SALIENT FACTORS IN THE ACQUISITION AND MAINTENANCE OF HERITAGE LANGUAGES AMONG US-BORN CHILDREN OF AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS[*]

James Chamwada Kigamwa (Indiana University, USA, jkigamwa@umail.iu.edu)

Abstract: This sociolinguistic study reveals some of the tensions surrounding transmission of heritage languages to U.S.-born children of two African immigrant families in the Midwestern region of the United States. Data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations, indicated that all children had limited proficiency in their heritage languages despite all their parents having native speakers' competence in those languages. Findings suggest that gains made in the acquisition of heritage languages before the preschool years, at home, were lost as soon as children began going to preschool. Older siblings were also found to influence the linguistic environment in the home as they became more proficient in, and increased their use of English, thus reducing the use of heritage languages in the home. Further, the parents' frequent use of heritage languages to obscure meaning from their children during adult conversations was also observed among adults. This study has implications for immigrant parents who would like to see their children learn their heritage languages in the home.

Key words: bilingualism, language shift, heritage language, code-switching, immigration, birth-order, indigenous languages

Interactions with African immigrant families in the U.S. often reveal an interesting linguistic phenomenon that seems to distinguish the parents' and children's language practices. It is easy to quickly observe how adults code-switch and code-mix between English, heritage languages, and heritage languages, while their children seem to speak predominantly in English and only use short responses, at most, in their heritage languages. Such occurrences have left observers with questions about the future of African languages; and have led some to ask immigrant adults whether their children actually speak African languages. Although the challenges of intergenerational transmission of heritage languages have been documented widely among immigrant communities in different diasporas (Portes & Hao, 1998; Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Hakuta, & D'Andrea, 1992; Krashen, 1982) few studies have focused on African immigrants' language experiences (Obeng, 2009). This study sought to answer the question, what are some of the tensions around the acquisition of heritage languages by U.S.-born children of African immigrants? This study draws its significance in the in-depth interaction between the researcher and a rarely studied theme in the community of African immigrants, heritage language transmission, and in the findings which are drawn from both children and their parents.

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Heritage languages

In the Diasporas, heritage languages are generally viewed against a backdrop of dominant languages, and are, thus, always considered as 'other' languages wherever there is a widely used language (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 2001). Different terms are used to describe heritage languages, some of which are: immigrant languages, minority languages, ethnic languages, community languages, mother tongues, and home languages (Baker & Jones, 1998; Kelleher, 2008). Valdés (2001) notes that in the U.S. context, heritage languages refer to "all non-English languages, including those spoken by Native American peoples" (p. 39). Fishman (2001) places heritage languages into three categories: immigrant, indigenous, and colonial, and defines immigrant heritage languages as those spoken by immigrants who came to the U.S. after it became independent, thus distinguishing them from the indigenous heritage languages spoken by Native Americans. This study adopts the term *heritage languages* to refer to indigenous languages from Africa that are spoken by adult African immigrants in the U.S.

Theoretical framework

In this article, theoretical perspectives on first language acquisition are drawn from wider sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), interactionist perspectives (Ginsburg & Opper, 1969), and Fishman's sociolinguistic frameworks on language transmission (Fishman, 1999, 2001). As a cultural artifact, language mediates social practice as well as psychological processes. Sociocultural perspectives foreground both the cultural and social contexts of language learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Zuengler & Cole, 2004), and are predicated on the assumption that language development of children is bound in the collective practices of a cultural group that children belong to. Interaction with more knowledgeable members of society such as parents and other fluent speakers of the heritage languages usually results in acquisition of the first language from their immediate environment, for children (Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Tse, 1998). Fishman (1999; 2001) highlights challenges associated with intergenerational transmission of heritage languages, and notes that effective learning is predicated upon intentional home language use, and also, that the maintenance of heritage languages is heavily dependent upon the a community's use of the language in different domains. Furthermore, it has been noted that, "if a language is not transmitted in the home, it is not likely to survive another generation" (Clyne, 2003, p. 22). A study conducted among African immigrant families from the Congo living in Sweden revealed that children who migrated after having acquired their immigrant languages at home shift more slowly than those who had not fully acquired the languages or were born abroad (Kasanga, 2008). A similar phenomenon was observed in the case of the two families featured in this study.

