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Said, F. and Zhu, Hua (2019) "No, no Maama! say 'shaatir ya ouledee shaatir'!" children's agency in language use and socialisation. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 23 (3), pp. 771-785. ISSN 1367-0069.

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## **Citation information**

Said, F., & Zhu Hua (accepted) “No, no Maama! Say “*Shaatir ya Ouledee Shaatir*”! Children’s agency in language use and socialisation. *International Journal of Bilingualism*

## **“No, no Maama! Say “*Shaatir ya Ouledee Shaatir*”! Children’s agency in language use and socialisation**

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## **Abstract**

### *Aims and Objectives*

This paper investigates how children in multilingual and transnational families mobilise their multiple and developing linguistic repertoires creatively to assert their agency in language use and socialisation, and why these acts of agency are conducive to successful maintenance of the so-called “home”, “community” or “minority” language.

### *Methodology*

Close, qualitative analysis of mealtime multiparty conversations is carried out to examine children’s agency in language use and socialisation.

### *Data and analysis*

Twelve hours of mealtime conversations within one Arabic and English-speaking multilingual family in the UK were recorded over a period of eight months. The excerpts selected for analysis in this paper illustrate how agency is enacted in interaction.

### *Findings*

The data analyses of the family’s language practices reveals both their flexible language policy and the importance the family attaches to Arabic. The children in this family are fully aware of the language preferences of their parents and are capable of

manipulating that knowledge and asserting their agency through their linguistic choices to achieve their interactional goals.

### *Originality*

This paper explores how Arabic is maintained as a minority language by second and third generations of Arabic-speaking immigrants in the UK through close analysis of conversations.

### *Significance*

The findings contribute to the current discussions of family language policy and maintenance by demonstrating children's agentic and creative role in language use and socialisation. Three factors are identified as the reason for the successful language learning, use and maintenance of Arabic: first, a family language policy that has a positive multilingual outlook; second, family relationship dynamics that connect and bond family members; and third, the children's highly developed ability to understand their parents' language preferences.

**Keywords:** Family Language Policy, Agency, Bilingual-Arabic speakers, Multilingualism, Language Socialisation, Transnational Families.

### **Introduction**

For many multilingual and transnational families, the learning and use of both the so-called heritage language and the majority language are important for reasons of integration, identity, belonging, and parental desire to transmit their family or heritage cultures to the next generation (Fishman, 1991; Okita, 2001; Rubino, 2014; Said, 2014). In this paper, following studies by Luykx (2003, 2005) and Kayam and Hirsch (2014), we approach family language policy (FLP, defined as the “explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members”, King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008, p. 907) from a language socialisation (LS) perspective (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). We investigate how multilingual children are socialised

into their respective cultures through learning and using their multiple languages. We focus on children's agency, an aspect that has been discussed extensively in language socialisation literature (Duranti & Black, 2011; Luykx, 2003, 2005; Moore, 2011; Pontecorvo et al, 2001), but only recently in FLP studies (Fogle, 2012; Fogle & King 2013, Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015).

In what follows, we first address the theoretical motivation of our research question and discuss why we are interested in the notion of agency, how it relates to children's language use and the possible effect this may have on parental language use and choice. This is followed by close analyses of recorded interactional data of mealtime conversations of a multilingual Arabic-English speaking family in London. We conclude the paper with a discussion emphasising that agency is context specific, realised uniquely in different situations, and that children play an important role in influencing the FLP.

### **Why agency?**

Agency or a person's "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" and to exercise control over their action (Ahearn, 2001, p.11) has received much attention since scholars in human sciences rejected the principles of structuralism (Ahearn, 2001). It is understood to be a complex notion that is achieved and negotiated context-specifically; Ahearn (2001, p.30) has warned the danger of misinterpreting the notion, because "[a]nything more precise than a barebones definition of agency runs the risk of over-generalizing notions that are actually culturally or linguistically specific". Therefore this paper follows a context-specific approach to understanding agency. Specifically, we locate agency in language use or as "emerging from discourse" (Ahearn, 2001) because language use reflects ideal, desired ways of being

and how speakers position themselves and others as they endeavour to realise their own personal social goals (see Du Bois, 1987; Duranti, 2004; Kockelman, 2007).

