

# Whose job is it to raise the kids

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In the current crisis, when schools and childcare centres may be closed for long periods, many families

have to make choices about work and childcare in new ways. In many households, mothers are finding that the burden of working and looking after children falls to them, while their husbands' job, with its higher wage and lower flexibility, comes first. [One writer](#) has suggested that for women in the West, the pandemic has sent them back into the 1950s, when married women did not work outside the home.

This is not news to those of us looking at issues connected with women, work and the unpaid labour of childcare and the domestic sphere. In my work, I look at minority language transmission, through the lens of family language work, building on Toshie Okita's book *Invisible Work: Bilingualism, language choice and childrearing in intermarried families*.



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I started thinking about this topic while working as an English language teacher in Sydney in 2008. A student sought my advice on what language she should speak to her daughter. Her English-speaking husband wanted her to switch from speaking Thai to English, which she had been speaking to her daughter since birth. She wanted some “expert” advice to negotiate with her husband about the family’s language policy; I told her she was right to speak her language and she seemed happy with that.

But the episode stayed with me. Who wouldn’t want their child to grow up with two languages? And why would the husband ask his wife to stop speaking her strongest language to their child?

My resulting doctoral research draws on interviews with participants in 30 linguistically intermarried couples. Questions of what to do about children and language came up often. For mothers in particular, these questions were linked to a sense of primary responsibility for the child’s language development. Even, surprisingly, when they did not speak a second language themselves.

## “And I never asked them to do it, it happened naturally”

In her book, Okita pointed out that many of the British husbands of Japanese migrant wives felt it was *natural* that their wives spoke to the children in Japanese, especially when their English was less proficient. The migrant mothers I spoke to in my research were highly accomplished multilinguals, which seemed to make the language choice both less clear-cut and more fraught. In fact, the majority of families reported that their kids were not actively bilingual. This was a source of great regret for those parents whose children could not effectively speak to family and friends in the first language of the migrant parent.

One exception was the family of Lucia and Marc, who had a sense of great pride that the kids spoke Spanish with each other, and not just with their Spanish-speaking mum:

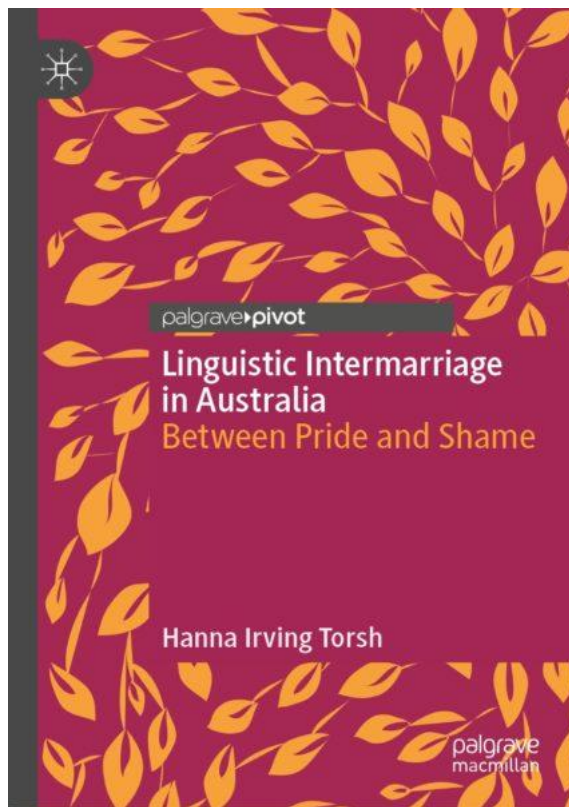
And I never asked them to do it, it happened naturally and they always talk to each other in Spanish, of course they mix English words when they don’t have them, when they don’t have the Spanish word they, you know, insert the English word, but you know all the structure and the communication’s in Spanish. [...] (Lucia)

Unlike many couples I spoke to, Lucia and Marc, were hopeful and positive about the idea of raising their kids with two languages. Perhaps Lucia’s positive attitude towards language mixing through language contact played a part in their approach. Related to this is the fact that Lucia, herself an English/Spanish bilingual from a young age, felt equipped for and was prepared to do the work of speaking Spanish to the children. For other migrant mums, working and integrating into a new country was enough to make the job of bilingual childrearing an ongoing and often insurmountable challenge.

