Digital storytelling: Multilingual parents' blogs and vlogs as narratives of family language policy

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Introduction

Sociolinguistic approaches to studying narratives, in particular migrant narratives, have contributed to understandings of how individuals use language to negotiate identity, agency and power in their presentation and positioning of the self in social experiences (De Fina 2003; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012; Golden & Lanza 2012, 2013, 2015, 2019; Lanza 2013). Narrative analysis has evolved over the years and transcended monologue focused stories to stories embedded in conversation, from big stories to small stories – from a focus on narrative as text to narrative as social practice (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2015). Sociolinguistic research on multilingualism has also been transformed in recent years, as pointed out by Martin-Jones and Martin (2017), through epistemological shifts to ethnographic and critical approaches, with a growing focus on the study of the social, cultural and linguistic changes brought in by globalization: transnational migration of populations, changes in the political and economic landscape, and especially new communication technologies. Against this backdrop, narratives have received increasing attention in the literature with storytelling in the *digital age* presenting new challenges and opportunities to narrative analysis (Page 2015, Alexander 2017, De Fina & Perrino 2017, Lambert & Hessler 2018). With the advent of the digital age and the affordances of new communication technologies, online blogs and vlogs provide gratuitous platforms for individuals to engage with the public, create virtual communities on a multitude of topics, and position the self in regards to these topics through personal digital storytelling (Eisenlauer & Hoffmann 2010, Barrett 2019). As Page (2015: 329) points out, such online stories "exemplify the

increasing range and diversity of storytelling practices employed at the turn of the twenty-first century, providing case studies against which scholars can test existing definitions and frameworks for narrative analysis".

Blogs (short for *weblogs*) are a product of the World Wide Web, characterized by chronologically organized texts that are published on a regular basis. As Rettberg (2014, p. 5) points out, "A blog consists of more than words and images. It cannot be read simply for its writing, but is the sum of writing, layout, connections and links and the pace of publication". Blogs may contain embedded video segments and indeed some platforms are focused vlogs (short for *videologs*), often found on YouTube channels. As Alexander (2017, p. 48) notes, "Blogging may well be the most visible and accessible form of Web 2.0 storytelling". Limberg (2019) extols the value and power of narrative in successful blogging, stating "Pack any bit of information you want to pass on to your reader into a story, and it will stay with him. Stories mean emotion, and emotion means deeply engraving the lesson into your reader's brain". There is even a website to help people create blogs that is called "Narrative".[1] A blog may be analyzed in its entirety as an overall narrative involving the blogger's presentation of self while individual stories in the blog may be subject to analysis. Analyzing these online multimodal platforms as narratives does indeed present a challenge, but both blogs and vlogs are truly treasure troves for understanding social experiences in contemporary society when one takes "socially minded linguistic approaches to narrative" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012, p. 1).

In light of international mobility, many online communities have formed, including a diversity of transnational families, many of which actively seek advice online on how to raise their children bilingually/ multilingually. Some parents relate their experiences online in raising bilingual/ multilingual children and propose in their view how to successfully raise children to use more than one language in the home. On the research front, the study of family language policies and practices in multilingual families has burgeoned in the past years (King, Fogle & Logan-Terry 2008; Curdt-Christiansen 2013; King and Fogle 2016; Lanza & Li Wei 2016; Lanza & Curdt-Christiansen 2018; Lanza and Lomeu 2020) and there is an increasing amount of attention paid to multilingual families' use of social media for communication (Lanza & Lexander 2019; Lexander & Androutsopoulos 2019, Palviainen 2020). However, there is a stark absence of analyses of online blogs and vlogs in which parents narrate their experiences in raising bilingual/multilingual children and present ideas on what they perceive as successful family language policies. These online platforms provide opportunities for the presentation of self, and negotiations of identity, agency and expertise. Kurtz, Trainer,

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1   https://narrative.so/

Beresford, Wutich & Brewis (2017, p. 1) point out: "Online research is an area of increasing interest to qualitative social science researchers, but is still underexplored, especially given its importance in everyday life for billions of people". At the same time, doing research on such online data presents both methodological and ethical challenges, as they emphasize. Nonetheless, these online sites offer new opportunities for addressing issues surrounding the social construction of multilingual parenting and family language policy. In this article, I will argue for the importance and indeed necessity of bringing blogs and vlogs to analysis in multilingual family language policy research.

