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# Family language policy among Kurdish–Persian speaking families in Kermanshah, Iran

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**Abstract:** Minority language studies have received increasing attention over the last decade in Iran. Drawing on Spolsky's (Spolsky, Bernard. 2004. *Language policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) language policy theoretical framework, this inquiry reports on the language ideologies, practices, and management efforts of an under-explored group of Kurdish families residing in the city of Kermanshah. To this end, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork guided the collection of data from 40 Kurdish–Persian bilingual parents. The thematic analysis of data revealed glaring inconsistencies among the three elements of family language policy (FLP). That is parents' strong attachment to Kurdish did not necessarily translate into their language practices and efforts. The results also suggest that the studied parents adopted a subtractive approach to their children's proficiency in Kurdish. We argue that parents are not the core force in heritage language maintenance and there are other external factors determining the transmission of the home language.

**Keywords:** family language policy; Kurdish language; language ideologies; language management; language practices

## 1 Introduction

Iran is a multilingual country where Persian (aka Farsi) is spoken as the official language of the nation and is the language of instruction in educational contexts. Other than Persian, languages with the greatest number of native speakers include

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both Iranian and non-Iranian rooted languages such as Azeri (Azerbaijani Turkish), Kurdish, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Arabic, Balochi, and Turkman. Among these languages, Kurdish has been less explored from a sociolinguistic perspective. Exceptions include the studies on Kurdish spoken in western Iran by Sheyhoulislami (2012) and Rezaei and Bahrami (2019) and the special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology of Language* (2012) which focused on Kurdish in Iran and other neighboring countries (Turkey, Iraq, and Syria). And among all these studies, no systematic rigorous research has been done on the FLP of Kurdish–Persian speaking families in the city of Kermanshah.

Following this niche in the literature, the present research reports the findings from ethnographic research on Kurdish–Persian bilingual families residing in Kermanshah in western Iran, where they are in a majority–minority struggle with Persian as the national and official language. More specifically, the current research investigated Kurdish parents' attitudes towards their home language (i.e., Kurdish), their language practices, and efforts to maintain that language. In addition, the external factors that may impact the FLP have also been explored. In spite of the existence of various terminologies in the field, the term home language (HL) has been used in the present research to denote the language used and spoken in the home domain (Schalley and Eisenchlas 2020) but other terms such as heritage, minority, and first language have also been used when referring to the background literature.

## 2 Family language policy: background and theoretical framework

Family language policy (FLP) inquiries into explicit and implicit language planning of family members with respect to their language use and literacy practices within the home domain (Curdt-Christiansen 2009, 2018; King et al. 2008). Theoretically, Spolsky (2004) propounds a model of FLP and specifies the three main dimensions of family language policy: (1) *language ideology* as a set of beliefs about language and language use, (2) *language practices* as consciously or less consciously linguistic behaviors that an individual displays, and (3) *language management* as language maintaining efforts.

With this theoretical background briefly presented above, research on minority communities in the context of Iran from a sociolinguistic perspective is still scant. However, it has drawn the attention of many scholars recently. To begin with, in his inquiry with Azerbaijani Turkish families in the city of Tabriz, Mirvahedi (2017) delved into families' attitudes and practices at home (micro-domain) as

well as language policies in the education system and the broadcasting media (macro domain) to see whether they can alter language decisions and choices in the home context. Results revealed that Azerbaijani parents and their children used Farsi and Turkish along with Azerbaijani to different degrees in the home domain. In another research within Azerbaijani-speaking families in Iran, Mirvahedi and Jafari (2018) reported the FLP in Azerbaijani-Farsi-speaking families in the city of Zanjan, another predominantly Azerbaijani-speaking city. They explored the preservation of ethnic language and shift patterns in 13 parents coming from different socioeconomic and educational echelons of the society in Zanjan. Generally, parents' favorable attitudes towards their HL were found to be incongruous with their actual language choice which promotes Farsi in the family. Rezaei et al. (2017) also conducted a large-scale survey with 400 Azerbaijani native speakers coming from varying social and educational strata residing in highly Azeri-populated provinces in Iran. The results also suggested that Azeri is a language with high vitality which is extensively used as a means of communication for daily interactions.

With regard to Kurdish sociolinguistic research, Rezaei and Bahrami (2019) explored the attitudes of Kurdish native speakers towards their ethnic language in the city of Ilam, its social prestige, its continuity and maintenance, and if any institutionally external support of Kurdish language is provided by the government. They found that Kurdish participants adopted positive attitudes towards Kurdish language in the foreground of Kurdish as their mother tongue, the main source of their ethnic identity and culture, and its link to their family history. However, in terms of the social status of Kurdish among its speakers in Ilam, most believed that Kurdish was not as prestigious as Persian in the Iranian community. The results further indicated that there were continuities of Kurdish among the Kurds in their daily communication. With respect to the institutional support for Kurdish in Ilam, participants expressed their dissatisfaction and even argued that the programs on Ilam TV provincial channel were tedious and old and they merged Persian and Kurdish (i.e., code-switching).

Research on minority languages has revealed that home language maintenance (HLM) is a multifaceted phenomenon and not confined to the notion of language acquisition. Hence, Spolsky's (2004) far-reaching tripartite FLP model which conceptualizes language acquisition around the issues surrounding language policy was adopted to investigate the language ideologies, practices, and management blueprints of Kermanshahi families. More specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Kurdish parents' language ideologies regarding Kurdish and Persian?
2. What language is mostly spoken by Kurdish families in their home domain?

