4 Harmonious Bilingualism: Well-being for families in bilingual settings

1 Introduction

1.1 Harmonious Bilingual Development/Harmonious Bilingualism

Home language maintenance, the main topic of this handbook, is a very emotional subject for many parents raising children in bilingual settings. As reviewed in De Houwer (2017), parents feel upset and ashamed when their children do not speak the language that the parents speak to them. On the other hand, growing up in a bilingual setting can lead young children to experience acute feelings of distress (first documented by Dahoun 1995). A bilingual situation can thus influence subjective well-being.

When subjective well-being is not negatively affected by factors relating to a bilingual setting, we can speak of Harmonious Bilingualism. This is an expansion on the notion of Harmonious Bilingual Development proposed earlier in De Houwer (2006, 2015). Harmonious Bilingual Development applies when families with young children in a language contact setting do not generally experience any problems because of that bilingual situation, or have a positive subjective experience with bilingualism. The notion of Harmonious Bilingualism increases the scope to families with children beyond the early childhood stage. Harmonious Bilingualism, then, is the more encompassing term to refer to a subjectively neutral or positive experience that members of a family in a bilingual setting have with aspects of that setting. The counterpart of Harmonious Bilingualism is conflictive bilingualism. Both Harmonious Bilingualism and conflictive bilingualism form two ends of a continuum.

Several studies have specifically assessed aspects of subjective well-being in bilingual situations. Others have revealed aspects of such subjective well-being (or the lack of it) more implicitly. This chapter aims to bring some of these studies together and consider how they contribute to a better understanding of Harmonious Bilingualism and the factors supporting it. First, however, I discuss the notion of subjective well-being.

1.2 Subjective well-being and the role of language

Subjective well-being is a multidimensional concept referring to “a broad category of phenomena that includes people’s emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction” (Diener et al. 1999: 277). While its precise
conceptualization is not clear, the relevant literature tends to define subjective well-being in terms of “the experience of pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, and life satisfaction” (Tov 2018: 3).

Subjective well-being (henceforth: well-being) is inextricably linked with overall physical and mental health, temperament, and personality (Lansford 2018). As reviewed in Diener, Oishi, and Tay (2018), there are many other factors that affect well-being, such as socio-economic status, the political system people live in, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Newland et al. (2018) studied these extensively for 25,906 9- to 14-year-olds across 14 countries, relying on data collected through the International Survey of Children’s Well-Being (ISCWeB), a worldwide research survey on children’s well-being that analyzes children’s answers to a questionnaire (http://www.isciweb.org).

The general ISCWeB questionnaire does not, however, query anything related to language, except as part of a question about language classes taken outside school time. Also, the comprehensive Diener, Oishi, and Tay (2018) handbook does not mention language as a factor in well-being. Yet, as studies of monolinguals show, it certainly is. For instance, preschoolers with better pragmatic language abilities enjoy higher peer status (Paulus 2017). Adolescents who are proficient speakers have a higher chance of having successful friendships than peers who are not (Durkin and Conti-Ramsden 2007). Low verbal abilities are a risk factor for antisocial and delinquent behavior (Muñoz et al. 2008). People who stammer or who can no longer speak fluently due to dementia or aphasia pay a dear social price. Even receptive language skills impact how others perceive us: A study of 615 children in middle childhood found that children with lower receptive vocabulary skills showed increasingly troublesome behavior and suffered progressively more peer rejection, thus lowering their well-being (Menting, van Lier, and Koot 2011). These results are not surprising, given that we have known at least since Sapir (1927) that language use in interaction is intimately bound with personality, which is a socially ascribed and often verbally expressed construct of how we perceive others and ourselves, with all the biases this may entail (Trofimova 2014). Thus, language plays a fundamental role in well-being (Rose, Ebert, and Weinert 2016).

