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Intergenerational Language Transmission in Urban Spaces: Constructing Family Identities in Multilingual Contexts

ABSTRACT

In multilingual urban spaces, families actively navigate the use of dominant languages while preserving indigenous ones. Intergenerational language transmission becomes central to sustaining linguistic heritage and constructing family identities. This study investigates the strategies employed by parents and grandparents to promote language use at home and examines how language transmission influences family identities in multilingual urban settings. Grounded in Family Language Policy (FLP) (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), the study employed a qualitative ethnographic design involving twenty-four (24) participants from eight (8) families, four each, from Kumasi and Cape Coast. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify three-generation families with active intergenerational contact, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that parents and grandparents employ multiple strategies to promote the use of indigenous languages. These include the consistent use of indigenous languages at home, rewards, storytelling, and, notably, informal language classes organised by grandparents, which emerged as a significant finding. Additionally, three established family identities were identified: ethnic identity, elite bilingual identity, and mixed identity. Alongside these, two emergent identities were further identified: a conflicted bilingual identity and a historically rooted colonial-heritage identity. These emergent identities reflect psychological tensions, intergenerational concerns, and the lasting impact of colonial history on language practices. The study concludes that urban families serve as dynamic sites for both the preservation and transformation of linguistic heritage, striking a balance between educational priorities, cultural maintenance, and historical legacies.

Keywords: *Family Identity, Identity Construction, Intergenerational, Multilingualism, Urban Spaces*

Introduction

Multilingualism has emerged as a defining characteristic of modern urban life, influenced by globalization, migration, and increasing access to education (Antwi, 2022; Little, 2020; Seong & Luef, 2020). Urban spaces bring together various linguistic communities, where daily interactions render multilingualism not just a practical necessity but also a fundamental aspect of urban existence

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(Purkarthofer, 2020; Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018). In these multilingual settings, families play a crucial role in managing linguistic diversity (De Houwer, 2020; Lanza, 2021; Lanza & Gomes, 2020).

At the core of navigating the complexities of multiple languages lies the process of intergenerational language transmission, which involves passing language from one generation to the next (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020). This process is not automatic; rather, it is influenced by ideological factors (Albury, 2020; Nakamura, 2016). In many urban contexts, dominant languages are frequently associated with social mobility, success, and modernity (Asilevi, 2011; Edu-Buandoh, 2016). In contrast, indigenous and minority languages are perceived as outdated or lacking economic value (Antwi & Edu-Buandoh, 2025; Owu-Ewie & Edu-Buandoh, 2014). These perceptions create tensions within families regarding which language choice(s) to use at home (Karpava, 2021; Schalley & Eisenchlas, 2020).

Studies focusing on African contexts have largely investigated family language use through the lenses of domain distribution, language choice, and endangerment (Afrifa et al., 2019; Gabriel, 2024; Lawer, 2025; Ohene-Asante, 2021). Similarly, studies on Family Language Policy (FLP) have examined parental ideologies and language management strategies, often within migration and diasporic contexts (Fabusoro, 2022; Gabriel, 2024; Kilangi, 2024). While these studies shed light on how languages are maintained, shifted, or managed, they tend to prioritize concerns regarding language vitality rather than theorising intergenerational language transmission as an active process through which family identities are produced and negotiated within specific urban sociolinguistic ecologies. This theoretical gap is particularly pronounced in urban Ghanaian contexts, where colonial histories, entrenched hierarchies between English and indigenous languages, internal migration and aspirations for socioeconomic mobility shape multilingual repertoires. Moreover, much of the existing literature in Africa has primarily focused on nuclear family relations, especially parent-child relationships (Kilangi, 2024; Lawer, 2025; Mkrweqana, 2022), leaving the influential role of grandparents in shaping language ideologies, mediating language continuity, and legitimizing specific identity claims within the household comparatively underexamined. By emphasizing parents and grandparents, this study highlights the intergenerational negotiation of language practices and demonstrates how authority and lineage intersect in the construction of family identities.

Anchored in Curdt-Christiansen's (2009) Family Language Policy and Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity, this study reconceptualizes intergenerational language transmission in urban Ghana as an important mechanism for the construction of family identity. By examining the strategies employed by parents and grandparents to promote language use at home and analyzing how these practices contribute to the construction of family identities in multilingual urban environments, the study foregrounds the dimensions of identity construction within family language practices that

remain underexplored in existing African sociolinguistic studies. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a literature review that situates the study within existing research. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and finally, the conclusion.

