



Family language policy in the public eye: raciolinguistic ideologies at play

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

This study draws on a rare media incident in which an individual family language policy (FLP) became the subject of public discussion and debate. In an interview on Swedish national television (SVT2), Nadim Ghazale, a high-profile police officer of Lebanese background, was asked why he had decided *not* to speak in his “mother tongue”, Arabic, with his children. His answer sparked considerable media reaction. The aim of this article is to take the public debate sparked by Ghazale’s FLP decision as an empirical entry point into understanding how debates about multilingualism are the discursive battleground on which other identity issues are negotiated and contested. To this end, the study draws on critical discourse analysis and the notion of raciolinguistic ideology to demonstrate how the arguments advanced by Ghazale and those who reacted against his decision are informed by a raciolinguistic logic that mutually constitutes language, race and social class. A detailed analysis of relevant media data illustrates that language, appearance and naming serve as signs of differentiation contributing to the social positioning of *Otherness*. The analysis also offers an interesting counterpoint to discourses that view bilingualism as *intrinsically* advantageous to speakers. This is not to say that bi/multilingualism necessarily has drawbacks; rather, we should be careful about issuing too-quick verdicts of guilt to parents like Ghazale without fully appreciating the raciolinguistic ideologies at play in relation to a language like Arabic in Sweden.

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The stories of multilingual families that we read today in the literature on family language policy (FLP) are often about bilingual parenting and language socialisation processes among Western middle-class bilingual couples, migrant families and families from indigenous communities (for a review, see Lomeu Gomes, 2018). The focal points of these studies are largely implicit and explicit home language policies, language management strategies and the underlying language-related ideologies and beliefs informing caregivers' language policy decisions and actual home language use among family members (King & Fogle, 2013; King, 2016; Smith-Christmas, 2017). However, what happens *in the homes* of families with minority language backgrounds cannot be isolated from broader sociopolitical processes and prevailing discourses about multilingualism.

The nexus between FLP and societal perspectives on multilingualism became particularly palpable in 2021 in Sweden when Nadim Ghazale, a high-profile police officer of Lebanese background, was asked in an interview on Swedish national television (SVT2) why he had decided *not* to speak in his “mother tongue”, Arabic, with his children. It should be noted that Ghazale is a well-known public figure in Sweden after receiving considerable media success through his participation as an expert on police work in a popular TV show called *Veckans brott* (The Crime of the Week). At the age of seven, Ghazale came to Sweden from Lebanon with his parents, who fled from the civil war in Lebanon in the 1980s. He now lives with his wife, of Swedish background, and their two children in the western part of Sweden. Ghazale's arguments, in support of his language choice, immediately sparked a flurry of public reactions on a variety of media platforms. This is a rare example in which the FLP of an individual family transcends the home domain and is literally cast under the public eye.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to take the public debate sparked by Ghazale's FLP decision as an empirical entry point into understanding how debates about multilingualism in Sweden are the discursive battleground on which other identity issues are negotiated and contested. In what follows, we first give a brief overview of the notion of FLP in the context of Sweden's ideologies about multilingualism and migration. This is followed by a presentation of the conceptual framework that informs the analysis, coupled with a description of the research material. Finally, relevant excerpts from Ghazale's interviews and media reactions to them are presented, analysed and discussed.

RELEVANT CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

FAMILY LANGUAGE POLICY

FLP can be defined as “explicit and overt as well as implicit and covert language planning by family members in relation to language choice and literacy practices within the home domains and among family members” (Curd-Christiansen, 2018, p. 420). Here family can be conceptualised as “a space along the private-public continuum” (Lanza & Lomeu Gomes, 2020, p. 165), which means that what happens in the home should not be seen as an isolated event that takes place in a social vacuum (Mirvahedi, 2021). Reasoning along similar lines, Purkarthofer et al. (2022) argued that research on family multilingualism should conceive the family “as a space where the private and the public meet at the crossroads” (p. 19). The private/public nexus has been captured in Curdt-Christiansen's (2018) model (Figure 1), which grasps the dynamic relationship between FLP and the sociolinguistic, sociocultural, sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts in which language socialisation takes place.

In the specific case of Ghazale under investigation in this paper, his decision not to speak Arabic to his children could be taken as a typical instance of an explicit and overt FLP. Any language policy, be it private or institutional, is a choice informed by certain views and beliefs about a particular language. This is what Gal and Irvine (2019) and other scholars call language ideology. When we talk about language ideology in relation to the heritage language, it is not uncommon for speakers to have varied views about their heritage language and culture (see Canagarajah, 2019). Some assign a high value to it and seek to transmit it to their children, whereas others may consider their language and culture to be unrooted as a result of the process of migration. As such the heritage languages become *detranslocated* (Higgins, 2017) and are perceived as less worthy. As a result, parents may refuse to socialise their children in

their heritage language (Pillai et al., 2014), partly because these languages are seen as having a minimal function in socioeconomic integration in the new country or are even perceived as a social “burden” (Piller & Gerber, 2018, p. 623). Individual families’ language ideologies, however, cannot be fully separated from how majority society views migrants and their languages.

