

THE INFLUENCE OF THE GERMAN LANGUAGE ON ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AMONG ALBANIAN MIGRANTS IN GERMANY, AUSTRIA AND SWITZERLAND

Osman Ismaili

University of Tetovo, Department of German Language and Literature, North Macedonia,
osman.ismaili@unite.edu.mk

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-0467-7533

Abstract: Migration has created new linguistic environments in which minority languages come into continuous contact with dominant languages. The Albanian-speaking communities living in Germany, Austria and Switzerland represent one of the most significant examples of European migration communities experiencing intensive bilingual development. This article examines the influence of the German language on Albanian language maintenance among Albanian migrants in German-speaking countries. The study focuses on language use patterns, intergenerational transmission, linguistic interference and the challenges faced by younger generations in maintaining Albanian as a heritage language.

Based on sociolinguistic perspectives on bilingualism, language contact and migration linguistics, the article analyses how German influences Albanian speakers in family, educational and institutional contexts. The findings indicate that while first-generation migrants generally maintain Albanian as their primary family language, younger generations increasingly demonstrate stronger competence in German, particularly in writing and formal communication. The study argues that bilingualism should not be understood only as language loss but as a dynamic process in which speakers negotiate multiple linguistic and cultural identities.

Keywords: Albanian diaspora, German language, language contact, bilingualism, migration linguistics, heritage language maintenance

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of the most important social processes influencing language development and cultural identity in contemporary societies. The movement of Albanian-speaking populations toward Germany, Austria and Switzerland, particularly after the 1960s, created new linguistic communities where Albanian and German entered into continuous contact.

The first major migration wave consisted mainly of labour migrants from former Yugoslavia who moved to German-speaking countries for employment opportunities. Later migration phases included political migration, economic migration and refugee movements, especially during the conflicts of the 1990s. As a result, Albanian communities developed stable social networks while simultaneously becoming part of multilingual European societies.

Language represents one of the strongest elements of cultural continuity among migrant communities. For Albanian migrants, maintaining the Albanian language has been closely connected with family identity, cultural traditions and relations with the homeland. However, the dominant position of German in education, administration, employment and public communication has significantly influenced the linguistic behaviour of Albanian-speaking migrants.

The research questions addressed in this article are:

- What has been the impact of the German language on the use of Albanian among migrants?
- What is the difference of first generation and second generation Albanian migrants?
- What are the factors that lead to maintenance or attrition of Albanian as a heritage language?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language Contact and Bilingualism

Language contact takes place when speakers of different languages have regular contact and use their languages in the same social setting. Weinreich (1953) suggests that language contact can cause different kinds of linguistic influence, such as lexical borrowing, interference, code-switching and changes in patterns of language use. Bilingualism is more than being able to speak two languages equally well. Bilingual speakers use one language for different purposes and in different social contexts. For example, Albanian migrants in Germany, Austria and Switzerland can use Albanian mainly in the family and with relatives; German is more often used in education, employment, administration and other formal contexts.

Romaine (1995) argues that bilingualism is a complex social phenomenon which is affected by migration history, education, social networks and attitudes toward languages. Language competence levels may also differ between generations. The first generation of migrants is characterised by better Albanian skills, while the younger generations might become more dominant in German through schooling and social interaction in the host country. The presence of German words or expressions in Albanian conversations can also be perceived as

a manifestation of language contact. These practices may reflect the everyday linguistic environment of migrants and illustrate bilingualism as a dynamic process in which the two languages are in constant interaction.

Maintaining a heritage language

A heritage language is a minority language that is of particular importance to a person's family or cultural background and is passed on within the home or community, while another language dominates in public and institutional life. Albanian is an important heritage language for Albanian migrants living in German-speaking countries, linking younger generations with their family and cultural background.

