

Lucija Čok

MULTILINGUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS – VIRTUAL REALITY OR IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE?

The Starting Point

The starting point of this paper is the author's research and knowledge of the manifold dimensions of life in the contact spaces of Europe through the prism of cultural and ethnic coexistence and the languages that enable this coexistence. In this complexity of social states, the cultural and political value of languages for the author is not a static trait, but an achievement of historically and socially located practices of speakers, including discursive practices that give recognisable sign values to languages and circulate them through recognisable pathways.

Language contact in society and in the face-to-face interactions between people are effective and efficient based on the effectiveness and efficiency of the natural or normative regulated processes of redefining linguistic differences and identities, language status competition, language promotion and language discrimination. The complex relationships between languages and cultures in politically defined national territories and in territories where the flows of mobility of people and languages are spread across cultural areas are realities that increasingly offer us solutions such as the protection of national languages from the dominance of a culturally neutral language (as the conceptualisation of the English language becomes). The concept of linguaculture / languaculture (Risager, 2020) in different studies does not make it easier for us to understand this complex situation relating to language use. The official status of languages: first language (mother-tongue), second or foreign language and lingua franca, is exceeded and their permanent interrelation no longer allows pure definitions. How can we develop and redefine these

analytical concepts taking into consideration the complexities of language contacts and plurilingual competencies?

To successfully preserve multilingualism or linguistic diversity in areas with languages in contact and to justify intercultural understanding in time and space, innovative solutions for language learning and use (linguistic didactics) are necessary and required. They should develop composite abilities and skills that, in addition to multilingualism itself, promote critical and humanistic thinking, tolerance and heuristic curiosity relating to the vital necessity to survive in a global world.

Six Crucial Questions

1. Why do we learn a language when speech is an innate necessity?

Let's start with a summary of what Noam Chomsky convinced us of (Syntactic Structures, 1957). His theory of universal grammar argues that a person has an innate understanding of how languages work, because all languages have quite similar structures and rules. Humans are genetically encoded for behaviours relating to language and understanding how languages are compiled and structured. The argument on universal grammar and the inherent nature of language is represented by the fact that everywhere in the world, children show an awareness of language categories at extremely early ages, long before any instruction occurs. We can observe how they learn to speak without much effort. Although they do not know individual words, they understand parents who use voice signs (phonemes) to convey the content of what is happening around them. Chomsky can be argued against with evidence that innate language utterance is not enough to acquire languages. Without stimuli and motivation, it is difficult to learn anything, not just language. Before Chomsky, Lev Vygotsky emphasised the role of social interactions in the development of mental abilities, such as speech and reasoning in children, and argued that the distance between the actual mental development of the child and their age is determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). However, it was precisely the theory of universal grammar that deeply marked the teaching and learning of

languages, first, as well as everything else that we want to learn in language communication.

As the world has changed throughout history, in particular (re)shaped by those environments where people have come together in community and continue to do so, respect for diversity and otherness is a key factor in their existence. Knowledge and the understanding of otherness and difference based on it cannot be put into practice without language learning, without successful education in multilingualism and interculturality, and without the availability of means and ways of experiencing the understanding of diversity in life practice. Knowing several languages and being able to communicate in a non-native language means building one's own intellectual capital, which benefits one in life.

2. Is the coexistence of languages (second, foreign or neighbourhood) in our lives an exception or a norm?

Language is the means that enables communication among individuals. The awareness of the first language / mother-tongue grows in the individual from the very beginning of communicating/uttering thoughts and feelings. Speech is primarily a response to stimuli from the family environment. The language helps us discover everything, even what other senses cannot reach. With our first language, we get to know the closest environment, discover it and judge or value it. Following our linguistic and cognitive experiences, we build our individuality, and we become social beings through accepting norms, values, attitudes and cultural habits. It influences the formation of one's personality in the processes of identification, either as a means of expression of one's reasoning and emotions, interpretation and the transfer of thoughts, or as a driving force behind one's influence on events in the outside world. Language is the means that opens the way to tolerance and harmony between individuals and groups wishing to reach the same or similar goals (Čok, 2010).

In our living environment, we also encounter other languages and different cultural environments. These languages can be an integral part of the communication of the immediate environment, or rare and less frequently used. We accept and assimilate the language that we recognise as part of our living

environment in a natural way through direct use. In linguistically mixed families, with the presence of two or more languages, multilingualism is motivated, real and verifiable (Čok, 2010). The relationship between them – especially in the family – is created with the help of the emotional relationship that the individual experiences with interlocutors (parents and relatives). The language needs, message purpose and expected effect are mostly known. In the external environment of the individual, where they check the useful power of their messages in a particular language, is different. We learn about the social value of the languages we speak or that are spoken by others in language encounters.

