

Language Socialization during Family Meals in Paraguay
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Abstract

This pilot study investigates the language socialization practices in Paraguayan families. Parents or primary caregivers act as linguistic models for their children. Paraguayan parents, from a small community, through both their language attitudes and daily practices, are socializing their children to be effective communicators in their bilingual community.

Paraguay has a unique linguistic dynamic. Some sociolinguists have labeled Paraguay as a diglossic society, where Spanish is the “high variety” or formal language and the indigenous language of Guaraní the “low variety” or social language. Since 1989, when the dictator Alfredo Stroessner was overthrown, Paraguay has been moving towards a new society where Paraguayans are protecting their culture to ensure a long life in modern times. One way of doing this is by acknowledging that Paraguay is the first country in the South American continent that recognizes the official character of its indigenous language. Furthermore, government officials made a political move making bilingual education mandatory. Ten years after government officials have passed these language policies, do Paraguayan families still see language use in their community in this dichotomous fashion?

In June of 2002, as part of another study, 27 parents (all with children attending first grade in a local elementary school at the time) were interviewed regarding their linguistic attitudes toward their first grader’s bilingualism. This study’s results illustrate that a majority of these parents value bilingualism. However, all parents see the Spanish language more important than Guaraní in their child’s life.

Keeping this sample’s linguistic attitudes in mind, the next step in understanding language socialization practices in this community is to investigate actual family interaction to see how language practices shape this linguistic environment and its dichotomous view of language. A subset of six Paraguayan families from this sample were videotaped during two family meals and then interviewed regarding meal practices in their families. It seems as though language use during family meals is congruent with parental linguistic attitudes. There also seems to be some trends in language use and linguistic gender differences in this sample of families. Interesting trends are also seen in terms of the functions of each language during a family interaction.

The results from this pilot study begin to illustrate that these Paraguayan parents seem to still be modeling this dichotomous or diglossic view of bilingualism despite the language policies implemented by officials in an attempt to give the indigenous language a more legitimate position in Paraguayan society.

Introduction

Socialization is the life-long process of the learning of expectations, habits, skills, beliefs, values and other requirements necessary for participation within society (Winston, 1995). One of the major tools used in socialization is language. Through such tools as language and how it is used in different contexts, caregivers play a key role in introducing a child to a complex social world. For a bilingual child, language socialization is particularly important. In order to understand, interact, and negotiate his sociocultural context successfully, the child must learn not only how but also when a language is used in the community, and the social meanings behind such linguistic practices. One way parents socialize a child on the importance of a language is through linguistic attitudes and practices that they convey on a daily basis through interaction. Both beliefs and practices are central explanatory constructs to understanding how parents socialize their children to interpret their particular sociocultural context.

Researchers recognize that the social environment that a child is exposed to on a daily basis is in fact a rich context for learning. For instance, a fruitful practice to study language development and socialization is mealtime. Many researchers see meals as a cultural practice to study language development (Pan & colleagues, 2000; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Beals, 1993; Berko-Gleason, 1975). In terms of bilingual socialization, Blum-Kulka (1997) illustrate that parents' success in socializing their children to bilingual practices is seen when children vary their language according to the addressee. In other words, researchers such as Blum-Kulka (1997) assert that such subtle linguistic cues illustrate skills that an effective communicator must internalize. Therefore, in order to understand this successful socialization, we must analyze actual family discourse.

This pilot study of language socialization practices during meals in the family context took place in Paraguay, a diglossic society. A diglossic society is a bilingual community where two languages coexist, but each language has separate functions in that society. One language is considered formal and the other a social language that is used in informal contexts (Hudson, 1997; Ferguson, 1959; Edwards, 1995). Are Paraguayan children socialized to favor the "high variety" language of Spanish at the expense of the indigenous language of Guaraní that holds much cultural importance for the country?

