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**“It's my language, my culture and it's personal!” Migrant mothers' experience of language use and identity change in their relationship with their children: An interpretative phenomenological analysis.**

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**Abstract**

The question of how migrants' language use impacts their ethnic identity has received considerable attention in the literature. There is, however, little understanding of how this relationship manifests or is negotiated in interethnic families. This paper presents an in-depth exploration of Spanish mothers' experiences of Spanish- and English-language interactions with their English-born children. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Spanish mothers living in Britain in interethnic partnerships and transcripts were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. Analysis reveals a process of identity change where participants' shifting ethnic identifications with host and heritage culture is intimately related to their language use with their children. Pivotal to this process is the participants' need to maintain their 'Spanish mother' identity, a desire that can only be fulfilled by transferring their heritage language to their children and speaking it with them. Findings reveal how this dynamic impacts perception of family roles, relationship quality and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Interethnic, mother-child relationship, ethnic identity, communication, qualitative, social psychology.

## **“It’s my language, my culture and it’s personal!” Migrant mothers’ experience of language use and identity change in their relationship with their children: An interpretative phenomenological analysis.**

### **Introduction**

For migrant parents bringing up children in a new country, the desire to maintain cultural identity is a significant motivating factor in transmitting their heritage language to their children (Guardado, 2002). Children’s socialisation into the cultural practices of their parents’ ethnic group and the acquisition of its beliefs and values is mediated by knowing the heritage language (Duff & Hornberger, 2008). Interethnic families worldwide are increasing and reports suggest 27% of births in Britain in 2014 were to foreign mothers, a third of whom were from countries within the European Union (ONS, 2014). This trend is seen in other countries, such as the US, where an estimated 25% of children have a foreign parent and one in five families speak a foreign language at home (US Census, 2010). There is, therefore, a need to gain insights into the experience of language use in interethnic families and to examine its relationship to parental identity within the family group (Soliz, 2010).

This paper examines how Spanish migrants, who have recently become mothers and are living with partners from a different language culture, understand their use of host and heritage languages with their English-born children. A dynamic relationship is explored between the mothers’ language use with their children and the perception of ethnic identity in this relational role.

Acculturation has been defined as the broad range of behaviours, attitudes and values that change when there is contact between cultures (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Central to this process is speaking the host language (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Ethnic identity is that aspect of acculturation that focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a given ethnic group and the particular feelings and meaningful ties that

accompany this sense of group membership (Phinney, 1990). Bilingual migrants living in changing social contexts experience shifts in ethnic identifications to the host and heritage culture with the most common being a bicultural identity with ties to both groups (Sam & Berry, 2006). Though extensive literature identifies a critical connection between migrants' ethnic identity and language use in different social contexts (Mu, 2015), little is known about how this relationship manifests and develops within relational roles in the family domain.

The family acts as a prominent in-group in the lives of individuals where family members share a sense of belonging to and identification with this social group (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Perception of the family and its relational roles is mediated by individuals' distinct identities, creating, at times, intergroup boundaries between members of the family group. In interethnic families, perceptions of ethnic difference between family members can impact relationships manifesting in particular language use and communication patterns (Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009). Given the increasing prevalence of interethnic parental partnerships, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how language use is experienced in families where partners and/or children may identify with different ethnic groups.

In migrant families, heritage language maintenance has been found to support closer intergenerational relationships, parent-adolescent discussion and greater family solidarity (Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). In contrast, reduced heritage language proficiency in children has negative repercussions on family well-being including tensions in parent-child relationships, reduced intergenerational communication and feelings of alienation from the wider cultural community (Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). Evidence from the US suggests that parents with limited language proficiency struggle to express their thoughts and feelings to their English-speaking children, while children's refusal to speak their heritage language can be a constant source of relationship tension (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Despite an emphasis on speaking heritage language in the home

environment, once children start mainstream school they often struggle to see its relevance to their life and actively resist their parents' efforts to maintain it (Donghui & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). Yet there are exceptions; parents who learn English in professional occupations adapt their efforts and expectations over language transmission, maintain communications and have cohesive filial relationships (Nesteruk, 2010).

Language practices within the family are central to transmission and are the strongest predictor of heritage language maintenance (King & Fogle, 2013). Language-learning methods, such as One Parent One Language (OPOL), are based on the central premise that language is best transmitted by each parent consistently speaking his or her language with their children (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004; So, 2007). Speaking heritage language at home, however, is often spontaneous, rather than a conscious decision, due to its emotional primacy and connection to parental identity (Pavlenko, 2004).

There is a strong desire among migrant parents to teach their children the heritage language in order to transmit cultural identity, maintain values and support wider family interaction (Park & Sarkar, 2007). Heritage language is important because of its connection with ethnic identity; its use provides minority speakers with a positive ethnic identity and closer ties to their families while a strong ethnic identity is a critical factor leading to heritage language development (Guardado, 2002). Studies focusing on Spanish-speaking migrants have drawn attention to this phenomenon; for example, Mexican descent research equates heritage language loss with cultural identity loss while Latin Americans in Canada saw heritage language transfer as cultivating family unity, culture and Latin American identity (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Bernhard, 2001; Schechter & Bayley, 2002; Su Yeong & Ruth, 2009).

