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Language, responsibility, and agency: How UK's immigrant-background young adults navigate linguistic heritage

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of agency and responsibility in navigating linguistic heritage among immigrant-background young adults (18–29 years old) in the UK. Drawing on Judith Butler's theorisation, it provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with and respond to the burdening aspects of heritage language maintenance within the complex context of globalised power structures and privileged dynamics. The research employs a qualitative approach, integrating journal entries, interview transcripts, and co-analysis to elucidate participants' experiences. Through grounded theory development, the study identifies key themes such as: negotiating responsibility across temporalities; the sense of guilt, shame and indebtedness embedded in the process of language maintenance; and finding agency through renarration. The paper contributes to geographical thought on migration and language by going beyond discussions of family language policy and proficiencies and drawing attention to the multifaceted implications of navigating linguistic heritage within immigrant families and monolingual Britain across the instabilities of social and temporal relations and power-laden positionings. It also highlights the repertoires of narrative and interrelational approaches to reframing heritage that immigrant-background young adults may access as they formulate their identities with and against language expectations, norms, proficiencies and hegemonies.

KEYWORDS
agency, Butler, grounded theory, heritage language, responsibility, UK

1 | LINGUISTIC HERITAGE, RESPONSIBILITY AND MIGRATION

Recent decades have seen significant changes in Britain's ethnocultural landscape, driven by increased migrant mobility from EU expansion, refugee movements and globalised markets (ONS, 2022b). This demographic shift has led to a diversification of the country's linguistic makeup, with the percentage of multi-person households reporting using a non-English main language rising from 7.7 in 2011 to 8.9 in 2021, and the proportion of children and young people in England speaking languages other than English at home increasing from 14.6% to 19.3% in the same period (ONS, 2022c;

Teravainen-Goff et al., 2021). Language plays a crucial role in place-making, identity formation, and signalling belonging or exclusion within social geographies. Beyond mere communication, language becomes a marker of difference. In settings where monolingual norms prevail, speaking a language other than English or being perceived as a non-English speaker can lead to discrimination, policy implications and media (mis)representation (Badwan, 2021). As the country experiences a resurgence of populist movements and anti-migration sentiments, it also sees England and Wales attributing over a quarter of all life births to non-UK-born mothers in 2021 (ONS, 2022a), a marked increase from 15% in the 1990s when those currently in their young adulthood—a life period at the centre of this paper—were born (ONS, 2019). This paper critically examines how immigrant-background young adults navigate their linguistic heritage and exercise agency in shaping their social and cultural lives amid the evolving linguistic and discursive climate in the UK. While acknowledging the term 'heritage language' as contested (Blackledge et al., 2008), I use it here in its fundamental sense: an inherited, often unchosen condition of one's life history.

The interplay of language and migration has been a fertile ground for academic inquiry, yet traditional approaches and empirical outputs often overlook the nuanced, relational nature of linguistic experiences. Rosa (2019) challenges this oversight, linking language to race and governance, thereby exposing the colonial roots and power structures. Building on Rosa's insights, Badwan (2021) underscores the historical processes that are intricately woven into the fabric of society, shaping language perceptions and valuation in the globalised world. As Hall (1997) discusses, the past sets limits on cultural possibilities and imposes significant weight on cultural identification and individual agency. These historical imprints, often obscured by their contextual nature, are pivotal in shaping normative thinking about language across societies. Where Rosa (2019) seeks to denaturalise the race–language nexus, this research extends the critique by contextualising linguistic heritage within the social, spatial and temporal aspects of individuals' realities, interrogating the role of privilege in experiences of heritage languages. Despite extensive studies on family language policies (e.g., Curdt-Christiansen & Morgia, 2018; Gruszczyńska-Thompson, 2019), less is understood about how the efforts to maintain heritage languages in families and the associated sense of responsibility for linguistic heritage are agentically navigated by immigrant-background young adults. In line with the sociolinguistics of globalisation, this paper engages with contemporary paradigms that recognise the complexity and fluidity of linguistic identities in an era of heightened mobility (Blommaert, 2010). By positing linguistic heritage as a dynamic component of young adults' reality and self-concept, this paper contributes to the evolving discourse on migration and language within geographical scholarship.

Existing research on young adults' experiences of heritage language in predominantly English-speaking contexts often suggests their positive attitudes towards navigating multiple linguistic settings, portraying it as an opportunity to get 'the best of both worlds' (Hosany, 2016; Jeon, 2020). This paper challenges such perceptions by framing heritage language as a responsibility. While researchers in sociolinguistics and education have examined the pressures of navigating linguistic expectations in various sociocultural contexts (Badwan, 2021) and the distribution of responsibility—between parents and schools—for heritage language education (Weekly, 2020), little attention has been paid to the lived manifestations of navigating responsibility for one's linguistic heritage, language use and proficiency amongst young adults from immigrant backgrounds. Snyder-Frey (2013), to the best of my knowledge, is the only researcher to explore this through her work on Hawaiian-language learners and the concept of *kuleana*, which in Hawaiian culture denotes a profound responsibility. Interestingly, in contrast to the results of my research, the concept of *kuleana* is free of Western connotations of responsibility as a *burden*, which prominently emerged in my discussions with British-born immigrant-background young adults living in the UK. In their recent paper on the meanings attached to intergenerational language shift in migrant families in Belgium, Verhaeghe et al. (2022) underscore the need for further research into the burden of individualised responsibility for both learning the majority language and maintaining heritage language carried by the 'second generation'. A gap addressed by this research.

