

Languages as Social Cohesion and Human Capital

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A peaceful coexistence of different European nations, as well as their economic development depend on both mutual understanding and close cooperation of European states as well as on acknowledgement of equal rights to all members within the partnership. Communication and the exchange of information are key issues that help to improve the understanding of various economic, social and cultural areas, which, in turn, form the most important platform for the development of common strategies of the countries that have decided to follow a common route. By acquiring relevant linguistic and intercultural communication skills and competence, individuals as well as social groups will be able to establish communication links needed for an efficient cooperation. Moreover, an intercultural communication must promote strong values at the state/national and European level, since the multicultural nature of modern societies is underpinned by a cultural identification. Namely, different national groups can coexist peacefully and interact only if they are led by mutual understanding and empathy. In fact emphatic competence has been listed by experts as one of the most important elements of an efficient intercultural communication.

HOW TO DEFINE INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

The need to use several languages in an open geographic and social space marked by the mobility of people and goods has enhanced the learning/teaching of foreign/second languages up to the point that language didactics has witnessed an incredible development. The number of projects of the Council of Europe (workshops, global projects and instruments) and the European Union (Lingua, and all projects related to language learning conducted within the Socrates, Erasmus and Comenius programmes) has increased, and some of them have considerably

changed the role of language learning and student achievement (reference levels recommended by the Common European Framework of References for Languages, self-assessment of achievements by using portfolios, language education policy profiles etc). The mastery of second and foreign languages no longer suffices for a successful communication and mutual understanding, since language communication involves differences and special characteristics that are expressed through the manner of transferring linguistic contents and through relations between the speakers in a certain communicative situation. What we are dealing with is intercultural language communication that is, together with language competence and skills, the best determined means of communication from the point of view of anthropology. Yet the most important points are communicating culture at a given moment and the uttering of contents and their meanings, as well as relations between the speakers manifested through the encounter of the speakers' cultures and languages. Language communication also involves the confrontation of various realities that are around us. Empathic competence, i. e. the power of identifying oneself mentally with all these realities (and so fully comprehend them), allows for tolerance and a better understanding of the other. During the process of growing up, when an individual develops his/her personality, two types of socialization can be distinguished: primary (taking place within the family) and secondary (in society). Both can be upgraded with tertiary socialization, which is much harder to achieve – if achieved at all. The process involves the development of the competence to assess and compare one's own experiences and values with those of other/foreign people, the turn from ethnocentrism and narrow identifications to common values, and the acceptance of the differences existing between various groups.

On the one hand, intercultural awareness is related to the understanding of culture as an artefact of the mind (Academic Culture), while on the other hand, culture is associated with the formation of habits, relations, rules and interactions in society (anthropological component of culture). Language learning/teaching includes both. Syllabuses of higher education courses (university study programmes) often include the discussion of concepts of 'high' culture (Skela 1999, 68) placed in an ethnic or wider context. In philological programmes, the subject is often called Cultural Studies (*Civilisation, Landeskunde, Civiltà*), whereas in compulsory education, foreign language curricula lay emphasis above all on 'behaviour' components of culture and their role in communication, i. e.

on culturally dependent beliefs/standpoints and influences that are received and transmitted through language. Intercultural communication and intercultural understanding/acceptance should become the general objectives of raising cultural awareness within the framework of teaching (first, second, foreign) languages. Yet when cultural concepts are discussed in the class, the target language culture should be made neutral. A favourable/hostile attitude towards a foreign language culture and the resulting acceptance/denial of this culture are a consequence of the positive/negative experience or education that an individual was faced with at school, at home or in his/her living environment.

Traditional teaching approaches place considerable emphasis on artefacts of culture (in literature, fine arts, history), whereas the modern communicative approach to language teaching focuses on the selection of linguistic tools in various communicative situations and on the manner of their use. Since intercultural communication can be perceived as a further stage of the communicative approach nowadays the teaching of 'Culture' also includes chapters on 'cultural behaviour' (Tomalin and Stempelski 1993). This new perception of culture has made differences and similarities between individual cultural environments much clearer. In order to raise our cultural awareness, we should not only observe and be familiar with the differences between given cultural environments, but also search for a means of mediation that will help us to get an insight into them and to establish relations between them. Language communication is the most perfect and the easiest accessible means of transmitting culture. The knowledge of cultural norms valid in other social and ethnic environments is supposed to be a prerequisite for comparisons that eventually enable us to create our system of values.

