



## Article

# The Relevance of Family Language Policy in Germany and Italy in the Development of Child Bilingualism: The Role of Natural Translation

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of natural translation in heritage speakers' bilingual communication in relation to the family language policies (FLP) adopted to maintain heritage language in Italian and German multilingual families. In order to investigate this, in spring 2023, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to both parents and children. The sample consists of 60 Russian-speaking bilingual HS living in Italy and Germany, where they have access to regular primary education and attend, in some cases, private Russian courses or schools. The informants do not receive specific translation training from or into the Russian language (they only practice translation at school from or into Italian/German), and they translate, in most cases, as an occasional activity, closer to the function of mediation or brokering. The role of translation in relation to FLP seems particularly relevant when comparing the two samples, considering different family compositions: mostly bi-ethnic in Italy and mono-ethnic in Germany. The survey showed that in daily life, both parents and children use translation, often as a specific kind of bilingual communication. In the Italian part of the sample, the strategy called OPOL prevails, and translation is a frequent activity in the domestic sphere. In the German one, instead, the separation of language use contexts is widespread, and all family members speak both Russian and German, making translation activity less relevant.

**Keywords:** multilingual societies; family language policy; natural translation; bilingual education; Russian language; Italian language; German language



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## 1. Introduction

In multilingual and multicultural societies, bilingual parents resort to various strategies in everyday family communication to ensure that their children maintain a good level of heritage language alongside the dominant language in society. An area of research that is becoming increasingly central to the analysis of bilingual development is what is known as family language policy (FLP) (Schwartz 2010; Lomeu Gomes 2018).

The concept of language policy was originally intended to define top-down language strategies adopted at societal and national levels. The study included family policies and gained more and more scholarly authority as J. Fishman emphasised the importance of intergenerational transmission of language (Fishman 1991, 2001) and B. Spolsky defined three important components of family strategies: “language practices, language beliefs or ideology, and language intervention, planning, or management” (Spolsky 2004, p. 5). FLP is now commonly defined as “explicit and overt planning for language use in the home among family members” (King et al. 2008, p. 907).

In most studies, FLP refers to parental decisions, but children’s attitudes and choices seem to be equally important. As Andritsou and Chatzidimou (2022, p. 105) note, “parents’ language strategies promote the development of bilingualism, although bilingual children also make their own language choices”.

If parents share the same mother tongue, a minority language in the society in which they live, with children, they can adopt an immersive approach called “mL@H” (minority language at home). If the parents’ languages are different (one is a minority language, the other the dominant language in the community), one of the most popular strategies is called “OPOL” (one person, one language). In this case, the parents may use the dominant language among themselves if the minority language is not known to both of them. On the other hand, they can shift from the first language to the dominant one and adopt a mixed strategy if the context or interlocutor requires it.

More specifically, S. [Barron-Hauwaert \(2004, pp. 163–78\)](#) highlighted seven types of family language use, as follows:

1. OPOL-ML (one parent, one language—majority language);
2. OPOL-mL (one parent, one language—minority language);
3. Minority language at home (mL@H);
4. Trilingual or multilingual strategy;
5. Mixed strategy;
6. Time and place strategy;
7. Artificial or non-native strategy.

In this study, we analyse only three of the seven strategies outlined as the most popular ones chosen by parents in our samples, namely OPOL, minority language at home (mL@H), and mixed strategy. These strategies will be related to the use of translation in the family sphere and out of it.

Among the strategies considered in family communication, translation can also be a valuable aid because, for bilinguals, it is one of the main and most natural types of cognitive activity. Sometimes resorting to translation at home can be a convenient and quick aid in communication, although the role of translation can change in relation to the strategies adopted in the family. In this sphere, translation is mostly understood as a natural form of linguistic mediation between members of the family or family circle, but in bilinguals, a conscious use of translation could lead to the development of linguistic and cultural awareness.

