Language discrimination in Germany: when evaluation influences objective counting

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Abstract

Language attitudes matter; they influence people's behaviour and decisions. Therefore, it is crucial to learn more about patterns in the way that languages are evaluated. One means of doing so is using a quantitative approach with data representative of a whole population, so that results mirror dispositions at a societal level. This kind of approach is adopted here, with a focus on the situation in Germany. The article consists of two parts. First, I will present some results of a new representative survey on language attitudes in Germany (the Germany Survey 2017). Second, I will show how language attitudes penetrate even seemingly objective data collection processes by examining the German Microcensus. In 2017, for the first time in eighty years, the German Microcensus included a question on language use 'at home'. Unfortunately, however, the question was clearly tainted by language attitudes instead of being objective. As a result, the Microcensus significantly misrepresents the linguistic reality of different migrant languages spoken in Germany.

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Language and behaviour

Who we are influences what we do and how we are perceived and therefore treated by others. Language is an integral part of who we are and thus it has an impact on what we do (or want to do) and what others do with us. Of course, there are other identity-related factors, for example, physical appearance, sex, etc. All these traits define which groups one belongs to or feels one belongs to; they are mentioned in anti-discrimination laws worldwide. According to German law, for example, one should not be discriminated against due to features such as sex, race, language or homeland and origin.[1] In order to implement and assess these laws, it is essential to have dependable data on the occurrence of these features and their distribution. In relation to our feature of interest (i.e. language), this means that one needs to know how the linguistic situation in a particular setting is conditioned. In our case this is Germany. Thus, it is necessary to find some kind of dependable statistics on language in Germany. It is also important to examine the concept of language and language attitudes present in the population, since the actual language situation and the perceived distribution of languages do not necessarily coincide. Furthermore, knowledge about lay linguists' evaluations and attitudes is important, as these build the foundations of social perception, decisions and behaviour.

The term 'lay linguist' is used here to contrast with 'trained' or 'academic linguists' (e.g. Davies 2008). The distinction relates to the terminological pair of non-linguists versus language specialists (Milroy 2001) and the concept of 'folk linguistics' as developed by Preston (1982; Hoenigswald 1966), that is, 'what people say about what goes on (and what lies behind their statements)' (Preston 1999:xxiv).

The article is structured as follows. First, I will provide some general information on the linguistic situation in Germany (section on 'Languages in Germany'). The next section, 'Language attitudes in Germany', describes lay linguists' language attitudes in Germany, which can be gleaned from the results of a current representative household survey that included questions on language attitudes. The section 'Counting languages in Germany' discusses the problems of surveying language use at a national level by investigating the so-called 'language question' in the German Microcensus. The final section, 'The effect of language-based discrimination on the purportedly objective counting of languages in Germany', concludes by discussing the implications of survey instrument design in the context of reproduction of language bias and the ecological validity of the survey results obtained.

Languages in Germany

Germany is conceptually and institutionally monolingual; the large majority of the German population speaks German and has German as their native language. This leads to the 'basic and deep-seated conviction that monolingualism in a society […] is the one and only normality, forever and always valid: the characteristic of a nation' (Gogolin 1997:41). Gogolin labels this phenomenon the 'monolingual habitus' (see also the so-called monolingual bias described by Auer 2007). For Germany, however, this German monolingual norm is not corroborated by dependable numbers; there are no overall collections of data on the linguistic situation in Germany (Adler and Beyer 2018:221; Rothe and Wagner 2015:17f; Stickel 2012). What we know about the number and distribution of languages in Germany is based on secondary data and small-scale or detail surveys (e.g. the Central Register of Foreigners with data on citizenship, or certain school statistics which are partly available for some federal states; Kemper 2017). Based on this, one would assume that virtually the whole German (resident) population speaks German. However, other languages are spoken in Germany and there is also regional variation, namely dialects. These dialects and some of the other languages have more or less always existed in Germany. In the course of the establishment of the German nation-state, first the other languages and later the dialects became marginalised. Nowadays, these languages are dubbed 'minority languages' (Danish, Friesian, Sorbian, Romani and the so-called 'regional language' Low German). Further, there are the allochthonous (minority) languages, which include immigrant languages such as Turkish or Polish (Adler and Beyer 2018). At a national level, these allochthonous languages are by far more present in most peoples' everyday life and perception than the autochthonous minority languages, even though only the latter are recognised and protected by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992). There are, for example, recurrent discussions of the use of German in so-called migrant families (e.g. *Die Zeit* 2014) and the usefulness of an obligation to speak German in schoolyards (e.g. *Die Welt* 2016). All these discussions are aimed at prototypical migrant languages. Finally, German sign language, which is part of the official repertoire in Germany, does not play any role in all this. For all these languages, there are no dependable data on the number of speakers in Germany (Adler 2018a, 2018b).

