

Multilingual Habitus and Language Prestige: Value Profiles of Croatian, English, German, and Italian in Croatia

Ivana Roncevic¹

¹ Applied Linguistics Research Lab, Department of Linguistics and Translation, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Ivana Roncevic, Applied Linguistics Research Lab, Department of Linguistics and Translation, Prince Sultan University, Rafha St., P.O. Box 66833, 12435, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: ironcevic@psu.edu.sa, ivana.roncevic@gmail.com

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Abstract

In a multilingual world, languages represent various forms of capital in society and gain or lose prestige depending on how transferable they are perceived to be into social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital. The dominance of the English language and social media content in the Information Age affects people's language worldwide. In many countries, there is a significant trend toward diglossia, where the national language is used alongside English, leading to the marginalization of all other languages. In Croatia, an EU member state, the most popular foreign languages are English, German, and Italian. However, due to the linguistic dominance of English, foreign languages other than English have experienced a loss of status. This shift implies that people's perceptions of the types of capital those languages represent are changing and that there is a movement from multilingualism toward diglossia. This goes against the strongly promoted idea of multilingualism in the EU, where language variety is considered a valuable form of symbolic and cultural capital. Within that framework, this study aims to examine the attitudes of multilingual speakers in Croatia toward the four languages included in the study. The goal is to determine whether they perceive a language to represent a form of social, cultural, economic, or symbolic capital. Furthermore, based on the results, it will be concluded whether multilingual language practice is affected and whether there is a clash between the desired multilingual habitus of European citizens and their perceptions of language values, which determine their language choices.

Keywords: higher education, language policy, language prestige, language value profile, multilingualism

1. Introduction

Given the increasingly intensive contact between different cultures and nations, contemporary society is often described as multicultural and cosmopolitan. The term "cosmopolitan" expresses, among other things, the expectations for citizens to be able to navigate cultural differences and to be sensitive to intercultural encounters (Gunesch, 2008). The promotion of multilingualism is particularly important for multinational communities such as the EU, whose integration process is based on unity in cultural and linguistic diversity (European Commission, 1996; Beacco & Byram, 2007). Based on this self-image of the European Union, there is particular emphasis on promoting foreign language skills and foreign language learning through language policy recommendations to the member states. The relevant EU language policy documents appear to assume that language is perceived by citizens of various countries as a symbol of culture and nation. Therefore, learning foreign languages contributes to promoting a sense of belonging in the EU. This indicates that language is symbolic capital (c.f. Bourdieu, 1983) and a part of the developing European identity. It also demonstrates that the EU relies on multilingualism as a language policy to be implemented in its member states. This is done through language learning, supporting multilingual projects and study programs, implementing multilingual policies in EU institutions, and supporting translation and interpreting study programs.

This paper analyzes the attitudes of multilingual speakers in Croatia toward a select number of languages (Croatian, English, German, Italian) to determine the transferability of each language into a form of capital and each language's prestige in the language community. These indicators shed light on the dominant language practice in Croatia. The framework for the study is the theory of language as a form of capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Sah, 2022) and the theory of language prestige (Haarmann, 1990, 2001). Results are examined in light of the policy of multilingualism as a top-down desideratum of the EU and the threat of diglossia as the evident bottom-up language practice being spread globally due to the prevalence of English and the power of its economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (e.g., Abbas et al., 2021; Ibarra Gambrell, 2021).

The theoretical framework in the next section includes the theory of language as capital by Bourdieu and Haarmann's language prestige. Section 3 presents the research methodology, and Section 4 findings of the study. Section 5 presents the discussion of results within the theoretical framework and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language as Capital

In Bourdieu's social theory, capital is accumulated work, either in the shape of matter or in internalized, "incorporated form" (Bourdieu 1983, p. 183), and can be economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital consists of material and financial goods that are personally owned, either as money or as objects that can be transferred therein. Social capital; however, refers to the possession of a permanent network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual knowledge and recognition or the possession of resources forming the basis of someone's membership in a group, particularly institutionalized groups. Cultural capital has two forms: objectified and institutionalized. Objectified cultural capital comes in the form of books, paintings, and musical instruments, while the institutionalized version is embodied in certifications and titles that are awarded to an individual for specific knowledge and accomplishments. There is also symbolic capital, which does not exist independently but can only be attributed to the other three forms of capital as additional capital in the form of reputation and prestige (Bourdieu 1987; Mathé 2010; Sah, 2022; Sah & Karki, 2023). With the aid of this capital, other types of capital are legitimized and socially acceptable.