As [Malakoff and Hakuta \(1991\)](#) pointed out, adult bilinguals possess a wider range of strategies at their disposal due to their advanced linguistic skills and heightened metalinguistic awareness. Instead, young bilinguals are not always aware of phenomena such as switching from one language to the other, translanguaging, that is, “new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories” ([García and Wei 2014, p. 21](#)), or simple translation used for everyday communication purposes. Such translation is quite often carried out by the speaker without any specific training, hence why it is called ‘natural’ by scholars.

Natural translation in early bilinguals was defined by B. Harris and B. Sherwood as “the translating done in everyday circumstances by people who have had no special training for it” ([Harris and Sherwood 1978, p. 155](#)). Although these same authors have identified this ability as innate in bilinguals, declaring that all bilinguals are able to translate within the limits of their mastery of the two languages ([Harris and Sherwood 1978](#)), [Malakoff and Hakuta \(1991\)](#) admitted that translation is not a skill typically associated with every bilingual individual and particularly not with minority-language children.

Among the leading specialists in the study of bilingualism, F. Grosjean dispelled the myth of bilinguals’ innate competence in translation, stating that bilingualism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of translation skills. Although the bilingual speaker may have a natural instinct for translation, without specific training, translation remains at the purely oral, informal level of mediation and brokering ([Grosjean 2010](#)). Naiditch says about ‘language brokering’: “immigrant children who translate for their families are today called language brokers” ([Naiditch 2015, p. 138](#)). This is not to be confused with the role of interpreter, because to fulfil this task, “interpreter training is very demanding and requires additional years of study” ([Grosjean 2010, p. 151](#)), while language

brokers, “unlike formal translators, mediate rather than merely transmit information among the parties involved” (McQuillan and Tse 1995, p. 195).

Other scholars have stated that natural translation is not only used to convey the denotative content of the source text but is mainly needed to establish an interaction between the sender of the message and its receiver (Ovchinnikova and Pavlova 2016), which is a form of interlinguistic and intercultural communication.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of work on the special role of translation in first and second language acquisition in bilinguals (Goletiani 2015; Naiditch 2015; Protassova et al. 2015; McQuillan and Tse 1995), and the importance of translation in the process of acquiring bilingualism as well as a pedagogical tool has been put forward.

The idea for this research arose in connection with the participation of bilingual HS in the international competition “Cultural Bridge” (*Kul’turnyj most*, <https://www.papmambook.ru/>; <https://www.papmambook.ru/contests/>, accessed on 5 April 2024), a project specifically developed to support families and Russian school teachers in the challenging task of promoting bilingual education of young HS. In this context, many Russian-speaking HS from all over the world translated short contemporary literary texts for children. The material from the competition sections held in Europe and the USA has been processed on the Sketch Engine platform (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>, accessed on 5 April 2024) to create parallel corpora (Russian-Italian, Russian-English, Russian-Spanish, and Russian-French) and to study the translation strategies of bilingual speakers (Perotto 2020, 2022). From this experience, we realised that HS who translate without proper training show difficulties of various kinds, already indicated by other scholars, such as “omission, addition, semantic generalisation and substitution, syntactical reformulation, and modification” (Goletiani 2015, p. 37). Not surprisingly, T. Galinskaya states that the so-called “translation bilingualism” (*perevodcheskij bilingvizm*) is obtained through the teaching of translation, which implies a high level of reflection on cognitive operations, developing metalinguistic competence (Galinskaya 2009; Ovchinnikova and Pavlova 2016). To this purpose, parallel corpora, used in specific translation lessons for bilingual speakers, as indicated in Perotto 2023, could be a valuable tool for developing real translation strategies.

In order to explore the role of translation in bilingual communication, through a survey, we tried to investigate when, how, and why Russian-speaking heritage speakers resort to translation in domestic communication and beyond.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The survey was carried out thanks to the cooperation of the associations of Russian *sootchestvoenniki* (compatriots) in Italy and Germany, with a sample of 60 informants in total. A double, semi-structured questionnaire in Russian was administered to these Russian-speaking informants (parents and children) to check language use in the family, social domains, and the use of natural translation. Considerable help was also given by the Russian schools, since a large proportion of the informants attend them. Some of the young informants participated in the “Cultural Bridge” translation contest, describing it as a pleasant experience (“I enjoyed it very much, and my sister and I are waiting for the next time”)<sup>1</sup>.

