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Mothers' Experiences of French Mother tongue Maintenance: Re/Gaining Fluency in a Linguistic Minority

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores how francophone mothers, who have taken on the primary responsibility for teaching French to their pre-school aged children, explain support and barriers to regaining and maintaining their own native language when they mother in a linguistic minority.

Purpose of Study

Language loss, choice, and maintenance among francophone women who mother in English-majority Canadian cities have not been extensively researched, despite the official status of the French language in Canada. Mothers are positioned in society as their children's primary teachers and their own ambitions are frequently subordinated to this function. Yet, motherhood presents an interesting learning opportunity for women who have native language loss and wish to (re)gain fluency in their mother tongue: at the same time as they teach their children, mothers can improve their own language abilities. However, in order to teach their children, women choosing to speak their mother tongue must have a certain sense of confidence and competence. The purpose of this study was to explore how francophone women, who have the primary responsibility for teaching French to their pre-school aged children, explain support and barriers to maintaining their own mother tongue while they mother in a linguistic minority. A better understanding of francophone mothers' experiences may help determine what kind of formal, non-formal, and informal educational opportunities mothers seek to improve their native language abilities.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism points to systems of oppression linked to gender and explains how these systems stratify individuals in society. Feminist theory, which provides the theoretical framework for this study, focuses political attention on the sexual division of labour, women's control of their bodies and sexuality, and on questions concerning women's personal and family lives (Rockhill, 1991). It also calls attention to education, training, and equality in the paid and un/underpaid economy (Hart, 1995). Feminist analyses rupture the myth of motherhood as an inherently natural manifestation of being female and present an alternative perspective to the dominant myth of the ideal mother as selfless and sacrificial (Forna, 1998; Phoenix & Woollet, 1991). This study is based on the premise that mothers who have experienced first-language loss will seek opportunities to improve their own language skills when they take on the primary responsibility for teaching their children French. However, as mothers struggle with obligations resulting from their gendered position in society, with constraints imposed from belonging to a francophone minority and with a culture that values children's language learning as a priority, they find little support in formal and informal adult education to assist them with reversing language loss.

Research Design

Sampling Strategy

The participants in this study were women who perceived they had experienced some loss of their French mother tongue and wished to prevent further loss. All eight participants were born in Canada and were raised, in childhood and adolescence, speaking French only or a combination of French and English. These women who desired to improve their language skills had the primary responsibility for transferring the French language to their young children (18

months – 5 years). French was the principal language of communication between mother and child both within and outside the home and, with one exception, the fathers did not speak French with their children. The rationale for the above criteria was to ensure that the woman was her child's primary source of French; as such, she would have the major responsibility for language transmission as compared to a woman whose child may be supported in learning French through school and/or communication with a French speaking father.

The main method of recruitment was to send written correspondence to key local francophone contacts whom I presumed would have access to a network of francophone women. These key contacts included, but were not limited to, the provincial Federation of Francophone Parents, French daycare and preschool coordinators, the Francophone School Board, and a French language adult education and training centre. I also contacted several women I knew personally through francophone activities I had participated in with my child and asked these individuals to suggest names of other women who might fit the criteria.

Interviews

The initial interviews for this study took place in June 2003, within a three-week period. I interviewed each woman individually in a face-to-face interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. Approximately six to eight weeks after the first interviews, I conducted follow-up interviews (by phone or in person) in which I asked participants further questions, asked them to verify my interpretations of what they had said and requested them to provide missing factual information. All the initial interviews and the second face-to-face interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed within one to three days. I took written notes during the phone interviews. The data were analyzed using qualitative research methods of analytic induction and constant comparisons.

Inspired from the literature and from my personal experience as a francophone mother raising my child in French, the semi-structured interview questions covered topics concerning the individual's personal language history, her experience and concerns with language loss, questions about communication within and outside the home and family, involvement in the francophone community, changes in her language use over time and specifically since motherhood, and her dreams and hopes for her and her family's language development in the future. The interviews, guided by a series of open-ended questions, took place largely in French but the conversations frequently moved between French and English. Pseudonyms have been used to refer to some participants in the research report whereas other participants requested that I use their real names.

