

L1 LITERACY AMONGST GENERATION 1b: A STUDY OF AN AUSTRALIAN AFRIKAANS SPEAKING COMMUNITY

Henriette Janse van Rensburg, Aniko Hatoss & Donna Starks

*University of Southern Queensland, University of Southern Queensland
and University of Auckland*

Abstract

Numerous studies have reported on the loss of L1 literacy skills amongst second and third generation immigrants but few have investigated the maintenance of L1 literacy skills amongst Generation 1b, individuals who were born overseas but moved to their new community in the early years of life. This study considers the literacy skills of Generation 1b South African immigrants to Australia, attitudes towards their L1 literacy maintenance, and language use in electronic media. Four findings emerge from the study: there is a general decline in L1 proficiency amongst Generation 1b; this decline is most noticeable in the areas of L1 literacy, family attitudes have relatively little importance in the decline in proficiency levels and L1 literacy is related to language use in electronic media. The findings also point to attitudinal differences towards L1 literacy by mothers and fathers and suggest electronic communication as a useful means of promoting literacy amongst Generation 1b.

Introduction

Language shift typically refers to the structural or functional reduction in the use of the immigrant language amongst second or third generation immigrant communities (Clyne, 2003; Fishman, 1991). Although less commonly discussed, inter-generational shift can also occur amongst children who were born overseas but who immigrated at an early age. These Generation 1b (Verivaki, 1991; Clyne, 1976) form a vital part of new migrant communities, and are the focus of the present paper.

Literacy skills in a second language are often viewed as secondary to oral/aural skills and as a consequence of this, are typically subject to greater degrees of attrition (see Roberts, 1991 for the NZ Cantonese community; Verivaki, 1991 for the New Zealand [NZ] Greek community). The literature on language maintenance and shift is focussed on oral/aural skills as this is often a reflection of the focus within communities themselves where literacy skills are considered to have very low priority and in some communities viewed as ‘not connected to language maintenance in the minds of most of the respondents’ (Roberts, 1991, p. 55). Although there is

substantial documentation on inter-generational shift in oral/aural skills, there are far fewer works on loss of L1 literacy.

Language attitudes are often cited as a factor for language shift, yet their effects on language maintenance are less than clear-cut. While negative attitudes impede language maintenance, positive attitudes do not necessarily have a positive effect, partly because attitudes are multiplex and in many cases, there may not be a direct relationship between stated language attitudes and observed language behaviour (Romaine, 1995, 319). This study considers the language attitudes, literacy skills as well as language choices in electronic communication in the first generation Afrikaans speaking community.

Context of the Study

Changes in linguistic social and political climate have led many South Africans to associate greater value and prestige to English (de Klerk, 2001; Rudrick, 2008 etc) with subsequent detrimental effects on South African's other languages (de Klerk, 2001; de Klerk & Barkhuizen, 2002, 2001; Finlayson et al., 1998; Kamwangamalu, 2004, 2002; Louw 2004a, b; Rudrick, 2008; Sonntag, 2003, etc). The social and political changes in South Africa have also resulted in the recent increased emigration of South Africans, with many choosing to immigrate to English speaking countries such as Britain, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Within the antipodean context, South Africans are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups within New Zealand (see Barkhuizen, 2006, 2005) and Australia. In the latter context they are the fifth fastest-growing ethnic group, where they represent 0.5% of the total Australia population (ABS, 2007). The South African population is located throughout Australia, with large settlements in Western Australia and Queensland. The present study is conducted in Toowoomba, a small regional city in Queensland. The majority of its residents are monolingual with 91% claiming to be speakers of English only. Of those born overseas, most originate from England and New Zealand, communities where English is the first language. Toowoomba's two largest multilingual communities are the South African and the Sudanese. Both communities are relatively small with local populations numbering fewer than 500, and with most recent migration in the past 10 years. Although the majority of Sudanese continue to speak their community languages, fewer than half of the local South African population report using Afrikaans as a home language. Because the majority of South Africans in the Toowoomba region come from families where Afrikaans was their mother tongue, the relatively small number of Afrikaans speakers is a likely sign of incipient language shift.

