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Family language policy as shaped by return migration: Reflections of Zimbabwean returnees from South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Following uncertainty surrounding the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits and changes to immigration policies and laws regulating the employment of foreigners in South Africa, Zimbabwe has been witnessing the return migration of families from South Africa. This phenomenon is also exacerbated by the increasing xenophobic sentiment infecting South African society. Some returnees are accompanied by children who were born in South Africa and speak South African languages. Coming from a country that does not support the teaching of immigrant language presents unique challenges for their schooling and assimilation into the Zimbabwean linguistic and cultural milieu. Families are thus faced with the task of ensuring their children's linguistic re-socialisation to align with the language requirements of the new setting. Drawing on the concept of Family Language Policy, this qualitative study focused on the reflections of purposively selected Zimbabwean parents who have recently returned from South Africa to understand how their language ideologies contextually shape decisions around children's language socialisation in South Africa and upon return to Zimbabwe. Findings show that their family language policies are largely aspirational, reflecting the families' imagined future identities and changing life trajectories. Their dynamic family language policies are also a response to the sociopolitical and educational context of the hostland and homeland.

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Introduction

My 12-year-old child speaks English and Afrikaans only. How is she going to be integrated in Zimbabwean government schools?... Children who have already moved to Zimbabwe are stressed. The adjustment is going to be huge (GroundUp, 23 June 2022).

The above interview extract is from an article published by GroundUp, an online news agency. It encapsulates concerns and uncertainties by Zimbabwean migrants contemplating returning from South Africa upon the expiry of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits (ZEP) dispensation. This is certainly the reality facing those who have returned to Zimbabwe, as the South African government dithers on the life of these permits. Zimbabwean migrants are generally dispersed in over 100 countries of the world due to a combination of political and economic push factors (Crush et al., 2015; Maziyanhanga & Majavu, 2023). While Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States of America and Canada are some of their preferred destinations, South Africa is more popular because of its relative ease of entry, levels of development and, spatial and cultural proximity with Zimbabwe (Vuuren, 2012). Partly, this explains why Zimbabwe's Matabeleland provinces have supplied the majority of immigrants for a long time (Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). Zimbabweans' migration to South Africa has a long history, often compartmentalised into 'migration waves' (Crush et al., 2015; Mpondi, 2018). The first wave of the late 80s to the mid-90s 'coincided with the collapse of apartheid and the opening up of

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South Africa to the rest of the continent', while the second and third waves were triggered by different phases of Zimbabwe's economic and political malaise (Crush et al., 2015, p. 365). Although various sources present conflicting figures, it is estimated that Zimbabweans in South Africa number between 800,000 and 1 million (Vuuren, 2012), making this one of the most phenomenal cases of South-to-South migration.

The presence of foreign nationals in South Africa frequently ignites episodes of xenophobic backlash from locals, who often scapegoat foreigners for violent crimes and unemployment for South Africans. The global economic recession triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened the economic and political climate and amplified voices calling for the expulsion of illegal immigrants and a rethink of the country's laws regulating the employment of foreign nationals.

Uncertain about their security in the context of increasing xenophobic sentiment, and despite the skepticism around their prospects back home, some have begun to trek back to Zimbabwe. As they seek to (re)integrate into the Zimbabwean society, these returning migrants face various challenges. Studies of return migration have tended to focus more on the humanitarian and economic aspects of these challenges (Dziva & Kusena, 2013) and rarely on linguistic and cultural issues. Some returning migrants are accompanied by children born in South Africa who speak South African languages. This presents unique challenges for some children's schooling and assimilation into the Zimbabwean linguistic and cultural milieu. Having been born in a country that does not support the teaching of their parents' heritage languages, children who are socialised into South African linguistic identities face a double blow of appearing 'foreign' in their parents' country of origin. Parents are thus faced with the task of fostering their children's linguistic re-socialisation to align with the language requirements of the new setting. This often calls for the revision and recalibration of their language use and language acquisition trajectories for their children, typically starting at the family level – a dimension referred to as Family Language Policy (FLP). Although FLP has received considerable attention since its inception in the early 2000s (Curdts-Christiansen & Palviainen, 2023), it has not been investigated from the context of return migration (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). To address this lacuna, this study focused on the reflections of purposively selected Zimbabwean parents who have recently returned from South Africa with their children. This study draws on the concept of FLP to discuss how these returned migrants navigate and negotiate hostland and homeland language ideologies and practices to assist accompanying children in integrating into the Zimbabwean linguistic, educational and cultural scene.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do hostland and homeland language ideologies shape family language policies of returning Zimbabwean migrants from South Africa?
- What strategies do parents employ to foster children's socialisation into the homeland's linguistic and cultural milieu?