It follows from this that knowledge of foreign languages belongs to cultural capital, specifically to its internalized or embodied form, meaning that it is an integral part of a person. The value of a person's language proficiency is attributed in the context of an imagined market at which forms of capital are traded and the more capital forms a language embodies, the more value is given. The value of a language as a form of cultural capital is higher if it can be transformed into additional forms of capital (i.e., economic, social, or symbolic) on the market (cf. Mathé 2010).

Internalized form of any type of capital becomes a part of an individual and hence their "habitus" (Bourdieu 1983, p. 187). Bourdieu defines "habitus" as the totality of individual life experiences, views, and preferences, which leads to the perpetuation of select preferences and forms of behavior. It is a framework that emerges from the totality of individual habits and behavioral practices acquired during life and, as such, belongs to the individual history of each person. In addition, the habitus of a person is adapted to and results from the social framework in which the individual moves. It is perpetuated in the present, thus influencing a person's conduct. Apart from habitus as a general notion, Bourdieu also discusses linguistic habitus: It is a kind of discourse production tailored to particular social contexts and social structures inside a particular market (Bourdieu 1993, p.115). While Bourdieu primarily refers to discourses as intralinguistic occurrences, in the context of this work, his concept is applied to separate languages as discourses within a multilingual habitus. Therefore, multilingual habitus depicts the discourse production in several foreign languages under the influence of social and economic factors on an imagined market where forms of capital are traded.

Bourdieu further adds that the choice of discourse, and in the case of multilingual habitus, of a language, indicates the user's (desired) belonging to a group on the market. This implies that, depending on their choice of a foreign language, speakers assign themselves to those speaker groups and social groups in which that language is used and valued. Multilingual habitus cultivated by an individual is then directly related to the social environment and the value that society ascribes to the knowledge of the respective foreign languages.

When the idea of capital is transferred to the knowledge of a foreign language, the following become clear: 1) Language knowledge is economic capital when it enables a person to get a scholarship, financing options during their studies, or additional ECTS points (Mathé 2010, p. 81). Depending on how often a language is deemed necessary in the labor market, its economic capital grows or shrinks. 2) Language knowledge can incorporate cultural capital if the language is needed to complete study tasks, such as reading from learning sources or following a lecture in that language. Language proficiency is objectified cultural capital if they are considered a prerequisite for the award of degrees or educational titles and if certificates are issued for the knowledge of a language. 3) Language knowledge represents symbolic capital in terms of shaping a person's identity, signaling belonging to a desired group or a circle of prestige. In the case of uncommon and highly valued degrees, one might even refer to a "rarity value," which has greater prestige the more individuals desire it, and the fewer people are able to acquire it (Bourdieu 1983, p. 190).

2.2 Language Prestige

With regard to the use of more than one language by an individual in an international and intercultural setting, Haarmann (2001) speaks of the image and prestige of the language. The use of a language in a multilingual environment is based on the degree of its image or status as a global language. This status, in return, relies on the demographic aspects, the proportions of primary and second language speakers, and the international distribution of speaker groups, as well as on geopolitical aspects or state or official language status, economic functions, use in international organizations, learning the language in foreign language lessons, the use of language as a medium of science, and the role of language in the information society (Haarmann, 2001, pp. 93-103). While the criteria listed suggest a choice of foreign language that is more likely to be influenced by society or politics, they do not provide insight into the factors that could have a greater impact on the individual decision on an emotional or affective level. The emotional aspect should also be included in the individual choice of foreign languages as part of the multilingual habitus because the emotional evaluation of a language is linked to the individual formation of identity and the resulting incorporation of the language into one's own linguistic or multilingual habitus.

Language prestige is viewed as an additional aspect of every language: It is a combination of various meanings with an overall positive assessment, imaginary intrinsic value as the sum of all tacit expectations associated with the use of that language (Haarmann, 2001, p. 128-129). A high prestige can give a language the image of a guarantor of social advancement, of control of the global flow of information, of technological know-how, and thus of development progress. The expectations of a given language depend on a common

“basic attitude” of its speakers, who in this way express their preference for it and their approval of it as a medium of international communication (Haarmann, 2001, p. 128). The basic attitude is described as an invisible yet noticeable “flair” of a language.

