Plenary session: “Multilingualism in education – policy, threats and opportunities”

T. Marinis: Language development in multilingual children and challenges as well as opportunities for educational systems

In this talk I will present findings from two studies addressing language development in multilingual children in two countries with large number of multilingual families, the UK and India. A decisive difference between the two countries is that multilingualism in the UK largely results from migration, whereas multilingualism in India is part of the makeup of the society. There are also significant differences in the education systems of the two countries that bring their own challenges and opportunities: the UK and England in particular has a largely monolingual educational system, whereas India has a three-language formula, whereby all children should be taught through the medium of a regional language or mother tongue, to which an additional modern Indian language (e.g. Hindi) and English can be added as curricular subjects. Despite this largely multilingual educational system, there is an increase in language inequalities in India because a large number of children are deprived of receiving mother-tongue support and are instructed only in the regional language or English, often from teachers with limited knowledge of the language of instruction.

The UK study focuses on how primary school children develop their language and reading abilities in English as a majority language and Greek as a heritage language. The results show that the children have better language and reading skills in their majority language, which is also the language in school, compared to their heritage language, which is the language spoken in the home. Although their vocabulary skills in English are lower than those of their monolingual peers, they have better reading skills than monolingual English children. This suggests that multilingualism and multiliteracy enhances the children’s reading development.

The Indian study is part of the MultiLiLa project <https://www.mam.mml.cam.ac.uk/> that addresses how primary school children in India develop language, literacy, and mathematical skills and explores how the complex dynamics of social, economic and geographical contexts affect the delivery of quality multilingual education in India. In this talk I will present data on literacy development and mathematical skills of children from two states in India and I will address how mother tongue education and socio-economic factors impact on the development of literacy and mathematical skills.