

Language Shift and Maintenance in Bilingual Families: A Systematic Literature Review on Current Trends and Underlying Factors

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Language Shift, Maintenance, Underlying Factors

Received : 10 February

Revised : 15 March

Accepted: 30 April

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected global society, bilingualism has become a widespread phenomenon, especially among migrant and transnational families navigating between heritage languages and dominant societal languages. This study examines current trends and underlying factors influencing language shift and maintenance within bilingual families through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Guided by the PRISMA framework, the study analyzes empirical research published between 2014 and 2024 from major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The findings reveal that the family remains the central domain for intergenerational language transmission, where societal pressures intersect with individual agency. A prominent trend is the gradual and often unconscious shift toward majority languages, driven by the dominance of formal education, peer interaction, and digital media. Simultaneously, a counter-trend emerges in the form of increased parental awareness and the intentional application of Family Language Planning (FLP) strategies to preserve heritage languages. The review identifies key influencing factors, including parental language ideologies, institutional pressures, children's agency, sibling dynamics, and the dual role of digital media. Digital technology acts as both a catalyst for language shift and a resource for maintenance. Language dynamics in bilingual families are complex and require adaptive strategies to sustain linguistic diversity

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected global society, bilingualism and multilingualism have become the norm rather than the exception. Families migrating to urban areas or distinct cultural landscapes often encounter complex sociolinguistic dynamics, prompting them to navigate between their heritage language (HL) and the dominant societal language. In this process, language shift, defined as the gradual replacement of one language by another in the daily communication of an individual or a speech community (Holmes, 2013), frequently occurs. While language maintenance strives to preserve the vitality of the heritage language across generations, the overpowering influence of dominant languages often accelerates the shift, particularly within the family domain which Fishman (1991) identifies as the last bastion for language survival.

In the contemporary era, the landscape of bilingualism has been dramatically reshaped by transnational mobility and unparalleled digital interconnectivity. Unlike in the past, where language boundaries were tightly bound by physical geography, modern families are increasingly exposed to dominant global or national languages even within the confines of their homes (De Houwer, 2021). Consequently, the traditional concept of the "family domain" as a secure sanctuary for heritage language practices has become highly permeable. Recent scholarship underscores that children in bilingual families are no longer exclusively socialized through interactions with native-speaking relatives; instead, their linguistic input is heavily dominated by digital platforms, social media, and online educational environments that primarily utilize the majority language (Smith & Lee, 2023; Suryani et al., 2022).

This constant external exposure generates immense pressure on bilingual families, frequently forcing a dichotomy between preserving ancestral identity and conforming to societal linguistic demands. Recent studies reveal that parental language ideologies, the underlying beliefs parents hold about the value and utility of specific languages, are often skewed toward dominant languages due to perceived educational and future economic advantages (Curdt-Christiansen & La Morgia, 2022). Consequently, even when parents possess a strong emotional attachment to their mother tongue, the pragmatic need to equip their children with a competitively advantageous language often supersedes the desire for language maintenance. This internal conflict inevitably acts as a modern catalyst for language shift, where the active use of the minority or indigenous language gradually diminishes within daily household interactions (Wei & Zhu, 2023).

The family unit plays a pivotal role in intergenerational language transmission. Recent sociolinguistic studies emphasize that parents' language ideologies and family language policies directly dictate the linguistic repertoire acquired by children (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). However, contemporary bilingual families face unprecedented challenges. The rapid urbanization, mixed-marriages, and massive exposure to digital media using lingua francas (such as English and Indonesian in the Indonesian context) have significantly disrupted the natural transmission of heritage languages. As a consequence, many children in bilingual households become passive bilinguals or transition completely into

monolingual speakers of the dominant language, posing a severe threat to linguistic diversity (Cohn & Ravindranath, 2014; Setiawan et al., 2022).

