Preface

Recent scholarship suggests that multilingualism has replaced monolingualism as the linguistic and communicative norm (Aronin 2015: 15; Ecke 2001: 90). And indeed, an examination of the current literature reveals that in many parts of the world, attitudes to multilingualism and multilingual practices have become more favourable compared to only some decades ago, with support for minority language revitalisation and early language education programmes increasing (Fisher & Lahmann 2020: 116; Portolés Falomir 2015: 10; Vaid & Meuter 2017: 8), and acceptance of multilingual practices augmenting (cf. Elin Thordardottir 2017: 20; Enever 2009: 16; Rajendram 2021: 2; Rodrick Beiler 2019: 22). This positive trend is to some degree the merit of intensive international research output, but it is also, especially in Europe, linked to the efforts of European institutions and policy makers who in their aim to promote multilingualism as an asset for Europe have been seeking to raise “awareness of the value and opportunities of the EU’s linguistic diversity” (European Commission 2008: 5). This said, all is not well and there are many ‘construction sites’ as of yet. For instance, a report commissioned by the European Commission (2017), found that in most European countries, multilingual education is still far from being a reality. The report highlights that although “there is evidence on the benefits of multilingualism, very few European countries presently support multilingualism at school and thereby miss an opportunity to capitalise on the advantages it brings to the learning process” (6). Indeed, in many countries in Europe multilingual pedagogies still meet with resistance. This is particularly true of education systems which are oriented towards sedimented monolingual canons. With language classrooms still very much pervaded by an ideology of monoglossia and monoglossic normativity, diversity of usage – as is characteristic of multilingual practices – is widely deprived of a legitimate status and instead incurs disapproval as flawed and deficient (Paquet-Gauthier & Beaulieu 2016: 171; Stopfner & Engel 2019: 75).

Adding to this there is in the specific minority setting of South Tyrol an historically determined fixation with the autochtonous German ‘mother tongue’, a de facto imposition of monolingualism (Giudiceandrea & Mazza 2012: 79) resulting from politico-strategic efforts to position the German minority language as under threat from the assimilationist influences of the former Fascist-colonialist powers. An officially trilingual region situated in the north of Italy on the border to Austria and Switzerland, South Tyrol, like most European countries, has seen substantive changes over the past few years. In analogy to the changing demographics at the global level, its socio-cultural landscape has undergone important transformations. Due mainly to employment-related immigration, the area has, within a short space of time, become a thoroughly multilingual place and home to people from 138 dif-
ferent nations (Astat Info 2020: 8). For the education system, these developments present significant challenges relating in particular to issues such as how best to tackle the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the classrooms and make sure that the presence of multiple languages does not obstruct local children's language development and academic learning.

It is the complexity of the South Tyrol context where minority language issues intermingle with those linked to the ‘new multilingualisms’, as result from recent waves of migration and new ways of languaging, which provides the backdrop to this study, and it is against this highly complex background that the book sets out to investigate early multilingual competences understood as young learner-users’ multilingual resourcefulness and agency.

With complexity constituting a major focal point, complexity thinking provides a propitious frame of reference for the current research. To the best of my knowledge no attempt has been made thus far to apply Complexity and Dynamic Systems Thinking to the study of multilingual competences in young learner-users. In breaking new untrodden ground, the book therefore has an important contribution to make towards augmenting scholarly understanding of early multi-competence. Originating in the natural sciences, Complexity and Dynamic Systems Thinking has, over the past two decades or so, found increasing application in the social sciences, in applied linguistics and multilingualism research. By offering new perspectives on long-standing – encrusted – theoretical positions and ideologies, complexity thinking has important implications for how (institutionalized) multilingual learning is framed, both at the politico-educational and wider societal level. Approaching multilingualism from a complex dynamic systems-inspired perspective, it will be argued, has the potential to change the way we think and talk about multilingual realities and multilingual education, both, in South Tyrol and beyond.

Framed within a multilingual orientation the book embraces a holistic conception of linguistic competence. As such it rejects the constraints of native-speakerism and unilingual norm expectations and takes special account of identity- and context-related aspects implicated in the formation and enactment of learner-users’ multilingual competence. The principal aims of the volume are then to

- offer a dynamic and complexity-inspired view of early multilingual competence building (MCB)
- highlight new conceptions of the (young) multilingual learner-user
- present holistic notions of ‘language competence’
- provide a new comprehensive framework for the discussion of early multilingual development (MLD) and competence building (the two notions clearly overlapping)
– propose a new measure for the assessment of multilingual competences (MCT) in young learner-users
– stimulate trans-disciplinary approaches to multilingualism research, and
– further research in the field.

The approach taken is innovative for several reasons. First, the author presents a new extended framework for the study of early multi-competence by conjoining complex dynamic systems thinking with recent psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and ecology-inspired principles. A major thrust of the book consists in weaving these new perspectives together into one explanatory model for the development of multilingual competences at the individual learner level. Second, the book proposes a conception of multilingual competences with English as a valuable educational target to be aimed at from pre-school to university and a view of the multilingual learner-user as a competent speaker-hearer (Grosjean 1989) and L3 user (cf. Cook 2002). Finally, the book advocates the application of multilingual measures alongside the assessment of single language proficiencies and presents a new practical tool for the investigation of multilingual competences with English in young learner-users at the primary level.