

## **Schools in the City of Buenos Aires: scenes of language policies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on certain language policies that have taken place in the schools of the City of Buenos Aires. More specifically, from a historical-structural perspective (Tollefson, 2015) and within the theory of language management (Spolsky, 2004, 2009), this article inquires into the socio-historical factors that determine the presence or absence of the foreign languages taught at primary level schools as well as their geographical distribution. In this way, we expect to contribute to a deeper understanding of the emergence, validity and transformational capacity of the language policies in the school domain.

*Keywords:* primary education; foreign language teaching; language policy; language management; historical-structural analysis.

### **RESUMEN**

Este artículo se enfoca en las políticas lingüísticas que han tenido lugar en las escuelas de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Más específicamente, asumiendo una perspectiva de análisis histórico-estructural (Tollefson, 2015) y enmarcado en la teoría de la gestión de lenguas (Spolsky, 2004, 2009), indaga en los factores sociohistóricos que determinan la presencia o ausencia de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en las escuelas primarias de la Ciudad, así como su distribución geográfica. Busca así aportar a la comprensión acerca de los modos de emergencia, vigencia y capacidad transformadora de las políticas lingüísticas en el ámbito escolar.

*Palabras clave:* educación primaria; enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras; política lingüística; gestión de lenguas; análisis histórico-estructural

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THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT has traditionally been one of the privileged domains of language policy application, so much so that a specific subfield in this discipline has arisen: educational language policy (Beacco, 2016). The centrality of these issues lies in the relevance of language, languages, and their teaching and learning in the school context and in the children's formative period. Indeed, what is at stake is their social insertion and identity, the development of skills and abilities to take the floor, their possibilities to access knowledge and to open up to other cultural universes, among other things; which is why it is relevant to understand the decisions that affect linguistic learning, the way they are implemented and their effects. That is the avenue of research that will be adopted in this article to gain greater understanding of language issues implicated in the schools in our work area, the City of Buenos Aires.

In order to make progress in this inquiry, the scope of "language policy" in this paper should be clarified. A restrictive definition that only attributes to the state the power of initiative and the responsibility of implementation, or that implies a linear and direct relation between decision, putting into practice and results would not show the complexity of the factors that guide linguistic practices in concrete fields. Actually, even a quick glimpse reveals that decisions related to languages and language at schools are made by different kinds of people that participate in the educational process, and not only the public power (local or national) through norms, political and pedagogical orientations or allotting of resources --teacher planning and methodology options, choice of texts and examples, and also the linguistic varieties they adopt at work or how they perform their normative function; parents with their support, resistance or pressure; heads of school when they conduct an institutional project which includes, implicitly or explicitly, decisions about the literacy development model, which language/s are/is taught besides the mandatory one/s, the place given to the languages spoken by the students' families, the role that all of the above have in the definition of the identity of the institution. Decisions like these have been taken in the past and still sometimes generate effects in the present, or are renewed or redefined according to social evolution, to the different representations attributed to the languages, to the demands of the community, to the changes encouraged by the educational authorities. They are also influenced by offers and incentives of other areas (with more or less weight in different times and contexts): the market, local or foreign NGOs, agencies of linguistic promotion of other countries with their contests, prizes or donations. In sum, multiple actors who participate, each in their own way, with their own interests and temporalities, at different levels (micro level at classrooms and breaks, institutional level, local and national government level and even the one of trends encouraged by international organizations and global "fads") articulated with each other in different ways, cooperative, neutral or conflictive. The traditional concept of language policy (Calvet, 1996 and other authors) is narrow to account for concrete phenomena in their complexity and multidirectionality. Therefore, we will adopt the concept of "language management" (Spolsky, 2004, 2009) to

cover this variety of courses of action about language and we will keep “language policy” to characterize these processes in their political sense and effects.

In this article, we intend to explore how language management takes place in the schools of the City of Buenos Aires. In order to limit the scope and the problem and considering the structural historic approach applied to research in this field (Tollefson, 2015), we ask ourselves about the socio-historical factors that explain the current distribution of additional languages taught at primary level in the city. Thus, the first section of this article introduces the scope and object of analysis, and focuses on sociologic factors. The middle sections address processes that derive from state initiatives or other actors (institutional, community) from a historic viewpoint. The last section focuses on a specific case, the teaching of Chinese. With this analysis, we wish to cast some light on the emergence, validity and transformational capacity of language policies at schools.

### **The territory of the City of Buenos Aires: schools and additional languages**

According to results derived from 2013 Annual Survey carried out by the National Department of Research and Quality Evaluation in Education (*Dirección Nacional de Investigación y Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación - DINIECE*, Ministry of Education), there are 883 primary schools in the City of Buenos Aires, attended by 280,525 students. The offer comprises a variety of proposals and modalities: there are 424 private schools and 450 state schools, the institutions may offer a single shift (morning or afternoon) or double shift, and they may depend on different Departments (*Primaria, Formación Docente, Gestión Privada*). Also, state double shift schools offer different educational proposals: 35 schools oriented to a field of knowledge (Arts, Science, P.E.), 26 plurilingual schools (intensified in foreign languages) and a Mandarin Chinese bilingual school.

