

Language has become a tool for social exclusion

February 21 2019, by Loredana Polezzi, Jo Angouri And Rita Wilson



Credit: Ivan Samkov from Pexels

Within a week of the [Salzburg Global Seminar's Statement for a Multilingual World](#) launching in February 2018, the document – which calls for policies and practices that support multilingualism – had

received 1.5m social media impressions.

The statement opens with some striking facts, including that "all 193 UN member states and most people are multilingual". It also points out that 7,097 languages are currently spoken across the world but 2,464 of these are endangered. Just 23 languages dominate among these 7,097, and are spoken by over half of the world's population.

As these statistics show, the soundtrack of our lives and the visual landscapes of our cities are multilingual. Languages, in their plurality, enrich our experience of the world and our creative potential.

Multilingualism opens up new ways of being and of doing, it connects us with others and provides a window into the diversity of our societies.

And yet, despite the more positive statistics above, we are currently witnessing a deep divide.

On the one hand, multilingualism is associated with mobility, productivity and knowledge creation (see, for instance, the EU's objective for [all citizens to speak two languages](#) in addition to their first one). On the other, monolingualism (speaking only one [language](#)) is still perceived as [both the norm and the ideal](#) for an allegedly well-functioning society. Linguistic diversity is seen as both [suspicious](#) and [costly](#).

Linguistic penalties

This is particularly visible in relation to the most vulnerable groups seeking a new home: refugees and asylum seekers. Newcomers are [often required](#) to prove they can [read, write and speak](#) the national language/s to be given the right to remain. Fluency, however, goes beyond technical ability in the majority languages. In the 1980s, [researchers showed](#) that language is more than just a code by which we communicate, it is related to social and political knowledge, and access to power structures.

Language skills are critically important for engagement with a host society and lacking those skills can be an insurmountable barrier for accessing opportunities in education, work, and other areas of social life. Success in finding one's place in a new social context, however, requires more than instrumental use of language.

Research has shown that refugees pay a "[linguistic penalty](#)" when transitioning to a new socioeconomic environment. That penalty refers to the consequences of being categorised as "different" or not "one of us" on the basis of language performance that does not follow established societal norms.

Speakers who inadvertently break societal rules of expected behaviour are assessed as "not having enough language", [which becomes a proxy](#) for an inability to "fit in". That inability, in turn, is interpreted as a moral deficiency: lack of fluency [becomes a sign of](#) insufficient desire to become "one of us" and marks the migrant as both a "failed" and a "bad" citizen.

Language, held up as a sign of belonging, becomes a gatekeeper for [inclusion/exclusion](#), regulating access to citizenship and education, health and legal protection. The responsibility for success or failure falls firmly on the shoulders of the "other" – the migrant, the minority member, the one who ["does not fit in"](#). This process is clearly visible in citizenship and [language tests](#). The tests blur language assessment with reproducing and assessing abstract values about the home society. They take a [narrow approach to cultural diversity](#) and represent [one hegemonic set](#) of "ways of doing things around here".

Deficit approach

The myth of one nation, one (national) language, one (national) culture – which was at the heart of the ideal of the nation state [in the 19th and](#)

[20th centuries](#) – perpetuates the master narrative of national homogeneity. The [consistent and robust evidence](#) that "[native speakers](#)" (a political term in its own right) fail citizenship tests and that the evaluation process is deeply political has not yet produced an alternative narrative.

By projecting a deficit approach onto refugees and asylum seekers, their contribution to society is dismissed and both their presence and the [linguistic diversity](#) attached to it are perceived as problems or costs. This mechanism of exclusion relies on a hierarchy in which not all languages are equal or desirable.

"Their" language(s) are low on the pecking order that the majority perceive as needed or wanted. Monolingual models insist on a "subtractive" principle in which one dominant language replaces another less "desirable" one, rather than recognising and valuing how multilingualism, by adding the ability to communicate in more than one language, can benefit everyone in our increasingly connected world.

These attitudes silence the contributions that new multilingual citizens make to economic growth, social cohesion or artistic production. A different approach is urgently needed, one that moves away from multilingualism as deficit and towards a recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity as a creative engine of civic participation and social well-being.

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