In the following, I will first present some theoretical background for studying the (multilingual) family online as a (public) space, examining how (multilingual) families have figured in mediatized discourses as well as in blogging and vlogging. Subsequently, I move on to methodological and ethical issues to take into account in dealing with online data, particularly blogs and vlogs. Then, I focus on multilingual parents' blogs and vlogs as narratives of family language policy. In conclusion, I point to the importance of addressing these new digital arenas of discourse and suggest various directions this line of inquiry could take in further research.

The family as a public space: mediatized discourses on families, and blogs and vlogs

Space is dynamic, rather than static; it is negotiated between actors with their discursive power, material constraints and spatial practices. (Social) space is seen as one relevant axis of analysis of social interaction and understood as a dynamic documentation of social forces, both historically grounded and performed over time (Lefevbre 1991; Massey 2005). The notion of space has been drawn into applied linguistics research. In regards to language learners, Canagarajah (2013) points out: "Migrants enjoy agency to negotiate the differing scales and indexical orders to their advantage and reconstruct space. They make spaces for their places, voices and norms as they contest dominant language ideologies and orders". The relationship between space and language ideologies is addressed in Li Wei's (2018, p. 23) definition of a *translanguaging space,* "... a space that is created by and for Translanguaging practices, and a space where language users break down the ideologically laden dichotomies between the macro and the micro, the societal and the individual, and the social and the psychological through interaction". As parents and children move through social and geographical spaces, they encounter different language ideologies and different language regimes. Through language use and everyday actions, spatial practices contribute to the construction of (safe) family

spaces, and make them recognizable to speakers (Purkarthofer 2017). Citing Lanza and Svendsen (2007)'s study on language maintenance and social networks, Higgins (2017, p. 113) points out the need "to consider networks from a spatial perspective, including people's virtual communities" in research on language, space, place, and migration.

The family is arguably one of the most private of spaces we navigate in, and was considered a private domain by Fishman (1972). While some scholars denounce "Fishmanian sociolinguistics" in light of current globalization and mobility, the concept of the domain, a cluster of settings and relationships affecting language choice, is still used in sociolinguistic research. The conceptualization of the family as a private domain, however, needs to be critically discussed and indeed can be challenged in light of current theoretical approaches to the study of space as applied to transnational families online (Lanza & Lexander, 2019). To argue that the family is a private space, we would need to argue that when it comes to communication, we can choose the language or languages we want to speak, express the ideologies or attitudes we have concerning different languages, and construct the identity(ies) we wish to construct through our own language choices. However, can we? In some cases, transnational families are <u>thrown</u> into the public media spotlight while in other cases, transnational families <u>choose</u> to "go public". In this regard, one may argue that the family has in fact become a *public* space. Before focusing on online parental blogs and vlogs, it behooves us to note that mediatized discourses show how families have become a public space more generally in the media (Lanza 2020). We see countless images of families seeking asylum or refuge, and read about families separated by institutional frameworks (Purkarthofer, Lanza & Berg, forthcoming). Moreover, we read of politicians telling migrant families to speak the societal language at home. The family has become highly politicized, at the target of social politics, cultural interventions, and proposed forced measures of integration, thus potentially having their well-being threatened both at home and generally in society. There is a need to examine how media represent transnational families and their linguistic and cultural integration in society, with a focus on family language policy in the current digital age.

