Mercator-Education: New Developments for a Central Service

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1. Introduction

Minority languages and cultures have become an increasingly important social issue over the last decades.

In the context of the international developments education is one of the key-areas. One of the first measures to stimulate a minority language is in many cases the creation of some form of bilingual education. The situation, circumstances and provisions are frequently not well known outside the area where the initiatives are taking place. Often the knowledge and experience in developing bilingual education remains located in one specific local community. These experiences could be profitable to other language groups as well. Knowledge of the problems and prospects of teaching minority languages is important for all of those involved in language planning for minorities.

Many factors are of influence on the social position and development of the language groups, among them are; the use in the family, the legal status, the media and the use in cultural live. Furthermore the development of a written standard, the economic prosperity of the community or its attractiveness for tourism and last but not least, the education in and through the minority language on all school levels.

In the light of increasing support at a European level and recognizing that education is often one of the first activities undertaken to revive or support minority language, it seems important to obtain an overview of what is going on in education in the different language communities. This is precisely the topic of this convention and one of the main issues for the Mercator – Education centre.
2. Mercator-Education

The Mercator network was set up because of the growing interest in the various aspects of minority or regional languages. It is organized as a network of autonomous, specialized Mercator-centres. Data about minority or regional languages are generally rather difficult to access, because they are spread here and there throughout the language communities. Mercator was initiated by the European Commission in order to improve the accessibility and the exchange of information and also to inform the speakers of ‘majority languages’ in a more systematic way. The network was named after the famous 16th century cartographer Gerardus Mercator, who was the first to put place names on his maps according to the language of the region where they were spoken.

Each of the three Mercator centres has its own thematic programme and specialist role: Mercator-Education at the Fryske Akademy, Ljouwert (NL) studies education at all levels; Mercator-Legislation at the CIEMEN foundation, Barcelona (E), is concerned with language legislation and language in public administration; while Mercator-Media at University of Wales, Aberystwyth (I) deals with press and media including the new media.

The Mercator centres maintain close relations with the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) in Brussels / Dublin. Of special relevance to Mercator-Education is the general European education network, Euridyce, maintained by the ministries of education in all member states and also coordinated from Brussels by a special office of the European Commission.

Mercator Education is located in the premises of the Fryske Akademy, in the province of Fryslân, the Netherlands. This research institute was established in 1938. Its main disciplines are linguistics, history and social sciences. It investigates the Frisian language and the culture, history and society of the province of Fryslân and its inhabitants. It employs about 60 researchers and administrative staff.

Mercator-Education has the following three aims:
- Exchange of information
- Maintain a databank of documentation and
- Carry out research through comparative analysis.

For these three aims the focus is on all forms and levels of education of regional or minority languages in the European Union. Several activities and projects are undertaken in order to carry out this three-fold objective. This comprises the collection of different types of data about the language groups concerned. These data are made available for distribution to potential target groups, mainly through the web site. In working towards this goal, contacts are maintained with participating
regional network-centres and individual experts all over Europe.

How education can contribute to language maintenance and development in certain cases depends on background factors and characteristics of the minority language group. States have built over a longer period of time a national educational system, which is not easily going to be adapted for the sake of a minority language group. A role of importance is also played by the history of attitudes to language and literacy. A stumbling block in trying to improve the provisions are often also persisting administrative traditions.

Of greatest importance are, of course, the final outcomes of the teaching of the minority language: does it lead to (improved) maintenance or, has it encouraged the transition to the dominant language? Especially in the latter case, a bit of attention to the minority language in education (a few lessons in primary schools, for example), may work as stimulus for assimilation to mainstream society, rather than as safeguard for the language concerned. Often in such cases the minority language is defined as a ‘learning deficit’, which has to be remedied through education. The ‘handicap’ rests in the parents or in the child, not in the school or in society. In the case of a stronger provision for minority education, the aim is often explicitly to contribute to maintenance. Learning the language is conceived as enrichment. The minority languages are defined as worthy of preservation and promotion. The outcome of such education is a contribution to cultural pluralism. All pupils will become bilingual and bilingual.

Because education is of such prime importance in the revival and development of minority or regional languages, almost all language groups have taken some initiatives. The provisions in the field of education vary widely, from barely any attention at all, to an almost complete educational system parallel to the state-system. The compact information accessible in a more or less standardized form may be of great help to the target groups of relevance to Mercator, in particular policy-makers and researchers, but also teachers, parents, journalists and ‘the public at large’.

