# **The Language Affiliations of Mobile Students in the International University**

Rosamond Mitchell

University of Southampton, UK

Emre Güvendir

Trakya University, Turkey

## **Abstract**

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The internationalisation of higher education has led to widespread adoption of English as medium of instruction in European universities, and this strategy is supporting increasingly diverse student mobility. Many students undertaking short-term Erasmus+ mobility see this as an opportunity to develop their English language skills, but may lack interest in learning locally significant languages. However, contemporary universities are complex multilingual spaces. This paper explores how far mobile students’ language affiliations are aligned to languages’ wider geopolitical significance, and how far they are influenced by personal and sociocultural factors, and the study abroad (SA) experience itself.

The study draws on a corpus of narrative interviews with mobile students in diverse European settings. Participants generally sustained strong affiliations with English. Affiliations with other international languages were more mixed. Some expressed a heightened affiliation to their home language arising from SA experience; others described new affiliations arising from local contacts and student friendships, with a local language, or with other international students’ L1. Overall, the study found that language affiliations showed some flexibility, and might derive from personal biographical factors, cultural values and personal relationships as well as from the instrumental value of internationally significant languages.

Keywords: language affiliation, language hierarchy, study abroad, student mobility

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, European educational policy has consistently promoted foreign languages. In practice, English is the preeminent L2, but large numbers of young Europeans have also studied other languages at school. At the same time large-scale migration has promoted linguistic diversity, so that both in and out of school, young people commonly encounter a wide range of languages. However, the impact that such multilingual experience has on language learning motivation and language identity is not straightforward. Comparative studies of European schoolchildren have shown increasing preferences for English (e.g. Busse, 2017; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Heinzmann, 2013). These authors agree that children display ‘a fundamental restructuring of L2 learning dispositions, with a growing division between world-language learning and non-world-language learning’ (Dörnyei et al., 2006, p. 143). Children across Europe also use and enjoy English-medium global media in their leisure time, with consequences for intercultural engagement, language learning motivation and L2 development (Csizér & Kormos, 2008; De Wilde et al., 2020). Henry (2017) has described what he calls a ‘contentedly bilingual’ identity among Swedish high school students, in which mastery of L2 English is desired but learning other languages is seen as a distraction.

In this paper we explore the values attaching to multilingualism at the next educational stage, i.e. among students in higher education (HE). The push toward globalisation in European HE has led to increasingly diverse student intakes, but also to the increasing adoption of English as medium of instruction (EMI), which in combination create a more multilingual environment even in historically monolingual institutions (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Schroedler, 2020). Our prime interest is in mobile students’ perceptions of linguistic hierarchy, the values they attach to languages other than English, and how these may be influenced through the experience of study abroad (SA).

To operationalise the notion of ‘linguistic hierarchy’, we present frameworks proposed by de Swaan (2001, 2010) and Extra and Gorter (2008), and refer to supporting empirical research in the economics of language. To capture the values attaching to particular languages, we also discuss the concept of ‘language affiliation’ (Leung et al., 1997; Rampton, 1990). We then present analysis of data collected with mobile students during 2018-2019, within the framework of the COST Action ‘Study Abroad in European Perspective’(SAREP)[[1]](#endnote-1), and draw conclusions regarding how far hierarchical language values are reinforced and/or modified through SA.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Language Affiliation***

The term *language affiliation* refers to an individual’s feelings and emotions for a language, ‘whether or not they nominally belong to the social group usually associated with it’ (Leung et al., 1997, p. 555). Rampton’s (1990) view of language affiliation underscores an affective component, and asserts that an individual can have an affiliation for a language that s/he is not proficient in or has no sociohistoric bonds with. This view contested a long-held assumption that bilingual students with immigrant backgrounds were best understood as native speakers of a language connected to their ethnic or national heritage, reflecting a direct relationship between ethnic background and language affiliation. The study by Leung et al. (1997) with minorities in the UK produced contrary results; their participants reported simultaneous relations and attachments with different languages and social groups. The authors concluded that assigning fixed linguistic identities to individuals misses the complex relationships between languages, identities and contextual factors influencing language affiliations.

### ***The Global Language System***

The reasons why people learn one language rather than another, and why they value particular languages, have been much debated. According to de Swaan’s (2001; 2010) concept of the global language system, languages are divided into a four-level hierarchy, namely the peripheral, central, supercentral, and hypercentral languages. English, which keeps the whole system together, is positioned as the *hypercentral* language. Next in the hierarchy are *supercentral* languages, most with 100 million-plus speakers, and including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Kiswahili, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish; many of these were superimposed historically by an imperial power. These languages ‘serve purposes of long-distance and international communication’ (de Swaan, 2001, p. 5), and connect users of central languages in so-called ‘regional constellations’. Next are the *central* languages spoken by 95% of the world's population and commonly used in education, the media, politics, and administration, as languages of record and national languages. At the lowest level of the hierarchy, *peripheral* languages form 98% of the world's languages, but together are spoken by under 10% of the world's population. These languages are typically used for local face-to-face communication; most languages at risk of extinction are in this group.

de Swaan (2001) stressed that ‘languages are learned “upwards”: from the small to the large language, from the little to the great tradition, from the poor to the rich language group, from the subjugated to the dominant nation’ (p. 25). For him, this upward movement is connected with the *Q-value* of languages, i.e. the communicative potential of a language. de Swaan describes Q-value as a measure of socially approved perceptions of a language's communicative capacity, or the communicative benefits of language learning as a consequence of spending time and money in its studying and learning. From an economic standpoint, learners who engage in an L2 do so with the expectation of acquiring a broader range of symbolic and material tools, increasing the value of their cultural capital. Learners may anticipate or hope for a positive return on their investment, one that will allow them access to previously unavailable resources (Norton, 2013).

