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Family language policy between the bilingual advantage and the monolingual mindset

Ingrid Piller and Livia Gerber

In contemporary Western societies, parenting has become the subject of a substantial body of advice and self-help literature. Within this literature, questions of bilingual parenting have begun to add yet another dimension to parental anxieties. Against this background, we examine how parents in a general Australian online parenting forum discuss the desires they have for their children's bilingualism and the challenges they experience to their bilingual parenting. We first demonstrate that individual bilingualism in the abstract is discussed in highly favourable terms and is widely conceptualised as a 'gift' from parents to children. However, their belief in the bilingual advantage does not easily translate into effective bilingual parenting practices. First, many posters are concerned that bilingualism in the early years might be jeopardising their child's English language proficiency and hence school success. Second, a very narrow definition of 'true' bilingualism is connected with a relatively dogmatic belief in the 'one parent, one language' parenting strategy. As a result, consecutive bilinguals, particularly migrant fathers, come to be perceived as both problematic bilinguals and problematic parents. We close with implications for family language policy and advocacy in the face of entrenched institutional English monolingualism.

Keywords: bilingualism; bilingual parenting; family language policy; gender; monolingualism; multilingualism

Introduction

In contemporary Western societies, parenting has become a source of considerable

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anxiety and is the subject of a substantial body of advice and self-help literature (e.g., Geinger, Vandebroek, and Roets 2014; Sunderland 2006). Within this large body of literature, advice specific to questions of bilingual parenting used to constitute a niche genre (Piller 2001). However, this is no longer the case and in recent years a ‘mainstreaming’ of bilingualism can be observed: questions such as whether and how to raise children bilingually increasingly constitute a feature of the general parenting advice and self-help literature (Bello-Rodzeń 2016). Despite these developments, discourses of bilingual child-rearing in the general parenting advice and self-help literature remain underexplored. Therefore, this research is designed to contribute towards filling this gap and to examine discourses of bilingual parenting in a general Australian online parenting forum. Specifically, we ask how ‘bilingualism’ is understood and evaluated in the forum; what family language policies and strategies are recommended; and how bilingual parenting is incorporated into broader discourses of what it means to be a ‘good’ parent.

The article is organised as follows: after an orientation to the key debates in bilingual parenting, we describe our dataset of naturally occurring online commentary on bilingual parenting. Our analysis finds that individual bilingualism in the abstract is discussed in highly favourable terms and widely conceptualised as a ‘gift’ from parents to children. However, the dominance of institutional English monolingualism along with beliefs in the necessity to strictly separate languages and the gendered division of labour in the family, conspire to make bilingual parenting problematic for parents. We close with implications for research and advocacy and suggest that advocacy for individual bilingualism might have to be rethought in the face of entrenched institutional English monolingualism.

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Discourses of bilingual parenting

Bilingual parenting is permeated by contradictory ideologies that constitute bilingualism simultaneously as a benefit and as a threat (e.g., King and Fogle 2006; Kirsch 2011). This is particularly true in English-dominant societies where prevailing attitudes towards bilingualism have been described as ‘Janus-faced’ (Ellis, Gogolin, and Clyne 2010): a tension exists between a belief in the monolingual nation on the one hand and the de facto reality of widespread linguistic diversity on the other. This means that the national language – English in our Australian case study – is valued more highly than minoritised indigenous or migrant languages. In other words, a tension exists between a public monolingual ideal, the ‘monolingual mindset’ (Clyne 2005) and widespread de facto multilingualism. As a consequence, proficiency in English is considered an asset – and the sole requirement for full socio-economic participation – and proficiency in languages other than English is considered at best an incidental benefit and at worst even a burden.

This English-dominated linguistic hierarchy has in recent years been further complicated by the belief that ‘bilingualism’ – independent of the specific languages involved – constitutes an advantage that the bi- or multilingual individual has over monolingual individuals. The idea of the ‘bilingual advantage’ posits a range of cognitive, health, economic and other personal benefits resulting from individual bilingualism (King and Mackey 2007). The idea has been widely popularised and regularly circulates in the media making ‘the bilingual advantage’ easily one of the most widely-known linguistic factoids. This makes the idea of the bilingual advantage – regardless of its truth value – a powerful language ideology in family language policy (FLP) decisions.