Of all registered primary level students, the 2013 Annual Survey shows that 267,009 study foreign languages. Not only at state primary schools but also at private ones, English is the language mostly taught (studied by 90.3%), distantly followed by French (2%). The rest of the foreign languages taught at state and private schools --Chinese, Italian and Portuguese (taught in both sectors), and German or other community languages (taught at private schools)-- reach 1% altogether when it is the only language taught; however, they account for 6.7% when taught together with another language.

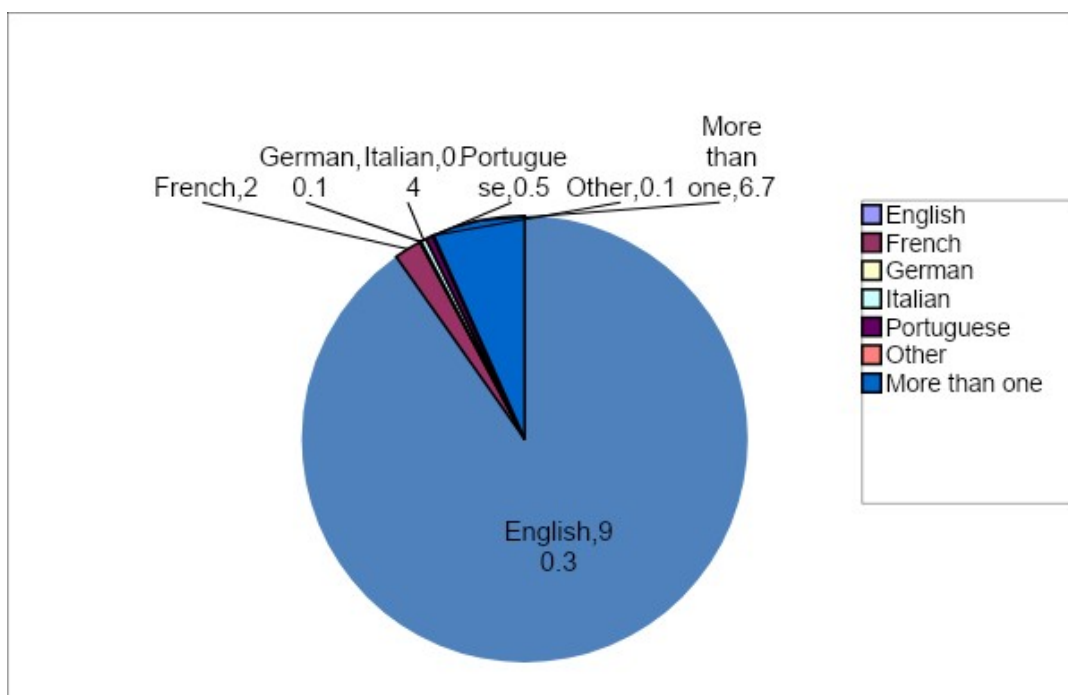


Figure 1. Percentage of students studying foreign languages at primary school level in the City of Buenos Aires  
 Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the 2013 Annual Survey, DINIECE.

When taking each sector (state or private) into consideration, significant differences can be seen in the amount of students that learn each language, particularly among the group that studies more than one language. In the private sector, the latter triple those in the state-run. Unluckily for our research, the instrument of data collection used in the Annual Survey does not enable us to identify the languages taught when they are more than one; however, inquiries made in representative institutions tend to confirm that the “more than one” category in private schools usually combines a community language (Arabic, Armenian, Hebrew, German, Greek, Italian, etc.) and English, while in state schools the combination is a Neo-Latin language (French, Italian or Portuguese) and English.

Another difference between state and private schools lies in the distribution of those languages which is unequal, except for English. While French and Italian are widely present in the state-run sector, German and Portuguese have a bigger number of students in the private one.

	English	French	German	Italian	Portuguese	Other	More than one language	Total
State-run sector	133.217	4.815	0	920	181	0	4.554	143.687
Private sector	107.662	590	360	171	1.131	180	13.228	123.322
Total	240.879	5.405	360	1.091	1.312	180	17.782	

Table 1. Students by language and sector at primary school level in the City of Buenos Aires  
 Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the 2013 Annual Survey, DINIECE.

### Distribution of language teaching in socioeconomic key

Due to its history and size, the City of Buenos Aires is far from being socially homogeneous. For this reason, as Di Pietro *et al* (2014) suggest, demographic and socioeconomic data is essential when analyzing offer and distribution of educational units and languages in the various areas.

The socioeconomic characteristics of the field we base our research on is backed by studies made by Di Pietro *et al* (2014), Di Virgilio *et al* (2015) and Fachelli *et al* (2015). These authors coincide in identifying three big areas according to their population profile: a residential area of high socioeconomic level in the north (communes 2, 13 and 14), a residential area of mid socioeconomic level which stems from the centre of the City (communes 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7) and stretches to the west (communes 11, 12 and 15) and a low socioeconomic level area to the south (communes 4, 8, 9 and 10)<sup>i</sup>.

