

Tell me what's your family language strategy and I'll tell you if you are satisfied

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Introduction

When a child is born into a family, parents start to speak intuitively to him or her in their mother tongue. It is only later on- after one day, one month or one year- that they might have a change of heart and choose amidst their native tongues or yet another language in order to communicate with the child. There are many people today who speak, write, or understand a number of languages, and there are called polyglots (OED 2015). These might have the ability and the possibility to choose between the languages they are capable communicating with at any given situation.

Being a polyglot might be the result of growing up in a multi-linguistic nation, like Switzerland, or the circumstances of a family history that involves moving from one language area to another. For example people fleeing from famine or war, changing work or just a life style. When two polyglots form a couple, they need to take a decision regarding which language or languages they will use in order to communicate with each other and their surroundings (Grosjean 2010, 39). This decision will become once again ever more complex when this polyglot couple will decide to bring a child into the world.

Most people believe that a child in a polyglot family is primarily subject to his or her parents' decision concerning language choice among other things. We are brought up into a language, and consequently into a culture, history and traditions. While many think that the language which the parent decides on will be the language the child will be most proficient in, it seems that many times it actually lies in the hands of the child. Children might decide for themselves which language or languages they will communicate with. At times, the child's choice of language will be in opposition or strongly insisting against the parent's desire (Ringblom 2004, 6).

In my research I will look more in detail into choices parents and children make for themselves and for their offspring regarding which language or languages they will use for communication. First, the family representatives reported on their languages which were assembled into a language background report. Then, the results and the reasons for the language repertoire are discussed. Finally, the family representatives were asked to comment on their satisfaction with the choices they made for their children, and how they look back on their parents' choices.

Methodology

In order to conduct this research, I interviewed representatives from two nuclear families which I am related to. These families are described as following:

Family number 1: consists of my aunt, Bianca Leiserowich, who represented herself and her late husband, Lulu. Bianca and Lulu have two daughters, Beatrice and Simona.

Family number 2: consists of my cousin, Beatrice Naftali, and her husband, Ilan Naftaly. They have three children: Rotem, Gilad and Ofek.

The first interview was performed with Bianca. She represented herself, her husband and her late daughter Simona which passed away almost two years ago. The second interview was performed with Ilan and Beatrice. In that interview, Beatrice primarily spoke about herself and her children regarding her own nuclear family (Family number 2), but gave additional information about Simona regarding Family number 1.

The families that were chosen are intentionally related to me. In this manner I could rely on my experience in order to verify the claims made by the interviewees and could act as a more or less objective observer of the reality. After performing the interviews, I admit to have had some doubts about my own "objectivity". Taking into account my hesitations, I decided to stand by my memory of the families' use of language during a life-long of observations. In some cases it matched the interviewee's claims, and sometimes it differed.

During the interviews, the family representatives were asked a series of pre-determined questions and a few follow-up questions that I felt were necessary for the purpose of having the whole picture. Many times those questions were related to the families' history, and not so much connected to the actual choice of language. The follow-up questions gave me the opportunity to think in a bigger scale of what influences a family's language strategy.

The families that were chosen did not use the family language strategy of one parent - one language which is very frequent today. Family number 1 used instead what Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys Jones refer to as *Non-dominant home language without community support*, as category of family bilingualism. This category implies that both parents speak the same native tongue which is different from the dominant language of the community. In addition, the parents speak their native tongue to their children (Baker and Prys Jones 1998, 30). Family number 2 appears to be monolingual, but its family members are multilinguals.

As a direct consequence of the familial history of each of the families, different family members are products of *naturalistic multilingualism* combined with *elite multilingualism*. By *naturalistic multilingualism*, one means that the speech environment required a certain language competency and the learning process was implicit through everyday social contact (Archer 2003, 157). By contrast, the term *elite multilingualism* infers that some languages in the repertoire were acquired by instruction, and were not meant primarily to be a contact language used with friends, family or neighbours. In this paper I will not take into consideration the degree of proficiency family members have in their respective languages.

