

Preface

Which languages for Europe?

At a seminar in the Dutch town of Oegstgeest in October 1998, this question – “Which languages for Europe?” – was put to an international group of experts and policy makers. As the initiator of the seminar, the *European Cultural Foundation* was seeking to create a platform for open, non-partisan debate on this highly controversial issue. The participants considered the kinds of practices and policies which would conceive of language as a tool for communication and social cohesion as well as a foundation for culture. The European constellation of languages was discussed from the domestic as well as from the educational and political perspective.

The seminar prompted a number of participants to look even more closely at the status of various minority languages – in particular, regional languages and those spoken by migrant communities – as well as at the prevailing approaches to these languages and possible new approaches (cf. *The Other Languages of Europe*, edited by Guus Extra & Durk Gorter, Multilingual Matters, 2001). As it turned out, the Oegstgeest seminar was only the first step in a series of debates, research projects, and publications.

It soon became apparent that there was a poverty – even an absence – of relevant information and data concerning the language practice of different generations of migrant communities. This was seriously hampering attempts to investigate the issue and make meaningful comparisons. Having identified the potential of the *Multilingual Cities Project* to improve this situation, to make a significant contribution to the ongoing debate, and to influence policy makers at various levels, the *European Cultural Foundation* committed itself to encouraging and supporting the project.

In the event, ‘Multilingual Cities’ provided a great deal of valuable information. One of the most striking outcomes of the project is the visibility it has given both to the existence and vitality of these ‘hidden languages’ of Europe. Who knows, for example, that another language next to or instead of Swedish is spoken in the homes of one third of Göteborg’s primary school children? Or that, overall, more than eighty languages next to or instead of Dutch are spoken in the homes of children in The Hague, with Turkish, Hind(ustan)i, Berber and Arabic as the top-four of languages, respectively?

For those dealing with sociolinguistics, language education and languages policies, this crossnational research offers new insights and perspectives. The *Multilingual Cities Project* demonstrates that policies relating to language use need not 'lock people up' in their home language, since language practice evolves quickly from one generation to another; rather, such policies should build on the often-unrecognized strength of multilingualism among the new citizens of Europe.

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