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Inter-Generational Language Socialization Practices of German-Speaking Migrants in the North of Finland

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from an interview study of practices of home language socialization and maintenance of German among German-speaking migrants in northern Finland. The focus of the analysis was on the importance of the minority language German in families, the role of the regional varieties of German, different ways of socializing children with German, and informal and formal means of German language development and instruction reported by nine German-speaking parents and two bilingual teenagers in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analyses of the data showed that there are different beliefs and practices about home language acquisition and maintenance and language socialization in the family, but also similar challenges. The place of residence did indeed play an important role, as home language instruction was rarely offered, and contact with other German-speaking or multilingual families was often very limited. Some children therefore attend German-as-a-foreign-language classes at school, which was perceived as a challenge by some of the interviewees. Nevertheless, inclusive solutions could help multilingual children, even in rural regions, maintain and develop their home language.

Keywords: German speakers in Finland; home language acquisition; inter-generational language socialization; language biographies; rural areas

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1. Introduction

This paper presents findings from a study of intergenerational language socialization and the role of the home language among German-speaking migrants and their families in Northern Finland. The study is part of the research project *German-speakers in northern Finland. Language identities, multilingual practices and language maintenance*, which analyzes language biographies of migrants from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland living in northern Finland. The focus is on the regions of North Ostrobothnia, Lapland, and Kainuu, which are among the least densely populated parts of Finland.[1] One important question of the project is how life in peripheral regions affects language identity as well as language maintenance, learning, and use. Multilingualism and migration have often been studied primarily in urban contexts, but as Aronin et al. (2013, pp. 3–4) note in relation to what they call 'current multilingualism', these are nowadays inherent and prominent features of postmodern society as a whole and of many individual social communities of varying sizes. Therefore, examining areas outside of metropolitan centers can provide valuable insights into migration and integration into local communities (cf. Bijvoet & Östman, 2023) and show how complex and multi-layered multilingualism and migration can be, even in regions that are not necessarily associated with these issues (Maar, 2024, p. 14).

Various topics related to intergenerational language socialization and the role of German as a minority language in Finland play a significant role in the interviews collected during the project, particularly with participants who have children. The participants

describe different facets of family language policy (FLP) at the micro level between family members (cf. Liddicoat, 2020). Thematic analyses of the data reveal diverse beliefs and practices regarding home language socialization and maintenance within the families. In addition, the interviews also refer to the macro and meso levels of language policy, i.e., to 'wider political, social, educational and economic forces' (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013, p. 2), and describe which resources are or are not available in their environment to support the FLP of multilingual families. Place of residence indeed plays a critical role, particularly in relation to language use outside of the family and access to formal instruction in German.

The Finnish constitution (*Suomen perustuslaki* 731/1999, 1999, 17§) grants everyone living in Finland the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Based on this law, children 'whose mother tongue or one of their family's languages is a language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi may participate in the instruction in his or her mother tongue complementing basic education' (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, p. 498). However, in practice, this right is not always implemented, as a minimum number of students is generally required to organize instruction in these minority languages, which is rarely met in smaller municipalities. While in Helsinki and other large cities children can attend German kindergartens and schools, or weekly lessons in German-as-mother-tongue are offered, in rural or peripheral areas the responsibility for the children's language development largely falls on the parents' linguistic choices, and German is almost exclusively learned at home (cf. also De Houwer, 2017). Consequently, some children attend German-as-a-foreign-language classes at school (if available), which some interviewees perceive as a challenge. Another key factor in home language acquisition and maintenance is part of transnational FLP, e.g., organizing extended periods in German-speaking countries.

This study focused on the following research questions: What role does the minority language German play in the families, and what practices of language socialization can be found in the families, according to the participants? What roles do linguistic varieties of German play in the language practices of the families? What informal and formal means of German language education and instruction are implemented by the families? In what way does the family's place of residence influence language socialization and education in the minority language German?

The following section will provide a short overview of the socio-cultural background of German speakers in Finland and the institutional preconditions concerning home language acquisition. This will be followed by a brief introduction to the materials and methods used for data collection and analysis, and finally the results of the study will be presented, addressing the experiences and beliefs of the participants.

2. Background of the Study

According to the *StatFin database* (Statistics Finland, n.d.), in 2023, a total of 7795 people in Finland reported German as their first language in the population register. The actual number is likely to be higher if bilingual individuals are considered, but since they are not centrally registered, there are no exact figures available. Unlike in earlier periods, German speakers are no longer among the largest foreign-language groups in Finland. In 1990, they were the third-largest foreign-language group (a total of 2427 people), after Russian and English speakers (Statistics Finland, n.d.). Although the number of German speakers has more than tripled since then, the number of people in other language groups has grown more rapidly over the same period. German now ranks behind languages such as Estonian, Arabic, Somali, Kurdish, Persian/Farsi, Chinese, Albanian, Vietnamese, Thai, Turkish, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Tagalog.

