languages that shapes their identity (Aronin 2016). Consequently, making generalizations based on the study findings may be challenging.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the survey was not explicitly tailored for correlational analyses to investigate causal relationships between parental ideologies, management strategies, and practices should be viewed with caution, and the conclusions be considered provisional. Nevertheless, this study has identified several factors that should be examined in future research on FLPs within multilingual Hebrew-speaking families. These factors include interactions between different family members, educational opportunities, and sociopolitical context.

The findings of the survey underscore the potential for further exploration of FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families not only in Finland but also within the broader context of the Nordic countries. Conducting research in this area can offer valuable insights into the specific challenges and opportunities encountered by Hebrew speakers in their efforts to transmit the language to the next generation.

The study contributes to the field of HLs by examining the specific combination of languages involved, namely Hebrew as a heritage language and Finnish as the majority language. It provides insights into the dynamics and challenges of maintaining the heritage of Hebrew, a language linked to a very specific religion and history of a nation-state, within the Finnish context. Additionally, the study contributes to the field of FLPs by examining the language policies of immigrant Israeli families in the Nordic context, shedding light on the factors influencing language transmission and maintenance within these families.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study based on several factors: anonymous nature of data collection, minimal risk posed to participants, absence of vulnerable populations, and strict adherence to GDPR compliance standards.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (Appendix A).

**Data Availability Statement:** The data are not publicly available. Portions of the data that do not compromise participant anonymity are available upon request from the author.

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## Appendix A

### SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

I understand that:

My participation in research is completely voluntary, and I can terminate it at any time without providing a reason.

I have the right to withdraw my consent and request the researcher to delete any data already collected. I understand that, at that stage, the researcher may have only anonymized data, but she will make every effort to delete my data.

The researcher will not dispose of my identity or any information that could potentially reveal my identity.

I can ask the researcher for more information about the research, and she will answer my questions.

- I agree;
- I do not agree.

1. Age: (OPEN QUESTION).

2. Gender: male/female/other/prefer not to answer.

3. Educational background (choose highest degree):

- Comprehensive school;
- High school;
- Vocational training;
- Bachelor's degree;
- Master's degree;
- Doctorate degree.

4. What languages do you speak, and at what age were you exposed to each of the languages?

For example: Hebrew—0, French—0, English—6, Finnish—30.

5. Does at least one of your parents speak Hebrew as a first language?

- Yes, one of them;
- Yes, both;
- No.

6. How long have you lived in Finland?

- Less than a year;
- 1–3 years;
- 4–9 years;
- 10–20 years;
- over 20 years.

7. Have you ever lived in any other country except for Israel or Finland? Yes/No. If you have, name the country/countries. (OPEN QUESTION).

7A. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, where, from what age, and for how many years?

8. Which language(s) do you use in your working life in Finland? (OPEN QUESTION).

9. Which languages are spoken in your family on an everyday level? (OPEN QUESTION).

10. Do you speak Hebrew with. . . . ? Yes/No/Occasionally/Not relevant.

- Your parents;
- Your siblings;
- Your partner;
- Your children;
- Your friends.

10A. You can elaborate on your language choice here: (OPEN QUESTION).

11. Where else (in which places or situations, except family and work) do you use Hebrew? (OPEN QUESTION).

12. I have children aged:

- 0–3;
- 4–6;
- 7–11;
- 12–15;
- 16–18;
- 19+.

13. How well can your child speak Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

Excellent/Good/Intermediate/Poor/Non/existent.

14. How well can your child understand Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

15. How well can your child read Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

16. How well can your child write Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

17. Do your child/children use Hebrew outside the home? Yes/no/not all the children.

17A. If you answered “yes”, where and with whom? Be specific about each child.

18. Is your child/are your children taught Hebrew outside the home?

19. Is it important for you that your child is able to understand Hebrew? Yes/no.

20. Is it important for you that your child is able to speak Hebrew? Yes/no.

21. Why is it important to you that your children understand and speak Hebrew? If you answered “no” in the previous question, skip the question.

- To communicate with family members living in Israel;
- To communicate with family members in other countries;
- To feel comfortable when visiting Israel;
- It is most convenient for me to speak Hebrew with them;
- It is important to preserve Hebrew, because we are Israeli and/or Jewish;
- I believe they will need Hebrew in the future;
- To communicate with the Hebrew-speaking community in Finland;
- Other.

21A. If you answered “other”, explain.

22. Is it important for you that your child is able to read Hebrew?

23. Is it important for you that your child is able to write Hebrew?

24. If your child does not read or write in Hebrew, what are the main reasons for it?

- They read and write in Hebrew;
- I have no time to teach them;
- Hebrew writing is easy, they will learn it fast when they decide to;
- Hebrew writing is too complicated;

- My children will not need to write Hebrew in the future;
- They should first learn to read and write in more important languages (for example, English, Finnish, etc.);
- They are too small;
- There is no educational framework that suits us;
- Other.

24A. If you answered “other” in the previous question, please specify.

24B. If the reasons are different for every child, please specify.

25. Is it important to you that your child/children master both languages, Hebrew and Finnish (Swedish)? Why?

25A. Are there other languages that you think your child should master? Why?

26. If there are several children in the family, what language(s) do the children speak to one another?

27. What is the child(ren)’s main language of compulsory education?

28. Would you be willing to be interviewed on the subject? If so, I would be very happy if you could contact me via my email or WhatsApp, which appears at the beginning of the questionnaire. Alternatively, you can leave your email here and I will contact you.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> “By law, everyone in Finland has one registered mother tongue in the Population Information System. The registered language is, above all, a tool for administrative division and planning for the arrangement of society’s services. It does not show how an individual perceives his or her own language, i.e., linguistic identity, or how the individual relates to other languages. There is no legal or linguistic definition for bilingualism at the individual level. When talking about bilingualism at the individual level, the question is who considers himself or herself to be bilingual” (Prime Minister’s Office 2012).

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## Article

# Language Policy and Practices in an Ethiopian University towards Multilingualism

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**Abstract:** The study explores an Ethiopian higher education institution's language policy and practices, explicitly focusing on multilingualism. The research highlights a discrepancy between language policy and classroom realities. Despite English being officially designated as the primary instructional medium of higher education institutions, the prevalent environment for teaching and learning is multilingual, incorporating Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and other languages alongside English. This disparity challenges the monolingual language education policy mandated by the Ethiopian constitution. The study employs a mixed-methods approach to offer a comprehensive perspective on the issue, stressing the necessity for a more holistic understanding of the situation. Furthermore, the research indicates that the Ethiopian constitution lacks explicit provisions addressing multilingualism within higher education institutions, revealing a gap in the legal framework. This misalignment calls for potential policy adjustments to better accommodate the multilingual nature of higher education. Beyond the classroom, both instructors and students frequently use Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and other heritage languages in their interactions, further emphasizing the importance of understanding these language dynamics in the Ethiopian higher education context. Overall, this study underscores the need for a closer examination of language practices and their implications, offering insights into promoting more inclusive education and informed language policies within Ethiopian higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Afaan Oromoo; Amharic; Ethiopia; heritage languages; language education practices; language policy; linguistic diversity; multilingualism

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia has a long story of formal education rooted in its ancient civilization and closely linked to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. However, modern higher education began in 1950 with the founding of Addis Ababa University (Wondimu 2003). In the following decades, specialized higher education institutions emerged, offering training in areas such as agriculture, engineering, and public health (World Bank 2003). The Addis Ababa University became a central institution in the country's educational landscape. Despite the slow progress in higher education between 1974 and 1991, significant reforms were introduced after the change of government in 1991. These reforms aimed to improve education at all levels and led to the establishment of new universities and the adaptation of measures to encourage private investment. Despite the impressive growth, there are still challenges in Ethiopian higher education, such as equity, quality, and the preference of the medium of instruction that greatly affect the quality of education and require continuous attention and solutions from the government. Among these challenges, this study focuses on exploring and analyzing language policy and practices in the higher education landscape of Ethiopia, more precisely as a case study in Mattu University, with an emphasis on the

promotion of multilingualism. Mattu is the capital of the Illu Abba Bor zone in the Oromiya region. This city is home to many ethnic groups from different regions. Languages such as Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, Anguak, Nuer, Tigrigna, Kefa, Guragigna, and English are spoken there. Apart from the latter, the other languages spoken in Mattu are indigenous languages.

Language policy and practice in Ethiopian higher education institutions are central in shaping the linguistic fabric of a nation, exerting a profound influence on educational outcomes and contributing significantly to socio-cultural dynamics (Ricento 2006). The present study addresses the nuanced complexities of language choices and examines how a higher education institution in Ethiopia navigates the delicate balance between the preservation of indigenous languages and the integration of a global language such as English.

Ethiopia, known for its rich linguistic diversity and colorful cultural heritage, provides a unique and compelling context for the study of language policy in higher education (Molla 2018; Lanza and Woldemariam 2014). The historical evolution, spanning from the imperial era to the present day, has witnessed dynamic shifts in language preferences and educational paradigms. This study seeks to unravel the intricacies of language choices and strategies and to illuminate the multiple ways in which higher education institutions have struggled with the challenge of preserving indigenous languages while accommodating global linguistic influences.

The significance of this study is multifaceted, and it is aimed at various stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and the general public. First, it has the potential to serve as a guide for researchers and policymakers by providing insights into the effectiveness and impact of existing language policies in Ethiopian higher education (cf. Molla 2018; see also Heugh et al. 2007 on language policy in secondary education of Ethiopia). By carefully evaluating the impact of these policies on students' learning experiences, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can help improve multilingual education strategies and thus promote a more inclusive and effective education system (Kaplan and Baldauf 2008).

In addition, the study recognizes the broader impact of language policy on national identity, social cohesion, and the development of a skilled and diverse workforce (Shohamy 2006). In a country like Ethiopia, where linguistic diversity is intertwined with cultural richness, language policy plays a crucial role in shaping the collective identity of the population (Hudson 1996). By addressing the intricacies of language choices in higher education, the study aims to contribute to a broader societal dialog on how language can be used as a tool for unity and progress. With Ethiopia's political, social, and educational landscape in a state of flux, a comprehensive examination of language policy in higher education is imperative.

The findings of this study are likely to support the formulation of evidence-based language policies that not only promote inclusivity within higher education institutions but also actively support the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages. In this way, the study seeks to prepare Ethiopian students for meaningful engagement on the global stage and to recognize the importance of multilingualism in an interconnected world (Crystal 2003).

