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United in diversity: Multilingual language policy and democracy building in the EU

Orsolya Katalin Szabo, PhD
Universitá degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza, Italy

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Abstract

The present study undertakes to examine how plurilingual practices in a political entity relate to the principles of democracy, with a particular focus on the European Union. In academia, there are different theories as to the compatibility of democracy with linguistic fragmentation. These faultlines are mostly rooted in different perceptions of democratic citizenship. The present essay will take a closer look at the state-of-the-art of scientific literature with regard to the subject. The compatibility of multilingualism with democracy is all the more fascinating when examining the subject at transnational level, in the institutional realm of the European Union, a transnational entity exploding the framework of a traditional international organization.

Keywords: Democracy, multilingualism, European Union

Introduction

In our globalized age, multilingualism has penetrated into all spheres of human life, both private and public. Individual and collective multilingualism are on the agenda of all democratic entities as freedom expression includes the right to choose one's mother tongue for communication and democratic entities are expected to enable their people to participate in political life. However, the more the languages used, the more complex the political structure is. To what extent is it possible to conciliate multilingualism with democratic building? The present essay seeks to

provide a comprehensive conceptual presentation of the relationship between multilingualism and democracy, with a particular focus on the EU as the most ambitious example of pooling state souvereignty at international level.

Methodology

The fundamental theoretical framework of this study is provided by critical approaches to International Relations. Key definitions such as the transnational concept of democracy and the politics of languages are described and put into a historical perspective right in the beginning, in order to provide both the conceptual and the temporal scope of the essay. The question whether democracy may unfold in a fragmented communicative space constitutes the major axis of the study and related academic literature will be summerized accordingly. The question will be extrapolated to the institutional realm of the European Union as the most ambitious example of power centralisation on the international stage. EU law sources and key policy documents will be key to the analysis of the conceptualisation of EU language policy, while empirical studies and Eurostat statistics will be used to examine language policy output.

The transnational concept of democracy

The classical theory of democracy has undergone several changes in the course of history. In 25 centuries, democracy developed in restricted political communities that managed to understand one another. (Archibugi 2005) The normative principles concerning democratic legitimacy developed in a historical period that gave birth to monolingual nation-states that equalled the concept of state with nation. This theoretical framework was subsequently called into question and such contemporary processes as the gradual widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness as well as the increased importance of individual rights gave a further impetus to this process.

Globalization, the proliferation of international organizations and the delegation of some parts of state authority has brought about an academic discourse that analyses the respect of democratic principles in a context transcending national levels, bringing to the fore the question of compatibility. As Teló put it: building a democracy beyond the state is a difficult challenge, as the first European attempts in the history of human being demonstrate. According to Telò , democracy beyond state can be defined as an institutional settlement among states, as confederal or federal democracy, or as cosmopolitan democracy. For others, the concept of transnational democracy is closely related to the concept of democratic deficit. Anthony McGrew (2006) speaks of double democratic deficit. First, democratic governments are losing capacity to manage transnational forces

in accordance with the expressed preferences of their citizens, second, global institutions more often than not enhance the interests of global elites at the expense of the wider world community.

The rise of the politics of languages

The politicization of language is a fairly recent phenomenon, intertwined with the advent of the formerly mentioned nation-states. Capitalism, the dissemination of written and later mediatized information generated a social cohesion whereby people identify themselves emotionally with the community of the nation and use a standardised language. Key to the emergence of national standardized languages were also industrialisation and warfare. The proliferation of commercial exchanges made it necessary for people to communicate in the same tongue, on the other hand, modern territorial states emerging in the context of war aimed to ensure loyalty of their citizens and promoted national solidarity. (Wright 2012)

The European invention of nationalism was subsequently exported to the rest of the world and in the three decades following World War II, the number of sovereign states more than tripled. In fact, one key feature of globalisation is the globalisation of the sovereign nation-state, having well-defined political, as well as linguistic characteristics. (Linklater 2006) At the same time, the second half of the century challenged the idea of an omnipresent nation-state and brought about more complex, multilayered systems of governance. Since the emergence of an international human rights regime, the politicization of languages brought to the fore such questions as the normative protection of language minorities and thus, the concept of collective multilingualism. Globalization, on the other hand, added an additional twist in that languages that were ‘winners’ of the standardization processes came to be threatened in global communication by lingua francas, especially by English. (Réaume & Pinto, 2012)

In our time, we are witnessing the relocation of power to substate and suprastate levels with significant linguistic impacts. In the first case, groups that were incorporated in the nation-states regain political and economic power. In fact, over the last 20 years, formerly repressed languages re-emerged, leading to multilingualism or even secession. In the second, a growing degree of political and economic power is controlled by international or regional organizations rather than national governments, undermining the predominance of the national, standardized language. (Wright 2012) All in all, multilingualism started to be an integral part of most political communities both inside and outside states.

