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Multilingual lives of Tibetan families in France

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Abstract

The multilingual repertoires of the Tibetan refugees in France reflects the successive steps of their migration history, from their home village in Tibet to the Tibetan settlements in South Asia, and from South Asia to urban centers in France. This paper describes the linguistic resources of Tibetan families living nearby Paris and focuses on the policies and discourses they hold towards the different languages and varieties they speak or aim at speaking.

After summarizing the main facts about “Tibetan” as a minoritized or minority language in the different places where it is spoken, the way the study participants describe their linguistic repertoire is examined, through the method of linguistic biography. The last section addresses the question of language maintenance by questioning the notion of “heritage language”. It argues that, in the case of Tibetan “heritage language”, language maintenance corresponds to a language shift from the parent’s variety to “Common” Tibetan. Finally, the question of the transmission of multilingual practices is addressed, beyond the heritage/host country languages dichotomy.

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Fig. 0: Tibet's traditional and modern administrative units, showing the diverse regions where the interviewed families come from (Lencer 2008)

1. Introduction

The multilingual repertoires of the Tibetan refugees in France reflects the successive steps of their migration history, from their home village in Tibet to the Tibetan settlements in South Asia, and from South Asia to urban centers in France.

This paper describes the linguistic repertoire of the members of six Tibetan families living near Paris, and the way these repertoires were built up over the course of their life trajectory. Based on semi-directed interviews and on the elicitation of visual representations, interviews and informal observations of linguistic practices during the last ten years, this research explores the attitudes and linguistic ideologies towards the different languages varieties Tibetan exiles speak. It also focuses on the family policies regarding their usage – confronted, on the one hand, with the French monolingual ideology and, on the other hand, with the dialect standardization at work in the exiled Tibetan society.

This study has a restricted scope in three ways. First, the number of interviewed families is small: the research has been conducted in six families from the greater Paris area only. However, informal observation of linguistic practices in other families during the last ten years tends to confirm the representativeness of the data collected. Second, the number of interviewed families is limited, and it only includes families in which the parents (and sometimes some children) are born in Tibet: a similar study among Tibetan families in which the parents are born in the South Asian Tibetan settlements would be necessary to complete the picture of the linguistic practices within the different social subgroups in the Tibetan diaspora. Finally, it is based on self-declarations, and further work should definitely include systematic observations of actual language practices. Despite these limitations, this work aims at contributing to a better understanding of the linguistic practices in the Tibetan diaspora – an understudied topic.

Section 2 explains the meaning of “Tibetan” as a minoritized or minority language at different levels. It provides an overview of the Tibetic language family, as well as some details on the Tibetan diaspora in South Asia and in the West.

Section 3 analyzes the way the interviewees describe their linguistic repertoire, revealing various attitudes towards the languages or language varieties they speak, and the way they make use of them as different resources. With their layered multilingual practices shaped by their different communicative needs and membership in diverse social groups, Tibetan people do not differ from other migrant populations in terms of their multilingual practices: the participants’ interviews illustrate the “superdiversity” (Blommaert & Backus 2013: 13) characteristic of many contemporary urban neighborhoods, and the dynamic and evolving nature of linguistic repertoires throughout an individual’s life.

The last section addresses the question of transmission of language(s). Although the Tibetan diaspora has existed for several decades, studies of language maintenance in exile in the West remain limited (Ghoso 2007; McPherson & Ghoso 2008; Ward 2015). We show that, in the case of Tibetan as a “heritage language”, language maintenance corresponds in a somewhat contradictory way to a language shift from the parents’ variety to “Common” Tibetan, with direct implications for the families. The choice to focus on families from Tibet, rather than from South Asian exiled communities allows us to document this phenomenon. Finally, we will argue that language transmission should not be restricted to the maintenance of the Tibetan language: Tibetan parents strive to transmit a whole range of multilingual practices and “Tibetan” is merely one component of the repertoire they want to see their children develop.

2. Tibetans in Tibet and in exile

2.1 The Tibetic languages in Tibet

Tibet is a geographically vast area, covering about one fourth of the territory of the People’s

Republic of China (PRC) and inhabited by about six million Tibetans. This geographical situation led to a huge dialectal dispersion: in the PRC, 45 distinct groups of Tibetic languages or dialects have been identified (Tournadre & Suzuki 2023: 45)^[1]. “Tibetan” is thus an umbrella term that might refer to any of the (written and spoken) Tibetic languages. All the modern Tibetic languages derive from Old Tibetan, the language spoken during the Tibetan Empire (7–9th century). Tibetic languages share their basic grammatical organization as well as core vocabulary, but also differ in many ways.^[2] Geographically distant Tibetic languages are not mutually intelligible. As observed by Roche & Luyal Bum (2018: 418), spoken Tibetan is “a polynomic language (Izzard 2016 [Vid. 1 (<https://youtu.be/qVCM7mGoIOs>)]), – ‘a language whose unity is abstract, and which is recognized by users as existing in several forms, each tolerated equally without hierarchical or functional distinctions’ (Sallabank 2013: 95)”.

Parallel to this dialectal diversity, “there is a severe diglossia between the spoken Tibetic languages and Literary Tibetan, whether in its classical or modern forms. Both Classical Tibetan and Modern Literary Tibetan are not spoken languages *per se*, but rather used exclusively as written languages” (Tournadre & Suzuki 2023: 85; see also Zeisler 2006: 180). Nearly all the speakers of Tibetic languages share this common written language.

In this paper, I will nevertheless use the term “Tibetan” without further specification in a number of instances. The term is vague but corresponds to the most frequent autoglossonym used by the interviewed participants, especially when they contrast their language to other major world languages. In other instances, the Tibetic varieties in question are specified referring to a place name of various scales, from the village to the traditional or modern district or province. As noted by Ward (2022: 457–458) for the Amdo area: “Despite an ideological emphasis on language standardization, Amdo social worlds rely on linguistic diversity. Amdo farming communities, in particular, organize sociality by linking place-based belonging and kinship relations to local language variation. [...] [E]thnographic inquiries have consistently demonstrated the deep-rooted cultural significance of language variation in Tibet”. This remark could be extended to the whole Tibet. This variation, correlated to the “relative distance to the homeland” and “presuppositions about an audience’s knowledge” about the region is also observed by Ward, Chow, & Ni (2022: 434–435).

The expression “Common” Tibetan is used to refer to the varieties of Central Tibetan spoken in exile, as a result of standardization and/or dialect levelling. “Common” Tibetan is defined here by its use outside Tibet and its function of “standard” language allowing mutual understanding between people from different linguistic backgrounds, rather than by specific linguistic characteristics^[3]. It must be noted that, like the other spoken Tibetic languages, “Common” Tibetan is not used in writing in any formal or school context.

Finally, in a number of cases, the interviewees used expressions such as “our language” or “our own language”, leaving it up to the interlocutor to interpret it as “Common” Tibetan or as a local variety of Tibetic.

2.2 Tibetans in exile

The exile of Tibetans began in 1959, after the Dalai Lama and his government fled to India due to the Chinese invasion in 1950–1951. More than 80,000 Tibetans followed him into exile, and, within a few years, they were organized into Tibetan settlements administrated by the Department of Home of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), in different states of India, in Nepal and in Bhutan. Exiled Tibetans also developed their own school network in South Asia, providing a Tibetan–English bilingual education (Gile & Tenzin Dorjee 2005: 148; Nawang Phuntsog 2018a, 2018b): “Tibetan language is used as the medium of instruction for 5 years from kindergarten to 5th grade and then as a subject for 7 years from grades 6–12 in all Tibetan schools in India” (Nawang Phuntsog 2018a : 90) with unquestionable success for the transmission of spoken Tibetan, more unevenly for the written language^[4].

A number of exiled Tibetans are thus 2nd or 3rd generation exiles and a common distinction among the exile community identify two subgroups: གསར་འབྱོར། *gsar*. ‘byor [newly arrived] who are born in Tibet, and གནམ་ཅགས། *gzhis.chags* [settled people], who are born in South Asia. The two groups are characterized by different linguistic repertoires: the presence of varieties of Chinese are characteristic of the former group, while the presence of English is more characteristic of the latter^[5]. In any case, a stay in these communities in South Asia is a quasi-systematic step for the Tibetans who arrive in France, be it for a few months, several years or their whole life.

The first group of Tibetan refugees arrived in France in the 1960s^[6], but their number remained very low until the first half of the 2000s. From around 2005 onwards, the arrival of Tibetan asylum seekers increased. According to Aukatsang (2020: 19): “[c]urrent estimates show the Tibetan population has increased fourfold in Europe [...] since CTA’s 2009 Tibetan Demographic Survey”. The Tibetan population in France has indeed grown very rapidly from an estimated 100 in 1999, to 1,000 in 2010, and at least 8,000 in 2020 (Aukatsang 2020: 18). Initially single people arrived and obtained the refugee status, and from around 2010 onwards family reunification procedures began to bring in the spouse and children who, in almost all cases, were living in India or Nepal. In 2022, Rigzin Choedon Genkhang, the current representative of the Office of Tibet, Brussels (Representative for Western Europe, Maghreb and EU) estimates that France has the biggest Tibetan population in Europe with 8,000 to 12,000 people. Tibetan as a minority language in France is therefore the product of a recent migration with almost all the adult and teenager speakers born abroad.

Jacquemet (2018: 381) highlights that:

Asylum [...] is just one of the many settings where deterritorialized speakers use of mixture of languages in interacting with family, friends, coworkers, and authorities; read English and other ‘global’ languages on the screens of their digital devices; watch local, regional, or global broadcasts; and access national and international institutions in a variety of languages.

Thus, studying the multilingual repertoires and practices of Tibetan refugees illustrates how this “mixture of languages” is articulated in a given community.

This paper is based on a series of audio-recorded interviews (one to two hours long each) made in December 2021 and January 2022 with six Tibetan families living nearby Paris. Apart

from general questions about the interviewees' linguistic biography, language practices and representations, the semi-structured interviews included prompts to create visual representations (Figures 1–4), which the interviewees were invited to further comment on and explain. The interviewed families were selected on the basis of their migration history, representative of the “newly arrived” group of Tibetan exile: the parents are born in different regions of Tibet and arrived in South Asia (India and/or Nepal) as young adults. They stayed there a few years, before moving to France during the last ten years: the first parent arrived between 2008 and 2014, followed by the rest of the family two to eight years later. They have between two and four children, who, depending on their age, are born in Tibet, in South Asia, or in France. The parents have various education backgrounds (from no formal schooling to university level), and, on top of the French education system, some of the children have also attended school in Tibet or/and in the Tibetan schools in South Asia. In two of the six families, the parents come from the same region in Tibet, while the three other families are mixed in the sense that each parent comes from a different region and has a different Tibetic language as (one of) his/her first tongue(s). The semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted in “Common” Tibetan, with some parts in French (with the children) and involved two to four family members at the same time.

3. Multilingual resources of Tibetan exiles

Multilingual lives of Tibetan exiles are emblematic of the development of “superdiverse repertoires” described by Blommaert & Backus (2013), at a community scale. As described above, the history of the Tibetan diaspora indeed closely corresponds to the kind of situations that produces “superdiversity”, as defined by Blackledge & Creese (2018: xxii):

Superdiversity describes people coming into contact or proximity as a result of (inter alia) migration, invasion, colonisation, slavery, religious mission, persecution, trade, conflict, famine, drought, war, urbanisation, economic aspiration, family reunion, global commerce, and technological advances. These phenomena involve the mobility of people, and the mobility of resources. [...] Superdiversity also includes the mobility of digital resources, as people come into contact or proximity online.

