

LANGUAGE ATTITUDE AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIOUR:
THE IMPACT OF WHICH IS STRONGER?
STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION SITUATION
AND LINKS WITH EMIGRATION

Summary

Language attitudes that are considered to be an important factor in language maintenance as they impact language behaviour. The paper analyses language attitudes in a particular setting of international adoption and this gives an opportunity to separate the cognitive and affective components of language attitudes from the behavioural component as the adoptive parents do not know the mother-tongue of their children. The data is taken from a sociolinguistic survey to the adoptive Italian parents of Lithuanian children. The respondents are 74 families and the information provided concerns 117 children adopted from Lithuania at different ages, the great majority over the age of 5, therefore with fully developed first language skills, about half also literate in their L1. Two thirds of the children were adopted together with at least one sibling.

The paper analyses the declared language attitudes, the language practices (knowledge and use of foreign languages) of the adoptive parents and the relation to efforts of maintaining some kind of link to Lithuanian. The results show that families where at least one parent knows and uses at least one foreign language are more likely to take initiative in maintaining links. However, in the situation of adoption, i. e. children with experience of abandonment trauma, this is sometimes postponed due to psychological well-being of the child.

Another aspect that is considered is the maintenance of Lithuanian in groups of siblings. The data shows that only groups of three siblings of older age (about 10 years old) maintain

Lithuanian speaking among themselves for longer than a couple of months after the arrival to the country of the new life. In this case when no interlocutors in the mother-tongue are available for the children within the family, the adoptive parents put other efforts to maintain at least some links. For instance, contacting local Lithuanian communities or at least talking to the children about Lithuania. The open questions of the survey reveal greatly positive attitudes of the adoptive parents towards Lithuania, they consider this country to be of great importance in their lives via adoption.

Despite the general very positive language attitudes of the adoptive parents both towards languages in general and towards Lithuanian and Lithuania as they hold it particularly dear, the children do not maintain the Lithuanian language. This shows in a very evident way how the cognitive and affective components of language attitudes, no matter how strong and positive they might be, when separated from the behavioural component, i. e. not speaking the language to the children, result in complete language loss within a such short period of time as one year. The situations described have resemblance with some language situations in case of emigration, a topic of great importance for Lithuanians in the recent decades, baring exactly this difference that the emigrated Lithuanian parents do have the ability to speak their mother-tongue to the children but sometimes are reluctant to do so or give up trying.

KEYWORDS: language attitudes, maintenance of Lithuanian, international adoption, language behaviour.

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