

Language barriers and language policies in public service institutions: Germany as a case in point

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Bernd Meyer
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Department for Intercultural Communication
meyerb@uni-mainz.de

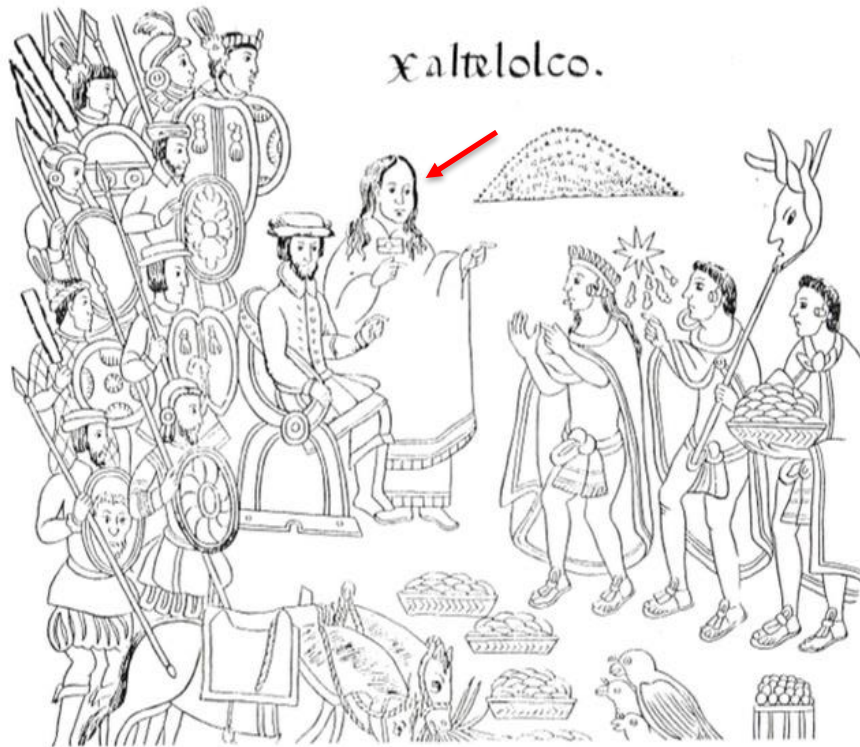
Topic and outline

1. Language barriers, language policies, and migration
2. Language mediation policies
3. Language mediation in HE

Linguistic minorities: no mediation needed

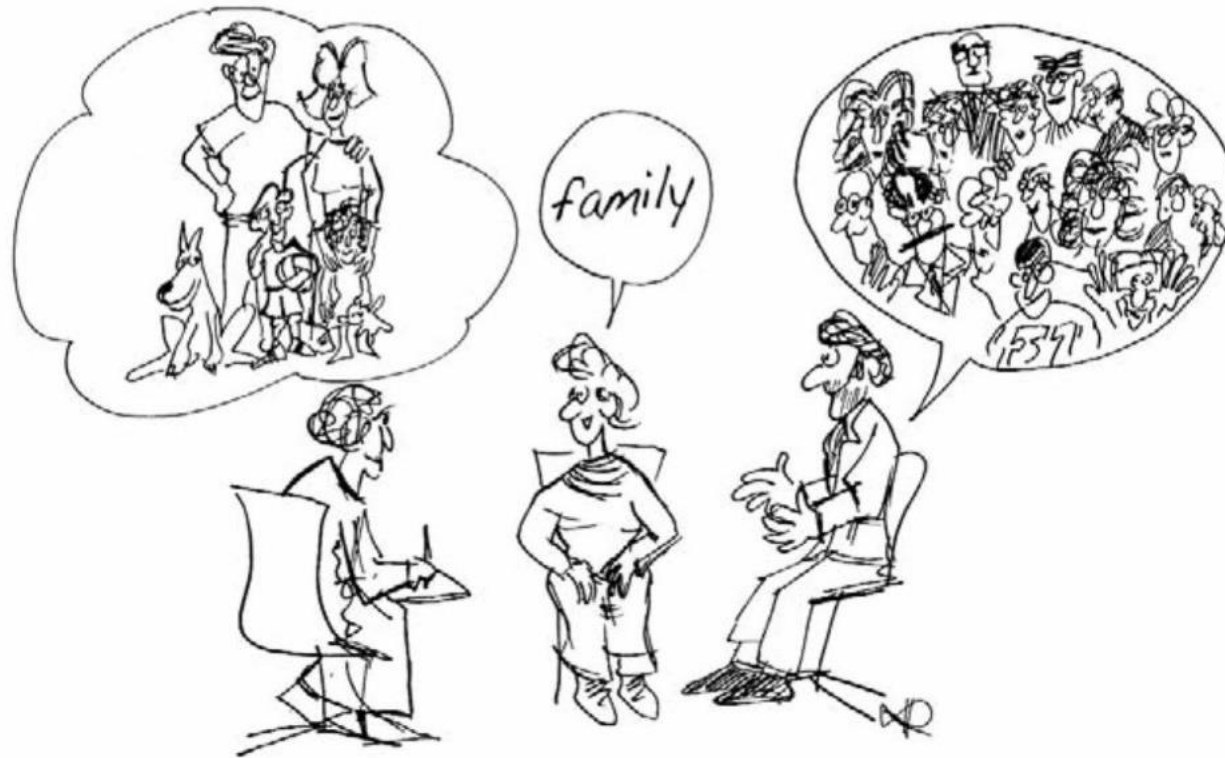


Migration, language barriers, mediation



Hernán Cortés and his interpreter negotiating with indigenous authorities

Migration, language barriers, mediation



Language barriers and mediation

- Language barriers hinder access to public service institutions
- Linguistic mediation is „a step (...) without which all [integration policies] will have little effect“ (Reichwein/Rashid 2012: 44, on integration policies)

Language barriers

- Approx. **23.8 million inhabitants** with migration background
- Approx. **25-30%** have little knowledge of German
- Estimated demand for language mediation in public institutions is around **2.2 million interpreting assignments** per year
- **Calculation:** "Number of people with a migration background x 0.09"

Language policies

- Established **monolingualism** in public service institutions
- **Exceptions**: legal system, police, governmental foreign relations, regional linguistic minorities
- **B2-level German** is legally required for workforce coming to Germany
- Different legal requirements: authorities are obliged to inform and to provide counselling for citizens, also in other languages if necessary
- But: **no established legal cases** on this subject (only in medical informed consent)
- **Tension**: multiple languages are present, but no approach

Language mediation policies

- **Language barriers** bring about different language mediation policies
- These can be formal or informal, legally justified or even without a legal basis:
- **Informal/bricolage**: mediation is coincidental, not regulated, not established, not funded
- **Local**: Institutions organise mediation based on constant demand, local regulations and practices
- **Official**: Established solutions at federal, state and local level

Informal mediation policies

- Typically in **health care, schools, welfare**
- **„Bricolage“**: mediation is **organised ad hoc** by relatives, employees, translation apps,...
- Informal practice may become **a rule**
- **Regulations** and **laissez-faire** side by side
- (We all adore bricolage!)

