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## 7. From Mokum to Damsko and back again?

Deep language diversity and the new urbanity

*Virginie Mamadouh and Nesrin El Ayadi*

Language diversity is a major challenge in contemporary Europe, but all too often the issue is reduced to the 24 official languages of the European Union and the difficult multilingual arrangements in EU institutions. A larger issue, however, is the language diversity in European cities, the languages that are spoken daily by their inhabitants and visitors. How many there are we do not know for certain, but certainly more than the 24 official languages of EU Member States. In many cities, like in Amsterdam, the authorities do not keep statistics on language knowledge and language use, but we do know that nationals of almost all states in the world are represented among Amsterdam residents. This multilingualism is overwhelming but nonetheless carelessly overlooked. In contrast to the government's policy on the Dutch language, there is as yet no targeted government policy on multilingualism. Dealing with this language diversity is difficult – perhaps not as explosive as dealing with religious or sexual diversity but just as controversial. While some fear that language diversity leads to fragmentation, segregation and conflict, and that it therefore forms a threat to social cohesion, others celebrate this diversity as the foundation of urbanity and a symbol of the richness of metropolitan culture. By mixing and exchanging, new language forms are created. City dwellers borrow words from each other, and many residents of Amsterdam have adopted the foreign names for their city without necessarily speaking the language from which the name originates. Yiddish is rarely spoken in Amsterdam anymore but Mokum (after Mokum Aleph what means 'safe city A' in Yiddish) is still the

city's nickname, and not everyone who refers to Amsterdam as Damsko speaks Sranan, the Creole language of Suriname.

## **Territorial integration and cities**

Cities are by definition a meeting place for people with different cultural, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds who come to the city for various reasons. Urbanity is therefore multilingual, but this multilingualism is structured by power relations. The linguistic landscape of a city is determined by dominant representations of languages and by the correct and appropriate use of language. Not all languages, language variants, dialects and sociolects are equal, and they are also not considered suitable to be spoken by everyone, at every moment of the day, in every part of the city and on every occasion. One language or language variant – the dialect of a certain region, city or neighbourhood; the sociolect of a particular class, profession or age group – is associated with more power and prestige than the others: those speaking it (and those entitled to speak it) have more power than those who have not mastered it. Speaking such a language is equivalent to exercising power.

In the past, it was not unusual for different professional groups (such as peasants, noblemen, merchants, soldiers and clergymen) in the same region to speak different languages. But in the modernisation process that took place in Europe with the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the industrial revolution and urbanisation in the 19th century and nationalism in the 20th century, the existing political entities evolved into modern territorial states. A distinctive part of that process was the forming of a national language. A single idiom was elevated above the others and became the language for the activities of the state: the city council and city administration, the police, the army, the judiciary and later education and sometimes also the national church. The formalisation of the chosen language (the creation of a grammar and the spread of strong normative beliefs

in the national educational system about correct language usage) and the harmonisation and homogenisation of language usage within the territory of the state led to monolingualism in most states: one language for the collective. In some cases, the national language pushed down the other languages present in the community – sometimes violently but usually by persuasion: those who wanted to get ahead in life had to speak the language, which gave them access to knowledge, jobs, relationships and friends, money and prestige. They in turn encouraged their children to do the same. In other cases, certain groups that spoke a different language demanded political autonomy in the region where they were in the majority. Some states formalised several languages (Switzerland, Finland) or several language variants (Norway), but these remained exceptions. Still others (Austro-Hungarian Empire) tried to do this but failed to become multilingual countries and were pulled apart after the First World War to form smaller nation-states with one dominant national language.

Over time, in this context of ideological monolingualism, multilingualism came to be distrusted – both individually and collectively. People with a knowledge of other languages were suspected of having ties with the communities that spoke this language; as a result, they were considered less loyal than monolinguals. These people often lived in peripheral areas that were poorly integrated into the nation-state or in cities where they came into contact with foreigners and where diplomats, merchants and other foreigners lived. As a result of globalisation, international migration has increased in the last 50 years, which has dramatically augmented the diversity in cities. New information and communications technologies have made it easier for migrants to maintain contact with people elsewhere in the world and to keep alive one's foreign language skills. European integration and the mobility stimulated within the EU also contribute to this: think of the Erasmus exchange students, labour migrants, tourists, retired people and others embracing the freedom of movement that gives EU citizens the right to pursue happiness in any other Member State of the Union.

## Multilingualism in contemporary European cities

This enhanced mobility highlights the fact that languages fulfil different social functions and that not all functions need not be served by one and the same language. One can use a different language at work than on the street, online than in the pub, at home than in the shop, in a house of worship than in a hospital. At a more abstract level, we can also distinguish between the two social functions of language. On the one hand, language is a means of communication that makes it possible to interact with others; on the other hand it can be used to strengthen relationships within a group that shares the same language and thereby to intensify that group's segregation from others. More language diversity in a city could mean more communication problems when its inhabitants do not always – or do not immediately – share a common language. This could lead to the emergence of linguistic islands in which others can quickly feel excluded if they do not know the language. But language diversity can also be a collective resource and can be used to make contact with people elsewhere in the world, and everyone can enrich his or her intellectual life through culture in all kinds of languages without having to travel across the city or country or having to spend the night in a different bed.