With regard to the survey carried out in Italy, it should be noted that the presence of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people in this country is rather limited. ISTAT data show the presence of 36,982 Russian and 225,307 Ukrainian citizens as of 1 January 2022 (before the start of the conflict in Ukraine) (see [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS\\_POPSTRCIT1&Lang=it](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRCIT1&Lang=it), accessed on 5 April 2024). Various studies and surveys on the Russian-speaking community living in Italy (Perotto 2009, 2013; Nikolaeva 2011; Goletiani 2015) confirm that Russian-speaking HS mostly live in bi-ethnic families, with Russian mothers and Italian fathers. Families from Ukraine, on the other hand, are often mono-ethnic, but they did not take part in this sample because they mainly speak Ukrainian.

The Italian sample includes 31 double questionnaires in Russian (parents and children). Children's ages ranged from 7 to 25 years old; all were born in Italy except two (Russia and Kazakhstan). Most of them (24) live in bi-ethnic families and are early bilingual speakers.

The German sample includes 29 double questionnaires in Russian (parents and children). Children's ages ranged from 8 to 26 years old; 23 of them were born in Germany, 4 in Russia, and 2 in Kazakhstan. Most of them (22) live in mono-ethnic families.

Germany's case is peculiar because the country hosts the largest Russian community in Europe, and the Russians here are the second largest group after the Turks. Post-Soviet migrants and their descendants form the largest immigration group in Germany; in 2022, there were around 4 million people. Around 3.2 million of them migrated themselves and mainly have ties to the Russian Federation (around 33%), Kazakhstan (around 31%), and Ukraine (around 17%) (see [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/\\_inhalt.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/_inhalt.html), accessed on 5 April 2024).

As reported by J. Panagiotidis (2021), two groups are central:

- Russian-German (late) repatriates (*russkie nemtsy* or *Russlanddeutsche*) and their family members;
- Jewish contingent refugees and their family members.

According to the results of the 2022 latest microcensus, published by the Federal Statistical Office in April 2023 ([https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/\\_inhalt.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/_inhalt.html), accessed on 5 April 2024), around 2.8 million Russian-German repatriates were registered in Germany by the end of 2022, while since the 1990s, around 220,000 Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union have been granted refugee status. Most of them came to Germany by 2004 (Tolts 2015). Of these 4 million people (including around 3.2 million adults), an estimated 2.2 million speak Russian fluently, or Russian is their first language. In addition, there are an unknown number of underage children and young people who speak Russian.

The calculation is based on findings from the representative study conducted by the Boris Nemtsov Foundation in 2016 ([https://nemtsovfund.org/cp/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Russians-in-Germany-v.9a\\_deu.pdf#page=3](https://nemtsovfund.org/cp/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Russians-in-Germany-v.9a_deu.pdf#page=3), accessed on 5 April 2024): 61% of adults with a post-Soviet migration background speak Russian as their first language, while a further 27% can speak it fluently. Eleven percent of respondents have limited knowledge of Russian.

The researchers actually claim that it cannot be taken for granted that the descendants of post-Soviet migrants born in Germany also speak Russian. For some of them, Russian is a second language, but some others do not learn the language from their parents (Lokshin 2020). In any case, all informants in our sample are Russian-speaking bilinguals.

By comparing the situations of two countries with such different scenarios, it is possible to draw a broader picture that transcends single-country policies, highlighting the connection between family choices and their reflection in the bilingual communication enacted by children.

### 3. Results

Since translation is a natural activity practiced mainly in the family sphere, we investigated first the domains of different (Russian, Italian, and German) language use, then the FLP adopted by Italian and German families, and finally the use of translation in communication, analysing the preferences of both parents and children and comparing their answers.