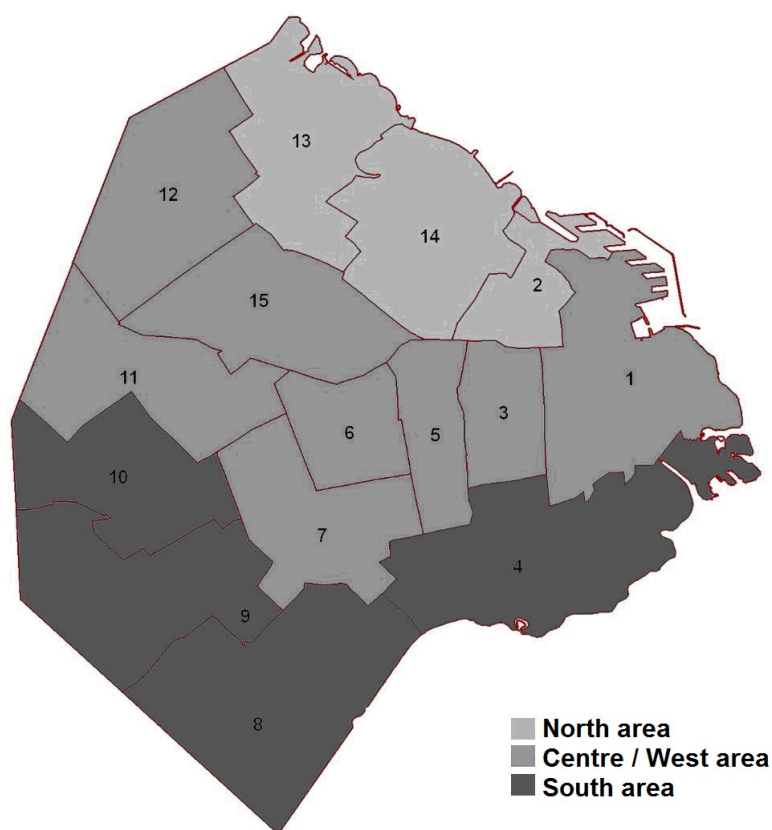


Figure 2. Communes and areas in the City of Buenos Aires. Source: Own elaboration on the basis of Di Pietro *et al.*, 2014; Di Virgilio *et al.*, 2015 y Fachelli *et al.*, 2015.

As mentioned above, the total amount of service units is allotted evenly among the sectors. However, when analyzing offer per area, this balance is kept only in the centre/west. While in the south state schools nearly double those in the private sector, the opposite occurs in the north. The same situation can be observed when analyzing enrolment numbers per area and sector.

Area	State-run sector		Private sector	
	Service units	Students	Service units	Students
North	57	17.209	116	33.817
Centre/West	240	69.212	220	66.895
South	162	60.365	88	33.027
TOTAL	459	146.786	424	133.739

*Table 2. Service units and students by area and sector. Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the 2013 Annual Survey, DINIECE.*

The above disparities lead us to wonder what happens when an additional variable is considered: the additional languages taught. Thus, when the students enrolled at school are analyzed per language and sector in the different areas of the City, the scenario is far from being balanced.

In the north, where enrolment in the private sector is twice as much as in the state-run sector, the relation stays the same among the number of students who study English. In contrast, access to more than one additional language is exclusive to the private sector. Also, the number of students of French is twice as much in the state-run sector and there is nearly the same number of students of Italian and Portuguese in both sectors.

In the centre, where total registration is the same between sectors, the equivalence is only kept among students who have access to English. The private sector concentrates the whole of the students of German and Portuguese and triples the amount of students who have access to more than one additional language. On the other hand, the state-run sector concentrates all the students of Italian and most of the students of French.

In the south, where state registration doubles the private one, such relation stays the same only with the English language. The same number of students of each sector accesses more than one language (therefore offer is lower in the state sector), while the other Neo-Latin languages exist only in the state-run sector.

Area	Sector	English	French	German	Italian	Portuguese	Other	More than one language
North	State-run	14.467	800	0	180	29	0	512
	Private	25.986	302	87	171	25	0	4.784
Center	State-run	63.225	2.992	0	236	0	0	2.373
	Private	52.164	288	273	0	1.106	180	6.785
South	State-run	55.525	1.023	0	504	152	0	1.669
	Private	29.512	0	0	0	0	0	1.659

*Table 3. Students by language, area and sector, at primary school level in the City of Buenos Aires Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the 2013 Annual Survey, DINIECE.*

The data allows for some preliminary hypothesis regarding the logics and criteria of distribution of languages at primary level. First, the offer of English (visibly predominant in both sectors) is predictable, following the variations of total enrolment numbers. On the

other hand, data about other languages taught at primary level show a variety of processes: a correlation between French and Italian, the state-run sector and mid and low socioeconomic level areas, which supposes the dependence of these offers on decisions of the public authorities; in contrast, the offer of German at this level is supported by private initiatives exclusively in areas of mid and high socioeconomic level; the highest amount and diversity of languages in the private sector and in favoured areas may reveal positive assessment and high investment of these sectors in early language learning, particularly Portuguese, which contrasts the weak presence and uneven distribution of this language in the state offer. Lastly, the almost null presence of “other” languages alongside the high number of students of “more than one language” in the private area might be considered as two sides of the same phenomenon.

