New Irish Families: Successes and Challenges in Heritage Language Acquisition for Second Generation Migrant Children

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Concentrating on families that have very young children born in Ireland, the information presented in this report relates to the early phase in children's lives rather than their experience at school and beyond. Our analysis of the information from the twenty in-depth interviews with 'new' Irish families revealed that heritage language is a particular challenge for migrant parents in Ireland. Consequently, this report focuses on the issue of heritage language maintenance and ways in which families influence heritage language acquisition and maintenance in the second generation.

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1. Introduction

There is a vast variety of reasons underlying the choice of Ireland as a destination country for many migrants from around the world. Some came to improve their economic lot or to escape persecution, others specifically to learn English, and others to study more generally. For those who emigrated from non-English speaking countries, the issue of maintaining their heritage language is of central importance to many, and particularly for those who are rearing children in a predominantly English speaking environment. Parents tend to pass on their mother tongue to their children (Fishman 1991), not only to facilitate communication with immediate and extended family members, but also to maintain a sense of cultural identity amongst their children. However, over time, many linguistic minorities experience 'language shift' (Valdés 2005: 415). As children born in the receiving country partake in pre-school and school related activities, they are increasingly exposed to the host country language, as well as to peer influence and the media of their country of birth. This can make them feel less positive towards their heritage language and consequently they are likely to use it less. Fillmore (2000) suggests that there are both internal and external factors that lead to the loss of the native language. The internal force for this choice is the desire for social acceptance and conformity to the dominant group, as well as the necessity to communicate with the members of the host society. On the other hand, external pressure comes from the socio-political environment, and the extent to which a society opposes expressions of difference, like for example anti-immigrant rhetoric of political parties, demonstrations and initiatives. Children may not understand what those public actions mean, but they are aware of the underlying sentiment and they interpret it as being different not being acceptable. As language is an obvious and easily identifiable difference, it may be the first to go in this context (Fillmore 2000:208).

As a result of limited usage, proficiency in the heritage language often wanes between the second and the third generation since second generation parents have fewer opportunities to use the ethnic language and impart it to their offspring. Accordingly, in many cases, the third generation starts to lose their ability in the heritage language despite the fact that their grandparents and/or parents are fluent speakers of the native language.

Apart from the family context, language maintenance within an ethno-linguistic community is influenced by a range of institutions, such as language schools, libraries, print and broadcast media, religious congregations, social clubs, and ethnic shops and restaurants (Fishman 1991). Furthermore, Mackey (2004) highlights the significant impact of multilingual broadcasting, the language of computer software and satellite networks on heritage language maintenance today. Due to the dominance of the English language, not only in Ireland but globally, it can be expected that heritage language maintenance is a particular challenge for migrant parents in Ireland. It is this issue of heritage language maintenance that is the focus of this report.

Issues related to language learning, multilingualism, cultural and linguistic diversity have only recently started to be addressed (Ní Laoire 2007; McFayden 2008; Carson and Extra 2010). In Ireland some initiatives encouraging linguistic diversity started to appear only in recent years mostly as a result of numerous requests from families and parents raising multilingual children (La Morgia 2011). Voluntarily, groups like Bilingual Forum Ireland and Multilingual Family Support Groups work to support local projects and initiatives which promote minority languages, as well as an understanding of the value of linguistic diversity.

In the last twenty years migration brought many changes to the linguistic landscape of Ireland, making multilingualism an increasingly common reality. According to the 2006 Census, more than 100 languages were spoken in the country alongside Irish and English. Census 2011 shows that recent migration to Ireland has resulted in far greater linguistic diversity with Polish and Lithuanian in particular spoken by a large number of families (Central Statistics Office 2012). This increased diversity in language can have both positive and negative implications for children and their families. For example, fluency in the language of the country of residence is considered an important factor for integration and an important determinant of the lives of migrants more generally (Molcho et al. 2011). This does not, however, have to be to the detriment of immigrants' heritage language. Indeed, contrary to previous beliefs about this matter, bilingualism has been shown to have positive effects on children, such as improved cognitive awareness (Barac and Bialystok 2011). So far, relatively little is known about this issue in Ireland, which we aim to address in this report.

