

DO THE CONCEPTS OF RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION CONSTITUTE USEFUL PARADIGMS FOR LANGUAGE POLICY?

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ABSTRACT

Claims are often made to the effect that multilingualism is a “treasure” or a form of wealth that societies should nurture. Other commentators, on the contrary, see multilingualism as a costly indulgence that should best be left to erode, as “economic rationality” leads to its progressive displacement by a supposedly more effective linguistic uniformity.

This paper is devoted to reviewing these claims from the standpoint of economic analysis. The focus is on the analytical instruments that can be brought to bear on the evaluation of the costs and benefits of multilingualism or, reciprocally, of “non-multilingualism”, as well as on the identification and measurement of the distributive implications of both.

These concepts and tools, mainly developed in the disciplines of language economics, education economics and public policy evaluation, have in recent years been fruitfully applied to various language policy problems, such as the promotion of minority languages or the social rates of return to the teaching of certain foreign languages. Their application to the more general question of the value of linguistic diversity poses challenges and raises conceptual questions that are only partly solved in the specialist literature. The paper argues that progress requires a targeted interdisciplinary effort as part of a long-term research programme.

1. Introduction

Plurilingualism (or, pending some definitional work that will come later, “linguistic diversity”) is a hotly contested social topic. Many people celebrate it as a treasure or a form of “wealth” that societies should nurture. Others, on the contrary, see it as an encumbrance on the way of human progress — hence the notion that Babel is a “curse” rather than a blessing. Some people would apparently prefer linguistic uniformity, which I take to represent the opposite of diversity.

What makes this question a politically crucial one is the fact that diversity or uniformity are not just social “givens”; rather, they constitute full-fledged social issues *because* human societies may, through deliberate intervention, aim for more diversity or, on the contrary, more uniformity.

Not only is the issue at hand a hotly debated one. It is also one in which, as Pool (1991) aptly wrote, people often seem to hold “extraordinarily stubborn beliefs”; what is more, logically different levels are apt to be

mixed up in the debate, even in papers written by respected academics. Therefore, it is indispensable to devote a little time to parsing the problem, and making a few important distinctions. Establishing these distinctions is the goal of Section 2. Section 3 discusses linguistic diversity and uniformity in terms of resource allocation. Section 4 integrates the preceding considerations in a broader framework that takes account of resource distribution. Section 5 provides a provisional conclusion and discusses data and research priorities.

2. Three conceptual distinctions

« Natural » dynamics v. policy-driven change

The extent of multilingualism (or “linguistic diversity”) that exists in a given society at a given point in time is the result of *language dynamics*. One first question that arises, therefore, is that of our understanding of language dynamics: why do some languages decline, why do others spread, how do these processes operate, and what are the explanatory factors involved? This immediately raises the question of the role of a particular class of variables in these processes, namely, *policy* variables. Putting it more simply, this issue is to understand language dynamics properly and to assess whether these dynamics can be oriented by policy choices. This is a matter that would justify a complex investigation and there is in fact no agreement on the matter. Some commentators deny that policies can have any serious impact on language dynamics.

This is a question I will not pursue here. Rather, I think that language dynamics can, to some extent, be influenced by deliberate policy measures. This is the logic that underpins the entire enterprise of language policy, and which must of course rest on a coherent vision of the links between policy measures and language dynamics. Let us therefore accept, if only as a working assumption, that policy *can* make a difference. This implies looking at language policy from a somewhat unusual perspective, namely to look at language policy as a form of public policy.

Language policy as public policy

The epistemologically key question is whether societies *should* intervene, and whether they actually *should* have a policy regarding linguistic diversity or uniformity. From a public policy standpoint, it is perfectly justified for society to commission its “instrument” — that is, the state — with the task to modify our “linguistic environment” in a direction deemed socially preferable. The reason for this is that we cannot expect the uncoordinated action of social actors to result in the socially preferable degree of multilingualism (along a scale running from a very low degree — in fact, uniformity — to a very high degree).

The set of conditions which make it impossible (or, at any rate, highly unlikely) that the uncoordinated behaviour of social actors would result in

an optimal degree of diversity has a name in the literature: it is called “market failure”, meaning that the issue at hand (in our case: linguistic diversity or uniformity) cannot be left to itself, and that therefore the state *must* intervene.

