

Our Languages, Our Lives, & the Global Pandemic

A survey about the experiences of
multilingual students during COVID-19



Sociolinguistic research in
the time of COVID:
Methods, Ethics, Theory

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Abstract: Our Languages, our Lives and the Global Pandemic

What will you remember about the COVID-19 pandemic a year from now? Will you remember the details of how it changed your daily life? How about ten years from now? Will you recognize changes that started with the experiences you are having now? We all have experienced some disruption in our daily lives as a result of the pandemic, and although we can make predictions, only time will tell which disruptions will lead to long-term change. Linguists who study language change already pay attention to the relationship between short-term variation and long-term change. We already know that relatively minor disruptions in communication patterns and networks can lead to major shifts in language ecologies (the languages we speak and the people with whom and places where we speak them). As COVID-19 spread around the world, the question that occurred to us was this:

How do disruptions related to the COVID lockdown affect multilingual students' language ecologies? Does it change how often we use the languages we know? And/or the contexts in which we use certain languages?

Nagy's research on heritage languages in Toronto has shown us that intergenerational conversations in a heritage language keep the language alive (think about the difference between the child who is cared for by their heritage language-speaking granny vs the one who goes to day care with English-speaking caregivers). And the flip side: that peer-to-peer interaction is key for promoting shift away from heritage languages. Usually we talk about these changes in terms of major events like immigration, starting school, or moving from one community to another. But what happens in the context of a global pandemic?

Think about it: around the world COVID-19 lockdowns have resulted in abrupt shifts in the amount of time spent at home vs. out of home for work, school, and "extracurriculars." This means a radical shift in the frequency and type of social and linguistic interactions. Most students are experiencing fewer peer-to-peer interactions with co-workers, fellow students and friends. At the same time, they have more intergenerational family interactions. How does this global event result in a change in students' language ecologies, many of whom have been physically displaced and, and all of whom have experienced disruption in their daily lives?

As we collect stories from students, we also hope to provide insights useful to university students, administrators and instructors, along these lines: **What languages do students use regularly? Which are they most attached to? How do they describe their language practices before and after immigration? Before and during the pandemic?**

More broadly, we will learn **how people talk about the concept of language loss. How does this relate to talk about relationships with family, with others, and with members of their previous home country? How do they talk about the choices that they make in terms of when they use different languages? How does it relate to how they see themselves?**

We have 300+ responses already. We hope you'll join us and tell your story! The survey is available here:

https://voicesoftoronto.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cDgu3bZ3HKrCbYN.



Motivation

While sociolinguists are doing long-range research projects about (what they think is) speakers' vernacular, life happens, there are disruptions, things change, so that a language variety that was being used regularly no longer is, or vice versa.

This is true for all speech communities.

COVID-19 has changed a lot about who we are talking to and how – in some cases, more intergenerational communication; fewer peer-to-peer interactions.

What is the effect then on language maintenance/shift?



