



Issue no: 01 | Vol no: 07 | October 2025: 50-61

Parental Language Ideologies and Children's Linguistic Futures in Crosslinguistic Families in Kenya

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Article History

Received: 2025.08.30

Accepted: 2025.09.25

Published: 2025.10.28

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Cite this article in APA

Achieng, B., Kitetu, C. W., & Ogola, J. O. (2025). Parental language ideologies and children's linguistic futures in crosslinguistic families in Kenya. *Editon consortium journal of literature and linguistic studies*, 7(1), 50-61. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjlls.v7i1.640>

Abstract

This paper examines how parents in crosslinguistic families in Nakuru, Kenya, conceptualise language choices for their children and how these ideologies shape family language practices. Crosslinguistic families, defined as intermarriages between parents from different ethnic backgrounds with distinct heritage languages, are increasingly common in urban Kenya due to internal migration. Language plays a critical role in identity and family dynamics, particularly in such families where multiple languages compete. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with twelve crosslinguistic households and analysed using Family Language Policy (FLP) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) frameworks. The analysis focuses on parental expectations, assumptions, and strategies for language transmission before and after childbirth. Findings indicate that while some parents considered their children's linguistic identities before birth, few implemented explicit planning. Often, children were assumed to align with the father's ethnicity, reflecting patriarchal norms that privileged the father's language. However, in practice, Swahili, the local lingua franca, and English, associated with education and social mobility, dominated family interactions, marginalising heritage languages. This shift reflects local sociolinguistic dynamics and broader discourses of legitimacy and opportunity. The study highlights how ideologies, power, and identity intersect to shape children's linguistic futures in multilingual settings. It advocates for intentional language planning in interethnic families to preserve both parents' linguistic repertoires, contributing to discussions on family multilingualism and the need to move beyond assumptions to proactive language strategies.

Key words: Children's linguistic futures, crosslinguistic families, language maintenance, multilingualism, parental language ideologies.



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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to examine how parents in crosslinguistic families in Nakuru town in Kenya conceptualise language choice for their children and whether and how these ideologies translate to particular family language practices. Language choices in the family are not usually random; instead, they are shaped by ideologies which include beliefs and expectations that parents hold about what languages matter for communication, identity, and opportunity. This is particularly true for crosslinguistic families, where parents bring different first languages into the household. Generally, parents are often positioned as gatekeepers who determine which languages are maintained and transmitted across generations, which are marginalised, and how these decisions affect children's linguistic choices and sense of belonging. Yet, as scholars note, parental ideologies are not always accompanied by explicit planning or consistent practices, leading to gaps between intentions and outcomes (Curd-Christian & Lanza, 2018; Spolsky, 2009; Tse et al., 2024).

In Kenya, these dynamics play out against a backdrop of great linguistic diversity. With more than forty indigenous (heritage) languages coexisting alongside Kiswahili, the national lingua franca, and English, the official language of education and governance, families navigate complex ideologies when deciding which languages to use at home (Barasa, 2023; Ogechi, 2019). Moreover, unlike rural areas where populations are relatively ethnically homogenous, different forms of internal migrations have resulted in high rates of ethnic diversity in urban centres, which have in turn brought different people together, leading to cross-linguistic marriages.

This paper investigates parental language ideologies in crosslinguistic families in Nakuru. Nakuru is a cosmopolitan urban centre characterised by increasing rates of crosslinguistic marriages and thus offers a rich context for studying language negotiations in crosslinguistic families. Currently, there is little research that examines how parents in such families imagine, plan or navigate their children's language use, which has important implications for heritage language vitality, family relationships, and broader societal patterns of language maintenance or shift.

The paper addresses the following questions: First, do parents in crosslinguistic families have thoughts, expectations, or conversations about language use at

home before they have children? Second, do parents have such expectations, have conversations, or make decisions after children are born? And thirdly, do parents engage in any specific strategies to realise their expectations or implement decisions made? By drawing on Family Language Policy (Spolsky, 2009, 2012) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010), the study demonstrates how parental beliefs, whether aspirational or strategic, shape everyday language practices and ultimately influence whether heritage languages are maintained or displaced by dominant codes. FLP provided a structure for examining the relationship between parents' ideologies, management strategies, and practices, while CDA enabled a deeper reading of how discourses of power, identity, and prestige informed language choices and parental expectations. This combined approach allowed the study to situate parental ideologies both within the micro-level family context and the broader sociolinguistic environment of Nakuru.