Literature Review

This section examines the strategies that parents and grandparents employ to preserve indigenous languages within their homes. It also discusses the relationship between language use and the construction of family identity, highlighting how language practices contribute to a sense of belonging in multilingual urban spaces.

Family Language Ideologies and Intergenerational Strategies for Home Language Use

Language use within the family is neither neutral nor incidental; rather, it is shaped by deeply entrenched language ideologies (Albury, 2020). In multilingual urban spaces, these ideologies significantly influence the strategies families employ to pass down language through generations (Karpava, 2022; King et al., 2008). Parents and grandparents often operate from differing ideological perspectives, shaped by their generational backgrounds, life experiences, and educational levels. These perspectives inform explicit language management decisions and the more subtle practices embedded in daily interactions.

Brooksbank (2017) examined how parents in bilingual households utilize discourse strategies to promote the use of a minority language, Spanish, within an English-dominant context in the United States. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Language Socialization and Family Language Policy (FLP), the study centered on Lanza's (1997) parental discourse hypothesis, which posits that parents' reactions to their children's language choices play a crucial role in shaping future linguistic behaviors. The findings indicated that parents adopted a "minimal grasp" approach, in which they feign a misunderstanding of their child's use of the dominant language. This strategy proved most effective in eliciting responses in the minority language. However, it was employed less frequently than more permissive strategies, such as parental code-switching, which signalled acceptance of English and often undermined the maintenance of the minority language.

Similarly, Kilangi (2024) conducted a study examining family language ideologies and intergenerational strategies for home language use among inter-ethnic families in Magu, Tanzania. Grounded in the Family Language Policy (FLP), the study utilized a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. The findings indicated that few parents

encouraged their children to use ethnic greetings and occasionally spoke to them in their native languages. More importantly, many parents turned to grandparents and extended family members who lived in rural areas to provide their children with exposure to ethnic languages, viewing them as more proficient and better equipped to offer authentic language input.

Building on these insights, Fabusoro (2022) examined the bilingual and cultural literacy practices of Yoruba heritage families residing in the Midwestern United States. The study focused on parental strategies to promote the use of Yoruba in predominantly English-speaking environments. It was grounded in sociocultural theories, particularly Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the concept of scaffolding, as well as New Literacy Studies (NLS). The findings indicated that family history, including the parents' upbringing and their ideological commitment to the Yoruba language and culture, was a significant motivation for transmitting their indigenous language to their children. A notable strategy observed was the use of Yoruba-language media, such as movies and cartoons, to reinforce linguistic and cultural knowledge. The study concluded that early, consistent, and intentional exposure to the indigenous language and culture in the home environment significantly enhances children's bilingual development and cultural identity.

Narrowing the discussion to the Ghanaian context, Adjei and Ansah (2022) investigated how storytelling practices contributed to language socialization across generations and evaluated the factors that influence their persistence or decline. Using Khan's (2009) social aesthetics as a theoretical framework, the researchers collected data through recordings of storytelling sessions featuring elderly narrators (aged 50–90) and younger participants (aged 8–30). The findings revealed that while grandparents (or elders) employed storytelling as a purposeful, culturally embedded strategy to promote language use at home, parents have largely stepped back from actively engaging in language transmission practices through storytelling, viewing it as outdated. The study concluded that revitalizing storytelling as a culturally embedded, home-based strategy could be important in promoting intergenerational language transmission and preserving cultural identity within multilingual families.

Lawer (2025) also conducted a qualitative study to examine language use in households where parents have different native languages (L1). The study was grounded in Family Language Policy (FLP) and Sociolinguistic domains theory. The findings revealed that a notably effective strategy for supporting intergenerational language transmission was the consistent use of the mother's native language during daily interactions with the children. Conversely, families that primarily communicated in English, whether due to a lack of a shared indigenous language or the perceived neutrality and utility of English, encountered significant obstacles to L1 transmission.

The reviewed empirical studies collectively highlight how family language ideologies shape and

are shaped by intergenerational strategies for transmitting indigenous languages within multilingual households. The findings consistently indicate that while families often express a strong attachment to their indigenous languages, these ideological commitments do not always translate into structured or sustained language practices at home. The strategies employed range from deliberate efforts to more incidental approaches. A recurring theme across the studies is the challenge of maintaining consistent language use in the face of pressure from dominant languages, particularly English, as well as the routines of urban life. However, what remains insufficiently explored is the variety and nature of strategies that parents and grandparents in contemporary urban Ghanaian households actively or passively implement to encourage the use of indigenous languages at home, and how the demands of urban multilingual living shape these strategies.