Methodology

The study considered language proficiency, language use and language attitudes of 54 Afrikaans speaking South Africans from 17 families. All participants immigrated

as families, migrated to Australia in the past nine years, and to live in the local area. All the selected families have children older than 10 years of age. This was to ensure that both children and parents were born outside Australia. 21 participants made contact with the research team, and of these 17 eligible families participated in the study. Volunteering participants gave their written consent in accordance with research ethics regulations and interview and questionnaire data were collected through an Afrikaans speaking immigrant with strong ties in the local community. For simplicity purposes, the questionnaire data was collected in English. All participants had some level of English as many of the younger participants were already more competent in English than in Afrikaans. The questionnaire had eight sections and included the following topics: language proficiencies and preference, language use, social contact with peers and the home country, use of Internet and computer mediated communication for community activities and language maintenance, language attitudes, language and identity, and views about language maintenance. Data was processed by using SPSS data editor and analysed by using descriptive statistical methods.

As part of the data collection process, the parents in the families participated in the interview. The joint one hour interview elicited free speech according to the related themes: migration history; language use and proficiency; attitudes to Afrikaans and English, motivation to use and maintain Afrikaans. The interviews were allowed to develop relatively freely according to the participants' observations and experiences and were conducted in the language of the parents' choice. All were tape-recorded in Afrikaans, transcribed and translated. The data was later categorised according to the main themes that emerged and information extracted into separate files for detailed qualitative analysis.

Findings

Of the seventeen families who participated in the research project, there were 15 two-parent and 2 single-parent families. The parents ranged in age from 30-52 years, the children from 10-20 years. The families had lived in Australia between 1-9 years.

Questionnaire data was elicited on the reported language abilities in each of the four skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing using a five-point Likert scale from 'not at all' (0) to 'very well' (4), summarized in Table 1 below. The findings show that these first generation family members consider themselves to be fluent in both English and Afrikaans. However, signs of incipient shift are beginning to emerge. Parents report slightly better skills in Afrikaans than in English, while the reverse is true for the children, with one exception. The children's mean scores were marginally higher for listening to Afrikaans than for listening to English. Although it is well-known that listening skills are often retained longer than speaking skills, it is rarely the case that the L1 listening skills of Generation 2 immigrants outrank those of their parents. It is likely that Generation 1b, who had weaker overall skills, made

more positive self-report judgments about their listening skills than their parents. Another striking observation from Table 1 is the reported generational differences in the areas of literacy. There is a marked decline in the reported Afrikaans reading and writing abilities of Generation 1b.

Table 1: Afrikaans and English mean scores for parents and children

	AFRIKAANS		ENGLISH	
	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
Listening	3.00	2.73*	2.78	2.77
Speaking	3.00	2.55*	2.66	2.73
Reading	2.97	2.05*	2.78	2.73
Writing	2.97	1.77*	2.66	2.68

*Chi-square<.01

The reported decline in Afrikaans literacy skills is well known within the South African community in Toowoomba. The parent interviews contain commentary on the decline of their children’s reading and writing skills in Afrikaans. One excerpt from an interview is presented below.

I want them to speak Afrikaans. Our children are sixteen and nineteen and we have been in Australia for just over two years and already our children have lost the ability to write in Afrikaans [Family 1]

The interviews reveal that for many Afrikaans speaking parents, Afrikaans literacy skills are considered to be of only minor importance. This is reflected in the following comments from the interviews.