1.1 Introduction to the New Irish Families project

The *New Irish Families* project had the aim of describing and analysing the profile of Ireland's increasingly diverse families with particular focus on the Irish-born children of non-Irish or mixed parents. By exploring the challenges faced by these families the project aimed to contribute to effective and inclusive policy making that addresses this much greater diversity. To this end, a profile of this cohort was created from the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) infant cohort dataset which describes the main demographic trends, the socio-economic status as well as the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of this group (see Röder et al. 2014).

While using a large quantitative dataset like the GUI offers a range of advantages, it cannot be expected to answer all questions. Although it is a comprehensive dataset, it did not for example ask about reasons for certain choices or outcomes, and did not allow parents to voice their own concerns or issues beyond those included in the survey. The representative, large scale dataset of GUI was therefore used to establish pattern, while we also conducted interviews with twenty families in relation to the core topics of interest (see below for further information). While the original GUI study included a qualitative element, this was not suitable here as it did not include the target population and themes that were the main interest of our study. In the following we present some general patterns from the quantitative dataset before discussing in more detail the findings from the qualitative interviews.

1.2 Language use in Growing Up in Ireland

Among the sample of families surveyed in the *Growing Up in Ireland* study[1], we found that even in families for whom English was not the native language of both or one of the parents, a large majority spoke to their infant children in English while at home. However, as shown in Figure 1 below, less than half of the parents from EU Accession States spoke English in the home. Among households where the Primary Caregiver was from one of the EU Accession States and English was not the main language spoken in the home, the most commonly spoken languages were Polish (66.2%), Lithuanian (17.2%), Russian (8.7%), and Romanian (5%). In households where the Primary Caregiver was born in Africa, the most common spoken languages in non-English speaking households were French (57.5%), Arabic (36.3%),

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[1] Please refer to our report *'New Irish Families: A profile of Second Generation Children and their Families'* (Röder et al. 2014) for details on the sample and methodology used.

and Portuguese (7.1%). Chinese (74.4%) was the main non-English language spoken in households where the Primary Caregiver was from Asia. In a small number of these households, Arabic and Spanish were spoken.
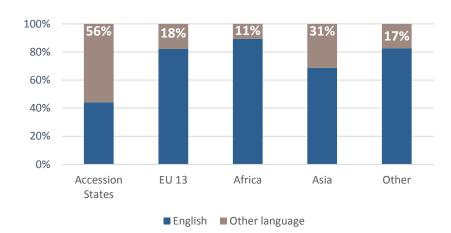
Figure 1 Language spoken to study child in the home

As shown in Figure 2 below, in households in which at least one parent was born in Ireland, English was the dominant language. The highest percentage (39.9%) of households in which English was not spoken in the home were those where neither parents were Irish. In mixed relationships, that is households wherein one parent was Irish and the other not, English was almost exclusively the main language spoken to the infants in their home. There are a number of reasons why some groups tend to speak their native language in the home. One explanation could be low levels of English speaking skills. Alternatively, it might indicate that they intend re-locating to their home country as some point. Another possible reason may be that parents wish to maintain and transmit to their children a strong sense of their cultural heritage which might be eroded if their children cannot communicate in their native tongue, which is explored further below.
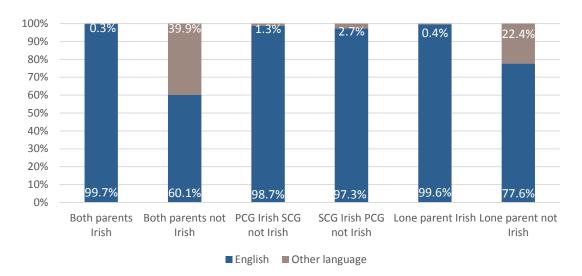
Figure 2 Parental nationality group dyads and language spoken to study child at home

1.3 Qualitative study – Methodology

Building on the initial analysis of the survey data from Growing Up in Ireland (Röder et al. 2014), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 families. To this end, a purposive sample, reflecting the main nationality groups identified[2] in the initial quantitative phase of the project, were interviewed using an interview guide developed in close linkage to the topics covered in the survey. In-depth interviews were conducted asking parents about their family context, local surroundings, early childcare for their young children, their labour market integration, and their social integration.

