

Valuing Community Languages: Policy impact of research into urban multilingualism

Conference Report

2nd - 3rd May 2014

The University of Manchester

This report summarises keynotes and main thoughts from the conference ‘Valuing Community Languages: policy impact of research into urban multilingualism’, held on 2-3 May 2014 at the University of Manchester. Hosted by Multilingual Manchester, in co-operation with Manchester Investment and Development Agency Services (MIDAS) and Manchester City Council, the conference was attended by a range of academic experts and sector stakeholders, as well as students and University colleagues with diverse research backgrounds.

The conference began with two panel discussion forums, focusing on community languages in Local Authority service delivery and the business sector. Research on urban multilingualism was then explored and exchanged in an academic seminar, followed by a final panel discussion centred on minority communities.

Yaron Matras opened the events with an introduction and welcome, outlining the language situation in Manchester and the aims of sharing collective experience of urban multilingualism. By bringing together academic experts with knowledge of other cities and Manchester-based agents who experience multilingualism in the host city, it was hoped that a rich blend of expertise could be shared.

Guus Extra, University of Tilburg: Responding to increasing linguistic diversity in multicultural cities: beyond the outcomes of the Language Rich Europe project (2010-2013)

Guus Extra began the presentations with an overview of recent developments in the Language Rich Europe (LRE) project, which promotes language learning as a means to increase social inclusion and intercultural dialogue in Europe. Cross-national co-operation in creating policies and sharing good practice are key to this project. Data were presented from a range of domains: educational settings, public services, businesses, media and official documents. Several observations and recommendations could be made by LRE. Few countries, for example, were found to officially teach or promote the learning of immigrant languages in the classroom: the project encourages the recognition of a variety of mother tongues in education. Compulsory language education in the UK was found to fall short of most other European nations. Only Greece joins the four UK constituent countries in ending compulsory foreign language education before upper secondary level. The UK is, however, the first EU country to collect Census data on languages other than the national language, although Extra underlined the underestimation caused by the ambiguous wording of this “main language” question. Regarding future policy, LRE promotes a harmonisation of European statistics on linguistic diversity and looks to the Victorian School of Languages in Melbourne, Australia, for good practice on provision of languages in education.

Antonella Sorace, University of Edinburgh: Multilingualism and minority languages: changing attitudes through information

Focusing on the value of community languages from a largely cognitive perspective, Antonella Sorace presented the aims and findings of the Bilingual Matters research. A bi-directional relationship was outlined: child multilingualism is important for the transmission, and sometimes survival, of languages, while raising children with a diverse linguistic repertoire arguably gives them a range of additional linguistic and cognitive benefits. These include enhanced metalinguistic and language-learning abilities, as well as refined “executive control” and mental flexibility. The initiative aims to promote multilingualism through provision of information on these positive effects to parents, teachers, health professionals, policy makers and more. Through work with local authorities and Scottish Government, the researchers have contributed to policy formation and are expanding on an international scale.

Clare Mar-Molinero, University of Southampton: Managing urban multilingualism: a case study of local language policies in the city of Southampton

Clare Mar-Molinero introduced the city of Southampton, and gave an overview of its language policy. As an 'average' British city, and especially as a port, Southampton is home to communities and migrants of various backgrounds who have enriched the city's language profile. There is still, however, a default monolingualism in the public sector. Mar-Molinero highlighted that funding issues dictate formation of language policies; both in cutbacks, that restrict policy, and in commercial gain, that drives some positive reactions to potential developments. Southampton City Council discourages translation of documents in favour of promoting English language learning (according to Mar-Molinero, arguably due to budget cuts.) Across the public sector, rather than an over-arching language policy, there is a complex series of top-down directives that are interpreted on the ground within a context of everyday contact, individual decisions and existing prejudices.

Panel discussion: Delivering services to a linguistically diverse community

Chaired by Yaron Matras, this discussion forum opened with statements from Clare Mar-Molinero regarding language policy in Southampton and Dieter Halwachs (University of Graz) on the extent to which any formal language policy is required. Guus Extra then spoke on the contributions of universities and, finally, Atul Ramanuj (Manchester Translations and Interpreting service) outlined Manchester City Council's strategies to serve a linguistically diverse public.