I don’t think it is important for them to be able to write in Afrikaans, it will just confuse them at this stage. If they later on show interest in languages, we will be more eager to teach them to write Afrikaans, but if they don’t show any interest, we will not force them to read and write in Afrikaans [Family 14]

To us, it is important that they speak Afrikaans, but they have never read in Afrikaans before so I do not believe they will be able to write in Afrikaans. It is not important to us that they do [Family 10]

It is important to us that they keep the ability to speak Afrikaans, but they don’t really have any need for reading and writing the language in Australia [Family 11]

I don’t think it is important for them to be able to write in Afrikaans [Family 14]

Numerous reasons were provided for the lack of interest in maintaining children's L1 literacy. Some parents reported a lack of available resources. A few acknowledge that skills are important but claim such skills are difficult to maintain because of the lack of opportunities available for reading and writing in Afrikaans.

It is important to us but they only have grandparents and us for whom they try to maintain their Afrikaans abilities in writing. They try hard, but it is only a few [situations] they have to do it for [Family 3]

It is important to us, also to be able to maintain their ability to write in Afrikaans as they regularly send emails to family and friends in South Africa. They might lose some of the writing ability in the future, because they don't write Afrikaans on a daily basis anymore [Family 6]

Those parents who were interested in maintaining their children's literacy often felt that it was the responsibility of others.

I do think it is important that our children know how to write in Afrikaans. I would strongly support lessons for him. I don't have the time, so I'll rather pay somebody to teach him [Family 4]

Yes, it is very important to me that they speak Afrikaans. We would like them to be able to read and write Afrikaans as well. After school classes in Afrikaans would certainly be appreciated by many and I do believe many Australian people would also like to learn the language [Family 9]

In order to investigate the children's attitudes, and to determine if their views differed from their parents and children, we separated the responses by generation. One question proved to be particularly revealing. It considered the participant's view about the importance of reading and writing skills in Afrikaans. Differences were observed by generation and gender. Fathers reported little importance while mothers saw more of a need for literacy skills. The view is in line with other research which has considered the role of the mother as the transmitter of the oral/aural L1 skills across generations and the "gatekeeper of language maintenance" (Extra & Verhoeven, 1999, p. 20; see also Fishman, 1991; Winter & Pauwels, 2005). The fathers' attitudes towards literacy provide a possible explanation as to why many of the Afrikaans speaking families who reported an interest in literacy in Afrikaans thought that literacy should be taught outside of the home.

Generation 1b expressed little need for Afrikaans reading and writing skills, although their views were generally more positive than that of their fathers (see Table 2 for details). Children's reported proficiency proved to be unrelated to their attitudes towards Afrikaans. Of the eight children in the study who reported little or no ability in writing Afrikaans, four originated from families where the parents reported an interest in reading and writing Afrikaans and four others originated from families where the children viewed Afrikaans literacy skills as unimportant.

Table 2: Are reading and writing in Afrikaans important?

	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
FATHERS	1/13	7%
MOTHERS	8/15	53%
CHILDREN	5/22	22%

Another potential factor that emerged as contributing to the maintenance of literacy skills concerns its use within the community. Many of the parents who commented on the usefulness of literacy skills in Afrikaans made reference to electronic correspondence with the homeland. In particular email correspondence from family in South Africa is seen as important for the maintenance of contact with family in South Africa. Most of the parent interviews made reference to this type of communication.

We definitely have other activities where we make use of our mother tongue, such as computer for emails, phone calls in Afrikaans, webcam to friends as well as Skype [Family 1]

We email our family and friends in South Africa and New Zealand in Afrikaans and of course when we speak to them on the phone we also speak in Afrikaans [Family 4]

I use the computer to communicate in Afrikaans by sending emails to family and friends in South Africa. I also use the computer for my work and have lots of communication with Afrikaans speaking South Africans wanting to immigrate to Australia, so I daily write Afrikaans emails [Family 9]

My husband does not use the computer, but I send emails to family and friends as well as using the phone to speak Afrikaans. [Family 12]

My wife makes use of the computer to read Afrikaans magazines and newspapers as well as to send emails to South Africa. We also use the phone and our mobiles to Afrikaans speaking family and friends [Family 13]

When we examined the questionnaire data by generation, it became clear that all seventeen families used email as an important tool for maintaining contact with relatives and friends in South Africa. Although parents reported more frequent electronic interactions than their children, both generations revealed the regular use of email as an important tool for maintaining contact with South African family and friends (see Table 3 for details).

