How can linguists contribute to the refugee crisis? Issues and responses

Public Event and Conference (Migrants and Language(s), Birkbeck,
University of London, 21-22 March 2016)

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Public Event and Conference

(*Migrants and Language(s)*, Birkbeck, 21-22 March 2016)

HOW CAN LINGUISTS CONTRIBUTE TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS? ISSUES AND RESPONSES

**Penelope GARDNER-CHLOROS, Nikolaos GOGONAS,
Lisa MCENTEE-ATALIANIS**

Mots-clés: *superdiversité, crise des migrants, discours de presse, (langue et) citoyenneté, impact linguistique de la migration, apprentissage des langues, maintien des langues, perte des langues*

Parole-chiavi: *superdiversità, crisi dei migranti, discorso di stampa, (lingua) e cittadinanza, impatto linguistico della migrazione, apprendimento delle lingue, mantenimento delle lingue, perdita delle lingue, superdiversità, crisi dei migranti, discorso di stampa, (lingua) e cittadinanza, impatto linguistico della migrazione, apprendimento delle lingue, mantenimento delle lingue, perdita delle lingue.*

In 2007, Steven Vertovec introduced the term *super-diversity* as a way to describe new patterns of migration in the United Kingdom that surpassed anything the country had experienced in the past. Although this term's usefulness in identifying a completely new and different state of affairs at the linguistic level is still controversial, there is little doubt that the consequences of migration have acquired a new urgency and topicality for the receiving countries.

Ever since a series of sociopolitical developments have resulted in ever increasing immigration to the UK as well as to other countries of Northwestern Europe. The most prominent developments are:

(a) The accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU which increased immigration from these two countries, following similar developments after the accession of Poland in 2004.

(b) The economic crisis in Southern Europe since 2009. New migrants from the European south are young, highly skilled and more educated than the 'guestworkers' of the 1960s and 70s - a characteristic they have in common with many refugees from Syria.

(c) Syria's civil war as the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Half the country's pre-war population - more than 11 million people - have been killed or forced to flee their homes. Families are struggling to survive inside Syria, or make a new home in neighbouring countries. Others are risking their lives on the way to Europe, hoping to

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find acceptance and opportunity. As we write, the European institutions and the member states most affected are wrestling to set up a manageable framework for dealing with these overwhelming developments.

Among the many challenges which these developments present, the Public Event and Conference at Birkbeck on 21/22 March 2016, hosted by Penelope Gardner-Chloros and Lisa McEntee-Atalianis, attempted to address the question as to how European states handle the specifically linguistic challenges brought about by the attendant new mobilities, especially those deriving from (c) above. The conference on 22 March opened with a useful political and historical summary by Eric Kaufmann of the events which led up to what is now widely called ‘the migrant crisis’. Guus Extra placed the likely linguistic impact of the new migrations in the context of existing multilingualism in Europe, pointing out the implicit hierarchy in which national languages of the EU states - with English increasingly on top - are celebrated most at the EU level, regional minority languages are less so, and recent immigrant languages the least. The latter are only marginally covered by EU language promotion programmes and mainly considered in the context of provisions for learning the national languages of the “migrants’ countries of residence”. There is a great need for educational policies in Europe that take the much more complex new realities of multilingualism into account.

One significant way in which Europe deals with the evolving linguistic situation is via gatekeeping. As Peter Patrick explained, this is achieved through LADO - *Language Analysis for Determination of Origin* - a process used by governments in processing asylum seekers who are undocumented and whose claim of origin is doubted. Applicants are interviewed by government agencies seeking to ascertain whether they speak the language of a group they say they belong to, as part of testing their claim to come from a certain nation, region or group. Generally speaking, speech recordings of telephone interviews are analysed to determine whether an applicant’s speech patterns show expected features of the specific language variety spoken by their claimed group. However, very often, state officials or non-expert linguists conducting LADO make false assumptions, which are informed by the ideology of perfect monolingualism in a standard national language which still persists in many European states and secondly by the ideology of ‘once a native speaker, always a native speaker’ which does not take into account the well-documented phenomenon of language attrition (see below). The key question that needs to be addressed scientifically in the context of LADO is not one of nationality but of language socialization and speech commu-

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nity membership.

