

# Language deficit in super-diversity 7 Comments

 5

2,082 views

By Ingrid Piller | August 20, 2014 | Language, migration & social justice



Linguistic diversity in Sydney (Source: Sydney Morning Herald)

The media in Anglophone countries regularly engage in a bit of a bragfest about the linguistic diversity of their cities. In Sydney, where I live, the local paper only recently boasted: ‘From Afrikaans to Telugu, Hebrew to Wu, the depth and diversity of languages in Sydney rivals some of the world’s largest cities.’ Not to be outdone, Melbourne – Sydney’s eternal rival for urban preeminence in Australia – quickly followed suit and declared itself ‘justifiably proud of its linguistic diversity’ because ‘more languages are spoken in Melbourne than there are countries in the world.’ These two Australian cities are not alone in their rivalry over the greater number of languages spoken in their communities. Across the Pacific, Canadian media, too, tally the linguistic diversity of Canadian cities and find ‘Toronto leading the pack in language

diversity, followed by Vancouver and Montreal.’ Similarly, the media of Canada’s southern neighbor suggest that US cities, too, compete in some kind of multilingualism championship: ‘New York remains the most multilingual city in the country, with 47% of its massive population speaking at least two languages.’ Continuing our journey east across the Atlantic, British media play the same game and we learn that Manchester has been ‘revealed as most linguistically diverse city in western Europe’ while London is celebrated as the ‘multilingual capital of the world.’

Strangely, while media texts such as these regularly brag about the extent of urban multilingualism, another set of media texts can be found simultaneously that bemoans the language deficit in Anglophone countries. Here we learn that the populations of Anglophone countries are lacking the multilingual skills of the rest of the world and will therefore be left behind when it comes to the global economic opportunities of the future. There is concern that students are not studying foreign languages in school and that, as a result, they will miss out on job opportunities at home and abroad. Additionally, lack of foreign language capabilities is presented as diminishing opportunities for international trade, limiting global political influence and threatening national security. The situation seems to be so dire that employers have to leave positions unfilled, secret services are missing out on crucial information and policy makers simply throw up their hands in despair and fund students to study abroad even if they have no knowledge of the language in their destination nor any intention of studying it while there.







Reading depressing news such as these one has to wonder how they can be squared with upbeat language <sup>^</sup> vs circulating in the media at the same time. How can the cities of Anglophone nations be hothouses of linguistic diversity where large numbers of languages are spoken by the population at the same time that there is a widespread linguistic deficit?!

The answer to this conundrum lies in the fact that commentators and politicians bemoaning the fact that Americans, Australians or Britons do not know languages other than English have a very different segment of the population in mind than those commentators who note their multilingualism.

Clive Holes, a professor of Arabic at Oxford University, explains the differential visibility of language skills with reference to Arabic in the UK: there are few students who study Arabic at university – a language for which there is high demand both in the private and public sector – and those who do are mostly middle-class students, who have no previous experience with Arabic. The kind of language they study is ‘Arabic university style,’ a variety that is focused on written texts and a standard form that is quite different from the varieties of Arabic spoken across the Arab world.

At the same time, Britain is also home to a large number of people who learnt to speak Arabic in the family. 159,290 residents of England and Wales identified Arabic as their main language in the 2011 census. According to Professor Holes these people have ‘more useable language skills’ than those who study Arabic at university without a background in the language. Even so, those who have Arabic as their main language are being overlooked for Arabic-language jobs: ‘They are an incredibly valuable national resource that we are failing totally to use.’

The existence of an apparent language deficit in contexts of so-called linguistic super-diversity points, yet again, to the fact that some language skills are more equal than others. When it comes to bragging about linguistic diversity and the number of languages spoken in a place, we are happy to count ‘diverse populations;’ but when it comes to the economic opportunities of multilingualism, these same ‘diverse populations’ become invisible all of a sudden.

 Facebook 1  Twitter  Google  Email  Print  More

ARABIC AUSTRALIA CANADA CULTURAL DIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND ECONOMY  
LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES LANGUAGE LEARNING LITERACY LONDON MEDIA DISCOURSE MELBOURNE  
MIGRATION MONOLINGUAL MINDSET MONOLINGUALISM MONTREAL MULTICULTURALISM  
MULTILINGUALISM NEW YORK CITY SOCIAL INCLUSION SOCIAL JUSTICE SOCIOLINGUISTICS SYDNEY  
SYDNEY MORNING HERALD TORONTO UK USA VANCOUVER