To firstly look elsewhere in the UK, Southampton City Council openly privileges English and does not actively translate documents. According to the Council, this approach stems from lack of literacy, the impracticality of translating in a large number of languages and a desire to follow the



national example. Attempts to form a language policy in the city ultimately painted multilingualism as a hindrance and aimed for higher English proficiency. However, it was argued that cities do not need a fully formulated language policy; rather, their dynamic, transient populations necessitate an informed and up-to-date awareness within institutions. The issue of resources, and recent economic restrictions, is key to the discussion of successfully delivering services. The media often emphasise the cost to the taxpayer of translation and interpreting, yet, as taxpayers, service users are entitled to this vital provision. This discourse of a costly, unnecessary drain is also exploited by politicians to win votes: to shake the prevailing colonialist view of linguistic diversity as a blockade rather than an enrichment opportunity, public figures

and politicians must avoid enforcing assimilation by condemning language needs. Nevertheless, greater efficiency among translation and interpreting services is to be encouraged to successfully deliver services to a linguistically diverse public.



Universities, as well as grass-roots organisations, can add value to the delivery of services in an ideological and practical sense. Students can be made sensitive to issues of linguistic diversity and service provision through outreach work within their undergraduate courses, and as these students progress to work in the local area or simply interact with their immediate network, awareness is raised and ideologies may begin to shift.

The value of NGOs and community organisations could be maximised further when connecting with a linguistically diverse public, considering the volatility of public sector funding. It appears that additional support is available to service providers, and that organisations do sometimes engage with academic and third sector support; however, there is no clear reference point or network, leading to misinformed decisions. To counter this, a Manchester Language Forum was proposed. As an exchange of information, data and advice, this forum could more effectively respond to the changing needs of a linguistically diverse city and was fully supported by both Multilingual Manchester and Manchester City Council.

Panel discussion: The value of community languages for economic growth

This panel discussion heard statements from Bernardette Holmes, Campaign Director at Speak to the Future and lead researcher at Born Global, and Helen Kelly-Holmes, University of Limerick.

Yaron Matras first gave an insight into the role of language in Manchester's economy. Reports from MIDAS emphasise the importance of languages in business, with the average company citing language skills as one of the top five considerations when planning investing in Manchester. Language has become a commodity in the city, with commercial ventures stemming from multilingualism: multilingual signage, satellite television provisions and the wealth of translation and interpreting agencies, for example. Language is not only beneficial for business, however; businesses, in turn, support language vitality by increasing visibility and encouraging their maintenance.

Born Global, a research project funded by the British Academy, examines the language needs of businesses in an effort to reemphasise the importance of language learning in the education system. Faced with falling uptake of language A-levels and degree routes, the research aims to clarify the value of linguistic diversity in stimulating a vibrant export market and pinpoint the actual competencies needed in a business context. The initiative also celebrates multilingual schools, often portrayed in the media as highly problematic, as hives of talent that will enhance the next-generation workforce. It was noted that organisations recognise

more than oral proficiency: initial results suggest that literacy in languages other than English and cross-cultural flexibility are equally valuable.

Businesses use languages in a complex fashion; rather than simply increasing profit, multilingual branding can encourage an affinity with a certain community or segment the market. The Internet lessens economies of scale through schemes such as crowd-sourced translations and facilitates the use of lesser-represented community languages, allowing companies to target a wider range of minority communities.

In order for businesses to access the benefits of a multilingual workforce, it seems that language learning must be further supported in primary, secondary and higher education. Increased dialogue between these two sectors will shape a more meaningful curriculum and encourage pupils to value their language skills as professional assets.

Ben Rampton, King's College London: Urban speech and linguistic citizenship

Resuming the presentations, Ben Rampton explored the case of linguistic citizenship in contrast to Linguistic Human Rights (LHR), outlining how the latter involves selective provision for a specific group, granted by state authorities. Associated with a top-down approach, LHR marginalises non-standard speakers of a language and fails to account for mixing and hybridity. Speakers have diverse identities, and country of origin cannot sufficiently capture these individual biographies. The notion of linguistic citizenship, however, focuses on 'voice' and values a range of linguistic practises – including those perceived as low-status – which are often more strongly linked to grass-roots activity rather than formal institutions. According to Rampton, language education in England suffers from the dominance of linguistic purism, devaluing the efforts of those speaking non-standard varieties or who have low proficiency in a language. Future policy could accommodate the values of linguistic citizenship to avoid these issues. Although schools are likely to rely on state directives, bottom-up initiatives encouraging these notions do exist in a number of schools and take language education closer to the reality of linguistic diversity.