The maintenance of a heritage language is influenced by a variety of factors, including: language practices in the family; contact with relatives and homeland; community institutions; parents' attitudes; educational opportunities; exposure to Albanian media and digital communication. Family is still one of the strongest institutions among the Albanian migrants supporting the transmission of Albanian from one generation to another. Children can keep up their knowledge of the language if they keep in regular contact with parents, grandparents and relatives. But the rising hegemony of German, especially through school, friendships and professional environments, may reduce the frequency younger generations use Albanian. Therefore, some young speakers may be able to understand Albanian well, but have weaker speaking, reading or writing skills. Heritage language maintenance is therefore highly associated with the quantity and quality of exposure that younger generations receive.

Language Identity and Migration

Language is not just a means of communication, but an important marker of cultural and social identity. For migrants, heritage language may serve as a marker of family history, cultural traditions, emotional attachment, and connection to the country or community of origin. For Albanian migrants, the use of Albanian can be a symbol of cultural belonging and family identity, whereas German is usually connected to education, employment, social participation and integration into the host society. These various functions allow bilinguals to use each language in different situations with different interlocutors. Younger generations may thus create identities that are a mix of Albanian and German culture. They are able to hold on to their Albanian traditions and cultural values while speaking primarily German. In this sense, bilingualism does not necessarily mean the choice of one identity over another, but may, instead, assist the formation of a flexible, hybrid linguistic identity. The connection between identity and language is especially significant in the study of heritage language maintenance.. If Albanian is perceived as being an important part of family and cultural identity, younger speakers may be more motivated to maintain and use it, even if German is their primary language in everyday life.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a mixed method approach, using qualitative and quantitative data collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with Albanian-speaking migrants residing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The combination of questionnaire and interview data allows the investigation of both general patterns of language use and the personal experiences, attitudes and perceptions of the participants toward Albanian and German.

The participants are split into two major groups:

- First generation immigrants

The first group consists of people who migrated as adults, mainly through labour migration. In general, their migration experience started in the 1970s and 1980s, when more and more people migrated from Albanian-speaking regions to Western European countries. Most of them had Albanian as their mother tongue before migration, and then learned German, mostly through work, daily communication and integration into the host society.

- Migrants of the second generation

The second group is people who grew up in German speaking countries and were exposed to German from an early age through education and social interaction. For many in this group, German became the dominant language, especially in the school, professional and social spheres, while Albanian was mostly retained in the family and in contact with relatives and the wider Albanian-speaking community.

The questionnaires and interviews are concerned with a number of key aspects of participants' linguistic and social experience, including: language use in the family; use of Albanian and German in daily communication; communication with educational and other public institutions; relationship and contact with the homeland; attitudes toward the Albanian language; perception of linguistic and cultural identity; experiences of integration into the host society; differences in language use between generations.

Special attention is paid to the differences between first and second generation migrants. The study investigates the influence of the social environment, education, family communication and constant exposure to German on the preservation of Albanian. It also examines if the younger generations still use Albanian actively or if their competence is increasingly limited to understanding and informal family communication.

The data are analysed comparatively in an effort to identify common patterns and differences of the participants from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a wider understanding of the connection between the impact of the German language, bilingualism and the survival of Albanian as a heritage language.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Practices of First Generation Migrants

The findings reflect that the first generation of Albanian migrants tends to maintain Albanian as the main language for family and interpersonal communication. Many migrants continue to communicate in Albanian with their spouses, children, relatives and friends from the same language and cultural community. Thus the Albanian is strongly linked to family ties, cultural traditions and emotional communication. Simultaneously, German is increasingly becoming the language of institutions and professions, especially in: workplaces; schools and educational institutions; hospitals and health care settings; administrative and public institutions.

A large number of first-generation migrants acquire functional competence in German through employment, everyday interaction and long-term residence, but Albanian still plays an important role in their private lives. The distribution of language use indicates that bilingual speakers frequently assign different functions to each language based on the social context. The findings thus imply that German is not necessarily used as a substitute for Albanian by first-generation migrants. Instead, the two languages co-exist with different communicative functions. German is predominant in public, work and institutional domains, while Albanian remains important for family communication and for keeping cultural and emotional ties.