Though the limited research focused on interethnic partnerships suggests parents are equally motivated to transfer language, language transmission for interethnic parents is more likely to fail than those who share a common language (Okita, 2002; Yamamoto, 2002). In

the UK, evidence is scarce and rooted in socio-linguistics: Okita's (2002) study of Japanese mothers attempting to transfer their language to UK-born children found evidence of both intentional effort and feelings of isolation. The sole paper on Spanish-speaking parents suggests that use of Spanish with their children is inseparable from the parents' ethnicity and need for normative belonging (Tyrrell, Guijarro-Fuentes, & Blandon, 2014).

Though the vast majority of research in this area has tended to concentrate on the connection between heritage language proficiency and positive identity development in children and adolescents (Mu, 2015), the evidence of language as a carrier of parental cultural identity brings into question whether migrant parents' desire to transfer language may be related to the maintenance of their own ethnic identity within the family group.

A large proportion of psychological research on ethnic identity and language is situated within the Social Identity Theory framework (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and its related theories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Identification with, and belonging to, an ethnic group provides an individual with an emotionally significant aspect of his self-concept. Language is an authenticity marker in claiming ethnic identity and facilitating a sense of belonging (Giles & Johnson, 1987) and in contexts when language is the most salient dimension of identity, it can be used to assert in-group identification and contributes to positive social identity (Byeong-Keun, 2005). When there is a need to signal social identity, it can also emphasise in-group distinctiveness from the dominant majority (Giles, Willemyns, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). A migrant's self-perception and desired self-concept, however, is fluid, subjective and context dependent and the experiencing of migrant identities is less as stable self-categorisations, but more as a shifting sense of co-existing categories. As Verkuyten (2005) suggests, to capture what it is to be a Turk in Holland it is less about whether a person feels Turkish or Dutch, but the degree they feel connected to both at the same time and how they cope psychologically.

The family is a shared group for all members and can be considered one of the most salient common groups in the lives of individuals (Scabini & Manzi, 2011). For migrants during acculturation, belonging to a family that shares their linguistic practices provides affirmation of their ethnic identity and a significant source of continuity between past, present and future lives (Breakwell, 1986; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2014). Shared heritage language interactions symbolise the culture of origin, maintaining ethnic identifications that otherwise risk being eroded by speaking to individuals from the host culture (Gaudet & Clement, 2009).

Though traditionally conceived solely as an intragroup context in which perceptions of inclusive-ness and solidarity support personal relationships, more recently family has also been seen as influenced by intergroup dynamics (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006). In contexts that emphasise family member's social identities, relationships can shift from being driven by interpersonal factors to a focus on supporting or negotiating their distinct social affiliations. Research on interethnic couples suggests that, though they perceive themselves as sharing a common family identity, events that emphasise ethnic difference result in relational tensions and negative affect (Soliz, 2008). Family communications that accommodate and affirm ethnic identity differences are important in satisfying relationships and reducing perceptions of ethnic difference (Soliz et al., 2009). However, little is understood about the motivations and meanings that shape the relationship between language use and ethnic identity and how this manifests and develops within specific relational roles and family dyads.

This study focuses on Spanish mothers in interethnic partnerships who are bringing up children in Britain. The women have lived in the UK for over a decade, are fluent in English and likely to have acculturated, but are experiencing a new transition: bringing up children in a new language culture. It explores their experience of language use with their children.

The methodology employed is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA endeavours to access subjective experience of individuals

living in a specific context by interpreting the meaning of these experiences for the individuals engaging in them. This paper builds on current evidence by exploring the meanings associated with the participants' language use with their children, as they are made sense of by the participants in their subjective world. By engaging in this process, it aims to offer insights into how these meanings reflect and influence the mothers' perception of their identity and the motivations related to it. The identity process presented in this study derives from an analysis of the participants' data, a procedure that requires interpretative activity on the part of the researcher but is not driven by a specific theoretical model or set of hypotheses. Only subsequently are the findings related to existing theoretical constructs, reflecting IPA's phenomenological and inductive epistemology that aims to foreground the participants' reflective accounts in their own terms.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were selected purposively to form a relatively homogenous sample for whom the research question was meaningful. IPA's idiographic and inductive mode of enquiry aims to recruit a closely-defined group of participants that represent a particular perspective in the area of study. That is, participants are representative of a group or perspective, rather than a population. By purposely selecting a relatively homogenous group of participants, it is also possible to provide insights into the similarity and variability of individuals who are representative of that perspective. Participants were recruited and selected by the authors via snowballing methods.

All participants were Spanish women, aged 35 to 42, who had grown up in Spain and moved to the UK as a young adult. They had lived in the UK for between 10 and 20 years

and were fluent in English. They were first-time mothers of children aged between 1 and 5 years who had lived in the UK since birth. An estimated 34% of UK migrants give birth between the ages of 30 and 34, falling to 20% from 35-39, suggesting these participants are reflective of older migrant mothers (ONS, 2014). None of the participants' partners had Spanish as their first language and they had no other children living with them.

The participants were educated to degree or post-graduate level and worked in skilled professions at lower and upper managerial level. Such characteristics are not uncommon among EU migrants in the UK: it is estimated that 30-40% have degrees and work in skilled professions (CPC, 2016). The participants had learnt English at school in Spain, some had been on exchange visits, and most believed their fluency had improved by speaking English with their partner or by using it in work and study contexts in the UK. Four participants were selected, a normative sample size for IPA that allows for a detailed analysis of each case. The participants' pseudonyms and anonymised relational information are listed in Box 1.

