

Grandparents' influence on children's language development in multilingual families: a capital theory perspective

Xiaoqian Li^{1*}

¹ School of Literature, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology, Zhuhai, 519040, China

Abstract. With the increasing prevalence of dual-career families and transnational marriages, most children live in two and more language environments. The theme of this paper is the influence of grandparents on children's language development in multilingual environments, filling the gap of traditional research that focuses on the role of parents and ignores the role of grandparents. Based on Bourdieu's capital theory, this study reveals the intertransformational relationship between family social capital (SC) and children's language competence (LC). The study conclude that rich family SC can be converted into good LC, while limited family SC can only be converted into limited LC. Conversely, LC can also reflect a certain degree of family intimacy. In addition, the paper explores the two-way influence mechanisms of intergenerational language transfer: focusing on the key role of grandparents in Family Language Policy (FLP), the power dynamics between parents and grandparents regarding language choice, and the active shaping of language development by children as autonomous language practitioners (rather than passive recipients).

1 Introduction

Global migration flows and transnational marriages are becoming increasingly common, and multilingual environments are becoming the norm in children's upbringing. Against the backdrop of the fact that most children are exposed to two or more languages in the home, the study of family language policy (FLP) has received increasing attention from the academic community.

FLP refers to the attitudes, planning and use of language by family members [1]. FLP has its roots in the special and private realm of the family and is entwined with family ties, goals, and future visions as well as psycho-emotional elements like aversion, intimacy, isolation, or adoration [2]. The focus of FLP research has changed in recent years from developing language skills to examining the associations between language, society, and families [3].

Grandparents' roles in children's language development stages appear to have been overlooked, despite the fact that research on children's language development in multilingual family environments has produced a wealth of results. This is because the majority of the perspectives in this research have focused on the influence of immediate family members,

* Corresponding author: 1707023003@stu.sqxy.edu.cn

particularly parents, and the roles they play in their language development as well as their attachment relationships and emotional interactions. More recently, researchers have started using Bourdieu's social capital(SC) theory to analyse the dynamic relationship between family SC and language capital (LC) [4]. It has been found that close relationships within the family can facilitate children's acquisition and maintenance of heritage language (HL), while at the same time, grandchildren often consciously learn and maintain the ability to speak the HL in order to enhance family cohesion and promote harmonious intergenerational interactions, e.g., children learn their grandparent's mother tongue (e.g., Vietnamese) often to maintain intergenerational emotional ties [5]. However, this process is often fraught with challenges. In a context where the dominant language (e.g., Mandarin or English) dominates educationally and socially, intergenerational language transmission can be characterised by stress and conflict. Children may refuse to use the HL due to school pressure or parental linguistic ideology, resulting in a disruption of intergenerational language transmission [6].

In addition, conflicting family power structures and language ideologies further complicate the phenomenon. Grandparents may act as the primary bearers of the HL, or they may promote the use of the dominant language in a given situation [7,8]. For example, the choice of language (Mandarin vs. Standard English) between grandparents and parents in Chinese families in Singapore reflects a negotiation of values within the family [9]. These studies suggest that children's language choices are not only a reflection of family relationships, but also a result of the interconversion of social and linguistic capital.

This paper applies the concept of capital to FLP, where linguistic capital and family SC are interchangeable, and examines grandparents' involvement in FLP to uncover the mechanism of the reciprocal connection between intergenerational relationships and language development in children, and to provide a new perspective for understanding the complexity of children's language development in a multilingual environment [4].

2 Key theories - application of Bourdieu's concept of capital to family language policy

Bourdieu classifies capital into three main categories: economic capital (EC), cultural capital and SC [4]. While cultural capital encompasses an individual's educational background, cultural literacy, and socially recognized credentials, EC refers to the material riches that people own. The value that people gain from their relationships and is known as SC. The effective possession of a network of kinship (or other) relationships that can be mobilized or at least manifested" is how Bourdieu defines limited SC [10].

2.1 Impact of SC factors

In multilingual environments, socio-economic capital factors influence the development of family language policies. If a non-dominant language has a high economic value and can increase potential income, then parents are motivated to enhance children's learning of this language in the family, but not all second languages have a high socio-economic value, or even disadvantages, in which case parents or grandparents, even if they have a certain knowledge of the second language, will not teach it to their children [11].

2.2 Interconversion of family SC and linguistic capital

In FLP, Bourdieu cultural capital is narrowly understood as children's linguistic competence, i.e., linguistic capital, while family SC represents the emotional elements and dynamics of

relationships within the family. HL is a particular form of linguistic capital. Capital is interchangeable, and one type of capital can be converted into another. The subtle transferability between family relationships and children's home language usage and the transformative and significant link between family SC and linguistic capital is best illustrated by objectives in FLP [4].

