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## **Space, family language policy and invisibility of languages**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws upon arguments about spaces as a central idea in order to understand language inequality and invisibility through the framework of family language policy. Tracing the history of sociolinguistic studies, space occupies a pivotal role whose importance has been revealed making contribution to many useful theories. Family language policy is the private sphere within the concept of space, long neglected, but renewed interest over the past 20 years has demonstrated in a sustained manner the tussle over the maintenance of the heritage language in the face of the host language. Language invisibilization within the family domain is not confined to heritage language and its accents but also to other non-reported languages, such as secret language and sacred languages. More in-depth empirical observations with new innovative methodologies are needed to understand the inequality and invisibility of languages at micro-level. The importance of the Family domain as the first place of socialization for children, compels us to seek a better understanding of spatially organized language practices and beliefs which have an impact on the whole upcoming generation.

### **Keywords**

Space, family language policy, language inequality, language invisibility, national language policy.

### **Résumé**

Notre article s'intéresse à l'espace, concept central permettant de traiter de l'inégalité et de l'invisibilité des langues dans le cadre de la politique linguistique familiale. Retracer l'histoire des études sociolinguistiques permet de montrer que le concept d'espace a largement contribué à la constitution de nombreuses théories désormais incontournables. La politique linguistique familiale s'intéresse à la sphère privée, « espace » privilégié longtemps non pris en

compte jusqu'à ce que certains travaux conduits ces vingt dernières années démontrent l'importance de la lutte pour le maintien de la langue d'origine face à la langue d'accueil. L'invisibilisation de la langue dans le domaine familial va au-delà de la non reconnaissance de la langue d'héritage ou de ses accents, mais elle peut, dans certains cas, concerner d'autres langues non déclarées, telles que les langues secrètes et les langues sacrées. Pour appréhender l'inégalité et l'invisibilité des langues au niveau familial, il s'avère nécessaire de conduire des observations empiriques approfondies montrant des méthodologies novatrices. Pour les enfants, le domaine familial est le lieu incontournable de socialisation première, cela oblige le chercheur à appréhender plus finement les pratiques et les croyances linguistiques disséminées dans l'espace familial puisque les différents phénomènes ne seront pas sans effets à la génération suivante.

### **Mots-clés**

Espace, politique linguistique familiale, l'inégalité des langues, l'invisibilité des langues, politique linguistique nationale.

## **1. Introduction**

All studies on linguistics, and sociolinguistics in particular, cannot be imagined without taking into consideration the importance of the space in which the language is spoken. Many sociolinguistic studies have dwelt heavily on the dynamics and importance of space in order to comprehend fully the role of language and its functions (Blommaert et al., 2005; Dong and Blommaert, 2009). Language is linked intrinsically with society, so, from its inception and evolution, to the stage of policy and planification, space has been a central platform. In the second half of the nineteenth century, William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894) wrote that "Speech is not a personal possession but a social" (Whitney, 1867), determining the role of society as crucial where it accepts or rejects an instance of a language uttered by an individual. Linguistic variation appeared as a new study from the late nineteenth century in France (Gilliéron and Edmont, 1902) and was then introduced in Germany by Georg Wenker followed by the American atlas project in 1931 (Shuy, 2003). This paper first gives a brief review of language in public spaces. It will then go on to examine in the second section the private spaces focusing on the family as locus and then in the third section it deals with the invisibility of languages both in public and private spaces.

All these studies established the value of space as the kernel of modern sociolinguistics. In fact, the first serious discussions and analyses within the field of sociolinguistics emerged in 1941 when the studies of André Martinet (1971, [1945]) took an interest in sociophonetics and variational sociolinguistics in relation to the differences of regional pronunciation in France. The discipline of sociolinguistics emerged as a response when space in terms of nation-states in a post-colonial world was considered as the principal antagonist (Rampton, 2021). Jernudd and Nekvapil (2012) point out the “classical language policy” during the 1950s and 1960s, when the problem of solving language was important (Spolsky, 2019: 23). It was the nation-state which ended multilingualism by promoting monolingualism on the basis of linguistic ideology. However, the interest in regional languages, indigenous language and diversity of languages progressively gained ground, showing that space has its own system of regulating languages.

