

LANGUAGE PLANNING, PUBLIC POLICY AND THE ROLE OF MINORITY LANGUAGE MEDIA

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1. Introduction

The topic originally suggested for this presentation was position of my institution, the *European Centre for Minority Issues* (generally known by its acronym of *ECMI*) regarding the role of multimedia in minority language use or promotion.

The ECMI is not an advocacy institution; it is an independent, non-partisan centre whose main activities in research, information and advisory services focus on *standards* in majority-minority relations, on the *implementation* of those standards, and on *constructive conflict management* (more information about the ECMI can be found on its web site at <http://www.ecmi.de>). Hence,

our “position” regarding the use of multimedia for minority language promotion, *or* the use of minority languages in various multimedia applications, is hardly an issue in itself—clearly, the ECMI has no reason not to be “in favour” of both. What probably matters more, however, is the way in which, in the ECMI’s work on majority-minority relations, it can be led to integrate multimedia developments. In this light, considerations regarding the role of multimedia development in minority languages hark back to issues of “implementation”.

Therefore, having said that the ECMI would have no reason not to approve of the notion of multimedia *in* minority languages or minority languages *in* multimedia applications, this presentation will address the question of how the *general* issue of minority language media fits into the work of the ECMI—more particularly in its *research* work. In the research work carried out at ECMI on *language* issues, the latter are approached chiefly in the perspective of language *policies*, because our emphasis is not so much on *problems* in majority-minority relations as on *solutions* in this area, and policies are embodiments of the quest for solutions.

As regards the particular case of language policies, these are arguably an area of increasing importance for governments and for society as a whole. We could discuss the origins of this trend, and examine the causes of this increasing importance, but this is not my point here. We can certainly agree that over the past ten or fifteen years, language matters have gained prominence as a topic in public affairs, because an increasing proportion of the world’s population is confronted, with greater frequency than before, to *difference* and *diversity*.

What is more, this diversity needs to be *managed*, for at least two types of reasons. On the one hand, diversity is not “easy”; rather, it is often

conflictual, which makes some degree of intervention necessary. On the other hand—and this may sound paradoxical in light of what has just been said—diversity is often fragile. More precisely, some *elements* of diversity are under threat. This applies, in particular, to minority languages, which are important *components* of diversity. If we agree (no matter for what reason), that diversity is valuable and hence worth preserving, it follows that intervention may also be required to preserve and promote it. And language policy, ultimately, is a form of *diversity management*.

This raises a number of questions regarding the nature of language policies, some of which are discussed in this presentation. Since limitations of time and space prevent us from embarking on a full-fledged analysis of the issues at hand, the aim of this presentation is simply to highlight some issues which I believe to have particular importance when trying to understand, from a policy perspective, the potential role of modern media in minority languages (including in the still loosely defined constellation referred to as “multimedia”). The application of policy analysis to language policy remains, at this time, a field of specialisation *in the making*, and much of what I will present today should not be seen as final certitudes, but as a set of issues submitted for your consideration.

More precisely, I would like to address two questions in this presentation:

(1) Should the state support the development and use of modern media in minority languages—or should such development be simply left to market forces? As you will see, I believe that strong arguments speak in favour of state support.

(2) What should the focus of intervention be? Should the emphasis be placed on the legal standards regarding minority languages, or should we emphasise

what happens *beyond* the legal plane? As you will see, I believe that the policies that can be adopted (as distinct from the legal provisions) have so far received far too little attention generally. This may not be true in the case of the *Comunidad Autonoma Vasca*, but I believe it applies to most minority languages in Europe.

2. Question 1: Why is language policy a relevant duty of the state?

Let us accept, as a starting point, that the preservation of diversity, including of minority languages as key elements of diversity, is a good thing in itself. Although this view is debated by some, it is not the goal of this paper to “make the case” *for* diversity. The question, rather, is how this goal may be achieved.