**Box 1: The participants and relational information.**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Years in UK</u>	<u>Partner</u>	<u>Partner Lang</u>	<u>Children (Age in years)</u>
Alison	39	14	Mike	English	Sara (5) & Jenny (2)
Bianca	40	15	David	English	Juana (5) & Claudia (3)
Iria	35	13	Omar	Arabic	Sabela (2)
Maria	42	18	Damian	Greek	Alejandro (4) & Emelia (2)

**Procedure**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in English. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of having children in a new language culture, to describe how it felt to speak both Spanish and English to their children and how that feeling had changed over time. The impact on children and the wider family of communicating in



different languages was also explored. The researchers were guided by an interview schedule, but encouraged the participants to talk freely about their experiences, and questions were spontaneously asked in response to their accounts. Each of the interviews took place in the home of either participant or researcher, and lasted for 1 hour and 30 minutes. Verbatim transcripts of the interviews served as raw data for the study.

The data was analysed using IPA following the procedure set out in Smith et. al (2009). A hallmark of IPA is its commitment to the idiographic; the analysis is conducted on a case-by-case basis, with super-ordinate themes generated for each individual case, before proceeding to the identification of patterns across cases. The first case was read line-by-line and analysed, in depth, by searching for points of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual note that were then recorded in the right margin. On re-reading, these notes were translated into succinct and resonant sub-themes, recorded in the right margin and checked to ensure the link with the transcript remains. The techniques of subsumption and abstraction (Smith et al., 2009) were then used to explore patterns between the series of sub-themes and identify connections out of which the super-ordinate themes were developed. Reflecting the principles of IPA, this inductive mode of analysis enables the prominent meanings of individual experience to emerge out of a detailed and rigorous analysis of that experience.

This produced, for the first case, a list of super-ordinate themes and contributory sub-themes with reference pointers to supporting evidence in the interview transcript. The process was repeated for each case. Finally, the four individual tables were jointly reviewed, major common themes, points of strong convergence and divergence were identified and the master table of themes was agreed (see Table 1). The super-ordinate themes were then turned into a narrative account with analysis supported by verbatim extracts from each participant.

## **Results**

### **Summary**

The six super-ordinate themes present a process of identity change that emerged during participants' interactions in heritage and host language with their children. The first theme, 'The natural Spanish mother surfaces', describes the rejuvenation in ethnicity felt by participants' when speaking to their babies in their heritage language. For all participants, speaking their native language to their children became the truest reflection of themselves as a Spanish mother, and the next theme, 'The need for affirmation shapes language goals', explores how this shaped the participants' desire to transfer this language to their children. The demands of attempting to transfer language are emphasised in theme three, 'Multilingual goals are a constant struggle', which highlights the effort of consciously speaking heritage language and the risk of relational conflict. Those participants who lapsed into speaking English with their children experienced challenges that are described in theme four, 'Feelings of failure and threat to authenticity'. For all, this shift to host language coincided with an emerging English self, described in the fifth theme, 'The mother's evolving self'. While this could support a closer relationship with their child, it also posed identity challenges and the final theme, 'Coping with change in the social arena' reveals the strategies adopted by participants within different cultural and linguistic contexts.

### **The 'natural' Spanish mother surfaces**

The participants found themselves speaking their heritage language to their babies as their Spanish self came to the fore. All described this as an expression of their inner self that instilled their new role with authenticity. As their desire to become a 'natural' Spanish mother was fulfilled, their ethnicity was rejuvenated during verbal interplay with their child.

Maria felt that speaking Spanish to her children, Alejandro and Emelia, was intuitive:

*Talking to them in Spanish feels natural, it feels natural [...], you re-live all that stuff [nursery rhymes], it comes flooding back, it's the language you've learnt to relate in a*

*particular situation. Rocking them in my lap, singing songs, I like it. It keeps something alive that was important with me and now, as an adult makes me feel quite warm.*

As Maria's Spanish self resurfaces, latent memories, such as nursery rhymes, come 'flooding' back, reconnecting her present with her past. Childhood memories are recalled with such intensity that they seem to bring the past into the present so that it feels re-lived. Maria's interaction with her baby – her 'singing' and 'rocking' – affirms for her the role of the Spanish mother by infusing it with 'natural' feeling. This is a regenerative experience that makes her feel 'alive' and 'warm'. Alison also instinctively spoke Spanish to her baby, Sara:

*It felt natural, you know, obviously when you speak to a baby it's all very... it does come out what's inside you and that's Spanish, and the songs that you sing, yeah that sort of came out of me, the Spanish comes out first definitely.*

Speaking to her baby is an instinctive experience where Spanish is the 'natural' expression of her authentic self which 'comes out first'. Nursery songs also 'came out', suggesting strong connections with her childhood in Spain.