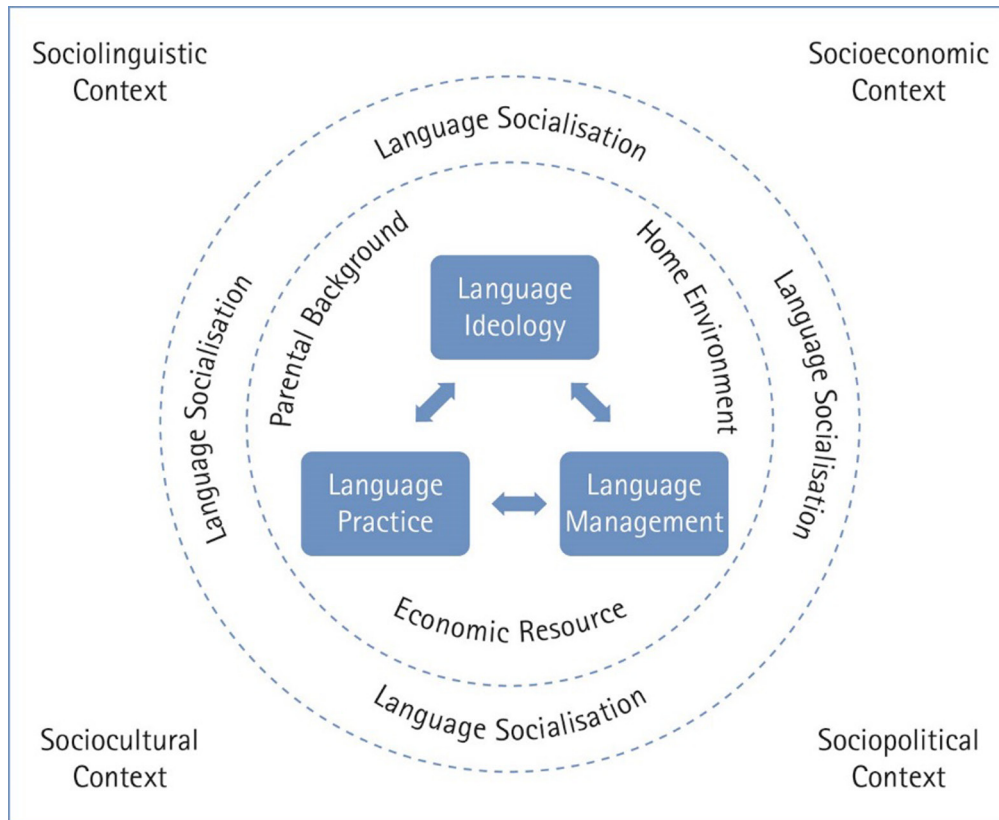


Figure 1 The interdisciplinary model of FLP Framework.

Note: From (Curd-Christiansen, 2018).

Sweden provides an interesting case in point in this respect, since it is a context that is often praised in the literature for its official recognition of multilingualism and multiculturalism (Milani & Jonsson, 2018). For example, Sweden is considered a role model internationally regarding the provision of mother tongue instruction (MTI) (Schalley, 2020), with over 150 different languages being taught as mother tongue subjects in school (Kheirkhah, 2016). The official promotion and support of multilingualism, however, has not been unanimously supported, as can be seen in media debates that question the worth of MTI (Straszer & Wedin, 2020). Arguments against MTI have been advanced mainly from right-wing parties, which portray MTI as (1) an obstacle to the learning of Swedish and to integration (Hedman & Magnusson, 2021), (2) “a path to alienation” for mother-tongue pupils since MTI class is scheduled outside ordinary school time (Hedman & Rosén, 2020, p. 31) and (3) a second-class subject vis-à-vis Swedish (Ganuza & Hedman, 2015; Vuorenperä & Zetterholm, 2020). Consequently, it is not surprising that the current centre-right government is considering abolishing MTI from the Swedish education system (Holmqvist, 2020).

Arguments against MTI are part and parcel of right-wing parties’ broader ideological agendas, which view migrants as lacking Swedish language skills and failing to integrate into Swedish society (Hedman & Rosén, 2020). From this ideological standpoint, Swedish is presented as the only language that migrants need (Milani, 2008). Conversely, varieties of Swedish associated with migrants, such as *suburban Swedish* (*förortsvenska*) and *suburban slang* (*förortslang*), are consistently presented in media debates in negative terms (see for example, Årman, 2018; Milani, 2008, 2010; Milani & Jonsson, 2012; Senter, 2022; Stroud, 2004). It is important to qualify that such negatively laden representations pertain specifically to migrants from the Middle East and Africa. As Milani (2020) argued, these migrants are perceived as “fundamentally external to the mainstream Swedish society and a threat to it” (p. 28). In light of this, Ghazale’s choice not to speak Arabic to his children and the concomitant reactions to it need to be understood in relation to this rather ambivalent ideological background at the societal level, one in which multilingualism is officially recognised in policy documents at the same time, as it is often

RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES

Over the last 30 years or so, the notion of language ideology has helped us theorise people's beliefs about language. As Woolard (1998) pointed out, language ideologies are never about language alone, but “envision and enact *ties* of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (p. 3, emphasis added). More recently, Flores and Rosa (2015) developed further the theorisation of language ideologies, pointing to their racialised underpinnings. Using the label “raciolinguistic ideologies”, Flores and Rosa (2015); Rosa and Flores (2017) underscored how European culture has co-naturalised language and race since the colonial period. As Rosa (2019) put it, “languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible, which results in the overdetermination of racial embodiment and communicative practice” (p. 2). In other words, raciolinguistic ideologies are stereotypical modes of perceptions and identifications towards certain bodies and communicative practices. Contemporary raciolinguistic ideologies manifested in various forms are continuations and extensions of European colonialism, and the racialisation of language is at the core of their colonial governmentality (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Thus, race and languages are the “colonial management schemas” of homogenising and differentiating people between normative Europeaness and raciolinguistic *otherness* (Rosa, 2019, p. 3).

