

The Role of Language Socialization in Arabic Heritage Language Maintenance/Shift in the U.S.

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Scholarship on Arabic as a heritage language in the U.S. has begun to flourish during the past decade (e.g., Albirini 2014; Albirini & Benmamoun 2015; and Hillman 2019). Such scholarship, albeit essential to heritage language (HL) research, use post-secondary school settings as the main site for research. In so doing, Muslim Arabic heritage-speaking children (MAHSC) in K-12 settings remain an understudied group. Additionally, despite the diversity of approaches adopted in exploring Arabic as a heritage language, the use of language socialization is still invisible. Language socialization “has at its goal the understanding of how persons become competent members of social groups and the role of language in this process” (Schieffelin & Ochs 1986:167). Such membership index certain identities and some participants may contest assigned identities and construct other multiple ones that are fluid and context-specific (e.g., He 2011; Engman 2015; Leeman 2015; and Hillman 2019). Therefore, since MAHSC and their parents do not live in sheltered spaces but rather interact with other participants, spaces, and institutions, this paper uses language socialization as a theoretical framework for studying a group of 12 MAHSC aged between 9-14 years who attend a full-time private Islamic school in Central Illinois¹. Using semi-structured interviews, this study reports on children’s linguistic and cultural practices and identity performances as they socialize and are socialized into using their heritage language and the innovations that entail and/or allow such use. It answers two questions: (1) what do Muslim Arabic heritage-speaking children report regarding their language and what child-based agency implications do these reports provide? And (2) what identity enactments do children report and how they factor into their language maintenance and/or shift? One of the findings of this study suggests that, in the context of an Islamic community-based school that houses Muslims from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, MAHSC may be pressured to lose their language because they perceive themselves as a minority (Arabs) within a minority school (Islamic). This means that through the interaction of the family-domain and the community-based school domain, there is a risk of language loss in an environment that was originally built to preserve Quranic Arabic (the Islamic school). In terms of identity reports, participants’ religious identity was more frequent but their ethnic identity reports varied across the participating families. While most parents referred to their country of origin as a determining factor in their identity definitions, most of the children suppressed this aspect and highlighted their American identities more frequently. The country of origin was mostly emphasized by the Sudanese children who denounced the identity *Arab* and used Muslim Sudanese American consistently. The only Arab children group that reported the country of origin in addition to the Sudanese ones are those who have Palestinian parents. In terms of children’s linguistic performance, another finding suggests that children become innovative agents as they socialize with their extended family members through online gaming applications using Arabic. Such innovations predict language maintenance/development. Other findings are of benefit to teachers and researchers of heritage languages as they examine the role(s) of language socialization in heritage language development, maintenance, and shift.

¹ In 2018, an IRB has been received for conducting this study.

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