Intergenerational Language Practices and Family Identity Construction in Multilingual Urban Spaces

In increasingly multilingual urban spaces, the family plays a pivotal role in not only transmitting and utilizing language but also in shaping and constructing shared identities across generations (Curdt-Christiansen & Huang, 2020; Ellis & Sims, 2022). Urban settings present challenges and opportunities for families navigating multiple languages (Purkarthofer, 2020). Consequently, how families engage with language at home is fundamental to the construction of family identity.

Tamleh et al. (2024) investigated how Iranian migrant families in the Netherlands use language practices and ideologies to preserve their heritage language, Persian, and how these practices intersect with identity. Grounded in Spolsky's (2004) Tripartite model of Language Policy, the study employed a qualitative approach; however, it did not detail the specific design used. The findings revealed that these families constructed a culturally rooted, emotionally connected, and heritage-affirming family identity that resists linguistic assimilation. Parents strongly associated the Persian language with cultural pride, emotional intimacy, and family cohesion. The authors concluded that through conscious language policies and daily practices, families can utilize language to construct, negotiate, and preserve family identity in the face of linguistic assimilation within multilingual urban settings.

Similarly, Yousef and Taylor-Leech (2018) conducted a qualitative, exploratory case study of Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers in Brisbane, Queensland. The study examined the challenges Arabic-speaking new-Australian mothers face in maintaining their heritage language. Utilizing Spolsky's (2004) Family Language Policy, the study involved four (4) well-educated Arab-Australian mothers. The findings revealed that mothers positioned Arabic as a symbol of cultural identity, using it to pass down values, traditions, and narratives from their countries of origin to their children.

Furthermore, the families constructed a religious identity, underscored by Arabic's intrinsic connection to Islam. For these mothers, the transmission of Arabic was crucial for equipping their children to participate in religious practices, understand Islamic texts, and uphold the moral values inherent in their faith. The authors concluded that intergenerational language transmission within the home not only supports the maintenance of indigenous language but also serves as a powerful mechanism for constructing complex family identities in multilingual urban environments.

In the South African context, Mkrweqana (2022) examined how multilingual families navigate language choices within their homes in urban settings. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, the study employed a qualitative approach informed by a social constructivist paradigm. The participants included two parents from different ethnic backgrounds who were either married or cohabiting and had at least two children in their family unit. The findings revealed a culturally rooted family identity, with parents emphasizing their responsibility to preserve their cultural heritage by speaking their mother tongues at home. The study found the emergence of a socially adaptive family identity as families balanced the preservation of their heritage with pragmatic adaptations.

In Ghana, Nutakor and Amfo (2018) explored children's language socialization practices, focusing on compound houses in three urban multilingual suburbs of Accra. Grounded in the Ethnography of Communication and the Community of Practice framework, the study gathered data from fifty (50) purposively selected participants, 30 children and 20 adults, from six compound households. The findings revealed that while families had access to, and often valued, their ethnic languages, daily language use was primarily shaped by dominant urban languages. Consequently, children were socialized into linguistic patterns that reflected broader urban norms rather than their ancestral heritage, leading to the construction of an urban family identity that prioritized adaptability and alignment with mainstream linguistic practices. Furthermore, the study found that many families adopted an assimilative identity, either consciously or unconsciously, by downplaying the transmission of indigenous languages in favour of more dominant ones. Nutakor and Amfo (2018) concluded that in multilingual urban contexts, language transmission within the family does not merely preserve communication; it fundamentally constructs or even displaces family identity in response to the pressures and realities of urban multilingual life.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that intergenerational language practices in multilingual urban settings are key mechanisms for constructing and negotiating family identities. However, significant analytical and generational limitations remain. Existing studies primarily highlight parents, especially mothers, as the main agents of family language policy, thereby sidelining the pivotal role of grandparents in influencing intergenerational language transmission and identity construction. This focus on the nuclear family obscures the collaborative nature of identity construction that occurs across

extended kin networks, particularly in contexts where grandparents serve as cultural custodians and linguistic authorities. Additionally, while studies in urban Ghana highlight language socialisation patterns, they mainly emphasise children's linguistic outcomes without exploring how everyday intra-family language practices contribute to the construction of family identities across generations within the urban home. As a result, existing studies provide only an understanding of how multilingual urban families create continuity, belonging, and cultural meaning through language. To address this gap, further empirical research is needed to investigate how both parents and grandparents influence family identities through language transmission and usage in multilingual urban contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Family Language Policy (FLP) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction.