1.3 Well-being in bilingual settings: Some examples

Except for extreme cases of atypical language use as in aphasia, the role of language in well-being is hard to see in individual interactions in monolingual settings. Perhaps this is why the general well-being literature has not paid much attention to it. In bilingual settings, however, the role of language in well-being is much more immediately visible. Consider the example of my taxi driver in Portland, Oregon, in March 2014. He was born in Ethiopia and had moved to the United States as a young adult. He spoke English fluently. My driver’s first language was
Oromiffa, and he self-identified as belonging to the Oromo people. He married an English-speaking American who did not know any Oromiffa. In 2014, my driver was the father of three young children and wanted them to speak Oromiffa. However, after his first son, Ifaa, was born, my driver did not speak Oromiffa to him because he thought it would confuse the child. He just spoke English to the baby. Yet Ifaa grew up with Oromiffa from birth, through input from his aunt, who lived with the family for the first two years of Ifaa’s life, and who interacted with Ifaa a lot and did not know any English. Ifaa learned to speak Oromiffa through her, but stopped speaking it when his aunt went back to Ethiopia just before his third birthday. When Ifaa was about 4, his father started to speak Oromiffa to his children because he was alarmed at the fact that Ifaa was not speaking much Oromiffa. At age 6, Ifaa was able to speak some Oromiffa to the family back in Ethiopia (on Skype) but refused to speak it to his father. My driver cited Ifaa as telling him there was no point in speaking Oromiffa to him, because he spoke English anyhow. The father was puzzled by the fact that Ifaa was able and willing to speak some Oromiffa with other Ethiopians, but not with him as his father. Throughout the conversation, my driver was very open about being upset because his son would not speak Oromiffa with him. He expressed his long-held sense of grief about what he saw as his failure as a father to transmit his first language to his elder son. Clearly, my driver’s well-being was being affected by specific language choices in the family. He was not experiencing Harmonious Bilingualism.

In another example, a child’s sense of belonging in preschool and overall well-being were under attack because of her inability to verbally communicate in a new linguistic environment and the lack of attention from that environment for her predicament. Zerdalia lived in Algeria during the French colonial occupation (Dahoun 1995: 35–36). She spoke Arabic at home. Her first day at a French-speaking nursery school in her neighborhood came as a brutal shock. There was no sweet teacher to greet her in Arabic and pronounce her name correctly. In fact, no-one spoke a language she could understand. When the teacher called on her, she was stifled with fear – in what language should she speak? Zerdalia soon realized that the language spoken in her home and neighborhood was excluded at school. The following months she paid close attention to the sounds coming out of the teacher’s and the other children’s mouths and to how their mouths opened and closed. She realized she would have to learn to do as they did in order to communicate with them. And there was candy if you found the right words to say. One day, she gathered her courage to get up and address the teacher, in the hope of getting a candy. Instead, she got a cold disapproving stare and a finger pointing at her seat. Zerdalia felt unfairly treated, and her identity and her language crushed (Dahoun 1995 is recounting her own experiences as a child). Thus, already at age 3, Zerdalia experienced a lack of well-being due to the linguistic diversity she was confronted with, or, rather, due to how that linguistic diversity was shaped in her environment. She was not experiencing Harmonious Bilingual Development.
The next example also shows a relation between linguistic factors and well-being, but this time it is a positive one: The young man in this example prides himself on his bilingualism, and his bilingualism seems to contribute to his overall well-being. John lived in Louisiana, United States, with his Canadian-American parents who spoke French to him (Caldas 2006). In Louisiana, John spoke English with his friends. He spent summers in Québec, Canada, and had many French-speaking friends there. When asked how he felt about being bilingual in Canada, he said: “I speak well enough French to be perfectly integrated socially. In fact, my bilingualism and Americanism actually gave me an edge” (Caldas 2006: 158). At age 18, John thus seemed to be experiencing Harmonious Bilingualism, an improvement from 6 years earlier, when he had felt self-conscious and awkward about being bilingual (Caldas 2006: 152–159).

A final example shows a more neutral relation between linguistic factors and well-being: A German mother in Greece admitted that her children did not speak German very well, but she considered this to be normal (Leist-Villis 2004: 166). After all, she said, Greek is the environmental language in Greece, and nobody can be perfectly bilingual. This is also why she did not pressure her children about speaking better German. She found it good enough that they were able to make themselves understood. If her children wanted to speak better German, it was up to themselves to make that happen. This mother attributed no particularly negative or positive aspects to her children’s lesser proficiency in the language she spoke to them. She appeared quite satisfied with her bilingual family situation, and was likely experiencing Harmonious Bilingualism.

The examples above show various degrees of well-being in people living in settings where they themselves or a family member are in regular contact with more than a single language variety. As the review below will show, there is indeed a large degree of interindividual variation in how people experience their bilingualism.

2 Scope of the review

The studies selectively reviewed below hail from different disciplines and research perspectives. Similarly to my earlier review of mostly European research (De Houwer 2017), I include both large quantitative and smaller qualitative studies. Their combination can likely tell us more about Harmonious Bilingualism than just a single research perspective. I here widen the scope to studies worldwide. Included are studies published in English, French and German. Most of the quantitative studies, however, are limited to countries where English is the societal language.