Bente A. Svendsen, University of Oslo: Social identities and values in the debate on 'Kebab-Norwegian': an ideological battlefield

Bente A. Svendsen presented the debate on 'Kebab-Norwegian'; a variety of Norwegian that contains borrowings from popular immigrant languages such as Turkish, Persian and Arabic. Played out in the Norwegian mass media, this debate saw opponents of the variety ascribing rigid values to its speakers and their backgrounds. Not only has 'Kebab-Norwegian' been presented as unintelligible and damaging to employment prospects, its speakers have been classified as a homogeneous, immigrant youth. This view neglects the massive social and linguistic diversity found among speakers, and fails to report that – supported by qualitative evidence from Svendsen's research – users are aware of and actively differentiate between more and less appropriate contexts in which to speak this variety. The presence of language ideologies and their effect on the perpetuation of linguistic stereotypes must be considered when language issues are debated in the media.

Angelika Redder, University of Hamburg: Societal multilingualism in Hamburg: some empirical findings and best practices

An overview of societal multilingualism in Hamburg was outlined by Angelika Redder. As a city with relatively high levels of immigration, there are various societal challenges posed by this intense linguistic interaction. Among these, Redder highlighted the emergence of a new linguistic suprastructure and discursive intercultural, the shift from individual to societal multilingualism and the differentiation between

communitarian, teleological and gnoseological linguistic functions. Multilingualism in Hamburg appears to be predominantly communitarian and multilingual communication occurs particularly in domains of consumption and distribution. Moving forward, policy can be shaped with three guiding principles: making use of the interconnected, institutional movement towards multilingual communication; encouraging a civil, as well as educational, discursive intercultural to counteract prevailing national monolingualism; promoting linguistic diversity in the workplace and in urban spaces.

Victoria Robinson and Esther de Leeuw, Queen Mary University of London: Multilingual Experiences: a comparison of large and small minority languages in Hackney

The 2011 Census revealed considerable variation in the number of speakers of individual languages in London boroughs. Victoria Robinson presented an exploration of linguistic variation in Hackney, focusing on the experiences of heavily-represented minority language speakers (Polish and French, in this case) compared to lesser-represented minority language speakers (Xhosa and Bulgarian). A study was undertaken with four female participants, investigating their self-reported language usage patterns, attitudes and perceived proficiency. Results showed that Xhosa and Bulgarian speakers used these languages a lot less frequently and in fewer domains than Polish and French speakers, plus experienced more English language interference in their home language speech. Robinson concluded that individual experiences of multilingualism are highly differentiated, and that variation between 'small' and 'large' minority language usage could have implications on language maintenance in migrant settings.

Barbara Schrammel-Leber, University of Graz: Urban Multilingualism: research and awareness raising

Barbara Schrammel-Leber guided conference participants through the Multilingual Graz research activity, based at the University of Graz, Austria. The project aims to document language usage, functions and attitudes in Graz, while using university research, community outreach and art to raise public and institutional awareness of multilingualism. The Multilingual Graz website contains basic information and greetings to learn for numerous languages, as well as biographies and student-led interviews for a varied pool of speakers. By making information accessible - and comprehensible - to the general public, Multilingual Graz aims to reframe popular but misguided ideas on language diversity and show that multilingualism touches many areas of life, not just domains restricted to 'foreigners'. Engaging particularly with schoolchildren in turn prompts parents to reflect on their own family's multilingualism and providing support to families, schools and institutions encourages a more informed and positive outlook on language diversity.

Evelyn Ziegler, University of Duisburg-Essen: Visibility of minority languages in the Ruhr-Area (Germany): discourses and functions

Initial findings of the research project "Signs of the Metropolises: Visual multilingualism in the Ruhr Area" were presented by Evelyn Ziegler. The research aims to better understand the extent to which regional varieties, as well as minority and majority languages, shape the linguistic landscape and constitute a community resource. In order to achieve this aim, researchers have begun to analyse over 25,000 geo-coded photos plus interviews with local residents – both taken from neighbourhoods with residential, trade and commercial components - to gain an impression of both actual language practice and public attitudes towards languages. Photos of the linguistic landscape are tagged according to language, type of discourse, locality and more. Analysis of these elements suggests community languages are under-represented in infrastructural facilities. A difference was noted between overt and covert multilingualism, the latter

addressing a specific community only. English was the most dominant language after German, while “Ruhrdeutsch” is used most often in transgressive discourse.

