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MOBILITY AND INCLUSION IN MULTILINGUAL EUROPE

THE MIME VADEMECUM

MIME
Mobility and Inclusion
in Multilingual Europe

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36 How should municipalities collect and share data about the linguistic profiles of their resident communities?

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Local awareness and knowledge of the local linguistic environment is key to a better utilisation of existing linguistic resources and an offer of better services. However, European- and national-level statistics generally lack relevance to local situations because mobile EU citizens, third-country nationals and refugees are not evenly spread over the national territory.

What does research tell us?

The available data are generally based on non-linguistic attributes (such as nationality or country of birth used as a proxy, in which case the main language of the country of birth and/or citizenship is often assumed to be a person's main language) or census questions on mother tongue in (where a census is taken). This knowledge is very partial and focuses primarily on residents' first language, at the expense of a more nuanced and complex representation of individual linguistic repertoires. These statistics often measure self-reported skills in the official language, in which case these skills in the official language are used as a rough measurement of integration and an argument for measures to enhance the use of the official language. Other language skills and their importance for social integration, educational paths and/or opportunities on the labour market are usually neglected.

Therefore, to tackle these problems municipalities should not only keep track of the linguistic characteristics of the population in their jurisdiction, but also pay particular attention to collecting data on other relevant linguistic variables, like skills in additional languages and patterns of language use in various contexts. Language skills could be monitored in conjunction with surveys on literacy (as well as Internet literacy).

Finally, these surveys could address metalinguistic skills. This would increase awareness of the importance of such skills for navigating a linguistically diverse society. Collecting this type of data, however, requires sensitivity and caution: they must enhance collective knowledge of the community without compromising the personal integrity and the privacy of individual residents.

Illustration and evidence

Such extensive data collection is unlikely to be a top priority of local governments, but inspiring examples exist. *Multilingual Graz* is a research project of the University of Graz (Austria) led by Dieter Halwachs that since 2012 has documented the languages spoken by the inhabitants of the city. It aims at improving local authorities' knowledge of cultural diversity based on the state citizenship of its residents. The website presents the languages observed in Graz (see screenshot). Each cell in this clickable table gives access to background information about the language (its name, speakers, status and area, written form and translation of standard greetings), sound fragments (with transcription and translation into German) and language biographies and language use profiles of residents of Graz speaking that language.

Policy implications

With a more nuanced assessment of the local linguistic repertoires, local authorities can adapt and improve their welcome and education policies as well as the organisation of local cultural activities.

Changes regarding the main languages of the groups arriving in the city could be signalled earlier; the efficiency of education policies could be improved by taking into account data on the main home languages of the pupils and their parents. Language courses for adult migrants could be more precisely targeted. With better knowledge of the languages mastered by learners of the local language(s) and with more insights into the language skills of newcomers, courses provided for the acquisition of the local language(s) could be organised more efficiently. For example, learners with similar language repertoires and skills or starting from the same language could be grouped together in order to focus on specific problems (from pronunciation to vocabulary and pragmatics).

Screenshot of the main page of the website Multilingual Graz representing observed languages in Graz (accessed 19 July 2017).

Such data collection can also be useful to raise awareness among all local residents about their linguistically diverse environment. Insight into the linguistic environment is also useful for organising local cultural activities. Public libraries could offer books and audio-visual materials in the main languages spoken in the local community and offer residents the opportunity to maintain and to expand their linguistic repertoires. Community activities could be organised to introduce (other) residents to the local linguistic diversity and to facilitate exchange between speakers of the same language or between those interesting in learning them. Likewise, social cohesion could be boosted by matching local volunteers with whom conversation lessons may be traded with migrants (this formula is known as the "tandem" model). Local schools can open their doors after school time to provide the infrastructure for such encounters (after working hours for most immigrants and volunteers).

References and further reading

Language statistics typically pertaining to mother tongue, language taught in secondary education or self-reported language skills:

Languages in Secondary Education: An Overview of National Tests in Europe – 2014/15 ▸ eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/facts_and_figures/187EN_HI.pdf

Office for National Statistics 2013 Language in England and Wales (2011). *Language in England and Wales: 2011.* ▸ goo.gl/gm5KJz

Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and their Languages ▸ ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf

See Tube Tongues for a visualisation based on these census data for languages around underground stations in London ▸ goo.gl/Dm6wUf