LANGUAGE SHIFT AND MAINTENANCE AMONG MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Dilafruz Mirzahamdamova,
Language Instructor, Kokand University, Uzbekistan
dilafruzmirzahamdamova1@gmail.com

MAQOLA HAQIDA	ANNOTATION
	Language shift and maintenance are central issues in sociolinguistics, particularly within migrant communities where heritage languages coexist with dominant national languages. This paper explores how immigrant families navigate the tension between preserving their native tongue and adapting to the linguistic demands of their host country. Drawing on existing sociolinguistic theories and case studies from diverse contexts, the research highlights the sociocultural, educational, and generational factors that influence language practices. The methodology combines a review of secondary literature with a qualitative case study of migrant families in multilingual contexts. Findings indicate that while younger generations are more prone to adopt the dominant language, family networks, community institutions, and cultural identity play crucial roles in heritage language retention. The paper concludes by stressing the need for policies and community initiatives that support bilingualism and prevent the erosion of minority languages.

Introduction. Language has always been more than a communication tool; it is a vital part of cultural identity, social belonging, and intergenerational continuity. For migrant families, the question of which language to use in everyday life is often complex. On the one hand, the dominant national language of the host country is crucial for integration, education, and economic opportunities. On the other hand, the heritage language represents familial roots, cultural traditions, and emotional connections to the country of origin. This tension often leads to phenomena of language shift and language maintenance, both of which are key concepts in sociolinguistics.

Language shift occurs when a community gradually abandons its heritage language in favor of the dominant language. Historical and contemporary studies suggest that this shift often takes place within two or three generations of migration[1]. The first generation typically maintains strong ties to the heritage language, but subsequent generations, especially children, adopt the dominant language more readily due to schooling, peer influence, and the need for social mobility. By the third generation, the heritage language often faces near extinction within the family context[2].

Conversely, language maintenance refers to efforts, whether conscious or unconscious, to preserve the heritage language despite external pressures. Maintenance strategies may include speaking the language at home, establishing community schools, religious practices, and organized cultural events. Such practices help reinforce the value of bilingualism and create opportunities for younger generations to remain connected to their linguistic heritage.

This paper investigates how immigrant families balance heritage language and dominant language practices in daily life. It seeks to answer two key questions: What factors drive language shift among migrant communities? And what strategies enable successful language maintenance? By exploring these questions, the study not only contributes to academic debates in sociolinguistics but also provides insights relevant for policymakers, educators, and community leaders.

Literature review. Research on language shift and maintenance has a long tradition in sociolinguistics. Joshua Fishman's seminal work emphasized that language loss in migrant communities is almost inevitable unless active steps are taken to sustain it. Fishman's theory of reversing language shift (RLS) provides a framework for understanding how minority languages can survive through institutional support, intergenerational transmission, and community mobilization.

Studies across North America, Europe, and Asia have confirmed the rapid pace of language shift. Portes and Rumbaut found that in the United States, the majority of children of immigrants achieve fluency in English by the second generation, while competence in the heritage language declines sharply[3]. Similar findings are observed in Australia, Canada, and Western Europe, where immigrant children prefer the dominant language to fit into the educational and social environment[4].

However, language maintenance is not absent. Research by Guardado showed that families who consciously create heritage-language environments at home—by telling stories, reading books, and encouraging conversations—achieve higher rates of bilingualism among children[5]. Community-based schools, religious institutions, and cultural associations also provide valuable platforms for sustaining minority languages[6]. For example, Saturday schools for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean communities in North America have proven successful in maintaining literacy in the heritage language.

Generational differences remain a central theme. The first generation of migrants often experiences linguistic insecurity and tends to transmit cultural pride through language. The second generation faces pressures to assimilate and often adopts the dominant language more readily. The third generation, unless exposed to structured maintenance efforts, typically loses meaningful proficiency in the heritage language (Fishman, 1991; Alba et al., 2002).