Research into linguistic variation associated with social class appeared in the fieldwork of John Gumperz (1982a, 1982b), carried out in India and Norway (Auer, 2014). Charles Ferguson (1959) contributed the theory of diglossia, which Fishman (1971) extended before devising his own model of diglossia and bilingualism. In the context of space, together with compelling social issues but largely based on language issues, many theories appeared from the 1950s onwards. The research by Fischer (1958) into understanding the use of suffix *in* and *ing* by the children of New England threw light on the socioeconomic status of speakers who chose one suffix over the other. Basil Bernstein (1960) took interest in studying the impact of social classes, social relationships and social contexts on language. Space provided the “epistemic sensibility” (Rampton, 2023) exposing the inequalities in languages over which Hymes (1972) showed concern from as early as early seventies of the twentieth century.

Around the same period, William Labov’s illuminating study on local spaces in the United States, such as New York City (Labov, 1966), Martha’s Vineyard and Harlem, or Peter Trudgill’s (1974) remarkable insights on the language situation in England, strengthened further the idea that many notions remain unexplored in the role of space. In the age of the new global economy from the 1990s onwards, theoretical concepts surfaced based on walls, boundaries, migration and superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) to name a few, highlighting again the dynamics of space and language.

In this paper, I attempt to provide a framework for examining the family as a space in the field of sociolinguistics and how the invisibility of languages is articulated in this milieu, as well as in general. Joshua Fishman (2004), American sociologist, described family as one domain among four others such as work, education, religion and friendship where language

plays an important role. Family, however, did not arouse much interest as a domain or as a space until the nineties of the last century. As mentioned above, due to global economic factors and mobility and later the consequences of wars (from the Gulf War), the Western world (Europe and USA) witnessed a large movement of immigrants to its boundaries. The presence of immigrants and their families remained somewhat invisible to researchers though they were already present in this part of the Global North, particularly in Europe, during the family reunification program launched in the 1970s by several Western European countries, particularly France and Norway.

From 1990 onwards, only when in the United States three bills were signed to alter the rights and responsibilities of immigrants when politicians linked migration to poverty (Gerken, 2013), welfare reforms and family values, the sociolinguists found a new domain in which to explore language practices, language transmission and the management of language at a micro-level: this was the family, which had hitherto been less visible. Likewise, similar echoes erupted in Western Europe on the issue of migration and language, assimilation of immigrants from the language viewpoint, language testing in the host language to acquire citizenship, in addition to other national debates on television and in other media about the identity of immigrants and their children.

Space legitimizes and delegitimizes language in accordance with ideology, first at the national level, reflected in the educational policies of public schools and in linguistic policies in general, and then, with repercussions at smaller scales, in households and within the migrant communities, where maintenance of the heritage language may become an arduous task. Family is a social-contextual spatial unit which had been largely ignored in the field of sociolinguistics. It thus became a major concern for researchers to explore the family space of immigrants and understand how language diversity – specifically, host language and heritage language – were positioning themselves and how each of these languages was playing a role in the repertoire and construction of identity of second-generation immigrants.

Inequality among languages is one of the obvious symbols in a multilingual society, and even in a monolingual society, where many other languages, including those from the margins and of migrants, are swept aside. Tollefson's work (1991) demonstrates the relationship between language planning and language inequalities. It is in this context that family language policy emerged as an important concept, first in France, mentioned by French scholars Louis-Jean Calvet (1993), Christine Deprez (1996) and Martine Dreyfus (1996), and later by the American sociolinguists Luykx (2003), Spolsky (2004) and King et al. (2008). Scholars in France took interest only in the "language transmission" part with a dialectical approach

