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April 2014
2014/02

What does language transmission within mixed families tell us about integration and multilingualism in the EU?¹

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Abstract

There is a gap between EU multilingual policies and language policies for migrants. In this context, migration is not seen as an asset. Rather it is a problem to be solved through assimilation. Migrants' multilingualism is, likewise, not considered an asset for society as a whole. In this context, research into the transmission of multiple languages within families is relevant for better understanding the processes under examination. "Nationally mixed people," that is to say people with parents born in two different countries, one country usually being the country of residence, have sufficient knowledge of the language of the country of residence. We think of people in plural language systems as having language issues. However, mixed families should be regarded as a social group allowing for the transmission of at least two languages. Are all mixed people bi- or multilingual? The explanatory factors of language transmission in mixed families, and especially the role of public policies and institutions on family language transmission have been under researched. However, a recent study has shown that since public policies and discourses affect both the migration and integration paths of the parents, they also indirectly influence the foreign language proficiencies of nationally mixed people.

1. This Migration Policy Brief is based on my PhD, and on an article entitled «La transmission de la langue du parent migrant au sein des familles mixtes: une réalité complexe perçue à travers le discours de leurs enfants», in *Langage et Société* (147), March 2014, 97-109.

POLICY
BRIEF



Key findings:

- Multilingualism is an asset for EU member States both in social and economic terms.
- The State of the country of residence is an important actor regarding multilingualism within migrant families: it influences both the migration and integration paths of the family members and the way in which the origin foreign language is taught.
- However, socialization within migrant families is not currently considered by policy makers as a multilingual asset for EU societies.

1. Migrant multilingualism: a problem or an asset for EU policy makers?

The EU seems to have a schizophrenic approach to multilingualism. On the one hand, the question of migrants' and their descendants' integration is of great importance for EU policy makers. Migrant integration is usually seen as “problematic,” while talking about the “lack of assimilation” of certain populations, who are reckoned to exist at the margin of the “host” society. Language acquisition tends to be misunderstood: in monolingual communities multilingualism, indeed, is perceived as a threat.

“Teaching of the language and the culture of origin” implemented in several EU countries had for its first goal the maintenance of foreign languages skills in order to facilitate the migration of migrants' families to their countries of origin. Migration was seen as temporary until the 1980s², and multilingualism originating from this phenomenon was not considered an asset. The awareness of the long-term settlement of migrant families in Europe was conducted in a new policy focusing on “intercultural educa-

2. The evolution of the conception of migration depends from one country to the other.

tion” at school and was directed towards all pupils³. However, in “secondary education, English, French, German, Spanish and Russian represent over 95% of all languages learnt in the majority of [EU] countries”⁴. International languages, though not all of them (e.g. Arabic or Chinese), are thus favoured by EU member States.

At the European level, on the other hand, multilingualism is celebrated. Multilingual societies and individuals are seen as assets in the global economy, and a necessity in building a cohesive society. The European Commission has implemented a series of policies: to improve language teaching within national school systems; to increase international exchange programmes; and to improve multilingual communication on the common market, and between EU institutions and EU citizens⁵. As for migrants, the main goal is still to learn the language of the “host country.” The enrichment of society thanks to people having multiple language skills in EU and non-EU languages seems to be secondary, even though it was mentioned in previous reports to the Commission⁶.

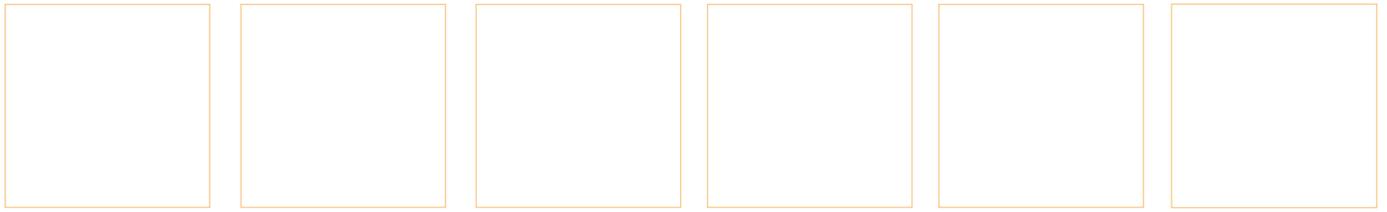
There is thus a gap between multilingual policies at the EU level and language assimilation policies for migrants. In this context, migration is not considered an asset. Rather it is seen as a problem to be solved

3. For more information, see: EURYDICE, *Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe*, 2009; Alexandra FILHON, *Linguistic Practices in Migration Models of Integration, Language Policies and Establishment of Social Hierarchy of Languages*, 2013; Gaye PETEK, «Les Elco, entre reconnaissance et marginalisation», *Hommes et Migrations*, n° 1252, 2004, pp. 45–55.

