Video calls as a nexus of practice in multilingual translocal families

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Abstract: This study explores how daily video calls were used by two multilingual family constellations to keep in contact with members located elsewhere. A three-stage data collection and analysis protocol was developed together with the two main participants, two single mothers each with a 4-year-old child. The results show that active collaboration among all members of the family was needed to get the activity going. The families employed a de facto family language policy where the focus was on successful communication and nurturing emotional bonds rather than developing language skills. At the same time, the regular video calls added a significant amount of time spent together and increased the amount of language input, factors conducive to language transmission. The study shows the urgent need to include digital practices in family language policy research.

In dieser Studie wird untersucht, wie tägliche Video-Telefonate von zwei mehrsprachigen Familien genutzt werden, um mit weiter entfernt wohnenden Familienmitgliedern in Kontakt zu bleiben. Dazu wurde ein dreistufiges Datenerhebungsverfahren mit den zwei zentralen Untersuchung-steilnehmerinnen entwickelt, zwei alleinerziehenden Müttern mit ihrem jeweils vierjährigen Kind. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die aktive Mitarbeit aller Familienmitglieder benötigt wurde, um die Gespräche auf Distanz durchzuführen. Die Familien nutzen eine Family Language Policy, bei der der Fokus nicht auf der Entwicklung sprachlicher Kompetenz, sondern auf der erfolgreichen Kommunikation und der Unterstützung der emotionalen Beziehung zwischen den Beteiligten lag. Gleichzeitig bedeuteten die regelmäßigen Video-Telefonate mehr gemeinsam verbrachte Zeit und verstärkter sprachlicher Inputs, Faktoren also, die den Spracherwerb begünstigen. Die Studie zeigt den dringenden Bedarf, digitale Praxen in der Family Language Policy-Forschung stärker zu berücksichtigen.

Keywords: video calls, family language policy, multilingualism, mediated discourse analysis

1   Introduction

The availability of communication technologies and the ease of access to them nowadays have radically transformed ways of keeping in touch across time and space, and have direct implications for how contemporary families form and maintain social and emotional relationships (King-O'Riain 2015; Madianou/Miller 2012; Parreñas 2014). Family members can be on the move, live in different households and/or be globally dispersed, but still instantly share what is going on in their everyday lives through communication applications on their smartphones, tablets or computers. Many contemporary families also regularly use two (or more) languages within the family, or, as in many migrant and transnational family contexts, members have one or more shared languages which are different from the one(s) used in the surrounding society.

Family language policy (FLP) represents a burgeoning research field which, among other themes, examines how explicit (or implicit) family language planning, practices and ideologies relate to how languages are transmitted across generations. More recently, the focus has moved more towards meaning-making in multilingual and transcultural families, and has also expanded to include more languages and different types of family constellations (Lanza/Wei 2016). However, despite the high level of media saturation and online communication of twenty-first century families, FLP research on globalisation and technology and their influence on multilingual families is still scarce (King/Fogle 2017). Within the fields of e.g. anthropology, sociology, psychology and communication theory, a growing body of research has appeared in recent years on how technology shapes practices and relationships in families (e.g., Lim 2016; Madianou/Miller 2012; Taipale 2019). What these have tended to fail to do, however, is to consider the role of language(s) (see however King O'Riain 2014; Little 2019).

The current study is situated in this research gap, in that it explores how two multilingual family constellations, in which members are distributed across different households and national contexts, communicate in a daily routine of multimodal video calls. Following the framework of Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) (Hafner/Jones/Chik 2015; Scollon 2001; Scollon/Scollon 2004), the daily video calls are seen as a nexus of practice, i.e., a constellation of social, linked practices. The overall aim of the study is to navigate the nexus of practice, i.e., to identify linked and recurring practices in the video calls across the two translocal family configurations. In doing this, attention will be paid particularly to the mediated actions, i.e., how the practices are shaped by the technology that mediates them, and to mapping the role and management of languages in the video call activities.

2   Family language policy across time and space

Following the tenets of Fishman (1991) and Spolsky (2004), the family and the home serve as key spaces for language transmission across generations. The connections between family interaction, parental strategies and language input on the one hand and children's bilingual language development on the other are well researched in the literature (e.g. De Houwer 1990, 1999; Lanza 1997). The research issues characterising the FLP field are therefore not in themselves new. It was, however, only in 2008 that FLP was defined by King/Fogle/Logan-Terry (2008: 907) as "explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members" and research started to grow exponentially. The original definition has later been extended to also include implicit and covert language planning (e.g. King/Fogle 2013; Spolsky 2012) and literacy practices (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen 2009; Fogle 2013). Planning is to be understood as the choices that are made by and negotiated among the family members: The family language policy may involve explicitly declared language planning or it can emerge de facto through interaction (Fogle/King 2013; Palviainen/Boyd 2013; Schwartz 2010; Shohamy 2006; Spolsky 2004; Van Mensel 2018). Over time, the field has undergone different shifts of focus and current approaches include more diverse types of family configurations and cultural and linguistic contexts than before (for overviews, see e.g. King 2016; King/Fogle 2017; Lanza/Lomeu Gomes 2020; Lomeu Gomes 2018; Smith-Christmas 2017). More attention has also been given to the role of child agency (Fogle/King 2013; Palviainen/Boyd 2013; Smith-Christmas 2017), emotions (Palviainen 2020; Smith-Christmas 2018; Tannenbaum 2012), and caretakers other than parents (Curdt-Christiansen 2016; Smith-Christmas 2018) for FLP.