This section first describes the linguistic resources declared by the interviewees and illustrates the dynamics of the repertoire throughout the life. The rich and diverse repertoires declared by the interviewees demonstrates the inadequacy of the “old binary oppositions of host majority culture versus immigrant minority culture(s)” (Blackledge & Creese 2018: xxiii), as an analysis grid and the necessity of an approach based on linguistic diversity. It aims at highlighting the discourses the participants have on their functions in the different domains and places of their daily life in France. The linguistic means that were not spontaneously mentioned by the interviewees, also point to different attitudes toward the different languages and varieties. Multilingual lives of Tibetan exiles are emblematic of the development of the “superdiverse repertoires” described by Blommaert & Backus (2013), at a community scale.

3.1 Active tri- or quadrilingualism

All the interviewees declared a rich multilingual repertoire. This multilingualism was already observed among Tibetans in Canada (McPherson & Ghoso 2008) and is hardly surprising given the situation of Tibetans, as summarized by Cenoz (2013: 3–4):

Multilinguals can be speakers of a minority indigenous language [...] who need to learn the dominant state language. In other cases, multilinguals are immigrants who speak their first language(s) as well as the language(s) of their host countries. In some cases, languages are learned as they spread internationally, and it is considered that they open doors for better economic and social opportunities.

Indeed, across their life trajectories, Tibetans refugees encountered the two first situations mentioned by Cenoz (2013): minoritized in Tibet in the context of the PRC, they migrated to South Asia and, later, to France where they learned the host-country languages. In addition, as we will see in Section 4, having one's children learn international languages is an important agenda for the parents.

The following figures correspond to the self-assessment indicating the languages used and their respective proportion of usage, as an answer to the question “What languages did you use last week?”.

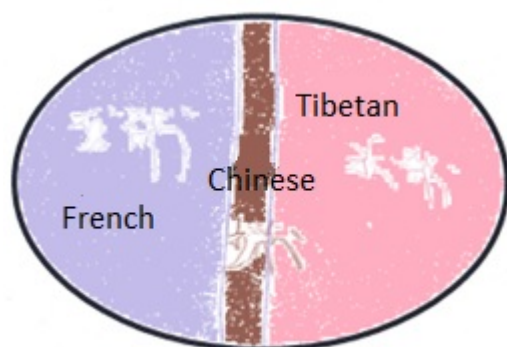


Fig. 1: Mo-3 [\[7\]](#) – Typical trilingual repertoire declared by a woman working in a restaurant (Education level: Primary school) (Simon 2023)



Fig. 2: Mo-1 – Typical quadrilingual repertoire declared by a woman in training as a caregiver (Education level: University) (Simon 2023)

Before further analyzing these data, it should be reminded, as pointed out by Pennycook & Otsuji (2015: 73), such self-assessments tell less about the actual use of languages than about the interviewee's representations about their languages: "While the readiness of these workers to discuss and negotiate their language use in such percentage terms is in itself intriguing (as part of popular discourse or local language ideologies), such comments [...] of course do little to capture the nature of actual linguistic interactions."

Nevertheless, such a question was primarily meant to initiate discussion on the topic of multilingualism and to trigger more in-depth comments on the linguistic repertoire and the function of the different languages in daily life. Unsurprisingly again, we find clear distinctions between three domains of social life: 1) Tibetan is mostly used at home and in the private sphere, 2) French is the language of communication with the official institutions and administration, 3) Economic life and work are the areas in which multilingual resources are used most flexibly. These general observations can be refined by detailing how a couple assesses the distribution of languages in their repertoire and how they make use of these resources for different social purposes. As underlined by Blommaert & Backus (2013: 23), these resources are associated to different levels of competences and patterns of learning, in line with the biography and the social needs of the individuals: "All of these resources [...] reflect particular itineraries of learning during specific stages of life and in particular places and learning environments."

3.2 A flexible use of the linguistic resources

Taking the Family 2 as a representative example, we will now examine in detail how these resources are used in three domains of the daily life: at home, at work, and in the official

domains (administration and health services). The parents (Fa-2 and Mo-2) were born in two different regions of Eastern Tibet, arrived in India in 2007 and in France in 2011 and 2014. They have respectively a high school and university degree in China, thus, they belong to the highly educated part of Tibetan society. They studied in a CTA's adult school upon arrival in India. They have four children aged 0–12 years. The father works in the kitchen of a fast food restaurant and the mother is in maternity leave at the time of the interview.

Tibetan is the main language used at home in everyday conversation. In general, efforts to use exclusively Tibetan with the children is considered crucial for all the interviewed families, in order to ensure language transmission to the next generation (see Section 4). Living relatively far from other Tibetans, occasions to speak Tibetan outside home is scarce in this family. Chinese is also used occasionally at home, as shown in (1).

(1)

Fa-2: དུ་གུ་ཚོ་གི་སྐད་ལ་སྐད་ཆ་ཡིན་ན་དཀྱིལ་མཚམས་མཚམས་དཔྱོད་འཕྲུལ་གྱི་ལུ་གུ་ཚོ་གིས་མཚམས་མཚམས་ཅིག་སྐད་ཆ་གོ་མ་ཉན་རྒྱུ་ཡོད་ཅེད་གྲུ།
མ་གོ་རྒྱུ་ཡོད་ན་ད་ད་གཉིས་རྒྱ་སྐད་ནས་བཤད། ལོ་ཚོ་རྒྱ་སྐད་ཉན་གོ་གི་མ་ཅེད།

‘When it comes to children, sometimes – how can I put it – sometimes there are things they should not hear. If there is something that should not be understood, we both speak in Chinese: they don’t understand Chinese.’

They both learned Chinese mainly in school. The father spent his childhood in a mixed Chinese-Tibetan village, and thus also had an informal learning of a variety of Chinese (different from the Standard Chinese taught in school). Conversely, the mother grew up in a quasi-monolingual Tibetan speaking environment: the only Chinese speakers present were also able to speak Tibetan, the traditional lingua franca in her home region.

Finally, the parents also mention English that they learned formally in the CTA's school during the few years they spent in India. They currently use English at home to help their elder children with their homework.

The professional environment is the one where language use is the most flexible: the father works with Chinese and Tibetan people, and colleagues of “other nationalities”. As observed by Pennycook & Otsuji (2015: 69): “Kitchens and restaurants can operate quite well multilingually, [...]. Such workplaces function with the use of a diverse and mixed set of resources (we do not need to ‘overcome’ linguistic diversity), rather than a namable language as a shared code.”

At work, Fa-2 fluidly adapts his languages practices to the interaction and the linguistic resources shared with the person he talks to: he speaks Chinese with the Chinese; with his Tibetan colleagues, he speaks Tibetan, and they answer either in “pure” Tibetan or a mixed code of Tibetan and English. With the colleagues of “other nationalities”, “neither Tibetan nor Chinese works, so, you speak French, whether you know it or not.”

This type of flexible use of linguistic resources in the workplace is also typical of

“metrolingualism” and “spatial repertoires”, that is, a situation in which “the repertoires formed through individual life trajectories [are linked] to the particular places in which these resources are deployed” (Pennycook & Otsuji 2015: 83).

In their critical assessment of immigrant and refugee language policies in a number of industrialized countries, Li & Sah (2019: 327) describe such policies as “an assimilationist approach characterized by an exclusive focus on learning destination language and culture, while neglecting the language resources that newcomers bring from home countries.” The example of this man’s professional situation, though, shows how his multiple linguistic resources can be used as an asset to enter the labor market upon arrival. However, if no further language training is available, this asset may also turn out to be an impediment to the development of new language skills. Roberts (2010: 217) also notes that:

Many low-paid, so-called entry-level jobs are insecure, isolated, in poor and noisy conditions, and organized into ethnic-work units [...]. These are often the only jobs that minority ethnic workers, particularly relatively new arrivals, whatever their educational background, can obtain. Under these conditions, there is little opportunity to be socialized into the dominant language.

Such a description precisely corresponds to the interviewee’s professional situation, and despite his high initial education level, his skills did not improve much since he arrived: he reports that he had little opportunity to attend French language classes, and after ten years, he “only knows a little bit basic French”.

Many Tibetans born in Tibet take economic advantage of their cultural and linguistic familiarity with Chinese though: they make use of the Chinese language social networks to find jobs or housing; if they start a business, they can use the services of a Chinese speaking accountant, etc. Thus, despite the underlying political conflict that drove them into exile, this language plays a crucial role for social insertion, especially in the initial steps, as explained by another interviewee in (2).

(2)

Mo-3: རྒྱ་མི་སྐད་འདི་གིས་ང་རང་ལ་དཀའ་ངལ་ཡང་མང་པོ་བསལ་སོང་བུ། [...] ང་མྱ་རན་སི་ལ་ སློབ་སྦྱོར་ནས། ང་དང་པོ་ཁང་པ་ཁྱུ་ཀར་འགྲོ་དུས། ཡིན་གཅིག་མིན་གཅིག་ ལས་ཀ་ ལས་ཀ/ ལས་ཀ་ཡི་གེ་ཚུ་རྒྱ་མི་སྐད་ལ་བསོང་བུ། [...] དང་ལས་ཀ་ག་པར་འགྲོ་གི་རེད། ལས་ཀ་མི་དན་ ཁང་པ་རག་གི་མ་རེད་ལབ་སོང་བུ། དང་ས་རྒྱ་མི་སྐད་ བ་རེ་ཐོ་རེ་ལབ་ན། དེ་འདྲི་རྒྱ་མི་སྐད་ལ་ འདྲ་པོ་ཡར་མར་བརྒྱབ་ནས་རྒྱ་མི་གི་ལས་ཀ་རག་རེད། ང་ལ། [...] དེ་ལོ་འདྲི་ དེ་ལོ་ རྒྱ་མི་གི་ཕྱི་རེ་པ་ལྟེན་ལག་དལ་ས་ ཀ་ལྟེན་ལག་དེ་རེད་བུ། ཁོ་ལས་སང་རག་སོང་བུ། དེས་ དཀའ་ངལ་མང་པོ་བསལ་སྐབས། ང་རང་ལ།

‘Chinese got me out of many difficulties. [...] After I arrived in France, at the beginning, when I went to apply for (social) housing, they told me that I had to bring a work contract. [...] They told me that if I didn’t have a job, I wouldn’t get housing. So, since i speak a little Chinese, i looked at some ads in Chinese and I found a “Chinese job”. [...] It was, uh, it was washing dishes at a Chinese [restaurant]. I got it right away [this job]. So, well, it got me out of a lot of troubles.’ (Emphasis added)

This role of intermediate language, between the mother tongue and the host-country language, is also reflected in the choice of several respondents to represent these languages as an insertion between Tibetan and French in the diagram (see Figure 1 above). As shown in Figure 3, this role can also be taken on by English.