Language attitudes in Germany

The Germany Survey 2017

There are two main collections of representative data on language attitudes in Germany: the Germany Survey 2008 (GS2008; cf. Gärtig, Plewnia and Rothe 2010) and the Germany Survey 2017 (GS2017), which basically follows the GS2008 design (Adler and Plewnia 2018, 2019) For GS2008, the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS, Institute for the German Language) conducted a representative telephone survey in collaboration with social psychologists from the University of Mannheim. In total, 2004 German residents were asked about their attitudes towards languages and regional varieties of German, language norms, language decay and the like. For GS2017, the IDS collaborated with the Deutsche Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (DIW, German Institute for Economic Research). The DIW has been conducting the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) – a representative household panel survey of Germany – since 1984. In 2013, part of the SOEP was opened for new and innovative questions – the so-called 'innovation sample' (Richter and Schupp 2012). The GS2017 is part of this representative innovation sample. It consists of two subsamples: first, a sample of 4339 respondents (data collected via personal interviews), and second, a sample of 1439 respondents (data collected via online questionnaires). In GS2017, respondents were asked about different language-related subjects such as language repertoire, attitudes towards languages and regional varieties of German, language decay, language variation, attitudes towards multilingualism. Both surveys are representative. They reflect a selection of core demographic features of the German population. In GS2017, the respondents were 51.8% women and 48.2% men. The average age of the respondents was 51 years (with a standard deviation of 18.8 years); the youngest respondent was 17 years old, and the oldest respondent was aged 96. Of the respondents, 26.4% had undergone nine years of formal school education, 29.6% ten years, 6.6% twelve years and 23.4% thirteen years. All sixteen German federal states were represented. The number of respondents from each state corresponded to the relative population size of each state, i.e. more populous states were represented by a larger number of respondents and less populous states by fewer respondents (e.g. North Rhine-Westphalia (21.4%), Bavaria (16.8%), Bremen (0.9%), Saarland (1.3%)).

In the following investigation, I will consider the GS2017 respondents' attitudes towards languages, namely 'liked' and 'disliked' languages. In order to be able to elicit a relatively general evaluation of languages, the GS2017 makes use of two kinds of questions: open-ended and closed-ended. We

Table 1: Question design in the Germany Survey 2017 (GS2017): questions about attitudes towards languages and regional dialects.

Subsample 1	Subsample 2
1 Languages (open-ended)	1 Regional dialects (open-ended)
a Liked languages	a Liked regional dialects
b Disliked languages	b Disliked regional dialects
2 Regional dialects (closed-ended)	2 Languages (closed-ended)

used a mixed design with regard to the method (i.e. open-ended vs closed-ended questions) and the content of the question (language vs regional dialect). This design allowed for an analysis of the results regarding both methodology and content. Table 1 illustrates the design of the questions.

In order to conduct this mixed design, the interview sample was split in two: one half (subsample 1) were asked open questions on liked and disliked languages and closed ones on the likeability of regional varieties of German. The other half (subsample 2) were asked closed questions on the likeability of languages and open questions on liked and disliked regional varieties of German. The concepts (i.e. languages and regional dialects of German) which had to be rated in the closed-ended questions were chosen based on the results of the open-ended questions from the GS2008 (Gärtig, Plewnia and Rothe 2010). The items included the languages Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish.[2] The items were randomised, with German never being the first item.

In order to illustrate language attitude development over time, the GS2017 results were compared to the results collected ten years earlier through the GS2008. The GS2008 uses the same kind of open-ended questions as the GS2017 with one difference, however: the question on liked and disliked languages in GS2008 focused on German spoken with a foreign accent. That is, the question referred to situations where German is spoken by someone with a first language other than German. Thus, whereas the GS2017 deals with *languages*, the GS2008 deals with *accents*. The latter seems to have a clearer focus on the concept of *foreign languages* in Germany. Eliciting accents in the majority (native) language evokes the concepts of foreignness, otherness and even appropriation. It apparently activates the concept of foreign languages, even though an accent can also refer to regional variation. In the end, however, the question on accents also aims at eliciting languages and, thus, both kinds of questions in GS2008 and GS2017 elicit similar concepts. Bearing these slight differences in mind, the answers to both questions can be compared very well because attitudes towards accents and languages relate to attitudes towards the speakers of these accents and languages. Language is considered as a secondary symbol

(e.g. Nelde 2004); that is, languages are associated with their stereotypical speakers. Evaluation of languages and accents does not necessarily reflect 'intrinsic or aesthetic qualities so much as the levels of status and prestige that they [language varieties] are *conventionally* associated with in particular speech communities' (Giles and Coupland 1991:37–8). Both surveys (GS2017 and GS2008) also included a question on which languages should be offered as foreign languages in schools. The answers reflect what languages are deemed important enough to be learned at school.