The fact that this “flair” exists indicates that language prestige is based on something more than functional-communicative factors. In this paper, I propose that language prestige also depends on affective evaluations of individuals based on their subjective notions influenced by society and the media. Bugarski (2004) emphasizes that such evaluations are rarely verified and proven but can nevertheless have a strong influence on the status of a language. Individual affective assessments of languages can be categorized into esthetic, moral, and pragmatic evaluations. We value a language esthetically by saying that it is or is not beautiful, morally by judging whether it deserves to be preserved, and pragmatically by evaluating its suitability in performing certain functions in comparison with the suitability of competing languages. Because these assessments are subjective, they pose a threat to languages, as they can have implications on language regulations. Žanić (2005, p. 136) explains that the evaluations of a language are transferred to its language communities due to its connection to the nation and culture. This is demonstrated in the example of the Italian fashion industry, which managed to not only redefine the image of Italians in the 1970s but also give the nation and the language an iconographic makeover. Without top-down political initiatives, people across the world wanted to learn Italian, among them businesspeople, entrepreneurs, and technical experts (Žanić, 2005). Thus, language is given a certain prestige through affective judgment, a “bundling of different connotations” and an “invisible flair” (Haarmann 2001, p. 128). As regards the importance of this prestige in the motivation for learning the respective languages, it is therefore informative to gain an insight into the language value profiles. For this study, the key classifications are Bugarski’s distinction of three sorts of evaluations and Bourdieu’s differentiation of the forms of capital.

3. Methodology

This is a mixed-method study with quantitative and qualitative segments. An online survey was disseminated among university students in Croatia, who speak English and German or English and Italian as foreign languages. The questionnaire was disseminated in Croatian language, and the questions were based on the semantic differential model of language attitudes evaluation (see Haarmann, 1989, 1990, 2001). Respondents were asked to rate each of the 18 semantic traits on a Likert-type scale ranging from - 3 to 3 using an online questionnaire. The semantic features represented four categories of affective language evaluations adapted from Bugarski (2004):

- Esthetic value (4): elegant, melodic, beautiful, creative, soft
- Moral value (6): peaceable, intellectual, has tradition, modern, multicultural, prestige
- Pragmatic value (6): worthwhile, necessary, easy to learn, receptive
- Identity value (2): close to me, part of my identity

The categories were also noted as components of economic, social, cultural, or symbolic capital. Esthetic and identity values were observed as elements of symbolic capital; the moral value category is representative of social capital; and pragmatic value is transferable into economic capital. Additionally, three respondents (G1, G2, G3) from the German language group and three respondents (I1, I2, I3) from the Italian language group were interviewed and invited to elaborate on their selections in the questionnaire. Based on the results, linguistic value profiles were calculated and shown in the form of graphs. From the fact that the feature profiles are unique for every language, it can be inferred that every individual language occupies its own place on the continuum of a prestige scale.

A total of 252 students at 2 Croatian universities took part in the study. One hundred fifty-three respondents spoke English and German, and 99 respondents spoke English and Italian as foreign languages at self-reported levels ranging from A2 to C1 of the European Reference for Languages. No gender differences were considered in the profiling because these did not prove to be particularly relevant in other studies of a similar nature (see Haarmann 1989, p. 153).

4. Results

The comparison of the language value profiles was created based on the ratings of all respondents. All interviewees were speakers of Croatian and English, but only 153 were German speakers, and 99 were Italian speakers. So, the number of respondents in the graph was $N = 252$ for Croatian and English, $N = 153$ for German, and $N = 99$ for Italian. The graph in Figure 1 demonstrates notable variations in the perceived prestige of the individual languages within the sample of respondents investigated. While the best ratings are recorded for English, it is also noted that Croatian and Italian are rated well overall. German has the worst values and exhibits the greatest status loss (see Figure 1).