Following an outline of the theoretical framework and the qualitative methodology employed, the paper will discuss the concept of responsibility for linguistic heritage and acknowledge the potential burdens associated with heritage language maintenance and non-maintenance within the context of social relations, temporality and power imbalances. The evidence presented highlights the often painful struggle with the unchosen conditions of one's life and the different aspects of participants' reflections that lead them to feeling responsible for their linguistic heritage and guilty for certain ways in which they are compelled to engage or disengage with it. The paper contributes to scholarship in geography and sociolinguistics by identifying—without typologising—the various sources of and responses to the sense of responsibility linked to 'inheriting' a language, such as *guilt*, *shame*, *debt* and *sense of duty*. It makes further original contributions by applying Judith Butler's (2005) theory of responsibility and agency as outlined in *Giving an account of oneself* to unpack the diverse manifestations of agency exhibited by immigrant-background young adults as they navigate linguistic heritage

within monolingual Britain. This, however, is discussed with emphasis on the limited power of individual agency in the face of linguistic ideologies rooted in colonialism and white supremacy that illegitimise many heritage languages spoken in the UK (Welply, 2023a).

2 | THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY AND AGENCY

Theories of agency and responsibility grapple with the complexities of cultural heritage and historical accountability, recognising their relational nature shaped in the interstices of social interactions, temporal engagements and spatial arrangements. Cultural boundaries, as Benhabib (2002) describes, are contested and fragile, influenced by relations, privileges and absences. Despite the fluidity inherent in cultural boundaries, their reshaping and navigation are not arbitrary or ungoverned. Massey (2004) critiques the hegemonic geography of care in Western societies, questioning the assumed higher sense of moral obligation towards proximity (for example, 'home') versus interconnectedness (that is, loyalties formed across territories and temporalities). This perspective resonates with some of this study's participants challenging the notion of the closest family as the locus of oppressive responsibility. Cultural heritage, including heritage languages, often provides ontological security for minorities, however, the construction of heritage and social memory can selectively emphasise certain aspects while sidelining others (Hall, 1999). This points to heritage's malleability and individuals' agency in shaping which aspects of culture are maintained. In examining the narratives of embracing and reconciling linguistic heritage, Butler's (2005) theory of responsibility and agency emerges as insightful, emphasising how responsibility and agency originate from one's emergence into the unchosen (heritage) and pointing to their relational, contextual and ambiguous constitution. This paper posits that individuals' emergence into specific historicities and temporalities creates an interesting, yet difficult-to-navigate, context for cultivating responsibility and agency within subjects whose origins can never be fully accounted for, who, nonetheless, are burdened with the obligation to respond *well* and take responsibility. Despite linguistic constraints, individuals, I argue, can exert and retain agency in reshaping their positionalities within discourse, challenging deterministic notions of subject constitution and language maintenance.

Agency encompasses the capacity for independent and willed action within societal, discursive and cognitive frameworks. This paper first explores how agency can be exerted by introducing difference into the continual reiteration of social norms, identifying gaps in citationality as potential loci of agency, where norms are disrupted, reconstituted and rearticulated. As Butler (1997, p. 18) proposes:

> This vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come [represents the] reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency [where p]ower rearticulated is 're'-articulated in the sense of already done and 're'-articulated in the sense of done over, done again, done anew.

Despite systemic marginalisation finding stability within discourse, it also offers opportunities for agency to inaugurate each time power is challenged and done over. This task of rearticulation, however, occurs under the conditions of responsibility for the other and the relations built under persisting discourse, urging one to engage with power as it has been articulated so far; as if it were already done. Accessing this theoretical agency proves difficult for those oppressed and racialised through histories (Anthias, 2001). As Davis (1991, p. 52) argues, social dualisms intersect with histories and geographies of power, limiting access to an agentic position for individuals situated on the negative side of binaries, such as 'black/white, child/adult, mad/sane', foreigner/native, bearer of an English-sounding name/bearer of a non-English-sounding name and so forth. Davis (1991) also emphasises the link between authorship and authority, problematising a social world where speaking, being heard and articulating meaning are available to those already in power. Expectations surrounding linguistic heritage maintenance are deeply ingrained in social functioning, influenced by factors like immigration policy, institutional practices, or everyday interactions.