Agency is also a major dimension in the LS paradigm, which is a dual process of socialisation *through* language and socialisation *into* language (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). LS is considered a lifelong process and takes place across a range of sites including homes, schools, higher education, the workplace, clubs, and cyberspace (Duff & Hornberger, 2008). Though initial seminal works on LS acknowledged children's agency and viewed them as "active socializers" in their own learning of both culture and language (Ochs, 1988, p.2; Baquedano-López & Kattan, 2007) whereby older persons and younger ones reverse the status of expert and novice (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011), most subsequent LS studies focused their attention only on the impact of socialisation on children or newer members of communities. Only recently have studies that illustrate extensively how children and novices influence their own socialisation appeared. For example, Del Mol and Buyssee (2008) view the socialisation process as one of bidirectionality, i.e. not just from parent to child and from child to parent, but the mutual and on-going nature of influence from one person to another. Garret and Baquedano-López (2002, p.350) contest that children are agents of change and have the potential to influence and reproduce both established cultural and linguistic practices. Likewise, Corsaro (2002) argues for an "interpretive reproduction" account of the process of socialisation, in which children not only participate and reproduce social order but also contribute to changes through their own (re)interpretation. Lanza (2007, p.47) calls for children to be viewed as "active and creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures, all the while contributing to the production of adult society". Likewise, several studies have looked into how children's linguistic practices influence that of others such as siblings

(de la Piedra & Romo, 2003), and peer groups (Schieffelin, 1990). Luykx (2005) focuses on the case of language shift among immigrants who are exposed to new languages or language varieties. She argues that in both situations, parents become less linguistically competent than children and this leads to a potential reversal of the traditional role of parent versus child in LS.

Unlike LS studies, the emerging field of family language policy (FLP) has only recently begun investigating agency in children and how they affect parental decisions about language learning and use. Fogle's (2012) work on adoptive families is a case in point. She highlighted three types of agency: (i) resistance through 'nothing' responses, (ii) interaction through the frequent uses of 'wh-questions', and (iii) influencing language choice of their parents. Fogle and King, (2013) using evidence from children's agentive roles in the process of LS and other studies in FLP, focus on daily interactions between parents and children in order to understand how children enact their agency. They argue that older children have the greatest agentive abilities "within transnational families, where family members with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together and the negotiation of such differences play a large part in establishing new family roles and relationships" (p. 20). As stated above, our interest here is to illustrate how third generation Arabic-speaking bilingual children in multilingual and transnational families mobilise their multiple (and developing) linguistic repertoires creatively to assert their agency in language use and socialisation, and why these acts of agency are conducive to successful maintenance of the so-called 'home', 'community' or 'minority' language. In particular, we would like to illustrate how language learning and socialisation of core family values go hand-in-hand and how understanding of transnational families'

FLP could benefit from a language socialisation perspective and examination of children's agentic roles.

### **Arabic-speaking communities in the UK**

In its analysis of the UK 2011 census results, the National Association of British Arabs (NABA, 2013) reports that there are as many as 240,000 Arabs in the UK; these include first generation (those born outside the UK) as well as second generation Arabs (those born in the UK). Arabs in the report are defined in terms of self-identified ethnicity, not the Arabic language, following the categories set out in the census. There are a number of established Arab communities in the UK, who migrated and settled in England during the colonial periods (Ansari, 2004). Of these the Yemenis settled since as early as the 1890s and to this day can be found in significant numbers, in South Shields, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cardiff, and Birmingham. Most other Arab communities arrived later and can be found in Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, London, Leicester and Nottingham.

To date there are three studies that have interrogated the maintenance of the Arabic language in the UK. For example, Gomaa (2011) looked at how Egyptian parents in Durham support their children to learn to speak Egyptian Arabic. Similarly, Othman (2006) looked at 14 families in Manchester of Egyptian, Jordanian, Libyan and Tunisian origin, and examined the efforts parents made to transmit the Arabic language to their children. Jamai (2008) explored how Moroccan families across the UK maintain their Moroccan Arabic and Moroccan culture. All these works involved questionnaires, interviews or observations, but no actual recordings of interactions. The studies combined acknowledged three factors that assisted parents in transmitting

Arabic to their children: first, strict rules of speaking Arabic within the home, second, the attendance of Arabic schools, and mixing with other Arabic-speaking families.

And finally, they also attribute the outcomes of family practices and maintenance of Arabic to parents alone without mention of the role children play in these processes.

### **Focus of this study and the family**

This paper differs from the above studies on Arabic-speaking immigrant families in three significant ways. First, it studies a second and third generation family rather than newly arrived families. Second, through a close analysis of interactional data (as opposed to interviews and questionnaires alone) it avoids reliance on speakers' self-report of their own language use. This is crucial because most speakers' perception of their language use is usually unreliable (Ammon & Dittmar, 2005; Glynn & Fischer, 2010) and so the recording of actual language use becomes imperative in understanding actual language use and its consequences. Third, it navigates the data set to look for children's agentic roles in the FLP, rather than focus on parents' efforts alone in the process of teaching and maintaining Arabic. It envisages in line with Fogle and King (2013) that FLP and the process of language maintenance are not only "...“top-down” (e.g., explicit parent-directed decisions about which language or which routine)" but also ““bottom-up” (e.g., child resistance and negotiation of those decisions)” (p. 20-21).