1.4 The sample

The main characteristics of the families included in the study are presented in Table 1 below. Three of the families included an Irish parent, with the other parent from an EU Accession country, EU-13 and 'Other' European country respectively. Six of the families were from African countries, five from Asia, three from EU Accession countries and one from South America. Our sample also included two families with mixed nationality pairing. Our sample had quite diverse migratory patterns. Six parents came to Ireland as asylum seekers and had

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[2] The nationality groups identified in Growing Up in Ireland were: The Republic of Ireland; The United Kingdom; EU Accession States – Countries that joined the EU between 1st May 2004 and 1st July 2013; EU-13 – This contains EU 15 countries, excluding the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom; Africa – The African continent; Asia – The Asian continent. Further details on these groupings can be found in (Röder et al. 2014), Chapter 2.

been granted refugee status and/or leave to remain. Five parents came initially on student visas and later became skilled professionals. Four parents came to join their spouse after marriage. About half of the parents who worked were in skilled professions, while the other half was employed in unskilled manual work or similar. The families participating in our qualitative study have between them a total of 29 children born in Ireland: one family/couple has three children; seven families have two children and 12 families have only one child. Also, three families have older children that were not born in Ireland. The youngest child born in Ireland was three months old and the oldest was seven years old, while the older siblings not born in Ireland were between seven and 18 years old.

Table 1 Main characteristics of the families

Characteristics	Groups	N
Nationality group	One Irish parent and one EU Accession	1
	One Irish parent and one EU 13	1
	One Irish parent and one 'Other' European country	1
	Two parent EU Accession	3
	Two parent African	6
	Two parent Asian	5
	Two parent South American	1
	Others – mixed nationality pairings[3]	2
	Total Number of Families	20
Marital status	Married	15
	Single	1
	Cohabiting	0
	Separated	3
	Divorced	1
Migratory path	Asylum seeker	6
	Student visa	5
	Work visa	22
	Followed existing spouse	4
Economic status at the time of interview	Skilled professional	12
	Unskilled manual	15
	Stay at home parent	6
	Student	2
	Unemployed, actively seeking employment	5
Household composition	Two parent, one child	8
	Two parent, more than one child	7
	One parent, one child	2
	One parent, more than one child	3
Children born in Ireland	Total number of children	29
	Youngest child	3m
	Oldest child	7y
	Number of children born in Ireland	29
	Number of children born outside Ireland	5

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[3] Details of these pairings are not provided so as to maintain participants anonymity

Similar to the quantitative study, this qualitative study focuses on families that have very young children born in Ireland, so that the issues we highlight here relate to the early phase in children's lives rather than their experience at school and beyond. Our analysis of the information from the twenty in-depth interviews with 'new' Irish families reveals ways in which families influence heritage language acquisition and maintenance in the second generation.

2. Parents' attitudes towards transmission of heritage language to children

The vast majority of the study participants reported that it was very important for them to pass their native language on to their children, mentioning various reasons why they wish for their children to maintain their heritage language. First of all, they viewed their native language as a means of transmitting their culture and traditions, thus encouraging the maintenance of the children's ethnic identity:

> *When you have the language you can explain the culture better* (Marie-Collette, African mother).

The ability to speak the heritage language was also considered very important because it enables the children to communicate with their grandparents and extended family.

> *I wanted my child to be able to speak to my parents when they come to visit us here and when we are going to visit them. I would be embarrassed if my child is not able to greet my parents or my in-laws in their language* (Rebecca, mother from EU Accession Country).

The majority of families in the study had grandparents who lived in their country of origin and did not know English. The immigrant parents visited their countries of origin, and the grandparents visited Ireland, often staying for lengthy periods of time to help with childcare. Regardless of the grandparents' country of residence and language, all the participants emphasised the importance of maintaining their heritage language to facilitate communication across generations.

Another reason why learning the heritage language was reported as being very important to parents is related to the intellectual benefits that come from knowing a second or even a third language. Some study participants were aware of research showing the benefits of bilingualism for children's intellectual development. For example, a mother from an EU New Accession country says:

> *I spoke to my husband about introducing our children to both our heritage languages because I found out that this exercise will help their brain to develop better. Also, my mother is a language teacher and she told me the same thing* (Aneta, mother from EU Accession country).

Another parent approached developing heritage language skills in their children as '*an investment*' in education and in their children's future. They also expressed a desire for their children to learn additional languages:

> *I think is important to know many languages as good as you can and I invest in that a lot. My older son is very good in my heritage language now and he is fluent in English now. We also put him this year in German classes. My husband's father is helping us to pay for these lessons because we think they'll become very useful in time* (Maria, mother from EU13 country).

One parent also mentioned that considering '*the global economy*', their children may use their parents' heritage language in a future profession:

> *Our heritage language is French, and we speak in the house English and French, because we want our child to know these two languages very well. He might need them in the future to travel or to get a job abroad* (Nyota, African mother).

Every respondent emphasised that it was their desire for their children to learn the mother tongue/heritage language. Parents were also well-informed about many of the benefits of bilingualism, and wished to see their children grow up competent in their heritage language and English. However, as the next sections show, not all were able to achieve this to the same extent, which raises questions regarding the strategies they use and obstacles they encounter.

3. Strategies employed for learning the heritage language

In light of the stated importance of heritage language, the families employed a range of strategies to promote its use among their children. For the very young children in this study, this was primarily done by using the heritage language in the home, among siblings and relatives, and by participating in community and group initiatives that promote heritage language usage. We now explore each of these aspects in turn.

3.1 Home Language Use

Parents, both consciously and unconsciously, create an environment that either nurtures or impairs heritage language acquisition among their children. According to Clyne and Kipp, 'the home has often been cited as a key element in language maintenance – if a language is not maintained in the home domain, then it cannot be maintained elsewhere' (1999: 47). Similarly, other research identifies the home as the core environment for the maintenance and transmission of heritage language (Fishman 1991; Hinton 1999).

This is more easily achieved in families in which both parents come from the same cultural background and therefore speak the same language. Some parents revealed that in their first years in Ireland they had limited proficiency in English, and consequently the heritage language was always used in the home. Others, though, made a conscious effort to be consistent in their heritage language use despite being fluent in English:

> *Definitely, we speak with each other and with him* [the child] only [heritage language]*, we do not want he doesn't understand* [heritage language] *and only speak English in this country. We want he also understands and speak his mother's tongue* (JY, Asian father).

In one family with parents of different linguistic backgrounds, the parents agreed a strategy whereby the mother spoke to their child in her heritage language and the father likewise in his. Importantly, this was an explicit, agreed upon approach, which they adhered to consistently. Learning to speak English - the third language in this case - did not seem to be a problem, particularly when the child joined a crèche and later school.

> *We were worried about introducing three languages to the child, but I read a lot about that [...]. I was concerned about that initially, but eventually when we were talking loads to him, I saw him that he is learning it so quickly that I was thinking probably there's no problem, so we kept talking to him in two languages in the house, I spoke my language and my husband spoke his language. Then, it was English, because we communicate between us in English. That was the third language that was reinforced when he went to crèche and school anyway, so now he speaks three languages* (Aneta, mother from EU Accession country).

Another mother from an EU 13 country married to an Irish person found that her children were becoming fluent in her heritage language because of the strategy they adopted. Key to this strategy was her husband's support which saw him taking lessons in the mother's native language to enable him to speak his wife's heritage language in the house with his children.

> *When my first child started school, he started to speak more in English, so I said to my husband, maybe we should speak more in my heritage language in the house, because everything is in English, school, play days, television, everything is in English, so if we speak Spanish in the house it will be easy for him not to forget it. My husband is very supportive and he learned my heritage language as well, so now we both speak to both of our children in my heritage language* (Maria, mother from EU 13).

Nevertheless, there was evidence that it was difficult to maintain the mother tongue/heritage language in the longer run, even when an agreed strategy between parents was in place. All the families interviewed acknowledged that sooner or later a language shift occurred. This could happen earlier for the children that have one English speaking parent and for those who are joining an organised form of childcare outside the family home (Fishman, 1991 and Valdés, 2005), which is discussed further below in more detail.