Another factor is socioeconomic status. Research shows that families with higher levels of education are more successful in maintaining their heritage language, as they often value bilingualism as a resource rather than a barrier. Additionally, the prestige of the heritage language plays a role: languages with global recognition, such as Spanish, Mandarin, or Arabic, tend to have stronger maintenance outcomes compared to languages with limited international reach[7].

Finally, the digital age has introduced new dynamics. Social media, online communities, and digital content in minority languages provide younger generations with access to heritage languages beyond the home. Androutsopoulos argues that digital spaces can serve as powerful tools for language maintenance, allowing heritage speakers to connect across borders and reinforce linguistic identity[8].

Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research design with a strong emphasis on the case study approach in order to examine language shift and language maintenance within migrant families living in multilingual environments. A qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for a nuanced exploration of language practices as they are embedded in everyday social life, family relationships, and identity construction. Rather than measuring language use quantitatively, the study seeks to understand how and why languages are maintained or lost across generations.

[1] Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages.* Multilingual Matters.

[2] TEACHING ENGLISH TO VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS. (2024). CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF SCIENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD, 1(10), 33-35. https://www.universalconference.us/universalconference/index.php/crismw/article/view/2985

[3] Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation.* University of California Press.

[4] Clyne, M. (2003). *Dynamics of language contact: English and immigrant languages.* Cambridge University Press.

[5] Guardado, M. (2002). Loss and maintenance of first language skills: Case studies of Hispanic families in Vancouver. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 58*(3), 341–363.

[6] Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). The Role of English as a Lingua Franca in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 51-53. https://tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/201

[7] Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). Linguistic Landscapes in Urban Areas: Insights from English-Speaking Countries. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 58-61. https://www.tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/203

[8] Androutsopoulos, J. (2015). Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 19*(2), 185–205.

The research primarily relies on secondary data, including sociolinguistic surveys, ethnographic studies, longitudinal research projects, and governmental or institutional policy reports related to migration and language use. These sources are complemented by interviews and narrative accounts previously documented in academic studies, which provide rich insights into the lived experiences of migrant parents and children. Using secondary qualitative data ensures access to diverse linguistic communities across multiple national contexts, making cross-cultural comparison possible.

The case study method enables an in-depth analysis of family-level language practices and intergenerational dynamics. Particular attention is paid to how language choices are negotiated among parents, children, and extended family members in different domains of use, such as the home, educational settings, religious spaces, and community events. The study considers several influencing variables, including age, generation status, educational background, length of residence in the host country, community support networks, and access to heritage-language resources such as books, schools, and media.

Data for analysis are drawn from published studies focusing on Hispanic, Chinese, Turkish, and Uzbek migrant families residing in various host countries. These communities were selected because they represent different levels of global linguistic prestige, community size, and institutional support. A comparative qualitative analysis across these contexts allows for the identification of recurring patterns as well as context-specific differences in language shift and maintenance.

The analytical framework is grounded in Fishman's theory of intergenerational language transmission, which emphasizes the central role of the family in maintaining minority languages. This framework is supplemented by more recent theoretical models addressing bilingual identity, linguistic capital, and transnationalism, which highlight how language practices are shaped by social mobility, globalization, and changing attitudes toward multilingualism. Through thematic coding and interpretive analysis, the study synthesizes findings from multiple sources to construct a comprehensive picture of language maintenance processes in migrant families.

Results. The analysis reveals several significant patterns related to language shift and language maintenance among migrant families in multilingual settings.

1. Generational Differences. Consistent with prior sociolinguistic research, clear generational differences emerge in language use and proficiency. First-generation migrants predominantly use the heritage language within the family domain, as it remains the primary medium for emotional expression and cultural continuity. However, they often acquire the dominant language rapidly for work, education, and social interaction outside the home.

The second generation typically develops bilingual competence, especially during childhood. Nevertheless, as schooling and peer interaction occur mainly in the dominant language, this language increasingly becomes preferred not only in public contexts but also in private family communication. By the third generation, proficiency in the heritage language is often minimal or passive, limited to basic comprehension, unless deliberate and sustained maintenance efforts are implemented by the family or community.