On this view, a parallel must be made between our linguistic environment and our natural environment. Market forces, left to themselves, do not guarantee an adequate level of environmental quality; it is incumbent upon the state to provide the coordination mechanism whereby the action of individuals will be conducive to a proper level of “non-pollution”. The same is true of other public services like public lighting (the traditional textbook example).

It is well established in the literature that the degree of linguistic diversity or uniformity resulting from language dynamics *can* be influenced by policy albeit indirectly, and that it is rational for society to engage in language policy, just as it engages in other forms of policy — with an *a priori* particularly close conceptual parallel with environmental policy.

Choice criteria v. norms or laws

Even if we have established that intervention is feasible and rational, it does not mean that we can move straight on to the discussion of the precise nature of the policy measures to be undertaken. A crucial intermediate step is that of deciding what should be done, which requires the identification and application of criteria of choice.

One general elementary rule of policy analysis is that out of the various options contemplated, society should pick the option that promises to deliver the highest “net value”, where net value is computed as a difference between benefits minus costs. I hasten to add that benefits and costs need not be purely financial or material ones; more generally, we can talk of “advantages” and “drawbacks” instead of benefits and costs. If the choice is between the status quo and a given policy, this policy should be launched if we think that the benefits it will generate are higher than the costs that it will entail. This way of making choices is often described as the “fundamental rule”.

Before we move on, it is important to observe three things.

First, even a relatively expensive policy can be appropriate, if its benefits are much higher, yielding a high net value — or, more to the point, a higher net value than the alternative under consideration, whether it be another policy or the status quo. In other words, evaluating the costs of the option is only one part of the problem; benefits must be evaluated too, in order to base policy decisions on net value.

Second, as already noted above, market and non-market dimensions must both be taken into account. Let us briefly recall that a “market” value can be observed on a market (e.g.: higher productivity reflected in higher wage

rages, etc.), whereas a “non-market” value cannot be observed on a market, but is no less relevant economically (e.g.: direct enjoyment from diversity; unfettered contacts with others; cultural understanding; etc.) environmental quality provides good examples of non-market value.

Third, much rests on the definition of the alternatives — what is often described as the “counterfactual”, that is, “that against which the option under consideration is being compared”. It is easy to fall prey to logical fallacies and to assess a policy against an inappropriate counterfactual. Consider for example the textbook case of communication in multilingual settings: should the costs and benefits of using one system for translation and interpretation (say, *with* relay interpretation) be compared with the costs and benefits of another system (say, *without* relay interpretation)? Or should it be compared with a broader range of options, which might include a foreign language learning effort by participants in communication?

Apart from that, it is useful to point out that this policy-analysis based approach is conceptually very different from a legal/institutional approach. A legal approach takes a number of things for granted, (for example, legal norms on minority rights). From a policy analysis standpoint, nothing is *a priori* valuable. We must therefore establish, through estimates of benefits and costs in the broadest sense (which might also mean “through a referendum on the issue at hand”), what is socially preferable.

Much rests, therefore, on the identification and measurement of benefits and costs.

3. Operationalising language-related welfare

In order to operationalise the ideas presented so far, we need to do three things; first, to clarify some terminology; second, to clarify what it means to have a “better” or perhaps even “optimal” level of diversity; third, to check what we already know on the subject.

Let us simplify the issue at hand by distinguishing between, on the one hand, “linguistic uniformity” and, on the other hand, “linguistic diversity”. Unless otherwise specified, we will be talking about language diversity at the *societal* level. We can think of the above not as two discrete categories, but as a continuum from “zero” through “low”, “moderate”, and then “high” or even “extreme” diversity. Equivalently, we may talk about a more or less diverse linguistic environment. All other things being equal, more *individual multilingualism* will be correlated with a higher degree of *societal plurilingualism*.

By the same token, non-plurilingualism would be considered analytically synonymous with linguistic uniformity, and evaluating the “costs of non-plurilingualism” amounts to evaluating the costs of “uniformity”.

Let us consider three points (M_A , M_B , M_C) on the continuum, denoting increasing degrees of linguistic diversity. The question would be to identify

the benefits and costs, and hence the net value, of M_A , M_B , and M_C , treated as the three policy options open to us. If some people (politicians, pundits, journalists, etc.) advocate, say, M_A , and M_A stands for zero multilingualism (or relentless uniformity), the question is whether M_A really carries a higher net value than the two other options.