In essence, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical framework and practical application and to promote a nuanced understanding of language dynamics in the higher education sector in Ethiopia (Bamgbose 2005). In this way, it seeks to contribute not only to the local context but also to the broader discourse on language policy in higher education in Africa and globally, where the complexity of multilingualism continues to be a relevant and evolving topic of discussion (García 2009).

## **2. Languages and Language Policy in Ethiopia**

### *2.1. General Overview*

Africa is a linguistic treasure trove. It is home to some 2065 languages, which make up a third of the world's linguistic diversity (Adegbija 1994; Batibo 2005; Eberhard et al. 2024). This diversity is spread across four major language groups—Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan,

Niger-Congo, and Khoisan—all of which contribute to Africa’s cultural richness (Heine and Nurse 2000; Greenberg 1981). Ethiopia, an East African country with more than 110 million inhabitants, is known for its linguistic diversity, which includes over 85 languages. This number can vary, as Lewis (2009) states, listing 86 languages. These languages can be divided into two primary language families: Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan, which are macro families. The Afro-Asiatic languages in Ethiopia mainly include the languages of the Cushitic, Omotic, and Semitic families. Within the Cushitic family, Oromo is the language with the most speakers (Lanza and Woldemariam 2014), followed by Somali and Afar. Other important languages in this family are Sidama, Kambata, and Hadiyya. Although Eberhard et al. (2024) has identified 47 Cushitic languages, this count is not definitive, as shown by the example of Oromo, which is often considered a single language with regional dialects, although it is categorized as three separate languages.

The Cushitic languages are mainly spoken in the eastern and central regions of Ethiopia. The Omotic language family, which is unique to Ethiopia, is mainly found in the Omo Valley in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS). Originally classified as Western Cushitic, it was later reclassified as Omotic. Despite Theil’s (2006) assertion of independence from Afro-Asiatic, important Omotic languages such as Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa, and Dawro are still widely spoken by many people.

Another important language group in Ethiopia is the Semitic languages, including Amharic, Tigrinya, Ge’ez, and the Gurage cluster. Amharic has the most speakers within the Semitic family, followed by Tigrinya and the Gurage languages. Although there are no native speakers of Ge’ez, it serves as a classical religious language within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, which is widely spoken throughout the country. The Semitic languages, commonly referred to as Ethio-Semitic, are widely spoken in northern and central Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Nilo-Saharan languages, which are spoken in the western regions on the border with Sudan and South Sudan, represent a smaller language group whose total population is less than 500,000 according to the 1994 census (OPHCC 1998).

Since 1991, Ethiopia has been divided into eleven federal, regional states, namely Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, Oromiya, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region, Tigray, Sidama National Regional State and Southwest Ethiopia Region, in addition to two city administrations, namely Addis Ababa City Administration and Dire Dawa. The distribution of languages in Ethiopia corresponds to the regional administrative boundaries for the five main languages: Afar, Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya. Apart from the regional state of Amhara, Amharic is spoken in all cities in the country and serves as a lingua franca (Meyer 2006; Meyer and Richter 2003; Lanza and Woldemariam 2014).

Tigrinya, Afar, and Somali are spoken in their respective regional states. In contrast, Afaan Oromo is spoken in Oromia regional state, Amhara regional state (in Kamise special zone of Oromiya), Somali regional state, Sidama regional state, Harari regional state, Benishangul-Gumuz region, Gambella region, and Dire Dawa city administration as Oromia region covers the largest area in central, western and southern Ethiopia. The SNNPRS is the most diverse region and consists of 56 ethnic groups. The major languages in the state include the Gurage cluster, Silti, Sidama, Wolaita, Hadiyya, Kambata, Gedeo, Gamo, and Dawro. Two regions were newly created by referendum and were part of the SNNPR. These are Sidama, which was established as Sidama National Regional State on 4 July 2020, and the Southwest Ethiopia region, which was established on 23 November 2021 (Chali and Parapatics 2023).

All languages are equally recognized in Ethiopia (Ado et al. 2021). Amharic is the working language of the central government and the working language of Addis Ababa City Administration, Dire Dawa City Administration, South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State, Gambella Regional State, and Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State as it serves as a lingua franca between the different ethnic groups that make up these regional states. Afar, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya are languages that serve as regional

working languages in the regional states where they are predominantly spoken (ibid.). The people of Ethiopia are linguistically diverse and speak over 85 local languages as mother tongues (Central Statistics Agency 2008). The situation is also reflected in the country's higher education (Mendis and Johannessen 2016 in Kassaye et al. 2021), as many local languages are taught as school subjects, and some are used as teaching tools in elementary school (Seidel and Moritz 2009 in Kassaye et al. 2021); therefore, university students become multilingual.

Language policies in Africa vary widely, with some countries prioritizing indigenous languages and others using colonial languages as a medium of instruction (Kigamwa 2017). In Ethiopia, the 1995 constitution (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995) and the 1994 education (Ministry of Education 1994) policy emphasize the use of national languages in primary education, while English is used in secondary and tertiary education levels.

The study looks at the challenges posed by language policy, particularly in higher education. The fact that Ethiopia prioritizes English as the primary medium of instruction is a cause of concern for educators and highlights the need for effective bilingual approaches to improve students' comprehension skills and academic performance (Cummins 2000; Baker 2011).

African countries struggle with the dual presence of official colonial languages and local vernaculars. The linguistic situation in Ethiopia, shaped by historical influences, reflects a complex interplay in which the dominance of a particular language has limited the integration and recognition of indigenous languages.

In summary, the linguistic panorama of Africa reflects a dynamic interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors that shape linguistic identities. While some nations successfully embrace local languages as symbols of unity, others, such as Ethiopia, struggle with complex problems arising from historical constraints, i.e., by neglecting other indigenous languages, Amharic has been seen as a language that represents the nation and brings people together in various spheres of life, such as education, public service, social interaction, trade, and business. It was used to teach, communicate, and conduct transactions (Getachew and Derib 2006; Woldemariam 2007).

The present study highlights the need for an inclusive language policy that balances the global demands for language proficiency with the preservation of the diverse linguistic heritage in the African context. Linguistic diversity in Africa reflects a rich cultural heritage that carries the histories and identities of different communities (Heine and Nurse 2000; Adegbija 2004). The coexistence of various language families underscores the depth and breadth of Africa's cultural richness and makes linguistic diversity an integral part of the country's past, present, and future (Adegbija 2004).

## *2.2. Historical Development of Language Policy in Ethiopia's Education System*

The historical development of language policy in the Ethiopian education system is a complex story characterized by the diversity of language, culture, ethnicity, and religion. Throughout the country's history, different rulers, from kings and emirs to queens and prime ministers, have implemented different language policies influenced by their political ideologies (McNab 1989; Heugh et al. 2007).

The establishment of the Minilik II School in 1908 marked the beginning of modern education in Ethiopia, which focused on European languages such as French, English, and Italian. This focus aimed to produce an educated elite capable of communicating internationally and representing the monarchy in diplomatic negotiations (Heugh et al. 2007). Initially, French was the only language of instruction, but it was later joined by English in 1925 (Marew 1998). These languages dominated education until the Italian occupation in 1936, when English became the national language (Gebremedhin 1993). After the withdrawal of the Italians in 1941, English remained the national language until the early 1960s, when Amharic was declared the language of instruction for primary education (grades 1–6) (McNab 1989). By switching from English to Amharic, the Ministry

of Education sought to address the challenges associated with language learning and language barriers and ensure a more effective and pedagogically sound approach (Heugh et al. 2007).

However, the monolingual education policy was criticized for its assimilationist approach, as only Amharic was used throughout the country and linguistic diversity. The introduction of English in grade 3 was recommended to accommodate children unfamiliar with Amharic, leading to a new English curriculum for secondary education in the academic year 1963/1964 (Tamene 2000). The political upheavals in the later years of Haile Selassie's rule and the emergence of movements like 'Land to the Plough' in 1974 diverted attention away from education. After the military government took power, the language policy changed and recognized the rights of different nations and nationalities to use their languages (McNab 1989). Under the National Literacy Campaign of 1975, fifteen Ethiopian languages, including Amharic, were used in informal education (Heugh et al. 2007).

Stoddart (1986) pointed out the problems students were having with their English language skills and recommended that more time be allocated to Amharic and that English be replaced by Amharic as the medium of instruction in secondary schools. However, this recommendation overlooked the global status of English and emphasized the need to expand English provision rather than abandon it. After the collapse of the "Derg" regime in 1991, Ethiopia's language policy underwent a significant change. The 1995 constitution recognized equal status for all Ethiopian languages and declared Amharic as the working language of the federal government. The Ministry of Education's policy gave priority to primary education in mother tongues, recognizing the educational benefits and the right of nationalities to promote their languages.

Today, several languages are taught in elementary schools in Ethiopia, representing a commitment to linguistic diversity. Amharic, Afaan Oromoo, and Tigrinya are also offered as subjects up to the secondary school level, emphasizing the importance of developing languages and cultures of different nationalities (Heugh et al. 2007). English plays an important role in the Ethiopian education system and serves as the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. The country's language policy reflects a dynamic interplay between historical, political, and pedagogical considerations.

However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the constitutional mandate and the implementation of a multilingual approach in Ethiopian higher education institutions. To address this discrepancy, this study attempts to investigate and answer specific research questions:

RQ1: How does the Ethiopian constitution deal with the concept of multilingualism in higher education?

RQ2: What language practices can be observed among students and instructors in the classrooms of Mattu University?

RQ3: How do the communication patterns between students and instructors outside the classroom at Mattu University reflect the multilingualism of the university community?

By addressing these research questions, the study aims to provide insights into the congruence or divergence between constitutional language policies and practical multilingual dynamics in higher education, with an explicit focus on Mattu University.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### **3.1. Research Setting**

The research was carried out on the African continent of Ethiopia, in the regional state of Oromiya, at Mattu University. It is one of the third-generation public universities in southwestern Ethiopia, founded in 2011. It is located around 600 km from the capital Addis Ababa. Ethiopia has been in civil war since 2020. The free movement of people is/was unsafe throughout the country, except in some parts of it. Since southwestern Ethiopia was safe, the authors chose Mattu University. Most students in Ethiopia also prefer this university to feel safe. Since the academic calendar was skewed across the country, there

was no uniform schedule. Consequently, the researchers were forced to collect the data in summer, from the beginning of July to the end of August in 2022.

The linguistic diversity of Ethiopia, explained in the previous chapter, is also reflected in the country's higher education (Mendisu and Johannessen 2016), as many local languages are taught as school subjects, and some are used as the medium of instruction in elementary school (Seidel and Moritz 2009). Therefore, students enter universities as multilingual.