Research context

In an attempt to mitigate against the ballooning number of undocumented Zimbabweans staying and working illegally in South Africa, the South African government introduced a five-year special visa regime under the Dispensation of Zimbabweans Project (DZP) in 2009 (Carciotto, 2018; Maziyanhanga & Majavu, 2023). The programme aimed to regularise undocumented Zimbabweans and permit them to work, conduct business and study in South Africa (Carciotto, 2018). Upon expiry in 2014, their validity was extended by three years up to 2017, then known as the Zimbabwean Special Permits (ZSPs). Thereafter, they were renewed as Zimbabwe Exemption Permits (ZEPs). The temporality of these permits has been a limiting factor in the holders' chances of acquiring citizenship (Maziyanhanga & Majavu, 2023). At every turn, there have been threats by the South African government to terminate the ZEPs, reinforcing the general attitude that holders of these permits are expected to eventually return to their homeland at some point (Maziyanhanga & Majavu, 2023). In November 2021, the South African government announced that no further extension of the ZEP would be permitted and that a 12-month grace period was to be granted to allow holders to apply for different visa categories that would allow them to legally reside in the country.

In response to the policy promulgation on ZEPs, permit holders coalesced and challenged this decision in court, delaying its implementation. This led to uncertainty and anxiety among the ZEP holders. Recently, the Minister of Home Affairs gave ZEP holders until the end of December 2023 to regularise their status under mainstream visa categories. This deadline also passed as the directive is still being contested in the courts. While most ZEP holders have opted to stay put and play the waiting game, some have started to trek back home as ‘expected’ (Maziyanhanga & Majavu, 2023). This return has also been exacerbated by the increasing xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment, epitomised by vigilante groups such as ‘Operation Dudula’,¹ and online movements such as #putsouthafricansfirst (Mutereko, 2024). This anti-foreigner crusade generally targets African immigrants from countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). While in South Africa, Zimbabwean migrants have had to adopt South African languages to shield themselves from xenophobic attacks (Maseko & Nkomo, 2024), with some even abandoning their heritage languages – thus socialising their children into South African linguistic and cultural identities to dodge the label ‘amakwerekwere’ – a demeaning reference for Africans who speak ‘unintelligible languages’.

Although there are no official figures regarding returnees as a result of this uncertainty, indications are that this number is growing. On 27 May 2023, the Sunday News, a state-controlled newspaper reported that at least 8000 ZEP holders had registered with the government of Zimbabwe for assistance to return home². The Herald of the 25th of May also reported that the government of Zimbabwe in conjunction with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) was preparing for the influx of returnees³. The Zimbabwean president was also quoted affirming the government’s readiness to welcome and assist returning migrants to integrate into society by providing support and opportunities such as jobs and access to education⁴. However, nothing has been said about how children accompanying returnees will be supported to integrate into the new linguistic and cultural environment, thus placing this responsibility in the hands of parents and families since they form the child’s immediate sociocultural sphere.

Theoretical grounding

To understand how the returned migrants’ language choices and practices are contextually shaped by the situation in the hostland and homeland, we deploy FLP as our theoretical lens. FLP is defined as the explicit and overt planning around language use within the home among family members (King et al., 2008). The FLP approach is a recent vein of enquiry that connects three previously disconnected fields of bilingualism, language acquisition and language policy to explain decisions taken by families to encourage and support the acquisition and use of some language(s) but not others (King et al., 2008). Recent scholarship has expanded the definition of FLP to include implicit and unconscious decisions on language use by families in a variety of settings (Seals & Beliaeva, 2023). In line with arguments by Fishman (1991) the FLP approach ascribes importance to language use in the family as the inescapable basis for heritage language transmission, use and stabilisation (Schwartz & Verschik, 2013). FLP has thus been deployed to understand what these families do with languages in their daily interactions, their beliefs and ideologies about language and language use, and their goals and efforts to shape and influence language use and language learning outcomes (King et al., 2008; Spolsky, 2012). As a result, the central concern of early studies was to explain why and how some children growing up in monolingual contexts become bilinguals while others do not, and the policies and practices parents put in place to encourage or discourage the use and acquisition of certain languages (Curdts-Christiansen, 2013). Accordingly, FLP inquiries differ markedly from psycholinguistically inclined studies of bilingualism because they do not focus on the individual but are concerned with how overall language and literacy decisions interact with the sociocultural context of the family Fogle and King (2013).

While the early conceptualisation of FLP was focused on the traditional nuclear families living together in indigenous contexts, the field has significantly expanded and evolved rapidly to encompass various family configurations in different contexts (Curdts-Christiansen & Palviainen, 2023). Beyond the more common extended family (Smith-Christmas, 2014), FLP has been applied to single-parent families (Ong, 2021; Vorobeve, 2023) and foster or adoptive families (Purkarthofer et al., 2021). Further, FLP innovations have considered families that are connected through online and virtual platforms, also referred to as digital families (Palviainen & Räisä, 2023; Taipale & Farinosi, 2018). The re-imagination of what constitutes a

'family' because of global migration and transnationalism has also facilitated the expansion of FLP to encompass language transactions and negotiations within geographically dispersed as well as families characterised by constant oscillation between the hostland and their homeland, also known as transnational families (Bose et al., 2023; Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2024; Hua & Wei, 2016).

Within these different family configurations and settings, FLP shows that language negotiations and practices are enmeshed with the extant sociolinguistic, economic, and political milieu. In this study, the FLP concept is appropriate to explain how the language negotiations among Zimbabwean returnees from South Africa are entangled with language ideologies and practices in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study focuses on parental reflections on their FLP in South Africa and how they have shaped their reintegration into Zimbabwean society.

