

Children as Socializing Agents: Family Language Policy in Situations of Language Shift

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1. Introduction: children and adults in language socialization research

The field of language socialization comprises two broad areas of interest: socialization *to use* language, and socialization *through the use of* language (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Within both areas, most research has focused on children; analyses of the language socialization of adults are relatively rare, though they have increased in recent years.¹ Within the first area, studies of adults have focused mainly on second language acquisition – occasionally with some attention to social factors, but only inasmuch as these affect speakers’ developing competency in the L2.

The second area – socialization through the use of language – has produced more culturally-situated examinations of how adults’ differing social roles are manifested in their linguistic practice (see for example the wide literature on gender differences in speech). Studies of secondary language socialization have also examined those specialized linguistic competencies acquired through formal education, though most of this literature focuses on literacy practices rather than oral speech (e.g., Ferdman, Weber, & Ramirez [eds.], 1994; Ivanič, 1998; Street [ed.], 1993, 2001; Ventola & Mauranen [eds.], 1986). Another important area of research has been language use in the workplace, especially as it relates to the construction of particular identities and of relations of domination and subordination (Bell, 2003; McCall, 2003; Roy, 2003). Finally, ethnographies of a wide range of “communities of practice” have illustrated how entrance into a new community or sphere of activity usually implies the acquisition of new discourse practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, among these different types of studies, few have examined the interplay of different spoken languages within adults’ secondary language socialization (exceptions include Atkinson, 2003; Bell, 2003; Luykx, 2003; Sunaoshi, 2003).

Studies in all of these areas have contributed to a view of language socialization as a dynamic, mutually-negotiated process extending across the lifespan (Bayley & Schecter, 2003). As Duranti notes, “only recently have researchers started to pay attention to the cultural prerequisites and the cultural implications of language acquisition” (2001: 259), and this is doubly true of language acquisition among adults. Existing studies of adults’ secondary language socialization have seldom bridged the traditional divide between socialization *through* language and socialization *to use* language – in other words, to show how adults’ acquisition of second, third, or fourth languages is implicated in the construction of identities and the negotiation of shifting social relationships, both locally and globally.

In addition to focusing primarily on children, language socialization research has traditionally cast children as the objects or recipients of socialization, rather than its agents. In contrast to earlier conceptions of children as “blank slates” upon which the linguistic practices of the adults around them

¹ For example, Schieffelin and Ochs open their review article (1986) by claiming that language socialization research “is not limited to the role of language in integrating children into society, but is open to investigation of language socialization throughout the human lifespan across a range of social experiences and contexts” (p.163); however, the bulk of the article then focuses on studies of children’s language socialization. Additionally, the majority of studies reviewed by Schieffelin and Ochs refer to monolingual situations (though some may well have *treated* as monolingual contexts that in reality were bi- or multilingual). The recent volume edited by Bayley and Schecter (2003) is an attempt to counter this assumption of monolingualism as the norm in situations of language socialization.

were inscribed, more recent research portrays children as actively negotiating meanings and relationships in the acquisition of new linguistic competencies (Greenfield, 1984; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984; Rogoff, 1990; Wenger, 1998, pp. 197-206). While a smaller subset of studies has examined how children's own linguistic practices may impact the language use of others (for example, Burns, 1984; Cardozo-Freeman, 1975; de la Piedra & Romo, 2003; Schieffelin, 1986), these have generally focused on interactions among siblings or within children's peer groups. The notion that children's language use might be instrumental in the language socialization of *adults* has received virtually no serious study.²

At first glance, this seems natural; given our understanding of childhood as a period of intense social learning, we expect children to be socialized by their elders, not the other way around. Adults are expected to command a broader and deeper repertoire of socially-valued linguistic resources than do children, and parents are expected to be primarily responsible for their children's linguistic socialization. However, there are two situations, increasingly common in today's world, in which our regular assumptions about who socializes whom may be inverted. These are: (1) rapidly modernizing societies undergoing language shift from a vernacular language (or languages) to an official language; and (2) immigrant communities in which families are transplanted into unfamiliar linguistic territory. In both types of settings, vernacular-speaking parents are often branded as linguistically deficient, unable to provide the sorts of linguistic socialization necessary to their children's future social and economic survival; consequently, much of the responsibility for children's linguistic socialization is shifted to the school. As a result of this shift, children are likely to have greater access to linguistic resources valued by the wider society (especially print literacy and oral fluency in the dominant language³), and are thus likely to acquire them more quickly and effectively than their adult relatives.

