

# Adolescents' Language Choice in Child-Parent Interactions:

## The Role of Family Linguistic Context

By

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*Abstract.* This paper examines the relationship between family linguistic context and adolescents' language choice in child-parent interactions in immigrant families. It focuses on the effect of adolescent language proficiency and language preference, and parental language proficiency and language choice with children. Using data from face-to-face parental interviews and a self-administered survey of adolescents from the second wave (1995) of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, the current study found that the adolescents' choice of English in child-parent interactions was associated with their lower proficiency in their ethnic language, their mother's higher proficiency in English and the adolescents' preference for English. The effect of the father's English language proficiency was weak. Neither adolescents' proficiency in English nor parental choice of English in child-parent interactions had a statistically significant effect on adolescents' use of English with their parents. Because the analysis also found that family climate had no significant effect on the probability that adolescents would speak English to their parents, the author concluded that the use of English in child-parent interactions reflected the family's ways of overcoming the discrepancy between adolescent and parental linguistic repertoires rather than indicated social and emotional estrangement between children of immigrants and their foreign-born parents.

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Sociolinguistic research positions language choice among the three inter-related components of individual language behavior, together with language proficiency and language attitudes (Hakuta and D'Andrea 1992). Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez (1994, 148) define language choice as “an individual’s choice to use differential amounts of the languages (in different discourse settings) given threshold proficiency in the languages.” Rather than being “a random matter of momentary inclination”, language choice is commonly described as an “an ‘orderly’ social behavior” (Li Wei 1994, 6). Because of its implied stability and assumed direct relationship to language proficiency, and because of the nature of language data collected by U.S. Census Bureau, immigrant language choice has been studied extensively. Use of an ethnic language at home, and particularly in child-parent interactions, remains a central theme in the study of immigrant linguistic adaptation in the United States.

Past research conceptualizes language choice in child-parent interactions in a variety of ways: as the family’s habitual pattern of language use (Fishman 1971; 1972), as a negotiation of the home and outside linguistic influences (Caldas 2006), as an enhancement of a marketable skill (Zhang 2008), as a realization of parental commitment to child’s socio-psychological well-being (Harding-Esch and Riley 2003; Portes and Hao 2002), or as an indicator of children’s independence from or emotional closeness to their parents (Tseng and Fuligni 2000; Burck 2005). Most commonly and across ethnic groups, language choice at home is described as correlating with the shifting significance of ethnicity for children of immigrants (Fishman 1966; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Schechter and Bayley 2002; Pease-Alvarez 2003; Zhang 2005).

This study contributes to sociological research on immigrant linguistic adaptation by exploring the sociolinguistic mechanisms of adolescents’ language choice in child-parent interactions in immigrant families. It examines four specific questions:

- (1) How does adolescents' preference for English language influence the probability that the adolescents will speak English to the parents?
- (2) How does adolescents' oral proficiency in their ethnic language influence the probability that the adolescents will speak English to the parents?
- (3) How does the mother's and father's oral proficiency in English influence the probability that their children will speak English in child-parent interactions?
- (4) How does parental choice of English language influence the probability that their children will speak English in child-parent interactions?

Accordingly, the study advances four specific hypotheses about the relationship between family linguistic context and adolescents' language choice in child-parent relationships:

- (1) Adolescents' preference for English language increases the probability that adolescents will speak English to their parents.
- (2) Adolescents' lower oral proficiency in their ethnic language increases the probability that they will speak English to their parents.
- (3) Lower parental proficiency in English decreases the probability that the adolescents will speak English to their parents.
- (4) Parental choice of English with children increases the probability that the adolescents will speak English to their parents.

The analysis of data from face-to-face parental interviews and a self-administered survey of adolescents from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study showed that the majority of parent-adolescent pairs reciprocally spoke their ethnic languages, followed by a non-reciprocal pattern with adolescents speaking English and their parents speaking their ethnic languages. The probit analysis found that adolescents' choice of English was strongly associated with their lower self-reported proficiency in their ethnic language, their mother's higher English proficiency, and the adolescents' English preference, pointing to the linguistic foundation of adolescents' language choice with parents as a viable addition to other explanations.

### The Significance of Language Choice in the Immigrant Family

The family plays a central role in individual language development. From incidental to planned language choices in infancy and early childhood, to literacy-oriented activities during

school years, the family establishes expectations and norms of individual language behavior at home and outside of it, shapes children's attitudes to languages and language speakers, and, overall, creates a home environment that may facilitate or hinder individual language development (Grosjean 1982; Hamers and Blanc 2000).

Past research shows that the bilingualism of children of immigrants in the United States begins within their families, when children acquire proficiency in their ethnic languages through daily conversations with their parents, grandparents, siblings and other family members (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Schechter and Bayley 2002). Studies by Pease-Alvarez and her colleagues (1996) and Zhang (2008) show that parents of Mexican and Chinese background explicitly define speaking their ethnic languages at home as their primary strategy for the ethnic language maintenance of their children. The immigrant family actively shapes children's language development until early adolescence, when the family's direct linguistic influence diminishes (Veltman 1983, Caldas 2006). Fishman (1966, 184) argues that as adolescent children of immigrants integrate into the educational and occupational structures of American society and disengage from the ethnic cultural life of their families, they tend to "outgrow" the linguistic authority of their foreign-born parents. Adolescents become more ambivalent about the linguistic practices of their families. Children of immigrants from families reinforcing bilingual-biliterate practices may become resentful toward the linguistic aspirations of their parents because of the increased peer pressure to conform linguistically and also with growing demands of school and extracurricular activities (Okita 2002; Caldas 2006). If children of immigrants shift toward English monolingualism, this shift is completed within their families, when the English language--the dominant language of a larger society--gradually becomes the exclusive medium of communication between children of immigrants and their foreign-born parents (Fishman 1966; Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez 1994; Hamers and Blanc 2000).

