

# Dominant language constellations

---

*Larissa Aronin*

Dominant Language Constellation (DLC) is an approach responding to the global shift to language practices that rely on clusters of languages rather than on a single language or the entire language repertoire (LR). LR refers to the totality of linguistic skills in a language (Gumperz, 1964) or in all the languages mastered fully or partially. Since it is impossible to use all the skills of the entire LR due to constraints of time and efforts, normally, individuals and communities use a group of languages that are of prime importance for them—DLC. DLC is defined as a group of the most expedient languages that enable an individual, family, school, university, or organization to meet all needs in a multilingual environment (Aronin, 2006, Aronin & Vetter 2021; Lo Bianco & Aronin, 2020). In other words, DLC is an active part of LR in a particular period of time and a particular setting. A DLC typically includes three languages in their various roles (e.g., heritage, official, minority, foreign), for example, Croatian/Italian/English in Croatia or Greek/English/Vlach dialect in Greece.

The concrete language varieties involved in a DLC could be any, including spoken and sign languages, pidgins and dialects, e.g., German/ German sign language /English. Languages of a DLC differ in linguistic and usage aspects such as amount of time in use, proficiency levels, and communicative purposes. Importantly, languages of different social standing comprising a DLC are not arranged in any pre-defined importance order in contrast to the tradition of a sharp hierarchy in value accorded to different named languages in society. This feature is especially useful for linguistically and otherwise diverse learners and various population groups. Upon a choice, any language or dialect can be allocated the central role in a DLC study or teaching practices along with concurrent attention to other languages of a cluster.

When personal needs and social settings change, as in the case of family relocation, a DLC adapts for the new context in which other languages are in use by accepting a new language and leaving other languages outside a newly emerged DLC. Languages of DLC interact in a variety of diverse

contexts and times but DLC is more than the sum of the qualities of each of its languages. Therefore, each DLC is unique.

The DLC approach to multilingualism reduces the languages under examination to manageable clusters that are used “here and now.” By concentrating on actively used languages and dialects, DLC enables focused and detailed handling of linguistically diverse language users, educational systems and settings. DLCs are theoretically and empirically studied in the fields of sociolinguistics, language policy, individual and group identity studies, and teaching /learning in multilingual formal and informal instructional settings. Due to immediate and practical implications DLC has gained considerable attention in teacher training and professional development. Much of scholarly attention goes to pre-service and in-service teachers’ language awareness, enrichment in methods of informed targeted instruction, multilingual curriculum design, teaching materials, and specific techniques for enhancing the awareness of their pupils about their own language assets and about the languages of their closer and wider environment.

DLC research entails identifying patterns of multiple language use (DLCs) according to their territorial, linguistic, and societal characteristics, and investigating actual DLCs to enable their appropriate and informed use in educational and social settings. Studying and leveraging multilingualism with the help of DLC is facilitated by patterns—identifiable regularities across locations, languages, learners/users, and language practices. Patterns allow for comparisons and exchange of findings from studies in language proficiency, language use, acquisition or crosslinguistic interactions. Digital technologies have opened new paths not only to describing but also predicting possible DLCs if settings are well-defined. Quantitative, qualitative, mixed and visual methods are most often employed in DLC studies.

Various types of DLC visualization and modelling are widely used for educational and research purposes. DLC is especially instrumental for a wide range of educational activities and is aptly capitalized on in teaching practices. In addition to verbal descriptions, language biographies and portfolios (Melo-Pfeifer & Chik, 2020), a wide range of multimodal techniques is employed in language teaching (Krulatz & Duggan, 2018). These include pictures, images, figures, graphs, collages, video, art installations, DLC artefacts, and personal sets of materialities. Hands-on DLC modelling sessions are useful and enjoyable educational activities for children and adults that increase

language awareness, stimulate language learning and provide information for tailored methods of teaching. Hands-on DLC activities often divulge hidden linguistic assets, legitimising dialects that multilingual users might not even acknowledge for themselves. Visual and physical representations of DLC are also instrumental for scholarly analysis. Both handmade and digital DLC models, AI-driven applications for users, administrators, and decision makers serve as analytical tools for managing and improving multilingual education for diverse student populations across diverse contexts.

The DLC approach is used in education from primary schools through secondary school to Higher Educational Institutions, in family, social, political, and minority contexts. DLC is relevant for theory and practice, for adults and children, for learners and users, and for teachers and educators.