Although policy analysis (with the associated assessment of benefits and costs) is well established in fields such as transportation, health and environment, there is very limited experience in the application of policy analysis to language. Despite early calls for such a development (Jernudd, 1971), the range of questions raised by policy evaluation has remained largely ignored in the language policy literature, even though their importance is regularly pointed out (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Jernudd, 2001). The weighing of pros and cons typical of policy analysis has been attempted, with varying degrees of generality, in the language economics literature, as well as in the burgeoning language policy evaluation literature (for reviews, see Grin, 2003).

The question can first be approached in general terms using a very standard economic concept: assuming that diversity carries both costs and benefits, how can these be expected to evolve? Generally, the benefits (of doing more of anything) will tend to increase at a decreasing rate, while the costs (of doing more of anything) will tend to increase at an increasing rate. This yields the "optimal diversity" figure, where the optimum occurs at D^* , when the difference between benefits and costs is highest. The important implication is that optimum diversity, for society, is neither infinite (costs would far exceed benefits), nor zero (because all the benefits of diversity are forfeited).

However, most of the contributions available in the literature offer only parts, but never the entirety, of what a general policy approach to linguistic hegemony should be; they only provide some elements of the what we need to assess and position these benefits and cost curves. Putting it differently, there is, to my knowledge, no published work, in language economics or in another field of research, offering a full-fledged allocative argument telling us whether linguistic hegemony is good or bad in terms of welfare, if we ought to seek more or less of it, and for what reasons.

This is not to say, however, that the matter has been ignored altogether. In fact, there exist some models (e.g. Breton, 1964; Church and King, 1993) that examine language-learning decisions in bi- or multilingual settings; they conclude that it is more economical to encourage minorities to learn the majority language than any other solution, which amounts to advocating a form of hegemony of the majority language. However, this result is predicated on a number of assumptions, the main one being that benefits result exclusively from communication, that communication is nothing but information transfer, and that the costs of different strategies boil down to language learning expenses that may befall a larger or a smaller number of people.

Other models yield significantly more nuanced results by taking account of differential language learning costs between individuals. Because linguistic hegemony is often ascribed to network effects (in which actors' decentralised decision-making can actually reinforce the hegemony of a language whose learning is comparatively costly), this type of models also allows for the possibility that through coordinated action, social actors may decide to adopt, as a common language, one whose average learning cost is lower than for any other. *One important result is that linguistic hegemony, even if the benefits of alternative options are confined to communication, is not necessarily the best option*, and this result obtains even when language is seen as no more than a tool for communication.

However, for this very reason (that is, this exclusive focus on communication benefits), this class of models does not amount to a full-fledged policy analysis perspective. Tentative steps in this direction, incorporating a wider range of benefits, also suggest that hegemony is not the generally best solution – except, precisely, when narrow restrictions apply.

Some readers may counter that this is a banal observation, that hegemony cannot be optimal because “obviously”, “diversity is good”. However, this notion is all too often taken for granted (hence the frequently-heard peans to diversity as a form of “wealth”, a “precious resource”, etc.). In fact, many observers dispute this very notion and keep claiming that the costs of diversity far exceed its possible benefits; it is riddled with non-sequiturs and logical leaps (for example, mistaking the promotion of minority languages for constraints on majority languages, and ignoring the fact that a phenomenon like bilingualism opens up a whole range of options). Such views, however, are often be countered with more elaborate arguments than simple assertions to the effect that diversity is good; the case needs to be argued more tightly than in papers who invoke economic arguments in favour of diversity but whose claims, though eminently plausible, fall short of a demonstration. Thus, there is no alternative to the painstaking identification and measurement of complex and interdependent benefits and costs in line with standard policy analysis theory.

To my knowledge, the literature only offers a rather general framework for the identification of benefits and costs of linguistic diversity, which can be adapted to the case of linguistic hegemony, since the latter can to a large extent be seen as the converse of the former. The approach rests on a breakdown benefits and costs along two dimensions, namely *market versus non-market value* on the one hand and *private versus social value* on the other hand. This break down is summarised in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: ELEMENTS OF NET VALUE
(BENEFITS, COSTS, BENEFITS MINUS COSTS)

	Private	Social
Market	A	B
Non-market	C	D

This figure and its contents have been discussed at length in other papers (Grin and Vaillancourt, 1997; Grin, 2003), and I will therefore not go over this material here; perhaps I can give you some examples (see slide) of what these components of value mean.

