

Why multilingualism is affordable

Seminario sobre lingua, sociedade i política en Galicia

Santiago de Compostela
4 May 2010

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REVISED VERSION

prepared for publication in Galician translation

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1. Introduction

Twenty years ago, an Australian linguist named Nicholas Thieberger published in the scientific journal *Multilingua* an article provocatively entitled: “Language Maintenance: Why Bother?” (1990).

The question raised by Thieberger remains a relevant one to this day, because it epitomizes a very widespread perception that multilingualism is cumbersome, too expensive, and ultimately, not *affordable*.

The form of multilingualism I am referring to here is, of course, *societal* multilingualism as opposed to *individual* multilingualism. There is generally no problem with individual multilingualism: most people agree that mastering two or three languages or more is a good thing, because a multilingual person can interact with more

people, and will sometimes have an edge on the labour market because of these language skills. Thus, the value of individual multilingualism is not contentious. What is being hotly debated, by contrast, is the value of societal multilingualism (which, for the purposes of this talk, I will refer to equivalently as “linguistic diversity”).

The perception that societal multilingualism, or linguistic diversity, is in itself a *problem* is, as you know, deeply entrenched, despite the political and ideological legitimacy that multilingualism has gained in recent years — not least in South Africa, which has chosen to recognise 11 official languages.

Of course, Thieberger’s question, which we might rephrase as “Multilingualism? Why bother?”, is a rhetorical one: he meant to criticise the callousness with which many commentators dismiss the efforts made in many countries of the world to maintain, let alone promote, linguistic diversity. However, some perfectly legitimate scientific issues do lie behind this type of question, because the relevance of engaging in the promotion of societal multilingualism is not a forgone conclusion.

This question is more complex than it seems. In this talk, I shall attempt to parse the problem, in order to side-step some often heard lines of argument and to propose instead an approach resting on basic principles of economic analysis.

I shall first attempt to tease apart four different levels in this question, namely the moral or “rights-based” argument; the “feasibility” argument; the “resource allocation” argument; and the “resource distribution” argument.

I will then take a closer look at the third one — that, is, the quintessentially economic question of resource allocation, which is crucial to the formulation of a reply to the challenge contained in Thieberger’s question; in so doing, we’ll take a detour to introduce the crucial distinction between *absolute* and *contingent* multilingualism.

Finally, I’ll try to move on from broad principles to the actual, measurable costs of multilingualism, showing that these costs are generally low. This gives rise to a strong presumption that, even

from a narrowly economic perspective, multilingualism is quite affordable — and ultimately well worth the effort.

2. Four different debates

Suppose that you are having a heated argument with somebody who says that he (or she) is definitely *against* multilingualism, and asks, precisely, “why bother?”.

But this question can mean rather different things; let’s first characterise them briefly, before looking at them in more detail.

- First, if a person rejects multilingualism, and doesn’t see it a worthwhile social goal, and therefore views support to multilingualism as an ill-advised policy, this may be challenged by way of a moral argument, giving rise to a moral or “rights-based” debate. This argument is generally quite popular among lawyers, political theorists and, interestingly, sociolinguists.¹
- Second, even if multilingualism is considered morally “right”, and is endorsed by political and legal discourse, it may be rejected on grounds of *feasibility*, giving rise to a (mostly) sociolinguistic debate about language dynamics — where the core question is whether language dynamics is a phenomenon that society *can* influence, or if it is entirely outside any kind of social control — and therefore beyond the reach of public policy.
- Third, even if multilingualism is considered morally and politically right, *and* practically feasible, it may be rejected on the grounds that it is a waste of resources that would be better spent on other pursuits—for example in health, transport or education policy. This gives rise to a third debate — this time, on the appropriate allocation of scarce resources (what we would call, in economics, a question of “allocative efficiency”).
- Fourth, even if multilingualism is considered morally and politically right, practically feasible, and a good allocation of scarce resources, the question still arises of the sharing of this burden— what we would call, in economics, a question of “distributive fairness”.

¹ See e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000).

Let us examine in turn the important issues that lie at the heart of each of these debates.