As King and Lanza (2019) note, current research trends include the examination of how processes of migration, mobility and transnationalism shape family life and how contemporary families are constructed through multilingual language practices. This is exactly where the current study is situated: the families under study are mobile, transnational and multilingual, and important parts of their family life are further mediated through and constructed by digital communication technology. In order to describe and explain phenomena and practices like these, theories and methodologies need to be developed within the FLP paradigm to do justice to the conditions that shape contemporary multilingual family constellations (Palviainen 2020). As contemporary, transglobal and technologically mediated family communication takes place across many layers of time and space which challenge traditional notions of 'home', I suggest that FLP should be understood as a dynamic enterprise of explicit/implicit and covert/overt planning among the members of a family network, across time and space, about their language, literacy and digital practices.

3   The multilingual digital family

The family constellations in the current study can be defined as transnational in that the members in them have moved between, reside in, and communicate across different national borders (Zhu/Wei 2016). However, in the nexus of practice under study, space is conflated and nation as a concept is downplayed or even irrelevant, especially for the young children. For them, the key issue is that they connect, through the digital screen, with significant family members who are physically located elsewhere but are at the same time virtually present. I therefore prefer the term translocal to transnational.

I see the family not as a unit based on membership categories – such as the Western notion of a nuclear family as consisting of a mother, a father and one or more children – but as comprised of individual webs of relationships, and I see communication within these webs as a process of 'doing' family (Lim 2016). As for doing the multilingual family, Van Mensel (2018) makes use of the notion of a 'multilingual familylect' to refer to the shared set of language practices – for example certain code-switching practices or language choice patterns – of a family network. The multilingual familylect is dynamic in that it is "an ongoing process, in which the interactional negotiation is just as much part of the picture as the family-specific language forms that may occur" (Van Mensel 2018: 236). In the current study, much of this familylect negotiation is digitally mediated, as the members are located in different places.

Digitally mediated communication constructs as well as reflects different configurations of family relationships. Taipale (2019: 14) defines the digital family as one sort of distributed extended family, consisting of related individuals living in one or more households who use communication technologies and social media to stay connected and maintain a sense of unity. In the current study, the main participants constructed their digital families slightly differently: one of the mothers included herself, her daughter, her daughter's father and her daughter's grandparents on both sides, whereas the other mother included herself, her son, his grandparents on her side and one great grandparent. The potentially significant role that caretakers other than parents can have for processes of language transmission within the family has been pointed out by several researchers. Chevalier (2012) showed the importance that the input from and interaction with an aunt played in a little girl's development of trilingualism, and Ruby (2012), Smith-Christmas (2018), as well as Curdt-Christiansen (2016) have all shown how grandparents living nearby actively added to grandchildren's language development. Thus, in addition to the well-studied parent–child relationship, it is important to examine the role of other relationships. This is particularly relevant in the context of digital families and video calls, as contact

can easily be made and maintained across long distances, for example, when grandparents live elsewhere.

4 Video calls and family communication

Video call applications such as Skype and FaceTime make it possible for family members to connect regardless of the distance between them. Whereas video call applications like Skype were originally developed for computers and sometimes required the installation of separate web cameras, they are now integrated into smartphones and tablets, which have built-in cameras and microphones. Similarly, instant messaging applications, such as Viber and WhatsApp, which were originally developed primarily for sending short text messages, now allow for the inclusion of voice and video content (Taipale 2019: 88). These merged media are an efficient and cheap means of keeping in touch translocally, whether in different countries or just round the corner in another house. In the case of families with small children, who are not yet able to read and write text messages or to make a phone call, video calls seem to be a particularly practical communication channel.

Harper/Watson/Licoppe (2017: 301) contend that "(t)o make a video call is commonplace; to do so with family is routine". Nevertheless, there is very little research literature on intrafamilial video communication and how it is organised. Whereas video communication in work places has been of interest for quite some time, research on domestic video call practices is rarer. One exception is Ames/Go/Kaye/Spasojevic (2010), who examined 22 families and the work needed to successfully engage in Skype calls with members living elsewhere. They singled out four types of social work connected with this activity: 'coordination' (such as assembling the family), 'presentation' (seeing to it that the camera captures the faces), 'behavioural' (e.g. having small children sit still), and 'scaffolding' work (engaging children in talk). They also found that the responsibility for making the calls lay primarily with the parents, while the grandparents mainly enjoyed the benefits of them: the grandparents could see the grandchildren, 'be there' with them, and share their everyday lives (see also King-O'Riain 2014).

