

The role of linguistic diversity in world governance

Prof. François Grin
University of Geneva

This lecture, given by invitation, was part of the *Àgora Cívica* organized in the broader context of the 2025 MONDIACULT Conference (see full program on <https://agoracivica.cat/en/program/>), under the subtheme of “Cultural and linguistic diversity” (see p. 17 of program in its English version). It lays out some of the major challenges of contemporary research on the governance of language diversity, reflecting the structuring objectives of the GLAD project.

Agòra Cívica, Mondiacult, Barcelona
26 September 2025

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon; it's a pleasure and an honor for me to be here and to address the *Mondiacult* conference.

Giving this talk, however, is a bit of a challenge, because linguistic diversity is a difficult subject in itself, and linking it up with world governance makes it even harder.

But let's give it a try.

In Part I of this talk, we'll look at some of the features that make linguistic diversity such a challenging topic. Then, in a second part, we'll look at a few rules of thumb that can be useful for meeting the challenge. Finally, in the third part of this talk, we'll ask ourselves what makes the governance of linguistic diversity such an essential responsibility in the troubled times that we're going through.

Part I – Linguistic diversity: what makes it a perennially complex topic?

There are several reasons that make linguistic diversity a challenging topic. Let's begin by a quick look at four of these reasons.

First, linguistic diversity is a very common condition. In fact, it's the normal state of affairs in most countries in the world. However, it can take very different forms. We might call this problem *the diversity of linguistic diversity*. It can be illustrated with straightforward figures about language diversity in various countries.

For example, Vanuatu numbers about 110 languages; Brazil harbors some 225; Cameroon can boast at least 250 languages, and India has some 780. The world record is probably held by Papua New Guinea, whose citizens speak over 840 languages. In international comparison, these figures are certainly in the high range. They are much higher than the four national languages of my native country, Switzerland. But the main point here is that (apart from the fact that only a very small number of countries around the world are *not* multilingual), they display **very different ways of being diverse**. Therefore, it's difficult to say something about linguistic diversity that would be valid *in general*. ***In fact, every case is a special case.***

Second, linguistic diversity is difficult to circumscribe. This is what we might call **the problem of fuzzy boundaries**. The question is what we actually include in "linguistic diversity". Do we just mean the languages that the citizens of a country have as *first* language? Or, out of these first languages, only those that also have *official status*? Or do we include *any language used* in that country – including, possibly, variants that some describe as "dialects"?

Depending on how wide we cast the net, the picture can look quite different, because linguistic diversity may include:

1. A local **majority** language;
2. One or more **local (traditional / longstanding) minority** languages spoken by communities typically made up of citizens:
 1. Languages of linguistic minorities
 2. Languages of national minorities
 3. Languages of diasporic minorities
 4. "Autochthonous" languages
3. **Sign** languages (typically a special case, but increasingly handled as a local minority language);
4. Languages maintained **by long-term immigrant communities**, which depending on legislation, may quickly or only slowly acquire citizenship, as part of a process that may or may not stress linguistic and cultural assimilation;
5. Languages spoken by **refugees**, whose presence would normally be expected to be only temporary, but may extend for long periods of time, as a result of economic crisis, geopolitical conflicts, or – increasingly – climate change.
6. Languages used by members **specific non-traditional resident communities**, such as long-term retirees from abroad;
7. Languages whose **presence stems from specific causes**, such as:
 1. frequent use in *specific trades and occupations* occurring domestically (e.g. English in business or university teaching and research in non-anglophone countries);
 2. frequent use in *international trade* (brand names, packaging of goods, product composition, safety instructions, etc.)
 3. *reciprocal* international agreements (e.g., in EU member states, allowance for the use of the languages of other EU member states)

8. Languages used by people who are **only present temporarily** (tourists, travelers, etc.) and/or by locals who interact with them in their language;
9. **Other** languages (e.g. **elective clubs** of learners and users of Esperanto, Japanese, Elvish, etc. and languages linked to **religious practice**);

Therefore, investigating linguistic diversity implies addressing a topic whose boundaries are difficult to draw.