(a) The “rights” debate

Very often, advocates of multilingualism rely on morally based political arguments to justify their position. In fact, moral or “rights-based” arguments, often invoking minority rights, probably are those most often used, and the amount of literature on language rights (or even “linguistic human rights”) dwarfs the literature devoted to other ways of dealing with this question.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with moral arguments — quite the opposite, any position that we take should pass ethical tests. However, moral arguments have one major weakness, namely, they usually fail to impress those who do not share the same moral views. Let us think of an argument such as “it is just and fair to recognise all the language communities that shape our country, and therefore we *must* promote all their languages”. This may be a perfectly consistent stand and ethically sound position. However, being an essentially *moral* argument, it may fall on deaf ears, and it often comes down to preaching to the converted. The problem is that not everyone is already a convert, and the views of opponents of multilingualism cannot be simply ignored. More precisely, from a liberal standpoint, it is difficult to simply dismiss the sincerely held opinion of persons who are *opposed* to multilingualism.

Furthermore, even a well-turned normative argument in favour of multilingualism can be dismissed on the grounds that it does no more than formulate its author’s subjective tastes, and therefore is not worth more attention than the possibly less sophisticated formulation of opposite tastes.

Let us remember that to this day, and despite the legitimacy gains made, in most public discourse, by multilingualism and minority languages, ensuring the survival all languages is not a legal obligation of states. The protection of one’s language is not recognised as an absolute individual right, and it is not enshrined in any binding international instrument. Whereas few people nowadays would speak *against* state intervention to prevent expressions of racism, many people still argue against intervention in favour of multilingualism or in favour of minority languages— and their arguments cannot just be dismissed, if one is going to

sway public opinion. These arguments *have* to be engaged. But as we shall see later, the analytical weakness of these arguments against multilingualism can be exposed without resorting to moral considerations.

Of course, the issue can still be pursued on this very plane — combining political theory, political philosophy and, of course, law. However—perhaps owing to my own social science background, specifically economics — I’d prefer to keep clear from this debate, because there are other ways. From an economic standpoint, the discourse of law is, by definition, *normative* (despite the fact that lawyers do talk about “positive law”); as to political scientists, they recognise the normative orientation of their work (they speak of “normative political theory”), and my aim here is not to engage in what is already well-trodden normative ground².

(b) The feasibility debate

Let us now say a few words of the second debate, which revolves around the feasibility of promoting multilingualism, or the stability of multilingualism in the long term.

Several authors, included noted commentators in the fields of law, political philosophy or even language policy (such as Brian Barry, Philippe van Parijs, or Abram de Swaan,)³ have dismissed efforts to foster, or even to preserve linguistic diversity, on the grounds that such efforts are ineffective and that they may even run counter to the wishes of the communities whose languages are at stake. This, apparently, is the argument put forward by Edwards (1985). What I call the “internal effectiveness” argument actually only focuses on the first part—no matter what we do, languages come and go, some are doomed to extinction, and we are inexorably gravitating towards a linguistically less diverse world.

This is largely an empirical question, which we do not have the time to address. But let us just mention a few facts that should alert us to the complexity of the processes at hand.

Let us not dwell on the eternal (and somewhat contrived) example of the rebirth of Hebrew. Nevertheless, we may observe that in recent years, languages dismissed as moribund have been doing

² See Kymlicka (1995a, 1995b) ; May (2001) ; etc.

³ See Barry (2001), van Parijs (2001, 2004), de Swaan (2001).

rather well under the circumstances — let us for example think of Welsh — and that the conditions are more favourable now than they have been in a long time, given not only the increased *legitimacy* of minority languages, but the renewed interest for them that appears to accompany “globalisation”⁴. It is also interesting to note that technological development, far from being a force that only serves the spread of English, puts many more languages in evidenc

For example, the share of English on the internet is declining constantly, whether measured by the languages used on web pages, or by the language of users.⁵ Or to add yet one more example from my own country, Switzerland, where we have four national languages (French, German, Italian and Rumantsch) a recent study has shown that contrary to many people’s expectations, commercial contact between companies located in these different language regions does not take place in English, but in our national languages.