In the experience of the first author, linguistic diversity can also be observed at Mattu University. It is common for students on campus to use different local languages to communicate with each other. This shows that they come from different ethnic groups who use different languages as mother tongues and second languages. This is practical proof of the metaphor as a common saying: "The higher education in the country represents the small Ethiopia".

### *3.2. Research Design*

We used a mixed-methods approach for an exploratory design. Some studies require only a single method, while others require multiple methods depending on the research questions. Researchers are interested in finding out the causal relationship or outcome of phenomena resort to experimental or quantitative research methods where all external variables must be controlled to prove that the effect is the result of an independent variable (Dornyei 2007). In contrast, in research that aims to explore the processes involved in a phenomenon, such as classroom research, the combination of the two methods may be more appropriate (ibid.). Furthermore, Dornyei (2007) notes that the mixture of the two methods has a complementary function, as it initially enables not only overlapping but also different aspects of a phenomenon to be viewed from different perspectives. It also helps to obtain a more comprehensive and complete portrait of the subject when applied sequentially, as in the case where the result of the first method explains the need for the second. It also works when researchers want to expand the scope and breadth of a study by including multiple components. Second, using mixed methods in a single study maximizes the validity of the results through method triangulation. Method triangulation is a way of testing the validity of a study's findings using multiple methods (validation by convergence) (Creswell and Clark 2007, p. 127). In this study, the compelling reason for using the mixed methods approach is to attempt to broaden the understanding of the subject by painting a relatively more complete picture of the situation.

### *3.3. Participants and Sampling Techniques*

The participants in the study were 349 first-year students in 2022/2023 and 108 instructors from Mattu University. They completed the questionnaires from six colleges and one school from a variety of disciplines, as follows: College of Social Sciences and Humanities, College of Natural Sciences and Computational Sciences, College of Education and Behavioral Studies, College of Engineering and Technology, College of Business and Economics, College of Health Studies, and School of Law. The sampling method used was stratified random sampling for both groups. Stratified random sampling is a probability-based technique in which the population is divided into different strata, and a sample is drawn from each of these strata. The resulting subsamples form the final sample of the study. The strength of this method is that all population groups are presented in the final sample. The stratification of the population is based on one or more significant criteria, such as gender, age, ethnic background, race, or economic status, but mainly on criteria that can be related to the research topic (Sarantakos 2012, p. 197). For this study, the stratum was formed based on their college/school. Furthermore, seven experienced instructors, one from each college at Mattu University, were selected to prepare for an interview. In purposive sampling, participants were asked to provide sufficient information for analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 56). A total of 464 respondents participated.

### 3.4. Instruments of Data Collection

#### 3.4.1. Document Analysis

Documents are ‘social facts’ that are produced, shared, and used in a socially organized way (Atkinson and Coffey 1997, p. 47). Ethiopian universities are responsible to the federal government. Regions have no authority to legislate for higher education institutions, with the exception of regional colleges that train primary school instructors. As a result, there are no local or regional laws that relate to higher education institutions. Therefore, the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 and the Education and Training Policy of 1994 were examined by the authors prior to the data collection to see how they address multilingualism in higher education institutions in Ethiopia (Chali and Parapatics 2023; see Supplementary File S1).

#### 3.4.2. Classroom Observation

Classroom observation provides a clear picture of what the actual teaching and learning process looks like, and the richness and credibility of the information it can provide makes it a desirable tool for data collection (Hancock et al. 2001). Therefore, non-participant observation has been used in the classroom as this method provides a first-hand account of individuals’ actions rather than relying solely on their verbal statements (Denscombe 2014). In non-participant observation, the role of the observer is purely professional and focuses on documenting specific behaviors (both verbal and non-verbal) of students and instructors. This is achieved through the use of a tally sheet system and written field notes to ensure the reliability and validity of the data (Cohen and Manion 1985, p. 103). A checklist was developed for the observation, slightly adapted from Cohn et al. (2013) and Mensah (2014). This checklist (see Supplementary File S2) covers the language practices of instructors and students inside and outside the classroom.

#### 3.4.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire is a widely used and helpful tool for compiling survival data by providing structured, often numerical data. According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989, p. 172), the main advantage of a questionnaire is that it can be given to a large group of people at the same time. These questions were slightly adapted again from Cohn et al. (2013) and Mensah (2014), who conducted research on language policy and practice in a multilingual Namibian high school classroom and developed a questionnaire to investigate multilingual language use. The first part of the questionnaire consists of two parts. The first one is about the personal information of the participants. The second part consists of questions about language competence (on this term, see Section 4.2 below), and the next part deals with language practice inside and outside the classroom. (For the questionnaires used for the present study, see Supplementary Files S3 and S4).

#### 3.4.4. Interview

The interview is the most frequently used method in qualitative research. Its main purpose is to provide a structured platform for interviewees to articulate their thoughts in their own words in a dialogue between two people (Leonard 2003, p. 166). A key feature of interviews is their adaptability compared to other research methods, allowing the interviewer to reflect further on the basis of the interviewee’s answers and clarify ambiguities in their statements (Gall et al. 1996, p. 289). It enables detailed information gathering, clear formulation, and flexibility that cannot be achieved with other methods (Seliger and Shohamy 1989, p. 166).

The semi-structured approach is preferred in this study because it allows the respondent to speak freely and reveal extensive information compared to a structured interview. Seven experienced instructors from Mattu University were purposively selected for the study, one from each college, as mentioned above. Accordingly, relying on the literature reviewed and slightly adapted from the abovementioned documents, we designed an inter-

view guide containing nine open-ended yet semi-structured questions for the interviewees (see Supplementary File S5).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Consideration of Multilingualism in Federal Documents

Ethiopia's approach to federalism is bold compared to other very different African states. Article 39 of the Ethiopian Federal Constitution, adopted in 1995, explicitly recognizes the country's ethnic diversity. Ethiopia is a federation made up of nations and nationalities, each of which has sovereignty as defined in Article 8 of the Constitution. Nations and nationalities with defined territorial homelands have the right to establish their own regions or even seek independence. There are eleven regions and two city administrations in the country, each of which has far-reaching powers. These include shaping policy, drafting the constitution, choosing the working language, and maintaining regional police and administrative services. However, higher education institutions such as universities are under the control of the federal government and the Ministry of Education.

For this reason, we examined the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 and the Education and Training Policy of 1994 to see how they address multilingualism in higher educational institutions. This sub-chapter sums up the main results of this analysis in order to provide a basis for a better understanding of the findings of the present study (for details see Anonymized reference).

The study aimed to determine whether Ethiopia has a language policy that specifically addresses multilingualism and the medium(s) of instruction within its general education system, as well as in the country's higher education institutions.

The analysis revealed that there is no explicit language policy that specifically addresses multilingualism in the general education system which was also confirmed in the interviews with instructors. The examination of the two documents revealed that they do not explicitly address or consider the issue of multilingualism within higher education institutions. Regarding the third question, Article 3.5.5 in the 1995 Constitution and Article 3.5.7 in the 1994 Education and Training Policy explicitly state that the English is the language of instruction for Ethiopian higher education institutions.

However, it is worth noting that despite documents mandating that English be the medium of instruction in higher education, the results of the interviews, both questionnaires and classroom observations, indicate that, in practice, this policy is being deviated from. Instructors and students often switch between English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic in class, indicating a discrepancy between the constitutional provisions and actual language practice, at least at Mattu University. These findings emphasize the need for further examination and potential development in this area.

### 4.2. Individual Language Proficiency

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), linguistic competence is a speaker's ability to use language for various communicative purposes. In the context of the present study, language competence is understood as the ability of multilingual people to understand language effortlessly, to articulate a variety of concepts clearly in both oral and written forms, and to interact with other speakers in a relaxed manner (Renandya et al. 2018, p. 619). Since language learning is skill-oriented, this definition shows that the main goal of language learning is to achieve a good command of the language in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Accordingly, both instructors and students were asked at the beginning of the questionnaires which language they could understand, speak, read, and write among the options listed (see Supplementary Files S3 and S4).

The students' responses showed that 163 (46.7%) could understand English, Afaan Oromo, and Amharic among the languages listed in the questionnaire. Afaan Oromoo and English can be understood by 101 (28.9%), English and Amharic by 46 (13.2%), and "other language(s)" were marked by a few students. As the questionnaires explain, Sidamu Affo, Wolayita, Afar, Guraghe, Hadiya, Anuak, and/or Gumuz are meant as "other" languages

(see Supplementary Files S3 and S4). The result of the instructors' questionnaire showed that 100 of them (92.6%) indicated that they could understand English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, while a couple of them marked Tigrigna or other(s) besides the mostly marked two or three languages.

A total of 151 (43.3%) students can speak English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, 113 (32.4%) English and Afaan Oromoo, 45 (12.9%) English and Amharic, and 27 (7.7%) English, Amharic and other(s). Among instructors, 100 (92.6%) indicated that they could speak English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic. Tigrigna, Somali, and other languages were also marked by a couple of participants in addition to two or three languages mentioned above, and one student marked only Afaan Oromoo by itself.

In regard to reading, 157 (45%) students marked English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, 109 (31.2%) English and Afaan Oromoo, and 53 (15.2%) English and Amharic. In addition, 22 students (6.3%) marked other languages besides English and Amharic, and a couple of them named Tigrigna and Somali. A total of 100 (92.6%) instructors indicated that they could read English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, while a couple of instructors marked these three in addition to Tigrigna or another language(s).

A total of 156 students (44.7%) indicated that they could write in English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, while 109 (31.2%) in English and Afaan Oromoo, 54 (15.5%) in English and Amharic, and 19 (5.4%) in these two languages in addition to other(s). Similarly, 101 instructors (93.5%) stated that they could write in English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic. Tigrigna, Somali, and other languages were marked a few times by both the students and the instructors regarding writing competencies.

Hammarberg (2010) states that L1 is a learner's first language acquired in childhood; an L2 is the language(s) learned later as (a) secondary language(s). In this context, both students and instructors were asked which was their first language(s) among the listed ones. A total of 252 students (72.2%) indicated Amharic as their first language, 30 (8.2%) marked "other(s)", 3 Tigrigna, and 2–2 students marked Afaan Oromoo and Somali. On the other hand, the responses of the instructors reveal a diverse linguistic background. Specifically, 70 (64.8%) indicated Afaan Oromoo as their first language, 21 "other(s)", 11 Amharic, 5 Tigrigna, and 1 marked Amharic and "other(s)".