Language shift and language choice

Heritage language acquisition and maintenance in the Diasporas is visualized against a backdrop of 'linguistic competition' between the immigrant languages and dominant language(s) among immigrant families. Fasold (1987) noted that:

language shift and, the other side of the coin, language maintenance, are really the long- term, collective results of language choice ... when a speech community begins to choose a new language in domains formerly reserved for the old one, it may be a sign that language shift is in progress (p. 213).

Generally, language shift is manifested as more members of a community that speak a minority language adopt a majority language "as their vehicle of communication" (Appel & Muysken, 1987, p. 32) and is characterized by speakers becoming less proficient in their heritage language. The failure by a community to maintain its language and the gradual adoption of another language heralds a language shift (Hoffman, 1991). Changes in language use seem to take place in subtle and covert ways (Gafaranga, 2010), which may not be visible to casual observers and may also be unrecognized by the speakers as well (Kulick, 1992). Baker (2006) argues that language shift happens based on deliberate decisions by language users, and that the shift may also reflect economic, political, cultural and technological changes that a society may be going through. It represents a gradual displacement of a language by another language, usually in cases where a difference exists in the prestige level of the two languages (Hornberger & King, 1997).

Regarding changes in habitual language use, it has been suggested that it generally takes an immigrant community three generations to attain a complete shift from an immigrant language to a dominant one (Fishman, 1991; Portes & Shauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998). Further, second generation children have been found to use English more than their heritage languages, and that parents who speak the same heritage languages are likely to uphold linguistic preservation more than those who speak different languages (Portes & Hao, 1998). The study also found that it is easier to retain foreign languages that have the same grammatical structures as the dominant language; therefore, immigrants who speak languages such as Spanish that share linguistic roots and some grammatical structures with English stand a better chance becoming more proficient in English than English learners of other foreign languages including heritage languages from Africa.

Speakers of multiple languages often have inherent ability to choose the language they wish to use in different communicative events. Such choices are not haphazard, but are guided by overall linguistic cost-benefit analysis, and various factors that are not limited to linguistic ability, but also include considerations of the contexts of where conversations take place (Tuominen, 1999; Piller, 2002). The choice and appropriation of a preferred language for home use by a family, otherwise referred to as private language planning or family language planning (Schwartz, 2010; Pillar, 2001; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009) is influenced by factors such as, linguistic ability, personal identity, and perceived social value of a language. Generally, language loyalty is compromised when parents view a language as a 'handicap' to their children's advancement and education (Saville-Troike, 1989, p. 205). The choices that lead to code switching, whether deliberate or not, will influence heritage language acquisition for their children as they have a bearing on both the attitudes and access to the heritage language for the children (Kigamwa, 2014).

Method and analysis of data

The study employed the use of individual interviews, focus groups, and observations to collect data from the families. The individual interviews were semi-structured and were conducted on a face-to-face basis with all adults who participated in the study. Focus group data were collected in sessions with three groupings of the participants, namely: parents, children, and families. The children were involved in a joint focus group session where they responded to prompts of semi-structured questions that were provided by the researcher. Likewise the parents in the study were involved in a joint focus group session that was led by the facilitator. A final set of focus groups was conducted with each family during the final debrief session where the researcher met with parents and children in their homes. Additional data were collected through observations during visits with the families and during social gatherings that involved the families interacting with other African families. The researcher took detailed field notes of all observations during the different events that involved the families. All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded using a digital audio recording device and were transferred to a computer. All the recorded data were transcribed and saved as Microsoft Word files that were then transferred to qualitative *data management* software for thematic analyses. The identities of the participants in this study were obscured in line with the institution's research board's requirements.