SC of Rich family translates into good linguistic capital. Close intergenerational relationships and emotional interactions motivate children to make greater use of their mother tongue. In a harmonious extended family, grandchildren often make a conscious effort to learn and maintain competence in the HL, regarding learning the HL as a necessary way to maintain close ties with grandparents. Furthermore, children's strong mother tongue maintenance can support excellent interpersonal interactions and family cohesion. According to one interview study, Elly and Tilly both thought that when learning Vietnamese, their HL, would help them communicate effectively with their grandmothers and other close family members and preserve strong emotional bonds within the family, which would help preserve their social capital in the long term.[5]. The study also found that multigenerational families are more conducive to the practice and use of their mother tongue than nuclear families. This implies that SC can be transformed into good LC in a supportive family setting, and that extended families may be better for children's linguistic ecology development than nuclear families [12].

Moreover, limited linguistic capital can only result from inadequate family SC. Smith Christmas discovered that children tended to use the family language less when their fathers taught them Scottish Gaelic on a regular basis [13]. When grandparents made disparaging remarks about their grandchildren's lack of proficiency in the HL, the child purposefully avoided speaking the language within the family. More distant and indifferent intergenerational relationships, i.e., a lack of SC in the family, will lead to a tendency for grandchildren not to use their mother tongue. Then this group of children will be less competent in the HL, and will use only the dominant language of the society for communication in the family.

As a result, family connections and family language continue to have a reciprocal relationship. Maintenance of the child's language or a complete shift in language can express different types of family relationships [14]. Higher levels of native language proficiency and frequent use of the parents' language by the child are often associated with greater familial intimacy. In contrast, a stronger tendency to adopt the dominant or new language is typically linked to lower levels of emotional attachment and reduced family-based SC. Moos et al suggest that the distribution of family power structures affects children's perceptions and emotional dispositions toward family relationships, which in turn affects children's language choices [15]. This study found that such children, who preferred the new language to their mother tongue, tended to be highly autonomous, but the sample was drawn from Chinese children, and it is possible that this high level of autonomy reflected a subtle protest against parental authority, with children persisting in their use of the dominant language even in the face of their father's strong demand for a mother-tongue response. Therefore, a highly hierarchical and power-structured family does not necessarily lead to a higher rate of heritage language maintenance. Instead, it is the child's autonomy in language choice that plays a more decisive role, highlighting their linguistic agency to a significant extent.

3 Impact of intergenerational relationships on children's language

3.1 Language transfer mechanisms

In many multilingual families, grandparents are important participants in the language practices of the family, often preferring to use HL, and are the bearers of traditional family culture. In many cases, the reading environments provided by grandparents are even different from those provided by parents, as grandparents tend to be more familiar with cultural practices as well as make more use of HL than parents, allowing children to engage with written texts as multilingual speakers, which facilitates the construction of children's reading identities that are linked to their family's cultural and linguistic identities [16]. In Zhang and Li's study, it was found that KA1, KB1/KB2 usually used Malimasa to communicate with their grandchildren in the hope that children could acquire their mother tongue in natural contact [6]. The grandparents' generation wanted to emphasize the use and communication of HL more as an important way to maintain national identity and cultural transmission.

However, under the Putonghua-dominated education system, intergenerational language transfer is often subject to multiple influences from the education system, sociolinguistic policies and mainstream values. For example, grandparents (e.g., AA1, AD2) took the initiative to try to teach Mosuo, but grandchildren refused to respond due to the use of Putonghua at school, resulting in the grandparents being forced to choose to communicate in Chinese [6]. Under the macro-level language policy, children preferred Mandarin due to the school and social environment, and young parents preferred to communicate with their children in Mandarin considering the practical concerns of future direction and employment.

Children's language preferences are not only influenced by their families, but can also influence family members' language interactions and policy making through the actual frequency of use. As developing emerging language users, they are not passive recipients of language; they have their own perspectives, motivations, and interests in the use of language in the family, and have considerable capacity for social participation, actively shaping language environments and practices, so that their own language preferences have a direct effect on the intergenerational transmission of the mother tongue [17]. The community and the school have a greater influence on children's language choices in multilingual settings, and the HL's continuous transmission will be at risk if children refuse to speak their mother tongue at home.