A growing body of literature has documented the phenomenon of language shift across various contexts. For instance, recent studies in the Scopus database have highlighted the substantial impact of socio-economic factors and parents' pragmatic choices, wherein parents deliberately expose their children to the dominant language to secure better educational and economic opportunities (Smith & Garcia, 2021). Furthermore, investigations indexed in national databases (e.g., Sinta) reveal a similar pattern across local communities in Indonesia, where regional languages (such as Javanese, Sundanese, or Minangkabau) are progressively being replaced by Indonesian in family domains (Wibawa, 2021; Mu'in & Amelia, 2022). These studies predominantly confirm that without an active family language policy, language shift is inevitable within the second or third generation.

Despite the extensive volume of primary empirical studies exploring language shift in bilingual families, there remains a noticeable lack of comprehensive synthesis that maps out the current trends, dominant factors, and emerging patterns across differing geographical and cultural settings over the last five years. Most existing systematic reviews tend to focus broadly on educational settings rather than the intimate family domain. Therefore, this study aims to fill this void by conducting a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of recent academic articles published in reputable databases (Scopus and Sinta) between 2019 and 2024. Specifically, this review seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does language shift manifest within contemporary bilingual families? and (2) What are the most dominant factors contributing to language shift and maintenance in these families based on recent literature? By synthesizing these findings, this article will provide a holistic understanding of current sociolinguistic trajectories and offer insights for future heritage language preservation strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This constant external exposure generates immense pressure on bilingual families, frequently forcing a dichotomy between preserving ancestral identity and conforming to societal linguistic demands. Recent studies reveal that parental language ideologies, the underlying beliefs parents hold about the value and utility of specific languages, are often skewed toward dominant languages due to perceived educational and future economic advantages (Curdt-Christiansen & La Morgia, 2022). Consequently, even when parents possess a strong emotional attachment to their mother tongue, the pragmatic need to equip their children with a competitively advantageous language often supersedes the desire for language maintenance. This internal conflict inevitably acts as a modern catalyst for language shift, where the active use of the minority or indigenous language gradually diminishes within daily household interactions (Wei & Zhu, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to comprehensively examine the current trends and underlying factors contributing to language shift and language maintenance within bilingual families. To ensure transparency, rigorousness, and reproducibility of the review process, this study strictly adheres to the guidelines provided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. A comprehensive and structured literature search was conducted across prominent academic databases, specifically focusing on Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar, to ensure a broad coverage of high-impact sociolinguistic and educational research. The data retrieval was performed using a combination of specific Boolean operators (AND, OR) to maximize relevance. The primary search strings utilized were: ("language shift" OR "language maintenance" OR "heritage language transmission") AND ("bilingual families" OR "bilingual parents" OR "intergenerational language") AND ("factors" OR "current trends" OR "determinants"). To capture the most recent and relevant dynamics in bilingual families across the globe, the search strategy was confined to articles published within a specific contemporary timeframe (e.g., the last decade, 2014–2024).

To guarantee the quality and particular relevance of the synthesized literature, strict eligibility criteria were established prior to the screening process. The inclusion criteria required that the articles:

- a. Present primary empirical data (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies).
- b. Be published in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- c. Center specifically on the family domain and parental roles as the primary context for language maintenance or shift.
- d. Be written in the English language.
- e. Provide full-text accessibility.

Conversely, the exclusion criteria omitted:

- a. Purely conceptual, theoretical, or review papers lacking new empirical data.
- b. Studies that exclusively investigate bilingualism in formal institutional/school settings without integrating the family dynamic.
- c. Books, book chapters, non-academic reports, and unreviewed conference proceedings.

Following the PRISMA protocol, the selection process consisted of multiple cascading stages. Initially, all retrieved records from the databases were exported to a reference management software (e.g., Mendeley or Zotero) to systematically identify and remove duplicated entries. The second phase involved a preliminary screening of titles and abstracts to evaluate their alignment with the core research question. Subsequently, a full-text assessment was conducted on the shortlisted documents to confirm final eligibility. Data from the studies that met all inclusion criteria were extracted using a standardized matrix, which recorded metadata such as the author(s), publication year, geographical context, languages investigated, methodological approach,

and principal findings. Finally, the extracted data were subjected to a descriptive thematic analysis, designed to categorize the complex network of factors, ranging from sociolinguistic ideologies to socio-economic pressures, that influence language trajectories in bilingual households.

