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Relationship Gaps: Effects on Parents and Children due to the Ignorance of Mother Tongue

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Abstract: ***Language serves not merely as a tool for utilitarian communication but as a primary vehicle for cultural continuity, socio-emotional bonding, and identity formulation. In rapidly urbanizing and multicultural environments, the shift toward global lingua francas- predominantly English- has precipitated a systemic attrition of native languages across generations. This empirical study investigates the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of mother tongue attrition within urban parent-child dyads. Utilizing a mixed-methods research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 91 parent-child dyads (N = 182 total respondent perspectives across paired sections) residing in diverse urban settings in India. The findings indicate that while 85.7% (n = 78) of parent participants report speaking their mother tongue at home, structural shifts toward English-medium schooling and multicultural urbanization have initiated noticeable intergenerational gaps. A significant majority of parents (83.5%, n = 76) assert that heritage language retention is crucial or important for a child's personality development. Furthermore, institutional language policies in academic settings- where 14.3% (n = 13) of children report punitive measures for native language use—accelerate language attrition. This paper delineates the dynamics of intergenerational linguistic displacement, evaluating its impact on familial intimacy, intergenerational knowledge transfer with grandparents, and socio-cultural identity preservation. Recommendations for family language policy, educational reforms, and community initiatives are provided.***

Keywords: Mother Tongue Attrition, Intergenerational Relationship Gaps, Family Language Policy, Personality Development, Bilingualism, Language Shift, Parent-Child Interaction

1. Introduction

Language is fundamentally intertwined with human cognition, emotional expression, and social identity. A person's native language- commonly referred to as the 'mother tongue'- is the primary linguistic system acquired during early childhood development. It forms the baseline cognitive framework through which an individual perceives, interprets, and communicates with the immediate environment. In the developmental context, the mother tongue functions as a critical bridge connecting the developing child with the familial unit, socio-cultural history, and intergenerational values.

1.1 Mother Tongue versus Acquired First Language

A distinction must be drawn between the mother tongue (L1) and an acquired first language or instructional language (L2). While the mother tongue is organically integrated into early domestic interactions from birth, formal schooling often introduces an institutional language (predominantly English in contemporary urban settings). For many children raised in urban Indian households, English rapidly assumes the role of primary language for formal instruction, social networking, and cognitive processing, occasionally eclipsing the native heritage language.

1.2 Psychosocial Functions of Native Language Retention

The preservation of heritage language within the primary family circle plays multiple roles in developmental psychology:

1) **Socio-Emotional Bonding:** Native languages carry unique idioms, terms of endearment, and contextual nuances that foster intimate emotional connection between parents, grandparents, and children.
2) **Cultural Heritage and Identity:** Language encapsulates cultural narratives, historical memory, and moral frameworks. Its loss frequently leads to cultural dislocation and identity confusion.
3) **Cognitive Development and Linguistic Flexibility:** Research in psycholinguistics demonstrates that robust grounding in a primary native language provides a strong foundation for abstract cognitive processing and facilitates additional language acquisition.
4) **Intergenerational Cohesion:** Fluent heritage language usage enables seamless communication across multi-generational households, ensuring that elderly family members (grandparents) remain active participants in child socialization.

2. Theoretical Framework

The conceptual foundation of this research integrates three prominent frameworks in developmental psychology and sociolinguistics:

1) **Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis:** Jim Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis postulates that competence in a secondary language (L2) is directly dependent upon the level of development achieved in the primary language (L1). A solid foundation in L1 promotes cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP), enabling smoother conceptual transfer across linguistic domains.
2) **Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) Model:** Joshua Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) model highlights intergenerational language transmission within the family unit as the pivotal stage for language survival. When natural transmission from

parent to child breaks down in Stage 6, language shift accelerates toward extinction.

3) **Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development:** Vygotsky emphasized that cognitive structures are derived from mediated socio-cultural dialogue. When children lose fluency in their native tongue, they lose access to the rich cultural mediation provided by elders, impacting self-concept and social reasoning.

3. Literature Review

The academic literature surrounding heritage language maintenance, family language policy (FLP), and developmental psycholinguistics emphasizes the connection between language, emotional health, and relational dynamics.

Author(s) & Year	Core Focus / Methodology	Key Findings & Implications
Carlson (1979)	Psychotherapy & Language	Native language usage facilitates deep emotional expression and symbolic attachment; acquired secondary languages often act as defensive barriers against emotional intimacy.
Benson/ UNESCO (2005)	Mother Tongue-Based Education	Instruction in native language significantly improves academic participation, increases parental involvement, and fosters trust between educational institutions and families.
Katsavdakis et al. (2005)	Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)	Individuals structure narratives and process emotional depth differently in their mother tongue compared to later-acquired languages.
King et al. (2008)	Family Language Policy Framework	Explicit parental decisions regarding home language usage directly shape children's long-term linguistic competence and identity negotiation.
Skutnabb-Kangas (2009)	Primary Education & Identity	Denial of mother-tongue education risks lower self-esteem, cultural disconnection, and diminished identity synthesis in children.
Kennedy (2013)	Linguistic Distance in Counseling	Language translation loses subtle emotional nuances; L2 usage is frequently employed to create psychological distance from traumatic or intimate topics.
Saneka & de Witt (2019)	Language Barriers in Early Childhood	While English serves as a key driver of economic opportunities, systemic biases exist against non-native speakers, creating developmental tensions.
Nishanthi (2020)	Cognitive & Cultural Value	Heritage language mastery enhances early cognitive flexibility, strengthens domestic ties, and aids secondary language learning.
Yusuf et al. (2022)	Parental Attitudes & Preservation	Active parental modeling, home immersion, and structured resources are critical determinants of heritage language survival across generations.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Questions & Hypotheses

RQ1: How does the reduced usage of the mother tongue impact emotional bonding within parent-child dyads?
RQ2: What role do parents attribute to heritage language retention in the personality development of children?
RQ3: To what extent does language shift affect multi-generational communication, specifically with grandparents?