In addition, both students and instructors were asked which language(s) they use as (a) second language(s). Among students, 193 (55.3%) indicated Amharic, 103 (29.5%) English, 23 (6.5%) Afaan Oromoo, and 17 (4.9%) as L2, and a couple of them mentioned other combinations, which included Tigrigna, Somali, and other languages. Similarly, 45 instructors (41.7%) reported Amharic as L2, 24 (22.2%) Afaan Oromoo, 21 (19%) English, 16 (14.8%) English and Amharic, while 1–1 instructor marked English and Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic and Afaan Oromoo as L2.

These results show that the majority of the students and instructors are fluent in more than one language. This corresponds to bilingualism or multilingualism, when people speak several languages in the course of their lives (Grosjean 2008; Navracscics 2016). Navracscics (2016) states that a bilingual person needs at least two languages in daily communication: one in private and one in public contexts. Taking this into account, the majority of the participants can use three languages. Furthermore, Aronin (2019) defines individual multilingualism as the ability of a person to master and use two or more languages appropriately. In line with these definitions, it can be concluded that most participants can be classified as multilingual according to their self-reflection.

#### 4.3. Language Practices between Instructors and Students Inside the Classroom

Multilingualism is a well-discussed topic in modern societies due to historical, social, political, and economic factors. In many schools today, multilingualism is seen as an important educational goal. According to Cenoz (2013), many educational institutions around the world include multiple languages in their curriculum, either as subjects or as languages of instruction. These measures can reduce the prevalence of monolingual education and promote the inclusion of minority languages in the curriculum, as May

(2008) and Baker (2011) suggest. This emerging area of research challenges the advocacy of English-only instruction (Kassaye et al. 2021). Learning is most successful when students are “taught and assessed in a language they understand and speak well” (Benson 2016, p. 3). In the present study, three questions were posed to students and instructors to explore their language use in the classroom setting. In the next couple of pages, the results are presented precisely to each question of this part regarding both students and instructors, and it is summarized at the end of the sub-chapter in Table 1 for the sake of transparency. Furthermore, the findings of the survey questions are compared to the data from the interview and the experiences of the classroom observation.

**Table 1.** Languages used in classroom settings by students and their instructors (n = 457) (E—English, AO—Afaan Oromoo, A—Amharic, nr.—not relevant; rounded results).

| Languages  | Students (n = 349) |                            |                    | Instructors (n = 108) |                  |                                  |
|------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
|            | Q&A                | Communication Other than E | Pair or Group Work | Instruction           | Q&A Other than E | Explaining Ideas During Teaching |
| E + AO + A | 22%                | nr.                        | 32%                | 57%                   | nr.              | 77%                              |
| E + AO     | 38%                | nr.                        | 18%                | 11%                   | nr.              | 0%                               |
| E + A      | 16%                | nr.                        | 11%                | 8%                    | nr.              | 0%                               |
| AO + A     | 10%                | 43%                        | 21%                | 2%                    | 81%              | 0%                               |
| AO         | 6%                 | 36%                        | 7%                 | 4%                    | 11%              | 10%                              |
| A          | 3%                 | 19%                        | 7%                 | 0%                    | 5%               | 3%                               |
| E          | 3%                 | nr.                        | 3%                 | 18%                   | nr.              | 0%                               |

Examination of the languages that students typically use to ask and answer questions in the classroom revealed that 132 (37.7%) use a combination of English and Afaan Oromoo for this purpose, indicating a widespread bilingual approach. Also, 77 students (22.1%) reported using English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, indicating trilingual interaction. In addition, 55 students (15.8%) use a combination of English and Amharic, while 34 students (9.7%) use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, indicating diverse linguistic practices. Further differences arise from the fact that 22 students (6.3%) use Afaan Oromoo, 11 (3.2%) English, and 11 (3.2%) Amharic for this interaction. Four of them use English, Amharic, and other languages, some indicated using English in conjunction with other language(s), and there were isolated cases where students used a combination of English, Afaan Oromoo, Amharic besides Tigrigna or other language(s) for asking and answering questions in the classroom.

The results of the question asked to investigate students’ use of language to communicate in the classroom when they do not understand English show convincing patterns. A total of 150 (43%) students reported using Afaan Oromoo and Amharic for communication, indicating a widespread bilingual approach. In addition, 127 (36.4%) students used Afaan Oromoo, and 66 (18.9%) Amharic, indicating different linguistic practices. A smaller number, five, reported using Amharic and other languages, while one used Afaan Oromoo and other languages.

In this context, instructors were asked which language(s) they allow their students to use in class other than English because these answers reveal a complex scenario. A clear majority of 87 (80.6%) admit that students are allowed to use both Afaan Oromoo and Amharic for communication. In contrast, 12 instructors (11.1%) exclusively allow the use of Afaan Oromoo. In addition, five (4.6%) agreed to the use of Amharic by the students. Two instructors (1.9%) mentioned that they allow the use of Afaan Oromoo alongside other languages. In a more limited context, one instructor explicitly states that they allow students to use Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and Tigrigna as an alternative to English, while another allows their students to use English and other(s). As interviewees shared, this complicated landscape of language permissions in the classroom raises interesting questions about the consistency of actual classroom practices with the established language policy outlined in the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 and the Educational and Training Policy of 1994. The observations from the classroom assessments and the interviews with

instructors about what language(s) they allow their students to ask and answer questions other than English reinforce the notion that the practical language dynamics may deviate from the prescribed educational guidelines. Classroom observations confirm that students predominantly use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic during Q&A sessions. The interviews with the instructors also confirm that the instructors do not mind if the students use these languages when asking and answering questions, indicating a harmonious alignment between the students' practices and the instructors' tolerance, although the two abovementioned educational documents advocate the exclusive use of English. This highlights the discrepancy between the institutional language policy at the macro level of the multilingual context and the observed language practices at the micro level in the classroom, as noted by Gorter and Cenoz (2017).

In addition, the languages frequently used by students for group or pair work in the classroom show clear differences. A total of 111 (31.8%) students reported that they frequently use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic for collaborative activities. Moreover, 73 (20.9%) reported using Afaan Oromoo and Amharic frequently, while 62 (17.8%) used English and Afaan Oromoo for such tasks. The study further reveals that 39 (11.2%) often use English and Amharic, 26 (7.4%) mostly use Afaan Oromoo, 23 (6.6%) use Amharic, 9 (2.6%) use English, and 2–2 (0.6%) use English, Amharic and other language(s), Amharic and other(s), English, Afaan Oromoo, and other(s). Classroom observations revealed that students frequently use Amharic and Afaan Oromoo for group or pair work.

Thus, the data obtained through classroom observations are consistent with these findings. It is noteworthy that despite Article 3.5.7 of the Educational and Training Policy of 1994, which states that “English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education”, students frequently switching back and forth between English and Afaan Oromoo as well as between English and Amharic. This discrepancy underscores that language practice in the classroom is not in line with the language policy for higher education.

Furthermore, based on the data collected, languages used by instructors in the classroom show a diverse linguistic landscape. Among the instructors surveyed, 61 (56.5%) chose English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic as their primary language of instruction. On the other hand, 19 (17.6%) use English, 12 (11.1%) use Afaan Oromoo and English, and 9 (8.3%) use both English and Amharic in their instructional practices. A smaller group, namely four instructors (3.7%), use only Afaan Oromoo, two (1.9%) use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, and one (0.9%) uses a combination of English, Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and Tigrigna. The prevailing trend in the responses emphasizes that instructors predominantly use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic in the classroom. These findings are further supported by the classroom observations and the interviews with the instructors regarding the language(s) they use in the classroom. In the latter, they stated that they use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic for teaching.

In addition, instructors were asked which language(s) they use to explain ideas during lessons, revealing a diverse linguistic landscape within the classroom. The majority, namely 83 instructors (76.9%), opt for a combination of Afaan Oromoo and Amharic to communicate concepts effectively. In contrast, 11 (10.2%) use only Afaan Oromoo for instructional purposes, indicating a difference in language choice. Furthermore, nine instructors (8.3%) use Afaan Oromoo and Tigrigna to explain ideas, indicating a nuanced approach. In addition, three instructors (2.8%) use Amharic, one (0.9%) uses Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and Tigrigna, and another (0.9%) uses Amharic and other(s). These findings are corroborated by classroom observations and interviews with the instructors. In the interviews, they explained why they use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic to clarify concepts when students have difficulties understanding them. However, this teaching practice contradicts the provisions of the Educational and Training Policy of 1994 again. The contradiction between actual classroom practice and established educational policy underscores the complex dynamics of language use in the academic environment.

Analysis of the students' responses revealed a predominant pattern of using both Amharic and Afaan Oromoo, indicating a classroom environment characterized by multilin-

gualism. Conversely, instructors reported using a combination of English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic as languages of instruction in the classroom. This approach allows students to use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic in addition to English, thus promoting a multilingual teaching and learning atmosphere. These practices resonate with the experiences of classroom observations and data from instructor interviews. However, it is noteworthy that these practices deviate from the monolingual language education policy enshrined in the Ethiopian constitution. This discrepancy between classroom realities and policy expectations underscores the need for a more in-depth examination of language use dynamics in Ethiopian higher education institutions and the potential implications for policy adjustments or reforms.