In order to illustrate how third generation Arabic-speaking bilingual children mobilise their multiple linguistic repertoires creatively to assert their agency in language use and socialisation, mealtime multiparty (involving more than two participants) interactional data were collected from one multilingual and transnational family in London over eight months. The family was selected because they speak



Arabic and English, and the first author specifically sought out second and third generation immigrant families in order to interrogate how parents of Arabic heritage socialised their children and how they maintained the Arabic language. Much of the work on transnational families is based on data of first generation parents and second generation children, where parents are often reported as speaking the host society language as a second language, whilst the children speak it as their first language (McCabe, 2014; Morales, 2015; Subhan, 2007; Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). However, as will be discussed below, when both parent and child have near equal access to all their languages (Arabic and English), negotiation of power and pursuit of agency are particularly salient.

The family consists of four members: the father, the mother, and two sons (Hamid and Adam were aged 6;10 and 9;06 respectively at the start of the recording). Both boys speak a mixture of Yemeni and Algerian Arabic and English. They attend an Algerian community school where they learn Classical/ Standard Arabic on Saturdays and take part in a language club to learn French and Spanish after school during the week. The father is a second generation Arab immigrant whose parents emigrated from Algeria to the UK in the early fifties. He is a multilingual speaker of Algerian Arabic, English, and French and literate in Standard Arabic. The mother is also a second-generation immigrant Arab whose parents migrated from South Yemen (which at the time was a British colony) to the UK in the early sixties. She speaks dialectal Yemeni (Adeni) Arabic and English, but is illiterate in Standard Arabic. Based on the first author's observation, the family speaks English, some Algerian but more Yemeni Arabic at home in their daily conversations. They spend most of the school holidays with extended family members in Algeria or Sheffield, during which they have the opportunity to meet other Arabic speakers. The family reside in an area

of London where the Arabic-speaking community is not very significant, and therefore their mixing with others who speak Arabic is restricted to the weekend school or family interactions. In an initial pre-data collection interaction with the family, the first author noted that the mother repeatedly highlighted that she was “not very good” at Arabic especially the “grammar” and that she was not sure if she was “doing a good job” in teaching her children Arabic. The mother’s lack of confidence in her Arabic is reflected throughout the corpus especially when the children do homework at the end of dinner or when they practice their Arabic (the first example presented below is a case in point). The parents also described themselves as “British-Arabs” and didn’t have a particular preference for one culture over the other, saying each one “has its time and place”. This attitude may explain why in the data there is no explicit talk about culture in labels such as “Arab culture” or “British norms” (Said, 2011). This open attitude, as explained below, seems also apply to their language use.

### **Data Analysis & Discussion**

Altogether 12 hours of mealtime multiparty conversations were video- recorded by the family following the guidelines given by the first author of this paper (who was present only for the first recording). The data were then transcribed according to the LIDES system (MacWhinney & Snow, 1990, see Appendix for transcription conventions). Two independent transcribers checked the transcription for accuracy in both content and translation, and the data were analysed from an interactional sociolinguistics perspective (Gumperz, 1982; Cameron, 2011). This perspective allows the researcher to understand how language used by speakers, as it unfolds over interactional time, indexes meanings to interlocutors and in turn how they then respond. By closely analysing the data in a turn-by-turn fashion we are able to see

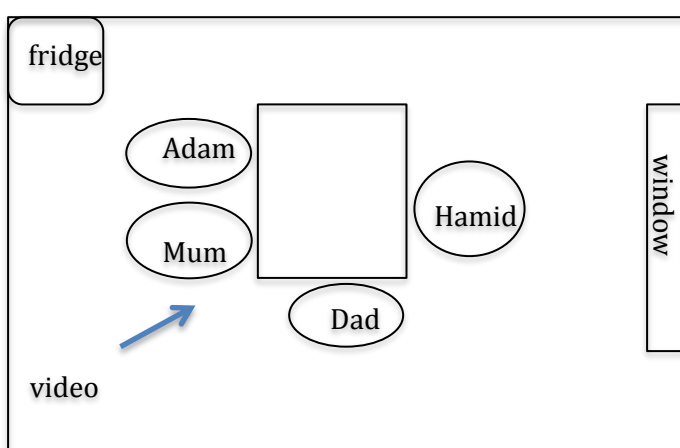
how issues of agency in FLP play out alongside socialisation practices in everyday interaction.