3. What language management strategies do Kurdish parents adopt to maintain their home language?
4. What intra-family factors affect the FLP of Kurdish families?

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design and context

This research draws on data from participatory ethnographic research. The data collection site was the city of Kermanshah—also known as Kermanshan—as the capital city of Kermanshah province and the largest Kurdish-speaking city. Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Ilam provinces are densely populated with different Kurdish-speaking dialects. In the 2016 census, the estimated population of Kermanshah was 946,681 and its people dominantly speak Kermanshahi Kurdish (also known as southern Kurdish) and Persian. The data collection sites for the present research were different upscale and downscale residential districts in the city of Kermanshah.

### 3.2 Participants

The present research focused on Kurdish families with particular characteristics in order to address the research questions and cover a representative sample of the population. Drawing on the combination of purposive and snowball sampling, a total of 40 Kurdish–Persian bilingual parents (mothers = 20, fathers = 20) from 20 families who had at least a child, and came from divergent socio-economic echelon of the society (high, middle, and low), were recruited. The standing of families in society was determined by considering their educational levels, occupations, and their place of residence. That is, families with upward mobility were better educated, lived in more affluent residential areas, and enjoyed more lucrative business and vocations. Therefore, for the upper-class category, seven families were included and seven and six families were categorized as middle-class and low-class groups, respectively (see Table 1). One of the researchers, who is a native speaker and resident of the city, used her contacts and relatives to reach more rich cases for this research. Participating parents were all born in Kermanshah and their ages ranged from 34 to 60 with an average age of 44. Except for one parent, Kurdish was the first language of all the participating parents. In addition, all families lived in the city of Kermanshah at the time of data collection and their level of education ranged from primary education to higher education (e.g., masters).

Table 1: Participants' socio-demographic information.

Number	Participants	Father's education/ occupation	Mother's education/ occupation	Father		Mother		Gender/number of children	Place of residence
				L1	L2	L1	L2		
<b>Upper class</b>									
1	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One son and one daughter	Shahrak-e Dadghostari
2	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Associate education/ Artist	Kurdish	Farsi	Farsi	Kurdish	One son	Nobahar
3	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Bachelor of Art./School principle	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One son and two daughters	Pardis
4	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Bachelor of Art./Teacher	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	Two daughters	Motekhasasin
5	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Associate education/ Calligrapher	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One son	22nd-Bahman
6	Family	Bachelor of Art./Army man	Bachelor of Art./Nurse	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	Two sons	Elahiyeh
7	Family	Bachelor of Art./White collar	Upper secondary edu- cation/Housewife	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One son and one daughter	Elahiyeh
<b>Middle class</b>									
8	Family	Associate education/ Army man	Upper secondary edu- cation/Housewife	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One daughter	Hafezieh
9	Family	Upper secondary educa- tion/Army man	Upper secondary edu- cation/Housewife	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	Two sons	Moallem
10	Family	Associate education/ Clerk	Upper secondary edu- cation/Housewife	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	One son	Shahrak-e Nasr
11	Family	Upper secondary educa- tion/Clerk	Secondary education/ Housewife	Kurdish	Farsi	Kurdish	Farsi	Three sons	Maskan

Table 1: (continued)

Number	Participants	Father's education/ occupation	Mother's education/ occupation		Father		Mother		Gender/number of children	Place of residence
			L1	L2	L1	L2	L1	L2		
12	Family	Secondary education/ Army man	Associate education/ Accountant	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One son and one daughter	Zafar
13	Family	Upper secondary educa- tion/Shopkeeper	Bachelor of Art/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One son and one daughter	Farhangian
14	Family	Secondary education/ Army man	Secondary education/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	Three daughters	Shahrak-e Moallem
<b>Low-class</b>										
15	Family	Secondary education/ Army man	Upper secondary edu- cation/Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One daughter	Karnachi
16	Family	Primary education/Self- employed	Primary education/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One son	Karnachi
17	Family	Secondary education/ Self-employed	Primary education/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One son and one daughter	Shahyad
18	Family	Primary education/ refuse collector	Primary education/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	One daughter and two sons	Shahyad
19	Family	Uneducated/Self- employed	Uneducated/Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	Two sons and three daughters	Danesh
20	Family	Primary education/ realtor	Primary education/ Housewife	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Kurdish Farsi	Farsi	Three sons and three daughters	Danesh

### 3.3 Data collection instruments

The data for the present research was collected through ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with parents. Ethnographic observations were undertaken by the Kurdish-native researcher at least twice over the span of three months for one to two hours. She took detailed notes after each observation to keep track of recurrent themes and emergent ideas. Initial observations of Kurdish-speaking families, along with interviewing them as part of piloting and reviewing the background literature, assisted us in better formulating the general objectives of the present research. The semi-structured interviews involved 21 questions and were divided into five distinctive parts. They reflected demographic information of participants, three components of Spolsky's (2004) language policy model, and the influence of a number of intra-family factors on FLPs in the home domain.