There have been some studies on acting as a parent at a distance using communication technology (Madianou/Miller 2012; Parreñas 2014) and pursuing long distance love relationships (Greenberg/Neustaedter 2013; King-O'Riain 2015). These studies agree that video calls are often employed as 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004), in other words, that the video connection channel is open for quite long periods of time (hours), during which the participants are emotionally engaged with each other and share everyday activities (such as talking, eating, or watching TV). This has also been described in the literature as 'always on' webcam presence

(Madianou/Miller 2012: 121), shared living (Greenberg/Neustaedter 2013), and emotional streaming (King-O'Riain 2014, 2015). These studies have tended to focus on the emotional side of keeping connected contact rather than "the interactional mechanics behind (…) it" (Harper et al. 2017: 304).

The research literature has to a large extent ignored linguistic practices and multilingual management as an aspect of family video calls. One exception is King-O'Riain's (2014) interview study of transnational families in Ireland who used Skype to keep in contact with extended family members elsewhere. In these families, technology served to not only make emotional connections but also to create important cultural and linguistic connections between grandparents and grandchildren. King-O'Riain (2014) quotes one mother of an Irish-French family living in Ireland who had daily Skype contact with her parents (the children's grandparents) in France. The mother made conscious choices for her children in order to connect them emotionally, culturally and linguistically with France: as it was possible to visit France only once a year, in the summer, she kept up the practice of daily Skype calls in which the children spoke only French to ensure that they had French-mediated contact during the rest of the year.

In seeing the family as something you do (rather than something you have or are), the sensible unit of analysis becomes the (digitally mediated) practices that shape and are shaped by these relationships. The particular focus of the current study is the role languages play in these relationships, and the extent to which language practices are explicitly or implicitly planned and managed. In other words, we set out to explore the digital multilingual familylect (Van Mensel 2018).

5 The study

5.1 Participants

A call for research participants for a project on multilingual families and their language practices was posted in a Facebook group for "Foreigners in X city". The criteria for participation were membership in any translocal family constellation (members not living in the same household) including at least one child, in which two or more languages were used on a daily/weekly basis, as well as communication technologies (such as Skype, WhatsApp, or Snapchat).

Two single mothers of 4-year-old children responded and agreed to participate in the study. Both were living in the same Finnish city. *Kati*[1] was in her thirties and

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[1] The names of the participants are pseudonyms. Other personal information has been modified to prevent participants being identifiable.

was from Finland. After graduating from a Finnish university, she had moved around and lived in several European countries before settling down in Finland again when her daughter was born. Her daughter, Mira, attended a Finnish kindergarten. Nick – Mira's father and Kati's ex-husband – was from the Netherlands but was then living elsewhere in Europe. Kati, Mira and Nick arranged video calls nearly every day. The other respondent, *Alexandra*, was 25 years old and had moved to Finland from Russia with her son one and a half years earlier to study in an English-medium university programme. Her son, Yegor, had been enrolled in a Finnish-language kindergarten for one year. Alexandra and Yegor had daily video call contact with Yegor's grandparents in Russia.

5.2   Methodological procedure

The data collection, designed as a pilot case study with the two translocal family constellations, was initiated against the background of, firstly, a shortage of empirical data on digitally mediated multilingual family communication and, secondly, an intuition of its potential significance for the development of a theoretical understanding of contemporary FLP. Following the principles of mediated discourse analysis and nexus analysis, according to which it is necessary to keep all the complexity alive in the analysis without presupposing which actions and discourses are relevant (Scollon 2001; Scollon/Scollon 2004), the main research participants (the mothers) and the researcher jointly explored the theme (Boivin/Cohenmiller 2018). This means that the data collection procedures did not follow a pre-established protocol but were explored and developed along the way.

The design that finally emerged consisted of three consecutive stages: I, a researcher-led interview; II, participant-led data collection; and III, a stimulated recall interview (see Table 1). After the mothers responded to the Facebook call, they were informed about the general objectives of the study and agreed to meet the researcher in a café. The orientation interviews – which served to engage with the subject – included questions about themselves, their family, and their media and language practices. In the two interviews, it soon became evident that one media routine that involved the children was more central than others: daily video calls to significant family members living elsewhere. In Kati's case this meant FaceTime calls with Mira's father (Kati's ex-husband), currently living in Switzerland, and in Alexandra's case it was Viber calls with Yegor's grandparents (Alexandra's mother and father) in Russia. These calls therefore constituted the nexus of practice (Scollon 2001) which the mothers together with the researcher decided to go on to explore in more detail. For the following stage, the mothers were free to decide how to empirically collect data. Kati decided to write diary entries on an iPad and collect screenshots that related to the calls, whereas Alexandra chose to borrow a video

camera and a tripod to record some video call interactions. At the orientation interview the researcher and mothers agreed to meet again after the data had been collected. The follow-up session therefore added a third stage to the design: a stimulated recall session in which the researcher and the mothers used the collected data as a point of departure for their discussion (Gass/Mackey 2017). All the interviews were carried out in English.