Findings

Four major themes emerged from the participants' narratives. First, although they experienced language loss in diverse ways, all the women connected their decision to speak French with their children to an attachment to their own personal and cultural sense of identity. Second, participants described that, as compared to before motherhood, they were much more motivated to communicate in French and participate in various francophone activities. Third, women felt that lack of resources in the community, lack of time, and having an English speaking partner limited their ability to actively improve their French. Fourth, participants in the study believed that their French fluency would improve if there were a greater number of activities in which they could participate with their children.

Language: Loss and Attachment

Prior to motherhood, the majority of the women in the study carried out their lives almost entirely in English. As a result, each woman had experienced some loss of her mothertongue.

This loss was felt to varying degrees and manifested in different ways but always resulted in a sense of frustration, discontent, or longing. Participants expressed concern over the fact that their French had not been developing as it would have had they been living in a francophone environment. The majority said they found it more difficult to write and read in French as compared to doing so in the past and in relation to doing the same activities in English. Pascale, whose parents are both francophones, explained:

“...it seems that I lack patience now towards written French, or more intellectual French. It’s like I’m at a lower level than before in my education. I can’t focus on a literary piece of work anymore...It’s like I find more anchors in English. In French, I feel like I’m plummeting down a steep hill, (gestures as if she’s trying to grab onto something)...That I find frustrating and a little depressing.”

Despite language loss and the effort required to speak French, all of the participants in the study had an attachment to French, as demonstrated by their commitment to speak their native tongue to their children. Indeed, many women referred to the fact that the French language was an important feature of their culture, history, and identity; these were parts of themselves that they wanted to transmit to their children. Several participants talked about the pleasure they felt when speaking French, specifying that this pleasure was not derived from ease of speaking, but rather from something more closely related to their sense of identity. Speaking French led to feelings of inclusion within a community of speakers.

Motivation and Participation Increase in Motherhood

Despite their individual sense of frustration towards their language loss, the women in the study repeatedly said that their children motivated them to speak French. They credited their children for the desire to improve their mothertongue and for wanting to speak French. Said Carole about her son: “He has awakened the need for me to speak French.”

Many of the women gave “thanks to” their children for generating this desire to improve and maintain their French fluency. For several of the participants, the motivation to speak French was concomitantly fueled by the knowledge that the mother was, until the child reached school-age, her child’s principle French language educator.

All of the women said that they used their French much more now than they did prior to motherhood. Before their child’s birth, the women living and working in Greater Vancouver pursued leisure and employment in English and few of them made regular use of French. However, for all, pregnancy and early motherhood brought about an increased interest in preventing further language loss. Now, it was through activities and interactions with their children that women felt they were most actively maintaining their language, preventing language loss, and getting involved with the francophone community. The ongoing acts of communicating in French with their children - done through talking, singing, and reading - chiefly contributed to the improvement of each woman’s French oral abilities. This data reveal the fact that women were conforming to a well-entrenched Western ideal which states that early maternal attention should be devoted to talking, playing, reading, responding, and initiating communication with one’s young child (Rossiter, 1988). The ideology of motherhood also prescribes that the transmission of language be part of the overall and ultimate responsibility women have for childcare (Burton, 1994). Interestingly, few of the women participated in leisure activities in French when the activities did not involve their children. Going to French movies, concerts, plays, getting together with francophone adult friends, or renting French videos was not something women did regularly, if at all, on their own.

Barriers to Improving Mothertongue

Each woman in this study identified lack of resources in the community, lack of time, and the fact that, with one exception, her partner was not fluent in French as key barriers to improving her mothertongue.

All the participants felt that there was a deficiency of services available in French for mothers and their pre-school aged children. The existing services did not meet their needs for a variety of reasons that included infrequent program offerings, unsuitable times, and inconvenient locations. Consequently, most mothers relied completely on themselves to improve their own French and to transfer the language to their children. Odette reflected:

“Well, it boils down to a personal discipline, in the end, because I don’t really see what I could do, outside of making the effort myself.”