### 3.4 Data collection procedure and analysis

The study commenced with visiting and observing four participating Kermanshahi families. In each observation, fieldnotes about the linguistic interactions between parents and children were also kept that offered first-hand data and a good understanding of the population under investigation. Recruitment of the twenty Kurdish–Persian bilingual families meeting the aforementioned yardsticks was hard; hence, the Kurdish-native researcher asked her close relatives and friends to introduce more referrals. At the beginning of the study, the researchers established the assurance of data confidentiality by providing the general aim of the study to the participants. Then, interviews with both parents in each family were simultaneously carried out in the language that they preferred, i.e. either Kurdish or Persian. Ten parents were keen to speak in Kurdish during the interviews. Accordingly, informants were allowed to openly express their opinions and perspectives. Interview sessions lasted about 45 min and they were conducted at any time or venue preferred by the interviewees. The interview data was recorded with the full permission of families and transcribed by the researchers for further analysis.

Finally, the interview data and ethnographic fieldnotes were coded based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic approach. The initial step of data analysis started with a meticulous reading of the transcriptions and jotting down recurrent patterns and topics to create initial themes followed by a more systematic classification of themes.



## 4 Results

### 4.1 Research question one: language ideology

The first research question explores the Kurdish–Persian-speaking parents' language ideologies and beliefs about Kurdish and Persian and the values that they assign to each one. The results showed that the majority of the parents (19 families) stressed the importance of Kurdish as their heritage language. They explicitly noted that since Kurdish is their mother tongue, it is important to maintain and transmit it to their children. This general consensus of opinion among parents comes from the association of their HL with Kurdish identity. They believed that the preservation of the Kurdish culture and identity tied with the maintenance of the Kurdish language (see the following extracts).

Extract 1     **Family 10. Father:** *As Kurdish speakers, we have to try to keep our language and pass it on to our children. If we stop speaking Kurdish, we disgrace the state of Kurdish as our heritage language.*

Extract 2     **Family 14. Father:** *Kurdish is considered to be the main part of our own ethnic culture and identity, and the strongest tool with which we can establish solidarity among the Kurdish-speaking people. So we have to try to preserve it.*

Only a couple of parents (see extract 3), however, did not see any considerable benefits to follow their HL. Therefore, they were detached from their heritage language maintenance and had dispensed with the use of Kurdish totally or spoke it only with their own parents.

Extract 3     **Family 12. Mother:** *Our children don't have to be able to speak Kurdish. And we are not strict about the use of it. There is no room for Kurdish outside the home domain.*

Regardless of the parents' affinity with Kurdish, results for comparing the importance of Persian and Kurdish for children, also indicated that 32 parents attached great value to Persian. They asserted that they wanted their children to learn both languages, but they liked their children to be more proficient in Persian than Kurdish. Kurdish is regarded as the second important language. Even participating parents compared the status of Kurdish with that of Persian and believed that Persian enjoyed superiority over Kurdish. (e.g. extracts 4 and 5).

Extract 4     **Family 4. Father:** *As you know many parents want their children to be much more competent in Persian. Since Persian is the language of the country and it is widely spoken, its learning is awfully important.*

Extract 5     **Family 7. Mother:** *I want my children to be competent in Kurdish and Persian, but as the formal language, Persian is superior to Kurdish so they need to speak Persian very well. That is why I spoke Persian with my children at first.*

Several reasons for parents' language priority were mentioned in the interviews, (1) the high status of Persian and its practicality as the formal language (see extracts 4, 5, and 6), (2) Persian as the medium of instruction in the educational system (see extract 6), and (3) Persian as a prerequisite for better occupational opportunities (see extract 6).

Extract 6     **Family 13. Father:** *The use of Kurdish is mainly limited to the home. On the other hand, Persian is spoken at schools and it is the formal language. Certainly, Persian is superior to Kurdish. Good command of Persian provides better occupational opportunities for our children. They are the reasons that I gave priority to Persian.*

As pointed out by the parents, it can be deduced that the importance of Kurdish comes from its role as an identity marker, and acquiring Persian is vital because of its contributory and influential outcomes in children's future academic and professional life. Regarding language priority, the parents contended that acquiring Kurdish before Persian would negatively impact their Persian accent. Therefore, they would run into difficulties while entering the broader community outside the home domain. This drawback can lead to psychological problems since their children do not consider themselves a member of the Persian community and therefore feel frustrated (see extract 7).

Extract 7     **Family 3. Mother:** *If I had spoken Kurdish at first, my children would have had difficulties speaking Persian at school and their Kurdish accent would have been mocked by their peers. Also, they might have difficulty getting a good job in the future outside their hometown. As a result, irreparable mental effects would occur since my children would consider themselves separated members of society.*

However, eight participants acknowledged that children's proficiency in Kurdish is more important and Kurdish must be acquired before Persian (see extract 8). From their viewpoint, the acquisition of Kurdish is regarded as extremely more complicated than Persian since children receive Kurdish input solely from the

home domain and contextual exposure to Kurdish outside the home is limited. Additionally, the unavailability of educational support for the Kurdish language led to a laborious Kurdish learning experience. Accordingly, if Kurdish was acquired first, learning Persian would be undemanding. Conversely, giving priority to Persian would result in troubled Kurdish learning.