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FLP research asks how language ideologies – as shared, even if multiple and contested, beliefs about language – shape language practices in the home domain (Curdt-Christiansen 2013). It has been a key finding in this field that beliefs about what constitutes a desirable linguistic outcome do not necessarily easily translate into practices and that the implementation of bilingual parenting strategies often confronts sizable challenges (Schwartz 2010). A particular challenge to the success of bilingual parenting aims is constituted by the fact that in countries such as Australia educational support outside the home is, by and large, lacking at all levels of the education system, starting from early childhood education (Benz 2017). In the Australian education system, as is true of other English-dominant societies, teaching of languages other than English is highly unsystematic, fragmented, and has long been found to result in extremely low levels of language proficiency (e.g., Clyne 2005; Lo Bianco 2008). This persistent school failure when it comes to language education is a fact that parents wishing to raise their children bilingually must take into consideration in their FLP decisions. Indeed, bilingual language development has come to be primarily regarded as a parental responsibility (e.g., Nicholas 2015; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Armstrong De Almeida 2006). As a consequence, the need for language education efforts within the home domain increases if parents wish for their children to have competences in one or more languages other than English.

Where language education is, by and large, a personal matter, parents not only face the question if they want to raise their children bilingually but also how to achieve their aims. For many well-educated middle-class parents this means researching and adopting specific FLP strategies (Paradowski and Bator 2016). The most widely-known bilingual parenting strategies are the ‘one parent, one language’ (OPOL) approach and the ‘minority language at home’ strategy (Schwartz and Verschik 2013). Both these

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strategies are based in specific language ideologies that view bilingualism as a form of ‘double monolingualism’ (Heller 2007) and are aimed at a strict compartmentalisation of the languages involved. This means that, even where bilingualism is valorised, this valorisation may be based on monolingual beliefs and may be pursued through strategies that themselves continue to reinforce monolingual ideologies.

The tensions surrounding bilingual parenting outlined so far must be understood against the background of the professionalisation of contemporary parenting for middle-class parents in the global north (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2016). As parenting in general and mothering in particular (Hays 1998) have become a daunting task that is largely understood as an investment into securing the child’s future, language planning issues add yet another dimension to parental anxieties. How to increase educational advantage for the child through investing into desired language proficiencies has become a pressing concern for many parents. However, given the language ideologies outlined above it may neither be clear what precisely constitutes a valuable set of linguistic proficiencies nor how it may be achieved. This research is designed to illuminate how these tensions play out in an online peer-to-peer parenting support forum.

Methods

Online advice and support have become central sources of parenting information and ‘community building’ (Jensen 2013; Johnson 2015). In Australia, essentialbaby.com.au claims to be the ‘largest online parenting community’, where ‘one million parents across social media and our unique forums provide each other with friendship, support

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and advice as they experience the journey of motherhood.’¹ The site is owned and operated by Fairfax Media, one of Australia’s major media corporations and includes journalistic and advertising content in the rubrics ‘conception’, ‘pregnancy’, ‘birth’, ‘baby’, ‘toddler’ and ‘just for you’, the latter featuring traditional women’s magazine content. The site also has a ‘forum’ section, where registered members can engage in peer-to-peer communication within a range of categories, which in addition to the rubric themes also include themes such as ‘hospital and birth centres’, ‘breastfeeding’ or ‘parties and special occasions.’

Before we describe our dataset in further detail, we state the rationale for our choice of the essentialbaby.com.au forum as our data collection site. First, this is a general parenting forum rather than a specialist forum of parents with a high degree of investment in bilingualism, as can be found on dedicated sites such as bilingualparenting.com or multilingualparenting.com.

Second, the site is situated within a specific national context, Australia, where English monolingualism predominates ideologically but coincides with significant linguistic diversity. Australia’s linguistic diversity is the result of high levels of immigration from non-English-speaking countries since the 1940s. Historically, most migrant groups have become English-dominant by the second generation and English-monolingual by the third generation (Piller 2016b). In 2016, a language other than English (LOTE) was spoken in 22.2 percent of Australian households (2016 Census QuickStats, 2018).

1 http://www.essentialbaby.com.au/about_us; last accessed December 29, 2017

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Third, forum discussions occur naturally and thus do not constitute researcher-generated data. This constitutes both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, as naturally occurring conversations about bilingual parenting, the corpus offers an emic perspective and provides a valuable snapshot of the online dissemination and public uptake of academic bilingualism research. On the other hand, we cannot systematically account for the demographic profiles of participants, including their language repertoires, as we will explain further below.

As stated above, we compiled our corpus from the ‘forum’ section of essentialbaby.com.au. ‘Bilingual parenting’, ‘language development’ or similar is not an available category indicating that bilingual parenting continues to be a ‘miscellaneous’ parenting issue. As no pre-given category was available we compiled our corpus on the basis of a keyword search for ‘bilingual’, ‘multilingual’ and alternative spellings in the forum archives. The search was conducted in April 2015 and resulted in 15 relevant threads posted since 2007. These contained a total of 15 original posts (OP) and 266 responses (see Table 1).

