Introduction

Public spaces are hugely important in our cities. They are the one area where everyone – inhabitants and visitors – mix freely. And all their languages mix with them - not just the local language(s), but the languages of migrants, regional languages, official languages and the languages of tourists and visitors.

Public spaces are shaped and defined by two main groups:

- Public authorities & urban planners
- Private businesses and communities: the people who use and interact with (and within) these spaces

As custodians of the spaces in the city, the public authorities have great opportunities to manage these spaces to promote and encourage people’s experience of their city, and use languages in spaces to support trade, culture and community cohesion and citizen exchange. This can be done in innovative and vibrant ways: physical, visual, artistic, ‘live’, virtual.

Cities can therefore provide an environment for people themselves – traders, community and event organisers, visitors and individuals – to make their own contributions and interact in all their languages.

Signs in different languages – both official and privately created (such as advertisements or shop fronts) – are perhaps the most obvious manifestation of multilingualism in city spaces. They can be practical (to help orientation or communicate vital information), symbolic (to foster a sense of inclusion), for marketing purposes (if an area wishes to be attractive to tourists) or branding (such as Chinatown in London).

Libraries, museums, galleries and cultural spaces are places of inclusion, discovery and learning although they are not always open to everyone in the same way as public spaces.

An important public space is the ‘virtual space’ – a city’s website, live and interactive screens, apps, public wifi… There are so many new ways for a city to interact with people in different languages. But there can be issues here with accessibility since not everybody is connected online.

Finally, an inherently public space is the audio landscape – announcements, broadcasts and all the languages which are spoken in a city’s shared spaces.

Challenges

Some European cities have a long history of multilingualism and a long history of reflecting this in their urban spaces; in other cities, multilingualism might be an emerging phenomenon. For them, understanding the benefits of encouraging a multilingual urban environment – and how to do it – can be a challenge.

But multilingualism is a fact of life for all modern cities and as our public spaces become ever more interactive and dynamic, different languages are increasingly visible. City spaces should reflect this.

However it seems that some languages are more accepted than others when spoken and seen in urban spaces. This is a real challenge since attitudes towards other cultures and languages cannot be changed overnight. Yet being fully open to all languages in the city is good for the city’s people, economy and image.

The languages we encounter might differ in different parts of town: migrant communities, businesses and tourists are often concentrated in particular areas. This means different areas might have different needs.

Advantages

City authorities: Do you want to be a global city? Attract talent? Promote trade? Build your city’s human capital? Encourage vibrant and inclusive communities? Attract foreign businesses to set up in your city? Take full advantage of the skills in your population?

Increase tourism? All of these can be supported by a city that thinks about languages in its management of public spaces.
Multilingualism in Urban Spaces

Businesses: Do you want to attract new clients? Increase the visibility of your business? Develop your brand? The way you present your business in public is vital.

Citizens and communities: Do you want to widen participation in your festival, group or other public activity? Languages are closely linked to cultural identities – you should take advantage of this!

Broken links, corrections and updates can be reported and viewed at www.urbanlanguages.eu/toolkits/errata
Ideas for public authorities / urban planners responsible for urban spaces

Keep in mind that there are two different functions of public language usage in the urban space: (a) the informative function of language (b) the symbolic function, meaning that a language serves as an acknowledgement of the presence of a certain community.

What are you trying to achieve in your management of public spaces? For instance, improving the image of the city, increasing trade, improving community relations?

Have you identified the ways in which language can support your priorities?

You might consider brainstorming with your team to develop a plan that uses languages to support your aims – look at what already exists and what you can plan for. You could refer to some of the questions below.

Does the ‘official face’ of your city promote it as a world city?

You can use the status of your city to highlight its international credentials, for instance by hosting international events and conferences. How could you promote linguistic diversity when hosting international events?

London is increasingly hosting world-class events to raise its international profile. An obvious example is the 2012 Olympic Games. London also draws on its diversity to promote itself internationally: London’s Chinese New Year festival is the largest outside Asia, and London has hosted events associated with other countries such as the Tour de France and is currently exploring a F1 Grand Prix. It also hosts culture-specific festivals, such as the Russian 'Maslenitsa' festival¹, which attract attention from people across the country as well as visitors and investors from abroad. Making the different languages visible is a good way to highlight the international nature of these events.