Literature Review

Linguistic Practices in Cultural Contexts

Schefflin & Ochs (1986) define language socialization as an interactional display (covert or overt) to a novice [child] of expected ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Schecter & Bayley (2002) define language socialization as the process by which children become socialized into the interpretive frameworks of their culture. Researchers working within this framework see both the context of interaction and the culturally sanctioned roles of the participants [in an activity] as major determinants of the language forms and strategies used in given situations (Schecter & Bayley, 2002). According to this socially and culturally defined view of language, researchers would look at the Paraguay mealtime situation as the cultural context, and the family members participating in the meal as having sanctioned roles in the interaction.

Linguistic Attitudes

Along with exploring language practices, linguistic attitudes are related to second language learning and bilingualism in various ways (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001). For instance, researchers have found a relationship between language attitudes and language proficiency. Linguistic beliefs being transmitted in the home environment may also play a factor in the language socialization and possibly the language maintenance for a bilingual individual. If parents hold negative attitudes toward a language, this could possibly have negative consequences on a child's language environment. Understanding the importance of exploring linguistic attitudes of a bilingual community, language beliefs have also been a focus of several linguistic studies in Paraguay. Rubin (1968) found that language loyalty is felt toward Guaraní and not Spanish. De Granda (1981), on the contrary, found language loyalty toward both languages. These research studies demonstrate that there does not seem to be an overall consensus about how Paraguayans' feel about their children's language use in this diglossic environment.

When 27 Paraguayan parents from this community were interviewed in June 2002 regarding their linguistic attitudes, parents reported the following:

1. The majority of parents report some conception of bilingualism as important for their child's development.
2. Some parents favor Spanish over Guaraní for their children.
3. None of the parents fear that their children will lose the indigenous language.

Family/Home as a Context to Study Socialization

The Role of Parents in the Language Socialization Process

Various linguistic resources are available to children in bilingual communities (i.e. peers, parents, and other family or community members). This study focuses on the parents' (both the mother and the father) roles in language socialization because many researchers agree that parents play a critical role in their child's language development. Some researchers see the process as a negotiated activity where children and their parents are key players in each other's language socialization (Vásquez, 1989; 1992; Vásquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Many language studies focus on the mother's role because she is often the primary caregiver who has the responsibility of socializing children. This study takes the discussion one step further by including the father and his important role in a child's socialization.

Family Meals as a Context to Study Bilingual Language Socialization

Many explicit topics concerning language and other areas of socialization have been studied using family meals as the cultural context. Kasuya (2002) studied bilingual Japanese-American families and found that English predominated the dinner conversations. Pan (1988) in a study of Chinese families focused on patterns of code switching. Pan & colleagues (2002) state the main questions/topics regarding bilingualism investigated in the meal context as:

- Dominant language of conversation
- Patterns of code switching
- Children considered influential on language choice

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Research Questions:

1. Will one language dominate conversation at the dinner table?
2. Who speaks more during the meal?
3. Are there patterns in the code switching? And who initiates the code switching?

Hypotheses:

- 1) In general, I predict that more Guaraní (the low-variety or social language) will be spoken during a meal.
-In terms of who speaks more during dinner? I predict that mothers will speak more to the children in comparison to other members of the family.
- 2) I predict that there will be patterns of code switching. Children will initiate code-switches more often than parents, and these changes of language are generally accepted by others participating in the meal.

Methods

Data Collection Site

This study was conducted in a Paraguayan town with approximately 15,000 inhabitants located about 40 miles from the capital of Asunción.

Linguistic Dynamics

Paraguay is a nation with two official languages. Paraguay may be classified as a diglossic linguistic community in which each language has a separate function in society (Rubin, 1968; Melía, 1993; Hudson, 1997; Ferguson, 1959; Edwards, 1995; Corvalan, 1985; Corvalan, 1977; Romaine, 1989). More specifically, Spanish is the “High Variety” language that is the prestigious language because it is favored in formal settings such as a classroom or school. In contrast, Guaraní is the “Low Variety” language because it is preferred in social settings such as the home (Rubin, 1968; Melía, 1993; Hudson, 1997; Ferguson, 1959; Edwards, 1995; Corvalan, 1985; Corvalan, 1977). Rubin (1968) discusses the complexities of this linguistic situation by exploring the social conditions that may lead one language to be preferred in certain domains in the Paraguayan diglossic society (cited by Edwards, 1995). Rubin found that a Paraguayan’s decision to use Spanish or Guaraní was based on a series of considerations, which could be ordered in a specific hierarchical way. Many Paraguayans seem to make language choices based on social factors such as socioeconomic status, familiarity with the person, and topic (Hoffman, 1991). However, some scholars find the definition of diglossia problematic (Baker, 2001; Hudson, 2002). The boundaries that tend to separate one language from another are never permanent. Regardless if Paraguay is classified as a diglossic society or

not, by understanding the linguistic attitudes and practices of a community that is undergoing language policy changes may lead to a better understanding of language socialization.

Pilot Study Participants

Six families who currently have children enrolled in the second grade at a local elementary school were participants.

Table 1 – Basic Demographics of Participants

		Gender of Target Child	# Of Siblings	Father Present
Family 1		Female	3	Yes
Family 2		Female	1	No
Family 3		Male	3	Yes
Family 4		Male	1	Yes
Family 5		Male	0	No
Family 6		Female	0	Yes

Table 1 contains the target child’s gender, # of siblings present at the taped meals and whether or not the child’s father was present for a meal or not.

Table 2 – Parents’ Occupations

	Father		Mother
Family 1	Driver		Housewife
Family 2	Driver		Housewife
Family 3	Driver		Teacher
Family 4	Teacher		Teacher
Family 5	Driver		Teacher
Family 6	Teacher		Teacher

Table 2 contains the occupations of the participating parents.

Procedure

General Pilot Study Protocol

Two meals were videotaped in each family’s home. The families told the investigator at what time meals were served. The videos were taped at different times for each family.

Videotaping a Meal Protocol/Transcription

Two digital video cameras and microphones were placed in a room of the home (researchers were not present). Each meal was transcribed verbatim in Spanish and Guarani by turns taken by each participant at the meal.

Preliminary Results

Which Language Dominates Dinner Conversation?

