

Introduction: Why mediation strategies are important

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Abstract

Mediation strategies are deployed when people use translation, interpreting, lingua francas, intercomprehension, language learning, or any combination of these to communicate in situations where there is more than one language in play. Such choices can be seen as enacting trade offs between the goals of mobility (across geolinguistic borders) and inclusion (primarily into labor markets and government services). Mediation strategies are nevertheless selected in accordance with complex sets of criteria by which they are evaluated and compared in each particular situation. Case studies suggest that, if seen as performative language policy, the strategies tend to give more priority to social inclusion than to language diversity. They might thus constitute a challenge to some approaches to official language policy.

“Four fish, per favor!”, says my mum to our village fishmonger in Spain. As a seasonally visiting grandmother, she no doubt breaks all the rules: this is not inclusive communication; it does nothing to respect or maintain the village variety of Catalan (*xaporiao*, “slapped together”), let alone the official Spanish and Catalan spoken on either side of the border where we live. No, this is decidedly not good language planning or language policy. My mother blatantly imposes her native English, plus a code-switch to something resembling Catalan then Spanish, but who cares about that difference? The thing is, accompanied by four raised fingers and an extended index, the utterance does get her the fish. And the other women present understand well enough; they accept my mum with good humor; they are actually the ones who told me the story: At last, they said, our English lessons have been useful!

If not exemplary, the anecdote at least raises a question of alternatives. What else could my mother have done? Perhaps, in the ideal world of professional linguists, she would have learned the varieties (*xaporiao*, Catalan, and Spanish) then made subtle and intelligent switches between all three. Yet she is a visiting grandmother, with little time and less inclination for tedious language learning. Perhaps she could have taken an interpreter along with her: a

professional would certainly have cost more than the fish, but she has a son and three grandchildren who could have mediated quite adequately. However, that too would have required added effort for little actual benefit: the fish would be the same, and her social inclusion would probably not have been enhanced. What else? She chose to use English, betting on its status as some kind of lingua franca even though it is not technically a lingua franca in this case (since it is her first language). Then she enacted a little code-switching, a minor gesture to an alternative language space, perhaps meant as a fleeting apology or implicit plea for inclusion. And as she was getting the fish, she probably grasped something like “cuatro” and “pescado,” thus successfully negotiating a minimalist bilingual conversation, a fleeting instance of intercomprehension. She made a choice between at least those alternative mediation strategies.

What I am calling “mediation strategy” here is simply a way to solve a communication problem involving more than one language. Our purpose in this volume is to explore, through a series of qualitative case studies, *why* people who move between countries and languages (“mobile subjects”) use some strategies rather than others, and what consequences this might have for language policy, mostly in Europe.

Names for things

The studies in this volume are from a work package called “Mediation,” which is part of a European Commission project called *Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe* (MIME) (2014-2018). Our mandate has been to look at the following strategies available to speakers:

- Translation, particularly the impact of free online machine translation;
- Interpreting, especially the provision of professional interpreters for public services;
- Lingua francas, when two or more speakers use a language that is not their first language (L1);
- Intercomprehension, when each speaker uses their L1 and has at least passive understanding of the language of the other person.

Despite a certain formal beauty in this menu, each of these terms is unhappy in various minor ways.

“*Mediation*,” to start with, normally applies to situations where there is a clearly present third party: a translator, an interpreter, or perhaps an online machine translation service. So

what about lingua francas and intercomprehension, where there need be no mediator physically present? In those cases, we are forced to see *language teachers* as mediators whose efforts are invested *prior* to the multilingual speech act. And if we take that step, then the whole of language education should probably be added as a further major “mediation strategy” available to speakers. In our various case studies, this is indeed the operative background assumption.

“*Strategy*” would seem less difficult. In military terms, though, a “strategy” is opposed to a “tactic”: it is a choice designed to achieve a *long-term beneficial outcome*, and such long-term planning can rarely be assumed in the kinds of encounters we analyze herein. A less problematic alternative might be “mediation choice”, simply to stress there is a range of options available and that people are able to choose actively between them. The insistence on choice could then invite further key terms like agency, intervention, performance, and situational complexity, which otherwise tend to find only marginal roles in discussions of language policy. So if we stay with “strategy,” which was the spontaneous preference of the research group, we do not forget the implications of active choice.