Parents socialise their children into a number of cultural values and do so through direct teaching, praise, or sanctions if those values are violated (Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Song, 2007). In this family, the parents have worked hard to socialise their children into many values, in particular, the value of good behaviour, intelligence, cleverness, and maturity, based on their constant prompts and teachings as is evident in the corpus. They socialise this value in different ways, but most notably through the use of the Arabic adjective “shaatir”. We consider this a key value and a keyword for this family, which has no direct translation in English. The word “shaatir” can mean, based on the context of use, ‘cleverness’, ‘good behaviour’ or ‘maturity’ in how one deals with things. Due to the parents’ regular use of this word in conversation to socialise, praise and encourage the children, a specific standard of “good” behaviour has been created in this family. The children therefore strive to embody the value of “shaatir”, as will be demonstrated below through the close analyses of two extended extracts that exemplify children’s agency in FLP and adults’ socialisation practices of this family.

In general the language choice and distribution across the recorded interactions are dependent on the subject of conversation and therefore patterns of switching or preferences for Arabic or English are never the same across episodes. Excerpt 1 is from the June 2009 recording during a school holiday lunch; the mother has prepared pizza, salads and noodles, a treat for the children. The episode, which is equivalent to one complete mealtime recording, consists of 209 turns and lasted for about 40 minutes. We define turns in line with Levinson (1983, p. 295-296) as “a time during which a single participant speaks”. Of the turns, 114 (55%) are in English, 68 (33%)

in intra-sentential switching (mixed), and 27 (13%) in Arabic. Hamid spoke the most, with 61 turns, followed by the mother, with 56 turns, then the father, with 50 turns, and finally Adam with 47 turns.

Comparing the speakers, we see that the father used Arabic the most, followed by the mother who used Arabic but not as much, as she mixed Arabic with English. Adam also mixed Arabic with English in his turns. While Hamid spoke Arabic very rarely, he used English the most. Although the father speaks Algerian Arabic, he mainly uses a form closer to Yemeni Arabic, which is simpler than Algerian Arabic in general. For the purposes of this paper, we did not draw fine differences between different varieties of the Arabic used; hence we refer to it just as Arabic here. We are also aware that in bilingual families sometimes the family as a unit gravitates more towards the father's or mother's language or dialect (see for example, Barron-Hauwaert, 2011) but that is beyond the scope of this paper. All members were present and the following diagram shows the seating arrangements of the family around the dining table:



*Figure 1: Family seating arrangement*

It is common that siblings, especially in intense face-to-face events vie for their parents' attention and attempt to outdo one another whilst pursuing that coveted attention (Bayley & Schecter, 2003; Gonzalez, 2006). Throughout this extract, Hamid attempted to attract his father's attention through addressing him directly to talk about the Arabic language or through attempting to speak Arabic. Having failed to change the subject many times, he was looking for an opportunity to become the centre of the conversation, and that chance availed itself after Turn 116. He immediately took the floor at Turn 117 calling out to his father by speaking Arabic. In the end the exchanges turned into Hamid learning how to construct a simple sentence in Arabic with help from his father.

**Excerpt 1: JL4.06.09:117-128 (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions)**

- 117 Hamid Baaba! Baaba! .... *Ana tuhhib*  
 %glo: Dad.N. Sing.Msc I.1st Neut like.2nd.Msc.PRS  
 %tra: Dad! Dad!..... I you like [sic]
- 118 Dad *Ana ahhib!* But *Inta tuhhib*  
 %glo: I.1st.sing.Neut like.PRS.sing.Neut you.2nd.sing.Msc  
 like.2nd.sing.Msc.PRS  
 %tra: I like but you like  
 %situ: In a teacher like manner pointing to himself and then to Hamid all  
 attention is on Hamid now
- 119 Hamid Yes akayy [ok]
- 120 Dad *Inta tuhhib aysh?*  
 %glo: you.2nd.sing. Msc like.2nd.Sing.Msc.PRS what.INT  
 %tra: You like what?
- 121 Hamid *Ana hibb...*  
 %glo: I.1st.ing.Msc.Neut  
 %tra: I like [ungrammatical verb construction]