Languages are crucial to such events: as they are international, this must be reflected in the languages used in the advertising, communications and proceedings. It is important to get it right: an embarrassing spelling error in a sign in Arabic at the London Olympics was widely reported in the international press.

In July 2013 Utrecht organised the European Olympic Youth Festival² (EYOF).

¹ http://www.maslenitsa.co.uk/
² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_European_Youth_Summer_Olympic_Festival
Cities can encourage areas to have a certain international identity as a way to increase the attractiveness of the area to visitors, and to increase trade. You can either capitalise on an existing local community, or create an entirely new area by urban planning. Areas of focus should include multilingual signs, a multilingual 'feel' to the area (including culture-specific architecture) and traders reflecting the language of the culture in question.

In London, city authorities are very supportive of areas which can develop an attractive cultural identity to attract trade and visitors, such as Chinatown or Brick Lane. Bilingual signs and shop fronts, menus and festivals are all supported.

Dublin developed its “Italian Quarter” in the Smithfield area of the city as a centre for hospitality and a popular destination for visitors. It is a result of urban planning and not based on a local population or history.

Many cities have a fascinating history which involves deep engagement across different cultures, nations and languages. Make this history more visible by visualising the languages attached to historical events.

Osijek has named streets to reflect the city’s multilingual history.

In the street named after him, Utrecht commissioned street art to celebrate the poet Jacob Cats, with fragments of his poems in 10 languages.

In Madrid, the Lavapiés district hosts festivals that draw on the multilingual and multicultural history of the area.

Linguistic diversity can be an eye-catching theme for inclusion in new architecture and public spaces, highlighting your city’s languages – both migrant and those of visitors your wish to attract – and promoting your city’s diverse and international credentials.

Madrid’s College of Architects (COAM) has developed initiatives to include all the city’s languages in its treatment of architecture (“Transforming Madrid Initiative”).
Sofia’s successful Wall-to-Wall Poetry project started on the initiative of the Dutch Embassy in 2004. It now boasts the participation of the Embassies of all EU member states and candidate countries. Each country has a wall on a notable public building in Sofia to post a poem in a language of the country, translated also into Bulgarian and English.

The goal is to popularise the wealth of European languages and cultures, united in a single European Union, thus showing unity in diversity.

Nearly 30 such poems are visible today on the walls of Sofia, transforming the facades of buildings into multilingual, cultural urban spaces.

In Utrecht, a series of doorways in buildings in the Kanaleneiland neighbourhood show the word ‘welcome’ in seven different languages.

In Hamburg, the front window of the main swimming pool in the multicultural district of Wilhelmsburg, displays the word “swimming” in many languages.

Your city’s ‘virtual spaces’ are crucial: they are often the first point of contact for visitors and locals who are looking for information. They can also be dynamic and responsive (compared to the physical space of the city). You should ensure your city’s websites include the important languages for your population and your visitors. Social media is increasingly important. Do you have a multilingual policy to support your multilingual users on Facebook, Twitter, etc? You could engage some of the multilingual young people resident in your city…
London’s websites (for instance the travel portal www.tfl.gov.uk) cater for the city’s main immigrant languages as well as the main international languages.

In Rome, Turismoroma³ is the city’s official tourist portal. It is run by the City Council and Tourism Office and is available in five languages: Italian, English, Spanish, German, French. The Tourism Office also runs eleven Information Points all over the city, providing multilingual information and brochures, and a Phone Contact Centre offering information on cultural life, events, tourist services in six languages.

The online guide to Madrid⁴ is available in Spanish, English, French, Japanese, Russian and Chinese.

Does your city space promote all its official languages?

You can ensure that any official language(s) are prominent in the street signs and other spaces.

Dublin ensures its street signs, signs at stations and airports, are all bilingual in English and Irish.

Do you use languages in your city’s spaces to attract and support foreign visitors for business and tourism?

Are you satisfied that all the main tourist areas and sites are fully equipped to provide information in relevant languages?

³ http://www.turismoroma.it
⁴ http://www.esMADRID.com
In Rome, the main train stations, Termini and Tiburtina, as well as Fiumicino airport have bilingual signposting.

In Utrecht, the policy is that all tourist information is translated into English.

*But is this enough? Remember how powerful it is to communicate with people in their own language. Also, see if you can provide information in migrant languages for information relevant to them. As well as being informative, this has a strong symbolic function for migrants, making them feel accepted in your city.*

In Hamburg, the city has tried to upgrade the multicultural district of Wilhelmsburg in many ways. One initiative is to build ecological “hybrid” houses in a fashionable design in central areas. Information on the special features of those hybrid houses are provided in German, English and Turkish (the language of the largest migrant community in Wilhelmsburg).