There are strong arguments, developed in mainstream economic theory, that the free market constitutes a mechanism whereby society’s goals can be reached and maximum aggregate welfare delivered. If so, there are no grounds for state intervention, and everything should be left to private initiative. The underlying adjustment mechanism goes as follows: if “not enough” of something is produced, its price rises, and producers will respond by increasing output to the desired level (while the rise in price simultaneously discourages some consumers); and if “too much” of something is being produced, its price will drop, meaning that more of the good will be absorbed by consumers, while some producers will simply turn away from a production line that no longer generates sufficient profits.

While this is a fairly credible line of argument for “simple” goods such as tomatoes, television sets or car tires, it becomes more difficult to accept in the case of much more complex commodities such as education, health, or the environment—and, of course, language.

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 “free” interplay of supply and demand results in an inappropriate level of production of some commodity, where “inappropriate” can mean “too little” or “too much”. There are essentially six sources of “market failure”:

- [a] insufficient information, which prevents economic agents (producers and consumers) from making the right decisions in terms of output, purchases, lending and borrowing;
- [b] high transaction costs, which move agents *not* to do something that would eventually have been economically beneficial;
- [c] the fact that some markets cannot exist (for example, yet-unborn generations cannot be present on today’s oil market to express their valuation of this non-renewable resource);
- [d] the existence of “market structure imperfections” such as monopolies and oligopolies;
- [e] the presence of “externalities”, that is, of a situation where the behaviour of one agent affects (positively or negatively) the position of another agent, without the gain or loss so created giving rise to corresponding compensation;
- [f] the existence of so-called “public goods”, which have (in the “pure” textbook case) two main characteristics described below: non-rival consumption and impossibility of exclusion.

In the case of linguistic diversity, market failure emerges through more than one of these six channels (actually, a strong case can be made that all six sources of market failure are present; furthermore, these manifestations of market failure are often inter-connected, for example forms [e] and [f]). Yet

one is particularly important (and may be analytically the most fundamental), namely, the “public good” nature of diversity, or of the languages that make up this diversity.

Linguistic diversity has many features in common with biodiversity. Although it is not my intention to overstate this case, it is useful to observe that the same analytical reasons that justify intervention to preserve and maintain our natural environment (which, for the analytical reasons presented above, simply *cannot* be left over to market forces) also applies to what I often call our *linguistic environment*. Just like other amenities that surround us, such as street lighting or the quality of air and water, the languages around us, and the greater or lesser diversity of these languages, constitute an *environment* which presents the core characteristics of “public goods”. Hence, there is absolutely no guarantee that the free market (that is, decentralised decisions made by social actors) generates the behaviour that will result in an *appropriate* degree of diversity, and in an *adequate* presence, use, learning, etc., of minority languages in our environment.

It may be that *some* dimensions of the linguistic environment could be left to private initiative; this is the case, for example, when one considers only the learning of languages of wider communication; because private actors find a directly marketable interest in it. Hence, people will normally invest in language learning (demand) in proportion with the benefits they derive from it; and the language teaching (supply) required can be provided and paid for as a result of this demand. This, however, does not hold for several dimensions of our linguistic environment, such as the visibility or presence of minority languages. To the extent that the preservation of those languages has been, at the outset, recognised as a “good”, it follows that only the state (or its surrogates) can be counted on to take the measures that will result in

an appropriate presence and visibility of minority languages in our linguistic environment.

This, in my opinion, certainly applies to many aspects of minority language media. The provision of *some* media can be left over to private enterprise, because unit costs are low, and a private producer can afford to make a small loss in order to demonstrate, for publicity reasons, his or her openness, and willingness to offer some media products in a minority language. But some other media, in particular television broadcasting, will typically *not* be provided through minority languages without some degree of state support.

This point could be developed in greater detail, yet the core idea is a simple one: linguistic diversity (and the languages that constitute it, particularly small, minority languages) presents many of the crucial characteristics of a public good; as such, it is usually under-supplied by the free market, making state intervention necessary to ensure adequate provision.

