

# LANGUAGE, IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY: THE CHOICE OF LANGUAGE IN DRC IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

## ABSTRACT

In South Africa there appears to be no published work on language policy in immigrant African families. This thesis, therefore, aims to understand the language policies and language practices of four immigrant families from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) living in South Africa (SA). These four families are presented as case studies and were chosen on the basis of their different 'family language policies': English-only, French-only, French-Tshiluba, Multilanguage. The study explores the underlying reasons for the choice of language/s in each family.

The main research question is: What are the current language policies and practices of selected DRC immigrant families, and their implications for children's schooling, for relations within the family and the DRC immigrant community, and for relations outside of these? This research is based on observations and recorded semi-structured interviews with the immigrant parents and children, principals, teachers, and the peers of two children from each family. A theoretical framework based on the work of Bernard Spolsky (2004) is used to understand and analyse the data in relation to: external forces such as power relations within and outside the family, the choice of language for the family, its regulation, and its identity effects.

The analysis of data indicated four main findings. First, in all the research families, gender and patriarchy, together with ethnicity and external forces, play a crucial role in the choice of languages for a family's chosen language policy. Second, the family language policy (FLP) emerges *mainly* as a consequence of anxiety regarding the marginalisation of immigrant families in their struggle to fit into the host society and to acquire material resources. Third, in three families whose policies restrict which languages may be used, other languages are spoken or heard in addition to the

language(s) stated in the policy; only the Multilanguage family has a policy which allows members of the family to communicate in any language within the household. Fourth, this research confirms earlier research (Peirce 1995; Krashen 1982) on the importance of affective factors such as motivation, investment, self-confidence, and optimism, on the one hand, and fear or anxiety on the other, on learning the host society's languages. In South Africa, ethnic enclosure and xenophobia prevent most immigrant family members (especially the mothers) from learning local African languages and English. Their exclusion (also self-imposed), together with unequal relations of power in South Africa, plays a crucial role in their interactions, thus limiting opportunities for learning local African languages. However, schooling enables immigrant children to integrate into the South African society. Regardless of the FLP, the immigrant children in the research families speak more English than the DRC languages which are showing signs of disappearing in their language repertoires.

Based on these findings, my research contributes to a deeper understanding of the experience of immigration and sheds light on foreigner identities. As well, the present study is significant in that it contributes to the emerging scholarship on language policy in immigrant African families, given the dearth of information on language choice and use among immigrants in South Africa. This research also adds to the burgeoning literature on the relationship between language and ethnicity in the diaspora.

**Key words:**

**Immigration, ethnicity, family language policy, identity**