Integrating language in theories on long-distance movement: migration vs mobility & the concept of motility
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Integrating language in theories on long-distance movement: migration vs mobility & the concept of motility

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Abstract

Language in the context of migration is an unexplored concept. This paper takes a first step towards integrating language into current theories of international mobility. The current state of migration research will be briefly outlined. Subsequently, the differences between the concepts 'migration' and 'mobility' will be discussed. Afterwards the notion of 'motility', which is widely used in biology, less so in sociology, will be reviewed. Motility, loosely defined as potential mobility, proves to be a key-concept when studying the connection between language and migration. Lastly, some methodological challenges specifically connected to the implications of motility for international mobility are reviewed. In this article the argument is made that language skills and policy have a great influence on motility and thus indirectly on mobility.

Keywords

motility, mobility, migration, language, linguistic infrastructure, linguistic competence

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1 Introduction

Since the end of the nineteenth century, scholars have identified different factors to explain internal and international migration. Different explanations, which vary greatly with respect to the level of analysis (macro/meso/micro) and scientific disciplines (economics, psychology, demography, among others) have been presented over the last century. Current migration theory is however virtually devoid of one potentially important set of explanatory factors: namely language, language skills and language policy. This paper aims to take a first step towards integrating language in migration theory. It departs from the assumption that language is not exclusively a tool for communication, although that is obviously one of its main functions. Language also represents a means to identification [Mamadouh 1999, May 2012]. Different communities define themselves mostly on the basis of their mother tongue. Language shapes the way we perceive the world around us, which is arguably also an important aspect of identification [Bauböck 2003].

Lastly, language can also be an instrument of power. Imposing one’s own language on others can be the result of, or perpetuate, political or economic domination – see for example the discussions on English as a lingua Franca by Phillipson [1992] and Korshunova and Marácz [2012]. These different functions of language can all directly or indirectly affect the movement of people. If we consider the role of language as a communication tool, it seems a plausible hypothesis that having more language skills will positively influence an individual’s mobility options, since the transition of one country to another is smoother in the absence of language barriers. ‘Linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu 1977, De Swaan 2003) facilitates access to mobility capital. The role of language as a means of identification is also important in the formation of transnational identities. The presence of an ethnic and linguistic network in the country of destination could expand an individual’s mobility options. Finally, it seems language can foster mobility when individuals experience severe language discrimination, which can trigger movement to a more favourable linguistic regime.

These few examples, even though convincing at a first glance, are at the moment still hypotheses, for the role of language into migration and/or mobility theory is, as already mentioned, barely studied in depth. This paper should be seen as part of a first phase of a research agenda in order to introduce language in the current theoretical frameworks. First, the current state of migration research will be briefly outlined, by mentioning the main characteristics of some dominant migration theories. After shortly reviewing them, we will compare the concept of migration with the relatively new notion of ‘mobility’, discussing which one is better suited to analyse contemporary movement of people. Subsequently, we will examine the concept of ‘motility’ and some of its possible operationalisations. Motility refers to potential mobility rather than to actual mobility. It will be argued that when attempting to integrate language as an explanation in migration theory, motility is a key concept.

Before starting our analysis, some issues need to be considered. First of all, this paper is solely concerned with voluntary migration theory and not with forced migration. The distinction between them is arguably not as strict as the two terms make it sound – see for example Skeldon [1997], Castles [2003] and De Haas [2009]. Both topics should merit a paper on their own and cannot be thoroughly discussed together here. Furthermore, the paper focusses on long-distance spatial mobility rather than its short-distance counterpart, and does not discuss social mobility. The connection between language and social mobility is apparent, but it lies beyond the scope of this article to discuss this link.

2 Migration theory

When referring to ‘migration’, the process of ‘uprooting’ is essential. Uprooting refers to the radical and inevitable change in one’s life when one migrates, making it a crucial notion to distinguish ‘migration’ from other forms of movement. Since there exists no ‘grand theory of migration’ [Massey et al. 2008], the differences in approaches between the different theoretical perspectives being quite large, a selection of the major theories will be shortly presented below.

