Université de Genève

Université de Génève

François Grin

Michele Gazzola

EFFICIENCY AND FAIRNESS IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATION: POLICY ANALYSIS APPROACH AND INDICATOR SYSTEM

Is multilingualism an asset?

How can we assess whether multilingualism is, indeed, an asset for businesses, for European institutions and for universities? By using a policy analysis approach to systematically compare the effects of multilingualism with those of the most likely alternative, namely, a drastically reduced oligarchy of languages or even monolingualism. A systematic comparison, however, requires meeting several conceptual challenges and answering seven key questions, namely:

1. what do we actually mean by "multilingualism"?
2. what are the conceptual requirements of a policy analysis approach to multilingualism?
3. what criteria should we use to compare multilingualism with its alternatives?
4. in what sense can multilingualism be "efficient" and "fair"?
5. what is multilingualism being compared to?
6. what type of data should be collected to monitor and evaluate the desirability of multilingualism and its alternative(s)?
7. how should this data be organised and made available to users?

The mission set for research Task 4.1 in the DYLAN project was to answer these questions.

What do we mean by "multilingualism"?

Just as language pervades every aspect of human experience, manifestations of multilingualism may affect them all. For the purposes of the DYLAN project, however, we focus on multilingual communication, because communication is generally acknowledged as one of the two key functions of language (usually along with an "identity" function). The question can then be rephrased as: do we communicate better with multilingualism than without it?

What is the policy analysis approach to multilingualism?

Multilingualism is an eminently man-made reality, which is the product of the complex interplay of numerous social, political and economic forces. It can also be influenced by public policy, which is a tool that modern societies use to achieve collective goals, in areas including, for example, health, transportation, education, the environment – and language. The task before us, therefore, is to assess whether multilingualism, taking account of its advantages and drawbacks, is on balance a state of affairs which ought to be encouraged through public policy.

What criteria should we use for comparison?

In order to ascertain whether multilingualism is an asset for European society, we need criteria of what counts as an asset, as well as a "metric" to measure the advantages and drawbacks of multilingualism. In line with standard policy analysis, we use two fundamental criteria: first, "efficiency", which refers to the allocation of scarce resources (whether material or not). In the economic theory on which policy analysis relies, efficiency is a formal technical concept with a very specific meaning; for the purposes of this project, however, we use this term in a simplified sense, which coincides with "cost-effectiveness". Our second criterion is "fairness", which refers to the distribution of the products of human activity. Fairness, in our context, should not be understood as a moral notion. Rather, this term refers to the identification and measurement of the benefits (and costs) that accrue to various groups in society, particularly as a consequence of adopting one policy or another.

In what sense can multilingualism be efficient and fair?

Since we approach multilingualism as communication, the latter will be considered efficient if it successfully achieves its goals. Banking on communication theory, we distinguish between three types of communication, namely informational, cooperative, and strategic. These three types are not sharply demarcated, and will often overlap; however, they synthesise actors' main communicational intents. Informational communication is primarily intended to convey information; cooperative information aims at reinforcing team integration; strategic communication attempts to charm or persuade, as in advertising, for example. Thus, in order to assess whether multilingualism is efficient, we first need to identify the type of communication concerned. Multilingualism will therefore be "efficient" (i) if informational communication is understood faster or more accurately; and/or (ii) if cooperative communication is more successful at ensuring a shared sense of belongingness among participants; and/or (iii) if strategic communication proves more persuasive. Communication will be considered fair if it guarantees that participants in the exchange (whether as individuals or as groups) (i) have relatively equal access to the network which the very act of communication creates, and (ii) can actively take part in the interaction on relatively equal terms. In addition, fairness requires that (iii) outside of a communication act proper, linguistically different actors or groups of actors enjoy similar net benefits.

What is multilingualism being compared to?

Multilingualism is not good or bad in the absolute; it can only be considered better (or worse) than explicitly identified alternatives, whose degree of efficiency and fairness must also be measured for the comparison to be possible. In general, we shall compare multilingualism in communication to the most frequently mentioned alternative, namely a diversity reduced to a small oligarchy of languages or even monolingualism (usually in the guise of a so-called "lingua franca"). Monolingualism will therefore serve as the counterfactual – a crucial concept without which no evaluation at all is possible.

What type of data do we need?

In order to assess the advantages and drawbacks of multilingualism relative to monolingualism, we need quantitative data that capture the magnitude of these advantages and drawbacks (which can be seen as "benefits" and "costs"). The data should be interpretable in terms of efficiency and fairness, since these are the concepts that provide us with a rationale for comparison. It is essential for the data collected to meet certain requirements, taking the form of 11 desirable features: validity, reliability, sensitivity, stability, adequacy, feasibility, representativeness, intelligibility, timeliness, comparability, and power. The data can then be seen as proper indicators relevant a across situations, as distinct from case-specific information.

How should the data be organised and made available to users?

Indicators identified on the basis of an analytical framework, or model, make up an indicator system. Our proposed indicator system contains 226 individual indicators, arranged in four main categories (demographic, educational, business-related, and EU-institutions related) and then in sub-categories. These 226 indicators, of course, are not populated with figures, since data gathering of this magnitude is a task that can only be carried out by national statistical agencies, which can pool their data under the auspices of a body such as EUROSTAT. Moreover, 226 indicators far exceeds the normal scope of an indicator system for a given policy area, which means that the European Commission and Member states would have to select some of these 226 indicators – or possibly adapt them, depending on needs formulated by stakeholders and information flowing in from Member states. At this time, however, the DYLAN project is the first to provide an integrated, theory-based, and practice-oriented structure for a system of linguistic indicators aimed at promoting efficiency and fairness in communication.

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Language dynamics
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CITIZENS AND GOVERNANCE IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY