

# Shaping participation

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## **Impact paragraph**

Why is *participation in linguistically diverse Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC) worth our attention? The Netherlands and Germany, just like many other countries, have linguistically diverse populations. ECEC commonly serves as the first place for children to be introduced to institutional contexts, so that there, children learn how to *participate* in social settings using language. Understanding how and why children shape their participation in the ways they do is not only of interest to scholars but also to society as a whole and various stakeholders like parents, ECEC professionals, or children themselves. For this reason, creating both *societal* and *scientific* impact was an important aspect of my PhD project. In line with the Maastricht University Promotion Regulations of 2023, this section reflects on scientific and societal impact in layman's terms.

### ***In a Nutshell: What did I find?***

My Ph.D. research focused on participation in ECEC centers where multiple languages are spoken by teachers and children, taking the examples of preschool Little Sprouts in the Netherlands and kindergarten Good Shepherd in Germany. I found that the way children and teachers interact with each other is very dynamic, involving aspects like what children and teachers *do*, for example, what they *say* or *sing*, the physical surroundings they are in, and, importantly, what they believe about how language should be used.

At preschool Little Sprouts in the Dutch province of Limburg, a language divide became evident. While the regional language Limburgish is spoken by many residents of the province alongside Dutch in daily life, the educational system still leans heavily towards Dutch. This already manifests as early as in ECEC, where teachers commonly reserve Limburgish for occasions in the care context, while Dutch dominates educational contexts, as also observed at Little Sprouts. Additionally, family languages like Albanian or Arabic were

not given much importance there. As a result of this language hierarchy, the way children participated in daily ECEC activities was affected. When teachers, for example, used Limburgish for a personal chat among colleagues during the daily fruit break, children understood this conversation as private and started other interactions. On the other hand, teachers used Dutch when they wanted the children to overhear their conversation, for example, in case they praised children. The use of Dutch in that case signaled that the conversation was for everyone, and children paid more attention.

Kindergarten Good Shepherd (DE) was attended by children with many different family languages. My research there showed that these children learned how to navigate linguistic diversity through participating in the ECEC day-to-day among this diverse group. While German was the main language at the kindergarten, the children often talked about their other languages with each other or simply used them (e.g., one word) with their teacher, peers, and with me, the researcher.

When children did so, this led to discussions and negotiations about what these languages meant to them and to the group. For instance, on one occasion, the teacher asked a child for translations into the family language, highlighting how valuable the family language is. The same child, however, experienced a pushback from her peers when she tried to use her family language on another occasion. This example shows that children have to figure out how to handle these different ideas about language use in the kindergarten, and they do so while participating in ECEC.

### ***What ECEC Professionals Can Learn From this Book***

A key take-away of this book is the importance of *acknowledging all languages children come into contact with*, also, for example at home, even if these languages are not the main language of the ECEC center. Such an acknowledgment of linguistic diversity can be beneficial for all children. It can help multilingual children develop their language skills, support children's language awareness and self-esteem, and it can also

encourage an open and curious attitude towards different languages in general. Since we live in societies characterized by diversity, such an open mindset can be of great benefit, also for monolingual children.

But how can a language-inclusive atmosphere be created in ECEC? In minority language contexts such as Limburg, one potential strategy to prevent children from perceiving the national language as more valuable than the regional one is the extensive use of both languages in a variety of situations and constellations. To change the current language divide, teachers can introduce Limburgish into educational group settings, such as during circle time or singing. There are several didactical resources towards these ends, such as from the project 'Jongk gelieërd, Good gedoan,' a collaboration between childcare organization MIK PIW group and the musical collective Troubadours van de toekomst which developed Limburgish children's songs<sup>21</sup>. Since songs are an important part of educational and instructional activities in ECEC, integrating such songs can be one way to signal the relevance of Limburgish to children.

Incorporating family languages into circle time activities is also possible with home languages that the teachers do not speak themselves. The project 'Storch Lingi [Stork Lingi]'<sup>22</sup> is an example of a valuable framework for this aim. Lingi is a stuffed animal with a keen curiosity about different languages, dialects, and various ways of speaking. The children take turns taking Lingi and the accompanying material home for one night. While at home, Lingi 'listens' to the languages and dialects spoken by their family members. The following morning, during circle time at the ECEC center, the children share Lingi's experiences and observations. Every child can participate

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/@troubadoursvandetoekomst>

<sup>22</sup> Wiese, Heike; Mayr, Katharina; Krämer, Philipp; Seeger, Patrick; Müller, Hans-Georg & Freywald, Ulrike (2014). *Deutsch ist vielseitig: Aus- und Fortbildungsmodule zur Sprachvariation im urbanen Raum*.

because Lingi is interested not only in different languages but also in various styles and expressions.

Yet another method to integrate family languages in ECEC is by reading multilingual books together. Digital tools like so-called ‘reading pens’ can help to put multilingual/dialogic reading into practice. These devices enable elements of a story to be recorded in different languages, for example, with parents' assistance, which brings new linguistic resources to ECEC.