- 122 Dad *Ana ahib*  
 %glo: I.1st.Sing.Msc.Neut like.1st.Sing.Neut.PRS  
 %tra: I like
- 123 Hamid *Ana ahib taakul...hahahaha!*  
 %glo: I.1st.Sing.Neut like.1st.Sing.Msc PRS. Eat.2nd.sing.Msc.PRS  
 %tra: I like to you eat [sic] hahahahaha  
 %situ: All laugh with Hamid, mum begins to clear plates from table and walks off camera
- 124 Dad *Ana..... ahib... aakul!*  
 %glo: I.1st.Sing.Neut like.1st.Sing.PRS eat.1st.Sing.Msc.PRS  
 %tra: I like to eat!  
 %situ: In a teacher-like manner again pausing between each word
- 125 Hamid *Ana ahib aakul*  
 %glo: I.1st.Sing.Neut like.1st.Sing.PRS eat.1st.Sing.Msc.PRS  
 %tra: I like eating  
 %situ: everyone laughs aloud, mum walks back and sits at table
- 126 Mum Good boy! Well done *habeebi*  
 %glo: beloved.Msc.Sing.POSS  
 %tra: Good boy! Well done my darling
- 127 Hamid No, no Maama! Say *Shaatir ya Ouledee Shaatir!*  
 %glo: clever.ADJ.Msc.Sing O.VOC boy.Sing.Msc.DIM  
 %tra: No, no mum! Say well done my clever little boy!
- 128 Mum *Ho! Shaatir ya habibi shaatir!*  
 %glo: clever.ADJ.Msc.Sing O.VOC beloved.Msc.Sing.POSS  
 %tra: Oh! Well done my beloved well done

In Turn 117 instead of using the first person Arabic marker [a] to signal the present tense first person verb, Hamid said “tuhhib” meaning “I you like”. This resulted in a mixture of first person marker [a] “ana” and the second person marker [t] “tuhib”, rendering the sentence incorrect. This initiation by Hamid is what King and Fogle (2013, p.8) term “children’s metalinguistic talk about language rules and

practices” and is explicitly agentive, as this very turn influences and shapes to a large extent the organisation of the following turns. In response from Turns 118 until 124, his father took on the teacher role and made teacher-like moves in an attempt to ensure Hamid produces a grammatical sentence. In Turn 119, Hamid then said “yes okay” agreeing to take on the student/novice position and to be corrected. In the next turn Dad asked Hamid in Arabic “inta tuhhib aysh?” meaning “what do you like?”, perhaps as a way to prompt Hamid to add an object to the verb “I like”. Hamid responded with another incorrect construction in Turn 121, and said [ana hibb] omitting the initial first person marker [a] to which Dad corrected again in Turn 122. In Turn 123, Hamid attempted to complete his sentence by stating what he likes “ana ahib taakul”, but this resulted in him incorrectly using a second person marker [t] in “taakul” meaning, “I like you eat”. Dad corrected this in Turn 124 using a slow and measured intonation, re-casting like an Arabic teacher, and waiting for Hamid to repeat the correct form “ana....ahhib.....aakul” meaning “I like to eat”. The father was patient: he did not rush Hamid and waited for him to produce the correct construction, as if this were an Arabic language class. Hamid was finally successful in Turn 125 and produced a fully complete and correct sentence which his father approved of, “ana ahib aakul,” meaning “I like to eat”. Mäntylä, Pietikäinen and Dufva (2009) emphasise the important roles of informal language learning contexts in the learning and maintenance of a minority language. The father’s readiness and patience in conducting a pseudo-Arabic lesson at the behest of Hamid shows how language learning and maintenance can be unceremoniously embedded into an ordinary mealtime conversation.

The mother spoke for the first time in Turn 126. Her silence has so far been congruent to her belief that she is not good at Arabic, as she stated to the first

author (Said, 2011). She supported the father's teacher position and contributed to the language learning by praising Hamid after he corrected his sentence. She said "good boy, well done habibi" meaning "well done my beloved". However, Hamid perhaps did not see the way she praised him to be fitting: he insisted that his mother should praise him through an intensified Arabic affective repertoire and even supplied the phrase copied from his parents' way of speaking on other occasions. This intensified Arabic affective praise includes the first person possessive diminutive form "ouledeee" ("my little boy"), an endearment carrying more force than other phrases his parents use in comforting him when he cries such as "ya sagheer" ("o little one"), or "habeebi" ("my darling"). Clearly, he understood these differences in endearment phrases this is evidence of how children are socialised into emotion based on how their parents selectively choose special terms to make them feel loved. In this case the use of a specific praise term, the diminutive is preferred by Hamid (Pavlenko, 2007). Additionally, he also chose to be praised as "shaatir", the well sought-after key family value meaning "clever", as explained earlier. The mother's surprise, humour and compliance to Hamid's request are manifested in her repetition of the word "shaatir", an almost word-for-word duplication after Hamid's turn. Ahearn (2001, p.41) refers to this type of talk as meta-pragmatic discourse, which demonstrates "how people talk about agency- how they talk about their own actions..."

Grammatically "shaatir" is an adjective and also an active participle (action) and it is therefore the very act of being 'good' or 'clever'. By using this word time and again, or by prompting their elders to ascribe this quality to them, it is as if the boys wish to describe their actions as examples of "shaatir". This wish and need to embody such a trait helps Hamid achieve his agency, through influencing his mother not only to



change from English to Arabic, but also to use a praise formula in which Hamid is recognised as someone who enacts the characteristics of a “shaatir” individual.

