



EUROPEAN

POLICY BRIEF

HERITAGE LANGUAGES IN THE EU: CHALLENGES OF IMMIGRANT LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY



Advancing the European Multilingual Experience (AThEME) is a 5-year collaborative research project investigating cognitive, linguistic and sociological issues in multilingual Europe. This particular policy brief is based on AThEME findings dealing with multilingualism and heritage languages.

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INTRODUCTION

When people migrate to another country, they bring with them their native heritage language and cultural identity. One of the challenges posed by migration in Europe is to facilitate integration and social cohesion without inducing cultural displacement. This typically involves concentrating on learning the language of the host country while ignoring the importance of maintaining the heritage language. A heritage language can be defined as a minority language acquired by children at home in a context of bilingualism with a majority dominant language; this situation is similar to that of children exposed to regional minority languages (see our previous [Policy Brief on Regional Languages \(March 2018\)](#)), except that bilingualism with heritage languages is becoming more and more common due to increasing transnational mobility. There is in fact an increasing number of children and adults in migrant families who speak a language at home that is different from the community language. This raises various challenges for European societies. On the one hand, a societal priority is to facilitate the integration of migrants and refugees in the host societies by emphasizing the role of the rapid acquisition and use of the majority language (see [EU's 2011 "Action Plan for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals"](#), and ["European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals"](#)). On the other hand, integration policies underestimate the fact that migrant languages play a crucial role for the well-being of individuals and can be a valuable resource for society from the point of view of social cohesion, education, cognitive development, and cultural awareness. Sociological studies on migration and ethnicity in Europe

show that knowledge of the majority language can be acquired while maintaining knowledge of the heritage language. In the case of heritage language users in Europe, it would thus be an asset for ethnic minorities to maintain active multilingualism involving the heritage language(s) and the majority language.

What we actually see, however, is that the heritage speakers' linguistic knowledge of their home language often does not pattern with the knowledge of monolingual native speakers in the countries of origin. This is due to a variety of causes, including limited exposure to the heritage language during childhood and changes occurring in parental language input due to language contact. It is more difficult to acquire and use heritage languages as a child in a society in which the ethnic dominant population speaks another language. In fact, parental questionnaires tell us that parents find it difficult to maintain the same level of language use of the home language as the child grows older. Parents' use of the home language with the child often decreases drastically as soon as the child enters the educational system in which the societal dominant language is used, because of the pressure on parents to use the dominant language in society.

Second and third generation speakers of a heritage language pattern like regional minority language speakers in these respects: they have a special cultural bond to the language of their parents/family but they are much more proficient in the dominant language of their community and do not reach their parents' or grandparents' level of proficiency because of lack of sufficient exposure and opportunity to use the language.

In many urban and suburban areas of Europe, we also witness the emergence of *multiethnolects*: these are new varieties of the dominant language that emerge when children who between them speak many different heritage languages come into contact with each other at nursery school or primary school, where the only potential language they could share is the dominant language of the society. These children therefore acquire the dominant language through the process of 'group second language acquisition' – not through formal language instruction but through social interaction with each other.

The AThEME project closely investigated speakers in the EU who are exposed to and regularly use their heritage language in the home environment and the majority language in the ambient society. AThEME researchers in France looked at how Heritage Korean as used in France compares to Korean spoken in Korea today and to Korean as a second language. Researchers in Germany investigated how heritage Italian and heritage Turkish are maintained in the home environment of children who grow up in Southern-Germany and attend monolingual kindergartens and primary schools in Baden-Württemberg. Researchers in the UK investigated the effect of heritage languages on a new variety of English, or "multiethnolect", spoken in multilingual areas of London. Researchers in the Netherlands investigated the dynamics of Urban Youth speech style of Dutch used by Moroccan heritage Youth.

The researchers' findings show that:

- Awareness of the value of linguistic diversity and avoidance of unconscious discrimination on the basis of language are important for social inclusion, opportunities for economic advancement of people with different backgrounds, and social cohesion.
- What is missing in most European societies are enough opportunities for young children to use and value their home language.
- This is especially true at the vulnerable ages between 3 and 8 when children start to attend kindergarten and learn to read and write at primary schools.