The important point here is that the case for state support can be made *not* on the basis of political arguments, or of an appeal to human rights or minority rights, but on the basis of an economic perspective on the very *nature* of certain types of services. This may be unsurprising to many of us here, who share a concern for minority languages—but the point is not to preach to converted. Rather, the point is to explain to sceptics why it is perfectly normal for the state to support those languages, in the same way as it is considered logical for the state to develop an education or an environmental policy.

3. Question 2 : Language policies—a focus on legal dimensions or beyond them ?

Traditionally, legal perspectives have played a central or even dominant role in state action in the field of languages. Although this may not be the case in Euzkadi, where policy implementation is particularly well-developed, the situation tends to be different for other minority language areas in Europe. Typically, the lion's share of state action with respect to linguistic diversity takes the form of legislative products, after which far less is done. Unfortunately, with a near-exclusive emphasis on legal dimensions, many of the most vital aspects of language policies can be overlooked.

Moreover, even if we *have* a very good legal text authorising the state to offer support to minority languages, the question then arises : what do we do ? *How* exactly is this support to be provided?

Generally, this raises questions regarding the *effectiveness* and the *cost-effectiveness* of policies. These questions will not be discussed here; however, I will simply mention a conference recently organised on this topic at the ECMI in Flensburg, Germany, in June 2000; this conference, which was co-financed by the European Commission, was, to my knowledge, the first one ever to address minority language policies in this perspective¹. I take this opportunity to draw your attention on the *recommendations* that were adopted at the closing of the conference, under the title of “*Flensburg Recommendations for the effective, cost-effective and democratic implementation of minority language policies*”.

¹ The corresponding *conference report* is available free of charge or can be downloaded from the ECMI web site.

However, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are not the issue I wish to stress here. Rather, I would like to raise the question of the actual role of minority language media and multimedia tools in minority languages as *instruments* for giving substance to legal provisions in favour of minority languages.

We know that there still is no full-fledged and generally accepted theory of language *dynamics* (that is, on the decline, maintenance and spread of languages). However, some progress has been made in recent years, in particular through the work of scholars like the famous sociolinguist Joshua Fishman, who has been a guest of the Basque country on numerous occasions. We now know a little more about language *revitalisation*. Keeping complicated matters as simple as possible, we may say that minority language revitalisation requires three things concerning the *users* or *potential users* of minority languages.

(1) A precondition is the very *capacity* to use the language: in other words, social actors must know the language (and if they don't know it but would like to, they should be able to learn it). "Capacity", or "linguistic competence" (a notion in the detail of which I will not go) can therefore be seen as an absolute requirement.

(2) Social actors, however, will only use the language if they have a desire to do so. Typically, minority language speakers are bilingual. This implies that in principle, they have a choice to carry out their various activities through the medium of the majority language *or* of the minority language. If there is a choice, one of the conditions for the choice to be made in favour of "doing things through the medium of the minority language" is therefore dependent on people's *desire* to do so. To some extent, this "desire" can be interpreted as a reflection of "demand", in the sense of standard micro-economic theory.

(3) Finally, even if speakers are *capable* of using their minority language and have the *desire* to do it, they also need *opportunities* to use it. To some extent, these opportunities are a purely private matter; in all but very dictatorial societies, individual actors determine what language they speak in the privacy of their homes. However, genuine language vitality goes well beyond strictly private use. The question is also that of the *public* use of a language. This is where the state often has a crucial role to play through its language policies. By creating opportunities for the people to use their language outside of the strictly private sphere, authorities contribute to the *supply* of a linguistic environment (where “supply” can be understood in the sense of standard economic theory).

In short, minority languages need three things to thrive: capacity, opportunity and desire (or, to use another terminology: “capacity, supply, and demand”).