Helen Kelly-Holmes, University of Limerick: Repositioning Irish as an online community language – some policy implications

Helen Kelly-Holmes first raised the question of whether Irish is a community language: privileged as the first official language and compulsory in the curriculum, it is, on the other hand, minoritised in everyday domains such as media and business. In the Gaeltacht (officially recognised Irish-speaking areas), there are reportedly low usage levels and evident threats to the maintenance of Irish as a community language. There is, however, evidence of changing practices. Urban Gaeltacht areas have been forged, as have networks of speakers in urban districts. Community is no longer rigidly defined by location, but more by shared interest, and there is a drive to reframe intermediate standards of Irish proficiency and language mixing as an added bilingual value rather than a deficiency or interim phase. The Web allows a sense of community among small language speakers and facilitates the proliferation of linguistic materials. Various discussion boards and blogs exist to promote Irish within a performance paradigm, in contrast to previous eras which saw minority language media ‘gifted’ resources from the state and driven by provision of a functionally complete service. In terms of policy implications, Kelly-Holmes warned that attempts to control language practice and artificially guide language choice online may be futile, and can fail in full public view. It is therefore important not to lose the gains of the gifting and service eras.

Sheena Kalayil, University of Manchester: “A political animal”: A narrative enquiry into language and identity in a second-generation South Asian Briton

Sheena Kalayil presented a narrative approach to investigating multilingualism, using qualitative data to explore issues of identity and the validity of the term “community language”. Conference participants listened to snippets of an interview conducted with a second-generation South Asian Briton, who discussed his relationship with the Gujarati community and language. The interviewee often downplayed his proficiency in Gujarati, and described himself as more comfortable in English; certain phonological features were often anglicised, but did emerge occasionally in his speech, indicating that he retains proficiency in Gujarati but can manipulate his speech to identify more or less with his heritage culture. Kalayil highlighted that narrative enquiries reveal the extent of variation in life experience, linguistic competence and ideas of identity among multilinguals. For this reason, and with consideration of policy implications, we must be careful not to categorise language communities as homogeneous entities and recognise that command of the community language and feelings of identification may differ drastically between individuals.

Tünde Puskás, University of Linköping: Valuing the teachers of immigrant languages in Swedish schools

In Sweden, 20% of all pupils speak a mother tongue other than Swedish and children are entitled to mother tongue tuition, provided there is sufficient demand and an available teacher. Tünde Puskás introduced her research into the views of school leaders and municipal politicians regarding the role of these immigrant languages, and the value of mother tongue teachers, in Swedish schools. Value was divided into two categories: a symbolic value, whereby cultural diversity and identity were thought to draw benefit, and a functional value, thought to support learning in a practical sense and facilitate communication with parents. Narratives emerged from qualitative interviews that classed mother tongue teachers as visitors, with symbolic value, and multilingual teachers and bridge-builders, with functional value. In Swedish schools where few pupils have migrant backgrounds, this symbolic discourse was more prevalent and mother tongue teachers were often seen as passing, isolated visitors. In schools with greater cultural

diversity, mother tongue teachers tended to be viewed as integrated intermediaries and a multilingual resource, and immigrant language education was thought to functionally enrich a child's learning.

Alex Robertson, University of Manchester: Mapping community language skills: the School Language Survey in Manchester

The first of the Multilingual Manchester speakers, Alex Robertson presented the School Language Survey as an alternative data collection method for home languages of schoolchildren. This method aims to provide more accurate and meaningful data than the current, official School Census, which reports on behalf of children and is fairly restrictive, discounting multilingual households. Multilingual Manchester's method consists of individual interviews with pupils regarding language usage with a range of family members, exposure to media and supplementary schooling, as well as testing oral proficiency in English and other home languages. The research found that the vast majority of children in this pilot were highly proficient in English, as well as speaking a variety of home languages. Home languages other than English were more commonly used with parents as opposed to siblings, and English was more dominant when communicating with these younger family members. The research proposed a more positive focus to the maintenance of these home languages, compared to the national approach of collecting data to anticipate barriers to the acquisition of English. These language skills, if encouraged, will mean a skilled next-generation workforce in Manchester, equipped to speak global languages of trade. For lesser-represented languages, we find a pool of potential teachers and mediators who can encourage the next generation to continue with their education while preserving ties with their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Deepthi Gopal and Philippa Hughes, University of Manchester: Mapping urban multilingualism: the challenges of data triangulation

Also representing Multilingual Manchester were Deepthi Gopal and Philippa Hughes, who spoke about triangulation of data sources to explore multilingualism in Manchester. Analysing the official 2011 Census as a source of language data, it seems that the question of "main language" can be interpreted in several ways, skewing results. There are areas that can be provisionally explored, however, including geographical clustering of languages; the extent to which self-reported speakers of particular languages live in proximity to speakers of certain other languages. Comparisons with other data sources reveal a richer picture: geo-tagged tweets, interpreter requests from Manchester hospitals and the School Census, for example, provide an interesting mosaic of data.