Figure 1

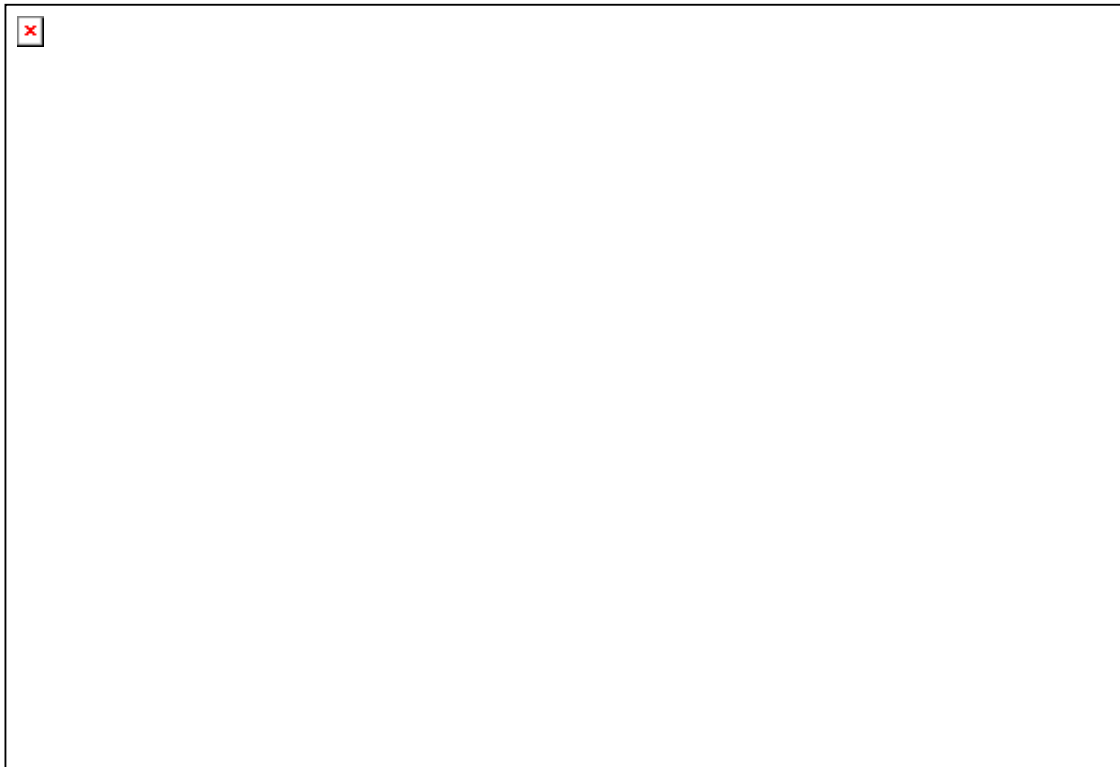


Figure 1 illustrates that Spanish is the preferred language during the first meal in all six families.

Figure 2

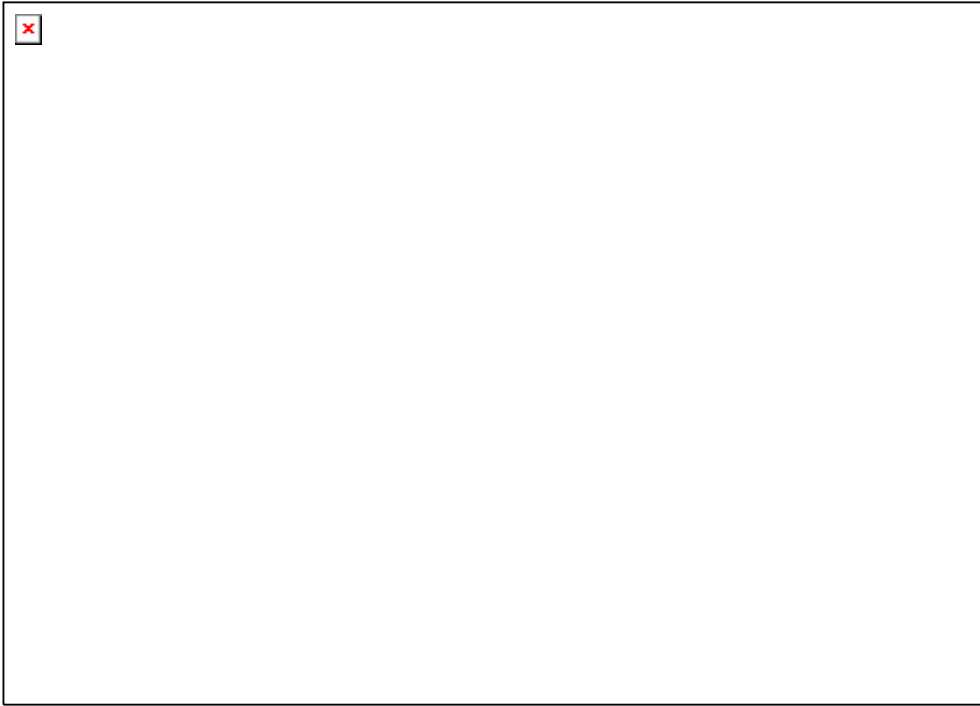


Figure 2 illustrates that Spanish is the preferred language during the second meal in all six families.

Does Anyone Dominate Family Meal Conversation?

Figure 3



Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of turns taken by each participant during Meal 1.