Although German speakers are no longer among the largest linguistic minorities in Finland, they still constitute a significant language group, not least from a historical

perspective, as they belong to one of the oldest language minorities in Finland and share several centuries of close cultural, economic, military, and private contacts (cf. e.g., Hentilä & Hentilä, 2016; Hietala, 2017; Junila, 2000, 2006; Kolehmainen, 2022; Parry, 2022; Schweitzer, 1993; Tandefeldt, 2002; Tertti, 1983; Ziemke, 1963). According to Breier (2017), Germans in Finland, similar to Fortier's (2000) studies on European migrants in the UK and Ruokonen-Engler's (2012) research on Finns in Germany, represent an 'invisible minority'. This means that German migrants generally integrate smoothly into Finnish society, both culturally and because of their appearance. Their background is not typically stigmatized, but rather is characterized by predominantly positive relationships (Breier, 2017). German migrants, or migrants from German-speaking countries, are less affected by the exclusion mechanisms and adverse social power dynamics that are often associated with stigmatization (cf. Busch, 2017), which in turn influences language policy in the family, i.e., parental language attitudes and language choices (De Houwer, 2017).

In northern Finland, i.e., in the regions North Ostrobothnia, Lapland, and Kainuu, the situation is as follows. In 2023, a total of 643 people living in these regions reported German as their first language. Most of them live in North Ostrobothnia (302 people), followed by Lapland (298 people) and Kainuu (43 people). Notably, in Lapland, the German-speaking population is not concentrated solely in the administrative and educational center of Rovaniemi; there is also a relatively large number of German speakers in the small, tourism-driven municipalities of Inari, Muonio, and Kittilä. In contrast, in North Ostrobothnia and Kainuu, the number of German speakers living outside the administrative and educational centers of Oulu and Kajaani is very low and is mostly not captured statistically. In 2023, there were 1117 children and adolescents (aged 0 to 19) throughout Finland who were registered with German as their first language. Of these, just under 100 live in Northern Finland: 45 in North Ostrobothnia, 39 in Lapland, and 7 in Kainuu. Again, it is likely that there is a larger number of bilingual children whose first language is registered as Finnish.

As previously mentioned, the Finnish constitution guarantees people living in Finland the right to maintain their own language and culture. This is also reflected in the curriculum for Finnish public schools, where it is stated that municipalities should strive to offer instruction in the children's 'own mother tongue' (here referred to with "home-language"), although they are not obligated to do so (for an overview of the history and status quo of own-mother-tongue teaching in Finland, see Yli-Jokipii, 2024, pp. 31–34). Instruction should also be available to children whose first language is Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi, to help them maintain language skills acquired, for example, during a stay abroad. Municipalities can apply for state financial support for two hours of lessons per week. The number of groups organized per language varies greatly between municipalities, and there are usually no separate groups for different age groups (Yli-Jokipii, 2024, p. 31). According to Tainio (2019), regional inequalities, also observed in other parts of education, are particularly significant when it comes to home language instruction. For example, in southern Finland, instruction was offered in 46 languages in 2017; in western, central, and southwestern Finland in 30 languages; but in eastern Finland, Lapland, and the Åland Islands in fewer than 10 languages (Tainio, 2019). There are significant differences in the minimum number of participants required to offer instruction in home languages. In some municipalities, it is four students, in others, the requirement is eight or ten students (cf. Ylä-Tuuhonen, 2023). In addition to the challenge of very different accessibility to home language instruction depending on the place of residence, research shows further challenges associated with this instruction. There is a shortage of qualified teachers, as well as limited opportunities to obtain such qualifications; the groups are very heterogeneous; the instruction usually takes place in various locations and after regular school hours; and there is a lack of suitable teaching materials (cf. Bärlund, 2020; Linderoos, 2016; Piippo, 2016; Tainio, 2019; Yli-Jokipii

et al., 2020). Despite the challenges of organizing and conducting the instruction, it is seen as an important tool to strengthen the competence in the home language and the cultural identity of multilingual children (cf. Linderoos, 2016; Piippo, 2016; Yli-Jokipii et al., 2020).

In 2022, 357 students in the spring and 360 students in the fall participated in state-supported German-as-a-mother-tongue instruction (Opetushallitus, n.d.). This makes German the twelfth largest group. There is no comprehensive overview of which municipalities offer home language instruction in which languages, but an internet search for German language instruction shows that it is primarily found in larger cities and regional centers. As a result, German-speaking families or multilingual families with German in remote regions have very limited access to home language instruction for their children and must find alternative ways to pass on and maintain the German language. This situation is also reflected in the interviews with German-speaking parents in northern Finland.

