



Council of Europe
Language Policy Unit
DGII – Education Department
www.coe.int/lang-migrants

Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants



Linguistic integration

The integration of newly-arrived migrants is a multifaceted process, and therefore complex to evaluate. Various indicators have been developed to assess how successful adjustment to another society has been. These include using as basis broad areas like social inclusion, health, etc. or more specific indicators (income, employment, housing, education, participation in society, etc.) such as those developed by Eurostat (Indicators of Immigrant Integration, 2011). These methods of analysis very often do not include criteria which are directly related to languages, even though the language of the host country is to greater or lesser degree crucial for adult migrants, especially in cases of long-term settlement.

The genuine integration of migrants into their new society also involves efforts to accommodate them that go beyond the specific steps taken to welcome them. The acceptance of new forms of social behaviour, provided that they do not infringe the fundamental values of democracy, presupposes that that the society in question is open to otherness and tolerant of change. It is important that this "collective self-questioning", which challenges the natural inertia of long-lasting cultural change, should be accompanied by educational measures for the benefit of everyone everywhere. (see White Paper).

Specific nature of linguistic integration

While it is possible to use the term 'linguistic integration', this kind of integration is definitely not to be regarded as being the same as other kinds. This is because languages are not to be seen merely as practical means of communication which simply need to be acquired, just as migrants end up finding housing or employment. They can also be used as material for building both individual and group cultural identities. As identity markers that are assumed, laid, claim to, or merely tolerated, languages play a part in creating social and cultural distinctions, just as religious beliefs and clothing do. Thus, learning and using a new language – the language of the host society – or using other languages there the migrant already knows but which are unfamiliar to the established population is not just a practical matter but may also trigger processes that lead to the questioning of identities.

Linguistic integration: an asymmetric process

The linguistic integration of migrants who speak other languages in the society which receives them is not a symmetrical process. For the members of the host society, the visible presence of new languages can trigger anxiety or fears about national identity surrounding challenges to (often imagined) linguistic unity or corruption of the dominant language as a result of "contamination" by other languages, not necessarily just those used by migrants. People find it hard to accept the development of a new form of diversity that replaces the traditional linguistic diversity of their home territory (regional and minority languages). These reactions occur at an ideological level, although the arrival of new languages in a given territory does not

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have direct implications for the established population who are under no obligation to learn the new languages.

For migrants, the issues are immediate and have other implications: they may view the acquisition of a language of the dominant language of their new home as a form of enrichment of their identity or may feel that it makes them vulnerable. Then again, learning the new language may cause suffering (through inability to express oneself) or may possibly undermine their existing identity. They may rightly fear that the language to be learnt will “drive out” their previous languages (including their mother tongue) for functional reasons and lead to the loss of a 'sense of belonging'.

Whereas for the established population it is their understanding of national identity which is at stake, for migrants both their cultural identity and their group allegiances may be called into question. The price of integration differs according to the viewpoint.

Linguistic integration: a one-way process?

The very idea of linguistic integration may actually only be one of what the established population deem to be the duties of newcomers and it is not necessarily the main aim of the newcomer. 'Integration' is actually often taken to mean that migrants do not stand out from other speakers or do so only minimally (through a slight accent, for instance) or even that they do not use their other languages in public and forget them. In this view of integration, migrants should go unnoticed linguistically and use the 'normal' language of the native population. This is an external interpretation of integration, which relates to the wishes of certain native speakers, namely the gradual elimination of differences combined with linguistic standardisation. This interpretation also requires adult migrants to show a high level of proficiency in the dominant/official language, which is perceived as a demonstration of their loyalty and allegiance to the host country. In the final analysis, proficiency in language is equated with citizenship: “someone who speaks French (well) is French”.

These 'assimilationist' expectations may be offset by a curiosity for unknown languages, a desire to learn them, goodwill regarding mistakes that are made or difficulties migrants have in expressing themselves and acceptance of the use of other languages in public or in the media. These more positive attitudes may depend on the degree of legitimacy attached to the languages (migrants' languages versus foreigners' languages) and to a large extent on the degree of acceptance of inherited diversity. These positive attitudes should be encouraged by all forms of intercultural education.

The position of the Council of Europe is that the external definition of linguistic integration mentioned above is not consistent with either the real needs of the host society or the expectations of migrants themselves and the rights they should be granted. From an internal perspective, integration should not be defined solely in relation to acquisition of the majority/dominant language, but in relation to each individual's language repertoire. From the point of view of migrant speakers, linguistic integration should accordingly be understood as their adjustment to their (new) communication environment, i.e. as a rearrangement of their individual repertoires and the integration of the languages that make up these repertoires.