To sum up, this initial quantitative analysis reveals a scenario characterized by a distribution of the offer of languages which, although diverse, is by no means random. In order to interpret the underlying processes it is necessary to disentangle the different ways of language management: state language policies, institutional projects, community and third party actions which overlap, intersect and tense.

### **State language policies in the City of Buenos Aires**

In this section we will discuss the origin and nature of state decisions related to the inclusion of foreign language teaching in primary schools. The choice of a historic viewpoint has led us to detect relations between such decisions and the ups and downs in both domestic and, above all, foreign policies.

#### **Teaching of foreign languages at schools: a diplomatic issue**

Apart from a couple of schools which depend from teacher training institutions, modern languages (*lenguas vivas*) were not part of the primary school curricula in the City of Buenos Aires until the end of the 1960's, when they were introduced in the schools which started offering double shift (210 out of 425 schools). In fact, the set of regulations adopted by the National Council of Education (*Consejo Nacional de Educacion*) in 1968, after assessment of experiences as from 1957 when double shift was introduced, determined that a foreign language should be taught as from 4<sup>th</sup> form<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to the set traditions at secondary level, which acknowledged a certain evenness in the offer of English and French (at least until the 1943 reform –Azar, 1999: 78-, which introduced the teaching of Italian in spaces formerly reserved for French), English would be offered widely in most schools, while French only in 16 and Italian in 2.

Such quantitative difference and the shift from the traditional position of French in Buenos Aires culture can be explained by international historical processes. In 1961 Argentina joins the Alliance for Progress, a program of economic, social and political aid that USA offered to Latin American countries and thus ratifies its integration to the zone of

influence of the northern power. In an attempt to recover prestige and attractiveness, France proposes cooperation agreements to the countries in the region, such as the one signed by Argentina in 1964<sup>ii</sup>. This agreement required that the teaching of French should be encouraged at all educational levels without any restrictions and giving the language a predominant place (art. 1). The decision to include French among the languages taught at double shift schools (7.5% of all) can be interpreted as a materialization of such commitment. The spatial distribution of the offer reveals practices and social representations related to language at the time. Most of the schools which teach French are located in the central area (*cf. supra*), on an axis that goes from the centre of the city to the west (coincidental with the route of Rivadavia Av.). This is the same area of settlement of middle class who, in its rise, starts creating modern society. The middle class is the privileged target of public policy (Varela, 2006, 2006 b) and not high class -whose competence in French is taken for granted- or popular classes who, at that time, are not taken into account by such policy.

Although weak (and therefore revealing of the political weight of the different sides), the presence of Italian can also be explained by diplomatic commitments, such as the Italian-Argentine cultural agreement signed by both countries in 1964<sup>ii</sup>. The presence of this offer, however, in southern areas (Boca and Barracas) is explained by different factors: not only by the historical settlement of Italian migrants in the area but also because of the previous intervention of the Italian government through its embassy –maybe supported by communitarian entities- and validated by local educational authorities. Thus, in the July 22, 1957 National Council of Education bulletin the following can be read:

“Authorization for Italian language courses”

File 2,920/C.E. 4/56-Buenos Aires. 12/4/1957. 1) Authorize two Italian language courses at School No. 19, C.E. 4; one for children and one for adults from 6:00 pm to 6:45 pm and from 7:00 pm to 8:20 pm, respectively, conducted by Miss. Paula Riva, appointed by the Italian Embassy (p.16). (Our translation).

Shortly before, the same Council had decided

“to accept and thank His Excellency, the Ambassador of the Italian Republic for his offer to provide financial support for the teaching of Italian at “*Republica de Italia*” school (No. 4 C.E. 4), to those who wish to attend after curricular hours, and to adults who are interested in such language (National Council of Education bulletin 9/1/57, p.32, our translation).

From such small presence to its current position, we can say that Italian, in proportion, has gained more space in public primary schools than French has. Apart from the Plurilingual Schools Programme (which will be later addressed), where French is taught in 4 schools as a



first foreign language and in 4 as a second foreign language, and Italian, in 4 and 5 respectively, Italian is currently taught in 5 schools as a first foreign language, in 2 others as a second foreign language in different areas of the city, besides the southern areas, where it keeps significant presence. French, in contrast, has retained the same number of schools as that in 1968 (16). Different factors have contributed to the policy for the promotion of Italian to be more effective in proportion; among them, actions derived from the Cooperation Agreement in relation with the launch of a programme for maintenance, strengthening and insertion of the study of the Italian language and culture at schools under the City of Buenos Aires government (GCBA) signed between GCBA and the General Italian Consulate in 1997, countersigned every three years. In 2014, under the government of Mauricio Macri (of Italian origin), this agreement was replaced by a new one, which will be in effect until 2019 by which GCBA commits to

keeping the teaching of Italian in the period 2014/2016 in those schools where the experience has been highly positive and assessing the possibility of extending it to other realities, especially to plurilingual schools, *maintaining or increasing* the number of school hours taught until the current agreement has been signed<sup>1</sup> (Our translation, emphasis added).