Butler (2005, p. 42) recognises discourse's oppressive nature and proposes an alternative avenue for exercising agency, one rooted in individuals' 'willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgement itself'. For Butler, the subject's positioning within the interplay of intersubjectivity and the continuous incompleteness of the self enables individuals to embrace narrative capacity and reimagine themselves beyond culturally imposed constraints. Therefore, in this paper, the concept of agency notes that counterforce can co-exist with power, authority and privilege. Nonetheless, while subaltern agency can potentially disrupt hegemonic forms, navigating this terrain proves challenging for individuals at the intersection of multiple axes of disadvantage (Davis, 1991). Building upon established theories of

responsibility and agency, particularly within Butler's framework, this study delves into the process of navigating linguistic heritage amid migration and mobility. It recognises the weight of heritage languages and examines reactions to responsibility, spanning from guilt and shame to feeling indebted or living with a sense of duty. By engaging with narratives and contextualising emotional responses, this research offers an original perspective on the temporal extension of responsibility for linguistic heritage and its manifestation both as a burden and a chance for empowerment.

3 | METHODS

The presented evidence is part of a broader study of UK's immigrant-background young adults—from a range of ethnic and economic backgrounds—and their relationship with parental cultural heritage and self-identifications. In this research, 'immigrant-background' describes individuals whose parents experienced immigration, but who themselves were born, grew up and live in their parents' host country, the UK. I focus, here, on young adults in response to the growing literature that describes identity development as one of the key development tasks during young adulthood (Arnett, 2014). Participant recruitment for this project took place between March and December 2020 via various online channels, such as social media and mailing lists. I did not direct my recruitment efforts to groups that claim to have common ethnicity or nationality characteristics (e.g., complementary schools, community media outlets), to avoid implying interest in specific iterations of cultural heritage or ways of navigating it. While the study was joined by a total of 15 participants and all of these accounts were influential to the arguments presented here, in this paper, I chose to focus on a subset of individuals to facilitate an in-depth exploration of how young adults narrate their specific realities and navigate linguistic heritages. Table 1 displays participant profiles (self-definitions) captured through an open-ended questionnaire at the end of their project engagement.

Each participant individually wrote or audio-recorded journal entries on five topics: belonging, culture, language, family relations and adulthood, totalling an average of 3000 words per participant. They were invited to account for these themes in ways appropriate to them without a specific focus prescribed by the researcher. From these entries, interview questions tailored to each participant's story were formulated. The subsequent one-hour interviews were transcribed and subjected to a collaborative analysis process, termed 'co-analysis', inspired by narrative analysis (Arvay, 2003) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). This involved participants reviewing their interviews, identifying omissions, and verifying their expressions of beliefs, attitudes, emotions and experiences. Meanwhile, my analysis included action coding, identifying narrative inconsistencies, and noting vocal elements for further development. Subsequently, co-analysis meetings were held to compare and discuss analyses. This multimethod approach facilitated diverse expression modes, promoted narrative ownership and agency, and generated nuanced accounts of participants' experiences over time. The methodology was thoughtfully selected to engage with the fluid and contingent nature of 'culture', 'heritage' and 'self-identification', fostering not only renarration but also reflection on the constraints of available narrative repertoires amid the enduring influence of politics, communities, histories and cultural 'norms'. The aim was not merely data collection, but also the development of a methodology conducive to exploring cultural heritage as an evolving dialogue.

The collected textual data, encompassing journal entries and interview transcripts with co-analysis annotations, underwent further coding within ATLAS.ti, guided by grounded theory development tools (incident with incident coding, memo-writing and constant comparison method). This phase aimed to discern the underlying processes inherent in the phenomenon of navigating heritage, drawing insights from multiple narratives and exploring parallels across participants' experiences, diverging from the singular account focus of co-analysis. Codes and narrative excerpts were juxtaposed in memos, leading to the emergence of dense theoretical categories rooted in participants' narratives. Key themes, such as cultural heritage as a manifestation of responsibility and debt, and agency in heritage navigation, started to crystallise. It was during this stage that the pivotal role of responsibility and its nuanced manifestations within the process of navigating languages became apparent. This conceptualisation underscores the unique contributions of this study to the broader discourse. As I delved into the theoretical literature, Judith Butler's works emerged as salient references; it is essential, however, to clarify that this engagement with Butler evolved organically within the rich tapestry of participants' lived experiences in a symbiotic relationship between theory and data. In essence, this grounded theory study expands upon Butler's framework by exploring the multifaceted nature of responsibility, particularly as it pertains to language, and by highlighting the pivotal role of agency in navigating cultural and linguistic heritage.

TABLE 1 Profiles of participants as recorded in 2020 in response to an open-ended questionnaire. [Correction added on 25 April 2024 after first online publication: Details of participant 'Adam' have been added in this version.]

