

## **Strategies for language maintenance in transnational adoption: which role for the parents?<sup>1</sup>**

**Alice Fiorentino**

*University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne*

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates adoptive parents' representations of their children's birth-language and language negotiation which takes place during early stages of transnational adoption. By drawing on the interview discourse of 20 Italian transnational adoptive parents, in the first part we will focus on the reasons that led parents to use the child's language with him/her and with orphanage staff during the first contacts in the country of origin. In the second part, the parents reported that they have relied both on productive and receptive acquired linguistic knowledge to negotiate linguistic contexts with the child. Language negotiation has been described by the parents as involving the practice of *intercomprehension*, a plurilingual communicative strategy, which allows participants to speak their first language, while exhibiting receptive competences in the language of the other. Eventually, in the third part, we will describe how the mothers and the fathers rationalized the children's linguistic transition from their first language to the parents' language and, finally, we will explore the parents' discourse around language shift. Examining parents' perceptions of the role that language plays in the experience of adopting contributes to understanding the negotiation which takes place over the topic of language maintenance in specific contexts where parents and children have divergent linguistic repertoires.

**Keywords:** transnational adoption, adoptive parents, language negotiation, language maintenance, intercomprehension

### **Introduction**

Transnational adoption necessitates a vast range of abrupt life-changes and requires consistent efforts for both adopted children and the hosting family. Whether the changes produced by this long-term mobility are positively or negatively perceived by the adopted children, depend on

---

<sup>1</sup> "The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement No. 613344 (Project MIME)."

how the linguistic, cultural, and background diversity is managed within the host family. The contribution of social sciences disciplines to the study of language in transnational adoption shows that the debate underpinning language maintenance can be characterized as a composite of dialectical tensions.

A large body of sociological and psychological research shows that facilitating transnational adoptees' understanding of their own ethnicities supports their adjustment to this new life experience and reduces potential behavioral problems (Smith et al., 2008; Lee & Quintana, 2005; Thomas & Tessler, 2007; Yoon, 2001 in Randolph & Holtzman, 2010, p. 92). In-depth research has also investigated parents' long-term efforts to keep the birth-culture of the children alive throughout their life by engaging in "culture-keeping" activities (Jacobson, 2008; Randolph & Holtzman, 2010; Shin, 2013, 2014). Recent studies have shown that some adoptive parents not only show positive attitudes towards adoptees' language learning by trying to reconnect them to the birth culture (Randolph & Holtzman, 2010; Shin, 2014), but also they engage in language learning activities at community schools to build a positive racial identity towards the birth culture of their children (Shin, 2013).

However, language maintenance in transnational adoption is not always simple. Linguistic studies like Fogle's (2012) noted that adoptees do not always appreciate the efforts of the parents to speak their language of birth, preferring the separation of the two languages over language mixing. Consistent with previous studies, in our study adoptees were reported as being reluctant when the parents, some time after the adoption, come out with some words of their languages of origin with the explicit goal of reminding them of this language.

Although there is a large body of adoption literature about long-term language maintenance, fewer studies have addressed parents' debates regarding language maintenance during the initial steps of family bonding. For adoptive parents, who are not necessarily used to language and cultural negotiation to the extent that bilingual couples are, coping with their children's cultural diversity embodied by a different language represents the opportunity to work on a new identity, both as a family and as individuals (see also Shin, 2014). Given that transnational adoption entails a deep sense of "a new family in making" (Volkman, 2005, p. 14), parents' discursive constructions of initial family negotiation about language can shed a light on different patterns of inclusion.

This paper draws on the initial results of the FP7 project *Mobility and inclusion in multilingual Europe* (Mime) and from the work of the team of the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne on the use of linguistic strategies in the processes of acculturation (see Berry, 1997), i.e. "the changes that occur when a group of people experience ongoing contact with another group of people who differ in cultural values, behaviors, and attitudes" (Hernandez, 2010, p.76). The preliminary study took place in the northern Italy Veneto region, where 3,510 families have chosen to adopt children from abroad in the last decade (2000–2013). Families living in the northern regions of Italy are estimated to make up 48% of the total number of transnational adoptions in the country (Commissione per le adozioni internazionali, 2013, p. 23). Unlike other countries, in Italy 38% of the children who were adopted in 2013 were school-aged and, therefore, the public authority generally advises parents to enroll in language programs. This study took place two years on average after the first encounters with the children, to get an

overall scenario of the first period after adoption. It does not come as a surprise that the parents attached an important role to the birth language during the first months after the arrival of the child, when both they and the children needed to adjust linguistically to one another. Once the family came back home, the parents described the transition from this language to the language of the parents as a process of negotiation, involving questions about which language should be used and when. Language negotiation described by the parents involved a recourse to plurilingual practices.