Literature review

Studies on FLP are on the rise globally. With increasing globalisation and mobility, much FLP work has sought to understand how families in migration contexts negotiate between the desire to maintain and transmit their heritage languages (Bose et al., 2023; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013) and the need to conform to the hostland language requirements, policies and politics (Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). These language choices are often linked to children's education needs and the general aspirations of immigrants to fit into the hostland's sociolinguistic milieu (Hua & Wei, 2016; Seals & Beliaeva, 2023). While some studies acknowledge the transnationality of migrants (Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2024), that is, their constant back-and-forth movement between their host country and country of origin (Hua & Wei, 2016), many tend to conceive migration as a permanent phenomenon. Consequently, marginal attention has been paid to the 'temporality of a given settlement and the idea of returning 'home' that often accompanies migrants' (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023, p. 214).

Connaughton-Crean and Ó Duibhir (2024) examined FLPs of Polish transnational families in Ireland to unpack strategies deployed by members to transmit and maintain the Polish language across different generations of migrants. Their findings show that due to the relative ease of travel between the two countries, family members tend to oscillate between Poland and Ireland as a part of a strategy to foster children's acquisition of Polish. Also focusing on three Chinese transnational families living in Britain, Hua and Wei (2016) show how family members' constructions and presentations of their identities and social relations correlate with their attitudes and perceptions about bilingualism and multilingualism. For one family, maintaining and developing a distinctive ethnic identity was the main motivation behind their FLP. In contrast, for the second family, the influence of globalisation and social changes within the Chinese diaspora led the family to adopt a multilingual FLP to sustain and expand its transnational networks (Hua & Wei, 2016). For the third family, however, diminished contact with other Chinese language speakers led to language shift, as members could no longer relate to the Chinese language and culture. Many similar studies have shown how the nuanced FLPs of transnational families are related to homeland and hostland language ideologies and broader considerations of globalisation (Purkarthofer et al., 2021; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013).

Within transnational families and other families in immigration contexts, a further preoccupation has been to understand how families negotiate between heritage language transmission and acquisition of the host country's majority language for children's education and assimilation into its linguistic and cultural milieu (Seals & Beliaeva, 2023; Soler & Roberts, 2019). These considerations often lead to a mismatch and tensions between parents' language ideologies and prevailing sociopolitical and educational realities. While parents may wish to foster the use of the heritage language and promote its intergenerational transmission, the educational and employment demands of the host country often compel them to renegotiate their FLPs to align with these realities. Seals and Beliaeva (2023) deploy the term 'aspirational FLP' to explain how FLP is often connected to families' imagined future identities, leading to an investment in some language(s), usually the majority language(s) of the host country, but not in the other (Seals & Beliaeva, 2023). Parents' desire for their children's acquisition and use of the heritage language often contradicts children's own imagined future identities and aspirations. Children have been shown to assert their language practices and language acquisition trajectories in alignment with the dominant language of the host country (Seals & Beliaeva, 2023).

While most FLP studies foreground parental authority as a critical aspect of FLP, studies focusing on children's agency and perspectives in both indigenous and immigrant contexts are on the rise (Bui et al., 2022; Fogle & King, 2013; Gyogi, 2015; Maseko, 2022). A central concern has been to show how children's educational and community language experiences and practices interact with their language acquisition and learning preferences, often leading to tensions pitting parents' ideologies and children's practices (Maseko, 2024). This was the case in two Vietnamese immigrant families in Australia where children's pro-monolingual practices contradicted their mothers' pro-bilingual language ideologies and stances (Bui et al., 2022). These children often draw on multiple resources to influence FLP by acting as their own language socialisation agents (Said, 2021). Several studies have also shown how children usually reverse the dynamics of FLP to socialise their parents into new language practices imported from and legitimised by education systems (Maseko, 2024; Revis, 2019; Said, 2021). The reproduction of education language policy in FLP blurs the binaries of home/school (Maseko, 2024), thus placing the family, and indeed FLP as a private and public space which is responsive to extra familial ideologies and practices (Purkarthofer et al., 2021).

Although return migration has been given the briefest treatment in available FLP literature (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023), this appears to be changing. Like most FLP studies, however, this literature focuses on the European and American contexts. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Daly (2023) discuss the 'linguistic identity of a Polish family in the process of migration to Germany and return migration to Poland' (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023, p. 214). They show how the family adapted its FLP in line with its changing circumstances in the hostland and homeland. While in Germany, the family did not abandon its Polish language which they kept alive through various language management strategies. These included keeping in touch with Polish traditions through regularly interacting with relatives and friends in Poland and supporting children's Polish language development by enrolling them in 'Polish Saturday School in Germany'. Such practices helped develop children's literacy skills while also offering linguistic and cultural support (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023, p. 233). This made their reintegration into Poland smoother as the family was adequately prepared, anticipated and entertained the 'idea of returning home'. In some contexts, however, return migration is not always as smooth and anticipated as is often the case in deportations (Gallo & Hornberger, 2019). Just as in the case discussed by Gallo and Hornberger (2019), return migration from South Africa to Zimbabwe is also involuntary, and families are often ill-prepared for the return journey. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Daly (2023) therefore present an interesting opportunity to compare the language experiences of families returning under different circumstances.

