

Preserving Heritage Language in Turkish Families in US

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A dearth of research concerning Turkish immigrant families in the United States exists, prompting this study's focus. This research aims to illuminate the influence of parental language attitudes among Turkish immigrants on their motivation to foster the preservation of their heritage language (HL) in their children, alongside an exploration of the strategies employed for HL retention. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 parents (16 mothers and 4 fathers), with each interview spanning 15–20 min. The interviews, conducted individually by the primary author in Turkish and later translated into English, unveiled a spectrum of parental language attitudes, impacting their motivation to uphold HL. Variances in motivation were observed, intertwined with factors such as home and community environments, parental acculturation experiences, perceptions regarding the relationship between culture and language, and the perceived advantages of bilingualism for children's cognitive development and future prospects. Despite differing motivations, all parents expressed a desire to preserve HL, prompting the deployment of diverse Heritage Language Management Strategies (HLMS). This study significantly contributes to the understanding of how parental attitudes shape HL preservation efforts within families, offering insights crucial to the field of HL and family language policy, thereby highlighting implications for practice and further research.

Keywords: immigration ; heritage language and culture ; bilingualism ; Turkish immigrants in the U.S.

1. Introduction

The United States (U.S.) is becoming increasingly diverse, partially due to bilingual immigrants ([Hoff 2013](#)). The community language brought by minority groups, including immigrants, to a host country within multilingual settings is considered a heritage language (HL) ([Bayram and Wright 2016](#)). Speakers of HLs present a particular case of bilingualism because HLs are acquired by children “due to a close connection to family members” ([Melo-Pfeifer 2015, p. 27](#)). Hence, the bilinguals' mother tongue is a minority language in a majority language context ([Bayram and Wright 2016](#)).

Preserving HL is often a crucial part of maintaining one's cultural identity, especially among immigrants. However, this task is challenging for immigrant parents. They must confront the family language loss experienced by their children ([Fillmore 2000](#)). Immigrant families have to actively manage at least two languages throughout their immigration and acculturation experiences, depending on the family structure ([Halsted 2013](#)). Most studies on bilingualism in early childhood language development indicate that HL acquisition tends to be interrupted once children start attending formal school in their host country ([Halsted 2015](#); [Place and Hoff 2011](#)). Initially, HL speakers may be more proficient in their first language during early childhood ([Ertanir et al. 2018](#)). However, the first language can become underdeveloped as the second language, the majority language, starts to dominate. Consequently, children of immigrants are expected to develop skills to switch between two languages ([Polinsky and Kagan 2007](#)).

2. Immigrants' Language Attitudes and HL Preservation Strategies

Immigrant parents exhibit diverse and dynamic preferences regarding heritage language (HL) preservation. They may strive to maintain their HL within their new societal environment in the U.S. ([Bayram and Wright 2016](#); [Curdts-Christiansen 2009](#)). Conversely, some immigrant families opt to adopt the majority language within their households for various reasons, including language policies, social pressures, or economic benefits ([Borland 2006](#); [Fitzgerald 1993](#)). Additionally, factors such as children's academic achievement in schools and parents' educational levels can influence parents' preference for the majority language in home settings ([Nesteruk 2010](#)). The attitudes and/or language ideologies exhibited by parents are referred to as language attitudes, defined as “a construct underlying the feelings people have about their language or others' languages” ([Cherciov 2013, p. 716](#)). Language attitudes can foster a “supportive home environment”