Within the framework of Mime's project, we observed the strategy of intercomprehension (Castagne, 2004; Meissner et al., 2004; Doyé, 2005) as a possible mediation strategy in multilingual encounters. In intercomprehension the actors reciprocally express themselves in their own languages and exhibit comprehension of the language of the interlocutor. Since transnational adoptive families represent a specific target of study, we wanted to conduct a preliminary exploration of the perception of the role that the language played in the experience of adopting. Unlike other studies that observed the adoption of intercomprehension in second and later generations of migrants as a strategy to maintain heritage language in the home (Herkenrath, 2012), in this study intercomprehension was described as a short-term strategy of communication to negotiate language contexts. However, even though our study cannot establish if short-term language support could result in long term language maintenance, we can make the hypothesis that those parents who were willing to study and speak the language of their children will be more willing to keep it alive also in the long-term. This hypothesis is confirmed by studies like Fogle's (2012) and it is supported also by some of the examples reported in this paper.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This article reports on the narratives of 20 Italian adoptive parents, grouped into 10 couples, living in the northern Italian city of Verona. The interviews were collected in February 2015 thanks to the cooperation with the *Centro Adozioni ULSS 20* of Verona, the local authority for adoption which helped us to promote our research and contact the prospective families. The participants were families belonging to the upper middle class (Table 1), they were on average 38-52 years old and, to be eligible for the study, they had to have adopted at least one school-aged child not younger than 5 years old at the age of adoption. Three couples have adopted in Russia, one in Ukraine, two in Colombia, one in Chile, one in Mexico, one in Peru and one in Brazil. Eighteen of the parents were native Italian speaking, one of them (Lorenzo) was a native Norwegian-speaker and one of them (Patrizia) was an Italo-Swiss French bilingual. All parents have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1: Parents' background information

Interview	Country of origin of the child/children	Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education	L1
1	Russia	Nadia	51	F	Secretary	Master's degree	ITA
2	Russia	Nicola	52	M	Sales Clerk	Master's degree	ITA
3	Russia	Teresa	50	F	Winemaker	High school diploma	ITA
4	Russia	Alessandro	51	M	Winemaker	High school diploma	ITA
5	Russia	Patrizia	48	F	Educator	Master's degree	ITA/FRA
6	Russia	Giovanni	57	M	High-school teacher	Master's degree	ITA
7	Ukraine	Caterina	56	F	High-school teacher	Master's degree	ITA
8	Ukraine	Simone	57	M	Lawyer	Master's degree	ITA
9	Colombia	Cristina	45	F	Educator	High school diploma	ITA
10	Colombia	Giuseppe	53	M	Bus driver	High school diploma	ITA
11	Colombia	Irene	44	F	Office clerk	High school diploma	ITA
12	Colombia	Giorgio	48	M	Sales clerk	High school diploma	ITA
13	Peru	Barbara	45	F	Primary-School teacher	Master's degree	ITA
14	Peru	Sergio	44	M	Business	Master's degree	ITA
15	Chile	Lorenzo	49	M	Secretary	Master's degree	NOR
16	Chile	Giada	50	F	High-school teacher	Master's degree	ITA
17	Mexico	Cristian	58	M	Office clerk	High school diploma	ITA
18	Mexico	Simonetta	59	F	Sales clerk	High school diploma	ITA
19	Brazil	Marina	46	F	Primary-School teacher	High school diploma	ITA
20	Brazil	Carlo	50	M	Office Clerk	High school diploma	ITA

All of them, except for three (Patrizia, Giovanni and Lorenzo), undertook linguistic training before meeting the child (Table 2). Although parents were not selected based on enrollment in linguistic training, it was expected from the beginning that most of them would have undertaken training. Indeed, further to our first conversation with the psychologists from the public authority (*Centro Adozioni ULSS 20*), we have learned that, prior to adoption, they recommend that parents enroll in a language program in the children's L1, to be able to establish a minimum conversation with them during the first months. The private agencies, accredited by the public authority to follow-up the adoption procedure, organize specific country-oriented trainings, which include also weekly language classes for the families who are willing to learn the language of their children. These classes aim at giving some basic information about the language and the culture of the chosen country like set phrases, greetings, feast holidays, customs and traditions. Besides this training, those parents who had time to enroll in private classes learnt the language independently. As Table 2 shows, this applied more for those families which adopted in South America and which were expected to spend approximately two months in the foreign country with the child before going back to Italy. Only one family which adopted in Russia undertook private language training.

Table 2: Parents' language training prior to adoption

	Russian	Spanish
<b>Nadia</b>	Agency's training + private language training	
<b>Nicola</b>	Agency's training + private language training	
<b>Teresa</b>	Agency's training	
<b>Alessandro</b>	Agency's training	
<b>Patrizia</b>	None	
<b>Giovanni</b>	None	
<b>Caterina</b>	Agency's training	
<b>Simone</b>	Agency's training	
<b>Cristina</b>		Agency's training + private language training
<b>Giuseppe</b>		Agency's training + private language training
<b>Irene</b>		Agency's training + private language training
<b>Giorgio</b>		Agency's training + private language training
<b>Barbara</b>		private language training
<b>Sergio</b>		private language training
<b>Lorenzo</b>		None
<b>Giada</b>		private language training
<b>Cristian</b>		private language training
<b>Simonetta</b>		private language training
<b>Marina</b>		private language training
<b>Carlo</b>		private language training

## Interviews

We conducted 12 hours of semi-structured interviews. To double-check mothers' and fathers' self-reported experience with adoption and to avoid similarity between interlocutors' answers, mothers and fathers were interviewed separately. The individual interviews, conducted in Italian and lasting between 12 and 56 minutes (mean duration 30 mins, Table 3), were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Table 3: Interviews

