"Charming Yet Challenging": Exploring Ethnolinguistic Identity Perceptions of Khalajs Through Positioning Theory

"Zor Ama Cezbedici": Halaçça Konuşurlarının Etnodilbilimsel Benlik Algılarının Konumlandırma Kuramı Çerçevesinde İncelenmesi

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Orta İran'da konuşulan tehlike altındaki bir azınlık dili olan Halaççanın etnodilbilimsel canlılığına dair algıları derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İran, Farsçayı neredeyse tüm toplumsal ve kurumsal alanlarda teşvik eden tek dilli bir politika izlediğinden, Halaçça gibi azınlık dilleri giderek daha fazla marjinalleşmektedir. Bu dil politikası, Halaççanın kullanıldığı işlevsel alanların daralmasına neden olmakta ve bu durum dilin canlılığını etkilemektedir. Bu çalışma, Halaçça konuşan toplulukların dillerinin canlılığını baskın dil olan Farsçayla karşılaştırarak nasıl algıladıklarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu algıları incelemek için çalışma, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve ayrıntılı saha çalışması notları ile elde edilen nitel verilere dayanmaktadır. Halaçça konuşan altı katılımcıyla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, konuşurların dillerinin geleceğini nasıl gördüklerine, karşılaştıkları zorluklara ve toplumsal olarak baskın dil olan Farsçanın etkisine dair bilgiler sunmaktadır. Saha gözlemleri, topluluk içindeki günlük dil pratiklerini ve dinamiklerini dikkate alarak bu verileri daha da zenginleştirmiştir. Bulgular, Halaçça konuşanların, dillerinin canlılığını büyük ölçüde *düşük* algıladıklarını ve dilin tehlike altında olması ve özel ve kamusal yaşamda sınırlı kullanımına dair kaygılarını yansıtmaktadır. Bulgular, aynı zamanda Farsçanın canlılığını son derece *yüksek* algıladıklarına işaret etmektedir. Bu nitel çalışma, İran'daki azınlık ve baskın diller arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimleri ortaya

koymakta ve tehlike altındaki dillerin etnodilbilimsel canlılığını korumanın çekici ama zorlu doğasını konumlandırma teorisi çerçevesinde vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halaçça, konumlandırma kuramı, etnodilbilimsel canlılık, tehlike altındaki dil, Farsça.

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the ethnolinguistic identity of Khalaj speakers, an endangered minority language community in Central Iran, through the lens of positioning theory. In a socio-political landscape dominated by a monolingual policy that elevates Persian in nearly all social and institutional contexts, minority languages such as Khalaj face increasing marginalization. This policy significantly reduces the functional spaces where Khalaj is used, adversely affecting the language's vitality and prospects for survival. The study investigates how Khalaj-speaking communities position their language in relation to the dominant Persian, examining their perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality. Utilizing qualitative methods, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and detailed fieldwork notes. Interviews with six key informants from the Khalaj-speaking community provided rich insights into how speakers perceive their language's future, the challenges it encounters, and the influence of Persian as the socially dominant language. Fieldwork observations further enriched this data, capturing the everyday language practices and dynamics within the community. The findings reveal that Khalaj speakers perceive their language's vitality as *low*, reflecting significant concerns regarding its endangerment and limited use in both public and private spheres. In contrast, they recognize the vitality of Persian as overwhelmingly *high*, acknowledging its predominance in education, governance, and media. These perceptions highlight the positioning of Khalaj within the sociolinguistic landscape, revealing the pressures that contribute to language shift and the potential for revitalization efforts. This qualitative study illustrates the complex interplay between minority and dominant languages in Iran, emphasizing the charming yet challenging nature of maintaining ethnolinguistic vitality for endangered languages like Khalaj through the framework of positioning theory.

Keywords: Khalaj, positioning theory, ethnolinguistic vitality, endangerment, Persian.

0. Introduction

Numerous Turkic languages, including Khalaj, Soyot, Lop, Fuyü, Chalkan, Chulym, Karaim, Tofan, Tuhan, and Dukhan, are facing an imminent threat of extinction due to the overwhelming influence of dominant languages (Johanson 2021: 4). This influence manifests in various forms, such as the dominance of national languages in education, media, and governance, which marginalizes minority languages and limits their intergenerational transmission. As speakers of

these Turkic languages shift towards more socially and economically advantageous languages, their native tongues are increasingly confined to older generations, with fewer opportunities for use in public or formal settings. In addition to language shift, the lack of institutional support for these endangered Turkic languages exacerbates the situation. Educational policies often prioritize the teaching of dominant languages, leaving little room for minority language instruction. As a result, younger generations grow up fluent in the dominant language but disconnected from their ancestral tongue. In such a context, efforts to revitalize these languages face significant challenges, requiring community engagement, the development of educational resources, and policy changes that promote bilingualism and linguistic diversity.