The paper thus contributes empirically to ongoing debates on family multilingualism and language maintenance by foregrounding the role of parental ideologies in shaping children's linguistic repertoires. It argues that ideologies about identity, power, and necessity can interact with sociolinguistic realities in certain contexts to privilege some languages while marginalising others. The paper highlights the Kenyan crosslinguistic family as an important space of negotiation for this process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of Family language policy (FLP) has emerged as an important area of scholarship for examining family multilingualism. FLP is generally defined as involving both explicit and covert decisions about language use within the home (King & Fogle, 2017). Based on Fishman's (1991) emphasis on the role of family in heritage language maintenance and Spolsky's (2009) policy model, scholars in FLP delved into research on decisions and choices families make about language, the language practices of family members and the consequences of these on language maintenance (Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022; King et al., 2008). A key feature in most FLP research has been the role of parental ideologies and strategies in the family's language socialisation process. By examining this interconnection between parental language ideologies, their strategies and language practices in the home, this research aims to show how parents in crosslinguistic families in Kenya

can promote or discourage maintenance of particular languages in their families.

Parental Ideologies and Language Expectations

Parents have been found to be among the key influencers with regard to the language socialisation of children from an early age. Spolsky (2009) highlights the agentive role of parents as language managers of children's linguistic behaviour. As a key aspect of the management, he proposes that the home language environment is 'controlled' by the parents through this agentive responsibility, which can either be explicit or implicit. Okita's (2002) groundbreaking research on parents' contributions in British-Japanese intermarriages reveals that the language decisions that parents make for children are not as easy as had been assumed. This paper agrees with Okita's observation and shows how parental decisions can be complicated and can have an influence not only on language choices but also on family dynamics that are themselves influenced by situational factors in and sometimes out of the family.

Globally, research on parental ideologies in crosslinguistic families has been characterised by analyses of beliefs that lead to explicit family language strategies to support the development of particular languages, separately called the one-person-one-language (OPOL) strategy (De Houwer, 2007; Koelewijn et al., 2023; Verhagen et al., 2022), beliefs that favour and support bi/multilingualism or mixing either for cognitive benefits (Piller & Gerber, 2018) or for maintaining heritage languages to preserve cultural connections (Ismail et al., 2024). In addition, parental ideologies may also be influenced by attitudes towards some languages, the vitality or dominance of a language and also the perceived 'prestigiousness' or social benefits that a language portends may impact the choices that parents make for children (Baghana et al., 2021; Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022; Muti'ah et al., 2025).

Although different in approach, both OPOL strategies (involving each parent speaking to the child in their language and MLAH (ensuring minority language is used at home) are directed at ensuring the child in a family eventually ends up speaking both or more languages. An important observation for this paper from these approaches is that they helped children to be fluent in their heritage language (Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015), and this gave them a sense of belonging in the communities associated with the language (Guardado, 2018; Little, 2020). In a linguistically diverse African setting like

Kenya, the OPOL and MLAH strategies operate differently. As data in this paper demonstrates, parents may wish to implement such strategies at home, but their efforts are likely to be overtaken by the dominance of existing community languages such as Swahili and English, which are prevalent in most urban Kenyan families (Barasa, 2023).

Additionally, an important question in crosslinguistic marriages is usually which of the two heritage languages, between the father's and the mother's, family members use at home. Unlike in global contexts where both parents' languages may be viewed in equal status, African contexts mostly present situations inclined to patriarchal culture-based ideologies that designate the fathers' ethnicity as the legitimate one. For instance, an earlier study by Kirsch (2012) on parental language ideologies of Luxembourgish multilingual mothers married to British men, most mothers stated that they would not consider raising children in a language other than their mother-tongue to maintain a good relationship with Luxembourgish relatives. Using semi-structured interviews and observation, the study found that most mothers had high expectations of their children becoming fluent in both languages and hoped the acquisition process would be 'natural' because they had OPOL plans for this (which were successful). This agentive role of parental ideologies on the linguistic 'shape' of children's futures is crucial in crosslinguistic families and is also evident in studies done in Singapore (Cavallaro et al., 2024; Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022), China (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018; Tang & Calafato, 2022) and Australia (Torsh, 2019).