Table 1: The three stages of data collection (Autumn 2017)

Main participant *Child*	Stage I: Orientation interview (researcher-led)	Stage II: Data collection of communication practices (participant-generated)	Stage III: Stimulated recall session (co-produced)
Kati *Mira*	Written notes 60 min (Aug)	Diary entries (n=10); screenshots (+notes) (n=20) (Aug-Sept)	Video recording + written notes 90 min (Oct)
		Video calls (FaceTime) with father Nick in Switzerland	
Alexandra *Yegor*	Audio recording 60 min (Oct)	Video recordings (n=2), 40 min (Oct)	Audio recording 40 min (Nov)
		Video calls (Viber) with Yegor's grandparents in Russia	+ audio recording 12 min (Sept 2019)[2]

This meant that the research process was in itself an act of co-production (Boivin/Cohenmiller 2018) between me as the ethnographic researcher and the research participants, involving not only the mothers but also the family members engaged in the video calls[3]. This also means that I as researcher and the participants together carried out the three different steps involved in a nexus analysis (Scollon/Scollon 2004: 152–178). In the first step, *engaging* in the nexus of practice, the crucial social actions and actors are recognised and identified. This was done primarily through the orientation interview (stage I). In the second step, *navigating* the nexus of practice, the task is to map the discourses, objects, places and concepts that circulate through it. This was the explicit objective at stage III, when in the stimulated recall session the mothers and I together analysed and tried to make sense of the

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[2] This was a short follow-up interview to clarify some questions I as the researcher had on the language practices within the family at the time of data collection.

[3] All the adult participants had given their consent to participate, and the parents consented on behalf of the children. Parents gave their consent to include images in the article.

complex data. The data collection by the mothers at stage II can be seen as an activity of engaging as well as navigating, as the mothers both identified relevant social practices and then made active choices as to what aspects to map in them (i.e., what data to collect and how). In the third and last activity of nexus analysis, *changing*, the links and connections within the social action are opened up and made visible. In the following I will open up how the video call practices were shaped by the technology that mediated them in these two family configurations, as well as mapping how the use of language(s) were negotiated in the video calls.

6 Video calls as the nexus of practice

The analysis is here presented as two case studies: first on Kati and then on Alexandra. In each case I will first explore how the mothers prepared for the video calls and how the calls were practically implemented and after this I go on to look at how languages were managed as part of these calls.

6.1 Kati

6.1.1 Video call management

Kati arranged it so that the calls with Nick happened in the evenings, after Mira had come home from kindergarten. The calls were typically made from their home but the location could also vary, depending on where they happened to be. The daily video calls lasted on average for 50 minutes, but Kati reported that she also had to put in a lot of time and effort to prepare for the calls, such as feeding Mira, giving her some time to relax and then motivating her to engage with her father. Kati thought that for both Mira and her father the daily routine of FaceTime calls was very important: "It's important that they have a relationship, of course her father wants to see her every day, it's hard for him to be at a distance, so I do everything to facilitate this" (orientation interview).

Kati used an iPad to mediate the video calls. Mira's father, on the other end, typically used a laptop and was either at his office or at home. In the stimulated recall interview, Kati says that she places the camera so that Nick can see and talk to Mira while she is doing something, like drawing or eating. Mira has her own iPad, on which she often watches cartoons while she is connected with her father. Figure 1 illustrates how Kati positions the two screens during this activity.

Figure 1: Kati demonstrates the screen setup: Mira's own iPad showing cartoons standing up on the left; Kati's iPad showing Nick's face standing up on the right; and Mira's face shown in the upper right-hand corner of the right-hand screen. (Stimulated recall interview)

So while Mira is watching videos on the screen standing up on the left, the right-hand screen with FaceTime serves as "the communication channel" (as Kati herself termed it). In addition to the two screens, Mira might also have a plate with snacks in front of her on the table. Although the kitchen table was the main locus in the video calls, both Kati and Mira could move around the apartment and do other things during the video call session, such as Mira going onto her potty or Kati doing the dishes (Excerpt 1). Similarly, Nick – at the other end of the communication channel – could be engaged in paper work (at work), for example, or cooking (in his own apartment).

Excerpt 1: 'The communication channel is open'. Transcript of stimulated recall video-interview. K=Kati, R=Researcher

K: Occasionally either of us would sort of… or she would leave the table, for her to go to the potty, for me to kind of like you know fill the dishwasher or empty the dishwasher or something and then we return to the table again.