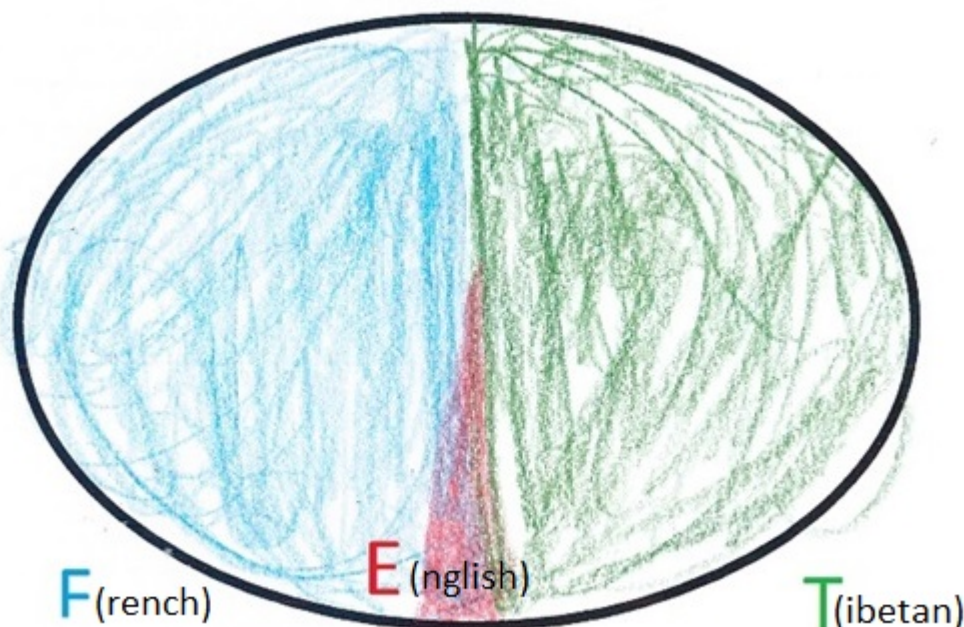


Fig. 3: Fa-5 – Trilingual repertoire declared by an unemployed man (No formal school education, literate in Tibetan) (Simon 2023)

Fa-2 explains that his knowledge of English can facilitate the communication in administrations or other official spheres: in such a strict French monolingual environment, he may use his knowledge of English to ask other users for help and translation. In other cases, he uses Chinese-based automatic translation tools or prepares the interactions in advance with the help of online and paper multilingual dictionaries. He adds that sometimes, as observed in many immigrant communities (Bigelow & Collins 2019: 56–58), he asks his elder children to act as translators.

Thus, even though the official domains (administrations, health, or social services, etc.) apparently leave no room for multilingual practices, it appears that people can still make use of their varied linguistic resources to communicate in the most effective way they can. It must however be stressed that the use of multilingual dictionaries is a strategy hardly applicable by people with a lower level of school education.

When we examine the language distribution according to the medium, we can observe that written Tibetan is scarcely used, and never used as an intrafamilial communication language in any of the interviewed families. As mentioned in Section 2.1, there is a diglossia between spoken and written Tibetan. There are significant lexical and grammatical differences with the spoken languages. The Tibetan classical orthography is archaic: it “reflects the pronunciation and grammar of some Central Tibetan dialects of the 9th century” (Zeisler

2006: 180) and therefore is largely untransparent to a speaker of a modern Tibetic language. As a result, written Tibetan is either not well mastered by the children, or by the parents, or by both, as reported in (3) and (4).

(3)

Avec ma mère, euh, pour lui envoyer un texto bah j'lui écris en tibétain mais

Da-3: *avec plein d'erreurs, donc euh, ma mère elle me gronde mais c'est pas grave... Elle me dit c'est pas... c'est pas bien. Mais... c'est tout [...].*

'With my mother, uh, to send her a text message, well, **I write in Tibetan but with lots of mistakes**, so uh, my mother scolds me but it's fine... She tells me it's not... it's not right. But... that's all [...].' (Emphasis added)

CS: *Et donc c'est que avec ta mère que tu écris en tibétain?*

'And so, it is only with your mother that you write in Tibetan?'

Oui, mais c'est très, très rare, euh... lorsqu'elle m répond pas, bah je lui envoie un

Da-3: *texto, mais... elle me rappelle pour m'dire euh, j'comprends rien à c'que t'as mis, donc euh... voilà.*

'Yes, but it's very, very rare, uh... when she doesn't answer the phone, well I send her a text message, but... **she calls me back to tell me, uh, I don't understand anything you've written**, so uh... there you go.' (Emphasis added)

(4)

Mo-4: དད་པའི་ལེན་རྒྱུ་ན། རྒྱུ་རང་རེད། རྒྱུ་རང་གི་ངའ་ལ་བོད་ཡིག་སྐད་ནས་འབྲིན་བྱུང་ཅིག་ བཏང་ཡོང་ན། ངས་འདི་ལ་ལན་རྒྱུ་གི་ཡོད་མ་རེད། [...] ལྷོག་ཐུབ་ཀྱི་ཡོད་
རེད། དམར་འའ་འབྲི་དགོས་བསམ་ན་དག་ཆཡའི་གོ་གི་མ་རེད་དུ།

'For instance, you: You sent me a message in written Tibetan and I couldn't answer [...]. **I can read, [but] if I want to answer, I don't know the spelling.**' (Emphasis added)

The Tibetan grammar and the written Tibetan language in general have a sacred status (Zeisler 2006: 179; Tournadre 2010). This status is also seen in some respondents' discourse explaining, and this status is also cited by some respondents to explain why they avoid writing simple, daily-life related texts in Tibetan (such as a shopping list). Not only could it be an obstacle for the children who might be unable to read it easily, but also they would have to discard such writings in a culturally appropriate way (i.e., by burning them), which is not convenient in the modern environment.

Illiteracy is widespread in Tibet: The 2022 [China Statistical Yearbook](http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2022/indexeh.htm) (http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2022/indexeh.htm) indicates that in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), which represents half of the Tibetan speaking area in PRC, more than 26% of the men, and almost 43% of the women were illiterate^[8] in 2021 and these figures are stable for the last ten years. In 1999, illiteracy rates were around 50% for men, and almost 70% for women. Results are better in Tibetan

areas outside the TAR, but illiteracy still remains quite high. The most recent language policies aim at promoting Chinese language at school (see e.g., de Varennes et al. 2022 report for the UN Office for Human Rights) and are clearly detrimental to the development of Tibetan medium literacy.

(5)

Mo-4: དང་རང་འདྲ་པོ་ཡིན་ན་། ད་དཔོན་གནས་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ཡིན་དུས་སློབ་གྲྭ་འགོ་སློབ་མེད། སློབ་གྲྭ་དཔེ་འདྲེ། ད། ལྷ་རན་སི་ལ་ཡོང་ནས་སློབ་གྲྭ་དེ་དཔེ་གལ་ཆེན་པོ་ཡིན་པ་ཉ་གོ་སོང། ཡི་གེ་སླུངས་འདོད་ཡི་ཡོད། ང་འདྲ་པོ་ཡིན་ན། [...].

'For me... Well, in fact, when I was little, I never went to school. School was very... Well, once I arrived in France, I understood that school was very important. I also really wanted to learn how to write [...].'

CS: ཨ་ནི། ད། ད་ལྷ་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ཤེས་པའི་སློབ་རིགས་ནང་ནས། ཨ་ནི་སློབ་རིགས་ག་རེ་ཡག་ག་ཤེས་ཀྱི་ཡོད།

'And among the languages you know, what is the language you know better?'

Mo-4: དང་རང་གི་མི་ཚེ་ནང་ནང་ནས་ད་ཆེས་རང་གིས་ཡག་ཤོས་བཤད་ཡག་འདི་སོ་སོ་གི་ཕ་སློབ་རིགས། ད་ད་ལྷ་རྒྱུ་སོ་སོ་གིས་སློབ་ཡིག་ཁ་ཤས་ཟེག་སློབ་ཡིག་ཟེར་ན་ཡི་གེ་དཔེ་གེ་གི་ཡོད་པ་རེད། སློབ་འདྲ་པོ་ཁ་ཤས་ཤེས་ཀྱི་ཡོད་རེད།

'Well, the language I know best in my life is my mother tongue, of course. Well, now, my few languages... If we talk about languages in speaking and writing, I don't know the writing. I only know a few languages orally.'

Mo-4 explains that she attended a literacy class in Tibetan combined with a basic English course in a CTA's adult school during six month right after arriving in India. However, for her as for other first-generation Tibetans born in Tibet and who arrived as adults in France, French (spoken and written) is the only language learned formally long enough to allow them to use it actively in writing – and in fact, she answered in French to all my e-mails written in Tibetan.

3.3 Languages of the past

To be complete, the picture of the multilingual repertoires of the Tibetan refugees in France must also include the “languages of the past”, which are not (frequently) used any more at the time of the interview but were active linguistic resources at other periods of the interviewee's lives. As underlined by Cenoz (2013: 12): “Another important dimension of holistic views of multilingualism is that the development of multilingual competence is dynamic and involves changes [...]. The exposure multilingual speakers have to the languages in their repertoire is not fixed, and their multicompetence is also variable.”

This is especially true of people experiencing successive migrations: “[T]rajectories of migration not only involve movement in space, but in time as well; thus, time scales are also important in exploring the relationships between migration and language” (Tovares & Kamwangamalu 2017: 208). These “languages of the past”, thus, reflect the evolution of linguistic competences developed according to the communicative needs to which speakers have to adapt, over the course of their history and successive migrations (Blommaert &

Backus 2013: 9–10).

In general, it appears that Nepali and/or Hindi do not play a role anymore in the daily life of the Tibetan refugees in France. Accordingly, most interviewees forgot to mention them when asked to list all the languages they knew. In some cases, they were forgotten in the most literal sense, that they reported having lost competence in these languages. For example, this is the case of a teenager who explains that when she was living in Nepal, between 9–11 years, she had managed to acquire enough Nepali to act as a translator for her family in certain (official) interactions. However, when she returned to Nepal, two or three years after her arrival in France and was put back in the same situation, she had realized that she was not able to do it anymore.

All the interviewed participants report that they learned how to speak Hindi informally in order to cope with the daily interactions (shopping and bargaining, working), but most of them do not use this language anymore. Some of the interviewees (especially those who have a low level of formal education) insisted on the ease with which they learned this language, as illustrated in (6) and (7).

(6)

Mo-6: རང་གི་སྐད་རིགས་མ་གཏོགས་གཞན་པ་དེ་ལས་སང་གི་ཐོ་དེ་ཉིན་དེ་ཟེང་།

'Except [my] own language, as for other [languages]... **the one I knew at once was Hindi.**' (Emphasis added)

(7)

Mo-4: ཨ་ནི་རྒྱ་གར་སྐད་དེ་སྤྱིར་བཏང་གིས་ང་རང་གི་ལ་དུས་ཡིན་ན་ངའི་ཚོགས་པ་ལ་སྐད་ཆ་དེ་འདྲིས་ བཤད་ཀྱི་ཡོད། སྤྱིར་བཏང་གིས་རྒྱ་གར་འདི་ལུང་ལ་སྤྱིད་པའི་གསལ་ཡིན་ནི་ལྟ་ ལུང་ལ་འདི་དེ་འདི་ཅིག་ འེའེའེ། མི་ལ་འབྲེལ་བ་སྐད་ནས་ངོ་ཚོ་མི་དགོས་བ། སྐད་དེ་ལས་སྐད་ཐོ་འེའེའེ་ སྐད་ནས། ད། ཤེས་དགོས་བ་བསམ་སྤྱོད་མི་ད་ ནའི་རང་བཞིན་གིས་ཤེས་འགྲོ་འདྲ་ཅིག་འདུག་གྲ།

'And the language of India, in general, I used to speak all the time with friends. In general, was it because this area of India was so nice?... Or because in this place, uh... I didn't feel like intimidated to get in contact with people?...This language, **I knew it easily, as if I didn't even think I had to know it!**' (Emphasis added)

Such comments indicate a good adequacy between the communicative needs and the learning context, and contrast with their experience of learning and speaking French, as shown in (8).

(8)

CS: ཨ་ནི་ཁྱེད་རང་གིས་རྒྱ་སྐད་མིའི་སྐད་བརྒྱུ་བ་དགོས་ལྗང་ན། ཨ་ནི་ཡང་ཉེ་ཅོ་ འེའེའེ། སེམས་མ་བདེ་བ་དང་དེ་འདྲས་འདྲ་པོ་འཚོར་གི་འདུག་གས། མཚམས་མཚམས་ལ།
‘When you have to speak French, do you feel uncomfortable or the like, sometimes?’