	Pseudonym and gender	Age	Parents' country of origin and first language	Race/ethnicity	Nationality	Citizenship	Education level (highest achieved)	Participant's occupation	Parents' occupation
1	Laura (F)	27	Uganda, Luganda	Black African	British	British	Master's	Receptionist, job seeker	(Not disclosed)
2	Fia (F)	21	Kosovo, Albanian	White European	British Kosovar	British	Bachelor's	Postgraduate student	Both in managerial positions
3	Cam (F)	24	Vietnam, Vietnamese	Vietnamese	British	British	Bachelor's	Planning Assistant	Convenience store owners
4	Andras (M)	22	Hungary, Hungarian	White European	Hungarian, British	Hungarian, British	A-levels	Undergraduate student	Medical doctor and stay-at-home mum
5	Adam (M)	20	Germany, German	White	British German	British, German	A-levels	Undergraduate student	Medical doctor and teacher
6	Alea (F)	22	Pakistan, Urdu and Punjabi	Asian-Pakistani	British	British	Bachelor's	Postgraduate student, part-time job in retail	Housewife, shopkeeper

4 | LANGUAGE AS RESPONSIBILITY

Linguistic heritage can play several roles in immigrant-background young adults' lives, including, for instance, forming an obstacle in social interactions and personal growth, or serving as an anchor that grounds the individual—although never fully—within a certain cultural sphere. The part that emerged as most theoretically dense in my analysis was, however, accounting for heritage language through the lens of responsibility and attempting to ensure continuity of something—be it linguistic heritage, culture, or collective identity—that, in many cases, the participants did not see as a representation of their selves. While within sociolinguistics, accounting for the pressures of navigating linguistic expectations within different sociocultural contexts has often been discussed (Badwan, 2021), the broader exploration of the sense of responsibility for one's linguistic heritage, abilities and heritage language maintenance has been virtually absent. In this section, I deploy the ethics of responsibility within the context of social norms and the unchosen condition of one's origins to consider how linguistic heritage is constituted as a sense of responsibility under different guises and how the impacts of such a framing manifest in immigrant-background individuals' narratives and lives. Following Butlerian thought, I will move beyond concepts of ethical principles that are based on individuals' convictions and beliefs, instead embedding heritage languages and the sense of responsibility for it in the social, temporal and uneven everyday realities that young adults with migratory backgrounds come to navigate (Butler, 2005). Throughout, this section will problematise assumptions of universal benefits of linguistic heritage maintenance by acknowledging the consequences that using a language other than English in the UK may carry.

4.1 | Responsibility and social relations

Language can be a marker of belonging and a means of embracing and expressing fluid affiliations and social roles (Badwan, 2021). However, as it emerges within the realm of interaction with people, places and discourse, all of which shape it through their subjectivity, it is constituted within a chain of citationality of norms, hierarchies and structures that favour some—people and languages—while marginalising others. Within such a reality immigrant-background young adults often report feelings of guilt and shame as they attempt to manage the sense of responsibility and, often contradicting, familial and societal expectations when navigating linguistic heritage. Within school settings and peer interactions, where conformity to dominant linguistic norms is often enforced, immigrant-background youth frequently encounter instances of 'linguistic othering'—a process whereby drawing on their multilingual repertoires or using vocabulary considered outside of an 'inner circle' English variety is met with alienation and scrutiny (Page, 2023). Laura, for example, whose parents migrated to the UK from Uganda, recalls moments of embarrassment when her use of Luganda inadvertently seeped into conversations with her English-speaking peers. She revealed she struggled to 'blend in' and wished 'to be known purely as British' in such situations. Similarly, Fia, whose parents are Kosovar and speak Albanian at home,[1] recounts feeling singled out for using English words in a manner deemed unconventional by her peers. These instances of being labelled as 'other' because of their linguistic background were not isolated occurrences, as both reported, but rather a reiterated experience of being different, that left Laura and Fia with, what they described as, the 'knock-on effects' and heightened levels of self-consciousness. The school environment, intended as a site of learning and socialisation, often becomes a battleground where immigrant-background youth navigate between asserting their linguistic repertoires and conforming to hegemonic linguistic standards (Welply, 2023a). These narratives underscore the inherent tension between the desire to belong and the imperative and responsibility to uphold familial and cultural traditions and point to the feelings of shame associated with occupying this unstable terrain.

The continual citationality of social norms and expectations takes place within families, too. Laura explained how she tries to navigate her relationship with linguistic heritage and the sense of responsibility for performing certain aspects of that heritage:

> I completely agree with those communities that push their children to learn, whether they're going to use the language or not. I think you should know it because it's like a part is lost. Let's say, if I marry someone who isn't Ugandan, then how are my kids gonna know Luganda?

This account, however, as Laura shared elsewhere, was constructed alongside her experiences of being frequently encouraged—or even pressured and implicated as 'responsible'—by her grandmother to learn Luganda. And, while she has received minimal help from her family, it is her who is left with the feeling of guilt and unfulfilled expectations, which she made

apparent when reflecting on her limited ability to communicate in Luganda ('It's a shame, I'm not happy about this. I feel dumb that I can understand but not speak'). This reflects Manosuthikit's (2018, p. 157) assertion—also echoed in Verhaeghe et al.'s (2022) empirical research—that the younger generation (i.e., children of immigrants) 'is branded as culprits for language shift or loss'. In the participants' narrative, language is framed as both deeply cultural and political. As a cultural practice, it is a carrier of ancestral past and a connector to specific—although not stable—cultural background. Many of my participants also perceive it as an identity-forming element, mostly seeing it as a missing link, as Laura suggested before ('a part is lost'), that if acquired would help them feel more grounded in their identification with their cultural 'origins'. Fia echoes this sentiment here:

> I feel like I haven't tried hard enough to retain this part of my identity, I haven't practised the language enough to be able to be Kosovar when I go to Kosovo and speak with my Kosovar relatives. It's a shame, I am ashamed ... Sometimes I wish that my command of the language was better to balance out the idea that my parents didn't enforce identity upon me, they didn't force me to be Kosovar, because they wanted to allow me to just grow the way I wanted to grow.