In Iran, a country characterized by its rich and diverse linguistic landscape, the presence of various minority languages, including several Turkic varieties, highlights the depth of its linguistic heritage (Gholami 2020: 347). While some of these languages, such as South Azeri (Ahmadi 2023a), have sustained a significant number of speakers, others, like Khalaj (Akkuş and Sağın Şimşek 2022; Akkuş and Ahmadi 2024; Doerfer 1971), Tati (Majidifard, Hajmalek and Rezaei 2023), Mazandarani (Bashirnazad 2023), and Mandaic (Ahmadi 2023b), are at risk of extinction due to challenges in both language preservation and cultural continuity. The growing threat to these languages underscores the urgent need for deeper investigation and documentation of their ethnolinguistic vitality and the speakers' positioning their identites in a multilingual landscape.

Understanding the factors contributing to the endangerment of these languages requires a multifaceted approach. To address the challenges facing these endangered languages, targeted research efforts are necessary. This includes conducting field studies that gather firsthand accounts from speakers about their language practices, attitudes, and aspirations for the future. Engaging with community members in participatory research can also empower them to take an active role in language preservation initiatives. By documenting not only linguistic features but also the cultural narratives associated with these languages, researchers can create a more comprehensive picture of their vitality.

This study aims to meet this critical need by focusing on the endangered Khalaj language and providing a comprehensive analysis of its ethnolinguistic vitality. By exploring the perceptions of the Khalaj-speaking community and contrasting them with the dominant influence of Persian, the research seeks to offer key insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics that impact language survival. These findings will contribute to the broader discussion surrounding endangered languages, emphasizing the value of ethnolinguistic vitality as a framework for understanding both the processes of language endangerment and the efforts to revitalize them.

1. Theoretical Framework: Positioning and Ethnolinguistic Vitality

Davies and Harré (1990: 43) challenge the traditional use of the concept of "role" in the construction of social identity by questioning its static and prescriptive nature. They argue that roles, as traditionally conceived, suggest rigid and predefined behavioral expectations that individuals are expected to conform to within particular social contexts. For instance, classic sociological frameworks often portray people as occupying fixed roles—such as that of a teacher, a leader, or a caregiver—each with a specific set of norms, duties, and characteristics that guide their behavior. In this view, the social self is largely shaped by conforming to these external expectations. However, Davies and Harré (1990: 43) contend that this perspective overlooks the dynamic and negotiated aspects of social interactions and propose an alternative conceptual framework with the term "positioning," which highlights the fluid, dynamic, and interactive nature of social encounters. They assert that human interactions are more fluid than simply taking on predetermined roles. Instead of passively fulfilling static roles, individuals engage in an active process of positioning, where they continuously shape and reshape their identities in response to the specific context, the people they are interacting with, and the discursive practices in play. Through this lens, social identity is not something fixed or inherent but is instead an evolving construct that individuals co-create in conversation and social interaction.

Positioning theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of identity formation, as it acknowledges that people can occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory, positions within different interactions. For example, a person may position themselves as assertive in one conversation but deferential in another, depending on the dynamics of the situation. This flexibility allows for a more complex view of social identity, where individuals have agency in how they present themselves and negotiate their roles within a given social structure.

Ethnolinguistic vitality (EV), on the other hand, refers to the capacity of a linguistic and cultural community to maintain and promote its distinct identity, language, and cultural practices in the face of external pressures. It encompasses both objective and subjective dimensions, including the demographic strength of the community, the institutional support available for the language, and the perceived status of the language within the broader societal context. High ethnolinguistic vitality indicates a robust motivation among community members to use and preserve their language, contributing to a sense of collective identity and resistance to assimilation or language shift towards dominant languages.

Research has shown that ethnolinguistic vitality is not static; it can fluctuate in response to changing external conditions and internal community dynamics. Consequently, understanding the factors that contribute to or detract from ethnolinguistic vitality is crucial for designing effective language preservation and revitalization strategies. Efforts to promote ethnolinguistic vitality may involve fostering positive attitudes toward the language, enhancing institutional support, and creating spaces for the use of the language in public life.

Within the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality, objective vitality refers to the measurable and observable aspects of the overall health and sustainability of a language and its associated cultural identity within a specific community or society. Objective vitality encompasses external factors that facilitate the continued use, development, and transmission of a language.