This study draws on Family Language Policy (FLP), as developed by Curdt-Christiansen (2009). FLP is based on the premise that language practices within familial settings are neither random nor incidental; rather, they are shaped by ideologies, conscious decisions, and the broader sociocultural context in which the family exists (Nakamura, 2016). It positions the home as a site for language planning, where beliefs about language intersect with everyday practices and efforts to manage language transmission across generations. At the core of FLP are three interrelated components: language beliefs, language practices, and language management. Language beliefs encompass the ideologies and value systems underpinning family attitudes toward different languages. Language practices pertain to the actual use of language in daily interactions among family members, shaped by purpose, setting, and relational dynamics. Language management involves the intentional strategies implemented to influence these practices, such as encouraging the use of an indigenous language, restricting the use of dominant or foreign languages, or establishing routines that foster bilingual or multilingual proficiency. Although language beliefs and practices are recognized as interconnected, they are not the main focus. This study focuses on language management, the deliberate strategies utilized by parents and grandparents to shape language use in urban households.

The study also integrates the Sociocultural Theory of Identity Construction as articulated by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). This theory provides a discursive and interactional perspective on identity, viewing it not as a fixed or inherent quality but as an emergent, context-dependent, and socially constructed phenomenon. Therefore, identity is generated within linguistic interactions and is best understood as the social positioning of oneself and others. The theory is structured around five core principles. The first principle, emergence, suggests that identity does not pre-exist but is dynamically

constructed through discourse. The second principle, positionality, examines how speakers adopt or are ascribed specific social roles and how these roles influence the construction of identity during interactions. The third principle, indexicality, refers to how linguistic choices signify social meanings and categories. The fourth principle, relationality, posits that identity is constructed through intersubjective relations. These relations are fluid and are tactically negotiated throughout interactions. Lastly, the principle of partialness acknowledges that identity is never entirely knowable or coherent. It is perpetually incomplete, shaped by the specific interactional context, institutional power, and broader ideological influences.

Taken together, Family Language Policy (FLP) accounts for the deliberate language management strategies families employ. At the same time, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity explains how these linguistic choices simultaneously construct family identities.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research was conducted in two urban centers in Ghana, Kumasi and Cape Coast, each chosen for its unique yet complementary multilingual and sociocultural characteristics. A total of eight (8) families participated in the study, with four (4) families selected from each city. Given the predominance of nuclear family structures in urban Ghana, purposive sampling was employed to identify initial families comprising three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) who either cohabited or maintained regular intergenerational contact. To locate additional families with active grandparental involvement, which is relatively uncommon in urban settings, snowball sampling was employed, with initial participants referring other eligible families. In total, twenty-four (24) participants were involved, typically consisting of one grandparent, one parent, and one child from each family. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. These interviews were complemented by participant observation in family homes (Asare-Amoah & Eshun, 2015). To minimize the observer's paradox, researchers made repeated visits and engaged in prolonged interaction to build rapport and foster a sense of familiarity. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive approach where initial codes emerged directly from the data through close and repeated readings of interview transcripts and field notes. The coding process was iterative, progressing from preliminary open coding to the refinement and clustering of related codes into broader thematic categories. As patterns became more salient across different families and generational groups, themes were reviewed, compared, and adjusted to ensure both internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness. The subsequent interpretation of these themes was guided by Family Language Policy (FLP) and the Sociocultural Theory of Identity. Data from interviews and observations were

triangulated to enhance trustworthiness and analytical rigour, allowing emerging interpretations to be examined across multiple data sources and interactional contexts. Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memo-writing was maintained to document interpretive decisions and monitor potential researcher bias. Member checking was employed to verify and refine emerging themes by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants and incorporating their feedback where appropriate. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the masking of identifying information, and all participants provided informed consent before their involvement.

The following research questions guided the study.

- a. What strategies do parents and grandparents employ to promote language use at home?
- b. How does language transmission and use within the family construct family identities in multilingual urban spaces?