Interview	Participant	Date	Time (in mins.)	Adopted children (age)
1	Nadia	13/02/2015	47	Sasha (6)
2	Nicola	13/02/2015	56	Sasha (6)
3	Teresa	02/03/2015	27	Igor (6)
4	Alessandro	02/03/2015	12	Igor (6)
5	Patrizia	03/03/2015	41	Nikolai (8)
6	Giovanni	03/03/2015	28	Nikolai (8)
7	Caterina	04/03/2015	35	Oresia (8), Sergei (6), Boris (2)
8	Simone	04/03/2015	31	Oresia (8), Sergei (6), Boris (2)
13	Cristina	17/02/2015	25	Javier (6)
14	Giuseppe	17/02/2015	24	Javier (6)
17	Irene	27/02/2016	43	Joana (10)
18	Giorgio	27/02/2016	34	Joana (10)
9	Barbara	14/02/2015	25	Diego (5)
10	Sergio	14/02/2015	29	Diego (5)
11	Lorenzo	16/02/2015	21	Gabriela (7), Carmen (5), Francisco (4)
12	Giada	16/02/2015	23	Gabriela (7), Carmen (5), Francisco (4)
15	Cristian	26/02/2016	35	Maria (8)
16	Simonetta	26/02/2016	29	Maria (8)
19	Marina	23/02/2016	25	Joao (11), Mariana (9)
20	Carlo	23/02/2016	36	Joao (11), Mariana (9)

Previous studies on language behavior showed that indirect techniques, such as in-depth interviews and dialogue-based data elicitation, produce more spontaneous responses (Cherciov, 2012; Lambert, 1967), and allow for more insights into the motivations involved in the language choice. Based on interpretative analyses (Bork & Mohler, 1994), we developed an initial conceptual framework which led towards three general research questions which make up the three sections of this paper: a) when do parents resort to the child's birth-language during early stages of transnational adoption and why? b) how do they negotiate the language context with their children? c) and how do they cope with language shift? This, in turn, helped us to draw up an initial list of categories (Table 4), which helped us to review, explore and analyze the text of the interviews by means of NVIVO qualitative data software.

Table 4: Initial coding categories

---

**Coding Categories**

Language policy - Initial Plan  
Parents' linguistic training  
Expectations on children's language acquisition  
Expectations on children's L1 proficiency  
Expectations on family communication  
First meetings with the child  
Communication in the child's country of origin  
Early stages of communication with the child at home  
Communication breakdown and troubles  
Signs of language shift  
Parents' attitude towards language maintenance  
Mono- or multilingual child  
Mono- or multilingual family

---

## Language maintenance and adoptive parents

Recently, studies on language patterns among bilingual families have focused on the role that the majority language parent has, as a non-native speaker, in the development of the minority language (Venables, Eisenclas & Schalley 2014). In their study of three bilingual families living in Brisbane, Australia, Venables *et al.* showed that majority language parents “presented a high level of support for minority language use and enhanced family relations through their use of strategies and commitment to bilingualism” (p. 447). The contribution of non-minority language parents has been interpreted as employing affective and social supporting activities, like encouragement and cultivating positive attitudes towards the minority language, as much as linguistic activities (Venables, Eisenclas & Schalley 2014). To this extent, the role of adoptive parents towards the child's first language reveals some similarities with the role performed by majority language parents, identified by Venables *et al.* (2014). Indeed, adoptive parents, as non-native speakers, compensate for their poor linguistic skills in the child's language, by promoting and favoring culture-keeping activities (Jacobson, 2008; Randolph & Holtzman, 2010; Shin, 2013, 2014), in order to exhibit a strong positive attitude towards the past:

In the following excerpt, Marina describes how they try to maintain the culture of their children:

*(1) Marina: il paese d'origine cerchiamo di tenere più collegamenti possibili non nella lingua però nella cultura, nella lettura gusti sapori è il loro paese del resto non puoi mica tagliare in modo netto [ci consideriamo] monolingue perché parliamo italiano ok però ci sentiamo un po' brasiliani ecco magari non di lingua però di spirito si [Marina: the country of origin we strive to keep as many links as possible not through the language but through the culture, through reading, taste, flavors it is their country after all you cannot clear cut [we consider ourselves] monolingual because we speak Italian ok but we feel a bit Brazilian maybe not with the language but with our soul yes]*

Marina describes culture-keeping activities (*reading, taste, flavors*) as a fallback option (*we speak Italian ok but we feel a bit Brazilian*) with the multiculturalism being interpreted by the mother as a sort of compensation strategy for their poor linguistic proficiency in the child's language. Further on, we will see that Marina's family is pro-language maintenance and shows regrets towards language shift.

A multicultural identity can be pursued by adoptive parents in different ways. In a study of 16 white US parents and their 22 transnational adopted children, Shin found that parents of Korean and Chinese adoptees desire their children to learn the birth-language, primarily because of "dominant social attitudes toward Asian Americans" (2013, p. 203). They contended that, because of their phenotypical characteristics, "others will expect them to behave as Asians by displaying knowledge about their native language and culture" (p. 203). Shin (2014) then focused on the reasons why four adoptive mothers enrolled in language learning themselves. The mothers reported learning Korean as a way to "facilitate their children's development of a strong Asian American identity", "for countering racism and negative social attitudes directed towards racial minorities" and for the children "to connect with their lost kin and identify with their roots" (p. 175). In addition, for the three mothers of Shin's study, learning their children's birth-language helped with "reinterpreting their own identities" and building "their own positions as parents of transnational adoptees" (p.175). As another way to pursue a multilingual identity, Randolph and Holtzman (2013) found that adoptive parents support their children in connecting to their heritage culture by utilizing heritage camps as these are "recreational institutions that promote ethnic pride and cultural learning" (p. 77). The authors claim that, according to an intrinsic "dialectic of transnational adoption" (p. 86), parents send their children to heritage camps "to downplay any uniqueness that might be associated with being adopted while simultaneously fostering and embracing the differences inherent in transracial adoption" (p. 87). Despite these examples, multicultural and multilingual family identity is not a desired achievement for all adoptive parents. Randolph and Holtzman (2013) contend that few adoptive parents willingly engage in activities that facilitate adoptees' understanding of their heritage, even though "higher levels of self-esteem, lower feelings of marginality, greater ethnic pride, less distress, and better psychological adjustment" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 27) are associated with it. The results of our study support Randolph & Holtzman's observation about the dialectics of transnational adoption, since the discourse about language shift reflects

