

Conference Report

HOLM 2016 – The International Conference on Social and Affective Factors in Home Language Maintenance and Development

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The International Conference on Social and Affective Factors in Home Language Maintenance and Development (HOLM 2016) took place at the Centre for General Linguistics (ZAS) in Berlin in February 2016. Jointly organised by the ZAS and Griffith University (Brisbane, Australia), the conference attracted close to 70 scholars and practitioners interested in home language maintenance and development from over 20 countries. Participants from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Taiwan met over a period of two days to exchange ideas and discuss projects. The conference was initiated by the International Association for Applied Linguistics (AILA) Research Network (ReN) on Social and Affective Factors in Home Language Maintenance and Development, which was founded in 2015.

It is uncontroversial that immigrants and their children need to acquire the majority language spoken in the host country as quickly as possible. And indeed there are currently enormous efforts to provide current refugees with language skills in the majority language, to facilitate their effective integration into the host society. Yet, minority languages spoken by immigrants and indigenous groups are seen as a problem (as articulated in Germany, for example, in Esser (2006)). As Lo Bianco pointed out in relation to Australian education policies, while some prestigious languages spoken abroad are regarded as valuable skills, most immigrant and indigenous languages spoken in Australia are not “welcome”. He concludes that, “when the languages are less foreign, when emotional attachment and mastery may be high, their study, public use, and maintenance ‘threaten civilization’. No longer a skill but sedition” (Lo Bianco, 2000, p. 99). As a result of these negative societal attitudes, children of immigrants and indigenous populations frequently stop speaking the languages of their parents and ancestors, which they later often perceive as a great personal deficit.

Thus, in an increasingly globalized world, home languages – and their role in society and education as well as their emotional relevance for the speakers and their families – have become a hugely important topic.

Accordingly, the HOLM conference aimed at exchanging and integrating international knowledge about social and affective factors that play a role in the acquisition and maintenance of home languages. As organizers, we hope to thereby create a foundation on which programs for the successful promotion of home language competencies can be developed. An additional aim of the conference was the exchange of information on practical challenges in multilingual contexts, as well as the pooling of existing resources.

The papers presented at the conference made it clear that two main directions play a role in current research:

- the *micro-level* (focus on the individual) – how are languages supported and used in families and communities? What social and emotional influences are recognizable, and do they affect the acquisition and maintenance of home languages?
- the *macro level* (focus on society and education) – which societal opinions and political attitudes influence the acquisition and maintenance of home languages; how do education policies deal with home languages and how are educational recommendations implemented?

Contributions in both the above areas were presented at the conference, supplemented by meta studies and best practice reports. One of the keynote speakers, Annick De Houwer from Erfurt, presented a meta-study analyzing 25 years of research on minority language education and its socio-emotional impact on the well-being of preschool children and their parents in the 28 European Member States. The analysis of the studies, which overall included about 14,500 participants, shows that the non-acquisition of the home language has indeed a detrimental effect on the well-being of parents and children. Parents feel incompetent, guilty and rejected by their children, if children fail to acquire the home language. Children, on the other hand, feel embarrassment and shame when they fail to acquire the home language, but pride and an increased sense of self-esteem when they do master the home language and grow up bilingually. It therefore seems that support for the parents in their efforts to offer their children a “harmonious bilingual language acquisition” (De Houwer, 2015) is of great importance.

The second keynote speaker, Elizabeth Lanza from Oslo, reported on the current situation in Norway, which has traditionally been called “linguistic paradise”, because of its openness towards dialects and other Scandinavian languages in all areas of life. With globalization progressing and a resulting increased multilingualism (15.6% of the Norwegian population are immigrants or children of immigrants, while in Oslo multilingualism stands at 32%), however, ideological battles in Norway are on the rise. As can be observed in other countries, calls are increasingly being made to abandon the liberal and open stance towards home languages in the education system, which is a dangerous development.