These ideas gain support from empirical research on the economics of language. In many European settings, knowledge of a foreign language is related to enhanced earnings, especially in white collar occupations (Ginsburgh & Prieto, 2011). Furthermore, knowledge of a particular foreign language increases the likelihood of migration to a country where that language is used in business and/or in national life (Aparicio-Fenoll & Kuehn, 2016), and is economically productive on arrival. A meta-analysis by Ridala (2020) investigated the labour market returns for learning a) a local state language, b) a significant local minority language, and c) a business language. She concludes overall that “knowing languages that are globally more influential is associated with higher labour market rewards’’ (p. 216). However she notes that in linguistically diverse countries, knowledge of local languages may also be rewarded, while in countries with very widespread knowledge of a business language such as English, any salary premium may be reduced.

Conceptualizing the worldwide language framework as a pyramid aims to illustrate communicative reach. Hierarchically, while English has the highest Q-value, peripheral languages have the lowest. Whereas speakers of a peripheral language need to become multilingual in order to extend their chances beyond their local group, a speaker of English may believe that this one language can satisfy their communicative needs on a local, national, and global scale (Piller & Grey, 2019). de Swaan (2001) argues that in a competitive environment:

Language students will choose the language which appears to be the most useful, the one which offers the greatest possibilities of communication, either directly, or indirectly, through the mediation of interpreters or translators. A language is more likely to be selected the more prevalent or the more central it is in the relevant language constellation. The prevalence of a language is an indicator of the opportunities it has to offer for direct communication with other persons in the constellation. (p. 33)

It follows that the hypercentral position of English may pose a threat to pro-multilingualism policies, as individuals may consider studying other languages unnecessary (Busse, 2017; Henry, 2017; Soler, 2007).

The model of de Swaan attempts to explain individual language learning preferences by languages’ Q-value. However, according to the alternative model proposed by Extra and Gorter (2008), language status can also be influenced by sociopolitical perspectives. Focusing on the European constellation, Extra and Gorter (2008) argue that languages in Europe display a hierarchical structure which differs in some ways from that proposed by de Swaan. English tops the hierarchy as a lingua franca (ELF) and means of transnational communication (similar to its ‘hypercentral’ status for de Swaan). The second layer of the hierarchy includes national or official state languages of European countries. These languages are a combination of the supercentral and central languages included in de Swaan's model. Among them however, three supercentral EU languages (French, German, Spanish) have a pre-eminent position. For example, after English (at 86.8%) they are much the most likely to be taught in European high schools (French, 19.4%; German, 18.3%; Spanish, 17.5%: Eurostat, 2018). They also carry labour market premiums in particular European regions (Ginsburgh & Prieto, 2011).

‘Regional minority’ (RM) languages (such as Basque, Catalan or Welsh) are located by Extra and Gorter in a third layer, and ‘immigrant minority’ (IM) languages are at the bottom. Comparing the RM languages of Extra and Gorter (2008) with de Swaan’s categorization of peripheral languages, an important difference lies in the sociopolitical status of European RMs, which receive some degree of institutional recognition and support in relevant regions. The position of IM languages, however, constitutes the key difference between the two models. Contemporary IM languages in Europe include languages spoken by millions of immigrants such as Turkish and Arabic. For de Swaan, both Turkish and Arabic are supercentral languages. However Yağmur and Extra (2011) noted that, in the EU context, IM languages are frequently associated with poverty, educational failure, and lack of integration. Extra and Gorter (2008) point out that:

Whereas the national languages of the EU with English increasingly on top are celebrated most at the EU level, RM languages are celebrated less and IM languages least. IM languages are only marginally covered by EU language promotion programmes and – so far – are mainly considered in the context of provisions for learning the national languages of the migrants’ countries of residence. (p. 4)

Extra and Gorter (2008), unlike de Swaan, present a hierarchical system more influenced by the political context rather than the abstract tendencies of individuals to learn languages. In regions such as Europe where language status can be shaped not only by Q-values but also by sociopolitical viewpoints, the language learning propensities of individuals and the factors that affect them merit fuller investigation.

In this paper we explore the relevance of the concepts of language hierarchy and language affiliation, for mobile students in European HE. The EU has promoted language learning at school level, through the ‘mother tongue plus two’ policy; in practice this has translated into virtually universal study of English, plus regionally more variable teaching of other European languages. Through Erasmus+ and other schemes (pre-Covid), hundreds of thousands of European students annually have experienced transnational ‘credit mobility’, i.e. have enrolled for one or two semesters in a partner institution elsewhere (Van Mol, 2014). The contexts of mobility are themselves multilingual sites, at least informally, with EMI increasingly available (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014){Henry, 2017 #856}, and linguistically diverse student populations attending institutions with globalising aims. Studies of mobile student communities have investigated lingua franca usage among international students (Behrent, 2007; Kalocsai, 2013). Previous ‘Study Abroad Research in European Perspective’ (SAREP) COST action investigations have investigated varied aspects of students’ language identity (Marinov et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). Here, we examine in more depth student affiliations toward languages at different hierarchical levels, and in particular how far the experience of mobility reinforces the notion of language hierarchy, or alternatively promotes different types of language affiliation.