Extract 8      **Family 4. Father:** *I wish I had spoken Kurdish to my children at first because they could have learned Persian later. For example, my brother and his wife spoke Kurdish with their children from birth. Now, my nephews can speak Kurdish and Persian very well. But my daughters' proficiency in Kurdish is very low because I used Persian with them at first and now they find Kurdish very difficult to learn. Learning Kurdish takes place at home. Later, children can learn Persian at school.*

Extract 9      **Family 6. Mother:** *I always regret why I didn't speak Kurdish with my children. Learning Kurdish is difficult for them now. This learning is demanding due to the role of the Persian language. People in Kermanshah tend to speak the official language which is Persian. In addition, the instructional language at schools is Persian.*

The studied families were also asked to evaluate the vitality of Kurdish in Kermanshah. Most of them (35 parents) consented to the decline of Kurdish and believed that Kurdish is at a serious risk of attrition and loss in its original form in the city of Kermanshah. On the other hand, five (12.5%) participants (see extract 11), did not raise any concerns about the condition of Kurdish.

Extract 10      **Family 12. Father:** *Kurdish is less spoken and parents are not interested in transmitting Kurdish to their children. If this situation continues, Kurdish will disappear from the city of Kermanshah.*

Extract 11      **Family 16. Father:** *Kurdish is our heritage language and represents our cultural identity. I don't think people will allow Kurdish to fade. In my opinion, Kurdish is not in danger of extinction at all.*

Parents, who were bitterly disappointed at the current status of Kurdish, further sought to enumerate the main reasons which led to the gradual attrition of the Kurdish language. The stigmatized attitudes towards Kurdish among people in Kermanshah was the most frequently mentioned reason (55%) for the decline of Kurdish. Participating parents believed that the sense of social inferiority of Kurdish to Persian prompts Kurdish-speaking parents to place more reliance on the use of Persian (see extract 12). Moreover, sixteen (40%) participating parents

attributed the chief cause for the decline of Kurdish speakers to the shortfall of institutional support. And finally, integration into the Persian-speaking community was mentioned by two parents (extract 13). They believed that since Persian is widely spoken and it is the formal language of the country people tend to speak Persian (see extract 13).

Extract 12     **Family 8. Mother:** *Using Kurdish might mean that you come from a lower social class. That is why many people tend to use Persian. This negative attitude must be removed because it acts as a block to promoting Kurdish.*

Extract 13     **Family 14. Father:** *No room is available for Kurdish at schools and only Persian is spoken. Therefore, many parents prefer their children to be more competent in Persian. On the other hand, the role of the large Persian-speaking community is not imperceptible. Most families are pleased to integrate into the majority community.*

## 4.2 Research question two: language practice

The second research question investigates the Kermanshahi families' language choice inside the home domain. As for the parents' description of their language use, Table 2 indicates different patterns of language choice and practices used by families. According to the results, 80% of participants stated that Kurdish was used at home as the main medium for daily conversation among parents. Among the 20 families, Persian was mostly spoken by five parents in their interactions with their spouses. A mother reported using Persian with her husband due to her incompetence in Kurdish. The other four parents were unwilling to use Kurdish and shifted to Persian.

**Table 2:** Parents' language practices at home.

Language choice	Mostly Persian		Persian & Kurdish		Mostly Kurdish	
	F	P	F	P	F	P
With my spouse	5	12.5%	3	7.5%	32	80%
With my sons	15	37.5%	11	27.5%	6	15%
With my daughters	20	50%	4	10%	2	5%

F stands for Frequency and P stands for Percent.

However, when it comes to their children, a marked shift from Kurdish to Persian was observed. Parents did not insist that their children must always use Kurdish. Most parents used Persian with their children, whereas some mingled Persian with Kurdish (11 parents). Only a few families spoke exclusively Kurdish while talking to their children (Table 2).

All the interviewed families described a different distribution of Persian and Kurdish used by parents in their interactions with children. Fathers were found to be more inclined than mothers to speak Kurdish with their children and showed a stronger tendency to the maintenance of their HL (see extract 14). However, all the participants mentioned that mothers also seemed to be the main determiner of language use in the family and fathers followed the language patterns set by mothers in interacting with their children (see extract 15).

Extract 14      **Family 8. Father:** *Certainly the role of fathers in Kurdish language maintenance is more influential. Kurdish-speaking fathers are more willing than mothers to speak Kurdish with their children.*

Extract 15      **Family 10. Mother:** *Although fathers prefer to use Kurdish with their children, there are mothers who finally decide what language should be spoken with children, especially with newborn children. They also encourage their husbands to speak Persian with their children.*

The results of the reported language practices further indicated that children's HL proficiency was strongly associated with their age and gender. Most of the interviewed parents stated that in Kurdish–Persian speaking families, Kurdish is normally used with older children, however, parents opt for Persian to speak with younger ones. Therefore, older children are more proficient in Kurdish than younger children (e.g. extract 16). The room for children's improvement in the HL is prevailing as they grow up and they eventually become more competent in Kurdish.

Extract 16      **Family 20. Father:** *In my family, older children are more proficient in Kurdish than younger ones. As children become older they acquire a piece of good knowledge of Kurdish. I think the reason is that older children get many opportunities to be involved in Kurdish (language) interactions.*

The Kurdish parents also reported that they used Kurdish with their sons more than with their daughters. This also indicates a kind of gender difference in the use of language between females and males. Parents described that males have a stronger preference for Kurdish use and maintenance than females. For some boys,

using Kurdish is considered a sign of masculinity and virility, while for girls it is nothing more than a menace to their social face (see extract 18).