3. Material and Methods

The material for this study consists of nine audio- and video-recorded interviews, carried out between 2021 and 2024. Eight of the interviews come from the corpus collected as part of the project *German-speakers in northern Finland*, which currently includes 20 interviews with German-speaking migrants living in the north of Finland. The participants who took part in the interviews as part of the project were found with the help of friendship associations of German-speaking countries operating in Northern Finland and through social media groups of German-speaking migrants in Finland. The participants were informed about the objectives of the project, data protection, and the use of the collected data in a data protection declaration. For this article, all interviews with participants who have children were selected from the corpus. Additionally, one interview was conducted with two bilingual siblings born in Finland and their German parent. The individual interviews lasted between 27 min and 2 hours, with the recordings totaling 11 hours. The interviews were conducted in German, and the quotes presented here were translated by the author. The families of eight of the nine participants consist of one German-speaking parent and one Finnish-speaking parent or new partner of the German-speaking parent. Only the father of Claudia's children is also German-speaking. Table 1 below provides an overview of the adult participants, including their pseudonyms, approximate ages, length of stay in Finland, and country of origin. The two teenagers (aged between 14 and 18 at the time of the interview) were born in Finland, and they are referred to by the pseudonyms Max and Ben. Since the community focused on in this study is relatively small, the mention of specific places of residence or other details, such as exact age or occupation, has been avoided to reduce the possibility of identification.

Table 1. Overview of the participants in this study.

Pseudonym	Age	Length of Stay in Finland	Country of Origin
Peter	60–70 years	45–50 years	Germany
Patrick	30–40 years	10–15 years	Austria
Stefanie	40–50 years	15–20 years	Austria
Claudia	50–60 years	25–30 years	Germany
Michael	50–60 years	25–30 years	Germany
Monika	60–70 years	10–15 years	Germany
Marianne	60–70 years	35–40 years	Switzerland
Julia	40–50 years	25–30 years	Germany
Thomas	40–50 years	20–25 years	Germany

As can be seen from the table, the respondents represent a heterogeneous cross-section of migrants from German-speaking countries in Northern Finland. Due to the small size of the community and its heterogeneity in terms of age, country of origin, timing of migration to Finland, professional background, and family status, it was neither possible nor intended to assemble a representative sample of the community in this study. Instead, this research aimed to capture individual biographies that may exhibit various pathways of migration, which may still reveal certain similarities in some respects.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics that align with the objectives of the *German-speakers in northern Finland* project. In addition to the theme of this article, the interviews included questions about the migration history, linguistic repertoire, and language practices of the interviewees, their linguistic identity, the role of the first language German and the lingua franca English, experiences of language loss, and acquisition of Finnish (cf. also Grasz, 2023a, 2023b).

The interview as a data collection instrument is widely used in German language biography research and is frequently employed in relation to topics such as language acquisition, language practices, and identity construction in multilingual environments (cf. Busch, 2016; Franceschini, 2002; Haas, 2019). It was chosen because it is particularly suited to the project's goal of gaining insights into the individual language biographies of the participants, as well as their experiences and beliefs about their linguistic practices in various areas of their lives. The research approach for analyzing the interviews was qualitative and was based on reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Thematic analysis was chosen because it is flexible and enables a comprehensive description of the data and a theory-based interpretation of the explicit and implicit patterns of meaning within the data. The analysis was carried out according to the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). Examples from the data are used to illustrate the interpretations.

4. Results

The topics of intergenerational language socialization, factors influencing FLP, and learning the minority language German played a significant role in the interviews with participants who have children. Apart from one participant who had a German-speaking partner, all participants in this study have Finnish spouses. Although all participants believe that bilingualism is desirable and that it is important for their children to learn the minority language German, differences were evident in how these beliefs are implemented in daily family life and how, for example, they are supported by education outside the family.

The following section will present and discuss topics that emerged as particularly important in the interviews. First, I will address some parts of FLP, with examples of different language practices and strategies in the families and the role that German plays in the upbringing of the children. Afterward, I will address a topic of linguistic practices that becomes relevant in relation to pluricentric languages, such as German, in the diaspora: namely, the question of which variety of the language is passed on to the children in the family. Do the parents choose standard German, or do they pass on their own standard variant, such as Austrian or Swiss German, or even a dialect? In the third part of the presentation of the results, I will focus on the concrete practices of passing on the German language within the family and the role that formal education in school or instruction in the home language organized by the municipality plays in this process.