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with every adult who was a part of the study. For each family both parents were interviewed separately; the only grandmother in the study was also interviewed on her own, with the help of a translator. Care was taken to ensure that translations were accurate as an independent speaker of the language checked random selections of the translations for accuracy. Interviewing each adult member of a family on their own was intended to act as a safeguard against possible influences in opinion by spouses, in case there were varied opinions on some of the issues regarding home language policies on heritage languages. The parents' focus group session allowed parents to speak to some of the issues as significant members of their own diaspora communities. Collecting data from adults through individual interviews, focus groups, and observations provided the need triangulation of data across these three data sources.

Children's views were also collected through focus group interviews where the children came together and responded to some open-ended questions regarding their experiences. The views of children were also collected through the family focus groups during the family debrief sessions during which parents and children got to respond to some of the questions. This last set of interviews sought to clarify some of the findings and initial conclusions from the overall study. The three sources of data from children; namely: children focus group, family focus group, and observations, also provided triangulated data. Although the active study was conducted over a period of one year, the researcher had begun to interact with the families much earlier, and observations of language use were taken over a period of at least two years.

This article reports on the experiences of four children born in the U.S. to parents who immigrated from an English-speaking country and French-speaking country in Africa. The children were part of a larger study in which other families participated. The children selected for this article had a lot more in common than the other children, and so the data collected from them was subject to comparison for the purposes of this write up. Some of

the commonalities include: they were all born in the United States of America, and had at least one grandparent living in the U.S. Although only one of the families in this case was living in a grandparent the other family had both grandparents living in the U.S. and more specifically in the Midwest region of the country, and had regular access to them. The grandparents who did not live with the grandchildren would also visit regularly, and the research observed interactions between these children and their grandparents on at least three occasions.

Participants

The children in the study consisted of two boys and two girls between the ages of eight and 12. The boys, Simeon and Steven were 10 and 12 at the time of the study, and were born in the U.S. to parents who speak Ekigusii, a language spoken in Kenya, an English-speaking country in East Africa. At the time of the study, the boys seemed to have a basic level of receptive proficiency in their heritage language, but were low on productive proficiency. They were both fluent speakers of English. Their parents, on the other hand, were proficient speakers of a number of languages, including their heritage language, English and Swahili. Additionally, the father reported that he could speak Spanish and French at an intermediate level. The mother, on the other, had proficiency in some dialects of Luhya, a language that is spoken in the western region of Kenya.

The Anglophone family had three daughters: Neema, age nine; Natalie age 12, and a toddler age two at the time of the study. Due to her age, the youngest sibling was not involved in the study. The children were born in the U.S. to parents who had migrated from Rwanda. The girls were basically monolingual English speakers with limited understanding of their heritage language, which was spoken widely by their parents and their grandmother who lived with them. The parents had migrated to the U.S. in the late 1990s, at which point they reported that they had not learned to speak English well. They worked in a busy department store in the Midwest as they went to school. Therefore, at the time of their migration and birth of their first child, they were fluent speakers of their heritage language, Kinyarwanda, and French, which they had learned as a result of going through school at a time when the language of instruction in their country was French. In addition to being fluent in Kinyarwanda and French, the parents could also speak Kirundi, a language that is spoken in Burundi, a country that neighbors Rwanda. The father could also understand Swahili. Both families had lived in the U.S. for close to 15 years at the time of the study and had established their homes in the U.S. being legal permanent residents in a Midwest state.

Findings

Analyses of the collected data yielded a number of themes that were salient to the acquisition and maintenance of heritage languages among the two African immigrant families who participated in the study. This article focuses on three themes that prominently played out in regard to language use in the home and were common to both families. The themes were: birth order, start of preschool and the effects of code-switching by the parents.

