Language Use in Family and in Society

Our parents have sacrificed their lives and have paid their dues in “tears and sweat,” as our grandmother used to say, in order to push us over the fence so we could attain education and success in the United States. Now that our parents have successfully pushed us over the fence, we find ourselves struggling to get back for fear of losing what we once had. This, however, is not an easy feat because language and culture separate us, placing us each in our own worlds, both of which are filled with loneliness, loss, and great emotional and psychological pain.

Linh Cao

Looking at Linh’s statement, we can see the important issues it raises. In this article, we discuss alternatives to the traditional research paper, suggesting that students can do meaningful language research within family and society. Although the work we describe here was done at the college level, it has obvious implications for secondary teaching. Linh’s family is of Vietnamese and Chinese descent. Members representing three generations of the family immigrated in 1979 to Reno, Nevada, from Vietnam as a result of the political and economic instability following the Vietnam War. The grandparents speak Hainanese (a Chinese dialect) and Vietnamese. The father of the family speaks Hainanese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and a little English, Vietnamese being his most often used language. Linh’s mother speaks Vietnamese and Hainanese and very limited English. The five children represent a wide age range, and their language experiences have differed significantly. The oldest, Linh, now 27, a high school English teacher and a graduate student in the MA Teaching English as a Second Language program at the University of Nevada, Reno, is both a participant and researcher in this study.

Linh was born in Vietnam, and her first language was Hainanese, which she speaks very little now. When she started in school, she learned Mandarin, which she also remembers little of anymore. After the Communist takeover in Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese government wanted to get rid of all Chinese influence and demanded that all the Chinese schools in Vietnam teach Vietnamese, at which point she learned to read and write that language. She was eight years old when the family moved to the United States. Today, she is most comfortable with English, yet she still speaks, reads, and writes Vietnamese, although her Vietnamese vocabulary does not extend too far into educational, social, or psychological domains.

Quyen, now 26; Tung, 21; and Kim, 22, were also born in Vietnam. Like Linh, Quyen attended Vietnamese school and can still speak Vietnamese fairly well, and she has since improved her Mandarin and Hainanese. She accomplished this primarily through contact with schoolmates from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Yet she, too, is most comfortable with English. Tung and Kim were about two and three years old when they came to the US and are now exclusively comfortable in
English, their Vietnamese vocabulary extending only into familial settings like food and cleanliness. Their Hainanese consists of few phrases—offering food to their grandparents or wishing them a happy new year. Communication among the siblings began to shift to English not long after they started school in the US.

Quyen and Linh communicate with Mom in Vietnamese quite comfortably, although sometimes they get stuck when they don’t know or have forgotten a particular word or expression, which she provides for them when she understands what they’re trying to say. With Tung and Kim, however, Mom’s communication is extremely limited, their conversation being restricted primarily to “yes/no” dialogue. Quyen and Linh often end up translating. With Dad, Linh communicates in Vietnamese and intermittent English words or phrases. Quyen communicates with Dad more in English than Vietnamese, and Tung and Kim communicate with him exclusively in English.

Quoc, the youngest sibling, now 11, was born in the US. Dad decided that the family needed to speak Mandarin with Quoc in an attempt to go back to their Chinese roots. Mom and the rest of the family learned how to say Mandarin phrases such as, Have you eaten your food? Have you cleaned up after yourself? Are you sleepy? Don’t make messes in the house. Don’t run in the house. But their Mandarin pretty much stops there. The grandparents have had similar things to say to Quoc in Hainanese, but not much else. Starting at about two years of age, Quoc spoke Hainanese with his grandparents, Mandarin with his parents, and English with his older siblings. Since he started school, he has been speaking to his siblings primarily in English, and he has little to say to his grandparents anymore. His language with Mom and Dad is Mandarin and English filled with much code-mixing and switching; that is, when speaking Mandarin he will use English terms and at times switch into English for extended pieces of discourse. Mom does the same due to her lack of proficiency in English and Mandarin.