#### 3.1. Domains of Language Use (Parents' and Children's Answers)

FLP is always connected to the language policy of the country. In Italy, Russian is not a protected historical minority language, as is German in Alto Adige or Occitan in Piemonte, so the maintenance of Russian depends on the language policy at home and at the Russian schools. The same can be said of Germany. Here, Russians are the second-largest group after Turks, and that is the reason why there are dense networks of cultural, social, and

commercial organisations and institutions that act as a reference point for Russian-speaking communities in Germany: newspapers, radio programmes, dedicated websites and portals, access to the Russian media. In sum, in Germany, an attempt is made to offer migrants the possibility of maintaining a link with their country; however, even here, Russian is not a protected minority language. Considering the data mentioned above, we can observe that the concentration of Russian-speaking migrants in Germany, which is far higher than in Italy, has given a significant impulse to the development of services and infrastructure supporting the Russian-speaking community. Although this aspect was not specifically investigated in our research (in the answers to our questionnaire, the mass media were very rarely mentioned by the informants), it can be hypothesised that easy access to media and information in Russian plays a role in the choice of FLP, also in relation to the use of translation, stimulating intercultural communication within the family.

Before discussing the relation between FLP and translation, it is considered essential to provide an overview of the language use preferences of our informants and the domains of Russian use in their daily lives. That was one of the focuses of our questionnaire.

First, the children’s language use preferences were investigated, both from their own subjective point of view and from the parents’ external perspective. To the question, “In which language do you/your children prefer to speak?” the informants could select one of the following options: “in Russian”, “in German/Italian” or “in the interlocutor language”, but also add in the end some personal observations.

Below are a table and a figure (Table 1 and Figure 1) showing their answers, previously matched with the FLP adopted in their family, in order to visually display more clearly the relationship between the latter and language preferences.

To the question, “In which language do your children/do you prefer to speak?” (Table 1), both parents’ and children’s answers showed that often, regardless of the language policy adopted by parents in the family, children prefer to speak the majority language or the interlocutor language (respectively, 24 and 22, i.e., a total of 46 out of 60). One informant declared, “With people whose native language is Italian I prefer to speak in Italian even if they know Russian”. Only 14 informants prefer to speak Russian whenever possible. However, a FLP that distinguishes the domains of language use seems to facilitate children’s ability to adapt to the interlocutor language, causing a significant percentage of them to have no particular preference in language choice (see the entry “mL@H” in Table 1).