Focusing on families in unplanned return migration, Gallo and Hornberger (2019) examined the complexities of FLP among deported Mexican families from the US. They showed how children of deported parents engaged with FLP in their routine interactions with parents. In particular, they reveal how children negotiated family language and literacy policies alongside their parents to prepare for transnational schooling in the US and Mexico. Notably, the study argues that in the context of deportations from the US to Mexico, there is a need for language in education policy that dynamically supports children's language development to prepare them for educational success across borders. In the context of this study, these studies shed light on how families can support language socialisation and resocialisation in the context of return migration (Gallo & Hornberger, 2019). Return migration by Zimbabweans from South Africa is largely involuntary, given that the conditions that led to their emigration still subsist. While Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Daly (2023) show how consistent investment in the heritage language is important for children's integration into the homeland's linguistic, educational and cultural milieu, families in unplanned return migration are often faced with unique challenges, particularly when they bring along children born in the host countries who possess little or no proficiency in the dominant languages of their 'homeland'. For such children, the importance of the homeland heritage language(s) may not resonate with them (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). This could be a source of tension in FLP, further complicating children's integration into the homeland's educational and community language practices.

Although the past decade has witnessed a proliferation of FLP studies globally (Curd-Christiansen & Palviainen, 2023), a majority of them focus on Western contexts as this review has revealed. In the Zimbabwean and African context generally, the FLP approach remains largely underexplored. Eventhough studies are beginning to emerge in Zimbabwe (e.g. Maseko, 2022, 2024; Maseko & Mutasa, 2018, 2019), they largely focus on FLPs in fixed indigenous families to understand how they negotiate the

transmission of minority and minoritised languages in a context dominated by English and other endoglossic languages such as Shona and Ndebele. Notably, no available studies focus on FLP within the context of return migration. This is also a global picture as noted by Wąsikiewicz-Firlej and Daly (2023). However, studies reviewed here offer useful theoretical and methodological insights into the dynamics of FLP in contexts of planned and unplanned return migration. In light of the foregoing, this study contributes to the scarce literature on FLP in the context of return migration.

Methodology

Following a qualitative research approach, this study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with four purposively selected returnees from South Africa. A qualitative descriptive research design thus allowed researchers to gain insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions and beliefs concerning their FLP choices and practices in South Africa and upon return to Zimbabwe from their perspectives (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). All four participants are based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city. Bulawayo is also the capital of Matabeleland provinces, which have contributed a significant number of Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa because of their proximity to South Africa, higher levels of unemployment and systematic marginalisation (Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). To enrol participants, the first author approached Zandie (pseudonym), a known returnee from South Africa who agreed to be the first respondent. To increase our sample size, snowballing sampling, also known as chain referral sampling (Ruane, 2005) was employed. Zandie referred the researcher to another returnee (Grace), who also supplied two more referrals (Sindie and Brian) who satisfied our criteria for inclusion into the sample. Potential participants were to have returned to Zimbabwe not longer than four years at the time of the interview. Potential respondents were supposed to be parents (biological Mothers or Fathers) to at least one child born in South Africa. We considered returnee parents to be rich sources of data to answer the study's research questions. Taking a cue from (King et al., 2008) we also considered parents as authorities whose language ideologies are central in the articulation of family language policies among migrants.

The first author conducted interviews with the selected participants between the 5th of January and the 25th of February 2024. All four interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. A set of predetermined interview questions (Appendix A) were used to guide the interview while follow-up questions were used for further probing and clarification as the interviews unfolded. Participants' informed consent was sought and obtained before each interview. This entailed a comprehensive explanation of the nature and objectives of the study as well as informing participants of their rights. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview anytime they wished to, and how their right to confidentiality and anonymity would be guaranteed. Accordingly, pseudonyms rather than participants' real names are used. Interviews were conducted in languages preferred by participants. Two participants (Grace and Sindie) were interviewed in English while Zandie and Brian were interviewed in Ndebele. For the latter, interview questions were translated from English to Ndebele. Interviews were audio recorded and partially transcribed by omitting meaningless fillers, pauses and other cues. Transcripts from Zandie and Brian's interviews were then translated into English.

Besides eliciting demographic and family sociolinguistic information, interview questions required participants to reflect on their family language practices in South Africa and how they were contextually shaped by family configurations as well as the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical dynamics of the hostland. Questions also sought participants' perspectives on how the conditions in the homeland upon return also impacted their language ideologies and concomitant language (re)socialisation of their children. The data analysis is largely descriptive, enabling us to foreground participants' reflections on their FLPs to show how they are shaped by, and intertwined with their experiences of migration and return migration.

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study.

Demographic and sociolinguistic profiles of participants

All four study participants have spent not longer than four years from the time of their return to Zimbabwe. Each participant is a parent with at least one accompanying child. Except for Grace, they all settled in extended family setups upon return to Zimbabwe. Table 1 summarises the participants' demographic, sociolinguistic and current living arrangements.