In contrast, Maseko and Siziba's (2024) study shows how, in interethnic marriages between Ndebele men and Shona women in Zimbabwe, patriarchal ideologies ensured wives got assimilated into the Ndebele language and culture, and consequently, children became Ndebele. Through semi-structured interviews with both parents from each family, his study demonstrates how language choice in interethnic marriages in an African setting can be complex. In one of his interviews, a Ndebele mother explains that when they were dating, they used Ndebele, Shona and English, but when they got their first child, the question of which language to use became an issue. She expresses her love for her Ndebele language and feels that it would be more useful to their child, but she also expresses her awareness of the fact that her husband prefers his Shona language. These two situations point to underlying tensions regarding language choice in

crosslinguistic families that this paper addresses in terms of parental expectations and language practices.

Kenya is not exempt from existing patriarchal ideologies (Ondicho, 2023), which are found to filter down to family dynamics, particularly ethnic identity, as shown in the data from crosslinguistic families in the present study. As language is taken as an integral part of ethnic identity (Ogechi, 2019), it is expected that the fathers' language will be taught and used in the family as the main language. However, as shown in many studies of urban areas in Kenya, there is a remarkable shift where parents seem to be bringing up children in the two dominant languages, namely Swahili and/or English, with the assumption that they provide a better social advantage than heritage languages (Barasa, 2023; Damiano et al., 2025). From these studies, it is evident that parental language expectations and practices may be shaped by ideologies of dominance, gender and identity as well as pragmatic considerations. Thus, it is necessary for crosslinguistic families to go beyond expectations to consciously plan and actively invest in their children's language practices by employing supportive cultural, social and material resources.

Ideologies and Expectations vs Language Practices

It is not always guaranteed that parents in crosslinguistic families will be actively involved in planning and executing language matters for children. A recent case study by Damiano et al. (2025) of language use among Tharaka parents and their children in Nairobi shows how urban families face increasing societal pressures with regard to language choice. Using a mix of questionnaires, structured interviews and participant observation, the study reveals that while parents express a deep connection to their Kiitharaka language, this connection did not translate to practice, and there was still a strong preference for Swahili and English when speaking with children. Like in Maseko and Mutasa (2018), the parents found themselves accommodating the children's use of the dominant languages. Adding the contribution of attitude, Sari (2020) conducted interviews and observation of Dyak-Mudarese couples, which reveal that where a parent has positive attitudes towards their language and is actively involved in teaching it, the children speak it, but where there is a lack of agency or a negative attitude towards the ethnic language, it is neglected. Her study attributes this neglect to the frequent use and preference (by some parents) of the dominant language, Indonesian, at home, which is the official language and is the language used at school and

with the wider community. This is a belief shared in many studies of countries where one or both of the heritage languages are usually a minority language and there are other languages perceived as dominant or more prestigious within a community (Indriani et al., 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Ting & Berek, 2021; Zuraida et al., 2020). The paper argues that although children in general tend to frequently select the dominant language for interactions with family members, the choice of a minority language for home use by parents can make it more prevalent, increasing linguistic exposure, and conveys explicit and implicit messages (Guardado, 2018) about its significance.

Across Africa, studies in crosslinguistic marriages have also found parents' ideologies about dominant languages as well as their own use of these languages playing an important role in the language practices of crosslinguistic families (De Klerk, 2001; Jogbodo et al., 2024; Kilangi, 2024; Maseko & Siziba, 2024). While parental language ideologies and preferences concerning family language are important, much effort is needed to actualise these intentions for them to translate to practice in children's linguistic behaviour. Kilangi's (2024) in-depth interviews with interethnic families in Tanzania reveal how, despite having a strong attachment to their ethnic language and sending children to their grandparents to 'increase chances' of them learning their ethnic language, a lack of an explicit strategy to teach children a language disadvantages the child's acquisition of any of the two languages. In this study, the disadvantage is made worse by the fact that the parents have also not learnt each other's language and therefore communicate in Kiswahili, which is the official and national language of Tanzania.