It would be misleading, however, to picture the linguistic change in an immigrant family as simply a linear shift from ethnic language monolingualism to transitional bilingualism and toward English monolingualism, and to disregard the complex interplay of family's linguistic repertoires contributing to that shift. Past findings about the use of English and ethnic languages by grandparents, parents, and siblings indicate that the immigrant family is never a domain of exclusive ethnic language use, regardless of family's ethnic origin (Zhang 2008, Stevens and Ishizawa 2007; Schecter and Bayley 2002). Instead, Fishman (1966, 181) described the immigrant family as “a meeting ground for two competing languages” and emphasized its dual function in immigrant linguistic adaptation:

On the one hand, by transmitting the ethnic mother tongue and ethnic ways to American-born children, [the immigrant family] serves as a bulwark of ethnicity. On the other hand, by brining together siblings whose use of English continues to rise as they grow older, it also becomes an agency of Americanization of immigrant parents and their children alike.

Fishman (1966, 181) argued that the two roles of the immigrant family were “scarcely reconcilable”, making the immigrant family particularly vulnerable to competing cultural influences. Burck (2005), on the other hand, observed that not only were the immigrant parents and their children living in the two cultural worlds of their host society and country of origin, but they also actively negotiated any cultural and linguistic differences and contradictions between these two worlds. For example, Burck (2005) described how bilingual immigrant parents in her study in England spoke English to their children to “perform authority” (p.140) or to connect to their children's concerns, which were often experienced in English. The same parents chose their ethnic languages to express feelings of intimacy and “cultural similarity” with their children, often shaped by their own childhood memories (p.136). Burck (2005, 143) wrote:

... just as individuals described being different in each of their languages in other contexts, they also experienced parenting in each of their languages as being a different

kind of parent, embodying different values encoded in the language, including different conceptualizations of 'parenting' and 'children'.

Distinct cultural meanings and personal experiences associated with ethnic and English languages, and family members' awareness about these differences, rendered language choices of children of immigrants and their foreign-born parents particularly consequential for child-parent relationships (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Hao 2002) and ethnic language maintenance (Fishman 1966).

Empirical evidence shows that adolescents' ethnic language proficiency and choice at home are strongly associated with the quality of child-parent relations in their families, although the direction of this relationship is unclear. On the one hand, the dissonant-acculturation argument proposed by Portes and Rumbaut in 2001 suggests that once ethnic language proficiency is lost, "fluent communication across generations ceases, opening the way for affective separation and weakening of parental authority" (p.127). Portes and Hao (2002) examined distinct forms of adolescents' linguistic adaptation and their consequences for family solidarity and child-parent conflict. The authors empirically distinguished fluent bilinguals, English monolinguals, limited bilinguals and foreign monolinguals as linguistic types among children of immigrants. Using longitudinal data and controlling for usual demographic predictors of linguistic adaptation, Portes and Hao (2002) found that, over time, fluent bilinguals reported greater family solidarity and lower child-parent conflict than members of other linguistic types; these positive effects were not contingent on English ability of their parents. Portes and Hao (2002) concluded that early acquisition of fluent bilingual skills predicted subsequently better child-parent relationships. These results were consistent with findings reported by Zhou and Bankston (1998) and Portes and Rumbaut (2001) that families in which either parents or children were fluent bilinguals likely followed the path of selective acculturation, associated with more

positive child-parent relationships, and higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, and higher academic achievement among children; children who maintained proficiency in their ethnic languages enjoyed the greatest socio-psychological benefits of selective acculturation.

The causation, however, may go the other way. The positive association between ethnic language use and child-parent relationships can be in part explained by children's sense of family obligations usually expressed through support of and respect toward their foreign-born parents who immigrated for the better future for their children. A 1999 study by Fuligni and colleagues found that, on average, adolescents with Asian and Latin American families placed greater importance upon treating their elders with respect, following parental advice, and helping and being near their families in the future than did adolescents with European backgrounds. The authors also found that adolescents who placed greater value on family obligations reported greater emotional closeness with their mothers and fathers, and a greater likelihood of asking for parental and siblings' advice about current life and future plans. The study did not ask adolescents about their language use. We could speculate, however, that adolescents who value, respect and communicate with their family members, and develop close emotional relationship with their parents, are more likely to accommodate parental linguistic needs and preferences in child-parent interactions.

Tseng and Fuligni (2000) examined the directionality of the relationship between child-parent relationships and ethnic language use among East Asian, Filipino, and Latin American-origin adolescents in the United States. Similar to Portes and Hao (2002), the authors found that, on average, adolescents from families with reciprocal language use in child-parent interactions (when both parents and adolescents speak the same, either English or an ethnic, language) reported greater family closeness and more frequent discussions of daily issues, personal problems and future plans than did adolescents from families with a non-reciprocal language use.

Adolescents reciprocally using their ethnic language with their parents reported higher average scores on family closeness and discussion scales than did adolescents from families reciprocally speaking English. With longitudinal data, Tseng and Fuligni (2000) also found, however, that family relationships were a *stronger* predictor of language-use patterns over a two-year period than vice versa. More favorable child-parent relationships were associated with either English or ethnic reciprocal language choices, and, in those relationships, parents were likely to choose the language preferred by their children (Tseng and Fuligni 2000). The authors concluded that the association between language use and child-parent relationships was established prior to mid-adolescence and determined family language choices afterwards.