One novelty of the present review is that it systematically brings together findings about young children, adolescents and parents who are part of a family with pre-adult children (Sevinç this vol. discusses families with adult children; De Houwer
2017 only considered studies involving families in bilingual settings with children up to age 6). “Family” here means a unit made up of at least one adult who lives with and is responsible for at least one person who has not yet reached legally adult status (excluded are institutions such as orphanages or boarding schools) (for a more in-depth discussion of the notion of “family”, see Palviainen this vol.). Families are dynamic systems that are firmly embedded within and influenced by wider society (Treas, Scott, and Richards 2017). Family members are autonomous persons who at the same time are strongly dependent on each other. What happens to one family member will affect the other(s) (Ram et al. 2014). Good child-parent relationships are central to family well-being (Suldo and Fefer 2013).

The review only considers studies yielding information on well-being and language use. Excluded are studies of well-being in bilinguals without a focus on language. The discussion below is limited to links between well-being and aspects of the bilingual setting in which respondents find themselves even if studies investigate additional aspects such as academic achievement.

The bilingual settings covered involve language varieties considered to represent different languages, rather than varieties of the same language. “Home language” here refers to any language not commonly used in public life in the region where the family lives (see Eisenchlas and Schalley this vol. for a more in-depth discussion); “societal language” refers to any language commonly used in public life. Families may speak both a home language and the societal language at home. Often, (pre)schools use the societal language, but some children are in institutions using both the home and the societal language, or just the home language.

Quantitative studies (section 3) often measure aspects of well-being through standardized assessment instruments. Many studies expressly examining well-being in relation to language consider children as individuals, that is, not in relation to their parents (3.1). Several other studies investigating well-being in bilingual settings focus on the child-parent relationship (3.2). So far, I have found only a single study systematically addressing aspects of parental well-being in bilingual families (3.3). Aspects of parental well-being in bilingual settings have mainly become visible through studies that happened to reveal some of those aspects as a result of a more ethnographic approach (section 4).

3 Empirical research explicitly addressing well-being in bilingual settings

3.1 Well-being in children in bilingual settings

When young children are raised with a single home language that is not the societal language, the first place they will meet up with another language in regular
interpersonal contact is day care or preschool (De Houwer 2013). Bullying and victimization by monolingual peers are real dangers for these emergent bilingual children who do not yet speak the societal language well (see Chang et al. 2007 in the United States, involving 345 emergent bilinguals between 4.5 and 5.5; and von Grünigen et al. 2012 in Switzerland, involving 203 emergent bilinguals between 6 and 6.5). Importantly, Chang et al. (2007) found that teacher behavior modulates bullying rates: Emergent bilinguals were less likely to be victims of peer aggression in classrooms where teachers spoke more Spanish (the children’s home language) compared to classrooms where teachers only spoke English (the societal language). Furthermore, the more teachers spoke English, the more they found their relationships with children to be conflictive. In contrast, the more teachers spoke Spanish, the less they felt that their relationship with the children was conflictive. von Grünigen et al. (2012) found that levels of bullying sharply decreased as emergent bilingual children gained proficiency in the societal language.

Societal language proficiency is important for all children: In a large (N = 7,267) cohort study in the United Kingdom, low levels of English proficiency at age 5 were associated with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties for bilingual and monolingual children alike (Whiteside, Gooch, and Norbury 2017). Similarly, an even larger (N = 261,147) cohort study of 5-year-olds in Australia found that children who were not proficient in the societal language (again English) showed high levels of developmental vulnerability on several measures of well-being, regardless of whether they just heard English at home or another home language (Goldfeld et al. 2014).

It is thus not surprising that bilingual children who have developed good levels of proficiency in the societal language upon (pre)school entry have an advantage over emergent bilingual children in terms of well-being. They may even have an advantage compared to monolingual children who speak just the societal language. 5-year-olds with good proficiency in English but whose main home language was not English experienced fewer social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties than peers from monolingual English-speaking homes (Whiteside, Gooch, and Norbury 2017). Bilingually reared 6-year-olds who did not yet know much English upon entry in English-speaking primary schools (N = 6,361) were consistently rated by teachers as being in the vulnerable range on several measures of well-being (Goldfeld et al. 2014). In contrast, bilingually reared children who already spoke English fairly well (N = 37,657) did not show this vulnerability, and had equal or even lower chances of being in the vulnerable range for well-being compared to monolingual English-speaking peers, mirroring Whiteside, Gooch, and Norbury’s (2017) findings. Another study from Australia found no bilingual-monolingual differences for socio-emotional outcomes in 8- to 9-year-olds, but did not consider levels of proficiency in the societal language at school entry (McLeod et al. 2016; N = 3,240). In the U.S., Han and Huang (2010) and Han (2010) found interesting differences amongst 5 types of children. They studied 12,580 and 14,853 children, respectively, who took part in a large cohort study
spanning 6 years. Han and Huang’s (2010) sample consisted of “Asian origin” children (N = 1,350) and “US-born, non-Hispanic White” children; Han’s (2010) of “Latino origin” children (N = 2,888) and “US-born, non-Hispanic White” children. They categorized children on the basis of language fluency at kindergarten entry (the preparatory year before primary school). Both studies found that language fluency status at kindergarten entry predicted later levels of well-being, viz., children categorized as fluent bilinguals or non-English-dominant bilinguals surpassed monolingual English-speaking children, English-dominant bilinguals and non-English monolinguals on measures of well-being 6 years later. In fact, children who upon school entry did not know any English had the lowest degree of self-control and interpersonal skills, and the highest level of internalizing problems 6 years later.

To prevent such long term negative effects of early developmental vulnerability in emergent bilinguals, Han (2010) proposes that children should have the chance to participate in high quality second language instruction programs as soon as they enter school. While this is no doubt a good recommendation, other factors can help as well. In their study of 2,059 Spanish-speaking Latino/Hispanic children in the United States, Winsler, Kim, and Richards (2014) found that strong skills in children’s home language help to fast-develop proficiency in the societal language. Four-and-a-half-year-olds with stronger Spanish and stronger socio-emotional skills made faster gains in English proficiency a year later compared to peers whose Spanish was weaker and who exhibited more behavioral problems, less self-control and lower degrees of initiative. Another U.S. study of somewhat older children (N = 228) showed that dual language competence correlated with well-being over and above other factors such as maternal education, levels of poverty, family structure, classroom composition, child non-verbal IQ, or gender (Collins et al. 2011).

The previous studies used teacher and/or parent ratings of aspects of child well-being. Two studies used self-reports to explore links between dual language proficiency and aspects of well-being. Van Der Wildt, Van Avermaet, and Van Hecke (2017) found that bilingual 4th graders (N = 1,761) in Belgium who reported knowing one of their languages much better than the other felt less of a sense of school belonging than children who knew both their languages equally well (school belonging supports well-being). In the Netherlands, Vedder (2005; N = 256) found interesting differences between two ethnic groups. Turkish origin adolescents experienced slightly better psychological adaptation if they knew both their “ethnic” language and the societal language (Dutch) well. Suriname origin adolescents, on the other hand, showed lower degrees of psychological adaptation if they knew both their “ethnic” language and the societal language well (unfortunately, Vedder does not identify the “ethnic” languages). Vedder explains this discrepancy by differences amongst Turkish and Suriname origin families in the extent to which they emphasize the importance of the societal language. If Suriname origin adolescents
try to speak the “ethnic” language well, they are in a sense rebelling against their parents, who tend to emphasize the value of only the societal language, thus contributing to lesser degrees of psychological adaptation. Turkish origin families, on the other hand, consider the home language to be very important. This brings us to the next section, which focuses on studies investigating well-being and adolescent-parent relationships in families in bilingual settings. They were all carried out in North America.

### 3.2 Well-being of children and parents in bilingual families

Tseng and Fuligni’s (2000) was the first quantitative study \((N = 626)\) to draw a link between teen well-being and language choice in bilingual families. It showed that adolescents in California who did not speak the same home language as their parents felt more emotionally distant from them and were less likely to engage in conversations with them compared to peers who spoke the same home language as their parents. In a later study of 414 9th graders, Oh and Fuligni (2010) found that in addition to language choice the level of home language proficiency also mattered for the quality of adolescent-parent relationships, reflecting similar earlier findings by Portes and Hao (2002). Similarly, Boutakidis, Chao, and Rodríguez (2011) found positive associations between 611 teens’ fluency in their home language and the degree to which they respected their parents. They also found that the more fluent teens were in their home language, the more highly teens rated the communication with their parents.

There have also been studies involving both teens and their parents, all focusing on Chinese as the home language and English as the societal language. These studies used parental and teens’ self-reports on language use but included well-being measures only for teens (through self-reports). In Liu et al. (2009; \(N = 444\) teens and their mothers) teens who were proficient in their home language (Chinese) and whose mothers were so too reported fewer depressive symptoms compared to teens who were less proficient in their home language or compared to high home language proficient teens with low home language proficient mothers. However, no relation between teen well-being measures and a match in levels of English proficiency between teens and mothers emerged. These findings are consistent with earlier findings by Costigan and Dokis (2006), who studied 89 fathers, 92 mothers and 92 12-year-olds in the same family. Fathers and mothers spoke the home language more frequently than their children. Overall, teens reported relatively low levels of depression and intergenerational conflict. Reported intergenerational conflict and feelings of depression were lowest, however, for children who spoke the home language and had mothers with high levels of home language use. Conversely, in their study of 451 13-year-olds and both their parents, Weaver and Kim (2008) found that teens who reported highest depressive
symptoms and who rated their parents as being least supportive had low proficiency in the home language and lived in families where parents had low proficiency in the societal language.

