

LINGUISTIC DISCRIMINATION OF HERITAGE LANGUAGE SPEAKING CHILDREN: WHY DOES IT HAPPEN AND HOW CAN PARENTS TACKLE IT?

Between September and December 2023, Babylonia collected questions from parents regarding their children's language development. This article aims to answer the following questions:

- It is 2024: why does our society still discriminate so strongly against certain languages and dialects? A Tigrinya-speaking child receives little appreciation from educational institutions compared to an English-speaking child. What are we still doing wrong? Who is most responsible for this inequality? How could these asymmetries be reduced as soon as possible? Why are decision-makers not interested in changing this?
- People always say that we should cultivate children's native/first languages. However, our family language is not welcome at school as part of the regular timetable, i.e., it is not promoted – isn't this institutional discrimination? Why is this not (yet) being discussed in Switzerland? Is linguisticism not an issue?

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Around the world, many parents raise their children multilingually, hoping that they will eventually become proficient and active users of all their languages. However, parents' multilingual child-rearing experiences – and often also their outcomes – are shaped strongly by the languages that are being transmitted. Specifically, there are systematic differences between parents transmitting multiple dominant societal languages (e.g., French and English in Quebec) compared to parents transmitting heritage languages. *Heritage languages* (henceforth: HLs) are languages other than the dominant societal language(s) in a given context, and a distinction can be made between *Indigenous HLs*, which are native to a region but have been minoritised (e.g., Māori in New Zealand, or North Frisian in Germany), and *immigrant HLs*, which are spoken by a society's minority population with a migration background (e.g., Tigrinya in Switzerland, or Tagalog in Japan). Differences certainly exist in the societal treatment of Indigenous versus immigrant HL-transmitting parents. However, the main point here is that

both types of HL-transmitting parents systematically experience more linguistic discrimination than their non-HL-transmitting counterparts – and the same also applies to their children. For instance, parents generally receive little respect and recognition for transmitting HLs, and they often get told to only speak the dominant language(s) of the society they live in. Children, as they get older, commonly have little or no school support for their HL development, and they frequently get mocked for using their HLs. This happens even when children are raised multilingually with dominant societal languages in addition to their HLs. But what is the root cause of such linguistic discrimination, what consequences does it have, and what can be done about it?

The reason for linguistic discrimination lies in people's language attitudes

Simply put, *language attitudes* are systematic beliefs that people hold about languages, language varieties (e.g., accents

and dialects), and linguistic phenomena (e.g., multilingualism and language mixing). Everyone has language attitudes, but no-one is born with them: they are socially constructed and learned from experience, usually early on in life. They can be influenced by caregivers, friends, neighbours, online acquaintances, and other people; shaped by the media, educational institutions, and the government; and transmitted explicitly or in very subtle ways. Importantly, people's language attitudes are always linked with their attitudes towards the *users* of the languages, language varieties, and linguistic phenomena in question. This is because language functions as a symbol of its users' social identities. It reveals – or it is at least perceived to reveal – what social groups someone belongs to: for instance, whether they are part of the societal majority or some kind of minority, what their social class is, what occupational group they belong to, and whether they are part of a monolingual or a multilingual community. There are two key cognitive processes that account for this: categorisation and stereotyping. When people first encounter someone new, they use that person's language cues to make inferences about their social group membership(s) – that is, they categorise them; and then they attribute to the new person all the traits that are stereotypically associated with their inferred social group(s). Language is thus used as a key way of dividing the social world – and from a fairly early age, people are conditioned to hold (1) a preference for members of prestigious, high-status social groups, as well as (2) a preference for anyone who is a member of their own social group(s), a phenomenon referred to as *ingroup favouritism*. Since people's attitudes bias their social interactions, these two preferences entail that people are much more likely to discriminate (1) against anyone who uses languages, language varieties or linguistic phenomena that are associated with low-status groups, as well as (2) against anyone whom they perceive as an outgroup member. Consequently, language users who are perceived to be members of low-status groups and/or outgroup members commonly face stigmatisation, challenges, and barriers in many spheres of their lives – including education, employment, the search for housing, and even judicial settings. Notably, speakers of dominant societal majority languages tend to perceive HL speakers as both:



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members of low-status groups *and* outgroup members. This can further amplify the disadvantages that HL speakers experience. *The information in this paragraph is taken from Kircher and Zipp (2022), where a more detailed discussion of the literature on language attitudes, their formation, and their consequences can be found.*

The extent of the denigration that HL speakers experience depends on their specific HLs and on the stereotypes these HLs are associated with. The latter can vary between language communities. (For instance, Spanish as a HL is commonly perceived very negatively by non-Spanish-speakers in the United States. This is linked to widespread raciolinguistic ideologies as well as the common association of Spanish with illegal immigration across the Mexican border. By contrast, in most European contexts, Spanish is viewed much more positively: it is seen as a beautiful language with high utilitarian value that facilitates travel and international communication. Such differences highlight that language attitudes do not indicate linguistic or aesthetic quality per se, but are instead contingent upon the social connotations that languages hold in different communities.) Relatedly, different kinds of