Analytically, taking a raciolinguistic perspective entails shifting attention from the racialised subject *per se* to “the historical and contemporary processes that structure the co-naturalization of language and race across various social settings” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 641). From a raciolinguistic standpoint, the idealised white speaking subject, a norm that minoritised *others* are expected to emulate in terms of linguistic practices, is an important aspect of consideration, for instance, to scrutinise the ideology of standard language education, as in the case of the institutionally constituted notion of standard English (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Similarly, the perceiving white listening subject is also a crucial element in raciolinguistic analysis because it forces us to understand how the linguistic practices of the racialised *others* are perceived through “hegemonically positioned modes of perception” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 630). Taken together, the white speaking and listening subjects should be viewed as “an ideological position and mode of perception that shapes our racialized society” rather than biographical individuals (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 151).

Flores and Rosa (2015) further pointed out that their conception of raciolinguistic ideologies links “the white speaking and listening subject to monoglossic language ideologies”, in which monolingualism and the monolingual ideal serve as norms to which “all the national subjects should aspire” (p. 151). This is tied to the Herderian language ideology of one people, one nation, one language, which has been instrumental in European nation state formation (Mishra & Tan, 2020) and continues to have wide currency today. It is this monoglot ideology that “produces and regulates identities” in which the state often appears to be its guardian by imposing “particular ascriptive ethnolinguistic identities for its citizens” (Blommaert, 2006, p. 244). These reflections take us to another relevant concept referred to as raciolinguistic socialisation (Chaparro, 2019), which underscores how children are socialised in a sociolinguistic context in which raciolinguistic ideologies are pervasive; consequently, their language use is racialised and associated with race and class. This paper employs the notions of raciolinguistic ideology and socialisation to understand the underlying rationalisation behind Ghazale's FLP decision and the views expressed in the media's reactions to it. Analytically, raciolinguistic ideologies, like any other language ideology, are “recoverable” (Lanza, 2008, p. 51) by investigating metalinguistic discourses, that is, what people say or write about language. From this perspective, discourse can be seen as “a site of ideologies” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 158) or as “a means through which (in which) ideologies are being produced” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 450). To analyse metalinguistic discourse, we rely on a critical discourse analysis (CDA), to which we now turn.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In this study, we employ CDA as an analytical toolkit to scrutinise the reproduction of “deep-rooted discriminatory ideologies relating to minority languages” that are continuously

replicated by multilingual societies through various discursive means (Blackledge, 2008, p. 296). CDA investigates both the interactional and structural dimensions of social life by analysing the details of textual features that can be revealed through all forms of verbal and non-verbal language, including spoken, written texts and visual language production. As a semiotic artefact, text is built on both what is explicit and implicit, and using CDA not only enables the analysis of what is textually present, but also allows us to flesh out what remains “unsaid”, that is, the taken-for-granted assumptions (Fairclough, 2003, p. 11).

In his framework, Van Dijk (1995b, 2006) illustrates the various ways in which ideologies materialise in text or talk. The overarching strategy is to achieve “positive self-presentation and negative other-representation” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 126). This overall strategy takes form in what Van Dijk (2011, p. 397) calls an *ideological square* (Figure 2), in which the positive aspects of the *self* and the negative points about *others* are *emphasised*, whereas the bad traits about the *self* and the good qualities about *others* are *de-emphasised*.

	In-group Self	Out-group Others
Emphasise	Our (my) good things	Their (others’) bad things
De-emphasise	Our (my) bad things	Their (others’) good things

Figure 2 Ideological Square.

Note: From (Van Dijk, 2011).

These discursive strategies are achieved through various means, such as semantic moves (disclaimer, lexicalisation, implicitness, granularity, etc.), syntactic structure (argumentation, topicalisation, active vs. passive, etc.) and rhetorical figures (metaphors, hyperbole, repetitions, comparisons, etc. (Van Dijk, 2006). Consequently, self-serving information or arguments are enhanced, whereas unfavourable information about the *self* is glossed over or denied. The exact opposite is done to put the negative representation of *others* in the spotlight (Van Dijk, 1995a). The ideological square is applied below as an analytical tool to deconstruct the arguments put forward by Ghazale and those who counterargued his FLP decision.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