Results: liked and disliked languages in Germany, 2017

Languages are not equally rated by German lay linguists. The same is true for regional varieties of German. The results of GS2017 reveal that some languages are liked and others are not. Table 2 displays the most frequent answers to the open-ended questions on liked and disliked languages, respectively, as well as languages that should be taught at school.

The language that is liked by most of the German population is French (31.2%). It is followed by Italian, English and Spanish, which are named by an almost equal number of respondents (26.6%, 25.8% and 23.8%, respectively). It is not surprising that this list emerged. French, English, Italian and Spanish are languages traditionally taught in German schools as foreign languages – especially the first two. The Romance languages are furthermore well-established languages of culture and prestige. Also, French is the language of a geopolitically close neighbour and English is

Table 2: Liked/disliked languages (interview, open-ended question, weighted results; the nine most frequently named categories) and school languages (online questionnaire, open-ended question, not weighted), GS2017.

Liked languages		Disliked languages		School languages	
(N = 2221)	%	(N = 2221)	%	(N = 1439)	%
French	31.2	None	21.5	English	91.0
Italian	26.6	Russian	19.9	French	62.9
English	25.8	Arabic	12.7	Spanish	61.1
Spanish	23.8	Turkish	11.2	Russian	20.8
None	7.8	No answer	10.1	Italian	20.7
No answer	6.4	French	7.0	Chinese	16.4
Dutch	5.0	Chinese	6.5	Latin	12.1
German	4.3	Saxon	5.7	Turkish	6.0
Bavarian	3.4	Polish	5.6	Arabic	4.2
				No answer	0.6

the global lingua franca per se. This set of popular languages is followed by the 7.8% of respondents who say that there is no language they like, and 6.4% of respondents who do not give any answer. Four answers are given by more than 3% of the respondents: Dutch, German, Bavarian and Russian. Bavarian is a category one would perhaps not expect as it is a regional dialect of German. But since the question followed an open-ended design, it was possible to give this kind of answer.[3] This means that the Bavarian dialect of German plays a prominent role even within the conceptual framework of languages. All other answers were given by even fewer respondents. Among these, there were some other regional or national varieties of German, for example, Swiss German (2%), Austrian German (1.9%), Swabian (1.4%), Northern German (1%) and Saxon (0.8%). The historically present minority languages do not play any role.[4]

In contrast, a more or less completely different set of languages are named as disliked languages – at least in the case of the most frequent ones. The main response is 'none', namely, the absence of any specific language (21.5%) the respondents do not like. Russian is the distinct second most frequent answer (19.9%), followed by Arabic (12.7%) and Turkish (11.2%). These three languages happen to be the perhaps most prominent migrant languages in Germany. Of the respondents, 10.1% did not answer this question at all.

French is the only language that is named as both liked and disliked. This might come as no surprise, since French is deeply rooted not only as a traditional foreign language in schools, but also as a very difficult one to learn. Considering the age of the respondents, this is a reasonable explanation. French as a disliked language tends to be named more often by younger respondents, for whom schooling is less distant than for older respondents; in particular, respondents aged under 40 named French as a disliked language. Age also correlates with French as a liked language; that is, older respondents tend to name French more often as a liked language than younger ones.

French is the first of a set of four languages that are named by more than 5% of the respondents; the others are Chinese (6.5%), Saxon (5.7%) and Polish (5.6%). The case of Saxon is again an example of a regional dialect of German found among the answers. Other regional varieties are named as well, however far less frequently (e.g. Bavarian 1.2%, Swabian 0.8%, Swiss German 0.3%). The recognised minority languages are virtually absent (Danish (0.5 %), Low German (0.3%), Friesian (0.1%), and no mention of Sorbian).