**Family Discourse Strategies**

Given the above explanation of familial language proficiency, we might wonder how communication proceeds. The following three pieces of discourse represent some important recurring dynamics of interaction in the family. The transcription notations follow:

- V Vietnamese
- H Hainanese
- M Mandarin
- E English

// Linh’s romanized phonetic transcription of Hainanese
[] Linh’s romanized phonetic transcription of Mandarin
() translations into English

Note narration of physical movement, description, and interpretation of background information and cultural comment

Notice that first the interlocutor is noted, followed by the language(s) used. For example, Dad-E indicates that Dad is speaking, and the primary language used is English. Dad-E-V would indicate a shift from English to Vietnamese in that conversational turn.

**Selection #1**

This interlude between Mom and Tung occurs solely in Vietnamese.

Mom-V: Nè Tùng, mi thích ăn bánh canh nè, ăn đi. (Here Tung, you like to eat this noodle dish, here, have some.)

Tung-V: Ói, má múc nhé quá. (Okay, Mom, you're giving me too much.)

Mom-V: Đi ăn đó, ăn ít quá. (Go ahead and eat, you eat too little.)

Note: Tung takes the bowl of noodles back to his desk where he eats over some papers that are spread out. He sighs and appears to be exasperated.

Mom-V: Làm bài chỉ đâu? Làm khó quá hà? (What homework are you doing? It's too hard, huh?)

Tung-V: Biên cái “essay”, không biết rằng nói cho mà nghe. (I have to write an essay, I don't know how to explain it to you.)

Mom-V: Ói... (Hmm...)
her role as mother, Mom is handicapped here with Tung. She can talk to him about food, but ultimately, food is just food. It cannot serve as the medium to reach into Tung's world of school, his worries about essay writing, how he feels about his essay topic . . . or his teacher, his friends, his delights. Yet, Mom stands, waiting for words that will not come.

In his book Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodriguez characterized his communication with his mother: “[She] grew restless, seemed troubled and anxious at the scarcity of words exchanged in the house. She smiled at small talk. She pried at the edges of my sentences to get me to say something more” (24). In the above discourse one sees this scenario clearly. What are Tung's options following his mother's last turn at talk? He has stated that he cannot explain his assignment to his mother. Why? First they do not share the vocabulary in Vietnamese to enter into “essay talk,” that is, the elaboration of the goals or process of essay writing. Second, Tung's mother has little life experience around essay writing due to her limited education. So the conversation ends abruptly as both share only their sense of frustration.

In this family, language interactions are limited to several domains, food being an important one.

This selection also depicts what conversation analysts call “routinized interactive exchanges.” In this family, language interactions are limited to several domains, food being an important one. This converges with a cultural value attributed to food and mothers feeding children as a way of demonstrating love and care. The routine that this family has developed is for the parental figure to offer food, at times too much or an item not desired, and the child to react in a declining manner. Then a judgment is made: “Go ahead and eat. You eat too little.” A routine such as this allows for talk to occur, yet it often leads to frustration, which is more clearly represented in selection #2. While this type of talk fills space, it does not allow for substantive conversation about topics important to parenting or to being a child filled with questions.

Selection #2

This interaction centers around Quoc, who has just come home from elementary school as he walks into the family room and kitchen where Grandma and Grandpa are sitting. Mom comes into the kitchen to prepare a sandwich for Quoc, while Grandma and Grandpa start asking him questions. Notice how four languages are used—Hainanese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English. The grandparents introduce the topic of food in Hainanese. Quoc attempts to maintain the discourse in Hainanese, but he is constrained by his limited proficiency; he repeats the same response three times before switching in frustration to English. Mom enters, code-mixing Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English with Quoc, allowing him to contribute meaningfully in the context as she appears to comfort him.