Heritage language acquisition gains lost at the start of preschool

A key finding of this study focused on significant changes in language practices and ability that could be traced to the start of school for both families. The transition from home to school seems to mark the beginning of a steady decline in heritage language ability for the older children. This entry into society's mandated socializer; school, brought with it changes in the children's lives as well as in the home of the child going to school for the first time. This is supported by what seems to have been the changing home language environment at the time the older children begun going to school. Although both families acknowledged that their older children had not developed absolute fluency in their heritage languages by the time they started going to school, they noted that the small gains in language acquisition, and the progression towards fluency, that were made while the children were at home seemed to disappear quickly after their children started going to preschool. While these changes were attributed by parents to the start of school, and were associated only with the first-born children and not with their younger siblings. This interruption in the steady progress in the acquisition of heritage languages had implications in changes that would affect the language environment at home. It may be important to note that other peer and social interactions for the children, outside of school, e.g. in church may also have contributed to the change.

In the case of the Anglophone family, the parents noted that at the time their older son began going to daycare, he was literally fluent in their heritage language, Ekigusii. They attributed his language abilities to the fact that he was being raised by his parents and his paternal grandmother who lived with them, at that time, and insisted on the use of their heritage language in all their communication. The practice of sustained use of the heritage language at home seemed to have provided a good language learning environment where their son was mastering how to speak in their heritage language. The family reported that when their son started going to daycare at about age three, he had a problem communicating with his caregivers because he could only speak in his heritage language. The parents reported that the loss of his heritage language ability started at that point and was greatly accelerated when he started going to preschool. The 'interference' in the heritage language development, initial loss of language and eventual shift into English were characterized by code-mixing in the child's conversation as he started going to school. In one incident, the boy's mother noted:

> … (when) he went to preschool for the first time … he didn't know milk. He was calling it mabere! … He didn't know kales/collards. He was calling them chinyani, [and would say] I don't want chinyani. I want more mabere!

The basic words he could put them there, like the things you should know as a child he was calling them in Kisii.

The mother's use of the word "fine" here is meant to emphasize the fact that the boy was making good progress and could communicate relatively well in their heritage language.

The Francophone family, on the other hand, had similar experiences, in fact theirs could be said to be even more embroidered since the family was speaking only their heritage language before their older child, Natalie, started going to preschool. The mother noted that her daughter "… was okay in Kinyarwanda … (until) she started school." The mother further

added that she had not lived in the U.S. for long when she had her first child and, at that time, she barely spoke English. Having come from Rwanda, a French speaking country, at that time, the family generally communicated in their heritage language. As the mother recalls, she was enrolled in an Intensive English Program (IEP) as a student. Their home heritage language environment was enriched further as at that time the children's grandmother, a monolingual Kinyarwanda speaker, lived with them. They noted that their home was basically 'saturated' with the use of their heritage language. The family noted that their older child only started learning English when she began going to preschool, citing that "… she did not pick up English when she was little. I spoke in Kinyarwanda because I didn't know English ... so … she was okay in Kinyarwanda … (until) she started school." At the time their daughter began going to preschool, she begun to quickly learn how to speak English. With her increased usage of English, her parents also seemed to have reduced their use of their heritage language in conversations directed at the child. Their increased usage of English could be attributed to, among other things, the fact that both parents were busy trying to learn English in order to keep up with their new jobs and some of the relationships that they were developing with neighbors and other members of the community, who were basically monolingual English speakers.

These occurrences among the two families are typical of immigrant families facing changes related to the beginning of school, before their children have mastered their heritage languages. The loss of a heritage language when it is replaced by a dominant language has been referred to as subtractive bilingualism (Baker, 2006). Lightbrown and Nida (1999) noted that, generally, in subtractive bilingualism, "children may begin to lose the family language before they have developed an age-appropriate mastery of the new language" (p. 3). Clyne (2003) seemed to also be in agreement that certain changes in lifestyle, such as entry into the workforce, and going to school for children, mark the beginning of a different phase in language development and could, generally, interrupt gains that have been made previously.

Other indicators of this individual and family based language shift starting to take place include children responding in a dominant language to instructions and conversations in their heritage language, signaling their receptive ability in the language and a gradual decline of their communicative ability.