Table 3: Frequency of electronic communication with friends and family

	PARENTS		CHILDREN	
	Friends	Family	Friends	Family
Never	3	1	8	3
Monthly	12	13	10	13
Weekly	11	15	4	6
Daily	4	2	0	0

Although studies within the South African context have suggested that English is increasingly becoming the language of electronic communication (see Deumert & Masinyana's 2008 analysis of Xhosa SMS), for both Generation 1 and 1b, Afrikaans is the preferred language in email correspondence (Table 4). It is of note that fathers used Afrikaans as their only language in their email correspondence despite their views on the lack of importance of Afrikaans literacy skills reported in Table 2. The only adult in the survey who did not use Afrikaans was the trilingual mother, who reported the use of German as her language of correspondence. The language choices of Generation 1b were more mixed, with children reporting the use of Afrikaans (12), English (7) and both codes (2). Further investigation revealed that Afrikaans is the language of choice amongst those Generation 1b fluent in Afrikaans (see Table 5). Those who use English for emails appear to do so because they have 'no ability' or 'little ability' in writing Afrikaans. Thus the choice of language is dictated by their literacy skills in Afrikaans.

At present, almost all family members view Afrikaans as the language of correspondence with South African family and friends. It is typically only in cases where Afrikaans skills are inadequate that English is used for electronic communication. This finding suggests that the promotion of regular email correspondence with the homeland may provide an important mechanism for the maintenance of L1 literacy skills about Generation 1b. We noted earlier that fathers report less positive attitudes towards the maintenance of L1 literacy skills. The fathers' use of Afrikaans in email correspondence contrasts with their expressed attitudes towards L1 literacy. It is possible that the fathers' actions provide Generation 1b with positive linguistic input for L1 literacy development. The promotion of regular electronic communication with relatives and friends in Afrikaans could provide a long-term effective means of maintaining literacy skills amongst Generation 1b. The active promotion of regular email correspondence with family in South Africa would have the additional benefit of providing important social links for maintaining and strengthening South African identity amongst Generation 1b.

Table 4: Language use in electronic correspondence

	PARENTS	CHILDREN	TOTAL
Afrikaans	31 (96%)	13 (59%)	44
English	0	7 (31%)	7
Both	1 (3%)	2 (9%)	3
Total	32	22	54

Table 5: Children’s reported skills in writing and their language use in electronic correspondence

	AFRIKAANS	AFRIKAANS/ENGLISH	ENGLISH
very well	4	1	
well	8		1
little	1	1	3
not at all	0		3

Conclusion

This study reports on the maintenance of L1 literacy skills of 17 Afrikaans speaking families living in a small rural city in Queensland. Although language shift is often considered across generations, these South African families show signs of shift within first generation families, with the strongest shifts in the area of literacy. Roberts’ (1991) observation that literacy maintenance is often not seen as important in language maintenance appears to be true in this context. The interviews reveal that parents value L1 oral/aural skills more than literacy skills, and this is reflected in the children’s reported abilities in these areas. Studies of language maintenance in immigrant communities note that mothers tend to play an important role in L1 maintenance, and similar results are reported here. Mothers showed more interest in the maintenance of literacy skills in Afrikaans than fathers. Although most Generation 1b report that they can read and write Afrikaans, the children’s language abilities varied across the families. Language attitudes about literacy skills also showed considerable variation across the families, but the two variables proved to be unrelated.