[Insert [Table 1](#) around here]

The OP in each of the 15 threads sought advice on bilingual parenting, either whether it was a good idea at all or on practicalities such as when to introduce a second language. In most cases, the advice seekers included a short description of their family’s linguistic repertoire to provide context for their query (see Table 1). Each request for advice received on average 18 responses. While advice seekers were relatively explicit about their linguistic repertoires, the level of information that responders provided about their language repertoires or about the basis for their advice was highly variable.

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We will now show what kind of demographic information, particularly with regard to language repertoires, can be gleaned from our data by using OP6 as an example.

DH² is from a non-English speaking country. He speaks English fluently and we decided that DS' first language should be English, as he is living and will go to school in Australia. He will learn his father's language when he is a little older, maybe 5. Everyone says now is a good time for him to learn both languages, which I agree with, but I can't help thinking it would be better for him to get English "under his belt" first. [goes on to describe and negatively evaluate the example of a friend who only uses a LOTE with her pre-school child] (OP6)

Like OP6, all original posters, and all but one response poster, identify as female. That the forum is dominated by women and that 'parenting' is implicitly understood as a female concern on the site is also obvious from the site's mission statement about 'helping Australian mothers [...] as they experience the journey of motherhood' and the fact that within the forum categories fathers are relegated to a special category, 'Dad's Zone.'

Second, it is obvious that OP6 is the mother of a young child (significantly younger than five years) and that is true of all advice seekers, too, whose children are either very young or have not even been born yet. The age of the children of responders varies, as some have older children, others relate their own experiences when they were young and others refer to the children of acquaintances. The focus on parenting babies

2 Throughout, all data excerpts are directly copied from the corpus and maintain the original spelling and other linguistic peculiarities. 'DH' stands for 'dear husband' and is a common abbreviation on the forum. Other common abbreviations include 'DD', 'DP' and 'DS' ('dear daughter/partner/son') and 'pg' (pregnant).

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and toddlers is also evident from the fact that essentialbaby.com.au also operates a sister site, essentialkids.com.au, ‘for parents of pre-schoolers to teenagers’.

Third, OP6 is one of 13 OPs who are a partner in a bilingual couple. In nine of these, the mother (and OP) is the English speaker and English is overwhelmingly identified as the couple language. The other language involved often remains unspecified, as is the case in OP6. Like the OPs, the vast majority of responders must be considered English-dominant. Some of these describe that they grew up speaking only English and rate their proficiency in other languages as minimal (e.g., OP2). Others describe themselves as growing up with a LOTE as ‘native’ language but using English with equal ease (e.g., OP14). A third group comprises second-generation migrants (e.g., OP10). With regard to bilingual proficiency, OP10, who claims to speak ‘99% Turkish’ constitutes an exception and explanations from this group that their own bilingual upbringings resulted in weak LOTE proficiencies are much more common:

My own parents used to speak our mother tongue at home all the time until we were at school when they decided that they were in Australia now and spoke to the children in English and each other in native tongue. But I am sad now because this meant that I cant speak their language more than a few words. (And I can't teach my own DS!) (5.3)

It's too common amongst my friends to not be fluent in their native languages and not many of them embraces it. (6.35)

While these unstructured self-assessments reveal significant complexity in bilingual proficiencies, the dominance of English as the medium of the site but, even more importantly, as the posters’ most dominant point of linguistic reference is obvious.

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well my native language would be English and my husbands Turkish as he moved here from Turkey 10 years ago. But since my parents always spoke to me in Turkish it feels strange to speak to my kids in English. Although my husband and I talk to each other in English..... (10.7)

In sum, advice seekers and givers are mothers of young children whose bilingual experiences centre on English with a wide range of additional proficiencies in various LOTEs. Their interest in bilingual childrearing mostly stems from the fact that they are in a bilingual relationship or from the fact that they are themselves descendants of migrants from LOTE-backgrounds. A minority of responders admit that they have no personal experience with a LOTE but contribute opinions or observations from a variety of sources.

This corpus of 15 OPs and 266 responses, comprising a total of 40,657 words, formed the basis for thematic analysis. We identified recurrent key topics related to beliefs and practices of bilingual parenting. Our deductive method centred on predetermined themes to ensure we would also account for themes not explicitly stated in the data (Pavlenko 2007) as well as erased language ideologies (Schiefflin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998). In the following, we will first describe how ‘bilingualism’ is understood and assessed before examining the relationship between English and the LOTE. We will then move on to explicate the FLP strategies favoured on the forum before showing how the vision of bilingual parenting espoused by the posters fits in with discourses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parenting.