Mercator-Education has carried out several projects in the area of education over the years, for example; on (pre)primary education, teacher training, learning materials, comparative education and models of bi- and trilingual education.

3. Minority languages in Europe

The variety of languages is enormous in Europe. We can divide the languages into four groups:

- State languages; such as English, Spanish, German, etc.
Immigrant minority languages like Turkish and Arabic
- Sign languages
- Regional or minority languages

The regional or minority languages can then be sub-divided. The typology normally used in the European Union for regional or minority languages is the following:

- **Unique minority languages;**
  Those minority languages, which do not have a kin-state (see further). We can differentiate between these unique languages in:
  a) Those spoken in one country like; Welsh, Frisian, Galician and Kashubian
  b) Those spread over more than one countries; such as Catalan (E, I, F) Basque (E, F) Ruthanian (P)

- **Minority languages with a ‘kin-state’;**
  These minority languages do have a ‘big brother’; most of the time the state language of a neighbouring country. In these we can differentiate in:
  a) Minority languages with a kin-states within the European Union, like German (B, Dk, F, I), French (I), Slovene (Au, I), Polish (Lit)
  b) Minority languages with a kin-states outside the European Union, such as Ukranian (Sl, Pol), Russian (Est, Lit, Lat)

- **Special cases,**
  a) Languages which have the status of state languages but which are only spoken by a minority of the population. Examples are; Irish, Luxemburgish and Maltese
  b) Languages belonging to minorities which are spread all over the European Union, such as Romani and Yiddish

Minority languages are widely spread all over Europe, most of them are concentrated in the border area’s of the countries. They show an enormous difference in size, the Cornish language is an example of a small language community with an estimated number of 200 – 500 speakers. The Catalan language is an example of a huge language community with than 7 million speakers. Most of the others are somewhere in between but have rather small numbers of speakers.

The Council of Europe is an important organisation for regional- or minority languages. The Council has developed the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages (1992) and later
on the Framework convention for national minorities (1994). The charter is a convention designed on the one hand to protect and promote regional and minority languages as threatened aspect of the European cultural heritage and on the other hand to enable speakers of a regional or minority language to use it in private and public life. It mainly serves a cultural purpose. The charter intends that Regional and Minority Languages are being used in education and in the media.

The member states of the Council of Europe can show that they share the interests of the charter by signing and ratifying the charter. So far 13 countries have signed the charter not followed by ratifications, 18 countries have signed followed by putting the charter into force.

4. Activities of Mercator – Education

Several activities and projects are undertaken in order to carry out the objectives of Mercator-Education. Some of the finished inventory studies have been mentioned before. A brief description of only a few of the current projects and ongoing activities will be mentioned here.
- Regional dossiers

The current core activity comprises the collection of factual, descriptive data on educational provisions for regional or minority languages in the form of so-called ‘regional dossiers’. This activity follows the model of ‘national dossiers’ of Eurydice. This European body has developed the concept of so-called ‘national dossiers’ to provide an integral overview of the educational system of each member state in a structured and unified way.

With the regional dossiers, Mercator-Education aims to provide concise, descriptive information and basic educational statistics about minority language education in a specific region of the European Union. Details about the features of the educational system, recent educational policies, divisions of responsibilities, main actors, legal arrangements, support structures, and qualitative information on a number of schools, teachers, pupils, and financial investments. This information is designed to serve the needs of policy makers, researchers, teachers, students, and journalists as they assess the developments in European minority language schooling. This information may also serve as a first orientation towards further research (additional readings are suggested and contact information is also provided).

The regional dossiers provide basic information for comparisons between the school systems in different communities. It is quite easy to compare the situation in educational provisions between the areas, or for example, in which areas the language is taught as a subject or where the language is the medium of instruction.

The situation of a language, especially in education, can change very rapidly and a dossier would then be outdated soon, therefore an up-date of a dossier is written every five years. Because of the regular updates of the dossiers comparisons can be made in time as well, trends can then be discovered and analysed.

At this moment more than 30 Regional Dossiers are published and available, in print as well as downloadable from our website.

- European digital library for minority languages

Since 2003 Mercator-Education is working on the development of a digital library for the European regional- or minority languages. The basis concept of this project is the combination of a central library, including the specialized library of Mercator-Education, together with the digital libraries of the area’s where unique minority languages are
spoken. It will create a network of libraries with a clear central platform. Language communities will be assisted, if necessary, with tools and software according the latest standards to develop a digital library.

