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German maintenance and shift in linguistically mixed marriages: three case studies

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This article reports on case studies of German maintenance and shift in three families living in South Africa. In each case the language histories are revealed by the women in the families: all three have German-speaking parents and are married to men who do not have German as their first language. The focus of the research is on German language shift across the generations. The analysis of the data obtained from biographical interviews with the women and their parents shows evidence of German language loss with a shift towards either English or Afrikaans, the dominant languages in the communities in which the families live.

Hierdie artikel doen verslag oor 'n gevallestudie van drie Duitse gesinne wat in Suid-Afrika woon. In elke geval vertel vrou van die gesin die taalgeskiedenis: al drie het Duitssprekende ouers en is getroud met mans wat nie Duits as eerste taal besig nie. Die fokus van die navorsing is op Duitse taalverskuiwing oor drie generasies. 'n Analise van die data wat uit biografiese onderhoude met die vroue en hul ouers verkry is, dui op Duitse taalverlies met 'n verskuiwing na óf Engels óf Afrikaans, die dominante tale in die gemeenskappe waar die gesinne woon.

Introduction

According to the 1991 census, only 0.66% of the white population living in South Africa claim German as their home language. German is not one of the eleven official languages in South Africa and most South Africans do not use it in everyday life. By these criteria then, German is considered a minority language in South Africa.

Various studies have demonstrated the trend that immigrant families living in an environment where their ethnic language is a minority language, will, over generations, experience a language shift from the ethnic language to the majority language, unless maintenance strategies are actively pursued. Generally, while the first generation of immigrants prefers to speak their native tongue, the second generation is bilingual and the third usually adopts the majority language as their first language or L1 (Barnes & McDuling, 1995; Harres, 1989; Grosjean, 1982; Stevens, 1985).

Barnes & McDuling (1995) describe language shift as a universal phenomenon which typically affects minority languages, especially in multilingual societies where the dominant language swamps the minority language. Weinreich (1979: 68) defines language shift as 'the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another'. Stevens (1985: 75) defines it more closely as occurring 'when children learn, as a first language or mother tongue, a language different from their parents' first languages'.

'Language maintenance', on the other hand, occurs when 'a language holds onto its own despite the influence of powerful neighbours' (Crystal, 1987: 360). Language maintenance is closely related to language loyalty and the degree to which speakers consciously resist changes in their language or its use. In this article, maintenance and shift are examined within the context of the family. Three family cases, where the husband and wife have entered a linguistically mixed marriage, are explored. The focus, therefore, is on the use of German in

these families, and not on the larger German ethnic groups living in South Africa.

In their discussion of factors which influence language maintenance, Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) propose a combination of three main factors (status, demographic and institutional support) into one factor which they call 'ethnolinguistic vitality'. According to them:

'[the] vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations. From this, it is argued that ethnolinguistic minorities that have little or no group vitality would eventually cease to exist as distinctive groups. Conversely, the more vitality the linguistic group has, the more likely it will survive and thrive as a collective entity in an intergroup context' (1977: 308).

With respect to the minority language, this implies that high vitality will lead to maintenance and low vitality will result in shift towards the majority language (either in terms of number of speakers or its prestige value).

In this article, the German language acquisition experiences of three families of German descent now living in South Africa are described. The focus, specifically, is on German maintenance and shift across the generations in these families, and on the family members' perceptions of their own German ethnolinguistic vitality (see Landry & Allard, 1994). The experiences are voiced mainly by the women (the mothers) in the families and revealed through an analysis of biographical interviews held with each of them and their parents.

Related research

The research on bilingualism is extensive and varied in the specific topics which it covers. Regarding family bilingualism, Barnes (1990, 1991, 1996) has written numerous articles which examine bilingualism in a South African context: those dealing with the concept itself, and others focusing on

English/Afrikaans bilingualism and on the Portuguese language context (Barnes & McDuling, 1995), the latter being somewhat similar to the situation with German.

