



Sustaining Cultural Identity through Intergenerational Language Transmission

Dr. V. Vennila¹ & Manoj Prabhakar. S²

¹Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Vels Institute of Science
Technology and Advanced Studies, Pallavaram, Chennai, India



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Abstract

Language is one of the most powerful carriers of cultural identity and collective memory. It reflects the historical experiences, social values, and traditional knowledge systems of the communities that speak it. The continuity of language largely depends on intergenerational transmission, a process through which linguistic knowledge is passed from elders to younger members of society through everyday communication and cultural practices. In recent decades, however, the increasing dominance of global languages, migration, urbanization, and changing educational priorities have affected the sustainability of many heritage languages. When younger generations gradually adopt socially dominant languages for academic and professional advancement, the use of ancestral languages often declines within families and communities.

This article explores the relationship between intergenerational language transmission and cultural resilience from a sociolinguistic perspective. It examines the role of families, community institutions, and educational systems in maintaining linguistic heritage. The paper also considers how digital technologies and contemporary media platforms can contribute to language revitalization by creating new spaces for cultural engagement. The discussion argues that sustaining heritage languages across generations is essential not only for linguistic diversity but also for preserving the cultural identity of communities in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Intergenerational Language Transmission, Cultural Identity, Language Maintenance, Cultural Resilience, Heritage Language, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Language plays a central role in shaping human identity and cultural belonging. It is through language that individuals express their thoughts, emotions, and social relationships. More importantly, language serves as a repository of collective knowledge, preserving the traditions, beliefs, and historical experiences of a community. Every language embodies a unique worldview, reflecting the ways in

which people interpret their environment and organize their social life. One of the most important mechanisms that ensures the survival of a language is intergenerational transmission. This process occurs when parents, grandparents, and other elders pass their language to younger members of the community through everyday interactions. Such transmission often takes place in informal contexts such as family conversations, storytelling sessions, traditional songs,



and cultural ceremonies. Through these practices, children not only acquire linguistic competence but also develop an understanding of their cultural heritage.

In contemporary societies, however, the process of language transmission is increasingly influenced by social and economic transformations. Globalization has intensified contact between cultures and languages, often leading to the dominance of widely used languages in education, employment, and digital communication. As a result, many families encourage their children to prioritize these languages for future opportunities. While this shift may provide certain advantages, it can also weaken the transmission of heritage languages within households. The gradual decline of heritage languages has significant cultural implications. When languages disappear, the cultural knowledge embedded within them may also fade. Therefore, understanding how languages are transmitted across generations is essential for preserving linguistic diversity and sustaining cultural identity.

Literature Review

Research on heritage language transmission has expanded significantly in recent years, particularly within sociolinguistics and language policy studies. Scholars have consistently emphasized that intergenerational language transmission within the family is the most critical factor determining whether a language survives or declines. A recent bibliometric review of research on heritage language transmission highlights the growing scholarly focus on family language policies and sociocultural dynamics in maintaining linguistic heritage across generations.

Several studies have shown that parental language practices strongly influence children's language preferences and linguistic identity. For example, research conducted in multilingual communities in Indonesia demonstrates that parents often encourage children to adopt the dominant national language to improve academic success and social mobility. However, this shift may occur at the cost of heritage language use within the home environment.

Other studies examining multilingual families reveal that language transmission often weakens across generations. Evidence from Southeast Asian Chinese communities shows a pattern in which first-generation speakers maintain the heritage language, second-generation members become bilingual, and third-generation individuals increasingly adopt the dominant societal language.

Recent linguistic research also highlights the phenomenon of intergenerational language attrition, where heritage speakers gradually lose proficiency in their ancestral language due to reduced exposure and inconsistent input. Such patterns are particularly common in migrant communities where dominant languages shape educational and professional opportunities.

Language and Cultural Identity

The relationship between language and culture has long been recognized in sociolinguistic research. Language does not merely function as a tool for communication; it also shapes how individuals perceive their social and cultural environment. Cultural traditions, moral values, and historical narratives are often expressed through linguistic forms that carry deep symbolic meaning. Within many communities, oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving cultural knowledge. Stories, proverbs, and songs transmitted through language provide insights into the beliefs and practices of earlier generations. These forms of expression also reinforce a sense of belonging among community members. When individuals share a common language, they often feel connected to a collective history and cultural identity.