## All his friends said “oh my god, you’re not, your children aren’t speaking Polish”

The situation was different again for the English-speaking background mothers I interviewed, who were either monolingual or had become bilingual later in life, often without much formal education in the language. Despite this, they felt responsible for the presence (or absence) of the other language in their children’s lives.

They spoke about mothers-in-law sending books from overseas; about enrolling kids in language classes; about listening to music and watching television in other languages; and about the pressure they felt for their kids to be bilingual, as in this example from Michelle:



All his friends said “oh my god, you’re not, your children aren’t speaking Polish” and I would just say to them “that’s the whole, that’s why it’s called mother tongue, you generally, as a kid you generally spend more time with your mother” and so you know, um, I think that’s it.

Michelle argues against the pressure to raise her children bilingually by subscribing to a mother tongue ideology. Her mother tongue is English and so she feels she has done her duty. Other mothers talked about how they saw their role as encouraging their husbands to speak the language with the children, such as Megan:

My husband, he’s more than happy to read them books in Hindi but I have to be the instigator of everything (laughs). “Why don’t you sing them a song in Hindi? Why don’t you read them a book in Hindi?” (Megan)

This is similar to the findings of [Piller and Gerber’s \(2018\)](#) study of how parents conceptualised their children’s bilingualism in an online parenting forum. They found that English-speaking background mothers were the main contributors to the forum, and that their multilingual partners were often represented as failing in their duty to speak their language to the couple’s children.

This was echoed by the mothers in my research who, whether they had proficiency in the language or not, positioned their role in their children’s language education as a primary one. In contrast, many English-speaking background husbands saw their role as marginal, as supporting their bilingual wives’ efforts by sometimes just permitting the language in the home and tolerating the fact that this often left them excluded from conversations. They saw their wives, as speakers of the language, as the primary decision-makers around language choice in the home:

Hey look, I’m happy to help. If you’re trying to teach the baby something or talking to it in Serbian, teach me a couple of phrases like, “put that down, don’t do that [...]”. (Jonathon)

In these examples, mothers are positioned as the parent who makes bilingualism in the home happen. This is not to say that fathers did not value bilingualism for their children, in fact almost all participants of the study were generally positive about bilingual childrearing. It just meant that they did not hold themselves as primarily responsible for it, even when the wives did not actually feel equipped to pass on the language. Thus, I argue that gender trumps language when it comes to bilingual childrearing.

Over the past thirty years there has been a welcome social shift in many places towards supporting families to pass on their indigenous or migrant languages in our transnational, globalised world. To better support families, researchers need to start paying attention to how social roles, such as motherhood, determine and shape family language policy experiences in very significant ways.

\*This blogpost is based on chapter 5 of my new book on this and other topics to do with language in couples and families: *Linguistic intermarriage in Australia: Between pride and shame*, published by Palgrave Macmillan and available as an e-book and print edition.

## References

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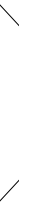
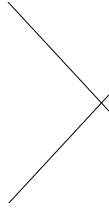
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Hanna Torsh is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, and a member of the Language on the Move research team. Her research interests are language issues in migration and education, multilingual families and family language policy and practice, language learning and teaching, and intercultural communication. Hanna's PhD thesis on linguistically intermarried couples won the Australian Linguistics Society Michael Clyne Award for the best thesis on immigrant bilingualism and language contact in 2019. Her current projects include an exploration of second language speaking migrants in reality television. Hanna tweets about her research at @HannaTorsh.