#### 4.4. Language Practices between Instructors and Students Outside the Classroom for Oral Communication

The concept of multilingualism, as explained by Cenoz (2013), citing the European Commission (2007), refers to the ability of societies, organizations, groups, and individuals to use more than one language regularly in their daily activities. This means that people and communities can communicate, work, and interact in more than one language as part of their daily routine. Multilingualism is about embracing linguistic diversity and recognizing the importance of different languages in different areas of life, from personal interactions to professional environments and cultural exchanges. Therefore, we formulated some questions to investigate the languages of interactions between students and instructors and within their own groups outside the classroom to obtain more information about the area under study. As in Section 4.3, the results are presented precisely, and they are summarized at the end of the subchapter in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2.** Languages used outside the classroom by students (n = 349) (E—English, AO—Afaan Oromoo, A—Amharic, nr.—not relevant; rounded results, except for results between 0% and 1%).

| Languages  | Students (n = 349)                   |                                |                                |                     |
|------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
|            | With Instructors in Academic Context | With Instructors in the Office | Cultural Exchange with Friends | Shopping Activities |
| E + AO + A | 9%                                   | 7%                             | 8%                             | 4%                  |
| E + AO     | 10%                                  | 10%                            | 8%                             | 5%                  |
| E + A      | 3%                                   | 8%                             | 2%                             | 2%                  |
| AO + A     | 28%                                  | 23%                            | 13%                            | 38%                 |
| AO         | 29%                                  | 34%                            | 46%                            | 30%                 |
| A          | 16%                                  | 15%                            | 16%                            | 20%                 |
| E          | 0%                                   | 0%                             | 0.3%                           | 0.6%                |

**Table 3.** Languages used outside the classroom by instructors (n = 108) (E—English, AO—Afaan Oromoo, A—Amharic, nr.—not relevant; rounded results, except for results between 0% and 1%).

| Languages  | Instructors (n = 108) |                                    |                    |                     |
|------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
|            | With Students         | Communication within Their Offices | Cultural Exchanges | Shopping Activities |
| E + AO + A | 30%                   | 21%                                | 21%                | 4%                  |
| E + AO     | 0.9%                  | 2%                                 | 20%                | 0.9%                |
| E + A      | 0.9%                  | 0%                                 | 2%                 | 0.9%                |
| AO + A     | 57%                   | 55%                                | 47%                | 76%                 |
| AO         | 8%                    | 16%                                | 6%                 | 14%                 |
| A          | 3%                    | 6%                                 | 3%                 | 5%                  |
| E          | 0%                    | 0.9%                               | 0.9%               | 0%                  |

In this context, a series of targeted questions were asked to understand the language practices of instructors and students outside the classroom. Students were then asked what

language(s) they use to communicate with other students outside the classroom. The results showed a wide range of language choices. In particular, 101 (28.9%) show a preference for Afaan Oromoo, while 98 (28.1%) prefer a combination of Afaan Oromoo and Amharic. In addition, 56 students (16%) opted for Amharic, 33 (9.5%) for English and Afaan Oromoo, and 30 (8.6%) used all three for this type of communication. Further analysis revealed smaller subgroups within the group of university students who use different language combinations. These combinations include 12 students (3.4%) using English and Amharic, 9 (2.6%) opting for Amharic and other languages, 3 (0.9%) using English, Amharic, and other languages, another 3 using Afaan Oromoo, Amharic and other(s), 2 students (0.6%) using English, Afaan Oromoo, and other(s), and another 2 using English, Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and Somali.

On the other hand, the instructors were also asked which language(s) they use when communicating with their co-workers in their offices. According to the responses, 59 (54.6%) use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic to communicate with their colleagues, while 23 (21.3%) use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic. In addition, 17 (15.7%) reported using Afaan Oromoo, 6 (5.6%) Amharic, 2 (1.9%) Afaan Oromoo and English, and 1 (0.9%) uses English for office communication. This corresponds with the definition of multilingualism provided by the European Commission (2007, cited by Cenoz 2013) as mentioned above. The observed data show that the majority of students and instructors predominantly use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic in their interaction with their peers and co-workers, which indicates bilingualism and thus, a particular case of multilingualism corresponding to the language(s) used in the classroom.

Students were also asked what language(s) they use outside the classroom when interacting with their instructors in their office. Specifically, 120 (34.4%) indicated that they use Afaan Oromoo. Additionally, 81 (23.2%) reported using a combination of Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, while 53 (15.2%) marked Amharic as their preferred language. A total of 36 (10.3%) communicate in English and Afaan Oromoo, and 28 (8%) in English and Amharic. A total of 26 (7.4%) reported using a combination of English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, while 5 (1.4%) mentioned various other language combinations. Similarly, instructors were asked which language(s) they use when communicating with their students outside the classroom. According to their responses, 62 (57.4%) use a combination of Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, 32 (29.6%) mainly use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, while 9 (8.3%) use Afaan Oromoo and 3 (2.8%) use Amharic. One instructor (0.9%) uses English and Afaan Oromoo, and another uses English and Amharic when communicating with students outside the classroom. These results highlight the widespread use of local languages for interactions between students and instructors outside the classroom, which corresponds to the concept of multilingualism defined by Aronin (2019), as mentioned earlier.

In cultural exchanges with friends, students were outlived in terms of the languages they use. The results are as follows: 161 (46.1%) reported using Afaan Oromoo, 54 (15.5%) Amharic, 45 (12.9%) both Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, 31 (8%) English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic. A total of 28 (8%) reported using both Afaan Oromoo and English, 10 (2.9%) Amharic and other(s), 8 (2.3%) Amharic and English, and 7 (2%) reported using others; 1–1 student (0.3%) reported using Afaan Oromoo and Somali, English, Tigrigna, English, Amharic, Afaan Oromoo, and Somali, and Afaan Oromoo and Tigrigna. Instructors were also asked about the language(s) they use in cultural exchanges. A total of 51 (47.2%) indicated that they use Amharic and Afaan Oromoo, 23 (21.3%) used these two in addition to English, 22 (20.4%) used English and Afaan Oromoo, 6 (5.6%) Afaan Oromoo only, 3 (2.8%) Amharic only, 2 (1.9%) used Amharic and English, and 1 (0.9%) marked English only. The majority of respondents opted for local languages during cultural exchanges, showcasing their multilingual abilities, as they demonstrated proficiency in both Amharic and Afaan Oromoo in addition to English. As regards the previous question, the majority of the respondents opted for the local language during cultural exchanges, demonstrating their

multilingual competence as they were proficient in Amharic and Afaan Oromoo, in addition to English. This finding corresponds with the results obtained from classroom observation.

The participants were also asked which language(s) they use in shopping activities. A total of 131 students (37.5%) reported using both Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, 105 (30.1%) only Afaan Oromoo, and 71 (20.3%) Amharic when communicating with sales clerks while shopping. A smaller percentage of the students use different language combinations during these conversations, including 19 (5.4%) who used English and Afaan Oromoo, 14 (4%) using English, Amharic, and Afaan Oromoo, 6 (1.7%) using English and Amharic, 2 (0.6%) who use English only, and 1 (0.3%) English, Afaan Oromoo, and other language(s). In the same way, the majority of the instructors, 82 (75.9%), use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, 15 (13.5%) use Afaan Oromoo only, and 5 (4.6%) use Amharic when shopping; 4 instructors (3.7%) use English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, and 1 (0.9%) uses English and Afaan Oromoo. This indicates that local languages are preferred when shopping both by students and instructors.

The findings reveal that both groups of participants use the indigenous languages for their social interactions outside the classroom, while they frequently switch between the three languages (English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic) in the classroom.

#### 4.5. A Summary of the Interview Results

As it was mentioned earlier, the study also involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews (1 h and 30 min each) with seven experienced instructors focusing on language policy and practices in higher education institutions in Ethiopia, especially at Mattu University. This qualitative approach aimed to explore the differentiated perspectives of the participants in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and insights (Seliger and Shohamy 1989).

The first phase of the interview focused on the participants' knowledge of Article 3.5.5 of the 1995 Constitution and Article 3.5.7 of the 1994 Education and Training Policy, which provides for English as the medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. The interviewees drew on their experience and shared valuable insights that they attributed to practical experiences, such as training secondary school teachers in the use of English in the classroom. Furthermore, they emphasized the historical background of the language policy, dating back to 1944/1945, and confirmed that they are aware of both documents and the challenges related to their implementation.

As the interview progressed, a key focus was on exploring the consistency of English as the medium of instruction. Participants pointed to variations influenced by students' linguistic backgrounds, revealing a dynamic interplay between policy and practical challenges. Descriptions were given about the use of local languages such as Afaan Oromoo and Amharic to enhance understanding, especially in addressing challenges related to English proficiency found in both instructors' and students' questionnaires.

When we asked whether students used English exclusively for Q&A, the interviewees noted a linguistic diversity, with students often reverting to their mother tongue or local languages. This posed a challenge to maintaining a consistent language policy, as reported by the instructors. This result corresponds with the results of students' and instructors' questionnaire data.

Regarding the use of local languages other than English in the classroom, participants confirmed the pragmatic inclusion of languages such as Afaan Oromoo and Amharic, which were influenced by the students' linguistic background. This observation was consistent with the results of the questionnaires and classroom observations, suggesting a consistent pattern across the different data sources. In terms of instructors' responses to students' use of local languages, the interviews revealed a spectrum of responses. While some instructors advocated the use of English, the majority recognized linguistic diversity in the classroom and aimed for a balanced approach that took into account both compliance with guidelines and considerations of students' linguistic preferences. The question about instructors' language use for communication outside the classroom elicited

varied responses reflecting the complexity of linguistic interactions. Participants reported using English, Afaan Oromoo, and Amharic, illustrating the complicated linguistic diversity in Ethiopia.

In summary, the in-depth interviews with experienced instructors complemented and enriched the broader research findings and were consistent with the results of the questionnaires and classroom observations. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the challenges and complexities of language policy and its implementation in an Ethiopian higher education institution and underpinned the call for a more nuanced approach to language education policy that includes the formulation of a multilingual language policy in such a diversified context.

In summary, the findings shed light on the complex linguistic landscape within the surveyed academic community and highlight the benefits of multilingualism among students and instructors. The use of local languages in different professional and other contexts underlines the richness of linguistic diversity and corresponds to the versatility of communication within the academic community. These findings have implications for educational policies and practices aimed at promoting and maintaining the multilingual skills of instructors in different academic and social contexts.

From the students' responses, it emerged that instructors often use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic when communicating with them, as these languages are commonly understood by most students. This was also confirmed by the feedback from the instructors, who preferred to use Afaan Oromoo and Amharic when communicating with the students outside the classroom. These practices help to create a multilingual environment in interactions outside the classroom. It is noteworthy, especially given the fact that the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 and the Education and Training Policy of 1994 stipulate English as the primary medium of instruction in higher education, as was already mentioned. The observed multilingual interaction dynamics indicate a practical deviation from the documents' guidelines and underscores the importance of understanding actual language practices and their implications in the Ethiopian higher education context.

The recognition of multilingualism in the context of the University of Mattu was underpinned by the examination of various data sources. The presence of multilingualism manifested itself through several significant indicators. One salient sign was the availability of reference books in the university library in Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English, demonstrating the diverse linguistic resources available to students and instructors. This shows that the students and instructors can access these reading materials as references and additional materials for teaching and learning. In addition, they can obtain information from different newspapers written in different languages, especially in Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and English.

