**Title**

Migration and Diaspora

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**Abstract**

As migrants settle in new host societies, they engage in social, linguistic, and cultural practices that relate to both their historical homelands and their new homes, forming communities that are often referred to as diasporas. Two major epistemological trends are noted: positivist approaches, viewing diasporas as bounded entities, and social constructivist approaches, seeing them as processes and practices. Language plays a crucial role in constructing, projecting, and maintaining diasporic communities. This entry examines how migration affects the maintenance of migrants’ heritage languages, the effect that host society languages have on the lexicon and structure of heritage languages, initiatives like complementary schools to preserve migrant languages and cultures, and ways in which migrant multilingualism can be measured and quantified. These are offered as examples of different epistemological and methodological approaches to the study of the language and migration nexus: (a) psycholinguistic and variationist sociolinguistic approaches that use quantitative methods to study heritage language acquisition and innovations in heritage languages; and, (b) social constructivist approaches that employ qualitative methods to explore how language shapes migrants’ experiences and their identities.

**Keywords**

multilingualism, language maintenance and shift, ethnolinguistic vitality, community languages, heritage speakers, complementary schools, supplementary schools, language census

**Main text**

**Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the relationship between language and migration, including in contexts that are referred to as diasporas. Tseng and Hinrichs (2021) highlight three common themes underpinning scholarly understandings of diaspora(s): dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance. As people migrate, they form communities which, at the same time, align with and disalign from both their historic places of origin and their host societies through stances and practices of becoming that involve the construction and projection of individual and group identities. Language is a key element in these processes. In Tseng and Hinrich’s words, “[l]anguage mediates how communities are imagined, constructed, and maintained on all dimensions. It plays a key role in diaspora’s polycentricity, lateral connections, and multiple identities” (2021: 652). Building on Alexander’s (2017) work, Tseng and Hinrichs further identify two major epistemological trends in the study of diasporas: positivist approaches that view diasporas as bounded entities and social constructivist approaches that promote an understanding of diasporas as processes and practices.

Related to these two trends, different methodological approaches are employed to examine the nexus of language and diaspora. On the one hand, psycholinguistic and variationist sociolinguistic approaches use mainly quantitative methods – including elicitation techniques, linguistic experiments, but also spontaneous speech – to establish how heritage languages – that is, the language(s) spoken in the migrants’ homelands – are acquired, how the majority language(s) of migrants’ host societies influence heritage languages, and how linguistic innovations are distributed within heritage language speaking communities with reference to social factors in the Labovian sense (age, sex/gender, but also the concept of generation; see below). See, for example, Montrul (2023) on the acquisition of heritage Hindi, heritage Romanian, and heritage Spanish; or, Nagy (2024) on applying variationist methods to the study of heritage languages. On the other hand, social constructivist and sociocultural approaches use primarily qualitative methods – including ethnographically-informed methods such as participant observations, interviews, note taking, vignette writing, forms of reflexive autoethnography, and other types of participatory and collaborative research – to explore how language shapes the lived experiences of people on the move as well as how migrants draw on their linguistic resources in order to achieve aims and goals associated with their migration projects and circumstances, to maintain links with people found in other parts of the world (Madianou & Miller, 2012), or to construct, project, and negotiate their identities as mobile, multilingual, and multicultural individuals (Block, 2008).

In what follows, I highlight some of the effects that the movement of people and the formation of diasporic communities have on migrants’ languages on both an individual and a collective level. I first consider some acquisitional and structural aspects focusing on patterns of language maintenance and shift among migrant communities and on structural and lexical changes that heritage languages can undergo in diaspora as a result of language contact with the majority language of the host society. I then move on to highlight sociolinguistic aspects of the language/migration nexus, discussing complementary schools as one of the most important initiatives of migrant communities to ensure that their languages as well as other elements of culture and identity are passed on to new generations of speakers. I finally touch briefly upon the challenges of safely estimating the number of people who speak a migrant language, that is, a language that is not considered autochthonous to a particular migrant-receiving country.