4.1. Language Practices and Strategies in the Participants' Families

The role that the first language plays, particularly in the lives of first-generation migrants, is influenced by various factors. In addition to the age at the time of migration, the length of stay in the different language environment, the proficiency in the surrounding language, the size and concentration of the language community, and the prestige of the first language, the family situation also plays a significant role (see, e.g., Clyne, 2003; Riehl, 2004; Spolsky, 2021). Often, the use of the first language is limited to the private domain, i.e., communication with the family, which strongly depends on whether the partner also speaks the language and whether there are children in the family (Spolsky, 2021). Previous studies have shown that, among Germans or German-speaking migrants in Finland, the German language also has a strong emotional value and plays an important role in private communication (see Breier, 2017, 2020; Grasz, 2023b). A significant event in the lives of migrants in this context is the birth of the first child, which often triggers a process of personal repositioning in one's identity (cf. Breier, 2017). According to Breier (2020), the German language, which often shifted to the background earlier, becomes more important again, as reflected in the decision to pass it on to their children.

Although most participants in the project *German-speakers in northern Finland* consider the first language and its preservation to be important, this study also reveals a certain problematization of 'Germanness', which often manifests among German migrants and can be traced back to the fundamental shift in German national identity after World War II and the era of National Socialism (see Breier, 2017; Grasz, 2023b). Nevertheless, all participants in the interviews expressed their intention to pass on German to their children and considered it important that their children become proficient in the language. The reasons for this are pragmatic, emotional, and ideological. Key factors influencing the decision include their personal emotional connection to the first language, viewing the language as an important part of their identity that they wish to pass on to the next generation, enabling their children to communicate with relatives in German-speaking countries, and the belief that strong proficiency in the German language will provide better future opportunities for their children. For example, in the interview, Michael stated that he could not imagine speaking Finnish with his children even though he speaks the language very well and uses it in other domains.

(1) Es war mir ganz klar wichtig, dass die Deutsch lernen, ich wollte nicht mit meinen eigenen Kindern eine Fremdsprache sprechen. Ich habe von Anfang an die Perspektive gehabt, dass es eine Bereicherung ist, zweisprachig zu sein, nicht nur weil es zwei Sprachen sind, sondern weil es eben wirklich zwei Weltbilder, zwei Blickwinkel sind. (It was absolutely important to me that they learn German. I didn't want to speak a foreign language with my own children. From the very beginning, I had the perspective that being bilingual is an enrichment, not just because it involves two languages, but because it truly represents two worldviews, two perspectives.)

With regard to beliefs about passing on the home language German to their children, changing societal attitudes toward bilingualism also became evident. For example, Marianne recounted that, in the 1970s and 1980s, she communicated with her children in German against the wishes of the children's father. Similarly, in Peter's case, whose first three children grew up during the same time, the family language quickly shifted from German to Finnish, and less emphasis was placed on ensuring that the children learned German. However, for his children born in the 1990s and 2000s, he made a very conscious decision together with his second wife to raise them bilingually (see example 2).

(2) Das [der Wechsel der Familiensprache] hat sich dann auch ausgewirkt auf die Erziehung der Kinder. [. . .] Die wuchsen viele Jahre mit sehr wenig deutschem Hintergrund auf. [. . .] Das hat sich dann in der zweiten Beziehung mit den Kindern total geändert, denn in dieser zweiten Familie wurden immer beide Sprachen gesprochen, Deutsch und Finnisch, sodass die zweisprachige Erziehung der Kinder viel systematischer angegangen werden konnte. (It [the shift in the family language] also impacted the upbringing of the children. [. . .] For many years, they grew up with very little German background. [. . .] This changed completely with the children in the second relationship because, in this second family, both languages, German and Finnish, were always spoken, allowing the bilingual upbringing of the children to be approached in a much more systematic way.)

Similar to Peter, it was particularly evident among the younger participants that they and their partners carefully considered how to raise their children bilingually at the time of their children's birth. They sought information from the relevant literature or from other bilingual families to learn how to do this most effectively. Most families chose the 'one parent, one language (OPOL) strategy' (see, e.g., Müller et al., 2006). In this approach, the German-speaking parent uses only, or at least primarily, German with the children, while the Finnish-speaking parent uses Finnish.

Even when the desire to pass on their first language to their children is present, some participants find it challenging to create enough opportunities to use German due to the family's language constellation. If the partner does not speak German, the German language often takes a back seat, with the common language between the parents being the decisive factor. For Thomas and Patrick, this common language is English. In this situation, the OPOL strategy is implemented relatively smoothly. The fathers speak German with their children, and the mothers speak Finnish. In most other families, Finnish is the common language between the parents. In these cases, Finnish often dominates communication with the children, as is the case with Monika, Stefanie, and Julia. Monika's example is particularly interesting in this context, as her children were born in Germany (see also Grasz, 2023b) and moved to Finland without their father. Although they quickly learned Finnish in Finland, they prefer to communicate with their mother in German. Monika finds this problematic at times because her Finnish husband does not speak German and is thus excluded from the conversation. This highlights a possible conflict between different linguistic identities within a multilingual family. For Monika, using the German language is not as important, and she would prefer Finnish, which is a shared resource for all family members. However, it is different for her children, as she explains: 'Die wollen mich als deutsche Mama. (They want me to be their German mom.)'