The material analysed in this paper has been taken from a corpus consisting of (1) two interviews Ghazale gave on Swedish national television (SVT, 2021, January 31) and on the Swedish radio programme, *Morgonpasset i P3*¹ (Sveriges Radio, 2021, March 02) and (2) four newspaper articles published in *Aftonbladet*,² *Dagens Arena*,³ *Dagens Nyheter*⁴ and *Hufvudstadsbladet*,⁵ a reportage published on *SVT Nyheter Väst*,⁶ a blog post on an online magazine called *Feministiskt Perspektiv*⁷ and 60 readers’ comments published on *Dagens Nyheter*. The textual materials that were published between 31 January 2021 and 30 June 2021 were retrieved from the large media database *Mediearkivet*,⁸ using the search terms Nadim Ghazale AND *min sanning* (my truth) and Nadim Ghazale AND *arabiska* (Arabic). It should be noted that Ghazale’s interview with SVT covered a wide range of issues ranging from his personal life to societal issues, and this study concentrates only on issues concerning their responses to his FLP decision. The radio interview, which took place days after SVT interview, was primarily about his FLP decision particularly in relation to media reactions following his interview with SVT and his response to it.

Concerning research ethics, both Ghazale’s interviews and the post-interview media reactions met the criterion of “reasonable expectation of publicity” (NESH, 2019, p. 10) since the data are taken from publicly accessible domains with a much wider audience than this paper. In relation to users’ expectation of publicity, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) also suggests that in the case of research focusing on publicly accessible archives or interactions that are intended by the authors as public, there may be less obligation to protect individual

privacy unless the communication is designated as private, for instance, in the case of closed chatrooms (Ess & Jones, 2004). Moreover, only translated versions of the extracts are presented to minimise the possibility of tracing content to the person who wrote the comment.

Finally, taking Ghazale's FLP decision and the media reactions that are geared specifically towards his FLP decision as the focal point of the study, key arguments put forward by Ghazale and those who reacted to his decision were identified, thematised and analysed with the help of Van Dijk's (2011) ideological square and the notion of raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

RESULTS

RACIOLINGUISTIC SOCIALISATION

A useful starting point for the purpose of this paper is the extract from the TV interview when Ghazale answered the journalist's question about the whys and wherefores of his FLP decision:

Extract 1

Journalist: *What does your father think about why you have not taught your children Arabic? Is it the hardest question of all?*

Ghazale: *Yes, it is [a] difficult [question]. He is sad about it.*

Journalist: *Why have you decided that?*

Ghazale: *It's complex... it's complex. In part, my relationship with Lebanon is complex. My relationship with my history, my language, is complex. I feel that, in Sweden today, Arabic is a huge asset for me. However, it is also a ridiculed language and a ridiculed people. One looks down on it ... It says very negative things about this particular group of people. As much as some people take Swedish names when they come to Sweden — just as much, I may want to save my children from ... what I have had to endure because of my language and appearance. You are protective as a parent. (SVT, 2021, January 31)*

Ghazale begins with a *disclaimer* in the form of an *apparent concession* (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 92) about the high value he ascribed to Arabic before explaining what made him decide otherwise. Moreover, in order to buttress his FLP decision and possibly pre-empt potential critique, Ghazale employs a rhetorical figure of comparison between what he did and the practice among some migrants in Sweden to change their names and surnames (Khosravi, 2012). These choices are aimed at coping with the stigmatisation and discrimination that come with speaking Arabic and having non-Swedish-sounding names. He further defends his decision by drawing on his daughter's wellbeing, saying that "you are protective as a parent".

Ghazale's rationalisation of his decision can be explained with the help of the notion of *raciolinguistic socialisation*, a process through which children are socialised in a social context in which language use is perceived through the lens of race and class (Chaparro, 2019). Such a language socialisation context is particularly evident in Ghazale's statement saying, "However, it is also a ridiculed language and a ridiculed people. One looks down on it.... It says very negative things about this particular group of people". This statement is not only the discursive manifestation of how Arabic and its speakers are perceived in Sweden, but also indicates how language ideologies circulating in the majority society ultimately shape the FLP decision-making process of a specific family (Curdts-Christiansen, 2018).

In explaining his decision, Ghazale refers to his own lived experience (lines 5-8). Such a personal reference can be taken as an example of what Gal and Woolard (2001) call the authority of authenticity. This is a discursive strategy through which a statement is imbued with *gravitas* through first-hand experience: in this specific case, what one feels when speaking Arabic and having particular physiognomic traits becomes subjected to public ridicule and stigmatisation, and this is a language socialisation experience that Ghazale tries to shield his daughter from. Yet, it could also be argued that Ghazale has internalised the views of a white listening subject that co-naturalises language and racial appearance (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Put simply, for Ghazale,

speaking Arabic is emblematic of a certain category of people (Rosa, 2019), which could make his children vulnerable to racism. As a result, he decided not to speak Arabic to them.

In a similar vein, during an interview with the Swedish radio programme *Morgonpaset I P 3*, Ghazale stated the following in more explicit terms, summing his experience of speaking Arabic in Sweden.