- The new emerging varieties of the dominant language in urban contexts characterized by the presence of multiple heritage languages have both a predictable linguistic structure and a clear social function.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The first relevant finding is that **heritage language speakers are not like L1 speakers due to the fact that they do not have enough exposure or opportunity to use the heritage language.**

ATheME researchers in **France** looked at Korean heritage speakers' language comprehension and production of Korean. They compared different aspects of linguistic knowledge across different types of populations: adult and child first language (L1) speakers, child and adolescent heritage speakers, and intermediate and advanced university second language (L2) learners. The properties under investigation concerned the interpretation of sentences which, depending on their word order, are interpreted as either information seeking questions or negative statements. The results indicate that 5- to 7-year old native Korean speakers already had adult-like knowledge of properties that are difficult to acquire – that is, just like adults, they appropriately discriminated between the question vs. declarative meaning of the sentences, depending on the word order. In contrast, heritage Korean speakers, like L2 speakers, had not fully acquired this property and were less sensitive to word order, tending to interpret the test item as a question, not as a negative statement.

These findings suggest that heritage language speakers in France are not like L1 speakers – and in particular, do not have the grammatical knowledge/competence that 5- to 7-year old monolingual speakers of Korean have acquired. This result corroborates the findings for regional and minority languages that heritage Korean speakers do not have enough exposure or opportunity to use the heritage language. More importantly, it also highlights that certain deep aspects of knowledge are acquired very early on and, therefore, the importance of exposure and opportunity to use the heritage language early in life, before the age of 5-7 which is when schooling typically begins.

This conclusion is further supported by the ATheME researchers in Germany, who worked on Italian and Turkish as heritage languages. The researchers found that the use of both languages decreases over time, but particularly for children growing up in Italian-speaking families the exposure to Italian as a heritage language drastically diminishes as soon as they enter the German educational system.

The second relevant finding is that **multiethnolects (new varieties of the dominant languages) emerge in accordance with general universal principles of language structure and are markers of social identity.**

ATheME researchers in the United Kingdom have studied one of these multiethnolects: Multicultural London English (MLE). This research shows that, as this variety has emerged, it has developed properties in its grammar that follow patterns predicted by universal principles. This ranges from the use of *man* as the impersonal pronoun, new patterns of relativization as well as question formation. A further important discovery is that as children become adolescents, many of the innovative language features typical of the multiethnolect come to symbolize integration into a multiethnic, multiracial urban culture. For young people who have grown up in the multiethnic community, immigrants and non-immigrants alike, these language features are part of their usual way of speaking. But they are also taken up enthusiastically by young people from outside the community when they want to perform a 'cool' urban identity. These findings suggest that (i) even in situations of massive linguistic contact, the universal general principles that guide the

development of language change are in play; (ii) the new language features have become part of a new urban dialect. This is not a new phenomenon: throughout history, languages have always changed as a result of language contact. What is new is the extreme diversity of the languages that are brought into contact today and the fact that at a very young age children create a variety of the dominant language for themselves in order to communicate with each other, thereby allowing greater possibilities for variation and change than in earlier times.

AThEME researchers in the Netherlands focused on an Urban Youth speech style of Dutch used by Moroccan heritage youth. Different from what has been suggested in earlier literature, using this variety does not necessarily imply that the user is taking an aggressive or anti-societal stance. In fact, it seems to be used also (or rather) as a way to characterize certain stretches of conversation as ironical and not-so-serious, while standard Dutch is used for serious topics, such as religion and advice. The findings also highlighted that users of Dutch Urban Youth speech styles have clear ideas about which styles 'belong' to which groups in spite of the fact that in practice these styles are used by members of many different heritage groups, including Dutch youth without a migration background.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The AThEME research reported above focuses on heritage speakers' language comprehension and production, on the role of exposure to the heritage language throughout the early school years for heritage language maintenance, and on the effects of heritage languages on the dominant language as emergence of new urban varieties. These are critical issues in contemporary societies: the more the world moves towards the dominance of three or four languages (English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and possibly Arabic), the more the relationship between local varieties, heritage languages, national majority languages and world languages will become critical to personal and social/economic advancement. This context creates a tension between the need to integrate and favour social cohesion by learning the language of the host country, and the need to maintain the heritage language and the cultural values embedded in it. On the basis of the AThEME results, we offer the following recommendations:

Ensure continuous heritage language input throughout childhood.