Linguistic fragmentation in democracies: main theoretical approaches

The question of whether democracy may unfold in a fragmented communicative space was addressed by academia as early as in the 19th century. Mill (1861/1991) observed the subject under the framework of liberal political thinking, writing that free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities and among people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages since the uniting fellow-feeling, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist. Consequently, he advocated that there was a correlational relationship between democracy and cultural unification. This one people-one state principle was the guideline for restructuring in Europe following World War I. (Robichaud & De Schutter 2012) Further on Schmitt (1923/1985) pointed out that democracy is only viable for a homogeneous people, in possession of a shared culture and identity, including language.

This thesis outlined by Mill and Schmitt remains influential in contemporary thinking. Dahl (1971) took up the language issue in a wide-ranging empirical study, aiming to determine the conditions of stability of democratic regimes, finding that structural pluralism, including cultural or linguistic heterogeneity, poses restrictions on the capacity of democratic systems to politically integrate different groups. Rustow (1975) argues that the combination of modernisation, democratisation and linguistic heterogeneity gives rise to severe political challenges. In the German academic literature (Kielmansegg 1993; Scharpf 1999), the pre-existence of a collective culture and identity is a necessary condition for the establishment of a legitimate democracy. This view can be originated from the German concept of the relationship between nationhood and citizenship, by which nations are based on a common culture, in particular, on a common language. Scharpf (1999) argues that the democratic principle of majority rule will only be accepted in polities with collective identity, meaning polities based on pre-existing commonalities of history, language, culture, and ethnicity.

When transposed to international level, the European Union for instance, the argumentation goes as follows: European peoples do not share a common language, they lack memories of a common history and they do not participate in a common European public sphere, therefore it is impossible to institute a European democracy. This is the main axis to Grimm's (1995) arugmentation, who draws a direct connection between the lack of democratic legitimation and the language issue in the European Union. The absence of a European communication system, due chiefly to linguistic diversity, has the consequence that for the foreseeable future there will be neither a European public, nor a European political discourse. He concludes

that for the present the possibility of democracy remains tied to the political framework of the nation-state.

The French notion of citizenship is based on ius soli principle, whereby citizenship is acquired through residence within a certain territory. In such a view, the formation of a political community may precede the development of a nation and it allows for the possibility to regard a political entity not as a cultural construct but as a legal one. This view is shared by Easton (1965) for instance, who proposes to make a distinction between social community and political community. While sense of social community is an indication of the cohesiveness of society, the sense of political community indicates political cohesion of a group of people who share a political structure and a political fate. It is therefore possible for a political structure to bind a group together before feelings of mutual identification emerge. According to Thomassen (2007), the argument that the demos need not to be defined exclusively in cultural terms does not imply that there is no empirical relationship between demos and culture. But the essential thing is that it is realistic to imagine that identification with a political community may take place prior to cultural identification with a community. Kymlicka and Grin (2003) argue that several multilingual states, including Switzerland or Canada, are working well while pursuing multilingual policies, thus it is unclear why a national language must prevail in all spheres of political, social and economic life to foster solidarity. Kymlicka (1995), Patten (2001), and Young (1990) all share the view that policies required to achieve common language are likely to alienate linguistic minorities and foster separatist tendencies, while protecting autochthonous languages may serve as a gesture towards minority groups affirming equality of power and mitigating national and ethnic tensions. The claim that multilingualism undermines participation in decision-making is contestable: it assumes a highly idealistic level of engagement by the citizenry that may not match reality. Réaume & Pinto (2012) write in particular that if democracy manages to lumber along under far from perfect conditions of informational and deliberative equality, one might wonder why the extra dash of imperfection brought by linguistic diversity is so fatal to democratic participation.

In the context of the European Union, a counterpoint to the Grimm-reasoning can be encountered in Habermas (1995). Habermas, as a representative to post-national academia, highlights the shortcomings of the nation-state idea and criticises repressive language policy. He loosens the ties that bind the language to a democratic community and aligns language with the communicative space as opposed to nation. For him, the key to democracy is the public sphere as an arena of public will formation. While he recognises that no such arenas exist at transnational level, he raises the

possibility of the creation of a network of national public spheres, bound together by a second first language, that preserve intact the internal circuits of communication. Van Parijs (2000), sharing this line of thought, claims that democracy is viable for communicating people who do not share a single culture or identity but have a common space for discussion and decision-making.

To conclude on this point, how language pluralism is approached in research on democracy constitutes a faultline in academic literature. Although there seems to be consensus on the fact that language plays a crucial role in democracy-building, there are different approaches to language in itself: in the first interpretation, language is a key constitutive component of a people's culture, in the second, it is considered a medium of communication.

