

A choice for the child: ethnolinguistic affiliation of children of native-immigrant couples in Finland

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Immigration has been one of the most influential social forces shaping European societies over the past decades. One significant consequence of this transformation is the growing number of mixed families, which can be seen as the most intimate setting of intercultural contact in contemporary societies. Although scholars have examined the intergenerational transmission of cultural markers within native-immigrant families (Le Gall & Meintel, 2015), the focus has largely been on qualitative research. In contrast, quantitative studies have predominantly investigated families in which mixedness is defined along racial or ethnic lines rather than by country of birth (Qian, 2004; Obućina & Saarela, 2020). In this study, we examine the language choice for children with mixed backgrounds in Finland, with a particular focus on native-immigrant couples. In Finland, parents are required to report the child's mother tongue, which indicates the affiliation to an ethnolinguistic group, and only one language can be opted for. We add to the literature by studying how mixed native-immigrant couples make identity choices for the children when forced into an official categorization.

The country's native population consists of two groups with equal constitutional rights, Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers, of which the latter constitute the numerical minority. Thus, Finland is not only a rare case for studying parents' identity choices for their children when the state dictates a "hard choice", but the setting also provides an opportunity to study such choices when both parents belong to a minority, yet one is native-born and enjoys the same constitutional rights as the majority group.

The language choice that mixed couples make for their children has institutional consequences and is therefore also of policy relevance at the national level. Our results have implications for service planning and resource allocation, as many of these are based on registered mother tongue, and they also help forecast shifts in the composition of the native population of Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers.

Our theoretical focus lies on gender and minority identity. This is because gender-related mechanisms are known to shape mixed marriages in which one partner represents a minority,

and they also play an important role in the choice of affiliation for the child (Saarela et al., 2025). Our study also speaks to theories of assimilation and identity transmission.

We use intergenerationally linked Finnish population registers, in which each individual is recorded with one unique mother tongue. Parents must register their child's mother tongue within three months after birth. Only one mother tongue is allowed, and although it can be changed at any point, few persons do so. We measure parents' registered mother tongue at the end of the calendar year in which the child was born, and the child's registered mother tongue at the end of calendar year following the birth year. The analyses are restricted to children born 1987-2022 for whom information on both parents is available. We distinguish between Finnish-immigrant and Swedish-immigrant couples, as well as native and immigrant endogamous couples, and examine the language-gender combination within these couple types. The analyses are based on logistic regressions.

Descriptive results on the language registration by the child's birth year and parents' language show that, among Swedish-immigrant couples, 16-33% of children are affiliated to the ethnolinguistic group of the immigrant parent when the mother is immigrant (100 minus the share represented by the blue line in Figure 1). This share decreases to 4-18% when the mother is native from the Swedish-speaking minority (100 minus the share represented by the red line in Figure 1). Among Finnish-immigrant couples, the proportion of children registered as a foreign-speaker is lower, or 7-15% when the father is Finnish-speaking (100 minus the share represented by the blue line in Figure 2) and 2-7% when the mother is Finnish-speaking (100 minus the share represented by the red line in Figure 2). When both parents share the same native mother tongue, that is, Finnish or Swedish, nearly all children are registered with it, whereas for parents with a foreign mother tongue, that is, other than Finnish or Swedish, 75-90% of children are registered with a foreign mother tongue (Figure 3). In forthcoming analyses, we examine the foreign mother tongue category in more detail by separating couples according to specific language groups. We will also look at how socioeconomic and demographic factors affect registration in native-immigrant families and families where both parents are immigrants.