Sociolinguistic studies of the German communities in Australia, in many ways, report on a situation comparable with the South African context. Both countries have multilingual and multicultural societies where English has a high status and German is a minority language. Numerous studies which focus specifically on German language shift and maintenance in the Australian context have been done (see, for example, Clyne, 1981; Harres, 1989; Pütz, 1991).

Harres (1989) provides a succinct summary of factors which influence language shift and maintenance, citing the studies of Kloss (1966), who studied the American/German language situation, and Clyne (1979) who referred to the Australian/German situation. The following, which should also be applicable to families living in a minority language context in South Africa, facilitate language maintenance:

1. Early point of migration
 2. Linguistic enclaves
 3. Membership of a denomination with parochial schools
 4. Status and usefulness of the ethnic language
 5. Extended families
- The following factors are ambivalent in that they may facilitate either language maintenance or shift:
6. Educational level of migrant
 7. Numerical strength
 8. Linguistic and cultural similarity
 9. Attitude of majority to the language or group
 10. Sociocultural characteristics
 11. Political situation in the homeland
 12. Pre-emigration experience with language maintenance.

Some of these factors relate quite closely to the three socio-structural factors which Giles *et al.* believe determine a group's ethnolinguistic vitality, namely, demography, institutional support, and status of the language.

The relationship between the perceived vitality of an ethnic group and the sense of group affiliation experienced by its members is similar to the theory of 'core values' developed by Smolicz (1984) to explain the link between language and culture. According to this theory, the degree of language shift is influenced, amongst other factors, by the value attributed to language as a direct link with the group's identity. So a high core value attached to language coincides with a low rate of language shift (loss), while a high rate of language shift is accompanied by a low core value (Harres, 1989). Kalantzis (1985) found that in Australia the core value of German is low. Most Germans saw no need to maintain it for domestic reasons. Second-generation migrants saw German as useful for travel, but for future life, they were more interested in English. This is in contrast to Greek where 'within the Greek reality *ethnicity* and *language* are core values inextricably linked together' (Tamis, 1990: 499).

Heller & Levy (1992) undertook a study of the linguistic frontiers created by mixed marriages (French/English) in Canada. They conclude that mixed marriages do not inevitably have to lead to assimilation to English (in this case), but that there will always be a struggle. Stevens claims that

'Groups characterized by high rates of either ethnic exogamy [cross-cultural or mixed marriages] or linguistic heterogamy within the ethnic descent group are probably marked by higher rates of mothertongue shift' (1985: 82).

Pütz, in an Australian context, reports:

'In the German migrant context in Canberra, the aspect of exogamy seems to play a decisive role where the shift to English is closely related to the non-observance of German cultural and linguistic patterns in the family domain' (1991: 482).

It is clear, then, that the effect of a mixed marriage is also a factor which determines whether a minority language will be carried over into the next generation.

Very little has been written about German language usage in South Africa. Stielau (1980) has indicated how German in Kwazulu-Natal has been structurally affected by surrounding languages, but she does not explicitly deal with language shift and maintenance. De Kadt (1995) does, in her article which describes aspects of the present-day distribution and usage of German.

Hauptfleisch (1977) undertook a nationwide survey of white urban adults to determine their attitudes to English and Afrikaans as official languages and bilingualism in those languages. He reports general satisfaction but also suggests that an overall language shift is occurring from Afrikaans to English. Years later, this strong pull of English is corroborated by the De Klerk & Bosch study (1994), which surveyed the language attitudes of English, Afrikaans and Xhosa speakers in the Eastern Cape. This very favourable attitude towards English is bound to contribute to language shift amongst German South Africans.

Methodology

Data for the case studies were collected by means of biographical interviews (Thesen, 1997) with three women of German descent and their parents. The three women interviewees were selected because they are women of a similar socio-economic background, and are second- or third-generation South Africans. They are also all married to non-German husbands and now have children of their own. The rationale for choosing such participants is that, having married non-Germans, they will have already made a language choice, and since they have children, they will have thought about the language issue further.