In a similar use of “shaatir”, the dinnertime recording transcribed in Excerpt 2 took place between Mum, Adam and Hamid in March 2009. In this episode, there are 38 turns; the mother spoke the most with 16 turns followed by Adam with 14 turns and Hamid with 8 turns. Of the 38 turns, 13 (34%) are in English, 5 (13%) in Arabic and 14 (37%) contain intra-sentential code-switched Arabic and English. Adam pleaded with his mother to let him go skating with his friend without the company of his father. Although his attempt to persuade her was unsuccessful, his switch into the desirable attribute, “shaatir”, in Arabic is noteworthy. The way he used his languages also illustrates how a multilingual child manipulates, exploits and creatively uses language in ways that perhaps his monolingual peer cannot.

**Excerpt 2 MD3.03.09:18-29**

- 18 Adam Maama...can I go skating tomorrow with Hamad and them?
- 19 Mum *Laa! Abuuk muu maujuud...*and besides you can't go alone  
 %glo: No! dad.POSS not.NEG available...  
 %tra: No! Your dad is not here...and besides you can't go alone
- 20 Adam Maama...*bass* you know Baaba, he said I could...[umm...  
 %glo: enough.  
 %tra: Maama...but you know Baaba he said I could...umm...
- 21 Mum [Laa! *Ma tasama'* ya  
*habeey Laa!* Look when [Baaba gets back you can ask him tamaam?  
 %glo: No.NEG not.NEG listen.2nd.Msc. Sing O.VOC beloved.POSS no.NEG complete.ADJ?  
 %tra: No! Are you not listening my dear no! Look when Baaba gets back you can ask him okay?

- 22 Adam [Maama, please? I have let Hamad know tomorrow...]
- 23 Hamid [Haha can't go, oh but can... I can I come?]
- 24 Mum [No!....I'll talk to Hamad's mum *ma fee* skating without Babaa!  
%tra: No!...I'll talk to Hamad's mum there's no skating without Baaba!]
- 25 Adam I'll be good and *shaatir* Maama  
%tra: I'll be good and be good (behave) Maama
- 26 Mum *Habeeby! Khalaas* I am not talking about the *mawdhuu'* anymore....it's  
%glo: beloved.POSS stop.IMP topic.N.MSc.Sing.ACC  
not safe... all by yourself... and besides you need abuuk because he  
%glo: father.POSS  
skates... just wait two weeks  
%tra: My beloved! That's it, I am not talking about the topic anymore...it's not  
safe...all by yourself...and besides you need your father because he  
skates...just wait two weeks
- 27 Hamid .....Maama, can I have more?
- 28 Mum Are you sure you are going to finish it? Okay bring your plate  
%situ: Looks at Hamid for a while before taking his plate and putting food on it.
- 29 Adam Two weeks?...well.....umm...*khalaas* [okay.... Oh! Can I phone Hamad then?  
%tra: Two weeks? ...Well fine okay...oh! Can I phone Hamad then?

Adam began in Turn 18 by asking his mother in English if he could go skating with his friend, his mother immediately refused his request in the next turn, first in/ Arabic “*laa abuuk muu mawjuud*” meaning “no, your father is not here”, and then explained in English “besides you can't go alone”. Her switch to English has a double function of emphasis as well as an explanation.

In Turn 20, Adam responded with the Arabic “*bass*” meaning “but” in an attempt to plead and to put forward his counter argument. Before he could further explain his request, Mum interrupted him and said in Arabic first “*Laa! Ma tasma' habeeby laa!*” meaning “no! Are you not listening my beloved? No!” Her change into

Arabic and then back into English is significant because one of the main functions of code-switching in conflict talk is that it is used as a linguistic resource for speakers to dominate the interaction, to establish and negotiate their positions, and to oppose and challenge their opponent (Zhu, 2008).

The mother's strong refusal did not deter Adam from interjecting her and pleading once more. However, she again overlapped him and refused in both English and Arabic "No, I'll talk to Hamad's mum, *ma fee* (there's no) skating without Baaba". At the same time as the mother's interjection Hamid spoke for the first time and teased his brother "Haha can't go". This double act of teasing and aggravating during mealtimes is common among siblings and they play out minor rivalries in subtle indirect ways (Busch, 2012; Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Paugh, 2012). In effect, Turns 22, 23 and 24 are all overlaps making this a highly involved exchange with three speakers competing to claim the floor and talk over one other; this kind of interaction is common in family conversations (Tannen, 2002). Both Mum and Adam ignored Hamid and in Turn 25 Adam promised, "I'll be good and shaatir". His agency was once more apparent in his skilled switch to Arabic and his choice of the word "shaatir". Instead of escalating the conflict, he was making a compromise by showing his commitment to one of the most desired family values, which has always been referred to in Arabic. Like the excerpt above, his meta-agentive use of the word "shaatir" was significant. Both boys used the active participle or adjective "shaatir", which reflects the children's ability to use their knowledge about parental linguistic and value preferences as a way of realising their own social goals.