In 2003 the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences made a pilot study for this initiative possible by providing funds from the so-called "digitaliseringsfonds". This resulted in the project called 'Digibyb', this pilot mainly focussed on the Frisian language and runs until April 2005. In the pilot project several techniques and standards have been tested in order to connect several institutes through the internet and make their collections and information ready for central indexing and searching, all this with the future European project in mind.

The provisional name for the European model is EMILL (European Minority Language Library). It aims to provide services for all unique minority languages; it will connect the local (digital) library with the central library that also functions as service portal and platform for exchanging information. To ensure participation of as much language communities as possible it is necessary to use well-known open standards and formats and open source software.

- Network of schools

At this moment around 30 bi- or trilingual schools are member of the network of schools. This initiative was taken by Mercator-Education in response to questions that were often received from teachers, students or parents. Teachers experiencing problems with bi- or trilingual teaching, parents who consider bi- or trilingual education or the school considers to start using a minority or foreign language as a medium of instruction, etc.

Parents can get all the information they want on bi- and trilingual education, they can read stories on experiences of other parents with bi- or trilingualism and may ask Mercator-Education all kind of questions regarding bi- or trilingual teaching. Pupils can get in touch with pupils from other minority language communities so they are able to ask each other questions and share experiences. Researchers are able to find other research done on bi- and trilingualism and may publish their own research on our website. Mercator-Education is keen to hear about other experiences and to include more schools with 'good practice' in the network.

The webpages of the network of schools are presently still part of the website of Mercator-Education, it will soon have its own specialized website. One of the focus points on this new website will be teaching materials. Adequate teaching material has been one of the problem areas for bi- and trilingual schools. By creating the possibility to share experiences through our network and include other experts, researchers and publishers we expect that these problems can be
counterbalanced to some extend.
Four times a year Mercator-Education distributes a special newsletter among the members of the network of schools.

- **Web-site** ([www.mercator-education.org](http://www.mercator-education.org))

Nowadays the Internet is the key medium for distributing the information and documentation on educational provisions for minority languages. Already for years a website has been maintained, it has showed a fast growing amount of information and pages accordingly ever since. The website’s popularity is increasing all the time, which can be read out of the numbers of interested visitors. On the website one can find not only a lot of information but also our products as regional dossiers, databases and links to the other Mercator centres. Links to organisations and to many language communities are available as well.

- **Databases and bibliographies**

Databases are another focal point of the activities. The maintenance, updating, extension and enrichment of the available data in the database are of central importance. This work includes all the sub-parts of the database that have been developed (persons/experts, organizations, bibliographic and different types of factual data). The database of organisations contains detailed information on over 500 organizations in the member states of the European Union, as well as some states outside.

Other products of Mercator-Education are a bibliography on bilingualism, bilingual education and the education of regional or minority languages. The library of Mercator-Education contains at this moment almost 7000 titles and is constantly growing.

**5. Conclusion**

The Mercator project as a whole (education, media and legislation) is financially supported to a substantial degree by the European Union.

Within the limited financial possibilities of this framework the Mercator centres play a keyrole as research and documentation centres. Sharing information and experiences are of crucial importance for the survival of the “old” and often endangered regional and minority languages. It is much easier for the Mercator centres to raise attention and interest than it is for the language communities individually. The centres have the network and the international platform needed for such. New developments in technology provide new opportunities and challenges to give these activities a new impuls. With the digital library project and the network of schools Mercator-Education has some good
examples. Both activities are still in an early phase, but will certainly prove to be of importance and value.

Although the education of regional or minority languages encounters quite some problems, mostly in the area of the teachers’ language proficiency and the availability of teaching materials, but also for these the recent developments provide new opportunities.

Much has happened in the last years in the area of regional languages and bilingual education. It is a dynamic area in which many developments are taking place. Education is not only necessary for promoting the language, but also for the emotional, cognitive and linguistic development of children.

As far as legal provisions are concerned, most provisions are found where language and education policies are made at the level of autonomous communities or state level.

Hopefully it has become clear that minority language education throughout Europe faces many complex linguistic and teaching tasks and that there is a continuing need for exchange of information and consideration for the problems in order to be able to do some work on planning an European educational policy for the coming years.
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