Through online media, families may, however, actually choose to go public. The media of parenting websites, online discussion forums, and blogs/vlogs are a flourishing setting for exchanging experiences and advice on raising children, with so-called 'mommy blogging' as a specific type of social media usage that is a common and growing phenomenon. This platform has been especially important for feminist media theory as it concerns new roles and expectations that often give rise to feminist insight (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017). A *New York Times* article in 2016 highlighted that 4.2 million American mothers — "many of whom detest the

dismissive term 'mommy blogger'" — blog about their personal family life.[2] Many of these women are stay-at-home mothers who receive paid sponsorship agreements for certain products announced on their websites and social media platforms. Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) take up intensive parenting in the digital age and note that *sharenting,* that is, sharing parenting experiences, has become ever more digital, visible, and scrutinized. Late modernity, Bauman (2002, p. xv) argues, is transforming "'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance". Recent studies reveal how mothers speak openly about their doubts and negative feelings concerning motherhood (Orton-Johnson, 2017) with Lehto (2019) showing how "bad is the new good" in negotiating bad motherhood on blogs in Finland. Mackenzie (2018) explored the construction of gender and parenthood in a UK-based digital discussion form called Mumsnet to unveil how discourses of gendered parenthood are negotiated, resisted and subverted. The *New York Times* has a parental newsletter online that aims to provide guidance and support to new and expecting parents: "We publish evidence-based guides and developmental milestones…. Our reporting helps you make decisions for your family, and our essays tell personal stories about all the ways you can become a parent — and live a full life with children".[3] Although there is a wide range of topics covered, language does not have a dominant role.

Methodological and ethical issues in dealing with blogs and vlogs

Doing research on online blogs and vlogs can present both methodological and ethical challenges, as noted above. The complexity of blogs has led researchers to examine both textual and interactional features; blogs are often composed of hypertexts, texts that contain links to other texts. Exploring the organization of weblog narratives, Eisenlauer and Hoffmann (2010) elaborated on the notion of hypertext and its four defining features, that is, multi-linearity, fragmentation, interaction and multimodality. Other analyses draw on Ochs and Capps' (2001) influential framework of narrative dimensions and their possibilities: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance (cf. Page 2015). While the focus in this work is on blogs, vlogs are in many cases embedded in blogs.

Despite the complexity of analyzing blogs and indeed vlogs, such online sites can offer valuable insights into the social construction of multilingual parenting and family language policy through digital storytelling. How do parents in trans-

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2   https://nypost.com/2016/05/29/my-mommy-blog-ruined-my-life
3   https://parenting.nytimes.com/

national families employ blogs and vlogs to tell about their experiences of language and culture transmission, well-being, and good parenting in their integration in society? Moreover, what are the language ideologies that pervade these websites? To what extent is the advice offered on such sites in line with current research in the field on the topic?

To answer these questions requires doing online or digital ethnography/ netnography, which involves transferring principles and methods of ethnography to computer-mediated communication (Hine 2015; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis & Tacchi 2016, Kozinets 2020). This requires observing and understanding various discourse communities online and all of their practices, including comments to various posts, photos, and other objects. Sociolinguists have engaged in digital ethnography for some time now, exploring various types of online media such as multilingual discussion fora (Androutsopoulos 2006, Piller & Gerber 2018). There is a growing understanding that online and offline lives are interconnected and hence should also be addressed, for example, through interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions concerning the online platforms.

The focus in this article is on online blogs on/for multilingual families, particularly those that are publicly accessible and address language as an issue. Blogs may be at the core of a discourse community of parental/ caregiver participants with multilingual families, who may need to subscribe in order to have access to more restricted spaces of the blog. According to Rettberg (2014, p. 17), there are three main styles of blogging: (1) personal or diary-style blogging, (2) filter blogging, and (3) topic-driven blogging. Blogs concerning multilingual families are especially of the two types: personal or diary-style blogging, and topic-driven blogging. The former concerns individuals who decide to tell stories about their own experiences raising their children bilingually and often have a very personal profile to the blogging. The blog typically has a menu header or section on the main page entitled "About", which presents the blogger's linguistic background and experience with languages, and tells about her/his multilingual family. These personal blogs may develop into blogs that focus on the *topic* of multilingual families, providing commentary more generally to the theme. A pioneer study of online blogs of multilingual families is Bello-Rodzen (2016), who did an online survey of parents who told stories about their multilingual upbringing experience on personal blogs. Her aim was to analyze and characterize multilingual parenting styles and strategies. She devised a web questionnaire in which she built the profile of participants based on demographic and linguistic background, blogging practices, and their family's linguistic situation. She also surveyed parents' views on being bi-/multilingual and parental insights on multilingual upbringing strategies. While parents told stories of their experiences in multilingual families, Bello-Rodzen (2016, p. 33) points out that "To some extent, parent-bloggers can be viewed as ethnographers willing to share their

participant observations and field notes with anyone interested in their finding". Indeed Kurtz et al. (2017) consider "Blogs as elusive ethnographic texts".