Extract 18      **Family 7. Mother:** *Boys want to preserve their manliness by the use of Kurdish while girls want to show that they come from a high-class background through the use of Persian.*

### 4.3 Research question three: language management strategies

Research question three explored the language management strategies adopted by parents in order to maintain their HL. Xiaomei (2017) underscored the crucial role of parents as the “language manager” to decide upon the dominant language at home and their management strategies make an impact on children’s language practices and beliefs. In response to the third research question, the results showed that most parents did not employ any explicit language strategies to reinforce Kurdish use in their children, and only 10 participants maintained that they pursued some language management strategies. The first common language management strategy adopted knowingly by the Kurdish-speaking parents was using their HL with children at home (see extract 19).

Extract 19      **Family 9. Father:** *We intentionally speak Kurdish with our children, although they respond in Persian.*

In one family, parents used the one-parent-one-language strategy. They explained that the father used Kurdish and the mother used Persian with their children. Two parents had planned to use translation and wanted their children to translate words or phrases from Persian to Kurdish. Three parents played Kurdish songs on purpose so they could provide more input for their children.

Although there were some explicit language management strategies among Kurdish families, parents implicitly passed on Kurdish to their children while using it to speak with each other in the family. All parents stressed the contributing role of this kind of implicitly planned input to children’s command of Kurdish. Other implicit language management activities that informants used were watching Kurdish-speaking TV programs and the use of Kurdish in their family gatherings.

Extract 20      **Family 17. Father:** *Since we are not really strict about our children’s Kurdish use, we do not use any special management activities or strategies on purpose. However, when my wife and I use Kurdish together we stir the use of Kurdish up among our children.*

## 4.4 Research question four: FLP and intra-family factors

The findings provide evidence for the ascendancy of some “intra-family factors” (Schwartz 2008) over the HL preservation and the dominant FLP at home among Kermanshahi families. These intra-family factors are explicated and discussed in the following sections.

### 4.4.1 Socio-economic milieu

Results of language ideologies and practices of the 20 families revealed that the socio-economic milieu in which they had grown could be a good predictor of what language they are disposed to use. The participating families who came from upward mobility leaned towards Persian and they also took more favorable language attitudes toward Persian. They explained that due to the high prestige of Persian, Kermanshahi people with higher social mobility were inclined to speak that language; however, the dominant language of downscale places was more Kurdish. One father explained that “since parents in downscale areas are not well literate, it is much easier for them to speak their first language”. As mentioned in the participants section, the upward mobility group of parents belonged to more educated and affluent families who resided in more expensive parts of the city whereas the downscale mobility group of parents were from middle class and lower economic and social classes.

### 4.4.2 Education system

The efficacy of the medium of instruction in the educational system is double-edged, boosting the transference of a language or damaging its linguistic status (Tsui and Tollefson 2004). In the current study, half of the participating parents held that the educational system brought about unfavorable effects on the preservation of Kurdish. They maintained that the absence of Kurdish from the educational and academic systems prompt Kurdish parents and children to rely heavily on speaking Persian (see extracts 21 and 22). This suggests the overwhelming predominance of the majority language over the minority language in education. Families mentioned this problem as a drawback of educational policies resulting in the disappearance of their mother tongue in academia.

Extract 21      **Family 3. Mother:** *Unfortunately, Persian is the only language of instruction at schools or universities and there is no place for Kurdish at all. I think heritage languages must be taught at schools too. This is a very effective way to pass them on to our children and preserve them.*

Extract 22      **Family 11. Father:** *In my point of view, schools can be as effective as families in transferring Kurdish. However, this is the shortcoming of our educational policies that Kurdish is not taught.*

The above interview extracts highlighted the importance of schools in preserving Kurdish as well as parental demand for instructional establishment of Kurdish in the schooling system. In addition, the unfavorable effects of the monolingual medium of instruction and the ineffective policies of education on HL have been closely observed. Undoubtedly, the lack of a literacy environment for speakers of regional languages restricts the opportunities for preserving their cultural heritage and mother tongue. Most parents wanted Kurdish to be taught as a separate subject of study, not as an instructional language. They explained that since Persian is the official language of the country, it is very important that their children have a good command of Persian. If the language of instruction were Kurdish, this would lead to difficulty in learning Persian. On the other hand, 12 parents denied the influence of the educational system on Kurdish maintenance. They believed that Persian and Kurdish are two separate linguistic systems and learning an HL is limited to home and is on the part of parents. Only eight Kurdish participating parents reported that the schooling system makes a favorable impression on the attitudes of their children towards Kurdish and encourages children to value their HL. They also mentioned that there are some male teachers who often speak Kurdish with their students.

#### 4.4.3 Persian-speaking community

On account of the high standing of Persian as the national language which is spoken over the country, the number of people who speaks Persian is greater than those speaking their mother languages. Accordingly, the plausible effects of the Persian-speaking community were taken into consideration. Twenty studied parents (50%) denied the potential effects of the Persian-speaking community on Kurdish (see extracts 23 and 24).