Evidently, children in crosslinguistic families end up adopting the dominant language as their main language due to a lack of an environment where other languages are regularly spoken. Similar findings are reported in the study by Jogbodo et al. (2024), who found that although children in exogamous marriage between Yorubas and other minority tribes acquired Yoruba as the dominant language, they lacked opportunities to use it because even their parents mixed it a lot with English, so they ended up using English, which according to the study, was more prestigious. The difference from the Tanzanian study is that, at least in this Nigerian situation, one of the home languages is learnt. However, one of the gaps in language management addressed in this paper includes the fact that knowing a language and not having contexts to use it may be a recipe for language shift.

Other studies have focused on the complexities and contradictions of parental language ideologies on their children's language practices. Maseko and Siziba (2024) argue that in a Ndebele-Shona home, such complexities were linked to 'dispositions and ideologies of parents towards their own and their partner's language. For instance, evidence of patriarchal family ideologies in some African societies defines a family's ethnicity as belonging to the fathers', so most Shona wives get assimilated into the Ndebele culture and maintain Ndebele in the home. However, the opposite is observed where the wife is a Ndebele and the husband a Shona. It is observed that in such households, the mothers pursued a 'parallel family language policy' where they took every opportunity possible to speak to their children in Ndebele. Maseko and Siziba (2024) suggest that this could reflect attitudes held by the parents about the respective language, as the position of Shona can be likened to that of Afrikaans in De Klerk's (2001) study-languages associated with a negative history. This situation presents an interesting intersection of struggles over language that are related to power, gender and identity all at the same time.

Despite widely held beliefs that there may be a degree of conformity to even the most implicit parental input by some children, the extent of mismatch between parents' language ideologies and the observed practices is pronounced in many families, as earlier evidenced by Curdt-Christiansen (2016) and Maseko & Mutasa (2018). This lack of conformity has been found to be mainly mediated by extra-familial language ideologies and practices, like those that are created and reproduced in public institutions such as schools (Curdt-Christiansen & Wang, 2018). Like in the Kenyan situation in Damiano et al.'s (2025) study, there is a danger of a potential shift when parental agency for developing the respective heritage language is undermined by the different status and social function of the heritage languages, as well as the presence of a different dominant language. This kind of situation was also replicated in De Klerk's (2001) study of English-Afrikaans intermarriages in South Africa, where results from semi-structured interviews showed that most families had shifted to English due to its rising dominance over Afrikaans at the time.

In sum, parental beliefs and attitudes oscillate between aspirations for multilingualism and pragmatic accommodation to dominant languages. Where ideologies are matched with consistent strategies, multilingual outcomes are achievable, but where

expectations remain aspirational, they seem to give way to the majority or dominant languages of the community. This relationship presents a critical gap that this paper addresses: whether and how parental language ideologies in crosslinguistic families in Kenya translate, or fail to translate into family language practices and the implications for these on language maintenance.

Theoretical Framework

The research employed Family Language Policy (FLP) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspectives to understand how language ideologies influence language choice in crosslinguistic families. FLP provides a lens to examine the interplay between ideology, management, and practice (Spolsky, 2012). Ideology here refers to parents' beliefs and expectations about the importance of different languages for their children, management captures the explicit strategies that families put in place, while practices reflect the everyday language choices that family members make. Prior studies show that even when parents hold strong beliefs about the importance of heritage language maintenance, clear management strategies are required for these to translate into practice. CDA, on the other hand, provides a critical perspective for analysing how language ideologies and practices within families are shaped by broader societal structures of power (inequality) and identity. This paper argues from Fairclough's (2010) stance that language use is never neutral and that it is more often than not reflective of underlying discourses of authority, legitimacy, cultural belonging, and perceptions about linguistic prestige. For this paper, CDA provided an analytical frame with which to uncover underlying tensions in the expectations, decisions, as well as 'uptake' or 'non uptake' of particular languages.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on data from a larger study of parental language ideologies in crosslinguistic families in Nakuru, Kenya. Nakuru was selected as the research site due to its ethnic diversity and the prevalence of interethnic marriages, which provided a fertile context for investigating how language ideologies are shaped in crosslinguistic family settings. The research utilised a qualitative approach, primarily using interviews to gather data. A purposive sample of 12 couples was selected through snowballing, each representing a crosslinguistic family in which the spouses came from different ethnic backgrounds. The families were labelled as Family 1 (F1) -Family 12 (F12). The participants are labelled as A1 for Husband (father) and B1 for Wife (mother) in