The studies reviewed here strongly suggest that teens feel best in families where there is a match between teens’ and parents’ language proficiencies.

3.3 Well-being in parents of bilingually reared children

I have been able to find only a single quantitative study investigating aspects of well-being of parents in bilingual families. In her in-depth structured interview and questionnaire study with 100 mothers in Greece and Germany who spoke mostly just German and Greek to their children, respectively, Leist-Villis (2004) included a question about mothers’ global satisfaction regarding their bilingual family life. Mothers had first-born children between 4 and 16 years. Most mothers (57) were very satisfied with the bilingual child rearing and development process as a whole, 20 mothers more or less so, and 23 were not satisfied. 12 of these 23 reported feeling they had utterly failed at transmitting their language to their child(ren), and felt very bad about that. Mothers who were highly satisfied with their bilingual family life tended to (1) have children who spoke the home language, (2) only speak the home language to their children regardless of the situation, (3) have children who attended a school that used the home language as a medium of instruction (exclusively, or in addition to the societal language), (4) have a spouse who was able to speak the home language reasonably well, and (5) have more home language speakers in their social networks.

Other interview studies might include questions about how mothers feel about their family's bilingualism, but few do so systematically or in a standardized way. Even if not asked, interviewees may happen to express evaluative feelings towards their bilingual situation. Investigators might also gain insight into aspects of well-being through observation. Section 4 reviews some findings gained through studies that are not explicitly focused on well-being.

4 Empirical research implicitly addressing Harmonious Bilingualism

Observational studies of preschool-age home language speaking children like Zerdalia who did not know the societal language when they first started to attend preschool show extremely high levels of stress and unhappiness in these children, with some withdrawing from engagement and remaining silent in preschool for up to two years (Dahoun 1995, Algeria and France; Drury 2007, United Kingdom; Manigand
1999, France; Kostyuk 2005, Germany; Nap-Kolhoff 2010, the Netherlands). These qualitative studies complement quantitative studies demonstrating that children who do not yet know the societal language when they enter (pre)school are especially vulnerable in terms of overall well-being (section 3.1).

A rare study based on ethnographic interviews with children gives some insights into how they evaluated their bilingualism (Mills 2001). None of the 10 children (aged 5 to 19) were very proficient in their home language (Urdu) but all spoke the societal language (English in the United Kingdom) fluently. None of them appeared to have any particular issues with their bilingualism, and accepted that they needed Urdu for contacts with older relatives and/or with people in Pakistan, even if they did not speak it very well.

If children still speak the home language a bit, its use may, however, become a locus of intergenerational strife, conflict, and power struggle (Danjo 2018; Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2015; Sevinç 2016). Children may actively refuse to speak the home language in particular situations, answer only with single words, or change the topic and with it the language (De Houwer 1999). Eventually, these strategies may lead to children not speaking the home language at all. This negatively affects parents’ well-being. Pakistani origin mothers in the United Kingdom expressed feelings of regret, remorse, and guilt at what they saw as their failure to transmit their home language to their children (Mills 2004). Such feelings are shared by parents all over the world (De Houwer 2017). Often, parents mention that if their children were not to be able to speak the home language they would no longer be able to communicate with grandparents and other relatives. Parents shudder at the thought. Rodriguez (1983: 29–30) remembers his relatives’ fiercely negative reaction when as a child he could not speak Spanish, his home language (see also Sevinç this vol.). Children are also expected to learn to use polite and respectful language forms when speaking to their home language-speaking grandparents (Mills 2004). If not, parents will be blamed for not raising their children properly. Wong Fillmore (1991) mentions a particularly tragic example where a Korean origin father in the United States felt compelled to physically punish his son for not using appropriate honorifics when the child’s Korean-speaking grandfather came to visit. The grandfather had scolded his son for not educating his grandchildren properly so they could speak polite Korean. The children were taken in protective custody. Unfortunately, no-one involved recognized the role that language played in this family drama.

