

Bilingual Siblings and Dynamic Family Language Policies in Italian/English Families

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Abstract : Framed by language socialization and family language policy theories, the present study explores the ways the language choice patterns of bilingual siblings contribute to the shaping of the language environment and the language practices of Italian/English families residing in Sydney. The main source of data is video recordings of naturally occurring parent-children and child-to-child interactions during everyday routines (i.e., family mealtimes and siblings playtime) in the home environment. Recurrent interactional practices are analyzed in detail through a conversational analytical approach. This presentation focuses on the interactional trajectories developing during the negotiation of language choices between all family members and between siblings in face-to-face interactions. Fine-grained analysis is performed on language negotiation sequences of multiparty bilingual conversations in order to uncover the sequential patterns through which a) the children respond to the parental strategies aiming to minority language maintenance, and b) the siblings influence each other's language use and choice (e.g., older siblings positioning themselves as language teachers and language brokers, younger siblings accepting the role of apprentices). The findings show that, along with the parents, children are active socializing agents in the family and, with their linguistic behavior, they contribute to the establishment of a bilingual or a monolingual context in the home. Moreover, by orienting themselves towards the use of one or the other language in family talk, bilingual siblings are a major internal micro force in the language ecology of a bilingual family and can strongly support language maintenance or language shift processes in such domain. Overall, the study provides insights into the dynamic ways in which family language policy is interactionally negotiated and instantiated in bilingual homes as well as the challenges of intergenerational language transmission.

Keywords : bilingual siblings, family interactions, family language policy, language maintenance

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