

Call for papers

Bringing the Outside In Conference 2023

Language and inequality: exploring access to services in multilingual contexts

21st-22nd July 2023, University of Essex

The majority of the world is multilingual. However, as a result of monolingual language policies, individuals and communities continue to face challenges associated with accessing resources and services. We see this across a range of domains, including education, access to health information and care, engaging with political life, interactions with the criminal legal system, and accessing opportunities in the labour market.

Despite an improved understanding of multilingualism over the last 50 years, we are yet to reach a consensus about how to best harness multilingualism as a resource for individuals, communities and society more broadly. Colonial and imperialist histories continue to exert significant impact on individuals' access to resources and opportunities.

We can see this in a number of contexts. For example: (i) The 'monolingualising' of education systems (Heller 1995, 2007) means that some 40% of the global population does not have access to education in a language they understand (UNESCO 2016:1); (ii) In some legal contexts verbal evidence and court proceedings can be conducted in a local language but written evidence and proceedings in higher courts of appeal are usually conducted in an ex-colonial language making participation ineffective in multilingual contexts; (iii) While ethnic background is often referenced and cited as the motivation for the outbreak of conflict there is no consideration of the role that the multilingual practices of communities can have in conflict resolution; (iv) In the health sector, language plays an important role in access to information and services, as well as participation in one's own recovery as was acutely demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, most service user-health practitioner conversations in many contexts occur in a dominant language that excludes those not proficient in it and thus is detrimental to a service user's treatment and wellbeing; and (v) in many multilingual contexts the labour market is made up of staff trained and educated monolingually producing a workforce that then fails to serve a multilingual society.

Following on from the successful 2022 inaugural meeting in the Bringing the Outside In series, this conference examines ways in which language practices in 'outside' spaces – such as the home and the community – can be harnessed to ensure more equitable access to resources and information across a range of domains. This includes but is not limited to education; health care and health information; legal institutions; and access to social services and infrastructure more broadly.

We ask:

- What impact do current language policies have on formal spaces (i.e. schools, courtrooms, health care institutions)?
- Do the practices that are permitted/encouraged/allowed 'inside' these spaces reflect those found 'outside'?

- How can the multilingual practices of the 'outside' be supported and strengthened to allow more equitable access?

We invite abstract submissions of 300 words by the 28th February 2023. We will be accepting abstracts for 20-minute presentations as well as 5-minute Work-in-Progress presentations. We will also be inviting all participants in the conference to share data for a collaborative data analysis session. We encourage submissions which discuss multilingualism in any context globally. We welcome submissions from colleagues who may be unable to attend the in-person conference, and will arrange hybrid sessions where necessary.

Key dates

28th February 2023 – 300 word abstract due (for 20-minute talk or 5-minute work-in-progress flash talk) (to be sent to colin.reilly@essex.ac.uk)

31st March 2023 – Notification of acceptance

1st April 2023 – Registration opens

30th June 2023 – Registration closes

21st – 22nd July 2023 – Conference