Multilingualism and democracy in the European Union

The European Union is an international entity sui generis, bearing characteristics of both intergovernmental and supranational nature. It is considered the world's most ambitious example of pooling state sovereignty at an international level. (Moravcsik 2004) Since its creation, Member States have conferred on the European Union an increasing number of competences, thus, it has grown from a purely intergovernmental, economic organisation of states to a supranational, political union of states, offering a European Union citizenship supplementary to national citizenship. The Treaty on the European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union make up the core functional treaties of the European Union and together with EU legislation they constitute European Union law, which has supremacy over national legislation. Thus, EU citizens are directly affected by European legislation. It is against this background that the European transnational political order needs to meet democratic standards.

If we assume that multilingualism and democracy are not mutually exclusive conceptual categories, a further question arises: what is the language of democracy in a multilingual entity? Archibugi (2005) speaks of two main theoretical perspectives with this regard. On the one hand, multicultural theorists point out that multilingualism is fully compatible with democratic participation as mono-ethnic states in reality hardly exist at all. Multiculturalism seeks to address common problems while at the same time conserving linguistic diversity by ways of public policies related exclusively to certain language communities, thus aiming at minimal exclusion. As Kymlicka (2004) argues, democratic politics is politics in the vernacular. By contrast, cosmopolitanism intends to implement public policies designed to remove linguistic barriers, even if this means that some of the members of the population are excluded. Cosmopolitanism often refers to the concept of

lingua franca use. In the European context, Van Parijs (2004) and Wright (2005) go as further as promoting English not only as the lingua franca of the EU but also as the common European language used to develop a 'real' community of communication.

The European Union is currently applying a hybrid solution named as multilingual language policy. EU multilingualism is based upon a very complex set of normative, institutional and theoretical components, built over the past 60 years. The concept of multilingualism in the EU has developed in three phases. First, Regulation No. 1/1958 of the Council put official languages with equal rights on a statutory basis. The founding fathers considered Europe as an entity of national languages, and the assumption made was that a mostly monolingual citizen could, if necessary and with the external assistance of the EU translation service, be put into the position of being multilingual. The next level of multilingualism was added between the 1980s and 1990s when the European Parliament adopted a series of resolutions aiming at minority language protection. The third stage corresponds to the development of multilingualism as a separate policy agenda. The White Paper on Education and Training: Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society (1995) supplemented the idea of multilingualism with the individual level by encouraging EU citizens to learn, in addition to their mother tongue, another language of the European Union as well as one more foreign language. In this temporal perspective, we can see the three strata of the current multilingual language policy in the EU (equality of all official languages, minority language protection, promotion of individual multilingualism). From a theoretical point of view, with reference to the conceptual categories as described by Archibugi, it shows a shift from a multicultural approach to a rather cosmopolitan approach, although there are some differences when comes to different EU institutions.

In fact, if we analyse the practical application of the above described theoretical framework and take a look at institutional communication in the EU, the multiculturalist endeavour of minimal exclusion appears in certain institutions e.g. the European Parliament, meanwhile the cosmopolitan approach of lingua franca use appears in others (e.g. European Commission). According to Krzyzanowski and Wodak (2013), the adoption of different language practices depends mostly on the functional characteristics of each institution. At the European Parliament, where the key ideology is that of the expression of national standpoints, multilingualism is in most cases driven by the MEPs' need to express their position from a nationally specific standpoint and thus in their national language. In fact, the European Parliament has often been praised for being the only truly multilingual institution in the EU and is considered as the most generous language regime in EU institutions. For Kruse & Ammon (2013), the idea of a multilingual

Europe has been implemented most extensively in the European Parliament. The European Commission, on the other hand, is not directly responsible to the national audiences, thus its internal linguistic practices remain guided by ideologies rooted in the principle of internal institutional efficiency and can be summarised as a quest for a common linguistic denominator. Kruse & Ammon (2013) observed 134 press conferences in the Barroso Commission and found that commissioners from the Eastern European countries with only one exception exclusively use the English language. In none of the observed cases was German used as a foreign language, while French was only used as a foreign language by two commissioners

When it comes to non-institutional communication, the European Union does not have a legislative competence. EU has exclusive legislative competence at the supranational level, that is, when communication involves the institutional realm of the European Union to any extent, whereas, in respect of the subsidiarity principle, national and local language policy-making is carried out by national or local agents. However, the European education system has a key role in transmitting to all members of society those cognitive competences that enable them to exercise their civil rights as EU citizens under all circumstances. We could assume that EU citizens are able to communicate in one of the official and working languages and thus the exercise of their civil rights is unhindered. Nevertheless, as explained beforehand, not all EU languages are official and working languages and some institutions, e.g. the European Commission, hardly uses any language other than English. This is why foreign language competences cannot pass unnoticed in this thesis.