Birth order influence

Language experiences of siblings were found to differ based on their position in the family. In both families, that some of the changes associated with the first child going to school that were introduced into the home created significantly different home language experiences for their younger siblings. The parents in this study reported a significant difference in the preschool experiences of their first and second children. Children who were born after the first born seemed to have come into a home environment that was already altered, or was changing, based on the fact that their older sibling(s) was already learning to speak English. Therefore, the home environment was already embracing an increased use of English in comparison to their heritage languages.

In both cases, the parents' circumstances as they raised their children caused them to use their heritage languages less and use English more in conversations with their children. With the older child speaking more English as a result of going to school, the parents seemed to respond in English more than they did before the children went to school. A second factor in the reduction of the usage of the heritage language seemed to affect the Francophone family, and had to do with the fact that the parents, who were already trying to learn English, were now engaging more in English at the time of the birth of their second child than they had previously when they had no children or when their first child was still young. This adjustment had already created an environment where English was being used a little more than at a comparable time when they were raising their first born.

For the Francophone family, the linguistic environment for the younger child was significantly different because the parents were now able to speak English more proficiently and were using it a little more with their older daughter. This increased use of English may have resulted in a complex situation in that, although both children may be said to be unable to fully understand their heritage language, the older child had developed better receptive skills in the language than the younger child. The case of the Anglophone family seemed related in that they reported that once their second son began to speak English, it influenced his younger siblings as they heard less of the heritage language and more English. These findings are in agreement with research in second language acquisition as cited by Shin (2002), who determined that birth order significantly influenced the language experience of children being raised in bilingual Chinese families.

Older children were, therefore, found to be significant influencers of the linguistic environment in the homes and, by extension, influencers of the linguistic factors that affected how their siblings were socialized into the acquisition of their first language(s). This was confirmed by Neema and Natalie's father who noted "… the older one was speaking English, the younger one followed into her sister's (practice)," thus highlighting the influence of interactionism in influencing the home language environment.

The absence of a deliberately thought out family policy on language use could also be a factor in situations in which the language experiences of older siblings seem to significantly influence those of the younger ones. The parents in this study indicated that they had not discussed what their home language use family policy should be. Many bilingual parents raise their children without ever having agreed on a deliberate family language policy (Yakoubou, 1994; Piller, 2002; Baker, 2006; Kamaungu, 2006; Kigamwa, 2014).

Code-switching among parents

An interesting phenomenon of language choice that was characterized by code switching and code-mixing among parents played out by adults in both families. The children in the study reported that often, and especially when their parents wanted to discuss something in 'privacy', or were unhappy with them, they tended to switch to their heritage language. The children cited specific incidents and circumstances under which parents would code-switch. These occurrences seemed to take place at times when the children were in close proximity to the parents, and because of the environment, they would find it difficult to excuse them-

selves or to ask the children to leave. Such places included in the car when driving, at shopping malls, in public gatherings when accompanied by the children, and during telephone conversations when children were nearby. Such switchings may have heightened the desire of the children to want to learn their heritage languages in order to understand what their parents were saying, as one child reported. The practice elicited other reactions as well, with one child noting that she felt "rejected …left out when my (her) parents use the language." Besides the feelings that code-switching elicited in the children, it appears that this practice also had an effect on the acquisition experiences of the children in the study.

For the parents, code-switching meant to signal that they were discussing something important as well as something they felt the children were not ready to be a part of, an 'adult issue'. Some of the issues included impending family activities, such as family travel or serious family situations such as the death of a loved one or member of the extended family, or even embarrassing situations that may have been unfolding in the extended family or among friends who the children probably knew. Pavlenko (2004) noted that sometimes bilingual parents code-switched to emphasize certain points or to make the children know that they really meant what they are saying. When this happens, in some cases, the heritage language becomes associated with rebuke and correction. The practice of code-switching seemed to curtail and limit the use of heritage languages in the families. It appeared that the immigrant parents' use of their heritage languages to obscure meanings during conversations among themselves did not seem to set well with their children, and that the children's mixed feelings about their parents switching from English to their heritage languages came to be viewed negatively.