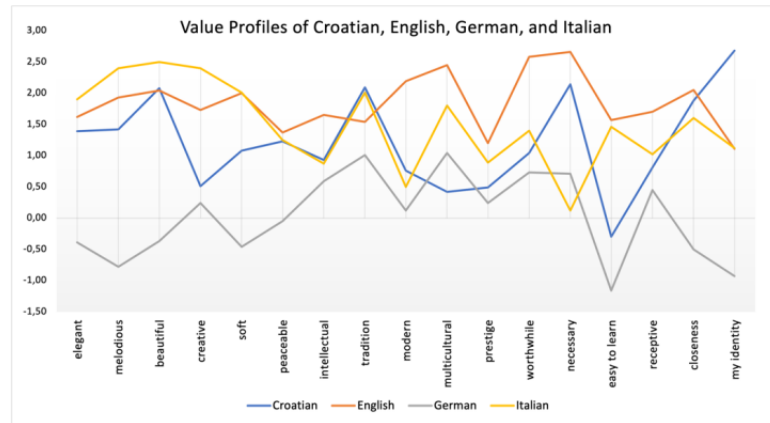


Figure 1. Value profiles for Croatian (N = 252), English (N = 252), German (N = 153), and Italian (N = 99)

Esthetic value category was measured based on the first five value items: elegant, melodious, beautiful, creative, and soft. The highest ratings in this category were given to Italian, then English, and thirdly Croatian. While Italian (1.9, 2.4, 2.5, 2.4, 2.01) and English (1.62, 1.93, 2.04, 1.73, 2.0) have consistent ratings across the five value items, Croatian is evaluated moderately highly in three elements (elegant 1.39; melodious 1.42; beautiful 2.08), but is not perceived as very creative (0.5) or soft (1.08). A respondent from the Italian group is a fan of Italian music and commented on both Italian and Croatian as lovely and pleasant-sounding languages: “I listen to Laura Pausini, but I also think Croatian is a beautiful language. I was surprised when foreigners told me we sounded harsh, like a mix of German and Russian” (I1)¹. German language largely ranks in the negative area of esthetics: It has negative values for elegance (- 0.39), melodiousness (- 0.78), beauty (- 0.37), and softness (- 0.46). For the element of creativity, it is in positive, yet low (0.24). Thus, in the area of esthetics, the German language scores negatively, while other languages score high values, with the exception of Croatian, which is inconsistent. Respondents’ comments about German were that they value its structure and organization (“It is such a well-structured language, that is why I love it,” G2), but they do not see it as a good choice of language for romantic songs (“I think German is suitable for bands like Rammstein, but I don’t listen to such music. I generally prefer to listen to music in English,” G3). Another respondent said about German music: “My only association with German music is a song that goes *Eins, zwei, Polizei* [demonstrates the music with body language and sounds]” (I2).

Moral value category was measured using the six value items following the esthetic ones: *peaceable*, *intellectual*, *has tradition*, *modern*, *multicultural*, and *prestige*. Neither of the included languages was rated consistently in this segment. Although English, Italian, and Croatian are perceived as peaceable (*Language x is peaceable, i.e., nonwarmongering*) languages to an equal degree (English 1.37; Italian 1.25; Croatian 1.23), the German language is still viewed as nonpeaceable (- 0.5), which indicates that its moral value is low in this item. Respondents’ comments on this were that “German is perceived as a militaristic language” (G1). Another respondent remarked, “Croatsians argue a lot, but I don’t see any language as particularly peace-loving or warmongering” (I1). Yet another comment was that “American English is the language of American dominance in world politics and NATO” (G1). In the part of *intellectuality* (*Language x is intellectual*), English is rated the highest (1.65), followed by Croatian (0.93), Italian (0.87), and German (0.59). This might be linked to the number of research sources in a given language available to respondents when looking for information. English remains the language of study and academia in the modern day, but for Croatian speakers, there might also be a lot of resources at their disposal in their native tongue. Also, speakers tend to be much more acquainted with literary works in their own language than any other, which also contributes to their perception of the language as intellectual. One respondent said: “If I need to write a seminar paper, most of my resources are in English and Croatian. You have to speak English nowadays, or you rely on Google translate, but it is not always accurate” (I3). In the segment of *tradition* (*Language x has a cultural tradition*), all languages are evaluated positively, with Croatian (2.09) and Italian (2.01) scoring highest, followed by English (1.54) and German (1.01). Respondents explain their evaluations in the following ways: “We are an old nation with a long history, of course, Croatian has a lot of tradition” (I2); “I think all languages have a tradition, but I am not familiar with their traditions enough” (G2). Conversely, only English is seen as *modern* (2.19), while the other three languages trail much behind (Croatian 0.76; Italian, 0.5; German 0.12). The prevalence of pop culture and social media in English is surely an element contributing to this perception. Respondent G1 said that “only English is a relevant world language and every trend we copy is in English ... Social media have contributed to this even more” (G3). In the aspect of *multiculturalism* (*Language x is multicultural*), the highest values are attributed to English (2.45), followed by Italian and German (1.8 and 1.04) and, lastly, Croatian (0.42). It is obvious that English is perceived as the most multicultural language, significantly more than the other three languages. Croatian is almost not seen as multicultural at all. Regarding English, one respondent claimed, “English is somehow void of culture to me because it is used for everything” (G2). Another one said, “People from different cultures use English in social media, so that is why it is multicultural” (I3).