The interviews also make it clear that linguistic practices and language choice within the family can change over time. The OPOL strategy is usually implemented relatively consistently during the early childhood phase. Later, often in connection with the children entering kindergarten or school, or with the birth of siblings, the surrounding language—in this case, Finnish—becomes more dominant and turns into the family language, which the German-speaking parent also begins to use with the children (cf. also De Houwer, 2017). Julia describes a similar process when she talks about language practices with her children:

(3) Ich habe oft zu viel Finnisch gesprochen. Ich habe jetzt gemerkt, dass wir uns wieder mehr auf Deutsch unterhalten. Aber ich hatte das Problem, wenn ich Deutsch geredet habe und die haben dann auf Finnisch geantwortet, dann habe ich automatisch auf Finnisch gewechselt und habe das gar nicht gemerkt, weil ich habe nur darauf geachtet, was wir sagen. (I often spoke too much Finnish. I've now noticed that we're speaking more German again. But I had the problem that when I spoke German and

they responded in Finnish, I automatically switched to Finnish without even realizing it, because I was only focused on what we were saying.)

Later, Julia noticed that, as the children reached their teenage years, they began to show increased interest in German and started using it again as a means of communication with their mother.

4.2. German Is Not Just German. The Choice of Language Variety in Migration

German is a pluricentric language with three major centers—Germany, Austria, and Switzerland—where it serves as the only or one of the national languages. Additionally, German is a national language in Liechtenstein (which shares its language standard with Switzerland) and Luxembourg, a significant regional language in South Tyrol/Italy and Belgium, and a minority language in several other countries. Spatial linguistic variability, as encountered in the case of German, also impacts the use of the language in migration contexts. When the first language of one or both parents is used with the child, the question arises as to which variety of that language is being used. Even within German-speaking areas themselves, there is a pronounced multidimensional language continuum (Löffler, 2016), with significant differences in the distribution of the use of varieties, such as dialects, regional colloquial languages, or national standard varieties. The use of varieties depends, among other factors, on the region within the language area, the place of residence (city or countryside), the age of the speakers or life stages, the contexts in which the language is used, and the educational background. In the use of dialects, especially in public and semi-public contexts, a north–middle–south gradient is evident in the German-speaking area, which is also reflected in the interview data. While dialect speech is predominantly found in private settings in northern Germany and often has a low prestige function in some regions, the use of dialects and regional colloquial languages in southern Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is not limited to the private domain. Particularly in Switzerland, dialect use extends to all domains of language use. In Austria and southern Germany, on the other hand, one encounters a multi-tiered polyglossia without sharp boundaries among dialect, regional colloquial language, and standard language (for more on the use of regional varieties in the German-speaking area, see Dürscheid & Schneider, 2019; Löffler, 2016; Schmidt & Herrgen, 2011).

Central to the present study is the fact that dialect use is often associated with stages of language acquisition (cf. Löffler, 2016). Dialects frequently play an important role during the primary language acquisition period before children enter kindergarten or school. For this reason, the participants in the interviews were asked whether they speak standard German or a variety of it with their children. Out of the nine adult participants, five—slightly more than half—use a dialect or dialectally influenced colloquial language with their children. This applied to participants from Austria, Switzerland, southern Germany, and central Germany and corresponded to findings on the use of varieties in German-speaking regions. One participant from northern Germany also reported using this linguistic variant (northern German colloquial language but not an actual dialect) with his children. Participants who do not use a dialect with their children are those who themselves grew up without a dialect. This seems to be linked not only to the region of origin (northern or central Germany) but also to the negative attitudes towards dialects that were widespread in Germany during their own childhood and adolescence.

Regarding the choice to speak dialect or dialectally influenced colloquial language with their children in Finland, it became evident that this was a conscious decision by the participants, reflecting sometimes contradictory beliefs and uncertainties. Internal factors, such as emotional connectedness, and external factors, such as socio-economic considerations, had a strong impact on the linguistic choices of the parents (see also

Ramonienė & Ramonaitė, 2024). The main reason cited for choosing their own dialect or a dialectally influenced colloquial language was the emotional connection to this linguistic form. Dialect is often referred to as a language of immediacy that reduces distance and strengthens group bonds internally (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher, 2012; Kehrein & Fischer, 2016). This sentiment was echoed in the interviews. For instance, Michael said that it was a clear decision for him to use his colloquial language because 'ich wollte so natürlich wie möglich mit den Kindern sprechen, nicht gestelzt daherkommen (I wanted to speak as naturally as possible with the children, without sounding stilted)'. He would have found the use of standard German to be 'anstrengend (exhausting)' and compared it to speaking a foreign language with his children—something he definitely did not want to do.