Family 1, and this follows with A2-A12, B2-B12 for the rest of the participants.

A sample of 12 was found appropriate for two main reasons. First, being qualitative research, the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences rather than to generalise findings. In-depth engagement meant intensive transcription and analysis, which would be difficult to achieve with a large sample. Secondly, the research applied Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) approach, where the researcher obtained families that were relatively adequate to capture the nature of diversity in crosslinguistic marriages in Nakuru (comprising ethnic groups from the provinces of Western, Eastern, Nyanza, Coast and the Rift Valley). After obtaining ethics clearance, semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants' homes to capture responses in their natural environment.

The researcher made an initial visit to the family to explain the nature of the research, to obtain voluntary informed consent, create rapport and make an appointment for the next interview visit. Both parents participated in the interview session, which took an average of one hour, and all were audio-recorded with participants' consent. A mixture of English and Swahili was used in the interviews. The interviews explored parents' beliefs, expectations, and assumptions about language use, as well as any conversations, plans or strategies adopted to support language learning for their children. To comply with the ethics of confidentiality and anonymity, names and any other personal data of participants are not used in this paper.

Data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed manually for accuracy. Because the interviews were conducted in Swahili and English, translation was done to ease the coding process. The data was analysed thematically following Braune and Clarke's (2006) framework, which enabled the researcher to identify patterns and generate codes based on emerging themes related to beliefs and expectations about language as well as language practices at home. This methodological approach provided rich qualitative insights into how parents in crosslinguistic families negotiate language ideologies and decisions for their children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the question of whether they had any thoughts, expectations or conversations or made any decisions

about language use at home before they got children, 6 out of the 12 couples reported having thought about language for 'expected' children. Couples in F3, F4, F7, F8 and F11 stated that they had thought of their future 'children' as belonging to the father's ethnicity. In F3, a Kalenjin-Luhya marriage, the parents both assumed that the children who would be born would be Kalenjin. This was further evidenced in the naming of the children as they came. However, some of these couples stated that the thoughts were not 'that serious', and most of them wish they had thought more seriously about it in order to make clear decisions about languages. None of the families reported having conversations about language or even making decisions about language at home before the children were born.

Couples in the study were also asked whether they had had any thoughts, expectations or conversations or made any decisions about language use at home after they got children. 5 out of the 12 families reported having expectations about their heritage language for their children. F3, who also had expectations before children, stated that after their firstborn, they did not have any language plans, so Swahili and English prevailed. F4, F7 and F8 expected that their children would be able to pick and learn both their heritage languages because they used them when speaking to their own relatives. However, most of these parents reported using a mixture of Swahili, English and their heritage languages.

Only two couples reported having had conversations about languages for the children. For F4, the couple had talked about the need for their children to have some knowledge of both their heritage languages. For Family 8, Participant B8 stated that it was not a conversation but more of an 'order' from the husband that the language to be used at home should be his language. F4 was the only family that reported adopting some kind of strategy to enable their children to learn their languages, with the father teaching the children his language, like how to say 'good night', and insisting that they all say this every day. Then the mother would also teach the same in her language. Although participant B8 in Family 8 expressed her excitement when her son repeated some of the Turkana words he picked from her telephone conversations with her relatives, she admitted that she did not employ any strategies to show encouragement or actively acknowledge the child's efforts.