It does not help that in-laws who do not speak the home language may also create tensions. Leist-Villis (2004) reports that societal language-speaking in-laws often voiced negative attitudes towards child bilingualism and/or to the home language, which led to conflicts and made the speaking of the home language by mothers and/or children into a battleground. In these situations, the parental couple relationship may be threatened as well: Spouses face the dilemma of either going against their parents, or against their home-language-speaking spouse, who in turn may not feel sufficiently supported (Leist-Villis 2004).
Conversations in which children speak the societal language and parents the home language involve divergent language choices (De Houwer 2019). The establishment of such conversations may have become a habit since children were preschoolers. Regardless of their feelings about them, parents may have adjusted to such conversations, as shown in Nakamura’s (2018) study of an Italian- and an English-speaking father in Japan whose school-aged children spoke mainly Japanese with them. A longitudinal and observational group study of parent-child story-telling interaction in bilingual families in the United States similarly suggests such adjustment. Park et al. (2012) traced home language maintenance (Cantonese or Mandarin) in 68 children who were 6 years old at Time1 and nearly 7.5 years old at Time2. They compared the amount of parental home language support in parent-child interactions with assessments of child home language proficiency. Home language support was defined as a combination of parental home language choice and feedback on child home language use, including the use of “insisting” discourse strategies which socialize children into using the home language. A lack of parental home language support at Time1 was associated with children’s home language loss at Time2. Importantly, this study found no evidence that parents decreased their expression of warmth towards their young children with limited home language proficiency. Likewise, fathers’ interactions with children in Nakamura (2018) showed evidence of a child-centered and warm parent-child relationship, in spite of divergent language choices. This stands in sharp contrast to findings for adolescents and their parents (3.2), where interpersonal relationships may be strained and conflictive if they speak different languages with each other.

There is less of a chance for conflictive bilingualism when children speak the home language. Parents in recently immigrated Iranian families in the United States mentioned that children started to take pride in knowing the home language (Farsi) when they were asked to translate from English into Farsi for their visiting grandparents (Kaveh 2018). Parents in Greece with school aged children who spoke the home language (Albanian) appeared satisfied with their bilingual family experience (Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2013). Indeed, many are quite satisfied if children speak the home language (Leist-Villis 2004). Others may not care much about the home language and are satisfied that their children are highly proficient speakers of other languages (Gogonas and Kirsch 2018), but such reports are rare: Most parents who speak a home language to their children want their children to speak the home language, too. There are no reports of parents or children feeling bad because of fluently conversing in the same home language.

Even if children speak the home language they may not want to use it outside the home. Many maternal reports indicate that somewhat older children are embarrassed when their mothers speak the home language in public (Kaveh 2018; Leist-Villis 2004; Little 2020). Examples abound of children telling their mothers to stop talking the home language in public. This telling off and rejection of their home language makes mothers feel bad. In most cases, though, they comply, and switch
to speaking the societal language in public (Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2013; De Houwer 2017).

Finally, parents are often insecure about how they should go about ensuring that their children learn both the home language and the societal language (De Houwer 2017). Many are torn between children’s need to learn the societal language well, and their desire that children should learn the home language as well (Mills 2004: 184; Kaveh 2018; Seviç 2016).

5 Research on well-being in families in bilingual settings: A brief assessment and outlook

Research explicitly addressing well-being in families in bilingual settings so far is mostly focused on children. We need more systematic studies like the one conducted by Leist-Villis (2004) that assess parental well-being in bilingual settings. Most of the information on parental well-being in bilingual families is rather scattered and unfocused, given that it usually just happened to come up in an interview. Also, this rather anecdotal information is virtually limited to mothers. We know little about fathers’ assessments of their bilingual family life.

The information regarding bilingual children’s well-being mostly does not take into account family level processes. Also here the research base needs to be expanded.

Most of the large scale studies of well-being in bilingual family members hail from North America, and are heavily tilted towards children in Hispanic and East Asian origin families. Currently available information on well-being in bilinguals does not indicate different patterns across countries. In particular, the two-country study by Leist-Villis (2004) did not find any differences amongst maternal feelings of satisfaction with their bilingual experience beyond the fact that different languages and societies were involved. Yet, there may be regional or language-specific effects that have thus far gone unnoticed. More comparisons across countries are in order.

Many families in bilingual settings have an immigration background. Recently immigrated individuals may suffer from acculturative stress. Others, also those with a less recent immigration background, may have experiences with non-language related discrimination. It is highly likely that overall processes of acculturation are linked to language. It remains to be investigated, though, to what extent levels of acculturative stress or feelings of societal exclusion are related to linguistic factors. Especially young children’s experiences with social exclusion based on lack of intercomprehension (as in Zerdalia’s example) may have long lasting effects. These effects may, however, go in either direction: Children may retreat from the new language and society, or they may start focusing only on their new language and reject the
home language and all it represents. Only long term longitudinal studies can reveal the effects of either.

The available studies, however, already allow us to formulate some main findings.