For Marianne from Switzerland, it was never a question that she would only speak Swiss German with her children, just as she would have done in Switzerland. Similarly, for Peter, who originally lived in a strongly dialectal region in southern Germany before moving to Finland, it was a clear decision to use his dialect with his children, saying that he wanted to speak 'mehr oder weniger wie mir der Schnabel gewachsen ist (more or less as naturally as possible, like I always have)'. Peter believes that his children perceive the use of dialect or regional colloquial language as positive. He reported that, through this, the children feel a stronger connection to a particular region or community in their parents' home country. Additionally, their dialectally influenced language often leads to them being perceived as 'authentic speakers' of German, thereby being more strongly recognized as part of a community in German-speaking countries.

Only one participant, Stefanie from Austria, consciously decided against speaking dialect with her children, even though she herself uses dialect in communication with her family in Austria and mostly with other German-speaking people. She explains her reasoning as follows:

(4) Wenn ich jetzt mit meinen Kindern—zu selten—Deutsch rede, dann rede ich auch nicht [Dialekt], sondern dann rede ich oder probiere zumindest eher Hochdeutsch zu reden und nicht [Dialekt], damit sie auch zumindest irgendwas lernen, wo sie sich auch mit jemand anderen unterhalten können. (When I now speak German with my children—too rarely—I don't speak [dialect], but rather speak more standard German, or at least try, so that they learn something that will allow them to communicate with others.)

This example is interesting because Stefanie views German less as a language of immediacy with strong emotional connotations and more from a socio-economic point of view as a form of capital from which her children might benefit in the future. In this regard, she perceives her dialect as inappropriate because it lacks broader regional reach. Therefore, she sees it as a linguistic barrier that might make it difficult for her children to be understood by others.

4.3. Language Socialization Practices in the Families and Formal Instruction in German

As has already become evident, it is important for all participants involved in this study to pass the German language on to their children. This was also reflected in the concrete linguistic practices in the families reported by the participants. Particularly during early childhood, all German-speaking parents exclusively used their first language, German, with their children, and most bilingual families continued to follow the OPOL strategy. Common to all accounts was that the participants read German-language books to their children and consciously familiarized them with songs or videos in German. The internet now makes access to German-language materials easy. However, this was not necessarily the case for the older participants, and children's books often had to be obtained via long postal routes or brought back from trips to German-speaking countries, which usually only

occurred once a year. In contrast to Helsinki, where there are or were German libraries, or where public libraries offer a broader selection of foreign-language children's literature, in rural or more peripheral areas, it is solely up to the parents to procure this material.

The exposure of the participants' children to the German language was primarily limited to communication with the German-speaking parent and relatives in German-speaking countries. On one hand, this contact has also been facilitated in the past 10 years by various online communication tools. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly restricted in-person meetings. The small number of German-speaking migrants in northern Finland, particularly in small communities, also makes it nearly impossible to organize contact with other children of the same age who speak German. In kindergartens or schools, the children of these families generally have no contact with other German-speaking peers in their own age. The situation is somewhat better in larger cities. For example, teenagers Max and Ben mention in the interview that they have had two bilingual classmates of the same age for some time now. They perceive this as extremely positive, as it is the first time in their lives that they can use German privately with friends in Finland. This positive experience is also reflected in the fact that they sometimes prefer to speak German with these friends rather than their stronger language, Finnish. German has become a 'secret language' for them, which they occasionally use so that their other classmates do not understand them. This indicates the important role that peers with the same home language play in strengthening the linguistic identity in that language among bilingual children. Social contact in the minority language with peers enables them to overcome the restriction of the language to the social role of the child (cf. Maar, 2024, p. 43).

Some of the participants, such as Marianne or Michael, attempted to organize regular meetings with other parents of bilingual children, where the children could meet peers to play with. In Marianne's case, this worked very well. Several Swiss German families met regularly, allowing the children to use Swiss German. In this instance, the fact that there were so few Swiss German–speaking families in the area seemed to contribute to these contacts being considered so important that even longer travel distances were accepted for these meetings. In the case of the German parents, such as Michael, these gatherings were seen more as a practical arrangement, from which no lasting relationships emerged.