To confirm the answers elicited by the open-ended questions, we additionally used closed-ended questions with the other half of the sample.
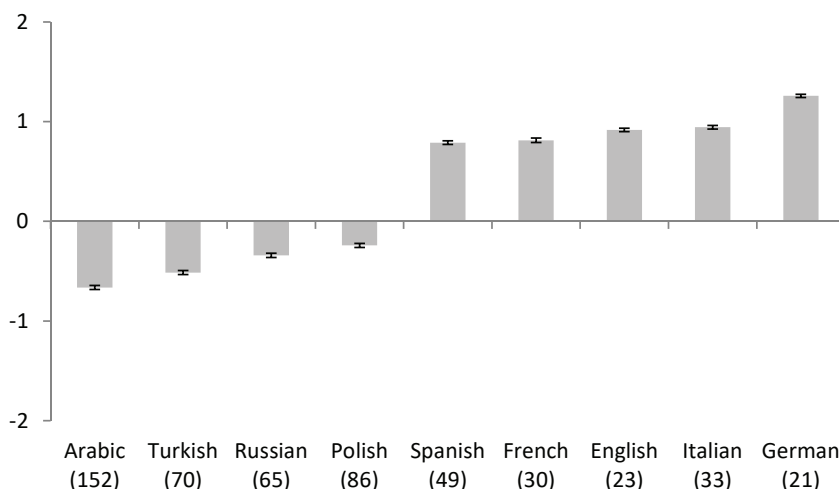
Figure 1: Evaluation of a proposed set of languages (interview, closed-ended question, weighted results), GS2017 (in brackets: non-responses for each category). Rating scale: –2 = 'very unlikeable', –1 = 'unlikeable', 0 = 'partly/partly', 1 = 'likeable', 2 = 'very likeable'.

The evaluation of the proposed set of languages verifies the results of the open-ended questions. Figure 1 displays the ratings of the proposed set of languages (i.e. the respective means).

The results show a clear dichotomy in the evaluations. There is a set of fairly liked languages: German, Italian, English, French and Spanish; and there is a set of fairly disliked languages such as Polish, Russian, Turkish and Arabic. This list more or less mirrors the results of the open-ended answer lists in Table 2. There are some differences, however. German, for example, is not an answer that plays a role in the set of answers to the open-ended questions. In the closed-ended questions, this does not influence the rating, since the languages to be rated are proposed in the question and do not need to be activated by the respondents themselves. German, the first language of supposedly the majority of respondents, is rated highest and set apart to some extent from the next liked languages. In this setting of direct evaluation, Italian and English fare a little better than French and Spanish.

Of the disliked languages, Turkish and Arabic have the most articulated depreciation. The ratings' means for Russian and Polish are relatively close to the neutral middle; meaning dislike is only articulated to a very small degree. Even for Turkish, and perhaps also Arabic, the ratings are not as intense as the high ratings for the liked set of languages. This shows that in the closed-ended design dislike is elicited to a lesser degree than liking.

Social desirability possibly plays a role in the avoidance of expressions of dislike. The number of missing responses is also interesting in this regard. The five positively evaluated languages have the smallest number of non-responses. Among these, the number is highest for Spanish (i.e. 49 non-responses). For the set of depreciated languages there are at least twice as many missing answers; the number is especially high for Arabic with 152 missing answers.

The ratings for Polish show an interesting pattern. In the results of the open-ended question (Table 2), Polish appears at the end of both lists; that is, it is named by only a few respondents as a liked or disliked language. This more or less corresponds to the rating in the closed-ended design with an evaluation slightly below the neutral middle. Thus, Polish is not clearly devalued, but also not ostensibly much liked. It seems that Polish does not play an important role in the active language concepts of German lay linguists (i.e. it is not prominent enough), and this prevents it from being evaluated at all (for a corresponding pattern with regional varieties of German see Plewnia and Rothe 2012).

The status of these languages as relevant language concepts is confirmed by the results of the open-ended question on languages that ought to be taught in schools (Table 2). The language named by almost all of the respondents is the global lingua franca English (91.0%). This shows that a language does not necessarily have to be evaluated as a liked language to be thought of as a language worth learning. The next most important mentions are French (62.9%) and Spanish (61.1%). In particular, English and French but also Spanish are the languages traditionally taught in schools and universities (Stickel 2012). Thus, the answers correspond to current real-life language conditions. Russian and Italian are named by approximately a fifth of the respondents (20.8% and 20.7%), followed by Chinese (16.4%) and Latin (12.1%). The last answer given by more than 5% of respondents is Turkish (6%). With the exception of Arabic and Latin, the list of languages that should be taught in schools corresponds to the first six languages in the lists of liked and disliked languages in Table 2. Again, Polish is not mentioned; also, regional varieties of German are not listed. While not a spoken everyday language, Latin is taught in schools and universities. Arabic has only recently emerged in the set of relevant languages in lay linguists' concepts. This is made quite clear by comparing the GS2017 data with the results of the GS2008 (Table 3).

The set of relevant languages and their pattern of evaluation is more or less the same in GS2008 and GS2017. The four or five languages that are named as liked accents or liked languages, respectively, are the same – only their order is different.

Table 3: Liked and disliked accents (open-ended questions, weighted results; all answers named by over 5 % of respondents), GS2008 (Gärtig, Plewnia and Rothe 2010).