The loss of language can therefore lead to a form of cultural disconnection. When younger generations are unable to understand the language of their ancestors, they may lose access to traditional knowledge and cultural practices. Over time, this can weaken the cultural cohesion of communities.

Intergenerational Language Transmission

Intergenerational language transmission refers to the process by which languages are passed from one generation to the next within families and



communities. Sociolinguists have widely acknowledged that this process is the most effective means of maintaining linguistic vitality. When children grow up hearing and speaking their heritage language at home, they are more likely to retain fluency and transmit it further to future generations. The family environment plays a particularly important role in this process. Children acquire language primarily through interaction with caregivers during early childhood. Parents who consistently use their heritage language in daily communication create opportunities for natural language acquisition. In many cultures, grandparents also play a significant role in this transmission by sharing stories and traditional knowledge with younger members of the family.

Community networks further support language transmission by providing spaces where the heritage language can be actively used. Cultural festivals, religious gatherings, and local social events often encourage collective participation in traditional practices. These activities reinforce the value of linguistic heritage and promote a sense of cultural continuity.

Challenges to Language Transmission

Despite its importance, intergenerational language transmission faces several challenges in modern societies. One of the most significant factors influencing language shift is globalization. As communication networks expand and international mobility increases, certain languages gain greater social prestige and economic value. Families may therefore encourage their children to adopt these languages to improve educational and career prospects. Migration and urbanization also contribute to changes in language practices. When individuals move from rural communities to urban environments, they often encounter multilingual settings where dominant languages are necessary for daily interaction. In such contexts, heritage languages may gradually lose their functional relevance.

Educational policies can further influence language use. In many countries, school curricula prioritize national or international languages, leaving

limited space for minority languages. Students who spend most of their academic life using dominant languages may gradually reduce their use of their heritage language. Media and technology also shape linguistic preferences. Global entertainment industries produce content primarily in widely spoken languages, which influences the language choices of younger audiences. Over time, this exposure may contribute to the decline of local languages in everyday communication.

Cultural Resilience and Language Preservation

Cultural resilience refers to the ability of communities to sustain their traditions and identity despite social and economic changes. Language plays a crucial role in this process because it carries the cultural knowledge that defines a community's identity. Communities that actively maintain their heritage languages often demonstrate strong cultural resilience. Language enables individuals to connect with their cultural roots while adapting to contemporary circumstances. For example, many communities continue to use traditional languages in rituals, ceremonies, and cultural events even when dominant languages are used in formal settings. Preserving linguistic diversity also contributes to broader cultural sustainability. Languages contain unique knowledge systems related to history, environment, and social organization. Protecting these languages ensures that valuable cultural insights remain accessible to future generations.

Technology and Language Revitalization

While modernization has contributed to the decline of many languages, technological innovation also offers new opportunities for language preservation. Digital platforms have created spaces where communities can document and share their linguistic heritage. Social media platforms allow speakers of minority languages to communicate with wider audiences and promote cultural awareness. Online communities provide opportunities for younger generations to practice their heritage language in informal contexts. Mobile applications and digital learning resources also support language education by making linguistic



materials accessible to a broader audience. Digital documentation projects have become particularly valuable for preserving endangered languages. Linguists and community members can record oral narratives, vocabulary, and grammatical structures, creating archives that safeguard linguistic knowledge for future generations.

Conclusion

Intergenerational language transmission remains one of the most effective ways to preserve linguistic diversity and cultural identity. When languages are actively used within families and communities, they continue to function as living expressions of cultural heritage. However, the pressures of globalization, migration, and educational priorities have made this process increasingly fragile in many societies. Strengthening language transmission requires collaborative efforts from families, educators, and policymakers. Encouraging the use of heritage languages at home, incorporating them into educational programs, and promoting community-based cultural activities can help sustain linguistic traditions.

At the same time, modern technology offers innovative possibilities for language revitalization. Digital platforms can support the documentation and dissemination of linguistic knowledge, ensuring that heritage languages remain relevant in contemporary contexts. Ultimately, preserving languages across generations is not only a linguistic concern but also a cultural responsibility. By maintaining linguistic heritage, communities protect the traditions, memories, and identities that define their place in the world.

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