In contrast to the other participants, Iria had chosen to speak Galician, her ancestors' language, rather than Spanish, the language her mother spoke to her. When her daughter, Sabela, was born, Iria did not experience the instinctive outpouring of her mother tongue that the other participants describe:

*I am Galician and I'm bringing that to London... I have made a decision in choosing Galician over Spanish for my daughter. So, it became our natural language and bonding language and it becomes to me, like, a very intimate thing.*

Though Iria feels that Galician is the language that best expresses her identity, the shifts of tense in the passage denote change and suggest that her Galician identity is nascent. By 'bringing' her Galician self to her maternal role and enacting it in her relationship with Sabela,

she is giving new life to it. She may not feel instantly 'natural' speaking Galician as a mother, but over time this identity 'becomes' imbued with 'intimate' meaning.

### **The need for affirmation shapes language goals**

Language transmission was a defining goal for all participants. They perceived their native language as the truest reflection of themselves, a legacy to be passed on, and aspired to establish a relational context that could affirm their ethnicity by symbolising their common origins and difference.

The participants felt that speaking Spanish demonstrated their ethnic difference from the English majority – and it was important that their children could see and appreciate this.

Bianca felt marginalised by her English-speaking household:

*I'm on my own, I'm the only one speaking Spanish to them [Juana and Claudia]...my husband is English...it used to be 50-50, now it's 75-25, so it's like 'Oh!'...I keep talking to her [Claudia, her second daughter] in Spanish because I really want her to know that I'm different, that Spanish is my language, that I don't speak like the others, because she's confused so I want her to know that my language is this language, I want her to know the limits, the difference.*

Bianca's use of the possessive – 'my language' – suggests that Spanish is central to her relational identity. Its significance is two-fold: it is how she expresses her Spanish self, and how she differentiates herself from the English 'others'. Bianca seems anxious that Claudia recognises that she is different. Her repetitive insistence that Claudia must get to 'know' it betrays a need for Claudia to affirm this difference. Her identity seems to be acutely relational, needing Claudia to confirm it by speaking to her in Spanish:

*I want them [Juana and Claudia] to speak to me, to see me as Spanish. That's the thing. When it comes to them I become very patriotic, I want them to know that at the end of the day I'm not English, so that they know it's part of them as well.*

Bianca's words reveal that 'when it comes to' her children she wants to be perceived as a mother who is Spanish and distinct from the English majority. Underpinning her language goals is a desire for her relational ethnicity to be both recognised and affirmed through having her children speak Spanish to her. Being spoken to in Spanish is particularly meaningful for Bianca because it signifies her children 'know it's part of them', thereby acknowledging their shared Spanish ethnicity.

Alison felt that, in order to preserve her Spanish ethnicity, it was important to cement a linguistic connection between her children and her family in Spain.

*I want them to know and be proud of where their mum comes from, and you know, have that contact with their Spanish family, just to keep their roots going [...] I am Spanish and I'm not going to change that, so yeah I want my children to know where they come from [...] Apart from them not being able to communicate with my family, it's my heritage, it's my language, I don't want them to be detached from me, I want them to know that they are half Spanish as well.*

Spanish connects her children to their familial 'roots' so they can understand, value and continue their heritage. Alison's ethnic identity is embedded in her Spanish heritage so she feels that, for her children to grasp its meaning, they must learn the language. Note the shift in emphasis during the passage from knowing where 'their mum comes from' to knowing where 'they come from': though Alison wants her children to recognise Spanish as her heritage, she also hopes they will identify with, and sustain, their common origins. As the extract unfolds, we realise that Alison's aspirations encompass a desire for her children to recognise and identify with her ethnicity. By doing so, Alison's role as a mother remains Spanish, while at the same time providing a relational connection.

Like Bianca, Alison uses language to differentiate herself from her English husband:

*I wanted her [Sara] to know that there were two people at home - mum and dad - and each of us spoke in a different language. [...] She understands now that there's others*

*that have children, foreign fathers or mums and dads [...] I like it when they [children] say it in Spanish because it's where I come from.*

Alison appreciates it when her children speak Spanish, seeing it as recognition of her distinct identity, yet her perspective is less self-centred than Bianca's. She expresses the importance that her daughters feel part of a broader cultural mix. It is a positive difference.

### **Multilingual goals are a constant struggle**

In practice, transmitting the heritage language to children became a daily struggle, requiring effort to consistently speak the language and vigilance to ensure it was spoken back. Both Iria and Maria adopted a language-learning method, OPOL, which states that, for a language to be assimilated, parents should constantly speak it to their children. Maria explained:

*We came across OPOL [...] and this is what we are doing and we've been pretty religious about it. [...] You need to be consistent about it, otherwise it doesn't work.*

Maria's integration of OPOL into her daily life is 'pretty religious', an analogy that suggests that, for her, this is a process that requires a level of personal belief and devotion, as well as effort. Iria also described the work involved in speaking with Sabela:

*I am very disciplined. I have to make an effort when I speak to my daughter, to make sure I am emphasising the language I want to transfer.*

Iria has to consciously check to 'make sure' that she and her daughter are speaking the correct language. This requires discipline and a level of self-awareness that prevents it from being a simple exchange between mother and daughter. Alison, did not subscribe to a formal language-learning method, but still worked hard to transmit her Spanish.

*I had a bit of an obsession that I wanted my children to be bilingual so I did make quite a big effort to talk in Spanish, especially my husband being English, I knew I was gonna struggle.[...] I really try hard to... to do it in Spanish, but I suppose there's times I just say it in English.*

Alison recalls being initially intensely preoccupied with her language goals, which were a self-conscious ‘obsession’. She knew how difficult it was going to be to keep Spanish going, being the sole speaker, and worked hard. Yet when the extract shifts from past to present tense, her tone is more resigned as she admits that, in spite of her efforts, she speaks English sometimes. It seems that her goals now feel less attainable than when she first had children.