In order to assess language competences at society level, I resort to Eurostat statistics on language skills. Statistics from the past years reveal significant disparities according to age, nationality and educational level and important shortcomings when it comes to individual language skills. Sweden is the best performer, and the Scandinavian and Baltic countries top the list, while Eastern European as well as Anglophone countries rank last. In 2016, more than half of the adult working-age populations of Bulgaria (50.5 %), Hungary (57.6 %), Romania (64.2 %) and the United Kingdom (65.4 %) reported that they did not know any foreign language. Statistics also reveal that 25 to 34-year-olds are the age group that tends to speak the most foreign languages, with 73% being able to express themselves in at least one foreign language, compared to 55% for 55 to 64-year-olds. There is a significant educational gap as well. In 2016, more than 8 out of 10 (82.5 %) people in the EU who had completed a tertiary level of education reported that they knew at least one foreign language. The corresponding share among those with an intermediate level of education was approximately two-thirds (63.1 %), falling to 41.7 % among those with a low level of education. The same

trend is reflected when it comes to employment: 80% of managers in the EU claim to be fluent in at least one foreign language, but this percentage drops to 53% for people with manual jobs. Eurostat statistics from 2018 based on self-assessment also paint a rather negative picture about personal language skills. Over one third (35.4%) of adults in the EU-28 report that they do not know any foreign languages. A similar proportion (35.2%) declare that they knew one foreign language, while just over one fifth (21%) say they knew two foreign languages. When it comes to foreign language choice, English ranks first. According to UNESCO, OECD, Eurostat UOE joint data collection from 2010, 92,7% of secondary school pupils learn English as a foreign language in the European Union. In the 2012 Eurobarometer survey on 'Europeans and their languages', two-thirds of Europeans thought that English is the most useful language to learn.

Conclusive remarks

The focus of the present essay has been the contradictory relationship between multilingualism and democracy. It shed light on the chief linguistic parameters of the world's most fascinating example of multilingual democracy, the European Union, an international entity sui generis, bearing both intergovernmental and supranational characteristics. The macropolitical context to this has been the relocation of power to the supranational levels, which raises the question of how democracies can unfold in linguistically fragmented contexts such as the one represented by the European Union. The conceptual framework to this analysis is a conflicting academic discourse, one perspective being provided by a conservative approach rooted in the cultural concept, the other one in the civic concept of citizenship.

When it comes to the analysis of democracy in the European Union itself, necessarily based on a civic concept of citizenship, another academic faultline has been identified, that is, how the EU itself can live up to the standards of democracy via its language policy. The EU solved this riddle by adopting a multilingual approach right from its foundation. The European Union, guided by the motto 'United in Diversity', seeks to put in place an inclusive language policy, based upon a complex set of normative, institutional and theoretical components. As the policy focus has right from the beginning been the inclusion of a wide range of languages, language policy and multilingualism policy have become synonymous in the EU. From a theoretical perspective, the chronological observation of the conceptualization of multilingualism shows a constant focus shift from a multiculturalist inclusive approach to a more pragmatic, cosmopolitan approach, even if the latter decisions are not based on well-defined normative guidelines.

The European Union combines multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism when aiming to tackle the challenges of building a multilingual democracy. The EU ensures all official languages an equal status, guaranteeing most EU citizens to assert their rights arising from their European citizenship in their native languages. On the other hand, the institutional language policy points more and more towards the use of one or maximum two official languages as it is impossible to ensure the use of all 24 official languages without jeopardising normal institutional workflow. In the race for the European lingua franca status, English seems to be the most successful candidate. In fact, the language currently enjoys the status of de facto lingua franca in the European Union's institutional communication and it is also the most popular foreign language to learn.

Would the European Union be more democratic by adopting English as its lingua franca? The functional differentiation of languages in the EU is a very delicate issue, bringing national(ist) emotions to the fore and as such, it is hardly ever faced overtly. Statistics also reveal that we still have a great deal to do in order to equip all EU citizens with foreign language skills that enable them to exercise their civil rights in the EU in unhindered fashion. However, the operation of the internal communication regime according to the scheme of plural monolingualism is not only unsustainable in the long run, but is also in contradiction with the language ideology of individual multilingualism, which the European Union has undertaken to promote over the years. The language policy of the European Union is clearly intended to set it apart from the traditional communicative parameters of international organizations, although the acceleration of globalization and the convergence towards the use of English, on the one hand, and growing regional forces, on the other hand, place the European Union under enormous pressure, which is yet to be resolved.

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