#### Motives for Speaking an Ethnic Language at Home

Past studies indeed show that positive family relationships could be a defining motive in children's ethnic language maintenance and use at home. Schechter and Bayley (2002) argued that the continuous use of Spanish among children from Mexican-origin families was first and foremost motivated by children's affective attitude to that language as an important part of their family's history. The authors (2002, 197) observed that:

...for the children we worked with, questions of the status of different language varieties, attitudes of the dominant society toward their family's language, and even success in school were not their main issues. Rather, children who had maintained proficiency in Spanish most often provided affective rationales for wanting to continue to speak their families' traditional language.

Shared ethnicity and cultural identity were cited as additional factors (Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez 1994; Schechter and Bayley 2002). In her study of Mexican-origin families in California, Pease-Alvarez (2003) found that both parents and their adolescent children described a close link between one's ability to speak Spanish and Mexican identity. Adolescents felt that they needed to improve their Spanish language skills in order to participate comfortably in Spanish-dominant



social networks, to avoid embarrassment when speaking Spanish, and to reestablish links with their ethnic culture.

The linguistic foundation of language choice at home, in addition to affective and cultural influences, was emphasized by Fishman (1966) and Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez (1994). The authors reported that adolescents' language choice at home was critically influenced by adolescents' relative proficiency in their two languages: on average, children of immigrants more proficient in their ethnic languages were more likely to use those languages in conversations with their parents. Hakuta and D'Andrea (1992) and Zhou and Bankston (1998) also pointed to the significant effect of parental language proficiency and choice. Zhou and Bankston (1998, 113) considered the parents' lack of English proficiency among the three main factors of ethnic languages retention among children of Asian origin, together with continuing high rates of immigration from Asia and living in an area inhabited by co-ethnics.

Contrary to the frequently mentioned pragmatic rationale for ethnic language maintenance, Schechter and Bayley (2002) and Zhang (2008) observed that prestige and marketability of an ethnic language, and other potential "future gains" from maintaining an ethnic language, were relatively weak predictors of adolescents' current language choice at home. Similarly, while the linguistic standards of school, peer group and local community could reinforce or hinder parental efforts of language maintenance at home (Caldas 2006), findings by Hakuta and D'Andrea (1992) indicated that adolescents' language choice in child-parent interactions was relatively immune to those outside influences.

#### Motives for Not Speaking an Ethnic Language at Home

Hakuta and D'Andrea (1992) suggested that there might be situational and attitudinal reasons for not speaking an ethnic language at home. Adolescents' increasing use of English

language with their parents may be a spill-over effect from their growing use of English when alone or with their siblings (Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez 1994). In that case, the shift toward English as the habitual language of the family is gradual. On the other hand, recently immigrated children may resort to speaking only English as a result of their dramatic experiences at their mainstream schools. Zhang (2008) documented several stories of children whose initially lower English proficiency resulted in considerable emotional and academic stress. Once those children learned some English, they actively refused to speak Chinese as a way to distance themselves from past unhelpful experiences. This refusal resulted in the decreased use of and growing discomfort with Chinese, which further reinforced adolescents' disinclination to speak Chinese at home.

A shift in adolescents' language choice may be triggered not only by their personal experiences associated with their lower English proficiency, but also by the lower English proficiency of their parents. While more often than not lower parental proficiency in English motivates ethnic language retention among children of immigrants, Burck (2005) reported stories of children feeling embarrassed by their parents' English language difficulties even after many years in their host country; those children spoke English in order to distance themselves from their parents. Burck (2005) emphasized that children's lack of confidence in their parents, and the parents' own uncertainty in the new language and culture, tended to disrupt the usual balance of authority in child-parent relationships. Indeed, Burck (2005, 126) wrote, "a parent could be profoundly responsive to and organized by their children's contempt," pointing to the "Who is socializing whom in the immigrant family?" question raised by Schechter and Bayley in 2002.

It is not surprising, then, that adolescents are not the only ones in their families who become ambivalent about ethnic language practices. Their parents, and particularly mothers of early and mid-adolescents, are confronted with conflicting aspirations. According to Burck

(2005) and Okita (2001), while mothers described speaking their ethnic languages to their young children as “natural”, the ethnic language maintenance with adolescents required considerably greater commitment and ongoing attention. The ethnic language maintenance became conceptualized as “language as work” and was perceived by mothers as putting undue pressure on their children and on family relationships generally (Okita 2002; Caldas 2006). So when adolescents insisted, many parents eventually gave in to their children’s linguistic preferences and needs, hoping to reduce the unnecessary tension in already challenging relationships (Pease-Alvarez 2003; Caldas 2006; Okita 2002). Snow and Hakuta (1992, 388) write:

Consider the case of the perfectly bilingual Mexican American whose children start to speak English among themselves and eventually to their parents. The adults can stubbornly go on speaking Spanish, which their children understand, to maintain the children’s proficiency in Spanish. But conversations where one partner speaks Spanish and the other speaks English are hard to keep going for long, as the convergence principle predicts. Not surprisingly, the parents typically give in, with the result that the children end up monolingual English speakers. Such parents can talk about the conflict--they would like their children to speak Spanish--but they do not want to sacrifice the familial intimacy, the freedom from conflict, and the convenience associated with acceding to their children’s preferences.