In contexts of modernization and/or immigration, children's greater access to new language varieties or to new modalities of language use (e.g., literacy) is often accompanied by a corresponding pressure on adult speakers to acquire these same competencies. So, within a single household, one finds speakers with greater access to certain linguistic resources, and other speakers with less access to those same resources, who nevertheless are under pressure to acquire them. The fact that this differential distribution of linguistic capital runs counter to the typical age-based distribution of power and status within the family gives rise to potential reversals and interruptions of the traditional roles of parent and child with regard to language socialization.

Below, I will focus primarily on the first broad area of language socialization (socialization to use language); however, children's socialization of adult family members may extend to the latter area as well (use of language to facilitate other sociocultural learning), as children's access to linguistic and social knowledge not shared by their parents provokes changes in other aspects of life, both within and beyond the family. Rather than reporting specific research results, this paper attempts to sketch out a research agenda focusing on children's role in the language socialization of adult family members. It presents relatively unstructured observations gleaned from years of living in the sorts of sociolinguistic situations described above. These observations happen to refer to Bolivia, but they reflect large-scale social changes that are occurring in many other countries as well. These social changes, and the sorts of speech interactions they give rise to, are of crucial concern to the field of language socialization in a rapidly globalizing world; it is hoped that by identifying possible directions for research, we may begin to illuminate this important but largely neglected phenomenon.

² Throughout their review article (1986), Schieffelin and Ochs emphasize children's role as "socializees," though there are a few brief mentions of adult novices in secondary socialization contexts, and of children as socializers of other children in peer and play groups. There is no mention of children as active participants in the language socialization of adults.

³ Throughout this paper, the term "dominant language" refers to the official, *socially* dominant language, *not* the language which is "dominant" in terms of the individual's own level of fluency. I have chosen to avoid the term "official" here, since, throughout Latin America, many vernacular languages have in recent years become "official" in terms of legal status (though actual implementation or enforcement of this status has lagged far behind).

2. What do we mean by “children as socializing agents”?

If we accept that children may in fact influence the language development of adult family members, what are the mechanisms by which this might happen? Three possibilities immediately present themselves, ranging from less direct to more direct; there may well be others. Each of these three, described briefly below, is applicable to social settings of either modernization or migration.

(1) Motivated by their linguistic aspirations for their children, parents make decisions that bring the whole family into contact with new language varieties. Siguán and Mackey (1986, pp. 60-61) note, almost in passing, that choices parents make with regard to children’s language socialization have consequences for the linguistic behavior of the entire family. A common example is the decision by vernacular-speaking parents to migrate, permanently and as a family, to an area of greater educational opportunity for the children (generally an urban center). Such a move is likely to increase all family members’ exposure to new language varieties and modalities, but also weakens parents’ role as the linguistic authorities of the household, placing them in a linguistically subordinate position to their urban-raised children. As children eventually surpass parents in their mastery of the dominant language, they may come to challenge or ignore aspects of the parents’ desired “family language policy.” For example, children may persist in using the L2 at home even though parents prefer the L1.⁴

(2) Another way in which children indirectly exert influence over parents’ linguistic development is when parents adapt their own language use in order to promote desired linguistic competencies in their children. Of course, numerous studies have examined the ways in which adults adapt their speech in response to the perceived communicative, emotional, and developmental needs of children; but such “caregiver talk” is a limited situational adaptation, restricted to the adult’s interactions with the child(ren). In contrast, when adults adapt their language behavior in accordance with the perceived sociolinguistic needs of their children, and when these adaptations then *persist beyond* adults’ interactions with the child, entailing a more permanent incorporation of new speech varieties into the adult’s own linguistic repertoire, we can speak of children having a socializing influence on their parents’ linguistic development, albeit indirectly.