Methodologically, the internet offers literally millions of relevant sites to be explored. For example, using the string of "blogs on multilingual families" in a Google search rendered 2,810,000 entries[4] while "vlogs on multilingual families" rendered 502,000.[5] The obvious question is how to limit the object of inquiry. The focus of the analyst will be constrained by the actual research question(s) of the study; however, there are sampling techniques that may be employed, if only as the initial forage into the web. Web users and potentially also other bloggers often review blog sites and list their favorites or use other criteria for selecting or highlighting certain blog sites, as the list in the Appendix indicates, for example, "20 Top Parent Bloggers Raising Bilingual Children in 2019" or "My Favorite Blogs on Multilingual Parenting and Language Learning". Pinterest even has a wide selection of pins on **"Blogs I love from bilingual (or multilingual) families"**, numbering 114. Most blogs also have vlogs available, with many vlogs having their own YouTube channel with subscription possibilities. Some series of vlogs on multicultural families may have a one off occurrence on the topic of raising children multilingually, while others are focused on what we may call family language policies and practices.[6] Even one carefully selected blogsite may render a considerable amount of data for analysis since comments to blogs are also a site for investigation along with the actual blogs/ vlogs. The variety of blogs and vlogs publicly accessible online is interesting in regards to language ideologies. Blogs and vlogs that are publicly accessible online usually center around European languages, especially English in contact with other languages.

As with any data involving people, ethical issues are at stake even with online sites that are publicly accessible, that is, those that do not require signing in. Kurtz et al. (2017) discuss ethical challenges in blog-based narrative data analysis. These blog and vlog sites are in public access, written for an unrestricted audience, and are officially in the public space. Nonetheless, such sites may contain information that in other contexts may be seen as highly personal. The bloggers do have a right to know that they are being researched, as pointed out by Lehto (2019), as they often write about very personal issues. Moreover, an analysis may have a potential impact on the particular blog site's following and readership. Hence a researcher analyzing blogs and vlogs should contact the authors to clear research on the site, if the site is active and thriving.

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4   About 2,810,000 results (0.55 seconds). Accessed 11 November 2019.
5   About 502,000 results (0.58 seconds). Accessed 11 November 2019.
6   For example, the vlog *Multilingual Family. A vlog for cosmopolitan people*
      https://multilingual.family/, also accessible on YouTube.

Giving advice on raising bilingual and multilingual children: Before and now

Giving advice on raising children bilingually / multilingually is actually an old established genre, although with a now new publication channel – the internet. The well-known OPOL strategy in family language policy – one person, one language – was actually advice given by linguist Maurice Grammont to Jules Ronjat who documented his son Louis' acquisition of French and German at home. Each parent was advised to use his/her own language to the child and Louis would learn both languages effortlessly, they were told. Ronjat (1913) recounts many experiences of the child's growing bilingualism in interaction with his parents. Werner Leopold (1939 -1949) gives an in-depth account of his daughter Hildegarde's, and younger daughter Carla's, simultaneous acquisition of English and German in the home, following up with insights parallel to Ronjat's. More recently, various guide books have come on the market offering personal stories of raising children with more than one language at home. Some of these are written by linguists in the field while others are authored by those wanting to share their experiences.