focusing on the Maghreb languages as heritage language (Barontini, 2014; Biichlé, 2012; Caubet and Barontini, 2008). Apart from Christine Deprez (1994; Deprez and Varro, 1991), who took some interest in advancing family language policy in France but did not evoke it within any theoretical framework, other scholars had long neglected it, except for a renewed interest in the last decade from Haque (2012, 2019c), Wang (2019) and Istanbulu (2017). Nevertheless, valuable developments in the last two decades have been led by Anglo-American sociolinguists (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; King et al., 2008; Luykx, 2003; Spolsky, 2012; Tuominen, 1999) in the field of family language policy. The study of family language policy has recapitulated the development of sociolinguistics and sociology of language proper, from multilingualism, identity, immigration, heritage language maintenance, language practices, language ideology, and language management, and it has attracted a number of fine researchers from the field of psychology (Guerraoui and Reveyrand-Coulon 2011), psycholinguistics (Sevinç, 2022), sociology (Filion and Zegnani, 2019) and curriculum studies (Song, 2019) who are attentive to the dynamics and impact of cultural differences on the family space.

## **2. Overview of family language policy**

Studies on children's bilingualism within the home setting could be traced back to the emblematic work of Maurice Grammont's (1902) *Observation sur le langage des enfants* (Observation on Children's language) based on One Parent – One Language (other recent studies of the same genre are by Barron-Hauwaert (2011) and Döpke (1992). In a similar vein, Ronjat (1913), a French linguist, applied the same method with his German wife and his son, so that the son attained the same level of proficiency in both languages – French and German. Though these two studies are often cited as precursors to the emerging discipline of FLP (Bissinger, 2021; Romanowski, 2021; Smith-Christmas, 2016), it must be noted that FLP is not limited to children's bilingualism or acquisition of language within the home setting; it is primarily based on conviction and beliefs in terms of ideology which stipulate the place and hierarchy of languages in the family space. Some claims (Yagmur and Bohnacker, 2022) have been made recently that resources precede ideology in a comparative perspective in studies carried out in families of Turkish heritage-speakers in Australia, Belgium, France, Sweden and the Netherlands. The authors addressed some crucial dimensions regarding language socialization, pressure and influence from macro-level on immigrant parents but no concrete answers were formulated over the lack of an ideology factor in FLP.

The findings of one study (Hollebeke et al., 2020), based on literature reviews of 191 articles on FLP showed that beliefs were not highly regarded as playing a major role in the maintenance of heritage language, but instead, the input language practices, management and exposure were the main determinants. Likewise, in another study (Hollebeke et al., 2022), which observed 776 multilingual families in Belgium, language beliefs and language management showed discrepancies.

Most of the studies in FLP draw on Spolsky's framework, in which Bernard Spolsky (Spolsky, 2004, 2008, 2012) made an instrumental contribution by proposing a tripartite model to understand the mechanism of FLP. It was based on language ideology, language practices and language management. Understanding this phenomenon from a hierarchical basis, language ideology is pervasive as the principal component ascribing and influencing the language practices for which language management plays a pivotal role. Either FLP counteracts the hegemonic beliefs related to language so as to prioritize maintenance of the heritage language or, by aligning with those hegemonic beliefs, the heritage language is swept under the rug. Parents and grand-parents have been considered the vital proponents of language ideology within the home setting (Caldas, 2012; Curdt-Christiansen, 2018; Smith-Christmas, 2016) and in this regard, this has been the significant current discussion on the role of parental agency as a nexus in FLP projects (Lanza and Lomeu-Gomes, 2020; Moustououi, 2020). However, some other studies have argued that child agency negotiates the place of language in the home (Maseko, 2022; Piller, 2018; Tuominen, 1999). To avoid any false assumption on the term "home language" which is used also as variable "in policy-oriented research on language-in-education" (Blommaert, 2017), I employ it in the meaning of "heritage language" and in the same manner it has been employed by the researchers in FLP domain.

Inspired by Spolsky's framework, Curdt-Christiansen and Huang (Curdt-Christiansen and Huang, 2020) proposed a new model of FLP based on internal and external factors which they termed a "Dynamic model of family language policy" (DmFLP). Under this model, external factors and internal factors were made explicit, demonstrating the crucial role of environmental concerns in providing adequate linguistic and cultural exposure to the target group, hence children. Another model of FLP was proposed by Bissinger (Bissinger, 2021) drawing insights from Spolsky's three components of FLP and in consonant less or more with DmFLP. Bissinger's concern was focused on the theories of child language acquisition/development and language maintenance in the context of FLP (inspired in particular by De Houwer [1995, 2009] and Lanza [1997]): he emphasized "child language

acquisition/development” in the model as an important factor in addition to the tripartite components proposed by Spolsky (2004, 2008; see also Montrul, 2012).