Language dynamics certainly is a complex topic; but there is abundant evidence (and plentiful anecdotes) showing that despite the rapid rate of extinction of small languages, linguistic diversity is a ongoing reality, that it is not antithetic to technological and economic development, and that it is something that can be strengthened through public policy — *if we want to*.

(c) The allocative efficiency debate

Now, do we *really* want to? This leads to the third debate.

Even if the two preceding questions have been settled in favour of multilingualism (i.e.: “it’s morally and politically right” and “it’s practically feasible”), many will contend that this is a bad idea, and an inappropriate use of scarce resources. This view is quite popular among people from my discipline (i.e., economics—that is, if they worry about language issues at all). It has been the object of a restatement by Jones (2000), who starts out by claiming that mankind needs a “common language”. This is, in itself, a legitimate starting point for a scientific argument, but he and progressively slips into a dismissal of efforts to promote linguistic diversity — a logically distinct question, but the very slip from one to the other

⁴ The paradox there may only be apparent ; see Grin and Rossiaud (1999).

⁵ See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm> (last consulted 24 February 2007).

is, in my view, indicative of the unconsciously supremacist agenda of many advocates of a world language (see Phillipson, 2003).

The argument is well-known, and it is one that cannot be countered on moral grounds. Put differently, moral or rights-based considerations are simply not relevant, because persons who consider multilingualism an ill-advised allocation of resources typically do not consider that there is a justification, let alone a “right” to the survival of languages generally (and their subjective views are no less valid than those of advocates of multilingualism). They put the question on a different plane, namely: “Does it make sense, in terms of the welfare of society as a whole, to engage resources in multilingualism?” — and *they* answer in the negative.

I shall return to this question in a moment (and devote an entire section to it), because I believe that this is where, ultimately, key issues for the future of linguistic diversity are nested. For now, let us briefly turn to the fourth debate, which is not about the allocation of resources, but the distribution of resources — and hence the issue is distributive justice, or fairness.

(d) The distributive justice debate

Let us now assume that multilingualism is recognised as morally right, practically feasible, and a good use of society’s resources — just like protecting the environment ultimately turns out to be a wise choice. Now, the question still remains of who should pay for it — or, more precisely, how the costs involved in protecting and promoting multilingualism should be shared.

The problem arises to the extent that the resources necessary may be levied on people who do not stand to gain directly from the endeavour (or who *feel* that they will not benefit). Therefore, the promotion of linguistic diversity may be rejected on the grounds that it entails unjustified *redistribution*.

Redistribution is a core question in all public policies. Consider, for example, free (or low-tuition) university education (still the rule in Switzerland, Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, and across Scandinavia, for example): it may be rejected because it implies a subsidisation of the upper-middle class (who sends its kids to university) by the entire mass of taxpayers, and implicitly a transfer from the relatively poor to the relatively rich.

In the same way, the debate about the pros and cons of multilingualism may focus on the implied redistribution of resources and on the appropriateness of this transfer. This question does, in a way, return us to the initial normative problem (that is, the “moral” debate), yet from a completely different angle, which does not involve the notion of undisputable entitlements, but the notion of fairness.

This is a relatively little-explored (and sometimes very technical) aspect of language policy (see however Pool, 1991; Grin, 2005; de Briey and Van Parijs, 2002), and one which I shall, unfortunately, have to eschew in the rest of this talk — although we can, of course, address it later during the questions session. Let us simply say that there is no *fundamental* problem there, because adjustments can in principle always be made to ensure that through transfers between initial winners and losers, no-one is left worse off by a policy; there would be, however, significant political problems of implementation.

3. Allocative issues: linguistic diversity and economic value

Let us now take a closer look at the third debate: *should* resources (including tax revenue) be allocated to guarantee multilingualism in society?

Again, the problem has to be parsed in two distinct questions. One is whether the result is *worth* the resources invested; another is whether it is incumbent upon the state to invest those resources, or whether this might not be left to private initiative. However, as a brief detour in the direction of economic theory will show, these two questions are closely linked.