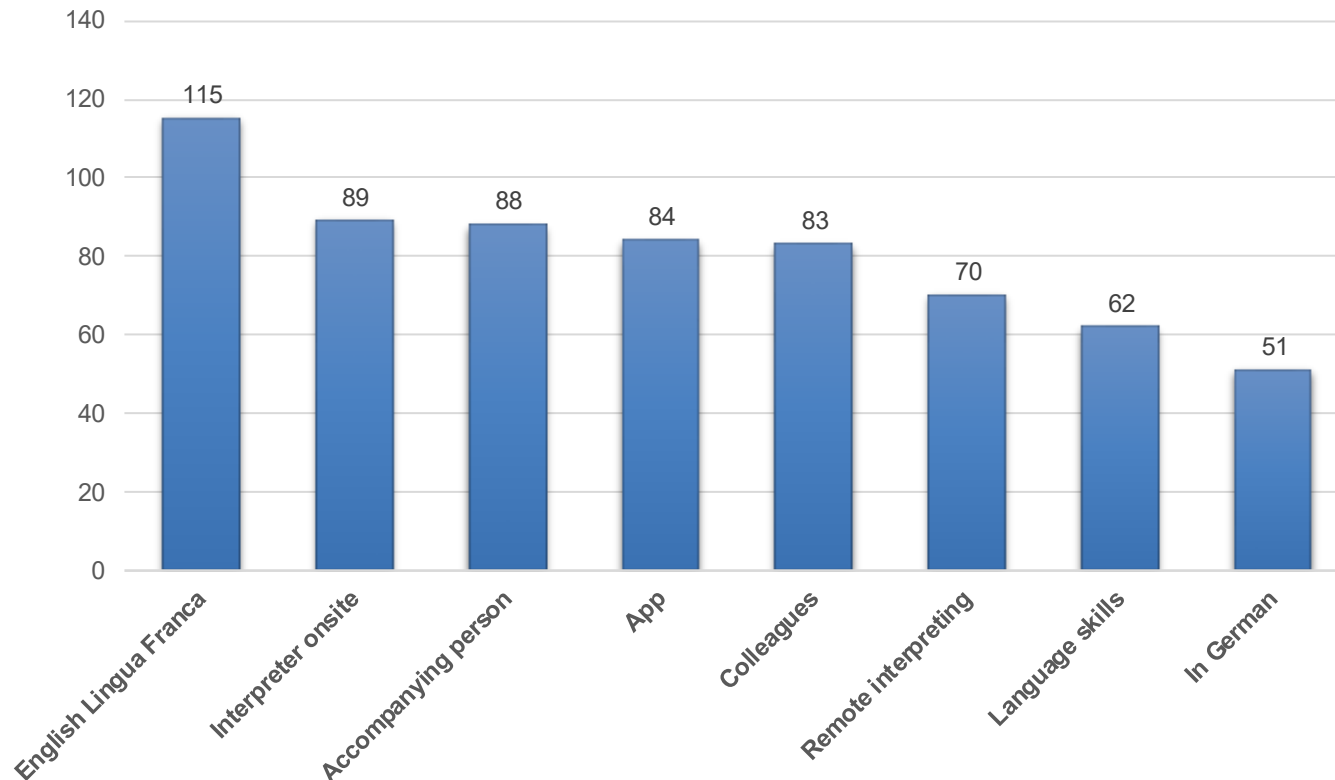
Informal mediation policies

- Survey among **Hamburg daycare centers** (n = 219, multiple selection)
- Staff **communicates with caregivers and children** using different procedures
- Employees or apps are **predominantly used**
- Some procedures are **considered inadequate** by institutions themselves (e.g. language mediation by children)
- Need for **language mediation is linked to economic situation** (low average income and migration background)

Other	Apps	Employees	Volunteers	Paid interpreters	Children	Caregivers	Not relevant
14	73	66	26	31	18	46	21

Informal mediation policies

Mediation practices in a welfare department in Berlin
Survey among social workers
(n=178, multiple selection)



AI-based mobile machine translation

- **Providers:** Google Translate, DeepL Voice, Vasco Translator, Skype, ChatGPT,...
- **Written language bias**
- Business model: elite migration, tourism and **business communication;**
- **De facto use:** migrant workers, refugees (Liebling et al 2020, 2022)

AI-based mobile machine translation

- “[Migrant communities], with low language proficiency, have the greatest translation needs to navigate their daily lives. However, current mobile translation apps do not meet these needs.”

(Liebling et al 2020)

- “We identify three key factors — usability, trust, and literacy — that shape these interactions and must be addressed to align MT with user needs.”

(Savoldi et al 2025)

Business model

- “Align with user needs” at DeepL Voice: video conferences



Issues in AI-based mobile machine translation

- **Data protection**, usability, **ergonomics**
- **Automatic speech recognition**, **oral language**
- Mistakes and **hallucinations**
- Handling of **pauses in speech**
- **No meta-communication**, **coordination**

To sum up

- **Linguistic mediation** is
 - Everywhere
 - Mainly linked to heritage languages
 - Very often bricolage practice, not coherently organised
- **Language barriers**
 - **Make public service less accessible**
 - **Make working in public service more difficult**

Language mediation in HE

- A crossdisciplinary topic
- Medicine, social work, nursing science, law, ...
- Natural sciences: multilingual teams
- At Mainz University: certificate open for all students
- Working title: “communicating inclusively”
- Topics: easy language, language acquisition, translation, interpreting, machine translation, etc.
- Hands-on training, life-world scenarios, to overcome bricolage practices

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