## **Method**

We address three research questions:

1. What are the language affiliations of contemporary mobile students?
2. How adequate is a ‘hierarchical’ model of languages to explain affiliation patterns?
3. How are these affiliations influenced by an SA experience?

### ***Overall research design***

The interview data used for this study came from a larger collaborative research initiative on ‘plurilingual identity’, conducted within the SAREP COST Action. In 2018-2019, members of the Action from HE institutions across Europe conducted an interview survey of mobile students. The survey explored different dimensions of language identity, including identity-related language proficiency, linguistic self-concept, and language-related personal competence (Benson et al., 2013; Beaven & Conacher, 2021). In each setting, a number of incoming and/or outgoing mobile students were interviewed up to three times, mostly in English, and using a shared set of semi-structured interview schedules. The interviews gathered information on participants’ language learning histories, their self-estimates of proficiency in all the languages they knew, the values and emotions they attached to them, their language practices during SA, and their beliefs about future use of languages. Other analyses of this interview corpus are reported by Marinov et al. (2021) and Mitchell et al. (2021). For the present study, an original analysis was conducted on a subset of the corpus.

### ***Participants***

The subset of participants in the present study included 22 females and 11 males following mobility programmes in 11 different destination countries (see Annex 1). Time and resource constraints meant that the study used convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) to find volunteer participants. They came from 15 different countries and named 14 different languages as their L1 (seven ‘supercentral’ and seven ‘central’ languages). A majority were undertaking SA through the Erasmus+ student exchange scheme, but a minority were following other programmes (three incoming from Latin America to Spain; two outgoing from Finland to South Korea). Most were spending just one semester in their host institution; the UK participants were an exception (two semesters). While some participants were language majors, others were specialists in other disciplines, as shown in Annex 1. All attended content courses in relevant disciplines during their sojourn. Participants sojourning in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal attended at least some classes taught through a relevant national language, sometimes alongside EMI classes; those in all other settings attended EMI content courses only, the only exception being local language classes.

### ***Data Collection***

Interviews with this subset of students were conducted by eight SAREP members in their home institution (seven members of academic staff and one doctoral candidate). While the common SAREP interview schedules were followed, the number of interviews per participant varied by site (see Annex 1 for details). At five sites (Belgium, Croatia\_1, Finland, Turkey and UK) the interviewers interviewed outgoing students from their own institution. These students were all interviewed at least twice (pre- and post-sojourn, with an additional interview insojourn in Croatia\_1 and the UK). At three sites (Croatia\_2, Italy and Spain), the researchers interviewed incoming students at least once, always insojourn except that a minority in Spain and Italy also did a remote postsojourn interview. Interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed, and translated into English where necessary for data-sharing. The subset of interviews analysed here amounts to 18.8 recorded hours, with a mean interview length of 21 minutes, and a range of 10 to 60 minutes.

The conditions of data collection can of course influence the nature of the data collected. Past research has established that mobile students are typically a relatively advantaged group socially, and may also had have greater past experiences of travel and of multilingual practices than their stay-at-home peers (Bahna, 2018; Van Mol, 2014). These limitations were likely to apply also to participants in this study. Furthermore, the inevitable power differential between academic staff and students may have encouraged participants to express what they perceived as desirable responses. The relatively large number of interviewers meant that interviews were conducted in somewhat different styles. However, the fact that the interview schedules had been developed collaboratively, and rehearsed to some extent at SAREP training events, supported the interviewers in creating a relatively relaxed atmosphere and a relationship of trust with participants, and eliciting broadly comparable reflections from them at the different sites.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic data analysis was carried out, supported by NVivo12 (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019); a set of analytic categories was developed covering the range of values mentioned as attaching to particular languages (including personal/emotional value, communicative and interpersonal value, academic value, employment value, leisure value: for details see Figure 1). The participants spoke about a large number of second languages, in addition to the language they identified as their ‘mother tongue’[[2]](#endnote-2). Following discussion, coding was carried out by the first author for a selection of these languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Bulgarian, Japanese and Romanian).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

## **Findings**

This section provides a qualitative description of the main trends found in the data, regarding participants’ affiliations to each L2 of interest, plus their ‘mother tongue’. This account is illustrated with direct quotations from participants[[3]](#endnote-3). In the following Discussion section, the stated research questions are directly addressed.