Focused research questions

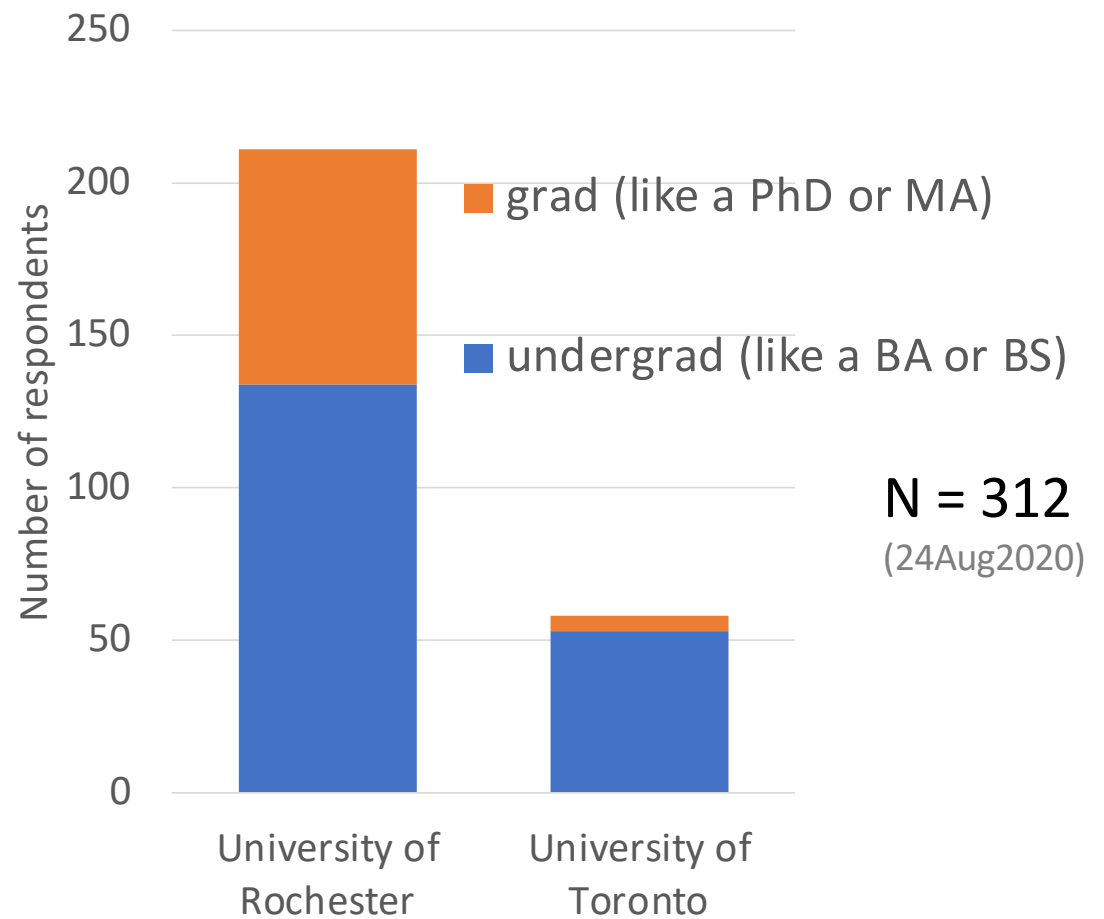
- **How do COVID lockdown disruptions affect multilingual students' language ecologies? Does it change how often they use the languages they know? And/or the contexts in which they use certain languages?**
 - What languages do students use regularly? How do they talk about these languages?
 - How do students describe their language practices before and during the pandemic? What, if anything, has changed?
- **Long term implications for language maintenance and shift?**