Research Findings and Discussion

This section of the study answers the main research questions posed.

What strategies do parents and grandparents employ to promote language use at home?

In urban spaces in Ghana, the home plays a crucial role in both the transmission and marginalization of languages. Utilizing the Family Language Policy framework (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009), this analysis examines language management by exploring the intentional strategies that parents and grandparents implement to promote the use of indigenous languages within the household.

Data from intergenerational urban households in Cape Coast and Kumasi indicate that families continue to transmit both indigenous Ghanaian languages, such as Fante, Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, and Ga, alongside English, which serves as a second and official language. However, the data highlight a notable contrast in how these languages are promoted within the home. While English tends to be used more incidentally rather than consciously, it is often reinforced through casual verbal praise and nonverbal encouragement. Parents and grandparents do not deliberately promote English. In contrast, the promotion of indigenous languages is markedly more intentional and structured. Parents and grandparents implement strategies to encourage the use of indigenous languages, including consistently speaking these languages at home, offering rewards, and sharing folktales.

Excerpt 1

I insist that they speak Twi (Asante). I want them to know how to speak our local language. (KF1P)

Excerpt 2

My grandma is a Ga; she speaks only Ga at home to me. She always wants me to speak Ga. (KF3C)

Excerpt 3

Since their parents are Fantes and I am also a Fante, I want them (grandchildren) to speak Fante well. (CF2G)

Excerpt 4

We speak only Akuapem-Twi at home. My children, too. It is their father's language, and that's what they speak to communicate with their grandparents. (KF2P)

Excerpt 5

The trend now is English; if you don't teach them (children) well, they can't communicate in it. So, that's what I speak with them about at home. These days, everybody's child is speaking English ... (CF1P)

The data indicate that both indigenous Ghanaian languages and English are being transmitted within intergenerational urban households. Dialects of Akan, such as Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, Fante, and Ga (a non-Akan dialect), are utilized in daily family interactions, showcasing a continued commitment to preserving these indigenous languages across generations. English is also present in the data, primarily as a response to societal expectations and educational demands.

With the linguistic diversity within households established, the data highlight a significant distinction in how languages are promoted across intergenerational urban families. While English is indeed present, it is often encouraged through casual praise and non-verbal gestures, rather than through structured or intentional strategies. One parent expresses this sentiment, noting:

Excerpt 6

When my boy speaks English, I feel proud as a mother. Sometimes, I tell him, "Well done," to encourage him. (KF4P)

Similarly, a grandparent shared:

Excerpt 7

Today, English is everywhere, and I want my grandchild to excel as well. I clap for him whenever he says a new word so that he can learn more. (KF4G)

The excerpts demonstrate that, while English is acknowledged and frequently used in urban homes, its reinforcement typically occurs incidentally. This phenomenon can be attributed to the societal dominance of the English language, which lessens the need for intentional efforts to promote its use. This is consistent with Lising's (2022) observation that the pervasive presence and perceived necessity of English often prompt families to adopt home-language practices that favour English, with minimal strategic effort.

In contrast, the transmission of indigenous languages is more intentional and supported by a variety of deliberate strategies employed by both parents and grandparents. Many actively choose to communicate with their children and grandchildren in the indigenous language. As one grandmother remarked,

Excerpt 8

*I encourage them (grandchildren) to speak Akuapem Twi by speaking it myself with them.
As they say, Leadership by example. (KF2G)*

A father similarly noted,

Excerpt 9

I intentionally speak Akuapem Twi with them so they can learn it. If I don't do that, they will lose it. (KF2P)

A child's account confirmed this practice:

Excerpt 10

My grandmother and my father can speak English, but they act as if they can't. They always speak Akuapem-Twi at home. (KF2C)

These excerpts highlight the consistent use of indigenous languages by both parents and grandparents, showcasing a deliberate effort to preserve them within the urban household. This contrasts with Kilangi's (2024) study, which found that only a few parents occasionally spoke to their children in their native languages.