Numerous studies claim that women maintain their L1 longer and that they play an important role in language maintenance (Harres, 1989). Stevens (1985: 77) claims,

'because of mothers' predominant role in childbearing, children of linguistically mixed backgrounds are probably more likely to speak their mother's first language than their father's first language',

and Lyon (1996: 204) states that 'a mother's language is the most powerful predictor of her child's language development' because generally she has more contact with the child.

Two of the families are from Uitenhage and one family from Cape Town. There is a German influence in Uitenhage because of the presence of a German motor manufacturer and related industries. From time to time numerous Germans come to South Africa to work on contract. This motor manufacturer and the German government in Bonn sponsor a 'Sonabend-Schule' (Saturday School) for the children to provide German tuition. Port Elizabeth is just 30 minutes away by road, and has a German club and a German church. Cape Town, being a metropolitan centre, has a sizable German community, with several German churches, a German club and a German school.

The interviews were semi-structured, informal interviews carried out in English, and they lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The interviews with the three women focused on their language background and their perceived language proficiency in general, not only with regard to German; their language attitudes; their perceptions of culture; and whether they are teaching their children German and, if so, how they are going about doing this. The interviews with their parents, in an attempt to gain a generational perspective, in essence focused on the same questions.

In one case study both parents were interviewed but in two separate interviews. In another study both parents were interviewed in the same session. In the third study, the only surviving parent was the mother, who has returned to Germany. A questionnaire was faxed to her (a more structured form of the interview) to which she replied in German, also by fax. Data collection involving the parents took on different formats. This, unfortunately, was unavoidable, but the information gathered nevertheless contributes satisfactorily to the findings of the study.

Case study 1: Kirsten's family¹

Kirsten's father was born in South Africa into a German family while her mother was born and brought up in Germany. They married in Germany and lived there for a time during which period Kirsten's older brother was born. The family moved to South Africa while Mrs K² was pregnant with Kirsten. Another two sons were added to the family in South Africa. Only German was spoken in the home, until the children started going to school. Because they were living in the North-West Province at the time, where they came into contact with more Afrikaans than English, the children acquired Afrikaans while at pre-school. To help their children learn the local language the parents decided to speak Afrikaans to them. Mrs K explains: 'The kids all spoke Afrikaans to each other. So we supported them, speaking Afrikaans to make it easier for them'.

The family moved to Kimberley before the oldest son began high school, and then Mrs K fought to put her children in an English school, which reveals her favourable attitude toward English: 'So then we started speaking English to the kids to encourage them to get out of the Afrikaans into the English'.

Once the family moved to Uitenhage, the children received limited informal German schooling at the Sonabend-Schule, but by Kirsten's admission this was not enough to seriously affect their German language proficiency: 'One hour a week is too little'. Kirsten does not feel comfortable speaking Ger-

man at all anymore, although she does comprehend it when others are speaking. She is, however, proficient in both English and Afrikaans.

By emphasising both Afrikaans and English, Kirsten's mother showed an integrative orientation to language learning (see Gardner & Lambert, 1972) since for her, it was more important for her children to learn the languages of the community than to hold onto German. Mr K, on the other hand, would have liked to emphasise German more. So Kirsten's father, the second-generation South African German, values the German language more than does his first-generation German wife. This is one instance where the view that the wife is more likely to maintain her L1 is contradicted.

But Kirsten's mother's whole attitude to life is one of constantly challenging herself and 'going with the times'. For her the 'whole German issue is not really an issue ... The world is going to be an international family. We are part of it'. When people ask what nationality she considers herself to be, she answers, 'I used to be German, but now I am international'. She no longer considers herself 'a pure German'. However, her husband pointed out that when she goes back to Germany on visits, she fits in very well. She agrees,

'I'm a different person ... then I am German ... But here [in South Africa] I am not a German. Here I am an international person'.

Kirsten has married a bilingual English/Afrikaans South African and they have two sons of preschool age. Kirsten feels she can understand German but not speak it well. So she is not teaching her children German at all herself now. To her English and Afrikaans are more important.