And, while elsewhere in her account she emphasises that no one should be blamed for her poor command of Albanian—explaining that she neither blames her parents nor herself—she shares an undeniable admission of guilt and shame that might be arising from a sense of responsibility for the language as a cultural resource. I argue that, in both Laura's and Fia's cases, this responsibility for language results from interactions within a problematic sociopolitical context that essentialises immigrant-background individuals as carriers of unified cultural identity and as bilinguals. A context that, on the one hand, inferiorises you for your linguistic heritage, on the other, expects you to perceive it as a 'gift' (Piller & Gerber, 2021) and hold onto it as part of your identity (Blackledge et al., 2008). A context that pushes them not only to associate with specific cultures or collectivities, but also to associate with them in specific ways that meet society's expectations; you should know your heritage language, otherwise you miss out on being bilingual; on the other hand, you should not use your (non-Western) heritage language in public spaces, or you will be perceived as an 'immigrant' and 'non-British'.

Badwan (2021) argues that linguistic expectations faced by those occupying unprivileged social positionings can diminish individuals' sense of cultural and linguistic identity. In this paper, I expand on this argument by intersecting such societal expectations relating to language that minoritised populations face with the sense of responsibility for the inherited linguistic background and its role in identity formation that they might internalise and struggle to reconcile within a hostile, monolingual environment of the UK. If the conditions of emergence are never fully known, making the subjects unable to give a complete account of themselves, perhaps that 'part' that Laura does not want to lose has never been there in the form that she imagines and her family and society expect. This is not to say that there is no merit in maintaining linguistic heritage, but perhaps—especially in those instances where it produces more guilt and shame than it allows for an exploration of one's self—there is space for awareness of how this responsibility for maintaining something that you cannot fully know was born within social relations and as such is open to change. As evidenced through Laura's and Fia's narrative accounts, the production of the sense of responsibility emerges as an ongoing, citational event that, while dynamic, occurs within a deeply rooted network of expectations, privileges and historicities that favour stable and homogenous perceptions of culture and language (Butler, 2005). Within such a social setting, immigrant-background individuals can struggle to find contentment in their relationship with linguistic heritage and feel ashamed and responsible for not managing to meet the predetermined visions of themselves that society and ethnic communities hold them against. Nonetheless, as I will proceed to argue, even amid such unfavourable conditions, there are agentic ways that may be drawn upon to challenge the chain of citationality of social norms and reframe the relationships with heritage language through intersubjectivity.

4.2 | Responsibility and temporality

The sense of responsibility for heritage languages can arise across different temporalities and manifest in feelings of regret, indebtedness and carrying a sense of duty. Cam, of Vietnamese heritage, provides an effective example of how regret can be produced retrospectively in reflection on what cannot be undone (*past*):

> Adulthood has made me realise how stupid I was to lose my connection with my Vietnamese background. I've made a promise to myself to ensure that my future children[2] learn the language and understand their

background more than I ever did as a kid. I am now making up for the lost time by trying to learn how to recreate my mum's classic Vietnamese foods and have been attempting to speak Vietnamese more to my parents. I talk more openly about my culture to my friends too, especially now that Vietnamese cuisine has become a lot more mainstream.

With age, Cam acknowledges how her narrative capacity and sense of awareness have changed to bring feelings of regret into the forefront of her account. She not only tries to operate with more recognition for her cultural heritage at present, but also shapes her present actions with the intention of making up for losing a connection with her cultural background, exemplifying perhaps feelings of indebtedness towards the Vietnamese culture. This, interestingly, coincides with favourable shifts in discourse which seem to legitimise Cam's exploration of her cultural heritage, including language. In a contrasting way, Andras, of Hungarian heritage, suggests that a sense of responsibility can also be generated by the prospect of regret (*future*), as he reflects on his responsibility towards language as a resource and a calling to preserve it for the next generations:

> I definitely wish to pass on the Hungarian language to my children. It is in some ways a dying tongue, and as a native speaker, I feel it's my duty to pass it on to the future generation ... Though my grasp of the language is weaker than my parents', I believe I can still pass on enough for my child to be able to feel comfortable navigating Hungary; meeting relatives, making friends etc.

Andras considers himself a native speaker of Hungarian and his responsibility for the language is rooted more in a sense of duty, rather than guilt. He recognises his limited capacity to maintain linguistic heritage and likely takes on a more manageable level of responsibility for it compared with Cam, who wishes to do better than her parents did. These differences, as will be suggested in the next section, should be considered along discourses of race and structures of privilege to embed the task of language maintenance within the hierarchal linguistic landscape in the UK. These divergent narratives highlight the nuanced motivations behind individuals' sense of responsibility for heritage languages as experienced across time and influenced by personal experiences and cultural contexts.