In any case, it is important to point out that for the most part, these four elements of value are only partly identified, even less evaluated. The only component known with some degree of precision can be located in cell A, owing to a large body of research on the rates of return on second language skills.

The preceding discussion is enough to suggest that we have relatively little to go on for establishing, in terms of complete resource allocation, the relative merits of linguistic diversity and linguistic uniformity. Most importantly, there is no empirical evidence regarding non-market value, such as the direct enjoyment derived from linguistic diversity and, conversely, the lack that may be experienced if the hegemony of one language hinders diversity. Given strong parallels between linguistic diversity and environmental quality, it has been suggested to assess the non market value of diversity through contingent valuation method — analysing this dimension would be one of the top priorities of an investigation of the net value of policy options.

Even if the many problems posed by the identification and measurement of private value were solved, another formidable problem arises, namely, that of moving from individual-level estimations of benefits and costs to the corresponding social aggregate. For complex commodities like a certain (more or less diverse) linguistic environment, aggregation requires more than a simple sum of private values. This stems from the fact that many of the language decisions made by actor *x* may affect the value of the language skills of another actor *y*. Even when the benefits associated with one or another language environment are defined only in terms of communication, decentralised decisions by actors can fail to deliver a social optimum; the same problem is even more likely to arise when a broader range of benefits is taken into account.

What is all the more surprising is the self-confidence with which some commentators, as well as large sectors of public opinion, seem to accept the notion that linguistic hegemony is a good thing, that this hegemony must be exercised by the English language, and that this is all justified by

economic analysis. The first two propositions are doubtful at best, and the third one is plain wrong.

Proper economic investigation, as operationalized through policy analysis, is in fact likely to yield a much broader range of conditional recommendations; but this is a matter that requires a sustained theoretical and empirical effort, which largely remains to be undertaken. Priorities include the evaluation of non-market benefits and the development of sound procedures for moving from the individual to the social level in the assessment of benefits and costs.

4. The distributive dimension

Let us now turn to the distributive implications of linguistic hegemony. Again, this question has not been the object of a full-fledged treatment, although recent literature offers solid leads. In essence, the distribution side of policy analysis focuses on the identification of the winners and losers from the various policy alternatives under consideration, as well as the amounts of the gains and losses they respectively incur; the assessment of these amounts is of course predicated on the identification of the transfers themselves, and therefore on a reflection on the nature of such transfers – particularly on the reasons that justify considering a certain effect as a transfer.

Distributive effects have crucial importance in policy. It may be, for example, that the policy that seems best from a resource allocation standpoint has unacceptable distributive effects; thus, the option of choosing this policy would be predicated on the possibility of building, into the policy design itself, a system of transfers from the winners to the losers. In the absence of such a scheme (let alone if such a compensation appears not to be possible at all), the policy should be rejected, despite its status as the allocatively optimal one. Distribution therefore raises matters of equity and justice, which, in the sphere of language, are only beginning to be understood.

It is important to note that, for example, one cost of a policy of officialising one and only one language, in a multilingual policy, may be the symbolic cost of disenfranchisement experienced by native speakers of all other languages. However, those costs (and benefits) that need to be taken into account in a distributive analysis are those that are distributed *unevenly* across members of society, or across groups that make up society. No additional conceptual problem arises if we are concerned about distributive effects between individuals, because an individual is a fairly easily identified unit. However, other questions immediately arise when we are concerned about transfers between *groups*: along what criteria are these groups defined (socio-economic status? Gender? Age? L1? Sexual orientation? etc.)? And which of these groups is it logical and legitimate to consider in an assessment of the redistributive effects?

Let us also note, at this juncture, that it is not enough to define justice in terms of equal or equitable access to a **certain opportunity set** (or, simplifying matters, of access to the same opportunity set) by members of different groups. This point is best explained with reference to the position of bilinguals in society. It is often true that *ceteris paribus* (especially in the absence of discrimination on the basis of one's first language), bilinguals have more opportunities than unilinguals. This may be the case even when bilinguals are native speakers of a minority language (say, *X*) who have had to acquire the majority language (*Y*). Some may be tempted to interpret such a situation as a downright advantage accruing to bilinguals; the existence of such an advantage would therefore exempt the state from any particular obligation towards the minority language – that is, it would exempt the state from taking steps to protect or promote the minority language as an element of cultural diversity.

