Heritage language maintenance in Lithuanian diaspora

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As well as most other post-communist countries of Middle and Eastern Europe, Lithuania is characterized by a substantial emigration during the past decades. According to Department of Statistics, more than half a million people left the country since the independence in 1990. Large Lithuanian emigrant communities are present in various countries of the world (USA, Canada, Germany, Australia, Argentina etc.) since the previous emigration waves after the first and second World wars.

Linguistic behaviour varies remarkably in different Lithuanian communities but so far it and heritage language maintenance have not been researched. It is known that Lithuanian communities in some countries strongly maintain the Lithuanian language that together with cultural traditions is passed on to the younger generation. However there are communities where heritage Lithuanian language is quickly shifted and the environment language takes over.

Based on a newly acquired quantitative and qualitative data from a research project of language use and language attitudes carried out in Lithuanian diaspora in Europe (Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain and other countries) and other continents this paper aims at exploring the correlation between maintenance of heritage language, family language policy and ethnic identity. The paper analyzes the data of both quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews. The sample of the survey was 2000 respondents, 1000 of which living in Europe and 1000 in other continents. The in-depth interviews with Lithuanian emigrants have been conducted face-to-face or via skype. The paper will focus on the following issues: the repertoire of home languages; language dominance and preference; the relationship between home language and construction of ethnic identity; the role of reasons for emigration, the age factor and education in these processes.

Keywords: "heritage language ", "ethnic identity", "language maintenance ".