that enhances language acquisition in both languages, especially HL (Park 2013, p. 39). Therefore, immigrant parents raising bilingual children in the U.S. need to implement a “family language policy” (Ghimenton 2015, p. 117; Schwartz and Moin 2012, p. 35). Through family language policy, immigrant parents establish rules and norms governing the language(s) in which their children are raised and how they will acquire proficiency in the dominant languages of the host society (MacCormac and MacCormac 2021). Parents also employ strategies that contribute to HL proficiency within immigrant households, playing a crucial role in family relations (Park and Sarkar 2007; Pearson 2007). These strategies may include organizing home literacy programs, taking children to cultural centers, and visiting the home country, thereby exposing children to their HL through multiple speakers in various environments (Place and Hoff 2011). When parents strongly advocate for and practice heritage language maintenance, their children demonstrate greater agency in continuing the use and learning of their heritage language (Shen and Jiang 2023). Heritage speakers often report their most frequent and highest use of the heritage language with their parents and older relatives, highlighting the critical role of parents in heritage language development (Montrul 2016). In immigrant households, language maintenance activities can be both overt and covert and may include instances when children serve as linguistic and cultural brokers for their parents (Velázquez 2014). Furthermore, intertwined with language brokering, children in immigrant families often engage in cultural brokering, navigating two sets of cultural norms to connect their families with local information and resources (Nesteruk 2021).

The effort immigrant parents put into preserving HL depends on various factors, such as the global number of speakers of a particular language. Since English is widely spoken globally, it is considered prestigious (Halsted 2013; Leeman and Serafini 2016). Conversely, HLs are typically spoken by smaller communities, which may lead to a perception of lesser prestige, potentially demotivating immigrant children from maintaining these languages (Halsted 2013). The lack of social contexts and values can influence how children of immigrants emotionally connect with their spoken language. Immigrant parents are cognizant of the potential social and cognitive benefits of preserving HL for maintaining their cultural identity. Social benefits include opening doors in the job market, social networking, community relations, and heritage descent bonding (e.g., A. De Houwer 2009). Cognitive benefits, extensively documented by bilingual researchers, include improved executive functioning at an early age, enhanced recognition memory among older bilinguals, delayed cognitive function decline due to aging, and delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease (Bialystok 2010; Bialystok et al. 2014; Barac and Bialystok 2012; Barac et al. 2014; Kroll and Bialystok 2013).

The context in which education occurs plays a crucial role in maintaining HL (Bialystok 2018). A host country's attitude toward preserving HL can provide integrative external support to immigrant families. Children of immigrant parents usually do not receive formal education in their HL; hence, their families provide internal support as a primary socialization unit (Park 2013; A. De Houwer 2009; Fitzgerald 1993). Furthermore, a harmonious bilingual development process can enhance family well-being in relation to preserving HL in immigrant contexts (A. De Houwer 2015). Strategies that motivate or demotivate parents in preserving HL depend on positive experiences with bilingualism (J. De Houwer 2006), which also influence language attitudes and practices among immigrant parents. The U.S. context, which surprisingly lags behind other countries in providing bilingual environments for immigrant populations (Halsted 2015), does not facilitate a positive bilingual development process for these families. While multilingualism was widely accepted in the 19th century (Fitzgerald 1993; Pavlenko 2002), the U.S. gradually became less supportive of HLs after the 1920s. Immigrant children started losing their HL, partly due to insufficient environmental support for families to teach their HL to their children (Leeman and Serafini 2016; Barac and Bialystok 2012). By the third generation, immigrant children tend to shift to English dominance or monolingualism (Hoff 2018).

In discussing the theoretical and practical issue of cross-linguistic value, particularly in the context of Turkish immigrant families and heritage language preservation in the U.S., it is crucial to consider the factors influencing the preservation or loss of HLs (Gupta 2020). Factors such as personal conviction and commitment, ethnic nationalism, and the accessibility of heritage language schools in neighborhoods are pivotal in HL maintenance. Additionally, parents' perspectives on maintaining the native language and practical ways to preserve cultural heritage are significant for understanding the cross-linguistic values in immigrant families (Lekatompessy 2021). Gupta's (2020) study provides insights into Indian parents' perspectives on maintaining HL in metropolitan settings, offering a valuable understanding of the practical challenges and strategies for HL preservation. Similarly, Sehlaoui and Mousa's (2016) research on parents' perceptions of heritage languages in the Midwest highlights the qualitative data analysis collected from parents' perspectives towards HL, providing theoretical insights into the value attributed to heritage languages within immigrant families. Understanding the voices and perceptions of parents is crucial for comprehending the theoretical and practical significance of heritage language preservation in immigrant communities.