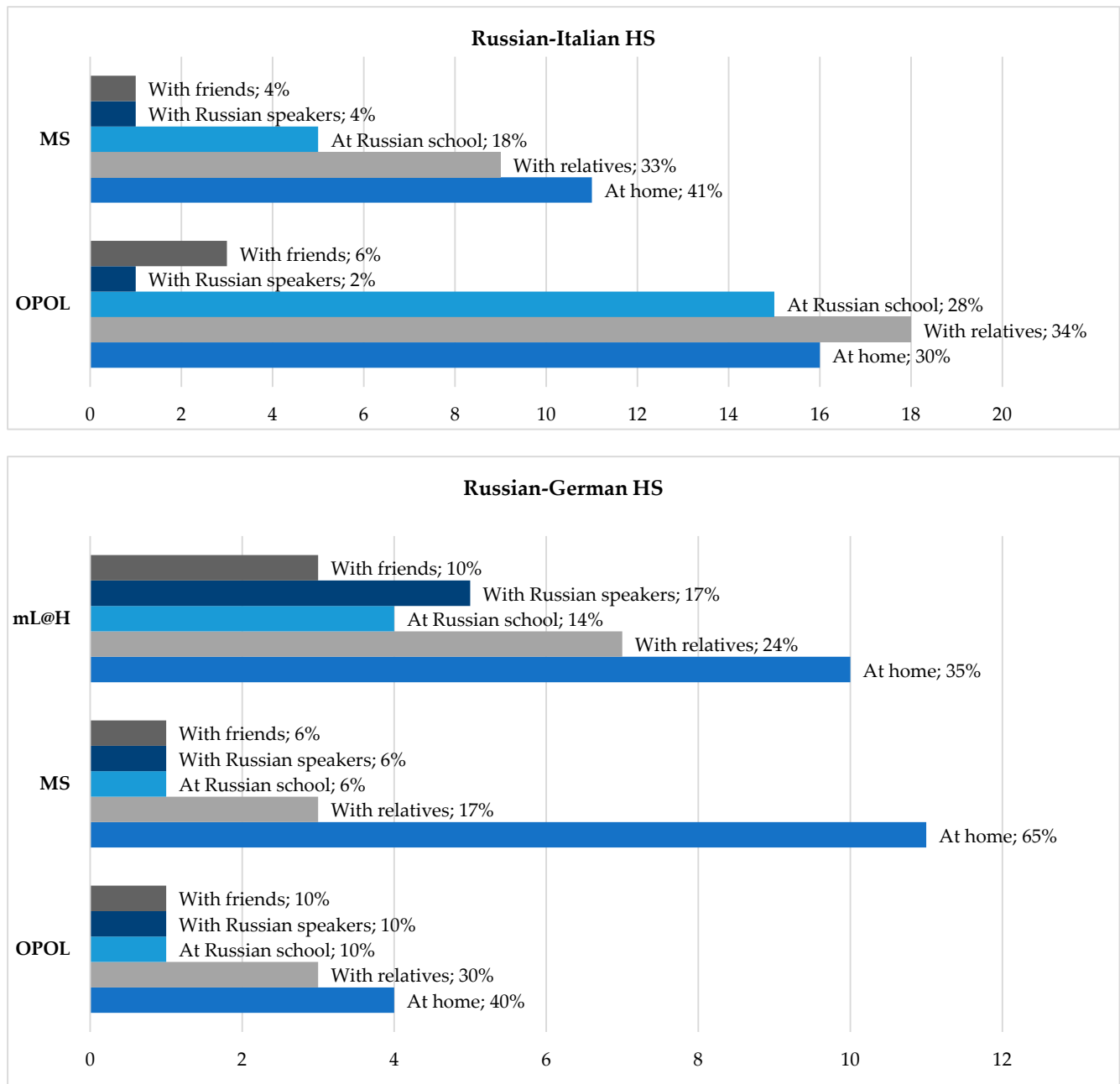
Parents were then asked when their children spoke Russian. Their answers were categorised and analysed jointly with the FLP adopted.

**Table 1.** In which language do your children/you prefer to speak?

	Russian-Italian HS		Russian-German HS		
	OPOL	MS	Parents’ answers		
			OPOL	MS	mL@H
<b>In Russian</b>	5	5	-	4	1
<b>In Majority language</b>	12	4	-	7	1
<b>In the interlocutor language</b>	4	1	6	1	9
			Children’s answers		
<b>In Russian</b>	5	3	1	3	2
<b>In Majority language</b>	8	4	1	8	3
<b>In the interlocutor language</b>	8	3	4	1	6

Based on the answers (Figure 1) of the Italian sample concerning the domains of Russian use regardless of FLP, there is a predominance of the home/family and school domains: informants adopting the mixed strategy declared that they speak Russian mostly at home (41%), and/or more generally with relatives (33%); the same applies to those adopting the OPOL strategy (with relatives 34%, at home 30%). In the case of the latter,

however, there is an equally significant percentage relating to the use of Russian in Russian schools (28%). A similar picture is found in the part of the German sample that adopts the same strategies, except for the voice “at Russian school” which, in the German sample, reports a significantly lower percentage (ranging from 6% to 10%) than in the Italian sample. In fact, as will be shown later German informants generally, on average, attend Russian schools less than Italian informants.



**Figure 1.** When do your children speak Russian?

It is also remarkable that, in both cases, the informants appear not to have many Russian-speaking friends or acquaintances, as the answers “with friends” and “with Russian speakers” have quite low percentages corresponding to them. Outside the sphere of home or study in Russian schools, it is rather difficult to find children socialising in Russian. The dominant language is usually the preferred one in communication with friends. Family friends, if they are Russian, may be an exception, but they are rare.