A vital element of objective vitality, introduced by Giles et al. (1977: 307), is institutional control, which refers to the level of influence and authority that an ethnolinguistic community has over educational, governmental, and cultural institutions. The ability to shape and guide these institutions plays a crucial role in the objective vitality of a language. Within this framework, the status of a language pertains to the social recognition and esteem it receives within the broader societal context. The prestige and influence of a language affect its usage across various domains, such as media, commerce, and public discourse, ultimately impacting its overall vitality. By examining these three structural variables—demography, institutional control, and status—researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the tangible factors influencing the relative strength and sustainability of ethnolinguistic communities. This framework enables a nuanced evaluation of the objective vitality of languages in contact, thereby guiding efforts for effective language preservation and revitalization strategies.

With the introduction of the objective vitality construct, it became essential to determine whether speakers from both majority and minority groups perceived their own groups' vitality in line with expert assessments of their objective vitality (Bourhis et al. 1981: 145). The concept of subjective vitality perceptions was developed to measure how individuals within language minorities and majorities view the comparative strength of their language communities. These perceptions were quantified using the Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire (SEVQ), which consists of 21 items designed to assess ingroup/outgroup vitality perceptions across demographic, institutional support, and status domains (Bourhis et al. 1981: 145). Covering a range of factors from demographic and status dimensions to institutional, economic, and media domains, the SEVQ provides nuanced insights into how individuals perceive the strength and viability of their language. By addressing aspects such as national and international language status, workplace usage, migration patterns, and future expectations, the SEVQ captures a comprehensive array of factors influencing subjective vitality. This multifaceted approach allows for a holistic understanding of community dynamics, facilitating targeted interventions and strategies for language preservation and revitalization.

Aligned with these theoretical foundations, ethnolinguistic vitality has garnered attention as a theoretical construct for investigating language maintenance and shift (Yagmur, de Bot and Korzilius 1999; Bourhis et al. 2019; Yagmur and Akinci 2003; Yagmur 2004; Yagmur 2009), language choice (Lewin 1987; McNamara 1987), and language revitalization (Yagmur and Kroon 2003, 2006).

As for Khalaj, in their 2022 study, Akkuş and Sağın Şimşek explore the relationship between social networks and ethnolinguistic vitality, focusing on the endangered Khalaj language in a multilingual context alongside Persian. They adopt a mixed-hybrid model combining social network theory and ethnolinguistic vitality to investigate how language use contributes to the formation and maintenance of social networks within the Khalaj-Persian community. The study involves 26 participants, categorized into three generational groups (older, middle-aged, and younger), with data collected through semi-structured interviews, fieldwork notes, and language use questionnaires. Their findings show a strong connection between language use in social networks and the vitality of the Khalaj language. Older participants preferred to use Khalaj in social interactions when possible, while younger participants predominantly used Persian, suggesting a generational shift in language use and a potential indicator of Khalaj language endangerment. This study highlights the critical role of social networks in shaping language vitality and underscores the challenges faced by endangered languages like Khalaj. In a recent study, Akkuş and Ahmadi (2024) present a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality among speakers of Khalaj. Quantitative data was gathered via a "subjective vitality questionnaire" administered to 249 Khalaj participants. The findings revealed that the Khalaj participants believed the ethnolinguistic vitality of their language to be low, while they perceived the vitality of Persian, the socially dominant language, as high (Akkuş ve Ahmadi 2024: 246).

2. Methodology

The qualitative research paradigm has been chosen for this study given its ability to provide deep, context-rich insights into participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena (Creswell and Poth 2016). It is particularly well-suited for studying language attitudes, identity, and ethnolinguistic vitality, as it captures the nuanced and subjective aspects of human behavior and interaction. This approach is especially valuable when investigating under-researched or marginalized groups, where understanding social context and personal narratives is essential for meaningful interpretation. Thus, the narratives provided by Khalaj informants in semi-structured interviews serve as an important resource for gaining insight into how individuals form their attitudes toward the ethnolinguistic vitality of their heritage language, as well as the sociopolitically dominant language in their environment. These personal accounts not only reveal the subjective experiences of language use within different social domains but also highlight the broader societal influences shaping language attitudes.

Semi-structured interviews are a key data collection method in linguistic studies, providing a flexible yet guided approach to exploring participants' language experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. They are constructed around a set of open-ended questions or themes that allow for a consistent framework while offering

room for participants to elaborate on their responses. This flexibility is essential in linguistic research, as it enables the exploration of both expected topics and emergent themes that may arise during the conversation (Kvale 1996).