Discussion

Parental Ideologies and Expectations before Children

The findings revealed that parents in crosslinguistic families in Nakuru town held particular expectations or assumptions about the linguistic futures of their children, but these rarely translated into explicit planning or sustained strategies. For instance, families such as F3 and F4 assumed that their children would belong to the father's ethnic group and, by extension, adopt the father's language. This ideological stance was first confirmed through naming practices, where all the children were given Kalenjin names, reinforcing symbolic belonging to the father's group. This aligns with both the patriarchal ideologies of the Kenyan family setting (Ondicho, 2023) and previous research showing how patriarchal norms influence family language policies and where the father's identity is often prioritised (Curdt-Christiansen & Lanza, 2018; King & Fogle, 2017; Little, 2020).

From a CDA perspective, the parents' expectations about language use reflect aspects of gendered power dynamics in society, where authority and cultural continuity are vested in men's identities (Qian, 2024). In Family 8, where the husband emphasises that his language be used at home, this 'directive' positions his language as the legitimate language in the family while relegating the wife's Turkana language to the private sphere of her personal conversations. In fact, the wife's reluctance to later recognise the son's efforts in learning Turkana words can be seen as a reflection of her convergence with the husband's ideologies. This aligns with findings from Maseko and Siziba (2024), which showed how women in Ndebele-Shona marriages would get 'assimilated' into Ndebele culture by default, implying that family language policies are not simply about communication but are deeply entangled with power, authority, and gender relations. Nevertheless, despite parents' reported expectations regarding language, many confessed that they did not talk or make any serious plans about it.

Absence of Explicit Conversations or Plans

The lack of explicit conversations or decisions about language use prior to or even after children were born highlights the informal and unplanned nature of family language policies in the Kenyan crosslinguistic households. Where parents expressed pride or desire for their children to learn heritage languages, the absence of concrete plans meant that dominant languages such as Swahili and English quickly took over. Previous studies of intermarried couples in Tanzania (Kilangi, 2024), Australia (Torsh, 2019) and Nigeria (Ochonogor, 2019)

also point to this trend and warn of its vulnerability to language shift. The absence of 'pre-child' planning highlights the informal nature of family language ideologies in crosslinguistic families in Kenya and is in deep contrast with other studies in Western societies that have shown interethnic families having well-articulated language plans before and after the arrival of children in the family (Kostoulas & Motsiou, 2020)

Shifting Expectations in Practice after Children

After children were born, parents' ideologies and expectations about language became more visible, though the study observes that they still rarely translated into consistent practices. Even where parents valued heritage languages, they seemed to be overtaken by the perceived necessity of Swahili and English for broader social integration and academic success. This mismatch produced a predictable outcome: children acquiring Swahili and English while heritage languages remained marginal. These findings align with Curdt-Christiansen's (2009) observation of Chinese families in Quebec as well as other studies (Baghana et al., 2021; Idaryani & Fidyati, 2022) that showed unplanned family language ideologies often accelerate language shift toward dominant societal languages. From both FLP and CDA perspectives, this occurrence highlights how external societal forces shape family language practices. The parents' framing of English as indispensable for education and Swahili as essential for everyday life illustrates how dominant languages are legitimised through repeated narratives of necessity, presenting their use as 'normal' rather than as a choice shaped by social pressures and which embody relations of power, identity and gender.

Power, Identity and Gender

The privileging of fathers' languages was not limited to expectations before children but was found to extend into household practices after children. Family 8 illustrates this when the wife says her husband insisted that his language be spoken at home, positioning his language as the legitimate one. As mentioned earlier, such scenarios underline how language choices are intertwined with power and gender dynamics, reproducing patriarchal discourses that grant men greater authority over cultural and linguistic continuity (Ondicho, 2023; Qian, 2024). From a CDA perspective, by positioning children as belonging to the father's ethnicity and aligning them with his language, their identities are established along patriarchal lines and the mothers' linguistic identities are downplayed. However, in Kenya, like in many African

contexts, family structures are heavily influenced by patriarchy such that ethnic identity being defined by a father's ethnicity is almost automatic (Ogechi, 2019; Ondicho, 2023). Yet contradictions were also evident. In some households, mothers resisted by creating what Maseko and Siziba (2024) describe as 'parallel family language policies', where they spoke to their children in their heritage languages even if the dominant home environment privileged the father's language. These acts of subtle 'resistance' highlight the contested nature of family language policy in which mothers exercise agency despite structural inequalities, thereby constructing and negotiating different or 'double' identities for themselves and for the children.