Mo-4: དེ་དང་འཚོར་གྱི་འདུག་ [...] ད་གཞི་ནས་ མོ་སོ་གིས་ ཚོག་འདི་ཡིན་པ་ཉ་མོ་ནས་མར་བརྒྱུ་བ་དགོས་ན་ཡང་། དོགས་པ་ཡོད་རྒྱུ་བོ། ཨྱི་འདྲ་ཡིན།
‘Yes, I feel like that. [...] Well, in the end, even if you know it is the [right] word, if you have to speak, you have doubts and the like...’

དེ་དང་རང་གིས་ད་ ང་སློབ་སློབ་གི་མཉམ་སྦྲེང་མེད་བ་དེ་རེད་བསམ་གྱི་འདུག།

‘I think it’s because I have no experience of studying.’

སེམས་པ་ནང་འག་དེང་ཚོད་སློབས་མ་བྱས། མར་བརྒྱུ་བ་འས་ངལ། ཨྱ། ཡིན་ན། མིན་ན། འདྲ་པོ་བསམ་ནས་གཞི་ནས་ དང་པོ་རྒྱ་སྐད་འགོ་བཅུགས་རྒྱ།
གཞི་ནས་ཁ་ནང་འས་ ག་དོན་མ་བྱུ་འས། ཨྱི་འདྲས་དཀའ་ངལ་དཔེ་མང་པོ་བྱུང་ནས།

‘I can’t be self-confident. I speak and I think: “Ah, was it right? Or not?” like that. First, I start [speaking] French, and in the end, I can’t get it out of my mouth, and... I have had many problems like that.’

This greater linguistic insecurity with French could be related to the general insecure and precarious initial period in France, where the community is less organized and supportive than it is in South Asia. It could also be explained by the more formal settings in which they learn French (associative and state-managed schools for immigrants). Finally, differences in linguistic policy are also a factor to be taken into account: the monolingual ideology is prevalent in France while in India, there is an official recognition of multilingualism, and diglossia goes together with *de facto* “non-regulation of L-variety languages” (Schiffman 1996: 157; García 2009: 147)

Finally, the mother language of the Tibetan exiles, i.e., their native distinct Tibetic language, is also part of the linguistic repertoire scarcely used after settling in France. It is used with the family members who remain in Tibet, when the political situation allows such contacts^[9], and with people coming from the same homeland. There might be very few of them, as shown in (9) and (10).

(9)

CS: ད་ལྟ་རྒྱ་སྐད་མི་ལ་ཡོད་དུས། ད་པ་ཡུལ་རང་གི་སྐད་བརྒྱུ་བ་ས་ཡོད་པས།

‘In France, is there anyone with whom you can speak the real dialect of your homeplace?’

Mo-4: ཡོད་རེད། ད་པ་ཡུལ་གཅིག་པ་རེ་བླག་ན་ ད་སོ་སོ་ རང་གི་ པ་ཡུལ་གྱི་སྐད་ཡིན་རྒྱུ་གི་ཡོད་རེད། དང་ཚོ་སྤྱི་མ་གི་སྐད་འདྲ་པོ་འདི་རྒྱུ་གི་ཡོད་རེད།

‘Yes, when we meet someone from our place, we speak our homeplace language. [Otherwise] we speak something like the standard language. Most of time, we speak a kind of standard language.’

(10)

Mo-3: དེ་སོ་སོ་འི་མ་ལུལ་གཅིག་པ་ཐུག་ན་དེ་ལོ་རང་མ་ལུལ་སྐད་རྒྱག་ཡག་རེད་ལྟོ།

‘Well, when we meet people from our homeplace, we speak our homeplace language, right?’

CS: ཇེ་ནི་འདི་ལ་པ་རི་སི་ལ་མ་ལུལ་གཅིག་པ་འདྲ་པོ་འདུག་གས།

‘And are there people from your homeplace here, in Paris?’

Mo-3: རང་ལུལ་གཅིག་པ་གཅིག་རང་གཅིག་ཡོད། འདི་གོ་རང་རེད། ལྷིང་ཇེ།

‘I had one and only one person from my homeplace. This [man] died, poor him.’

Thus, through the examination of the linguistic repertoire declared by Tibetan refugees in France, and of the way they use these languages in different domains and places of their daily life, we can see how their distinct roles and functions articulate. Crucially, beside Tibetan and French, intermediate languages are a valuable resource exploited to facilitate social insertion.

Thus, as a speech community, exile Tibetans cannot be defined as a “Tibetan speaking community”, but rather as a community of linguistic practices that includes (varieties of) Tibetan among other resources. In this respect, the language practices described by the interviewees are emblematic of the study of superdiversity, which consists of “study[ing] not only new migrants but the mix of individuals in a place: ‘old’ and ‘new’ international migrants, native established populations, and resident minorities” (Blackledge & Creese 2018: xxiii).

In the Tibetan case, the persistence, and even the development (see Section 4.3) of multilingualism is due to specific social relationships that require different language repertoires, or in a more agentive reading, to a strategy to make a full use of their linguistic resources. The situations described by the participants closely correspond to the observations made by Pennycook & Otsuji’s analysis (2015: 83): “Clearly the context with which we are dealing here is not one in which one language serves a particular function but, rather, a range of resources are deployed” to meet communication needs.

4. Language(s) transmission and maintenance

How is this linguistic repertoire transmitted to the (in France, incipient) second generation? First, the issue of Tibetan language maintenance and transmission as a “heritage language” will be discussed. We will then contrast the parents’ and teenage children’s linguistic repertoire, and describe the parent’s multilingual aspirations for their children, and how the latter endorse this program.

4.1 Tibetan as an “heritage language”

Like in other immigrant communities, the issue of language transmission and maintenance takes an important place in the exiled Tibetan linguistic policies. As underlined by Edwards

(1995 [1994]: 129): “[L]anguage maintenance is not a *necessary* condition for nationalism; however, it would be foolish to ignore the commonly-held assumption that it is *the* pillar of groupness.”

Tibetan communities in South Asia have developed their own network of primary and secondary schools, which play a crucial role in the construction and transmission of a common Tibetan language and identity (Giles & Tenzin Dorjee 2005: 148–149). It is not the case in Western countries, where Tibetans live more dispersed. At the community level, weekend schools are organized, usually with volunteer teachers, in the form of local community associations, as noted in Aukatsang (2020: 22–23):

[Tibetan weekend school] is a popular service offered by all the C[ivil]S[ociety]O[rganization]s to their local Tibetan population. The exception here is the London Sunday School, which is managed by the O[ffice]o[f]T[ibet]^[10] [...].

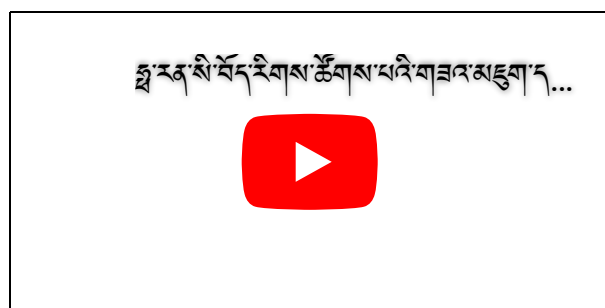
Seven of the schools have adopted a formal curriculum [...and...] provide the textbooks to the students. One respondent mentioned using the additional story-telling method.

Of the 15 CSOs, four have paid teachers funded through fees collected from the parents, with annual wages between a range of €600 to €1800. The majority, 11 schools, are served by volunteer teachers.

In France, the main Tibetan Sunday school, administrated by the association Tibetan Community in France is located in Paris. It opened in 2004, with nine children. This number increased to 40–50 students in 2016, and more than 200 in 2021. It provides two hours per week of classes, by volunteer or quasi-volunteer teachers. In the past few years, other smaller Tibetan Sunday schools opened outside Paris. These schools are the main infrastructure for the transmission of written Tibetan.

In the following video, the political significance of Tibetan language transmission and maintenance is made clear in the interview of Karma Thinlay (ཀཾམ་འཕྲིན་ལམས།) the president of the Tibetan Community in France.

Vid. 2: Tibet France TV, May 18th 2022 – Tibetan language Sunday school (tibet france tv 2022)



(<https://www.youtube.com/embed/LPvusEuaitY>)

(11) Interview of Karma Thinlay on Tibet France TV (from 06'02'')

ཨ་ནི་འདི་མཐའ་མ་འདི་དང་ཚོ་འདི་ལ་ཐུ་གུ་ད་སློབ་ཐུག་གཉིས་བརྒྱ་ཚུ་འཕུག་རེད་ཅ། གཉིས་བརྒྱ་ཚུ་ཡོད་པ་འདི་འདྲེས་ཆགས་བསྐྱེད་བཞག་དེ་འདི་ལ།
 རྒྱ་རན་སི་ལ་བོད་པ་ཁྱི་གཅིག་ལྷགས་ཚུ་ཡོད་ལ་བ་ཀྱི་ཡོད་རེད་དུ། དེ་དུ་ཡོད་བསྐྱེད་པ་འདི་ཀྱང་ཚང་མ་ལོགས་སོ་སོའི་མི་རིགས་དང་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ཀྱི་སྐད་ཡིག་སྤྱད་སློབ་བྱེད་
Rep: ཡག་གི་ཚེད་དུ་རང་། དེ་ཚད་དེ་གུང་གམིང་དང་སྐབས་བསྐྱེད་བྱས་ཚོད་མང་པོ་བཏང་། འདུག་ཟེ་གནང་བསྐྱེད་ཡོད་རེད། དེ་འདི་ལ་འི། འདི་ནང་ལོགས་ལ་མེད་པའི་དམ་
 མ་དང་བྱ་ཐུག་ཨ་ནི་བོད་རིགས་སྤྱན་རློང་ད། པ་རི་སི་དང་པ་རི་སི་གནས་འཁོར་ལ་ཡོད་བསྐྱེད་པ། ཁོ་རང་ཚོ་ལ་ཡང་ཚོགས་གཙོ་རིས་ནས་དམིགས་བསམ་ཀྱི་རེབ་དང་དེ་
 འདྲེས་གནང་ཡག་ཡོད་པས།

‘Now there are about 200 students, there are more than 200 students. At the moment, here in France, it is estimated that there are more than 10,000 Tibetans. Those who are here [in the school], they all devote a lot of their free time, their holidays, to the preservation of the language of their nation, of their country. Do you [president of the Tibetan community in France] have any special expectations from the parents and children who live in Paris or in the surrounding area but are not here?’

ཡིན་དང་ཡིན། [...] འདི་འདི་དངོས་གནས་རྒྱ་བ་ཉངས་ངལ་ག་ཡག་པོ་ཅིག་རེད། [...] གཙོ་བོ་དེ་དང་སང་བོད་ལ་ཡུ་དེ་དངོས་གནས་ད་རྒྱ་མི་གིས་སྲིད་རྒྱས་རན་པ་འདི་
 ལ་ཡུ་དང་ཚོས་དག་དོང་ལེན་བྱེད་དགོས་ཡོད། གཙོ་བོ་འདི། རང་རང་གིས་དག་ཞོན་སྤྱི་ཚོ་ལ་ཡུ་སོ་སོའི་སྐད་དང་ཡི་གེ་འདི་བསྐྱབས་ཡག་འདི་ཉངས་ངལ་ཡག་གིས་
KT: གལ་ཆེན་པོ་ཆགས་ཀྱི་འདུག་རེད་ཅ། [...] འདི་འདི་སྐད་ལ་ཡུ་དམ་མ་གང་མང་མང་འདི་ཀྱང་། རང་ཚོ་འདི་ལ་ཡུ་ཨ་ནི། སུ་གུ་ཚོ་འདི་ར་ཁྱིད་རིགས་གནང་། འདི་མ་གཏོགས།
 ཨ་ནི་འདི་ག་རེབས་ནས་གལ་ཆེན་པོ་ཆགས་ཀྱི་ཡོད་རེད་ཟེ་རན། ད་སྤྱོད་ན་ནས་ད་རྒྱ་ནག་དུ་བཅུ་དགུ་དུ་ལྟ་བར་དུ་ཨ་ནི་བོད་མི་རིགས་དེ་ཚོ་རྩ་མེད་བཟོ་ཡག་ཁོང་ཚོ་
 གིས་སྲིད་རྒྱས་མང་པོ་ཅིག་བཏང་ཡོད་རེད།

‘Yes, of course, thank you for that very good question. [...] Actually, as we have to deal with the Chinese bad policies in Tibet, it is particularly crucial that we teach our language and script to the younger generation, isn’t it? [...] That’s why please, may as many parents as possible bring their children here. It is important because since before, since 1959, China has developed many policies to eliminate the Tibetan nation.’