Despite the participants' efforts, some found that, over time, their children chose to speak English to them. For Bianca, speaking Spanish with her first child Juana was an intuitive experience that felt completely 'natural'. That changed dramatically with her second child Claudia who preferred to speak English:

*It doesn't feel natural talking to her, I have to make an effort all the time which I never had to do with Juana. Every time she says something in English, I repeat in Spanish[...] It's a battle, I feel all the time I have to push. I feel like giving up, like, 'Ah I can't take it anymore, I can't do it anymore', pushing and pushing all the time: 'Speak Spanish!'*

Bianca's fierce struggle to achieve her language goals has gone beyond just speaking Spanish to Claudia and now involves an insistence that she speak Spanish back. For Bianca, the unnatural feeling is particularly acute because it is so much harder than talking to Juana ever was. She refuses to acknowledge Claudia's English, repeating her words back in her mother tongue. Bianca is engaged in 'a battle' to save her Spanish mother identity by dictating her child's language. This requires levels of mental effort that can feel overwhelming. Her repetition of ‘pushing’ suggests the weight of her mental effort has a physicality that she finds hard to tolerate. As the passage shifts into the present tense, we hear the emotional distress created by this mental struggle. Her plaintive exclamation ‘I can't take it anymore’ seems to represent a separate, weaker voice to the one that defiantly insists ‘Speak Spanish!’.

This demand for Spanish may also represent a challenge for Bianca's children: as even her eldest daughter, Juana, turns to English, it reaches its peak when Bianca denies her daughter's English identity:

*She [Juana] said the other day; 'I'm English' and I say 'No, you are Spanish' and she says, 'No mummy, I'm English now.' 'You are both, you are 50-50!'*

### **Feelings of failure and threat to authenticity**

Those participants whose children spoke English to them found that, at times, they also lapsed into it. For Bianca and Alison, this elicited negative feelings because they were failing to implement their language goals. Moreover, as the mothers' use of English increased so too did a sense of artificiality, reflecting a loss of authenticity in their relational role with their children. Bianca, recalled how speaking English to Claudia was accompanied by strong feelings that it was not the correct language:

*It feels wrong [...] I shouldn't be doing it because I know she's struggling and she's not learning Spanish much, so every word I speak to her in English is like a failure.*

Bianca's communication with Claudia is governed by an absolute code where Spanish is right and English wrong. Her emphasis that 'every word' is like a failure suggests an emotional intensity that seems disproportionate but also hints at what she is sacrificing personally by speaking English to her child:

*I feel like a bad Spanish mother, like I'm telling them, sometimes I'm saying it in English to her just to be quick, but then part of me saying, "No, no, no, no, you have to keep that!" It's just, it's part of me, it's my language and speaking English to them, it feels unnatural, it's wrong.*

Bianca's words suggest that speaking English to her children not only goes against her language goals for them but also undermines her own Spanish identity which is the ethnicity she strongly feels in her role as a mother. Using the 'wrong' language as a 'Spanish mother'



is a discordant ‘unnatural’ experience, where she feels part of herself is in jeopardy and that she seems desperate to protect; ‘No, no, no, no, you have to keep that!’

Iria, whose conversations with Sabela were in Galician, did not have feelings of failure but still found speaking English elicited feelings of inauthenticity:

*I can communicate well (in English) and generally, I don't have any barriers. But when it comes to my child, it's not natural, it's... I don't have the words (in English) [...] I feel so uncomfortable, it's almost as if I'm in a theatre play and I'm playing this role [...] I feel terribly artificial. I don't feel it's natural. Galician feels that much more intimate with my daughter that I think I would feel a little bit upset if she decided to speak English to me, if she changed or broke that intimacy that I would like to keep in Galician. If they drop it, I will be sad, without a doubt [...] I would have to accept it but I would feel sad because I have invested emotionally in it.*

Iria's words encapsulate what is ultimately at stake for all the participants when they speak in English with their children. She is acutely aware that when she speaks English to Sabela it creates a 'terrible' discordance within her. Despite her normal fluency, when it ‘comes to’ speaking with Sabela in English she struggles to ‘have the words’. This ‘role’ she plays feels outside of herself, an artificiality that is an affront to personal authenticity. This also challenges her perception of herself as a ‘natural’ mother, a significant self-meaning. Early in the process, the participants all felt ‘natural’ speaking their heritage language to their babies because it was an expression of their ‘inner’ self that evoked intimacy and belonging with their child. Now, by speaking English, Iria and the others risk forfeiting those feelings that sustain their role and, in doing so, contribute to a positive sense of self.

At the same time, Iria is poignantly aware that ‘intimacy’ risks being ‘broken’ if Sabela chooses to speak English to her. As with the other participants, having a child speak English to her is problematic because for the mother it signifies her daughter’s identification with a distinct social group, posing a threat to relatedness and belonging. Iria knows this is

something that, ultimately, she 'would have to accept', but she would 'feel sad' because so much of herself has been 'emotionally invested in it'.