While some parents viewed their children as belonging to 'two worlds', others preferred to maintain what they considered neutral for their children. For example, participant B2 in Family 2 presents this predicament when she advises her children to tell anyone who asks her children about their ethnicity that they were 'Nazareths', that they belonged to the tribe of Jesus, because they were Christians:

R₁: *na unakuta baba pia hata yeye kuongea nao hiyo language ni ngumu. Kwa nini mimi naongea nao Kikuyu....*

R₁: Naturally, *utakuta tu hata nikingombanisha ninaongea na Kikuyu, kwa nini mfanye hivi! nyumba mmewacha inakaa hivi! nyumba ninawacha nimeongea Kikuyu na wanaelewa Kikuyu. Lakini hakuna siku utapata baba yao anaingia na apate loud music na ukute anasema kwa lugha yao aje? Kuongea ni kwa English ama Kiswahili. Alafu another part ya baba yao nafikiri ni tricky zaidi anaongea Kiluhya, Kiluo*

INT: So, which one will he pick?

R₁: (*sasa, which one is which*). *Mara utasikia anaongea kijaluo, mara utasikia ni kiluhya hata yeye anashangaa atatransfer gani kwa watoto. Hata sometimes mtoto anauliza mimi ni tribe gani, mimi ni mlugha gani. So I end up telling him that ukiulizwa useme wewe ni Mnazareti. Kabila la yesu.*

R₁: *kwa sababu sasa utasema wewe ni mkikuyu, mluhya ama mjaluo?*

(atakapoendelea kukuwa atajua vile atakuwa akiwaambia wenzake...

(Participant B12, personal communication, August 2022)

Translation:

R1: And you find that even their father also finds it difficult to speak to them in his language. Why is it that I speak to them in Kikuyu...

R1: Naturally, you'll just find that even when I am scolding them, I end up speaking in Kikuyu, "Why do you do this! You've left the house looking like this!" I find myself speaking in Kikuyu, and they understand Kikuyu. But you will never find their father coming in, finding loud music playing, and speaking to them in his own language. He will speak either English or Kiswahili. Then another part about their father, I think it's even trickier, he speaks both Luhya and Luo.

Interviewer: So, which one will he pick?

R1: (Now, which one is which?) Sometimes you'll hear him speaking Luo, other times Luhya. Even he gets confused about which one he'll transfer to the children. Sometimes the child even asks me, "What tribe am I? Which language is mine?" So, I end up telling him, "If anyone asks, say you are a 'Nazarene', the tribe of Jesus."

R1: Because now, what will you say you are, a Kikuyu, a Luhya, or a Luo? (When he grows older, he'll decide for himself what to tell others...)

(Participant B2, personal communication, August 2022)

This excerpt clearly tells the tensions that are sometimes faced by crosslinguistic families in making decisions about languages for the family. The mother views her heritage language, Kikuyu, as a natural and emotionally authentic medium of communication, using it unconsciously with her children until they have learnt it. In contrast, the father prioritises socially dominant languages, English and Kiswahili, reflecting a pragmatic orientation that values utility and social mobility over ethnic continuity. His multilingual background

(Luhya/Luo) further contributes to 'linguistic ambiguity', resulting in conflicting ideologies that leave children uncertain about their own linguistic and ethnic identity.

These results echo previous findings by Sari (2020) and Zuraida et al. (2020), which indicated a potential language shift where particular languages were ignored. This paper argues that the marginalisation or relegation of a parent's language negatively affects its transmission and may reflect broader societal inequalities and attitudes towards languages, which are potentially reproduced within the private family space. However, even when parents possess positive attitudes towards their language, the lack of consistent strategies to teach it to their children still hampers transmission.