Bilingualism as an asset

Throughout the data, ‘bilingualism’ is understood to be constituted by English, the implicit sine qua non, plus one (or more) other languages, as in these examples:

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Oh, I think one of the best gifts a parent can give a child is another language. (6.7³)

We really believe that we have given our children a gift, in being bilingual, it is so easy for DH and I, why would we not pass this knowledge onto our children. (6.25)

What it means to ‘give’ or to ‘have’ another language, however, is never specified. This means there is no evident awareness in the data that language proficiency comprises oral and written skills nor that it may be constituted at different levels of proficiency. The LOTE is seen as being imparted as a whole undifferentiated object to the child as in the recurring ‘gift’ and ‘asset’ metaphors:

Plus you never know when a language might be beneficial. You don’t have to go and live in that country for it to help. There are advantages to studying a language for university entrance, there may be jobs where it’s helpful and employers often regard bilingualism as an asset even if it’s not actually required for the job. (12.14)

Excerpt 12.14 suggests that the key benefit of having another language is the ability ‘to go and live’ in the country onto which the LOTE is mapped. Additionally, bilingualism might also confer an educational or employment advantage within Australia, although such statements tend to be probabilistic (‘may be’, ‘not actually be required’). Indeed, it is mostly economic and academic benefits of bilingualism that are highlighted:

It also provides extra opportunities to work in that country, to work with tourists or immigrants from that country, to do social, historical, political or cultural studies of that country and gives them advantages that many other Australian’s don’t have. (12.32)

³ The first number indicates the thread and the second the response number.

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While economic and academic benefits are foregrounded, references to cognitive and health benefits are relatively rare:

Apparently it's also been shown that bilingual people are less likely to suffer from dementia or other degenerative brain conditions in old age. (3.11)

Language- and community-specific benefits, such as the ability to communicate with grandparents and extended family, or the ability to appreciate the literature of a particular language, are completely absent. The fact that bilingualism is primarily conceptualised as an academic and economic asset, rarely as a cognitive advantage and never as a socio-cultural strength presents problems for languages that lack economic clout as they cannot be accommodated into the discourse of bilingualism as a valuable economic gift. As the following excerpts show, this may discourage some parents from bilingual parenting in languages without obvious economic value:

DH doesn't feel that he wants to teach our child/ren his second language. It is only spoken within his home country which is far away from here. Our child/ren would have limited opportunity to speak it with anyone but him. (OP12)

My family is bilingual, we originate from another country, however both my children will be speaking English only. I don't see the point in teaching them a language they will never use here in Australia. We are not returning to our country, so there is no need for it. (12.8)

In sum, bilingualism is conceived as English plus another language. That other language is conceptualised as an undifferentiated yet valuable object. Its value lies predominantly in the economic and academic benefits it may confer on individual bilingual adults. Given that the potential beneficiaries are babies or even unborn, these benefits obviously lie in the far distant future.

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Apprehensions about bilingualism

While the benefits of bilingualism are thus projected into the far distant future of the children's adulthood, parents are confronted with language development concerns in the more immediate or less distant future: there are concerns that bilingualism might result in speech delay or might jeopardise full English language development. Questions and concerns about bilingualism leading to speech delay or language 'confusion' in young children are regularly raised in our data:

I was concerned that my kids may find it hard and the two may confuse or delay them.. (no evidence of this thus far), however I really think the pros of having two languages (or more!) far outweigh any cons in the long run. (4.10)

However, concerns about speech delay are usually dismissed as temporary and thus outweighed by long-term benefits:

The only down side is that they may take a little longer to speak, but once they do they will have the benefit of being bilingual. I'd say go for it -the long term gains are worth the minor speech delay. (2.6)

Some posters even dismiss concerns regarding speech delays altogether as lacking an evidence base:

DH and I have done a lot of research on raising multilingual children and based on that (as well as our own experience and those of friends with multilingual children), I really don't subscribe to the widely-voiced view that children with more than one language routinely experience delays in speech. (4.5)

In sum, concerns regarding bilingualism leading to speech delays are frequently voiced throughout the data but are prone to being dismissed. Either they are regarded as

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a minor short-term inconvenience that is worth accepting in the face of long-term benefits or they are altogether rejected as a ‘myth’ lacking evidence.