The widespread use of multiple languages for communication and teaching among instructors and students within the university was another clear indication of the institution's multilingualism. This practice underscores the dynamic linguistic environment at Mattu University, where different languages are actively used for both learning and interaction. This underscores the importance of recognizing and examining multilingualism within the institution.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of the current study, which focuses on multilingualism within the Ethiopian higher education system, can be interpreted in the context of previous studies conducted in different countries with similar multilingual settings. The concern over language in education policy within multilingual contexts has been a recurring theme among educators, and while no local studies have explored this in multilingual Ethiopia at the tertiary education level, various studies in Africa provide a comparative framework. For instance, research in the Republic of Kenya revealed a discrepancy between policy and classroom practices, where the mother tongue should be taught as a subject and used as the medium of instruction, yet teachers resorted to code-switching be-

tween Kiswahili and English in teaching non-language subjects. This echoes the tension identified in the current study between policy mandates and actual classroom practices (Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012).

Similarly, a study in the Republic of South Africa between 1996 and 1998, particularly in mathematics and science classes, indicated that teachers predominantly used English and switched to learners' primary languages for reformulation and interaction (Setati et al. 2002). The findings in Malawi showcased a policy allowing Chichewa as the medium of instruction, but teachers tended to instruct in a local language other than Chichewa, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of language use (Chilora 2000). The studies in the UK and Québec also revealed instances of language policy non-compliance, with bilingual and multilingual settings witnessing code-switching and variations in the use of the first language (Wei and Wu 2009; Bouchard 2015), respectively.

In light of these international comparisons, the current study's identification of a significant gap in the Ethiopian constitution aligns with the broader literature emphasizing challenges in legal frameworks of language policies in educational settings. The consistency of the identified deficiency with prior studies highlights the critical role of legislative support in shaping language policies and practices, forming a basis for the study's interpretation and contextualization.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the complex issue of multilingualism within the Ethiopian higher education system, specifically focusing on Mattu University. Notably, referring to RQ1, the research identifies a significant gap in the Ethiopian constitution, revealing the absence of explicit provisions addressing multilingualism within higher education institutions. This observation aligns with the existing literature highlighting challenges in legal frameworks of language policies in educational settings.

The identified deficiency in the legal framework is consistent with prior studies that emphasize the critical role of legislative support in shaping language policies and practices within educational institutions. Research from various global contexts underscores the importance of clear legal provisions to guide multilingual practices (cf. Wei and Wu 2009; Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012; Setati et al. 2002), and this study adds to that body of knowledge by highlighting a similar gap in the Ethiopian context.

The study's exploration of the multilingual environment within classroom practices, referring to RQ2, aligns with existing discussions on the complexities of language use in educational settings. The observed contradiction between the multilingual teaching and learning atmosphere at Mattu University and the monolingual language education policy mandated by the Ethiopian constitution resonates with international studies (e.g., Wei and Wu 2009; Bouchard 2015), highlighting tensions between policy mandates and actual classroom practices.

The revelation that instructors and students use Afaan Oromoo, Amharic, and other heritage languages for communication outside the classroom (referring to RQ3) underscores a common theme in previous research (Mensah 2014). Studies globally have documented instances where linguistic practices outside formal educational settings diverge from policy expectations, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of language use beyond the classroom (ibid).

The confirmation of multilingualism within Mattu University, as evidenced by the availability of reference materials in various languages in the university library, echoes findings from other international studies (Mensah 2014). Libraries as linguistic spaces reflecting the diversity of languages in academic institutions are well-documented, and this study contributes to that literature by highlighting the importance of recognizing multilingualism within the institution.

In the international context, the alignment of these findings with discussions on challenges associated with implementing multilingual policies in higher education institutions resonates with the existing literature. The emphasis on nuanced approaches to language policies and the acknowledgment of multilingual realities in educational settings aligns with global efforts to address linguistic diversity within universities.

The study's call for further investigation into language dynamics in higher education institutions with diverse linguistic landscapes corresponds with a broader research agenda in the international literature. Ongoing efforts to explore the impacts of multilingual practices on various aspects of the educational experience, including student learning outcomes and faculty collaboration, are evident in scholarly discussions.

In conclusion, this research provides a valuable contribution to the global discourse on multilingualism in higher education, drawing attention to specific challenges within the Ethiopian context. The alignment of these findings with international studies reinforces the universality of issues related to language policies and practices in educational settings, emphasizing the need for context-specific yet globally informed approaches to address the complexities of linguistic diversity within universities. The implications of this study extend beyond its immediate context, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in the broader discussions on language in education.

It is crucial to acknowledge and address the limitations of this study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research context and potential implications. The primary limitations include the exclusive focus on one university, Mattu University, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other higher education institutions in Ethiopia. While Mattu University offers valuable insights, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the results to a broader national or international context.

Another limitation is the study's concentration on first-year students. This intentional focus on a specific subset of the student population may limit the generalizability of the findings to students in other academic years. First-year students may have unique experiences and perspectives that differ from those in subsequent years, and thus, the scope of the study should be considered within this specific demographic.

Additionally, the research direction of this study provides a snapshot of language policy and practices at a specific point in time. Consequently, the dynamic nature of educational systems and evolving language policies should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Changes in policies or practices after the study period could impact the relevance and applicability of the results to current educational contexts.

To mitigate these limitations and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of language policy in Ethiopian higher education, future research should consider expanding the study to include multiple universities, diverse academic levels, and longitudinal perspectives. This broader approach would enhance the generalizability and robustness of the findings, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of language policy and practices in Ethiopian higher education institutions.

## 6. Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from the study underline the need to tailor language policy to the diverse linguistic composition of a nation. In the case of Ethiopia, the existing language policy has primarily favored a monolingual approach to education. However, this approach overlooks the complicated and rich linguistic diversity that is deeply embedded in the country's historical context. The findings of the study draw attention to this discrepancy and highlight the existence of cross-linguistic practices in the higher education environment.

An adaptive language policy is crucial to effectively manage the complexity arising from multilingualism. Ethiopia's historical and current linguistic diversity is complex and multifaceted. By favoring a monolingual approach to education, the current policy aims to recognize and accommodate the different languages spoken in the country. As a result, this approach does not fully address the needs and strengths of a diverse student and teacher population.

The exposure of code-switching practices in the university environment clearly demonstrates the need for a flexible language policy. This policy should be able to take into account and integrate the complexity of multilingualism. The adaptability of language policies in educational institutions is crucial for creating an environment that respects, supports, and effectively uses the speakers' different language abilities.

In summary, the present study highlights the need to rethink and restructure the Ethiopian language policy to better reflect the diverse language landscape in Ethiopian higher education institutions. However, it should be noted that the findings of this study represent only a snapshot of language policy and practice in relation to multilingualism in a specific university context. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, it is recommended that future research include multiple universities, different academic levels, and longitudinal perspectives. Such an approach would provide a better insight into the complexity of language policy implementation and its impact on different educational institutions in Ethiopia.

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## Article

# Methodological Approaches to Online Serbian Heritage Language Instruction

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we propose adequate methodological approaches for Serbian as a heritage language based on the critical analysis of the existing Serbian Ministry of Education's Curriculum for Serbian as a foreign language. This curriculum is recommended for use in Serbian heritage language education; however, it has been shown to be insufficiently effective in the classroom. The methods in question should benefit heritage speakers the most, such as communication-based methods and form-focused instruction, which enhance metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, we suggest an integrative model of teaching as we believe that cross-cultural approaches positively impact both types of students.

**Keywords:** heritage language; foreign language; teaching methods; Serbian language; Serbian as a heritage language; Serbian as a foreign language

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, second language instruction for heritage speakers (HSs) has gained increased attention, as it has become evident that they should not be defined simply as foreign language learners; rather, they represent a distinct and heterogeneous category (Kagan and Dillon 2001). Regarding Serbian HSs, the general conclusion is that there are no educational curricula specifically designed for this group of learners. Instead, the standard Serbian national program for L1 speakers is applied, executed by language teachers primarily trained in the philological tradition, whose teaching methods are based on text analysis rather than on enhancing students' communication skills.

Over the last decade, a significant number of heritage language (HL) learners have expressed an interest in learning Serbian online, which offers methodological advantages such as individualized and specialized classes, flexible schedules, and remote study options.

In this paper, we examine the differences in approaches to teaching grammar to HL learners compared to native speakers in Serbia. We propose facilitating the acquisition and education of Serbian HL learners by suggesting a fairly standardized school program for the Serbian diaspora, along with the appropriate classroom methods. We recommend that the language of instruction in the proposed textbooks be in the dominant language of the society. Additionally, instruction should be organized by levels in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Given that different methodological approaches can be applied to HL speakers and L2 learners, we utilize the following criteria: HL learners typically begin with better communication skills, as well as stronger listening and comprehension abilities, because they acquire Serbian in a naturalistic context. However, many exhibit low literacy skills and poor metalinguistic knowledge, as the majority have not received formal language instruction. Conversely, L2 learners of Serbian often outperform HL learners in grammatical and writing tasks but tend to have lower communication and pronunciation skills (in line with Montrul 2010).

We also advocate for a more individualized approach to lectures for HL speakers, as the intensity of their motivation to learn Serbian as a heritage language varies among individuals; typically, they face pressure from their parents, unlike L2 learners, who generally initiate their studies independently.

In accordance with Cvikić et al. (2010), it is often necessary to implement content that appeals to the student while also covering all the key points designated for the particular teaching unit. Another example is introducing culturally themed materials to HL speakers or focusing on perfecting both alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic equally), whereas with L2 learners, the emphasis is often placed on the Latin alphabet.

## 2. Background

In this section, we first give a short overview of the main properties of heritage speakers in general. Afterwards, we explain their position as heritage language learners, with a brief history of Serbian heritage schools.

### 2.1. Heritage Language Speakers' Characteristics

While heritage speakers (HSs) have existed alongside other bilinguals, it is only in the last 30 years that researchers have shown a greater interest in them as a distinct group of bilingual speakers and learners. Valdés (2000, p. 376) defined HSs as “individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language”. Kisselev et al. (2020, pp. 1–2) provided a more inclusive definition regarding the HSs' possible dominant language, stating that “they all grew up speaking language(s) other than the dominant language of the society at home and became dominant in the language of their new society, which could be either their other first language for simultaneous bilinguals or their second language for sequential bilinguals or early L2 learners”.

Specifically, regarding their ability to speak the language, HSs can be seen as individuals who began acquiring the language, though the acquisition may be incomplete (Montrul 2008). In a broader sense, they may never have fully acquired the language but possess a motivation to learn due to their cultural heritage (Cvikić et al. 2010).