### **The mother's evolving self**

Alongside feelings of failure and artificiality, changes to the participants' self-identifications were also emerging. Though they all expressed a strong identification with their native language, those whose children no longer spoke Spanish to them described a feeling that, over time, they were becoming more English.

Alison's Spanish self remained central to her relationship with her children, but she also recognised an evolving English self:

*I am Spanish and I am very proud and I want my children to know, but I've got a bit of a...I would say 30% is starting to be, you know, English, because this is where I'm living, this is where my house is and I like it [...] so for me talking to them in English, it's not unnatural talking to them in English, it's not unnatural, you know, it doesn't come unnatural at all now.*

Throughout her interview, Alison reiterates 'I am Spanish' and wants her children perceive her that way. Yet she has an increasing awareness of being English. Rather than fight this, she stays in control: her English self does not overwhelm her, she accepts it and recognises that it helps her to communicate with her daughters. Alison is adapting, not only in response to her English life, but also to her children's increasing use of English. It seems that her Spanish self, so integral to her perception of her 'natural' role as a mother, has been partly supplanted by an English self that sustains a closer relationship with her children where they share the same language and social group. Yet her repeated use of the double negative 'it's not unnatural' is telling: though she accepts her new Englishness and the relationship it supports with her children, she cannot bring herself to call it 'natural'. This would belie what seems to have been lost personally in this experience of self-compromise.

Bianca also saw that a part of her was changing.

*I'm finding speaking in Spanish harder. I feel I'm thinking more in English now, so my Spanish is forced, it's not natural anymore. Sometimes I'm finding myself speaking to Juana in English [...] I don't like it. It feels like I'm moving away, away and away from Spanish. When I let myself go and I speak English sometimes, I always have the guilt factor and sometimes I retract and speak Spanish again.*

Unlike Alison, Bianca does not feel in control of her English. Her repetition of the phrase 'I find myself' suggests that her English self is emerging outside of her consciousness, forming a new part of herself. She is in a state of flux, floating 'away' from Spanish. English starts to suppress Spanish as she begins to find herself 'thinking' as well as speaking in the language. Speaking English is an expression of her changed cognitive state, wherein she processes more in English. Her Spanish self is no longer 'natural' but feels 'forced' when talking to her children because it can no longer adequately express her thoughts. Unlike Alison, Bianca resists this change to English – 'I don't like it' – because she remains emotionally tied to her Spanish self. The cognitive and emotional divergence, created by her transition, provokes a dilemma where speaking English is a release – 'I let myself go' – yet remains emotionally problematic. This dichotomy shapes her language use so that just as she starts to enjoy speaking English, she is silenced by 'the guilt factor', her emotional commitment to her Spanish.

### **Coping with change in the social arena**

As family life became dominated by English, participants' ability to cope was mediated by the strategies they used to manage the impact of change on their self-continuity. These became particularly important when managing changes in the social context when the challenges to self became acute.

Alison described two selves, English and Spanish. On returning from a visit to Spain, she explained a process of switching between the two:

*I've just changed the chip and I'm in my Spanish chip and when I come back I've got to turn [...] to completely switch back to English again, so it's not just the language, it's the whole thing [...] it's a part of me that, as I say, it's 50-50, I've got to share and it's difficult sometimes, it's a bit upsetting.*

Alison's ability to switch between two worlds is helped by her two selves being distinct, represented as computer chips. This detached perception of mental state helps her cope with the emotional transition of changing worlds that is particularly painful when returning from Spain. As she asserts, the challenge is 'not just the language' but the 'whole' experience, where her propensity to switch languages becomes inseparable from, and guided by, her emotional response to the change in social context. It may be that leaving Spain is a reminder of what she has personally compromised by accepting a relationship with her children based predominantly in English. We begin to appreciate that for Alison, this is no easy mastery of a divided English and Spanish self, but a 'difficult' process where she feels obliged, time after time, to 'share' her self equitably between Spanish and English worlds.

It was when speaking to other Spaniards that Bianca's doubts about her own language emerged into consciousness:

*I notice I'm not so good. They must be thinking, 'What's she saying? What's she on about?' I sound like a foreign English person, I don't sound properly in Spanish. I'm in this mix that I'm not good at any languages, so getting bad at Spanish and I'm not great at English so I feel like a mongrel now, I'm a mixture.*

Bianca's ethnicity is threatened because she feels unable to communicate naturally with Spanish people. This causes feelings of alienation and questions the authenticity of her Spanish identification with that social group. Bianca is unable to find strategies to cope with this self-challenge because the root of its power is, at least in part, her inability to reassert her Spanish authenticity through language. It may be that thinking and speaking more in English with her children has precipitated uncertainty over the authenticity of her mother tongue.

Bianca's expression that she is now 'in this mix' symbolises her perception that her identity is being diluted. She feels compromised but, unlike Alison, her Spanish and English selves cannot be coherently distinct because she feels that neither belongs to her. This leads her to 'feel like a mongrel', a vivid description that demonstrates a pervasive negative sense of self which has little value or belonging.