The president of the Tibetan Community in France then details the education policies implemented in Tibet, and their consequences for the vitality of Tibetan language in Tibet^[11].

Indeed, Roche & Lugyal Bum (2018: 418), note that Tibetan in Tibet “*is* threatened, in the sense of being in a position of increasing marginalization and subordination” and details on the promotion of standard Chinese as a medium of instruction at school to the detriment of Tibetan, together with the implementation of pre-schooling and boarding schools can be found in Leibold & Tenzin Dorjee (2023). As a reaction to these policies, grassroot movements for the promotion of Tibetan language in Tibet emerged, described, e.g., by Rigdrol Jikar (2022), but faced drastic limitations due, in particular, to “a political environment that is hostile to civil society” (Roche & Lugyal Bum 2018: 424).

Tibetan Sunday schools in exile are thus seen as a response to what Roche & Lugyal Bum (2018: 419) describe as the “aggressive promotion of Modern Standard Chinese at the expense of Tibetan, primarily through subtractive bilingual education programs”. Exile is considered a place (if not the place) where the Tibetan language and culture should be preserved.

Subsequently, the president of the Tibetan Community in France insists on the responsibility ascribed to Tibetans living outside Tibet to maintain the Tibetan language. Language transmission is thus presented as a political responsibility, in a context where Tibetans

consider that communities in exile are crucial spaces in which they can have a real control over the formal transmission of their language.

Tibetan as a heritage language obeys imperatives that are comparable only to a certain extent with those of other immigrant communities in France. They are faced with a double constraint: to transmit Tibetan, a language that was minoritized by Chinese colonization in Tibet and a minority language in the country of immigration. Consequently, parents are actively encouraged to use only Tibetan with their children and this discourse is fully endorsed by the interviewees, as shown in (12):

(12)

ཁྱེས་གང་ཡིན་ཟེར་ན་ français ལྟ་འདྲ་པོ་ཅིག་བརྒྱབ་གྱི་ཡོད་ན། ང་དག་འཇ་དགོས་ནས་ད། ང་སེམས་པ་དཔེ་སྐྱོ་པོ་འདུག་ཟེར། ངས་ནང་ནས་བསྐྱ/སྐྱིང་རྗེའི་
Mo-4: བསྐྱབ་བྱ་བརྒྱབ་གྱི་ཡོད། རྒྱ་རང་གཉིས་ཀྱིས་བོད་སྐད་བརྒྱབ་དགོས་ཟེད། མི་གིས་ང་བོད་པ་ཡིན་ཟེར་ནི་བོ་གཅིག་བོ་གིས་ འགྲིག་གི་མ་ཟེད་དུ་ཟེར། བོད་པ་ཟེད་ལ་ངའི་
 གཤོད་པའའ་བྲིས་ཡོད་མ་ཟེད་ཟེར། བོད་པ་ཡིན་པ་འདི། སོ་སོ་གི་སྐད་དང་རིགས་གཞུང་དེ་གིས་སྟོན་དགོས་ཟེད་དུ་ཟེར། ངས་དེ་འདྲས་བསྐྱབ་བྱ་བརྒྱབ་གི་ཡོད།

'At home, I give [my daughters] adv-, loving advices: "If you speak French, I am not happy, I'm very sad. You two have to speak Tibetan. [Some] people say they are Tibetan, but it's not enough. I'm Tibetan but it is not written on my face. Being Tibetan means showing it through your language and you culture." I give them such advice.'

However, given the linguistic diversity among the Tibetic languages, we may wonder what is this "Tibetan language" evoked here. Mo-4, who comes from North-Eastern Tibet (Amdo province) pronounces the word "Tibet" with a phonological form close to Central Tibetan varieties: she says /po/ (compare to Lhasa Tibetan /pʰø/ [12]) rather than the Amdo Tibetan /wo/ when she refers to the Tibetan language, people or culture, and this, despite the fact that she keeps several phonological and morphological features of Amdo Tibetan when she speaks "Common" Tibetan. This remark brings us to the definition of "Tibetan" as a heritage language and, given the diversity of Tibetic languages, the question of language standardization or dialect levelling in exile. As pointed out by Blackledge & Creese (2008: 537) in their analysis of heritage language among Bangladeshi immigrants in the UK: "[I]t cannot be assumed that the preservation and transmission of 'heritage' is straightforward. Simply the process of 'passing on' resources will alter them." In the case of Tibetan, we will see that language maintenance implies, in fact, language/variety shift between the parents' and the children's generation.

4.2 Tibetan language maintenance as language shift

In this study too, the linguistic diversity among the Tibetic languages was never spontaneously addressed by the interviewees, even though it is part of everyday experience, as admitted by an interviewee in (13):

(13)

CS: ལྱིེད་རང་གི་སྐད་ལྟུང་གྱི་སྐད་དང་ལྷ་བརྒྱབ་པའི་བོད་སྐད་འདི་གཅིག་པ་ལ་རེད་མི་འདུག་གཤམ།

'The Tibetan language you speak right now and the one spoken in your region are not the same, right?'

Mo-4: ཉཅ་འདྲ་གི་མ་ལེན། འོང།

'It's a bit different, yes.'

In fact, for most Tibetans who do not come from Central or Southern Tibet (eight of the 11 adults interviewed for this paper), the linguistic differences between their languages are such that there is no mutual intelligibility, and they report several difficulties related to language barriers during their first months in exile, as shown in (14):

(14)

Fa-2: དང་པོ་རྒྱ་གར་ལ་སླེབས་པ་འ་མེས་ལ་འཕོ་ཚོན་གྱི་མི་འདུག་ལྟུང་། ལ་ཤས་ཀྱིས་དགོངས་དག་ཟེར་ནས། དགོངས་དག་ཟེར་ནས་ཉལ་གི་མ་ལེན། ག་རེ་ལམ་གི་ཡོད་ནེས། དཀོན་པ་དག་ཟེར་ན་ཡིག་སྐད་ནང་དགོངས་འདྲ་པོ་དགོངས་པོ་ཡོད་ལྟུང་། དམ་ཚཱ་མོ་འདྲ་པོ་ཡོད་ལེད་ཟེད། དེ་འདྲས་འདྲ་པོ་གོ་བ་རེད་ མ་གཞི། དགོངས་དག་ཟེར་ན་ད་བཀའ་རྒྱ་འདྲ་པོ་ཡིན་པ་རས་ཉལ་གི་མ་ལེན། ད་རྒྱ་གར་ལ་དཀོན་པ་ཤེད་བསྐད་ཡག་འདི། [...] དེ་ནས་ག་ལེ་ག་ལེ་རིམ་པ་རིམ་པ་ཟེར་ནས་ག་ལེ་ག་ལེ་འཕོ་ཚོན་གྱི་འདུག།

'When I just arrived in India, I didn't understand [them]! People said *gonṭa?*, *gonṭa?* [i.e., sorry, sorry] and I didn't understand! What did they mean?! For us, *gonṭa?* looks like *gonṃmo* [i.e., evening] in written Tibetan. [This word] exists, right? Something like “night”. That's all that I could understand... I didn't know that *gonṭa?* meant something like *kwafin* [i.e., a common politeness formula in his region]. [...] And then, slowly step by step, by talking, slowly [we] understand.'

CS: ཇ་ནི་དུས་ཚོད་ག་ཚོད་འགོར་སོང།

'How long did it take?'

Fa-2: དུས་ཚོད་ཉལ་ཉལ་ཅིག་ཟེར་ན་ད་ཉཅ་ཉཅ་ཅིག་རིམ་པ་རིམ་པ་ཟེར་ན་འཕོ་ཚོན་འདྲ་ཚོད་འདི་འདྲས་ཅིག་དམངས་ཁྱེར་བཏང་གིས་ཨ་མ་བོད་སྐད་རེད་ལྟུང་། ཡིན་ལ་ལ་ཡང་ཅིག་ཡག་སྐོར་མག་སྐོར་ཟེར་ན་ཅི་ཡས་སྐོར་དམངས་ཁྱེར་ཡག་ཡོད་ལེད། [...] ཟླ་བ་ལྔ་དུག་དུས་འཁོར་བུས་ནས་མོ་ལབ་རྒྱ་ནང་བཞིན་དཀོས་པར་ལ་བཤད་ན་ཅིག་དབུས་གཙང་སྐད་མེད་རྒྱ་བོ་འདྲ་པོ་ཅིག་བོད་སྐད་རེད།

'As for the precise time, well, it was like step by step that I started to understand. Tibetan is the mother [of all the Tibetic languages] you know, so, we come to understand each-other. [...] After five–six months, as she [my wife] said, when we speak it is not exactly the language of Ü-Tsang [Central Tibetan], it is really “Common” Tibetan ^[13].'

People's appropriation of “Common” Tibetan while in exile is not without any tension: loyalty to one's native language, sometimes described as more authentic than “Common” Tibetan, as shown in (15), enters in competition with the communication needs and the nation building of the small population of exile.

(15)

Fa-2: དག་དག་ཅེ་ཟེ་དགོས་ཅེད། ལྷོ་རབ་ཏུ་ལ་ཡུལ་གྱི་སྐད་དེ་ཡང་འདི་ལྟེ་ལོགས་ཀྱི་བོད་པའི་སྐད་འདྲ་གི་མི་ འདུག་གྲ། དེ་ལ་ཡུལ་ནས་སོ་སོ་གི་དུང་ལུང་པ་གི་སྐད་རིགས་
བརྒྱབ་ན་གཙང་མ་གཙང་རྒྱབ་ཅེད། བོད་སྐད་གཙང་མ། ལ་ཉི་རྒྱུ་མིའི་སྐད་གཅིག་གཉིས་འདྲེ་ཡག་འདི་འདི་ཅེད། མ་གཞི།

‘How to say... Basically, the language of [my] native region, well, it doesn’t look like the language of the Tibetans outside, you know. Well, back home, **you speak the language of our valley and it’s completely pure, pure Tibetan.** And then, there’s one or two Chinese [words] mixed in, but that’s it.’ (Emphasis added)

Conversely, another interviewee described “Common” Tibetan as “purer”, because she finds it closer to the written language^[14]. Some people reported occasional negative attitudes towards non-Central Tibetic languages on the part of exiles born in South Asia.

At the same time, most interviewees insisted that being able to maintain a strict distinction between the two varieties is viewed favorably by their family members, as reported in (16), while the mixing of “Common” Tibetan and their original variety is highly stigmatized, as described in (17).