(3) Third, and most directly, parents may actually learn new language varieties, or elements thereof, from their children, who have greater access to the new varieties and eventually start to use them at home (most typically with siblings). In many such situations, parents’ competence in the new language may show no appreciable change, but data does not exist to determine whether this is generally the case. Especially if parents already have some knowledge of the new language (or language modality), pressure from the school to use it at home – for example, to help children with their homework – may lead parents to invest considerable effort in expanding their oral and/or written skills, with their children as the most immediate sources of input. Gonzalez (2001), for example, observed that Mexican immigrant mothers in Arizona switched from Spanish to English during homework sessions with their children, and it is conceivable that they eventually increased their own English fluency in the process.

One situation in which children would seem likely to have a direct influence on adults’ linguistic development is that of child interpreters, or “family language brokers.” The importance of child interpreters’ role in helping adult family members (usually immigrants) negotiate interactions with dominant-language individuals and institutions is gaining increasing recognition (e.g., McQuillan & Tse, 1996; Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez, 1994; Valdés, 2003), but thus far has dedicated little attention to how this relationship affects adults’ linguistic development.^{5,6}

⁴ This seems to be much more common than the opposite situation of children showing reticence to use the L2 despite parents urging them to do so (cf. Pease-Alvarez, 2003, pp. 21-22).

⁵ An ERIC search on the topic produced several sources, most focusing exclusively on the effects of brokerage on *children’s* language competence, especially as it related to their schooling. Chu (1999) noted that children’s brokering role did have implications for relationships of knowledge and power within the family, and even extending to the wider community, but of the sources listed, only Hardman (1994) examined any effects on parents’ L2 development. In the project described by McCrossan (1996), children recruited parents/caregivers into an adult ESOL program which focused on children and adults learning together; children participated in

Thus, while the most direct type of child-parent language socialization would be children providing language input to parents acquiring an L2, it is also the scenario for which least evidence exists to date, since few studies (if any) have examined such interactions with a focus on *adults*. In contrast, the less direct mechanisms by which children influence parents' linguistic development are well-supported by evidence that, while largely anecdotal, is manifest and constitutes common knowledge in many immigrant and modernizing communities.

3. Evidence for children's influence on adults' language socialization

The following observations are taken from a decade of living and working in Bolivia, in an urban center (Cochabamba) that is a frequent destination for (primarily) Quechua-speaking migrants from the countryside. These observations are also informed by years of living in a very different urban immigrant community: Miami, Florida. Readers will no doubt bring to bear their own experiences in other bilingual and multilingual settings.

Let us examine again the three principal ways in which children act as "language socializers" of parents, this time within a specific sociolinguistic context:

(1) *Motivated by their linguistic aspirations for their children, parents make decisions that bring the whole family into contact with new language varieties.* Elsewhere (Luykx, 2003, p. 40) I have noted that family language policy in Bolivia is often shaped in anticipation of the language policy of the school. Parents know that a working knowledge of Spanish is a great advantage to children entering school, and also that Quechua- or Aymara-speaking children's acquisition of Spanish is likely to be more effective in urban schools, where there is more contact with fluent Spanish speakers, than in rural ones. In Bolivia, access to urban schools is often the primary factor in rural families' decision to migrate to an urban center. Although the move may be motivated by concerns for the children, it obviously has implications for the language use of other family members as well. Since most rural-dwelling Bolivians speak primarily Quechua or Aymara, urban migration entails moving to a sociolinguistic milieu where, while vernacular languages are certainly not absent, all family members will have greater exposure to Spanish, and most will experience pressure to acquire and use Spanish on a regular basis. Monolingual indigenous language speakers are a shrinking minority in Bolivia,⁷ so for many migrants, moving to the city means expanding and refining their already incipient use of the dominant language, as it becomes a more regular part of their everyday practice. In families that are already bilingual, the decision to migrate often constitutes a decision, conscious or not, to have Spanish eventually replace Quechua or Aymara as the language of predominant use within the household.