In contrast with the agreements related to the Italian language, those concerned with French signed after 1964<sup>1</sup> do not commit the government of the City of Buenos Aires to extending it (but to *guaranteeing* its curricular teaching<sup>1</sup>). As regards English, however, none of the measures that helped its absolute predominance in the offer of foreign languages is the result of international agreements.

Let's analyze some of them:

- In 1980 the Curricular Design for primary teaching in the City of Buenos Aires, in effect until 2001, was approved (Resolution No. 3000/1980-Secretariat of Education). The document included teaching guidelines only for English, although both French and Italian were being taught as part of the curricula.
- By 1992 Decree No.538, modules are designed for the teaching of English for students of 1<sup>st</sup> cycle in some double shift schools, most of them located in the north of the city<sup>1</sup>. Among the recitals of this measure, “the communal demand for learning English”, which would be “progressively greater” was argued.
- Resolution No. 841/1996 stipulates the incorporation of the teaching of English in all single shift schools, as from 4<sup>th</sup> form. In this case, the arguments that support the option for English actually apply to foreign languages in general:

that the knowledge of foreign languages is an *essential tool* for development in the modern world;

that in the framework of a plurilingual offer it is *necessary to ensure proficiency in at least one foreign language* in the school population as a whole;

*that the choice of the first [foreign] language to teach must be made in consideration of its likelihood of wide use in order to access the most updated sources of information; [...]*”(Our translation, emphasis added)

Nothing, except for implicit evidence, shows that the language to be taught should be English.

What we do observe in this elliptical argumentation is the consideration of “plurilingual offer” (i.e., the effective presence of different languages in the educational proposal of the schools of the city, as a result of decisions made in the past) which reveals at least a friction between an argument that naturalizes the hegemony of English and another which supports plurality as a positive value.

### **From bi- to plurilingualism**

This idea starts to form in the official sphere of the city –in contrast with the movement in favour of the generalization of English as *international language* fostered by the government in those years<sup>i</sup> -- under the Radical party administration led by Fernando de la Rúa (City Mayor as from August 1996). However, it will be in the following period –Ibarra and Telerman (FREPASO) administration- from August 2000 to December 2007, when an innovative language policy will appear. In the framework of this new policy the Bilingual Schools Programme of the City of Buenos Aires is introduced, with the purpose of “introducing foreign languages teaching systematically, intensively and gradually as from 1<sup>st</sup> form in state primary schools” (Resolution No. 786/SED/01, our translation).

Following a “curricular justice” criterion<sup>i</sup>, actions would initially focus on the socioeconomic disfavoured population of the schools to the south of the city. In view of the reality of the field, and at the request of the technical team in charge of the programme, the initial project quickly becomes the “Plurilingual Modality Schools Programme with Intensification in First and Foreign Languages” (Resolution No. 2736/SED/02): a huge change in paradigm that leaves behind the initial objective of a Spanish-English school bilingualism based on an equity criterion and replaces it with one of integration of the knowledge of two foreign languages with the language of schooling and the first language(s) of the students (or “language practices” in general) and the rest of the curricular subjects. The transition between one model and the other also implies decisions as to which languages will be included in the plurilingualism encouraged by the programme: the traditional array of international languages taught in formal Argentine education (English, French, German<sup>i</sup> and Italian), to which Portuguese is added for the first time at primary level.

At this point, it is worth considering how each school adopted “plurilingualism”. In other words, how it was decided which languages would be taught and in which order, in each case. According to Ms. Lucila Gassó, former coordinator of the programme, while the schools chosen to participate in the programme (one per school district) were selected by the

authorities because of strategic reasons; the rest of the decisions were left in the hands of the school heads. Thus, several factors were taken into account: previous situation regarding the language taught at the school, historic-identitarian factors (e.g., if the students were in contact with people living close to Brazil, as in the case of the schools named Province of Corrientes and Province of Misiones, which chose Portuguese as the first foreign language, or if they were located in former Italian immigrant settlements, which has undoubtedly had an influence on the incorporation of such language in La Boca and Barracas plurilingual schools), together with other more arbitrary or diffuse factors. The care for balance in plurality, therefore, was assumed by those responsible for the programme and resulted in skilful negotiations with the school heads. As we can still see today<sup>1</sup>, the intervention has left long lasting effects in the linguistic school map of the city, and remains even when the political-linguistic orientation of the current administration has taken different ways (*cf. infra*, § 4).