### ***How I Engaged the Public, ECEC Sector, and Children with this Research***

First and foremost, I found it important to engage the key stakeholders with my research: Children themselves. For the target group of children in ECEC age, particularly those in the German-Dutch border area, I developed a bilingual children’s book for research dissemination in close collaboration with illustrator Léonie Smith<sup>23</sup>. The Dutch/German bilingual book ‘Zing je mee?/Singst du mit?’ has been widely distributed to public partners in ECEC, including to preschool Little Sprouts (NL), where the research for the book had been carried out. For the wider public and other children, an Open Access version is available online.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Funding for this project has been generously provided by the FASoS valorization fund and the chair of languageculture in Limburg.

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[https://marierickert.github.io/assets/pdf/Zingjemee\\_Singstdumit\\_Publicversion.pdf](https://marierickert.github.io/assets/pdf/Zingjemee_Singstdumit_Publicversion.pdf)



Figure 13: Children's book

Secondly, for primary-school-aged children, I offered two interactive workshops at the WizzKidz summer camp of Maastricht University about children's languages and multilingualism. Valorizing my research on singing in interaction in ECEC, I gave a presentation to Limburgish musicians who were interested in input to their process of developing children's songs in Limburgish for use in ECEC contexts.

Turning to the broader public in the German-Dutch border area, together with Leonie Cornips, I was invited to give a Studium Generale lecture in the scope of the lecture series 'Im Gespräch/In gesprek' from the public libraries of Krefeld and Venlo. The event was bilingual in German and Dutch and up to today, the online recording of the event has reached 267 views. In addition, an article about this research appeared in the regional newspaper *de Limburger*.

When it comes to stakeholders from the ECEC sector, I discussed initial research results with the team manager of preschool Little Sprouts (NL) and the assistant for language support at Good

Shepherd (DE) toward the end of the respective fieldwork periods. Parents at Little Sprouts have received a flyer with an infographic summarizing initial findings on my last day of fieldwork. I also informally discussed results and observations with the teachers of Little Sprouts during two visits after the end of fieldwork, and visits to Good Shepherd (DE) will follow.

To valorize the insights from the Limburgish minority language context beyond the region, I participated as an invited speaker in the third regional language symposium, ‘Plat veur Potwottels,’ organized by the Heritage Center Achterhoek en Liemers. This event targeted educators and interested residents of the Dutch region Gelderland.

### ***What Scholars Can Learn From This Book***

Turning to scientific impact, this research primarily contributes to the field of *Linguistic Anthropology*. Linguistic Anthropologists research the intersection of language and culture, often focusing on how people use language in their daily lives. When it comes to educational settings, this field has mainly investigated how children and teachers participate in linguistically diverse educational settings in primary schools and beyond. Linguistically diverse ECEC, on the other hand, has not received much attention yet, even though it is important for children when it comes to learning how to use language. My focus on ECEC in this book helps to gain an understanding of language use in the earliest stages of children’s educational trajectory. Especially very young children primarily communicate through other forms than what we classically call ‘spoken language.’ For example, they rely on gaze or gestures to convey their messages. In this research, I included these non-audible forms of young children’s (but also adults’) communication by drawing on my own observations and making video recordings. I have shown that these approaches can help us to trace the subtle details of participation.

Another scientifically valuable aspect of my research is how I examined my role as a researcher in the interactions I observed. In

linguistic anthropology, it is common for researchers to get involved in the situations they study to build rapport and gather information. A rather novel aspect of my research is that I explicitly analyzed how I participated in the interactions in ECEC as well. I did this by using the same moment-to-moment technique of analysis that I used to look at interactions between children and teachers. This approach sheds light on how the various participatory processes in ECEC are connected. It also makes very transparent how the data for this research was collected.

### ***How I Informed the Scholarly Community About This Research***

To begin with, all four articles that make up the empirical chapters of this dissertation have been published open access in international, peer-reviewed journals. One of these publications appeared in a Special Issue entitled ‘Language policies and practices in ECEC: Perspectives across European migration societies’, contributing to international joint efforts among colleagues to shed light on language policy and practices in linguistically diverse ECEC. In addition to these publications, the entire dissertation is also accessible Open Access online and available for purchase in paperback on the website of LOT, the Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics. Another research article drawing on this project is currently in preparation and will be submitted to a renowned academic outlet for Open Access publication (in collaboration with Verena Platzgummer).

In total, I have given 21 academic presentations about this Ph.D. research at national and international academic conferences and workshops, ranging from a 5-minute pitch in combination with a poster presentation to a 1.5-hour talk. In addition to these presentations, I have facilitated eight workshops and data sessions for academic peers and colleagues. These workshops have sparked mutual exchange among colleagues, e.g., about the topic of researching multilingually and with awareness for linguistic diversity. I have contributed to organizing two academic conferences (the LIMES final conference [booklet



committee] and the 7<sup>th</sup> ICLHE [organizing committee]), which presented valuable occasions for academic researchers to discuss topics including linguistic diversity and interdisciplinary research. In order to get into a dialogue with students, I have given four guest lectures about the present research at German and Dutch universities (University of Duisburg-Essen, University of Münster and Maastricht University). Similarly, this research has also informed my teaching of two university courses. Students' evaluations have shown an appreciation of the practical insights into linguistic ethnographic research processes and participation in linguistic diversity in ECEC.