

Managing or Celebrating Linguistic Diversity in the E.U.?

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SUMMARY

It is far too early to understand the vast number of effects that the May 1, 2004 expansion of the European Union will have, especially when considering language policies, linguistic diversity and democracy. But there are at least two linguistic issues within the academic literature that seem to have already become clear: one has to do with the permanency of the ‘official and working’ languages framework¹ and the other issue concerns how to understand the spread of English and its meaning for supra-state democracy.

Prior to this most recent expansion, several scholars argued that it would be almost impossible to alter the official languages framework of the EU whereby the one major language of each member state becomes an ‘official and working’ language of the EU’s institutions, on par, at least officially, with all the rest. They argued that it does not matter how cumbersome and expensive such a multilingual regime might be. Because the Treaty of Rome stipulates that the language policies of the institutions must be decided unanimously by the Council of Ministers coupled with the symbolic importance of language, the 1958 model of one member one language is unassailable (Loos 2000, Krauss 2000, and De Swaan 2001: 167-71).

The increase from 11 to 20 ‘official and working’ languages lends further support to this argument especially the specific situation of Maltese that will be discussed below. This paper argues that expansion raises the tension between whether the EU celebrates linguistic diversity in general or just the limited diversity of those languages that are ‘official.’ Such a situation can fall easy prey to critics who see ‘official’ language status as merely symbolic, overly bureaucratic and connected not as much to democratic representation as to the politics of federating nation-states of vastly different sizes.² And this, I will argue, is important for the real and perceived

¹ While some sociolinguists and other scholars make a distinction between ‘working’ and ‘official’ languages, the EU Treaties never make this distinction and in effect define them synonymously in terms of the languages that the institutions of the EU (the Parliament, Commission, etc....) use. Here we are not talking about the languages used by citizens which is officially, if not practically (to be discussed in the paper), left to the realm of the member states.

² So for example, Danish and now Maltese have ‘official and working’ language status within the EU and Turkish, for example does not. The fact that there are many more Turkish

democratic process of the EU.

The second development is the increased prevalence of academic arguments specifically in favour of adopting English as a lingua franca for both EU institutions and for EU citizens in their daily *public* or transnational lives. The notion is that an increase in the number of official EU languages complements the continued spread of English – as Abram De Swaan phrases it, “the more languages, the more English.” Moreover, there is an implicit or explicit position that this poses no problems for the development of democracy at an EU level. Many argue that the spread of English is not a challenge to EU multilingualism, both of the EU institutions and EU ‘civil society.’ To take just one example, Phillippe Van Parijs argues that English should be adopted as Europe’s lingua franca because “we need a way of communicating directly and intensively across the [nation-state] borders drawn by the differences of our mother tongues, without the extremely expensive and constraining mediation of competent interpreters. We need it in particular if we do not want Europeanisation, and beyond it globalisation, to be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy and the powerful who can afford quality interpretation.” (Van Parijs 2003: ms6).³ More descriptive and ‘objective’ assessments less concerned with justice and fairness as Van Parijs also paint a picture of the inevitable dominance of English that seems irrational to resist (De Swaan 2001). Whereas before 2000, there was very little academic work in this area, especially from political scientists, now such literatures are burgeoning and this specific line of argument is one prominent theme.

This paper argues that many such arguments that support the adoption of English as a lingua franca for Europe utilize a rarified notion of language that ignores the history of language within the rise of the modern nation-state and democracy. If the decision to adopt English as a lingua franca is the result forces outside democratic will formation, it will only exacerbate the democracy deficit. Moreover, since the mid-1990s, the EU has been increasingly adopting policies that celebrate and foster linguistic diversity – however vague or ineffectual they might be. Some of these policies are the outcome of a process that is at least struggling to be democratic and related to questions of human rights, overcoming the ‘democracy deficit’ and the voter malaise that grows with each EU election. In other words, while some scholars and the EU Treaties themselves tend to downplay the tensions around the possibilities of supra-state democracy and language, these challenges seem to be at the heart of the European project. As Robert Phillipson argues, “Uncertainty about supranational language policy reflects uncertainty about the type of political entity that the EU is evolving into, and the relative fragility of channels of communication uniting people and civil society beyond national borders” (Phillipson 2003: 13).

speakers than Danish or Maltese in the EU is seemingly irrelevant. Moreover, the prevalence of English as a second language in Malta relative to say Turkish speakers in Germany makes the question of citizen’s language rights and political representation even more pronounced.

³ Claude Truchot discusses the various costs involved noting that even the estimation that translation and interpretation accounts for 2% of the total EU budget is probably too high (Truchot 2003: 109).

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