After this brief outline of the state initiatives regarding the languages taught at the schools of the city, we can draw some conclusions. First, there seems to be a straightforward relation between foreign language policy and foreign policy, i.e., the official view about the international positioning of the country, which determines partners or privileged allies in such field. The ideological proximity and the strategic interest that leads two countries (or, recent evolution, sub national entities such as the cities of Buenos Aires and Beijing) to become politically connected has, given certain conditions (recognized vehicular value and prestige to the partner's language, specially) effects on the linguistic and educational policy. In these cases, state schools work as the place for the realization of such projects of diplomatic nature. In contrast to what happens with French, Italian or Chinese, the decisions concerning English do not relate with explicit diplomatic commitments but rather to acceptance by the education authorities of a hegemonic power of diffuse origin: an imperative of the time, or a social demand. Also, it is noticeable that not always have state policies followed top-down movements in their constitution. Local active processes and willingness (in the process of implementation of plurilingual schools) even ended up being conditions of feasibility of the project.

The fact is that founding interventions which take place in certain moments of history under specific circumstances, with defined arguments and objectives, leave a trace: the (small) current plurilingualism in language teaching at Buenos Aires schools is, thus, in great extent, a historic inheritance.

### **Language policies in institutions and communities**

The overlap of interests (international, institutional and communitarian) influencing language management in the curriculum does not take place solely in the state-run sector. In fact, several agents ought to be taken into account to illuminate the underlying reasons for the decisions regarding languages in the private sector as well.

There are a great number of private schools in the City of Buenos Aires, many of which were founded by immigrant communities (Arabs, Armenians, Basques, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Japanese, Koreans, among others). Even if these communities have spread across the city over time, the location of their schools is a reminder of their original settlements, the neighbourhoods where the newly arrived established their first religious and communitarian centres. Such is the case of the Armenian and Greek schools in Palermo and Villa Crespo, the Arab schools in Floresta and San Cristóbal, the Jewish schools in Balvanera, Flores and Villa Crespo, or the Korean school in Flores.

The identitarian adscription of these institutions is undeniable: it emerges in their educational ideals, crests, flags and curricular projects. However, according to the data collected, the number of students studying the community languages at school (Italian, German, and those in the “other” category) is extremely low. This apparent inconsistency in the data is explained by the fact that all these schools have also included English as an additional (foreign) language in their curriculums. The schools differ in the status assigned to the languages taught, though: in some institutions, the community language loses value in relation to English, while in others the community language is stripped off its communitarian status to become an international language.

In the first case we identify institutions that find it impossible to insist of the compulsory learning of the community language, either because the new generations lack interest in it or because the school begins to attract students who do not belong to the community. The schools in this situation (the Arab, Armenian or Greek schools, for instance) have thus opted for English as the main additional language, while the community languages have been relegated to a second place. These languages are taught in optional courses for the children who do not belong to the community (for example Armenian at Colegio Mekhitarista o Instituto San Gregorio el Iluminador) or in after school classes (as the Arab courses at Instituto Argentino Árabe Islámico<sup>ii</sup>), or still remain compulsory subjects but with a low class load (e.g.: Greek at Instituto Incorporado Colectividad Helénica o Hebrew at Escuela ORT). These changes in the status of the languages hardly ever follow a planned institutional language policy. Instead, they tend to occur progressively and “by default”. Moreover, they reveal the tensions between varied, and even contrasting, representations about languages, in which the instrumental academic and professional value attributed to English outweighs the cultural and identity value of the community languages, a value which is actually too distant or even nonexistent for most students and their families. Nonetheless, the schools do not relinquish their identitarian adscription, and since the community language is no longer the main guarantor of the cultural transmission, this role falls mostly on religious practices, art (music, dancing) and school liturgy.

In the second case we find schools which consider their linguistic-cultural patrimony the core of their institutional identity. These are institutions typically located in the north area of the city, with a high academic profile and which attract students from middle or high

socioeconomic levels. In the same scenario of the arrival of students from outside the community, these schools adopt an explicit institutional language policy characterized for adding English to their curriculum, but alongside the community language. They define themselves as “bilingual” institutions (Escuela Comunitaria Arlene Fern, Colegio Beth), “plurilingual and pluricultural” (Instituto Privado Argentino Japonés en Buenos Aires) “bicultural and trilingual” (Escuela Italiana Cristoforo Colombo) or “bicultural and multilingual” (Colegio Pestalozzi), and it is precisely because of the languages they offer that these schools gain competitive advantage. The strategy of keeping the community language does not relieve them from tensions, though. At these schools, the languages depart from their close affiliation to the local immigrant community to get redefined as global or international languages, a new label institutionally supported and consolidated by strengthening ties with foreign universities (such as Cambridge University or Okinawa University) and agencies for language and cultural policy (Jewish Agency for Israel, DAAD, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, etc.), which offer access to study trips, international examinations or dual certification of studies.

Both cases reveal that the institutional decisions regarding languages are not taken in isolation. All the community schools that have been investigated share similar characteristics: they were founded by local immigrant communities and they have received international support at some point of their (past or recent) history –by embassies, international cooperation agencies, ministries of foreign affairs or other governmental organizations of their countries of origin. The scope of the synergy varies in each institution, depending on the ability to match the local efforts to the foreign policies of cultural promotion or their financial capacity.