Neo-classical approach

The neo-classical approach is among the oldest and best known international migration theories. It is largely based on models that were originally developed to study international labour migration [Massey et al. 2008]. Neo-classical economics argues that international migration is mainly caused by geographical differences in the supply of and demand for labour [Todaro and Maruszko 1987].
Some neo-classic scholars analyse the macro-level, hereby focusing on larger entities of people, whilst others such as Sjaastad, prefer an individual-based approach on the micro-level. Sjaastad argues that immigrants have reflected thoroughly on the costs and benefits of their immigration plans [Sjaastad, 1962]. Immigration is thus in his view purely a rational choice, influenced by ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors.

Neo-classical theory, both at the micro- and at the macro-level, assumes that potential migrants have perfect, accurate knowledge of all these ‘push-pull factors’. Migration decisions are overwhelmingly based on rational economic motivations. Migration is thus mostly the result of the individual ‘agency’. ‘Constraining factors’ such as government regulation are treated as a distortion of the rational market.

Structural migration theories

Historical-structuralist theories deem rational choice less important. These theories argue that the unequal distribution of political power among the different nations and the expansion of global capitalism worsen global inequalities. Poor countries’ poverty is perpetuated, due to their disadvantageous position in the geopolitical structure [Massey et al., 2008].

In the 1970’s Immanuel Wallerstein developed one of the branches of historical-structuralism, which he coined ‘world systems theory’ [Wallerstein, 1974]. Analysing the expansion of global capitalism, he classified countries according to their dependency on the dominant capitalist powers: ‘core’ nations, peripheral nations (dependent) and semi-peripheral nations (having a certain degree of independence). World system theory argues that migration is mainly a way of mobilising cheap labour for capital: the penetration of capitalist economic relations into non-capitalist or pre-capitalist societies creates a mobile population that is prone to migration [Massey et al., 2008].

Always looking for higher profits, multinationals in core countries ‘invade’ the poorer nations in the periphery, looking for land, raw materials, labour and consumer markets. International migration emerges thus as a natural outgrowth of disruptions and dislocations that occur in the process of capitalist development [Massey et al., 2008].

Skeldon, inspired by Rostowian modernism, developed an alternative structural migration theory: the ‘transitional migration approach’. He argues that a country’s migration pattern is linked to its ‘development stage’ [Skeldon, 1997]. He distinguishes five stages of development (ibidem):

“the (1) old and (2) new core countries (e.g., Western Europe, North America, Japan) characterised by immigration and internal decentralisation; (3) the expanding core (e.g., eastern China, South- Africa, eastern Europe), where we find both immigration and out-migration and internal centralisation (i.e., urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration); (4) the labour frontier (e.g., Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Mexico, the Philippines (...) which are dominated by out-migration and internal centralisation; and the so-called (5) "resource niche" (e.g., many sub-Saharan African countries, parts of central Asia and Latin America), with variable, often weaker forms of migration.”

Skeldon’s theory is in a sense the Rostowian alternative to world systems theory: it categorises different nations according to their development level, but does not assume that these different regions have a problematic relationship with each other. World systems theory, as we have seen, argues that core-nations are impeding the development of periphery-nations, whereas transitional migration has a more positive approach, claiming that countries are fully capable of climbing the development ladder.

Migration psychology

As the name implies, this framework seeks to explain migration using psychological factors. Unlike neo-classical scholars, migration psychologists object to a sole economic approach. In their view there are also many, non-financial factors that play a significant role to understand migration.

One of the core texts in this field is written by De Jong and Fawcett in 1981. They proposed to study migration using a ‘value-expectancy research model’, which consists of seven potential motivations to migrate [De Jong and Fawcett, 1981]: ‘wealth’, ‘status’, ‘comfort’ (the goal to achieve better working and/or living conditions), ‘stimulation’ (exposure to pleasurable activities, such as entertainment and recreation), ‘autonomy’, ‘affiliation’ (the value of being with other persons),
and 'morality'. Similar to the neo-classical approach, migration psychology claims potential immigrants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a migratory move, but do not base their decision entirely on economic considerations.