(16)

དང་སྤྱོད་ན་མ་ ༢༠ ་: ་: ་: ལ་བོད་པར་འགོ་དུས་ད་ཚང་མ་གིས་ལྷ། [...] ཚང་མ་གིས་ལྷ། རྒྱུད་སྐད་འདི་བསྐྱེས་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་འདུག་དུ། [...] ངལ། ད་ཆར་དེ། དེ་ནས་

Fa-1: ང་གཟབ་གཟབ་ཞེ་དགས་བྱས་པ་ཡིན། དྲང་པོ་དྲང་པོ་བཤད་ན། སོ་སོ་དངོས་གནས་གཟབ་གཟབ་དཔེ་བྱས་པ་ཡིན། ་: ་: ་: སྐད་བརྒྱབ་ཡག་ལ་ཐབས་ཤེས་བྱས། ་: ་: ་:
སྐད་དེ་སྤྱོད་ན་གཅིག་ཡོད་ཅེད་དུ། ང་ཚོ་ལ་ཡུལ་རང་སྐད་བརྒྱབ་ཡག་དེ་འབད་བརྟེན་དཔེ་བྱས་པ་ཡིན།ག།

‘When I went back to Tibet in 20XX^[15], everyone said, “Ah, your language is mixed!” After that, **I was very careful**, to put it frankly. I was really careful. I tried to speak X Tibetan – there is [a variety of] X Tibetan, isn’t there? **I made a lot of effort to speak the language of our region.**’ (Emphasis added)

ང་མཉམ་དུ་གྲུ་བ་ཅིག་འདུག་གྲ། [...] རིད་གཉིས་གྲོང་པ་གཅིག་ལ་བ་ན་ད་། དེ་གཅིག་པ་ཅེད། ད་ལྟ་འདི་ཅེད། འེའེ། *xiang* རང་ལ་གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གཅིག་པ་ཅེད།
གྲོང་ཁྱེར་ལ་བ་ཀྱི་ཅེད་དུ། གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གཅིག་པ་ཅེད། གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གཅིག་པ་ཡིན་དུས། རྟག་པར་གྲུག་གི་འདུག་གྲ། ང་ཚོ། དེ་འདྲས་ཡིན་དུས་གྲུ་པ་འདི་གི་ལ་ཅག་ཅིག་ཡོད་ཅེད་དུ།
ལ་ཅག་འདི་གིས་ལ་བ་ཀྱི་འདུག་གྲ། ངར། ལྷོ། ་: ་: ་: ། རྒྱུད་རང་སྐད་ལྷོ་ན་ནས་འགྲུ་རམི་འདུག་ རྒྱུད་རང་གི་ X སྐད་དཔེ་ཡག་པོ་བརྒྱབ་ཀྱི་འདུག་ རྒྱུད་རང་སྐད་འགྲུ་རམི་
འདུག་ ངའི་ལ་གོ་ ངའི་ལ་གོ་ཟེ་ར་ན་འདི་ཅོ་ཅིག་ཟེར། ངའི་ལ་གོ་ ་: ་: ་: སྐད་ལྷོ་ན་ནས་བརྒྱབ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་མི་འདུག་ཟེར། ད། དག།

‘With me [in exile], there was a monk. We both come from the same neighborhood, uh, the same *xiang* [Chinese term for township], the same town. Since we’re from the same town, we saw each other all the time. We... And this monk, he has a sister, you know. This sister said to me, “**Oh, [Name], your language has not changed at all! You speak very well!**” Your language hasn’t changed! My *ako* – (my *ako*, that means my elder brother) – My *ako*, can’t speak X Tibetan anymore at all!”’ (Emphasis added)

(17)

དཔ་ཡུལ་ལ་མཚོ་མས་མཚོ་མས་འ་ལ་ལ་པ་ར་ཟེ་དང་དེ་དགོས་བྱས་ན་སྔོན་མ་འདྲ་པོ་ཡིན་ན་ད་ཀྱི་རྒྱ་མི་འདྲ་པོ་ཡོང་རྒྱུ་འདྲ་མོལ་འདྲ་པོ་ཡིན་ན་པ་ཡུལ་གྱི་
Mo-4: སྐད་འདི་ཉ་ལམ་མཚོ་མས་མཚོ་མས་འགོ་གི་མེད་རྒྱུ་བོ་འདྲ་པོ་འདྲ་བཤུ། འདུག དེ་ནང་མི་དེ་ཚོ་གིས་དཔེ་འདི་གཤེ་གཤེ་འདྲ་པོ་བཏང་གི་འདུག རྩོད་ཕྱི་ལོགས་
 ལ་འགོ་ནས་མང་པོ་མ་རེད། རྩོད་པོ་ཚོ་གི་མི་འདུག་གས་ཟེཟ། དེ་སོ་སོ་གི་སྐད་འདི་ཞི་འདྲ་བྱས་ནས་བཤད་ན། རྩོད་ཞེ་བོ་ཅིག་ཇིག་པོ་ཡིན་བསམ་གྱི་འདུག་གས།

‘Sometimes, when I call my home region by phone, or whatever... Before, at the beginning, when I came to France, **it was almost like sometimes I couldn’t understand the language of my home region anymore. My family blamed me a lot [for that].** [They said to me:] “You haven’t been abroad very long, **aren’t you ashamed? Speaking your own language like that!** Do you think it’s fancy?!” (Emphasis added)

Thus, what do language transmission and language maintenance entail for Tibetan parents? The comments on the Tibetan language schools in Western countries published in Aukatsang (2020: 23) also illustrate this ambiguous attitude between the promotion of “Common” Tibetan as the standard in exile and the maintenance of linguistic diversity. Whereas most of them agree in calling for more material support from the CTA, there are diverging opinions regarding the way dialectal diversity could be taken into account. Thus, one comment reads: “We get nothing from [the] CTA. But we would like [...] **Tibetan language teaching in three Tibetan dialects** ^[16] for children released on YouTube because children here watch lots of YouTube”; while another claims: “[The] CTA should and could do more to make use of the 4–5 week school vacations by organizing summer language camps [...]. **The emphasis should be on teaching standard spoken language/Lhasa dialect**” (emphasis added). Such tensions and variation in attitudes towards “Common” Tibetan are in line with Lane, Costa, & De Korne’s (2017: 12) observation that “[m]inority language standards are [...] subject to negotiation, debate, contestation and appropriation by various types of social actors in very diverse circumstances.”

This study shows that the maintenance of one’s native Tibetic language was considered crucial for the parent’s generation, as illustrated in (15) to (17). However, the discourse is completely different when it comes to the children. Unsurprisingly, in mixed families (i.e., where the father and the mother come from different regions in Tibet), speaking “Common” Tibetan is considered a necessity:

(18)

CS: དུ་གུ་ཚོ་བོད་སྐད་བརྒྱུ་སྟངས་། དེ་ལྟར་རང་གཉིས་བོད་སྐད་བརྒྱུ་སྟངས་ལོགས་དགར་ ཡིན་གྱི་རེད་ལྟོ།

'Your children's way of speaking Tibetan, your way of speaking Tibetan, it's different, right?'

Fa-2: རེད།

'True.'

དང་གཉིས་གིས་་་་དག་རང་འདི། ལྷ་ས་སྐད། དབུས་གཙུག་ལྷན་པོ་འདི་བརྒྱུ་བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་ ཡོད་རེད་ལྟོ། གར་ཡིན་ཟེར་ན། སུ་གུ་གཉིས་ཆ། ངས་ཨ་མ་མདོ་སྐད་བརྒྱུ་བ། ལོ་

Mo-2: ལམས་སྐད་ བརྒྱུ་ན་ད། དེ་འདི་འཇུག་ནས་ཡོང་གི་མ་རེད་ལྟོ། ཨ་ནི་་་་ག་རེ་རེད། དབུས་སྐད་ཡིན་་་་། སྤྱི་སྐད་ནས། དེ་དེ་ལྟར་ཚོས་སྐད་ཆ་བཤད་གི་ཡོད་ནི་བོ་འདི་ འདུག་སེ་བསྐྱེད་བསྐྱེད་ཡོད་རེད།

'Well, both of us, we shifted to speak Lhasa Tibetan, Central Tibetan. Because **if I speak the Amdo language, and he speaks the Kham language, the children will mix, and it won't work**. And so, that's why we speak Central Tibetan, the common language; we speak like that.' (Emphasis added)

CS: ཨ་ནི་འདི་འོ་སྐོར་ལ་ག་རེ་བསམ་གྱི་འདུག ཡག་པོ་འདུག ཡག་པོ་མི་འདུག་།

'And what do you think about that? Is it a good thing, a bad thing...?'

Mo-2: དེ་འདི་ལ་འདི་་་་བེད་སྤྱོད་མ་བཏང་རང་བཏང་རེད། ཚང་/ བོད་པ་ཚང་མ་དེ་འདི་་་་བཏང་ན། [...] བོད་པ་དེ་ཚོ་ཐུག་དུས། དུ་ཉ་མ་གོ་པ་ཆགས་གྱི་མ་རེད་ལྟོ། དག་རེ་ལབ་ ན་ལོ་ཚོ་ཚང་མ་ཉ་གོ་ འགོ་གི་རེད་ལྟོ། ང་ཚོ་ཨ་མ་དོ་ཨ་མ་དོ་ཐུག་དུས་ཡང་། དག་རང་ཨ་མ་དོ་སྐད་རྒྱུ་རྒྱུ་ བཤད་ཀྱི་ཡོད་གི་ བ་ཡུལ་གཅིག་པ་དང་ཨ་འདྲས་་་་།

'Well, **we have no choice but to use the common language**. If all Tibetans used it [...] when these Tibetan meet each-other, there would be no misunderstanding. Whatever you say, you will be understood [...].' (Emphasis added)

Fa-2: སྤྱི་ཡོངས་གྱི་ཆར་ས། ཨ་ནི་ཕྱི་རྒྱལ་ལུང་པ་ལ་ད་་་་། དང་ཚོ་དུ་ལྷ་བཤད་ཡག་དེ་འདི་་་་ ཆེ་ཟེར་ དགོས་རེད། དབུས་གཙུག་ལྷན་པོ་འདི་་་་ དེ་དབུས་གཙུག་ལྷན་པོ་འདི་བེད་ སྤྱོད་བཏང་གི་ ཡོད་རེད་ལྟོ། [...] དམངས་ཆེ་བས་འདི་བཤད་བཞག་གི་འདུག་སྟེ། ད། བོད་ནས་སྤོངས་རྒྱ་བོ་ ཡིན་ནའི་རེད། རྒྱ་གར་ཡིན་ན་ཡིན་ཡིན་པ་རེད་ལྟོ། དེ་སྤྱི་ཡོངས་ གྱི་ཆར་ས་དེ་འགོ་ན་དགའ་ས་རེད་བསམ།

'Generally speaking, **in a foreign country... well, we use the language we are speaking now, how to say, some sort of Central Tibetan**. [...] Most people, those who come from Tibet or, of course, [Tibetans] from India, generally speaking, they think it's better to do like that.' (Emphasis added)

In exile, the necessity to make one's children shift from one's native Tibetic language to "Common" Tibetan, is also reported in families where both parents have the same native variety of Tibetan (here, a variety of Amdo Tibetan):

(19)

Fa-6: འདྲམ་ལྟེང་ཡག་པ་ཡིན་ན་དེ་ལྟར་གནས་པ་དེ་ནས་གི་ཨ་མ་དོ་སྐྱོད་པའི་མཉམ་ཞུགས་ལྟར་ཡག་པོ་འདུག། བསམ་གི་འདུག་ ཡིན་ནའི་ཁོ་རང་ཚོ་རྒྱུ་དུས་དུས་སྐད་འདྲ་བོ་སྐད་ཡིག་བཤད་བཞག་ ད་ཨ་མ་དོ་སྐྱོད་ཡིག་རང་ཚོ་གིས་བསྐྱབས་འདུག་ཅུ་རྒྱུ་གས་བརྒྱབ་ནའི་ཡོང་གི་མི་འདུག། ཁོ་རང་ཚོ། ཁོ་རང་ཚོ་སྤོང་མ་ཤེས་སྐྱོ་བོ་དེ་ལ་མ་ཤེས་འདྲ་བོ་ཚགས་གི་འདུག་ དེ་བུ་དག་ལྟར། བོད་སྐད་ཟིག་ཡིན་ན་འགྲིག་གི་འདུག་བསམ་ནས། ཨ་ནེ། ལྷ་ས་སྐད་ཡིན་ན། ཨ་མ་དོ་སྐྱོད་ཡིན་ན། རྒྱུ་པ་རེ་མི་འདུག་བསམ་ནས། ཨ་ནེ། འདི་ནས་ཅིག་ནས་རྒྱུ་བོད་པ་གི་ལབ་ཡག་གི་སྐད་འདྲ་བོ། དུས་སྐད་སྐད། འོ་དེ་ཡིན་ན་འགྲིག་གི་འདུག།

‘Well, for us, in general, at best, I think it would be good if [my sons] really knew Amdo Tibetan, to be frank. But they speak something like Lhasa Tibetan since they are young. Even if we insist and teach them Amdo Tibetan, it doesn’t work. What they might used to know, here, they don’t know it anymore. Whatever, one Tibetan language is fine, I think, and it doesn’t make a difference if it’s Lhasa Tibetan or Amdo Tibetan. And if it’s this Tibetan, the Tibetan language usually spoken here, that is, Lhasa Tibetan, it’s fine.’

