ABSTRACT

TWO TALES OF LANGUAGE LOSS AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE: ELICITED ANCESTRAL LANGUAGE USE IN LAZURI-TURKISH AND TURKISH-GERMAN CAREGIVER-CHILD DYADS DURING STRUCTURED PLAY

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In language contact situations parents, who grew-up acquiring their ancestral language (L1) often have to make choices about the fate of L1 transmission by negotiating resources and beliefs on what is best for their children’s future. These language practices either contribute to L1 loss or maintenance, affecting developmental pathways for bilingualism. Little is known about how parental language practices shape L1 fluency, i.e., frequency of L1 production in children who grow-up overhearing an endangered language, such as Lazuri—a Grade 2, severely endangered Southwest Caucasian language longer being used in child-directed speech.

The situation of the Laz children in my sample illustrates a global phenomenon of rapid language loss within indigenous communities and is associated with language socialization goals, socio-economic, and historical reasons, which are also discussed. Second-generation Turkish families in Berlin (i.e., Berlin) who have maintained L1 at home serve as a base of comparison with the Laz families (i.e., Lazona) to better understand the role of language practices on children’s L1 fluency in culturally different language enclaves. Guided by Fishman’s language transmission model rooted in sociocultural perspectives, I used an elicitation task to encourage the use of L1 in caregiver-child dyads (incl. 62 children, \( M=30.0, SD=9.4 \),
range 12-48 months) during structured play activities involving culturally relevant toy props (i.e., animal-farm, tea-party).

In Study 1, I examined L1 production in 62 caregiver-child dyads (incl. 30 grandparents, 30 parents) from Lazona as a function of generational communication (i.e., grandparent vs. parent) and activity context. A subset of the parent-child dyads from Study 1 were compared with age matched Turkish-German parent-child dyads from Berlin-Germany (N=12, M age=29 mo, range 16-46). All caregivers completed a short demographic and language use questionnaire and dyads were instructed to converse in their L1 (i.e., Lazuri in Lazona, Turkish in Berlin). Utterances were transcribed and coded for frequency of language use (i.e., L1, L2, Mixed). Communicative gestures (i.e., pointing, showing, and iconic) were also coded. Overall, my elicitation task across the two studies showed that (1) children’s communicative pattern in L1 is a reflection of caregiver input, and (2) communicative exchanges were mediated by play context. In the context of language endangerment, my elicitation task provided no generational communication effects on children’s L1 production but that children’s language performances were mediated by the parent generation. The present dissertation extends the bilingual literature with including understudied language enclaves and corroborates how practices and beliefs about what to teach and how to talk to children contribute to ancestral language loss or maintenance. Benefits and ways of maintaining L1 in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts are discussed.

Keywords: parental language practices, caregiver-child interaction, language enclave, L1 loss, L1 maintenance, indigenous children, immigrant children