In addition to conducting the interviews I also consulted some academic literature regarding this issue. An overview of the subject is well-presented by Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys Jones in their *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* (1998, 30-50). However, while reading the chapter regarding choices parents make for their children concerning which language they should use and when, I felt there was a lack of attention to the issue of satisfaction and rate of success. Therefore, it seemed relevant to ask the parents what do they think about their choice in aftermath; are they happy with the results? Are their children happy with the results? And this is what the next few paragraphs are mainly going to deal with.

Results

As it appears from the interviews I performed, both Family number 1 and Family number 2 did not actively choose to be multilingual in their home environment as in both cases each couple shared the same native tongue. They needed their contact languages for different purposes, and their most important concern was their proficiency in the majority language- Hebrew. As one of my research revolve around multilingualism, it seemed best to find out if the different family members were indeed polyglot. The interviews entailed a detailed study of the language background of each member in each family and the documentation of their repertoire as demonstrated in tables 1 and 2. This was followed by questions regarding results, reasons and satisfaction from the family language choice they have made.

Starting with Family number 1, I asked Bianca what languages each of the four family members spoke. She reported that she speaks Romanian, Hebrew, and has some knowledge of Yiddish and French. Her husband spoke Hebrew and Romanian. Simona spoke Hebrew, Romanian, English and Arabic, and had some knowledge of Spanish and Russian. Beatrice speaks Romanian, Hebrew and English (see Table 1).

Language/Name	Bianca	Lulu	Beatrice	Simona
RO	✓	✓	✓	✓
HE	✓	✓	✓	✓
YI	✓			
FR				
EN			✓	✓
ES	✓			✓
AR				✓
RU				✓

Table 1. Family number 1 members and their language repertoire.

This language background report shows that each of the family members was at least bilingual, and the majority multilingual. Later on, one might observe that the offspring of Family number 1-Beatrice- continued the tradition of multilingualism in

different manners. This multilingualism was not only natural and based on need, but was also an elite multilingualism subsequent to instruction.

In order to understand the results and the satisfaction rate of the applied strategy, I had to better understand the implementation of the strategy. It seems that the parents of Family number 1 decided to speak Hebrew at home after arriving to Israel even though their native tongue was Romanian. That revealed itself to be very difficult, since neither of them was given any Hebrew instruction when they immigrated from Romania to Israel. This shows that Lulu and Bianca were more concerned with their daughters mastering Hebrew than maintaining any cultural or lingual ties to their mother tongue Romanian.

As Bianca and Lulu used the *Non-dominant home language without community support* as their family language strategy (mentioned above), I wished to know what their satisfaction with the results was. Bianca expressed wide satisfaction. She said both Beatrice and Simona spoke "excellent Hebrew" and she feels happy with the family language strategy they implemented. However, they have different levels of Romanian proficiency and the main reason for that was motivation, according to her.

The specific family story of Family number 1 seems to have formed the basis of the language strategy this family implemented. Bianca and Lulu spoke the majority language to their children even though they did not really master it. They did so thinking that the more a child is exposed to a language, even if it is not correct, will contribute to successful integration in the society. Good proficiency in Romanian was never their goal; therefore the rate of satisfaction is very high in defiance of some low mastery of Romanian.

After having discussed at large Family number 1 and its family language strategy, the reasons for it, its results and the rate of satisfaction, Family number 2 will be the next object of investigation. Beatrice and Ilan reported as well on the language background of their family members in order to determine if they have polyglots in their family.

Beatrice said that she speaks Romanian, Hebrew and English, and has knowledge of Spanish, Arabic and Italian. Her husband reported he speaks Hebrew and English, and has some knowledge of Arabic. They reported their daughter, Rotem speaks Hebrew, English and Spanish, and has some knowledge of Arabic. Their son, Gilad speaks Hebrew and English, and has some knowledge of Arabic. Lastly, their youngest son (12 years of age), Ofek speaks Hebrew and has some knowledge of English (see Table 2).

Language/Name	Beatrice	Ilan	Rotem	Gilad	Ofek
HE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RO	✓	-	-	-	-
EN	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
ES	✓		✓		
IT	✓				
AR	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 2. Family number 2 members and their language repertoire.