Extract 23      **Family 2. Father:** *Persian-speaking society exerts no influence on preserving or fading Kurdish because preserving the Kurdish language is more limited to the family.*

Extract 24      **Family 17. Mother:** *Kurdish and Persian are two completely separate linguistic systems and no reciprocal relationships exist between them.*



In this sense, families' responsibilities for transmitting their HL and the linguistic distinction between the two languages were the most frequently mentioned explanations for the neutral effect of the Persian-speaking community. On the contrary, 13 participants agreed on the detrimental effects of the Persian-speaking community. Here, the interviewees attached more value to Persian and agreed on the fairly general acceptance of Persian language use in social contexts. Thus, parents and children mostly prefer Persian, especially in their interactions outside the family domain. As a result, there would be a substantial drop in the number of people who speak Persian (see extract 25).

Extract 25      **Family 20. Father:** *Since the predominant language is Persian, every parent is trying to speak Persian with their children. Consequently, this results in the gradual disappearance of Kurdish.*

The second point which came up in a number of interviews is the stigmatized perception of Kurdish in Kermanshah (see extracts 26 and 27). Parents explained that owing to the prestige and value of Persian, speaking Kurdish might be translated into a low social status for those who speak it in a social context. Such a humiliating perception of the mother tongue has led to the limited use of Kurdish.

Extract 26      **Family 3. Mother:** *A number of Kurdish families refrained from using Kurdish in public because they want to hide their actual identity and show they come from a high social class.*

Extract 27      **Family 15. Mother:** *The existing negative attitude towards Kurdish, that people who speak Kurdish are not prestigious, results in the heritage language fading away among Kurdish families.*

These parents further explained that the Persian-speaking community has negatively influenced the purity of the Kurdish language. The parents explained that Kurdish is crammed with Persian borrowed words and many people unconsciously use them while speaking Kurdish (see extract 28). It should be noted that the current Kurdish dialect spoken in Kermanshah is replete with Persian words to the point that Kurdish is more intelligible to non-Kurds in Kermanshah when compared to the Kurdish in Sanandaj—another largely Kurdish-speaking city in western Iran.

Extract 28      **Family 7. Father:** *We are surrounded by many Persian-speaking people. We see that many words from Persian are borrowed for use in Kurdish and all these borrowed words are unknowingly replaced by their original Kurdish words.*

#### 4.4.4 Relatives

Almost all parents said that they mostly used Kurdish while talking to their relatives. It is commonly considered that relatives and family gatherings provide Kurdish input or encourage the children to learn Kurdish. As can be seen in extracts 29 and 30 below, relatives and family gatherings lay out a rich space for children to be exposed to Kurdish and also reinforce their desire to learn and speak their mother tongue.

Extract 29      **Family 4. Mother:** *Certainly, our relatives can have positive effects on preserving Kurdish because we mostly use Kurdish when we talk with our close relatives. As a result, our daughters are provided with Kurdish.*

Extract 30      **Family 10. Father:** *Since we only used to speak Persian with our son, he knew no Kurdish at first. But when he saw that his cousins could speak Kurdish, he tried to learn Kurdish. Now, he thinks Kurdish is his first language although he spoke Persian at first.*

#### 4.4.5 Peers and friends

Thirty-eight parents in this study underscored the role of their children's peers and friends as a significant contributor to enriching children's Kurdish language knowledge. Some parents even associated the vital role of their children's friends and peers with the extra use of Kurdish by their children when compared with the incentives created by the parents themselves in the home domain. However, they mentioned that the apparent effect of friends on children's Kurdish development was more noticeable in boys than in girls (see extracts 31 and 32).

Extract 31      **Family 18. Mother:** *My children's friends played a very important role in their Kurdish language learning. I can even say that friends motivated them to speak Kurdish.*

Extract 32      **Family 15. Father:** *The role of friends is really important. But this issue is completely different among girls and boys. Boys tend to speak Kurdish with their friends to construct a sense of masculinity. Contrarily, girls rely more on Persian since they don't want to ruin their social prestige.*

Interview extracts 31 and 32 demonstrate how parents associated their sons' Kurdish language use among their friends with their masculine potency. The

studied parents explained that Kurdish–Persian speaking boys demanded to flaunt their masculinity among their friends and speaking Persian could jeopardize this feeling. Therefore, such friendship would put pressure on boys to work on their Kurdish. When it comes to girls, however, the situation was totally different. Conversely, girls felt that speaking Kurdish would tarnish their social prestige among their friends.

#### 4.4.6 The media

There is a growing body of research on the influence of broadcasting media on language minorities (Amezaga and Arana Arrieta 2012; Salawu and Chibita 2016; Uribe-Jongbloed 2014). The role of media influence has been recognized from two different considerations. They are regarded to be a threat to minority languages or an opportunity to promote them (Cormack 2007). Despite the majority of the Kurdish population in Kermanshah, Zagros as the local TV channel of this province broadcasts only a small portion of its programs in Kurdish (at least two or three programs). In the current study, the participating parents evaluated the efficacy of their local TV channel in promoting Kurdish use. Although most families (36 parents) believed that Zagros could effectively influence the linguistic practices of the HL, they obviously expressed their dissatisfaction with its low-quality programs. They argued that Kermanshah’s local TV channel could produce better programs in Kurdish. The families held that the local TV channels of other Kurdish-speaking provinces—such as Sanandaj and Ilam—meet more satisfactory standards. In addition, several viewers reflected the insufficiency of Kurdish programs, and the use of Kurdish mainly for humorous topics was actually a sign of the Zagros TV channel’s weakness to promote the status of Kurdish.

