

Series: Migration and Refugees / Part 3

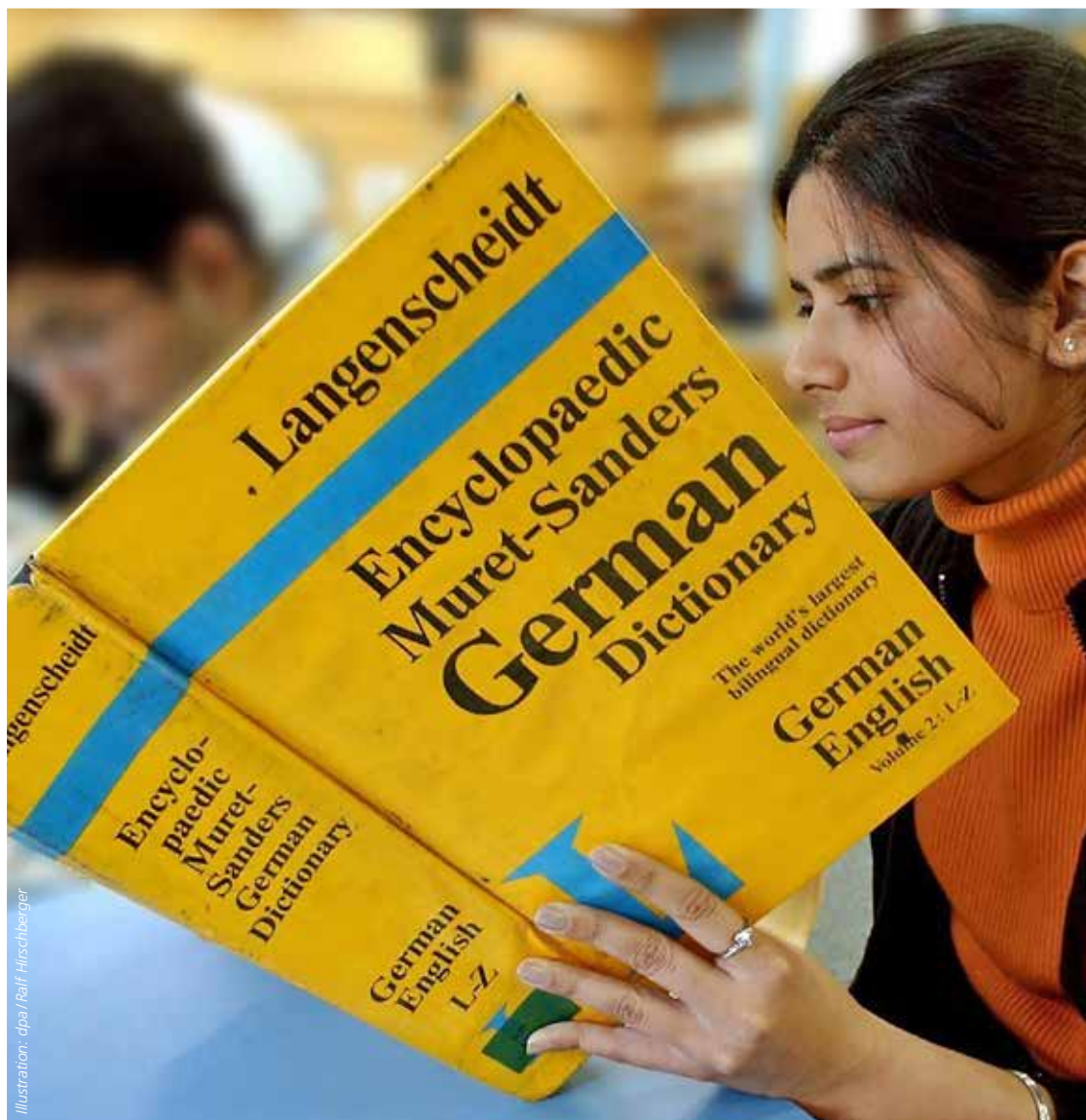


Illustration: gpa/raif Hirschberger

What makes it easier for people to leave their homes and seek a better life in a faraway country, and what makes it harder? Language and language skills are among the most important incentives and indeed barriers to migration – and this is what we examine in the third part of our series. We focus not on German language skills per se, but on

the learning of German in migrants' home countries. This change of perspective is as unusual as the source material used: the annual records of Goethe-Institut centres around the world form the basis of this economic approach. We also take a brief look at other DFG-funded projects on factors that facilitate and hinder migration.



Learn German – And Then What?