Pease-Alvarez (2003) reported that the use of English in child-parent interactions in Mexican origin families tended to increase significantly over time in the United States. In some families this shift could be a continuation of occasional slips to English in daily conversations (Döpke 1988; Goodz 1989). In others, parents shifted to the dominant language to establish distance from sad memories of their own childhood (Burck 2005). More often, however, mothers attributed this shift to an increased financial pressure to work outside of home and little remaining time to help children learn and speak Spanish (Schechter and Bayley 2002). Pease-Alvarez (2003) also found that parents held lower expectations for their children’s Spanish proficiency compared to English, not only because of their recognition of the importance of the English language in the United States, but also because of their feeling of insecurity about the

“correctness” and “purity” of their own ethnic language proficiency--a rationale also repeatedly used in Chinese families in England (Burck 2005).

The parental shift to English has dramatic and long-lasting consequences for children’s ethnic language proficiency and use. With data about Spanish-speaking high-school students in two California communities, Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez (1994) found that parental language choice at home was a principal influence on adolescents’ language choice with parents. Whereas adolescents’ English language proficiency was commonly high and Spanish language proficiency was relatively stable, the shift toward English language choice was gradual and consistent for both adolescents and their parents. Once parents shifted to speaking English language at home, the maintenance of Spanish proficiency and choice by their adolescent children was very unlikely, regardless of parental proficiency in Spanish, adolescents' language preferences or adolescents’ language uses outside of the home (Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez 1994).

## Method

### Sample

The study uses data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS). CILS provides extensive information about social and linguistic adaptation of children of immigrants and their families. The 1992 baseline CILS sample (N=5262) consisted of U.S.-born children with at least one foreign-born parent and children born abroad but brought to the United States at an early age (CILS 2005.) The 1995 follow-up, utilized in this study, included 4288 participants.

The current study supplements student data with data from parental interviews conducted with 54% of parents randomly selected from the 1995 CILS student sample. Unlike student surveys, mostly conducted at school via self-administered questionnaires in English language, parental face-to-face interviews were conducted in six different foreign languages and mostly at

home. An additional analysis indicated that none of the sociolinguistic variables of interest had a significant effect on the probability of parents to be selected for parental interview; that probability was positively associated with the family's intact status, foreign nativity of both parents, and lower child-parent conflict and greater family cohesion. National origin and gender of the adolescent participants also affected that probability. The sample was further restricted to those adolescents who reported in 1995 that people living in their household spoke the same ethnic language as reported by the adolescent participant. Of the combined adolescent-parent sample, 91% (n=2,102) met that condition. The final sample size for this study was 1,662.

Among 1,662 adolescent participants, 58% reported Latin American and Caribbean national origin, 41% reported Asian national origin and one percent reported other national origin. About 50% were females; 44% were native-born, almost 46% came to U.S. before turning 10, and another 10% arrived between ages 10 and 16. About 94% of adolescents reported that both their parents were foreign-born. Almost 72% of the participants lived in intact families with both of their biological or adoptive parents, 83% had at least one sibling in their household and 15% had at least one grandparent in their household. The average score on the child-parent conflict scale ranging from 1 (less conflict) to 4 (more conflict) was 1.7 with a standard deviation of 0.63. The average score on the family cohesion scale ranging from 1 (lower cohesion) to 5 (higher cohesion) was 3.6 with a standard deviation of 0.97. The average score on the familism scale ranging from 1 (lower familism) to 4 (higher familism) was 1.9 with a standard deviation of 0.63.

More than 97% of parental interviews were conducted with participants' mothers or fathers; the rest of interviewees were stepparents, grandparents, uncles or aunts. Almost 60% of parental interviews were conducted with female guardians of the adolescents, and 40% with male guardians. Based on parental interviews, 39% of mothers and 42% of fathers had less than high-

school level education, 18% of mothers and 17% of fathers were high school graduates, 29% of mothers and 23% of fathers had some post-secondary education but had not completed college, and 15% of mothers and 18% of fathers had a college degree or a higher level of education. In 1995, 48% of mothers and 54% of fathers were employed full-time; 25% of the parents reported family income below \$15,000, 40% between \$15,000 and \$34,999, 29% had family income between \$35,000 and \$74,999, and 6% reported family income of \$75,000 or above.

## Measures

### *Language choice in child-parent interactions*

Adolescents' language choice with parents was measured using the open-ended question: "When you talk to your parents (or guardians), what language do you most often use?" Parental language choice with children was measured with the question: "In what language do you mostly speak to your child?" Among adolescent participants, 28.6% reported English, 66.8% reported an ethnic language and 4.6% reported bilingual choice. Among parents, 9.8% reported English, 83% reported an ethnic language and 7.2% reported bilingual choice. Because this study examines English choice compared to an ethnic or bilingual choice, the language choice variable was coded as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 for "English choice" and 0 for "ethnic" or "both about the same".

It is important to emphasize that this study uses a self-reported measure of language choices by adolescents and their parents. Parents and children reported their language choices in child-parent interactions independently from one another. Their answers, therefore, only reflected their own respective perceptions of which language *they themselves* usually used with their parents (or children). Adolescent participants were *not* asked about their parents' language choices, and the parents were *not* asked about their children's language choices in child-parent

interactions. This approach reduces the likelihood of possible misrepresentations of language choices in parent-adolescent interactions. This measure of language choices, however, should not be confused with the measure of language choice based on the researcher's direct observation of actual linguistic interactions, usual in linguistic research.

#### *Adolescent's language preference*

Adolescents' language preference was measured using one question: "What language do YOU prefer to speak most of the time?" The question was open-ended: 69% preferred English, 16.5% reported some combination of English and ethnic languages and 15.5% reported an ethnic language. Because this study is concerned with English preference, the language preference data were coded as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 for "English preference" and 0 for "ethnic" or "both about the same".