In order to understand this point, it is useful to consider different aspects of the “allocative” issue.

Let us first observe that the question looks very different depending on whether we worry about multilingualism “in the absolute” (that is, when the counterfactual is linguistic uniformity in the world – or unilingualism) or about “contingent” multilingualism, where we ponder the value of engaging in more or

less “multilingualist” strategies, *under a given contingency*, namely, that the world *is* multilingual. Let us henceforth focus on this latter situation. Three levels of evaluation may be considered:

- benefits and costs accruing to the individual, which include (i) symbolic (or “non-market”) effects, practically never estimated quantitatively so far, and (ii) earnings differentials in favour of persons with certain multilingual skills (these are often referred to as “private rates of return”, which is a convenient, though analytically not hundred percent correct expression);
- benefits and costs as measured at the societal level, which take account of the fact that resources are invested in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (mostly through the education system); the resulting net value is typically estimated through “social rights of return” (and in technical terms, these are genuine rates of return);
- benefits and costs measured at the level of the economy as a whole, in which language skills are treated as production factors (that is, as inputs in an aggregate production process approached in macroeconomic perspective); the resulting value will typically be expressed as a percentage of GDP (gross domestic product).

In recent years, arguments on contingent multilingualism have been significantly reinforced, in the sense that its market value can generally be shown to be positive. The data requirements are high and at this time, relatively few are the cases (e.g., Switzerland and Québec) where estimates have been produced (Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt, 2010); nevertheless, even if private and social rates of return on languages are liable to be lower in less multilingual countries, they most probably remain positive. Taking account of non-market benefits (that is, direct enjoyment derived from knowing or using other languages, just as one derives enjoyment from intercultural contact in general) would, if anything, reinforce this conclusion.

Even though estimates are beginning to appear on an increasing range of economic contexts, the underlying processes of value creation remain little-known, and several assumptions in this respect still deserve to be examined (for example, whether individual multilingualism is correlated with creativity and, therefore, whether creativity might explain higher productivity,

which is, in turn, what would explain statistically significant private and social rates of return on language skills).

However, the debate often shifts from contingent to absolute multilingualism – without the participants to the debate being aware of this shift. Let us therefore examine the question of absolute multilingualism – putting it bluntly, might we not all be better off if there were only one language on earth? This question sounds ridiculous to me, and I hope it sounds ridiculous to my readers; but remember that many people do think this way – particularly when the one surviving language turns out (surprise, surprise) to be their own.

This latter question is closely related to the problem of the role of the state in language issues.

One could indeed argue (following a standard “laissez-faire” ideology) that government should not intervene, and that maximum welfare will proceed from the uncoordinated actions of people (individuals, firms, third-sector organisations), allowing market mechanisms to regulate, as it were, the “production” of diversity: if diversity is something people want, there will be some demand for it, and it will be “produced” to an adequate level. If little (or no) diversity is “produced”, it must be because people do not want it and (implicitly) that they are happy functioning in one language only.

This is a fairly credible line of argument for “simple” goods such as tomatoes, television sets or car tyres, Unfortunately, it doesn’t work of more complex commodities such as education, health, or the environment—and, of course, *languages* as components of our linguistic environment.

Even mainstream economics acknowledges that there are some cases where the market is not enough. These cases are known as “market failure”. When there is “market failure”, the unregulated interplay of supply and demand results in an inappropriate level of production of some commodity, where “inappropriate” can mean “too little” or “too much”.

According to economic theory, there are essentially six sources of market failure⁶, which we will not discuss here. Nevertheless, it is

⁶ For a detailed treatment, see any public economics textbook.

quite clear that in the case of linguistic diversity, market failure emerges through more than one of these six channels. One of them is particularly important, namely, the “public good” nature of diversity, or of the languages that make up this diversity.