To further communicate her displeasure and wish to end the discussion, the mother used the Arabic word "khalaas" meaning "it's done" and said that she did not want to talk about the "mawduu" (topic) anymore because Adam needed "abuuk"

(your father). Her switch between English and Arabic was an emphasis of her authority, power and a message to Adam that the final decision was hers to make as a parent. Her use of the word “abuuk” took on a more serious tone than if she had said “baaba”, as the former is only used in very formal situation. These factors therefore mark the switch and make her refusal more emphatic. The excerpt ended with Adam surrendering and agreeing that he would not go until his father returned.

In both examples, the boys began and initiated conversations, and the parents accommodated and allowed them to do this, making the exchanges largely child-centric (Ochs, 1988). From an LS perspective, Hamid asserted his agency throughout Excerpt 1 on a number of fronts, despite an asymmetrical relationship between his Arabic linguistic ability and that of his parents. First, Hamid initiated an utterance in Arabic as his strategy of taking the floor and attracting his family’s attention. Secondly, while the conversation rapidly became a language learning exchange in which he validated and accepted his parents as the language experts and embraced his novice status as a speaker of Arabic, he asserted control over the situation when he had a chance. Third, he playfully demanded to be praised in the most intensifying and elaborate manner and for a desirable attribute, a value that his family have high regard for and he has been socialised into. Similarly, in Excerpt 2 Adam took up his agency through his appeal to the desirable family value of being “shaatir”, and through code-switching between English and Arabic in order to challenge his mother’s authority and to dominate the conflict talk. Bringing these two examples together, the analyses suggest that the children in this family realise their agency through the way they creatively and strategically use and switch between their Arabic and English and particularly by: (a) not yieldingly reproducing parental language routines by using their own inventive constructions, re-productions and

formations, and by (b) manipulating the family's ideal image (that of a child being "shaatir") hence challenging and (re)negotiating the child-parent relationship.

The children's ability to use language nearly as skilfully as their parents provides an opportunity for them to assume their agency with much greater success than children who lack proficiency in one of the family's languages. Although the children are still learning Arabic and the father sometimes steps up as an Arabic teacher, the disparity between their linguistic ability is not as significant as the cases where children serve as language brokers or where there is an intergenerational language shift (Luykx, 2005). This type of linguistic proficiency distribution among family members therefore is conducive to the children's uptake of their agency whereby, as shown above, they can challenge and negotiate with their parents on a near-equal footing through manipulating languages and their symbolisms. The parents' status as experts is regularly tested requiring them to be resourceful with their children regarding the rules and social practices of the family.

In terms of development over time, the parents use "shaatir" consistently in a number of ways in order to coax the children into certain practices and actions (such as finishing food or homework, being polite and so on) throughout the data. However, the children never use the term themselves until three months into the recording of the mealtimes, in which both boys use it as a tool to achieve their social goals as chronicled above in detail. This suggests that over time the boys may have gradually understood the importance of such a family value in their lives, and having understood the parents' desire for them to embody such habitus or ways of being, they are now using the concept agentively to achieve their own agendas.

The boys' attempts to take up their agency lies in the fact that they are fully aware of their parent's flexible FLP, and hence discursively blend Arabic and English to negotiate and scaffold their multilingual agentive positions at home. While the family is flexible and relaxed about multilingual practice, it places high value on learning and use of Arabic. It appears, based on the data that both parents, like many speakers of Arabic, have a certain awe for the language (Suleiman, 2003). For this reason, the Arabic language is supported within the home, the children are praised for speaking Arabic well, and they also attend a Saturday Arabic school. The father speaks the most Arabic and often takes on the role of correcting the children's Arabic, with the mother supporting his role. Significantly, the children are fully aware of their parents' affection for the Arabic language, and as shown in the examples, Hamid attempted to exploit this knowledge to get attention and to achieve his social goal, whilst Adam used it to assert himself and to defy his mother's authority.