These families are relatively new immigrants, and all report the use of email for their correspondence with family members and friends in South Africa. Afrikaans is still

largely the only language for parent correspondence, but the children differ. The language use in the email is directly related to the reported language skills in reading and writing Afrikaans. Those that write 'well' or 'very well' use Afrikaans; others use English, with few reporting the use of two languages. These findings suggest that parents could help to maintain their children's literacy skills in Afrikaans through the promotion of email correspondence with relatives and friends in the homeland.

Given the technological age in which we live, it is easier to communicate across the globe enabling migrant communities to maintain stronger links with the homeland. These Afrikaans speaking parents use email to communicate with their family and friends and these actions appear to have a positive effect on children's email use and their code choice. Given the difficulties of maintaining literacy in an immigrant context, and the current reported patterns of language use in electronic communication in this community, electronic communication with the homeland should be promoted as it is likely to have positive effects on literacy in this and other migrant communities.

Notes

We would like to express our sincerest appreciation to the Afrikaans speaking South African community in Toowoomba, the local secretary of the South African club as well as Anika Ferreira, for her assistance with this project.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2007). Census. QuickStats. Toowoomba (QLD) (Statistical District). Available at <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2005). Missing Afrikaans: 'Linguistic longing' among Afrikaans-speaking immigrants in New Zealand. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 26, 216-232.
- Barkhuizen, G. (2006). Immigrant parents' perceptions of their children's language practices: Afrikaans speakers living in New Zealand. *Language Awareness*, 15, 63-79.
- Clyne, M.G. (2003). *Dynamics of language contact: English and immigrant languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clyne, M.G. (1976). *Australia talks: Pacific Linguistics D-23*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- de Klerk, V. (2001). Case study: the cross marriage language dilemma: his language or hers? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 4, 197-216.
- de Klerk, V., & Barkhuizen, G. (2002). English in the prison services: a case of breaking the law? *World Englishes*, 21, 9-22.
- de Klerk, V., & Barkhuizen, G. (2001). Language usage and attitudes in a South African prison. *World Englishes*, 21, 9-22.
- Deumert, A., & Masinyana, O. (2008). Mobile language choices – the use of English and isiXhosa in text messages (SMS): evidence from a bilingual South African sample. *English World-Wide*, 29, 117-147.
- Extra, G., & Verhoeven, L. (1999). Immigrant minority groups and immigrant minority languages in Europe. In G.Extra & L. Verhoeven, (Eds.), *Bilingualism and migration* (pp. 3-28). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Kamwangamalu, N.M. (2002). The social history of English in South Africa. *World Englishes*, 21, 1-8.
- Kamwangamalu, N.M. (2004). Language, social history and identity in post-apartheid South Africa: a case study of the "coloured" community in Wentworth. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 170, 113-129.
- Louw, E. (2004a). Anglicising post-apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25, 318-332.
- Louw, E. (2004b). Political power, national identity, and language: the case of Afrikaans. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 170, 43-58.
- Roberts, M. (1991). The New Zealand-born Chinese community of Wellington: aspects of language maintenance and shift. In J. Holmes & R. Harlow (Eds), *Threads in the New Zealand tapestry of languages* (pp. 31-70). Wellington: Linguistic Society of New Zealand.
- Romaine, S. (1995). *Bilingualism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rudrick, S. (2008). "Coconuts" and "oreos": English-speaking Zulu people in a South African township. *World Englishes*, 27, 101-116.
- Sonntag, S.K. (2003). *The local politics of global English: case studies of linguistic globalization*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Verivaki, M. (1991). Greek language maintenance and shift in the Greek community of Wellington. In J. Holmes & R. Harlow (Eds.), *Threads in the New Zealand tapestry of language* (pp. 71-116). Wellington: Linguistics Society of New Zealand.
- Winter, J., & Pauwels, A. (2005). Gender in the construction and transmission of ethnolinguistic identities and language maintenance in immigrant Australia. *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 25, 153-168.