Other languages, even if they are distant or foreign, can be important for the individual and the community, they can represent cultural proximity and tradition, economic motive and encouragement or family roots. That's why we learn them independently or with guidance.

The coexistence of languages within a linguistic community, the simultaneous presence of multiple linguistic systems in the repertoire of a given community, which we call multilingualism, is more the norm than the exception in linguistic communities: in particular, the growing multi-ethnic and multicultural composition of the countries of the European Union has recently given wide resonance to the dimension of variability, which is intrinsic to all linguistic systems. Multilingualism intrinsic phenomenon within all linguistic systems – the coexistence of languages, the simultaneous presence of multiple linguistic systems in the repertoire of a given community, and the increasing multi-ethnic and multicultural composition of the countries of the European Union following the policy on the mobility of people and goods and migration flows. An awareness of the co-presence of multiple languages, implementing the methods of their interaction, and applying the communicative rules that guide the alternative use of codes are the social and educational implications of multilingualism and the basic objective of the research and practice conducted by educators (Čok, 2023).

3. What do we call intercultural linguistic communication?

The mastery of first, second or foreign languages no longer suffices for successful communication and mutual understanding since language communication involves differences and special characteristics that are expressed through the manner of transferring linguistic content and through the relations between speakers in a certain communicative situation. Does this mean that the speakers think differently about the world?

Learning a new language (especially one not closely related to those you know) is never easy; it seems to require paying attention to a new set of distinctions. Learning to speak languages requires something more than just learning the vocabulary: it requires paying attention to the right things in the world so that you have the correct information to include in what you say (Boroditsky, 2017). Representations of things such as time, numbers, musical pitch, kinship relations, morality and emotions have been shown to depend on how we think about space, for example.

4. Are these differences/distinctions caused by language per se or by some other aspect of culture?

Language use is a social act, and the language code is a means of successful communication, cognitive process and culturally defined and intercultural immersive experience.

Language communication involves the confrontation of various realities that surround us in a culturally and socially specific environment. Intercultural immersive experience deals with language communication, which, apart from activating language competence and skills, not only at a given moment but also the uttering of contents and their meanings, as well as relations between the speakers manifested through the encounter between the speakers' cultures and languages to the point of issues: creating communicating culture (Čok, 2006).

Empathic competence, i.e. the power of identifying oneself mentally with (and thus fully comprehend) all these realities, opens a passage to a tolerant understanding of the other.

Intercultural dialogue, too, can be a tool for education on tolerance and respect for ideological or spiritual diversity, to overcome ethnocentrism and to achieve ethnic relativity. It is not only conceived in the traditional sense of acceptance of the cultures around us, but in its anthropological aspect of living common daily lives with its differences, misunderstandings and understanding existential dimensions. It can become a tool in the meshing of a common path within the galaxy of civilisations.

The concept of linguaculture combines and seeks to integrate three different dimensions of language (or language practice): the semantic and pragmatic dimension, the poetic dimension and the identity dimension. All these dimensions represent well-established fields of language study that may not only in be relation to first language use but also in relation to the learning and use of languages as second and foreign languages (Risager, 2007). The combination of linguacultural practice, discursive practice and other forms of sociocultural practice can be observed in a specific communicative event. Where cognitive approaches would focus on context as a kind of knowledge that is linked to linguistic competence, social approaches would see context as part of the reality between the interlocutors – both the immediate situation in which a communicative event is embedded and the wider environment all the way up to the global setting (Risager, 2011).

5. Should learning/acquiring and using languages directly present in the environment or more distant be regulated?

Language is the means that enables communication among individuals. Furthermore, communication opens the way to tolerance and harmony between individuals and groups wishing to reach the same or similar goals. Practical application is not the only dimension of learning and the use of languages (native/origin/first, second, foreign). Communication between people would also be possible using only one communicational code (it could be labelled a *lingua franca*), which would indirectly affect the relations between

individual participants in the processes of cooperation, integration and the exchange of social roles, but it would, however, endanger the lesser-used languages and individual cultures and their features.

Language planning is aimed at solving problems relating to the position and existence of an individual language or its genre in cases of language contact practices, if and when the implementation of such practices is wanted or required. Language planning theories include the social, economic and political dimensions of the influence of external factors upon an individual who chooses and uses a certain language code. This choice is not only influenced by one's will, but also by the political and social sensitivity of the community to the use of a certain language in contact with other languages. Using a certain language, the formation of one's national and cultural identity is also facilitated by the mutual influence of external factors upon one's awareness and will (Čok, 2003).