### ***Hypercentral English***

All of the participants had studied English at school, and reported attaining intermediate to advanced proficiency (usually referencing CEFR levels B2 or C1). Many also mentioned supplementary English learning activities, including summer programmes, leisure activities such as online gaming, and consumption of English-medium music, TV or cinema; some mentioned use of English in the family, and strong social support for English learning. A few mentioned poor motivation for learning English in early life [B05: French, in Italy], or lack of opportunity/access to English [L06: Brazilian, in Spain]. Participants generally took a utilitarian view of the status of English:

*English is everywhere, so I [laughs] study English [laughs].* [L03: Ukrainian, in Spain]

*Their language [Swedish] is so (.) it’s not really spoken in the world, so they need to speak English [laughs].* [B01: French, in Italy]

There was a shared consensus concerning the positive value of knowledge of English, for varied reasons. The language was viewed as promoting international communication and supporting travel and mobility, as well as employment:

*For me it’s extremely important to know English of course, because it’s like the language that everywhere in the world supposedly, you can meet someone who speaks English, you know it’s a universal language.* [SP03: Polish, in Croatia]

*I can say to you that in Brazil if you don’t have English you don’t work in in good position.* [L06: Brazilian, in Spain]

A number of participants mentioned how in their life at home, English provided access to academic knowledge, and to aspects of culture and entertainment:

*English plays a huge part in my life because it is the language that allows me to understand cultures, because whatever you want to look at, if you search for it in English you will find way more results, and this applies to everything, to media, to studies, to whatever you want.* [L05: Italian in Spain]

During SA, participants accepted both the academic value of EMI, and the immediate communicative value of ELF. While some struggled in particular with EMI, they generally believed their English proficiency had benefited:

*INV: What was your language of instruction?*

*T04: English yeah, so mostly English, and the teachers also they taught us in English, some of the teachers especially on the [dance] technique classes didn’t speak (.) that great English, but then somebody always translated to us […] and we wrote all our schoolwork in English.* [T04: Finnish, in Portugal]

*We socialized with other Erasmus students who came from various countries and we mostly spoke English with them, and because I used it on daily basis it helped me lower my inhibitions and fear of making a mistake, I spoke English faster and I felt maybe more self-confident about my English knowledge*. [OS02: Croatian, in Cyprus]

Despite the acknowledged challenges involved in becoming a proficient user of English, and occasional expressions of ambivalence about the privileged position of English monolinguals, a complete consensus obtained among participants about the status of English and their willingness to make the necessary personal investment to master it. The main impact of SA on participants’ affiliation to English was to build their confidence in their own abilities as users of English for academic and communicative purposes.

### ***Supercentral Languages***

In response to open questioning about the languages which were important in their lives, a short selection of supercentral languages attracted most comments; these were Spanish, French, and German. Affiliations to these three languages are described in more detail below.

As for other supercentral languages, participants generally displayed much less awareness of these. Three participants were L1 speakers of Portuguese, and one (TU04) spent her SA in Lisbon; three others mentioned learning some Portuguese informally during SA from other sojourners (in Germany and in Spain); several commented on the potential learnability of Portuguese, if another Romance language was already known. Russian language was also mentioned by several participants (including one L1 speaker, from Ukraine). Three participants had studied Russian in school (in Czechia and in Finland); none mentioned any active use during SA however, though several mentioned associating with Russian students. Moving beyond the European language constellation, just one participant (OS01) was currently studying Japanese (including during SA in Lithuania), and one other (B05) had learned Kiswahili in the past. Several participants noted the presence of Chinese students in their SA location, but none had tried to learn the language from them, and just three participants acknowledged the supercentral status of Chinese or expressed any interest in learning it in future. It is of course unsurprising that SA in Europe should primarily promote affiliations to European languages even at supercentral level.

*Spanish*

Three main factors connected participants with Spanish, the supercentral language mentioned most frequently in the interview corpus. These were their perception of Spanish as a world language, their interest in Spanish culture and language, and job opportunities provided by Spanish. In addition, a small number (who were either languages specialists, or L1 speakers of Portuguese) stressed that Spanish was valuable for their SA academic purposes, SA communication, and future studies. Opportunities to learn Spanish in school were reported to have been limited, but remarkably, around a quarter of the participants reported efforts to learn it outside school.

Around half the participants explicitly described Spanish as an international language and held related positive opinions. For example:

*I prefer to know Italian or Spanish, to French […] Ah Italian because I’m here now and I plan to come to Italy more often, because it’s a beautiful country, and Spanish is a world language.* [B06: Dutch, in Italy]

Some participants addressed how SA communicative encounters in Spain fashioned their perceptions regarding the Q-value of Spanish, and led to stronger affiliation:

*Both Spanish and English gained a lot of value for me, as they showed me how important they are in today's world and how much they allow you to communicate.* [L05: Italian, in Catalonia]

Other participants' affiliation improved mainly as a consequence of their contact with Spanish culture and language aesthetics:

*I have kind of fallen in love with Spanish culture […], and I love the sound of Spanish, and I love the sort of Spanish attitude and the way of life.* [SO3: British, in Spain]

Such contacts could have an influence even outside Spain. So, SP02 stressed that during SA in Croatia, she started to like how Spanish sounded and wanted to learn more:

*Here I saw [?] a lot of Spanish, and their language is very beautiful, so I really wanted to learn and to speak in the same way, I think I will speak more Spanish, I have more opportunity to speak Spanish than Italian, so yeah maybe.* [SP02: French, in Croatia]

The instrumental value of multilingualism for job opportunities was stressed by some participants with reference to Spanish:

*Although maybe you will never need Spanish for that job, but when an employer sees that in your CV he values you more, at least I think so.* [OS03: Croatian, in Greece]

Overall, the quite widespread positive affiliation to Spanish was very striking, and it seemed that the SA experience enhanced this to some extent, with participants reporting increased awareness of the international communicative value of Spanish, as well as positive emotional and interpersonal value.