Liked accents		Disliked accents		School languages	
(N = 2004)	%	(N = 2004)	%	(N = 2004)	%
French	36.0	None	57.7	English	95.6
Italian	20.9	Russian	17.2	French	65.8
None	16.9	Turkish	13.3	Spanish	39.3
English	9.7	Polish	8.5	Russian	19.0
Spanish	9.6	No answer	16.8	Italian	9.9
Dutch	7.3			Latin	8.0
No answer	17.1			Chinese	7.5
				No answer	1.7

In GS2008, the liked accents are French, followed by Italian, no particular language, English, Spanish and Dutch. Ten years later the liked languages are the same while the order changes slightly: French still comes out first, followed by English, Italian, Spanish, no particular language, Dutch and other languages. One noticeable difference between both data sets concerns Spanish: in 2008 it is only a liked accent for approximately 10% of the Germans, while in 2017 23.8% like this language. Spanish seems to have risen in likeability over the past ten years.

The disliked accents/languages show more or less the same answer pattern. For the majority of the respondents there is no accent or language they dislike, followed by Russian, Turkish and Polish. Ten years later, Polish seems to be a less prominent response. This could be due to a shift in lay linguists' concepts of languages and their evaluation, but may also be due to the different question design. Another obvious difference in the set of disliked languages concerns Arabic. It was almost absent (i.e. 1.9%) in GS2008: ten years later it comes second after Russian. Clearly, Arabic has become a relevant language concept. Reasons for this may be found in the current sociopolitical situation in Germany (cf. the next section). Interestingly, the answers to the question on languages that ought to be taught in schools remain largely the same. The set of languages is more or less unchanged with the exception of Spanish. Far more respondents wished to see Spanish taught in schools in 2017 than in 2008. This confirms the overall rising status of Spanish in the evaluation of German lay linguists.

Counting languages in Germany

Language statistics in Germany

Until recently, languages have not been an integral part of official statistics in Germany. In 2017 – for the first time since 1939 – a German Microcensus introduced a question on the population's language.[5] This coincided with a sociopolitical situation influenced by the high influx of refugees after 2015, which has been labelled as a 'refugee crisis' (*Flüchtlingskrise*) in public and political discourse.[6] In addition, a number of high-profile criminal incidents are related to this situation, such as the mass sexual assaults on women by men of Arabic and North African appearance in Cologne and other German cities during the public New Year's Eve festivities of 2015/2016 (e.g. *The Guardian* 2016). This has generated an ongoing debate about how one can define successful integration of migrants and foreigners into society and also what it means to be an integral part of German society.

The German Microcensus (GMC) is an annual survey conducted since 1957. It is based on a sample that represents 1% of the total German population (i.e. 810,000 respondents in approximately 400,000 households; Statistisches Bundesamt 2018/19). Since the larger Macrocensus is conducted only every ten years, the GMC can perhaps be considered the most powerful instrument of statistical information in Germany. The selected respondents are legally bound to give the requested answers. This is not necessarily an easy task. In 2019, for example, the GMC questionnaire consists of 201 questions. After its first iteration in 2017, the 'language question' was repeated in 2018 and 2019, and it will be repeated again in the following years as well as presumably in the 2021 Macrocensus. Its wording is as follows: 'Which language is mainly spoken in your household?' Figure 2 shows the question design.

The question has remained more or less the same the three times it has been asked so far. There have been two small changes, though. In 2018, a note was added to help clarify who should answer the question. In 2019, Romanian was added to the list of possible answers.[7] The following section describes the question as well as its most evident shortcomings.

Shortcomings of the GMC's language question

The question on language is remarkable in several aspects (for a detailed critique, see Adler 2018a, 2018b, 2019). First, there is the wording of the question. Instead of eliciting data on native or first languages, it focuses on the language *spoken* in the community of the household, thereby ostensibly

154 Regarding question 154, one person may answer it on behalf of all individuals sharing a household in the dwelling. All other persons of that household please continue with question 155.
Which language is mainly spoken in your household?

Person 1

German .... 01 ☐

Not German but ...

... Arabic .... 02 ☐

... English .... 03 ☐

... French .... 04 ☐

... Italian .... 05 ☐

... Polish .... 06 ☐

... Russian .... 07 ☐

... Spanish .... 08 ☐

... Turkish .... 09 ☐

... another European language .... 10 ☐

... another African language .... 11 ☐

... another Asian language .... 12 ☐

... another language .... 13 ☐

(a)

154 Bei Frage 154 ist es ausreichend, wenn eine Person stellvertretend für alle Personen, die gemeinsam einen Haushalt in der Wohnung bilden, die Frage beantwortet. Für alle weiteren Personen im Haushalt geht es mit Frage 155 weiter.
Welche Sprache wird in Ihrem Haushalt vorwiegend gesprochen?

