Book reviews

LANGUAGES AND SOCIAL COHESION: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY LITERATURE REVIEW
Gabriela Meier and Simone Smala
Meier, G., & Smala, S. (2021). Routledge

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Language and Social Cohesion: A Transdisciplinary Literature Review by Gabriela Meier and Simone Smala is a timely and highly topical review on the connection between language and social cohesion in the age of globalisation.

Social cohesion is a topic increasingly debated in public and gaining attention in academia, especially following the Covid-19 pandemic and a rise of conflict around the globe. This book complements general understandings of social cohesion, economic integration, global labour markets, national identity and immigration (e.g. Walter, 2020) with much needed research on the relationship between language and social cohesion in current social contexts. The subtitle of the book indicates that the work is "a transdisciplinary literature review", whereby transdisciplinary, as explained by the authors, contains two folds of meaning; first, the overlapping of different academic disciplines; and second, researchers across disciplines working together on research topics of practical significance.

The intended readership of the book is anyone with an interest in tension and conflicts between languages and communities. Through a thematic analysis of 285 research articles from 50 countries published between 1992-2017, the book provides an extensive transdisciplinary scoping review of literature that links languages and social cohesion. The authors propose a five-dimensional framework to dissect the influence of language use on social cohesion, particularly in terms of how societies affect language and how languages are organised in a society. The book clearly highlights how social cohesion is of great significance to any society and purports socially cohesive societies are more resilient and able to cope with challenges than divided societies. It

suggests that a socially cohesive society might be described as one that is bound together by the same language, culture, and traditions. The book then unpacks this rather broad statement via research findings in applied linguistics and research literature across different disciplines.

Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction of the reasons for writing the book, namely that in a globalised world with linguistic diversity, maintaining social cohesion can be a challenge. Apart from an overview of the content, the authors also introduce two key concepts underlying this book. First, the authors provide a conventional concept of language as a stable system that can be studied. In addition, they highlight language as a means of identification and social practice, where it can be used as a political construct and interface of struggle. Second, borrowing on concepts such as social integration, community cohesion and social inclusion, the authors draw on updated sociological research findings to develop a working definition of social cohesion for this book. Their definition focuses on social cohesion as shared norms and values in a society on which people can build social trust, social networks, and a sense of belonging.

Chapter 2 draws on a scoping review of literature on different transdisciplinary perspectives to establish and link theoretical concepts of languages and social cohesion. It first discusses how languages affect society, then it investigates how social cohesion impacts on the language use of a society. This chapter ends with a transdisciplinary framework offering two dimensions of analysis to examine the relationship between language and social cohesion: 1) observable—analysis of social networks; and 2) invisible—analysis of social norms and sense of belonging.

Chapter 3 reveals the research methods employed for identifying relevant studies and the thematic analysis used for understanding the data. The authors conducted a systematic scoping review of literature and provide a quantitative description of criteria for choosing the 285 articles from 50 countries between 1992 and 2017 after screening an initial 16625 articles. The authors elaborate on how they employed thematic coding and synthesis as a data analysis method to generate five main themes from the data. While justifying the scoping review of literature published between 1992-2017 as research method for this study, the authors acknowledge the English-language bias in academic contexts and recognise that they may have missed possibly

relevant articles in languages other than English.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. In their review of the 285 articles, the authors crystalised five overarching themes to understand the connection between languages and social cohesion: Theme A highlights how social networks and access to resources through languages affect social cohesion. Theme B unpacks how language norms are related to social groups and substantiates the complex nature of norm-based social relations and linguistic repertoires. Theme C focuses on languages and group belonging and confirms linguistic allegiance as a complex affective factor shaped by historical and social context and individual identity. Theme D encompasses manifestations of linguistic behaviour that integrate or divide a society. It highlights how individual behaviour is guided by language ideologies and language behaviour can be used to integrate or divide language groups. The last theme (Theme E) continues to investigate manifestations of language behaviour, but from a top-down perspective. It analyses how social language behaviour can be informed by language policy and language planning methods such as institutional language regulation. Theme E exposes the controversial nature of language policy and language regulation; and raises awareness that language policy and implementation can polarise a society or pose a threat to social cohesion.

Chapter 5 is the brainchild and embodiment of the authors' creativity and originality. The authors ingeniously use a hexagon knot with six points and interconnecting loops to clearly demonstrate the intricate and complex interconnections and interrelationships between languages and social cohesion. The proposed six perspectives – behavioural, organisational, emotional, ideational, distributive and contextual – complement the literature on social cohesion and provide a multifaceted, systematic, and nuanced way to view the interconnection between language and social cohesion.

Critique of the book
Meier and Smala's contribution to applied linguistics and issues of social cohesion is timely, particularly in terms of its topical value in post Covid-19 pandemic conditions brimming with conflicts and clashes. Social cohesion affects how well people can work together and trust each other in a society. In an increasingly pluralised world under globalisation, with clashes and crashes in ideological values and cultural practices, it is crucial to develop a

complete understanding of the connection between language use and social cohesion. They have combed through the literature of various overlapping fields to provide a systematic framework to scrutinise the links between languages and social behaviours, social practice and social cohesion.

The authors creatively apply a geometric hexagon pattern to visualise and simplify the intricate complexity of links between language and social cohesion. Further demonstrating the originality of the book, they also sum-up the findings of their scoping review of literature with a series of well-formulated questions informed by six perspectives to inspire further dialogues and investigations on language related issues. These inspiring questions for future study reflect the authors' ambitions to transform the knowledge and distinctive insights gained from their transdisciplinary review into practical and accessible significance, prompting further consideration of how multiple languages and diverse beliefs can coexist in a globalised world.

As acknowledged by the authors, the research is heavily biased toward English-language articles published in mainly in English-mediated peer-reviewed journals with only few research papers providing data from other areas, such as China. If the authors were to publish a future edition of the book, a recommendation would be to examine social cohesion from a more complete angle including factors, such as multi-languages and heteroglossia. More non-English articles could also be added to explicate the complexity of how a national language or languages may play a role in enhancing social cohesion or addressing social disruption.

In conclusion, this insightful book is highly recommended for those who study, work, or conduct research in any field related to language, identity, and cohesive society studies. The transdisciplinary scoping review of literature, rigorous analysis, and distinct insight contained in this book make it a must-read to unpack the nuanced and complex role that languages play in the operation of society and may provide readers with new perspectives on the role of language in social conflicts facing the globalised world.

Reference

Walters, R. (2020). *National identity and social cohesion in a time of geopolitical and economic tension : Australia - European Union - Slovenia.* Springer