Even if we can, in principle, apply clear and reasonable criteria to decide what is "in" and what is "out" (that is, what's part of our approach to linguistic diversity and what isn't), such criteria aren't easy to spell out and justify, whether scientifically, legally, or politically. In fact, what criteria are relevant will depend on the situation concerned.

Of course, international standards enshrined in international instruments provide some guidance. In this regard, I believe that one of the most useful legal instruments in existence today is the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. As all those who are familiar with the *Charter* know, it's a very cunning, flexible document. But this very flexibility (we might even say this *plasticity*) puts us right back in front of the problem pointed out above: it's very difficult to say something about linguistic diversity that has *general* validity.

Third, even if we have duly defined and circumscribed what we mean by diversity, yet another challenge arises, namely, that of **properly measuring diversity**. How do we know if we have "more" or "less" diversity when we compare different places, or when we look at the same place, but at different points in time? Diversity isn't just a matter of the total number of languages present in a given place at a given time. That's because, say, the presence of "5 languages" gives rise to a completely different linguistic reality depending on how they're distributed in the population: the pattern isn't the same if "5 languages" means "5 communities that each make up 20% of the resident population", or "1 community that makes up 90% of the population plus 4 communities that each makes up 2.5%". Moreover, properly accounting for the diversity stemming from the fact that some citizens are bi- or multilingual further complicates the issue.

This isn't of merely academic interest: in the governance of linguistic diversity, the **calibration** of various public policies crucially depends on how we count diversity.¹

This is an area in which a lot of fascinating research is currently going on. But it often raises very technical, even mathematical questions that we don't have the time to address here. However, you probably now see why, at the beginning of this talk, I've said that speaking about the governance of linguistic diversity was a challenge.

¹ For example, the cost of a policy of increasing, from one to two or more, the number of language streams in an education system can be estimated on the basis of a simple count of languages; but a policy that subsidizes linguistic integration measures in ethnoculturally diverse cities typically requires a more precise counting that uses, for example, the "Greenberg Diversity Index" or one of its variants; and an even more elaborate (multilevel) metric is needed to monitor the demolingistic evolution of a country.

As if all that weren't enough, a **fourth** problem arises, namely, that linguistic diversity is an area in which consensus is notoriously hard to achieve. Let's call this **the problem of the elusiveness of consensus**. Quite simply, different actors hold different (or even opposing) views about the proper response to the challenges of linguistic diversity.

These differences of opinion emerge on two distinct planes – or levels. One level is eminently normative. The **normative** level is that of the tension between what we consider to be right and what we consider to be wrong, on moral and political grounds. Ultimately, this has to do with the values we mean to uphold. The other level is **positive**, because it is that of the tension between what we consider, from a scientific, factual perspective, to be true or false.

Contemporary societies have been able to achieve *some* degree of consensus on the normative level, and that's what most international instruments are intended to enshrine. Examples that have to do with various forms of diversity (even if *linguistic* diversity doesn't feature prominently in them) include:

- ♣ **UNESCO**, 1960: *Convention against discrimination in education*
(http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12949&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)
- ♣ **United Nations**, 1966: *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>)
- ♣ CSCE (later **OSCE**), 1990: *Copenhagen Document*
(<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304>)
- ♣ **Council of Europe**, 1992: *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*
(<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/157.htm>)
- ♣ **United Nations**, 1992: *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*
(<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/minorities.htm>)
- ♣ **UNESCO**, 2001: *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*
(<https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/unesco-universal-declaration-cultural-diversity>).

Nevertheless, even with some degree of agreement on the normative level – that is, if there is agreement about what's right and what's wrong – divergences often remain regarding the positive level – that is, the choice of specific policy measures that a given situation requires.