Extract 2 *In my life, I have experienced that when I speak Arabic, I have been treated worse, and that is something I want to protect my children from.*
 (Sveriges Radio, 2021, March 02)

Relying once again on the authority of authenticity, Ghazale unequivocally stated why he reached a decision that he believes protects his children from the kind of experience inflicted upon him. What is particularly interesting in the above extract is how racialised otherness is indexed through three signs: language, appearance and name-changing practices. Quite unsurprisingly, Ghazale's reasoning was met by a wide range of counterreactions. Fredriksson (2021), a Korean adoptee who claims to have been through a racial profiling experience, was one of the many viewers who felt provoked by Ghazale's interview and thus wrote a blog post to counter his reasoning:

Extract 3 *I understand Nadim Ghazale in that I, like many others, visibly racialized adoptees did everything in my power not to deviate in a way that could make me a target. However, it probably doesn't help much not to teach the children Arabic; it is not the language that makes them vulnerable to racism. I don't speak a word of Korean and that hasn't made me any less vulnerable to racism. Everyone chooses their own strategy, but when it comes to racism, it does not matter what language you know, what name you have or how much herring you eat. It is about how your appearance is perceived. That is what racial profiling is.* (Fredriksson, 2021, paragraph 6)

As can be inferred from the extract above, the author disagrees with Ghazale, arguing that neither a Swedish-sounding name nor native-like proficiency in Swedish can guard one from racism as long as one's physical appearance does not match the listening subject's expectations. Thus, language as a unique sign of identification is downplayed, whereas physical appearance is emphasised (Van Dijk, 2011). In order to buttress this claim, Fredriksson employs the strategy of authority of authenticity by referring to how her lack of knowledge of Korean has not protected her from racial profiling. According to Fredriksson, it does not matter how well you speak Swedish, how well integrated you are in Swedish culture (as implicated through the expression "how much herring you eat") or whether you have a Swedish-sounding name or not. Ultimately, the main mechanism underpinning racial profiling is how the speaking subject is physically perceived by the white listening subject. Put differently, raciolinguistic ideologies operate in such a way that those who are phenotypically perceived as ethnically non-Swedish become subjected to racism regardless of their conforming to Swedish language and cultural norms.

Similar comments were made by other commentators in an article published in the Swedish daily, *Dagens Nyheter*, entitled "Omöjligt att skydda barnen" (Impossible to Protect Children).

Extract 4 *This is not about speaking Arabic but about looking like an Arab. That is where racism lies.* (Ziab, 2021)

Analogous to what Fredriksson said in Extract 3, Ziab claims that it is how one looks in the eye of the listening subject, not how one sounds in the ear of the listening subject, that undergirds racism. Thus, speaking Arabic is again *de-emphasised*, whereas "looking like an Arab" is *emphasised* (Van Dijk, 2006, 2011) and is thereby portrayed as the prime factor in racial profiling. The expression "looking like an Arab" is a direct reference to Ghazale and indicates that it is his appearance, not his language, that exposed him to racism. Other commentators also made comments underscoring physical appearance.

Extract 5 *Unfortunately, Nadim Ghazale is mistaken if he thinks it is the language that triggers racists. It is the appearance that is the problem. People who can be identified as originating from Africa and the Middle East are attacked even if they speak good Swedish.* (Swensson, 2021)

Consistent with earlier comments, the appearance of the racial *other*, with particular reference to people from Africa and the Middle East (Extract 5), is construed as the key mechanism in racist practices, irrespective of how well one speaks Swedish. Overall, Ghazale's pronouncements and the statements made by those who reacted to him have three elements in common: appearance, language and naming. These three signs of differentiation are arguably indicated as factors that could expose people to racial profiling or *raciolinguistic profiling* (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

In a similar vein, Rosa and Trivedi (2017) stated that the identities of people with migration backgrounds are still perceived through the Herderian language ideology of one people, one nation, one language. Such a stereotypical ideology frames the listening subject's expectation of a linguistic behaviour of the speaking subject that "associate[s] the particular linguistic practices, places and populations with one another" (Rosa & Trivedi, 2017, p. 332). Similarly, in their study of people with mixed heritage identities, Tsai et al. (2021) stated that the racial identities of these people are often questioned, particularly whenever their language practices or physical appearances appear incompatible with the listening subject's normative expectations of linguistic behaviour and physical appearance. Likewise, linguistic behaviour influences how the listening subject perceives the speaking subject in terms of racial/ethnic identity. Tsai et al. (2021) further indicated that "when the speaking individual has an ambiguous racial appearance, a listening subject may use a speaker's linguistic practices to ascribe a racial/ethnic identity" (p. 2).

Despite viewers' insistence on the importance of physical appearance over the linguistic aspect in terms of perpetuating racism, as shown in earlier extracts, a closer look at Ghazale's television interview reveals that Ghazale also espouses a similar view about the possible role of skin colour in vulnerability to racism, as shown in the next section.

"YOU ARE AS LIGHT AS YOUR MOTHER": RACISM IS ABOUT WHERE ONE IS LOCATED ON THE SKIN COLOUR SPECTRUM

During the television interview, Ghazale shared the following conversation he had with his daughter about the Black Lives Matter movement, which seemed to be reflective of the spectrum-based racial logics (Rosa, 2019) that stratify and locate people based on their phenotypical characteristics.

Extract 7 *My daughter asked me during Black Lives Matter this summer, "Dad, are you Black?"*

"No, I'm brown!"

"Am I brown?" she said.

Then I said, "No, you are as light as your mother." Because she is.