It is a truism to say that migrants' language skills often decide how successfully they are able to integrate. But what about the situation prior to migration? Do people who already know German leave their home countries more quickly and more willingly? And what difference does it make when and where they learned the language? Empirical data sheds light on a little-studied question.

The mostly young people queuing up outside a language school exude openness, patience and yet also ambition: they are waiting to sign up for German classes (image above). This photo, taken in Valencia (Spain) in 2013, speaks for itself and also says something about the current economic climate in Spain. After more than five demoralising years of economic crisis on the Iberian peninsula, a growing number of Spaniards – and not just

in the country's third largest city – are seeking a better future abroad. Of Spain's 47 million citizens, the younger generation is particularly interested in embarking on a new life outside their home country. One possible destination is the economically and socially stable Germany. The long lines of people in front of the German language school in Valencia therefore also emphasise a key message: good language skills are of prime importance to success-

ful economic and social integration in a foreign country.

In more general terms, in a global world, skills and qualifications – what is referred to as “human capital” – are of vital importance. At the same time, economic activities in industry and trade often take on an international dimension. This may result in interaction with foreign partners and customers, but also encourage people to emigrate. To put it in economic terms, the transfer

of human capital from one country to another nearly always demands knowledge of the language of the destination country. Multinational companies and special sectors such as scientific research may, to some extent, represent an exception to this.

We can therefore expect migration decisions and knowledge of the languages of potential destination countries to be closely connected. At this point it is important to draw a distinction between two factors, which are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, individuals may already have some language skills, perhaps from language lessons at school. Obviously, in most cases they will not have made a personal choice (as a child) to study a particular language; rather, this choice will be the result of a variety of factors. These

Left: Demand for German classes – queue in front of the Centro Aleman in Valencia. Below: When peaceful day-to-day life was still possible in Syria – students of German leaving the Goethe-Institut in Damascus; this photo dates from summer 2009.

include parental preferences and the languages available on the timetable or at a given school. Acquired language skills then form one contributing factor in the decision to migrate (or not) and, especially, the choice of destination country. This choice therefore proceeds from existing language skills, which may have an importance influence on a later migration decision.

Secondly, an individual may start off with no foreign language skills. People choose a destination country on the basis of a number of different criteria, perhaps the economic situation, cultural factors or climate. Linguistic proximity, or the similarity between an individual's native language and the language of the destination country, may also play a role. Some people who intend to migrate specifically seek out language classes. This is different from learning a foreign language at school, because the decision is made by the individual as an adult and may be seen as an investment in individual human capital or “in an improved transferability of human capital”. The likely direction of the

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causal relationship is therefore reversed: the migration decision provides the incentive to learn to speak and write a language.

Here too, it can be observed that a lower degree of “linguistic proximity” presents a barrier to migration as it results in more difficult economic and social integration. At the same time, integration problems can be reduced through acquisition of the appropriate language skills.

In the case of languages that differ more from an individual’s mother tongue, this may be associated with higher monetary and non-monetary costs but potentially also with greater returns. From an empirical perspective, it is critical to know what language skills migrants possess. It is also vital to better understand the language learning process, with an awareness of the causal relationships between migration and language.

German teacher Frau Kleinert teaches a class at the Goethe-Institut in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the 1960s.

