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Languages Represent!: Linguistic Diversity and Library Staff

Abstract:

This paper is motivated by an interest in how the existence of multiple languages plays out in library environments. As the medium for the majority of human communication, language is fundamental to social existence. It is both a means of differentiating people from each other and of integrating them into social contexts, and yet its treatment in library contexts has rarely been extended to the professionally and institutionally held value of diversity. Instead, works on multilingual services and collections, which are well-represented in the library literature, have been focused on solving specific problems of access and disconnected from wider contexts of diversity and ideology. As well, while many libraries recognize the need for multilingual staff, staff linguistic diversity has not been consistently or explicitly implicated as a factor in providing linguistic access to services and collections.

In this paper, I suggest a linguistic conceptualization of diversity as a way to unify the library literature, describe the extent of library multilingualism, and encourage multilingual support in practice. I start by reviewing the literature on multilingualism in libraries, with an emphasis on multilingualism as a kind of language practice that requires access and contributes to diversity. I then move to focus on the role of diverse staff as a means of mediating access to information, one that has not been foregrounded in the library literature on multilingualism. This interest was motivated by the assumptions that language skills are necessary at some point in the process of multilingual service and that linguistically diverse library staff will thus be more capable of supporting their multilingual patrons.

To inform these assumptions and to explore directions for future research on library language use, I conducted a pilot study of linguistic diversity in the staff who shape and deliver that access. The study used language proficiency as a metric for linguistic diversity and attempted to assess it with a voluntary self-report survey distributed to library staff. The working hypotheses on which the research questions were based were that 1) library workers are not as representative as the general population in terms of linguistic diversity, in keeping with known disparities in race, gender, and socioeconomic status and that 2) credentialed librarians are less linguistically diverse than uncredentialed library workers in keeping with lower relative diversity in other regards. For the study, I secured participation from the directors of three large to mid-sized public library systems and asked them to distribute an electronic survey to all staff via internal email. This survey asked questions about language knowledge, language fluency, language use on the job, contact with the public, and educational level.

While the survey did not definitively answer the stated research questions, it succeeded in suggesting some answers to them and in uncovering unexpected data that present a more complex picture of linguistic diversity in library staff. It represents the first study to attempt comparison of library staff and service populations' languages, to look at the frequency of language use in public service staff, to assess the fluency of library staff in non-English languages, and to look at language knowledge and use in terms of professional credentials.

One significant and somewhat unexpected result was that knowing a language did not equate to fluency in that language, nor to use on the job. While English-only status was less common in staff populations than in service populations, the actual use of non-English languages such as Spanish was much more proportionate to their incidence in the service populations. Moreover, the fluency and frequency of that use were quite low,

suggesting that an accurate picture of linguistic diversity requires more than the sheer quantity of languages known to be taken into account. Such pictures must go beyond strictly numerical quantifications to encompass the extent of that diversity as expressed in terms of use, fluency, and other metrics. This gap between knowledge and use means that while library workers are overrepresentative of their service populations in terms of language knowledge, they may actually be underrepresentative in terms of language use with those populations. For instance, a system with several staff possessing a basic level of Spanish may be numerically diverse, but its collective fluency, or its languages' use on the job, still may not reflect the use and fluency present in its service population. Thus, if libraries are going to provide equal access, they need to look at how they can increase use on the job and the fluency of that use, not only at how they can hire people who know a given language.

Another unanticipated finding from the pilot study was that although those with MLIS degrees or equivalents turned out to be more likely to know a language, those without such degrees seemed slightly more likely to use their languages on the job despite lower overall proportions of language knowledge. This disparity points to differences between credentialed and non-credentialed library workers that deserve further attention.

Future directions for language-related research may include expanding the range of quantitative data available, not just on language skills, but on multilingual collections, metadata, and other means of access. This data could also be complemented by qualitative input on both staff and patrons' attitudes towards the extent of library multilingualism and by works exploring other metrics for library support of multilingualism. The library literature might develop and adapt grounded and theoretical approaches towards language in libraries and incorporate theory and models from other

fields to inform its practice. From such beginnings, we can start to describe concrete actions that libraries can take to increase linguistic diversity and explore how approaches and models from practice-oriented fields can be applied.

In this paper, I attempt to tie language in libraries to broader themes of access and diversity while also engaging in practical inquiry to increase understanding of how those themes play out in context. I suggest that libraries can support multilingualism to the extent that it is present in their service populations by viewing and enacting their values of access and diversity through a linguistic lens. Staffing in particular is an aspect that requires further exploration in regards to language. The intent here is not to minimize the importance of other kinds of access and diversity but to add language into the mix as an additional factor deserving of consideration. Ultimately, it is my hope that a conscious and systematic consideration of language as a factor in diversity and access will encourage proactive rather than reactive responses to linguistic issues faced by library users, non-users, and staff. Such responses will help libraries strengthen existing capabilities and provide starting points for them to consider if and how they should change further. It will reduce and remove barriers to service and improve access for all, regardless of language.