Women compensated for the lack of easily accessible resources by isolating themselves with their children in order to limit the children’s exposure to English. When alone with their children in the “francophone bubble” (as one participant called it), mothers felt completely free to communicate only in French; in the presence of anglophones, many mothers worried that speaking French would be perceived as antisocial.

Not only did a lack of resources create a barrier to improving their French, but participants also habitually felt they did not have enough time or energy to read, listen to the radio, watch television, and participate in francophone activities with their children. For example, arranging play dates with other francophone friends and their children was a near constant challenge given work-schedules, daycare schedules, and other family activities. Frequently, the monotonous and routine activities associated with childcare consumed large amounts of time. Marie-France described:

“I’m tired of diapers. I spend my day cleaning, cooking, cleaning, cooking, washing...I look forward to him being out of diapers. It’ll give me a break...because I’ve got him all day, everyday.”

Whether she was employed full-time outside the home, or cared for her child full-time, each woman felt that various priorities competed for her time; this impeded her ability to improve her French for she could not necessarily participate in, and take full advantage of, existing activities and resources.

Additionally, each woman, except Marie-France who was a single mother, described events and circumstances that demonstrated that her partner’s lack of French fluency (as compared to her own) was an impediment to her own ability to improve and maintain her French. Interestingly, when I probed this issue directly, most women denied that their language maintenance was thwarted by their partner’s limited fluency. But their stories contradicted them: several women said that they avoided social situations where there would be a majority of francophones out of concern that their husbands would feel isolated, excluded, or frustrated by not being able to communicate in French with others.

Ideal Circumstances and Resources

The women in the study craved more opportunities to meet and develop friendships with francophone mothers and their children. Opportunities to socialize, they predicted, would enable them to speak French more often (thus helping to improve their French), would allow their children to hear and speak French more frequently (thus aiding with language transmission), and would alleviate the isolation that many mothers experience. Many participants wished there were a greater variety and number of organized and regular parent-child activities and said that they would like these to be offered at diverse times so that they could attend in addition to

working full-time. The women felt that if these activities were advertised and offered through an established organization in their neighbourhood, such as a community centre or a public library, this would greatly increase their likelihood of knowing about – and ultimately participating in – the activity.

Many of the women, when asked if there were formal educational opportunities that they wished were in place to help improve their mothertongue, said that taking a course was not something they wanted to do. There was a sense that they were “beyond that”: they had taken numerous French courses in the past and this type of formal content was not appealing. A minority expressed an interest in belonging to a book club and in participating in themed and moderated conversations. Both these activities currently exist in Vancouver, but none of the three women who suggested these as potential activities were participating in them.

Implications

This study investigates how cultural identity is (re)constructed in motherhood. By studying the personal experiences and accounts of francophone women who mother in linguistic minorities, the study emphasizes the difficulties women face in meeting their own language needs when they have limited support in the community and are assuming the complex and demanding role of their child’s principal pedagogue and caretaker. Motherhood presented both opportunities and challenges to the women in the study: it strengthened their desire to maintain their language and concurrently imposed responsibilities that restricted their abilities to do so.

The present findings, which reveal how the francophone mothers in the study made sense of their ability to maintain and improve their own mothertongue, contribute to adult educators’ understanding of how to assist women in (re)gaining literacy skills in their native tongue. Women’s literacy skills have traditionally been applied to gender-related roles and have often remained unrecognized or unrewarded as being socially valuable. “Women’s literacy skills have typically been a means of fulfilling the needs of others rather than tools for their own public participation and achievement” (Hayes, 1988, p. 7). Yet, the invisible nature of women’s literacy is challenged when women begin to claim education to fulfill their own needs. Educational programs are a public means of validating skills and knowledge that remain devalued in the domestic sphere. However, women’s participation in these programs is uncertain given the conflicts between family responsibilities, personal relationships, work, and education.

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