The intuition behind it is the following: linguistic diversity has many features in common with biodiversity, which is generally recognised as type of public good (and let me add in passing that this parallel can be drawn without engaging in debatable biological metaphors). Much like the quality of air and water, languages constitute an environment which presents the core characteristics of “public goods”, which the market, if left to itself, will not provide in adequate amounts. This holds, in particular, for smaller, usually non-dominant languages. It is important to point out that the case for state involvement in the protection of linguistic diversity can therefore be made *not* on the basis of political arguments or of an appeal to human rights or minority rights, but on the basis of economic theory.

Readers will have observed, however, that whole line of argument is predicated on the assumptions that linguistic diversity is essentially a *good* rather than a *bad*. Some people are prepared to assert that diversity is intrinsically a bad thing, just like the pollution of air and water are *bad* things (at least for most people). But generally, people will be reluctant to claim that linguistic diversity is bad *per se*. Hence, if they are not prepared to make such a claim (which they would then have to back up with convincing facts), it follows that they are ready to concede that *all other things being equal*, linguistic diversity is a good.

Typically, the fall-back position of enemies of multilingualism will then be to say that “yes, it is a wonderful thing, but it is too expensive”. Now, is it, really? This is the question we shall turn to in the conclusion of this paper.

4. Is linguistic diversity worth the effort? From benefits to costs

An allocative case in favour of multilingualism (that is, that promoting multilingualism is an efficient allocation of resources) must logically offer proof that resources spent on it are well-spent. This means that the *benefits* of doing so are higher than the *costs*.

While a joint evaluation of benefits and costs of diversity would take us too far, it stands to reason that a positive difference between benefits and costs is more likely to arise if benefits are high, *or* if costs are low.

Typically, benefit evaluation is the more difficult side; I shall content myself with saying once again that linguistic diversity ought to be looked at in the same way as our natural environment. It is increasingly being recognised that a higher environmental quality results in a higher quality of life, even if the nature of these benefits may appear quite elusive — the fact that an unspoilt landscape may be pleasing to the eye is a benefit, but why do we accept to incur the corresponding cost, if not because we are willing to devote scarce resources to some complex, and possibly impossible to define, notion of “quality”? The same can be said about our linguistic environment: many people would agree that there is a positive correlation between the diversity of our linguistic environment and our quality of life.

Even though this view, which I personally subscribe to, may be gaining ground, it often remains a hard sell. It is, however, easier to focus on the other side of the coin, and to show that even if we cannot be quite sure of the amount of the *benefits* generated by minority language promotion, its costs are quite low — much lower, at any rate, than many commentators appear to assume, usually on the basis of little or no evidence whatsoever.

It is true that at this time, the amount of evidence available about the costs of minority language promotion is limited; however, it generally points in the direction of moderate costs. To clinch this point, I shall confine myself to one example, namely, that of moving from a unilingual (dominant language only: *Y*) to a bilingual education system (*X+Y*), in which both languages are used as a medium of instruction.

As a general starting point, we must remember that states have a general responsibility to provide (and to finance) compulsory education. Given this responsibility, there is a certain *cost* attaching to it. Hence, the real cost of bilingual education is the cost it entails *over and above* the alternative—that is, a unilingual education system.

Calculations have been made in the case of the teaching through Basque in the Basque Country in Spain, or through indigenous languages (particularly Maya) in Guatemala. Independently produced studies arrive, in these cases, at surprisingly close estimates, all in the 4% to 5% range. Such figures probably represent upper-bound estimates, because of the evolution, in the long run, of some of the terms that go into the estimation (particularly the training of teachers to enable them to teach through a non-dominant language).

Further developments on this question are possible (and, in fact, necessary); yet it is highly very plausible that moving from a unilingual to a bilingual school system means that pupils will be able to get education in a language that they understand well, instead of a language that they understand poorly; this will generate additional benefits.

This conclusion can only be a temporary one, since a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical work remains to be done in order to increase our knowledge of the costs of promoting multilingualism and ensuring it in the long term. However, on the basis of what we know, we can say that multilingualism is certainly affordable.

This gives us something to answer to the question “Multilingualism? Why Bother?” —the logical reply must simply be: “Why? Because it’s morally right, technically feasible — and well worth the cost”.

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