I think it is nice because maybe she will escape racism. Then, it is only my last name that they [Ghazale's children] will bear. (SVT, 2021, January 31)

As can be inferred from his account of the dialogue with his daughter, Ghazale seems to be positive about the skin colour of his daughter in terms of where she is located on spectrum-based racial logic (Rosa, 2019) that follows a skin colour continuum. Ghazale positions her phenotypically proximate to whiteness, which is a step away from his categorisation of himself as "brown". He assumes that his daughter might escape racism because of her closer phenotypic resemblance to her Swedish mother. This is a clear empirical example that supports Rosa's (2019) point that "some groups and bodies come to be positioned as desirable for their perceived mixed-race status and proximity to whiteness" (p. 3).

Thus, drawing on his statements (Extracts 1 and 7), Ghazale seems to be relieved from two sources of worry or possible signs of differentiation that could expose his children to racism: physical appearance and speaking Arabic. On the other hand, Ghazale is adamant about passing on his surname to his children, despite being aware of the possible role that naming

may play in making people vulnerable to racial profiling (see Extract 1). Along a similar line concerning these signs of differentiation, Rosa and Flores (2017) pointed out that the practices of raciolinguistic profiling “involve assemblages of signs that bundle together to position individuals in various ways depending on the context” (p. 636), implying that the perceiving white listening subjects recruit multiple semiotic forms to identify the racial others. With this, we move to the next section and analyse Ghazale’s stance and viewers’ perspectives on the co-naturalisation of naming and linguistic identity.

WHAT’S IN A NAME? THE CO-NATURALISATION OF NAMING AND IDENTITY

That names matter can be seen in the pervasive name-changing practices in Sweden among many migrants (see Khosravi, 2012), which are directly connected to Swedish employers’ negative attitudes towards Arab/Muslim-sounding names (Rooth, 2007). Because of the possible religious and ethnic connotations that names carry, some Muslim migrants in Sweden change their surnames to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination. Pertaining to naming, Ghazale said the following:

Extract 8 *The only thing they [his children] have of me is the last name, of which I am very proud. (SVT, 2021, January 31)*

For Ghazale, bearing a non-Swedish-sounding surname is a potential sign of differentiation that could make his children vulnerable to racism, as it may reveal their affiliation with raciolinguistic *otherness* (Extract 1). However, unlike his stance on Arabic, he is keen to pass on his last name to his children, which he sees not only as the main index of their Lebanese heritage, but also as an important element of fatherly pride. Ghazale’s decision to keep his surname was dismissed by many commentators.

Extract 9 *What new pains are created by being a child of a Lebanese and having an Arabic surname of your father but [having] no access to the language, the culture? Such a huge part of the identity is erased. (Shams, 2021, paragraph 6)*

Extract 10 *I do not know how many times my Syrian relatives have shaken their heads and sighed, haram (mortal sin), when I uttered a few words in Arabic. They felt that it was my father’s duty to teach me Arabic. And they are right. Without the language, I am doomed to be just an empty shell of an Arab man. (Al Fakir, 2021, paragraph 9)*

Shams (2021) construed Ghazale’s FLP decision as self-conflicting because, on the one hand, Ghazale is proud of his Lebanese surname, but on the other hand, his daughter is “denied” access to her heritage language and culture. Put differently, this is an ideological view that pairs naming and linguistic behaviour as mutually recognisable entities that essentialise the link between these two identity markers as indexical. The hyperbolic expression “What new pains are created” is a way of emphasising the negative aspects of Ghazale’s decision. Similarly, in the statement “Without the language, I am doomed to be just an empty shell of an Arab man”, Al Fakir (2021) essentialises language as a core attribute to identity claims, thereby positioning himself and, by extension, Ghazale’s daughter as persons with inauthentic Arab identities. The noteworthy ideological work done by these counterarguments lies in the presupposition about the indexical link between one’s name and the specific linguistic identity, in that the person in question is supposed to embody both identity markers simultaneously. Overall, the above extracts suggest that the arguments against Ghazale’s FLP are informed by an ideology that essentialises heritage language knowledge as a core attribute of ethnic and cultural identity claims.

THE IDEOLOGY OF BILINGUAL ADVANTAGE

The other aspect that came into play in the discussion about Ghazale’s FLP was the ideology of bilingual advantage. During the television interview, Ghazale was asked about his decision from the perspective of being bilingual. While there is no official statistical data about language use in Sweden, there are indications that Arabic is the second most widely spoken language after Swedish (Parkvall, 2019), with an approximate number of 430,000 Arabic speakers.

