Language maintenance and linguistic identity in times of change

In my paper I would like to present research on the change of language maintenance of formerly Yugoslav, now Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian migrants in Germany. One of the largest group of so-called guest-workers which migrated to Germany in the 1960s-1970s came from former Yugoslavia.

Back then, Yugoslavia was a socialist, block-free state consisting of six republics and two autonomous provinces. Its standard was Serbo-Croatian with two scripts, Latin and Cyrillic. Additionally, Slovene, Albanian and Macedonian were regional languages. People mainly migrated for economic reasons and were actively recruited by German bureaus in their home-country.

The first immigrants formed very close social networks, founded clubs and were very interested in language maintenance. Additionally, Germany funded language schools – even if the intention was born out of the wish of making it easier for the 'guests' to return, which eventually in most cases did not take place.

Since then, this particular diaspora has seen many changes in its home-country and has changed accordingly. The disintegration and the political disputes surrounding the Balkan crisis also became subject within the communities abroad, eventually leading to their separation into ethnic/national groups.

The linguistic disintegration from Serbo-Croatian to Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian went hand in hand with the country's disintegration and eventually also reached the diaspora. In Germany, today it is virtually impossible to adhere to culture and language abroad, if individuals choose not to follow mainstream ethnic distinction or religion, since most of language courses are offered via religious institutions.

This has led to a situation in which many have withdrawn from official language courses and have either given up on language maintenance or try to achieve it individually through virtual networks, media and holiday visits.

I have interviewed parents (of different ethnic backgrounds) and recently arrived migrants concerning their attitudes towards language maintenance and compared it to views of first generation migrants.

The results show that there are differences on questions concerning cultural identity and on how linguistic identity is perceived and how its maintenance is rated today.

I have chosen a qualitative approach, which very much differs from my so far quantitative research on linguistic divergence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, since it is difficult to reach a now largely scattered young diaspora and due to the decreasing number of first wave immigrants. It also offered far more in-depth information on the topic of interest.