For those who manage to pass through the LADO process successfully and be admitted to an EU country, the challenge of *integration* lies ahead. The European Handbook for Integration (1) states (2010: 160): 'Basic knowledge of the host society's language, history and institutions is indispensable to integration; enabling immigrants to acquire this basic knowledge is essential to successful integration'. Clearly, the acquisition of language skills in the host country's language helps migrants find employment and avoid marginalization in the public realm and in service contexts such as banks and health clinics. Melissa Moyer's study of the difficulties faced by migrants in a medical context illustrated the difficulties of relying on interpreters in such cases, even where the latter are provided by the institutions concerned. Support for migrants to learn the host language should be central to any policy that aims to meet the challenge and to help them to contribute to society and to the economy. And yet, in the UK, as pointed out by Melanie Cook, ESOL is under threat after a series of deep cuts made by the last two governments. There has been an estimated cut by 60% to the host language teaching provision since 2007, and fees have gradually been introduced for those in employment or not on 'active benefits'.

Added to this, teachers face increasing challenges in providing an inclusive, language-rich environment in which children of many different mother-tongues can effectively be taught together and thrive. As Sofia Ali explained, specialised funding was first introduced in 1966 but from 2012 schools were no longer required to spend the funding on EAL learners or ethnic minority pupils at risk of underachievement. Together with the absence of any government guidelines on how to manage the integration of EAL pupils, this has led to a diversity of practice in schools across the UK.

At the same time, in the UK as in some other countries, there has been a shift away from multiculturalism and the recognition of difference towards a spurious association between competence in English and political belonging (or what David Cameron terms 'British values'), and, equally unsupported by evidence, between a lack of English knowledge and tendencies to radicalization. Right wing parties with anti-immigrant agendas have in some cases gained considerable power (*e.g.* in France, Germany and the Netherlands). This is related on the one hand to polarization over economic austerity measures, and on the other hand to nationalistic sentiment fanned up so as to justify limiting immigration, even when doing so is contrary to legally binding agreements (*e.g.* the free circulation of workers within the EU, and the humanitarian obligation to provide asylum under

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international treaties).

The role of the populist press in diffusing such anti-migrant discourse is crucial and was explored in the talk by Will Allen. As he demonstrated, critical studies of news discourse show that migrants in UK print media are most often presented in such a way as to propagate myths about them and to depict them in a negative light. A large, corpus-based study of articles in a range of British newspapers revealed that the adjective which was by far most often associated with the noun 'migrants' was 'illegal'. Such tendentious reporting is important as public concern is high, with over 4 out of 10 people in the UK thinking that immigration is one of the most important issues facing the country (Ipsos MORI February 2016). Press coverage of migrants being generally negative, a more comprehensive and systematic look at the press is needed to formulate guidelines about how the press should cover events.

Governments frequently comment on the alleged weaknesses of the multicultural model and the advantages of 'thicker' notions of community, as attested by the revision of the citizenship law and policy in the UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere to include more stringent testing in the host language, despite the lack of evidence as to any positive effects of such a policy. There has been much hand-wringing about integration, as countries try to come to terms with the impact, perceived and real, of immigration. Language learning is often central to such debates but migrants themselves are rarely heard with regard to what they think about the issues which concern them and the challenges they face to 'integrate' and get on in the host society.

The rare presence of the migrants' own voice in the media, and the impact of this one-sided presentation, was the object of the talk by Lisa McEntee-Atalianis and Colleen Cotter. The conventions of journalism are partly to answer for how a story is constructed and how the representations of migrants are read. Many have argued that the migrant voice is absent within the media; however McEntee-Atalianis and Cotter uncovered instances of their presence in recent UK newspaper articles. Their paper theorized the role of 'voice' (or the linguistic construction of social personae) by journalists, showing how news discourse works with other rhetorical devices to advance a particular stance or value judgment by or about migrants and their conditions. They found that the migrant voice is often neutrally presented in both tabloid and broadsheets; however it is the surrounding text within the article which constructs a particular stance/news slant and a particular identity for the migrant/migrant community. They recommended ways to promote the migrant voice in newspaper coverage and the importance of raising linguistic and pragmatic aware-

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ness amongst journalists and newspaper readership.

European states need to implement policies *beyond* the unilateral concept of “integration”. David Little presented a positive framework developed within the LIAM (Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants) project, launched in 2006 by the Council of Europe. Its purpose is to support member states in the development of policy and practice that recognizes and respects migrants’ human rights. It is also worth mentioning the *Refugee Project*, which is ongoing, consisting of a toolkit to help volunteers working for governments, NGOs and local agencies. There is a need to disseminate good practice to other teaching contexts throughout Europe so as to help teachers and students resist dominant, negative discourses around migration. In a similar vein, but in the very different context of refugee camps in Lebanon, Turkey, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Jordan, the *Language for Resilience* project is investigating the literacy practices of young pupils and parents as well as their language learning needs. It further examines how international agencies understand resilience for Syrian refugees and what this means for building resilience within host countries on an individual, community and institutional level. This project was presented by Tony Capstick, who is directly involved in data collection. Run by the British Council, it focuses on the teaching of English, but insights from the project would potentially be relevant for European countries’ policy makers in implementing pluralistic approaches to integration.