**Migration system theory, social networks**

Since the 1980’s the economic theories of migration have been confronted with increasing amounts of criticism \[Castles and Miller, 2009\]. It was argued that these approaches did not succeed in explaining the complexity of migration processes, because of their sole focus on economic variables such as wage differences. Out of such critiques various new approaches emerged, such as the migration system theory, which seeks to provide a basis for interdisciplinary dialogue (ibidem). Migration system theory argues that migration flows arise usually from prior links between sending and receiving nations, for example by colonisation, political influence, trade, investment or cultural ties (ibidem). Social networks often provide financial, cultural and social capital making migration possible. Migration system theory claims migratory chains are usually initiated by external factors. Subsequent migrant groups tend to follow “beaten paths” \[Stahl, 1993\], helped by family and friends already living in the receiving country.

Social networks, making migration easier and safer, provide an extra incentive for potential immigrants. Therefore migratory movements, once started, become “self-sustaining social processes” \[Castles and Miller, 2009\]. Massey et al. \[2008\] coined the term “cumulative causation” to explain this development: all acts of migration change the social context in which later migration decisions are made. Usually this leads to increasing migration flows.

**3 Mobility vs. migration in the 21st century**

Migration is not a new phenomenon, but its character has changed in the twentieth century. Revolutionary technological developments, infrastructural developments and the incorporation across the globe of regions and countries in global capitalism all significantly influenced the nature and size of migration flows. The great advances in transport and communication technology in the second half of the twentieth century further facilitated globalisation, and subsequently the international migration process. Transport and communication costs have been sharply reduced. These developments increased interdependence of countries and peoples, accelerating the breaking down of barriers that in the past hindered the flows of capital, goods, services, ideas and people \[Stiglitz, 2002\]. Advanced communication and transport technologies enable migrants to easily keep in touch with their relatives in their home country, meaning that they will develop so-called “transnational (...) identities” \[De Haas, 2010\].

The theories that have been formulated to account for this development are grouped under the notion of ‘transnationalism’ \[Bash et al., 2008\]. Kearney \[2008\], Portes et al. \[2008\]. They provide a necessary modernisation of migration theory. Migration in its classical meaning refers to an act of ‘uprooting’: immigrants largely cut their ties with their economic and social networks in the country of origin. Stemming from this definition of migration, it seemed inevitable that every migrant would go through various stages of ‘assimilation’ to the host culture, ending with complete adaptation \[Gordon, 1964\], Alba and Nee, 1997\]. Transnationalism renders such views outdated, though we do have to note that not all immigrants can take part in transnational activities \[Portes, 2011\].

The classic notion of ‘migration’ is thus becoming more and more problematic over time. A new concept better capturing the complexity of contemporary international movement is therefore needed. In that respect the so-called ‘mobilities’ paradigm gives us an interesting perspective, which is used often by scholars like Urry \[2002\] and Cresswell \[2011\]. This approach provides a broader analytical lens than most migration theories: it studies the movement of people and ideas, analysing the broader social implications of these movements. According to ‘mobilities’ scholars,
mobility lies at “the center of constellations of powers, the creation of identities (…)” [Cresswell, 2011]. The mobilities paradigm offers interesting venues to integrate language (policy) into current theories. Its preoccupation with how mobility can shape and/or create identities is evidently connected to language. Language is naturally essential for communication purposes, but is also instrumental in the formation of identities [Mamadouh, 1999]. As we hypothesised in the introduction, this function of language can influence mobility via contemporary developments such as transnationalism.

Furthermore, uprooting is not an important element in the concept of mobility. This single difference between migration and mobility makes the latter concept better fit to account for transnationalism, which is partly the result of the advancement of communication and transport technology. Urry [2002] distinguishes three broad categories of mobility: ‘corporeal’, ‘virtual’ and ‘imaginative’ mobility. Corporeal mobility refers to the actual movement of people, virtual mobility to long-distance communication via electronic means (e.g. the internet) and lastly, imaginative mobility implies ‘transportation’ through images or television. We will only discuss the first two categories, since the relevance of imaginative mobility for the study of mobility and language is rather doubtful.