R: Yeah.

K: And then I…

R: …is he still on FaceTime then?

K: Yes. Yeah, so we just kind of… the communication channel is open there, we might not be sitting doing nothing.

R: Yeah.

K: You know or staying at the table but we might sort of... she is sitting at the table and doing her own thing either watching a video or colouring occasionally saying something to one or other of us. The communication channel is open between the iPad and his computer typically but then we do other stuff around the house.

The setup with a multimodal communication channel also made distant parenting possible. In the orientation interview, Kati said that she had recently found a couple of ways of using the iPad device so that it served as a "distant babysitter", for example so that Nick (or a grandparent) could keep an eye on Mira while she took out the rubbish. King-O'Riain (2015: 11) reported a similar case, in which a mother asked her son to interact with his grandparents over Skype while she was having a

shower. In these cases the activity is made possible through the active involvement of all the participants as well as the reliance on technology.

6.1.2 Language management

Kati described herself as a native speaker of Finnish, fluent in English and a beginner in Dutch. Nick, in turn, was a native speaker of Dutch, fluent in English and with some skills in Finnish. Kati and Nick had always used English as their main joint language but had over the years also acquired some knowledge of each other's mother tongues. Mira was described by Kati as trilingual: her strongest skills were in Finnish, she had good skills in English, and fairly good skills in Dutch.

In the stimulated recall session, when Kati had demonstrated the screen setup and video call activity (see Figure 1), I asked her about the language practices in these activities. She said that when talking to Mira she herself almost always used Finnish, whereas Nick used "sort of this mixture of English and Dutch to her" (Excerpt 2). The lingua franca in the conversations was English, which all three felt comfortable with.

Excerpt 2: 'Having a three-way conversation'. Transcript of stimulated recall interview with Kati. K=Kati, R=Researcher

K: On very very rare occasions if I, if we're clearly having a three-way conversation I may say something to her in English so that he understands at the same time. But typically I would use Finnish with her then what I do is sometimes I translate [into Finnish] what Nick is saying.

R: So basically in this situation when you are all three around and you are using these screens and you might be in the background somewhere, all three languages are used more or less?

K: Yes. English is sort of… ehm

R: …anchor?

K: Yeah. Yeah because then sometimes yes of course I do speak to her during these conversations. Well I remark like okay 'Syöpäs nyt sun puuro kulta' [in Finnish], something like that, so like 'please eat the porridge sweetie' or something like that. And she asks me things in Finnish and sometimes there is a longer conversation in Finnish between us and he can sort of understand some of it.

R: Yeah.

K: And then he speaks sort of this mixture of English and Dutch to her. And then when we [Nick and Kati] speak to each other and then what I typically do is I turn the camera to myself so if it was sort of, if I was… I might be here [points to the side of the table]… if Mira was sitting here

[taps on the table in front of her, screen facing Mira]

and I might be sitting here [moves to the side of the table] and the camera would be facing her and then I went sort of like

[turns screen so it is facing herself]

'bla-bla-bla-bla-bla'

[makes a speaking gesture with hands]

if I have something to say to him,
and then I would turn the camera back to face Mira again.

[turns screen so it is facing Mira]

The digitally mediated familylect at this point can thus be described as Kati and Mira using Finnish with each other, the practice being justified by the fact that Nick could follow Finnish to some extent. English was used by all three of the participants as it served as a common language. Kati described how, when she herself wanted to say something directly to Nick in English, she adjusted the screens so that they were face-to-face (and Mira was left out of sight). This is similar to the action that could be expected in a real encounter, when two people turn to each other to talk (Harper et al. 2017).

Kati as well as Nick adjusted to Mira's language competence: Kati sometimes felt the need to translate from English to Finnish to ensure that Mira could follow what Nick was saying (Excerpt 2 above). Nick, in turn, spoke a mixture of English and Dutch. When Kati went into detail about Nick's language practices with Mira, she explained that he used English when he wanted to be sure that Mira understood, whereas "simpler things" were expressed in Dutch (Excerpt 3). He might even occasionally use some Finnish words to translate what he had just said in Dutch.

Excerpt 3: 'He's speaking a mixture of English and Dutch'. Transcript of stimulated recall interview with Kati. K=Kati, R=Researcher

K: Well he's speaking English to me and then to her he's speaking a mixture of English and Dutch. He, sort of simpler things he would say typically in Dutch you know. But then, then if he sort of really expects an answer from her then he would typically say it in English, because I've been telling him all this time that he should just stick to Dutch, but maybe because she wasn't responding to it you know immediately he just switched essentially to English and he understands some words in Finnish.

R: Yeah.

K: Or he understands of course more [Finnish] than he speaks. So sometimes he would say somewhere if he wasn't sure that Mira would understand in other languages he would say some words in Finnish.