### **Discussion**

The participants in this study demonstrate a process of identity negotiation and change that arose out of linguistic relationship with their children. Pivotal to this was a desire to be a 'natural' mother, a meaning that was fulfilled when speaking their heritage language to their child. On becoming mothers, their Spanish self was rejuvenated creating a co-dependency between their ethnic identity and relational role. The need to establish a relational and linguistic context that could affirm their Spanish mother role drove their efforts to transfer language, a process that proved a daily struggle and could escalate into conflict. Those participants whose children persisted in speaking English found that they also lapsed into it, eliciting a sense of inauthenticity and feelings of failure. As their English-language interactions increased, these participants became aware of an evolving English self that supported their role as a mother, but posed a threat to a coherent self-concept.

The participants illustrate the significance of language in constructing and negotiating different roles and identities within the family, to maintain a coherent sense of self in a changing relational and social context. The significance of language lies in the way it contributes meanings to their identity structure, in particular, during major transition.

Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) argues that the social roles people adopt add meanings to their identity through social interactions. It suggests that when an identity is salient, behavioural choices are likely to be made in accordance with the expectations

attached to it. In this study, the 'natural' meanings attached to the mother role were fulfilled by participants' speaking their native language to their children. Their rejuvenated Spanish self imbued their relational role with intimacy, authenticity and belonging: identity needs that also satisfied the perceived meanings associated with their maternal role (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). By repeatedly enacting the role of the Spanish-speaking mother, these self-aspects became integrated by their mutual reinforcement of meaning. Speaking Spanish to their babies evoked nostalgic childhood memories, supporting continuity between past and future roles and relationships (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge, & Arndt, 2008).

For migrants, the mother tongue prompts a discourse of emotional primacy that is perceived as the natural choice for expressing feelings and is the language that evokes the highest arousal during interaction (Pavlenko, 2004). In the present study, the intimacy aroused by speaking Spanish with their child fostered feelings of relatedness and belonging. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Yet the mother tongue is not synonymous with emotionality and the findings suggest that its true significance lies in realising a desired self-concept. One participant's mother tongue was incompatible with her perception of her mother role and precluded its use but, although her alternative language could not elicit intimacy instantly, over time it was acquired by directing her interactions to create it.

Language transmission in interethnic families is commonly perceived as carrying significant aspects of migrants' cultural identity to future generations. The findings in the present study revealed a new vantage point, from where language transfer also serves participants' desire to have relational ethnicity recognised and maintained through their linguistic relationship with their children. Heritage language was a fundamental resource that, once transferred to children, could provide a means to affirm ethnicity by symbolising a shared in-group with the child.

The importance of heritage language in affirming the participants' identity was bi-dimensional, bringing both belonging and distinctiveness (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Speaking Spanish symbolised a shared filial ethnicity suggestive of language's function as an authenticity marker that facilitates feelings of in-group relatedness and belonging (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). This process, widely evidenced in intragroup contexts, affirmed the participants' relatedness with their children, suggesting the function of intragroup dynamics within parental relationships to foster feelings of closeness (Harwood et al., 2006).

For some participants, self-affirmation was also achieved by demonstrating their distinct ethnic identity from the English majority. The use of language to differentiate boundaries between social groups is well established. In particular, when group identity is uncertain, individuals will assert personal distinctiveness by differentiating them from the out-group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Distinctiveness needs also arise in families, where the ability of relationship dyads to affirm and recognise individuality and difference mediates individual identity formation (Barber & Buehler, 1996). The present study findings suggest that distinctiveness needs motivate language use in parental relationships where a mother's ethnicity risks being overlooked by her English-born child. Equally, the analysis suggests that children also used language to emphasise their Englishness and delineate their ethnic difference from their Spanish mother. Interestingly, this dynamic was only prominent in families where the father was from the host culture, indicating how the father's ethnicity may mediate the mother's linguistic relationship with her child.

Intergenerational conflict in interethnic families is commonly attributed to struggles over language transfer and is associated with effort and psychological stress (Okita, 2002; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Though the present study demonstrates similar struggles, it also highlights the mediating effects of identity non-verification on relationship tension and language deadlock. Consistent non-verifying feedback, from self and others, particularly

when individuals are highly committed to an identity, induces negative emotion that can diminish relationship quality and lead to the demise of the verification context (Burke & Stets, 2009). Though it is well recognised that heritage and host language use in social groups mediates individuals' ethnicity verification, its significance in interethnic families and its associated effects on relationship quality is far less understood. The findings of this study support emerging evidence that, in interethnic families, communicatively recognising and affirming the divergent ethnicities of members is an important aspect of relationship quality and an individual's psychological well-being (Soliz et al., 2009).

An evolving English self was perceived, arising out of increased English-language interactions. Extensive evidence indicates that greater use of, and self-confidence in, a language is concurrent with a strong identification with that linguistic group (Noels & Clément, 1996; Yip, 2005). It is also widely evidenced that heritage language transfer supports children's identifications with their parents' heritage culture (Guardado, 2010; Mu, 2015; Noro, 2009). The present study findings suggest that changes in parents' identifications to the host culture are also related to their experience of language use with their children.

Speaking English to their children, at times elicited feelings of failure over lapsed goals and a loss of authenticity, findings that are emphasised by other emerging evidence (Tyrrell et al., 2014). For participants who persisted in English, these emotional and identity challenges may have eroded their resistance to change. The emergent English self, though supporting English-language interactions and a closer maternal relationship, initiated a depletion of ethnicity, precipitating threats to authenticity and belonging (Breakwell, 1986).