Only in two larger cities in northern Finland it is possible to attend home language classes in German. Parents make use of this opportunity to varying degrees. In Peter's case, this was considered an important part of the bilingual education of his younger children, and he was actively involved in organizing and promoting this option in his community. For his older children, this option was not yet available. Julia's and Thomas' children also attend or have attended these classes and viewed it as a crucial component of their bilingual upbringing. Although, according to the parents, the children occasionally find it tiring to attend German classes in the late afternoon after regular school hours, the interviewed teenagers Max and Ben noted that, apart from the fact that at certain stages they attended classes mainly at the request of their parents, today they are very satisfied and motivated to participate in the classes. They both started lessons when they were in the third grade and at the time of the interview had been attending lessons for 5 to 7 years. They attend the same group, as several age groups are taught together. In the home language classes, they acquire skills that they would not learn at home by communicating only with their father. Ben mentioned in this context: 'Grammatik lerne ich eigentlich nur da. (I actually learn grammar only there.)' They see the German lessons as an important opportunity to maintain and develop the German language. Thomas, the father, expressed a similar sentiment, noting 'ass da Sachen gelernt werden, die ich von mir aus so nicht vermitteln könnte (that they learn things there that I wouldn't be able to teach them myself)' and that go beyond 'normalen Sprachgebrauch (normal language use)'. Additionally, he emphasized

the importance of 'noch jemand anders zu haben, der mit ihnen Deutsch spricht (having someone else who speaks German with them)' during the lessons. Moreover, both the father and the sons highlighted those extracurricular activities, such as theater performances or Christmas celebrations, are very beneficial. In addition, the German classes do not just involve language lessons but also, for example, geography lessons in German, which is seen as very positive.

The findings of this study align with those of previous studies (e.g., Linderoos, 2016), showing that not all parents are aware of the opportunity to participate in home language instruction. For example, Patrick and Stefanie, whose children are not yet of school age, were unaware that such classes exist in their area. Additionally, parents whose children do attend or have attended home language classes were not informed about this option by the school but learned about it through family friends or the German-Finnish Association.

For families living in small communities where no home language classes are available and where travel to the nearest larger city is too far, the question arises whether German-as-a-foreign-language classes, which are offered at least in some communities in comprehensive schools, could be an option for their children to receive formal instruction in the German language. Monika's children attended these classes but dropped out after a short time because the expectations and demands of the class did not match. Particularly in comprehensive schools, it seems challenging for the teacher to meet the needs of both bilingual children and Finnish-speaking students who are just beginning to learn German in a way that satisfies both groups. Language education would have to be differently focused and highly differentiated to consider the different background and learning needs of pupils (cf. Bergmann, 2017). On the other hand, German classes at the upper secondary school level (for students aged 17 to 19) appear to be more attractive even for bilingual children. Peter's, Julia's, and Michael's children attend or have attended these classes and are very satisfied with them. They appreciate the grammar-oriented focus of the lessons, which is often criticized by others, as they feel they can continue to develop in this area. Furthermore, they view it positively that they can achieve an official qualification through the final examination. This was also a reason mentioned by Thomas and his sons, Ben and Max, when they explained that they plan to take German as a foreign language at the upper secondary level. Additionally, aspects related to multilingual identity play a role here. Julia reported that her son, who previously showed little interest in German, developed a sense of pride in his abilities and knowledge of German over the course of the upper secondary school classes. The positive perception of his bilingualism by his classmates also played an important role in this development.

5. Discussion

The results of this analysis, based on interviews conducted in northern Finland with nine migrants from German-speaking countries and two bilingual teenagers born and raised in Finland, demonstrate that the German language plays an important role in families with children. While German tends to recede into the background over time for adults themselves and for German-speaking migrants without children, and while some even problematize their 'Germanness' (cf. Breier, 2017; Grasz, 2023b), none of the participants considered raising their children solely in Finnish to be an option. This is supported by the fact that the participants possess a tight emotional connectedness and a strong linguistic identity, and that their native language, German, generally holds a prestigious position in Finland, where its use is typically viewed as beneficial. These findings align with those of Breier's (2017) study, which also identified the birth of the first child as a turning point when the German language becomes more significant in the lives of Germans in Finland.