Another bilingual parenting concern that permeates the data is related to the question how the introduction of a LOTE in the early years will influence English language development. The potential problem is assumed to arise in the medium future at primary school entry, which in Australia usually starts when a child is five years old. In a sense, primary school presents the first test case for parents to assess whether their investment into their child’s academic future is on the right track. At that milestone, proficiency in a LOTE counts for nothing, as explained above. What counts is proficiency in English and parents may have to consider whether potential benefits in the far distant future outweigh the potential threat that a bilingual parenting strategy may present to an ‘ideal’ school start. In other words, posters are worried how the presence of a LOTE might affect their child’s English language development. This concern is not only ‘more real’ than the promises of bilingualism because it is closer at hand but also because posters are aware that English proficiency is variable as migrants’ English language proficiency is a frequent topic of political and media discussion (Piller 2016a). This is in contrast to the way they see LOTE proficiency, which is seen as one undifferentiated entity, as explained above. Personal experience of different levels of English language proficiency and its consequences for school success are evident in examples such as these:

I grew up in a high ethnic neighbourhood and saw all too many kids attending special ESL (english as a second language) classes at school and suffering setbacks due to their parents not speaking any English at home. (5.2)

I agree that children pick up English quickly once in school, but they cannot be at the same level as children who have had five years of English speaking. (6.14)

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Beyond presenting a threat to English proficiency for school success, LOTE use is also feared to endanger a child's inclusion in friendship groups, as 1.11 relates while confessing to her minority-language-at-home strategy as a 'mistake':

I made the mistake of only teaching my daughter turkish. i kept telling dh to talk in turkish to her while we always speak english to each other recently ive noticed she cant verbally communicate with other kids at parks. so now we are speaking/teaching both to her (1.11)

Attempting to raise bilingual children may mean delaying exposure to English, as it does here. This may result in an early childhood where 'bilingual' means the same as 'not speaking English'. In fact, it is not unusual for the posters to use the term 'bilingual' to mean 'not speaking English'. The concerns this may raise for English language development mean, yet again, that English and the LOTE constitute an unequal pair in bilingual parenting: English language development constitutes a priority for parents. Instead of being equal, the LOTE becomes an optional 'nice to have' rather than a firm commitment:

I am pg with number 1 and our plan before reading this post was for my parents to only speak to bub in Spanish and the in-laws to speak to bub in Maltese and DH and I will speak to bub in English. But now I am going to do some more research as maybe we should wait until bub is speaking in English and then introduce the other languages. (1.14)

Because posters consider English language development to take priority, pursuing bilingual parenting strategies that focus on the LOTE in the home may even be represented as 'selfish', as in the following excerpt where the poster relates the story of an acquaintance who only uses a LOTE with her young child:

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I think the mother is being a bit selfish really, and her DD will have trouble when she starts school. DH disagrees – he says she will learn English at school and doesn't need to know it before then. [...] I think she will be disadvantaged though, as the other kids at school will already be speaking English from the start, and she won't. (OP6)

Like OP6, many posters relate stories of parents who exclusively use the LOTE at home. In most cases, posters express concern about such examples of applying the minority language at home strategy, as in the following examples:

I think the parent needs to tread carefully here. You can't just only speak to the child in their native language otherwise they may miss out and be behind in their first year of schooling. (6.26)

I teach children ESL in a state school and some children from homes when other languages are spoken wait until they come to school to teach them English. It seriously impairs the child's ability to make friends and participate in the classroom and it can be so stressful for the child. (10.17)

In sum, posters agree that bilingualism is highly desirable but they also have a number of concerns regarding bilingual childrearing. Some of these, such as concerns about language delay, are easily dismissed and posters provide reassurance to each other. However, there is one concern that looms large and that is reinforced by posters: this is the worry that the development of the LOTE might come at the expense of English. In effect, the apprehension that a focus on LOTE development in the early years – as in the minority language at home strategy – will jeopardize a smooth transition into primary education, means an overwhelming argument for another bilingual parenting strategy, OPOL, as we will show in the next section.

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Bilingual parenting strategies: making the case for OPOL

As mentioned above, bilingual parenting may involve monolingual language use strategies such as only using the minority language at home. With very few exceptions, parents who employ the minority language at home strategy are absent from the site. They are frequently talked about (as in Excerpts OP6, 6.26 or 10.17 above) but they do not participate in the discussions themselves. On the other hand, there are posters who contemplate using only English at home but still aiming to raise their children bilingually by introducing the LOTE at a later point in their lives (e.g., OP6). Both these strategies, which amount to a pursuit of consecutive bilingualism are evaluated negatively on the site. Criticism of the strategy to pursue consecutive bilingualism is based on the common belief in the ‘the earlier, the better’ idea, which is voiced across the data and ties in with another ideology, which states that only simultaneous bilingualism constitutes ‘true’ bilingualism:

There has been study after study showing that children who are raised bilingually from birth do better academically than their monolingual peers. You are doing your child a disservice by not offering the opportunity to have two true first languages. (6.28)