'I know that English is probably going to be the major language in the country, so I decided to bring my children up in that language. We did start to speak Afrikaans to [my son], and then we actually had to sit down and talk about it, and really decide what we're going to do and then we switched over to English'.

It appears, therefore, that Kirsten and her husband did make conscious decisions about which languages they want their children to speak, but German was not seriously considered. The fact that her husband does not understand German was also a factor.

When asked about her attitude towards German and the fact that she feels that she 'is losing it completely, because it is of no use to me at the moment', Kirsten replied: 'No, I am sorry that I can't speak it, sorry that I did lose it, or that I can't speak it more fluently, but in the situation that I am in, I cannot find any way around it'. However, when asked about German culture, Kirsten said she recognised 'quite a lot' of German culture in herself: 'Although the language is missing, I definitely keep up the culture side'. In contrast to her mother, Kirsten shows some interest in German things just because they are German.

Case study 2: Sonja's family

Sonja's parents were born in South Africa but grew up in German missionary communities, one in Kwazulu-Natal and the other in the Western Cape. They spoke only German in their parents' homes. Both said their first language was definitely German, although technically speaking they are second-generation German speakers. Once they were

married, to speak German in the home was just natural. 'It was never an issue We never made any really conscious efforts to teach our children German, it just was natural'. Sonja's father is competent in English, which he used in the business world, but her mother is not that comfortable using English. Mrs S did not have much exposure to English. This reflects the belief that women (wives and mothers in families) are more inclined to maintain their L1, especially when not having to use the L2 daily in the workplace (Harres, 1989). Living in Cape Town where there is a large German community also makes it possible to move only within German circles, which this family did.

When asked what nationality Mr S considered himself to be, he replied: 'South African of German descent. It's tricky ... What is a South African? In Germany I would not be called a German'. Sonja's mother identified herself more closely as German: 'I feel because I am German, I stick to it. If I let go, then I feel I am [laughter] nothing'. She also mentioned another dilemma: 'In South Africa, [people] see me as German and in Germany they see me as foreigner. So actually we don't belong anywhere.

Sonja and her older sister went to the German junior school in Cape Town as well as to the German church and moved in German social circles. Both then went to an English high school. Sonja found this very difficult, being so used to German. After studying German as her first language and English as her second language at the German school, Sonja transferred to an English school where she did English as her first language and German as a third language. This she found very frustrating since in the German class, I knew more than the teacher did.

Being married to an English husband, Sonja now lives in a very English community. The only German contact she has is with her parents and one or two friends. She has become more English. In the past, she would have said her first language was German, but not anymore. When asked what nationality she sees herself as, she said:

'I'm a South African, but that's only become more recent. When I was younger it was confusing, I would say "No, I'm German"... [My husband] definitely makes me more South African ... I would call myself South African, German-speaking South African even'.

Sonja is trying to teach German to her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter by speaking German to her, but is feeling the strain of being solely responsible for passing on the German language to her child. Her daughter does speak and respond in German, but is more inclined to use English. Sonja says:

'When she was a baby and she wasn't talking, it was very natural for me to speak German to her. I would have felt uncomfortable speaking English to her, but now that she responds to me in English, I naturally almost want to speak English to her ... The more she is learning in English and talking, it is almost odd if she says to me "Mommy I want some juice", and I say, "OK, warte [wait] ..." I respond in German and I do, but sometimes I think "This is crazy!"'.

Sonja displays an integrative orientation towards her daughter's German language acquisition when she indicates that she would like her daughter to feel comfortable when she is with her grandparents: 'I just basically want to give her the opportunity, specially for my parents' sake'. Sonja plans to send her daughter to the German pre-school in Cape Town when she is four so that she will be exposed to other German speakers and also to alleviate the pressure on herself. This will also bring Sonja into contact with other German parents and build up Sonja's confidence in her own German.