#### *Language proficiency*

Adolescent and parental proficiency in English language was measured with the question: "How well do you speak English?" Parental proficiency in English was recoded as a set of four dichotomous variables: "Not speaking English", "Speaking English very little", "Speaking English well", and "Speaking English very well". More than 75% of adolescents reported speaking English "very well", and another 23% reported speaking it "well"; therefore, adolescents' English proficiency was coded 1 for "Speaking English very well", and 0 otherwise.

Parents were not asked about their proficiency in their ethnic language. Adolescents' proficiency in their ethnic language was measured with the question: "How well do you speak a language other than English?" It was recoded as a set of four dichotomous variables: "Speaking an ethnic language very little", "Speaking an ethnic language not well", "Speaking an ethnic language well", and "Speaking an ethnic language very well".

In order to keep cases of adolescents from single-parent families in the sample, which otherwise would be left out due to missing data on their second parent's language proficiency, education and employment, I recoded these missing data to modal categories for each variable and created two additional dichotomous variables: "Mother present in a household" and "Father present in a household". All models reported in this study include interaction terms for mother's or father's presence in a household with mother's or father's proficiency in English, education and employment status, respectively. That means that the effect of, for example, the father's ability to speak English "very well" on adolescents' language choice should be interpreted as the effect of the father's self-reported ability to speak English "very well" when the father is present in the household.

#### Control variables

##### *Adolescents' characteristics*

Adolescents' age of arrival to the United States was measured as a difference between year of birth and year of immigration to the United States. Age of arrival was coded 0 for U.S.-born adolescents. Gender was coded 1 for females and 0 for males. Adolescents' national origin was a set of seven dichotomous variables including Asia, Caribbean, Cuba, Mexico, Other Latin America, Other (Canada, Europe, Middle East, Africa), and the Philippines.

##### *Family characteristics*

Adolescent interviews were a source of data on intact family, parental nativity, presence of grandparents and siblings in a household and family climate. Intact family was coded 1 when the participant lived in a household with both of their biological or adoptive parents present. Parental nativity was coded as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when both parents were foreign-born and 0 when one of the parents was U.S.-born. Presence of grandparents was coded



as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when at least one grandparent was present in the household. Presence of siblings was coded as a dichotomous variable equal to 1 when at least one sibling was present in the same household.

The study uses three characteristics of family climate: child-parent conflict, familism and family cohesion<sup>1</sup>. Following Rumbaut (1994), the child-parent conflict was a composite scale including three items each scored 1 (minimum) to 4 (maximum): Item 1 “In trouble with parents because of different way of doing things”; Item 2 “My parents are usually not very interested in what I have to say”; Item 3 “My parents do not like me very much.” Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.6<sup>2</sup>. Familism can be described as a subordination of individual interests to those of the kinship group or a greater sense of family obligations (Rogers and Sebald 1962) and a greater reliance of family network (Tienda 1980). Following Rumbaut (1994), the measure of familism was a composite scale with three items scored 1 (minimum) to 4 (maximum): Item 1 “One should find a job near his/her parents even if it means losing a better job somewhere else”; Item 2 “When someone has a serious problem, only relatives can help”; Item 3 “In helping a person get a job, it is always better to choose a relative rather than a friend”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.59<sup>3</sup>. Family cohesion was a composite scale consisting of three items each scored 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum): Item 1 “Family members like to spend time with each other”; Item 2 “Family members feel very close to each other”; Item 3 “Family togetherness is very important”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.84.

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<sup>1</sup>There was no statistically significant association between familism and child-parent conflict, and there was a weak statistically significant association between family cohesion and familism ( $r=0.10$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). There was a moderate negative association between child-parent conflict and family cohesion ( $r=-0.40$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

<sup>2</sup> The results of the factor analysis indicated the one-dimensional structure of the child-parent conflict scale. The extracted Factor 1 was highly correlated with Item 1 ( $r=0.59$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Item 2 ( $r=0.79$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and Item 3 ( $r=0.83$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

<sup>3</sup> The results of the factor analysis indicated the one-dimensional structure of the familism scale. The extracted Factor 1 was highly correlated with Item 1 ( $r=0.70$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Item 2 ( $r=0.82$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and Item 3 ( $r=0.71$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

Parental interviews were a source of data on parental education, employment status and family income. Parental education was an ordinal variable with the following categories: 0 “No schooling”, 1 “Less than high school graduate”, 2 “High school graduate”, 3 “More than high school but less than college graduate”, 4 “College graduate or higher”. Parental employment status was coded 1 when father or mother was employed full-time and 0 otherwise. Total family income was an ordinal variable with 15 categories ranging from “none” to “\$200,000 or above”.