When applied in a linguistic study, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to probe participants' responses and ask follow-up questions to clarify or expand on certain points (Creswell and Poth 2016). This method provides rich, qualitative data that can reveal the deeper motivations and emotions behind language behaviors, offering insights into how language is intertwined with identity and social dynamics. Additionally, the conversational nature of semi-structured interviews helps build rapport with participants, often leading to more candid and reflective responses (Mann 2011).

After transcribing all the interview data *verbatim* in Persian, a thematic analysis was applied to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the data. This approach allowed the researchers to uncover recurring themes related to language use, identity, and perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality.

The process of thematic analysis typically begins with data familiarization, where the researcher becomes thoroughly acquainted with the data, often by reading and re-reading interview transcripts or field notes (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012). This is followed by the coding phase, where key features or ideas in the data are systematically identified and labeled. These codes serve as the building blocks for the analysis, capturing both explicit content and underlying meanings related to the research question (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules 2017). Once the data are coded, the researcher groups similar codes into potential themes, organizing the data into broader categories that reflect significant patterns (Braun and Clarke 2012). After themes are identified, they are reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represent the data. The final phase involves defining and naming themes, providing a detailed analysis of how each theme contributes to answering the research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the context of linguistic research, this approach helps illuminate how speakers perceive their language and identity within their sociolinguistic environment. Through thematic analysis, researchers can uncover complex patterns of meaning that shed light on language attitudes, usage, and the broader social factors affecting linguistic behavior (King 2004).

2.1. Research Questions

This study aims at investigating the perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality among Khalaj-speaking communities in Central Iran, particularly in relation to the dominant Persian language. Thus, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do Khalaj-speaking communities perceive the ethnolinguistic vitality of their language in comparison to the socially dominant Persian in Central Iran?

2. What sociolinguistic factors and challenges contribute to the perceived decline in the vitality of Khalaj, and how do these perceptions influence language maintenance or shift within the community?

2.2. ·Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

In order to answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted so that participants could provide detailed, personal insights into their perceptions of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Khalaj. Six interviewees, all of whom are native Khalaj speakers, were selected for the study based on their knowledge of the language and their active involvement in the community. These individuals represent a range of ages, occupations, and social backgrounds, offering a diverse set of perspectives on the challenges facing the Khalaj language. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions regarding their language use in daily life, their perceptions of the language's future, and the influence of Persian as the dominant language in educational, governmental, and media domains. This diverse sample allowed for a nuanced understanding of the varying attitudes toward the ethnolinguistic vitality of Khalaj.

2.2.1. Informants

Table 1 furnishes crucial demographic information about the Khalaj speakers who took part in the interviews. This information encompasses the participant's anonymized code, the province and district of their residence, age, gender, and education level. The diverse range of ages, genders, and educational backgrounds among the participants contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives presented in the study.

Table 1. Demographic information

Interviewee	Province	District	Age	Gender	Education
Khalaj (1)	Qom	Shadqoli Khan	23	Female	Undergraduate
Khalaj (2)	Qom	Shadqoli Khan	32	Male	Undergraduate
Khalaj (3)	Markazī	Mansour Abad	49	Female	Undergraduate
Khalaj (4)	Markazī	Mansour Abad	52	Male	MA degree
Khalaj (5)	Qom	Shadqoli Khan	80	Female	No education
Khalaj (6)	Qom	Shadqoli Khan	80	Male	No education

Table 1 presents demographic information about 6 Khalaj interviewees, including their province, district, age, gender, and education level. Notable observations can be made regarding the diversity in age, educational attainment, and literacy within the Khalaj sample. Interviewees are from two different provinces: Qom and Markazī. Within Qom, they are specifically from the Shadqoli Khan district, while those from Markazī reside in Mansour Abad. This geographical diversity may contribute to variations in cultural experiences and perspectives. The age range of the interviewees is wide, spanning from 23 to 80 years old. This diversity in age groups ensures a broad representation of experiences and insights, considering the potential differences in generational perspectives. The data includes an equal number of male and female interviewees, enhancing the gender balance within the sample. This balance is crucial for capturing diverse viewpoints and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the Khalaj community. Education levels vary among the interviewees. While some have completed a diploma, indicating secondary education, others have achieved higher academic qualifications, such

as an MA degree. Additionally, two interviewees are noted as illiterate, underscoring the diverse educational backgrounds within the Khalaj community.