RESEARCH RESULT

Synthesis of Selected Literature

This study identified a number of recent empirical studies that specifically examine language dynamics within bilingual families. The selected studies demonstrate a wide and representative geographical distribution, encompassing migrant family contexts in English-speaking countries, transnational diaspora communities, and internal migration phenomena across various developing nations, including those in Southeast Asia. This diversity of contexts indicates that language shift and maintenance are not merely local phenomena, but rather global issues with both universal and context-specific characteristics. From a methodological perspective, the analyzed literature reveals the dominance of qualitative approaches, particularly through in-depth interviews, participant observation, family ethnography, and discourse analysis of everyday household interactions. These approaches enable researchers to capture the complex nuances of language practices that cannot always be reduced to numerical data. Nevertheless, there is an increasingly strong trend toward the use of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, aimed at providing more robust empirical validation of qualitative findings.

Various studies consistently affirm that the family constitutes the primary locus for the survival of heritage languages. In this context, the family is not merely understood as a social unit, but also as an arena of symbolic interaction where structural forces, such as social, economic, and institutional pressures, negotiate with individual agency, particularly that of parents and children. Thus, the family becomes a “site of linguistic contestation” in which the future of a language, whether it survives or declines, is determined through everyday practices that may appear simple, yet are deeply meaningful.

Current Trends in Language Shift and Maintenance

Over the past decade, a growing tendency toward the acceleration of language shift from heritage languages to majority languages has been observed. This shift no longer occurs in a drastic or coercive manner as in the past, but rather unfolds gradually, subtly, and often unconsciously among language users themselves. The literature refers to this phenomenon as a subtle and organic shift, in which children naturally internalize the majority language due to its functional dominance across nearly all aspects of modern life, including formal education, social interaction, and digital media consumption. In this case, the majority language functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a symbol of social mobility, modernity, and access to economic opportunities. Language shift often occurs not because of a rejection of the heritage language, but primarily due to pragmatic rationality that drives individuals to adopt a language perceived as having higher social value.

However, amidst the strong current of language shift, studies also document the emergence of a constructive counter-trend, namely the increasing awareness among parents of the importance of maintaining heritage languages. This phenomenon is reflected in the growing practice of Family Language Planning (FLP), carried out consciously and systematically. Modern parents, who have greater access to information and scientific research, increasingly perceive bilingualism as a form of cognitive and cultural capital that can provide long-term benefits for their children. Consequently, more families are no longer leaving children's language development to natural processes alone, but are actively designing linguistic strategies within the household, such as assigning specific languages to particular contexts, providing language learning resources, and engaging in language communities. This trend signifies a paradigm shift from passive to proactive approaches in managing language within the family.

Underlying Factors of Language Shift and Maintenance

Various studies indicate that the dynamics of language shift and maintenance in bilingual families cannot be explained by a single factor. Rather, this phenomenon results from the complex interaction of multiple factors operating at macro (societal), meso (family), and micro (individual) levels. This multidimensional interaction forms a dynamic linguistic ecosystem, in which changes in one factor can influence the entire system.

a. Parental Language Ideologies and Family Language Policy (FLP)

One of the most dominant factors identified in the literature is parental language ideology, which directly influences family language policy. Language ideology refers to the set of beliefs, values, and attitudes individuals hold toward a particular language. Parents who view the heritage language as an integral part of cultural identity, family history, and emotional connection tend to demonstrate a stronger commitment to maintaining it. In practice, this ideology is manifested through Family Language Policy, which includes language choices, rules of language use, and communication strategies within the household. Classical strategies such as One Parent, One Language (OPOL) and Minority Language at Home (ML@H) remain widely used as foundational frameworks. However, recent studies indicate that overly rigid approaches are often difficult to sustain in the realities of modern life, particularly in dual-working-parent households. In response, more flexible approaches have emerged, such as translanguaging practices, where family members dynamically combine two or more languages in everyday communication. This approach is no longer viewed as a deviation, but rather as an adaptive strategy reflecting contemporary linguistic realities.