Younger generations' language behavior

The linguistic profile of the younger generation is different from that of migrants first generation. These people have grown up in German-speaking societies and are usually exposed to German from an early age via schooling, friendships, media and wider social interaction. Therefore, German often becomes the dominant language, particularly in formal and educational environments.

For lots of young Albanian speakers:

German is the dominant language of reading and writing; German is the preferred language in educational and professional settings; Albanian is used more in family and cultural settings; Albanian may be more understood than actively written or spoken. One of the particularly important findings is that some of the young bilingual speakers have relatively good knowledge of Albanian but face difficulties with reading and writing. This difference between receptive and productive language skills may be related to the fact that their formal education has been mainly in German while Albanian has been acquired and maintained mainly through interaction with the family. These patterns show a strong relationship between exposure to Albanian and language maintenance in the younger generations. Family communication can sustain basic conversational competence, but limited opportunities for formal use of Albanian may lead to weaker literacy skills. However, the ongoing use of Albanian in family and cultural domains shows that the language remains an essential component of their linguistic repertoire and identity.

The German Influence on Albanian

The influence of German on Albanian can be traced in many aspects of daily bilingual communication, especially through: lexical borrowing; code-mixing and code-switching; changes in patterns of everyday communication. German words and expressions may be used in Albanian conversations, particularly when speakers discuss topics like education, administration, technology, employment, and professional life. It is particularly comprehensible in contexts where German is the dominant language of the surrounding social and institutional environment that there should be such linguistic influence. The existence of German elements in Albanian should not be interpreted as evidence of language attrition or decay. Rather, it can be seen as a natural result of a long-term language contact and bilingual communication. Speakers may use German lexical items because they are more readily available or because certain concepts occur more frequently in German. At the same time, the frequent German influence may gradually contribute to the changes in the way younger generation uses Albanian. The extent of this perceived influence seems to depend on such factors as frequency of contact with German, educational background, language practices in the family, and opportunities to use Albanian outside the home.

The general conclusion of the findings is that German and Albanian are involved in a dynamic process of linguistic interaction. German takes on a more important role in public, educational, and professional domains, while Albanian remains significant in communication in the family, cultural belonging, and identity. This relationship points to the fact that bilingualism among Albanian migrants should be understood not just as a process of language replacement, but as a continuous interaction between two linguistic systems.

5. CONCLUSION

The case of Albanian and German among Albanian migrants in Germany, Austria and Switzerland illustrates the complexity of bilingualism in contemporary migrant communities. The findings suggest that German has taken

on the role of a central language of education, employment, institutional communication and wider public participation, whereas Albanian continues to be an important factor within the family, cultural traditions, emotional communication and maintenance of ethnic identity. The greatest challenge comes from younger generations, who are usually more exposed to German through schooling, social interaction, media and the professional environment. Their competence in German is often higher, especially in reading, writing and formal communication, and their formal competence in Albanian may be more limited. Nevertheless, the use of Albanian in family and cultural settings suggests that the heritage language is still salient in their linguistic repertoire and identity.

The impact of the German language on the Albanian language, e.g. lexical borrowing and code-mixing, does not have to be seen as a negative phenomenon. These characteristics are natural results of long-term contact between languages and are mirrors of the multilingual realities of Albanian migrant communities. At the same time, it is important to have a strong connection with Albanian to ensure intergenerational language transmission and cultural continuity.

For a successful maintenance of Albanian, cooperation is necessary from families, educational institutions, community organisations and diaspora associations. Increased opportunities for heritage language education, literacy development, and regular use of Albanian can help members of the younger generations acquire a higher degree of competence in their family language. Such efforts need not be at odds with successful integration into German-speaking societies. In fact, retaining Albanian while developing high levels of competence in German can provide important linguistic, cultural and social resources to migrants and their descendants.

Bilingualism should not generally be seen as a problem or as simply a process of language replacement, but as a linguistic and cultural resource. The case of Albanian and German coexistence shows that migrant communities can preserve some of their linguistic and cultural heritage and at the same time fully participate in the social, educational and professional life of the host societies.

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