*French*

Around one-third of the participants said that they considered French to be valuable because of its international role, and some others valued French for its interpersonal role in SA contexts, the attractiveness of French culture and/or the job opportunities it promoted. A small number of language specialists also stated that French was valuable for their academic work during SA and their future academic plans.

The majority of participants expressing a positive attitude towards French stated that this was due to the role of French in regions of the world such as EU, Africa, and Canada:

*French I like it very much, […] it is international language for sure.* [L01: Syrian, in Catalonia]

*So hopefully continue doing French, because French is important for the European Union […] [Italian, French, Spanish] those are the languages that I really like.* [B07: German, in Italy]

A specialist participant sojourning in France reported that through tandem exchanges, she had the opportunity to meet new people, which led to stronger attachment:

*I think it is brilliant, I have made a lot of French friends through tandem […] I have never particularly been exposed to that side of the language before, it is really really useful, and I really enjoy it.*[S01: British, in France]

As with Spanish, a number of participants stressed that knowledge of French offered a job market advantage:

*So like for instance like French, so when you speak more than two languages, it’s good for you, for your development also into employment and for getting a job.* [B05: German, in Italy]

*Because in Africa it’s very important to know English and French, that way if you know both languages you can get a job anywhere in Africa.* [SP03: Polish, in Croatia]

The last factor that influenced some of the participants’ affiliation with French was the aesthetic appeal of French language and culture. As participant TR02 said: *‘I like the pronunciation of French, it has glottal sounds, but I like its pronunciation, it sounds pretty elite.’*

Overall, it seemed that participants’ affiliations to French were established prior to SA, and were little altered by participation in SA (apart from increased interpersonal value attaching to the language for the specialist sojourning in France).

*German*

Rather fewer participants viewed German as an international language, though some spoke of its role as a regional language. German was valued for two main reasons: the use of German in communication during SA (for language specialists), and the employability opportunities generated by German knowledge.

*If I were fluently in German, it would be for me easier to find the job there, because salary will be more high.* [SP01: Czech, in Croatia]

*So I see from what I got from speaking German abroad that I can use that in my future job, and maybe I’m considering to go for translator or (.) ah maybe I will do like a course to become a teacher.* [G02: Belgian, in Germany]

In addition, participants reported that speaking German was a pleasant experience and that (for specialists) knowledge of German had a positive impact on their academic experience during SA.

*I feel like German has become a lot more significant in my eyes […] I also feel much more confident in in using German, in speaking and writing in German than I did before.* [GO3: Belgian, in Germany]

Again, with the exception of language specialists, it seemed that affiliations to German were largely established pre-SA and were little affected by it.

### ***Central Languages***

In this study, Italian was the central language attracting most comment from participants. Only one participant reported learning Italian at school, and it was not characterized as an international language by anyone. However, Italian attracted particular attention from participants doing SA in Italy. None were languages specialists, yet all of them reported doing some preparatory study of the language pre-SA, and three were attending Italian language classes during SA. Several participants in other countries also tried to learn a little Italian informally, from their Italian sojourner peers.

The majority of participants who valued Italian focused on its role in forming and strengthening interpersonal relationships rather than its large-scale Q-value. Participants also found Italian language and culture aesthetically attractive:

*I’m happy to learn this language because I think every language is useful, and (.) to be here I consider it is even more useful because everybody is speaking Italian, […] I think the language brings me closer to Italy and also to the experience, so I’m also happy to learn it.* [B04: German, in Italy]

*I can understand Italian if they [Italian flatmates] try and speak a little bit slower than they usually do, because I can recognise a lot of French, and that’s why I want to learn it, it sounds so nice.* [G01: Belgian, in Germany]

The other central languages that we have examined in the data are Bulgarian, Romanian, and Croatian. These languages were only mentioned by individual participants who did SA in the countries where they are national languages. The affiliation of participants TR01 and TR02 with Bulgarian and Romanian emerged during SA largely as a result of their positive social and personal relationships with local L1 speakers. Of the five participants doing SA in Croatia, one (SP05) was studying Croatian seriously and reported that she enjoyed this as it related to her future professional plans; the others used a little Croatian in service encounters, but otherwise used ELF with Croatian contacts.

### ***Affiliations to Home Languages***

The interviews offered scope to participants to discuss their personal language histories. Many spoke of their home language in a ‘taken-for-granted’ manner, e.g. *‘So my mother tongue is Dutch obviously’* [G02], *‘Of course Finnish is my mother language’* [T04]; half the participants used the ‘mother tongue’ metaphor, along with brief descriptions of this language as ‘important’ and in daily use. Some elaborated on the positive emotional value attaching to L1 use:

*When I talk Dutch, it feels warm and normal.* [B06: Belgian, in Italy]

*When I am writing Turkish it is more deep, more emotional, but while I am using English it is more like a mathematical thing, it is more like a grammar.* [SP05: Turkish, in Croatia]

A few participants commented on local variants of their national language (i.e. peripheral languages, in de Swaan’s terms); all the Belgian speakers of West Flemish expressed positive affiliations to this ‘dialect’ (their term), but a speaker of Sicilian [L01] was more ambivalent: *‘I actually use it with my friends, but it is in a more jokingly way […] we make fun of it.’* A few others expressed affiliations to heritage IM languages:

*I am from Germany so I was raised in German, but my dad is from Portugal but I wasn’t raised in Portuguese, just educated as a monolingual […] this is a big topic of my life that I wasn’t raised bilingual, I had to catch up with it later.* [B04: German, in Italy]