1. Person

Deutsch .... 01 ☐

Nicht deutsch, sondern ...

... arabisch .... 02 ☐

... englisch .... 03 ☐

... französisch .... 04 ☐

... italienisch .... 05 ☐

... polnisch .... 06 ☐

... rumänisch .... 14 ☐

... russisch .... 07 ☐

... spanisch .... 08 ☐

... türkisch .... 09 ☐

... eine sonstige europäische Sprache .... 10 ☐

... eine sonstige afrikanische Sprache .... 11 ☐

... eine sonstige asiatische Sprache .... 12 ☐

... eine sonstige Sprache .... 13 ☐

(b)

Figure 2: The language question in the (a) German Microcensus 2019 and (b) its official English version (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2019).

excluding single-person households, in which the inhabitant might not have another person to talk to on a daily basis.[8] Further, the question is formulated in the singular complemented by the use of the restrictive adverb *vorwiegend* (i.e. 'mainly', 'predominantly'); only one answer is allowed. This means that even if several languages are spoken (on an equal basis) in the household, only one of those can be named. Thus, multilingualism virtually cannot be represented by the answers. Multilingual constellations are very diverse and language repertoires of multilingual individuals may even differ within the same household. Reducing this diversity to one single language per household is both audacious and an oversimplification. This kind of approach to language, however, may be due to a monolingual perspective on language matters in the design of the question, in which the monolingual setting – perceived as being the language norm in many European nation-states – is used as a point of reference ('monolingual habitus', Gogolin 1997).

The question follows a closed-ended design, meaning the respondent has to pick one of the answers proposed on the list. This list consists of two types of answers: the first is represented by the answer 'German'; the second groups a set of answers and labels them 'not German, but …'. Through this design, the first answer is clearly presented as the default. The second type of 'not German'-answers comprises nine single languages (eight in the English version – Romanian has been left out due to inadequate translation) and four more general groups of languages. The languages are ordered alphabetically (i.e. Arabic, English, French, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish); the general categories apparently follow a geographical order (i.e. another European language, another African language, another Asian language). The list is closed by the most general category, 'another language', which could be labelled the 'ultimate residual category' (Adler 2018a).

The list is quite revealing in several aspects. First of all, there is the unnecessary dichotomy distinguishing between German and all other non-German languages. It is not clear why this judgemental dichotomy is at all necessary for answering the question. In addition, the non-German languages in the list certainly do not relate to the languages that are presumably spoken most often by foreigners living in Germany (Adler 2018b). They are ordered alphabetically, but their choice reveals that mainly two groups of languages were thought of: on the one hand traditional foreign languages, and on the other hand migrant languages. And, according to the GS2008 and GS2017 language attitudes data, with the exception of Romanian, the languages are exactly the same as those that appear in the lists of liked or disliked languages (see section on 'Language attitudes in

Germany'). This means that the languages listed in the GMC language question represent not only the most prominent language concepts of lay linguists, but they are also strongly connected with a certain type of evaluation – some with a more positive evaluation and others with a more negative evaluation. It is only fair to assume that there are some issues with social desirability; that is, social desirability may influence responses and ultimately the results. Certainly, each list of languages can be interpreted in various ways. To avoid this, one could either opt for the absence of a list (i.e. replace it with an open-ended question) or one could propose a more exhaustive, longer list.

The general categories (e.g. 'another European language') in the list of answers are problematic as well. They are ambiguous insofar as their delimitation is not really clear. For example, where should one put Portuguese? Is it another European language (as it is spoken in Portugal), another African language (it is an official language in Angola) or even another Asian language (it has an official status in Macau). The very European principle of 'one nation – one language' is clearly oversimplifying matters. The decision as to where to position a language lies with the respondents or perhaps with the interviewer. This decision-making process and the ultimate choice of response option cannot be made transparent afterwards. For the census results, this means that these general response categories remain opaque entities with a lack of granularity. They are therefore of less or even no use for the evaluation of the results.[9]

The list of response options does not include an 'open' option, meaning the question has to be answered by means of the proposed items on the list. This is quite important insofar as in the case of the GMC there is a legal obligation to answer all the questions. Another important aspect is the addendum in the 2018 iteration that the language question is to be answered by only one representative of the household.[10] This means the question only elicits the language that is predominantly spoken in German households, and not languages on a personal level. The informative value of the results is therefore limited in at least two aspects. First, only one respondent gets to give the answer. For multilingual constellations with all their complexities, it is this one respondent per household who gets to decide which of the possible languages to name. Second, the results do not reflect the language use of German residents but only of households.