The broad sphere of the media must be viewed primarily as a component of *supply*. However, depending on the type of media considered, we may be speaking about the supply of mostly “private” or “public” opportunity. Web resources in minority languages can be provided at low cost, and even if such supply is unprofitable, it is generally not indispensable for the state to step in; furthermore, web resources tend to be consumed privately. But again, the provision of media such as television broadcasting carries such a high cost that its supply normally requires an adequate degree of public support.

One question which is, to my knowledge, insufficiently assessed is that of the actual impact of “new” media on minority language vitality. There are data on the range, variety and frequency of minority language resources on the web (which point in the direction of a rapidly rising diversity of languages on

the internet), but this does not tell us what these resources do in terms of actual promotion of the languages concerned.

At this point, another important aspect needs to be mentioned: if we wish to assess the importance of the “new media” for minority language maintenance, it is not enough to simply say proudly that more and more web sites in minority languages are available. This would simply amount to stating that *supply* has increased. But as I have just pointed out, what matters is not supply alone; what matters is the *intersection of supply and demand*, because the interaction of opportunity and desire is what determines the extent to which such resources are used.

Some tentative calculations have been made in the case of another (and more traditional) medium, namely, television—the case in point being that of S4C (S Pedwar C”, or “Sianel Pedwar Cymru”), the Welsh television channel opened almost exactly eight years ago, on 1st November 1992.

In a little book published by the ECMI in 1999, we have tried to estimate the number of hours of actual language *use generated* by the *supply* of Welsh-language television, because merely looking at the supply of programmes would have fallen short of an estimation of its actual effect on the position of the language. We found that S4C can be estimated to generate a total of 167.7m person-hours of Welsh-language television viewing per year. Given a total expenditure (in 1996) of approximately EUR 77m, the per-hour cost of a person-hour is in the region of EUR 0.50, or about fifty cents.

It is therefore important, when assessing policy interventions in the field of the media, to think not only in terms of supply, but also in terms of demand, and hence to investigate the intersection of supply and demand, because this will be a much stronger test of what policies really achieve, beyond legislative

development. I believe that we only have extremely patchy information about the “new media”, and this opens up a whole new and exciting field of investigation.

4. Conclusion

In this presentation, I have attempted to sketch out two of the major questions that arise nowadays in the evaluation of language policies, also with respect to the media as a possible field of language policy intervention.

One point is, I believe, well established, namely, that the intervention of the state is justified—not for political or moral reasons, which are not my point here, but for “technical” reasons related to the very nature of linguistic diversity.

I have then tried to show that it is important, in the analysis of language policies, to look beyond the legal plane, and to examine the actual effects of policies. With respect to this question, and with particular regard to media resources, it is important not to look only at supply, but to remember that what matters, for language vitality, is the interaction of supply and demand. This is the “acid test” of the importance of the media for the future of minority languages.

In conclusion, much work remains to be done, theoretically but also empirically. This is particularly true when it comes to integrating the role of the new media in an analysis of minority language promotion: not only is this type of analysis fairly new, but so are the media in question themselves. It is therefore an extremely welcome development that a conference such as this brings together specialists of minority language media, because their work will generate a host of highly valuable information. I can only hope that the

type of approach sketched out in this presentation can help to *structure* usefully the gathering of information, which we will then be able to put at the service of a living linguistic diversity.

Suggestions for further reading

Fishman, Joshua, 1991: *Reversing Language Shift. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Grin, François (ed.), 1996: *Economic Approaches to Language and Language Planning*. Theme issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 121.

Grin, François, 2000b: *Evaluating Policy Measures for Minority Languages in Europe: Towards Effective, Cost-Effective and Democratic Implementation*. ECMI Report No. 6. Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues.

Grin, François and Vaillancourt, François, 1999: *The cost-effectiveness evaluation of minority language policies: Case studies on Wales, Ireland and the Basque Country*. ECMI Monograph No 2. Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues.

Kontra, Miklós *et al.* (eds), 1999: *Language: A Right and a Resource. Approaching Linguistic Human Rights*. Budapest: Central European University Press.