During SA, participants referred to the comfort deriving from L1 use:

*When you are in a foreign country, you miss speaking Turkish, but I did not have such a longing because my roommates were Turkish, we spoke Turkish all the time when we were in our room.* [TR01: Turkish, in Romania]

SA had little detectable influence on L1 affiliations, except that for L1 speakers of central languages, there seemed to be some heightening of language awareness, but also increased concern about the implications of a relatively low hierarchical status:

*[SA] helped me (.) to understand (.) what kind of rules we have in Finnish language, because I studied there English grammar as well, so of course the teachers were really interested about that, like ‘Finnish language is one of the hardest language in the world, how you do these kind of things?’ […] like complicated things but also really unique, and I think really beautiful like how we can put so many information in one word, like times, and pronouns, like who is doing what, doing how, all that kinds of things, I was surprised.* [TU02, Finnish: in South Korea]

*I feel like Croatian itself is not actually valued as much as it should be in Croatia, and through talking to people in Lithuania I found that they also don't really value their language, it's a similar thing, and I feel like it stems from the fact that we are very small countries […]we feel so small sometimes.* [OS01: Croatian, in Lithuania]

### ***Obstacles and Facilitators for Plurilingualism***

Here we review briefly the evidence concerning factors which may hinder or facilitate the development of multiple affiliations and a plurilingual identity among student sojourners.

*Languages’ Hierarchical Position*

The Q-value of English in transnational environments created an obstacle for some mobile students. These students stated that they had expectations of using languages other than English, but found that local people often preferred to use English with them. This situation lowered their motivation for other languages:

*One obstacle that is always the case is that when you try and talk [Italian], and people also know English, they will switch to English, because they hear that you have an accent […] it’s also very demotivating when it happens.* [B04: German, in Italy]

Similarly, a student (L03) who studied in Catalonia stated that although she tried to use Catalan (an RM language), local people switched to Spanish or English when they noticed that she was not proficient[L03, Ukrainian, in Catalonia].

*Intra-Group Ties and Exclusion*

Some participants stated that they tried to use languages learned in school to communicate with international peers. However, they reported that L1 speakers did not modify their speech when a L2 user was around them, which made it harder to join their conversations:

*I think I will not speak a lot of Spanish because they’re like a big group and sticking together, and (.) yes ’you can’t come in', I guess because my Spanish is too bad to really talk to them.* [B03: German, in Italy]

*Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy Beliefs*

In turn, the language practices of the participants were influenced by their L2 self-efficacy beliefs and self-confidence; those with low self-efficacy beliefs refrained from using languages other than English despite the availability of L1 speakers during their SA. As SP04 put it:

*SP04 I have met five or six people from France and I I’ve been partying with them and talking with them sometimes, but we always speak English.*

*INV English, have you tried French with them?*

*SP04 No I haven’t, because I know that I can’t have a conversation, I can just like present myself to them, or like ‘hello, my name is SP04, I’m from Portugal’, but I cannot develop further the conversation so I don’t even try the case, it would be a very short conversation [laughter].* [SP04: Portuguese, in Croatia]

*Absence of Speakers*

Several participants reported that they did not encounter people with whom they could practise the languages they had formerly studied. In such cases, SA was unlikely to impact on their language affiliations:

*INV And what about Spanish?*

*B01 I don’t really use it anymore because when I got to university in France, I didn’t have any more Spanish classes so I just stopped, I mean sometimes I watch series in Spanish but that’s it.*

*INV Ok, and you don’t know people in [this city]?*

*B01 No I don’t know any Spanish or Hispanic people*. [B01: French, in Italy]

*Neutralising the Hierarchy*

In some circumstances, SA supported the development of new language affiliations regardless of the hierarchy. Such affiliations might arise from new interpersonal relationships: *‘My girlfriend is from Iran so Farsi is […] on the list’* [B05]. There was recognition of the interlinking of language and culture, and the importance of local languages for cultural integration:

*It’s not necessary, but it makes this so much easier if I know Korean when I work with them, […] because language is also a part of the culture, and that makes so I understand them better, not only the words but why they behave like they behave.* [T02, Finnish in Korea]

Increased awareness of relationships between languages also provided a sense of empowerment as a language learner for some participants, and promoted interest in typologically related languages, regardless of their hierarchical status:

*I notice that Czech is more similar to Ukrainian, so in Poland we have a lot of Ukrainian people in my dormitory for example, so I could understand what my friend is talking to her mother while skyping even though I don’t speak the language, because of Czech, […] so I feel like a member of world, I can go everywhere I want and it is easier for me to find myself to adjust myself and I don’t feel lost.* [SP03: Polish, in Croatia]

This last comment also reflects a more general sense of increasing self-efficacy as a language learner, which was common among participants and led to an attitude of openness to additional language learning in future, as life circumstances might dictate. Finally, almost all participants reported extensive experience of translanguaging in informal settings during SA, and had positive feelings about this.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Having presented detailed findings on participant affiliations to a range of languages, we now draw on these to answer our original research questions in more general terms.