## Results

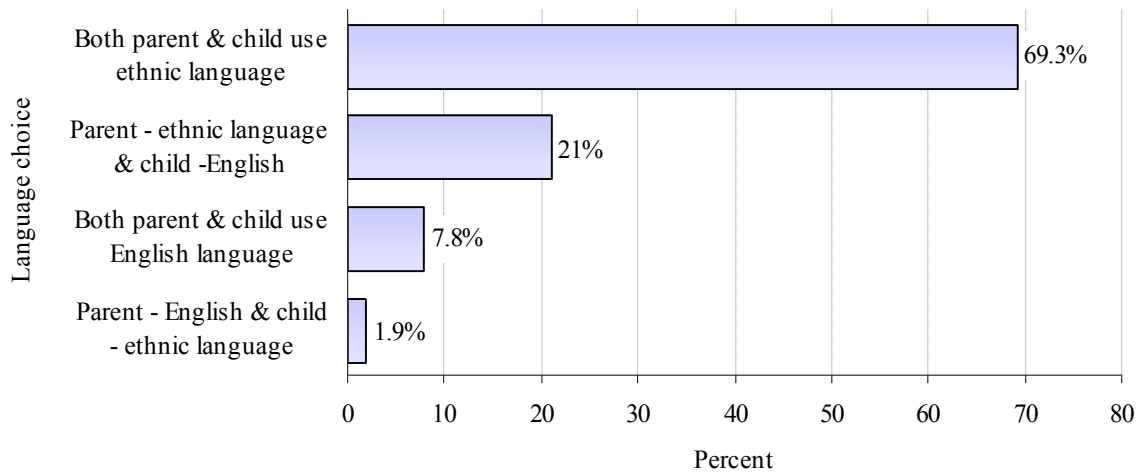
### Descriptive Analysis

In 1995, the majority of the adolescent participants were bilingual with dominant English language: 75% reported speaking English “very well” and 24% reported speaking it “well”; 68% of adolescent participants preferred speaking English. In comparison, 39% reported speaking their ethnic language “very well”, 41% reported speaking it “well”, and 20% reported speaking it “not well” or “very little”. The parental English language proficiency was more evenly distributed: 22% of mothers and 24% of fathers reported speaking English “very well”, 27% of mothers and 28% of fathers spoke English “well”, 34% of mothers and 24% of fathers spoke it “not well”, and 14% of mothers and 7% of fathers reported speaking English “very little” or “not at all”.

Over 71% of adolescents reported using their ethnic languages with parents at least some of the time, whereas 29% spoke English only. On average, girls were more likely to use only English with their parents than boys (31.3% and 25.9% respectively). By language preferences, almost 40% of adolescents who preferred English and only 6% of adolescents with bilingual or ethnic language preference spoke only English to their parents. It is notable that among adolescents who spoke English to their parents, 93.5% preferred English. Over 90% of parents

reported speaking an ethnic language with their children (with no gender difference), and almost 10% spoke only English.

Figure 1 Percentage Distribution of Patterns of Language Choice in Child-Parent Interactions (N=1,662)



SOURCE: CILS 1995

Figure 1 presents distribution of patterns of language choice in parent-adolescent interactions. In 69.3% of 1,662 child-parent pairs, both adolescents and parents reported speaking an ethnic language and in 7.8% of pairs both adolescents and parents spoke English. In 21% of child-parent pairs, adolescents spoke English and parents spoke an ethnic language, whereas in almost 2% of pairs adolescents spoke their ethnic language and parents spoke English.

Table 1 shows variation in patterns of language choice in child-parent interactions by adolescent’s national origin. With the exception of the Philippines, where English is a dominant language, the majority of participants in all other national-origin groups either reported a reciprocal choice of their ethnic languages, or a non-reciprocal language choice with adolescents speaking English and the parents speaking their ethnic language. Except for the “Other” national-origin group, a reciprocal choice of ethnic language was a dominant pattern: the share of

adolescent-parent pairs reporting it ranged from 48% for Caribbean national origin to 88% for families of Asian background. The non-reciprocal choice with ethnic language spoken by parents and the English language spoken by children dominated in families of Caribbean background (51.5%), and was reported by a third of Filipino and Cuban families. This non-reciprocal pattern of language use was least prevalent in Asian families (9%). The reciprocal use of English was rare except for Filipino families, where it was reported in 51% of parent-adolescent pairs. Finally, a non-reciprocal pattern with parents using English and children using their ethnic language was reported by 5.5% of Mexican families, 4.2% of Filipino families and almost 2% of Asian families.

Table 1 Patterns of Language Choice in Child-Parent Interactions, by Adolescent's National Origin (N=1,662)

National origin	Pattern of language choice in child-parent interactions				Total
	Ethnic (P)† & Ethnic (C)	Ethnic (P) & English (C)	English (P) & English (C)	English (P) & Ethnic (C)	
Cuba	66.3%	33.3%	0.4%	-	100% (n=291)
Mexico	76.0%	13.8%	4.7%	5.5%	100% (n=254)
Other Latin America	83.1%	16.3%	0.6%	-	100% (n=355)
Caribbean	48.5%	51.5%	-	-	100% (n=68)
Philippines	11.2%	33.5%	51.2%	4.2%	100% (n=215)
Asia	88.2%	9.00%	0.9%	1.9%	100% (n=466)
Other	23.1%	69.2%	7.7%	-	100% (n=13)
Total population	69.3%	21.0%	7.8%	2%	100% (n=1,662)

SOURCE: CILS 1992, 1995,

† (P) for "Parent" and (C) for "Child"

Table 2 reports pairwise correlation coefficients for measures of language proficiency and language preferences. The results shows that adolescents' choice of English with parents was negatively and strongly associated with adolescents' proficiency in their ethnic language ( $r=-0.46$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). It was also positively and strongly associated with the mother's English proficiency ( $r=0.48$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), moderately associated with the father's English proficiency

( $r=0.28$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), with the adolescent's English preference ( $r=0.35$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), and with the adolescent's English proficiency ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

Table 2 Pairwise Correlation Coefficients for Selected Independent Variables (N=1,662)

Variable name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Adolescent speaks English to parents	1.00						
2 Adolescent prefers English	0.35*	1.00					
3 Adolescent speaks English "very well"	0.23*	0.35*	1.00				
4 Adolescent's ethnic language proficiency	-0.46*	-0.30*	-0.05	1.00			
5 Parent speaks English to adolescent	0.37*	0.15*	0.11*	-0.39*	1.00		
6 Mother's proficiency in English (P)†	0.48*	0.27*	0.31*	-0.25*	0.24*	1.00	
7 Father's proficiency in English (P)	0.28*	0.13*	0.17*	-0.17*	0.22*	0.32*	1.00

SOURCE: CILS 1995

\*  $P<0.05$

† "P" indicates data from interviews with adolescents' parents or guardians

Parents' choice of English with their children was negatively and strongly associated with adolescents' proficiency in their ethnic language ( $r=-0.39$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), and it was positively and moderately associated with the mother's English proficiency ( $r=0.24$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and the father's English proficiency ( $r=0.22$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Parents' choice of English was weakly associated with adolescent's English proficiency ( $r=0.11$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Finally, there was a moderate positive association between adolescent and parental choice of English in child-parent interactions ( $r=0.37$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The data show no statistically significant association between adolescents' self-reported English and ethnic language proficiency.