parents' regret for the children's loss of cultural uniqueness and the simultaneous desire for their total integration into the new country.

### **Intercomprehension as plurilingual strategy in oral communication**

The phenomenon of intercomprehension was originally described among Romance languages (Ronjat, 1913) as a form of asymmetric communication in which each person uses his or her own language and understands that of the other, thanks to the linguistic proximity existing between the two languages. According to a number of studies, though, L2 competence, attitude and familiarity with asymmetric communication contribute to different extents to enhance communication through intercomprehension (Ten Thije & Zeevaert, 2007; Ten Thije, 2014). In oral communication, interlocutors in multilingual settings have been observed to resort to intercomprehension for several different reasons. In bilingual societies, like bilingual Catalonia, intercomprehension has been found to be a non-marked language choice where “one speaker consistently uses language A while the other consistently uses language B, without any orientation to the other party's choice as divergent” (Gafaranga and Torras, 2001, p. 205). Similarly, the alternation of languages in interaction was investigated by Zentella (1997) in conversations between young bilinguals and adults as a form of children's identity positioning and noncompliance with adults' language choice (“I speak what I speak best and you speak what you speak best”, 1997, p. 89). In her longitudinal study of two bilingual families, Lanza (1997) showed that bilingual parents, by not insisting on the child's use of the same language and engaging themselves in dual-lingual conversations, tried to avoid communication breakdown and negotiate with the child in a bilingual context. Herkenrath (2012) examines the related concept of receptive multilingualism (Ten Thije & Zeevaert, 2007) within a diglossic immigrant situation where the alternation between two unrelated languages, like Turkish and German, serves for informal family communication between first and second migrant generations. The acquisition of receptive knowledge in the heritage language represents a support for the minority language maintenance for immigrant families, in which “many other functions are overtaken by the language of the surrounding majority and institutions” (Herkenrath, 2012, p. 306). Eventually, language alternation was observed by Fogle (2012) in her study of three adoptive families where she found that parents and children negotiate the linguistic context and interact in two or more languages as a practice “to construct local meanings,” such as the negotiation and ascription of participant identities (Cashman, 2005 in Fogle, 2012, p. 136).

### **Data analysis**

We first explore parents' motivations to use the birth-language of the child in the early stages of adoption, which was made possible by the fact that most of them had attended some language classes before the child's arrival (Table 2). In the second part, we will show how a linguistic



context is negotiated during the very first period, usually once the family arrives back in the parents' country. Language negotiation has been described as involving conflicting issues of identity and developing plurilingual scenarios. As all the parents reported language shift taking place quite rapidly, the third part will show the ambiguity associated with whether adoptive parents look at this phenomenon as regrettable or inevitable.

### **Initial use of the child's language**

In our study the parents, who were advised by the public authority to attend a few language classes, reported to have learned, if anything, some set phrases to help break the ice in the first steps of communication:

*(2) Barbara: pensavamo di parlarti un pochino nella sua lingua un pochino lui aveva 4 anni e mezzo sapevamo che di sicuro per l'età che aveva un minimo di lingua [...] per cui avevamo imparato proprio le cose normali c'è questa ragazza veniva è ci ha insegnato le parole della vita quotidiana cioè non è che ci ha fatto letteratura, ecco. Quindi gli oggetti, le cose, mi ricordo che avevamo fatto anche i vestiti, il cibo queste cose qua che a me più che al papà sono servite proprio per comunicare con il bambino* [Barbara: We thought that we would have talked to him in his language, he was 4.5 years old and we knew that, due to the age, he knew something of the language [...] which is why we had learned just normal things, there was this girl who came and taught us daily words, not literature I mean, so she taught us objects, things. I remember we did also clothes, food these things that we needed to communicate with the child

Besides the practical considerations, knowing the language of origin represented for some of the participants a first step to gain agency as parents, when they met the local institutions in charge of their children in the country of origin:

*(3) Marina: [imparare la lingua è servito] per noi stessi anche quando eravamo là, con i figli adesso con i bimbi ti trovi in un paese no hai bisogno di tutto di parlare dal medico ... cioè ad esempio la sentenza con Mariana, il giudice parlava solo brasiliano vabbè che hai l'avvocato che l'italiano lo sa però lo capivo insomma lo capisco abbastanza* [Marina: [learning the language served] for ourselves also because when we were there, with the children you know with the children you are in a country I mean you need everything, you need to speak, to the doctor ... I mean for example the court case with Mariana, the judge spoke only Brazilian oh well you have a lawyer who knows Italian but really, I understand it quite well]

*(4) Caterina: quando siamo tornati su per la terza volta eravamo da soli aveva imparato così bene le frasi di circostanza che ormai si fidavano quelli dell'Istituto ce li davano da portare fuori* [Caterina: when we returned there the third time we were alone we had learned so well the set phrases that at that point those of the Institute they trusted us they let us take the children out]

In the excerpt, Marina starts describing the reasons which prompted her and her husband to learn Brazilian as functional (“you need to speak, to the doctor ...”) but in the end, when she mentions the presence of the lawyer, she implies that knowing the language herself put her in

a more favorable condition to understand what was being said. To the same extent, Caterina argues that knowing some set phrases in Russian allowed them to gain the trust of the orphanage's staff, and enhanced their ability to be in control of critical situations without depending too much on third persons.