Yaron Matras, University of Manchester: Multilingualism in the curriculum: a strategic approach

Yaron Matras concluded the presentations with an example of multilingualism in the curriculum at the University of Manchester. The model of Multilingual Manchester was presented, in which teaching and research are intertwined, using project-based assessment to build local links and expand student experience. At the University of Manchester – and across the Higher Education sector in general – there is currently a strong spotlight on the impact of the institution, and its research, on the wider community. By incorporating research into teaching, and equally using teaching as an opportunity to enhance research, Multilingual Manchester not only maximises resources and staff support available to students, but also increases the lasting impact they can have on the local area.

As a brand, Multilingual Manchester also addresses language needs in the city through a volunteer scheme and close interaction with a range of local services and organisations. Actively talking to these agencies

gives an overview of the city's approach towards languages, and allows Multilingual Manchester to establish areas of need that can be supported with student volunteers and further research.

Panel discussion: The value of languages for minority communities

Opening statements were given by Antonella Sorace, who spoke of the cognitive benefits of multilingualism, and Tünde Puskás, who outlined the teaching of immigrant languages in Sweden. Sudip Chatterjee (former Educational Development Officer, Manchester City Council) then discussed Manchester City Council's relationship to supplementary schools, followed by Munira Alsusa (Noor Arabic School), Theresa Teng (Huaxia Chinese School) and Sandy Lo (linguist with a specialism in Chinese in Manchester) who explored the maintenance of their respective languages.

Supplementary schooling in Manchester emerged as the main focus of this discussion forum, and was thought, by numerous practitioners, to have a significant influence on language vitality in the city. This influence, of course, varies according to community and will inevitably vary with passing generations; optimism regarding language maintenance can often be gauged on parental enthusiasm and it is noted that identity issues – which, again, vary with age and generational difference – tie strongly to the success of supplementary schooling. When children cannot identify with the linguistic or cultural worth of maintaining their heritage language, for career-orientated reasons or for personal development, they will be less likely to pursue this study.



Supplementary schools face various challenges in their logistical running. Raised in the discussion were the issues of high turnover rate of part-time, voluntary teachers, a lack of financial resources and difficulties in obtaining exam board recognition due to shared premises and unconventional working hours.

A closer dialogue between supplementary schools and educational

policymakers was agreed to be a positive step for resolution of the above issues. It was also widely agreed that a bidirectional learning relationship between mainstream and supplementary school leaders could benefit both systems and strengthen the perceived value of minority languages in their respective communities and in wider society. Universities can play an active role in facilitating this dialogue and bringing together educational practitioners with policymakers, as happened as a direct result of this particular discussion forum.

Outcomes

A main strand of thought emerged around the homogenisation of communities and the analytical framework by which to consider multilingualism: whether speaking dialects or standard varieties, it appears individuals and groups are often defined linguistically, ignoring the breadth of experience and varying identification found among minority communities. Multilingualism is not a uniform trait and varies according to language and according to individuals, who have very different repertoires. It is therefore unproductive to apply rigid language policies and enforce top-down directives that, despite seeming to pay due attention to language issues, continue to frame linguistic diversity as a problem. Instead, it is arguably more beneficial to consult a range of communities, researchers and agencies to gain a wider, more accurate perspective before taking strategic decisions.

As an alternative to an inflexible, formalised language policy that may quickly become outdated in a rapidly changing city, a Manchester Language Forum could provide a point of reference to encourage more informed decisions and deeper consideration of varying multilingualism by Manchester agencies. By sharing



experience and data, organisations will gain a clearer picture of not only the distribution of language communities in Manchester, but also the variation within each community.

Closer dialogue was a theme that equally emerged in the discussions of businesses and minority communities. The mainstream education system is thought to play a key role in shaping the perceived worth of multilingualism among the next-generation workforce, and matching commercial demand for language skills. This can only be targeted, however, with increased cooperation between actors in the business and education sectors. Supplementary schools were highlighted as equally important in emphasising the value of these competencies at an early age, providing a solid foundation in the language and enabling the future choice of studying it to a working proficiency. Again, mutual support between institutions could decrease barriers facing supplementary schools while highlighting elements that could improve mainstream language teaching.

Universities have a role to play in sharing knowledge that could influence policy and popular perception of the value of community languages. They can act as an intermediary between communities, researchers, policymakers and educational representatives to encourage a more informed dialogue and closer cooperation.