3.2 Language use with siblings and relatives

Speaking to non-English speaking relatives was considered by many participants as being an important way of practicing and maintaining the heritage language. The presence of older siblings and relatives that were fluent in their heritage language encouraged the families' attempts to maintain the heritage language spoken in the home:

> *Well, that was the original idea, so he* [the child] *understands the heritage language and also speaks it. He is learning English at school and in the streets, so there's no point trying to teach him, trying to talk to him in English which I don't fully understand myself. Then, there were the other children in the house. They were born in* [origin country] *and they were fluent in the heritage language. Also, my mother came to visit after the little one was born…and she doesn't speak English* (Ross, father from 'Other' European country).

Visits and holidays to the home country were seen to play a significant role in helping maintain the heritage language:

> *We are taking him over for a whole summer holiday from the time he was one year and a half, for every summer, for three summer months. So, we try to do that for him every year. … He loves it, especially with my parents, because they have a farm, you know, a tractor, animals, chickens to feed. Also, he can speak only our heritage language there, so we keep the language alive* (Millie, mother from EU Accession country).

Immersion of the children in the parents' native countries and culture was an intentional strategy of some parents to encourage for the benefits of heritage language usage outside the close circle of family in Ireland:

> *I want them to know where their mother was coming from and I want them to speak the language with their relatives in the original environment, if I can say that. In Ireland they hear only me speaking to them in* [heritage language] *and everyone else is speaking in English. I don't want them to think that their mother tongue is used only by their mother, you know*. After a week there my son started to speak fluently my heritage language with my parents (Anna, single mother from EU Accession country).

The presence and involvement of grandparents in passing on and maintaining the heritage language was highly valued by those parents that were in a position to benefit from the opportunity of having the grandparents around. In some cases, children were sent to stay for extended periods with their families in the origin country, often as a result of requiring childcare as well as creating an opportunity for language learning:

We sent her [the daughter] *to India because we wanted her to learn our native heritage language there. Once they go to school here, they do not speak our language anymore, so we decided to send her to my home country to my parents to look after her when her brother started school here. He was with us and he learned with us our native language, but we wanted the daughter to learn the heritage language as well* (Joe, Asian father).

3.3 Community and group initiatives

Hinton (1999) points out that while family dynamics play a crucial role in establishing language use in the second generation, the wider community is also influential.   There is for example a positive association between migrants' heritage language maintenance and the number of contacts in their social network who speak the heritage language (Hulsen, de Bot and Weltens 2002), highlighting the importance of the broader environment. While heritage education in general is not currently supported by the public education system in Ireland, independent initiatives run by churches, community groups and volunteer Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have been attempting to assist migrant families to maintain and develop their heritage language. Religious communities in particular can play an important role in this. For instance, it is well known that ethno-religious communities not only meet their congregants' spiritual needs but also provide valuable opportunities for members to socialise, to maintain links to the ethnic group and exchange information about jobs and housing (Ebaugh and Saltzman 2000; Alba and Nee 2003).

Participants in our study who were strongly committed to the preservation of their heritage language confirm that they enrolled their children in weekend schools run by ethnic community churches, even though they were not particularly religious:

We are not very committed religious people, but we are committed to keep our language and culture alive in our children, so we are bringing our children to the church mostly for Saturday and Sunday School. They learn there some traditional songs, a bit of our country's history and they can talk to other children in our language (Millie, mother from EU Accession country).

Another initiative that was used by some parents is the language playgroup. The aim of language playgroups is to allow the children to be exposed to the heritage language from an early age and to encourage them to speak the language with their peers rather than only with their parents. According to La Morgia (2011), there are playgroups organised in Ireland (mainly in urban areas) by linguistic minority community groups including German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Latvian, Spanish, Czech, Slovak, Estonian and French.

Some of the benefits of such language playgroups were highlighted by our interviewees. A single mother that struggles to get her children to speak their mother tongue outside of the home was willing to drive long distances during weekends to bring her children to a playgroup because this was the only opportunity for her children to interact in their heritage language outside of their home:

> *It is a big commitment yeah, but I am willing to take it because it works for my children. It is the only way that they will get to speak their heritage language with other children in Ireland* (Anna, single mother from EU Accession country).