“*Translation*” and “*interpreting*” are not really any simpler. The professional distinction is between “interpreting” as *spoken* mediation and “translation” as *written*. The studies herein nevertheless concern what is more technically known as “Public Service Interpreting and Translation,” where the important part is not the mode of delivery but the *service* being delivered between members of a community, particularly for the reception of migrants (cf. Hale 2011: 232). The distinction between the oral and the written is not necessarily paramount: the work of interpreters is often backed up by translated written (and ideally audiovisual) materials; the same people often provide both services (Brown 2001); the professional distinction, although maintained in our studies, is not the main thing here. A further professional division is sometimes made between “interpreting” as the *close* oral rendition of a speech, and “mediation” (or these days sometimes “translanguaging”) as a *looser* way of explaining what was said or what has to be done. In our context here, where we position interpreting as a mode of mediation, that division is also of limited interest: what counts is whether or not there is a person there (a “mediator”) to help cross-language communication. The more important distinction, involved in all our studies, is thus between the *presence* of that person and what can be done in the *absence* of that person, notably with free online machine translation and, technically, the knowledge gained from prior language learning.

“*Lingua franca*” is no less tricky. Technically the term refers to a language that is not the communicators’ first one: for example, English as used between speakers of German and Portuguese. But then, when one of the speakers *does* have the language as a first language, do

we really want to bring in a new term? Not really. In our studies we have generally opted for a loose reading of “lingua franca,” applying the term to cases like my mother’s English in Spain, where she makes use of an international lingua franca.

“*Intercomprehension*” then merits similar leeway, allowing for situations where the languages in a bilingual exchange are not the L1 of one or both of the speakers. We insist more on the role of “receptive” comprehension, where the speaker understands the other’s language but does not normally speak it. This mainly happens between cognate languages, but other scenarios crop up in our data.

All those terms are more than a little loose, yet still distinct enough to name strategies that can be compared. Tighter definitions are then offered in most of our actual case studies, to suit the particular circumstances under discussion.

Our wider project also brings in two further terms, of rather more importance.

“*Mobility*,” in European Union parlance, is simply the condition of people who move, in this case across geolinguistic borders. Our case studies concern various kinds of mobility: migrants, language teachers, visiting family members, and families adopting children abroad. We assume a world of people in movement, since that is what set up the multilingual encounters we are looking at. Mobility, however, is these days rarely limited to just one jump: people can choose to keep moving throughout their entire life, and the *intended duration* of each stay thus becomes a key factor in the choice of mediation strategies. There is not just one kind of mobility.

“*Inclusion*” is the other main variable in our wider project, where it is generally seen as the ability of a person to participate in social life, particularly with respect to access to the labor market and government services. There are definitions of “inclusion” to suit all tastes. Our approach here is mostly minimalist, where the mobile subject is broadly considered to be included if they understand the language in which employment is made available or a service is provided – even though they may not *feel* included, and there might be other factors inhibiting their access. The range of definitions can also be extended to the point where the fully included subject feels they are co-author of the community’s laws (Habermas 1995). Many points in between are then located when our subjects are asked if they have ever felt “excluded.” No matter how much doubt there may be about what “inclusion” means exactly, there is much less doubt about what it feels like to be excluded.

Identified as such, mobility and inclusion might seem mutually incompatible: a person who uses only English and achieves a high degree of mobility will likely be socially excluded when employment and services are provided in other languages, and a person who achieves

maximum social inclusion by using no more than a local language is likely not to benefit from much mobility. The conceptual beauty of the MIME project, modeled in Grin et al. (2014), is that *both* mobility and inclusion are considered desirable goals, such that the aim is to locate trade-offs where degrees of both can be attained at the same time. That is considered to be the general goal of multilingual language policies: to allow citizens both to move and to be included. In principle, our mediation strategies all allow trade-offs of this kind, since they all function as ways in which degrees of inclusion and mobility are achieved at the same time. Even my mother, with perhaps the least sophisticated mediation strategy around, is able to get her fish, have a laugh with the women, and keep coming back to our village year after year. And all the other choices would probably have fared even better. That is why, I posit, mediation strategies should be important for language policy.

Case studies

In what specific ways do mediation strategies allow for trade offs? Here we seek answers in a series of case studies, all of which involve interviews with fairly small numbers of people:

- 51 Russian-speakers in southern Catalonia, Spain;
- 20 English-speaking migrants in Leipzig, Germany;
- 34 asylum seekers in Ljubljana, Slovenia (selected from 127 answered questionnaires);
- 23 language teachers in Ljubljana, Slovenia;
- 10 international adoption families in Italy.