Sonja's parents insisted that she speak pure German while she was at school and frowned upon codeswitching. This now has instilled in Sonja the conviction that if her daughter is to learn German, it must be German, not English-German, or Afrikaans-German, it must be pure. She acknowledges that, although now she appreciates her parents' insistence on proper German, in her youth she found it annoying:

'I suspect if [my daughter] gets to that stage, I'll say, "Just speak English, your father can't understand German in any case". So I think her German won't even get as far as mine'.

Although Sonja's husband does not understand German, he does not object to Sonja teaching their daughter German. He recognises it as an advantage for her. However, Sonja feels the strain of her husband not understanding German:

'I feel guilty sometimes ... I feel language can create barriers. If having tea, I am speaking to [my daughter] in German, I am cutting him off. And I don't want to do that. German to me is not that important. I would rather have [my husband] included. That's why at the table I often speak English'.

Furthermore, Sonja also believes it is rude to speak German to her daughter in front of her daughter's friends, and thus feels obliged to speak English. Sonja realises that if she is to succeed in trying to build up a one-person one-language bond (Brettigny & De Klerk, 1995) she should only be speaking one language so as not to confuse her daughter, but this cannot be so.

Case study 3: Antje's family

Antje's parents were born in Germany and spoke only German at home. They came to South Africa when Antje was two-and-a-half-years old and her brother was five-and-a-half. Two more sisters were born in South Africa. Both parents did an *English for foreigners* course at the local Technical College to brush up on their school English. This shows their favourable attitude towards English, which Mrs A never really acquired. Because Mr A was contracted to work in South Africa, and not permanently employed here, they returned to Germany every three years or so to visit. There was thus regular contact with Germany.

They always spoke German at home, but when the children began going to English schools and having English friends, the children soon learnt English. The siblings spoke mostly English to each other, and German to their parents. All the children went to extra-mural German lessons. Antje's brother studied German independently as a seventh subject for his school-leaving examinations. (It was not offered as a subject at school.) Antje would also have done German as an extra

subject, but played provincial tennis which interfered with German classes. Antje says:

‘My brother did matric in German as a subject at school. I should have and would have, but I was very involved in tennis. My dad never discouraged me from tennis, but I think my dad would have preferred me to do my matric in German. Sometimes I wish I had’.

Antje speaks and understands German well, but she is hesitant about writing German. With respect to her proficiency in German, she sometimes has her doubts about whether or not she should be teaching her children:

‘I still have my moments when I think “Oh, am I doing the right thing?” because my German is not fantastic. I find now as my daughter is getting older, she is asking more complicated questions which I cannot explain so well in German’.

At the same time, Antje states that she quickly improves when she visits Germany:

‘I find when I am over there, I am a bit self-conscious in the beginning, then I settle down. After about two or three weeks, I start thinking in German. I do change. It comes back’.

Now Antje lives in a totally English environment. Her only contact with German is her mother who has moved back to Germany, and a few acquaintances. Her mother’s return to Germany has actually strengthened Antje’s ties with Germany. Antje finds questions about her nationality problematic:

‘If you asked me if I regard myself a German or a South African, I would still say German in a way ... Ever since my family has moved back to Germany, my affiliation to Germany has become stronger again. But if Germany had to play against South Africa in a sport, I would choose South Africa’.

Antje has three children ranging in age from seven years to eight-months old. She is trying to teach her children German by speaking German to them. When asked why, she replied:

‘... because I want them to learn another language. And maybe because I feel there is some German in me, in my background, my history, my side of the family and I would like to keep some of that’.

Integrative orientations can be seen in this response, and in the following: ‘my father had always said that he would like his grandchildren to speak German’. Her mother also writes that it would please her greatly if her grandchildren could speak to her in German.

Speaking German to her children also provides Antje with opportunities to practise her German:

‘If I wasn’t speaking German to my kids, then maybe I would feel more that I am even stronger about English than I am now. Because I am speaking to them, I have that feeling that I am keeping some German’.