6. To what extent have communication technologies changed language learning in life/education?

In the last decade, interactive media have affected the development of language. The style, grammatical structure and purpose of the message have changed (brevity and directness of the message, shortening of words, phrases and sentences, omission and informality). Written language is getting closer and closer to the spoken one. The indicator of social changes can be seen because the use of new media does not limit the use of colloquial literary language (Dobrovoljc, 2008).

»Adapting the language to new requirements and discovering new expressive possibilities is a process that takes place successfully, and the task of linguists is to describe and shed light on language peculiarities and try to find out in which aspects the new media language is so different from the language of traditional media that it could be said that the Internet also stimulated the outbreak of the language revolution.« (Dobrovoljc, 2008, 296)

The mediation tool (e.g. a computer) with the support of AI (artificial intelligence) has changed language: from written text – focused on form and

information, from oral messages – dialogue and relationships between speakers, to electronic mediation, which is aimed at the technology of connections and direct contact between those involved.

Chomsky (2023) wrote about AI and comparing natural language with it (calling it *Plagiarism Software*): »The human mind is a surprisingly efficient and even elegant system that operates with small amounts of information; it seeks not to infer brute correlations among data points but to create explanations. It doesn't create anything, just copies existing works from artists and alters them sufficiently to escape copyright laws.«

A Challenge: Public Thought-Provoking Discussion

With the legal introduction of languages either at the beginning of schooling or in the third triad of primary school in Slovenia, there has been a debate between lay persons, between mediators and language users, even between teachers and parents in schools¹:

- Has anyone asked whether these children will even need a foreign language when they grow up?
- Machine translation of non-literary texts is already completely satisfactory today.
- If the development of artificial intelligence continues at today's pace, twenty years from now, learning a foreign language will seem like an antediluvian activity (like coin-operated payphones, for example).
- We will speak in our own language; the interlocutor will listen to us (with the help of a technological device) in their own.
- There will be no linguistic imperialism, no dying small languages.
- We will only speak in our national language.
- Languages (digitalised) that have enough speakers will persist and evolve.
- Knowledge of foreign languages will be part of professions, hobbies or snobbery.

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 1 DELO, March 2, 2024. Letters from readers.

- Language learning in 1st grade (the early years of schooling) will fail if the teachers force them with a single grammar rule.

How can an acquaintance, researcher or teacher as a thinking practitioner answer such claims? Let's try to give the unfounded challenge a well-founded response!

Will children need a foreign language when they grow up?

The life of a child is not an existence in a closed cell; the environment of their existence does not have only one language. A child is a curious creature, and their curiosity can be very useful in learning another language. The use of languages in a child's encounters is different and not always relevant to them.

A child is a curious creature, and their curiosity can be very useful in learning another language. It helps them discover the linguistic correctness of the message, and even more so to check its environmental validity. It can accurately imitate voices and voice assemblies; it faithfully summarises the intonation and sentence melody of a message in another language. It addresses voice peculiarities by pattern that does not cause him any difficulties. However, what the child sees and hears they remember quickly and intuitively at the level of short-term memory. Therefore, they also quickly forget and drilling also has a real-time effect on memorisation (Čok, 1997; 2010).

The acceptance of other languages depends on the motivation that arises in them relating to the role of another language in their life.

In a child, personal motivation is primarily unconscious. It is created through pleasure at something happening, develops through play and monitors the processes of children's personification with phenomena and events in the outside world. In the child's world, the needs for language use are different from those of an adult and communication activities are realised with different speech positions. They will experience intrinsic motivation while consciously learning the language later – at the operational level of development and at the stage of intuitive learning with the help of the game (Čok et al., 1994).

Twenty years from now, training in a foreign language will seem like an antediluvian activity.

Multilingualism is the most ancient phenomenon. The oldest accounts can be traced to the Panini grammar of Sanskrit (5th or 6th century BC) and more (religious texts such as the Bible). The Roman Empire was bilingual (Latin and Greek) on the official level and multilingual at the individual and non-official level. Latin continued to be taught as a language of power and education in Europe and beyond for many centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire. In modern times, various forms of bi-/plurilingualism were in common use in society (the historical phenomenon of Franco-Russian bilingualism in imperial Russia and bilingual colonial societies: the Spanish in Mexico and the British in India, as well as China and Japan in East Asia).

We will speak in our own language; the interlocutor will listen to us (with the help of a technological device) in their own.