Another set of practices, presented by Raymonde Sneddon in the UK context and linked to successful integration, concerns inclusive approaches to EAL teaching, valuing the students’ home languages in the school context, encouraging their learning and supporting parents in teaching them. In UK schools a positive approach to home languages for bilingual pupils led to the development of a stronger interest in reading in English. Therefore, a coherent policy that recognises the value of multilingualism both for the individual and society and supports initiatives in both the voluntary and the mainstream sectors is very necessary. So is an awareness among educators about the migrant youths’ ethnolinguistic identity construction through the range of their language and literacy practices in the family context and in peer communities. Jacomine Nortier and Penelope Gardner-Chloros presented studies in various urban European contexts which have pointed to the development of youth vernaculars as well as to the emergence of phenomena such as *crossing*, involving migrant languages which may be officially ignored but which nonetheless carry considerable *covert prestige*. Research may reveal the possible influence of Syrian Arabic, or the languages of newly

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arrived adolescents from elsewhere, on urban youth styles in the future. Such research should also have implications for curriculum learning. Conversely, Monika Schmid's talk described the effects of first language attrition, which has so far been studied mainly in relation to individual bilinguals, but which is likely to occur on a broader scale even within the first generation of arrivals if there is a failure to accommodate and nurture the linguistic capital that the migrants bring with them. While host countries may be happy to ignore this issue, the attendant loss of identity and anomie which is suffered can have far-reaching psychological impact on the migrants and add a further stumbling block on their path to integration.

To sum up, the various talks covered a wide range of linguistic issues and concerns of direct relevance to the current crisis. Beginning with the reasons for the new influx of migrants in Europe, European multilingual policy was then evoked, and its failure to represent or valorize the actual languages spoken by large groups of people. A failure to acknowledge and take account of the linguistic realities within migrants' lives could lead to false determination of origin and faulty decisions regarding asylum. Despite the existence of positive initiatives, especially at international level, to encourage integration in a pluralistic sense, at a national level migrants' need to communicate effectively in institutional and work settings is insufficiently catered for. Budgets to teach them the host-country language are being cut, while paradoxically, host-country language competence is being written into citizenship tests and held up as a necessary sign of loyalty to the host-country. In schools, budget cuts mean that measures promoting multiculturalism are increasingly left to individual teachers' initiatives, and research about the benefits of mother tongue maintenance is under-recognised or ignored. This is likely to lead to attrition of the mother-tongue and identity difficulties which will differentially affect the different generations within the migrants. The formulation of positive policies is not aided by creeping negativity towards migrants in public opinion, as to which the media were held to frequently manipulate and misrepresent both migration in general and the voices of individual migrants. Time will tell to what extent the new languages spoken in Europe, or the differing proportions of speakers of existing languages, will impact on the local linguistic and cultural landscape, and whether multicultural speech modes, for example, gain further currency among adolescents, as has already been the case in several multicultural capitals.

We may conclude from this conference that it is the shared opinion of linguists of many different areas of specialism that the specific language characteristics, needs and identity of migrants are woefully

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under-recognised or ignored in the European countries which are receiving them. A first step would be for their languages to be considered a fully-fledged part of the European linguistic tapestry and included within multilingual policies at all levels. This involves valuing and where possible maintaining the languages of origin in schools, as has been argued in the case of the languages of regional minorities, which have also battled for recognition. This is not for merely idealistic reasons, but also because extensive research shows this to be educationally effective. Second, the complexity and diversity of individual linguistic profiles should be better recognised, as otherwise injustices and human rights violations arise when people are simplistically categorized by assumed linguistic origin. Third, it is seriously counterproductive to cut funding for host-country language teaching provision, while paying lip-service to the need for integration and while strengthening the association between competence in the national language and citizenship. Fourth, it is necessary to counteract the continuing misrepresentation of migrants in press discourse, which forms and informs public opinion; the challenge here resides in the fact that the press is a commercial operation, and bad news and scandal sell more copies than positive messages. Again, this should be based not on idealism or propaganda, but on respect for the truth, and false messages should be exposed. Finally, linguists should consider how best they can get out these various messages, while showing that they are scientifically, rather than ideologically or politically, based.

FOOTNOTE

Niessen, J. and Huddleston, T. (2010) (3rd edition) Handbook on Integration for Policy-makers and Practitioners. European Commission Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security. http://europa.eu/comm/justice_home/ or www.integration.eu ISBN 978-92-79-13511-8 doi: 10.2758/15387