Heritage speakers are a heterogeneous group that shares similarities with both monolinguals and second language learners. To understand the potential pedagogical implications, it is important to examine their linguistic characteristics. Montrul (2010, p. 12) compared heritage speakers (HSs) to monolinguals (MLs) and second language learners (L2Ls), pointing out the following similarities and differences from both types of speakers:

- MLs and HSs similarities: early language exposure; naturalistic acquisition of oral language input; control over grammar (phonology, vocabulary, certain grammar structures);
- L2Ls and HSs similarities: language errors throughout acquisition and transfer; variable language competence (usually incomplete); fossilization; motivation plays a significant role;
- MLs and HSs differences: in monolingual acquisition, the result is successful and complete; there is no fossilization; motivation plays no role; complex structures and vocabulary are acquired right after the age of 5, when metalinguistic competence also starts developing;
- L2Ls and HSs differences: in second language acquisition, there is a delayed exposure to the target language; variable language input in naturalistic and instructed setting; possible permanent incomplete grammar; more experience with literacy and formal instructions.

In more recent research, heritage speakers have not only been compared to monolinguals and second language learners but also to other types of speakers, such as first-generation immigrants. This comparison typically involves the heritage speakers' dominant language and the non-dominant language of the first generation (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013). First-generation immigrants are considered providers of the baseline language for heritage

speakers (Polinsky 2018). Some studies suggest that these two groups are more linguistically similar than previously thought (e.g., Stover Stevens 2019).

Conversely, some research has focused on the baseline language of unbalanced adult heritage speakers in comparison to other bilinguals, such as balanced adult bilinguals and child bilinguals (Polinsky 2017). In the case of relative clauses, Polinsky (2017) found that child bilinguals exhibit native-like performance, whereas adult heritage speakers show an exaggerated subject preference when interpreting gaps. The author concludes that an adult heritage speaker may reanalyze structures that child heritage speakers have not fully learned, bringing adult speakers closer to the baseline language (Polinsky 2017).

It is worth mentioning that the question of the exact definition of a heritage language speaker, and therefore a heritage language learner, remains open. Zyzik (2016) identified two core issues in this regard—speakers' proficiency and the role of implicit versus explicit knowledge. Motivation to learn, as well as the nature of linguistic input, also play significant roles. While Zyzik (2016) proposed a model for a prototypical heritage language learner—proficient and exposed to both implicit and explicit knowledge—she also acknowledged the frequent cases of learners who have diverged from the prototype. In this category, she includes overhearers (Au et al. 2002), who have been only passively receptive to the language, as well as those with minimal or no implicit knowledge.

## 2.2. Heritage Language Speakers in the Classroom

Usually, the heritage language is acquired at home from an early age. However, once speakers begin their formal education (pre-school and school), they become predominantly exposed to the language of society, and the use of the heritage language is reduced to the home environment. Some eventually “wish to learn, re-learn, or improve their current level of linguistic proficiency in their family language” (Montrul 2010, p. 3). Kisselev et al. (2020, p. 2) considered heritage language learners (HLLs) to be a subgroup of heritage speakers, defining HLLs as those who attempt formal study of their heritage language.

It is important to note that heritage language pedagogy is a developing field. As Valdés (2005) highlights, “While the number of HLLs in the mainstream L2 classrooms has been increasing, the field of language pedagogy has been slow to rise to the challenge of meeting the educational needs of these learners”. Specifically, attention needs to be brought to the actual language experiences of these speakers and their motivations to learn or improve the target language in order to better specialize the pedagogical approaches (Kisselev et al. 2020). On the other hand, Montrul (2010, p. 17) acknowledged the importance of pedagogical practices in SLA, noting that “[...] in this respect, L2 classroom research has much to offer to the heritage language classroom, whether it involves classes developed exclusively for heritage language learners or mixed classes that cater to both types of learners”.

Further research on the topic of heritage speakers in the classroom has given a more detailed description of effective teaching methods (e.g., Janjić 2018; Otwinowska et al. 2023; Pavličević-Franić 2012; Polinsky 2014; etc.). Janjić (2018) acknowledged the importance of what she calls an “integrative model”, which is based on combining different cultural content in Serbian heritage classrooms. Polinsky (2014), for example, noticed that some of the testing methods did not apply positively to heritage language learners, such as grammaticality judgement tasks.

## 2.3. Serbian Heritage Language Schools

There have been different waves of Serbian immigration to various countries. For example, those who immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the 20th century typically have descendants who are the third generation of Serbian immigrants, usually with little or no knowledge of the Serbian language. More recently, the wave of the 1990s saw many people immigrating to Canada and New Zealand, whose children form the second generation and inherit the language. In the Netherlands, first language schools were founded in 1972 (during the Yugoslavian period) and taught Serbo-Croatian until

1991/1992. After that, schools began teaching in the languages of the newly formed countries (Palmen 2016).

To this day, education of Serbian as a heritage language in the diaspora is mostly conducted as supplementary, meaning that, in addition to regular schools (which teach in the dominant language of society), children attend extra classes that are usually taught on Saturdays at local churches. The teachers are rarely formally trained to teach Serbian as a heritage language. The program they receive from the Ministry of Education (or the appropriate competent ministry) has been shown to be inadequate for the heterogeneous groups of students they teach.

As for young adults, some university students may enroll in Slavic studies and attend courses in BCS (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian). For others, however, such courses are usually unavailable (Pavličević-Franić 2012).

More recently, both adults and children (encouraged by their parents) have started enrolling in online courses of Serbian as a foreign or heritage language, offered by individuals or accredited schools in their homeland.

### 3. Materials and Methods

For this research, we analyzed the Plan and Program for Serbian as a Foreign Language, issued by the Institute for the Improvement of Education, as well as the Handbook for Teachers of Serbian as a Foreign Language, modeled after the Plan and Program. There is no official plan or program specifically for Serbian as a heritage language. However, it is important to note that there are centers for Serbian as a Foreign Language at universities in major cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš), as well as a few accredited schools offering Serbian as a foreign language (e.g., Azbukum in Novi Sad, Academic Serbian Association in Niš). Based on our analysis, we have proposed methods that would most benefit heritage speakers learning Serbian.

### 4. The Plan and Program

In this section, we outline the content of the Serbian Ministry of Education's Curriculum (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019) for learning Serbian as a foreign language, focusing on its pedagogical suggestions and potential challenges in applying them to the reality of Serbian heritage schools.

Firstly, the Plan is defined by educational standards set across three levels of proficiency—basic, intermediate, and advanced. The introduction raises the following important question: how can learning and knowing Serbian as a foreign language be applicable to children in their everyday lives? The standards describe the competencies a child should achieve, both globally and more specifically. There should be guidance for the evaluation of students, but personalized evaluation must also consider all language competencies. The global standards consist of the following three levels:

Basic level—basic information, introducing oneself, and basic grammar;

Intermediate level—the student can use phrases and hold conversations and recognizes notable figures from their culture;

Advanced level—the student actively uses the most frequent words and recognizes differences between their own culture and the culture of the language they are acquiring (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, pp. 3–4).

Specific standards are divided into functional pragmatic (speaking, reading, writing, comprehension), linguistic (grammar and orthography), and intercultural (knowledge and comparison of cultures). These standards are explained in detail for each competency across the three proficiency levels (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 5).

Moving on to the Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 7), a problem arises because it does not take into account the heterogeneity of students learning Serbian. The curriculum is not organized by the grade level of the student but by the number of years the student has previously spent learning the language. The main

guidelines that teachers should follow are only briefly described, noting the individual differences among students and suggesting that the program and methods may be adapted to meet their needs but without specific clarification. The Program is categorized from Year 1 to Year 12 of learning Serbian. In each year, there are specified outcomes, themes, and content that should be covered. The topics are generally consistent throughout the years, but they gradually become more nuanced. The norm is around 150 new words each year as the complexity of grammar increases.

Methodological and didactic instructions for applying the program can be found in a separate chapter, which provides brief guidelines on using the standard framework, including global and operational plans and an example of a prepared lesson (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 10).

The Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 10) made a valid point about the main difference between teaching Serbian as a foreign language and teaching it as a first language. When teaching Serbian as a foreign language, the primary focus is on communication and the actual use of language. On the other hand, teaching Serbian as a first language puts more emphasis on metalinguistic knowledge, such as the grammatical terms, principles, and rules about the language.

The Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language (2019, p. 11) suggests focusing on communication skills rather than emphasizing grammatical accuracy. Instead, it encourages creating actual conversational situations and learning about the socio-cultural context. Grammar is addressed through functional grammar and the communicative method, which guides students to apply grammar rules intuitively. Learning grammar is presented as a developing spiral.

The postulates outlined serve as guidelines for various learning situations, depending on the topics or units (notably, a distinction is made between the evaluation of foreign language (FL) students and L1 students). Guidelines for developing and improving the following four language skills are also presented:

Listening and comprehension—Fairly concrete examples of exercises and tasks are provided, though they are not overly specified; for instance, suggestions to use audio materials without indicating which ones are appropriate for particular units;

Reading—The program mentions the pre-elementary stage of learning to read (for the youngest students). The focus is on adapting texts according to the level, age, interests, or goals of the students;

Writing—Dictation is highlighted as a main example, followed by suggestions for writing greeting cards for specific occasions;

Speaking—A communication method is implemented, emphasizing communication skills over correcting mistakes (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, pp. 13–17).

The views on teaching grammar suggest that students do not need to know grammar definitions that they cannot apply. Grammar is learned both explicitly and implicitly. However, very few examples of these tasks are provided in the guidelines (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 18).

Regarding creative classroom activities, games and exercises are listed, but they are not detailed or specified for particular units. As for evaluation, it is emphasized that assessment occurs before enrolment (following the standards of the Program), as well as during the learning process and at its conclusion. Again, evaluation methods are not particularly exemplified (Plan and Program of Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language 2019, p. 20).

We largely agree with the main principles of the Program and the guidelines for developing language skills. However, the Program lacks detail in differentiating among various groups of learners of Serbian, particularly heritage language learners (HLLs) and second language learners (L2Ls), indicating that they require a specific assessment.

## 5. Pedagogical Implications for Improvement

Since the Program allows students to enroll in a certain grade based on the number of years they have been studying Serbian, this approach seems more applicable in a monolingual setting and less so for heritage language speakers and learners. In this context, students of different ages may possess the same level of language competence, which is typically not the case for monolingual learners. This, along with other factors, creates discrepancies that make a group of students enrolled in the same grade often very heterogeneous, rendering it difficult to uphold a single pedagogical approach.

Therefore, we recommend creating specialized programs for the following three age groups, each consisting of three proficiency levels (basic, intermediate, advanced): children aged 7 to 12; young adults aged 12 to 18; and adults aged 18 and older. Textbooks should be developed accordingly.