When multilingual migrants struggle to integrate dual ethnic identifications, they adopt strategies to sustain self-coherence. Participants who viewed their English and Spanish selves as compartmentalised avoided negative feelings while those who saw them as blended felt neither was legitimate (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In intergroup contexts, distinctiveness is



reinforced through language use as a strategy to divert threat. Yet in this study, the pressure of the Spanish social context initiated an assault on one participant's self-esteem because she could no longer perceive herself as authentically Spanish. This highlights how language use in interethnic parental relationships and its associated impact on individual ethnicity can impact on the ability of migrants to relate to, and communicate with, their heritage country.

## **Conclusion**

The study findings bring a new perspective to the language transmission literature showing that language transfer can serve a mother's desire to maintain her ethnic identity by creating a shared in-group with her child. While the wider literature emphasises the significance of heritage proficiency among second generation children for a positive bicultural identity, this study emphasises the impact of language transfer on maternal identity. The participants' struggle to speak their heritage language with their children suggests a desire to maintain ethnicity but also to establish a role that is consistent with their perception of 'natural' motherhood. The findings indicate that the language dynamics associated with identity processes in social groups also manifest in mother-child dyads. This has significant implications for relationship quality and psychological well-being.

A process of identity negotiation emerges from the analysis, where those unable to sustain parental interactions in Spanish experience an increasing English self that supports a closer maternal relationship but also precipitates a depletion in individual ethnicity. This suggests a co-dependence between individuals' ethnic identity and relational roles that in interethnic contexts can prove mutually supportive or detrimental to each other. Moreover, it highlights language use as a key mediator of this relationship in interethnic family contexts.

In support of validity, the study was performed in accordance with the criteria set out in Smith (2011) including a transparent account of the method and sufficient sampling from

the data to show density of evidence for each theme. The claims made in this study are not generalisable because of the wide range of complex factors in any individual's social and relational contexts. Yet the insights provided offer possible implications for the way in which mother-child relationships in interethnic families and their language use are perceived and managed. Findings of relational conflict and feelings of failure suggest a need to help parents formulate realistic expectations about their children's language use and identity development. Access to information about the typical development of second-generation children in English cultures – for example, that starting mainstream school tends to be associated with increased English use at home – might help parents see their children's English use as normal (Donghui & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009).

Education for parents could also consider the present study's findings highlighting the negative impact of children's English use on mothers' sense of ethnicity and filial intimacy. Parents could be taught to perceive their children's changing language use as reflective of adaptation and multicultural identification, and information provided to illustrate that the shifting language use of second-generation children often reflects their efforts to negotiate the emergence of multiple identifications with host and heritage cultures rather than indicating a rejection of heritage ties (Tyrrell et al., 2014). It is understandable that parents might struggle to appreciate this, given that the dynamic is markedly different to their own use of heritage language at home to signal Spanish identity in an English environment. Moreover, parents might benefit from learning that the development of multilingualism among second-generation children is evidenced to promote positive cognitive outcomes (Barac & Bialystok, 2012).

The data indicates that identity threat was particularly challenging for participants with partners from the host culture who felt marginalised by dominant use of English at home. Rather than viewing language transmission as the only way to sustain Spanish identity,

these parents might benefit from strategies that help them to maintain their ethnic identity. For example, diverse approaches are used by interethnic couples to negotiate ethnic differences; some attempt to assimilate to host culture or integrate aspects from both cultures, while others seek to maintain ethnicity by immersing themselves in the values, customs and food of the heritage culture (Crippen & Brew, 2013). By gaining an appreciation of the wide-ranging strategies used to negotiate cultural affiliation and difference, parents would be better equipped to adapt to change in their own lives. Social support from in-group members can also provide an alternative environment to express their ethnicity (Gaudet & Clement, 2009).

Parents should also be aware of the influence of communicative style on language outcomes. For example, evidence indicates that the promotion of relational warmth and autonomy during parental interactions promotes language learning and might promote more positive relationships (Guardado & Becker, 2014). This study indicates the potential necessity of communicatively respecting and recognising ethnic diversity between family individuals while also establishing strategies to maintain a sense of family membership within individual relationships and roles. Further research is required to investigate the relationship between language use and parental identity in different family dyads and cultural groups.

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## Tables

**Table 1: Table of master themes with sub-themes**

<p><b>The 'natural' Spanish mother surfaces</b></p> <p>Ethnicity rejuvenated by offspring</p> <p>‘Mother tongue’ expresses ‘natural’ maternal self</p> <p>Relational intimacy through native language</p> <p><b>The need for affirmation shapes language goals</b></p> <p>Passing on heritage through language</p> <p>Language as means of asserting ethnic difference</p> <p>Speaking mother’s language represents shared ethnicity</p> <p><b>Multilingual goals are a constant struggle</b></p> <p>Self-conscious effort</p> <p>Relational tension over child’s choice of English with mother</p> <p><b>Feelings of failure and threat to authenticity</b></p> <p>Children’s resistance of shared language</p> <p>Feelings of failure over lost language goals</p> <p>Speaking English (with children) inspires feelings of inauthenticity</p> <p><b>The mother's evolving self</b></p> <p>Evolving English self</p> <p><b>Coping with change in the social arena</b></p> <p>Division of self</p> <p>Challenge to self in the social context</p>
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