Figure 4

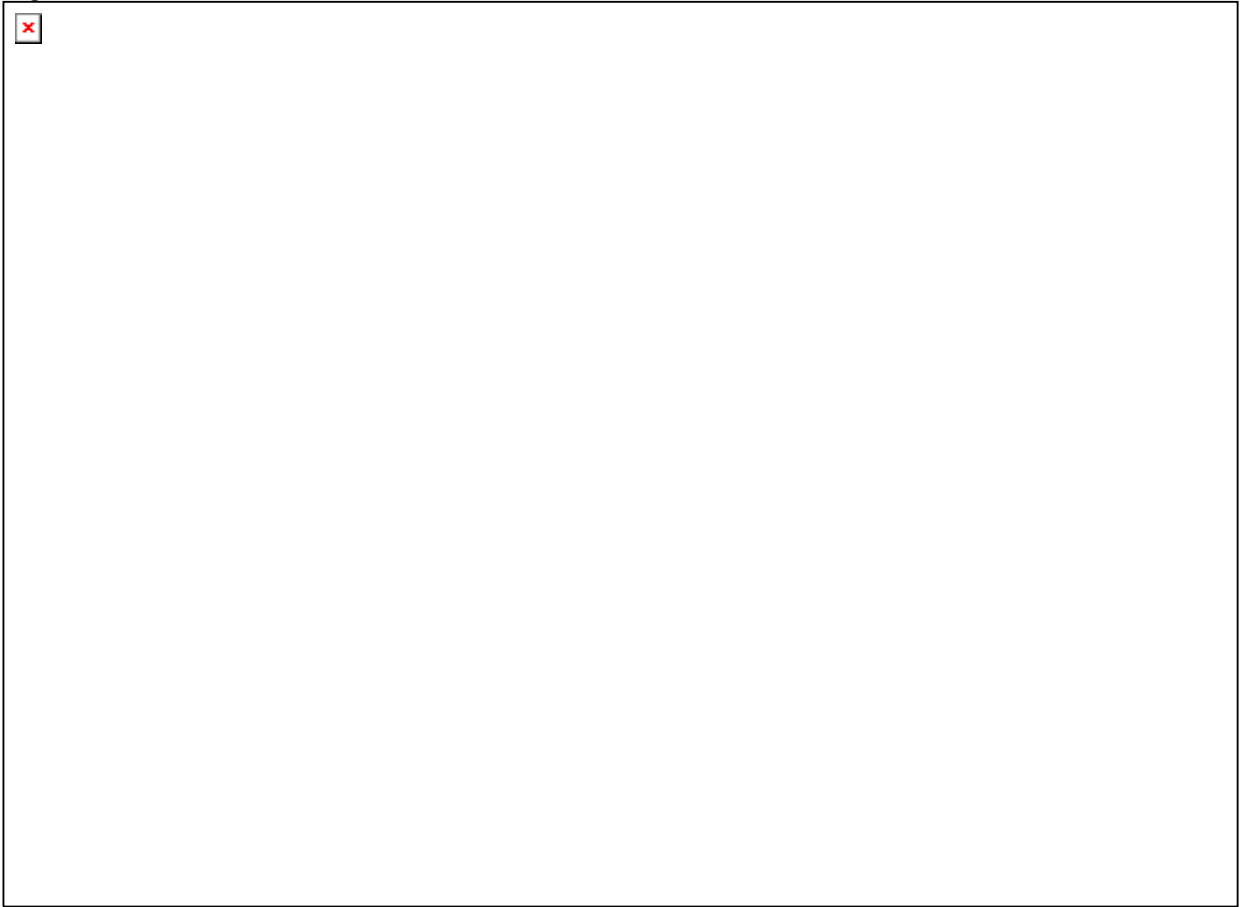


Figure 4 illustrates the percentage of turns taken by each participant during Meal 2.

Are there Patterns to the Code-Switching?

Preliminary trends indicate that code switching or mixing changes when dyads (parent and child) versus when the entire immediate family shares a meal.

Dyads (Mothers and Children)

When mother and child shared a meal, no code-switches were accepted. When a child (both female) initiated a language switch from Spanish to Guaraní, the mother responded in Spanish following the child's language change.