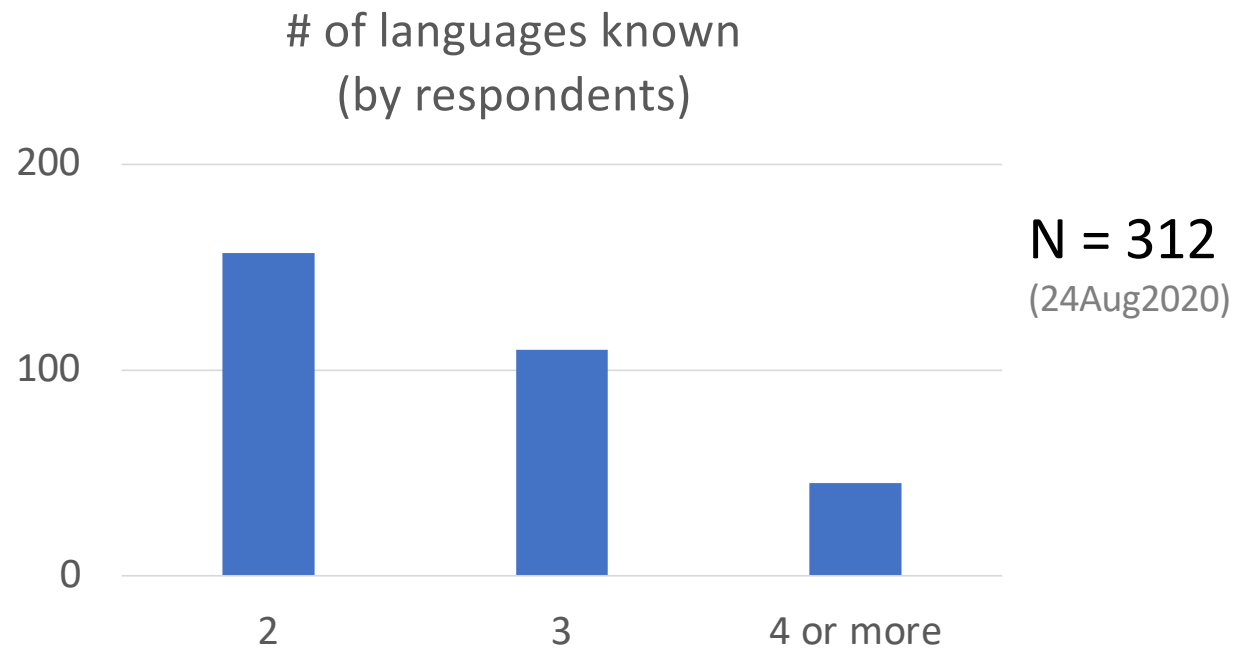
Survey design

- Online survey
 - 34 questions on language use / frequency of use
 - before and during the pandemic
 - with different interlocutors
 - in different domains
 - One open-ended question about future predictions
 - Option to upload an audio diary reflecting on language use and the pandemic
- Currently 498 respondents

Who
responded?



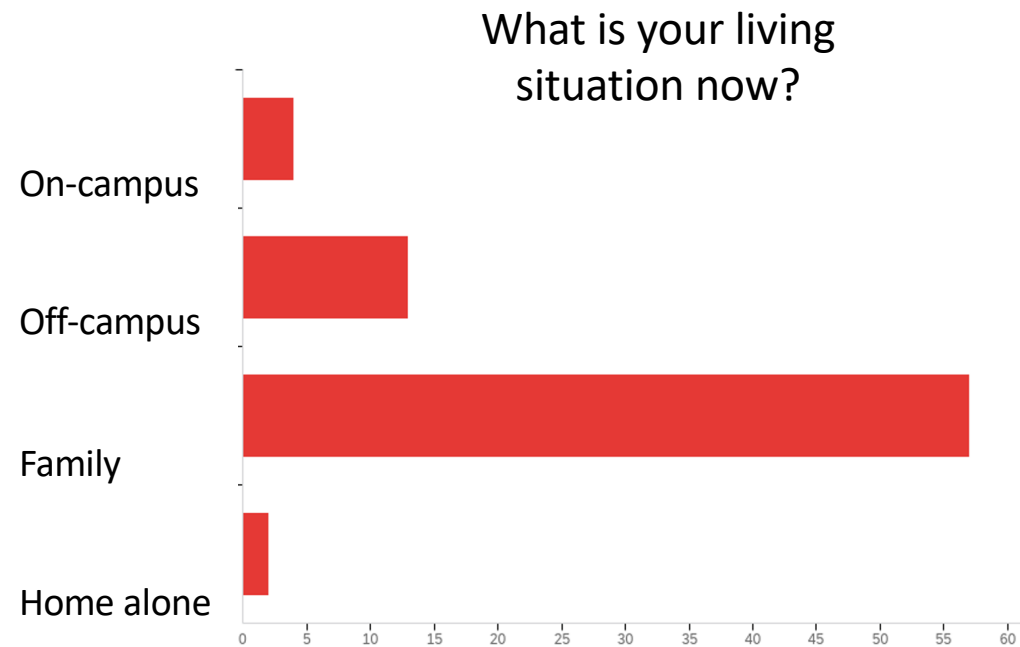
Q4 - We'd like to know about your multilingualism.
How many languages and dialects do you know?