Zandie returned from South Africa in 2020 with her two sons. They currently stay with Zandie's parents. Grace returned to Zimbabwe in 2022 and lives with her 9-year-old daughter. Sindie and her two daughters returned from South Africa in 2021 and they currently live with Sindie's mother-in-law. Brian returned to Zimbabwe in 2022 with his only son. Brian's wife passed away in 2020. They live with Brian's mother and Brian's younger sister. Regarding the participants' family linguistic repertoires, all four families speak Ndebele as their 'first language.' English and Zulu are also spoken within all four families. Additionally, Sepedi and Sesotho are spoken in Sindie and Brian's families respectively by the returnees' children. Although profiles presented in Table 1 indicate that three participants live in extended family households, Grace and Sindie's family configurations are more complex. While they are both married, their husbands remained in South Africa. However, the two occasionally visit their husbands in South Africa and the husbands also visit the families in Zimbabwe during holidays. This suggests that while the two are considered returned migrants, their family experiences are characterised by transnationalism as they oscillate between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Grace is also raising her daughter somewhat 'as a single parent since I often play the role of mother and father.' These fluid family configurations also confirm the complexities surrounding the notion of 'family.'

Reflections on FLP in South Africa and Zimbabwe

Zandie

During her stay in South Africa, Zandie got 'married' to a Cameroonian national with whom she has two children. Although the marriage was not legally registered in South Africa nor customarily formalised, 'we lived together as husband and wife for some years before we broke up.' In South Africa, their FLP revolved around English and Zulu. She explains that although her then-husband was a French-English bilingual, they never used French at home. She used English and Zulu with the children while her husband, who could not speak any indigenous South African language only used English. The decision to use English and Zulu with children was motivated by educational and security considerations. She explains:

[...] We used English and Zulu at home. We spoke English because the boys' father is Cameroonian and could only communicate in English. Another reason was that most daycares in our neighbourhood used English because it was a community of people from different nationalities [...] I also used Zulu with the children as one of the major languages of South Africa. With increasing cases of xenophobia, I wanted my children to be safe. I also wanted to be safe, so I did not use Ndebele. Even though Ndebele and Zulu are almost similar, there are differences in accent and tone.

Pragmatically, Zandie, who is a Ndebele speaker herself, preferred both English and Zulu in the household to bridge the cultural divide and prevent her family from being victims of xenophobia. She reiterated that her preference for Zulu was motivated by the need to socialise and align her children with a South African identity to navigate the xenophobic environment where language has been weaponised to identify and torture foreign nationals:

Table 1. Participants' profiles.

Name/ Sex	Age	No. of children, (sex) ages	Year of return	Family type in Zimbabwe	Family's linguistic repertoire
Zandie/Female	42	2 (boys) 10; 7	2020	Extended (lives with parents)	Ndebele, English, Zulu
Grace/Female	39	1 (girl), 9	2022	Single parent (husband in South Africa)	Ndebele, English, Zulu
Sindie/Female	42	2 (girls) 10; 7	2021	Extended (lives with mother-in-law)	Ndebele, English, Zulu, Sepedi
Brian/Male	40	1 (boy) 10	2022	Extended (lives with mother and younger sister)	Ndebele, English, Sotho, Zulu

[...] I did not want my children to be identified as children of foreigners when they went out of the house. Although children were rarely targeted, I thought they would grow up in South Africa because I did not plan to bring them back to Zimbabwe but, here we are.

Zandie's reflections suggest that no efforts were made to pass on her Ndebele heritage language, nor that of her husband's to the children as their FLP centred on English and Zulu. Considerations of safety and schooling were the main motivations behind their FLP.

Upon return to Zimbabwe, Zandie revised her FLP. Now resident in Bulawayo where Ndebele is the major community language and the language taught as a subject in schools, Zandie now endeavours to expose her children to Ndebele to help them integrate into the family, community and school life. She explains how she has abandoned 'all the Zulu and completely reverted to using Ndebele' to help improve her children's Ndebele language skills. To this end, she retorts:

On returning home, I had to change my approach to language use. There is no reason to fake being Zulu anymore. I now use 'pure' Ndebele so my children can learn it from me. I have dropped the Zulu accent and tone. Besides, in Bulawayo, you sound ridiculous when you use Zulu accent and Zulu words.

To further develop children's proficiency in Ndebele, Zandie leverages the presence of their grandparents who 'always address the children in Ndebele'. The extended family setup has thus been an opportunity to reverse the intergenerational disruption of Ndebele that was happening in South Africa. Zandie's changing ideologies and language preferences for her children's language development thus affirm the view of FLP as being responsive to the sociolinguistic context and educational realities, as well as the family's changing life trajectories (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). Zandie has however maintained the use of English at home, but this time only during children's homework. For Zandie's family, English is important for children's schooling. In Zimbabwe, English is the default lingua franca at all levels of education. In South Africa, English also functioned as the family's lingua franca to accommodate Zandie's husband who couldn't speak any indigenous South African language.