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multilingualism are judged differently. For instance, even though both Tigrinya and English are immigrant HLs in Switzerland, multilingualism involving one or more of the Swiss societal majority languages in combination with Tigrinya is not valued anywhere near as much as multilingualism involving one or more of the Swiss societal majority languages in combination with English. The former is stereotypically associated with precarity and poverty, the latter with prestige and privilege. The term *elite multilingualism* is used to describe the kind of multilingualism that involves 'powerful' languages such as English and Spanish, whose knowledge is deemed very desirable due to its tangible market value – at least in most European contexts. Of course, English is a special case since it is also taught as a subject at school, both across Europe and in many other parts of the world. Its teaching is linked with its tangible market value. Moreover, English is the global lingua franca. It therefore holds a doubly special status, which makes it markedly different from other HLs. Consequently, it is not surprising that children who grow up multilingually with English as one of their languages experience less linguistic discrimination than children who are raised multilingually with other HLs. *The information in this paragraph is largely based on Kircher and Zipp (2022) as well as Barakos and Selleck (2019); the latter provide an excellent introduction to the topic of elite multilingualism, including its connection with broader structural inequalities.*

The consequences of linguistic discrimination can be severe

While parents do not usually hesitate to transmit dominant societal languages to

their children, many parents do feel pressured to stop using their HLs with their children in public places, where they can be heard by others – and some parents even cease to transmit their HLs in the home. Further down the line, parents are also less likely to ask for school support for their children's HL development if they feel that it is not socially accepted. All of this reduces the exposure that children receive to their HLs. This, in turn, negatively affects children's language outcomes – because both the quantity and the quality of exposure they receive to each of their languages is essential for their multilingual development. If parents reduce the amount of HL exposure their children receive, and if they do not strive to provide rich and varied language experiences, they are thereby also reducing the likelihood that the children will become active and proficient speakers of these HLs. *Multilingual development is further discussed in the articles by Gathercole and De Houwer in this special issue; Fibla et al. (2022) also provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant research.*

What can parents do to support their children's HL development in the home?

Especially in the early years, a crucial step is to cultivate the home as a domain in which the HL is actively promoted. There are many ways in which parents can achieve this: for instance, by establishing family traditions that are associated with the HL, through shared reading practices to promote HL development, and by encouraging contact with extended family members who can provide additional HL exposure. Ideally, parents should regularly assess how their *family language policies*

(i.e., the ways in which they want to use one or more languages in the home) are working out, making objective appraisals of what language(s) their children are exposed to in their day-to-day lives. Based on these appraisals, family language policies may need to be adapted dynamically to ensure children's adequate HL exposure. *Family language policies are further discussed in this volume in the articles by Gathercole, Montanari, Nakamura and Slavkov; Fibla et al. (2022) and Kircher et al. (2024) also provide more detailed discussions of family language policies and the pivotal role that the home environment plays in HL transmission.*

Notably, in the home, parents are not only able to transmit the HL itself; they also have the opportunity to shape their children's attitudes towards it. As noted above, a child's language attitudes will most likely be influenced not only by their parents but also by numerous other people, as well as by the media, educational institutions, and the government once the child gets older. This may make the promotion of positive attitudes towards the family's HL challenging. Nonetheless, parents should feel heartened by their own agency in this regard. Children's early exposure to the HL will determine their later HL development and whether they are able to use it – while children's attitudes towards the HL will influence whether they will actually want to use it. Moreover, a child with positive attitudes towards their HL is more likely to withstand linguistic discrimination.

What can parents do to combat institutional linguistic discrimination?

HL-speaking parents and children in many societies would benefit from policies that promote structural changes and provide them with more institutional support. Over time, such policies would also promote the amelioration of attitudes towards HLs and their speakers – and thereby reduce linguistic discrimination at an inter-personal level. As it is always easiest to stick with the status quo, it is unlikely that decision-makers will implement such policies without pressure to do so. However, parents can play a key role in this regard: they are able to use their agency to advocate for change. Advocating for change is a

challenging task and parents may find it easier to work towards this goal in groups, together with other like-minded HL-transmitting parents. This also makes it more likely that they will get heard and taken seriously by the relevant decision-makers. The long and turbulent history of language education policies in the Canadian province of Quebec serves as an example of how effective parent pressure groups can be.

Depending on their circumstances, different HL communities will benefit from different policies. Their needs may include paid parental leave so that the primary caregiver(s) can provide adequate HL exposure during infancy; the availability of HL childcare and/or tailored preschool programmes during toddlerhood; the subsidy of institutional activities such as HL storytime at the local library or cultural centre; and, as children get older, HL instruction and other assistance through the school system. *These examples are taken from Fibla et al. (2022), who also provide an overview of other potential policies to support parents who are raising multilingual children with HLs, and who explain how each of these policies can promote children's language development. Throughout, the authors highlight the importance of policies and support measures that are tailored to specific communities.*

Before parents start advocating for policy changes, it is important that they find out what policies are already in place and what opportunities are already available for their children (for example, by requesting this information from school boards and/or education ministries). Sometimes, certain measures simply are not advertised sufficiently and are therefore not on the HL community members' radar. It is also helpful if parents are aware of what the science says about children who grow up multilingually: namely that these children are not at a disadvantage compared to their monolingual peers, they will not be confused by acquiring multiple languages, and their multilingualism will not lead to any delays in their language acquisition process. *Myths and milestones regarding children's multilingual development are the topics of De Houwer's articles in this volume; Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013) also debunk some of the most common myths about childhood multilingualism. Awareness of the facts may help parents stand up to*

anyone who expresses negative attitudes towards childhood multilingualism.

Advocating for policy changes is not an easy task – but in the long term, the benefits can be substantial. Structural changes, institutional support, and more positive attitudes towards HLs and their speakers will allow parents to navigate the child-rearing process more easily, without constantly encountering linguistic discrimination. This, in turn, will contribute to the well-being of the parents, the children, and the HL community at large.

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