Another intentional strategy employed by parents and grandparents involves using incentives to promote the use and acquisition of indigenous languages. A mother noted,

Excerpt 11

I told Kweku that if he passes the BECE Fante, I will give him something. And I have told her (my daughter) that if she passes Fante in her exams, we will go to KFC or Pizzaman. (CF1P)

A grandmother remarked;

Excerpt 12

I buy gifts for my grandchildren when they tell me they passed their exams, especially the Fante exams. (CF3G)

A child also confirmed this, stating,

Excerpt 13

... my grandma rewards me for speaking Fante. (CF1C)

These excerpts illustrate how positive reinforcement, through gifts, treats, or outings, promotes the use and learning of indigenous languages. Rewards are directly linked to performance in

indigenous language exams, not solely to demonstrate academic capability, but rather to serve as evidence that the child is sincerely engaging with and learning the language. This implies that families perceive these exams as an effective means of monitoring and validating their children's acquisition of indigenous languages (Alfat & Que, 2022).

Another deliberate strategy for promoting indigenous languages is storytelling. A grandmother articulated,

Excerpt 14

I tell my grandchildren stories in Akuapem Twi. You know, as I narrate the story to them, there are songs I sing too, and I teach them those songs too.

(KF2G)

Another grandmother echoed this practice, saying,

Excerpt 15

When they (grandchildren) are home, especially on Saturdays, I tell them stories, and they like them.

(CF1G)

Notably, the data suggest that grandparents are the primary storytellers. A child confirmed this, saying,

Excerpt 16

... It is my grandma who always tells us stories in Akuapem Twi.

(KF2C)

A mother similarly expressed her sentiment,

Excerpt 17

Their grandmother tells them stories in the local language. As for that, I must give her credit.

(CF3P)

These excerpts illustrate how generational roles within the family influence the transmission of language. Grandparents, often seen as guardians of tradition, tend to assume a greater responsibility and have more time to engage in storytelling. In contrast, parents appear to be largely absent from this role, as indicated by the data. This observation supports Adjei and Ansah's (2022) assertion that older generations are more actively engaged in indigenous storytelling traditions, thereby fostering the continuation of indigenous languages. Meanwhile, younger generations, particularly parents in this context, tend to withdraw from such practices.

In addition to the commonly employed strategies, a significant finding of the study highlights the proactive involvement of older generations, particularly grandparents, in organizing informal indigenous language classes during weekends and school vacations. This was illustrated by a grandmother who expressed:

Excerpt 18

I teach them. We have a little school every Saturday, and when they vacate. I teach them the names of the days, the week, months, and the year. We also learn some songs, Fante songs. (CF1G)

A mother corroborated this practice,

Excerpt 19

There has been a significant improvement in their Fante speaking because Grandma took it upon herself to teach them. On Saturdays, they will do Fante school, so grandma will gather them and teach them.

(CF1P)

A child further confirmed,

Excerpt 20

... my grandma teaches us Fante every Saturday.

(CF1C)

These excerpts collectively emphasize the central role of grandparents, especially grandmothers, in the transmission of indigenous languages. The structured and routine nature of these Saturday and vacation classes illustrates that intergenerational language transmission is not merely incidental, but rather a deliberate and organized practice. Furthermore, the corroboration from both parents and children highlights the perceived effectiveness of this approach in improving children's proficiency in indigenous languages.

How does language transmission and use within the family construct family identities in multilingual urban spaces?

In multilingual urban contexts, family language practices extend beyond mere communication; they operate as interactional sites where identities emerge, are negotiated, and are continually reshaped (Ellis & Sims, 2022). Thus, language transmission is pivotal in shaping how families perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) Sociocultural theory of identity, the data reveal that language practices within families construct analytically distinguishable identities such as ethnic, elite, and mixed identities. The identity categories are constructs derived from patterned language orientations across families. The following excerpts highlight these constructions of identities.

Excerpt 21

I am a retired teacher, but I don't encourage the children to speak English at home. ... we speak Twi, and I feel proud of my language. If you lose your language, you lose your culture. (KF3G)

Excerpt 22

Since their parents are Fante, and I am also a Fante, I want all of us to speak Fante well; that's our identity. (CF2G)

Excerpt 23

I am proud to be a Fante; that is my identity. I was in Koforidua the last time, my tone alone let them know that I am a Fante. So, when I speak, ... they will call me Maame Fante. (CF3P)

Excerpt 24

I think we have to pass on what we have to our younger generations. ... We have to recognise ourselves as Asantes. That is who we are. (KF1P)

The excerpts highlight the construction of ethnic identity. The use and transmission of indigenous languages serve as key indicators of belonging and cultural continuity. This identity is constructed through everyday interactions and is indexically tied to group affiliation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Within urban households, the sustained use of indigenous languages strengthens relational bonds within both familial and communal contexts. Consequently, language serves as a tangible index of identity, allowing others to recognize a speaker's ethnic background. This illustrates how multilingual families in the competitive linguistic environment of urban Ghana actively promote indigenous languages as essential cultural symbols and strategic resources, essential for maintaining group visibility and cohesion (Tamleh et al., 2024).