Q11 - Before the Pandemic:

For many of us, our living situation has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. What was your living situation before the pandemic?

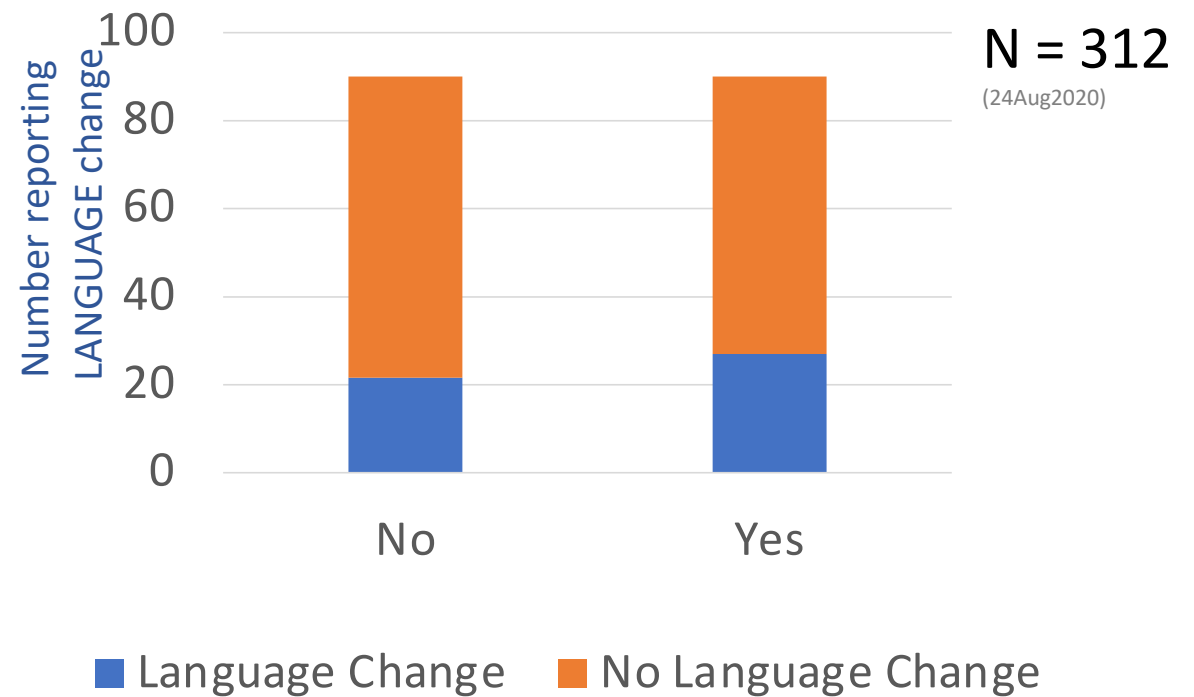


N = 312

(24Aug2020)