During the time when I was writing my doctoral dissertation, I was interested in carrying out my research on families on the basis of empirical data collected with tools combining ethnographic and sociolinguistic approaches. In informal discussion of preliminary results with a sociolinguistics professor, Josiane Boutet, in Paris, I told her that one of my participants had sent his son to the country of origin, to learn an Indian language. She asked me how I landed upon “an atypical family”. Reflecting upon her remark, I recalled that living in a suburban area of Paris, my wife, a high school English teacher, had often told me that some of her students would disappear for a semester or two and then come back. In fact, these students were sent to their countries of origin (North Africa or Sub-Saharan African / former French colonial territories) in order to learn the language and local cultural ethics. These findings had never surfaced in any study in sociolinguistics conducted in France on language practices in an immigrant family.

The problem was twofold: a) methodological b) lack of interest in the family as a domain or object of research. Much of the research which had been conducted on families from immigrant backgrounds in France (Billiez, 1985; Dabène, 1981; Trimaille, 2004) was based on either questionnaires or interviews solely focusing on the individual trajectory of the person, and often the school as the principal space or context where the individual’s linguistic performance and attitudes were observed, instead of taking interest in the family.

A questionnaire-based tool on a large scale has its own limitations in that self-reporting may not portray the real language ideology and practices. In a monolingual-based society, such as the case of France, schools are spaces that reflect the government’s policies and multilingualism in heritage languages is often not well supported. As Deprez (2015) reminds us, the teaching offered in heritage language maintenance by the Ministry of Education in France does not fulfill its role and, despite these attempts, the transmission of heritage language and culture is exclusive to families.

The emergence of complementary schools for minority or immigrant groups in France or elsewhere, such as the UK, for example (Creese, 2009) or Spain<sup>1</sup> (see Nandi et al., 2023), with the motive of teaching heritage language or culture, has appeared as an alternative space. Though very little research has been carried out on its efficacy, most of these schools operate

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<sup>1</sup> Co-operative schools *Semente* for preserving Galician and *Ikastolak* (started as a clandestine school) for protecting and maintaining Basque serve a pivotal role (Nandi et al., 2023).



either on Wednesdays or Saturdays or even on Sundays: these places are a supplemental burden in terms of money and time for the parents but they show the priorities where FLP is invested. In Germany, for instance, there are Heritage Language courses integrated in the public-school curriculum. However, this is only done during the primary school (see Olfert and Schmitz, 2018). The further development of the HL skills from the secondary school onwards depends primarily on the family.

With the aim of encompassing a critical perspective, I tried to address both these problems in my research (Haque, 2012) by exploring the space of family as my central resource for empirical observation and by employing a holistic methodological approach with diverse tools, so that the data elicited corroborate the real ideology and practices of the family members. Through my experience, I have discovered a new world each time I carried out empirical observation in the family space related to immigration. There was a wealth of information on the “regime of languages” (Kroskrity, 2000), in which both parents and children were acting as agencies in different roles. Questionnaires and interviews on family members were not generally sufficient to elicit data on the “real” language practices. It does not preclude that there are “unreal” language practices but I want to draw attention toward self-reported languages in a migratory context which are in line with the nation’s ideology, often purposefully or inadvertently making other heritage languages invisible.

Few studies have highlighted the discrepancies between real and unreal language practices within the family domain (Billiez et al., 2003; Latomaa and Suni, 2011). In this paper, I propose to illustrate the invisibility of languages in the family space and examine the reasons behind this invisibility under the theoretical framework of FLP. While engaging with the language practices within the family that evoke the linguistic trajectory and ideology, invisibility factors appear as a suitable tool to examine whether the space is influenced or uninfluenced by external forces.

