Heritage languages, place-making and belonging:
Three geographical excursions

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Languages are important to place-making and to processes of inclusion and exclusion in particular places (Mamadouh & El Ayadi forthcoming). This contribution borrows the linguistic notion of *heritage language* to highlight the role languages to which one relates emotionally without necessarily (fully) using them can play in place-making processes and in the fostering of a sense of belonging. The notion of *heritage language* emerged in the United States to describe situations when confident speakers of a dominant language in a society have another home language, a language they inherited from their parents. These speakers are generally expected to have limited proficiency in this language (a migrant or an indigenous language) – sometimes not even more than a limited passive knowledge – due to incomplete acquisition for lack of exposure in education and other social encounters, apart from home. The notion of heritage language has been also used for speakers of waning regional languages in Europe when similar combinations of partial command of the language and emotional value occur. The expression heritage language stresses the value of the language for the individual, and possibly for the collective. For that reason heritage languages are often the target of language policy and planning to preserve and sometimes to revitalize

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them. The linguistic challenge and the policies vary between different contexts: the more traditional competition between two languages in specific regions or cities (typically the state language and the regional minority language) can be contrasted with the superdiversity of current urban multilingualism shaped by international migration Europeanization and globalization.

The paper explores three types of engagement with heritage languages that can be relevant to place-making and territorial identification 1) by the state, 2) by civil society associations or 3) by families.

The first pertains to the use of official street signs and road sings in the linguistic landscape to promote a sense of place. Typically these signs are bilingual and the heritage language coexists with the state language. The heritage language (generally a regional language that has been displaced and replaced by the state language) can function as a common heritage, regardless of the individual linguistic skills of the inhabitants of the place.

The second turns to efforts to make room for the home language of migrant children through informal language classes, typically organized by migrant associations (sometimes with the support of their home country). They give participants the opportunity to discuss local affairs in their heritage language and hence to foster a sense of belonging in their place of residence (instead of using it only in the home or in the homeland).

The third discusses family policies to enhance the heritage language and the resulting entanglement between language and place identity. In his seminal work on language shift Joshua Fishman observed in the 1960s that the linguistic assimilation of immigrants was swift: the immigrants would learn an additional language, the second generation would be bilingual, their children would have passive knowledge of their heritage language if any. Family policies can however cultivate heritage languages as a contribution to the cultural richness of their new

place of residence. As a result heritage languages can become meaningful as collective cultural markers, not so much due to widespread and extensive linguistic skills, but to the will to acknowledge this linguistic diversity. Residents relate to these collective heritage languages to feel at home.

References

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