Limited Strategies for Heritage Language Maintenance

Only one family (F4) reported adopting a deliberate strategy to teach children their heritage languages, such as daily greetings in both languages. While the study finds this to be symbolically significant, these efforts did not seem like they would have long-term effects, bearing in mind Spolsky's (2009) argument that any language management strategy must be systematic and consistent for it to influence long-term language practices. Even in moments where some parents reported feeling happy when children spontaneously picked up words from overheard conversations, as in Family 8, the mother did not do anything to build upon the child's initiative through encouragement or deliberate teaching.

The reliance on environmental exposure, rather than intentional parental input, demonstrates the vulnerability of heritage languages in crosslinguistic families. Studies elsewhere confirm this precariousness of heritage language maintenance (Damiano et al., 2025; Guardado, 2018; Sari, 2020; Zuraida et al., 2020). Guardado (2018), for instance, found that in Spanish-speaking families in Canada, heritage language survival depended on consistent and deliberate reinforcement by parents. Without this, even children who showed interest in heritage words quickly abandoned them in favour of dominant societal languages.

Influence of Dominant Languages

The prominence of Swahili and English was universal across the families, with parents consistently emphasising Swahili as the community lingua franca and English as the language of education, both framed as indispensable. This framing reflects what CDA identifies

as discourses of necessity and prestige: Swahili and English are not seen as choices but as 'normal' imperatives for mobility and integration. Studies in Tanzania (Kilangi, 2024) and Kenya (Waweru, 2023) show that Kiswahili's national status overrides ethnic languages even in families with strong symbolic attachment to the heritage language.

These results also echo findings in studies done in Nigeria where English was also found to dominate in many exogamous marriages in the South-western parts of the country (Jogbodo et. al, 2024). The post-child stage reveals several contradictions and tensions. While parents valued heritage languages ideologically, their practices overwhelmingly favoured dominant codes. From a CDA perspective, these findings illustrate how discourses of prestige (English) and integration (Swahili) normalise the displacement of minority languages. The implication here is that heritage languages survive only where ideologies are translated into deliberate practices that resist hegemonic narratives.

Overall, the results in this paper confirm that parental language ideologies influence the family language practices of crosslinguistic families, whether they are matched with intentional input or not. The heritage languages are mostly affected by this. Moreover, the issue of language choice in these marriages is not neutral as it is tied to other aspects of power, ethnic identity and gender relations. The study demonstrates that, regardless of these aspects, limited parental involvement in teaching their languages leads to marginalisation and gradual language shift, which is a well-problematized issue in sociolinguistics studies in Kenya. Intentional language planning and action by parents in these crosslinguistic families can promote multilingualism, ethnic identity and language maintenance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This paper has illustrated the complex interplay of ideology, practice, and power in shaping family language policies among intermarried couples and the recurring tension between aspiration and reality. Four ideological stances are evident from the discussion: the heritage as identity ideology, the assimilationist ideology, the integrationist ideologies and the pragmatic or majority language dominance ideology. While parents expressed desires for their children to know heritage languages, the lack of explicit planning and the majority language dominant ideology gave way to Swahili and English, limiting the possibilities for transmission.

Fathers' languages are frequently privileged at the level of ideology, but even these are often displaced in practice by dominant languages.

The implications of these findings are threefold. At the linguistic level, the failure to align parental ideologies with deliberate practices accelerates language shift, endangering heritage languages while reinforcing dominant ones. At the relational level, unequal regard for parents' languages may affect family relationships, either fostering intimacy when efforts are reciprocal or reinforcing hierarchies when power dynamics prevail. Lastly, at the societal level, while family choices can contribute to the marginalisation of minority languages, they can also become sites of resistance where intentional strategies can promote linguistic diversity. Crosslinguistic families are thus not only shaped by

multilingual contexts, but they also actively shape the linguistic future of their children and the community at large.

Recommendations: While this research delved into parental ideologies and language practices in crosslinguistic families, there is a need for children-centred studies that foreground children's agency in negotiating and reshaping parental ideologies. This would provide a more balanced perspective that integrates both parental intentions and children's language socialisation. Secondly, researchers could also adopt longitudinal methods to track how parental expectations and children's actual language practices of a family evolve over time, especially as children enter school and gain greater exposure to societal discourses.

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