Following the completion of the qualitative data collection phase, the video recordings underwent verbatim transcription. Manual refinement and categorization were subsequently applied to the preliminary transcriptions, aligning them with predefined categories derived from the interview questions. The meticulous transcription process, as highlighted by Yin (2014), plays a crucial role in case studies, facilitating rigorous and in-depth analysis. Utilizing the thematic analysis framework, this study incorporated predefined themes aligned with Bourhis et al.'s (1981) framework. These themes, including language status, language use, birth rate dynamics, language prestige, speech community prestige, influence of marital relations on language maintenance, and migration movements, served as guiding pillars. Grounding the analysis in established theory, these themes simultaneously reflected the real-life experiences of the participants.

The analysis of the interview data, aimed at capturing the present moment within its specific locality and exploring how Khalaj-speaking individuals perceive the ethnolinguistic vitality of their heritage language, revealed three main themes. This section presents these themes along with illustrative excerpts.

Bridging Generations and Heritage Language: The Role of (Grand)parents

The primary theme evident in the data revolves around the role of heritage language as an emotional bond which bridges generations, as exemplified in the narrative provided by Khalaj (2) in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1 [Khalaj (2), Interviewer]

> **1. Interviewer:** Can you tell me about your childhood? Who took care of you?
> 2. Tell me about your family
> 3. **Khalaj (2):** My parents, but mostly my grandmother.
> 4. Because she said that I am obligated to fulfill the rights deserving of a
> 5. mother to you.
> 6. **Interviewer:** So you spent your childhood with your grandmother?
> 7. **Khalaj (2):** Yes.
> 8. **Interviewer:** What kind of environment was your life?
> 9. I mean, for example, were you in the city from the beginning? Were you in
> 10. the village?
> 11. **Khalaj (2):** No, it used to be a village when we were children. It became part
> 12. of the city in 1976, which means that the city came closer to us, and we stuck
> 13. together.
> 14. **Interviewer:** When did you first learn the Khalaj language?
> 15. **Khalaj (2):** From our parents.
> 16. **Interviewer:** Have you ever lived outside the Khalaj-spoken (Xäläč-zebån)
> 17. region?
> 18. **Khalaj (2):** No.

The primary theme emerging from the data centers around the pivotal role of heritage language as an emotional bond that spans across generations. This theme

is vividly illustrated in Khalaj (2)'s narrative within Excerpt 1. The interview begins with inquiries about Khalaj (2)'s childhood and family, unveiling a significant reliance on the grandmother, emphasizing the emotional connection through the statement, "Because she said that I am obligated to fulfill the rights deserving of a mother to you." This expression encapsulates the cultural and emotional weight attached to the heritage language. Khalaj (2) confirms spending childhood with the grandmother, reinforcing the deep bond formed during upbringing.

The subsequent discussion about the environment adds contextual layers to the heritage language's significance, emphasizing the transformation from a village to part of the city and the communal cohesion that ensued. Khalaj (2) highlights learning the Khalaj language from parents, reinforcing the intergenerational transmission of the language within the family unit. The fact that Khalaj (2) has never lived outside the Khalaj-speaking region further underscores the close relationship between the individual, their linguistic heritage, and the geographical context.

Ethnolinguistic Social Networking as a Strategy for Language Maintenance

The following excerpts offer valuable insights into two Khalaj speakers' early language experiences and the dynamic linguistic environments they navigated. The conversations delve into their linguistic interactions since their childhood, highlighting the prevalent use of Khalaj among people in their social networks.

Excerpt 2 [Khalaj (5), Interviewer] [underlined italics show switches to Khalaj, (eng.) shows English translations]

1. **Interviewer:** Okay, about the languages you learned when you were little,
2. did you only speak Khalaj when you were a child?
3. **Khalaj (5):** Both Persian and Khalaj.
4. **Interviewer:** How old were you when you learned Persian?
5. **Khalaj (5):** Learning Persian… like from the age of fourteen.
6. **Interviewer:** Okay, before… you only spoke Khalaj?
7. **Khalaj (5):** Khalaj, yes, all Khalajs were elders, they don't teach us
8. Persian, they taught the same thing, they teach us their own language,
9. Khalaj.
10. **Interviewer:** I see!
11. **Khalaj (5):** Yes, we were speaking in Khalaj.
12. **Interviewer:** I see!
13. **Khalaj (5):** For example, we used to call water _suv_ (eng. water).
14. **Interviewer:** Right!
15. **Khalaj (5):** Yes.
16. **Interviewer:** Then, when did you first learn Persian?
17. **Khalaj (5):** That's how we learned.
18. **Interviewer:** Right!
19. **Khalaj (5):** We used to learn together when we used to wash our feet, yes.
20. **Interviewer:** Have you ever lived outside the Khalai-spoken region? Or...
21. **Khalaj (5):** No