Though, as mentioned, some children reported that code-switching by parents seemed to motivate them to want to learn the heritage language, for others it seemed counter-intuitive with the wishes of the parents to have their children learn to speak their heritage languages. Krashen (1982) in his monitor hypothesis theory argued that people learn second languages when they receive a lot of comprehensible input. For the purposes of this article, it may suffice just to note that it appears that although the linguistic environment may have been filled with the heritage languages, the fact that the content was not intended for the children to hear it makes it difficult for the learners to benefit from the 'input.'

This study determined that, in general, the parents were basically the only ones interacting significantly with the heritage language. During the study, the researcher witnessed numerous occasions of code-switching and code-mixing as the parents conversed among themselves as well as when they spoke to their children. In some cases, it appeared that the switching and mixing were not deliberate, but rather communicative practices which the parents were not intentional about. It may also have signaled a lack of intentionality on the part of parents in approaching their role as language teachers for their children who were entirely dependent on them as the single, and key resource for accessing their heritage languages. Code-switching to obscure conversational meaning was not just limited to children, but seemed to extend to other adults who were not familiar with the languages. In line with what seems to be common African hospitality to visitors, as I would visit the homes repeatedly for interviews and observations, the families served me a beverage, usually tea or juice. In most cases, I was invited to share in the evening meal with the family that I visited. In literally every visit, what would signal to me that the family was organizing or preparing to invite

me to share in their meal would be the switch from English to their heritage language be-tween the adult members of the family. This code switch would sometimes be followed by instructions to children, usually in English or sometimes in short instructions in the heritage language, or a mixture of English and the heritage language.

Shin (2003) argued that code-switching is usually done by choice or as a result of limited competence in a language. In this study, the parents were clearly switching to their heritage languages by choice and, specifically because they wanted to discuss among themselves things that they may not have wanted their children to understand or be aware of. The inter-views conducted during the focus groups confirmed this, as the parents acknowledged the practice; as one of the parents noted: "when we want to share secrets, we switch to a language they don't understand." The children in the two families also confirmed that the adults tended to change their languages when they wanted to speak about something they were not com-fortable with their children knowing. In the case of the Anglophone family, code-switching was mainly from English to Ekigusii and in some cases into Kiswahili, since their children could understand some spoken Ekigusii.

The Francophone parents portrayed the most elaborate use of different languages. Code-switching occurred at two levels: sometimes the parents spoke in Kinyarwanda while at times they chose to use French. In observing the family, I could see that the conversations between the adults were mainly in Kinyarwanda, with limited usage of English. However, the conversations between the parents and children were in English. Although I did not ob-serve the use of French, the parents reported that there were times when they spoke French, which kept the conversations strictly between themselves, because even the children's grandmother could not understand the language.

Conclusion

This article highlights the effects of school for children who are in the process of acquiring their heritage language, the effects of the influence of older siblings on the younger siblings as they impacted the home environment, and the intentional use of heritage languages by parents to obscure meaning in conversation, among adults, in the presence of children. While the former two factors certainly influence acquisition, it is easy to see how the intentional use of heritage languages by parents would affect language learning by children. Shifting language practices in the home are bound to take place as immigrant families increasing use of the dominant language, while linguistic gains made in the home are bound to be lost or to wane as children's proficiency in a school language improves when they start going to school. Intentional use of heritage languages in the home remains an important factor for heritage language transmission. The home language environment is also bound to change for immigrants whose use of the dominant language increases with their extended stay in a host country. Faced with the initial challenges of the acquisition of heritage languages, chil-dren born in the U.S. may never learn the languages well enough to maintain them. The effects of this kind of usage on language learning are yet to be fully understood, and may need to be investigated further, however we can conclude that code-switching, to obscure meaning in conversations by adults, curtails heritage language acquisition for their children.

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