2. Family Language Practices. Family language policy plays a crucial role in determining maintenance outcomes. Families that maintain consistent use of the heritage language at home demonstrate significantly higher levels of bilingualism among children. Parents who consciously insist on speaking their native language—even when children reply in the dominant language—tend to foster stronger receptive and productive skills in the heritage language.

In contrast, families that gradually shift to the dominant language as the primary medium of household communication often accelerate language loss. This shift is frequently motivated by practical concerns, such as academic success, social integration, or children's resistance to using the heritage language. Over time, this leads to reduced exposure and weakened intergenerational transmission.

3. Role of Community Institutions. The presence of supportive community institutions emerges as a key factor in language maintenance. Heritage-language schools, cultural centers, religious organizations, and community events provide structured and meaningful opportunities for language use beyond the home. Families whose children attend weekend or after-school heritage-language programs report higher levels of literacy and greater confidence in using the heritage language.

Moreover, these institutions reinforce positive language attitudes by connecting language with cultural identity and collective belonging. In communities where such resources are limited or absent, families face greater challenges in sustaining language transmission across generations.

4. Socioeconomic Status and Cultural Prestige. Socioeconomic factors and the perceived prestige of the heritage language also influence maintenance patterns. Languages with strong global or regional value—such as Spanish and Mandarin—show more robust maintenance outcomes. Families speaking these languages often express greater pride and see tangible benefits in passing them on, including economic opportunities, international mobility, and social status.

In contrast, speakers of less widely spoken languages report facing external pressure to prioritize the dominant language, which can weaken motivation for maintenance. This disparity highlights how linguistic capital shapes family language decisions and long-term outcomes.

5. Influence of Digital Media. An important and relatively recent finding concerns the role of digital media in heritage-language maintenance. Access to heritage-language television channels, online videos, social media platforms, and messaging groups provides young people with informal and engaging exposure to the language. Younger generations who regularly consume digital content in their heritage language demonstrate higher motivation, improved comprehension, and stronger emotional attachment to the language.

Digital environments thus function as alternative spaces for language socialization, partially compensating for reduced face-to-face interaction in the heritage language and offering new possibilities for maintenance in transnational contexts.

Discussion. The findings of this study strongly confirm the central arguments in the sociolinguistic literature regarding language shift and maintenance in migrant communities, while also extending existing research by foregrounding the increasing importance of digital resources. Overall, the results align with Fishman's assertion that language shift is a common and powerful process in migration contexts unless deliberate and sustained efforts are made to counter it. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that language loss is not inevitable, supporting more recent perspectives that emphasize agency, identity, and evolving communicative environments.

First, the generational patterns identified in this study closely mirror those described by Fishman, Portes and Rumbaut, and Alba. As these scholars argue, first-generation migrants typically retain strong competence in the heritage language and rely on it for emotional expression and cultural continuity[9]. The results of this study confirm that first-generation parents continue to serve as the primary carriers of the heritage language within the family domain. However, consistent with Portes and Rumbaut's findings, the second generation shows a marked shift toward the dominant language, particularly due to schooling and peer interaction. By the third generation, heritage-language proficiency is significantly weakened unless reinforced by structured family or community practices. This pattern supports Fishman's claim that intergenerational transmission within the home is the most fragile yet crucial stage of language maintenance.

At the family level, the findings strongly support Guardado's argument that conscious parental strategies significantly improve heritage-language outcomes. Families in this study that maintained consistent heritage-language use at home—through storytelling, daily conversation, and resistance to switching to the dominant language—reported higher levels of bilingual competence among children[10]. This confirms Guardado's view that family language policy is not accidental but actively constructed. In contrast, households that adopted the dominant language for convenience or educational reasons accelerated language shift, echoing Clyne's observation that social integration pressures often override maintenance intentions.

The role of community institutions identified in this study further reinforces Fishman's emphasis on institutional support as a pillar of reversing language shift. Heritage-language schools, religious organizations, and cultural associations function as extensions of the family, providing domains where the minority language is legitimized and valued. The success of weekend and supplementary schools observed in this study parallels findings from research on Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Saturday schools in North America, which have

[9] Alba, R., Logan, J., Lutz, A., & Stults, B. (2002). Only English by the third generation? Loss and preservation of the mother tongue among the grandchildren of contemporary immigrants. *Demography, 39*(3), 467–484.