Extract 11

- Journalist: *They have a Swedish mother, they were born here, and they, of course, speak perfect Swedish. Is it not a disadvantage not to have a second language?*
- Ghazale: *No, it is not a disadvantage. Speaking Arabic has not always been an advantage for me. You get different expectations for yourself, at least as a police officer. If you speak Arabic and look like one, you are associated with a particular image, and it can be negative. If I speak Arabic and look like one, is it to my disadvantage? Then maybe you think I let things slide more than other police officers do. You are not equated with the others.* (SVT, 2021, January 31)

Here, Ghazale points out that speaking Arabic as a police officer in Sweden constitutes marked linguistic behaviour: it is a sign of linguistic differentiation that deviates from what is expected of a police officer. In this sense, it is not so much an advantage but a disadvantage that invites people to form a negative view about the speaking subject. Put differently, speaking Arabic as a police officer could make people question his professional integrity. What transpires here is how raciolinguistic ideologies not only mutually constitute language and race but also tie them to professional identities and social class. A vivid example has been provided by Rosa (2019), who convincingly demonstrated how young Latino students in Chicago are wrongfully perceived as nothing but “gangbangers and hoes” (p. 11) purely based on how they look and speak. Similarly, Ghazale seems to believe that speaking Arabic would make people think that he is untrustworthy as a police officer. In such a way, Ghazale complicates the view that bilingualism necessarily brings with it an advantage to speakers. Commentators, however, did not agree with him.

- Extract 12 *Unfortunately, he does his children a great disservice by not giving them access to one of the world’s widely spoken languages and the opportunity to communicate with their relatives in their language* (Ängfors, 2021).

Here the portrayal of Ghazale’s decision as doing a “disservice” to his children is based on an ideological position that underscores the merits of being bilingual. The argument is further advanced by *emphasising* Arabic as one of the most widely spoken global languages and its usefulness in maintaining ties with extended family members. Interestingly, this commentator highlighted the merits of knowing Arabic without taking into account any of the points raised by Ghazale (Extract 11). Similar views about bilingualism also transpire in other comments:

- Extract 13 *Heavy reading. This thing about not learning another language is an incredible pity. An entire world is closed. And what do you get in return for it?* (Ziab, 2021)
- Extract 14 *I understand that it may feel like a remedy for many, but it closes so many doors at once.* (Mansur, 2021, paragraph 8)

The use of the hyperbolic expressions of “heavy reading” and “incredible pity” (Extract 13) are discursive strategies invoked to *emphasise* or enhance the negative aspects of Ghazale’s FLP decision. Similarly, the use of the metaphors “the entire world is closed” (Extract 13) and “it closes so many doors” (Extract 14) are ideological traces of the belief that knowing more languages widens one’s worldviews and increases socioeconomic opportunities. Similar views are also present in the following comments.

- Extract 15 *I think I can rattle off fifteen different ways of saying “darling” in Persian, and I cannot imagine hiding all those words from my children.* (Shams, 2021, paragraph 11)
- Extract 16 *In most contexts, it is a wealth to be able to speak and understand this language, even here.* (Magnusson, 2021, paragraph 6)

In Extract 15, the idea that a language indexes a particular worldview is expressed through a reference to the many Persian words that mean “darling”. In saying so, the commentator also contributes to conveying the feeling of being a good and affectionate parent. As such, it is a discursive strategy to achieve “positive self-representation” (Van Dijk, 1995b, 2006). By extension, Ghazale is implicitly assumed to be a bad father who might be hiding not only words but a whole language from his children. While Extract 15 highlights the positive affective aspect of the intergenerational transmission of a minority language, Extract 16 brings up the issue of economic advantage connected to proficiency in a widely spoken language like Arabic, even in a context like Sweden.

While one should not deny the social and linguistic advantages connected to bi/multilingualism (see e.g. Diamond, 2010), all comments seem to have ignored the raciolinguistic implications of speaking Arabic in post-9/11 Sweden, where perceptions against its speakers have become increasingly negative (Larsson, 2005). Despite the fact that language-induced racism was the core rationalisation behind Ghazale’s decision, this aspect of the argument was largely ignored by commentators who espoused the ideology of bilingual advantage. However, one should not ignore the raciolinguistic complexities of bi/multilingualism and their actual materialisation in people’s lives. The point is that we should always be wary of perspectives that univocally celebrate bi/multilingualism without sufficiently recognising the social injustices that linguistic minorities may experience (Piller 2016).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Focusing on a rare media incident in which the FLP of an individual family became the subject of public discussion and debate, this article has taken the public debate sparked by Ghazale’s FLP decision as an empirical entry point into understanding how debates about multilingualism in Sweden are the discursive battleground on which other identity issues are negotiated and contested. With the help of van Dijk’s (2011) ideological square and the notion of raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), the analysis demonstrates that the racialisation of communicative practice in Arabic and the negative perceptions associated with it and its speaking subjects appear to be the main issues underpinning Ghazale’s FLP decision about refusing to socialise his children into Arabic. Hence, Ghazale’s FLP decision can be better understood through raciolinguistic socialisation, which describes a sociolinguistic context in which raciolinguistic ideologies are pervasive; consequently, children’s language use is perceived through the lens of race and class (Chaparro, 2019). By contrast, those who argued against Ghazale’s choice emphasised physical appearance as the main trigger of racism and ignored the possible role that speaking Arabic as well as having a non-Swedish-sounding name may play in exposing people to racial profiling. This is not to say, though, that Ghazale completely ignored physical appearance. In sections of his interview, it became evident how his positive evaluation of his daughter in terms of where she is phenotypically located in spectrum-based racial logic led him to assume that her resemblance to her Swedish mother might help her to avoid racism.