The position of the question within the questionnaire is also revealing. It is part of the set of questions on citizenship and length of stay in Germany, and not part of the set of socio-demographic questions. This might play a role with regard to the social desirability of answers, as the question is obviously placed in a framework constructing 'otherness'. It is therefore

quite possible that, for example, multilingual respondents choose to name the majority and default language German instead of another language, as they might think this will reflect better on them.

It is not clear how or why the language question or the proposed list of answers was designed as it was, as there is no documentation about it. The German Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt, destatis) does not publish any information concerning the development of census questions; however, some legal texts can shed light on the underlying motivation of the language question and reveal a biased perception of languages and language repertoires. The specific aim of the language question is described in detail in a draft for the German Microcensus Law (*Mikrozensusgesetz*), presented and passed in the German Federal Parliament in 2016:[11]

> Migration from foreign countries and integration is an important political subject. […] The recording of the language predominantly spoken in the household complements the information on migration backgrounds and is significant for the assessment of different dimensions of integration. It allows detailed analyses of the state of integration. In particular, cultural integration is closely related to the language spoken in the household. (author's translation)

The central aspects of this part of the text are very evident; they concern migration and especially integration. Regarding the latter, language is supposed to be used as a proxy indicator for cultural integration.[12] This seems to follow a rationale whereby speaking the majority language at home corresponds to cultural integration. Again, this clearly matches a monolingual view of languages, namely, not acknowledging the possibilities of multilingual constellations and their significance for integration. For example, it is quite common for multilinguals to speak one or two native languages at home (i.e. the private domain) while speaking another language, for example the language of the majority, in the public domain (at work, in shops, etc.; Adler 2018b). And this does not imply anything about them being integrated or not.

To conclude, the two main problems with the language question are its inability to represent multilingual settings and the heavily limited value of its results. Both can be linked to a naïve or ideologically tainted management of the language question. These limitations are even more severe regarding the question's intention. Instead of objectively counting the languages spoken in the German population, the question aims at eliciting language as a proxy-variable to measure cultural integration. The latter especially focuses on people with a so-called migration background (Will 2018), that is, potentially multilingual people. Regrettably, because multilingualism cannot be adequately captured by the language question,

the answers cannot adequately display the linguistic reality of the people surveyed.

The effect of language-based discrimination on the purportedly objective counting of languages in Germany

All we think we know about languages in Germany is not corroborated by dependable data, since until now there have been none (see section on 'Languages in Germany'). There are, however, some representative data sets on language *attitudes* in Germany representing folk concepts of languages and their evaluation (section on 'Language attitudes in Germany'). The results of these surveys have shown that languages are evaluated differently. While some languages are liked, others are disliked, and some other languages do not even seem to induce evaluation of any sort. There is, for example, a clear tendency of liking Romance languages, such as French, Italian and Spanish, and English. In contrast, Germans tend to dislike Russian, Arabic and Turkish. The pattern of evaluation has been relatively stable over the past ten years – with some small changes concerning the rise of Spanish as a liked language and the increase of Arabic as a disliked language.

Why does this kind of data matter? It matters insofar as language and behaviour are strongly connected and language attitudes may influence behaviours and decisions. Therefore, knowledge about the underlying patterns of language attitudes is crucial. The patterns of liked and disliked languages may not only have consequences for individual decisions such as which kindergarten or school to choose because of their use of different languages or their language curricula (Rothe and Wagner 2015). They may also influence how one is perceived and consequently treated by others, meaning that language attitudes lay the ground for intergroup relations and language-based discrimination (cf. 'linguicism'; Skutnabb-Kangas 1988). According to our results, for example, speakers of Russian or German with a Russian accent may more likely be subject to discrimination in Germany than speakers of French or German with a French accent.

There are several examples of how attitudes towards language actually have an impact on behaviour. To name only a few, research focusing on regional varieties of German has shown that people are more likely to move house according to dialectal regions (Lameli 2013). These dialectal regions can also explain with whom one is more likely to trade (Lameli *et al*. 2015). Other research indicates that the way someone speaks can have an economic impact, namely, there seems to be a correlation of dialectally accented speech with level of wages. According to research by Grogger,

Steinmayr and Winter (2019), people speaking with a regional accent earn significantly lower wages than those who do not. Also, studies on the housing market arrive at similar results; speaking a depreciated language or variety makes it more likely that someone will be discriminated against and will experience more difficulties getting a viewing appointment and finally renting or buying an apartment (Baumgarten, Du Bois and Gill, this issue). In the light of the patterns of German language attitudes presented here, it is not at all surprising that discrimination takes place in the housing market in Germany, and that the probability of being discriminated against is higher for those who speak with a Turkish accent than for those with a US-American accent or those speaking Standard German (Du Bois, this issue). Some other corroborating findings come from experiments using a special reaction time design (i.e. IAT, the Implicit Association Test). According to Roessel, Schoel and Stahlberg (2018), non-native accents generally trigger spontaneous, negatively biased associations. In yet another context, it has been shown that accents and spoken varieties have an impact on juridical evaluation; that is, language-based evaluation of witnesses or defendants, etc. may lead to certain verdicts in courtrooms (Axer, this issue; Dixon, Mahoney and Cocks 2002; Frumkin 2007; Sharma *et al*,; this issue; Wood, this issue).