22. **Interviewer:** You didn't go out of Shadqoli Khan?
23. **Khalaj (5):** We didn't go out; we were here from the beginning.
24. **Interviewer:** Okay!
25. **Khalaj (5):** Until now, that dome of Honorable Masoumeh was all visible
26. from here.
27. **Interviewer:** Okay!
28. **Khalaj (5):** We were the closest, we were born here, we lived here, there
29. are no other villages. We didn't migrate, we didn't come, we were here,
30. yes.
31. **Interviewer:** The mother tongue of your friends, the friends you had...
32. **Khalaj (5):** We were just Khalaj.
33. **Interviewer:** okay, were you speaking in Khalaj with them?
34. **Khalaj (5):** Yes, when we were kids, we used to talk in Khalaj to each
35. other

This excerpt, featuring Khalaj (5)'s responses, offers insights into the linguistic landscape of the Khalaj community, emphasizing the pervasive use of Khalaj within their social networks. The interviewer initiates the discussion by inquiring about the languages Khalaj (5) spoke during childhood. Khalaj (5) reveals a multilingual upbringing, speaking both Persian and Khalaj. The emphasis on learning Persian starting at the age of fourteen indicates a significant initial reliance on Khalaj in early years. Khalaj (5) attributes the primary language exposure to the elders in the community, who exclusively taught Khalaj. The description of learning together while associating reflects a communal and informal setting, illustrating the organic transmission of the heritage language within the community.

The affirmation that Khalaj (5) never lived outside the Khalaj-spoken region reinforces the tight geographical and linguistic connection within their community. The detailed account of being born, living, and not migrating from the region emphasizes the enduring attachment to their linguistic and cultural roots. The conversation about the mother tongue of friends further highlights the homogeneity within Khalaj (5)'s social circle, where everyone spoke Khalaj. The confirmation of speaking Khalaj with friends during childhood suggests a strong linguistic bond within the community, reinforcing the notion that Khalaj serves as a primary means of communication among peers.

Excerpt 3 [Khalaj (2), Interviewer] [underlined italics show switches to Khalaj, (eng.) shows English translations]

1. **Interviewer:** Since you were seven years old, when you went to school,
2. you used to talk to your friends Khalaj.
3. **Khalaj (2):** Yes, everyone, Khalaj.
4. **Interviewer:** Then, teachers?
5. **Khalaj (2):** The teachers spoke Farsi, but some of the children answered in
6. a vague way, for example, what is this picture? For example, they answered
7. the cat in the Khalaj language, they called it _pušuq_ (eng. cat), and everyone
8. laughed. The teacher said, "Hey, you should say it in Farsi!"
9. **Interviewer:** Oh, that's interesting, when did you first learn Persian since

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10. you were a child?
11. **Khalaj (2):** We learned in school over time.
12. **Interviewer:** Oh, from the teachers?
13. **Khalaj (2):** Yes, we learned from the teachers.
14. **Interviewer:** When did you first learn the Khalaj language?
15. **Khalaj (2):** From our parents.
16. **Interviewer:** Have you ever lived outside the Khalaj-spoken (Xäläč-zebån)
17. region?
18. **Khalaj (2):** No.

This excerpt offers valuable insights into Khalaj (2)'s early language experiences and the dynamic linguistic environment they navigated. The conversation delves into their linguistic interactions since the age of seven, highlighting the prevalent use of Khalaj among friends during school days. Khalaj (2) affirms that everyone, including friends, conversed in Khalaj.

The discussion shifts to the interaction with teachers, revealing a bilingual classroom setting where teachers primarily spoke Farsi. However, the playful use of Khalaj by some children, such as referring to a cat as "*pušuq*," led to laughter among the Khalaj-speaking classmates. The teacher's intervention, urging the children to switch to Farsi, reflects the societal emphasis on the official language within formal education.

The interviewer's inquiry about when Khalaj (2) first learned Persian elicits a response centered on the school environment, indicating a gradual acquisition of the official language over time. Khalaj (2) confirms learning Persian from teachers, underlining the impact of formal education on language proficiency. The subsequent exploration of when Khalaj (2) first learned the Khalaj language unveils a reliance on parental transmission, emphasizing the importance of the family in heritage language acquisition. Khalaj (2)'s assertion of never having lived outside the Khalaj-spoken region reinforces the connection between linguistic identity and geographical context. In sum, this excerpt provides a nuanced account of the significance of Khalaj (2)'s ethnolinguistic social network ties for the language maintenance, highlighting the interplay between heritage language, societal expectations, and familial transmission within the Khalaj-speaking region.