### **The case of Chinese: state and community policies**

According to the Communities Observatory of the City of Buenos Aires statistics, 80% of the Chinese population that arrived to our country settled down in the City of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires. In the city, the area surrounding Belgrano C train station became known as Chinatown, the centre of the Chinese and Taiwanese community where they set up their institutions: shops, civil associations, religious centres and non-official schools. The latter offer after-school or Saturday courses of Chinese language and culture for the children of the community.

What makes the case of Chinese different from the other community languages is that it has been the target of language policies designed by the local government over the past years. These actions have taken place mostly in the educational arena, and the most salient result has been the opening of the Argentine-Chinese Bilingual School<sup>iii</sup> in 2014. This school, inaugurated by then Mayor of Buenos Aires M. Macri in an event with high media coverage, was born from a strategic and commercial alliance settled in a Cooperation

Agreement<sup>iv</sup> signed in 2009 between the City of Beijing and the local authorities. The agreement establishes cooperation and joint action in several areas, such as urban development and infrastructure, culture, tourism, transport, health and education.

The school is located in Parque Patricios and it offers a bilingual curriculum applying the model of reciprocal immersion. In the opening ceremony, the Chinese Embassy Cultural Advisor explained that the school also meets a recurrent demand of the Chinese community for official education<sup>v</sup>. However, decisions regarding location, human resources and curriculum were made by officials of the embassy and of the Ministries of Education of Beijing and Buenos Aires, with no participation of the community. The two sides also hold different representations of the language: while for some it is a vehicle of cultural transmission and a link to the country of origin, for the others it is a global language for the future<sup>vi</sup>. These disparities may explain the characteristics of the first students enrolled, mostly Spanish-speaking children living in close to the school (Argentinean or from neighbouring countries) and only a reduced number of Chinese students coming from Belgrano and other areas by a bus provided by the school.

The Argentine-Chinese Bilingual School is not the only school where students have access to that language, though. There is another case of a state primary school that has been authorized to include Chinese in its curricula (Res. N° 1356/MEGC/2015). This school<sup>vii</sup>, located in Belgrano neighbourhood and depending from the Department of Teacher Training (*Dirección de Formación Docente*), has been delivering Chinese courses since 2015. In this case, the inclusion of Chinese answers to an actual need of the institution, which, due to its location, was already receiving a great number of students from the community. Yet, the model implemented has little to do with that of reciprocal immersion aforementioned: this single shift school offers an hour extension with Chinese classes for first cycle students (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> formers) and optional after school classes for students in second cycle (4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> formers).

In a kind of contagion effect, some private institutions have also started to include Chinese classes, either in curricular or extra-curricular courses. Far from communitarian purposes, they base the arguments for its inclusion on the attributed instrumental value of the language from a purely strategic commercial standpoint. For example, at Lincoln College, a traditional private elite school, the primary school students have been learning Chinese since 2014 because it is a “new tool for their future<sup>viii</sup>”.

These recent experiences reveal disparity in the financial and human resources devoted to the teaching of Chinese at primary school level, even within the same sector. A similar disparity emerges in the value and status attributed to the language, a global language for the government officials and some institutions, a vehicle for identitarian and cultural transmission for the Chinese-speaking community. It is true that the inclusion of Chinese in state primary level schools is a very young and scarce phenomenon, but it gains greater relevance when looking at other actions of state language policy outside formal education:

the offering of extra-curricular courses at secondary school level<sup>ix</sup>, the inclusion of Chinese in the CLE examinations<sup>x</sup> since 2014, the presence of the language in Buenos Aires Book Fair since 2016. All in all, these actions seem to confirm that Chinese has entered into the education system of the city as a language of high instrumental value, which, in the current political scenario, may gain ground against other foreign languages in the curriculum.

### **Conclusion and implications**

In this temporal and socio-spatial journey we have undertaken to try and comprehend the process that have led to the current distribution of foreign languages in the primary school level in the City of Buenos Aires, we have managed to identify various configurations of language policy at different points in time. From top-down interventions planned by the state (the incorporation of foreign languages in double shift schools in 1968), to actions presented as a response to social demand (the widespread teaching of English); from focal interventions negotiated with the beneficiaries (the Plurilingual Schools Programme), to actions conditioned by diplomatic agreements; from institutional policies with explicit rationale and objectives, to other that just happen, driven by inherent inertia.

Nevertheless, these processes take place over a pre-existent social fabric, and they are an expression of it, as well as a manifestation of the intention of the actions that seek to intervene in it. The traces of the Italian immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are inscribed in the decisions that sustain the teaching of Italian in the south of the city, even if the language acquires a new meaning in the current context in which Italy seems to be an interesting political and economic partner. The French foreign language policy promoted since the 1960s, which aims at extending knowledge of French in the middle classes from countries such as ours, still produces effects. The community languages resist, with diverse strength, an assimilating process of unknown fate, whereas those which manage to redefine themselves as international or, even better, global, survive and expand. And if the assimilating process turns overwhelmingly to the predominance of English (facilitated, more often than not, by state policies), the elite schools place high value on plurilingualism, to the extent that it becomes the core of their educational proposal and institutional identity. It is a plurilingualism (or cosmopolitanism) of global languages, which includes English, French, German, Italian and, lately, Chinese and Portuguese.