**Language maintenance and shift among migrant speakers**

When people migrate from one part of the world to another, their languages naturally travel with them. In diasporic contexts, migrants continue to use their home languages to communicate with others who speak the same language both in their home countries and in the host country. Crucially, migrants also speak their home languages to their children, as they consider these languages important elements of identity and culture that they want their children to retain. However, transmitting home languages to new generations and maintaining them in the diaspora is challenging. Many studies show that the children of the original migrants (the so-called second generation) overwhelmingly tend to become dominant or ‘native’ in the languages of the host country (Li Wei, 1994; Sofu, 2009; Jee, Park & Jeon, 2023). This dominance is due to the extensive exposure to the host country’s language in daily life, including through formal education. Second-generation speakers may be highly proficient in their parents’ languages, but their competencies can be uneven. For instance, they might be stronger in listening and speaking rather than reading and writing. They may feel comfortable using their parents’ languages to discuss everyday topics but not professional matters. Some may even have very low proficiency in their parents’ languages. By the third generation—the children of the second generation and the grandchildren of the first generation—the languages of the migrants’ home countries may not be used at all. For a schematic representation of the three-generation model of language shift, see Table 1 and refer to Pauwels (2016).

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Language(s) of the migrant-sending country** | **Language(s) of the migrant-receiving country** |
| **1st generation*****(parents, born in migrant-sending country)*** | ‘Native’ | Non-native. Proficiency ranges from high to very low. No proficiency at all is possible. |
| **2nd generation*****(children of 1st generation, born in migrant-receiving country)*** | Proficiency ranges from high to low. | ‘Native’ |
| **3rd generation*****(grandchildren of 1st generation, born in migrant-receiving country)*** | Proficiency ranges from intermediate to very low. No proficiency at all is possible. | ‘Native’ |

**Table 1.** The three-generation model of language shift.

The course that intergenerational home language transmission will take in a particular (group of) individual(s) – for example, within and among the members of a family or ethnic community – depends on numerous factors. A well-known framework for organising this complexity is the ethnolinguistic vitality model, proposed by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977). This model categorises factors into three broad areas: status, demography, and institutional support. Status includes the economic, social, and sociohistorical status of the speech community and the prestige of the language(s) within and outside the community. Demography considers the distribution of the speech community, whether it has a national territory, its concentration in specific areas, and its proportion as a majority or minority group. It also includes factors such as the community’s size, birth rates, mixed marriages, immigration, and emigration. Institutional support refers to the use of the language(s) in formal and informal settings, including mass media, education, government services, industry, religion, and culture. Further research has examined the influence of social and biographical characteristics of migrant speakers on language maintenance. These characteristics include age, gender, socioeconomic status, level of education, place of residence (urban versus rural), and duration of residence in the host country. These factors play a significant role in whether migrants are likely to maintain their home language(s) or shift to the language(s) of the receiving country.

These approaches exemplify what Tseng and Hinrichs (2021) identify as the ‘diasporas as entities’ epistemological trend as speech communities and generations tend to be conceptualised as having fixed boundaries, whereas the likelihood of heritage languages being intergenerationally transmitted seems to correlate with different constellations of independent statistical variables.

**Linguistic innovations in diaspora**

The social conditions under which migrants acquire and use the languages of their places of origin, combined with the dominating presence of the hegemonic languages in the host societies, often lead to novel linguistic developments. These changes can affect the structure of the home languages, their lexicons, and the social meanings attached to them. One of the most notable features in the speech of migrants is their vocabulary, which tends to blend lexical archaisms with lexical innovations. Migrants often continue to use words and phrases in their home languages that may have fallen out of use in their countries of origin. They might also struggle to keep up with lexical developments in their home countries, such as the creation of new words and phrases or new uses and meanings for existing words. Consequently, their lexical choices can sometimes give the impression to non-migrants from the same home country that the language of the diaspora is frozen in time. This perception is a misconception, as the languages of migrants continue to evolve in diaspora. One significant pathway for this evolution is the borrowing of loanwords from the dominant language of the host society. These loanwords are integrated into the home language lexicon, a process documented across various migrant communities and contexts worldwide (Adalar & Tagliamonte, 1998; Hatoss, 2016; Rocchi, 2006).