The case-study approach has been preferred because of the complexity of the variables involved and the quantitative incommensurability of the main values. After all, how can one compare, in abstract quantitative terms, long-term language maintenance, variable-term mobility, and short-term social inclusion? How could language policy juggle those kinds of affective and moral values with the quantitative measures of time, effort, and money? Yet when people actively choose one strategy rather than another, they are effectively making value judgments of that order of complexity: “when something is of value for social actors, their behavior indicates it” (Grin 2002: 21). And those judgments, inherently individual yet accumulatively social (since they concern communication), provide a basis on which policymakers can indeed compare values. On the level of policy, one might perhaps make a

global comparison of mediation strategies in the same way we ultimately compare governments: by seeing how people vote – except that they are electing mediation strategies almost every day.

Although efforts have been made to ensure that the sample groups represent wider populations to some degree, our studies can lay no major claim to generalizability. Asylum seekers in Ljubljana do not represent asylum seekers everywhere; the Russian-speaking community in Spain is in many respects a very particular immigrant group even within the Spanish context; migrants in Germany are learning a language that is closer to the international lingua franca than most other languages are; adoption families tend to be defined and regulated nationally, so what happens in Italy need not be the case elsewhere; and language teachers are, perhaps by definition, uniquely aware of language issues, in a way that a more general population would tend not to be. Our case studies will always be open to challenges on those flanks. What we are mainly looking for, though, are not so much quantitative correlations as conceptual relations, the *logics* by which trade-offs are made, with their particular operational criteria. And those logics involve far more than the kinds of values that can be put into quantitative boxes. Although our mandated variables are mobility and inclusion, our subjects indicated that other major criteria are operative: the (intended) duration of mobility, the costs of each option (in terms of economic, physical, or cognitive effort), the relative independence allowed to the communication partners, and “accuracy” as a broad measure of the linguistic quality attained. Our various discussions over the years, comparing our evolving studies, have given rise to a rule-of-thumb guide to the values entering into trade-offs (Table 1).

Table 1. General criteria for mediation strategies

Mediation strategy	Mobility frame	Cost to user or provider	User independence	Linguistic accuracy	Inclusion
Translation technologies	Short	Low	High	Low	Low
Public-service interpreting and translation	Short	High	Low	Medium/ high	Moderate
Intercomprehension	Short / medium	Moderate	High	Variable	Moderate
Lingua francas	Indefinite	Variable	High	Variable / high	Moderate
Learning host language	Long	High	High	Variable / high	High

This analysis suggests, for instance, that online machine translation tends to come to the fore in situations of short-term mobility when little effort is to be invested (indicating a low-risk situation), linguistic accuracy is thus not required, and inclusion is not a high priority.

Each mediation strategy thus has its strong and weak points, to the extent that a certain commonsense balancing act could predict which should be used when. Our studies nevertheless often find that the options are combined and effectively reinforce each other: online machine translation might be used to prepare for a visit to the doctor (thus providing some language learning), while the actual visit is then carried out in a lingua franca, for example.

Some less than convenient findings

As neat as the language of trade offs may sound, there are several points in Table 1 that could leave some language-policy theorists perplexed or otherwise less than enthralled.

Most of us, for example, like to see ourselves as fighting on behalf of translators and interpreters, who certainly deserve more social recognition of the roles they play in enhancing inclusion. In this vein, the data from all our studies happily put paid to any suggestion that the provision of translation and interpreting services restricts people's motivation to learn host languages, and do so quantitatively. The questionnaire used for asylum seekers in Ljubljana and Russian-speakers in Catalonia asked whether the interviewees would learn the host language if they were provided interpreters for all their interactions, and our subjects overwhelmingly replied that they *would* indeed learn the host language (cf. Pokorn and Čibej 2017). So that particular ideological battle could be considered won: interpreting services need not harm language learning. Yet our mobile subjects also tell us, repeatedly, that they prefer *not* to use professional translators and interpreters because those human mediators tend to restrict the speakers' independence. Our subjects would rather rely on friends or otherwise manage things for themselves. This could be because people seeking asylum from oppressive regimes (many of our subjects are asylum-seekers) tend not to believe in neutral mediators; it could also perhaps be because people interested in language like to use these occasions as learning experiences; but sometimes it is also because, as one adoptive parent put it, “era più bello spiegarsi da soli” – “it was more beautiful to explain ourselves alone” (Fiorentino, in this volume). Mediators can get in the way. As mentioned, the generalizability of our studies will always be a problem, but it is clear enough that we cannot generalize professional translation and interpreting as ideal communication solutions. Their virtues are relative to the costs, risks, and emotional values involved in each situation.