She tries to speak German to her children all the time, unless there are other English people around. When the children’s friends visit, she speaks English because it is a bit awkward. In front of her English-speaking husband she persists in speaking German to the children, which she says he does not mind. The children are not at all comfortable using German. The eldest daughter is more proficient than her brother, who is five-years old:

‘So far, my daughter ... doesn’t speak any German at all really. We sometimes play games and I say “What’s this in German?” It will come. She’s all right. He’s got a long way to go ... If I had to judge the oldest now, I would say it is working to the extent that they understand, although she doesn’t speak it yet. With him I think “Aaa – no it is not yet”’.

When asked about German culture, Antje said she recognised very little or none in herself. Some things she still does as her mother did, but in most things, like cooking and baking, she has developed her own style. Christmas is celebrated in the English tradition because the family normally celebrates with the husband’s side of the family.

Discussion

Within these three families, language shift is taking place. English is becoming more dominant at the expense of German. There are a number of factors leading to this change. Many of the 12 factors which influence language shift and maintenance (Harres, 1989) mentioned earlier certainly do seem to be relevant to the lives of these family members. For example, the status of German in the general community is not as high as the official languages of South Africa, notwithstanding German school and church support. For the members of these families there is just too much pressure, both from within and without the families, to shift away from using German for a wide range of purposes.

Furthermore, one’s willingness and ability to teach a language to one’s child will be greatly influenced by one’s own proficiency in the language, for example. Here reference is made to Kirsten, who, because she does not feel comfortable speaking German, obviously will not teach her children German, focusing instead on English and Afrikaans. Both Sonja and Antje also mentioned that they no longer felt proficient enough in German to be able to answer all their children’s questions.

Consequently, it is important for the mothers to have external language support so that they maintain their own proficiency in German. All three women are in either English or Afrikaans communities now, and have no or minimal external support for maintaining German. Sonja said that she does not want to teach her child incorrect German, and as her daughter learns to speak more herself, she is asking Sonja questions which she cannot answer, for example, ‘What is a remote control in German?’ It is little instances like this which weaken Sonja’s resolve. A tentative conclusion, therefore, would be that to maintain a language, support is essential, whether it be for the mother to keep in practice or to avoid the responsibility for the maintenance of that language falling onto one person’s shoulders (see Baker, 1995).

The fact that these mothers are the only German influence in their children’s lives is in itself a big strain on the mother, and this pressure is then compounded because the father does not understand what is being said. All three women who were interviewed mentioned that they do not want to isolate or alienate the father as a result of teaching their child German. The husbands of both Antje and Sonja do not object to their children learning another language, but the situation can be awkward if, say, at the dinner table the father does not understand what is being said. At this stage the children are still

very young so the conversation is elementary and understandable, but later this may no longer be the case. If at any stage a conflict arises because of the language situation, it is very likely that, to maintain peace in the home, speaking German will be abandoned.

Sonja's children and Antje's children do not speak German naturally without prompting. This is very discouraging for both mothers. Pütz (1991: 482) found a similar situation in his study of Australian immigrants: 'Parents conversing with their children in German tend to receive replies in English by them'. Sonja says, '[My daughter] just hears so much more English. I can't avoid it'. The power of the majority language to swamp the minority language is being experienced by these parents. The pull of English is great because of the strong perceived international, commercial and academic value of English. This is thus a factor strongly influencing language shift.

As indicated earlier, attitudes play an important role in language acquisition. Kirsten's parents felt it was more important for their children to gain proficiency in the languages spoken in South Africa, so they spoke Afrikaans and English to them instead of German. All of the women expressed the wish that their children can one day speak German, because it is part of their cultural heritage. But the fact is that in South Africa one does not need to speak German. Ultimately, both Antje and Sonja felt that as their children become more involved in the English-speaking communities around them, it will become increasingly more difficult to find a place for German: as Sonja says, 'I will try my best, but ... when it comes to being happy and a family ... I don't want to put up this barrier by speaking German'.