### Probit Analysis

Table 3 describes the relationship between parental and adolescents' language proficiency and language choice in child-parent interactions. The results in Model 1 indicate that, controlling for participants' individual and family characteristics and national origin, adolescents were more likely to speak English to their parents if they generally preferred speaking English

( $r=0.952$ ,  $p<0.001$  in Model 1). The impact of adolescents' English preference remained strong and significant in all Models in Table 3.

Model 2 shows that, controlling for their English preference, adolescents were more likely to speak English to their parents if their parents also spoke English to them ( $r=0.547$ ,  $p<0.05$  in Model 2). The effect of parental English choice slightly decreased after adding fathers' and mothers' English proficiency in Model 3, but it remained statistically significant ( $r=0.413$ ,  $p<0.05$  in Model 3). This reduction was due to the correlation between parental English language choice and English language proficiency, and indicated that part of the observed effect of parental language choice was due to the fact that parents who speak English with their children were more proficient in English to begin with. The inclusion of adolescent's language proficiency in Model 4 reduced the effect of parental English choice to statistically non-significant.

Results presented in Model 3 also show that fathers' and especially mothers' proficiency in English were significant predictors of adolescents' English choice in child-parent interactions, controlling for adolescent English preference and parental English choice. Adolescents with mothers speaking English less than "very well" were significantly less likely to use English in child-parent interactions ( $r=-1.010$ ,  $p<0.001$  for speaking English "very little",  $r=-1.031$ ,  $p<0.001$  for speaking English "not well", and  $r=-0.585$ ,  $p<0.001$  for speaking English "well" in Model 3). The absolute size of the effect of maternal English proficiency (when mothers spoke English "very little" or "not well") was bigger than the effect of adolescents' English preference. The effect of mothers' English proficiency increased slightly after adding adolescents' language proficiency in Model 4, indicating that among children of immigrants with similar self-reported language proficiency and preferences, their mothers' lower English proficiency significantly

decreased the probability that the adolescents would use only English in conversations with their parents.

Table 3 Probit Regression Coefficients of Adolescent’s Choice of English with Parents on Parental and Adolescent Language Proficiency, Preference and Choice (N=1,662)

Variable name	Probability that adolescent will speak English to parents			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Adolescent prefers English	0.952 (7.31)**	0.925 (7.11)**	0.892 (6.65)**	0.734 (5.26)**
Parents speak English to adolescent (P) †	-	0.547 (3.10)*	0.413 (2.45)*	0.235 (-1.29)
<i>Mother’s proficiency in English</i>				
Mother speaks English “very little” (P)	-	-	-1.010 (-5.07)**	-1.052 (-5.10)**
Mother speaks English “not well” (P)	-	-	-1.031 (-7.75)**	-1.041 (-7.52)**
Mother speaks English “well” (P)	-	-	-0.585 (-5.06)**	-0.612 (-5.19)**
Mother speaks English “very well” (reference category)	-	-	n.a.	n.a.
<i>Father’s proficiency in English</i>				
Father speaks English “very little” (P)	-	-	-0.167 (-0.75)	-0.126 (-0.56)
Father speaks English “not well” (P)	-	-	-0.253 (-1.76)	-0.205 (-1.40)
Father speaks English “well” (P)	-	-	-0.251 (-2.12)*	-0.242 (-1.96)
Father speaks English “very well” (reference category)	-	-	n.a.	n.a.
<i>Adolescent’s language proficiency</i>				
Adolescent speaks English “very well”	-	-	-	0.214 (1.43)
Adolescent speaks ethnic “very little”	-	-	-	1.492 (6.66)**
Adolescent speaks ethnic “not well”	-	-	-	0.912 (5.66)**
Adolescent speaks ethnic “well”	-	-	-	0.560 (5.11)**
Adolescent speaks ethnic “very well” (reference category)	-	-	-	n.a.
<i>Family climate</i>				
Child-parent conflict	0.041 (0.57)	0.043 (0.59)	0.019 (0.26)	0.016 (0.20)
Family cohesion	-0.041 (-0.85)	-0.036 (-0.74)	-0.050 (-0.98)	0.010 (0.18)
Familism	0.870 (1.30)	0.097 (1.44)	0.139 (1.97)	0.143 (2.00)
Household (HH) composition	YES	YES	YES	YES
Family socioeconomic status	YES	YES	YES	YES

Adolescent's characteristics	YES	YES	YES	YES
National origin	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	-0.481 (-1.08)*	-0.281 (-0.61)	0.415 (0.87)	-0.767 (-1.47)

SOURCE: CILS 1992, 1995

\* P<.05, \*\* P<.001

† "P" indicates data from interviews with adolescent's parent or guardian

Controls: *Household composition* (grandparents present in HH, intact family, both parents foreign-born); *Family socioeconomic status* (mother's level of education, father's level of education, mother employed full-time, father employed full-time, family income); *Adolescent's characteristics* (female, age at arrival); *National origin* (Asia, Caribbean, Cuba, Mexico, Other Latin America, Other, Philippines).