One illustrative case is the borrowing of different types of lexical material from English into Cypriot Greek by Greek-speaking Cypriot migrants in the UK, including a large number of nouns that were structurally integrated into the Cypriot Greek morphological system by the addition of gender-, number-, and case-marking suffixes and, in certain cases, derivational suffixes, as well; for example, *bus* > πάσον /ˈpason/, fish (and chip shop) > φισιάτικον /fiˈʃatikon/, naughty > νόττης /ˈnotʰːis/ (masculine) and νόττισσα /ˈnotʰːisːa/ (feminine). Loanwords such as these are constructed by Cypriot Greek speakers in the UK as an integral part of a distinct, diasporic variety of Cypriot Greek, which they label Grenglish – a blend of Greek and English – and which is an emblem of their history as Cypriot migrants (Karatsareas & Charalambidou, 2020).

Moving on to structural innovations, the linguistic biographies of migrant speakers, especially those born in the host country or who migrate at a very young age, distinguish them from both native speakers (L1) and late learners (L2) of the same language(s). Migrant speakers are exposed to their home language for most of their childhood, acquiring a significant part of its grammar similarly to native speakers. However, the reduction of social domains in which the home language is used, especially after heritage speakers attend mainstream schools, interrupts the acquisition process. This results in a type of linguistic competence that resembles that of L2 learners. The incomplete acquisition of the home language, possible subsequent attrition, and interference from the dominant language of the host society lead to the formation of new heritage grammars. These are characterized by innovations across all levels of linguistic analysis, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Montrul & Polinsky, 2021; Polinsky, 2018).

Generally speaking, heritage speakers sound more ‘native-like’ when they speak their home languages compared to L2 learners, although non-migrant speakers might perceive them as having an ‘accent’. Heritage speakers tend to emphasise the phonological properties that distinguish their home language from the dominant societal language while downplaying the phonological similarities between the two. In terms of morphology, heritage speakers often produce a significant number of forms that might be considered ‘errors’ from a monolingual baseline perspective. They tend to retain forms that are regular, frequent, and perceptually salient, while either not producing irregular, infrequent, and opaque forms or overgeneralizing morphological rules to them. Case and gender marking and agreement are particularly vulnerable in heritage speech, unlike core syntax, which generally undergoes fewer changes among heritage speakers. However, some syntactic operations are more prone to transfer from the dominant societal language and to the effects of attrition and incomplete acquisition. These include null subjects, word order, long-distance dependencies such as *wh*-movement and relative clauses, and discontinuous elements like the links between nouns and classifiers. In semantics, heritage speakers exhibit differences from L1 speakers in the interpretation and expression of genericity, specificity, definiteness, and topic and focus.

**Migrant language education**

Migrant communities place great importance on the intergenerational transmission and maintenance of their home languages, viewing it as a key determinant of ethnic identity alongside shared ancestry, cultural traditions (such as music, dance, food, and literature), historical experiences, and religious beliefs. Knowledge of these elements can be passed on to new generations within the migrant family, directly from parents, carers, and other family members to children. To provide more systematic and institutionalized language education and to counter the effects of language shift and assimilation, migrant communities often establish formal language education initiatives. Complementary schools—also known as supplementary schools, heritage language schools, community language schools, mother tongue schools, or Saturday/Sunday schools—are common examples of such initiatives (Lytra & Martin, 2010; Simon, 2018). These schools, along with townsmen associations and community media, are considered pillars of the diaspora, as they foster relationships and social networks within migrant communities. They address the linguistic needs of migrant and ethnic minority children in the absence of appropriate support from the educational systems of host countries (Li Wei, 2006).

Complementary schools are highly multilingual spaces, where multiple languages and varieties are used daily for communication and learning both inside and outside the classroom. They can also be ethnically and/or nationally heterogeneous. With language as the central cohesive element, pupils and families from different parts of the world can coexist within the same school. For example, Hungarian complementary schools in the UK may include pupils from Hungary, Austria, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia, while Arabic complementary schools might teach Arabic to pupils from various Arabic-speaking countries.