The relationship with linguistic heritage can also become an ongoing negotiation of responsibility across temporalities, as Fia suggests:

> One area of thought where my cultural identity comes up again is when I ask myself, 'Am I gonna teach my kids Albanian?'. I can't speak Albanian, so it'd be ridiculous to hold myself to such an ideal. I'd probably teach them completely gobbledygook wrong language because my grammar is horrendous apparently, according to my mom. But then would my mom and dad want my kids, their grandkids, to know it ... All these different dynamics about how I'm gonna navigate my cultural identity in furthering my family and what sort of emotions I feel around that. Whether I'll feel guilty if my kids have English names and speak English and I have an English husband ... It's an open-ended question that I still don't know the answer to.

Fia's considerations show how immigrant-background individuals may apply the ethics of responsibility to their current actions and decisions to avoid the prospect of guilt. She finds herself facing the awareness of the unique conditions that she emerged into—different to her parents'—and the susceptibility to others that has been shaping her responsiveness and indebtedness towards heritage language and its maintenance (Butler, 2005). At the same time, she grapples with her inability to make plans with regard to heritage language and understand her responsibility towards it across dynamically evolving temporalities. Fia also spoke about the sense of guilt she carries for the unchosen conditions of her emergence and the sense of responsibility for knowing her 'mother tongue' which are rooted in traditions and expectations that predate her existence:

> I think being able to speak fluently in your mother tongue is one of the pillars, one of the main ways of honouring your cultural identity. And I think it has a lot to do with communication with your family. When I go [to Kosovo] and I struggle to articulate myself, I feel quite bad about that ... because that was the least I could do being a child who went to England and was raised there, away from my family. When I go back, the least I could do is be able to speak fully with them, and I haven't kept up my end of the bargain. That makes me a bit sad, but it is what it is. No one is to be blamed, no one needs to be blamed. I don't think it's anyone's fault.

Fia feels indebted to her family in Kosovo as if her birth away from her parents' country of origin was her first sin. She was born into susceptibility and a social context that predetermined her relationality and responsibility for something

she had no freedom to choose or control. While Butler (2005, p. 91) would argue, '[i]t is, in some ways, an outrage to be ethically responsible for one whom one does not choose', Fia is still obligated by virtue of her relationship to her family to use this 'unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other'. This kind of preontological responsibility is inescapable; the passive act of emergence brings the subject into being within a social realm that continues to make ethical demands on her.

In considering the experiences of responsibility across temporalities, a nuanced discussion emerges regarding the pressure versus opportunity inherent in navigating linguistic heritage. While the sense of responsibility remains constant, the connotations vary, ranging from fulfilling a duty to grappling with an innate debt that may feel insurmountable. These distinctions prompt a deeper exploration of privilege within the context of linguistic heritage navigation, as detailed below. Questions arise regarding who possesses greater access to certain stances in the process of heritage language maintenance. This includes the ability to receive recognition and validation for preserving and utilising one's linguistic heritage, as well as agency to wield and cultivate one's linguistic repertoire. Additionally, consideration needs to be given to identifying to whom this sense of responsibility feels empowering, akin to an invitation to steward a cultural asset, as opposed to burdensome, like a weighty obligation. By probing these dynamics, I will illuminate disparities in the experience of linguistic heritage navigation, shedding light on the interplay between privilege, agency and cultural responsibility within immigrant-background communities.

4.3 | Responsibility and privilege

The cultural, linguistic and racial privileges deeply ingrained in the relations of power within the UK's migration politics, educational policies and media reporting are also citationally reproduced in and through immigrant-background individuals' experiences of heritage language use. Adam, who self-identifies as a British German, shared his reflections on bilingualism:

> I feel incredibly lucky I grew up bilingual. It's given me a whole other worldview and enriched my life. To understand another culture, you must understand that language. Being able to speak German gives me a very strong connection to my heritage and my family ... Being bilingual means that I find the acquisition of other languages easier, as my brain has a larger language inventory. This has undoubtedly helped me in my life and my degree and has played a large part in getting me to where I am today.

Andras, of Hungarian heritage, shared a similar view:

> I've always been proud of speaking another language living in the UK. Especially in earlier years when most of my peers were only just starting to learn French, my knowledge of Hungarian was a bonus and something I would gladly brag about.

Adam's and Andras' level of appreciation for growing up bilingual was unparalleled by other participants, the majority of whom identified with ethnic and racial backgrounds other than white. This points to the complex interplay of linguistic heritage, race and discourse within the hierarchical ordering of language in the Western world (Rosa, 2019). Dina Mehmedbegovic (2017), for example, delineates the difference between what is perceived as a heritage language in the UK and what as a modern foreign language, outlining a system in which German is seen as 'higher status', whilst Urdu or Luganda might be designated lesser value. This is not to say that German speakers can always occupy a position of symbolic domination amongst foreign-language speakers in the UK's linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991). When reflecting on a lack of attachment to a country or nationality, Adam mentioned, 'I feel like most Germans don't feel like they're allowed to be proud of being German', suggesting that there might be discursive obstacles to his capitalising on his linguistic heritage, too. In Andras' case, while Hungarian is not a language taught in British schools, and as such is not legitimised through the education system, I speculate that, thanks to living in a white body and his parents' intention—though unrealised—for return migration to Hungary, he grew up with a sense of stability and pride in his identification as a Hungarian. He shared, 'What I believed quite strongly for a long time (until my teenage years) was that I was Hungarian through and through'. Andras also described his joy in sharing his cultural background with peers, something that was not available to Laura, for example, who, as mentioned earlier, wanted to blend in and be identified 'purely as British'.[3]