In the exploration of theoretical and practical aspects concerning the cross-linguistic value, especially within the context of Turkish immigrant families and the preservation of heritage language in the U.S., it is imperative to incorporate insights

from cross-linguistic studies. Understanding the factors influencing the preservation or loss of heritage language (HL) is essential (Gupta 2020). Factors such as personal conviction, commitment, ethnic nationalism, and the accessibility of heritage language schools are pivotal in HL maintenance (Gupta 2020). The perspectives of parents on maintaining the native language and practical strategies for preserving cultural heritage contribute significantly to understanding cross-linguistic value in immigrant families (Lekatompessy 2021). This study aims to address the apparent gap in the understanding of Turkish immigrant families' experiences in the U.S. by exploring how their unique cultural practices impact the upbringing of bilingual children.

3. Turkish Immigrant Families In and Outside of the U.S.

Several studies have focused on Turkish immigrant families' HL transmission experiences in and outside of the U.S. For instance, Bohnacker's (2022) article, "Turkish Mother Tongue Instruction in Sweden", provides an analysis of the current status of Turkish mother tongue instruction (MTI) in Sweden. This study examines the context of Swedish language policy and discusses the practical implementation of Turkish MTI by municipalities in Sweden. It highlights discrepancies between the official language policy and its actual application, making it highly relevant to the topic of interest by offering insights into the status and implementation of Turkish MTI in Sweden.

Additionally, K. Yagmur (2016) delved into the intergenerational language use and acculturation of Turkish speakers in these four immigration contexts, shedding light on the complexities of language preference, attitudes, and maintenance among Turkish immigrants and their descendants (K. Yagmur 2016). The study examined the varying levels of acculturation among Turkish immigrants in different European countries and indicated that Turkish immigrants in Australia integrate better into mainstream society than their counterparts in various European countries. Additionally, it investigated the acculturation and language orientations among three generations of Turkish immigrants in Australia. Furthermore, the authors of the article also examined acculturation and language orientations among Turkish immigrants in Australia, France, Germany, and the Netherlands (Yagmur and van de Vijver 2011). The study also highlighted that the use of the native language by Turkish immigrants depends on their contextual needs in various countries, including Australia (Altinkamış and Agirdag 2014). Moreover, the research emphasized the importance of understanding the vitality of ethnic groups, including Turkish communities in Australia (T. Yagmur 2011). It also discussed the impact of acculturation on parenting among Turkish mothers in Australia, indicating a shift in child-centered goals and inductive methods among Turkish migrants in Australia (Yagmurlu and Sanson 2009). The article provides insights into the acculturation orientations of Turkish speakers in Australia, contributing to the understanding of intergenerational differences in acculturation orientations (T. Yagmur 2014). Finally, the study emphasizes the significance of the Turkish language as a strong marker of identity among Turkish immigrants in Europe (Pot et al. 2018).

Furthermore, qualitative studies on Turkish immigrant families in several countries have explored various aspects of their experiences, including language acquisition, identity formation, and social integration. For instance, a study by Kunduz and Montrul (2022) investigated the acquisition of Turkish heritage language among second-generation children and their parents in the U.S. The study used a story-retelling task and a picture selection task to understand the sources of variability in the acquisition of the Turkish heritage language. Similarly, Willard et al. (2015) examined family factors predicting vocabulary in Turkish as a heritage language, highlighting the importance of proficiency in both Turkish and the host country's language for Turkish immigrant families. Moreover, Daskalaki et al. (2020) delved into the effects of parental input quality in child heritage language acquisition, providing insights into the role of parental input in heritage language development within immigrant families. Additionally, Montrul (2016) emphasized the influence of adult immigrants on the input of heritage speakers, indicating the interconnectedness of language development within immigrant communities. In summary, the qualitative studies on Turkish immigrant families in different contexts have contributed to understanding various aspects of their experiences, including language acquisition, identity formation, and social integration, shedding light on the complexities of heritage language maintenance and the challenges faced by successive generations in immigrant families.

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