

Reshaping family language policy: Paternal absence and the role of domestic caregivers in Botswana

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This study investigates the impact of contemporary family structures on Family Language Policy (FLP) and Heritage Language Maintenance (HLM) in Botswana. It addresses two distinct but intersecting phenomena: 1) the linguistic consequences of paternal absence in single-parent households and 2) the role of domestic childcare workers as significant agents of language input in child language acquisition.

In Botswana, traditional family structures have been reshaped by high HIV/AIDS prevalence, labour migration, and declining marriage rates (Dintwat, 2010). Data from the 2022 census indicates that 44% of households are female-headed, while 55% of household heads have never married or cohabited (Statistics Botswana, 2025). When fathers are absent, children are often deprived of consistent exposure to the father's linguistic variety. This is particularly critical in the Botswanan context, where minority language speakers are increasingly shifting towards dominant regional languages or the national language, Setswana (Shah, 2025).

Furthermore, the study explores the influence of domestic caregivers on children's linguistic trajectories. While previous research in the Gulf States and Hong Kong has examined how domestic workers influence children's language practices and proficiencies (Al-Jarf, 2005; Said & Jaafarawi, 2025; Taha-Thomure, 2022 for the Gulf countries and Wolfaardt, 2021, 2022 for Hong Kong), few studies treat childcare workers as agents of language input in the Global South. In Botswana, domestic workers – frequently Zimbabwean nationals who may not speak Setswana – often use English with their wards, providing them with early, extended exposure to English within the home domain.

Data were collected as part of the project “English in the multilingual ecologies of Botswana” (DFG FOR 5728). 180 participants completed a researcher-administered sociolinguistic questionnaire covering socio-demographics, language repertoire, proficiency, use, and attitudes; 60 of these participants subsequently took part in semi-structured interviews. The analysis focuses specifically on participants whose fathers were absent or who had domestic caregivers for extended periods during their childhood.

Part 1 provides descriptive statistics of the Dominant Language Constellations, ethnic identities, and language proficiencies of participants whose fathers were absent during their childhood, supplemented by qualitative interview data elucidating strategies that single mothers employ to maintain the paternal heritage language. Part 2 analyses how exposure to English in the home domain via domestic workers impacts participants' proficiency in English and their confidence in speaking it. By examining these two features of contemporary family life, the study provides a multifaceted account of the variables currently shaping FLP and impacting HLM in the Botswana context.

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