Zandie explains how she has noticed some improvement in her children's language use and proficiency in the Ndebele language. She attributes this improvement to her language interventions such as consciously dropping the Zulu accent and Zulu words from her speech, as well as the role played by the children's grandparents with whom they spend most of the time 'while I am out trying to make a living'. She notes:

I have noticed a great change in my child's language use since we returned because he is now spending time with children who speak one language and has managed to adjust and adapt.

Grace

Grace has one child born in South Africa. She is married but her husband remained in South Africa to fend for the family as prospects of gainful employment in Zimbabwe remain dim. Since they 'take turns to visit each other', they can also be considered a transnational or long-distance family (Palviainen & Räisä, 2023). Grace's reflections reveal how her husband, who is a former teacher and 'an avid admirer of Zimbabwean education' has always preferred a Zimbabwean education for their children. He thus used the 'ZEP permit uncertainty to convince me to return to Zimbabwe with our daughter'. While in South Africa, the family had kept its Ndebele heritage language alive and used it 'almost all the time at home'. Although the family also used English and Zulu, they took conscious decisions and measures to maintain Ndebele. Grace recalls:

In South Africa, we used Ndebele most of the time. My husband always had this idea that we would one day return to Zimbabwe. All I can say is that he is proud of his identity and unlike most of us, he does not fake being Zulu to fit in South Africa. He speaks 'deep Ndebele' without even trying to mask his accent or tone. He does not hide that he wants his children to learn in Zimbabwe because he holds the education system here in high regard. He always addressed our daughter in 'deep Ndebele'.

On the other hand, Grace recalls how she would constantly contravene her husband's explicit FLP choices for their daughter's language socialisation:

I understood and supported my husband's choices, but to be honest, I often found myself using Zulu and English. At the back of my mind, I wanted to fit in South Africa and avoid trouble with locals. I wanted the same for my daughter but her father's conviction about teaching her Ndebele was so strong.

As part of the family's language management to keep their heritage alive while in South Africa, Grace indicates how they kept in constant touch with other family members in Zimbabwe and the Ndebele community in South Africa:

We kept the language alive by maintaining contact with relatives back home and socialising with people from home on our off days. We also joined WhatsApp groups with news from home and shared accommodation with other Ndebele speakers from Zimbabwe.

To further concretise and foster their child's acquisition of the Ndebele language, the couple also ensured to take their child along during their visits to Zimbabwe. This underscores the importance placed by the family on the role of the extended family members in fostering the intergenerational transmission of their heritage language and culture.

Upon return to Zimbabwe, Grace indicated that she did not have to make drastic revisions to their FLP as her child's Ndebele language development was already enough for her integration into the home-land's linguistic and cultural milieu. For Grace, the only thing that changed was the location. As she still lives with her daughter, she does not see the need to change her FLP. She believes her husband's investment in language learning opportunities for their daughter while still in South Africa is partly the reason why she and her daughter did not have difficulties in reintegrating. While she does not live with any of her daughter's grandparents currently, she acknowledges their role and other relatives who often engaged in Ndebele-centred conversations with their daughter during family visits to Zimbabwe and the 'long hours they spent with her on the phone'. She opines:

I have to be grateful for introducing and cultivating the Ndebele language while still in South Africa. We do not have any language problems here as our daughter can speak Ndebele well. I am glad she spent time with her grandparents during our visits back then.

The above also underscores the importance of technology in fostering heritage language development and intergenerational transmission. Grace suggests that the Ndebele-centred phone conversations between their daughter and members of the extended family were instrumental in her language development. Besides occasional visits to South Africa and the father's visits to Zimbabwe, Grace's daughter also spends 'a lot of time talking to her father on the phone and chatting on WhatsApp'. Ndebele is used during these interactions because of the father's deliberate interventions.

Sindie

Sindie's husband also remained in South Africa. In Zimbabwe, she lives with her mother-in-law and her two children. In South Africa, their FLP emphasised Zulu for the same reasons as Zandie's family. Sindie's children can also speak 'a bit of Sepedi learnt from our neighbours and friends in South Africa'. On their FLP in South Africa, she recalls:

We mainly spoke Zulu to fit into the community. The children also spoke Sepedi which they learnt from playing with their friends next door and the community. At home, they would also mix these languages with Zulu even though we preferred to be identified as Zulu for security reasons. Our mother tongue is almost similar to Zulu; therefore, it was convenient to identify as Zulu.

From Sindie's reflections, the xenophobic sentiment that pervades South African society influenced their Zulu-centred FLP which resulted in neglect of their Ndebele heritage language. She further remarked:

Most of the challenges that we faced in using our heritage language were linked to our fears of xenophobic attacks. When crimes were committed, foreigners, especially Zimbabweans were always blamed [...] We tried as much as possible to speak and sound Zulu to fit in and be safe because language always gives away identity.