From this it can be inferred that most important to Nick was that Mira got the message and that he was understood, not necessarily what language(s) were used to accomplish this. Their language practices emerged as a result of the organic nature of family language policy, where language practices are experienced, experimented on and renegotiated as parents' and children's language proficiencies develop (Armstrong 2014: 579). This means that Nick acted, on the one hand, on his experience of Mira's relative skills in English, Dutch and Finnish, and on the other on the language resources to which he himself had access.

Dutch was Mira's weakest language at this stage in her development and it was a language Mira did not come into contact with as much as with Finnish and English. The interpretation of Nick saying "simpler things" in Dutch points not only to his adjusting to her level of competence, but also to his wanting to succeed in communicating with her in Dutch. Kati, however, reveals in Excerpt 3 that she wished Nick would exercise even stronger language management: "I've been telling him all this time that he should just stick to Dutch". In other words, Kati thought that Mira would benefit from getting more input in Dutch, and that Nick should be more consistent. She also reported in the orientation interview that when they visited the Netherlands she sometimes left Mira with Dutch-speaking relatives in order to expose her to Dutch, and that for Mira's sake she had tried at some point to make contact with the Dutch-speaking community in her Finnish hometown, but had given up.

The data thus showed some potential struggles about what policy to pursue with the Dutch language. Armstrong (2014) pointed out in his study of Gaelic in Scottish bilingual families that when a language is in a minority position, more explicit language management and more deliberate efforts are needed by the parents in order for the language to be transmitted to the child. This can put parents in something of a dilemma: on the one hand they want to be responsible parents and encourage, or

even push, their child to use and learn a minority language (Dutch in Mira's case), and on the other hand they want to avoid stressing and 'forcing' a child to speak a language (as when Nick switches from Dutch to English).

Despite this potential conflict, the multilingual familylect of Kati, Mira and Nick can be described as an apparently fairly uncomplicated and pragmatic use and mixing of the three languages: their joint goal was to communicate smoothly and to make sure that everybody – but especially Mira – understood each other. The emotional, well-being aspects of the relationship between Mira and her father were thus foregrounded (King-O'Riain 2014, 2015; Madianou/Miller 2012).

6.2 Alexandra

6.2.1 Video call management

The history behind the daily video call routine and the motivations for it were slightly different in Alexandra's case. Alexandra moved to Finland to study, bringing the three-year-old Yegor with her. The country was new to her and she did not know any Finnish. The situation caused emotional stress on all sides, which the daily video calls with Alexandra's parents in Russia helped to reduce: "I think me and my parents mostly like to keep in touch and because we just moved I was stressed, they were stressed, everyone was stressed, Yegor was stressed and it was important to keep in touch and just share what's going on and we kept it going on on a daily basis" (stimulated recall interview).

The daily video calls between Alexandra, Yegor and Yegor's grandparents in Russia lasted 20–30 minutes. The coordination work (Ames et al. 2010) typically started with Alexandra's mother sending a text message asking if Alexandra and Yegor were available for a video call. Alexandra used her smartphone to mediate the video calls. She said that they had tried to use a laptop but it did not work out well because it was not portable. The portability of the device was crucial in their case as an important part of the routine was Yegor's involving his grandparents in his play, and showing and telling them about his toys. In a similar case, King-O'Riain (2014) reported how Skype created a multimodal transconnective space enabling the grandchild to show her grandparents her dancing and singing and point out to them her new toys and books. Yegor and his grandfather also had a game of their own, pretending to run around and "fight" with each other.

Alexandra and her parents collaborated on the different types of social work (Ames et al. 2010) involved in the calls. By holding the smartphone, following Yegor around in the apartment and making sure that he stayed in the camera frame, she did presentation work: "I'm just like, I'm just the operator, camera man or camera woman, I don't know [laughs] camera lady" (orientation interview). By routinely

asking Yegor about things that were important to him, such as what he was up to, his friends and his day at kindergarten, the grandparents performed scaffolding work.

When not walking and playing around in the apartment, they were often seated on the sofa. In Excerpt 4, grandmother is on the smartphone screen and Yegor is watching cartoons on a TV screen. Yegor and his grandmother are engaged in a conversation about the events unfolding in the cartoon (the grandmother cannot see the TV screen). Alexandra facilitates the conversation by positioning the screen so that Yegor and her mother can have eye contact when they are talking (first and second images in Excerpt 4). Yegor has a piece of bread in his hand and when Alexandra and her mother both ask him to concentrate on eating for a while (and only after that will they be able to continue the discussion about the cartoons, his grandmother says), Alexandra turns the screen so it faces her and her mother asks her how she is faring. Their adult-to-adult conversation then continues over several turns (not in excerpt).

Excerpt 4: 'Just eat, then we'll talk'. Transcript of self-recorded video. GM=grandmother, A=Alexandra (mother), Y=Yegor (son).