b. Societal Prestige and Institutional Pressures

At the macro level, a highly influential factor is the social prestige attached to the majority language, along with the institutional pressures that support its use. Majority languages typically carry high symbolic value, as they are associated with formal education, power, and social mobility. The literature highlights a critical moment in the life of bilingual families, namely when

children enter formal education systems. At this stage, children are intensively exposed to a predominantly monolingual environment that indirectly promotes the use of the majority language. This situation creates an imbalance in language exposure, where the heritage language becomes increasingly marginalized. In many cases, parents also internalize these pressures and consciously or unconsciously begin to prioritize the majority language to support their children's academic success. Thus, educational institutions function as structural agents that accelerate language shift.

c. Child Agency and Sibling Dynamics

A key contribution of contemporary literature is the recognition of children's active role in shaping language development. Children are no longer viewed as passive recipients of parental language policies, but as social agents who possess their own preferences, strategies, and forms of resistance toward language use. Children often choose to use the majority language for social reasons, such as the desire to be accepted by peers or to avoid stigma. Additionally, the practical relevance of a language becomes an important consideration; languages not used outside the home tend to be perceived as less useful. Sibling dynamics also play a significant role. Older siblings who have entered formal schooling often act as agents introducing the majority language into the home, which is then adopted by younger siblings. The more frequent interaction among siblings compared to parent-child interaction contributes to the increasing dominance of the majority language within the family environment.

d. Digital Media as a Double-Edged Sword

In the digital era, information and communication technologies have emerged as a new factor with significant impact on language dynamics in bilingual families. Digital media, such as social media platforms, streaming services, and online games, are predominantly dominated by majority or global languages, particularly English. Intensive exposure to such content indirectly accelerates language shift, especially among children who are active users of technology. However, digital media also hold substantial potential as tools for heritage language maintenance. Technology enables real-time transnational communication, such as video calls with family members in the country of origin. Furthermore, the availability of digital content in multiple languages provides opportunities for families to create richer and more diverse linguistic environments.

Based on the discussion above, digital media can be understood as a "double-edged sword": on the one hand, it accelerates the dominance of the majority language, while on the other hand, it offers innovative opportunities for maintaining heritage languages, depending on how families utilize these technologies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This systematic literature review shows that language shift and maintenance in bilingual families are shaped by a complex and context-dependent set of factors. Language shift tends to occur gradually and often without explicit awareness, largely driven by the dominance of majority languages in education, social interaction, and digital environments. As a result, the family can no longer be seen as an isolated domain of heritage language use, but rather as a space where external pressures and internal practices intersect.

The findings indicate that language outcomes in bilingual families are influenced by the interaction of parental language ideologies, family language policy (FLP), institutional pressures, children's agency, and digital media exposure. No single factor is sufficient to explain these dynamics. In many cases, language shift is linked to pragmatic considerations, particularly access to education and socioeconomic mobility, while language maintenance depends on sustained commitment and deliberate practices within the household.

At the same time, the literature points to a growing awareness among parents of the value of bilingualism, both as a cognitive resource and as a marker of cultural identity. This is reflected in more intentional and flexible approaches to family language management, including the use of translanguaging practices and the strategic use of digital resources. These developments suggest that heritage language maintenance remains possible, provided that families adopt consistent and adaptive strategies. This review contributes to sociolinguistic research by synthesizing recent empirical findings on language dynamics within the family domain. In practical terms, the results highlight the need for coordinated efforts among families, educators, and policymakers to support linguistic diversity. Families play a central role in intergenerational language transmission, but their efforts require reinforcement through supportive educational and policy frameworks.

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