The comparison of different cultures should be carried out with a positive motivation and emotional distance. A positively oriented consideration of cultural differences and similarities implies that the individual is no longer at the centre of attention and tries to avoid prejudices that would affect his/her judgement in advance (Kramsch 1995).¹ Intercultural language communication involves not only the knowledge of rules of linguistic communication, but also the awareness of the cultural component of these rules. The competence to distance oneself can be developed by learning the forms, approaches, behaviours and interaction effects in various cultural environments. It has to be stressed, however, that the process does not involve the alteration of differences by force or the search for general criteria and rules that would eventually lead to

a universal, general behaviour. On the contrary, the differences should be revalued in a way that would enable each individual to retain his/her idiosyncrasies and those characteristics that determine him/her as a cultural and social being (Kramsch 1995).²

82 When discussing cultural experience, one should pay attention to the multiplicity of accepted values and functions that an individual or social group has acquired through time. Yet an individual, who would like to retain his/her accepted values, is far from being static when performing activities aimed at preserving them. The dynamics of his/her memory use is complemented by his/her will with which he/she strives to transform the world. In the process, he/she makes use of mediation means of higher mental functions related to cultural behaviour and practices (perception and active use of intercultural language communication, formation of active and empathic relations and positions between participants in the communicative situation, use of safeguards and incentives during participation in communication etc.) and develops the mediation means as means of communication and behaviour related to the formation of cultural memory (Cole 1996, 113). Cultural memory is developed through the elaboration of more complex 'tools of remembering' that help create a new, deeper cultural experience, which serves as a basis for a further development of relations between individuals and groups. One of the mediation means of mental functions is language, which is linked to culture in several ways:

- Language is a manifestation of culture at a given moment and an expression of the manner through which an individual exhibits his/her cultural awareness.
- Certain cultural content is materialized through the use of language tools and verbalization.
- Language forms abstract systems of values and identities the implicit elements of which are cultural values and cultural identity.

An individual should also be regarded as a member of a certain group, society or nation. Owing to its cultural interdependence and linguistic diversity, today's society can no longer function without ethnically aware individuals and groups. On the basis of their mutual knowledge, various ethnic communities can comprehend and accept cultural norms of other groups and establish an unbiased interaction. The competence to identify oneself mentally with other cultures (empathic competence) is often considered as one of the most important intercultural competences. To

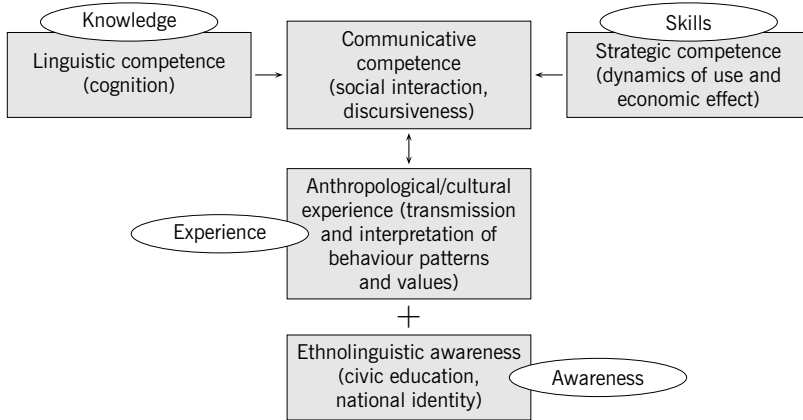


FIGURE 1 Components of intercultural linguistic competence

provide an example: when various national experts represent their countries in the EU, their success and efficiency also depend on their cultural knowledge, competences and skills. In other words, the level of their cultural awareness determines the manner in which they establish relations in verbal and non-verbal communication, their competence to present various subjects and their manner of participation in partnerships. Various manners of dealing with intercultural communication imply various types of interaction: various approaches at the labour market, various distribution of linguistic inequality, different use of language at work, various roles of a certain language in the socio-economic development of society.