Grandma-H: /non jia ho gai bia bo?/ (Do you want to eat this cookie?)
Quoc-H: /no bo jia/ (I don't want to eat it.)
Grandpa-H: /jia ho gai di/ (Eat this then.)
Note: Grandpa points to some Chinese pastries, gestures for Quoc to come over, and pushes the pastries toward Quoc.
Quoc-H: /no bo jia/ (I don't want to eat it.)
Grandpa-H: /dai yieu bo hia na/ (Why not eat?)
Quoc-H: /no bo jia/ (I don't want to eat it.)
Grandma-V: Ta.i ra %¡ ng không ăn? (What not eat?)
Note: Quoc grows increasingly irritated with the grandparents’ insistence that he eat what they offer him, and he stomps away, pouting, and looking sideways at Grandma.
Grandma-V: Chu cha! Hạng liễt kì, hăng liễt con mặt. Coi cái mặt nào, đi, sân! (Goodness! Look at that scornful face, look at that sideways glance. Look at that face. Humph, bad!)
Quoc-H, E:  /non bo jia/ God, just leave me alone!  
(I don't want to eat it.) God, just leave me alone.

Note: Quoc stomps over to the living room, sits down on the floor in front of the coffee table, pulls out his homework from his backpack, and starts working. Mom comes over with a sandwich on a plate.

Mom-M, E, V:  [je shu jo go] sandwich nê.  
(Quoc, you eat this sandwich here.)

Quoc-E, M:  Okay, [she she, niang.]
Okay, (thank you, Mom.)

Mom-M, E, V:  [je jo] homework hà?  
(Quoc, you’re doing homework, yes?)

Quoc-E, M:  Yes, [je] have to color [jo go] map.  
(Yes, Quoc has to color this map.)

Mom-E, M:  Okay, [quai.]  
(Okay, good.)

Here, using four languages, a rich set of assumptions involving cultural expectations of the roles of the family around the theme of respect are played out in a routinized interaction. Conflict arises around the food theme, and the conflict remains unresolved. The grandparents address Quoc as if he were three or four, using oversimplified Hainanese. This is the level of Quoc’s Hainanese proficiency, yet, as we are aware from conversation with him, he knows that this kind of talk treats him as though he were still a toddler, and he feels diminished not receiving the respect from his grandparents for the fact that he is, after all, eleven. He becomes irritated with the grandparents and acts this out through his stomping away, his pouting, and his sideways glance. Respect, of course, works both ways. The grandmother perceives Quoc’s behavior as highly disrespectful, as it would be in Asian culture, where respect for elders must consistently be demonstrated, and children must not be seen as challenging the authority or position of an elder (Ima and Kheo 156–57). Quoc’s mother most likely does not interfere in the interaction between Quoc and his grandparents for exactly this same reason: She does not want to be seen as siding with her child in the conflict and not respecting her elders.

Quoc’s irritation here on one level is due to the fact that he cannot explain to his grandparents why he doesn’t want the pastries they offer. Maybe he doesn’t like their taste, maybe he’s waiting for the sandwich his mother is making. He has no way, no language to express this other than English, and he does finally revert to English in his frustration. Yet the grandparents do not speak English. Quoc is trapped in this situation through both language and cultural constraints. His Asian culture requires that he show respect to his grandparents, but he doesn’t possess the language skills necessary to decline an offer with the subtlety required to show respect. This example is reminiscent of a story recounted by Lilly Wong-Fillmore in her article “When Learning a Second Language Means Losing the First.” She tells of the outcome when a Korean grandfather visited his grandchildren in the US. The US family had stopped speaking Korean in the home, and when the children addressed their grandfather in Korean, they made errors in the morphological markings required to indicate respect. They were physically punished for their disrespectful language. Language failed them.

Selection #3

This interaction is carried out in Vietnamese and English as Mom, Dad, Tung, Kim, and Linh plan a visit to China and Vietnam.

Dad-E:  Linh, you guy look at the calendar. You gotta talk about what you guy wanna do in China . . .

Mom-V:  Ông ni, làm cái chi mà ông cười nói tiên. Anh với máy đa nỉ không à.
(This man, why does he speak English with the kids so much these days?)

His Asian culture requires that he show respect to his grandparents, but he doesn’t possess the language skills necessary to decline an offer with the subtlety required to show respect.
Dad-E: You gotta have plan, otherwise you guy fight where you wanna go.

