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Abstract

Languages worldwide are undergoing a profound shift, with global languages and regional lingua francas gaining prominence while indigenous languages face challenges in survival. Linguists estimate that half of the over 7'000 languages spoken worldwide are in danger of disappearing (Ethnologue, Glottolog). Globalization and urbanization are among the leading factors contributing to the decline of indigenous languages as their speakers leave their homes for big cities in search for better economic opportunities (Austin 2011; Amano et al. 2014).

The principal aim of this study is to investigate the key factors contributing to language preservation and language decline in urban contexts, taking Berlin as a model example. According to the Berlin-Brandenburg Statistics Office, approximately every fifth person in Berlin comes from a non-German cultural background with over 160 different countries represented (SBEE), making Berlin one of the most multicultural urban centers in the world. Our research addresses questions such as which heritage languages have a chance of survival, how members of various language communities presently organize themselves, and what are their needs and wants. For our study, 26 interviews were conducted with speakers of 32 languages, various cultural backgrounds, ages, and professions.

The results of our research conducted in collaboration with over 30 students in the course of two semesters reveal several critical factors influencing language endangerment, including the size and cohesiveness of the community, the involvement of embassies, the presence of inter-community rivalries in their country of origin, and the availability of essential infrastructures in Berlin such as libraries, bookstores, cultural centers, religious facilities, food stores, and restaurants. Language acquisition opportunities in kindergartens, schools, language schools, and language cafes also play a significant role, as they facilitate intergenerational language transmission. The existence of a standardized writing system is another significant aspect, as the absence of established input methods for orally transmitted languages leads to their lower visibility in social networks and mass media.

In this talk, we will present our contributions to two larger scientific projects 'Berlin spricht!' and the online platform 'Sprachen Berlins'. Additionally, we will discuss the results of the interviews and consider concrete measures to support language communities in big cities. We hope that the results of our research will be used to inform policy decisions, adjusting them to the necessities of the communities, and to help preserve the language diversity in the city as well as to provide additional aid in language planning and revitalization.

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