LANGUAGES AS HUMAN CAPITAL

Nowadays, when the society is marked by integration and globalisation processes, language and economy are treated in the context of intercultural communication, where the individual's language behaviour happens to be closely linked to the value (in the sense of economy) of his/her language. Intercultural communication means also the ability of overcoming cultural obstacles in the work process, the ability of promotion and preservation of specific features, as well as the ability of adapting to common rules. In the conditions of intercultural communication the awareness of the diversity of business and work relationships is important, and so is familiarity with the processes regulating cultural diversity in this particular field.

The contents characterizing the link between language and economic processes in multicultural societies most often refer to benefits and costs related to different forms of intercultural/intergroup communication regulation, different approaches in the labour market, various distribution of language inequality, various roles of individual language within the society's economic development, and to economic advantages of the policy of teaching different languages. Thus, in a multicultural society, language planning and language policy serve as tools, directing society in a social and – directly – also economic sense. Some scholars deny the significance of economic factors in the preservation of ethnolinguistic vitality of a society, but Edwards (1985) attributes greatest importance to economic and pragmatic factors, which are essential in everyday life, emphasizing the fact that analyses of several linguistic movements indicate and confirm the strength of the economic element in the choice and usage of individual languages.

Theories dealing with the role and status of languages, and with language processes in societies, marked by integration and globalisation processes, do not explicitly expose the economic aspect of language; rather, they link the economic value of language and the policy of plurality (Grin 1996, 153–73). Thereby, the following parameters are considered:

1. The value of linguistic diversity (majority language, traditional autochthonous minority language, immigrant group's language, foreign language), and the extent of financial and institutional support.
2. The value of adequate intergroup communication which includes adequate language teaching.
3. The value of language vitality, which includes the effect of language upon commerce.

The value of language in intercultural communication is becoming multilayered and hard to measure in the economic sense. In the 'value' of language, the economic aspect happens to be just one of the variables appearing in close relation to motivations, though only in cases when an individual is motivated – in terms of economy and status – to acquire command of another language, and to use this language in specific situations. In many cases the economic variable affects the individual's attitude towards a specific language, and thereby also his attitude towards the other community. This means that the economic factor is related in most complex ways – directly and indirectly – to all the aspects affecting

language processes, from language preservation and language dropping to the strategies of language accommodation.

Linguists, sociolinguists and sociologists of language agree upon the interrelatedness of economic and language processes, although only few economists study these problems. Inasmuch as economists deal with the link between economy and language in the context of multiculturalism, their advocacy of the theory of mutual dependence is far less convincing, as their perception of the relation is exclusively one-sided. Pragmatically and rationally oriented experts treat the link between language and economy only in terms of cost analysis and non-profit investments, conditioned by the respect and implementation of the state's multicultural character: a necessary element in language planning, but a redundant item in the state budget. However, such an attitude is a short-term investment even from the point of view of economy.

Some authors (Grin 1996) treat language only as a means of communication and compare it with money. Language and money share similar characteristics, always serving as a means of exchange, and offering the possibility of quantitative and qualitative changing of processes and relations. However, there are many other theories and links between economy and language, e.g.: language command offers a broad spectrum of employment possibilities, and is certainly an advantage in job seeking. Moreover, it shows respect of language diversity on a workplace and is useful when bilingual contacts are needed. All these parameters contribute to the production of human capital and exert indirect influence upon an individual's economic and thereby also social status.

Although there are different approaches dealing with the relation between language and economics, there is no uniform theoretical concept embracing this aspect in a complex and systematic way. Marschak (1965, 135–40)³ was one of the first scholars who focused on the question of the value of language in an economic sense. Why is language usage subject to change, why are some languages better preserved than others, what is language efficiency, were but some of the questions he was particularly interested in. For him language is an object of choice, directed towards realization of a certain goal. He applied the choice of language in communication, or the decision for learning a certain language to the standards of micro-economy, and added them up in the very same way as an individual would do with his economic decisions, which – from the purchase of a product to investment – always represent a result for him; the best choice in a given moment.