The forms of linguistic integration

Looked at from this point of view, several forms of linguistic integration are possible, and just as many ways of adjusting individual language repertoires to a new linguistic environment. They reflect the various aims or needs of migrants (or other groups). Whether the adjustments are satisfactory or not is for the individuals concerned to judge.

A distinction may be made between:

- low level integration of the languages in the repertoire: the language resources available in the individual repertoire are uneven because the resources in the majority language are insufficient to deal with communication situations effectively without considerable effort. Communication often requires the involvement of third parties and its success depends largely on the linguistic goodwill of the other speakers. This may lead to social self-censorship: the migrants do not take part in or actually avoid certain activities because they seem linguistically too challenging. They may regard their repertoire as ineffective and a source of frustration. This may lead to them being 'excluded' by native speakers of the language. However, they may equally well be accepted by them with greater value being assigned to their previous languages and a purely practical role to the majority language of the host society, and may not develop their proficiency in the new language further. Their language of origin may retain a strong identity function here;
- functional integration of the languages in the repertoire: the resources in the repertoire (essentially in the majority language) suffice for dealing (relatively) successfully with most social, professional and personal communication situations and are sufficient to ensure that most verbal exchanges are successful. There may be mistakes or examples of fossilisation, which the migrants may ignore if they are mainly concerned about effectiveness or may attempt to address with a view to achieving greater linguistic 'naturalisation' and not standing out less if they believe this to be useful and acceptable. In this case, the language of origin does not necessarily have a prominent identity function;
- integration of the languages in the repertoire: the migrants actively rearrange their repertoires and incorporate the majority language, which then takes its place alongside the languages in which they are already proficient. It is no longer a strain to draw on as it can now be used naturally, with the speakers shifting between languages depending on the social situation ; in this case, the language of origin, which may have been the sole language of identity, may retain joint identity status with the majority language. In this sense, the fact that there are several languages of identity in a repertoire is analogous to having dual nationality. The migrants' languages of origin may then achieve such value that they wish to pass them on. But, from the point of view of identity, it is the rearranged repertoire that now matters.

These albeit abstract forms of integration of the languages in the migrants' repertoire probably depend on the higher or lower value accorded to the languages present in their repertoire before they arrived in the host society. The degree of success in integrating languages into the repertoire is not quantifiable (e.g. low integration, functional integration, integration proper):. These forms of linguistic integration and their variants represent the possible choices open to the adult migrants:

- Deciding not to change their repertoire, ie not systematically to learn the main language of the host society; the migrants put up with the functional pressure, of not being able to use it, especially if they spend most of their time in environments where their language of origin dominates;
- Wishing to change their repertoire, but being unable to do so due to lack of time or self-confidence, etc, which causes psychological and social discomfort;
- Aiming to functionally 'rearrange their repertoire, without attempting normative adaptation, ie accepting fossilisation, retaining a non-native accent and transposing cultural communication habits into the target language, etc, as part of a single-identity language strategy i.e. marked by the migrant's language of origin;
- Aiming to rearrange the linguistic repertoire in order to achieve 'linguistic naturalisation', involving the gradual dropping of the language of origin and its ultimate disappearance so that it is not passed

on between generations,, Again this is part of a single-identity language strategy marked by the language of the host society;

- Aiming to rearrange the functional repertoire but with two joint languages of identity

It is up to migrants to decide for themselves and for their families and children which of these language strategies are best suited to their goals in life and the management of their identity, to the role of language training, is to inform them about the consequences of these choices and explain that migration necessarily involves an identity adjustment process which should be managed with plurality and mixing in mind rather than with nostalgic inflexibility.

When providing training these language users could be asked to reflect on how to manage code shifting, for example 'micro shifting' within the same communicative situation depending on the participants and their tolerance of linguistic diversity), or the distribution of two or more languages throughout their social exchanges (macro shifting). In any case, the fact that migrants may wish to choose among these various types of adaptation implies that arrangements need to be made for listening to migrants' views and for designing and managing tailor-made courses.

JCB

Related Resources

- *Languages and language repertoires : plurilingualism as a way of life in Europe* 2004, Jean-Claude Beacco
- *Language learning, teaching and assessment and the integration of adult immigrants. The importance of needs analysis*, 2008 - Piet van Avermaet & Sara Gysen
- *Living together in diversity - Linguistic integration in Flanders*, 2008, Reinhilde Pulinx
- *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe*, 2007, Jean-Claude Beacco & Michael Byram, Council of Europe (see Chapter 4)
- *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue - Living Together As Equals in Dignity*, Council of Europe, 2008