Complementary schools operate outside the mainstream education systems of migrant-receiving countries, often resulting in minimal contact between mainstream and complementary schools, even within the same local area. Classes in complementary schools typically take place after hours, on weekend mornings and/or weekday afternoons, in community spaces or other premises that may be rented or provided free of charge to the migrant communities. Some schools rely on volunteers for teaching, though it is not uncommon for teachers to be paid if the school’s finances allow. However, complementary schools often face financial precariousness, relying on limited income sources such as modest tuition fees paid by parents, fundraising activities, and support (typically in kind) from migrant-sending countries. These schools may be run informally by associations of parents or within an existing community structure, such as an ethnic community centre or religious organisation, or they may have a more formal legal status as independent educational organisations. In some cases, educational authorities in migrant-sending countries oversee complementary schools in the diaspora. For example, the network of Greek complementary schools in the UK is overseen by the Cyprus Educational Mission (CEM), a London-based unit within the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Youth of the Republic of Cyprus. The CEM supports these schools by allocating teachers seconded from the Cyprus ministry to work in the UK for several years, organizing training and professional development seminars for teachers, developing curricula and materials for teaching Greek, and acting as a community representative and advocate in larger-scale decisions that may impact the operation of Greek schools in the country (Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024).

The study of community language education illustrates the sociocultural perspective to the language/migration nexus, highlighting, as it does, the language practices and agency that migrants display in their host societies.

**Quantifying migrant multilingualism**

It is challenging to accurately estimate the number of people belonging to a particular migrant community and even more difficult to determine the number of people who speak a non-autochthonous language in a given territory or nation-state. This difficulty arises because many countries do not systematically and reliably collect information about migrants’ languages, such as through national population censuses. In contrast, countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States include questions in their census questionnaires that allow both native ethnic groups and migrants to declare the languages they speak at home. The census in France, however, does not collect any information about respondents’ languages, whether autochthonous or otherwise. In the UK, from 1851 until 2001, census questionnaires only included questions regarding respondents’ knowledge of Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, and Irish—the ‘indigenous’ languages of the British Isles. A question about all languages spoken in the country was included for the first time in 2011 (Sebba, 2018). Until then, language data was collected only to address the language-related needs of specific migrant groups. For example, the Department for Education requests schools to submit information about pupils’ languages annually to support students who speak English as an additional language. In the absence of larger datasets, these sources were invaluable for gauging the extent of migrant multilingualism in previous decades (Baker & Eversley, 2000).

Migrant-sending countries may have accurate data on annual emigration numbers but often overestimate the size of diasporic communities over time for political reasons. For instance, while it is documented that 75,801 people emigrated from Cyprus to the UK from 1955 to 1985, the National Federation of Cypriots in the UK suggests that there are 300,000 Cypriots living in the UK. To address these shortcomings, researchers in migration studies have started using advanced statistical methods, including respondent-driven sampling (Tyldum & Johnston, 2014), to calculate the size of migrant groups. These methods can also be applied to establish the size of migrant language speech communities.

**Conclusion**

The study of the intricate interplay between language, migration, and diaspora offers significant insights into how languages evolve, adapt, and sometimes diminish over generations. This exploration highlights how language serves as a crucial marker of identity and a means of preserving cultural heritage for migrant communities. The dynamics of language maintenance and shift, driven by factors such as generational changes and social integration, underscore the challenges and complexities faced by diasporic groups in retaining their linguistic heritage. In such contexts, linguistic innovations may emerge, often blending elements from both home and host cultures. Educational initiatives like complementary schools play a pivotal role in supporting language preservation, offering structured environments for language learning and cultural continuity. However, accurately quantifying the extent of multilingualism within migrant communities remains challenging due to varying data collection practices. Overall, understanding these linguistic dynamics enriches our comprehension of the broader social and cultural impacts of migration, emphasising the importance of language in the diaspora experience.

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**Contributor Bio**

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