### The negotiation of the linguistic context

Overall, as the return to Italy approached, the parents reported that they used the children's L1 as an adjustment to the fact that the children could not speak other languages and to let them feel free to express themselves:

(5) *Caterina: abbiamo mantenuto il russo con loro per la comunicazione primaria cioè proprio le esigenze primarie eccetera infatti era incredibile che Oresia era convinta che io parlassi molto bene il russo e quindi a volte mi attaccava di quelle pezze mostruose ...* [Caterina: we kept Russian with them for basic communication, I mean, just for basic day to day language etcetera, and in fact it was incredible that Oresia was convinced that I spoke Russian proficiently and so sometimes she started to talk and talk and talk ...]

As with the father in Fogle's longitudinal study (2012, p. 9), Caterina identifies Russian as a means to smooth the transition to the new situation. Indeed, she emphasizes that Russian allowed their children to communicate with her spontaneously, just as if she was a Russian native speaker herself. In her discourse, she implied that this effort of accommodation attenuated the potential shock reaction of the children, attributing the well-being of the daughter to her loquacity ("it was incredible that Oresia was convinced that I spoke Russian proficiently and so sometimes she started to talk and talk and talk"). However, later in the interview, Caterina noticed that, after a while, she started to feel frustrated because she was not able to answer back appropriately:

(6) *Caterina: e io continuavo a dire da da da e basta ogni tanto nient [...] qui purtroppo abbiamo dovuto fare una scelta cioè io il russo più di tanto non potevamo andare avanti a barare in quel modo* [Caterina: and I kept on saying da da da and that's it, sometimes nient [...] and we had to make a choice unfortunately I mean I don't speak so much Russian and we couldn't go on like this]

The impossibility to carry on with the child's language is embraced by the mother with a hint of regret as expressed by the adverb "unfortunately" (in Italian "purtroppo"). We will point out that this expression symbolizes the parents' ambiguous attitude towards language shift. Indeed, it is interesting that Caterina's husband reports having a different approach from his wife's:

(7) *Simone: dal momento in cui l'aereo è atterrato noi non abbiamo più parlato una parola in russo [...] il cordone ombelicale si è tagliato quando siamo arrivati qua "adesso siete tra virgolette nostri figli siete voi che dovete adattarvi" mentre quando eravamo là eravamo noi che dovevamo adattare/ avvicinarci a loro* [Simone: Ever since the plane landed we haven't spoken a word of Russian any more [...] The umbilical cord broke when we arrived here "now you are - quote and quote - "our

children” and it’s up to you to adapt”, whereas when we were there it was up to us to adapt/approach them]

In (7) a much more radical linguistic transition is described. As far as language choice is concerned, Simone identified the plane as a symbolic metaphor which formalized the passage from the country of origin of the child to the new home. Further on in the interview, he insists on the assumption that their language choice was determined by the social context:

*(8) Simone: o almeno solo per solo per parlarci tra di loro però ovviamente in casa con gli amici con le persone il percorso era ha rovesciato* [Simone: at least only to only to speak with them but obviously at home with friends with people the path was the other way around]

In their discourse, Simone unconsciously applies a majority/minority language policy: it is the majority which decides the language and the minority needs to adapt. To this regards, Herkenrath (2012) claims that in multilingual settings there are different types of communicative practices which people prefer: “basically, speakers can either accommodate the addresser’s choice or continue speaking their L1, the majority language, or the default language of the constellation at hand; alternatively, they can realize a free mixture of both” (p.288). In this study, language mixing is described as an option:

*(9) Interviewer: quindi c’è stato un momento in cui lui parlava italiano e i figli parlavano spagnolo*

*Giada: si si mescolavano*

*Interviewer: e c’era qualche problema rispetto ...?*

*Giada: no no no ci si capisce perché poi le parole in una famiglia sono sempre quelle*

[Interviewer: so that there was a moment when he [the father] spoke in Italian and the children spoke in Spanish

*Giada: yes, they mixed*

*Interviewer: and there was any problem with ...?*

*Giada: no no no, we understood also because the family words are always the same]*

In (9) receptive plurilingual resources help both the father and the children to communicate with each other, even without sufficient productive skills in the language of the other. Nadia, one of the mothers who studied the child’s language the longest (two years), described language alternation as a mixed language practice:

*(10) Nadia: abbiamo fatto il primissimo periodo che io gli parlavo in russo e lui mi rispondeva in russo, poi io ho cominciato a parlargli in italiano e lui mi rispondeva in russo e abbiamo fatto il terzo che lui parla in italiano e io gli rispondevo in italiano per poi arrivare che io gli parlavo in russo lui mi rispondeva in italiano* [Nadia: we did the very first time that I spoke Russian and he answered in Russian, then I started to speak Italian and he answered in Russian and then he spoke Italian and I answered in Italian and finally we got to the point that I spoke Russian and he spoke Italian]