Another mother involved in coordinating a language playgroup emphasised the support the group offered to families raising bi-lingual children for maintaining the heritage language. She also believed that parents need to actively encourage the children to use their heritage language and to prevent language shift:

> *When we go to play days with my* [country] *friends, we encourage the children to speak* [the heritage language] *because they tend to play in English (…) so we encourage them to speak and when we hear them speaking in English, we say: "No, no, no,* [heritage language] *please". So, yeah, we are trying to keep the language alive* (Maria, mother from an EU 13 country).

Some of the families tried to get their children practising the heritage language outside of the family environment, socialising their children with other children coming from families that would speak the same heritage language:

> *We have some family friends and they are from the same country like us and we are trying to meet them regularly, so kids can speak and play together. Unfortunately, if they play a game together, they switch to English as they do in school and is very hard*

In general, the participants commented that interaction with other families with children from the same country of origin provided opportunities to maintain their heritage language, although as the children grow up, they are more likely to speak English with each other.

4. Challenges to heritage language transmission

Immigrant parents involved in our qualitative study seem to be committed to communicate with their children in the heritage language, especially in their home environment. However, parents also reported to be seriously struggling to continue maintaining and developing the heritage language after children started to attend regularly centre-based childcare or other non-relative childcare. In such contexts, the pressure to fit in and conform becomes higher, as well as the need for fluency in English becoming more urgent. While parents aspire to have bilingual children as discussed above, and have a strong emotional desire for their children to speak their heritage language, it seems that there are a range of obstacles they face when trying to implement this, which are discussed in the following.

4.1 The pressure 'to fit in' and to conform

Many parents place great importance on education as a means for their children to do well in life, and mastering English is an important part of this. This meant that some families at some point switched from making a strong effort to teach the heritage language to prioritising English. The example of children who were sent to live with grandparents in their parents' countries of origin illustrates this point: when back in Ireland, parents began speaking English at home to prepare their children for school in order that they '*not fall behind*' or '*not be perceived as an immigrant*', highlighting the tension between wanting to maintain the heritage language on the one hand, and the importance of acquiring fluency in English on the other despite a strong desire for both.

> *It is a pity, but we had to switch to English when the child started in school. We did not want him to be bullied that he is Irish and he doesn't know English. They are here, they are in school in Ireland and we have to conform and get our kids integrated* (Rebecca, mother from EU Accession country).

Almost all parents indicate that it is relatively easy to maintain the heritage language while children are young, but as soon as they attend childcare outside of their family home and schools, it is getting very difficult, because all of their school work, friends and related issues are discussed in English.

> *I have to speak English to my son when I'm helping him with his English homework, because he is very confused if I'm helping him in my heritage language* (Ross, father from 'Other' country).

Further, when children start attending day care centres and schools, their English started improving rapidly while the heritage language skills diminished. As one father from an Asian country explains:

> *It is very hard to maintain heritage language in children. Over time, I saw how their* [heritage language] *becomes rudimentary and no longer develop, while English becomes their first language. Children start talking between themselves only in English, because English is the language they use outside and in school and with their colleagues and friends* (JY, Asian father).

Given the strong desire for bilingualism amongst parents, it is important to look at issues the parents identify in preventing them from achieving this or 'giving up' and prioritising English only. Among the challenges faced by the families participating in our study in transmitting, maintaining and developing the heritage language with their young children mentioned were: the presence of multiple siblings in the household; special needs and learning difficulties; and lack of a clear and consistent strategy within the family to maintain the heritage language.

4.2 Family structure and children's ability

According to the participants, while the children are small and spend a lot of time with their family, it is relatively straightforward to transmit the language:

> *I am a stay-at-home mom now and my daughter is not going yet to the crèche. My English is not so good, so we are speaking only in* [heritage language] *now* (Nita, Asian mother).

Some parents that have two or three older children note that they were more successful in transmitting their heritage language to their first-born child and less successful with subsequent children (see also Ellis and Johnson 2002). Also, some participants refer to the fact that parents of only children have more time and energy to focus on heritage language learning.