In this paper, I want to recognise how privilege can facilitate the maintenance of linguistic heritage and lessen the burdening sense of guilt and debt that many less privileged immigrant-background individuals might carry. I acknowledge how assumptions of 'deficit' and 'otherness' attached to users of languages other than English affect which linguistic practices are considered legitimate and which are not (Kroskrity, 2021). These assumptions, rooted in nationalist and imperialist ideologies, as well as racism and white supremacy, make those in racialised bodies more exposed to linguistic othering and marginalisation (De Costa, 2020). Alea, of Pakistani heritage, shared her view of bilingualism in the UK:

> When I was younger, even up until my late teenage years, I didn't like speaking Urdu in public. I guess it was for this recurring reason, just because it was weird, it was different, I wanted to fit in, I didn't want to stick out like a sore thumb. I thought it was embarrassing, so I would try to speak English wherever possible.

As the conversation continued, she mentioned that now, as a young adult, she 'embraces bilingualism' and feels more confident using Urdu in public. This shift, however, as will be discussed below, might not be related to any drastic changes within the broad ideological and social context. What seems to have changed is Alea's relationship—and agency within it—with her cultural heritage and her social positioning. Another aspect that likely enabled this agency was Alea's transition to university where she felt supported by her peers, was able to look at her family's practices from a more distant perspective, and started to attach her own meaning to culture, language and heritage.

5 | AGENCY

Agency viewed as subjects' ability to oppose social norms that oppress them, while possible, is extremely limited and challenging to establish within the confines of discourse and the specificities of social contexts one occupies. In this section, I will explore two avenues that immigrant-background individuals may traverse to establish an agentic stance, namely, through opposition and breaking the chain of citationality, and through renarration and the acknowledgement of one's unknown situation. The former means of exercising agency can be recognised in Cam's account of reclaiming her name amidst a common practice in the UK adopted by bearers of foreign-sounding names to choose new, 'westernised' or 'English-sounding' ones (Wykes, 2017):

> I have a full Vietnamese name (Mai Anh Cam Le) and, when I went to school, my mum gave me an English name (Lily) and I went with it for many years! However, it's not on my passport or birth certificate and I didn't go by it at home (I was called Anh Cam by my parents). It felt alien being called this by my friends growing up. When I started high school, I changed it to Cam, but not Anh Cam because I still felt this was too 'foreign/strange looking and sounding'. I think it is sad she gave me an English name, but this is quite common in Asian culture. Many of my cousins and my siblings also have 'English names' ... I think it's awful this has been normalised, because we don't want to stand out and want to 'westernise' our names so that we don't have to go through the whole ordeal of people butchering the pronunciation or looking uncomfortable when having to address us. I think a lot of the time, Asian people want to stay out of the way and just go with the motions to avoid any abuse or awkwardness.

Cam's inclination to 'stay out of the way' and adapt her linguistic heritage so it sits well with the dominant society's views of what names can sound like is an example of feeling 'responsibility for another'. In return, there is hope that through this act of buying into the social norms, one can avoid being constantly reminded of her otherness in the eyes of racism and hegemonic discourse (Wykes, 2017). By discontinuing the use of the English name, Cam attempts to create a gap in the chain of citationality and destabilise reiterated power by finding a middle ground between reclaiming her Vietnamese name and conforming with the social world that disadvantages her due to her linguistic background.

In other attempts to adopt a more agentic stance, immigrant-background young adults involved in this research did it through establishing themselves as narrative agents. As Butler (2005) proposes, the continuous incompleteness of the self within this ever-changing intersubjectivity and the need to self-identify to and through the other create space for freedom and agency. An agent self is a narrative self that acknowledges the limits of her knowledge and sees her unknown conditions of emergence as freeing from the bounds of interpellation and reinforced unified cultural identities and expectations. Below, using Laura's and Alea's accounts, I consider how through self-reflection young people of

immigrant backgrounds can navigate responsibilities related to linguistic heritage and find freedom in their ambiguous origins. Laura states:

> I have come to the conclusion that I neither truly belong to the UK nor Uganda. When I was younger this did bother me quite a bit, not having a sense of truly belonging to one specific place. However, as I've gotten older, I'm now embracing this aspect of me. I actually like not belonging to a particular place. This has enabled me to be open and identify with so many people from different backgrounds ... [L]ooking back to how I felt in high school in comparison to how I feel now I can say I am a lot surer and more confident in myself, my background and SURNAME [Laura's capitalised surname redacted].

