

When Ideals and Reality Clash: Mothers Reflect on Frustrated Bilingualism in Their Families

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Introduction

- Whereas childrens' well-being is being studied (see Hollebeke et al. 2021), "most of the information on parental well-being in bilingual families is rather scattered and unfocused, given that it usually just happened to come up in an interview" (De Houwer, Ortega 2019).
- Children's bilingualism with minority language is emotionally challenging for minority mothers (Okita 2002; Timofeeva, Heen Wold 2012; Karpava et al. 2018, De Houwer 2019).
- Minority parents' emotions are barely addressed in help-tools for bilingual families (see Barron-Hauwaert 2014; Bourgogne 2014; Abdelilah-Bauer 2015; Meisel 2019, etc.).
- Even less is known how parents feel in situations of un-harmonious (frustrated / conflictive) bilingualism (De Houwer 2006, 2015, 2020).
- Overwhelming negative emotions are ones of the factors that are not only caused, but also themselves lead to "failed" bilingualism in families with Lithuanian as minority language (Hilbig 2020).
- There is a need for "studies that explore the socio-emotional spheres and include families from various language groups or communities" (Hollebeke, Struys, Agirdag 2020).

Research participants, data, methodology

- ✓ 7 in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2018-2021
- ✓ First generation Lithuanian migrant women from inter-ethnic families
- ✓ Live in in France, Denmark, Spain and UK
- ✓ 5–22 years in emigration, very good integration in the host societies
- ✓ 2–3 children aged 4–17
- ✓ All want to transmit Lithuanian to their off-spring
- ✓ Lithuanian is barely spoken in their homes: not only by children, but also by most mothers
- ✓ Data analysis method: Interview narrative analysis (thematic analysis)

Our aim is to offer a glimpse into Lithuanian migrant women's emotional experiences with frustrated bilingual child-rearing.

*It hurts me so much. I cry sometimes. For me... I'm so terribly frustrated. I blame myself for... We own a family restaurant, we are just so busy. (...) I read in Lithuanian for M., but he makes a fuss, he doesn't want it. I try to teach him: „Dad says la chat, I say katė“. He says: „Maman, la chat!“ He calls me maman, maman... And there's something inside me... It's so painful... (...) I feel a need to constantly prove to everyone in Lithuania, that actually I didn't want to emigrate at all, that I love Lithuania dearly. (...) For me, my child without my language is like my child without one leg. I simply can't wrap my head around it – my child doesn't speak **my** language! This is like amputation. It's not what I ever expected... (Vita, 35)*

One needs to stand firm in those times, when there are those "downs". When things don't go well at all. When I would rather lay back and stop struggling. (...) Is it difficult for me emotionally? Yes, disillusionments are difficult to endure. It's hard to start anew, in order to prevent new disappointments. And then, this sorrow, thoughts that I need to be stricter with myself. Those setbacks... If there were only pleasure and steps forwards... (...) I feel helpless, I feel like a loser, when every single attempt to restart bilingualism ends with a failure or only with very little progress. I feel a pressure to immediately do something for the situation not to stay the way it is. But those feelings do not bother me every single day, of course, so... (Rasa, 35)

For a long time, the feeling deep inside me was that I don't feel good about speaking Catalan to my children... Not because of lack of vocabulary or something, but... because it's not 100 percent me then (...) Afterwards I got reconciled to that somehow, although this won't ever happen fully, I think (...) When children started growing, I got aware that it will be such a pity not to be able to use Lithuanian sayings, metaphors, word play with them. That they won't grasp some jokes... (Joana, 39)

I was so afraid of Lithuanian people's reactions. Your child does not speak Lithuanian?! How come? What kind of mother are you then? It's just something sooooo terrible, it can't be worse! (...) I was looking for something to cover up, especially in the beginning, when things started falling apart. It was so painful. But gradually one gets used to that, put on some plasters, get a thicker skin... (Asta, 47)

There's no excuse, really. (...) We were not reading Lithuanian books, we were not watching cartoons in Lithuanian... Oh, I feel ashamed, you know. I feel ashamed. I would like my children to speak Lithuanian (...) Why? Because I'm Lithuanian. Because I speak Lithuanian. It's very normal that one passes on to the off-spring what one knows and can. Not because I'm Lithuanian and I must wave the flag. I am not this way, I am not a nationalist, Lithuanians are very often over-patriotic! But because it's a present, I could have given it to my children, their language... (Laima, 39)

Negative emotions according to Linehan 2015

- Negative emotions are meant to point to a problem and urge to act and to fix it. However, very strong negative feelings might hinder sensible evaluation of reality and taking appropriate action to improve the situation – in our case, to make the experience with bilingualism more harmonious.
- Recognising and accepting one's negative emotions helps to gain control them, they might even lose their intensity and stop impeding the pursuit of one's goals. Could recognising one's feelings in the stories of others also help?

Conclusions

- Some mothers are better at coping with the fact that their children – or even they themselves – do not speak Lithuanian, whereas others struggle emotionally more.
- Mothers experience various inner tensions and conflicts.
- Feelings of frustration, helplessness, failure, sadness, regret, anger, shame and guilt dominate in their discourses.
- Some suffering is caused by the inability to use one's native language with children. However, larger part of emotional pain seems to be induced by (internalised) Lithuanian societal expectations towards migrant women, and understanding of Lithuanian language transmission in diaspora as a moral duty and an act of patriotism.
- Cases of un-harmonious bilingualism – and how parents feel in such situations – have to be explored further and made more known to parents and societies, in order to normalise both them and care-givers' negative feelings in them. We believe that this could contribute to more harmonious bilingualism with minority languages and general well-being of families.

Thank you for your attention and time spent reading this!