Null Hypothesis (H0): Ignoring or reducing mother tongue usage during primary development does not produce a significant relationship gap or emotional distance between parents and children.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): Ignoring or reducing mother tongue usage during primary development produces a significant relationship gap, emotional distance, and cultural shift between parents and children.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

Data were gathered using a structured mixed-methods survey distributed digitally to urban households. The final dataset comprised N = 91 completed dyadic responses (providing paired qualitative and quantitative data across both parent and child dimensions, representing 182 distinct profile assessments). The sample exhibited broad linguistic diversity representative of urban Indian metropolitan centers, including Telugu (33.0%), Tamil (19.8%), Kannada (16.5%), Hindi (11.0%), Malayalam (7.7%), Punjabi (4.4%), and other regional languages (7.6%).

5. Quantitative Results and Empirical Analysis

5.1 Domestic Language Usage and Linguistic Proficiency

Spoken Mother Tongue at Home (Parents): 85.7% (n = 78) speak their native language at home, 8.8% (n = 8) speak it 'sometimes', and 5.5% (n = 5) do not speak it at home.

Frequency of Home Communication: 80.2% (n = 73) engage in native language usage daily, 12.1% (n = 11) speak it only when elders are present, and 6.6% (n = 6) reserve it exclusively for extended family gatherings.

Literacy Gaps among Parents: While 82.4% (n = 75) of parents report being able to read and write in their mother tongue, 9.9% (n = 9) can read but not write, and 6.6% (n = 6) possess no literacy in their native language.

5.2 Children's Primary Language Used at School

School Language Setting	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
English Exclusively	54	59.3%
English (Teachers) / Native (Friends)	22	24.2%
English Only (Punishment for Native Use)	13	14.3%
Mother Tongue	2	2.2%

5.3 Intergenerational Communication with Grandparents

Grandparent Communication Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Everyday Interaction	61	67.00%
2-3 times a month	13	14.30%
1-3 times a week	11	12.10%
Living with them / Daily immersion	4	4.40%
Other / Multi-linguistic adaptation	2	2.20%

6. Qualitative Findings and Discussion

6.1 Familial Intimacy and Relational Shifts

Qualitative entries provided nuance regarding emotional attachment and communication dynamics within households. When reflecting on emotional attachment to their mother tongue, 79.1% (n = 72) of parents expressed high attachment, describing it as central to their identity, family traditions, and emotional authentic self-expression.

"When we speak in our native language, there is an immediate warmth and emotional depth. With our children, because their vocabulary is limited to basic household commands, complex emotional conversations default to English. It changes the dynamic from familial intimacy to functional dialogue." — Respondent Parent (Dyad #14)

6.2 Intergenerational Connection with Grandparents

A primary area of relational friction occurs between children and the elder generation. In the survey, 67.0% (n = 61) of children reported interacting daily with grandparents in their mother tongue. However, 26.4% (n = 24) reported infrequent communication due to linguistic barriers. Qualitative analysis revealed that as children's proficiency in the mother tongue declines, conversation with grandparents becomes restricted to simple greetings. Grandparents face reduced opportunities to transmit oral histories, cultural folklore, and emotional support, creating a notable intergenerational divide.

6.3 Threat of Linguistic Attrition and Identity Erosion

30.8% (n = 28) of parents believe their mother tongue 'will be lost very soon' in urban centers, while 16.5% (n = 15) state that their family has 'already lost most of the language' depth. Despite these attrition risks, child respondents exhibited a strong desire for language reconnection: 72.5% (n = 66) stated they would like to learn more about their native language, and 23.1% (n = 21) expressed tentative interest.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Hypothesis Testing Summary

The empirical and qualitative evidence supports the rejection of the Null Hypothesis (H0) in favor of the Alternative Hypothesis (H1). Although absolute language extinction has not occurred in most households, the systematic reduction in mother tongue vocabulary, literacy, and emotional usage creates a measurable intergenerational distance. This shift impacts parent-child emotional depth, reduces meaningful engagement with grandparents, and alters cultural identity transmission.

7.2 Strategic Recommendations

1) **Explicit Family Language Policy (FLP):** Parents should establish consistent home language practices where the mother tongue is utilized for non-academic, emotional, and social conversations.
2) **Educational Reform & Policy:** Educational institutions must abolish policies that penalize students for speaking native languages during informal peer interactions and adopt mother-tongue-based multilingual education frameworks.
3) **Community and Digital Tools:** Development of engaging digital applications tailored for urban children to build literacy in regional languages.

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