### **3. Invisibility of languages**

A critical examination of space might yield different insights on inequalities permeating for over a long time but went unnoticed. Studying culture and political economy through the lens of space, Setha Low (2014:34) demonstrates that “methodologies of space and place can uncover systems of exclusion that are hidden or neutralized and thus rendered invisible to other approaches”. In the past decade, a number of researchers have attempted to show the invisibility

of languages at micro-level (Gkaintartzis and Tsokalidou, 2011) or particularly in the field of migration (Cowie and Delaney, 2019), and even in the field of literature for an indigenous language (Bradette, 2020). Nevertheless, at family level, no studies, to my knowledge, have focused on the phenomenon of the invisibilization of multilingualism (IM) within the theoretical framework of family language policy (FLP), national language policy (PLN) and educational language policy (ELP). Language planning at tertiary level often has a tendency to segregate multilingualism at family or societal level, resulting in a mono or bilingual language policy favoring official language status. This can be seen as the main reason for invisibilization, reducing the scope of languages within one's community, and gradually, this scope is so limited that the language is no longer used.

Languages discarded in this process become invisible to the individual on a micro level, or semi-invisible languages that can be heard or seen (like the sacred languages of Sanskrit or Qur'anic Arabic), but never or hardly ever used. In a migratory context, there is a tendency to make one's language invisible in one's verbal repertoires – to make one's heritage language invisible, to make one's accent invisible – and in this way, a precious part of one's identity risks becoming invisible. This is the case, for example, with the English spoken by indigenous peoples in Australia, which is considered a “defective” English when compared with standard Australian English, and consequently its speakers are invisible.<sup>2</sup>

Dell Hymes was interested in the notion of the invisibilization of languages as he pioneered the main function of sociolinguistics, pointing to inequality based on language practices. The invisibilization of multilingualism could reveal a multitude of factors leading to the disappearance of languages. The international colloquium, “Will Europe speak English tomorrow?”, held on March 3, 2001, even though it took place twenty years ago, is a reminder that English monolingualism, a global phenomenon, is in turn affecting European linguistic practices, further impoverishing Europe's rich linguistic heritage.<sup>3</sup>

In Europe, linguistic and social restructuring is taking place in many pockets of cities, with immigrant languages becoming invisible in favor of the more valorizing languages of the host country. It is within the context of immigration (IM) that we find all traces of national and family linguistic ideologies, with their impact on education, on multilingualism in general – in other words, on the linguistic landscape – and then at the micro-scheme level: in the verbal

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<sup>2</sup> [Invisible language learners: what educators need to know about many First Nations children \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/invisible-language-learners-what-educators-need-to-know-about-many-First-Nations-children), consulted on 17 December 2022.

<sup>3</sup> This conference took place at Bibliothèque de Bordeaux.

repertoires of individuals within the family. Among the latter, in a migratory context, we find the inclination – alarming as it may be – to gravitate towards the languages of power and prestige, leading to the gradual disappearance of little-known heritage languages that have little or no value in their new society. In this regard, as Amin Malouf (1998: 96) points out, “all modernization is now Westernization”, with the modernization imposed on the immigrant population implying the constant abandonment of heritage languages (see also in particular Blackledge (2000) for the practices of monolingual ideology in multilingual multi-ethnic setting of Britain). In the pages that follow, three elements of invisibility will be examined from the macroscopic as well as microscopic viewpoint: a) invisibility of secret languages, b) invisibility of sacred language, c) invisibility of heritage language and regional accents.

### **3.1. Invisibility of secret languages**

By secret language, we mean the language we refrain from using overtly in public or even in a private space like the family. There are many compelling reasons for this: belonging to a persecuted religious group whose ritual practices are significantly different from those of the majority group, or belonging to a migrant community whose language is not valued or is even denigrated, provoking a hostile reaction in the host society.

To begin with, I shall talk about the Hakka community in Taiwan, considered “invisible men” who, according to (Lai, 2016), have assimilated so well that they have mastered the local language, and rarely use their heritage language in public. But this invisibility as a community is a result of the fact that the Hakka language is no longer publicly expressed, for obvious reasons of minority status. The same is evident in the case of the Hmong immigrant family in France, where, in a case study, one of my interviewees, Ly, told me that his ethnicity and Hmong language had been subsumed under ‘Chinese’ (Haque, 2019b) by fellow classmates at his school, in particular, and from non-Hmong people in his daily life, in general.