However, this “advantage” is usually dearly bought through various forms of financial and symbolic cost; the dominance of a language can in fact impose considerable costs on speakers of other languages, which, on balance, may more than offset the wider range of opportunities available to them as bilinguals. Whether we are talking, on balance, of a “welfare” deficit or of an “opportunity” deficit makes little difference from an economic (welfare theory) standpoint, although the situations are different in practice.

Although I have just characterised the issue in terms of majorities and minorities, it occurs in a much wider range of cases. First, it may arise (as in Belgium) in contexts where the groups concerned are not of markedly different size. Second, what is usually labelled as a “minority problem” may be just as much a “majority problem”: the fact that a situation is “problematic” is logically as much the result of the imposition of majority norms as that of the protection of minorities; let us observe that this should remind us that it is logically dubious to see “diversity” as an encumbrance inflicted on majorities by pesky minorities. Third, such inequalities can arise from other situations of linguistic and cultural dominance, for example, when a particular language is elevated to the status of regional or global *lingua franca*, to the point of exercising hegemony.

The observation made earlier to the effect that we still do not have a general allocative theory of diversity management also applies to the distributive side of the matter. Nevertheless, the information at hand suggests that the inequalities entailed by linguistic hegemony, in the absence of a system of compensations, these transfers are contrary to equity.

Now, some people would say that the loss to losers is more than offset by the gain to winners, and that a policy in favour of homogeneity is therefore justified. This position is logically defensible if two conditions are met: first, that the transfers are of a nature such that they are “acceptable”, and that it is politically and socially acceptable to design compensation schemes from winners to losers. Second, *if the previous condition is met*, that such transfers actually take place. Let us examine each question in turn.

As to the first question, I would argue that these transfers are likely to be considered *not* acceptable, because linguistic homogeneity would far too fundamentally alter our linguistic environment. Language is not a mere tool for communication, but one of the key defining features of this environment. Therefore, any breaches to linguistic diversity can only be countenanced with extreme caution. In any event, this is a matter which can only be settled through democratic debate.

Now, even if, through democratic debate, we end up agreeing that the dominance of one language is socially and politically acceptable, the question arises of the compensations that should flow from the winners to the losers. In the context of communication within the European Union, the adoption of English as the sole official and working language would require that the government of the United Kingdom (and, to some extent, of Ireland), pick up the total cost of teaching English to all European MPs and all European civil servants, up to a degree of fluency *equal* to that of native speakers of English. In addition, the same member countries should provide a more-than-proportional contribution to the cost of translation of legal texts that *have*, for legal reasons, to be made available in the various official languages of member countries (the precise algorithm for this over-proportional contribution being another matter). All this is very unlikely to happen; this gives us another reason to conclude that linguistic uniformity, or “non-plurilingualism”, is a bad proposal from a policy analysis standpoint.

5. Provisional conclusion

Many aspects of language policy evaluation remain little known. There is research to be done, and I would like to conclude by pointing out some priorities. These fall in two categories.

The first, and most important category, is conceptual and analytical; there is no point in rushing to gather data unless we understand the issues to which we want to apply them. Key analytical questions include:

- Deepening our understanding of private market value
- Identifying and measuring private non-market value
- Designing aggregation procedures to move from private to social values
- Identifying and measuring transfers resulting from language policy choices

It is then necessary to gather data; given the paucity of data (from national censuses, from sources like the recent Eurobarometer study, etc.), that the range of needs is enormous, and cannot be discussed in full. Of particular importance, however, are data that would enable us to assess non-market values, including symbolic costs. This means in particular:

- perception of objective aggregate importance of different languages
- perception of objective importance of linguistic diversity
- personal (subjective) preferences regarding linguistic diversity

- indicators of 'willingness-to-pay' for a range of specific manifestations of linguistic diversity

There is no doubt that we need to investigate many questions at closer range. We need to move from general priorities to a specific research design. However, the type of questions that require investigation is relatively clear: they should rest on a goal-oriented philosophy, and focus on conceptual identification and empirical measurements of benefits, costs, and transfers as guides for social choice. Finally, one thing should be obvious: this can only be an interdisciplinary effort.

So far, there has been no coordinated research into those matters. Ten years ago, a modest proposal in this direction, entitled "The political economy of language", was rejected by the US National Science Foundation. Since then, the need has not grown less; on the contrary, it is, if anything, more acute. This points in the direction of a research line for Europe that would not only be intellectually challenging, but also offer the possibility of encouraging a strong European lead in this area of research— and it would also be eminently socially responsible.

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