Several implications follow from the *elusiveness of consensus*. But the main one is probably that **there is no such thing as "good practice", let alone "best practice" in the absolute** in the governance of linguistic diversity. We often have to settle on a set of policy measures where there's only partial consensus; and this consensus proceeds from the fact not that they're "optimal", but that they can be shown to be *relatively better* than *alternative* measures, and to have delivered *some* degree of

success (or can be credibly expected to do so). It is in this sense that it can prove more realistic not to aim for “good” or “best” practice, but to try and identify examples of “successful practice”.

So, let's now see how we can move towards “successful practice”.

Part II – Formulating and implementing measures for diversity governance: three rules of thumb

Several principles (or, more modestly and informally, several **rules of thumb**) can help us develop responses to the challenges of linguistic diversity.

The usefulness of these rules of thumb is that they cut across the four problems we've just reviewed. (To recap: the **diversity of linguistic diversity**; the **fuzziness of boundaries**; the **difficulty of proper measurement**; and the **elusiveness of consensus**.)

Rule of thumb No. 1: Recognizing necessity

The first thing to acknowledge is that the governance of linguistic diversity is unavoidable. Apart from the fact that linguistic diversity shapes people's everyday life in many important ways, dealing with it is a logical necessity in any contemporary society. The reason for this is that language can't be confined to the private sphere, unlike other expressions of human diversity, such as religious persuasion, sexual orientation, or aesthetic preferences.

Dealing with linguistic diversity, therefore, isn't something that we can just choose to do or not to do. Modern states need to make many language choices regarding in particular:

1. the language(s) of communication between the authorities and the people living under their jurisdiction;
2. the language(s) used for communication within the state apparatus, in particular public administrations;
3. the language(s) in which various services are provided, from the legal system to domains such as education, social services, or policing.²

All these are basic questions in the governance of linguistic diversity.

A crucially important point, in connection with the **unavoidable** character of this governance, is that **we don't necessarily need to decide that linguistic diversity, per se, is a good thing to be celebrated and supported, or a bad thing to be contained and suppressed**.

What we need to acknowledge is that linguistic diversity simply **“is”**; it's a complex reality that, as human societies, we just have to deal with.

² This is also true for additional public policies, whose range and scope vary depending on the panoply of competencies vested in the state. This may extend to privately provided services mandated or regulated by the authorities.

Rule of thumb No. 2: Acknowledging wickedness—and taking it in stride

At the beginning of this talk, we've noted that linguistic diversity raises tough questions. In turn, the *governance* of linguistic diversity may deserve ***the label, developed in the social sciences, of a "wicked problem"***. But what are "wicked problems"?

In simple words, wicked problems are difficult and complex ones. But this goes a little beyond this very general observation.

Wicked problems typically present ten key features:³

1. They do not have a definitive formulation.
2. They do not have a "stopping rule." that is, these problems lack an inherent logic that signals when they are solved (*i.e., we can never establish that a wicked problems has been "resolved" once and for all; we need to keep paying attention to it*).
3. Their solutions are not true or false, only good or bad (*i.e., some solutions can be shown to be better than others—but that's all*).
4. There is no way to test the solution to a wicked problem.
5. They cannot be studied through trial and error. Their solutions are irreversible, so "every trial counts."
6. There is no end to the number of solutions or approaches to a wicked problem (*i.e., you can always re-approach a wicked problem under a different angle*).
7. All wicked problems are essentially unique.
8. Wicked problems can always be described as the symptom of other problems.
9. The way a wicked problem is described determines its possible solutions.
10. Planners, that is those who present solutions to these problems, have no right to be wrong. Unlike mathematicians, "planners are liable for the consequences of the solutions they generate; the effects can matter a great deal to the people who are touched by those actions."

Wicked problems often look intractable—and in many ways, they are. But if they can't simply be ignored (as in the case of the governance of linguistic diversity), society needs to deal with them; they may not have clear-cut solutions, but it doesn't mean that nothing can or should be done.