Nadia's description of language alternation points to the variety of scenarios in which *intercomprehension* is used with two non-cognate languages like Italian and Russian. Eventually the fact that the mother reported having used Russian is described as being the result of her desire to support language maintenance:

(11) *Nadia: ogni tanto io gli parlo ancora in russo ma lui non si ricorda proprio più neanche una parola e allora sta facendo una scuola di russo perché ci tengo che mantenga le sue origini* [Nadia: sometimes I still talk in Russian but he doesn't remember not even a word and then he's attending an heritage Russian school because I care that he preserves his Russian bonds]

The description of intercomprehension in (10) shows the evolution of the child's language shift and Nadia's reaction. As the child's preference for Italian grows, the mother switches to Russian to contrast the child's language shift, as she elaborated in (11). In cognate languages like Italian and Spanish, it is rather the perception of typological similarity that leads to language alternation:

(12) *Cristian: ma lei capiva benissimo quello che dicevamo è che lei non rispondeva rispondeva in spagnolo quindi lei continuava a parlare in spagnolo noi continuavamo a parlare italiano [...] lei sapeva che capivamo [...] consciamente o inconsciamente lei non voleva imparare l'italiano lei ci diceva sempre "yo soy Messicana no hablo italiano hablo castellano"* [Cristian: She understood very well what we said, it's just that she didn't answer, she answers in Spanish that's why she kept on talking Spanish and we kept on talking Italian [...] she knew that we understood [...] consciously or unconsciously she didn't want to learn Italian. She said all the time "I'm Mexican, I don't speak Italian I speak Castilian" [this final sentence spoken in Spanish in the original]]

The father's presumption of language intelligibility due to the similarity between the languages made the parents think that the child understood them and they attribute her unwillingness to speak Italian to a resistance pattern. Excerpts (10), (11) and (12) show how efforts at building a common identity entail a great deal of mutual accommodation towards the language of the other.

### Parents' attitude towards language shift

In this study, parents described an overall language shift in their adopted children. However, statements they made about language shift are often associated to the term "*unfortunately*" as seen in example (13) (cf. Caterina in (6)) which works as a marker for parents' displeasure with the loss of the language.

(13) *Carlo: di pari passo non c'è stato solo il minor uso del brasiliano la lingua che pian pianino purtroppo è svanita diciamo "purtroppo" perché è un patrimonio che speriamo che magari da parte loro ci sia nulla eventualmente asseconderemo di certo la volontà di riappropriarsi di questa lingua [...] è la lingua del loro paese natio con tutte quelle espressioni che è una lingua anche molto bella, molto gioiosa, molto musicale,* [Carlo: meanwhile they were not only starting to speak less and less Brazilian,

the language which unfortunately started to fade away, we say “unfortunately” because it’s a heritage that we hope that maybe they will be willing of course we will support their wish to learn it back [...] it’s the language of their birth country with all those expressions, it’s a beautiful language, very joyful, very musical,]

The parents’ positioning towards language shift in this study could be considered as consistent with the relational dialectics theory of Randolph and Holtzman (2013). According to a relational dialectics approach, “parents and children in transracial adoptions embrace and give meaning to their racial and ethnic differences while simultaneously attempting to construct identities that are grounded in similarity - that is, identities that downplay differences” (p.76). In our corpus, parents considered, on the one hand, that the children needed to assimilate to feel good about themselves and, on the other hand, felt regret for the loss of the language:

(14) *Barbara: cioè il bambino deve deve sentirsi italiano deve integrarsi cioè è purtroppo chiamamolo un trauma ma è un passaggio obbligatorio, ce l’avevano spiegato gli psicologi* [Barbara: I mean, the child needs needs to feel Italian, he had to integrate, I mean, it is, unfortunately, a trauma, let’s call it like this, but it is an obliged step, the psychologists explained to us]

Barbara had been reassured about language shift in the pre-adoption by some psychologists, who had described it as necessary since the first language, which could represent a traumatic reminder of ancient suffering, needed to be temporarily abandoned. However, those parents who were explicitly in favor of language maintenance (Nadia, Nicola, Patrizia, Caterina, Lorenzo, Giada, Simonetta, Cristian, Giuseppe, Marina and Carlo) reported having attempted to revive the knowledge of the child’s language of origin in their interactions:

(15) *Nicola: gli ho fatto scappare una parola in russo finche guardavamo la televisione, sai quando sei li sul divano rincoglioniti così ... “si, ma cos’ha detto, ah questo qua” c’era un dialogo in russo con i sottotitoli “m’è sfuggito ...” “ha detto pane bianco”* [Nicola: I succeeded in making him babble a word in Russian while we were watching the television, you know when you are there, laying down on the couch ... “yes, but what did he say? Yeah, this one” when there was a Russian dialogue with subtitles “I missed it ...” “He said white bread”]

In these requests for elicitation it is the child who is expected to provide linguistic information to the parents. This is contrary to common strategies of translation identified in parent-children interactions (Döpke, 1992). This inversion of the common teacher-learner patterns in parent-children interactions is probably made by parents to express their appreciation and interests towards the child’s language and to encourage their native lingual capacities. However, the parents described the children’s reaction to direct questions as reluctant:

(16) *Giuseppe: se sentiva anche alla radio qualcosa, parlare una parola così, “ma io non so cosa vuol dire” “ma a me non interessa” “ma io non” “ma no no ma dai cosa vuoi che ti dica non so niente di quello che dicono, non ho capito”* [Giuseppe: If he heard something on the radio, saying a word or something like that “but I don’t know what it means”, “but I don’t care”, “but I don’t”, “but no no what do you want me to say, I don’t understand anything they’re saying, I don’t understand”]

Patterns of resistance in adoptive children such as explicit refusals to participate in family routines and the avoidance of norms of conversation have been observed in adopted children as forms of gaining agency (Fogle, 2012). In our study the children seem to resist the parents' expectations about their capacities and the parents' willingness to use the language of origin in interactions with them. In recent years, several scholars have explored the conflict between heritage language and the standard language among second and later generations of a migrant population (see Spolsky, 2012). Adoptive families can be seen as coping with the competing demands of the child's heritage and of the parents' environment (Spolsky, 2012). The adopted children in this study seem to oppose their parents' attempts to maintain some vestiges of the heritage culture and language by developing a defense mechanism. As a general response to this reaction, some parents feel the responsibility to act as "guardians" of the language, on behalf of their children:

*(17) Caterina: ricordo piu' io di Russo rispetto a loro. Loro hanno veramente è quasi come se l'avessero rimosso giuro e io sono rimasto un po' stupita eeh io, spesso io e Simone scherziamo gli diciamo "sapete come si dice" che ne so "pollo in russo?" mi guardano e sì che lei ha mangiato pollo per 6 mesi! [Caterina: I remember more Russian than they do. They really have ... it's almost like they have removed, I swear, and I was a bit astonished eeh I, often I and Simone make jokes, we say "do you know how do you say" for example "chicken in Russian?" they stare at me and she ate chicken for six months!]*

In (17), Caterina's allusion to the Russian word for chicken refers to the family's background and their first moments of life together. By monitoring that the birth-language does not disappear for good, adoptive parents remind the whole family and themselves that their identity is built on multilingual and multicultural references:

*(18) Simonetta: Sì, diciamo che [il repertorio familiare] è diventato italiano, dialetto con qualche ovviamente inserimento di alcuni termini spagnolo modi di dire spagnolo qualche parola che abbiamo appreso quando stavamo in Messico oppure qualcosa che ha portato S. cioè ci sono delle cose che delle espressioni che comunque ci vengono meglio ci piacciono [Simonetta: Yes, let's say [familiar repertoire] it became Italian, dialect with some integration of Spanish words, Spanish colloquialisms, some words we learned when we were in Mexico or something Maria brought, so there is something, some expressions which sound better to us, that we like more]*

Apart from Giada and Lorenzo, who hired a Spanish-speaking *au pair* and Nadia and Nicola, who enrolled their son in a Russian heritage school, all the other parents reported that birth-language maintenance was limited to micro-interventions like word games, songs in the birth-language or loans and borrowings. However, for the parents who were in favor of birth-language maintenance, the use of the child's language can be attributed not only to a general positive attitude towards the child's language, but also as a reminder of the plurilingual nature of adoption process.

## **Conclusion**

As far as adoptive parents are concerned, the children's diversity, embodied by a different language, represents the opportunity to negotiate the terms of a new identity, both as a family and as individuals. Although we cannot generalize from the experiences of our interviewees to those of other adoptive parents, the findings are compelling for several reasons.

First, this study sheds light on the many conflicting issues related to the initial integration of adoptive children into the cultural setting of their parents. In our study, while the child's birth-language played a central role in smoothing the transition towards the new family environment and in helping adoptive parents to gain agency as parents, some contrasts between a child's heritage maintenance and the new social environment rapidly surfaced. In the study, this contrast triggers debate amongst the parents with regard to language choice, in particular about which language should be used and why.

Second, plurilingual patterns of communication seem to be suitable for such language negotiation and an alternated use of parents' and children's language, which we referred to here as *intercomprehension*, and which expresses the first efforts of accommodation. Direct access to interactional data will be needed to observe the real potential of *intercomprehension* for family communication and to better evaluate mutual understanding among adoptive families. However, it is interesting to observe that such a practice was described by adoptive parents to achieve communication, without it being mentioned by the interviewer.

Third, our study supports Randolph and Holtzman's findings on the contribution of the relational dialectics theory for explaining the contradictions inherent in the adoptive experience. Randolph and Holtzman found that the "dialectic of transnational adoption" leads parents to both downplay and boost children's cultural uniqueness (2013, p. 87). Adoptive parents of this study showed divergent attitudes towards the disappearance of the language, as they felt that language shift was simultaneously necessary and inevitable.

As a general conclusion, in this paper, culture-keeping is described as emerging linguistically in micro-interactions between parents and children, showing that the multicultural character of transnational adoptive families grows from the multilingual resources that family members share at the beginning of their acquaintance and that parents embrace as a reaction to language shift.

## **References**

- Berry, J.W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5-68.
- Borg, I., & Mohler, P. P. (1994). *Trends and perspectives in empirical social research*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Cashman, H. (2005) Identities at play: Language preference and group membership in bilingual talk in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37(3), 301–315.