Moreover, the analysis illustrates the presence of an ideology of bilingual advantage as well as an ideological view that essentialises language knowledge as a core attribute to ethnic and cultural identity claims in the media commentaries against Ghazale’s standpoint. However, Ghazale complicates the ideology of bilingual advantage by arguing that speaking Arabic in Sweden perpetuates racism by serving as a readily distinguishable sign of professional otherness. What is interesting is that both Ghazale and his critics relied on their authentic lived experiences of racism to imbue their claims with authority. Moreover, all the data suggest that language, appearance and naming are “attributed racial characteristics” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 87) that are subjects of scrutiny in the ears and eyes of white listening subjects. As Rosa and Flores (2017, p. 630) pointed out, white listening subjects not only overdetermine the identity of racial *others* through linguistic signs and phenotypical characteristics, but also recruit “a wider range of semiotic forms” to homogenise or stratify people via various signs of difference, among which naming is one.

Concerning the maintenance of heritage language in the context of migration, the findings suggest that the process of language socialisation in minority languages is not merely a matter of a private FLP decision that can be exercised based on individual dispositions and beliefs; rather, it needs to be understood against the broader backdrop of prevailing language ideologies and identity-related discourses that circulate in a given society (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). Put differently, Ghazale’s decision is not a private FLP matter, but rather a clear manifestation of the

family as a space between the private and the public (Lanza, 2021; Purkarthofer et al., 2022) where the sociolinguistic and the sociopolitical processes shape what happens in it (Curd-Christiansen, 2018; Mirvahedi, 2021). As Ortega (2020) noted, minority language speakers “are the likely targets of cumulative daily putdowns related to their language in intersection with other minoritized markers of identity, such as their ethnicity, race, or immigrant or otherwise minoritized status” (p. 38). In this respect, Ghazale’s personal account of the ways in which he has been treated while speaking Arabic (Extract 2) can be taken as an illustration of what Ortega (2020, p. 38) describes as “the daily putdowns” that minority language speakers experience.

Overall, this study reveals the intricate dimension of practising FLP in the context of migration, since communicative practice in minority languages is not only a means of fostering identity expression and continuity in the heritage language and culture, but also a linguistic practice contributing to the social positioning of *otherness*, as implicated in Ghazale’s statement about what it could mean speaking Arabic as a police officer in Sweden. Consequently, Ghazale’s lived experiences serve as a counterpoint to discourses that view bilingualism as *intrinsically* advantageous to speakers. This is not to say that bi/multilingualism necessarily has drawbacks; rather, we should be careful about issuing too-quick verdicts of guilt to parents like Ghazale without fully appreciating the raciolinguistic ideologies at play in relation to Arabic in Sweden. As Piller (2016) warned, “If we do not understand how linguistic diversity intersects with social justice and if we are unable to even recognize disadvantage and discrimination on the basis of language, we will not be able to work toward positive change” (p. 5). Ultimately, the findings in this article have unearthed some of the complexities surrounding the intergenerational transmission of a minority language, such as Arabic, in Sweden.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

... longer pause

[text] Text added by the researcher to clarify

NOTES

- 1 *Morgonpasset i P3* (literally ‘Morning Pass’) is a morning radio programme in Swedish Radio P3, which broadcasts during weekdays from 06.30 am to 10.00 am (<https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/om-morgonpasset-i-p3>).
- 2 *Aftonbladet* (literally ‘Evening Paper’) is a Swedish daily newspaper published in Stockholm and is one of the largest daily newspapers in the Nordic countries (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aftonbladet&oldid=1074361953>).
- 3 *Dagens Arena* (literally ‘Today’s Arena’) is a Swedish online magazine that started in 2007. The newspaper claims having an independent stance on its investigative journalism, news, opinions and other genres (<https://www.dagensarena.se/om-dagens-arena/>).
- 4 *Dagen Nyheter* (literally ‘News of the Day’) is a Swedish daily newspaper published in Stockholm. It is one of the largest morning newspapers in Sweden, with a wide distribution across the entire country (https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Dagens_Nyheter&oldid=1065680621).
- 5 *Hufvudstadsbladet* is a daily Swedish-language newspaper in Finland with the highest circulation in the country. *Hufvudstadsbladet* can be approximately translated as ‘Journal of the Capital’. It is headquartered in Helsinki (<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hufvudstadsbladet&oldid=1051195528>).
- 6 *SVT Nyheter Väst* (literally ‘SVT News West’) is one of the regional news bulletins of the Swedish National Television (SVT) that broadcasts regional news from Gothenburg, and the Västra Götaland and Halland regions. (https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sveriges_Television&oldid=1068536629).
- 7 *Feministiskt Perspektiv* is an online non-partisan, independent feminist news magazine published twice a week, every Tuesday and Thursday. The magazine was established in 2011 to promote feminist journalism and education (<https://feministisktperspektiv.se/om/faq>).
- 8 *Mediearkivet* is a database where newspaper articles published after 1981 can be accessed in full text. This media archive is the Nordic region’s largest digital news archive containing printed newspapers, magazines and business press. In the Media Archive, you can search for articles from all major daily newspapers, regional newspapers and hundreds of magazines. In addition, there is access to additional media channels that complement the printed material: Swedish web archive, blogs and TV/radio. <https://www.ub.gu.se/sv/databaser/mediearkivet>.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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