This seems very simple. To think about just a few of the capacities of this almighty digital translator, let us see some characteristics that indicate efficient use in our speech.

Appropriateness:

- whether the language is suitable or fitting for ourselves, as the speaker, our audience, the context of the speech and the speech itself.
- whether the language you plan on using in a speech, fits with your own speaking pattern / idiolect (the form of a language that a particular person speaks).
- whether the language you are choosing is appropriate for your specific audience. The audience analysis is a key factor in choosing the language to use in a speech.
- whether the language you will use is suitable or fitting for the context itself. This context includes the occasion, the time of day, the mood of the audience and other factors in addition to the physical location.
- whether the language is appropriate for your specific topic.

The main guideline for using language efficiently is to use vivid language:

- Imagery helps your listener create a mental picture of what a speaker is saying: realities instead of abstract ideas.
- Examples and descriptions for better understanding (deaf as a post, sordo come una campana, gluh kot noč).
- Metaphors: applied to something in a nonliteral way to suggest a resemblance.
- Rhythm: effective language in speech uses rhythm. Language is musical (children's intuition in learning languages!)

There will be no linguistic imperialism, no dying small languages.

Quite the reverse! The genre and status of languages are constantly changing. Old classifications are being abandoned; new ones are being created. Some are permanent (*lingua franca*). The abandonment of the living use of lesser-used languages will be the definitive end to their existence. Without protection, minority languages can quickly sink into the majority language.

Languages (digitalised) that have enough speakers will persist and evolve.

Historical events, different socio-economic conditions and specific international agreements have all contributed to the introduction of educational models in the ethnically mixed area of Europe. The educational models for bilingual, multilingual and multicultural areas, which have been laid down by law in numerous European countries, vary according to state and region and are not static. Not just through their development over time, but also because of educational policy interventions and their constant reversal. Therefore, it is not only necessary to present the current educational and socially protective model or the forms and contents of first/second/minority language learning/teaching in environments of linguistic and cultural contact, but to proceed following steps in history and in policies that have laid the foundations for ensuring human rights for peaceful coexistence in a given territory.

We will only speak in our national language. Knowledge of foreign languages will be part of professions, hobbies or snobbery.

The fundamental basis for globalisation and knowledge intensification is communication, which must function smoothly beyond one's own borders in order to be successful. Knowledge of foreign languages and cultures is therefore essential not only in leisure time and hobbies, but above all in professional life.

Mastering more than one language is a great challenge for our brain and, according to neuroscientists, even ensures that the grey cells grow and become better connected. This is important for mental performance at an age when we are still in the process of building a career and holding our own in a job. Foreign language skills also help when it comes to making more rational decisions, maintaining emotional distance and taking advantage of attractive opportunities.

Translation apps can be a first aid when writing emails in a business context. However, they do not make language learning superfluous. Even apps that are described as working with artificial intelligence are only suitable for translating factual texts. They do not understand emotions, for example, which can easily lead to unpleasant misunderstandings. To be able to check translations, you need your language skills (Deck, 2021).

Bilingualism or multilingualism also has a positive effect on episodic memory in older age. It strengthens the components of episodic memory, i.e. the processes that are necessary for the active encoding and decoding of memories. Learning a foreign language in later life does not lead to bilingualism per se, but there is ample evidence that the brains of older language learners retain their plasticity. Language learning exercises, which have not yet been studied in detail, can be seen as cognitive training that may influence the processes of cognitive decline in later life (Čok & Meulenberg, 2019).

Language learning in 1st grade (early years of schooling) will fail if the teachers force them with a single grammar rule.

School is one of the places where it is possible to create an intercultural laboratory that goes beyond the limits of the individual, favours rapprochement between people, brings together those who belong and, finally, is the working place for the development of bilingualism. The pedagogy of proximity (intercultural and linguistic) is emerging step by step and can be implemented

in all disciplines of school education. From this point of view, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of school teaching solely based on the analysis of standards in subjects and school administration, which are unable to represent the level of socialisation objectives achieved. It is therefore necessary to pay greater attention to researching and analysing the effectiveness of teaching regarding the transfer of values such as democratic thinking or respect for members of other ethnic groups, i.e., all those values that are not innate to the individual and do not develop automatically in society. The education system plays a fundamental role in their development and transmission to new generations.

Teaching a language to younger learners is nothing like adult learning. We have known this for at least 50 years. There is no technical learning and the most dynamic form of activity is games. When we integrate play into the learning process, it acquires the role of method and strategy, it is therefore didactically defined. Didactic play is a means of socialisation, developing abilities and skills, realising the interests of students, contributing to the formation of personality and is a factor in the behaviour of the educator in their upbringing. It therefore has a social, cognitive, emotional, diagnostic and didactic function.