Only the part of the German sample that adopts the mL@H strategy shows a more distributed use of Russian in the various domains of daily life, including the social sphere (10% “with friends” and 17% “with Russian speakers”), although it is always the domestic one that prevails (35% “at home” and 24% “with relatives”). In relation to this, it is considered significant to point out that in the German part of the sample, most families are mono-ethnic, while in the Italian part, they are bi-ethnic. Relating this data to the presence of Russians in the two target countries (Italy and Germany), it seems reasonable to think that in Germany, as there is a real Russian-speaking community distributed throughout the country, children more easily find opportunities to socialise with other Russian-speakers.

### 3.2. FLP Adopted (Only Parents’ Answers)

As mentioned earlier, language practices refer to patterns of language use within the family, through which family members realise, negotiate, and modify their FLP in face-to-face communication. The linguistic input produced by parental interactions determines children’s language production to a significant extent.

To the question, “Which strategy do you apply as FLP?” parents’ answers from the Italian part of the sample show that 68% of families prefer the OPOL strategy, while the remaining 32% reported adopting the mixed strategy. In the German part, the OPOL strategy (applied in 21%) is not consistent with the composition of most families (which are mono-ethnic), and thus the mixed strategy (41%) or the separation of usage domains (mL@H) (38%) prevail, holding the view that almost all the mono-ethnic families in the sample state that all family members are able to understand and speak both languages.

### 3.3. The Use of Translation (Parents’ and Children’s Answers)

Analysing translation as a natural activity practiced in the family, as we can see in Table 2, according to parents’ answers, German HS globally translate less than Italian and only when at home mixed strategy prevails. In the case of Italian parents’ opinion, it happens if they choose the OPOL strategy. However, by comparing these data with children’s answers, which are much more complete, it appears that German HS actually declare that they translate almost as much as the Italians, who use translation mainly at home with relatives or if somebody does not understand. On the other hand, it can also be noted that only German HS mentioned the translation of audiovisual media. This could confirm the fact that the aforementioned easy access to Russian media fosters ties to the ethnic community of origin and keeps motivation for language maintenance higher.

**Table 2.** When do you translate?

	Russian-Italian HS		Russian-German HS		
	OPOL	MS	Parents’ answers		
			OPOL	MS	mL@H
<b>It depends on the situation</b>	3	1	-	2	1
<b>From R into ML (P to C)</b>	4	3	2	4	-
<b>From ML into R (C to P)</b>	1	1	-	2	1
<b>Into ML to relatives</b>	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Into R to relatives</b>	1	1	-	-	1
			Children’s answers		
<b>If somebody does not understand</b>	4	2	2	3	4
<b>To relatives from/into R/ML</b>	8	1	-	1	-
<b>To my parents</b>	2	2	-	1	2
<b>At school (from/into other languages)</b>	4	2	2	2	6
<b>To friends</b>	1	-	2	1	-
<b>Video, Games, Film</b>	-	-	-	2	-
<b>When travelling</b>	-	1	-	-	-

In order to support the data shown in Table 2, to the question *Talking to your children, do you translate single words or phrases, if necessary?* (Table 3), parents who gave negative answers are the majority in both samples (21 in the Italian sample, 18 in the German one). They rarely admit using translation because they claim that it is not necessary, as their children's bilingualism, in their opinion, is sufficiently balanced, while the children recognise translation as a valuable aid in communication. A Russian mother living in Italy states about her children: "they answer in the language in which they are addressed; they rarely resort to translation into Italian". Another one living in Germany declares, "For my daughter there is no difference in using Russian and German and in communicating with native speakers of these languages".

**Table 3.** Talking to your children, do you translate single words or phrases, if necessary? (to parents).

	Russian-Italian HS		Russian-German HS		
	OPOL	MS	OPOL	MS	mL@H
Never	5	1	2	-	6
Rarely	10	5	1	5	4
Sometimes	1	-	1	1	-
Often	4	4	2	4	-
Always	-	-	-	2	-
Yes	1	-	-	-	1

Among parents, there are also those who admit, instead, to resorting to translation: "yes, sometimes I have to explain words in Italian, mostly for my middle daughter, she is a teenager and Russian is going into a more passive phase".