(2) *Parents adapt their own language use in order to promote desired linguistic competencies in their children.* This happens most frequently under pressure from the school, or from the children

ESOL/cooking classes with parents and mentored parents in computer-assisted language learning once a month. McCrossan notes that "several of the children remarked that this was the first time that they had heard their parents speaking English" (p.2), and parents recognized the children as more advanced in their acquisition of English. The report was favorable but included no language assessment data on either children or parents.

⁶ In her study of language socialization in a Canadian Arctic community, Patrick mentions that Inuk families will often enroll one child in the "French stream" at school, in order have an Inuktitut/French translator in the family (2003, p. 175). Later, she mentions in passing the case of a (non-Inuk) Francophone Canadian man who reported learning some Inuktitut from children, including his own small son (p. 179); but she does not mention whether children were ever instrumental in Inuk adults' acquisition of French or English.

⁷ Albó (1995) has analyzed and summarized sociolinguistic data from the 1992 Bolivian national census. Compared with data from 1976, the percentage of Bolivia's population that was monolingual in an indigenous language shrank from 20.4% to 11.5%. The census has not made available data on Spanish and indigenous language fluency according to age of speakers, but in rural areas Spanish fluency is most commonly a result of formal schooling; consequently, vernacular monolingualism is concentrated among pre-school-aged children and older adults who grew up with little or no formal schooling. A community study undertaken in 1987, of an Aymara town near the capital of La Paz, found that households in which the eldest child was under twelve years old were three times more likely to contain two bilingual parents, than households in which the eldest child was older than twelve (Luykx, 1989, p. 49)

themselves as a result of schooling. While Bolivian attitudes towards indigenous languages have progressed significantly in recent decades, and bilingual education is becoming a well-established part of the regular school system, many Aymara- and Quechua-speaking parents are still advised by school personnel to expand their own use of Spanish in order to better support their children's emerging competencies in that language.⁸ Since the children's competency in the L2 may quickly surpass that of the parents, such advice sometimes does more harm than good. For example, I heard of one monolingual Quechua-speaking mother who was instructed by her son's teacher not to speak to him in Quechua, in the belief that it would hinder his acquisition of Spanish. The mother was faced with the disheartening choice of rapidly acquiring Spanish (not a realistic possibility in her situation), supposedly harming her son's chances for educational success, or simply minimizing her linguistic interaction with him. More often, parents who already speak Spanish as a second language, to a greater or lesser degree, make an effort to use it in interactions with their school-aged children, often to the point where it replaces Quechua or Aymara as the language of the home. Evidence for this is also found in the fact that older siblings within a family are more likely than younger ones to retain fluency in the vernacular language; by the time two or more school-aged children are using Spanish with each other at home, socialization of subsequent children in the vernacular language is less likely to occur. Obviously, this shift would not occur if parents had not been socialized into new patterns of linguistic behavior as well.

(3) *Parents learn new language varieties, or elements thereof, from their children, who have greater access to the new varieties and eventually start to use them at home.* As mentioned above, there is less concrete evidence of this type of child-parent language socialization, but it seems likely to occur in at least some cases. Circumstantial evidence in its favor includes the fact that vernacular-speaking parents of school-aged children have increased exposure to Spanish, as the children acquire it in school and begin using it in their interactions at home (though the degree and circumstances under which this takes place are not clear). Also, parents who are not themselves literate, or only marginally so, come under pressure to assist their children with school-assigned homework. Even Bolivian parents who do not read themselves often require their children to present their notebooks and show the written work they did in school that day. Conceivably, regular engagement in such activities could increase parents' own competencies in either oral or written Spanish.⁹ But again, detailed studies of these sorts of parent-child interactions and their long-term effects on parents' own linguistic competencies have not, to my knowledge, been done.