All participants made conscious decisions regarding language policy within the family, decisions that in most cases were also supported by their partners, leading to minimal family conflicts. Only in Marianne's case was bilingual upbringing carried out against the father's wishes, as he held the belief that bilingualism could potentially harm the children's development. Similar attitudes towards bilingual education were also reported by participants in Breier's (2017) study on the linguistic situation of Finns in Germany. They reported some strong prejudices against bilingual education in the 1960s and 1970s (Baier, 2007, pp. 101–102). Such beliefs are no longer found among the younger participants, a change that reflects shifting societal perspectives on multilingualism. None of the younger participants reported experiencing negative reactions from their surroundings to the multilingualism within their families. These predominantly positive attitudes, which are closely linked to language ideologies (cf. Spolsky, 2009), are further reinforced by the prestige of German-speaking migrants and the German language in Finland. Finland and Germany (as well as Austria and Switzerland) have a long history of intense bilateral relations and cultural exchange. Migrants from German-speaking countries are predominantly seen as lifestyle migrants, who migrate not due to economic or similar pressures but as a result of a free choice (cf. Codó, 2018; Lawson, 2017). Additionally, German, though less so, remains a widely taught foreign language in Finnish society, where it is valued relatively highly, particularly for its economic relevance. These factors contribute to the low level of stigmatization faced by German-speaking migrants in Finland. This, in turn, affords them a degree of freedom in self-representation (cf. Breier, 2020), which also influences language practices within the family (cf. Spolsky, 2009). This freedom is evident, for example, in the choice of the German variety used with their children. Although some parents consider which variety of German will be most valuable for their children's future, their decisions ultimately seem to be based on personal preferences and emotional connections to a particular form of the language.

The study further highlights that German-speaking parents, together with their partners, actively engage in learning about bilingual upbringing and early childhood language acquisition. Knowledge of early childhood language development is regarded as a key element in bilingual education (cf. Ekinci, 2019). This engagement with bilingual upbringing takes place through both self-help and specialist literature, as well as discussions with other bilingual families. In particular, the exchange of experiences within the German-speaking community is considered very important in this regard. On the other hand, at least in northern Finland, especially in rural areas, there seems to be little to no support or guidance from officials, kindergartens, or schools. In these institutions, little to no attention was paid to the bilingualism of the children. As a result, the sole responsibility for passing on and maintaining the home language often falls on the German-speaking parent.

The role of the family is enormously important, particularly in rural areas, as it is often the only context in which the language is used. The situation is very different to the context of Breier's (2017, 2020) study of the role of German in the transcultural urban context of Helsinki, where a 'German infrastructure' exists (Breier, 2020, p. 51). Today, contact with family and relatives in German-speaking countries is facilitated by various digital applications and is used intensively by the participants. However, this was different 10 years ago, when the use of the German language, apart from interactions with the German-speaking parent, was mostly limited to annual holidays in the parents' country of origin. One major disadvantage associated with living in northern Finland or smaller communities, as mentioned by most participants, is the lack of peers. This is also emphasized by the teenagers Ben and Max, who only recently started having other bilingual classmates, which they perceive as very positive. When parents wish to organize meetings with other bilingual families, they often have to travel long distances,

which is seen as a drawback. Infrequent meetings often result in relationships remaining superficial. However, contact with age-adequate verbal patterns, roles, and identities is seen as very important for developing a stronger identification with the community of the home language (cf. Pułaczewska, 2021).

Official home language instruction is available in the regions of northern Finland studied here only in two larger cities, which parents view as a problem. German as a foreign language—if it is offered by the municipality—could be an alternative, but at least in the context of comprehensive schools, it is generally considered not particularly useful. The background and access to the German language seem to be too different between bilingual children and those without prior knowledge of German. Addressing this difference within the curriculum is likely challenging for teachers, and differing expectations among parents could potentially lead to conflicts (cf. Bergmann, 2017). Despite these challenges, smaller communities might consider whether a way could be found to address languages for which there are not enough children to organize special home language instruction, and for which qualified foreign language teachers are available in schools. A potential solution could involve partially combining foreign language and home language instruction. This would require further training and awareness-raising, but ideally, it could benefit all students, including those learning the language as a foreign language.

This study was only able to provide some insights into the different life realities of families raising their children bilingually in northern Finland. Despite the differences that emerged, many experiences common to families living outside the Helsinki metropolitan area and the more densely populated southern Finland were also discussed. The insights gained in this study can serve as a basis for further research that investigates the phenomena in more detail, over longer periods of time and on different levels (e.g., the micro, meso, and macro level, as presented by Liddicoat, 2020). The use of different methods and the focus on different actors in this process (in addition to the families concerned, e.g., teachers and decision-makers in the municipalities) can also deliver important new results. There is still little research on migration in peripheral regions in general and on issues related to the multilingual upbringing of children in these regions. It is also important to consider the varying conditions faced by different groups of migrants. This clearly represents a research gap, as questions related to the promotion of linguistic and cultural identity, as well as the constitutionally enshrined right in Finland to maintain and develop one's own language, have a significant impact on the well-being of multilingual families.

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Note

[1] The population density is 11.4/km^2 in North Ostrobothnia, in Lapland 1.9/km^2, and in Kainuu 3.4/km^2 (figures from 2024). In comparison, the population density in Uusimaa, the region around Helsinki, is 196/km^2, in Pirkanmaa with the centre of Tampere 41.2/km^2 and in Southwest Finland with Turku 46.4/km^2.

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