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Multilingual moves

Language and motility of migrant communities in Europe

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015 the immigration and integration debate rose once more to prominence on the European political agenda. It fitted within a trend that had started in the early 2000s in which migration-related issues often dominated the discussion in the Member States of the EU. Angela Merkel's famous, or according to some infamous, declaration that Germany and the German people were well-equipped to handle the incoming migration flows (symbolised by her often quoted statement 'wir schaffen das') laid bare the slumbering division between Eastern and Western Europe on the topic of immigration.

The debates primarily dealt with the protection of the external borders of the European Union (EU). However, an important secondary issue, that was mostly talked about within nation states, was the optimal strategy for integrating as effectively as possible the refugees who qualified for a longer stay in their respective destination countries. The role of language acquisition was arguably the most important element of that discussion. On the one hand language is considered a tool for creating social cohesion, usually in the context of host language acquisition by immigrants. In a policy brief of 2013, the Dutch Minister for Social Affairs Lodewijk Asscher wrote, 'Learning the [Dutch] language is a first requirement for participation. Knowledge of the language grants independence, connects people and presents opportunities' (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal 2013: 2, my translation). It is safe to argue that this is the prevailing sentiment among the political elite in the majority of West European countries: host language acquisition is of vital importance, both for the individual immigrant and society as a whole. But on the other hand, language is regarded as a source of division, in this case usually referring to the role of migrant mother tongues. These languages, especially when they impair host language acquisition, might help develop undesirable segregated communities.

When this study commenced in September 2014, the immigration debate was still relatively tame compared to the present time (2019). Within these five years we have witnessed, among other events, several Islamic-inspired terrorist attacks on European soil, the refugee crisis, and an attempted coup against the Erdoğan regime in Turkey which had clear ramifications for the Turkish diaspora in Europe. These events have massively influenced this project. Over the course of these four years I have experienced first-hand the strong interaction between the fields of social sciences/ humanities and the 'living world' one is researching.

[1] The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Program (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement no. 613344.

Political events thus presented several hurdles that had to be overcome, which was a largely successful exercise. What will be presented in the following chapters is an explorative theoretical and topical study that attempts to fill a particular but relevant niche within migration research: namely the connection between language (policy) and migration; or, to put it differently, the possible causal relationship between language (policy) as the 'X' and migration as the 'Y'. Migration theory has over the decades included many different explanations of why migration flows occur, and of the factors which influence their size and composition. Logical explanations such as income inequality, demography (and population size in particular) and the presence of social networks have both theoretically and empirically been investigated to a great extent. Language and language policy have rarely been featured as a separate explanation, even though in the current age of relatively accessible transnational communication (via the internet) and affordable long-distance travel options it is difficult to imagine language *not* being an important factor.

This study thus aimed from the outset to explore whether this omission of language was indeed justified, or whether perhaps a new explaining factor for migration flows should be added to the existing body of theoretical literature. It was decided to focus on three 'ideal-type' EU countries, according to the existing literature, when it comes to language policy: multicultural Sweden, assimilationist France, and the Netherlands, which transitioned from a multicultural to a more assimilationist country. In the course of the research it became clear that these rather rigid theoretical classifications were much more fluid in practice, a view that has been shared by several scholars (Bertossi, Duyvendak and Scholten 2015). In all three countries data would be gathered on a non-EU and EU migrant group: the Turkish and Polish communities respectively. Previous studies on the effects of migrant languages rarely included perspectives of the immigrants themselves, which is an omission this study aims to correct. These groups were well represented in all three countries and across the whole of Western Europe, which opened up interesting research avenues, such as the connection between different diaspora communities all over the EU. In the social-science literature this development has been described as 'transnationalism'. In their edited volume *The Politics of Multilingualism*, Grin and Kraus (2018) state the relevance of studying transnationalism and questions of multilingualism jointly:

> it is obvious that mobility and transnationalisation entail challenges that can hardly be addressed in the context of the often dogmatic multilingualism associated with the period of expansion of national forms of rule, in which the dominant political tendency was to establish a tight bond between cultural standardisation and social integration. Rather, such challenges seem to require policy architectures that are as complex as the realities which they are supposed to tackle, thereby offering sophisticated institutional templates for linking 'transnational' citizenship and transnationalism (Grin and Kraus 2018: 5).

Indeed, transnationalism is a key concept when attempting to understand processes of migration and integration (or: mobility and inclusion) in the twenty-first century. Technological advances have always been a main driver for social change, and a clear case can be made for innovations in communication and transportation having a comparable effect on the inclusion of minorities. Transnationalism limits the possibilities for nation states to 'integrate' (or assimilate) their minorities within a strict national framework. Thus, transnationalism is an essential concept to include in a policy-oriented study on multilingualism.

In an attempt to establish a causal connection in theory between language and migration, it became clear early in the project that the existing conceptual apparatus, which will be elaborated upon, was not wholly sufficient. Is it logical to assume, for example, that achieving a certain linguistic competence in German would directly cause the respondent to migrate to a German-speaking country? Instead, it is more likely for migration and language to have an indirect relationship. Learning a new language does not directly cause migration, but it expands the options for potential migrants which they can act upon at a later date. Expanding language skills increases mobility *options* rather than *actual* mobility. I argue that to study the connection between language (policy) and migration properly, a comprehensive concept, taking into account both mobility options and actual mobility, is necessary, namely the concept of 'motility'. Motility has its roots in biological research and was introduced in urban geography by Kaufmann et al. (2004) to analyse mobility potential on the local level. In this study motility is further theoretically developed to be employed on the global level. It will be shown that motility is essential to understanding both present-day migration patterns and the connection between language (policy) and migration in particular.

This research has the character of an explorative study, seeking to take the first steps to flesh out the concept of motility. However, several theses will be defended, with the necessary caution. Firstly, the ideal-types of integration policies that are attributed to certain countries are in fact more nuanced in practice, and in the case of the Netherlands warrant a comprehensive reinterpretation. Secondly, perspectives on language acquisition among immigrants are very diverse and depend greatly on several societal factors, the most important of them being social class. Finally, it has become apparent over the course of this study that both the connection between language and migration, and the concept of motility, are valid, and even necessary, tools to understand patterns of migration in the twenty-first century.