In Utrecht, the “Miffy’s House” part of the Central Museum is presented in Japanese because of its popularity among Japanese tourists.

*Unfortunately, no other efforts are made to welcome Japanese tourists at the museum: there are no signs or commercials in Japanese on the buses or in the restaurants near the museum, for instance.*
Are practical issues – especially transport – easily understood by speakers of other languages in your city? You should consider interactive screens to complement staff’s linguistic skills. Audio announcements are key.

London’s website for transport services[^6] is available in several languages. London’s ticket machines for the underground trains operate with multilingual screens, as do bicycle hire screens.

The Paris Metro has audio announcements in French, English, German, Spanish, Japanese and Chinese.

In Rome, the Public Transport Agency offers news and information on both TV and radio (available online and in some underground stations and buses/trams) featuring information on public transport and traffic in French, English, Spanish, alternating with Italian: [http://www.muoversiaroma.it/muoversiaroma/](http://www.muoversiaroma.it/muoversiaroma/)

Strasbourg’s transport company CTS has embarked on a project to ensure all key transport documentation is available in Spanish, Italian and Chinese by 2015 (in addition to French, German and English).

If your city’s main language does not use Latin script and you wish to attract more English-speaking and European visitors, you may wish to consider applying a English-based transliteration of signs, to cater for international visitors.

Varna (with its signs in Cyrillic alphabet) has changed its signs to an English-based system (rather than using French or Slavic transliteration as was done in the past) to project a more international image.

Use welcome signs at train stations or airports to greet visitors in their mother tongue.

London’s main train stations have large signs saying ‘Welcome’ in several different languages. Unfortunately, staff in London are often unable to communicate in these languages. It is important to back up any such ‘symbolic’ use of multilingualism with real multilingual services – either by training or hiring multilingual staff, or by developing a robust multilingual information system (including interactive screens).

After arrival and on the way to the subway, a sign at Hamburg airport welcomes visitors in many languages.

Information on important sights can be displayed in different languages. Virtual media offers a flexible platform for this.

In Sofia, telephones established in front of important sights offer audio information in different languages.

In Budapest, touch screens in front of important sights offer visible information in different languages.

You can prepare citizens who are the first point of contact for visitors to be able to communicate in different languages.

In London there have been efforts to increase the linguistic skills of taxi drivers in preparation for the Olympic games; and also efforts to increase the ethnic (and linguistic) diversity of taxi drivers.

You should encourage all visible manifestations of trade which attracts foreign investment to communicate in the relevant languages.
In Limassol, signs for real estate are shown in Greek, English, Russian and (increasingly) Chinese.

Does your city exploit the languages and cultures present in your diverse communities to encourage and generate more trade and exchange?

Immigrants’ businesses and groups don’t just have to cater for their particular community. There is evidence that there is a lot of curiosity among the wider population, which can be harnessed by city authorities to improve community relations and increase trade through festivals or local initiatives.

Rome is involved in the “Roma Migranda” project which organises tours of its migrant areas, showing favourite places, cafes, restaurants, markets, etc. Multilingualism/multiculturalism is a tourist attraction in itself.

Rome’s involvement in the “Indovina chi viene a cena…?” [Guess who’s coming for dinner?] project supports families from Senegal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Peru and Moldova to offer traditional dinners in their own houses, open to everyone.

Chinese New Year is present in many cities and is a good example of local immigrant businesses organising themselves in partnership with the city authorities to generate trade through festivals and events. Cities such as London have extended this model to include many other communities.

Do you make full use of languages to communicate with everyone in your city’s spaces? Migrant communities are often underrepresented in public life – have you considered different ways to engage these communities through the urban space?

While economic benefits are a main concern for cities and their populations, it is important as a city to deal with social inclusion and support languages and communities which are less visible.

Can you work with communities to ensure their languages are visible and encourage social inclusion? Our research indicates that some communities are more visible than others in cities’ public spaces. For instance, in Madrid there are very few shop signs in Romanian despite the large Romanian immigrant population, whereas other communities are much more visible.

Officials in Aluche, south-west Madrid, support the open market which visibly caters for the local Romanian population.