> *It was easier to maintain* [heritage language] *when you have only one child, but when you have more than one, it becomes a struggle and we became tired of chasing them to speak only* [heritage language] *in the house* (Ross, father from 'Other' European country).

Another example in the study involves a family that has one child with special needs. His parents made the decision not to burden him with their heritage language so that he can focus on English only and achieve his milestones.

> *Then to be honest, I had to struggle because my son had mental developmental delays, so his speaking and walking was delayed, and he couldn't pick* [heritage language*], and he found English was easier for him because of the kids around him and adults and everyone in therapy was speaking English and then, so when we went to the doctor he said that "it seems like your son will respond more to English than your native language". Because I just want him to talk, so I said, well, I don't care; I just leave heritage language, I just want him to speak, so English became his first language* (Amina, African mother).

In families that are dealing with special needs and learning difficulties the maintenance of heritage language seems to be hindered. Consequently, parents can feel that they have to give up on their efforts to maintain the heritage language with the special needs children, in order to achieve progress with the prescribed therapies.

4.3 No clear strategy between parents

It seems to be very hard to maintain the heritage language in the family if no strategy exists between the parents. In this case, learning outcomes are poorer. For example, one mother finds it really difficult to speak her mother tongue in the house if she has no encouragement

or support from her Irish husband. A medical condition of a child combined with the mother going back to work after maternity leave is also contributing to the loss of the mother tongue:

> *I spoke to her in my heritage language until probably… 16 months, 17 months. Then, I went back to work and my husband does not speak my heritage language at all, so when she* [the child] *started speaking, it was coming out in English, you see, like she had lots of ear infections. Because of her ear infections, I was paranoid that it was something wrong with her hearing, so I was trying to encourage her speech, so when reinforcing, I was reinforcing back to her in English, and then…it slip. Now she has no heritage language at all* (Tonya, mother from 'Other' European country).

Another mother reported that the support in maintaining the heritage language with second generation is hard when not every member of the family is determined *'to stick with the heritage language no matter what'*:

> *I have to follow my children around the house and catch them when they speak English. It is not useful because my former husband is not supporting me effectively in this effort. He just says: 'Hey guys speak only* [heritage language] *at home, not English', but he actually goes on in speaking English with them too when he is in my house* (Anna, single mother form EU Accession country)

This shows that a preference for English can be particularly pronounced where one partner is Irish and does not actively support children's bilingualism. According to the migrant parent in such couples, although their partners value heritage transmission in theory, in practice they are fast to '*go with the flow'* and communicate with their children in English. As we saw, on a daily basis, 'new' families have to wrestle not to slide into convenient English themselves and to remind their children to speak their heritage language. This often feels like *'hard work after a day of work'* and *'another constant struggle'*, that not all families are able to maintain consistently in the absence of support for such efforts.

5. Conclusion

The findings in this study reveal overwhelmingly positive attitudes of parents towards the transmission and maintenance of the heritage language to second generation children in Ireland. Mothers and fathers emphasise the importance of knowing the heritage language in

order to enable communication with grandparents and extended family, and to enhance their children's intellectual development and education, a finding consistent with similar studies of other migrants (see for example King and Fogle 2006). Parents report using their language at home, with children's grandparents, with co-ethnic friends and with the broader ethnic community, provided that these are available.

Parents interviewed in our study that have very young children seem optimistic about the possibility of transmitting the heritage language to their children, and some do succeed in the short term. Having a stay-at-home mother with limited English skills tends to be associated with greater heritage language use initially, while regular contact to grandparents, extended family and ethnic friends as well as use of community playgroups further support language use. However, in most families, both parents have to work and/or study hard to get established in the new country, thus facing multiple demands in their time and energy, which can lead to less investment in language maintenance.

While study participants appreciate that their children have an opportunity to grow up bilingually, they realise that this is only possible if they make intentional efforts on a daily basis to develop and maintain the heritage language. Various aspects influence the level of success, which have to do both with the immediate family environment and the broader context as outlined above, and appear to become more challenging the older children are. When one partner is English native speaker it becomes particularly difficult for families to be consistent, and outcomes depend on the partner's level of support. Other common challenges reported by parents in this study include early employment of the mother after a short maternity leave and an accompanying rushed lifestyle with little energy left to invest in language development; absence of contact with family members and lack of ethnic friends and community support; and the tendency of children to communicate with their siblings in English and to respond in English, particularly when they join a form of organised childcare outside of the home.