Grin (1990) presents a theoretically simplified model of the economic approach referring to minority or migrant community languages. The model is based on *two functions of language: the objective (applicative) function and the forced function*. Later on he revises the concept and emphasizes that the essence of the economic aspect of language (Grin 1996, 17–45) is in the functioning and mutual intertwining and in the influence of three variables. He sets three categories of variables:

1. *Traditional economic variables*: price, profit, interest rate, salary.
2. *Traditional linguistic or sociolinguistic variables*: number of speakers of individual languages, dispersion of languages, patterns of language usage, formal and informal language usage, attitude towards language.
3. All variables that cannot be included into the first or second category.

An individual is usually not interested in a language as such (*per se*); rather, he likes the life associated with it. The quantity of language usage (the quantity of time spent on reading and communicating in a certain language, the number of read pages, books) in this context is measured and thereby included into an individual's applicative function. Reading and talking in a language means creating or – in the economic terminology – producing.

Regarding the economic approach, language also appears on the market, which, in turn, sets 'the price and demand', and directs its distribution.

In multicultural societies language and economy are also dealt with in the context of intergroup communication. A model was created (Colomer 1996), which is based on the individual's language behaviour and different social standards affecting intergroup communication. Experts are trying to ascertain, with the analysis of variables, which are the economic elements that influence language discrimination in the intergroup contact.

The economic aspect of language also appears in regard to the second language acquisition. Language can also be treated as human capital, enabling an individual to acquire financial means and improve his living standard. In such cases the wish and motivation for knowledge accumulation (command of a second language) represents a pure linguistic stimulus, the aim of which is not to learn a second language to improve one's communication with neighbours, nor to get to know their culture and

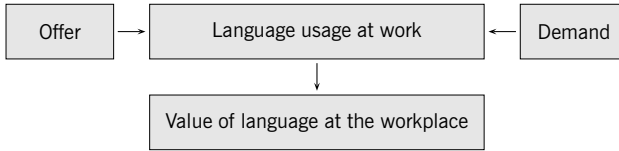


FIGURE 2 The role of language usage at work

history or to contribute to the coexistence in his surroundings; it means that one is learning a second or third language primarily because this is an investment into his knowledge. For an individual, the knowledge of language is basically the accumulation of intellectual capital (Grenier and Vaillancourt 1983), which, as an investment, brings him short-term profit (better salary, and in the case of an ethnically mixed territory such as Slovenia, special allowance for bilingual contacts at workplace), and long-term profit – easier access to foreign markets, the knowledge of culture and mentality of a market contributing to a more sovereign and easier business making. The accumulation of such type of human capital can also be indirectly observed amongst the inhabitants of Slovenia.

Proceeding from the above starting points, the link between language and economy can be placed within the framework of offer and demand, following Vaillancourt's scheme (1996, 82; see fig. 2) which focuses on the role of language usage at work.

In settings where two languages – a majority and a minority language – are present, economics can promote the minority language, but only in cases when this language has a certain 'instrumental value'; however, in cases when the minority language has no such value, the argument of economics remains without any value. This is confirmed by the result of an empirical research (Novak-Lukanovič 2002).

One of the great challenges of the present European reality is in the very attempt to carry out the economic and political integration under the provision of cultural diversity and thus to offer to the global public, after a century, a new civilisation model that would not equate the social-economic globalisation with the social-cultural variant of the American melting pot. This new European civilisational model will be confronted with the first test in the numerous European 'contact' settings, where – apart from the issues of international contact and of settling the functional social, economic and administrative issues – conditions for a coexistence and mechanisms to protect cultural specificities of different peoples as well as ethnic and language groups are created. The abolition of

different kinds of 'frontiers' will demand a major revision of traditional and ethnocentric conceptions and social behaviours (Bufon 1997).

NOTES

- 1 'Not just discover how things are and have been, but how they could have been or how else they could be. Neither history nor ethnography provide thus imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own' (Kramsch 1995 in Morlicchio 2002, 92).
- 2 'We are irreducibly unique and different and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances – in other words, that stranger . . . is in us'. (Kramsch 1995 in Morlicchio 2002, 92)
- 3 The author is cited from Grin (1990) who writes that Marschak happens to be one of the first authors dealing with the economics of language in his article Economics of Language.

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