Lost in bilingual parenting

It is not unusual for bilingual parents to experience a sense of bewilderment when it comes to language choice in the family. When raising a child in a language different from the one parents were socialised into, old truths and certainties quickly disappear. Studying language choice in migrant families, Pavlenko (2004) found that parents’ confusion can be related to language ideologies that see the first language as the language of emotions and the second language as the language of detachment. Consequently, parents are often torn between speaking their first language because it is supposed to enhance the emotional connection with their children and speaking the second language because it is supposed to be the language of the new country.

This sense of bewilderment is often expressed by Iranian migrant parents to Australia who I interviewed for my ongoing doctoral research into bidirectional language learning in migrant families. Mina and Mahmoud (all names are pseudonyms), for instance, adopted a monolingual Persian-only policy with their primary-school-aged daughter, but, at the same time, speak about their intention ‘to change the plan’:

Mina: Because, basically, we have set a rule at home that everyone should speak in Persian.

Mahmoud: I think it was excellent for [our daughter’s] Persian language improvement, but not for us, in terms of English, and in fact, recently we=

Mina: =we’ve decided to change this plan.

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Mahmoud: Certainly my English is not at a level so that I would want to express many of my emotions to her in English as well as I am doing now [in Persian].

Mina: I think it’s a bit hard for me if I want to switch into, talk in English at home.

Like many parents in Pavlenko’s (2004) study, Mina and Mahmoud construct Persian as the ‘language of emotion’; their preferred language choice to ensure an intimate parent-child relationship. While this discourse reflects the perceptions of many parents, some parents may use their second language for various reasons such as making closer connections with their children or to be in control of the situation, as in Farhad and Farah’s case.

Farhad: What I did, the reason that I said that I spoke English with [my children] outside the home, or at least, at certain times at home when we first came, was this, because I didn’t want to distance myself from their world. I wanted, similar to Persian, well, which is ok, there is also English. I wanted to know what they were saying, what they were talking about.

Farah: We make ourselves closer to them, while, at the same time, trying to attract them towards us.

Nevertheless, I could feel a sense of hesitation – if not to say guilt – about using English with his children in Farhad’s talk. This sense of hesitation can also be inferred when he tries to rationalise his use of English at home, and to redress its ‘unacceptability’ by stressing ‘at certain times when we first came’. This uncertainty about parental language choice, is often increased when parents receive contradictory advice, particularly from those who are deemed to be ‘experts’, such as educators, pediatricians, or speech pathologists. The excerpts below illustrate instances of this kind of advice given to parents.

Ramin: When we first came, everybody told us to speak English at home. Honestly, I began to feel dubious about it for a while, whether to do it, really, or not. Then I came to the conclusion that, ‘no’.

Azar: When we first came, Amir’s teacher emphasised so much that we should talk in English with him at home. Later I told her that maybe we would not be able to speak that much English with him, but we would try to teach Amir more [English] words.
Iman: We even sought some advice, close to school, when we went and saw the school principal. We even asked her what to do. She said, ‘Don’t worry about her English. You work on Persian with her as much as you can.’ She said, ‘Leave her English to us, you use Persian with her.’

In multilingual contexts, such either-or propositions undergirded by monolingual ideologies oversimplify the reality of multilingual existence in the emotion-laden context of family interactions where members have more than one linguistic resource at their disposal. A reality which is depicted by Emad, a father for whom family multilingualism is not a new experience that came with migration. Emad had himself grown up with multiple languages back in Iran.

Emad: You know, there is a point that in Persian and English- with my sister who we spoke in English and Persian, sometimes we wanted to express our feelings very precisely. Sometimes we had to, when we spoke together, I remember that we spoke Persian with my sister and brother. We said that what I want to say, that is the word of my heart, it is this word which exists in Turkish, but not in Persian, or that, it exists in English but not in those two languages. What I mean to say is that sometimes those words help you express precisely the spirit of your emotions.

Emad is one of the parent participants who embrace the fact that a multiplicity of languages can be developed as resources to convey emotions. Therefore, while recognising the different context of his child’s English learning to that of his own, Emad allows a natural flow of emotional communication by his child.

Emad: For instance, [our daughter] was saying to her mother the other day, she called her mum at night and said, ‘Just give me a hug!’ She was, for instance, expressing her emotions. But, well, I feel, we thought that, in fact, this emotion is being made through a native language, not through an artificial one that we learnt.

All in all, the emotional primacy of the first language is a reality in migrant families. However, at the same time, the development of ‘emotional multilingualism’ is another reality that needs to be acknowledged. In migration contexts parents may be particularly concerned about maintaining emotional ties with their children. As migrant families become socialized into a new society, the relationship between language and emotions is bound to change. The dilemma of which language to choose may well be the product of a monolingual mindset that unnecessarily denies the reality of families’ linguistic and emotional growth.