Extract 33      **Family 4. Father:** *The use of Kurdish is limited. The programs for children are presented in Persian. Kurdish is mostly used for comedy TV shows. I can remember that “Kermanshah 20” was one of the people’s favorite TV shows screened a few years ago. This TV show was very good at attracting a large audience... However, I think this is a weakness of the Zagros TV channel since it limits the use of Kurdish to funny topics.*

Extract 34      **Family 11. Father:** *My family occasionally follows our local TV channel. I think the quality of the programs is low.*

Additionally, some parents strongly objected to the use of Persian in Zagros channel. They believed that since Zagros TV is the representative channel of a Kurdish-speaking province, the only presiding language should be Kurdish. As for

why Sanandaj and Ilam TV channels are more appealing, one of the parents mentioned that they use Kurdish in their programs more. On the other hand, four parents expressed no opposition to the use of Persian because they believed that there are also Persian-speaking citizens residing in Kermanshah (see extract 37).

Extract 35      **Family 16. Mother:** *As a local TV channel of a Kurdish-speaking province, all programs should be presented in Kurdish. Unfortunately, Persian is used more.*

Extract 36      **Family 3. Mother:** *There are other Kurdish local TV channels for the provinces of Sanandaj and Ilam and I prefer them to Zagros. Even my son is a big fan of the local TV channel of Sanandaj.*

Extract 37      **Family 14. Father:** *Kermanshah is a metropolis in the west of Iran. Both Persian-speaking and Kurdish-speaking people live here. I don't think Persian should be removed from the provincial channel.*

## 5 Conclusion and discussion

This study was set to explore the FLPs of bilingual Kurdish–Persian-speaking families in Kermanshah. Regarding parents' language ideologies, all families held strongly positive views on the transmission and maintenance of their HL to preserve their culture and identity as native speakers of Kurdish, a finding compatible with studies of other minority speakers in Iran (e.g. Mirvahedi and Jafari 2018; Rezaei and Bahrami 2019). It also revealed that respondents' underlying beliefs about their HL solely represent “the symbolic function of the heritage language as a link to the ethnic identity” (Gkaintartzi et al. 2016: 6). Although parents valued Kurdish, they differed in their eagerness for the embrace of their HL. More specifically, despite the parents' great attachment to the maintenance and transmission of Kurdish, they assigned a high priority to Persian and heavily relied on it while speaking to their children. In this sense, it could be interpreted that the studied parents hold a subtractive approach to Kurdish maintenance.

Most parents believed that learning Kurdish might interfere with the learning of Persian and if they introduced Kurdish to their children at first, they would speak Persian with a trace of a Kurdish accent. In that case, children might undergo psychological pressure outside the home domain due to the stigmatization of the Kurdish language in the city. This negative attitude towards Kurdish and Kurdish accented Persian was similarly found in Demirci and Kleiner's (1998) and Schluter's (2021) study in the context of Turkey where the Kurds have a minority

presence as opposed to the dominant Turkish speaking natives. However, several parents had reverse views. They explained that massive exposure to Persian is available for children and the restricted use of Kurdish outside home makes learning Kurdish burdensome. Hence, they thought that parents should initially use Kurdish with their children. In general, parents valued their HL and as Palviainen and Boyd (2013) have put it in the context of bilingual Swedish–Finnish speaking families, there was unity in the discourse of parents but diversity in their practice. The parent–children interactions in Persian might be inimical to the maintenance of Kurdish in the home domain and result in the replacement of Kurdish with Persian. Since the number of Kurdish native speakers has been declining, the participants in this study reported that their HL is being endangered for some considerable reasons including socially inferior attitudes towards Kurdish, the impacts of the Persian-language educational system, and the Persian-speaking community. The findings from Polat and Schallert (2013) show that the Kurds in the context of Turkey, likewise, were under the pressure of getting closer to the dominant Turkish speaking accent to identify themselves with the official national language, i.e. Turkish.

The disagreement between the expressed attitudes and actual linguistic practices arises from the benefits of speaking Persian in the context of Iran, which are reflected in many respects such as providing better occupational and educational opportunities as well as upward social mobility desire. Based on different parental linguistic practices with other family members, the study underlined the role of mothers as the major determinant of language choice and the role of fathers as the transmitter of the HL. Although prior studies viewed mothers as the ‘gatekeeper of language maintenance’ (Extra and Verhoeven 1999: 20) and signified their effective role in L1 transition (Gogonas and Maligkoudi 2020; Kaveh 2017; Nesteruk 2010), this study reached opposite results. The strong inclination of mothers to use Persian instead of Kurdish can be explained by the mothers’ sensitivity to the accomplishments of their children which are linked to a good command of Persian. On the other hand, Kurdish fathers in this study were keener on using Kurdish with their children.

When gender differences come to children, there was some reluctance on the part of girls to use Kurdish, especially outside the home context. Girls’ reluctance to speak Kurdish was mainly due to the social value and prestige attached to Persian, as the language of higher prestige, when compared to Kurdish. By contrast, boys attached their masculinity to the use of Kurdish. Such gender differences can be reinforced by the role of children’s peers and friends. Peer pressure provides boys with constant sources of Kurdish language input. Contrarily, girls encourage their peers to use Persian. This may reflect the findings noted in Çağlayan’s (2014) study that women are more likely to shift towards the language

that offers greater external prestige in the community. The role of gender in choosing the minority (Kurdish) or majority (Persian) language is an interesting and unique finding in the present research which can be further investigated.