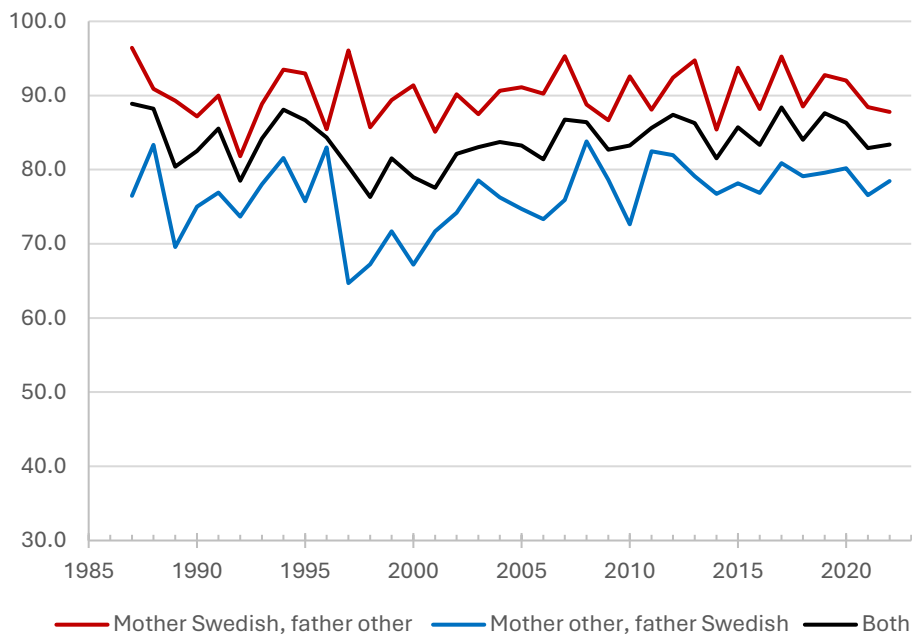


Figure 1. Percentage of children registered with Swedish mother tongue of all children of Swedish-immigrant couples, by parents' mother tongue and child's birth year, 1987–2022

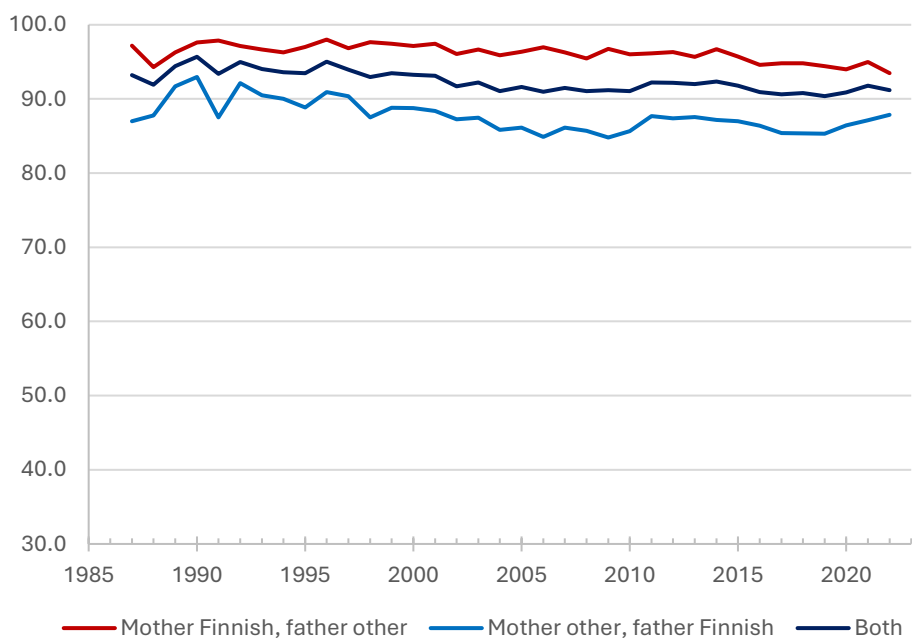


Figure 2. Percentage of children registered with Finnish mother tongue of all children of Finnish-immigrant couples, by parents' mother tongue and child's birth year, 1987–2022

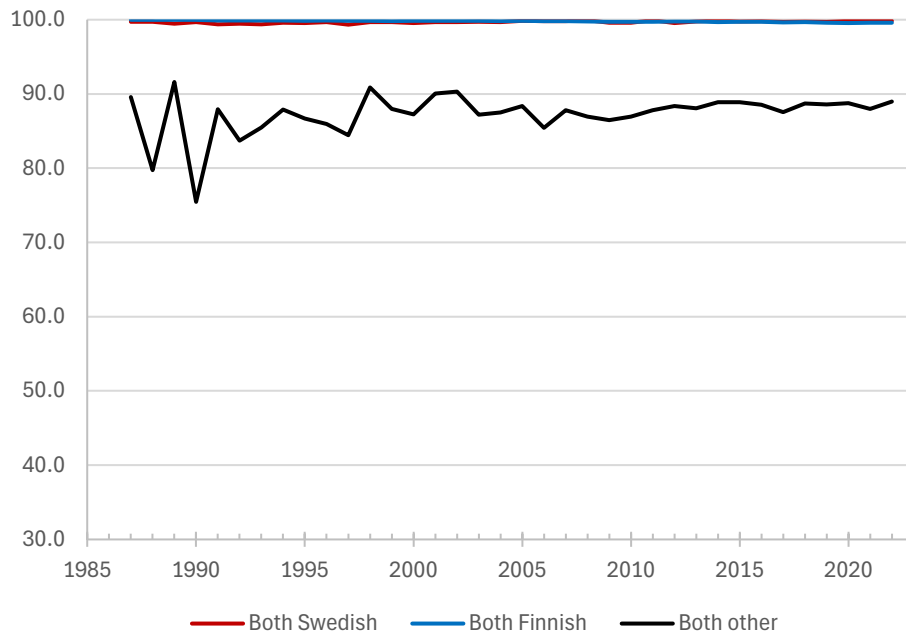


Figure 3. Percentage of children registered with same mother tongue as parents of all children of monolingual couples, by parents' mother tongue and child's birth year, 1987–2022

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