Also, to the question about translation as brokering (Table 4, *Do you sometimes translate for your children in the presence of strangers, or do they translate for you?*), parents mostly gave negative answers. Some of them, however, admit that their children play the role of brokers. In the Italian sample, a Russian mother states, "it happens, but rarely. As a rule, I ask my children to translate from Italian to Russian for me, in different situations, when I am not sure, I understand correctly; they usually don't ask much. Kids adapt and usually don't ask in the presence of strangers. Somehow, they figure out the meaning themselves". In the German sample another one admits: "since my daughter knows German better than we do, we occasionally ask her to translate into Russian if we don't understand something". It is, however, noteworthy that the number of positive answers is higher in the Italian part of the sample.

**Table 4.** Do you sometimes translate for your children in the presence of strangers, or do they translate for you? (to parents).

	Russian-Italian HS		Russian-German HS		
	OPOL	MS	OPOL	MS	mL@H
Often	1	1	-	3	1
Sometimes	8	4	-	-	-
Rarely	1	1	3	6	2
No	11	4	3	3	8

To sum up, comparing the answers of parents and children, it seems that the former are more reluctant to admit the use of translation in family communication because this would mean admitting low levels of bilingualism.

In the next table (Table 5), we still show parents' answers. From the data, we see that more Italian than German informants attend Russian schools, where, anyway, translation is not a typical teaching activity (at Russian schools only 3 Russian-Italian HS and 3 Russian-German HS practice translation). If a similar question (*Do you usually translate at the Russian school?*) is posed to children, they confirm the fact that they do not translate at the Russian



school (25 Russian-Italian HS and 27 Russian-German HS); in Italian or German schools, they only formally practice translation in other foreign languages (Table 6). Speaking about the kind of translation, from the answers given, both Italian and German informants prefer oral translation to written, which may remind them of some kind of school homework (see Table 7). In some cases, translation can become an instrument of solidarity between schoolmates: “In the Italian fifth grade, for six months I translated into Russian for a Russian-speaking classmate who came to Italy and did not know Italian”.

**Table 5.** Do your children go to a Russian school? (to parents).

	Russian-Italian HS	Russian-German HS
Yes	20	12
No	8	12
Private lessons	3	5

**Table 6.** Do you usually translate at the Italian/German school? (to children).

	Russian-Italian HS	Russian-German HS
Yes, but not into R	22	18
No	8	9
Rarely	1	-
Into R	-	2

**Table 7.** Do you prefer oral or written translation? (to children).

	Russian-Italian HS	Russian-German HS
Oral	10	8
Written	7	6
Both	3	2
No answer	-	13

About translation, the young informants also say, “I like translation, interpreting, translating, writing”; “Yes, I like it, but more from English songs, blogs and movies”; “I am not a professional translator, but I am pleased that I understand almost everything in Russian”; “Yes, I like it. I translate orally and in writing. Sometimes I help my mom to write messages in Italian”.

If we consider the answers given by the HS to the most general question (*Do you usually translate?*) about translation activity in the family, we notice that they acknowledge using translation, and in particular, Italian HS seem to translate more than German HS (20 Italian HS, but only 9 German HS answered “yes”). This could again be explained by the fact that Italian informants live in mixed, multilingual families, and translation can be a way of facilitating domestic communication. An Italian Russian-speaking informant, who is 25 years old, admits: “when I was a little girl, I often translated some expressions”.

#### 4. Discussion

The picture obtained from the two samples is very different because, in the Italian case, the informants live mostly in bi-ethnic families and therefore resort more frequently to translation, while in the German case we are dealing with many mono-ethnic families in which Russian tends to be used at home by all members of the family.

Despite this, regardless of FLP, the language preferred by almost all HS (the one in which they speak and read most willingly and report having the least difficulty) is still the majority language. Questions posed to parents and children sometimes gave different answers, but in the case of the answer “I speak ML with everyone”, this was similar in number in both samples. Especially as they grow older, bilingual HS tend to leave Russian school attendance and increasingly socialise with non-Russian-speaking peers.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the Italian context, where the Russian-speaking community is not close-knit but dispersed in the various regions of the country.