Games chosen for language learning are tied to verbal expression. Words and movement are the most common gameplay activities, as well as words and music, or words, music and movement. So, in a series of games, verbal messaging is an integral part of it. The context, which is both verbal and non-verbal, not only promotes language learning, but also experienced, social and psychomotor learning (Pišot & Čok, 1998). A variety of gaming activities offer opportunities for cultural education. Play trains all language skills: we use communicative patterns, raise awareness of auditory habits, deepen the comprehension of texts, read and write. The communicative ability is developed through cognitive games and we are made aware of words through games of complementing, collecting, sorting and grouping.

Oral communication is of primary importance in early learning / teaching of a foreign language. Writing in a second language, as mastering a higher level of symbolisation, is normally introduced with a time lag in relation to the first/mother language. In gaining multilingual literacy, we mark differences, recognise particularities and accept equivalencies. So it is natural that

we comprehend the already obtained skills of writing and reading in the first/mother language as the grounding of pupils' literacy in a second language, though we often introduce a completely different methodological approach to literacy in a second or foreign language. Since writing is like a cultural technique and written communication is also cultural literacy, analysis, synthesis and the adaptation of signs also have educational importance.

Hybrid Approaches to Language Teaching and Learning – Some Proposals

The use of tools that enrich the lessons teachers have planned make the teaching and learning process more interesting, more motivating for the learners and – with the creativity of both the teacher and learners – also means collaborative learning through new technologies. With the support of communication technologies and digital tools, information is quickly gained and learning, including language learning, is faster and more concise. The procedures for learning are different and the information material is more accessible, effective and pleasant. The response or the evaluation of progress is immediate and direct. Globalisation, the technological revolution and, consequently, artificial intelligence (AI) have brought new approaches to language teaching in the field of learning foreign and other languages, based above all on the fact that it is no longer the location and tools of learning that are important, but the shortest path to knowledge. AI offers a personalised and immersive experience for every individual.

The development of the Internet and digital technologies has also offered language learning new paths (online courses, platforms for interaction and the exchange of languages and mobile applications). There are many advantages to online learning – especially the time savings, as it is not necessary to change location, which saves transport costs. In addition, they allow a great deal of flexibility in terms of learning schedule, as well as content, progress, speed of learning, etc. Younger generations and extremely busy people who are more inclined to new technologies and online solutions or who travel a lot are thus already more open to online learning, which is certainly what the future is bringing us. It is becoming increasingly important for curricula and teaching resources to enable us to learn in a way that is flexible and that can run anywhere, anytime and in any way.

Do language teachers opt for a hybrid form of classes with a combination of textbook, workbook, study strips and prepared tests – i.e. a closed planned structure of classes – or are they increasingly using content that best fits the subject matter / topic and is available online?

An example of opportunities for teachers to use online materials in their classes is the case of the European project *Stories of Fisheries Through Time*, which offered, among other results, pedagogical solutions for learning language, history, ethnology, food culture, etc. In the applied part of their research, a group of researchers (Čok Lucija, Cavaion Irina, Čok Tina, Bratož Urška) produced materials on several levels and for various pedagogical purposes. All these materials are cited in the bibliography of this chapter.

Instead of a Conclusion – Looking Ahead

A comprehensive reflection on new approaches to educational and didactic culture, which enables effective interlingual and intercultural communication in both analogue and digital environments, opens the way for strategies that will reject the utopian ideas of unnecessary living contact with language, but:

- put into practice the laws of interpersonal communication,
- prevent the degradation of the diversity of cultures and
- enable the humanist paradigm of our civilisation to be preserved.

Establishing mechanisms to combine the good existing and the necessarily new requires reflection beyond a limit of time and takes a mental leap. Educational strategies, Slovenian/national and beyond, set flags and guidelines! The time to switch to language technologies and the use of artificial intelligence, which we can no longer resist in education, require the application of new knowledge in life and practice and has an impact on present and future generations. In the meantime, we will find out if robots are more powerful than humans and/or if the robot thinks and feels emotions like humans. This is a key element to discourage the fear of artificial intelligence.

It is productive to think about whether a robot can do what a human needs to do.

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Tales from the factory: <http://www.zgodbeoribistvu.si/sl/aktivnosti/pripovedi-iz-tovarne>

Glossary: <http://www.zgodbeoribistvu.si/sl/glosar/>

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