The utilization and transmission of language within urban familial contexts serve as indicators of aspirations related to social status and educational attainment. Families strategically adopt the English language to enhance their social positioning. The data illustrates this.

Excerpt 25

English is what we speak at home. My neighbours in the next house see us as educated, and when they talk to us, I can see that they respect us. (KF3P)

Excerpt 26

... because of our environment, brɔfosɛm nkoaa (only English). We stay here with some lecturers, and because they are lecturers, they don't want to speak Fante. (CF2P)

Excerpt 27

As educated as I am, I can't teach my children the local language, for them to fail at school. English is what will take them far ... (CF1P)

Excerpt 28

They go to school and get little knowledge, and when they get home, it is Fante, Fante, Fante. We decided to stop that and turn to English so they can be perfect in English, which is what will ensure they do well.

(CF3P)

The excerpts illustrate the construction of an elite identity, where English functions as both a practical and symbolic resource for social positioning. Urban families intentionally adopt English as a means of signaling their membership in an educated or upwardly mobile social group. This deliberate choice reflects Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principle of positionality, through which speakers align themselves with socially valued attributes such as prestige, competence, and respectability. In multilingual urban contexts, English also carries significant indexical meanings, often indexing modernity, educational attainment, and socio-economic aspirations. This pattern supports the argument that socially adaptive family identities are shaped by the unique challenges and opportunities characteristic of urban multilingual environments (Mkrweqana, 2022).

The data further underscore the emergence of a mixed identity, as urban families blend English with indigenous languages in their daily interactions. This mixed identity is reflected in their code-switching practices and the fluidity with which they navigate different linguistic repertoires. It aligns with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) concept of partialness, in which identities are fluid, context-dependent, and never entirely knowable or coherent. The families' code-switching demonstrates how linguistic forms are strategically employed to balance cultural preservation with the practical demands of communication in a multilingual urban setting, as evidenced by the excerpts. This contrasts sharply with the assimilative trends noted by Nutakor and Amfo (2018), where urban families often reduce their use of indigenous languages in favor of dominant ones. Mixed identities are thus characterized by additive, relatively stable bilingual positioning, in which families intentionally integrate English and indigenous languages without expressing ideological tension or regret. The excerpts illustrate this.

Excerpt 29

You know we, the Fantes, speak English Fante, and so it is a mixed identity. So, we are English Fante if there is something like that.

(CF1P)

Excerpt 30

I switch from Fante to English if I want to tell her (my sister) something. Sometimes, too, if I am looking for a Fante word but I don't remember, I say it in English.

(CF1C)

Excerpt 31

The truth is that I cannot speak Twi throughout with you without mixing English words. My Twi is not too pure like my mother's.

(KF2P)

Excerpt 32

As for my husband and me, we have decided since day one that we will use both English and Twi at home. So, we blend both when speaking to our children. English is important, and Twi is important too.

(KF3P)

A significant finding from the data is the emergence of conflicted bilingual identities among urban families. Unlike the mixed identities described earlier, which reflect stable, additive bilingual integration, conflicted bilingual identities are marked by expressed ambivalence, guilt, and uncertainty about language priorities and the long-term intergenerational consequences. The excerpts provided further exemplify these tensions.

Excerpt 33

Now, ... even though I want them (children) to learn and speak English because they need it at school, I also want them to speak Fante because they study it at school and must pass it too. So, now I feel guilty and confused about pushing English too much.

(CF1P)

Excerpt 34

Nowadays, even when I want to speak Twi, I forget myself, and I speak English. I am getting confused myself.

(KF2P)

Excerpt 35

What troubles me is which of the two languages I want them (children) to speak. ..., because of too much English, my Twi is not good. It worries me too that if my children speak a lot of English, then they will end up like me.

(KF3P)

These excerpts demonstrate that families face competing priorities regarding language use and transmission. They are torn between the educational and social benefits of English and the cultural value of indigenous languages. The tension between promoting English for academic success and preserving indigenous languages for cultural continuity gives rise to uncertainty, guilt, and anxiety, particularly concerning the implications for future generations. This struggle highlights how hierarchical language ideologies and intergenerational concerns in urban families shape bilingual identities.