This can take different forms, for example:

- Encourage continuous heritage language input within the family, by providing families with information about the benefits of maintaining their home language.
- Provide more heritage language input for children in their everyday lives to improve their language skills, which can potentially help them to develop literacy in their heritage language.
- Provide early literacy training to make a substantial difference in (the quality of) heritage language proficiency.

Promote awareness that new varieties of language always emerge as a result of language contact and that these varieties are well-structured forms of language that conform to general principles of language organization. These new varieties are not an obstacle to social inclusion provided that children have adequate access to the standard varieties so that they are not socially, educationally or economically disadvantaged and can fully participate in the wider society, as outlined in existing EU integration policies.

This can be done in different ways, including:

- dissemination of information about multiethnolects and their relation to the dominant language in the form of fact sheets, public lectures, through the media including social media, workshops for school teachers, HR departments, lawyers and other relevant sectors of society;
- production of resources for the teaching and learning of the standard varieties that also foster an understanding of linguistic diversity.

Institutions working towards policies that promote social equality and diversity (for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission) should be encouraged to include language as a protected characteristic.

Awareness of linguistic diversity and avoidance of unconscious discrimination on the basis of language is as important for social equality as awareness of the potential effects of gender, race, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

AThEME is a 5-year collaborative research project studying multilingualism in Europe. Researchers from 17 partner institutions across 8 European countries worked on (1) investigating cognitive, linguistic and sociological issues in multilingual Europe, (2) assessing existing public policies and practices within the areas of education and health and (3) contributing to evidence-based policy making.

The project focused on four main research themes: **(a) regional minority languages, (b) heritage languages, (c) atypical bilingualism and communicative impairment, and (d) the cognitive aspects of being multilingual.** The aim is to advance knowledge of the various factors that contribute to successful multilingualism in different environments and in typical and atypical contexts, as well as to understand how multilingualism affects language comprehension in human interaction, and what the effects of multilingualism are at the neuro-cognitive level.

The main research objectives relating to heritage language users in Europe were to increase an understanding of the use and maintenance of these languages within migrant families in different European contexts, and to analyse the linguistic and social effects of multilingualism with heritage languages on new varieties of the dominant language. To this end, the following objectives were identified and addressed:

- to understand the factors contributing to partial language development and attrition in heritage languages, and those enabling speakers to maintain their heritage language and reach proficient bi- or multilingualism;
- to understand the impact of schooling and literacy in the majority language on maintenance of the heritage language;
- to assess the impact of multilingualism with heritage languages on the emergence of new urban varieties – multiethnolects – and to examine the linguistic and social characteristics of these varieties.

A defining feature of the AThEME project is its interdisciplinarity, involving researchers from theoretical linguistics, sociolinguistics, experimental linguistics and cognitive psychology working together to address complex research questions arising in different contexts of multilingualism. AThEME research combined theoretical and empirical work. Most of the linguistic research was

qualitative, but some teams used a range of quantitative methods. Most of the psycholinguistic research was experimental and relied on a variety of methods to collect both online and offline data.

Dissemination plays an important role in the AThEME project and was coordinated jointly by Bilingualism Matters centre in Edinburgh (through a network of branches set up in each partner country) and the Taalstudio in Amsterdam. Dissemination meetings were organised every other year in order to establish and facilitate contact and exchange between research teams and different groups of practitioners.

More details on the AThEME project, its activities and research outcomes are available on www.atheme.eu.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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**FURTHER
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