GM:	Но если опасности, то тогда нужно обязательно разбудить.	But if there is any danger, then he absolutely needs to be woken up.
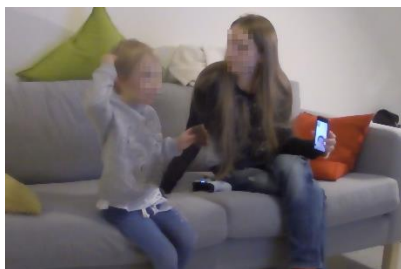
[Phone screen facing Yegor. Yegor tells his grandmother about the Youtube cartoons shown on the TV screen.]

Y:	Да, вот он спит на балконе все, он не может упасть, он просто сидит, сидит, сидит, сидит, сидит. Он много... он просто лежит и просто спит.	Yes, there he sleeps on a balcony, he can't fall off, he just sits, sits, sits, sits, sits, he a lot... he just lies down and just sleeps.

[Yegor gazes at phone screen]

A:	Ты, давай, кушай.	Just eat.
GM:	Давай, кушай, потом поговорим. Кушай хлебушек.	Just eat, then we'll talk. Eat the bread.

[Alexandra turns the telephone screen to face her.]

A: Это самое… как дела?   It is… how are you?

In Excerpt 4, we thus recognize two phenomena from the nexus of practice and Kati's case. First, Alexandra positions the screen so that Yegor has face-to-face contact with his grandmother when they are talking, and then she changes the position so that she and her mother have face-to-face contact when they are having an adult talk (cf. Excerpt 2 with Kati above). Second, the grandmother performs a type of distant parenting in supporting Alexandra in urging Yegor to eat his bread.

6.2.2 Language management

In the orientation interview, Alexandra said that she had grown up in a Russian city and although she had studied English (and French) at school, she had not really used English before she moved to Finland one and a half years before. Yegor, who was three years old when they came to Finland, did not speak any Finnish upon their arrival but fairly quickly learned to communicate in Finnish after he started in a Finnish-medium kindergarten. By the time of the data collection, Alexandra had started to learn some Finnish but used mainly English in her studies. Alexandra and Yegor always used Russian with each other and the data from the video calls also showed that Russian was the only language used in the video calls with the grandparents. In Excerpt 5, she explains that the use of Russian was not the result of deliberate choice or explicit planning (Palviainen/Boyd 2013).

Excerpt 5: 'It's just the way it is'. Transcript of stimulated recall interview with Alexandra. A=Alexandra, R=Researcher

R: Was that [to use Russian] an explicit decision or how would you describe that?
A: I don't think it was explicit, it's just the language that we use and I can't imagine speaking to him in any other language because he's more proficient in Finnish than me.
R: Yeah.
A: And well I mean he doesn't like how I speak it.
R: So it's not an explicit decision?
A: No, it's just the way it is.
R: That's the way it is, yes, yeah.
A: It's the language that we use to communicate with extended family.

There is, however, some degree of choice involved here: Alexandra admits that Yegor is more proficient in Finnish than she is, and although she comments humorously that he dislikes the way she speaks Finnish, it does point to the fact that switching their joint language to something other than Russian would risk her power position in relation to her child (Armstrong 2014). Neither of them is likely to take this risk. Russian is also the joint language of the extended family.

Russian was used in the video calls. When I asked Alexandra if she had any explicit intentions with regard to Yegor for the video calls, such as stimulating his Russian language development or his cultural identity (King-O'Riain 2014), she said no: "It's more just to share (with the grandparents) what's going on" (stimulated recall interview). In conclusion, it can be said that although English and Finnish were used outside the home, the familylect was strongly dominated by Russian[4], both in the communication between Yegor and Alexandra, and in the transconnective space when engaging with Yegor's grandparents in the video calls.

7   Discussion

Alexandra and Kati were both single mothers who mostly lived on their own with their 4-year-old children. At the same time, they had members of their family who lived elsewhere and who were a significant part of the children's lives, actively engaged with them. Both Alexandra's and Kati's reports revealed that the nexus of practice was characterised by a connected presence (Licoppe 2004) and shared living (Greenberg/Neustaedter 2013) in which the participants were sharing moments as they happened and going on with everyday family life mediated through the screens. The video calls nurtured the emotional bonds (King-O'Riain 2015) between members of the (extended) families: whereas Kati carried out the video call routine primarily in order to facilitate the emotional relationship between her daughter and her father, in Alexandra's case it seemed to be equally important emotionally for all the participants. The nexus of practice also involved distant parenting, in which the family members located elsewhere could support the mothers in doing parenting while connected.