Contributions focusing on the micro level emphasized two crucially important factors: a positive attitude to multilingualism (of parents as well as teachers in day care centres and primary schools) and a targeted approach to multilingualism in the family, such as through a “family language policy”. For example, results from New Zealand show that children with more consistent language and management practices are more likely to speak their home languages, while children who grow up with a “laissez-faire” approach in the family tend to speak the majority language exclusively.

In principle, however, there is consensus among researchers that a great variety of factors both at the micro- and the macro-levels influence the acquisition and maintenance of home languages, although it is not yet entirely clear which factor affects language acquisition in what manner. Some factors mentioned at the conference include (note that the list is neither exhaustive nor ordered in any way):

- attitudes of the families and their environment to multilingualism, cultural identity and integration;
- environmental factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, education and age of parents, family structures, integration into the diaspora or speaker community);
- affective-emotional factors in children and parents (e.g. emotional well-being, identity formation);
- characteristics of the diaspora or speaker community (e.g. size, ongoing immigration, contextual use of the home language, for instance in cultural and religious events);
- mainstream regulations (e.g. educational, political and societal ideologies);
- language acquisition pathways (e.g. simultaneous vs. sequential multilingualism, continuous vs. interrupted acquisition, patterns such as the one-parent-one-language (OPOL) approach vs. the “minority-language-at-home” approach);
- amount and quality of the input in the home language;
- the status and prestige of the home language;
- language-learning practices (e.g. home language as subject at school, family practices such as special reading activities, visits to the country of origin, etc.).

Other presentations focused on the topic of home languages in formal education. These studies dealt, for example, with the current situation of home-language teaching in Sweden (“mother tongue tuition”), with integration measures for multilingual students in a Russian school, or with the strategies used by a preschool teacher in France to facilitate young learners’ transition into the formal school system. Tied in with these were several reports on the implementation and evaluation of practical programs. Mutual support in parenthood was a main theme, but the transfer of knowledge from academic research to educators, teachers, speech therapists, paediatric nurses, and especially to parents was also identified as crucial to strengthening knowledge and self-confidence in multilingual education.

Moreover, a number of presentations were devoted to indigenous languages. Many indigenous communities are struggling with the imminent loss of their languages. The current global language death highlights the importance of language preservation and the prevention of further language loss. Conference contributions for example reported on Kven, a Finno-Ugric language in Norway, and Gaelic in Scotland. Similar problematic situations are also encountered in two Aboriginal communities in Australia. In Barunga in Central North Australia, for instance, Kriol (an Australian creole) is mainly used, while 14 different languages are spoken by about 2,500 speakers in Maningrida in Arnhemland. Interesting methodological questions were raised, since the research tools need adaptation to the respective cultural contexts.

During the ensuing discussions at the conference, the main focus was on the following topics:

1. Multilingualism in the education system – how to collaborate with in-service and pre-service teachers of various disciplines, to better evaluate the linguistic diversity in classrooms;
2. Instruments for language proficiency assessment and language diagnosis of multilingual children – which ones are there and what is the social impact of the lack of appropriate multilingual measurement instruments;
3. Diversity of family structures and profiles – which profiles have largely remained unexplored (e.g. adopted children) and how much diversity must be taken into account when carrying our research;
4. Researchers as stakeholders and lobbyists – what can and should they do in the area?

The conference provided an opportunity to consolidate existing interests and activities and to network with AILA research members more closely. The feedback we received as organizers was extremely positive. Further activities have already taken place or are planned. The network again met in Stockholm in September 2016, and a network symposium will take place as part of the AILA world congress in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in July 2017.

Finally, the ReN website is fully functional (<https://www.languageathome.info/>) and open to anyone. Researchers interested in joining can do so by visiting the website (<https://www.languageathome.info/member/register>). Members of the wider community can visit the ReN's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/homelanguagemaintenance/>), which aims at disseminating research findings on the importance of home language maintenance, to inform teachers, families and policy makers.

References

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