Note: Dad takes calendar off the wall in the family room, moves over to the kitchen table where Linh is sitting, watching Mom cook and fuss with some pots and pans. Tung and Kim are in the adjacent family room watching some talk show on TV and laughing to themselves, not really taking Dad seriously.

Linh-V: Tính thì tính. Má cua nê. Ngày ni mình o"dây di Los, ngày ni lên máy bay đi Trung Quốc, ngày ni tới Quảng Châu, rồi di Hải Nam ở mấy ngày?

(All right, let’s plan. Mom, come look. This day we go to Los Angeles, this day we get on a plane and fly to China, this day we get to Quang Zhou, and then we go to Hai Nan for how many days?)

Mom-V: Thì o'H a'i Nam một tuần, rồi đi Việt Nam . . . ngày ni ở Quảng Châu đi Sài Gòn, rồi đi Da Nang rồi mới đi Tam Kỳ được. ở Tam Kỳ, máy ngày, bốn năm ngày, rồi ra lại Da Nang rồi ra Sài Gòn, ở Sài Gòn đi máy bay qua lại Quảng Châu, hay là đi Hồng Kông mà?

(Well, we’ll stay in Hai Nan for one week, then we’ll go to Viet Nam. This day, we’ll go to Sai Gon from Quang Zhou, then we’ll go to Da Nang and then we can go to Tam Ky. We’ll stay in Tam Ky for four, five days, then back out to Da Nang and Sai Gon to return to Quang Zhou, or do we go to Hong Kong?)

Note: At this point, Tung moves from the TV into the kitchen to get some food off the stove. Mom gets up from the kitchen table to get the food for Tung, and Linh continues looking at the calendar.

Tung-V: Thôi mà, được rồi.

(Okay, Mom, that’s enough.)

Mom-V: Thằng ni, ăn có số . . .

(This boy, You eat just a tiny bit . . .)

Dad-V: Linh, thì tính mà mi phải hỏi hai divul kia miia, cơ thi hàng hợp ý không ạ.

(Linh, you can plan, but you have to ask those two, too, to see if they agree.)

Linh-E: Okay you guys, come look at this and see if you think it’s okay.

Tung-E: Whatever’s fine with me.

Kim-E: Hey, I wanna go to Beijing . . . I told my friends I’d meet them there . . .

Dad-V, E: Dó, thấy chưa! I told you guy, you gotta talk it out and plan ahead.

(See, look at that!) I told you guy, you gotta talk it out and plan ahead.

This interaction in English and Vietnamese dramatically points to an important role older siblings often play in an immigrant family during language loss and shift. Note how Linh mediates between the parents and younger siblings. She plays not only a role of translator of language, she indeed must take on a unique authority role which all must rely on. The authority on a superficial level seems to come from her linguistic ability, yet what is given over to her is partially parental authority. This role of “go-between” presents even more of a dilemma when the individual assuming the role is young, such as a child in elementary school. How can parents comfortably give over to children their parenting roles?

Many of the tensions created by language loss in this family can be seen in the educational domain.

In such a case, psychologically, second language (L2) domination over the first language (L1) could cause parents to feel that they have lost authority because they now depend on their children to translate (Ima and Kheo 155–56). In Southeast Asian cultures, parents’ roles are generally authoritative in nature, and parents have the last word. In a role reversal, where children receive information first and then transfer this information to parents, parents begin to take a secondary role in decision making. They also feel that they no longer control their children’s destiny, especially in school and in major academic decisions such as going to college. In this family, once Linh entered high school, she read course and graduation requirements, chose classes on her own, and later gave advice to Quyen, Kim, and Tung when they entered high school. When parental signatures were required, the parents signed off at the “X.” Linh recalls trying to explain to them what they were signing, but they were
constrained in two ways. First, none of the languages they shared with Linh had been developed to a level by all of them to meet the expressive needs for discussing deeper issues of education. Second, their own low level of education prevented shared understanding of the concepts, and specifically the American educational system was very foreign to them. She remembers them often shaking their heads sighing, “I don’t know, you do what you think is good.” Once Linh and her siblings entered college, the parents’ loss of control became even more overwhelming to all involved.