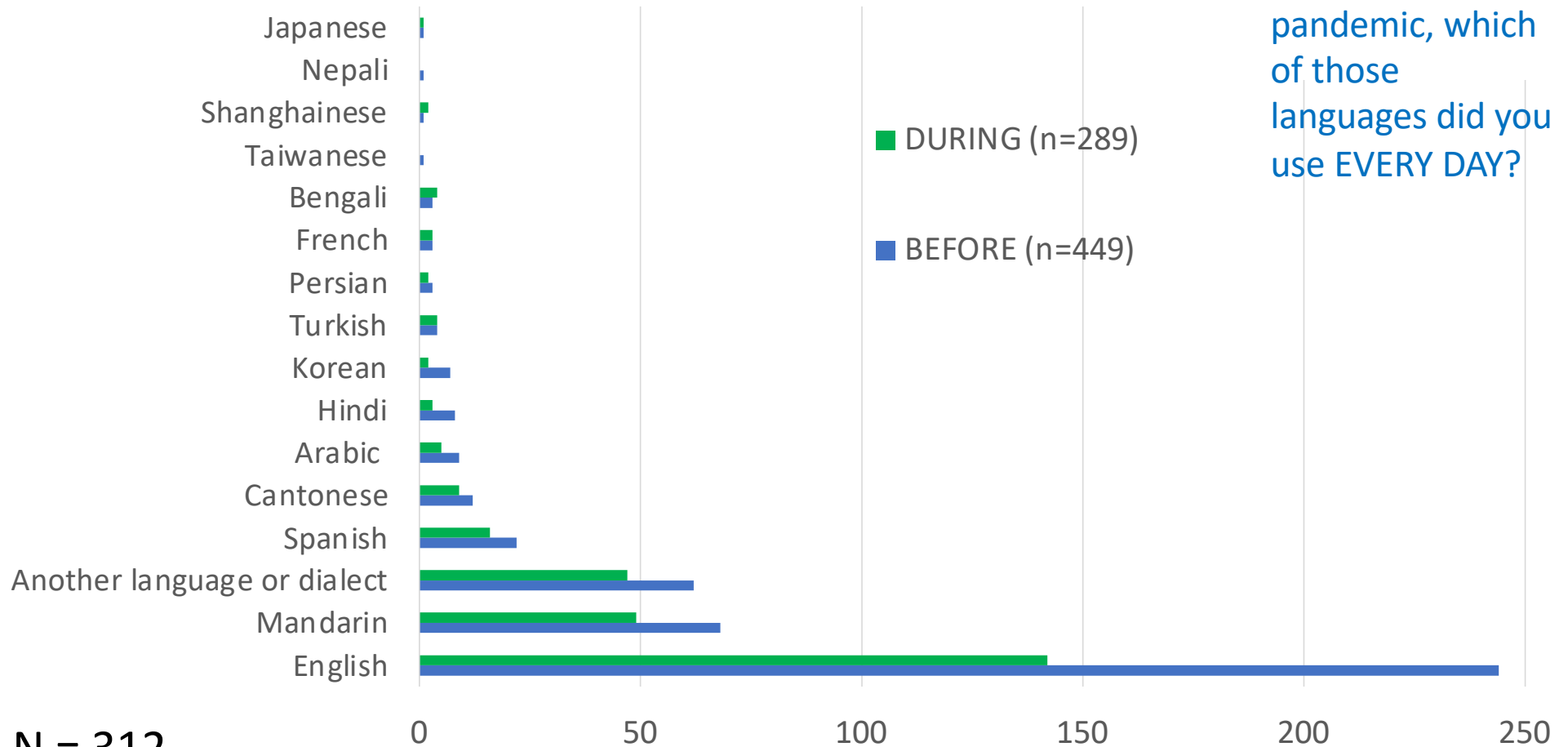
Do life
disruptions
trigger
language
disruptions?

Has your living situation changed because
of the COVID-19 pandemic ?



Languages used DAILY

Q37 - Before the pandemic, which of those languages did you use EVERY DAY?



N = 312

(24Aug2020)





Mixed methods approach

- Multilingual speakers' circumstances are diverse, so putting them into boxes – while important for generalizing - abstracts away from the nuances of their experiences (see Włosowicz 2014)

"I might start speaking English full-time again! And I will miss my mother tongue, Marathi! I feel like I'm a different person when I speak Marathi." (UofT undergraduate)

"I think I might be a little out of touch with English because having stayed on campus this whole summer with no jobs or internships has immensely diminished my contact with my friends. I do talk to some of my friends on phone but they are mostly my old friends back from Nepal and I mostly use Nepali to speak with them. It feels like ages since I have last used English fully to communicate my feelings and emotions." (UR undergraduate)