The benefits of language diversity are taken for granted. Some kind of policy would be most welcome though, to further develop language skills (for even if you speak Chinese, Russian, Turkish or Portuguese at home, that does not automatically make you a professional interpreter-translator) and to encourage the enjoyment and exploration of other cultures. The disadvantages of language diversity, by contrast, are widely discussed, as many are concerned that it could lead to the breakdown of social cohesion and to identity crises. There are different estimations given to different languages and language variants: some languages are considered well-placed to be a (global) means of communication because they have a large and powerful social base that gives them prestige, while other languages are associated with

small and/or marginal groups. Mastering and speaking the first kind of language is applauded as tolerant and open-minded, but mastering and speaking the others is framed as narrow-minded and a denial of modernity. The distinction is sometimes arbitrary, and some 'major' languages are deemed to be insignificant out of pure ignorance. One example is Portuguese, which is worldwide a much larger language community than German. But considering certain languages and language variants as obsolete and dispensable due to the small number of people who speak them, is missing the other social functions of language, namely its roles to identify and give meaning to the world or to express an identity or strengthen relationships within small groups of people.

### **Deep language diversity and connections**

Global cities, but other European cities just as well, are characterised by deep language diversity and thus have to contend with three major challenges that deserve the attention of cultural and political organisations, including the government. It might be uneasy and inconvenient to have to deal with these challenges, but we can develop an ethic that would allow everyone to be accepted for who they are while at the same time limiting communication problems.

The first challenge concerns connections within the city. How can we provide a welcoming and inclusive public space where everyone can feel at home? The national language can be a binding factor if it is a shared language. But if there is a constant influx of newcomers and guests, or if there are people who do not (yet) know the national language or do not learn it because they are visiting (as tourists, exchange students or expats who are sent to the country for a short period), then this is not sufficient and measures must be taken to reach out to as many people as possible. This is often by default the language of globalisation: international English. In the Netherlands,

the hospitality industry provides English menus, shops have English-speaking assistants, and businesses and universities use English as the common language in the workplace. Public utility companies, public transport and the government often do not systematically relent to this norm – they even do that less than they used to in the 1980s when folders in the language of the new migrants were customary, but their employees switch to English informally when needed. English as a second language has become natural. While tourists used to be considered polite if they first asked if someone could speak English before they struck up a conversation, they now get an offended look in return if they ask. This shadow function of English is more dangerous in the long term for the stature of the Dutch language in our daily life than all the other languages put together. English-speaking migrants (not necessarily people for whom English is the first language) often complain that they are not given the opportunity to learn and practise Dutch because everyone immediately switches to (Dutchified) English. As a result, they feel foreign and excluded in the Netherlands. It is for that matter important not to allow language diversity to grow wildly at the expense of the local sound of a city. If that happens, then diversity is no longer the sound of the city but begins to sound like exclusion: native city dwellers no longer identify with their city because too often they cannot understand conversations they overhear between their neighbours or among passers-by.

The second challenge relates to connections with other cities in the world. Here, too, English is too often and wrongly perceived as a panacea. As inheritors of a trading nation, the Dutch should realise that it is important to speak the language of your customer. It is therefore crucial from an economic point of view to be proficient in German and French. Chinese, Russian, Turkish and Portuguese are also becoming more and more important. Bilinguals (who are not necessarily people whose roots lie abroad) are also important cultural and political links. Discussions about politics and society are increasingly being

fuelled by American and British debates, while knowledge from other language areas, societies and cities could be more inspiring. How different would our perceptions of contemporary problems be – for example the refugee crisis, the euro crisis or climate change – if we were better able to follow the debates occurring in the affected areas?

Finally, the connections between cities and the surrounding countryside are a point of concern. There seems to be a widening gap between multilingual and multi-ethnic cities and the rest of the country with its monolingual and mono-ethnic society in which fellow citizens do not feel welcome: the gap between, say, North Amsterdam (the very diverse northern district of the city) and Volendam (the former fishing harbour located further North known for being closed to national and foreign newcomers). Are the two worlds drifting further and further apart – culturally, but also politically? And what impact could this have? Will Europe become an archipelago of multilingual cities – islands in a hostile sea of conservative national communities that close their doors to those who speak another language? That is not an inviting prospect! Or is it inevitable that diversity can only be tolerated in metropolitan areas and that the best we can hope for is that Amsterdam tries to live up to its Yiddish name?

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<http://www.mime-project.org>

### **Further reading**

Mamadouh, Virginie. 2014. 'De nieuwe taalgrenzen: meertaligheid in Nederland', in: Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling (Ed.). *Nationaal belang in meervoud: perspectieven op internationale politiek*. 34-59. The Hague: Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling: <[www.adviesorgaan-rmo.nl/Publicaties/Adviezen/Nationaal\\_belang\\_in\\_meervoud\\_juli\\_2014](http://www.adviesorgaan-rmo.nl/Publicaties/Adviezen/Nationaal_belang_in_meervoud_juli_2014)>  
MIME website: <[www.mime-project.org](http://www.mime-project.org)>