Many of the tensions created by language loss in this family can be seen in the educational domain. The awkwardness of a school open house or awards ceremony that resulted from the parents’ limited language and the children playing “go-between” in parent-teacher dialogue eventually led to the children not informing the parents of the activities. They felt embarrassed that their parents did not know English or the American culture very well. Interestingly, the children recognize that they have contributed to their parents’ powerlessness, putting them into a secondary position of decision making. As so many immigrant children before them, as new Americans, they have distanced themselves from their parents.

As Linh says:

Our parents might hear about how difficult some classes and subjects may be or how many hours we must invest in homework, but they can seldom understand what it is to have to write an essay, or to analyze a novel for its thematic values, or to perform a biology experiment, or to take the SAT test, or to apply for college. Their only consolation is that we’re doing “something academic,” but because they know so little about American schooling, it could very well be something else altogether (e.g. drugs, crimes, gang activity). How do we even begin to discuss our feelings with our parents when all that we have been able to say to them is what revolves around food, cleanliness, going to and from school and work? How do we begin to discuss our indecision about the best plan of study to pursue in college or what will make us happy in life? We never learned how.

With respect to playing the role of “go-between” she says:

For L2 and L1 proficient children, there is an added burden of having to mediate/facilitate relationship and interaction between L2 proficient siblings and parents proficient in the L1 only or with limited L2 proficiency. Mom and Dad often ask Quyen and me about what Tung and Kim are doing in school, what they plan to study, what careers they plan to pursue, and basically, who they are as people. Quyen and I do our best, but we often ask ourselves if this is right. Shouldn’t parents have the right to know their own children rather than having to learn about them through others?

Conclusion

Today in the United States the public is mistakenly of the opinion that immigrant families resist learning English. The reality is that English is being acquired very rapidly and that family languages are being lost (Cho and Krashen 37). The discourse examples presented here reflect how this plays out in everyday communication in one typical immigrant family undergoing language shift and loss, demonstrating subtractive bilingualism, that is, losing one language while acquiring another. The result for this family, as we believe is also the case for so many families, is one of frustration, confusion, and isolation.

The difficulties in maintaining communication in immigrant families when heritage languages are not maintained increases as the children move toward English monolingualism. It is important that we consider the dynamics of this transition as we design English language programs that will support the desire of a public quite uninformed about the process of language acquisition and much less about language shift and loss. As people demand less assistance and demonstrate less tolerance for heritage language maintenance, English teachers may increasingly be the only contact students will have with teachers of language. It will be English teachers who teach them whether there is tolerance for other languages. These teachers will model to all students what they believe language is, how it should be used, how it is used to exclude some in a society, and how language policies discriminate. It is really a critical moment in the teaching of English for us to expand the English curriculum to a “language” curriculum to teach about the role of language in people’s lives and touch on general sociolinguistic phenomena. The topics of bilingualism, dialects, language policy, and the history of languages in the United States are all filled with opportunities for student research about what language is and how it affects people’s lives. We don’t need to wait until students are in universities, as we
have done for so long, to have them investigate these topics.

What we teach, research, and model about language affects public attitudes about it. Ethnographic studies such as the one undertaken here, looking at how language is used in particular settings, can be used to explore language use in other settings such as classrooms or meetings. Investigating language use in legal and medical settings with ethnographic techniques is fascinating for students. They can also develop projects looking at language use of unique groups like high school cliques or clubs to gain understanding of language and social interaction. What they will quickly find is that research opportunities about language are all around them just waiting to be explored.

Notes
1. The names of the siblings have been changed.
2. Written Vietnamese reflects Linh’s vernacular central Vietnamese accent.

Works Cited

Lee Thomas teaches linguistics in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno. Linh Cao teaches English to native and non-native speakers at Sparks High School, Sparks, Nevada.

Pat O’Keefe is a former high school English teacher. He lives in Ingleside, Illinois.