‘True’ simultaneous bilingualism promises to yield the full advantages of the gift of bilingualism without jeopardising English language development. Posters are almost unanimous about the strategy that will ensure this desired goal and recommend again and again the ‘one person, one language’ (OPOL) strategy:

The earlier the better and waiting till 5 is counter-productive. I understand your concern about English not being mastered, but the best way to do this is to ensure one member of the family always speaks in English (ie you) while those that have the other language, always speak that language with your DS. (6.21)

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Posters stress the value of this strategy throughout the data and place a premium on its consistent implementation:

I think the key is consistency. You can't mix in English with the other language or vice-versa. You speak to your child in one language at a time and you can't go wrong. (4.8)

From what I've heard, consistency is the key. If you're the English speaker, you should always speak English with your daughter (don't dip in and out of English and Norwegian when you talk to her), and your partner should always speak Norwegian with her. (9.4)

The mother at whom the advice in 9.4 is directed had described herself as a native speaker of English who had learnt Norwegian later in life and speaks it 'fluently'. Despite explicitly pointing out her fluency, she is advised against using Norwegian with her child by other posters. This advice is embedded in the ideology of the linguistic superiority of the native speaker, which – implicitly or explicitly – underlies many of the posts, as in the following the examples:

I went to an open day at the German School here in Melbourne (where they teach in both German and English) and they have a rule that the native English speaking teachers speak English to the kids and the native German speakers speak German to the kids. (10.3)

We do the one parent one language method because Afrikaans isn't my native language. I am conversationally fluent, but not totally fluent and as such would not be able to teach my DD the language properly. (10.13)

Late bilinguals such as posters 9.4 and 10.13 may pride themselves on their proficiency in their second language but they do not consider themselves true bilinguals. By the same token, they are not usually considered desirable language models for their children

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– neither by themselves nor other posters. In fact, some posters consider the input provided by late bilinguals in their second language downright dangerous:

I caught my parents correcting my son's english once and had to laugh because my son was actually pronouncing it more correct. Since then I have banned my parents from teaching him english! (10.14)

The value of a strategy aimed at language division by parent and native speaker status is often justified with reference to professional advice (such as the school mentioned in 10.3) and expertise from speech pathologists or other ‘professionals’:

As a speech pathologist, I have always advised parents to do exactly what you are already doing – each parent only speak one language to the child, to help the child by providing a clear ‘division’ between the languages. (1.3)

I have been told that each parent should speak their respective mother tongue to their child in order for the child to be bi-lingual. We are expecting our first and I will speak English and my husband will speak Turkish. [...] It seems to be what the professionals would recommend. (8.7)

The fact that the OPOL strategy is considered the ‘professional’, ‘best’ or ‘correct’ FLP strategy demonstrates yet again that bilingualism is conceptualised as consisting of two clearly separated languages. By contrast, language mixing is not only viewed as not constituting ‘bilingualism’ but as harmful and one of the dangers of bilingual parenting:

Another thing I wanted to add, is that most books I've read on this say that a parent should not "MIX" two languages, and I have to say I have been guilty of this. Sometimes I'll speak to DS in English and then sometimes in our mother tongue and I have to correct myself now so as to avoid further confusion for him as apparently having one parent mixing languages is far too confusing for children. (5.10)

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[Language mixing] is actually not necessarily the best thing to do, it's usually easier for them if they have the constancy and parents not switching back and forth between 2 languages. (7.4)

In sum, posters believe that a consistent FLP strategy clearly dividing the two languages, ideally through the OPOL strategy with each parent speaking their 'native' language, is essential for successful bilingual parenting while forms of language mixing are evaluated negatively.

Gendering OPOL

The strong support for the consistent implementation of the OPOL strategy voiced on the site needs to be understood against the background that most of the posters are English-dominant. In the scheme espoused on the site, this means they are the designated English speakers. As mentioned above, they are also overwhelmingly mothers in traditional families. This raises a number of problems for the implementation of an OPOL strategy where the English speaker is also the primary caregiver, as becomes obvious from the following excerpts:

My Spanish is limited, so [DH] and I talk almost exclusively in English. He talks to the kids in Spanish exclusively, but because he also works very long hours, that is only for a few minutes each day. They spend a few hours together most weekends.
(OP13)

DP is French, I speak a little but not really enough to teach a child WELL. I do 99% of the child raising. (13.2)

By contrast, the LOTE dominance that may result where the mother is the designated LOTE speaker usually creates discomfort, as was obvious in the excerpt

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from OP6 above or the following example, where OPOL transforms from an ‘ideal’ strategy to ‘hardcore’ in a case where the mother is the designated LOTE speaker:

So I guess my question is if we are confusing our boy? – or will it effect him somehow?? I just really want him to understand and speak Danish – so should I be really hardcore and ONLY speak Danish to him?? (OP8)

In constellations such as these, where the family situation is such that the application of the native speaker ideology results in dominance of the LOTE in the home, ambiguity about OPOL emerges. By contrast, in intermarried families where the mother is the designated English speaker, implementation of the OPOL strategy means that fathers – who are overwhelmingly absent from the forum and whose language practices and repertoires are represented through their partners – bear substantial responsibility for the success of bilingual parenting as the designated LOTE speakers. This constellation results in recurring complaints that fathers ‘forget’ to use the LOTE show:

DH is supposed to speak always in Hungarian to our sons but sometimes doesn’t remember. (2.9)

DP is Norwegian and I am Australian, we do one parent one language. Although I often catch DP speaking English with DD which really annoys me as her Norwegian has really slipped lately. He says he always forgets to speak Norwegian which I find really strange since it’s his mother tongue. (13.4)

In addition to ‘forgetting’ to use the LOTE, fathers are widely represented as being generally lax in their commitment to the LOTE and bilingual parenting:

My DH is German and [...] sometimes does speak German to DS, but to be honest I think he can’t be bothered to do it consistently, which is a shame. (5.15)

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It took my DH a good couple of years to learn to be consistent in speaking Spanish with DD1. It's hard to do, because he tends to respond in English when she speaks to him in English. He's better at it now, though not 100%. Like you, I used to "catch him out" speaking English to her and have to remind him to switch them into Spanish. (13.5)

In these comments, fathers are represented as problematic partners and parents, who cannot be relied upon to keep their part of bilingual parenting arrangements and whose language practices with their children need to be policed by mothers who are prone to 'catching them out'. Beyond presenting themselves, seemingly un-ironically, as nagging wives, one poster even plots to guilt-trip her husband into linguistic compliance:

I want this [=bilingualism] for DS and was what we had planned before he came along. If only DH would speak his native language to him more. Maybe when his parents visit in a couple of weeks and DS has no idea what they are saying to him, then maybe he'll feel guilty. (1.4)

These excerpts construct the role of the English-dominant mother in bilingual parenting primarily as managing the LOTE-speaking father's language practices. In the process, designing and implementing a FLP become the mother's managerial responsibility not vis-à-vis the child but the father. In fact, a father who does not comply with a bilingual FLP may even be constructed as a failing on the part of his wife:

And shamefully I also haven't encouraged my husband or his family to shower my children in Italian. (6.6)

In sum, despite the strong commitment to bilingual parenting, implementation problems are reported throughout the data. With regard to OPOL, these implementation problems result from the gendered division of labour in the family. As the belief in OPOL and its implicit bias towards 'native speakers' remains unquestioned, it is

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individual fathers who are singled out as problematic. Bumbling at best, intentionally sabotaging at worst, the language of designated LOTE-speaking fathers is presented as in need of being policed by their wives. The mother, even if she is monolingual herself or has only low proficiency in a LOTE, paradoxically becomes the expert in ‘good’ bilingual parenting whose mothering role includes ensuring compliance of other bilingual adults.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the discursive construction of bilingual parenting in a general Australian online parenting forum. We have shown that the posters favour a very narrow definition of what bilingualism is: the simultaneous acquisition from birth of English and a LOTE. This kind of bilingualism is mostly evaluated positively and represented as an asset that will likely be of academic and economic value when the child reaches adulthood. As such, bilingual parenting becomes an investment into the competitiveness of the child and hence a form of ‘good’ parenting. However, the ‘gift’ of bilingualism is closely circumscribed: confronted with the overwhelming social dominance of English, posters raise concerns about negative effects of the LOTE on English language development. Simultaneous bilingualism from birth is seen to guard against that threat and the ‘correct’ implementation of a FLP strategy therefore becomes paramount. That strategy is identified as the consistent implementation of the OPOL strategy with each parent consistently speaking their ‘native’ language to the child. This means that bilingualism is believed to be best achieved via two sets of clearly separated monolingual language practices from an early age. References to expert advice validate these double monolingual ideologies as scientific facts. In practice, however, it emerges that the two languages rarely receive equal time because of the gendered division of

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labour in the family. Our research confirms that bilingual parenting continues to be seen as women's work (Okita 2002). Against the background of the language ideologies espoused in our data this means that, when the mother is the designated English speaker and the father the designated LOTE speaker, the dominance of English is further reinforced. In the process, the bilingual expertise of adult bilinguals who use English as an additional language becomes problematised and mothers, irrespective of their bilingual proficiency, become the guardians of their children's 'true' bilingualism.