¹All the cited respondents were interviewed in Croatian, and their statements were transcribed and translated into English by the author of this study.

For all four languages, there is a consistent decline in the scores for *prestige* (*Language x is prestigious*), and neither of the languages is thought to be very prestigious. While the trend of lowered ratings is consistent for each language, it is still obvious that English has the highest prestige (1.2), followed by Italian (8.89), Croatian (0.49), and German (0.24) in the last position.

Pragmatic value category included the categories *worthwhile*, *necessary*, *easy*, and *receptive*. English is perceived as far more *worthwhile* (2.58) than other languages (Italian 1.4; Croatian 1.04; German 0.73), which indicates that participants consider it more beneficial to invest their time in learning English than any other language in this study. Interestingly, in the category of *necessity* (*Language x is necessary*), the values are quite different for each language. English (2.66) and German (0.71) are seen as important to a similar degree as valuable, whereas Croatian and Italian are ranked quite differently in those two categories. Meanwhile, Croatian is considered much more necessary (2.14) than worthwhile (1.04), and Italian is considered much less necessary (0.12) than worthwhile (1.4). Another factor of great pragmatic significance is the *ease of learning* (*Language x is easy to learn*). English (1.57) and Italian (1.46) are rated as languages that are equally easy to learn, while Croatian (- 0.3) and German (- 1.16) are rated in the negative for this element, with German being perceived as considerably difficult to learn. It is quite unexpected to see natural speakers of a language considering it as challenging to learn. However, this seems to be a global occurrence and possibly the consequence of studying the language's structure and literature in more depth than any other language in that respect. Thus, this evaluation was comparable for Japanese by Japanese speakers (see Haarmann, 2001), as well as for Arabic by Arabic speakers, based on the author's interviews with students in Saudi Arabia. The category *receptive* evaluates whether *Language x is receptive, i.e., easily accepts foreign words*. In this respect, English is ranked as the most receptive language (1.7), followed by Italian (1.02), Croatian (0.81), and German (0.45). Respondents explain that "You can always coin new words in English, and it accommodates words from other languages easily" (I1). Conversely, some respondents assert, "Most languages are forced to accept English words because everything nowadays comes from English" (G2).

Identity value category is the final category examined in this study and consists of two elements: *closeness* (*Language x is close to me*) and *a part of my identity* (*Language x is a part of my identity*). It is unexpected to see that respondents consider English (2.05) as closer to them than their own language (Croatian, 1.88). However, they rate the Croatian language the highest as a part of their identity (2.68). Italian speakers also feel very connected to the Italian language (1.6), while German speakers do not consider German as close to them (- 0.5). Respondents also rate English (1.11) and Italian (1.12) as parts of their identities, while German (- 0.93) remains in the negative in that segment, too. A German student stated: "Even though I speak German, I only consider it a part of my identity within the classroom and my classmates" (G1).

5. Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, it was proposed that languages are a form of internalized cultural capital and are valued on an imaginary social market in relation to their ability to be transformed into other types of capital (economic, social, and symbolic; c.f. Bourdieu, 1983; Mathé 2010). It was also demonstrated that the choice of discourse, and language in a multilingual environment, reveals the user's language habitus and (desired) belonging to a group on the market. Also, the use of a language in a multilingual place is based on its perceived prestige (Haarmann, 2001), which reflects speakers' subjective notions influenced by society and the media (Bugarski, 2004).