The situation of Chinese and Portuguese, with conspicuous presence or absence in recent state policy, is particularly revealing. In the case of Portuguese, the status of valuable international/global language attributed by some private elite schools has no correlation in the decisions affecting the teaching of languages in state schools, where it is barely present despite its geographical, linguistic and cultural proximity. And when compared to the boosting of Chinese, the difference becomes even more striking.

This last example is a good synthesis and an open door to start new inquiries into language policies that shape the history and place of the languages in the City of Buenos

Aires. To unravel the mechanisms and intentions of the decisions on language policy, we cannot but question the underlying social model and geopolitical project in which they are inscribed.

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i. At the time of the 2013 Annual Survey, the bilingual Mandarin Chinese state-run school did not have students learning that language in the primary level yet. According to the City government, 400 children will be able to enroll in that school (<http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/la-ciudad-inauguro-la-primera-escuela-bilingue-argentino-china>). Nor had the English-Mandarin Chinese intensification started in the primary level at Escuela Normal Superior N° 10 “Juan Bautista Alberdi”.

ii. As from 2005, the City of Buenos Aires has been reorganized politically and administratively in 15 communes, decentralised territorial units usually comprising more than one neighbourhood (Law N° 1777/05, City of Buenos Aires). This new organizations has not modified the population distribution that has characterised the different areas of the city since the beginning of the 20th Century.

iii. The few schools chosen to apply a pilot plan included the teaching of a foreign language as from 1<sup>st</sup> form. This stopped in 1973, after the introduction of the new regulations for double shift schools, which stated the start of language teaching as from 3<sup>rd</sup> form.

- iv. Cultural, scientific and technical cooperation agreement between the Argentine Republic and the French Republic governments.
- v. Cf. Bein, n.d., <http://www.linguasur.com.ar/panel/archivos/f9227ef50db3de732e1d3f897de85aa8Bein%20lenguas%20extranjer.pdf>.
- vi. Cooperation Agreement between the government of the City of Buenos Aires and the Consulate General of the Italian Republic in Buenos Aires, 2014, art 6
- vii. Cooperation Agreements between the Embassy of the Republic of France and the former Secretariat of Education of the City of Buenos Aires, 2001 and 2005; Educational, scientific and academic cooperation agreement between the French Embassy and the City of Buenos Aires, 2013.
- viii. Cf. art. 5to. Full text of the agreement at <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/sites/gcaba/files/conven-franciagcba.pdf>
- ix. Schools involved: No. 4 and 9 D. E. 9, No. 6 and 22 D.E. 10, No. 2 and 22 D.E. 14, No. 3 and 27 D.E. 15, No. 4 D.E. 13, No. 19 D.E. 20, No. 13 D.E. 19, No. 5 D.E. 21.
- x. Cf. e.g., Ministry of Culture and Education: *Common Basic Contents for Polimodal Education*, 1966
- xi. Cf. Castillo, L., in Ruiz de Aguirre, 2013: 125.
- xii. Although the inclusion of German in the programme was considered, it was never implemented (Lucila Gassó, personal interview, May 2017).
- xiii. <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/educacion/idiomas/idiomas-en-primaria/escuelas-plurilingues>
- xiv. We would like to thank Libertad Fructuoso for kindly sharing information on Instituto Argentino Árabe Islámico, which is part of her research work at Maestría en Gestión de Lenguas, UNTREF.
- xv. School No. 28 D.E. 5. In this double shift school, two bilingual classes for 4- and 5- year-olds were authorised in 2014. As from 2015, the Bilingual Modality started at primary level.
- xvi. Cooperation Agreement N° 26/2009, Law of the City of Buenos Aires N° 3565/2010.
- xvii. "The Chinese residents used to complain because of the lack of official schools to send their children; that is why we put forward this need to Minister [of Education] Esteban Bullrich, and this project was completed soon' explained Mengtang Han, Cultural Advisor of the Chinese Republic Embassy in Buenos Aires" ("Una escuela en la que se hablan chino y español", *Diario La Nación*, 18/3/2014, our translation).
- xviii. "In the past, people would learn French to read literature and English to do business. What will the language of the future be? It may be Chinese." Official Facebook post of then Mayor of Buenos Aires, M. Macri on the inauguration of the school (18/03/2014, our translation).
- xix. Escuela Normal Superior No 10 "Juan Bautista Alberdi" D.E. 10, located in the vicinity of Chinatown.
- xx. Cf. [http://www.lincoln.esc.edu.ar/nivel\\_primario.php](http://www.lincoln.esc.edu.ar/nivel_primario.php). Last access 1/6/2017.
- xxi. Bussiness School No. 7 D.E. 10 "Manuel Belgrano" (in 2011) y School No 18 D.E. 18 "Dr. Alberto Larroque" (in 2013)
- xxii. Foreign Languages Certificates (*Certificados en Lenguas Extranjeras*), exams to accredit knowledge in foreign languages for students who are studying in state and private schools in the City of Buenos Aires.