Much can be said about Urry’s distinction. Starting with the most positive asset, it can hardly be denied that the importance of virtual mobility has increased considerably over the last few decades. The rise of the internet has expanded the opportunities for immigrants to stay in touch with their social networks in the country of origin. Virtual mobility is in that sense closely connected to theories on transnationalism and migration networks. The concept emphasises the importance of internet developments for the covering of distance, which could before only be traversed corporeally.

It is evident that language in its role as communication tool is crucial for virtual mobility. In that sense, language-policy can greatly influence virtual mobility opportunities. Older migration theories, such as neo-classical economics and migration psychology theory, did understandably not account for the rise of the internet in the 21st century. The concept of virtual mobility can potentially amend these established theories. Another advantage of distinguishing virtual from corporeal mobility is that it allows us to conceptually look at the interplay between the two. The hypothesis that the two mobility forms influence each other is plausible. Virtual mobility might lead to corporeal mobility and vice-versa, due to the transnational ties that can easily be maintained using the former.

However, one of the mobilities paradigm’s main strengths, namely its broad conception of movement and its implications, is paradoxically also a potential weakness. The paradigm succeeds in describing the very complex reality of many forms of mobility, but does not seem ready yet to provide a concrete explanation for the movement of people. Truth to be told, it is not the goal of the mobilities paradigm to provide an all-encompassing explanation for people’s movement. It rather raises important questions and proposes a new methodology [Sheller and Urry, 2006].

4 Motility

Another limitation of both mobility and migration is that in the end they are both predominantly focussed on actual movement. Most mobility and migration studies limit their scope by only analysing past and actual fluidity and have relatively little attention for potential movement. The latter is arguably very important when evaluating the effect of language (policy) on movement: language skills might not be only related to actual mobility, they can also influence the range of one’s mobility options. For this reason we argue in favour of the concept of ‘motility’. Motility is widely used in biology to describe animals that have the ability to move – as opposed to those who can’t, defined by ‘sessility’. The concept was elaborated upon from a sociological perspective by Kaufmann et al. [2004] and has in the core retained its biological definition: it is used to analyse the potential rather than the actual movement.

Influenced by the work of Bourdieu [1986], it essentially sees mobility as a form of capital which is intertwined with other forms, like social and financial capital. If considered as such, the obvious question can be raised how motility is or should be distributed across the society. Motility has consequently a connection with the fields of mobility justice [Sheller, 2013]. Some individuals have more opportunities for mobility than others, the latter category being sometimes referred to as the ‘mobility poor’ [Cresswell, 2008]. The question of social justice and mobility is most
often discussed in articles about the effect of natural disasters on the poor – e.g. Sheller discusses the earth-quakes on Haiti, while Cresswell analyses the effects of the hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. This issue is however also relevant to the field we are interested in, namely voluntary mobility. Whether mobility equality is an ideal we should strive for is a normative question. For argument’s sake, we assume that some form of mobility equality is desirable, but this assumption should be discussed in depth in another paper. Regarding motility, Kaufmann et al. [2004] identify three main factors:

Access refers to the range of possible mobilities according to place, time and other contextual constraints, and may be influenced by networks and dynamics within territories. Access is constrained by options and conditions. The options refer to the entire range of means of transportation and communication available, and the entire range of services and equipment accessible at a given time. The conditions refer to the accessibility of the options in terms of location-specific cost, logistics and other constraints. Obviously, access depends on the spatial distribution of the population and infrastructure (e.g. towns and cities provide a different range of choices of goods and services), sedimentation of spatial policies (e.g. transportation and accessibility), and socio-economic position (e.g. purchasing power, position in a hierarchy or social network).

Competence includes skills and abilities that may directly or indirectly relate to access and appropriation. Three aspects are central to the competence component of motility: physical ability, e.g. the ability to transfer an entity from one place to another within given constraints; acquired skills relating to rules and regulations of movement, e.g. licenses, permits, specific knowledge of the terrain or codes; and organizational skills, e.g. planning and synchronizing activities including the acquisition of information, abilities and skills. Competence is multifaceted and interdependent with access and appropriation.