An important contribution to the literature on raising children bilingually, and conceivably a forerunner of online blogs, was the *Bilingual Family Newsletter,* published by Multilingual Matters, which ran from 1984 until 2010.[7] This publication, which was sent in the mail to subscribers, published short informative articles on recent research in the field along with personal narratives of bilingual families. The newsletter filled a growing need, especially in a European context. Across the Atlantic, another newsletter and network was founded in 2003, entitled *Multilingual Living.* The underlying subtitle was "Because global communication begins at home". This endeavor had a digital publication retrievable online, *Multilingual Living Magazine,* and it evolved into an online blog site, which very well may have been the first online blog for multilingual families,[8] and also had a Facebook interface. The blog had many informative posts based on current research and also had guest posts recounting personal narratives of life in a multilingual family. The founder of this resource was Corey Heller, an American with a German spouse, who wanted to raise her children bilingually in the US and could not find available resources for parents. The blog was awarded the *Multilingualism in the Community Award* in 2011 by publisher Channel View Publications (Multilingual Matters).[9] Unfortunately, the blog ceased operations in May of 2018, while the site is still up online although it is dormant. Nowadays, however, a plethora of sites can be discovered online.

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7   http://www.multilingualmatters.com/bilingual_family_archive.asp

8   http://www.multilingualliving.com/

9   https://channelviewpublications.wordpress.com/2011/06/02/multilingual-living-wins-the-multilingualism-in-the-community-award/

Family language policy has been conceptualized as an important element of good parenting. Nonetheless there is a scarcity of studies addressing the multitude of online blogs and online parental forums that focus on the raising of children multilingually and how these may potentially have an impact on multilingual families' language management (Curdt-Christiansen & Lanza 2018). While online blog sites need to be analyzed holistically bringing into account other aspects besides words and images, as Rettberg (2014) points out, a thematic analysis of the contents of these blogs on multilingual families reveals a wide range of topics addressed. Often these topics are highlighted by phrases such as "10 tips to …", "20 reasons why", "10 ways to …", and "15 things you need to know about…". There are indeed many interesting dimensions to be analyzed in these online blogs, such as

- The construction of agency and an (expert) identity by the blogger
- Ideologies about language(s) and speakers of other languages
- Gender issues in multilingual families
- How ethical issues are taken into account

Some blogs and vlogs have an emphasis on the personal experience of the blogger/vlogger through storytelling while others refer to research in the field, illustrating the blogger's appeal to expertise. Furthermore, we may investigate these blogs and vlogs for the extent to which the advice given is in line with current research on the topic. For example, the reader of blogs will note that the putative cognitive advantage of bilingualism is still highly invoked in many blogs despite the fact that this is hotly debated in the field (cf. Lehtonen, Soveri, Laine, Järvenpää, de Bruin & Antfolk 2018). These online sites are interwoven with implicit language ideologies and identity constructions. In several vlogs surveyed, monolingual ideologies prevail that advise parents to shun using languages interchangeably in interaction. Gender in multilingual families is a neglected topic in studies of family language policy and could be explored in online media as parents relate multilingual experiences with their daughter or son.

Personal parent-blogging is indeed popular and many blog sites are platforms for multilingual parents to share their experiences through narratives. Some of these blog sites widen their scope and become more topic-driven, as noted above, developing into platforms for not only sharing personal experiences about raising children multilingually and multiculturally, but also giving advice and inviting guest posts and interviews. These blogs may have a Facebook and Twitter interface, refer to the blogger's published book, and include consultancy possibilities. This illustrates how multilingual family language policy can, and has, become a *commodity* in today's globalized society. In the current digital age, there is a

growing need to examine the role of technology in studies of family language policy, in order to shed light on issues of multilingualism, ideologies and identity. While a considerable amount of work has evolved in recent years on families' use of social media to communicate, there is a current need to delve more into issues regarding how family language policies may affect language outcomes among children in multilingual homes. Investigating narratives in blogs and vlogs is an excellent step in this direction.