One might observe that even in Family number 2 there is some evidence of multilingualism for the majority of the family members. However, the language repertoire of Gilad and Ofek is due solely to instruction (Hebrew is their mother tongue)- which is classified as elite multilingualism. Admittedly, their first-born, Rotem, has both naturalistic and elite languages in her repertoire, similar to her mother, Beatrice. Therefore we can conclude that Beatrice did not fully continue with the tradition of multilingualism with her own children even though she herself was raised as a natural bilingual.

Taking into account the language repertoire of Family number 2, one might wonder how come it looks so different from Family number 1. The answer it seems lies in the family history of each of them. The parents of Family number 2 never left their native language area, and therefore did not need to become multilingual in order to communicate with their surroundings. Since both parents are native speakers of the majority language, it was evident for them to communicate among them in Hebrew and teach their children Hebrew.

Furthermore, there are other aspects that are different between the two families which might have affected the choice of family language strategy and its results. For example, Beatrice and Ilan share the majority's native tongue, whereas the parents of Family number 1 shared a minority language. Second, Ilan is not a natural multilingual; he has acquired both English and Arabic through instruction (see language repertoire in Table 2). Therefore, he might not feel convenient or perhaps just unaccustomed with multilingualism in a familial environment.

Thus far, the results and reasons of the family language strategy were discussed. The interview was concluded by Beatrice and Ilan describing their satisfaction with the results of their language strategy. They expressed discontent. They believe that "Romanian would have helped the children with their English [studies at school]". They were primarily concerned with their children being a part of society. However, they did not consider the beneficial impact knowing Romanian would have given to their children in their English as foreign language acquisition process. It is worth mentioning that acquiring a high level of English proficiency in Israel is viewed as a vital language skill for a successful life. Beatrice mentioned that "back then, I did not see it as important competence. Nowadays however, I understand it was a mistake".

In spite of Beatrice's conclusions regarding the family language choice she made for her children, she seems happy to have had Romanian as a part of her family life as member of Family number 1. Consequently, she could communicate with older family members and feel that she resembles her parents and the rest of the family at least by her linguistic skills.

Discussion

Analyzing the two interviews performed, it seems that even within the same family, different circumstances contribute to different decisions taken concerning family

language strategy. The main reasons identified can be categorized as consequences of structuralism and conformism. That means that structures and life circumstances at time may override a family's will or custom. In addition, once a person is raised as multilingual, even if actively chosen not to follow the tradition, eventually will feel regret due to conformism and the wish to be similar to once's parents.

Family number 1 actively decided to speak Hebrew at home, even though it was nearly impossible, due to lack of language instruction. Both parents were native Romanian speakers with no knowledge in Hebrew. They chose this strategy since they were concerned with their daughters' proficiency in Hebrew, and did not mind much about the linguistic and cultural competences that come with a language. The motive behind the family language choice was their view on what makes a successful integration.

Family number 2 however, did not preserve the multilingualism of the mother and chose a monolingual communication at home and outside. The interviewees did not give an explicit answer to their decision. As we can see, Beatrice and Ilan are dissatisfied with their decision concerning family language strategy. Both she and her husband think that had their children known Romanian, it would have facilitated their English learning at school, something that they see as a difficulty for both older children (Rotem and Gilad).

Finally, it seems that Beatrice as a child is happy to have Romanian in her language repertoire, as she can communicate with older family members. That said, she feels regret for not supporting her children becoming natural polyglot as she believes it would have helped them with their English studies at school. Each family applied a different strategy, and arrived at different results.

In addition to the factors that were mentioned: family language strategy, familial specific life story and the parent being himself a polyglot or not, one should not forget the more obvious factors which influence and drive people to extend their language repertoire. With that I include motivation, work opportunities and interest. Children and adults together have free will, but the structures around them have great influence. Furthermore, their rate of satisfaction with the results seems to be subject both to their possibility to act according to their will, but also to the opportunity to be like their parents.

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