The following excerpt navigates through the intricacies of a Khalaj speaker's early years learning languages through interactions with Azerbaijani Turks and the gradual immersion into Persian.

Threads of Resilience: An Odyssey in Language Learning

Excerpt 4 [Khalaj (6), Interviewer]

1. **Interviewer:** Okay! A little about your childhood, the environment you grew
2. up in, when did you study, did you study at all? Did you not study? Did you
3. work? Since when did you work? How was your childhood?
4. **Khalaj (6):** Otherwise, we were so poor that we didn't understand anything
5. of our childhood ((laughter)). Since our childhood, due to poverty and

6. helplesness, we used to herd sheep, we used to herd goats.
7. **Interviewer:** How old were you then?
8. **Khalaj (6):** At that time, I was about seven or eight years, until we slowly
9. came and grew up.
10. **Interviewer:** What languages did you learn in your childhood?
11. **Khalaj (6):** No language, just the same Khalaj. When we grew up, we went
12. back and forth with Turks, worked, and learned (Azeri) Turkish.
13. **Interviewer:** How old were you when you learned Turkish?
14. **Khalaj (6):** I was about ten or fifteen years old. Yes...
15. **Interviewer:** When did you first learn Persian?
16. **Khalaj (6):** I've been learning Persian since I was a child, here was close to
17. the city, here around me where agriculture and everyone who comes was
18. Farsi, we slowly learned Persian, yes.

This excerpt provides a captivating glimpse into the linguistic journey of a Khalaj speaker, revealing a narrative woven with threads of resilience and linguistic adaptation. The exploration of language learning in a multilingual landscape shows the speaker's adaptability, with a transition from Khalaj to Azerbaijani Turkic through interactions with Azerbaijani Turks. The chronological progression of language acquisition, from childhood to adolescence, adds depth to the narrative, emphasizing the speaker's ability to navigate linguistic landscapes at different stages of life. The mention of learning Farsi further underscores the speaker's multifaceted linguistic journey, highlighting the dynamic interplay between geographical proximity and language assimilation. The progression of the dialogue demonstrates not only his linguistic journey but also hints at the broader theme of linguistic diversity and the impact of geographical proximity on language learning. The narrative culminates with the speaker's recounting his early exposure to Farsi, emphasizing the gradual assimilation into Persian language due to proximity to the city center of Qom.

Excerpt 5 sheds light on the intricate dynamics of language use within a familial and community context, and the challenges it faces in this context.

"Charming Yet Challenging": Challenges and Opportunities

Excerpt 5 [Khalaj (4), Interviewer]

1. **Interviewer:** … What language would you prefer to use when you talk to
2. your children?
3. **Khalaj (4):** We spoke Persian with our children, but because we spoke
4. Khalaj together, they both learned Khalaj. They understand all the words,
5. but they have some difficulty in speaking, and they use this language even less.
6. **Interviewer:** It means almost being in contact with the Khalaj language since
7. childhood, right?
8. **Khalaj (4):** Yes, yes, because our going to and from the village has not been
9. stopped, and the main conversation there is still the same Khalaj.
10. **Interviewer:** What language do you use to communicate with your
11. relatives or neighbors?
12. **Khalaj (4):** We use the Khalaj language when we go to the village.

…

13. **Interviewer:** If you want to describe your mother tongue with a metaphor
14. or simile, what would you say?
15. **Khalaj (4):** I can say "charming yet challenging".
16. **Interviewer:** Beautiful, Charming yet challenging…
17. **Khalaj (4):** Yes.

Excerpt 5 provides a profound exploration of the delicate balance and challenges inherent in language use within the context of family and community for the Khalaj speaker. The interview opens with a pivotal inquiry regarding language preference when communicating with the speaker's children, unveiling a nuanced linguistic environment where both Persian and Khalaj coexist within the familial realm. The revelation that, despite exposure, the children encounter difficulties in speaking Khalaj emphasizes the complexities of language transmission within a multilingual family. The concluding metaphorical description of Khalaj as "charming yet challenging" adds a deeper dimension to the narrative, encapsulating the speaker's nuanced feelings toward their heritage language. This not only suggests an emotional attachment to the language but also acknowledges the sociolinguistic intricacies and hurdles faced in its usage.