Inasmuch as the interactions above demonstrate children's awareness of FLP at play, they also reveal the nature of the relationship of this family - a close, caring and loving family relational dynamic. It is this very kind of family relationship that lies behind the success story we have seen in this family as far as language socialisation into language maintenance is concerned. Due to the tight-knit nature of this family, children freely interject and overlap other speakers in conversation and are thus empowered to exercise agency liberally through choice of language and conversational style. The multiple languages are used as tools through which the individual members are able to reinforce, forge and strengthen bonds with their family members. The theme of learning is repeated throughout the data in which the parents create a space for learning and discovery during their mealtime conversations, and the children are not fearful of making mistakes and being corrected or being given

different perspectives of facts they already know. Similar findings on the importance of family relationship in language maintenance were reported elsewhere. For example, Tannenbaum and Berkovich (2005) found that in families where children felt that their families were close and trustworthy there was also a successful maintenance of the minority language. Kenner, et al (2008) argue that it is the parents' open, child-friendly manner that allows the third generation to appreciate, enjoy and welcome the learning of their heritage language.

## **Conclusion**

Mealtime interactions are one of the sociolinguistic contexts in which family members bond as a family (Mondada, 2009) and, in the case of multilingual families, it is a time in which members can “do being bilingual” (Auer, 2002). Through close turn-by-turn analyses of the extended multiparty mealtime interactions, this paper investigated how children in multilingual and transnational families enact their agency in language use and socialisation and why these acts of agency are conducive to successful maintenance of the so-called “home”, “community” or “minority” language. By using interactional data, the minute often fleeting details of how conversation unfolds were captured in order to magnify how speakers communicated their meanings and how listeners responded.

The analyses revealed that the children are able to negotiate and take up their agency thus influencing parental language use, choice and inevitably the FLP due to the following three factors: first, their highly developed ability to switch between and manipulate the symbolisms within their languages, encouraged perhaps in part by the parents' flexible policy. This is consistent with the findings by Schwartz (2008, p.400), who argues that children are best able to balance and manage their languages

when there is “a tendency towards the co-existence of the first and second languages” within the family home. More recently, De Houwer (2015, p.169) suggests that bilingual language development (which is determined by the FLP and inevitably predicts later maintenance of a minority language) needs to be viewed from the point of view of “harmony” or “well-being in a contact situation involving young children and their families”. Two of the elements of harmony she suggests are: “children’s active use of two languages and not just one, and children’s more or less equal proficiency in each language” (p.169). She advocates that where children and their families find harmony as a result of the contact situation they find themselves in, then harmonious bilingual development will take place. It follows then that the more positive the experience, the more likely it is that children will be highly proficient in their languages and the more likely it is for the minority language to be maintained. For future work we propose that it would be important to understand: does a positive experience influence an open FLP, as is the case in this family? Or does a flexible FLP create a positive experience?

Second, the children successfully use the knowledge of their parents’ preference for the Arabic language to attract their attention or challenge their parental status. Third, the family’s close relationship is shown through the child-centric nature of the interactions and the nearly egalitarian fellowship at the dining table. These three unique factors create a distinctive context in which the children are able to navigate and pursue their agency despite the naturally asymmetric nature of the relationship between themselves and their parents. As demonstrated here, agency is a constant, on-going, and effortful notion that is understood and enacted in specific ways that suit this family. There is still much to be learned, and more interactional data analysed from a turn-by-turn perspective are needed in FLP research as well as



that of agency in order to understand these issues. Although self-reporting, questionnaires, interviews and observations are important data collection methods, they need to be used alongside actual language use in order to understand the meaning making process. It is hoped that this article contributes to paving the way for such work.

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**Appendix I: LIDES transcription convention (MacWhinney & Snow, 1990).**

<b>Symbol/word</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>Italicised</i>	Arabic (spoken for both Yemeni and Algerian Arabic)
<b>Bold</b>	Standard Arabic
Normal script	English
<b>%glo</b>	is the gloss of the original Arabic utterances and is the grammatical presentation of the word (nouns, imperatives, pronouns).
<b>%situ</b> (or <b>%act</b> )	is a description of the extra-linguistic non-verbal actions that accompany the verbal exchanges of the conversation.
Multiple dots (...or.....)	show a pause, the longer the pause the more dots that are placed.
<b>%tra</b>	is the translation of the original Arabic, where needed
xxxx	Inaudible or unintelligible speech
[ [	Parallel square brackets in two different turns means an overlap or simultaneous speech
((	double bracket means that there was an absence of a pause between one speaker and the other, though it does not constitute an overlap.
!	High tone in speech

**Appendix II: Abbreviation conventions for parts of speech (MacWhinney, 2015).**

Abbreviation	Meaning
POSS	Possessive Pronoun
IMP	Imperative
N	Noun
Msc.	Masculine
Fem.	Feminine
ACC	Accusative
NEG	Negation
VOC	Vocative particle
Sing.	Singular
Pl.	Plural
1 <sup>st</sup>	First Person
ADJ	Adjective
Neut.	Neutral
PRS	Present tense
PST	Past tense
INT	Interrogative Particle