This discourse is prevalent in all the six interviewed families. In Family 1 too, where the parents have the same native variety of Tibetan, only “Common” Tibetan is transmitted to the 11-year-old daughter. “Common” Tibetan is referred to as “relocatee’s language” in (20), a slightly pejorative term for the language spoken in the South-Asian Tibetan settlements. This reflects a negative attitude towards this variety. In spite of this negative attitude, the daughter reports having been actively discouraged to speak her parent’s variety of Tibetan:

(20)

Fa-1: ད་གཞིས་ཚགས་སྐད་རང་རེད། འདི་རེ་འཚར་ལོངས་བྱུང་སོང། རེད་ལྷ། ལྷོ་ལགས་ལ། བཅོམ་བཅོལ་ནང་ལ་འཚར་ལོངས་བྱུང་སོང། ད་སྐད་ཚབ་ཤད་སྐད་སྐད་པ་དག་རང་རེད། བོད་ནང་གི་ .: .: གི་སྐད་ཚར་བཤད་ལྱེ་མི་འདུག།

‘[What our daughter speaks], **it’s really the relocatees’ language**. She grew up there, outside. She grew up in exile, so she speaks like them. **She can’t speak the real language [spoken] inside Tibet, in X.**’ (Emphasis added)

Da-1: སྤོང་མ་ཡིན་ན་ང་མཚམས་མཚམས་ .: .: གི་སྐད་ཚོག་གཅིག་གཉིས་ཅམ་ལབ་ཡོང་གི་རེད་ལྷ། ཨ་ནེ་ཨེ་འདྲས་ལབ་སོང་ན་ད། མ་མ་གཉིས་ཀྱིས་གདམོ་ཤོར་ནས། རེད་རེད་ཟེར། ཡིན། ཡིན་ནའི་དེངས་ངང་།

‘Before, from time to time, I would try to speak a little bit, to say one or two words in Tibetan of X. **If I spoke like that, my parents would laugh** and say “Yes, yes !”, you know. But, now, I...’ (Emphasis added)

Thus, the parents’ policy regarding the maintenance and the transmission of Tibetan is radically different whether they are considering themselves or their children. They tend to try and make efforts to preserve their native variety for themselves, but when it comes to the second generation, growing up in exile, the ideology of Tibetan language maintenance means that they shift to “Common” Tibetan.

Tovares & Kamwangamalu (2017: 214) observe that “Migrants’ intent to return to their homeland is intimately connected to their linguistic repertoires and identities and vice versa.” In the context of forced migration, the lack of transmission of one’s native variety could correspond to the awareness of the impossibility to return permanently to Tibet. It would be,

however, contradictory with the efforts made to develop children’s skills in Chinese (see below).

A similar generational shift in the context of migration is observed for speakers of Chinese varieties in Canada, with a similar rationalizing discourse, even though they do not face obstacles to visit their homeland. This would be “a solution to pragmatic concerns about the communication with speakers of different mother tongue” (Ward, Chow, & Ni 2022: 436). The authors also highlight the fact that “by linking the *fangyuan* [local varieties] to the past and standard Mandarin to the future, narrators unknowingly contributed to the decline of topolects across space and time” (Ward, Chow, & Ni 2022: 441).

There is little doubt that the polynomic nature of “Tibetan”, mentioned in Section 2.1, facilitates this adoption of “Common” Tibetan and prevents it from being perceived as a real shift. Such a shift may be labelled “standardization” or “dialect levelling” (Trudgill 1986), but it must be emphasized again that, in most of the cases, these Tibetan “dialects” do not allow mutual understanding. Crucially, in the Tibetan case, a direct consequence of this shift is the impediment of intergenerational communication with their family members in Tibet – contact possibilities already limited due to the political situation.

In four of the six interviewed families, parents report that their children encounter difficulties to understand or be understood in phone and WeChat calls, as illustrated in (21) and (22):

(21)

CS: ལུ་གུ་གཉིས་ད་ [...] མོ་མོ་སྒྲོ་སྒྲོ་མོ་མོ་མཉམ་དུ་སྐད་ཆ་བཤད་ཐུབ་ལེ་ཡི་རེད་པམ།

‘Your children [...], can they speak with their grand-parents?’

Mo-6: ཐུབ་གི་རེད་ད། ཡིན་ན་ཡང་ཨ་མ་མདོ་སྐད་ཡག་པོ་བཤད་མི་ཐུབ་གི་དེ་གིས་ཨ་མ། པ་ལགས་དེ་ཞེ་རྒྱལ་ས་གོ་གི་མི་འདུག

‘They can. But they are not able to speak good Amdo Tibetan, because of that my mother and my father don’t understand much.’

(22)

CS: ཨ་ནི་བུ་མོ་གཉིས་ཀྱིས། དག་རེ་ཟེར། རྒྱུ་རེད་གི་པ་ལགས་ཨ་མ་ལགས་མཉམ་དུ། ཡང་མིན་ན་ནང་མི་མཉམ་དུ་སྐད་ཆ་/ དགོ་བར་འཕྲོད་ཐུབ་ཀྱི་རེད་པམ།

‘And your daughters, how to say... Do they speak/ understand each-other with your parents or your family?’

Mo-4: འེའེ་.....དའའའ། དཀའ་ལས་ཁག་པོ་རེད། ལུ་གུ་གཉིས་ཀྱི། དེ་མོ་གིས་ཉཅ་ཉཅ་བཤད་ཡག་དེ་འགོ་ཚེད་གི་འདུག ཡིན་ནའི་མར་བརྒྱབ་ཡག་འདི་དཔེ་དཀའ་ལས་ཁག་པོ་ཆགས་ཀྱི་འདུག

‘Eehh, well... It’s hard. The children, well, they understand a little bit what is said, but it is very hard for them to answer.’

It must be added that Ward (2022: 482) observes a similar shift within Tibet (in this case, in Amdo):

At the time of writing, Amdo childhoods are facing radical change. Since the late 20th century, the rise of market labor and constraints on rural land use have pressured Amdo families to move to urban centres to ensure their socioeconomic stability [...]. [...] [C]hildren [...] will enter boarding schools in towns and cities. Their language use, social relationships, and senses of place will shift. Future research is necessary to understand the consequences of these profound changes to children's social worlds. Because the *yul skad* [local variety of Tibetan] anchors Amdo children's senses of belonging, the close analysis and documentation of children's changing grammatical repertoires in multi-modal communitive ecologies will be essential to this endeavor, as both lived environments and social relationships are transformed.

In Tibet, the consequence of such a shift from a local variety to a regional standard, though, is less dramatic: as the varieties are less distant, mutual intelligibility within the family is better preserved than it is for the families in exile.

As mentioned above, parents nevertheless tend to see this shift as a necessity and an inevitable outcome of the new sociolinguistic settings. Language transmission is, of course, not limited to the school environment. However, Tibetan Sunday Schools in France, like language revitalization activities in Tibet “focus on classroom learning of written Tibetan and overlook the local spoken variety” and “present a contradiction whereby protection of the language entails the marginalization, and perhaps even loss, of the local spoken variety: revitalization as de-vitalization” (Roche & Lugyal Bum 2018: 423). Whereas (official and unofficial) purist discourse and standardization efforts and their outcomes in the Tibetan areas in the PRC have been discussed, e.g., by Thurston (2018), Rigdrol Jikar (2022), and Tsering Samdrup & Suzuki (2022), this topic in the diaspora remains to be addressed systematically within the perspective of sociolinguistics. Nevertheless, it should be noted that such programs fail in promoting the maintenance of local varieties inherited by the parents, which are replaced by a variety of “global Tibetan”, spoken by all the diaspora. Rather than a disaffiliation with homeland, the preference for this global “Common” Tibetan would better be interpreted as a strong affiliation with the transnational community centered around South Asian settlements and the seat of Tibetan government in exile. The role of South Asia as a “secondary homeland” is also made evident by the organization of summer camps in South Asia for Tibetan children living in the West, conceived as a means to enable them “to get a feel of the Tibetan spirit of maintaining their identity in exile” and “reconnecting with their culture”^[17].

Future research should analyze contrastively parents' and children's variety of “Common” Tibetan in exile, not in terms of language attrition but in terms of dialectal difference. However, preliminary observations are congruent with these discourses: while parents retain (to a highly variable extent) phonological, morphosyntactic, and/or lexical features of their native Tibetic language when they speak “Common” Tibetan, only very few or no such features can be found in the variety of “Common” Tibetan spoken by their children. Tibetan as a “heritage language” is thus inherited less from the parents than from the wider community within which they grow up (i.e., horizontal and oblique transmissions, in the terminology of Berry et al. 2002: 20).

4.3 Parent's multilingual agenda of transmission

The maintenance and transmission of “Tibetan” is thus considered an essential element of the Tibetan political and cultural identity in exile and in this context, language maintenance goes together with a standardization process and language shift. Nevertheless, the issue of language transmission is by no means restricted to the community's “heritage language”. As highlighted by Lane, Costa, & De Korne (2017: 12):

Under the homogenising logic of state languages, the users of standard national languages were intended to be (or become) monolingual. Monolingual individuals came to be understood as the norm [...but...] such communities [of speakers of minoritized languages] are often familiar with multilingualism and view diversity positively, as an asset.

The Tibetan parents who participated in the present study show a positive attitude towards multiple linguistic skills; as they seek to integrate themselves and their children into a multilingual society, they tend to have a clear idea of the linguistic repertoire their children should develop:

(23)

CS: ཡག་ཤོས་ཡིན་ཅིང་རང་གི་བུ་གཙོ་སྐད་རིགས་ག་རེ་ག་རེ་སྦྱངས་དགོས་ཟེད།

‘Ideally, what languages should your children learn?’

Mo-2: ཨ་ནི་འེ་འེ། གྲ་སྐད་དེ་ལོང་ཚོ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་རེད་ཟེ། ད་འདི་འེ་ཞོར་ལ་ལོ་དྲ་སྐད་དང་ཨ་ནི་དབྱིན་སྐད་འདི་ཚང་མ་དེ་ཤེས་དགོས་ཀྱི་འདུག་ཟེ། དབྱིན་སྐད་འདི་གལ་ཆེན་པོ་རེད་བསམ་གྱི་འདུག། དབྱིན་སྐད་ཤེས་ཚར་ན་ངས་བལྟས་ན་དུ་རྒྱུ་ལ་རྒྱ་ཡིག་ཅིག་རྒྱ་སྐད་ཅིག་མི་སྦྱངས་རང་སྦྱངས་རེད་བསམ་གྱི་འདུག།

‘Well, uh... They know French, don't they! And besides that, Tibetan and English: they should know everything in English and Tibetan. I think English is important. Once they know English, then I think it's essential to learn Chinese.’