With age, Laura has found more acceptance for the elements of her cultural upbringing which she acknowledges as inherited. She realised that she is unable to control certain parts of who and how she is and that it is not her role and within her power to change the social environment around her. However, Laura also recognises what she can influence. She notices shifts in how she feels about her cultural identity and her foreign-sounding surname and manages to exercise agency by exploring the fluid nature of identification. She finds some comfort in in-betweenness and establishes herself as a self-reflexive subject navigating her ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities within the limits of discourse. Her account points to a more affirmative notion of agency that, rather than through resistance, is produced creatively through subjectivity and new understandings of freedom (Magnus, 2006).

While often described by the participants as oppressive, especially when accounting for their relationships with parents and socialising in predominantly white British contexts, intersubjectivity and dependence were also viewed by some as agency enablers. Butler (2005, p. 63) notices:

> Something is being done with language when the account that I give begins: it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical. It may well seek to communicate a truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language.

Some of the participants shared how they reframed their personal notions of 'being different' through their interactions with others. For Alea, this was enabled through her transition to university:

> I stopped questioning my belonging so much, because when you go to university, you're exposed to so many different cultures and people coming from so many different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds, and it made me realise there is no one definition of being Scottish or British or anything. It's okay to be different, but it's okay to also sort of be Scottish. Even though I have slightly different values or beliefs, I can still call myself Scottish. I don't have to be white with blue eyes, blonde hair ... I started to feel a sense of belonging a bit more. I very much developed as a person, I became more independent and I still am.

Alea speaks about the sense of independence and freedom that she unlocked through developing relations with a more diverse social group. Interestingly, it not only helped her feel better navigating her cultural and linguistic heritage, but also helped her broaden her definition of what it means to be Scottish and reassured her of her membership in this group. As described earlier, with age, similarly to Laura, Alea gained more confidence in her cultural heritage, including her use of Urdu in public spaces. I argue that, rather than being related to noticeable changes in the discourse of people of immigrant background, people of colour, or those of Pakistani heritage in the UK, this shift was enabled by Alea's mobility between and within social contexts, agentic use of language for renarrating, and engagement with ambiguity through acknowledging the flawed nature of the essentialist social system that she comes to operate in. She redefines the meanings of 'Scottish' and 'British' and reclaims the language of the colonisers to inscribe herself in these re-articulated definitions (Welply, 2022a).

Butler's (2005) incorporation of the concepts of intersubjective responsibility and self-reflexive unaccountability into her theory of agency finds grounding in the participants' narratives which show that becoming agent does not have to mean separation from others but can be enabled through interaction. Accounts presented above, indeed, suggest that immigrant-background individuals, to an extent, can take charge of shaping their linguistic heritages, stories and value systems, and that their morality is not a mere symptom of social conditions and discourse. It can be redefined to generate more capacity and meaning with the linguistic repertoires that we wield. Nonetheless, this evidence of agentic reshaping

should not be misinterpreted as supportive of policies and views that responsibilise individuals by assigning the task of managing difference and diversity to them, nor does it suggest that the damaging and discriminatory structures governing subjectification and reiteration of social norms can be disregarded owing to individual agency.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I framed the exploration of immigrant-background young adults' experiences within the broader context of sociolinguistics and geographies of language, shedding light on the complexities of navigating heritage language amidst globalised power structures and privileged dynamics. Utilising Butler's theory of responsibility and agency as a theoretical lens, I provided a nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with and respond to the burdening aspects of heritage language maintenance. Through a critical examination of the different sources and responses to the sense of responsibility, including feelings of guilt, shame, debt and duty, I highlighted the multifaceted nature of heritage language maintenance within the social, normative and temporal contexts that immigrant-background individuals occupy. The paper showed how responsibility seen as responsiveness to the discourse, social norms, and the social setting that one interacts with can also be perceived as an invitation to an agentic response. A response that might (a) challenge the discursive patterns and break the chain of citationality of oppressive norms, or (b) be born of one's self-reflexive unaccountability; a place of realisation that one cannot fully account for oneself or change the conditions of one's origins and inheritance. I proposed that it can be within this space that immigrant-background young adults find agency through redefining themselves and renarrating their experiences as they embrace ambiguity. Ultimately, this study emphasises the often painful struggle inherent in confronting the unchosen conditions of one's life, particularly when faced with unfavourable discourse, offering an alternative understanding—to those proposed in extant literature—of upholding expansive linguistic repertoires upon migration.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data supporting the findings of this paper are not publicly shared to protect anonymity of the study participants. Anonymised fragments of the data might be available from the author upon reasonable request. No data will be shared without seeking further consent from the participants in question.

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ENDNOTES
[1] Fia's parents were proficient in English when they arrived in the UK. They predominantly spoke Albanian at home until Fia began pre-school, after which they gradually incorporated more English into their family conversations.

[2] The participants reflected on the prospect of becoming parents. They did not have children at the time of data collection.

[3] Although neither Andras nor Adam reflected on linguistic othering, this is not to suggest that those of European backgrounds have been universally spared. Around the time when both boys went to school, the media 'moral panic' surrounding the 2004 EU accession—that, in large part, was concerned with language—was likely still echoing through the education system (Welply, 2023b).

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