6 Well-being in bilingual families: Some main findings

The review above shows that language choice and proficiency relate to well-being in members of families living in bilingual settings. Language use in families living in bilingual settings deeply affects family relationships within the nuclear family and beyond. Furthermore, children’s positive or more negative language related experiences in (pre)school are likely to not only affect children as individuals, but also their families.

6.1 Home language use between children and parents

Parents and children may use the same language(s) in speaking to each other, and thus follow the default convergent pattern for language choice (De Houwer 2019). Although same language choice does not guarantee friction-free intergenerational communication, both quantitative and qualitative studies show that well-being is at risk if parents and children address each other in different languages. The pattern whereby children speak the societal language and parents the home language does not serve family members well.

Several surveys show that this divergent choice pattern of intra-family communication is quite common. A quarter of the 5,335 children in 2,250 families in Flanders, Belgium, who heard a home language from one or both parents did not speak that language but solely spoke the societal language, Dutch (De Houwer 2003). Longitudinal findings for 93 infants exposed to an indigenous language in Australia and the societal language, English, show a nearly identical proportion of sole English use by the time children were of preschool age (Verdon and McLeod 2015). A larger longitudinal study of children in Australia, this time including speakers of any non-English home language, found that of the 666 children who spoke a home language at age 2 to 3 only 78% still spoke that language by the time they were 4 to 5 (Verdon, McLeod, and Winsler 2014). Slavkov (2017) reports similar proportions of home language use by school-aged children in bilingual families in Ontario, Canada. A fifth of 626 adolescents with a recent immigration background in the United States reported speaking English to their home language-speaking parents (Tseng and Fuligni 2000). The fact that home language maintenance generally
appears to be absent for about a quarter of the families surveyed suggests that many families in a bilingual setting do not experience Harmonious Bilingualism.

A study investigating parent-child language choice in more detail concerns 1,086 families with at least one 5- to 7.5-year-old child in Texas and California where Spanish was the home and English the societal language (Branum-Martin et al. 2014). Amongst others, this study queried whether family members spoke only/mainly Spanish to another family member, Spanish and English equally, or mainly/only English. If we consider just the percentage of parents and children who spoke only Spanish with each other, my comparison of data in Branum-Martin et al. (2014; Table 2) shows that in father-child conversations 52% of fathers spoke just Spanish but only 46% of children did so, and that in mother-child conversations 62% of mothers spoke just Spanish but only 52% of children did so. These comparisons confirm the frequent occurrence of parent-child divergent choice conversations in which parents speak the home language and children the societal language (the reverse pattern has not been reported).

Patterns of divergent language choice may start to occur quite early. Many mothers note that children started to refuse to speak the home language soon after they started attending a preschool in the societal language (Leist-Villis 2004: 187–192; Kaveh 2018; Mills 2004; Wong Fillmore 1991). In response to children’s increasing use of the societal language at home, parents may start to speak less and less of the home language, so that eventually the entire family just uses the societal language (e.g., E-Rramdani 2003), with parental feelings of regret and shame as a frequent result.

6.2 Children’s dual language proficiency

Apart from what happens with the home language and with intra-family communication, studies demonstrate that children’s proficiency in both the home and the societal language is of importance to their well-being, and this from the very start. In this respect children who have been raised with both languages from the very start fare much better than children who have not had the chance to learn the societal language from when they were infants.

Parents are very much aware that dual language proficiency is important for their children’s overall well-being and success in life. Society, however, may make it very hard for parents to succeed in raising dual language proficient children. Mothers complained about negative attitudes towards the home language in (pre)schools and blamed these negative attitudes for the fact that children no longer wanted to speak the home language (Leist-Villis 2004: 187–192). All too often, teachers, speech therapists and pediatricians advise parents to solely speak the societal language at home instead of the home language (Beşcioğlu-Göktolga and Yağmur 2018; Kaveh 2018). Such advice is ethically reprehensible and legally
unacceptable (De Houwer 2013). As Wong Fillmore (1991) already noted, teachers harm parents and children with this advice. It makes parents feel insecure and thus detracts from Harmonious Bilingualism (De Houwer 2015a; 2017). If home language-speaking parents follow this advice, professionals are co-responsible for taking away the best chance bilingual children have to grow up harmoniously: Supportive and rich language input from expert speakers who love them.

7 Conclusion: The hallmarks of Harmonious Bilingualism and how to support it

How family members experience their bilingual situation is intensely personal (De Houwer 2015a). This implies that individuals with at first sight similar experiences do not necessarily evaluate those experiences the same way. Yet the bulk of the literature that gives “accidental” insights into Harmonious Bilingualism in bilingual families and the large scale studies addressing well-being in bilingual family members does allow for some fundamental generalizations across different individuals, contexts, and languages.