Furthermore, a number of case studies (Ghilzai, 2020) on the transgender community have highlighted the fact that the secret language used within this community is invisible to the general public. Doctoral research focusing on the language, identity and subjectivity of Pakistan’s transgender community shows that discursive practices are consolidated through the Hijra Farsi language. Hijra Farsi is considered a secret language of this community, as is Ulti Bhasha, spoken by transgender people in the western part of India, in Kolkata, Nadia and Murshidabad, as well as in Bangladesh. These two languages, Hijra Farsi and Ulti Bhasha, are

used in everyday conversations among transgender people, but remain completely invisible on an official level, or even to the general public. The Ulti Bhasha language offers a wide range of lexemes charged with love, from sexual organs to various types of erotic acts (see Zabus and Das 2020). Thus, it is designed to effectively capture the sexual desires of transgender people, which is not possible in the mainstream languages.

In another doctoral study of trans communities in Brazil's Pajubà region, the same trend is evident in the emergence of a secret, hybrid language practice among transvestites (Probst, 2023). Children who are raised in such an environment, although such research is non-existent (see Wagner and Armstrong, 2020), might be assumed to learn or acquire the secret language from their childhood as part of the FLP.

Then, there is the Russian community in Finland, who do not speak Russian in public, making both the language and their identity invisible (Viimaranta et al., 2019). During my stay in Estonia in 2009 as part of my doctoral research, some Russian speakers informed me that they never speak Russian in public amid fears that they would be ethnically identified and become targets for discrimination. I observed the same phenomenon in Ukraine during my visit to the town of L'viv as part of an international conference in October 2021. People over the age of fifty years had received education in Russian, and despite being Ukrainians were afraid to use Russian in public, especially in a climate of war that had reigned there since the capture of the Crimean region by Russia in 2014. Among people of Russian ethnicity in Ukraine, Russian had become a secret language and was confined to the home.

At microscopic level, I have not found any secret language during my fieldwork on case studies of Indian-origin immigrants in Europe (Haque, 2012) or on the Hmong community in France (Haque, 2019b). From personal observation without any fieldwork on Urdu students from a Pakistani background enrolled in my institution, INALCO, Paris, it seems that Punjabi or other regional languages are secret languages within the household (Haque, 2022). Students report Urdu as their heritage language and the language of all family members in their first year but gradually, by the end of the third year, most of them report Punjabi as the main language of the parents. In Pakistan, the Punjabi language bears a highly negative connotation often associated with illiteracy, vulgarity, and low socio-economic class (Kalwar and Mahmood, 2022; Rahman, 2007) and most of the immigrants from this linguistic community in France express guilt or shame at being associated with the language. Hence, the language is hidden or made invisible in public by shifting to Urdu and transmitting Urdu language to their children through formal education, instead of preserving the heritage language.

### 3.2. Invisibility and sacred languages

Sacred language is not often reported as one of the languages of verbal repertoires in a migratory context. None of the four families in the doctoral thesis, variously practicing Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, reported the sacred language (Haque, 2012). Only prolonged immersion in the family revealed the presence of Sanskrit, Koranic Arabic and Old Punjabi for the parents and seldom for the children. In each case, the family's language policy has privileged the transmission and learning of value-adding languages, such as French, Norwegian, Swedish, English and, in some cases, heritage languages, while the sacred language has been marginalized or even made invisible to the second generation in the case of families practicing Hinduism and Sikhism.

The same applies to the Hmong family in northern France (Haque, 2019b) and the Hakka families in Pakistan (Haque, 2019a), where the sacred languages were not reported explicitly. Only during fieldwork in the Hmong family was it found that a variety of Hmong was used for practicing the rituals of shamanism; however, for the Hakka in Pakistan, no information could be obtained due to lack of fieldwork.