On their return to Zimbabwe, Sindie's children initially had problems fitting into the community because of their distinct Zulu accent and tone. Sindie recalls how they were often ridiculed and labelled as 'onjivana'⁵ for their Zulu linguistic features. Because of this, she explains how she has consciously dropped the Zulu tone and accent and avoids Zulu words when speaking to her children as a way to

socialise them into Ndebele. She also notes how the children's paternal grandmother has been central to this 'second process of socialisation' (Stoessel, 2002) as her presence increases children's exposure to 'proper Ndebele':

My children were often ridiculed for speaking Zulu. They were often taunted as 'onjivana' by our neighbours. This had become a source of anxiety for them. It was important for their well-being to be resocialised to use proper Ndebele.

[...]

I had to act fast to help them fit in the society. Luckily, we live with their grandmother who is helpful in this regard. Spending time with her has helped a lot. Although they faced problems initially, they are now beginning to sound more like Ndebele than Zulu and the ridiculing has stopped.

Sindie's reflections confirm that FLP is never cast in stone but can change with the changing circumstances of the family. Her dynamic FLP choices also demonstrate that, in both hostland and homeland contexts, prevailing sociopolitical conditions can either support or disrupt the intergenerational transmission of migrants' heritage languages.

Brian

Brian is the only male participant in the study. Although this picture may not be representative of the general profile of Zimbabwean returnees from South Africa, it may suggest that men are generally reluctant to return, opting to remain to fend for their families since the economic conditions in Zimbabwe have not improved. Brian returned with his only son whose mother 'passed away in 2020 in South Africa after a long illness'. Just like Zandie and Sindie, Brian and his son currently live in an extended family setup with Brian's mother 'who is a widow'. They also live with Brian's sister. While in South Africa, the family had adopted Zulu as their 'home language' for the same reasons as other families in this study. Although Zulu was the preferred language at home, Brian recalls how his wife also used English with their child when she was still alive:

In South Africa, we used Zulu mostly at home. It was deliberate to use Zulu because we wanted our son to grow up speaking it. We also used it to mask out foreign identity [...] When his mother was still alive, she also used English when helping our son with homework [...] I am not good in English hence I strictly used Zulu.

From these reflections, it is apparent that like in all families in this study, the choice to use Zulu at home was informed by the parents' aspirations for the family's identity while English was used in activities linked to the child's schooling.

On returning to Zimbabwe, Brian also notes how his son struggled to fit into the 'new' family's linguistic practices. Despite his grandmother and aunt's assurances that it was acceptable to use any language he wanted, 'he became introverted, particularly during the first few months of their return'. This 'silent period' negatively impacted his integration into the family and locating himself in the new family and community setting. Since it is 'through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time' (Stoessel, 2002, p. 98). Brian's son's struggle to gain access to the family network also denied him the opportunity to seamlessly integrate:

The first weeks of our return were particularly difficult for my son [...] He struggled with understanding certain Ndebele words and expressions. He would constantly ask for clarifications when addressed in Ndebele. It was difficult to adapt to the new environment, new school, new culture, new teachers and new languages.

Brian further added:

We were used to speaking Zulu in South Africa. The change to a Zimbabwean language was difficult for him but he had no choice because Ndebele is the main language in Bulawayo while Zulu was only useful in South Africa.

However, Brian recalls that as time went by, the efforts and influence of the extended family began to manifest in his son's Ndebele language development. Brian also takes his son to visit relatives in the countryside to reinforce language resocialisation. He considers this an important practice to foster his

son's Ndebele development. As also evident from previous families, the extended family is key in Brian's son's Ndebele language improvement as confirmed by Brian:

Staying with his grandmother and aunt helps because these people are always speaking Ndebele with him. They are always sending him around and giving instructions in 'pure' Ndebele. I stayed in South Africa for a long time and had gotten used to Zulu hence as for me, I always find myself using Zulu.

The presence of the boy's aunt in the family is beneficial for Brian's son as she helps with his homework:

We are lucky to also stay with my younger sister. Unlike me, she speaks good English and that is very important as she helps with my son's schoolwork.

These findings show that Brian's family's FLP also responds to the prevailing conditions and context of the family.

Discussion and conclusion

The study findings suggest that families in the context of return migration face different challenges as they attempt to (re)integrate into the sociolinguistic milieu of their homeland. These challenges are often linked to the dispositions towards their heritage language while in the host country. Also evident from the findings is that while in the host country, immigrant family ideologies are often shaped by the obtaining sociopolitical and educational realities. This is also confirmed by previous studies (e.g. Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). For some families in this study, the xenophobic climate in South Africa resulted in their reification of Zulu-centric 'aspirational FLPs' (Seals & Beliaeva, 2023) to navigate the risks posed by xenophobia. Considerations of children's education also influence FLP. Under such conditions, other studies also show that the tendency has been to shift to the majority language(s) of the hostland (Hua & Wei, 2016; Maseko & Nkomo, 2024). However, the findings of this study show how a combination of these did little to discourage Grace's family from pursuing an FLP that supported intergenerational transmission of the family's heritage language. This was possible because the family entertained the idea of 'returning' home someday, typified by the father's desire for a Zimbabwean education for his children. Unlike the three families who did not foresee nor plan to raise children in Zimbabwe until the sociopolitical and immigration conditions 'conspired' against them, Grace's family had deliberately adopted an FLP that prepared the family for the 'return journey'. Other studies have also shown how families who anticipate return migration take deliberate steps to foster the acquisition of the heritage language for use back home (Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2024; Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). Conversely, families who do not anticipate return migration face difficulties in reintegrating into the linguistic and cultural environment of their homeland, often typified by children's failure to adapt to the language demands of the education system (Gallo & Hornberger, 2019).

