

General public

Language is a living creature

The linguistic diversity of Europe is represented in more than 20 official languages, over 60 regional (minority) languages and as well as the many languages that families (outside of Europe) bring with them when they move from one country to another, called heritage languages. This linguistically diverse population interacts and cross-pollinates to create new forms of languages, illustrating clearly that language is ‘a living creature’.

Multiethnolects

One effect of language contact happens when elements from various heritage languages are mixed with elements of mainstream languages. This kind of language contact can result in the creation of new linguistic styles, also called ‘multiethnolects’. An international team of ATHeme researchers studied the development of these new styles across a number of European countries. They concluded that multiethnolects are a distinct new language variety through which speakers may express group identities. Multiethnolects follow the typical path of language development, just like any other language. However, a particular characteristic of multiethnolects is that they are constantly changing. Therefore, it is more important to understand the mechanism of change rather than document the specific forms that are used. Multiethnolects provide an important source of information about the social and cognitive forces that shape the use and the nature of language. (Cheshire, Nortier & Adger 2015)

Change of grammar

ATHeme researchers investigated grammatical language change in three regional and minority languages across Europe: Frisian, Cimbrian and a variety of Basque called Guipuscoan. These local language varieties face the pressure exerted by either a stronger standard language or other more prominent dialects. The researchers concluded that the nature of grammatical change within these three languages displays similarities. They describe language contact as two abstract feature systems that are in contact inside the bilingual mind. The bilingual mind favours features or patterns that are shared by the two languages and disfavours the language features that are specific to one language. In all three cases, they observed that language contact contributes to the acceleration of ongoing change by either favouring well-known grammatical paths or by reducing the range of variation patterns. (Padovan, A., Tomaselli, A., Bergstra, M., Corver, N., Etxepare, R. & Dold, S. 2016)



How does speaking with a foreign accent influence a conversation?

It is widely known that the way people speak affects how others perceive them. How a foreign accent affects understanding within a conversation has not been the subject of many studies, in spite of the fact that the situation is common in contemporary society. AThEME researchers looked at exactly these situations. They found that in general, people perceive native speakers as easier to understand than speakers with a foreign accent. When speakers with a foreign accent make an error while speaking it is harder for the listener to process this error, compared with errors taking place during native conversations. Research assumes that this is caused by a higher number of unexpected words. However, native listeners also adapt to foreign-accented speech, after a brief period of exposure. Preliminary research results suggest that listeners have clear expectations about upcoming words when listening to a native speaker. However, when listening to a speaker with a foreign accent, expectations do not reach the same level. (Romero-Rivas & Costa 2015)

Knowing what information is common ground during a conversation between speakers seems to be relatively easy when speakers have the same linguistic and cultural background. In the case of a conversation between a native speaker and a non-native speaker, this can be more complex. AThEME researchers investigated if a foreign accent affects the behaviour of a native speaker towards the non-native speaker. The results showed that native speakers do not adopt a more 'helpful' way of communicating, nor do they change their communication 'for the worse'. The fact that native speakers do not change their behaviour when communicating with someone who has a foreign accent suggests that perspective taking and assumptions of common ground are surprisingly not affected by the native or non-native accent of a conversational partner. (Foucart & Costa 2017)

Foreign languages and emotions

Foreign languages are generally learned in emotionally neutral academic environments, while native languages are acquired in emotionally rich family contexts. AThEME researchers investigated if this difference in learning contexts influences emotional response on emotionally-charged sentences. Results of the investigation pointed out that automatic reactions to emotional-charged sentences are reduced when it involves a foreign language. Highly emotional words do not seem to cause the same emotional reaction in the native and the foreign language. (García-Palacios, Costa, Castilla, del Río, Casaponsa & Andoni Duñabeitia 2018) (Iacozza, Costa & Andoni Duñabeitia 2017)

Maintaining regional languages in multilingual Europe

Linguistic diversity is essential to our cultural heritage. Indigenous people often abandon their language and culture in hope of overcoming discrimination, securing a livelihood, enhancing social mobility or assimilating to the global marketplace. This may seem more relevant to other parts of the world, but it also occurs in various regions in Europe. AThEME researchers made an inventory of the maintenance of regional minority languages and their varieties across Europe: Basque, Frisian, Fiuman dialect, Gallo, Sardinian, Primorska Slovenian and varieties spoken in Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol. They concluded that the transmission of regional languages within families is a



principal matter of concern in relation to the decrease of speakers. They emphasise the need to document the languages, support new policy initiatives and create new materials to enhance the vitality of endangered languages and varieties. (Epelde et al., 2015)

For more information:

Multiethnolects

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Publications

Cheshire, J., Nortier, J. & Adger, D. (2015). *Emerging multiethnolects in Europe*. Queen Mary's OPAL # 33: 1-27. Occasional Papers Advancing Linguistics. (deliverable 3.1)

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Padovan, A., Tomaselli, A., Bergstra, M., Corver, N., Etxepare, R. & Dold, S. (2016). *Minority languages in language contact situations: three case studies on language change*. Us Wurk, vol. Jiergong 65 (2016), n. jefte 3-4, 2016, pp. 146-174. (deliverable 2.3)

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Videos

[How do \(multilingual\) speakers adapt to each other's linguistic choices in conversation?](#) by Timea Kutasi

[Communication with foreign accented speakers](#), by Cristina Baus

[Processing of foreign-accented speech](#), by Niels Schiller

[Language change by language contact? Naturally, but selectively!](#) by Norbert Corver

[Regional Languages under Contact](#), by Ricardo Etxepare

[Gallo: bilingualism and dialectal variation](#), by Samantha Becerra Zita

[Understanding of heritage language acquisition: the case of heritage Korean](#), by Jiyong Choi

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