We also propose a comparative and contrastive method that would involve comparing the target heritage language with the dominant language of society in grammar instruction and not just in cultural and conversational topics.

Lastly, we will provide examples of the methods that Serbian heritage learners can benefit from. Note that these approaches can be applied in both online and in-person settings, as well as in individual and group classes. The nature of individual lessons, for example, allows for a more detailed assessment of each student's competencies and needs, as well as their personal interests. Online lessons also facilitate the use of digital teaching tools. We propose that the following three models be applied in all the aforementioned forms of Serbian heritage language learning:

- communicative model;
- form-focused instruction;
- integrative model.

To clarify the importance of the communicative model in heritage language (HL) education, we refer back to “the Proficiency movement, based on communicative approaches (also known as macro-approaches), [that] downplays explicit grammar-based instruction and advocates for the creation of an immersive environment in the classroom, where communicative tasks are carried out exclusively in the target language and any pedagogical instruction is preferably conducted in the target language” (Kisselev et al. 2020, p. 3), from which communicative models are derived. Kisselev et al. (ibidem) further explained that these models are most effective for heritage language learners (HLLs) because they build on the learners' existing global linguistic competencies; ideally, they also enhance cultural awareness and bilingual identity while fostering involvement with the heritage community.

Wu and Chang (2010, p. 26) provide an overview highlighting the advantages of macro-approaches for HLLs, who often cannot rely on their metalinguistic knowledge (unlike second language learners, L2Ls) to understand complex grammatical definitions and explanations. They also present an adapted version of Kagan and Dillon's (2001) distinctions between micro and macro-approaches (see Table 1).

Following those instructions, we propose that the communicative model consists of practices such as the following:

- role-play;
- creating conversational situations;
- open-ended questions;
- research tasks;
- listening and comprehension as a start-up for conversation;
- prompt pictures that invoke conversation, as presented in Figure 1.

The second model, form-focused instruction, complements the communicative model. Therefore, it should be integrated as an important method, as it draws learners' attention to form in the context of communication (Long 1991). Furthermore, Kisselev et al. (2020, p. 5) explained that this type of instruction reinforces: “(1) attention to grammatical form (noticing) and the ability to recognize and analyze form-meaning mappings, (2) conceptual

understanding of grammar, and (3) metalinguistic awareness”, which can be achieved through the explicit teaching of language structure.

**PRACTICE / VEŽBANJE**

**1. Ana i Ivan igraju tenis. Igraju ga na teniskom terenu. Za tenis se koriste, reket, loptica i mreža.**  
Ana and Ivan are playing tennis. They're playing it on a tennis court.



**Koji sport igraju Ana i Ivan?** What sport are Ana and Ivan playing?  
**Gde Ana i Ivan igraju tenis?** Where do Ana and Ivan play tennis?  
**Šta se koristi za tenis?** What are they using for tennis?

**2. Ivan i Džon igraju košarku. Za igru koriste loptu i koš.**  
Ivan and John are playing basketball. For the game, they are using the ball and the basketball hoop.



**Koji sport igraju Ivan i Džon?** What sport are Ivan and John playing?  
**Šta koriste?** What are they using?

Figure 1. Prompting pictures for starting up conversation.

Table 1. Micro and macro-approaches.

| Teaching Domains | Micro-Approaches                                                                                      | Macro-Approaches                                                                                          |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vocabulary       | Full range                                                                                            | Age-appropriate/literary/academic/formal                                                                  |
| Reading          | Small texts, gradually and slowly increasing in volume and complexity                                 | Fairly large and complex texts almost from the beginning                                                  |
| Writing          | Sentence level, gradually advancing to paragraph level                                                | Emphasis on the content and gradually improve spelling, grammar, and stylistics                           |
| Speaking         | Initially restricted to dialogue, gradually progressing to monologue and discussion                   | Emphasis on monologue and discussion                                                                      |
| Listening        | Short simple texts, gradually increasing in volume and complexity                                     | Full range of native language input (i.e., movies, documentaries, lectures)                               |
| Culture          | Initially isolated and decontextualized cultural items of which learners have very limited experience | Full range of language input (e.g., audio, visual, and print) that contain pertinent cultural information |

Applying this model in a Serbian heritage language classroom could be demonstrated, for example, by helping students notice and understand grammatical concepts such as the distinction between the accusative and locative cases when combined with verbs of (non)-movement. It can also involve prompting metalinguistic awareness in heritage language learners by comparing or contrasting the heritage language with the dominant language and other languages the learners are familiar with.

Here, we provide the following examples of focusing on form-meaning in the use of the unstressed dative form of personal pronouns in Serbian:

- Dative of possession in Serbian vs. English possessive:

- (1) Lepa ti je haljina. (Serbian)  
nice 2ndSg.DAT is dress.  
Your dress is nice. (English)

- Dative used in expressing emotions or states:

- (2) Hladno mi je. (Serbian)  
Cold 1stSg.DAT is.  
I am cold. (English)

In addition to possessive pronouns (moj ‘my’, tvoj ‘your’, etc.), Serbian allows the use of unstressed dative forms of personal pronouns to express possession (1). However,

the same language units are also used in constructions such as (2), where the standard beneficiary is interpreted as bearing the patient or experiencer theta-role, denoting their emotions or states. Unlike in (1), this second use is possible with both clitics and the stressed forms of the personal pronouns.

On the other hand, we provide the following example of instruction explicitly focused on forms:

- Serbian past tense vs. Russian past tense:

|     |           |       |         |           |
|-----|-----------|-------|---------|-----------|
| (3) | Ja        | (sam) | išao    | (Serbian) |
|     | Ya        | Ø     | poshël. | (Russian) |
|     | I         | AUX   | went    |           |
|     | "I went". |       |         |           |

Serbian past tense (*perfekat*) is constructed with an auxiliary (present tense of the verb *jesam* 'to be') and the past participle of the full verb, as shown in (3). In Russian, however, the auxiliary completely vanished from this construction (altogether with the same verb previously used as copula in nominal predicates), resulting in the simple form of past tense. Nevertheless, Serbian also displays the same, truncated construction (labeled as 'truncated perfect' (*krnji perfekat*)), but it is stylistically marked and far more frequent in the colloquial and literature registers.

The aforementioned distinction between the Serbian accusative and locative cases with verbs of (non)-movement could be parallelly compared with the German accusative and dative cases and the nature of the verbs they are combined with, as follows:

|     |     |                                       |        |          |                     |                     |           |
|-----|-----|---------------------------------------|--------|----------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| (4) | (A) | Ja                                    | se     | nalazim  | u                   | bioskopu.           | (Serbian) |
|     |     | I                                     | REFL.  | situated | in                  | movies- <u>LOC.</u> |           |
|     |     | Ich                                   | bin    | im       | Kino.               |                     | (German)  |
|     |     | I                                     | am     | in       | movies- <u>DAT</u>  |                     |           |
|     |     | "I am at the movies".                 |        |          |                     |                     |           |
|     | (B) | Ja                                    | idem   | u        | bioskop.            |                     | (Serbian) |
|     |     | I                                     | go-1Sg | in       | movies- <u>ACC.</u> |                     |           |
|     |     | Ich                                   | gehe   | ins      | Kino.               |                     | (German)  |
|     |     | I                                     | go-1Sg | in-ACC   | movies.             |                     |           |
|     |     | "I go/am going to the movie theater". |        |          |                     |                     |           |

As another example of form-meaning mappings, we show in (4-A), when combined with verbs that denote non-movement such as *nalaziti se* 'to be situated', the complement of the prepositional object takes the locative form. In German, the same construction requires the dative case of the nominal complement. When it comes to verbs of movement such as *ići* 'go' in Serbian, and *gehen* 'go' in German (4-B), the complement bears the same, appropriate accusative case form. The difference between the two languages remains in the way cases are marked, where Serbian utilizes postnominal case suffixes, while German uses prenominal definite and indefinite articles, which could be contracted together with the preposition (cf. *im* in (4-A) vs. *ins* in (4-B)). Interestingly, in Serbian, the dative and locative case forms of all declinable categories are syncretic. Therefore, these similarities with the German language could potentially have a facilitating effect on the acquisition of both languages. Another form of contrasting and comparing could be included in the acquisition of the Serbian alphabet, as presented in the Figure 2.

To emphasize the vital role of form-focused instruction, we note that heritage language (HL) speakers typically outperform second language (L2) speakers in metalinguistic tasks (Kisselev et al. 2020). Due to frequent code-switching and lexical borrowing, they may develop strong metalinguistic awareness in both of their respective languages (Kisselev et al. 2020).

Lastly, the integrative model (Janjić 2018) is based on the principle of (inter)cultural referentiality. It connects different cultural elements from Serbia (tradition, customs, history, music, geography, food, science, sports, religion, art, folklore, etc.) with the culture of the dominant language or the student's other background. This approach is beneficial for both

HL and L2 learners, but it is more extensive in HL contexts. For example, when teaching the alphabet, we emphasize the Cyrillic alphabet, as the written cultural material available to students increases significantly. Additionally, texts adapted for grammar tasks could relate to Serbian historical events. Furthermore, cultural comparisons can be explored through learning idioms and their contextual usage. A student task could involve finding equivalents in their respective languages and discussing the differences. The intention is to immerse students in what they feel is already a part of their heritage.

| Abeceda | Izgovor/ Pronunciation | Primeri/ Examples |
|---------|------------------------|-------------------|
| A a     | Vater                  | avion, navika     |
| B b     | Bett                   | baba, slab        |
| C c     | Katze                  | cipela, ocena     |
| Č č     | deutsch                | čokolada, učiti   |
| Ć ć     | Brötchen               | ćerka, ici        |
| D d     | dunkel                 | deda, dan         |
| Dž dž   | George                 | džem, udžbenik    |

**Figure 2.** Serbian alphabet for German speakers.

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to provide corrective suggestions for the existing plan and program of Serbian as a foreign language to better accommodate the heterogeneous group of heritage speakers. We proposed the application of three models, namely the communicative model, form-focused instruction, and the integrative model. We believe that Serbian heritage learners can benefit from both innovative communicative approaches and more traditional form-instructed models. Because they acquired Serbian naturalistically, they have certain advantages over L2 learners, which generally results in better communicative skills. However, these skills, along with their metalinguistic awareness, should be further enhanced by following the proposed models. Literacy and grammatical accuracy need to be taught more explicitly and more frequently through “culturally colored” teaching materials.

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