1. ***What are the language affiliations of contemporary mobile students?***

Firstly, it is clear that perceptions of a language hierarchy have an important influence on students’ language affiliations. Apart from a fairly unreflecting positive affiliation to home language(s), the universal and uncritical acceptance of English as the pre-eminent international lingua franca stood out, in line with the findings for research with younger students reviewed earlier (Busse, 2017). Affiliations to English were not narrowly related to likely economic benefits but multistranded; English was attributed academic, communicative and leisure value, as well as employment value. After English, significant groups of participants acknowledged the European supercentral languages French, German and Spanish as important for international/regional communication, and declared different types of affiliations to these. Of course, these are all Europe-centred languages, and quite widely taught in European schools (Eurostat, 2018). Despite having been less widely studied by our participants in school, Spanish was the language which attracted most positive affiliations, probably because of its clear image as an internationally significant language, combined with an appealing cultural image. The significance of German lay primarily in its potential value for employment within Germany and neighbouring countries; economic value (Ridala, 2020) was associated most explicitly with German. Supercentral languages outside the European constellation attracted barely any attention/affiliation. Thus, there was considerable evidence of willingness to direct language learning ‘upwards’, as de Swaan suggests, but primarily within a European regional constellation of the type described by Extra and Gorter (2008).

In comparison, interest in/affiliations with central languages was fairly limited, but also variable. Those participants who were sojourning in Italy had all made an effort to begin learning Italian pre-sojourn, and some continued to study it in-country; others who already knew a related Romance language enjoyed playful exchanges with Italian sojourners. It seems probable that this Italian preference is related to the historic socioeconomic and cultural standing of the language. In contrast, participants in Croatia mostly made quite limited efforts to learn the language, finding that knowledge of English was widespread and it could be used as lingua franca in most settings. Similarly in Catalonia, participants found that knowledge of Spanish was an obstacle to the use of Catalan. In countries where a hyper-/supercentral language was not so generally known (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania), participants made more effort and found satisfaction in language learning as a means of social integration.

1. ***How adequate is a ‘hierarchical’ model of languages to explain affiliation patterns?***

A hierarchical model seems partly capable of explaining the language affiliations of mobile students; however this view has to be qualified to some extent. The hierarchy is clearest at the top (regarding English and supercentral languages), and is reinforced by the availability/non-availability of language learning opportunities pre-SA, and of opportunities for language use during SA. Of course, positive affiliations to first/home languages mostly cut across the hierarchy, including affiliations to RM and IM languages. Affiliations may also be influenced by interpersonal relationships and local contextual factors (as also observed by Rampton, 1990). More generally, hierarchies themselves need to be viewed as to some extent locally conditioned, with related impact on affiliation patterns. For our participants, there was very limited awareness of supercentral languages outside the European constellation (e.g. Chinese), and our limited evidence re e.g. Russian suggests a recent decline in its hierarchical value (confirmed in other studies, e.g. Dörnyei et al., 2006); on the other hand, participants’ favourable affiliations to Spanish had outstripped the learning opportunities available in their earlier schooling.

1. ***How are these affiliations influenced by an SA experience?***

Finally, regarding the impact of SA, it must be noted first of all that our participants were already quite sophisticated language learners pre-SA, with an established set of language affiliations deriving from earlier educational and social experience; their hierarchical perceptions were not substantially changed through SA. The main impact of SA was on their sense of self-efficacy as L2 users (Benson et al., 2013), most consistently with reference to English, and to varying degrees with other languages. A number of participants also fine-tuned their language affiliations during SA, becoming more self-aware regarding their affiliations to L1, and deepening their understanding of the intercultural and communicative opportunities attaching to knowledge of additional languages. But most importantly perhaps, many participants seemed to develop a more open attitude to language learning in general, whatever their future life circumstances. For such participants, affiliations to particular languages became more blurred, into what may best be described as a ‘plurilingual identity’ (Beaven & Conacher, 2021).

The investigation reported here has a number of limitations, most obviously its focus on European conditions, with their exceptionally high levels of instructed multilingualism, and within Europe, the limited selection of research sites. However the analysis has shed new light on the character of the language affiliations of mobile students, which may be of wider application. While these may be largely explained through the ‘language hierarchy’ construct, they remain dynamic and can be influenced significantly through interpersonal and local contextual experiences, regardless of hierarchy. Most importantly it seems that the SA experience in combination with earlier language learning contributes significantly to development of a confident ‘plurilingual user’ identity, able to make flexible use of current language resources and open to further language learning in the longer term. It would be a fruitful line of future research to explore these claims with a wider range of mobile student groups.

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Figure 1: Coding Scheme for Data Analysis

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Code | Definition |
| Learning Language N\* | Personal experiences of learning Language N, institutionally and informally; self-tuition using digital etc. resources; participation in tandems; opinions on the quality of Language N education/ instruction |
| Knowledge of Language N | Includes comments on own level/ knowledge of Language N, plus comments on others’ levels of knowledge in the community at home, and/or in the SA location |
| Emotions about Language N | Liking and disliking Language N; motivations for learning Language N; aesthetic reactions to Language N; positive and negative feelings about native speaker accents; wish to learn/improve the language in future; value attaching to Language N in home country; perceptions of Country N as a multilingual country of immigration |
| Academic value of Language N | References to use of Language N as medium of instruction during study abroad; references to past experience of using Language N for studying; general references to utility of Language N for academic purposes |
| Communicative value of Language N | Immediate communicative value of Language N during study abroad, communicative value of Language N when at home, plus wider value of Language N for international communication; includes any references to contexts or people who do not speak Language N and the consequences for communication |
| Employment value of Language N | Employment value of Language N in getting jobs at home or abroad; mobility value, enabling possible future migration |
| Interpersonal value of Language N | Value of Language N in building personal relationships; in achieving social integration; for intercultural understanding; for rearing children |
| Leisure value of Language N | Accounts of any consumption of games, films, TV, social media, literature etc through Language N |
| Limitations of Language N | References to Language N as insufficient for social integration in a particular locality; references to Language N as blocking the use/learning of other languages; Language N as insufficient for international communication |

\*For Language N, insert English, French, German etc.