However, instead of thinking in terms of "solutions", we should think in terms of "responses". Developing "responses" doesn't necessarily mean coming up with "solutions" but, rather, ***giving ourselves the means to "intervene"*** (and, in so doing, aiming for efficient and fair responses).

This carries a wide range of implications for language politics and language policies. ***It dovetails with the "language policy cycle", a consistent methodology for the formulation, implementation and evaluation of language policies.*** It can serve to avoid ideological overreach and, instead, to foreground pragmatism and transparency. In itself, this encourages the quest for consensus, which is desirable even if it's elusive.

³ <https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/wicked-problem/about/What-is-a-wicked-problem>.

Aiming for good rather than bad responses requires **formulating transparent comparisons between alternatives**, and spelling out the reasons we may have for advocating response *A* versus responses *B* or *C*.

Rule of thumb No. 3: Bearing in mind the difference between the positive and the normative

As famous sociolinguists in the past have often said, language problems are never "just" language problems. Language problems are related to identity, prestige, privilege, money and power. This is true *within* societies (e.g. within countries), but also *between* societies and between countries.

Because of this remarkable, pervasive importance in the life of human beings — whether individuals or groups — people are often passionate in their approach to the governance of linguistic diversity, as well as in the beliefs that they hold in this regard. This isn't surprising, because the stakes are high. But passion, in turn, may get in the way of cool-headed analysis; it can also create confusions. The most common one is between the positive and the normative planes (or "levels").

As pointed out earlier in this talk, the positive plane and the normative plane are quite different. They belong to different (onto-) logical orders. Again, the normative plane is about what's (morally, ethically) right and wrong; the positive plane is about what's (factually, scientifically) true and false. A crucial difference between them is that even though we may have different *perceptions* of reality, there's only *one* reality. By contrast, our views of what's morally right and wrong can differ, and in fact they do—ultimately, there can be as many judgements of right and wrong as there are persons. Of course, the epistemological difference between the positive and the normative is much more subtle and nuanced than that, but this essential distinction remains.

Confusion often arises, however, because at both levels, we use *arguments* to convince our interlocutors and win them over to our preferred response; but the nature of the arguments, in both cases, isn't the same. Therefore, a normative argument is never an adequate reply to a positive objection; conversely, a positive argument isn't a relevant answer to a normative challenge. The importance of maintaining the distinction between orders has been made very eloquently, for example, by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (who breaks down the issue more finely than is done here).

A simple way to make use of the distinction between the positive and the normative is to use the analogy of the compass and the map. A moral compass helps us to set the direction in which we want to go; an *accurate* map helps us to pick an itinerary to go in that direction.

To make this even more practical (and this will probably speak more directly to those members of the audience who are directly involved in the selection, design and evaluation of language policies), this can be linked up with some important orientations in research on linguistic diversity, namely *Linguistic Human Rights* (LHR) and *Language Policy and Planning* (LPP). ***In a nutshell, LHR provides a moral compass, and LPP provides an accurate map.***

Part III – On the importance of language and linguistic diversity in times of crisis and change

In discussions about the governance of linguistic diversity, a question that recurs constantly is whether the advantages of diversity exceed its drawbacks, or whether it's the other way around.

This is a perfectly legitimate question, particularly once (or if) we agree – as suggested before – that linguistic diversity, per se, is neither "good" nor "bad", but that it simply exists, and that the real question is **how** contemporary societies manage their diversity.

There is abundant research, mostly at the intersection of economics, political science and sociolinguistics, about the identification and measurement of the advantages and drawbacks of linguistic diversity.

For lack of time, we can't explore this question in detail, but let me note that theoretical research and (when data are available) empirical research on the subject converge. Economic analysis shows that linguistic diversity carries both advantages and drawbacks, some material, some symbolic. It also suggests that the notion of "a preferable level diversity" makes sense, and that this preferable level tends to be a finite, positive magnitude. ***In other words, the best level of linguistic diversity isn't infinite—but it's not zero either.*** Putting it differently, linguistic uniformity is never the best choice.