Appropriation refers to how agents (including individuals, groups, networks, or institutions) interpret and act upon perceived or real access and skills. Appropriation is shaped by needs, plans, aspirations and understandings of agents, and it relates to strategies, motives, values and habits. Appropriation describes how agents consider, deem appropriate, and select specific options. It is also the means by which skills and decisions are evaluated.

Looking at these three broad characteristics on the one hand, and our ambition to integrate language in movement theory on the other, we can argue that all these three factors are relevant for our thinking. We will discuss them shortly starting from top to bottom. Firstly, ‘access’ refers to contextual possibilities and constraints that determine each individual’s range of mobility options. These constraints and possibilities are both of a technological and social nature. As mentioned before when we discussed virtual mobility, language is obviously essential for communication. In order to even have the option to build up a network, it is paramount to speak the appropriate language. We can thus easily tie the ‘access’ component of motility to our discussions on transnationalism, migration networks and virtual mobility. Kaufmann et al. [2004] emphasise in addition the importance of transport infrastructure. In our case we should consider the linguistic infrastructure. The latter refers to the opportunities (or lack thereof) a state offers to immigrants to learn its language. For instance, in Western-Europe citizenship courses, advanced language courses and the education system are part of the linguistic infrastructure.

Secondly, ‘competence’ refers to skills that determine an individual’s capability to effectively make use of the other two factors. Kaufmann et al. also mention international English as a useful skill, but much more can be said about language in relation to competence. Naturally, already having a solid command of several languages is a sign of competence. However, the aptitude of the potential migrant or ‘mobilee’ to learn new languages is also of great importance. It determines if one can use the existing linguistic infrastructure to its maximum effectiveness. In other words: we have to consider the potential mobilee’s linguistic competence.

Thirdly, ‘appropriation’ describes how potential mobilees’ perceive their own skills and whether they actually have the desire to move. Some of the factors of appropriation which are connected with ‘values’ and ‘motives’ can be indirectly connected to language policy. For example, the type of language policy can influence an individual’s sense of inclusion in his/her home society. Oppressive language policies wherein minorities have few options to cultivate their own language
can be perceived as discriminatory, which can incite a desire to move away from an unfavourable political climate. These types of explanations have some affinity with the migration psychology theory. In addition, appropriation can also refer to the mobilee’s motivation to learn a new language and thus his/her willingness to make full use of the linguistic infrastructure and competence. Having no desire to learn another language can decrease motivation to be mobile.

Motility thus, due to its main characteristics, offers migration research interesting venues to integrate language within its theoretical framework. This is not the only reason to favour this concept. One of the main arguments supporting the use of motility lies in the word ‘potential’. The fact that motility does not compel us to limit our analyses to the actual mobility of people, but also allows us to study their mobility options opens a new field of research. Especially when considering the effect of language policies on mobility, it is much more likely that they affect one’s motility rather than one’s mobility. Hypothesising that, for instance, acquiring more language-skills directly influences mobility seems rather far-fetched. It is on the other hand a reasonable assumption that these skills expand an individual’s mobility potential, in other words, his/her motility.

5 Motility and methodology

If we were to phrase the relationship between motility and mobility in abstract terms, we would have to argue that motility encompasses the abstract, systematic rules and conventions in which mobility can be actualised. A possible inconvenience when trying to operationalise these kind of structural concepts is that it can be difficult to identify which variables we exactly need to look at and how to measure them. The first problem, the identification of the key factors, has in the case of motility been decently solved by Kaufmann et al. [2004], by distinguishing the three main aspects of access, competence and appropriation. Finding a way to measure them, especially in the case of short-term research, poses a challenge. Flamm and Kaufmann [2006] proposed a qualitative methodology, consisting of focussed interviews, in which respondents were asked numerous questions about their daily mobility, perceptions to various means of transportation and their personal priorities in life. Given the fact this article mainly focusses on long-distance movement and its connection with language, and since Flamm and Kaufmann seem mostly interested in local mobility, the methodology needs some adjustments to fit our research purposes.