As exemplified by the cases under study, families in return migration can either adopt a variety of strategies or leverage the family's configuration and situatedness to foster their children's language resocialisation. Languages acquired by children in the hostland may become sources of anxiety for the children as exemplified by Sindie's children who have been ridiculed and taunted for speaking and sounding Zulu. This added a sense of urgency for the family to revise and recalibrate their FLP. Returnees also leverage their homeland family arrangements to support children's heritage language use and development. This may impact positively on children's integration in their 'homeland' and general well-being. All the families in this study live in extended family households. They also profit from the proximity of grandparents and other extended family members to foster children's acquisition and development of the heritage language. Extended family arrangements have been shown to provide a lifeline for heritage languages in a variety of contexts (Smith-Christmas, 2014; Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). These findings also align with previous studies by showing how extended families are rich sources of language input for families in indigenous and transnational contexts, as well as return migration (Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2024; Soler & Roberts, 2019; Wąsikiewicz-Firlej & Daly, 2023). The study findings also resonate with the argument that the language behaviour of immigrants constitutes a continuum, with some being 'language maintainers, who frequently and also correctly use their L1s, and others being language shifters, who have shifted to the use of L2 in most contexts of their everyday lives' (Stoessel, 2002, p. 94).

As a result of globalisation and migration, the notion of 'family' is increasingly becoming complex and fluid. Families in return migration face unique challenges and opportunities for the transmission of their home languages. Families in this study exemplify these dynamics. While Grace and Sindie's husbands remained in South Africa, they are still very much part of their families. They participate in their family activities through digitally mediated communication. Grace's husband is even able to influence FLP by participating in Ndebele-centred phone conversations with their daughter and through chatting on WhatsApp. This further complicates this family's categorisation and buttresses the notion of 'family' as more complex than it has been previously conceptualised. App-mediated family language practices can be considered an important part of family communication and a source of heritage language input for such geographically separated families (Palviainen & Räisä, 2023; Taipale & Farinosi, 2018). The case of Grace's family's language policy shows how geographically dislocated parents leverage the affordances of digital communication to collaborate in their child's language socialisation. What is clear from the findings, however, is that migration and return migration cause changes in family configurations, which changes can either be detrimental or beneficial for the intergenerational transmission of heritage languages.

This study was limited to the perspectives of purposively selected parents in the context of South Africa-Zimbabwe return migration. It focused on participants' reflections to reveal how their FLP preferences are intertwined with the sociolinguistic and educational conditions of the host and homeland countries. Findings revealed that the FLPs of the participants are largely aspirational. They also revealed that their FLPs are also a function of language loyalty and the extent to which migrants entertain the idea of returning home. Different families thus exhibited different depositions towards the maintenance of their heritage languages. Because of its scope, an obvious limitation of this study is the absence of children's voices. However, this study assumes that the accompanying children may have been too young to appreciate the sociopolitical and sociolinguistic dynamics in the host country. Further research could incorporate these returning children's voices to show how their practices align with or contradict their parents' choices in the context of their 'homeland.' In future, ethnographic studies could also be done to observe children's language practices and confirm if they replicate their parents' language ideologies and FLPs.

Notes

1. This is a quasi-civic and vigilante movement operating on an anti-immigrant platform. The word 'dudula' means 'to force out' in Zulu. The group has almost formalised what has previously been sporadic xenophobia-fuelled vigilante attacks in South Africa
2. <https://www.sundaynews.co.zw/zep-permits-8-000-ready-to-return-home-from-sa/>.
3. <https://www.herald.co.zw/govt-prepares-to-receive-sa-returnees/>.
4. <https://www.herald.co.zw/editorial-comment-returning-citizens-from-sa-need-to-be-accepted/>.
5. This is a colloquial term used to denote Zimbabweans who emigrated to South Africa but occasionally return to Zimbabwe during holidays. They are often identified by their use of peculiar Zulu linguistic features in their speech. They are also colloquially known as 'omtshifana'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Demographic information

1. Could you please provide some basic demographic information about your family?

- Family structure (both parents, single parent, extended family)- include ages and their first languages.
- How many children do you have? How many were born in South Africa?
- What are the children's ages?
- Children's level of education

FLP in South Africa

2. During your time in South Africa, what language(s) were mostly spoken in your household?

3. What were the reasons for your choices in 2 above?

4. How did your family maintain your Zimbabwean linguistic and cultural identity while living in South Africa?

5. Were there any challenges or barriers you faced in maintaining your family's heritage language while in South Africa?

6. Did you actively seek out opportunities for your children to learn or use Zimbabwean languages while in South Africa?
If so, how?

FLP upon return to Zimbabwe

7. What challenges related to language use do you or your children face in the community?

8. What challenges related to language do children face at school?

9. Have you noticed any changes in your family's language use since returning to Zimbabwe?