The rationale behind this concealment or invisibility of sacred language is that participants probably do not attach such prominence to it, as it serves a specific function, such as a sacerdotal language for praying or reading a holy scripture, or attending a mass or religious ceremony. Moreover, in most cases, these functions are ad hoc, depending on the profile of the family – practicing or not – and usage seems quite restrictive in our modern, Western, urban society. It has also emerged that linguistic competence in the sacred language is often truncated<sup>4</sup> (see Blommaert's notion of truncated competency, Blommaert, 2010), prompting respondents to make it invisible when being interviewed or completing a questionnaire. In the case of a questionnaire survey on language practices and attitudes among immigrants of Pakistani origin in France, none of the 37 respondents mentioned the sacred language as a language they used (Haque, 2022). A follow-up study on the same respondents with fieldwork and long immersion may reveal the usage of sacred languages, hitherto invisible in the first stage of inquiry.

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<sup>4</sup> Blommaert et al. (2005: 199) defines truncated multilingualism as “linguistic competencies which are organized topically, on the basis of domains or specific activities”.

### 3.3. Invisibility of heritage language and regional accents

The visibility of certain unwanted or non-valued mother tongues and accents in an urban setting has become a kind of anxiety for many speakers when they move to a big city as part of internal migration within the same country. Dong and Blommaert (Dong and Blommaert, 2009) mention in their article a pupil from a western inland region of China who was enrolled in Ningbo city for his studies. She considered that she was not speaking “perfect Potunghua” like her teacher, and hence, she became “language-less” in a new migratory space. In fact, she was a speaker of Potunghua but her rural Sichuan accent made her somewhat invisible for her peers and teachers, who mocked her.

Upon tracing my personal journey from a large city in eastern India to the capital, New Delhi, the city of central power, I was confronted with a linguistic tension in terms of my regional accent, even though I spoke the same language – Hindi. I started making invisible my regional accent (Bihari) in favor of the Delhi Hindi accent, the latter carrying notions of both prestige and value.<sup>5</sup> During my doctoral research, I found that an Indian-origin father settled in Sweden was sensitive to the accents of his children in the Swedish language. He said to me: “*I would like that my children speak so well Swedish that nobody could have a wild guess if they are children of Indian immigrants*”.

The father’s wish to make invisible the traces of Indian accent in the spoken register of his children paved the way for only-Swedish language learning when all attempts to transmit the heritage language initially failed and when the father realized the importance of cultural capital, in the Bourdieusian sense, that speaking a particular language or accent promoted by the State is regarded as prestigious and valorizing in the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1982). It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that Pierre Bourdieu, who invented the theory of capital linguistic as a part of “cultural capital”, was himself ashamed of his Bearnease accent (south-west of France) when he came to Paris to prepare for competitive exams. In a film documentary, he narrated that his task was to “correct” his accent by losing it (‘invisibilizing’ in this paper’s terms) in order to enter the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* of Paris (Carles, 2001).

In this context, it is worth highlighting the corporal punishment inflicted on a schoolboy for speaking his native Yoruba language instead of English at school in Nigeria, a country

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<sup>5</sup> On the theme of the Bihari accent, see the article entitled “Langues et accents: pouvoir politique et lute des castes” (Haque, 2018), which shows how the Bihari accent is considered backward and ridiculous on a national level, but how it has been promoted by a local politician in order to win over his electorate. It would be important to note also that the Bihari accent of Urdu was once considered somewhat prestigious in the nineteenth century, as we find testimonials from a writer of early nineteenth century (Insha, 1988). In this context, it shows how, with the passage of time, space regulates the prestige of language, taking into account socio-political factors and, perhaps, state ideologies, which can have an impact at a micro-level.

which is home to 500 languages but which made English the official language following British colonization.<sup>6</sup> The pupil in question declared that he had the ability to understand English, but that he could only express himself in Yoruba. According to this report, this pupil was not an isolated case, and despite the fact that the new Minister of Education has called for schooling in mother tongues for the first six months, many pupils are subjected to punishment if they fail to express themselves in English. Likewise, in India, I was myself reprimanded several times by my teachers when I did not speak English in place of my first language, Urdu, in a school where the instruction was in English.