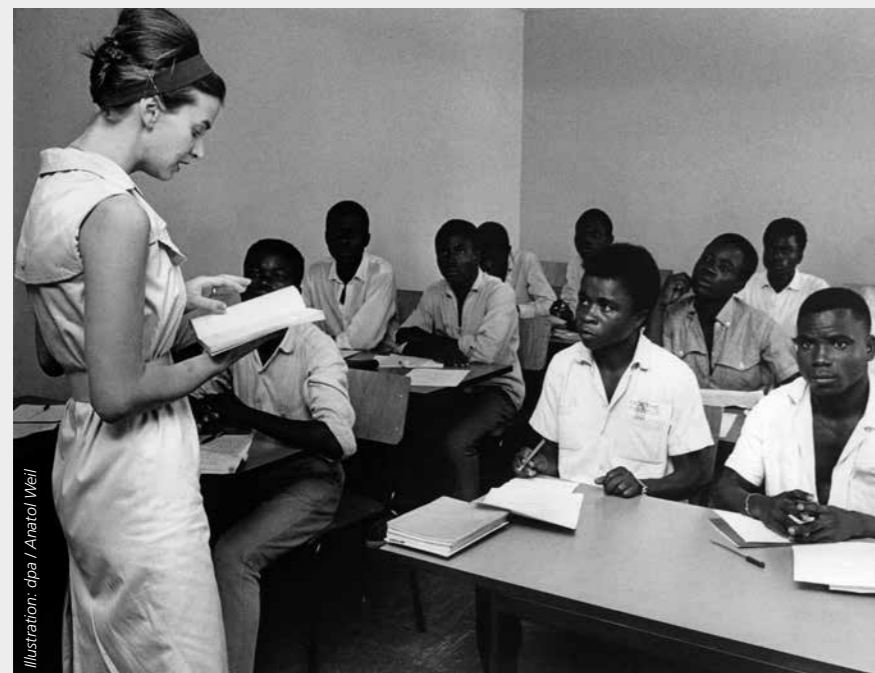


Illustration: dpa / Anatol Weil

In the past, studies on migration and language have often resorted to data that documents migrants’ language skills at a particular point after their arrival in the destination

“The migration decision provides the incentive to learn to speak and write a language”

country. This was primarily due to limitations on the available data. Although this data can generate useful insights, by and large it fails to illuminate the exact relationship between the decision to learn a language and the decision to migrate, and in particular the order in which they happen – learn the language first, or make the decision to migrate first.

Yet the conscious decision by an adult to learn or not to learn

a language as preparation for emigration is also of political and economic relevance. Given the importance of language skills to the integration of migrants, countries have an economic interest in identifying those with less incentive to learn the language and motivating them to acquire language skills through a variety of measures. Governments may have no influence over the curricula in foreign schools, but with adults, there are more options available. Consider, for example, rules requiring a certain level of language competence, such as those introduced in Germany in 2007 for migrants’ families to be able to join them in the country. Another option is to create language-learning opportunities in the home country and abroad.

This is at the heart of a DFG-funded project which is studying “Migration Incentives and Migration Barriers – Language Acquisition and Migration”. The project is based on data generated from the annual records of the Goethe-Institut combined with data on migration into Germany. The Goethe-Institut is the cultural institute of the Federal Republic of Germany, with centres in over 90 countries worldwide and a history going back more than 60 years. Its primary aim is to promote international cultural exchange and the study of the German language abroad.

In particular, the project is concerned with two research questions. Firstly, the research team is investigating whether and how migration decisions are connected with targeted language learning. If this is the case, then a migration visible in the data should be

preceded by attendance at language classes and participation in language assessments, whether at an institute in Germany or in the home country. In other words, the focus is on demand for language classes and assessments as the result of an intention to migrate.

The results point to a difference between migrants from European Union (EU) countries and third countries. For EU countries, preparatory language learning mostly takes place in the home country, whereas migrants from non-EU countries are more likely to attend language classes and sit assessments in Germany. This would appear to be entirely rational, so to speak. Learning a language is an investment, normally made with the expectation that it is highly likely to “pay off”. For EU citizens, freedom of movement presents no legal barriers to migration and thus less uncertainty.

For citizens of other countries, the situation is different. It is not easy to say whether they will ultimately migrate, and this greater uncertainty reduces the incentive to participate in preparatory language learning. For politicians, this provides evidence that migrants from non-EU countries often arrive in Germany without good language skills. It follows that measures to encourage and require language acquisition are especially important for this group.

The researchers on the project are also investigating whether the presence of language learning opportunities in the home country results in more migration to Germany. This aspect therefore focusses on the availability of language classes and assessments with regard to an intention to mi-



Illustration: dpa / WaiTrauk Czobizsch

Integration course for migrants at the Volkshochschule (adult education centre) in Leipzig. Here, people from Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria, Georgia, Myanmar and Lebanon sit around the same table.

grate. A positive correlation can be observed between the number of Goethe-Institut centres offering language classes in a given country and the number of migrants to Germany from this country. Interestingly, this does not apply in the same way to centres that do not provide language classes. Although the relationship appears to be somewhat more complex, language learning opportunities could result in more language learning and thus influence, at least in part, the decision to migrate.

However, to interpret the results gathered so far it is important to note that it is only possible to draw conclusions at a macro level. In other words, aggregated data on language learning and migration is being analysed to identify statistically significant and thus economically and socially

relevant connections which will, ideally, allow conclusions to be drawn about causal relationships. It is impossible to say on the basis of the data whether individual language learners ultimately go on to migrate to Germany after completing a language course. However, patterns can be recognised that make it possible to derive insights and political implications. To discover more about individual motives for language learning and potentially associated migration intentions, the next step will be to investigate this micro level with the help of surveys.

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