Statistics represent counts and measurements of objects. They generate knowledge about these objects. Often, statistics are perceived as means to produce knowledge and truth (Urla 1993). A population census such as the German Microcensus is a special kind of measurement, because it surveys a large portion of the population, or even all of it, and generates a supreme type of statistical data. For this reason, any census has a special status and is seen as '[t]he ultimate register of the "truth" ' (Arel 2002:94). Because population censuses are considered to legitimately produce truth, they are also exploited as a means to yield legitimacy (Arel 2002:115). Thus, a census should be an objective instrument for the unbiased collection of data, meaning it should be free of any ideology or attitudes. Surprisingly, this is not the case for the language question in the GMC. The question displays several shortcomings, which can be explained by a monolingual perspective on language matters combined with certain attitudes on languages (see section on 'Counting languages in Germany'). Without doubt, a biased question leads to biased results. As a consequence, the results of the language question cannot represent dependable data on the linguistic situation in Germany. Considering the issue at hand, having a biased census question is all the more tragic. Despite the question's shortcomings and the equally biased results, they are most likely going to be perceived as ultimate truths anyway. In our case, this means that the deficient results of

the defective language question will probably be treated as objective facts and not be questioned at all.

It is evident that the language question needs improvement. Changes seem to be generally feasible as the question has been slightly modified in 2018 and 2019. Also, the shortcomings identified here – not deploying a list including general categories, not admitting multiple answers and not including an open answer – can be easily remedied, as multiple answer options are employed in other questions used by the GMC (Adler 2019). Also, it seems obvious that the lack of documentation on the development of the question needs improvement. Finally, there are other ways of eliciting information about the language of a population. Countries all over the world handle this quite differently in their census (e.g. Arel 2002 or a recent overview in Humbert, Coray and Duchêne 2018). In Canada, for example, there is a set of four questions to gather data on languages (Adler 2019): the first question focuses on proficiency in English and French, the second and third questions on languages spoken at home, and the last question targets languages learned during one's childhood. The possible answers to these questions all consist of several possibilities – of which only one can be chosen – including English, French and, most importantly, an open answer box. This design covers at least some of the complexity of individuals' language repertoires and seems to be able to collect dependable data on language repertoires.

With regard to the German situation, the analyses presented in this article show that because of flaws in the language question design in the Microcensus, there continues to be a lack of dependable data on the linguistic situation in Germany. Consequently, there is still no representative source for assessing basic data for language-based discrimination in Germany.

About the author

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Notes

1 Article 3 of the German Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany ('Equality before the law'; https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.pdf).
2 The regional dialects were itemised as follows: Austrian, Bavarian, dialect of Berlin, dialect of Cologne/Rhenish dialect, Hessian, Low German, Northern German, Saxon, Standard German, Swabian, Swiss German, the respondents' own dialect; Standard German was not the first item and Low German was placed before Northern German.
3 This illustrates one of the strengths of open-ended questions: because respondents have to formulate answers (i.e. concepts) on their own, their answers reflect which concepts are most relevant or prominent for them (without any researcher bias influencing them).
4 Danish (1.3%), Low German (1.3%), Friesian (0.2%), and no mention of Sorbian.
5 Before 1939, questions on language had been an integral part of national statistics since Prussian times (cf. Labbé 2003).
6 The results of a word search within the corpora of written Standard German (DeReKo, http://www1.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora.html) indicate high frequencies in 2015 (16,802 hits in 11,532 texts) and 2016 (20,527 hits in 15,318 texts; of a total of 48,627 hits in 36,275 texts from 1979 to 2018).
7 Romanian apparently was forgotten in the English translation.
8 At least 41.8% of the households surveyed in the 2017 Microcensus were single-person households and therefore not appropriately targeted by the question.
9 The results are not analysed in detail here, but suffice it to say that all the general categories amount to 40% of the 'not German' answers, which make up 9.1% of the total answers.
10 Before that, the question still had to be answered by only one representative per household, but there was no explicit note concerning this restriction.
11 See http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/094/1809418.pdf (retrieved on 28 February 2019).
12 Interestingly, language also served as a proxy-variable in the nineteenth century, for example, in Austria, Hungary, Prussia and Russia (Arel 2002:96).

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