Participants' reports indicate that it is feasible to transmit heritage language to young children if practical strategies are in place, but it is exceptionally difficult to maintain it when children are going to school due to the peer pressure and lack of support and encouragement coming from mainstream society:

> *I don't think my child will continue to speak [heritage language] when he'll go to school. My friends are telling me that their kids told them that 'it is not cool to speak weird languages in school' and that their teacher does not encourage other language but English between children* (Amina, African mother).

While there are some success stories of developing bilingualisms and even multilingualism in the second generation, the reality for many new Irish families seem to be a gradual loss of the heritage language as English becomes de dominant language, a finding consistent with the literature (Fishman 1991; Alba et al. 2002). There appears to be little support beyond local initiatives that parents can avail of that help them bridge the desire for their children to integrate and speak English, whilst maintaining their parents' language.

Studies suggest that for the continued development of a family's heritage language, parental input is not sufficient by itself; broader linguistic input from peers and support of the larger community are also necessary (see for example Kravin 1992). The availability of ethnic social networks provides immigrant families with an opportunity to speak their native language, thus increasing heritage language maintenance (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Children that have an opportunity to use their heritage language in various social domains (e.g. family, religion, work, government) are more likely to maintain it. The availability of playgroups and schools that are supportive of heritage language seem to play an important role in reinforcing parents' efforts in the process of intergenerational language transmission. Other studies showed that a combined institutional supports and ethnic social networks increase the probability of balanced bilingualism in the second generation (see for example Chumak-Horbatsch 1999).

Our study's participants valued and praised local initiatives and social networks that use their heritage language if they had the chance to access it. Unfortunately, these initiatives are not encouraged at the national level and parents are finding it very hard to find out about them unless they are involved in ethnic churches or ethnic-led NGOs:

> *I know there are many parents that want to get their children speaking their heritage language, but they don't know about local ethnic groups like that. We are church goers and our child speaks the language with other kids like him in church group, but what about those who are not going to ethnic churches? There should be some national*

initiatives for those as is good for the kids to speak more languages (Millie, mother from EU Accession country).

This study shows that heritage language acquisition and maintenance was left largely to the family and their ethnic/linguistic community. However, attitudes and strategies regarding language maintenance varied from one language group to another and from one family to the next. Some families were keen that their children quickly assimilate into Irish society, learning English and Irish as soon as possible, while others were adamant that they retain their native culture, of which fluency in their heritage language was an important part.

Nevertheless, it was very clear that the participating families with young children born in Ireland acknowledged the importance of passing the heritage language to their children. To achieve this, they employed a variety of strategies to maintain and even reinforce the use of the heritage language as long as possible within family and community/ethnic group circles. However, they also reported a variety of challenges. Overall, our findings show that immigrant families with more resources appear to be more successful in raising children who are balanced bilinguals. At the same time, the loss of heritage language skills among many of the second generation children was a source of great disappointment to parents.

Immigrant parents who are strongly committed to the preservation of their heritage language try to provide support to their children in order to enhance their proficiency in the heritage language. Nevertheless it seems that parents that have older children are seriously struggling to continue maintaining and developing the heritage language after children are starting to attend regularly centres based childcare and/or non-relative childcare. The lack of support beyond the local community, and a perceived lack of encouragement in maintaining the heritage language within organised childcare settings seems to hinder the maintenance and development of the heritage language for the second generation children involved in our study in an environment dominated by English, and is one area where much improvements could be made to support parents' in their desire to bring up bilingual children. Given the general lack of language skills in Ireland (Department of Education and Science 2005) the increasing linguistic diversity of Irish families could become a great asset if second generation children are supported in acquiring English and Irish as well as valuing and maintaining their heritage languages. According to our study, the issues are not lack of willingness on behalf of

the parents, or indeed lack of information about the benefits of bilingualism, but rather lack of on-going support for the difficult challenge of raising second generation children who maintain their heritage language without this being at the expense of their English language skills.

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