Much the same held true for the Indian family settled in France, whose children had spent part of their schooling in India ([Haque], 2012). Speaking any language other than English was strictly forbidden, with a fine of 50 paise, equivalent to half an Indian rupee. During my schooldays, I observed that parents in India were, in general, supportive of these punishment measures to converse or employ only English because that “school” was the only environment where English could be used.

In his book, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*, wa Thiong’o laments the “structural inequalities” (Canagarajah, 2020) at the expense of his own mother tongue, Gikuyu, where English, an outsider language, prospered. Wa Thiong’o (1986:28) points out this hierarchical system of language practice in these words: “the abnormal is seen as normal and the normal is seen as abnormal”. In other words, if the mother tongue or first language is to be privileged and spoken within the family, it may be considered abnormal according to national language policy, echoed by family language policy if in accordance with the linguistic ideology of the state.

Likewise, privileging another language such as English or French to the detriment of one’s own mother tongue is considered normal in the name of “reinforcing social capital” (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). A study conducted on 120 participants from the South Asian Muslim community in Paris some fifteen years ago shows marked erosion of the mother tongue (Chatterji, 2007). A recent study has shown the same pattern of heritage language loss or shift toward maintenance of a prestigious language by a small group of Pakistani immigrants in France (Haque, 2022).

Thus, language invisibility has become a central phenomenon in a migratory context for immigrants. The upward shift from valueless language to high-value languages for the sake of assimilation into a host country comes at the risk of cutting all ties with the past, having a severe

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<sup>6</sup> Nigerian schools: Flogged for speaking my mother tongue - BBC News.

impact on the upbringing of the children – from a multilingual ideology to a monoglot ideology. However, resistance has been reported by Nandi et al. (2023) in the case of Spain, where grassroots-level language policies were successfully led by parents to maintain and promote Galician and Basque as heritage languages, despite their lower visibility in education and media in comparison with the hegemony of Castilian.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I gave importance to the historicization of sociolinguistic epistemologies and methodologies, which for Jan Blommaert was a pre-requisite for critique (Deumert, 2021). The present study was particularly designed to determine the effects of spatial concepts on the regulation of languages. An implication of this is the possibility of language inequality, seen mostly in an urban setting (generally homogenous and segregated, but also superdiverse in some areas), leading to the invisibility of many indigenous languages and other languages not supported under the structures of monoglot ideology endorsed by the State.

Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers some fresh insights into the FLP domain, which has taken a central position to understand the mechanism of language practices and attitudes at the micro-level. With over twenty years of in-depth studies in the field of FLP, researchers are exploring and unpacking all the complexities of language attitudes and practices under the lens of its commodification at macro level, on the one hand, and how languages are viewed through marginal and subaltern discourses in the context of migration, on the other hand. FLP is just one important new link in a long chain of spatial analysis in sociolinguistics that started with the works of Deprez, Spolsky, Fogle, Luykx and Curdt-Christiansen, to name a few. Progress in research in FLP as a domain of inquiry, expanding into new terrains, has provided the basis for more and more accurate empirical study.

One of the pressing concerns for modern sociolinguists (Jan Blommaert, Ben Rampton, etc.) was to combat language inequalities in our social structure, plagued by the phenomenon of “oligolinguism” (Blommaert, 2019). Language invisibility is one of the offshoots of language inequality. If state apparatus, such as school, media or other institutions, endorses the process of invisibilization of languages, the family serves as an agency for obscuring languages such as those for sacred use or their own heritage languages, besides their varied accents. A full discussion of language invisibility with empirical data lies beyond the scope of this study.



A plea for more interdisciplinary research in order to advance the knowledge of family language policy and contribute the new approaches and findings of theoretical-ideological critique would be welcome. More broadly, alternative proposals in FLP would be to renew and expand the initial approaches of linguistic implications in space and assessing its impact with new tools and variables so that new categories of analysis develop in FLP. Family has the potential to emerge as a center of resistance carving out its own space in a monoglot state. This depends, however, on the agencies within the family and whether language inequality and language invisibility matter to them or not. The family, however, is the space where the understanding of ideology is grounded and from where the repercussions of ideologies are projected in different spaces, bringing greater language inequalities or making the invisible visible.

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