7 http://www.cittamigrande.it/
8 http://www.indovinachivieneacena.it/
Our research indicates that one of the challenges for the integration of new immigrants is that the existing population can be especially resistant to hearing foreign languages spoken around them. Can your city be more visibly multilingual, through posters, videos and announcements? Perhaps you could consider having a city-wide “guest official language” on a rotating basis. Cities should find ways to celebrate their diversity. If your city is positive about languages and its official face is multilingual, this will help. Running projects in schools is effective, as it engages young people with their multilingual city, and through them some of these messages will reach their parents.

Schools and citizens can be encouraged to participate in the Language Landscape project. The website enables everyone with an internet connection to add language recordings to a world map. The project has worked with schools in London very successfully: pupils loved the activity and it increased their curiosity about their own communities and language learning at school.

Remember it can be symbolically important to recognise the languages of your local population when communicating information to them. Even the simplest acknowledgement (a greeting, a phrase, etc.) can make a difference and engage the population more effectively.

The Mayor of London recorded a welcome video for the Maslenitsa [Russian] festival in Russian.

Celebrating local communities’ languages in their physical surroundings – buildings, public art – is an effective way to make them feel welcome and to engage them.

The district of Tower Hamlets in London included slogans in many different languages in a recycling campaign.

9  http://languagelandscape.org/
10  http://www.maslenitsa.co.uk/
This Multilingual Wall in Utrecht displays a poem in the most encountered languages of the area.

This column erected in Norrebro (Copenhagen) is a strong declaration that the city wishes to be a tolerant and diverse society.

Try to avoid the use of signs and announcements in particular languages in circumstances where the translation reinforces negative stereotypes of particular populations. For instance, we recorded an instance of a sign saying “No pickpockets” translated into Bulgarian and Romanian only.

Your city’s libraries, museums and public spaces can play a key role in education, engaging communities, and social interaction. City authorities should ensure they are fully engaged with these institutions (see next section for more).

**Ideas for libraries and other public spaces**

*How are you using your public space (library, museum, etc) to engage the local community? Are you aware of the key role your space can play in encouraging social inclusion and increasing the numbers of visitors?*

Think about innovative ways you could engage local communities in their languages, such as events, readings, materials and educational sessions.
In Rome’s “Biblioteche in Lingua” project, 18 libraries worked together to include new sections in the languages of the largest migrant communities to encourage local participation rates and community involvement in the library and city life more widely. They also organised a dynamic new programme of events.

If your library serves an area with a large immigrant population, you could consider increasing the visibility of the community’s languages in your library signs (both outside and inside the building) and systems.

London’s Charing Cross public library operates bilingually in English and Chinese as a high proportion of its users are from the Chinese community.

Posters, flyers and brochures in migrant languages can be handed out in municipalities and among migrant communities. Multilingual slogans that encourage reading can be placed on flyers and in entrance areas of the library.

11 http://www.romamultietnica.it/biblioteche-in-lingua.html
12 https://www.westminster.gov.uk/chinese-library
Rome’s libraries include multilingual documents welcoming migrants to the library. This is part of a strategy that has seen an increase in participation from the migrant communities in library activities.

Osijek’s celebrations of International Mother Tongue day include a street festival and other events. The promotional materials are inclusive of all local community languages.

**How well established is your section of literature and media in foreign languages? Do you also include migrant or regional languages?**

Provide reading material and other media in as many languages as possible. In particular, you should include the languages of the migrants of your area and select new books in cooperation with migrant communities. Children’s literature is an especially excellent way to engage local communities.

In Strasbourg’s Meinau municipal library, children’s books are available in Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Turkish.

If possible, establish an Intercultural Office at your library that is the contact point for media in other languages and intercultural activities.

**Have you considered using your library as a driving force for language discovery and for people to meet (and mix)?**
You could organise conversation exchanges where local people sign up to speak in another language with another local person.

Dublin Central Library provides ‘Conversation Exchanges’ in French/English, German/English, Irish/English, Japanese/English, Russian/English, Spanish/English and Italian/English, as well as general English language conversation.

Readings can take place in foreign or migrant languages. This can happen in the library or in schools (organised by the library, in connection with a campaign encouraging children to read in other languages), or for school classes in the library.