At least three implications of our research can be identified. First, overt valorisation of bilingualism in the abstract does not necessarily mean that concrete multilingual repertoires are valued. The overwhelming fact of the dominance of English in Australian society and particularly the education system means that the discourse of the bilingual advantage is closely circumscribed. The overt valorisation of bilingualism is further limited by its focus on academic and economic benefits and, to a lesser degree, cognitive benefits. Ignoring the specific socio-cultural benefits of specific languages means that the learning of small or powerless languages can easily be dismissed as pointless, even where 'bilingualism' in the abstract is valued. Our research thus contributes to ongoing research into the decoupling of language and identity in favour of a utilitarian view of language as a 'commodity' (Heller et al. 2016). In the discourse we have examined here, any link between language and membership in a broader community of speakers is erased and the idea that language may be a marker of identity and constitute part of belonging to a community is entirely absent.

Second, beliefs about what constitutes a desirable linguistic outcome may well be in conflict with beliefs about how to achieve that outcome. While contradictions between goals and strategies have been regularly reported in the FLP literature, we extend those findings by showing how language and gender ideologies intersect to

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implicitly both devalue the LOTE in bilingual parenting and to relegate it to a lower status through linguistic strategies that are posited as ‘ideal.’ Therefore, we also contribute to the emerging research on how linguistic privilege is enacted and sustained (Piller 2016a). As we have shown, the valorisation of ‘true’ simultaneous bilingualism in conjunction with the adoption of a conventional mothering role may even serve to position monolingual or minimally bilingual mothers as better bilingual parents than highly proficient consecutively-bilingual migrant adults. In the discourse we have examined, being the guardians of their children’s bilingual language development means that, irrespective of bilingual proficiency, mothers end up as managers of their family’s bilingualism and arbiters of bilingual parenting practices more generally.

Third, our research has implications for advocacy and outreach. Many academics in the field of bi- and multilingualism research are committed to helping raise the status of bilingualism and to encouraging home language maintenance efforts. Our research has shown that that message is ‘getting through’ and that the idea of the bilingual advantage and bilingual parenting as good parenting is firmly entrenched among posters. Parents wish for their children to become bilingual and to enjoy the benefits of language learning. However, we have also shown that the idea that individual bilingualism is a good thing does not have a lot of leverage in the face of entrenched institutional English monolingualism. Therefore, we suggest that advocacy for the valorisation of individual bilingualism may need to be extended in a variety of ways. These may include challenging views of language as a property of the individual rather than constituted in interaction. They may also include the promotion of more differentiated views of LOTE proficiency, such as highlighting the importance of literacy learning for home language maintenance (see also Eisenclas, Schalley, and Guillemin 2013). We also suggest that, while the recent focus on the family as a unit of

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FLP research undoubtedly constitutes an academic advance (Spolsky 2012), families do not actually constitute an ideal locus for advocacy. Advocacy needs to continue to target institutions and particularly schools to ensure more just linguistic arrangements that place high-level multilingual proficiencies within the reach of all.

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Table 1. Corpus of forum threads related to bilingual parenting and self-identified language repertoires of advice seekers

Original Post	Date posted	Number of responses	Self-identified language repertoire of mother (=OP)	Language repertoire of father as described by OP	Couple language as described by OP
OP1	March 26 2007	15	another language	English	English
OP2	June 16 2007	16	English / some BASIC Hungarian”	Hungarian	regular English
OP3	Oct 14 2007	12	English	Hebrew	English
OP4	Jan 24 2008	11	English	native language	English
OP5	May 16 2008	21	my mother tongue	n/a	n/a
OP6	April 12 2009	41	English	from a non-English speaking country ... speaks English fluently	English
OP7	Oct 14 2009	12	English as second language	English as second language	n/a
OP8	May 03 2010	17	Danish	English	English
OP9	Sept 22 2010	15	English	Norwegian	English
OP10	June 04 2011	21	born and raised in Australia and I am Turkish	(same as OP)	99% Turkish
OP11	Nov 29 2011	16	English	Dutch	English
OP12	March 02 2012	32	I'm Australian born and only speak English. I never even learnt a language at school	from another country / bi-lingual. English is his first language, but he is fluent in a second language	English

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OP13	May 10 2013	21	English / my Spanish is limited	Spanish	English
OP14	April 10 2014	6	my native language is not English / I'm equally as comfortable speaking English as my native tongue	English	English
OP15	June 16 2014	10	English / my Spanish is not all that good	Spanish / English is around 85%	an even mix of Spanish and English

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