Unsurprisingly, besides French, Tibetan is the first language listed by the mother in (23), but two other languages, English and Chinese, are also mentioned. They are identified as world “major” languages, that would enable their children to access better economic opportunities. In the case of Chinese, the parents' life experience ascertains the usefulness of learning this language with regards to the economic opportunities it opens – both in Tibet where Tibetan is more and more minoritized and where Chinese is becoming a dominant language, and in France (see Section 3.2). In addition, the parents hope that their children will be able to visit Tibet in the future, and they are aware that, on such occasions, knowing Chinese is necessary in most contexts of the daily life.

Such an attitude promoting the children's development of an enriched multilingual repertoire is directly reflected in their actions: in four of the six interviewed families, children were or had been enrolled in private English and/or Chinese classes and in one family living in the far suburbs of Paris, the parents explained that they had actively looked for such classes, without

success. Such practices can be observed in other migrant communities (see e.g., Dagenais 2003). Similar practices are, for instance, reported by Antony–Newman (2022: 7) in immigrant families from Eastern Europe in Canada: “Immigrant parents not only brought their home languages to English–speaking Canada, but further enriched the plurilingual linguistic repertoires of their children by sending children to French Immersion classes. [...] [T]he main rationale behind such decision was belief in the value of language learning”.

Active family linguistic policies promoting children’s multilingualism is prevalent in the vast majority of the Tibetan families I have been in contact with, and is unrelated to the parent’s level of school education. Extra private classes represent an important financial effort for families with limited (and often irregular) income, as exemplified in (24).

(24)

Mo-4: དད་ལྷན་ཅི་ཅིག་སྐྱེས་ཀྱི་འདྲུག་ན་དཔེ། དད་འདྲུས་འདོད་པ་ཉང་སངས་ཡག་ཤུགས་ཆེན་པོ་ཡོད། [...] ང་རང་ག་ས་ག་བར་ཁ་པར་ཨང་གྲངས་འདྲ་བོ་དེ་འདྲ་རག་
ནས་ངས་ཁ་པར་འདྲ་བོ་བཏང་། དཔེ་གོང་ཆེན་པོ་རེད་བཞག་ཚུ་ཚོ་དེ་ལ་སློབ་མོ་ཉི་ཤུ་ཚ་ལྔ། ལུ་མ་ཅུ། ཨྱི་འདྲ་ལབ་ཀྱི་འདུག་དེ་འདྲས་དང་མོ་བཤད་དགོས། ངས་སྐྱད་ཐུབ་
ཀྱི་མི་འདུག་[...] རྒྱ་ཡིག་ལ་དེ་ཚོ་ཡང་དེ་འདྲ་གོང་ཆེན་པོ་མ་རེད། ཞོར་དུ། རྒྱ་ཡིག་རྒྱ་མི་སློབ་གྲྭ་ལ་བཏང་གི་ཡོད། [...]དད་འདྲུ་རྒྱ་མི་སློབ་གྲྭ་འདི་ཡང་ངང་རང་དཔེ་
གས་ཆེན་པོ་འདྲ་བོ་མཐོང་གི་འདུག།

‘If I made [my daughters] learn English, [it would be] very... I have such a strong wish to do that. [...] I have called everywhere to the phone numbers I could get [but] it is very expensive! 25,30 euros per hour, they said. I have to speak frankly: I can’t pay that. [...] As for Chinese [classes], it is not such expensive. Beside [school] I send [my elder daughter] to Chinese language, Chinese class. [...] This, the Chinese class, I see it as very important.’

This quadrilingual agenda for children seems ambitious, but in fact, at least some children (all the three teenagers who participated to this study, who belong to three different families) considerably exceed their parents’ expectations. Figure 4 contrasts the languages reportedly used during one given, ordinary day by a mother and her 16–year–old daughter:

ཁ་སང་སྐད་ཡིག་ག་རེ་ག་རེ་བེད་སྤྱོད་བཏང་པ་ཡིན།

What languages did you use yesterday ?



Fig. 4: Mo-3 and Da-3 self-reported language use for “yesterday” (Simon 2023)

While the mother only declares two languages – Tibetan and French, with some hesitation regarding their respective proportion, the daughter indicates no less than six languages, and comments Figure 4 as follows:

- **English** is currently her favorite language, the one she feels the most at ease to use. She started learning English some months after her arrival in Nepal (she was about 10 years old), after she was enrolled in a Tibetan school. During her four years of “college” in France, she attended a bilingual (French/English) curriculum. She notes that the variety of English used in France is not the same she used to learn in Nepal, especially for what concerns the phonology: she has switched her South-Asian English to the more prestigious varieties of her English-speaking friends and only uses her “Indian English” pronunciation to make them laugh. Until this school year, when she went back to the mainstream monolingual French class, English was the main language she used with her friends.
- **French** is used mainly at school with teachers and her new friends outside the bilingual curriculum. “Yesterday” she had classes only in the morning, that is why she did not use much French.
- **Tibetan** is used at home with family members and its proportion directly depends on the time she spends with them. Although she started her school education in Tibetan, she doesn’t use this language in its written form any more, which is typical of Tibetan language use in exile (cf. Examples 3 and 4).
- She attends a 1.5 hour/week **Chinese** class and tries to exchange text messages with a Chinese friend. When she attended school in Tibet, she was too young to have Chinese classes.

- She learned **Hindi** in India and Nepal by watching Bollywood movies, and she still regularly watches such movies since she arrived in France.
- **Korean** also corresponds to a passive usage, related to the consumption of cultural products (TV series and radio broadcast).

Such linguistic practices are comparable to those of the two other Tibetan teenagers, who share a similar migratory history. Although the number of interviewees remains too small to draw a firm conclusion, there seems to be a linguistic profile shared by Tibetan second generation teenagers, who combine the inherited Common Tibetan language together with Asian “major” languages (Chinese, Hindi, and Korean or Japanese), in addition to French and English, thus constructing a transnational linguistic identity.

The question of language transmission and language maintenance must be understood in a wider sense, as the transmission of some key elements of the parent’s linguistic repertoire, reflecting a full range of linguistic practices related to specific communicative needs both within and outside the community. Such a transmission of a rich repertoire of plurilingual practices corresponds to what Antony-Newman (2022: 13) proposes to call “plurilingual parenting”:

[T]he new concept of ‘plurilingual parenting’ allows to move beyond the constraints of bilingual parenting often underwritten by the concept of ‘double monolingualism’ [...]. It could be used in other contexts where immigrant parents engage with rich linguistic diversity by adopting dynamic plurilingual practices, flexible family language policy, and negotiating complex linguistic and cultural identities.

Children’s repertoires correspond both to the parents’ transmission policies and the children’s own choices. The persistence of multilingualism in the second generation corresponds to specific social relationships that require different language repertoires and choices to maintain or develop other parts of the repertoires, independently from the parents’ agenda. It will be interesting to investigate in the future if the same type of multilingual practices is observed among young Tibetans born in France, who do not have the same migratory history.

5. Concluding remarks

The (self-declared) multilingual repertoire of several Tibetan families in France illustrates how these repertoires change over time, closely following the successive migration paths and as a result of their adaptation to sociolinguistic pressures arising from the development of new needs.

The choices made by the parents and the community as a whole to transmit some parts of this repertoire to the next generation, emphasizing “Common” Tibetan over specific varieties and implementing active policies to sustain multilingual practices over generations call for a refined definition of “heritage language(s)” and language(s) maintenance. We have indeed

shown that, in the case of Tibetan parents born in Tibet, “heritage language” maintenance corresponds to a language/variety shift, interpreted as the integration to a transnational community of Tibetan exiles. Furthermore, efforts are made not only to maintain this community’s language, but also other language skills (especially English and Chinese), forming a type of repertoire specific to this community.

This preliminary study opens up more questions than answers, and calls for further research on the language practices in the Tibetan diaspora. First, future research should confront the reported discourses to systematic observation of specific daily-life interactions of Tibetan refugees at various stages following their arrival in France. A precise assessment of the children’s skills in the different languages and varieties would also be needed, as well as a contrastive study of children’s and parents’ variety of “Common” Tibetan. Finally, a contrastive study of the discourses and language practices in the diaspora in other European countries and in other parts of the world, such as the US, Canada, or Australia would also allow us to know whether these experiences are shared among the different communities, or are specific to the French Tibetan community.

Footnotes

1

On top of that, “Some Tibetans speak, as native speakers, non-Tibetic languages such as various Rgyalrongic, Qiangic, Bodish as well as Tani, Lolo-Burmese or Naic languages” (Tournadre & Suzuki 2023: 73; see also Ward & Roche 2020). In two of the six families included in this study, one parent was a native speaker of a non-Tibetic language (rgyalrongic), as well as an early bilingual speaker of a Tibetic language.

2

To name a few differences, some Tibetic languages have a phonological two-tones distinction while other have no tones; depending on the language, demonstratives and adjectives may be pre- or post-posed to the noun (Tournadre & Suzuki 2023: 231), and the TAME systems, despite common bases, present several morphological and semantic-pragmatic differences.

3

Important structural variation can be observed among first generation exiles speaking “Common” Tibetan, and would deserve specific studies.

4

Nawang Phuntsog (2018a: 91) notes, however, that “the low standard of Tibetan language across all schools was primarily due to the dull curriculum with its overemphasis on content rather than language proficiency development”. According to my own observations in two Tibetan schools in Kathmandu, “Common” Tibetan is used for oral explanations but written practices remain the exclusive domain of classical Tibetan or its modern version; apart from homework, students overwhelmingly report reading in English only, because they found English books more interesting and easier to read (fieldnotes, August 2022).

5

Of course, this tendency does not preclude the fact that some Tibetans born in exile do learn

Chinese, and some Tibetans born in Tibet acquire a good command of English.

6

In 1962, 20 Tibetan children were sent to France with their teacher (see Meunier: [article](#) (<https://www.la-croix.com/France/enfants-Dalai-Lama-projet-secret-entre-France-Tibet-2020-08-04-1201107711>)).

7

The participants of the present study are identified by their kinship status in the family (Fa = father, Mo = mother, Da = daughter, So = son); These are followed by a number referring to the family (e.g., Fa-2 is the father in Family 2, or else Da-3 is the daughter in Family 3). CS is the interviewer.

8

Whether these figures refer to illiteracy in Tibetan, in Chinese, or in any language is not specified.

9

The situation varies greatly according to the place and the period. Some interviewees say that they can communicate (on unsensitive topics) by WeChat or by phone without much pressure while others report that their family members requested them to stop all contact.

10

The official representative office of the CTA, acting *de facto* as a consulate.

11

For a description of movements for the promotion of Tibetan language in Tibet, see Rigdrol Jikar (2022).

12

Underscore indicates a low tone. Central Tibetic language have a two-tones distinction while Amdo Tibetan has no tone distinction.

13

Here, like in (12), I translate the term /poke/, which corresponds to the word ‘Tibetan (spoken) language’, pronounced with a phonological form close to the Central or Lhasa Tibetan form /p^hø_kε/ as ‘Common Tibetan’.

14

Such an evaluation is likely to be related to the fact that she first learned how to write and read in exile, with speakers of “Common” Tibetan.

15

Precise biographic details are anonymized here.

16

Tibet is traditionally subdivided into three provinces (Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo), each supposedly corresponding to one (single) dialect in popular descriptions.

17

See for instance the summer school program offered by [Tibetan Children's Village](https://tcv.org.in/tcv-summer-school-program/) (https://tcv.org.in/tcv-summer-school-program/) schools and the [Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies](https://sarah.instituteofbuddhistdialectics.org/exchange-programs/summer-tibetan-study-program/) (https://sarah.instituteofbuddhistdialectics.org/exchange-programs/summer-tibetan-study-program/).

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