The findings also showed a general pattern for Kurdish use by children of different ages. The older children had more prolonged exposure to their HL than younger children. In addition, younger children were more competent in Persian due to parents' language shift to choose Persian for newborn children. The findings support Óhifearnáin's (2013: 361) remarks that "minoritised languages are not as widely used as dominant ones among young people in bilingual and multilingual communities".

Considering Kurdish management strategies to encourage the HL use among children, only a few parents explicitly employed specific strategies. This suggests parents' less engagement in Kurdish maintenance. However, the results showed that all the families subconsciously passed Kurdish on to their children while using Kurdish with their spouses. This study also confirms that implicit and covert language planning efforts can imply "the default language practices in a family" (Curd-Christiansen 2018: 420).

Additionally, reports from the Kurdish-speaking parents in this study diminish the strong view on the home domain as the major context for HLM and marked the dependency of HL transition on varying factors. It was vividly found that the maintenance of Kurdish is multifaceted and the three elements of FLP along with other intra-family factors impact the HL development of Kurdish families. This inquiry shows the significance of educational policies embedded into Kurdish FLPs. In a similar vein, Gu and Han (2021) pointed out that family language planning is affected by language practices at school and the home domain is interconnected to other social contexts.

Consistent with the Group Socialization Theory (Harris 1995), it has been found that Kurdish–Persian bilingual children are more affected by the language practice of peer groups outside the home than parental language choice. The children shift from one language to another since they have a strong tendency to use the language which is spoken by their peers and friends. The findings from the present research show how children use either Kurdish or Persian via code-switching to align or misalign with their peers as similarly discussed by Nguyen and Hamid (2020) for Vietnamese school children when conversing with their ethnic peers in either school or other social community gatherings.

In the current study, the results indicated that peers or friends lead to the HL convergence or divergence for boys and girls respectively. Peer-based HL development in boys has roots in their sense of virility among their friends. On the other hand, girls' shying away from Kurdish comes from sensitivity to their social face. The role of Kurdish as a minority language, when compared with Persian as the

dominant and official language of the country, in bringing recognition can be also found in other Kurdish speaking countries in the region. In Turkey, for instance, the results from Kasper's (2021) research show that using Kurdish in the dominant Turkish speaking Turkey can trouble the assimilation for the Kurds and this even refrains them from opting for Kurdish names as it may affect their present and future social and work life in Turkey.

In this study, a negative attitude towards Kurdish was a matter of concern to some families. Such a humiliating perception of the mother tongue has culminated in the limited use of Kurdish and the reinforcement of this unfavorable perception as is the case in other similar contexts (see Chatzidaki and Maligkoudi 2013: 682). The findings demonstrated how societal language ideology can exert influence on language practices and language management strategies adopted by parents and outstrip their language attitudes. In spite of parents' favorable attitudes, the dim view on Kurdish among its community deters some families from transmitting their HL to the next generations.

As another intra-family factor, families underlined the presence of relatives in family gatherings that exposes children to Kurdish input and directly exerts a beneficial influence on the listening ability of the children. Finally, families further mentioned the vital role of provincial media in encouraging Kurdish culture and language; however, most of the parents believed that Zagros TV presents few or no engaging programs to promote HL use. Besides, the parents complained that most of the programs were mixed with Persian language. The Persianization attempts in TV programs has been discussed by Haddadian-Moghaddam and Meylaerts (2014) for Kurdistan province which is another densely populated Kurdish speaking province. They have provided interesting data about the proportion of Kurdish-only, Persian-only and bilingual programs in Kurdistan.

Besides the findings of the study, a set of recommendations can be presented for future research. The stated FLPs of the parents showed varying patterns of language use by Kurdish families while addressing different members. To attain a broader picture of the families' language practices, further attempts should be made to explore family interactions about diverse topics and in different settings. This study also presents empirical evidence of how Kurdish families' demographic variables such as gender, age, and their social strata are related to their language planning and policy. Since Kermanshah is diversely multi-religious, it is a question of future research to consider how families with different religions or from different religious sects (Shia or Sunni) would value their HL and what language policies they adopt. In addition, our results open up a gripping novel avenue of study focused on peers' influence over minority children's language choices, which determines to what extent a particular language used by bilingual children can be influenced by their peers. Given the importance of family structure, still more

studies are required to consider the presence of grandparents (Kaveh 2017) and older siblings (Kopeliovich 2010; Spolsky 2007) which have been viewed as the major sources of influence on children's HLM.

By investigating parental language ideologies, practices, and management strategies, this study has yielded profound insights into the FLP of Kermanshahi families and has provided a thorough understanding of the importance and influence of some intra-family factors on FLP. The findings further call Spolsky's (2004) theoretical framework of language policy into question that parental language practices and strategies are not inevitably in the same vein as their language ideologies. This study suggests that planned endeavors must be made to align parental language ideologies with their language practices and management for Kurdish maintenance. The contradictions between reported language beliefs and practices of parents could result in Kurdish language attrition among the next generations. There is also a need to ease the troubling gender differences in language use among parents and children which might be detrimental to HLM. It also implies that female speakers' Kurdish language development needs to be more supported by policy efforts. To achieve Kurdish language maintenance, it would be favorable to include Kurdish as a subject in educational institutions.

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