The video calls required collaboration among all the participants. They were all to different extents engaged in the coordination, presentation, and behavioural as well as scaffolding work (Ames et al. 2010) in order to get the activity going. The mothers, however, did the main work in arranging and managing the video calls, including engaging the child in them. The mothers also reported how the devices placed

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4   As I do not speak Russian, I am unable to say anything about particular linguistic forms and this family's way of doing their familylect (Van Mensel 2018).

some constraints on the practice: Kati could prop up the tablet in such a way that it was possible for her to do the housework at the same time, but moving the tablet around and holding it prevented her from doing anything else; Alexandra, who used a smartphone, could easily follow Yegor and his activities around the apartment but reported that she could not cook and hold the device at the same time. Kati also stressed in both her interviews that the daily call routine demanded quite a lot of time and effort on her part to make it work and that she (and Nick) sometimes had to make a deliberate effort to motivate Mira to engage in the calls. The nexus of practice is highly affected by child agency, mood and age (Ames et al. 2010). Although video calls are a good means of keeping in multimodal and instantaneous contact with family members, the research literature does provide examples of technical constraints, practical challenges or even negative emotional experiences connected with them (Harper et al. 2017; King-O'Riain 2014; Parreñas 2014).

As for the languages which circulated through the nexus of practice and constituted the digital familylects, they were differently employed in the two family constellations. In the case of Kati, Finnish was used between herself and Mira, a mixture of Dutch and English with some Finnish between Mira and her father Nick, and English between Kati and Nick and in three-way conversations. In the case of Alexandra, only Russian was used in the video calls. According to Alexandra, this was not a result of deliberate planning but a natural language practice of this family constellation. Negotiating language practices did not appear to be of much significance in either of the families. Kati's explicit request for more stringent language management on Nick's part in order to support Mira's Dutch language development (Excerpt 3) was the only example of an expressed belief as to how languages can or should be managed.

The two family constellations employed a de facto family language policy (Shohamy 2006) rather than an explicit, declared one. By analogy with the findings reported by e.g. Taipale (2019: 13), that "technology-mediated communication is shown to often serve families' need of staying connected, with the informational content of the communication being of no more than secondary importance", one could conclude that the focus in these two families was on communication itself, rather than on which language(s) it was mediated through. In the case of Kati, both parents employed strategies to ensure that Mira could follow the conversation – either by translating from one language to another, switching or mixing languages (Excerpts 2 and 3) – but the focus was on successful communication and nurturing emotional bonds rather than developing language skills. The emotional importance has been shown in the case of Alexandra as well, in that the video calls were performed in order to reduce stress when some members of the family had moved

abroad and now lived geographically a long way from the others. The Russian language was likely to play a very important role in this nexus, as that was the joint language of the family and a language Alexandra and Yegor did not use so much in their everyday life in Finland.

One of the most essential questions within the FLP field is how (parental) language practices and children's multilingual language repertoires are related, and therefore we need to ask whether these translocal video calls add anything to Yegor's and Mira's language development. In the development of bilingualism or, as in Mira's case, even trilingualism, the amount and regularity of linguistic input as well as interactional styles play significant roles (see e.g. Chevalier 2012; De Houwer 2007; Lanza 1997). Mira spent time with Nick (and other relatives) for several weeks during the year. Similarly, Yegor's grandparents travelled to Finland every now and then. However, the video calls in between the visits added a significant amount of time spent together, albeit in virtual space, increasing the amount of language input and meaning that the children got to interact in these languages every day.

As previous research has shown, extended family members can play a decisive, motivational role in a child's development of a non-dominant language. In the studies carried out by Chevalier (2012), Ruby (2012) and Smith-Christmas (2018), the people in question lived nearby or even in the same house, whereas in the current study Mira and Yegor met them in virtual space. Both Mira and Yegor spent much of their time in a Finnish kindergarten, and when the father or the grandparents asked about their everyday life in English/Dutch or in Russian, respectively, the children needed to work out how to transform their Finnish-coded experiences and vocabulary into another language. As the connected presence involved daily routines like eating, bathing, and cooking, they got to talk about these things quite naturally. In Yegor's case, when Alexandra was the only Russian speaker in his everyday life in Finland, the daily conversations with his grandparents made him realise that there are other speakers of Russian besides himself and his mother. Such a realisation is known to be conducive to successful language maintenance (Caldas/Caron-Caldas 1992).

8   Conclusion

The nexus analysis of the video call activity in these two translocal family constellations revealed complex, linked and recurring practices, and the results also strongly suggest that video calls can play a significant role in processes of language maintenance within families[5]. However, the study was small-scale and inductive by nature and the issues therefore require more extensive and systematic research in future. To respond to the research call by King and Fogle (2017) to focus on how globalisation and technology influence multilingual families, we need to further explore digitally mediated communication (such as video calls, instant text messaging, and social media) as part of the FLP negotiation, as well as its role in the processes of language maintenance and change across time, space and (digital) generations. Finally, the current study focused on the adult perspective – the mother's in particular – and the voices of the other participants were only indirectly heard. The active inclusion of children's voices – as well as those of fathers, grandparents and other significant members of the family – would make an important contribution to our exploration of how digitally mediated family language policy comes about.

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