In Rome, the Intercultural office runs a project with the city’s libraries called “Storie dal Mondo” [“Stories of the world”]: school classes participating in the project read texts from African, Arab, Latin-American, Chinese, Indian and Eastern European literature, as well as texts from migrant literature. The project also features meetings in libraries and in schools with scholars, authors and Italian and foreign intercultural mediators. Other projects and intercultural events take place in several libraries with the aim of welcoming diversities and sharing cultural interests, such as Italian language courses in libraries.

Organise a “Mother Tongue Day” where minorities present their languages and customs, for example by presenting and reading from books written in their home languages.

Mother Tongue Day is celebrated in libraries in Osijek and Rome. In Osijek, schoolchildren teach each other their languages and customs in various workshops and on the final day a big celebration is held with all minority groups, with singing and reading together for the public.

Libraries often feature exhibitions in their entrance area on foreign cultures, political events etc. You could display the particularities of a language, similarities of different languages, phrases, collocations and their origin, “the story behind a phrase”.

The city, library or foundations could support poetry contests in different languages or where languages are the topic.

Brussels has produced a booklet containing poems in 20 different languages.

Ideas for businesses

Would it be possible to organise a partnership with other local businesses in a public space to promote trade on the theme of a country, culture or language?

- Local events, festivals and partnerships can be organised to attract visitors and customers. It is best done in partnership with the local authorities.

- Chinese New Year celebrations are a good example of how this can take shape.

Are you using the city’s physical spaces to engage all your potential customers? How visible is your business to them?

- You could ensure that the visible signs for your business (shop signs, company emblem, advertisements) reflect the languages of your potential customers.

- Real estate agents in Limassol ensure their signs are in English, Greek, Russian and Chinese.

- In London, Korean supermarkets include signs on their windows in English to describe the foods on sale, to ensure non-Korean customers are interested.
In Hamburg, a local (German) bank in the multicultural district of Altona addresses clients in Turkish.

Have you considered using your business as a venue for linguistic or cultural exchange?

You could organise conversation exchanges in your shop or café.

There are ‘Language Cafés’ in both Dublin and Utrecht, where people can meet for a coffee and a conversation in another language.

Ideas for community organisers

When you consider organising or supporting an event or festival, do you think of how languages fit in?

A successful street event is a good way to raise the profile of your community. Such days offer excellent opportunities to stimulate linguistic awareness, a positive attitude towards different mother tongues and multilingualism in a city.

You could take inspiration from an existing festival and use it for your own community, such as the International Mother Tongue Day\(^\text{15}\), the European Day of Languages\(^\text{16}\), Europe Day\(^\text{17}\), a world event such as the World Cup or any number of national days.

16 [http://edl.ecml.at/](http://edl.ecml.at/)
17 [http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/europe-day/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/europe-day/index_en.htm)
You can also engage with local libraries or public spaces for support and ideas.

It is also worth remembering the commercial value of a successful festival or event.

In Varna, a community-run celebration of Europe Day has evolved into a larger event with the support of other organisations and Varna Municipality.

In Madrid, the Chinese New Year festival in Lavapiés is organised by several different community groups, making it a larger and more diverse celebration.

Are you using the city’s public spaces to reach as wide an audience as possible?

Think about making your project visible in areas with a high ‘footfall’ (i.e. very busy places of transit for the city population).

In London, different community-led newspapers are distributed outside busy railway stations. By approaching the authorities together, community organisers gained permission to distribute newspapers in protective containers.
Conclusion

Public spaces in cities are some of the most important, universal and immediate ways a city can engage its inhabitants and visitors. They are also one of the areas of city life which are most open to innovative and dynamic ideas.

Using different languages in public spaces can benefit the image, culture and profile of a city; it can encourage trade and tourism, but also community cohesion, the integration of newcomers, and influence the attitudes of established communities towards newcomers and tourists. Remember the full scope of what a city can do with its public spaces such as its streets, libraries, venues, transport... using documents, signs, street signs, audio services and websites – and its people of course!

We encourage cities to begin with a vision of the areas they wish to develop and think of ways of making the city a physical reflection of this vision. We offer some real life examples from the LUCIDE cities as sources of inspiration.

Please do get in touch with us to share your experiences and tips of using more than one language in your city’s urban spaces!

www.urbanlanguages.eu
www.facebook.com/urbanlanguages
@urbanlanguages

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Published 2015. Project funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme.

© LUCIDE Project and LSE 2015.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.
Multilingualism in Dublin: LUCIDE city report (AUGUST 2013)

By Lorna Carson, Sarah McMonagle, Deirdre Murphy