The central finding across all relevant studies is that families in bilingual settings experience Harmonious Bilingualism when children develop good language skills in both the home and the societal language from a young age. This dual language proficiency allows children to develop and continue developing barrier-free communication within and outside the family (Leyendecker et al. 2014).

All children eventually learn the societal language, though not necessarily to high (enough) levels of proficiency. Several surveys of children’s and parents’ home language use show, however, that home language maintenance is much less of a given. A lack of home language maintenance is linked to a lack of Harmonious Bilingualism in parents and adolescent children alike.

Home language maintenance is threatened when parent-child interactions mainly consist of divergent language choice patterns in which parents speak the home language and children the societal language. Parents tend not to be aware of the importance of convergent choice patterns. Many lack what I have called an “impact belief”, that is, a belief that they can influence their child’s language development (De Houwer 1999). Yet parents can use conversational practices encouraging very young children’s choice of a particular language (Lanza 1997). Such practices tend to be successful. The parents in Greece with children who spoke the home language (Albanian) all insisted that children speak Albanian at home with them and other older relatives (Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2013). For many parents such insisting strategies may not suit their parenting style (Currie Armstrong 2014). However, the research evidence suggests that parents (and children) may be spared
much sadness and frustration if they socialize children into answering in the same home language that they were addressed in.

In addition to using insisting strategies, the parents in Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi’s study tried to expose children to Albanian as much as possible, and actively supported their children’s development of home language literacy. The mothers interviewed by Leist-Villis (2004) pointed at the importance for the home language of visits to the country where the home language was a societal language, and of visits of relatives to the country where the family lives. A Greek mother in Germany noted that her Greek mother came to stay with the family 6 months a year. The grandmother did not speak German and this motivated the mother’s son to speak Greek (Leist-Villis 2004: 177). My driver was grateful when I gave him tips about how to increase his use of Oromiffa to his children and told him about the importance of joint book reading. I also suggested that he should have his sister record stories and rhymes and songs in Oromiffa that could then be played to the children. The father was aware of having to choose activities that would interest the children and became hopeful that he might be able to turn the tide with Ifaa and do better with his younger children. Indeed, as discussed in other contributions to this volume, there are many more factors supporting home language maintenance besides convergent choice conversations. Frequent and qualitatively high home language input to children is crucial (De Houwer 2018).

Age appropriate proficiency in the societal language is another pillar supporting Harmonious Bilingualism. Many parents raise their children with both a societal and a home language from birth. Parents in such bilingual families hold various ideas about child bilingualism, the languages they should speak to children, the language(s) children should learn, or the best way to teach children two languages (De Houwer 1999). Some of these ideas are likely to support Harmonious Bilingualism (e.g., if parents believe it is possible for young children to learn several languages from early on), whereas others will not (e.g., if parents believe it is harmful to children to learn several languages from early on). Early bilingual acquisition is very much driven by the language input environment children find themselves in, but parents are not always aware of this fact. Frequent and qualitatively high language input is important in any language.

Finally, (pre)schools have a crucial role in supporting Harmonious Bilingualism. They can do so by showing respect for children’s home languages and thus bolster children’s pride in their home language while children are acquiring the societal language at school (De Houwer 2015b; Robertson, Drury, and Cable 2014). Zerdalia was lucky to have another teacher in the second year of nursery school (Dahoun 1995: 38): Ms. Bruno was new to Algeria and held no linguistic or racial prejudices. She made a patient effort to reach out to the silent Zerdalia, and Zerdalia opened up to her. Ms. Bruno even visited Zerdalia’s home and tried to say some things in the local Arab dialect. Because of Ms. Bruno’s “intelligence du coeur” (p. 38, intelligence of the heart), Zerdalia started loving school and loving French. She continued to speak
Arabic with her family and in the neighborhood, and describes how she came to evaluate her bilingualism as positive. Chang et al. (2007: 265) note that “The [teacher’s] acknowledgement of a child’s home language changes and elevates the status of that child within the classroom”. School and home are intricately linked: When children feel that their home language is respected at (pre)school, they will show less of a tendency to reject it. This is uniquely shown in a study from Belgium attempting to explain differential levels of self-rated home language proficiency in 312 10- to 12-year-olds (Dekeyser and Stevens 2019). Home language proficiency was not only directly related to parental home language choice and child-rated maternal home language proficiency, but was also higher in students who thought they were allowed to speak the home language at school.

Families in bilingual settings may experience Harmonious Bilingualism most of the time. Others may go through long periods in which they do not. The good news is that Harmonious Bilingualism is possible even after families have had negative experiences. As researchers, we need to investigate the causes of this ebb and flow so that we may furnish families with the tools to help increase their resilience.

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