A second less than convenient finding can be found in Table 1 where “lingua francas” are considered to allow “moderate” inclusion. This has been the object of mild debate within the MIME project, where some defend the principle that English as a lingua franca is the

ideological opposite of social inclusion, indeed the enemy of multilingualism in general. This might be expressed, for example, in the proposal that, when all else is equal, the best language policy is the one that favors maximum multilingualism – a principle that would probably see any lingua franca lose every time. Our studies challenge that blunt principle by noting the use of several lingua francas: English is indeed omnipresent, but the function of lingua franca is also taken on by Spanish in a Catalan-speaking part of Spain, by Russian for people from the ex-Soviet Union, by BCMS (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian) among migrants in former Yugoslavia, and by Esperanto in its own inclusive communities and beyond. In all these contexts, the use of a lingua franca is found to constitute a mediation choice that *can* open paths for enhanced inclusion. So if there is a problem with English, it is not particularly because of its status as a lingua franca. And even if we do want to focus on English alone, it is not hard to find ways in which its international status can play a positive role in the acquisition of further languages, particularly in the case of closely related languages like German (see Fiedler and Wohlfarth in this volume).

A third cause of disconcertion might then be the surprisingly marginal role played by intercomprehension in our studies. Minor instances turn up almost everywhere, often as very transitory solutions, but we have come across no long-term stable situation where interlocutors each speak their L1 and have receptive comprehension of the other. This is unlike reports of relatively stable intercomprehension between Scandinavian languages (Verschik 2012) or between Dutch and German (Berkens 2010), for instance. In our studies, the mediation choice that might otherwise seem the most equitable and economical, touted by European intellectuals of the order of Claude Hagège (1992: 273) and Umberto Eco (1993: 292-293), is strangely not generalized. Indeed, our data contain more instances of code-switching and code-mixing, strategies by which speakers flaunt rather than demarcate the borders between languages.

In sum, a few of the things that a theorist or policymaker might like to see in mediation strategies are not substantially there. This suggests that something slightly more profound could be at work.

No language policy without mediation strategies?

Since our studies work mostly bottom-up, from empirical data to questions of policy, we could be on a collision course with the kind of top-down thinking that goes from questions of policy to mediation strategies. An instance of the latter might be the approach adopted by Meylaerts (2011), where analysis starts from brave appeals to “democracy,” “justice,” “fairness,” and

“multilingualism” on the level of language policy, and then points out that such noble aims should require considerable use of translation at the level of social implementation. Hence the slogan, “No language policy without translation policy” (Meylaerts 2011). A brilliant application of this approach is González-Núñez’s study of translation policy in England (2015), where the legal bases for language rights are analyzed on the international, national, regional, and local levels. As one moves down each level, it becomes very clear that the rights cannot be exercised without the provision of translation services, which are often absent or inadequate. That top-down approach is certainly not wrong; it retains a strong critical import. When we work bottom-up, though, starting from the mediation strategies deployed on the ground, it quickly becomes clear that professional translation and interpreting services are only a small part of what is being done. Why should translation be the only strategy? Because it is the only one you are looking for? We could just as easily say that there is no language policy without *lingua francas*, or machine translation, or language learning, or intercomprehension, or relative transaction costs, or communication risks, or we might just say, without mediation strategies.

There is an even more serious issue here. When people choose between mediation strategies, their criteria are a long way from the abstract ideals of those who would defend the justice of multilingualism. When you are in a European university and perhaps close to Brussels, multilingualism tends to mean the defense of official national languages, with their clear borders, extensive language resources, and established teaching programs. From the perspective of the people actually making mediation choices, especially in the situations currently constituted by immigration from beyond Europe, there are many more languages involved, far fewer trained professionals available, and much less faith in language rights. From that second perspective, the best policy could be one that maximizes not multilingualism, not the defense of any one language against others, but social inclusion. As Lo Bianco (2002: 25) puts it, language policy thus shifts from “universal western state models” to the “evaluation of practice.”

In the end, the kind of policy that prioritizes a formal diversity of *languages* is not likely to evaluate *language practices* in a less systemically segmented sense. Where some thus claim that there is no language policy without translation policy, we might reply that, if inclusion is indeed what counts most, there is no *social inclusion* policy without *mediation strategy*. Both goalposts move.

When people make mediation choices, they can be seen as performing a kind of communication policy, a policy they negotiate with others, enacted in each particular situation and for that situation. True, one might then hope that official policies influence those choices

in the interests of greater goods: one could make it easier for seasonally visiting grandmothers to enjoy learning local languages; stimulus could be given to intercomprehension skills in all additional-language classes; campaigns could inform users about the strengths and weaknesses of online machine translation; the training and provision of professional interpreters can be adjusted to suit the languages and situations where they are most needed, for example. But the first step, in order to achieve any such influence, must be to understand the complex reasons why people make decisions on the ground.

That is ultimately why mediation strategies are important.

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