4. EDUCATION, AUDIOVISUAL AND CULTURE EXECUTIVE AGENCY, *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*, 2008, Eurydice, p. 11.

5. COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*, 2005.

6. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *An Inventory of Community actions in the field of multilingualism - 2011 update*, 2011.



through assimilation. And migrants' multilingualism is not, likewise, considered an asset for society as a whole. However, "integration" is not a one-way process: it cannot be achieved if the borders of the majority group are closed. In addition, migration should be considered an asset helping a given society become cohesive, and the economy to become competitive in the global era. Thanks to migration, multilingualism will become an asset in the global economy. In this context, research on the transmission of multiple languages within families is relevant to better understanding the processes under study here.

2. How is multilingualism preserved or transmitted? The example of mixed families

Migrant families are a perfect social space where multiple languages could be transmitted. "Nationally mixed people," that is to say people having parents born in two different countries, one country usually being the country of residence, have sufficient knowledge of the language of the country of residence. We think of people in plural language systems as having language issues. However, mixed families should be regarded as a social group allowing for the transmission of at least two languages.

The parental migration path, parallel to the individual migration path, has a huge impact on the foreign language proficiencies of nationally mixed people. Regarding the migrant parent, the migration context, that is to say, the age at migration and its causes (e.g. fleeing from war or misery versus coming to study at university) influences the strength of ties and thus the wish to transmit the origin country language. In addition, to transmit a language one has, of course, to be able to do so. A mother who came to France from Portugal at the age of two would have more difficulties in transmitting Portuguese than if she had come at 23.

Parallel to the migration path, the integration path of migrant parents could encourage them to transmit their mother tongue (or to not do so). If they consider assimilation to the country of residence in terms of breaking all ties with the country of origin, they will not transmit its language. Language transmission could even be seen in this context as a barrier towards assimilation, because it would demonstrate that children have a foreign background, or because the fact of talking their mother tongue to their children is reckoned to endanger their acquisition of the language of the country of residence. If they consider themselves, instead, as being from both societies, and even move back and forth, they will transmit the languages of both countries.

3. What can policy-makers do to benefit from migrant multilingualism?

Public policies and discourses affect the foreign language proficiency of nationally mixed people, even within the family. The international comparison I conducted, for instance, showed national differences that could be explained through the national conception of migration. So, in France, bilingualism was scarcer than in Germany. This could be explained by the "Republican model of integration" which is assimilationist, rather than multicultural, whereas the German context has long considered migrants as temporary workers. Nationally mixed people in France were less frequently migrants themselves, and had fewer connections to their foreign country of origin, while this population experienced circular migration more often in Germany. Thus, in France, Germany and the UK, the nationally mixed people I interviewed all had sufficient knowledge of their respective country of residence: but the political view of migration affected their foreign language proficiencies.

In addition, in France, Germany, and the UK, public or subsidized institutions influenced language pro-



iciency. Parents were often told in these places that “bilingualism,” which is in this context “no-lingualism”, would penalize their children at school. In addition, since the language of the country of residence is dominant, it seemed to be very difficult for the migrant parent to transmit his/her language of origin. Then, parents willing to transmit their foreign language could do so with the support of external institutions, such as language classes in associations, at school, or through the media. And all these institutions need support, or at least they should not be forgotten by the State.

Thus, the State of the country of residence is an important actor regarding multilingualism within the family.

4. Policy Recommendations

- First, multilingualism should be seen as an asset within society. States should, first, publicly state the value of multilingualism and not only for international languages such as Spanish and

English. This kind of a communication strategy might be addressed towards teachers particularly because of the impact they have on parental educational choices.

- Second, the transnational ties of migrant families should not be seen as a withdrawal within a community, out of the majority group, but as an asset that could help the EU-Member States to lead the world economy. So, instead of trying to cut ties with the country of origin, transnational ties should be encouraged by integration policies.
- Third, in order to help migrant families to transmit foreign languages (EU and non-EU languages), the EU-Member States should consider multilingualism as a priority within education at school, but also while promoting associations favouring multilingualism, the transmission of foreign languages within family, and social interaction between natives and migrants. In addition, multilingual media, and programs in the original language should become the rule rather than exception.

Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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