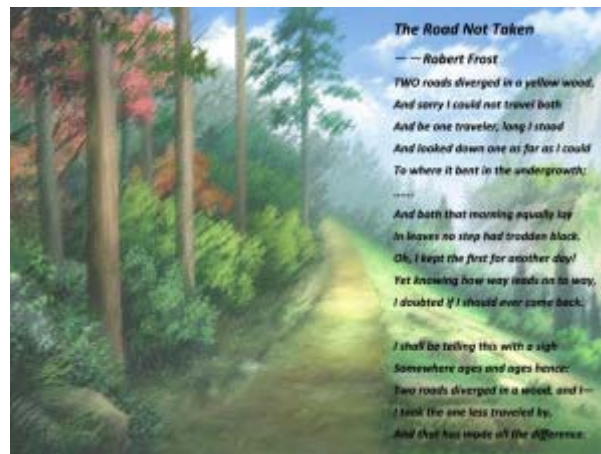


Lost in bilingual parenting



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':

مینا: چون اصولاً در خانه قانون کردیم که همه فارسی حرف بزنیم.

محمود: فکر کنم برای improve زبان فارسی‌اش [دخترمان] خیلی عالی بود، ولی برای ما نه، از نظر انگلیسی خیلی و اتفاقاً اخیراً ما=

مینا: تصمیم گرفتیم تغییر بدیم این برنامه را.

محمود: مطمئناً من زبان انگلیسیم در حدی نیست که بخواهم خیلی از احساساتم را به زبان انگلیسی به خوبی الان بیان کنم برایش.

مینا: من فکر می‌کنم قدری برایم سخت است بخوام switch کنم، تو خونه انگلیسی حرف بزنم.

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.

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.

فرهاد: من کاری که کردم، دلیل اینکه من گفتم توی خارج از خانه، یا حداقل، تو خونه شاید اوایل یه زمان خاصی باهاشون [بچه هام] انگلیسی حرف بزنم، همین بود، بخاطر اینکه نمیخواستم از دنیای اینها فاصله بگیرم. میخواستم، همانطور که خب فارسی، اینا که خب حله، انگلیسی هم هست. بدونم اینا چی میگن، حرفاشون چیه.

فرح: ما خودمون را به اونا نزدیک میکنیم در عین حال سعی میکنیم که از اونطرف هم اینا رو بکشیم سمت خودمان.

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.

رامین: اول که اومدیم همه به ما می‌گفتند در خانه انگلیسی صحبت کنید. من واقعیتش یک مدت دچار تردید شده بودم که واقعا باید این کار را بکنیم یا نه. بعد به این نتیجه رسیدم، "نه".

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'.

آذر: اوایل که آمدیم معلم امیر خیلی تأکید می‌کرد امیر در منزل انگلیسی صحبت کنیم، بعد من به او گفتم شاید خیلی نتوانیم با او انگلیسی حرف بزنیم ولی سعی می‌کنیم امیر را لغت یاد بدهیم.

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.

ایمان: ما حتی یک سری مشاوره گرفتیم، نزدیک مدرسه، که رفتیم principal مدرسه را دیدیم. ما حتی ازش پرسیدیم که ما چکار کنیم. گفت "اصلاً شما به انگلیسی این کاری نداشته باشید. شما تا میتونید فارسی را باهاش کار کنید." گفت "شما انگلیسی‌اش را به ما بسپرید، شما باهاش فارسی."

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.

عماد: می‌دانید یک نکته است که در فارسی و انگلیسی- خواهرم که با او هم انگلیسی صحبت می‌کردیم و هم فارسی، بعضی وقت‌ها می‌خواستیم احساساتمان را خیلی دقیق بگوییم. بعضی وقت‌ها مجبور می‌شدیم، با هم صحبت می‌کردیم، من یادمه با خواهر برادرم فارسی صحبت می‌کردیم. می‌گفتیم این چیزی که می‌خواهم بگویم، آن حرف دل من است، این کلمه است که در ترکی هست که در فارسی نیست، یا در انگلیسی هست که در این دوتا زبان نیست. می‌خواهیم بگوییم بعضی وقت‌ها آن کلمات کمک می‌کند که آدم اون اصل حسش رو خود را درست بیان کند.

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.

عماد: مثلاً، اونروز به مادرش می‌گفتش که، مامانش رو صدا کرد شب می‌گفت، 'Just give me a hug!' مثلاً این احساسش را داشت بیان می‌کرد. ولی، خب، احساس میکنم، ما فکر می‌کردیم که این احساس، در واقع، با یک زبان native دارد ساخته می‌شود نه با یک زبان مصنوعی که ما یاد گرفتیم.

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.



Pavlenko, A. (2004). 'Stop Doing That, Ia Komu Skazala!': Language Choice and Emotions in Parent—Child Communication *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25 (2-3), 179-203 DOI: [10.1080/01434630408666528](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630408666528)