Conclusion – the way forward

The field of family language policy has the past ten years expanded and evolved to such an extent that King (2016) has voiced concern over a potential splinter in the field. While initial studies of family language policy posed the question as to what (socio)linguistic environments are conducive to learning two or more languages in the family, more recent studies focus on research questions that examine language as a means through which multilingual adults and children define themselves and their families (King & Lanza 2017). Hence we see in more recent studies of family language policy a move away from investigating the link between parental ideologies and practices and how these affect various language learning outcomes (the original question of family language policy research), and see rather a focus on how language competence is a means through which adults and children define themselves, their family roles, and family life. In other words, we see a move away from a mere focus on developing language competence to a focus on the interrelationship between family, language and post-modern society. Nonetheless, many families strive to establish multilingualism in the family and search for advice on how to do so, and online blogs and vlogs serve this purpose.

We may ask: Why is it important to study multilingual parents' blogs and vlogs? Multilingual transnational families are faced with decisions about language and culture as they take part in society. Moreover, there is an increasing number of internet users in the world and hence also a large number of caregivers seeking advice online. Internet World Stats indicated a mid-year 2019 of internet users' distribution in the world, showing that on the basis of over 4.5 billion users, Asia accounts for slightly over 50% with Europe in second place at 17%, Africa 11.5%, and North America at slightly over 7%.[10] If on the other hand, internet world penetration rates by geographic regions are considered, North America is at the top at nearly 90% of its population having access while Europe is slightly behind. With the world average at nearly 59%, Asia falls slightly under with about 54% and then

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10   https://www.internetworldstats.com/

Africa with just under 40%. These statistics do not, however, indicate languages used online, yet English is surely one of the most used, if not the most used language online.

Finally, are blogs and vlogs on and for multilingual families WEIRD (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan 2010)? The authors of this influential article claimed that behavioral scientists routinely publish far-reaching claims about human psychology and behavior in publication outlets across the world based on samples drawn entirely from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. It may be claimed that such blogs and vlogs, as described in this article, are consumed by mobile "expats" as opposed to "immigrants", those who *choose* to raise their children in another language as opposed to those who are *forced* to do so in order to participate in society. While the distinction often made between expats and immigrants is very much a real one, there is indeed a fuzziness across the two categories when it comes to raising children with more than one language. Many immigrants have the community support to maintain the heritage language while mobile expats may not. Nonetheless, societal ideologies towards languages will greatly affect language maintenance and, more often than not, this may negatively affect immigrant/ minority languages.

The blogs and vlogs that are publicly accessible, and that are referred to in this article, are written in English. There are indeed similar platforms that are not public spaces for which the consumer must log on, which have been established by diaspora groups as well as indigenous groups, and are written in other languages. Furthermore, there are open sites, meant for parents to interact in chat forums, which use other languages (for example, a Turkish-language parenting forum in Germany). More work on all such platforms needs to be done. Bello-Rodzen (2016, p. 16) states that "Parental blogging is personal yet public, dynamic but consistent, and introspective though socially-oriented in nature". There is a need to know how parents and other caregivers in transnational families employ online media to address and investigate issues of language and culture transmission, well-being, and good parenting in their inclusion into contemporary society. Moreover, there is a need to know what kinds of advice caregivers are getting from online resources and how this potentially affects their family language policies and practices. The field of family language policy has a challenge ahead, and indeed a means to renew the original family language policy question is to address the digital storytelling in online blogs and vlogs of, and for, multilingual families. Multilingual parents' blogs and vlogs as narratives of family language practice and policy will add a vital and necessary dimension to the study of raising children with more than one language.

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Appendix: Sample of blogs on multilingual parenting

My Favorite Blogs on Multilingual Parenting and Language Learning
https://languagelearningathome.com/blog/2018/1/18/my-favorite-blogs-on-multilingual-parenting-and-language-learning

20 Top Parent Bloggers Raising Bilingual Children in 2019
https://www.summerboardingcourses.co.uk/blog/parent-bloggers-raising-bilingual-children/

Top 15 Bilingual Parenting Blogs & News Websites To Follow in 2019
https://blog.feedspot.com/bilingual_parenting_blogs/

Blogs about Bilingualism (Pinterest: "Blogs I love from bilingual (or multilingual) families"): 114 pins
https://www.pinterest.com/babybilingual/blogs-about-bilingualism/