The data analysis showed that the mixed strategy deployed by about one-third (22) of the total number of interviewed families actually produces a kind of isolation of the minority language, which is relegated almost exclusively to domestic and family use (50% at home, 27% with relatives, 14% at the Russian school, 5% with Russian-speakers, 4% with friends), both in the Italian and German cases. Even in families adopting the OPOL strategy (27), the domestic use of Russian prevails (33% at home, 35% with relatives, 26% at the Russian school, 3% with Russian speakers, and 3% with friends). Despite the fact that this strategy has often been recommended as a necessary condition for raising bilingual children, in reality, as [De Houwer \(2007\)](#) also argues, it is at least not sufficient.

Our study shows that the optimal condition for the most balanced development of both languages is a clear separation of domains of use: at home, the minority language, and outside the home, the majority language. In the case of the 11 German families who report adopting this strategy, the use of Russian appears to be more distributed in the various domains of children's lives (36% at home, 21% with relatives, 14% at the Russian school, 18% with Russian speakers, and 11% with friends).

Translation is an activity practiced in the family sphere, but not in Russian schools. It is practiced most often by Italian informants, and oral translation is preferred over written translation. Sometimes the written one is imposed as a school exercise in other languages, but not in Russian. This could be the reason why most of the informants do not like written translation, although some of them in both samples took part in the CB competition.

## 5. Conclusions

From the results of our study, we can conclude that FLP is one of the factors contributing to the development and maintenance of heritage languages, but, by itself, it is not sufficient since children's preferences and choices sometimes differ from those of their parents.

However, if the family is aware of the need to choose a proper strategy, by separating the domains of language use, children seem to adapt more to the language of the interlocutor and have a more flexible and balanced bilingualism. Otherwise, they speak almost only the majority language, as in the case of the mixed strategy, which exposes children to the majority language even at home, creating an imbalance of input received in favour of the latter.

Comparing parents' and children's answers revealed discrepancies: while in many cases, children openly reported using translation as a bilingual communication strategy, parents more often reported the opposite. In fact, the latter showed a greater reluctance to evaluate translation positively, more often associating it with an act of compensation, evidence of inadequate language skills. Moreover, in the case of families adopting a mixed strategy, it is possible that this biased attitude towards translation is mixed with a lack of awareness on the part of the parents themselves, who may translate without being aware of it.

Children, on the contrary, seem to appreciate translation as a valid communicative strategy and not just a compensatory one, but, practicing translation mainly in the family sphere, their competence level in this field can only be defined as natural translation or brokering.

According to [Malakoff and Hakuta \(1991\)](#), children who develop a certain sense of metalinguistic awareness should also develop better language skills in general; therefore, it would be highly recommended for bilingual children to be introduced to translation as a metalinguistic and metacultural reflection, and the teaching of Russian in schools for HS should include this matter. As pointed out in another paper about natural translation in HSs ([Perotto 2020](#)), bilingual children who attend Russian schools and receive formal instruction in their mother tongue show a higher level of translation awareness and do not resort exclusively to calques or word-by-word translation.

It is reasonable to assume that translation could stimulate the bilingual speaker's awareness of the two linguistic systems, especially when the use of the majority language prevails. As suggested in [Goletiani \(2015\)](#) and [Protassova et al. \(2015\)](#), more specific translation training from the earliest stages of bilingual education will lead to the acquisition of a greater metalinguistic consciousness and the development of a more balanced bilingualism. The use of parallel corpora and other didactic tools, as mentioned in [Perotto \(2023\)](#), could be a valuable aid in developing translation strategies. The result of such training for HS may be the improvement of their translation skills, which could be a professional resource for them in the future.

These hypotheses could be the subject of further, more extensive research (with a larger sample), which would also consider the possibility of verifying them by direct observation of HS behaviour, dispelling the doubts linked to the discrepancies previously mentioned.

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