- Castagne, E. (2004). Intercompréhension européenne et plurilinguisme: propositions pour quelques aménagements linguistiques favorisant la communication plurilingue. In H. G. Klein & D. Rutke (Eds.), *Neuere Forschungen zur europäischen Interkomprehension* (pp. 95-108). Aachen, Shaker Verlag, Coll. Editiones EuroCom, Band21.
- Cherciov, M. (2013). Investigating the impact of attitude on first language attrition and second language acquisition from a Dynamic Systems Theory perspective. *Transnational Journal of Bilingualism*, 17(6), 716–733.
- Commissione per le adozioni internazionali (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri). (2013). *Dati e prospettive nelle adozioni internazionali rapporto sui fascicoli dal 1° gennaio al 31 dicembre 2013*. Firenze: Istituto per gli innocenti.
- De Geer, B. (1992). *Internationally adopted children in communication. A developmental study*. Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, Lund University: Lund. Working Papers 39.
- Döpke, S. (1992). *One parent one language: An interactional approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Pub. Co..
- Doyé, P. (2005). *L'intercompréhension. Guide pour l'élaboration des politiques linguistiques éducatives en Europe – De la diversité linguistique à l'éducation plurilingue*. Strasbourg: Conseil de l'Europe.
- Fogle, L.W. (2012). *Second language socialization and learner agency: Adoptive family talk*. Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Fogle, L.W. (2013). Parental ethnographies and family language policy in transnational adoptive families. *Language policy*, 12, 83-102.
- Gafaranga J. & Torras M. C. (2001). Language versus medium in the study of bilingual conversation. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 5(2), 195–219.
- Giles, H., Coupland, J., & Coupland, N. (1991). Accommodation theory: Communication, context, and consequence. In H. Giles, J. Coupland & N. Coupland (Eds.). *Contexts of Accommodation* (pp. 1-69). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Herkenrath, A. (2012). Receptive multilingualism in an immigrant constellation: Examples from Turkish–German children's language. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 16(3), 287–314.
- Hernandez, A. (2010). Acculturation. In Caroline S. Clauss-Ehlers (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Cross-Cultural School Psychology* (pp. 76-79). Heidelberg, Germany: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.
- Jacobson, H. (2008). *Culture keeping: White mothers, transnational adoption, and the negotiation of family difference*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Lambert, W. E. (1967). A social psychology of bilingualism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 23(2), 91-108. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1967.tb00578.x
- Lanza, E. (1997). *Language mixing in infant bilingualism: A sociolinguistic perspective*. Oxford Studies in Language Contact, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, D., & Quintana, S. (2005). Benefits of cultural exposure and development of Korean perspective-taking ability for transracially adopted Korean children. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 11(2), 130–143.



- Meissner, F. J., Meissner, C., Klein, H.G. & Stegmann, T.D. (2004). *Introduction à la didactique de l'eurocompréhension. EuroComRom. Les sept tamis. Lire les langues romanes dès le début*. Aachen: Shaker-Verlag.
- Randolph, T. H., & Holtzman M. (2010). The role of heritage camps in identity development among Korean transnational adoptees: A relational dialectics approach. *Adoption Quarterly*, 13(2), 75-99.
- Ronjat, J. (1913). *Essai de syntaxe des parlers provençaux modernes*. Macon: Protat Frères Imprimeurs.
- Shin S. J. (2013). Transforming culture and identity: Transnational adoptive families and heritage language learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 26(2), 161-178.
- Shin S. J. (2014). Language learning as culture keeping: Family language policies of transnational adoptive parents. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 8(3), 189-207.
- Smith, S. L., McRoy, R., Freundlich, M., & Kroll, J. (2008). *Finding families for African American children: The role of race & law in adoption from foster care*. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/instituteresearch.php>
- Spolsky, B. (2012). Family language policy – the critical domain. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(1), 3-11.
- Taylor d. M. (1996). *Diversity with justice and harmony: a social psychological analysis*. McGill University: [http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/litreviews/tylr\\_rev/tylr\\_rev-01.html](http://canada.metropolis.net/research-policy/litreviews/tylr_rev/tylr_rev-01.html)
- Talmy S. & Richards K. (2011) Theorizing Qualitative Research Interviews in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(1), 1-5.
- Ten Thije, J. (2014). The effectiveness of lingua receptiva (LaRa) in multilingual communication – Editorial. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 5(1), 125-129.
- Ten Thije, J., & Zeevaert, L. (2007). Receptive multilingualism: Linguistic analyses, language policies and didactic concepts. Amsterdam: John Benjamin Pub. Co.
- Thomas, K. A., & Tessler, R. C. (2007). Bicultural socialization among adoptive families: Where there is a will, there is a way. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(9), 1189–1219.
- Venables, E., Eisenclas S. A., & Schalley, A. C. (2014). One-parent-one-language (OPOL) families: Is the majority language-speaking parent instrumental in the minority language development? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 17(4), 429-448.
- Volkman, T. A. (2005). Introduction: New geographies of kinship. In T.A. Volkman(Ed.), *Cultures of transnational adoption* (pp. 1–22). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Yoon, D. P. (2000). Causal modeling predicting psychological adjustment of Korean-born adolescent adoptees. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 3(3-4), 65–82.
- Zeevaert L. (2007). Receptive multilingualism and inter-Scandinavian semicomunication, in J. Ten Thije, & L. Zeevaert (Eds.). *Receptive multilingualism: Linguistic analyses, language policies and didactic concepts* (pp. 103-136). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.

*Fiorentino*

Zentella, A. C. (1997). *Growing up bilingual: Puerto Rican children in New York*. Oxford: Blackwell.