The case studies described in this article support Smolicz's (1984) theory of core values and specifically Kalantzis's findings in Australia, where the core value of German could be classed as low. In the South African interviews, the idiom of 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' was mentioned time and again by the different participants. There did not seem to be any great hankering after an exclusive German cultural identity. Most of the interviewees had the attitude that in South Africa, German can help, but it is not necessary. Only Antje's mother ascribed a value to the culture and language, although also not very strongly:

'In Südafrika waren unsere Kinder mehr Englisch orientiert. Das ist meiner Meinung nach auch ganz natürlich, wenn man in einem Englisch sprechenden Land lebt, muß man sich der Allgemeinheit anpassen. Trotzdem braucht man die deutsche Sprache und Kultur nicht ablegen'.

In South Africa, our children were more orientated towards English. In my opinion, this is perfectly natural, as when one lives in an English-speaking country, one should adapt to the general public (the environment). However, one does not need to reject the German language and culture.

Speaking from Germany though, where she is immersed in German culture, it is perhaps easier for her to say this. On the other hand, German cultural values were not consciously sacrificed in order to embrace South African ones. Both Antje and Sonja, who were taught German, said that they did not rebel against being taught German, or having to speak it in

their homes. In spite of this, it appears as though the three women in these case studies perceived the ethnolinguistic vitality of German in their families and communities to be low. Although there was, at different stages of their lives, support from church, schools and family, and although they did not systematically and intentionally downgrade the German language and culture, the non-German pressures from the broader communities in which they lived were, realistically, just too strong.

Pütz reports that in the Australian context, 'the positive attitude held towards Australian values and lifestyle, including Australian English, serves as an ethnic marker of cultural solidarity on the part of the Australian-born second generation' (1991: 482).

In some cases this was manifested in a rebellion against learning the German of their parents. With the women in this study, in the South African context, this does not seem to have been a factor. (Antje's mother, however, mentions that Antje's older brother complained about the German lessons. Kirsten's mother mentioned that Kirsten's younger brother refused to go to German classes because he said he is a South African, not a German, but that, in her opinion, was probably due to laziness more than a rejection of the culture! A discussion of these, possibly gender, differences is not within the scope of this article, but is an interesting topic for further research.)

Most of the interviewees found the questions on cultural identity very difficult to answer. Trying to pinpoint their nationality was problematic, although most eventually settled for South African of German descent. Trying to define what German culture is, aside from the language, was also very difficult. Some thought more of German philosophers and musicians, while others thought of the traditions surrounding Christmas and Easter as well as methods of cooking and baking and decorating one's house. One thing at least one participant from each family mentioned as part of the German culture, was strong filter coffee.

Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) mentions birth order as one of the learner variables which affect success in acquiring another language. Rosenblum & Dorman (1978) report that good imitators of language among their subjects were either first-born or an only child. Kirsten reports that in her family, her older brother

'would be able to do better than [her younger brother] because at that stage, when we were still young, my mother had just come from Germany, and spoke a lot of German, whereas later when [my younger brothers] were born, she was then speaking either English or Afrikaans'.

Antje's younger sisters moved back to Germany when the rest of the family moved, and Sonja and her sister were very close in age, so they could not be assessed as an indication of this universal trend. Birth order and age in mixed-marriage families are clearly areas where further research could be undertaken.

Conclusion

Within the limited parameters of this study, it has been observed that within the German language acquisition experiences of the selected participants, the general trends of language shift are occurring. In mixed marriages especially it is very difficult to maintain an ethnic, minority language, such as German in a South African context. However, as Barnes points out ‘Bilingualism is not a static phenomenon: Families can move towards bilingualism or they can shift away from it’ (1991: 22). There is always the chance, in the families that have been studied, that in the future the children will develop in themselves an interest in German and pursue German language proficiency and German cultural identity on an individual basis.

Notes

- 1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in the research.
- 2. The parents of Kirsten, Sonja and Antje are referred to as Mr and Mrs K, S and A respectively.

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