The effect of paternal English language proficiency on adolescents' English choice was relatively weaker than the effect of maternal English proficiency. Adolescents whose fathers reported speaking English less than "well" were significantly less likely to use English in child-parent interactions compared to families with fathers speaking English "very well" ( $r = -0.251$ ,  $p < 0.05$  for fathers speaking English "well" in Model 3). The effect of fathers' English proficiency decreased after adding adolescent language proficiency in Model 4, indicating that part of its effect on adolescents' language choice in child-parent interactions was due to the adolescents' own language proficiency.

Adolescents' proficiency in their ethnic languages had a marked impact on their choice of English with their parents. Adolescents speaking their *ethnic* language less than "very well" were significantly more likely to use English with their parents ( $r = 1.492$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for speaking ethnic language "very little",  $r = 0.912$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and  $r = 0.560$ ,  $p < 0.001$  for speaking it "well" in Model 4) than adolescents speaking their ethnic languages "very well". At the same time, the effect of speaking *English* "very well" was not statistically significant. To turn this interpretation around, adolescents speaking their ethnic language "very well" were significantly less likely than their less proficient counterparts to speak to their parents in English-only, controlling for adolescent language preference, English language proficiency, and for parental English proficiency and choice.



## Discussion

This study examined the relationship between the immigrant family linguistic context and adolescents' use of English language in child-parent interactions. The findings showed that a reciprocal use of an ethnic language was the most common pattern on language choice in child-parent interactions, even among adolescents who otherwise preferred speaking English. The reciprocal pattern of ethnic language use was followed by a non-reciprocal pattern, with parents speaking their ethnic language and adolescents speaking English; it is notable that the vast majority of adolescents who spoke only English to their parents preferred English. The prevalence of different patterns of language choices in immigrant families varied across national-origin groups.

Consistent with findings from past research (Hakuta and Pease-Alvarez 1994; Snow and Hakuta 1992), the results underscored the importance of adolescent and parental language proficiency for adolescent language choice in child-parent interactions. The findings supported three out of four hypotheses of this study. Controlling for adolescents' individual and family characteristics, and national origin, adolescents' proficiency in their ethnic language was the strongest predictor of their language choice in child-parent interactions, followed by maternal proficiency in English, and adolescents' English preference; the effect of the father's English proficiency was weak.

Contrary to my fourth hypothesis, parental choice of English had no statistically significant effect on adolescents' choice of English in child-parent interactions. This finding is in part due to the correlation between parental language choice and parental and adolescent language proficiency, indicating that part or all of the effect of parental language choice on adolescents' language choice was due to their own and parental self-reported language proficiency. The analysis also found no statistically significant relationship between the

characteristics of family climate (child-parent conflict, family cohesion and familism) and the probability that adolescents would speak English to their parents. The finding of these non-significant relationships pointed to the importance of the linguistic foundation of adolescent choice in child-parent interactions. Based on these findings I suggested that the use of English in child-parent interactions reflected family members' and particularly parental ways of overcoming the discrepancy between adolescent and parental linguistic repertoires, rather than indicated social and emotional estrangement between children of immigrants and their foreign-born parents.

The influence of adolescents and parents on language choice in child-parent interactions is not symmetrical. Consistent with the findings by Tseng and Fuligni (2000), Snow and Hakuta (1992) and Burck (2005), adolescent language proficiency and preference had a primary influence, whereas parents were, hypothetically, more likely to adjust their linguistic behavior to meet the linguistic needs and preferences of their children. In the context of this asymmetrical influence, as also suggested by Zhou and Bankston (1998) for Asian languages, the maintenance of an ethnic language use at home required one of the parents, particularly the mother, to be obviously less proficient or uncomfortable in English in order to counterbalance the influence of the English language dominance of the children.

The findings from this study address some of the basic assumptions of the dissonant acculturation argument (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), particularly related to immigrant linguistic adaptation. First, the finding about the linguistic foundation of adolescent language choice in child-parent relationships suggests that their linguistic adaptation is a gradual process. Past studies, and Okita (2001) and Burck (2005) in particular, show that language use at home cannot be separated from family relationships, not because language choices are imposed on either adolescents or their parents, but because language choice changes gradually, following changes

in actual and self-evaluated language proficiency of family members. Language choice, therefore, is unlikely to be a one-time decision, but rather “a series of choices that constitute affirmation and reaffirmation of a commitment to the minority language,” as Schecter and Bayley (2002, 171) suggested.

Second, the linguistic foundation of adolescents’ language choice with parents suggests that linguistic dissonance in immigrant families does not exist in absolute terms because absolute loss of the acquired language is unlikely. Based on vocabulary production and recognition tests, Hakuta reported in 1992 that attrition of Spanish among adolescent children of immigrants of Mexican origin was associated with difficulty of retrieval (remembering) rather than with a total loss. Pease-Alvarez et al. (1996) also questioned the previously assumed importance of language exposure for ethnic language maintenance, suggesting that once language is acquired at the adult-like level it can sustain itself even if it is not spoken regularly.

Finally, even in families experiencing the linguistic dissonance, the impact of that dissonance on parent-adolescent and family relationships likely depends on how important an ethnic language is for family functioning. After all, as ethnographic studies have repeatedly emphasized, immigrant families live within and between two cultures, trying to reconcile multiple cultural differences. As long as communication between parents and their children continues, language choice may not always be their primary concern and consideration.

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