4. Directions for future research

This paper has provided a brief overview of an area which is little studied but ripe for investigation, given the rapid language shift of so many regions where vernacular language speakers are moving to the metropolis, or the metropolis is coming to them. Some questions that may provide a framework for developing future inroads into this area of research are:

- What are the characteristics of intergenerational speech interactions in homes where children are the vector for the introduction of new, socially-valued language varieties (or modalities) into the family's daily language behavior?
- In such families, how does children's greater access to socially-valued linguistic resources affect other aspects of family life, such as authority relationships and the non-linguistic aspects of children's socialization?

⁸ Note that this process may involve receptive as well as productive aspects of language use; for example, urbanized children may habitually watch Spanish-language *telenovelas* (soap operas) accompanied by their parents; as the parents' comprehension of Spanish increases, they may begin to follow the programs on their own, even when the children are not present.

⁹ Conversely, as indigenous children enter Spanish-speaking contexts and become aware of the social stigma associated with indigenous languages (or indigenous varieties of Spanish), they may begin to criticize or correct their parents' speech, leading older speakers to *avoid* certain speech varieties. King (2001) reports similar interactions between older speakers of Ecuadorian Quichua, and younger speakers who had learned the standardized "*Quichua unificado*" in school.

- In immigrant families where children are a source of linguistic input for parents who are acquiring the L2 (formally or informally), what other sources of input do the parents have access to, and in what capacity?
- In situations where children serve as interpreters or “language brokers” for adult family members, might the latter gradually acquire competence in the L2 via their role as “peripheral participants” in these interactions? Do these adults draw upon linguistic knowledge or routines that they have acquired by observing the child language broker’s speech, in situations where the child is not present?
- In families without a previously established literacy practice, how do children’s emerging (school-based) literacy practices affect other family members? When children act as mediators between non-literate parents and written texts, is this role a static or an evolving one? What elements of informal literacy instruction, if any, does it entail?
- What role do children’s language ideologies play in situations of large-scale language shift away from the parental generation’s first language and toward the language preferred by children (or imposed upon them by the school)? How does the family’s own language policy adapt or respond to externally-motivated changes in children’s developing language ideologies? What impact does this dynamic have on the language ecology of the surrounding community, and beyond?

All of these questions, and others, must be considered if sociolinguists are to come to terms with the impact of children’s language choices (and obligations) on the language ecology of modernizing and immigrant communities.

5. Conclusions

In Bolivia, as in other countries with large numbers of vernacular language speakers, the school has been well established as a major factor in language shift. From here it is a small but significant step to argue that language shift is driven in part by the influence of schoolchildren’s emerging competencies on the language habits and ideologies of other family members, including adults. Children’s role in the linguistic socialization of adult family members results from children having greater access than adults to socially valued linguistic resources, which is itself a result of the school assuming socializing functions that were previously left to parents and communities. Clearly, these trends are closely linked to other, broader changes in language ecology and family dynamics in immigrant communities and modernizing societies throughout the world.

The situations described above cast doubt upon the scholarly habit of treating the home as an isolated sphere with regard to language socialization, by demonstrating that wider sociolinguistic and economic forces affect the most intimate of domestic interactions (cf. Luykx, 2003). On the other hand, the importance of the domestic sphere is regularly underrated in discussions of language planning and policy, which tend to focus on high-status, highly-visible public domains such as the school and the mass media, even though the centrality of these domains to minority language maintenance or revitalization is questionable. Inasmuch as language socialization in the home is a determining factor for language shift or language maintenance, *family language policy* constitutes an area of urgent concern for both researchers and minority language advocates. A dynamic, relational view of language socialization requires us to attend to children not only as the objects of socialization, but also as its potential agents. Such studies should aim to bridge the divide between language socialization research’s two main areas of concern, by linking the study of second language acquisition with the study of culture change. Such critical, contextually-situated research would combine attention to the details of domestic language use with attention to the broader social dynamics of globalization, modernization, migration, and the emergent identities and social relationships accompanying these processes.

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