So, even if we don't have the time to go into the vast (and fascinating) question of the identification and measurement of ***the material and symbolic value of linguistic diversity***, there's a related question that I'd like to address in the closing part of this talk.

The question is whether the value (or, more generally, the *importance*) of linguistic diversity tends to go up or down in times of crisis, such as the world is currently going through.

There's little doubt that the world is currently experiencing extreme uncertainty and a high degree of geopolitical tension. Against this backdrop, is linguistic diversity a secondary issue, something that we can safely put aside for the time being, in order to concentrate on arguably more urgent matters?

My answer to this question will be a clear "no". In fact, there are reasons to think that a skillful governance of diversity is particularly crucial at the current juncture, precisely in the face of these unprecedented tensions.

Why is it so?

The reason is that linguistic diversity is a phenomenon that can be all too easily instrumentalized or even weaponized. Some political actors are actively exploiting the complexities of diversity in order to destabilize their adversaries, whether domestically or abroad.

Admittedly, there's nothing particularly new about that—except that technological developments make it easier to spread fake news and alternative facts, in which linguistic diversity is a particularly easy topic about which to spread disinformation and lies.

A related drift, abetted by misuses of technological progress, is currently taking place and may prove even more worrisome. As part of this drift, discourse and representations are taking precedence over reality as a basis for individual and collective choices. As such, it undermines democracy, because one of the essential pillars of democracy is a realistic and honest relationship with reality.

Many current crises feed on this. Real-world examples are numerous and obvious enough not to need to be spelled out here. But let's point out that:

- Certain minority groups in country *X* that speak language *Y* can be manipulated by country *Y* to destabilize country *X* – or even be used as excuse for aggression of country *X* by country *Y*.
- Some minority groups in country *X*, being linguistically and culturally different, are actively persecuted by the authorities of their own country (that is, country *Y*).
- The presence, in country *X*, of migrant communities from other countries (say *Z*), creates a socioeconomic context that can be manipulated in order to advance the domestic political agendas of some politicians in country *X* who are trying to push regressive or manifestly antidemocratic agendas.
- Some of these regressive and antidemocratic agendas end up undermining a delicate geopolitical architecture that, though full of egregious manifestations of injustice, has also contributed to the maintenance of a *relative* degree of world peace in the decades following WWII.

Alleviating the tensions that directly or indirectly threaten world peace and prosperity, therefore, requires developing the tools and analyses needed for an efficient, fair, and – where applicable – internationally coordinated governance of diversity.

In parallel with all this, deep changes in the international world order are taking place. I've just mentioned deleterious changes; but other changes are welcome, because they can offer opportunities for a more just partnership between South and North. (Let me note in passing that labels like "north" and "south", which harbor analytical inconsistencies, should be taken with a pinch of salt, but that's not the main point right now, and we can use them for the purposes of this discussion).

But these changes in the world order also imply a redistribution of responsibilities, including with respect to the governance of linguistic diversity. More explicitly, promoting sound thinking about diversity must be understood as an internationally shared responsibility, bearing in mind that ***all nations are contributors to this diversity, first because they are "externally" different from each other, but also because they each harbor their own unique blend of internal diversity.***

Language and linguistic diversity are essential tools of sovereignty and democratic resilience, internally and externally; this is why developing efficient and fair language policies in order to cultivate all the components that make up the world's linguistic diversity is in the interest of all, and is a shared responsibility of all.

For all these reasons, perhaps it's time to activate (or reactivate) an important collaborative project, namely the drafting and adoption of a ***Universal Convention on Linguistic Diversity***. It would be an essential contribution to world peace and prosperity.

But while this is an idea that we, in the academic world, can wholeheartedly support, it's an idea that's for people operating in the national and international political arenas to turn into a reality.

Thank you for your attention.