"There will definitely be more face-to-face conversation in English, but other than that I don't expect my practices to change. I'll keep having phone conversations in Russian with my family and some of my friends, and will keep having online and phone conversations with my English-speaking friends who are in different countries right now. The only difference will be that I'll have more face-to-face conversations in English with my English-speaking colleagues and in grocery stores/cafes/etc." (UR graduate)

Mixed methods approach: Coding

- **Open coding:** two coders close-read the comments and identified core themes (Emerson 2011) → lots of overlap!
- **Focused coding:** coders collaboratively decided on themes and codes to mitigate individual biases (Cornish, Gillespie & Zittoun 2014)
- All co-authors together **revised the themes and codes**
- Together, we came up with “**key assertions**” (Erickson 1986, cited in Saldana 2013: 252)

Themes and codes: Step 1

- Identified **seven themes**:

1. I use English less frequently, but I use my home language more.
2. I use my home language less frequently, but I use English more.
3. There has been a change in my English use.
4. My language choice depends on the medium of communication.
5. My language choice depends on access to particular interlocutors.
6. I have an emotional response regarding my language use.
7. My language practices with regard to an L3 language (exclusive of home language or English) has decreased.

Themes and codes: Step 2

- Identified **codes** within each **theme**
- Example:
 - **Theme 4:** My language choice depends on the medium of communication.
 - Change due to talking more
 - Change due to texting more
 - Change due to Zoom/video calls/etc.
 - Change due to regular calls
 - Change due to more face-to-face conversation
 - Change due to less face-to-face conversation

Themes and codes: Step 2 (continued)

- Example:
 - **Theme 6:** I have an emotional response regarding my language use.
 - Anxiety about English
 - Anxiety about home language
 - Anxiety about choice of language
 - Positivity about English
 - Positivity about home language
 - Positivity about choice of language

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“I might start speaking English full-time again! And I will miss my mother tongue, Marathi! I feel like I’m a different person when I speak Marathi.” (U of T undergraduate)

Theme 3 : There has been a change in my English use.

Code: Use of English more often.

Theme 6: I have an emotional response regarding my language use.

Code: Positivity regarding use of home language.



“I think I might be a little out of touch with English because having stayed on campus this whole summer with no jobs or internships has immensely diminished my contact with my friends. I do talk to some of my friends on phone but they are mostly my old friends back from Nepal and I mostly use Nepali to speak with them. It feels like ages since I have last used English fully to communicate my feelings and emotions.” (UR undergraduate)

Theme 2: Language choice is dependent on access to particular interlocutors

Code: Change in rate of use of language due to decreased access



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Theme 4: My language choice is dependent on the medium of communication.

Code: Change due to face-to-face conversation.

How do people talk about the future?

	n
No change	36
My language choice depends on access to particular interlocutors.	32
I use English less frequently, but I use my home language more.	17
There has been a change in my English use.	13
My language choice depends on the medium of communication.	11
My L3 language practices has changed.	13
I use my home language less frequently, but I use English more.	6
I experience an emotional response regarding my language use.	3
Total	131

Theme: Lasting changes

Theme	n
No change	36
My language choice depends on access to particular interlocutors.	32
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My L3 language practices has changed.	13
I use my home language less frequently, but I use English more.	6
I experience an emotional response regarding my language use.	3
Total	131

Conclusions

Speakers offer a mix of predictions

Key assertions:

- The pandemic has had a positive effect on home language use
- At least two factors play an important role in this context
 - Interlocutors
 - Medium of communication

We will continue to explore the relationship between life disruptions and language disruptions

References and Acknowledgements

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Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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Włosowicz, T. M. (2014). Some advantages of qualitative methods in multilingualism research. In D. Gabryś-Barker & A. Wojtaszek (Eds.), *Studying second language acquisition from a qualitative perspective* (pp. 111-25). Cham: Springer.

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Q50 - Has your work situation changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic?