[10] Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). ENGLISH IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES. Journal of Applied Science and Social Science, 1(4), 39–44. Retrieved from https://inlibrary.uz/index.php/jasss/article/view/97263

been shown to support literacy and positive language attitudes[11]. These results suggest that without such institutional reinforcement, family efforts alone may not be sufficient for long-term maintenance.

Socioeconomic status and linguistic prestige also emerge as decisive factors, supporting Pavlenko's argument that families with higher educational backgrounds tend to view bilingualism as a form of linguistic capital rather than a deficit[12]. The findings indicate that languages with greater global or regional prestige—such as Spanish and Mandarin—are more successfully maintained, as families perceive tangible economic, educational, and symbolic benefits. This confirms earlier research showing that language ideologies and power relations strongly influence family language choices. Conversely, families speaking less globally recognized languages face greater pressure to prioritize the dominant language, accelerating shift despite emotional attachment.

Conclusion. One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in its discussion of digital media, which extends the work of Androutsopoulos. While earlier studies emphasized face-to-face interaction and institutional settings, the present findings demonstrate that digital spaces now play a crucial complementary role in heritage-language maintenance. Social media, online videos, and transnational communication platforms provide younger generations with accessible and engaging exposure to the heritage language. In line with Androutsopoulos's argument, digital environments function as new domains of language socialization, enabling heritage speakers to negotiate identity and belonging beyond the constraints of the immediate local community.

Finally, the emotional and symbolic dimensions of language use observed in this study resonate with broader sociolinguistic discussions on identity and belonging. Language is not merely a communicative tool but a carrier of cultural memory and familial bonds. This finding supports Fishman's view that language maintenance is deeply tied to values and affect, as well as Pavlenko's emphasis on the emotional investment involved in bilingualism. Encouraging children to embrace bilingual identities, rather than framing heritage languages as obstacles to integration, appears to be a critical factor in successful maintenance.

References

1. Alba, R., Logan, J., Lutz, A., & Stults, B. (2002). Only English by the third generation? Loss and preservation of the mother tongue among the grandchildren of contemporary immigrants. *Demography, 39*(3), 467–484.

2. Androutsopoulos, J. (2015). Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism, 19*(2), 185–205.

3. Clyne, M. (2003). *Dynamics of language contact: English and immigrant languages*. Cambridge University Press.

4. Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Multilingual Matters.

5. Guardado, M. (2002). Loss and maintenance of first language skills: Case studies of Hispanic families in Vancouver. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 58*(3), 341–363.

6. Pavlenko, A. (2004). 'Stop doing that, ia komu skazala!': Language choice and emotions in parent–child communication. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 25*(2-3), 179–203.

7. Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. University of California Press.

8. Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). The Role of English as a Lingua Franca in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 51-53. https://tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/201

9. Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). Linguistic Landscapes in Urban Areas: Insights from English-Speaking Countries. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 58-61. https://www.tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/203

10. Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). ENGLISH IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES. Journal of Applied Science and Social Science, 1(4), 39–44. Retrieved from https://inlibrary.uz/index.php/jasss/article/view/97263

11. Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). Code-Switching in Bilingual Communities: Patterns and Implications. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 65-68. https://www.tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/205

12. TEACHING ENGLISH TO VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS. (2024). CONFERENCE ON THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF SCIENCE IN THE MODERN WORLD, 1(10), 33-35. https://www.universalconference.us/universalconference/index.php/crismw/article/view/2985

---

[11] Mirzahamdamova, D. (2025). Code-Switching in Bilingual Communities: Patterns and Implications. TLEP – International Journal of Multidiscipline, 2(4), 65-68. https://www.tlepub.org/index.php/1/article/view/205

[12] Pavlenko, A. (2004). 'Stop doing that, ia komu skazala!': Language choice and emotions in parent–child communication. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 25*(2-3), 179–203.