Multi-Party (Fathers are Present)

In the remaining four families fathers were present for both of the family meals. In only one of the four families there was an equal distribution of total code-switches for the males and the females. In 2 out of the 4 families where the father was present, males in the family code-switched significantly more than the females in the family.

Table 3

Who is Initiating Code-Switching?

		Meal 1	Meal 2	Total
Family 1	Males	14	29	43
	Females	0	7	7
Family 3	Males	9	6	15
	Females	22	6	28
Family 5	Males	23	16	39
	Females	5	4	9

Table 3 contains the frequency of initiated code-switches by gender. In Families 1 and 5, males code-switched more than females. In the first meal for Family 3, females code-switched more than the males.

The next step in data analysis is to investigate more closely the linguistic function in each meal.

Summary of Results

1. The “high variety” language of Spanish is the language of choice. Spanish is the language of choice during family meals for all six families. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, more turns were taken in Spanish than in Guaraní or Jopara, the Guaraní term for combination of Spanish and Guaraní in a single phrase. I hypothesized that the “low variety” of Guaraní would dominate the meal conversations because the home context is an informal or social domain.

2. No one person dominates meal conversation. No one person truly dominates the meal conversation. When mother and children share a meal together, turns taken by each participant is divided rather equally (See Figures 3 and 4). When both parents are present, in 3 out of the 4 families, mothers talked less when dad was present.

I hypothesized that mothers would dominate the conversation, but in fact no one member of the family dominates meal conversation. It seems to be truly a multi-party context where various people have a chance to join in the conversation. Mothers tend to speak a little less when the father is present.

3. Code-Switching Patterns. In terms of code switching or mixing, it seems that the number of people sharing the meal might be related to the language choices made during the activity. More specifically, when the family meal just included mother and children, the children initiated the language switch to Guaraní more than mothers, and none of these code-switches to Guaraní were accepted.

In addition, the fact that 2 of the remaining 4 families, demonstrate that males code-switch more than females may illustrate that language practices may be gender-specific. It may be more socially acceptable for males to speak the indigenous language than females.

Discussion

Understanding that the importance of investigating both a community’s linguistic attitudes as well as practices to understand language socialization of a bilingual community, this pilot study starts to illustrate trends regarding how Paraguayan children may be socialized to become effective communicators in their particular linguistic community.

In terms of linguistic beliefs, these parents all report that some degree of bilingualism is important for their child’s development. Some parents report highly valuing both languages, while others still hold a diglossic view of the two languages. However, when it comes to actual language use during a meal, it seems that parents are still modeling the “high variety” language to their children. Despite, the government’s efforts to give the indigenous language more legitimacy by implementing a mandatory language policy in the schools since 1992, for these parents Spanish is the preferred language for this activity.

This strong Spanish dominance during meals is contrary to previous language studies in Paraguay (Rubin, 1968) illustrating that Guaraní is the language of choice in social settings amongst familiar people. Could this illustrate that a language use is changing in Paraguay? In other words, language function in this community may not be as

dichotomous as 30 years ago? Are parents still modeling the diglossic view of language? When are children exposed to the Guarani language if not in the home context? A follow-up study is currently underway, which follows a child for several days, noting language choice and context, to determine when and where a child is exposed to the two languages during his/her daily life.

In terms of the trend for gender difference in language practices during family meals, this result could have implications for language maintenance in this community. If it was more socially acceptable for men to speak Guarani than women, what does this mean for the future of the indigenous language? When meals consisted of only a mother and her daughter, mothers did not accept code switching. Does this mean that these parents are not in favor of both languages or they accept them for boys but not girls? These are just some of the questions that this study is still attempting to answer.

This pilot study has illustrated many interesting trends in bilingual language practices in this community. By understanding these daily language practices of this community, researchers will be one step closer to understanding how bilingual children are socialized to become active members in their sociocultural context and maintain such cultural practices as bilingual language use across generations.

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