3.2 The influence of power relations and value systems in intergenerational families on children's use of family language

Previous research has found that grandparents are often considered the “gatekeepers” of the HL in multilingual settings, and Braun recognizes the effective role of grandparents in maintaining the HL [7,8]. However, grandparents can also act as facilitators of the shift from HL to “mainstream language”, often depending on the geographic location of the grandparent's residence (host country or country of origin), with grandparents in the country of origin providing an important source of HL input and motivation for grandchildren to learn the HL, and grandparents in the host country tending to communicate with grandchildren in the dominant societal language. Grandparents living in the host country tend to use the dominant language of the society in which they live to communicate with their grandchildren, and may even abandon the HL in order to facilitate the grandchildren's acquisition of the dominant language when time and space are limited.

Both parents and grandparents play an important role in the development of FLP. Parents and grandparents are the primary caregivers in the process of children's language development, and their linguistic choices as well as linguistic ideologies influence children's use of language, and the power games and value systems of grandparents and parents in the

family influence the development of FLP, which in turn determines the kind of language that children acquire and use.

When grandparents and parents share the same linguistic ideology, i.e., they both work together to reinforce the same common linguistic system, which is often the dominant language promoted under macro-policies and has high economic value and SC, HL give way to the dominant language. In cases where time and space resources are limited, grandparents and parents may even abandon the use of the HL with their children and use the mainstream language exclusively for communication. For example, in the multi-generational Singaporean Chinese Yee family, the grandparents and parents use more standard Singaporean English rather than colloquial 'Singlish' (Singapore Spoken English) when talking to Yee. When Yee's father talks to his grandparents there is some use of colloquial English and its characteristic micro-phrases, such as words like *leh* and *or-not*, but then switches back to standard Singaporean English in the blink of an eye when telling his son that it is time for him to go to bed [9].

When grandparents do not reinforce the same language system as parents, i.e., in the case of conflicting language ideologies, grandparents may or may not even be able to re-route the trajectory of the family's language practices, reflecting the agency and authority of the grandparent carer. For instance, in an interview study of three Chinese dual-income families in Singapore (James and Joyce's family, Corrine's family, and Yee's family, respectively), all of the families had grandparents as the primary caregivers of the children [9]. Subject Corrine's mother believed that standard English is something children learn naturally at school, so making English the dominant language of the family at home was unnecessary, whereas the grandparents, out of concern that Corrine might later speak "rojak" (non-standard English), strongly urged the parents to speak English rather than Mandarin, and a heated argument arose between the grandparents and the parents. Since then, the parents have also made it mandatory for the child to respond verbally in formal English.

However, this is not absolute and there are multigenerational families that take a more *laissez-faire* approach to family language management." The family is also a dynamic system, made up of members of different generations, each with their own views, roles and ideas about language and life" [18]. Whilst different family members hold different views on language, it is not absolutely clear which language children are required to use. For example, in Wenhan et al's study, James and Joyce's grandparents tended to communicate with their children in Mandarin, whereas the parents had their own strong preference for speaking only English when they themselves communicated with their children but did not interfere with the language in which the children responded, which is a reflection of the fact that the grandparents and the parents worked together, and that the cultural values of respect and harmony in intergenerational relationships transcended the parents' own language management practices. own language management practices [9].

With the increasing pace of society and the growing number of dual-income families, grandparents become the best and irreplaceable caregivers for their children when their parents are busy making a living. In some families, grandparents have a significant influence on their grandchildren's use of language because they spend more time together. They play a significant role in language use and management. When the language ideology of grandparents and parents is in conflict, parents will avoid conflict with grandparents, as well as out of the respect and sense of indebtedness to the grandparents of the long-term care of the child, will be more submissive to the will of the grandparents, which in fact embodies a kind of family power game, reflecting a form of compromise in the Eastern collectivist culture of respect and harmony as the core. The result of this game ultimately determines the rules and practices of language use within the family and influences children's language choices.

4 Conclusion

This paper integrates Bourdieu's capital theory with FLP and finds that family SC and linguistic capital are interchangeable, i.e., harmonious and close intergenerational relationships lead to a greater tendency for children to use and maintain the dominant language, whereas cold and distant relationships may lead to the disruption of HL transmission. At the same time, children's language choices can reflect their family relationships. Family language ideology is influenced by the educational system, sociolinguistic policies, and mainstream values, so grandparents may be important maintainers of HL, or they may be active promoters of mainstream languages.

Families comprise multiple generations, and each family member has his or her own views on language and life, which may lead to inconsistencies in language views within the family, while grandparents, as the best and irreplaceable caregivers who spend the most time with children when parents are busy with their livelihoods, hold language ideologies that significantly influence on the language choices of both parents and children. When the language ideologies of grandparents and parents are in conflict, parents tend to be more submissive to the will of grandparents and agree with their language policies out of respect and a sense of indebtedness to them for their long-term care of children. Children are not passive recipients of language but rather active agents who shape their language environment. Their own language preferences are directly affected by the family's language policy.

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