Conclusion and Discussion

The intricate interplay between heritage language and identity emerges as a pivotal theme within the narratives examined in this study, reflecting the foundational arguments presented by Akkuş and Sağın Şimşek (2022). The excerpted narratives provide compelling evidence of how the Khalaj language serves not merely as a means of communication but as a vital conduit for emotional and cultural connectivity across generations. The families' shared experiences and the explicit acknowledgment of their linguistic heritage underscore the binding force that language exerts in maintaining familial ties and a sense of belonging. This is not just a narrative of words spoken; it is a testament to the lived realities where heritage language transcends mere vocabulary, becoming imbued with emotional weight that is felt deeply within familial relationships.

The intergenerational transmission of the Khalaj language is emblematic of a broader phenomenon where language serves as a repository of collective memory and identity. The narratives illustrate how the emotional connections associated with speaking Khalaj contribute to an individual's sense of self and their place within the family structure. These connections are intricately woven into the fabric of daily life, illustrating that language is not just an abstract construct but a living, breathing part of a person's identity. The familial obligation to pass down the language is not merely a duty; it reflects a deep-seated understanding of the significance of language as a resilient emotional thread that binds individuals to their cultural heritage and ancestral roots.

Furthermore, the lifelong connection to the Khalaj-speaking region enhances this understanding of identity. It emphasizes the notion that personal identity cannot

be separated from linguistic heritage and geographical context. The narratives reveal how individuals' experiences are often influenced by their surroundings, grounding their identities in a specific place that is simultaneously rich with cultural history and familial narratives. This multifaceted relationship emphasizes the heritage language's role as a powerful element in shaping one's identity, deeply intertwining personal and communal experiences across time. As such, these narratives collectively illustrate how heritage language is not only a vehicle for communication but also a vital thread in the larger tapestry of personal and communal identities.

However, the complexities surrounding heritage language maintenance cannot be overlooked. The characterization of heritage language as "charming yet challenging" poignantly captures the difficulties faced by children in speaking Khalaj, even when exposed to it in familial settings. This challenge highlights the intricate dynamics of language transmission within multilingual contexts, which has been emphasized by Humeau, Guimard, Nocus, and Galharret (2023). The struggles encountered by children as they navigate between multiple languages underscore the multifarious challenges inherent in maintaining a heritage language in an increasingly globalized world. The narratives reflect a poignant reality where the desire to preserve linguistic heritage must contend with the practicalities of modern life, illustrating the complexity of language transmission in contexts where diverse languages coalesce.

This broader theoretical context enriches our understanding of the dynamics of heritage language maintenance. Drawing from literature on social networking, intergroup relations, and language revitalization, the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality emerges as a versatile research tool, as highlighted by Sachdev et al. (1987) and further developed by Yagmur et al. (1999) and Bourhis (2001). Ethnolinguistic vitality provides a framework for analyzing the social-psychological intricacies that shape the experiences of heritage language speakers and the broader sociolinguistic landscape in which they exist. The studies reviewed affirm its effectiveness in uncovering the nuanced relationships between language, identity, and social cohesion, thereby illuminating the paths toward fostering linguistic diversity and the vitality of language communities.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic discourse, presenting practical considerations for policy-making and community engagement. The insights gleaned from the narratives illuminate the importance of fostering environments where heritage languages can thrive, particularly in the face of societal pressures that often favor dominant languages. By understanding the emotional and identity-based dimensions of language maintenance, policymakers can design initiatives that not only promote bilingualism but also create spaces that celebrate and preserve linguistic diversity.

Moreover, the narratives examined serve as a reminder of the resilience inherent within language communities. The enduring bonds formed through linguistic upbringing underscore the capacity of communities to nurture and revitalize their heritage languages, even amidst challenges. This resilience highlights the vital

role of community support systems in facilitating the intergenerational transmission of language and culture. In this sense, the narratives transcend individual experiences, echoing a collective commitment to preserving linguistic heritage as a means of fostering social cohesion and communal identity.

In conclusion, the narratives surrounding the Khalaj language poignantly reflect the profound significance of heritage language as a binding force that transcends generations. Through the lens of intergenerational transmission, we observe the intricate connections between personal identity, linguistic heritage, and geographical context. The emotional weight embedded in these narratives paints a rich tapestry that underscores the resilience of heritage language as an essential thread in the fabric of personal and communal experiences. While challenges persist in the maintenance of heritage languages, the narratives illuminate pathways toward revitalization and the fostering of linguistic diversity, echoing the sentiments articulated by Akkuş and Sağın Şimşek (2022) and reaffirming the vital role that heritage languages play in shaping our identities and communities. The legacy of these languages, therefore, continues to evolve, remaining a testament to the enduring power of words to connect, to bind, and to inspire across generations.

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