

VID Colloquium

Modeling Language Dynamics

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We begin with a general overview of various approaches to modeling language dynamics and language death found in the literature with special attention to how individual behavior influence the long-run distribution of language usage. Three different factors are assumed to play key roles in individual's choice of language usage. Firstly, the language is a means of communication - this is a force in the direction of one dominant language and the demise of other (minority) idioms. Secondly, language often reflects and defines the cultural identity of an individual. The pride in the own culture, hence, constitutes a force in the direction of the survival of minority languages. Thirdly, there are various costs, not the least opportunity costs, associated with the learning, usage and cultivation of a language. This would be a force in the direction of unilinguality. The relative strength of these factors determines the dynamics of language usage in society. For the long-run preservation of multilinguality, it is shown that the inter-generational structure is of crucial importance, influencing the behavior of the individuals in each new cohort and their linguistic preferences.

About the presenter

Bengt-Arne Wickström was born in Sweden and was until his retirement in 2013 Professor of Economics (Public Economics) at Humboldt-University of Berlin. He is now responsible for one of the sub-projects of the EU financed research project MIME (Mobility and inclusion in a multilingual Europe) at the School of Cultural, Societal, and Educational Sciences at Humboldt-University of Berlin. At the same time, he is Herder professor for public economics at Andrásy-University in Budapest. Earlier, he held chairs at Johannes-Kepler-University of Linz and at the University of Bergen, Norway. He received his PhD degree in Economics from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His fields of research include questions concerning social evolution and the development of norms which is applied to the connections between economics, language and society, as well as to the evolution of the welfare state. He also works on welfare theory, especially economic theory of justice, and public-choice theory.

[Presentation](#)

[back to events](#)

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