Annex 1: Participant Profiles

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Particip-ant | no. inter-views | M/F | Home Country | SA dest-ination | L1 | Other languages | Programme |
| B01AMB | 1 | F | France | Bologna IT | SCL: French | English, Spanish, Italian | Journalism and culture |
| B02AMB | 1 | M | France | Bologna IT | SCL: French | English, German, Italian | Informatics |
| B03AMB | 1 | F | Germany | Bologna IT | SCL: German | English, French, Italian, Turkish | Media and communication |
| B04AMB | 1 | F | Germany | Bologna IT | SCL: German | English, Latin, Portuguese, Italian | History of Art + Portuguese |
| B05AMB | 2 | M | Germany | Bologna IT | SCL: German | English, French, Italian, Kiswahili, Hebrew | Masters in Sociology |
| B06AMB | 1 | F | Netherlands | Bologna IT | CL: Dutch | English, German, French, Italian | Public administration and organizational science |
| B07AMB | 1 | F | Germany | Bologna IT | SCL: German | English, French | Literature & Linguistics/ English & German |
| G01GB | 2 | F | Belgium | ? DE | CL: Dutch | German, English, French | Languages and translation |
| G02GB | 2 | M | Belgium | ? DE | CL: Dutch | German, English, French | Languages and translation |
| G03GB | 2 | M | Belgium | ? DE | CL: Dutch | German, English, French | Languages and translation |
| L01JMC | 2 | F | Syria | Lleida ES | SCL: Arabic | English, Spanish, French | ? |
| L02JMC | 1 | F | Venezuela | Lleida ES | SCL: Spanish | English, French | Medicine |
| L03JMC | 2 | F | Ukraine | Lleida ES | SCL: Russian | Ukrainian, English, German, Spanish | Agronomy |
| L04JMC | 2 | M | Brazil | Lleida ES | SCL: Portuguese | English, Spanish, German, Japanese, Catalan | Electrical engineering/ programming |
| L05JMC | 2 | F | Italy | Lleida ES | CL: Italian | Sicilian, English, Spanish, Catalan, German | Languages and translation |
| L06JMC | 1 | M | Brazil | Lleida ES | SCL: Portuguese | English, Spanish | Production engineering |
| OS01VPT | 3 | M | Croatia | Kaunas LT | CL: Croatian | English, Japanese, Lithuanian | English & History |
| OS02VPT | 3 | F | Croatia | Athens EL | CL: Croatian | English, German, Korean, Greek | Information Science |
| OS03VPT | 3 | F | Croatia | Athens EL | CL: Croatian | English, Greek | Information Science |
| S01RM | 3 | F | UK | Strasbourg FR | HCL: English | French, German | French & English Literature |
| S02RM | 3 | F | UK | Marburg DE | HCL: English | German, French | German & French |
| S03RM | 3 | F | UK | Granada, ES | HCL: English | Spanish, French | French & Spanish |
| SP01SM | 2 | M | Czechia | Split HR | CL: Czech | Slovak, Polish, English, German, Russian, Croatian | Business/ marketing (?) |
| SP02SM | 2 | F | France | Split HR | SCL: French | English, Italian, Croatian | Economics |
| SP03SM | 2 | F | Poland | Split HR | CL: Polish | English, German, Czech | Urban planning/economics |
| SP04SM | 2 | M | Portugal | Split HR | SCL: Portuguese | English, French | ? |
| SP05SM | 2 | F | Turkey | Split HR | CL: Turkish | English, Spanish, Croatian | Economics |
| TR01EG | 2 | M | Turkey | Constanta RO | CL: Turkish | English, Romanian, Spanish | English education |
| TR02EG | 2 | M | Turkey | Shumen BG | CL: Turkish | English, German, French, Bulgarian | English education |
| TU01AH | 2 | F | Finland | Seoul S Korea | CL: Finnish | English, Swedish, Spanish, German, Korean, Russian | Mechanical engineering |
| TU02AH | 2 | F | Finland | Seoul S Korea | CL: Finnish | Sign language, English, Swedish, Japanese, Korean | Business (tourism and wellness) |
| TU03AH | 2 | F | Finland | Hamburg DE | CL: Finnish | English, Swedish, French, German | Energy technology |
| TU04AH | 2 | F | Finland | Lisbon PO | CL: Finnish | English, Swedish, Russian, Portuguese | Dance education |

1. COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a research networking initiative of the European Union, funded through Horizon 2020. The SAREP project ran from 2016-2020 as COST Action 15130. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The term “mother tongue” has been widely used in the European Union to apply to speakers’ primary language of socialisation. It was the preferred term of our participants and we have therefore adopted it here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Quotations are presented in conventional orthography and to aid readability, hesitations and repetitions have been removed. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)