An additional finding is the construction of a historically rooted colonial heritage identity. Whereas mixed identities reflect contemporary and intentional blending of linguistic repertoires, the historically rooted colonial-heritage identity frames bilingualism as inherited, naturalized, and historically sedimented rather than strategically chosen. Thus, urban families regard English as an ingrained linguistic habit influenced by the experiences of preceding generations. English is presented as an almost inevitable aspect of daily communication, highlighting inherited linguistic patterns rather than deliberate contemporary blending or integration. The following excerpts illustrate this further.

Excerpt 36

You see, we, the Fantes, were trained by our colonial masters, so there is no way you can speak without speaking part of the English language. It has become part of us.

(CF2G)

Excerpt 37

... Fantes and English are like five and six. You know our history. English is part of our language.

(CF1P)

Conclusion

This study examined the strategies employed by urban families to promote language use at home and how language transmission influences family identities within multilingual urban spaces. The findings indicate that parents and grandparents employ multiple strategies to promote the use of indigenous languages. These include consistent language use at home, rewards, storytelling, and, notably, informal language classes organized by grandparents, which emerges as a significant finding. Furthermore, the study identified three established identities: ethnic identity, elite bilingual identity, and mixed identity, alongside two emergent identities: conflicted bilingual identity and historically rooted colonial-heritage identity. These emergent identities reflect both psychological tensions and historical influences on language use. The findings highlight the complexity of linguistic life in urban Ghana, where educational priorities, historical legacies, and intergenerational aspirations shape language practices. Thus, the family unit emerges as a dynamic site for preserving and transforming linguistic heritage. Practically, these findings indicate a need for language policies and community initiatives that promote competence in indigenous languages alongside English, while also recognizing the importance of diverse bilingual identities for cultural sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is grounded in two urban centers in Ghana (Kumasi and Cape Coast) and involves eight families, which limits its statistical representativeness. As a qualitative inquiry, the focus was on

analysis rather than population generalizing. Nonetheless, the transferability of the findings hinges on the similarities in sociolinguistic, educational, and cultural conditions across urban contexts. Future research could explore language transmission and identity construction in rural Ghanaian settings, incorporate larger and more ethnolinguistically diverse samples, or adopt longitudinal designs to investigate how intergenerational language practices evolve.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Generative AI tools were employed exclusively for language editing, grammatical refinement, and enhanced readability. The authors bear full responsibility for all intellectual content, including study design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Interview Guide: Grandparents

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you speak fluently?
2. Which languages do you use with your children? With your grandchildren?
3. Are there any languages you feel are important to pass on to younger generations? Why?

B. Strategies for Promoting Language Use

4. How do you encourage your grandchildren to speak or understand your language(s)?
5. Do you tell stories, sing, or do activities in your language with them?
6. Are there moments when you insist on using your language at home? Why?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. How important is it to you that your language is spoken in your family?
8. Do you feel your language helps connect the family across generations?
9. Have the ways your family uses language changed over time? What do you think caused these changes?

Appendix B- Interview Guide: Parents

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you and your partner speak at home?
2. What languages do your children speak or understand?
3. Are there languages you actively try to pass on to your children? Why?

B. Strategies for Promoting Language Use

4. What do you do to encourage your children to speak your language(s)?
5. Do you use different languages with different family members or in different situations? Can you give examples?
6. How do grandparents contribute to language learning or use in the family?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. Do you feel that the languages your family speaks reflect who you are as a family?
8. Have you had to make decisions or compromises about which languages to use at home?
9. How does living in a multilingual city like Kumasi or Cape Coast influence your family's language practices?

Appendix C- Interview Guide: Children (15 years and above)

A. Language Transmission

1. What languages do you speak and understand?
2. Which languages do you speak with your parents? With your grandparents?
3. Are there any languages your family encourages you to speak? Why do you think that is?

B. Strategies and Language Practice

4. Do your parents or grandparents try to get you to speak certain languages more often?
How do they do that?
5. Can you give an example of a situation where you had to switch languages at home?
Why?
6. What kinds of things do you do in different languages at home (e.g., jokes, stories, music, or prayers)?

C. Language and Family Identity

7. Do you feel your language use says something about who you are or who your family is?
8. Are there times when language makes you feel closer or more distant from family members?
9. How do you think living in a city with many languages affects the way your family uses language?