First of all, when language (policy) is included in the framework, a whole new set of factors comes into play, especially when analysing the motility of minorities. Language policies can determine to a certain extent their mastery of the mother tongue and other languages, which in turn influences their capability to develop a sense of transnationalism. Moreover, the linguistic infrastructure of the mobilee’s home state can influence his/her inclusion in society, impacting his/her socio-economic position and thus also his/her motility.

Secondly, short- and long-distance movement have different ramifications on the relative importance of the three aspects of motility (access, competence, appropriation). Perception and reality can differ. That statement would probably surprise few people. Nonetheless, the extent to which they differ is arguably much smaller in the case of short-distance movements. The mobilee will have decent knowledge of the area he/she is living in and should be capable of having reasonable expectations of a move’s result. Long-distance mobilees are much more reliant on information from third-party sources, be it the media, popular culture or contacts in the area, especially when they move to a place they have barely or never visited before. This means that the difference between perceived and ‘actual’ reality can be very big. It implies that if we wish to study long-distance motility, the perceived reality of the respondent can be of great importance and thus needs to be accounted for when formulating a methodological strategy. Lastly, alongside a qualitative analysis, we propose a quantitative methodology, which can be helpful for obvious reasons. If we for instance wish to study the interplay between language policy and motility, it is very difficult to achieve such a goal with just in-depth interviews. Checking for indirect relationships and analysing the significance of the results can only be done using statistical methods.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have ventured into an uncharted territory of mobility and migration research. The connection between language and mobility or migration has almost never been investigated in previous theoretical frameworks. First we outlined some major migration theories, so that we have a decent understanding of the current state of the art and we can use the acquired
insights and observations. Then we proceeded to discuss the limitations of migration as a concept in our modern time and argued in favour of the notion of mobility. Mobility and migration however both have the inconvenience that they almost exclusively focus on explaining ‘actual movement’ and finding the factors that directly impact it, limiting the possibilities to integrate language within these frameworks. It is hard to imagine those situations wherein language skills or language policies directly generate movement flows, but they can greatly influence mobility potential. For this reason, the effect of language can be best assessed using the notion of ‘motility’, which seems until now an underused concept within mobility and migration research.

Motility as defined by scholars such as Kaufmann et al. [2004] already offers us compelling new research-topics. But if we connect the concept with language, the possibilities are even greater. In addition, motility has in the past mostly been applied to explain short-distance mobility. Long-distance mobility, with its increased importance of the gap between perception and reality of the individual mobilee, asks for a particular point of consideration. There are some methodological challenges that need to be faced, so our reflection on the operationalisation of motility should continue. However, if operationalised and theoretically thought through in a proper way, motility is a very important concept to analyse the structure of mobility.

Understanding motility in a given situation can elucidate why people move. It grants us additional instruments to make predictions on their future mobility. It needs to be emphasised once more that this article is just one of the many steps that need to be taken in order to integrate language into our current theoretical frameworks on mobility and/or migration. We do believe that motility is a very important concept in our future endeavours to achieve this goal.
Abstracts in other languages

Abstract


Resumo

La rilato inter lingvo kaj migrado estas ankoraŭ ne sufiĉe esplorita. Ĉi tiu artikolo esploras la vojon por kunigi rezonadon pri lingvoj kun la nuntempa teorioj pri internacia movebleco. Unue oni prezentas la nuntempan argumentadon pri migrado, poste oni diskutas la diferencon inter la konceptoj de ‘migrado’ kaj ‘movebleco’. La sekvanta paŝo estas la enkonduko de la koncepto ‘moviĝpovo’, kiun estas vaste uzata en biologio, kaj pli malvaste en sociologio. Moviĝpovo, iom simplige difinita kiel povu movebleco malkaŝas sin kiel kernan koncepton kiam oni studas la rilaton inter lingvo kaj migrado. Fine, kelkaj metodologiaj defioj specife rilataj al la konsekvencoj por internacia movebleco estas prezentitaj. La plej grava argumento de ĉi tiu artikolo estas ke la lingvaj scipovoj kaj politikoj grande influas moviĝpovon kaj pro tio nerekte moveblecon.
References