By examining the language value profiles produced from the findings of this study, it was feasible to rank the languages based on the degree of their general perceived prestige: English is ranked first, followed by Italian, Croatian, and German. English is the language with the greatest rankings overall and was rated favorably (above 1.5) in all the elements of esthetics, most elements of the moral category, and all the elements of the pragmatic category. Values above 2.5 were recorded for being worthwhile, and necessary, indicating a strong transferability of this language into economic capital. Scores above 2.0 were identified for beauty, modernity, multiculturalism, and closeness. These elements, particularly modernity and multiculturalism, provide English great deal of social and symbolic capital. While there were no negative ratings for English, it scored the lowest in identity, prestigiousness, and peaceableness. These rankings demonstrate that English is viewed as the global language of those who wish to communicate globally. Overall, English is the language that everybody should speak; it is thought as lovely, multicultural, modern, and essential.

Italian is the only other language without negative ratings in this study. With only one element graded at 2.5 (beauty), it does not score as highly as English. However, it scores the highest in the esthetic category (1.9, 2.5), while its ratings are mixed in the other two categories, tradition being the only highly rated (above 2.0) element. Ratings exceeding 1.5 in the remaining three categories were noted for multiculturalism, receptiveness, and closeness. While Italian did not get negative ratings, it received low scores in necessity (0.12) and modernity (0.5). It is clear that Italian has a high prestige mostly due to its perceived esthetic and symbolic value, i.e., its transferability into cultural, social, and symbolic wealth.

The German language stands out in this study due to the number and range of negative ratings: While there are no high ratings for German (the highest being 1.04 for multiculturalism), there are as many as seven negative ratings. It is clearly seen negatively in the esthetic category (0.24 to - 0.78), ease of learning (- 1.16), and the identity category (- 0.5, - 0.93). Most of the positive ratings for German are found in the moral value category, with averagely high scores for tradition (1.01) and multiculturalism (1.04). From these criteria, it is clear that the German language does not have the expected prestige of a second foreign language in a country and does not represent an international language with a prominent position among multilingual Croatian speakers. The German language is mostly seen as one with tradition and one that is good to know, which means it is transferable into moderate amounts of social and economic capital.

Croatian, the respondents' original tongue, was expected to obtain the lowest scores due to Haarmann's (1989) study, which demonstrated

that speakers tend to place greater importance on a foreign language than their own. While Croatian scored low in comparison with English and Italian, its scores were still significantly higher than those of German language. Multiculturalism is the only element in which Croatian scored lower (0.42) than all the other languages. The greatest values for Croatian were, naturally, those in the identity category (1.88, 2.68), but values exceeding 2 were noted for beauty (2.08), tradition (2.09), and necessity (2.14). Croatian was also evaluated above 1.0 in most other esthetic elements, as well as for being peaceable and worthwhile. It performed especially poorly in creativity (0.51), multiculturalism (0.42), prestige (0.49), and ease of learning (- 0.3). It can be said that the Croatian language possesses cultural and symbolic prestige, with some transferability into social prestige.

Results obtained show that language value profiles indicate prestige loss for languages other than English and a narrowing in the range of the use of various languages for different purposes. The dominance of English is evident, reflecting the “myth of modernization” (Haarmann, 1989, p. 122; see also Park & Wee, 2012; Sah & Kubota, 2022). According to this idea, languages are not only utilized to communicate but also to demonstrate the understanding or support of a particular culture or advancement. Then, those languages become icons, and English became the “icon of modernization.” Because modernity is its dominant symbolic strength and it does not seem likely that other languages will be similarly strong in this aspect in the near future (c.f. Sah, 2022; Sah & Karki, 2023; Tri & Moskovsky, 2023), Haarmann (1989) suggests a qualitatively different language profiling for languages whose positions are endangered by English. He points to the absence of a European “flair” in English but a strong presence of it in French. However, a language marketing top-down strategy is unlikely to succeed if it deviates from real speakers’ opinions (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). Today’s market is governed by economy and digital culture, not by policies and institutions.

The prestige of the languages examined here is a crucial sign of the choice of foreign languages in the development of a multilingual habitus of foreign language learners. Based on the language value profiles, insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the prestige of the languages examined was gained, which provides some opportunities to better profile certain foreign languages. More brief and long-term research in this area is needed in multilingual populations in Europe and other parts of the world.

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