Democratic debate among speakers of different European languages is not only possible, but also helps to protect linguistic diversity

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One of the key problems in strengthening democracy across the EU is the diverse range of languages spoken by European citizens. **Matteo Bonotti** *writes on theoretical approaches to language policy and outlines their relevance for the European debate. He argues that although some theorists have viewed a common language as being necessary in a democracy, it is not necessary for this to be a common mother tongue. Mandating the use of English or an alternative language such as Esperanto at the European level would pose both moral and practical problems, but it might be necessary in order to justify the protection of linguistic diversity.*

Language and linguistic diversity are objects of investigation in several academic disciplines such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, philosophy, and psycholinguistics. Some scholars, for example, focus on the internal structure of languages, some on their relationship with human cognitive faculties and others on their reciprocal interaction with specific social and cultural contexts.

Political theorists, however, analyse language and linguistic diversity from a different perspective. Rather than focusing on empirical questions concerning the way languages work or evolve, they adopt a normative approach to language issues. They ask, for example, whether the state ought to preserve and promote linguistic diversity and why; whether linguistic minorities ought to be granted special rights in order to protect their linguistic identity and avoid being assimilated into a dominant language; whether public services ought to be offered in more than one language, and whether publicly funded education ought to be bilingual.

In order to answer these and similar questions, political theorists appeal to concepts such as justice, equality, recognition and democracy, and aim to show how different understandings of each of these concepts can generate different arguments regarding language rights and language policy. By developing sophisticated analytical frameworks, political theorists can therefore

Tower of Babel, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Public Domain)

play an important role in providing the normative principles that ought to guide decision-making in these areas. However, in order to offer empirically informed answers, it is also important that political theorists dealing with language matters become acquainted with the findings of other language-focused disciplines (e.g. sociolinguistics) and move beyond the abstract realm of ideal theory.

As Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten have thoroughly shown, political theorists deeply disagree regarding how the state ought to respond to the fact of linguistic diversity that most (if not all) polities are increasingly experiencing in the western and non-western world. Some authors, for example, emphasise the importance of ensuring that all citizens in a polity are proficient in a common national language and that immigrants are assimilated into the majority

language rather than helped or encouraged to preserve their linguistic identity. According to this view, linguistic homogeneity enhances individuals' range of opportunities (e.g. professional, educational, etc.) and facilitates the pursuit of common public goals such as social cohesion and democratic deliberation.

Other authors, however, defend the view that linguistic diversity ought to be preserved and promoted by the state. Some appeal to the intrinsic value of linguistic diversity both within individual polities and at the global level. Others emphasise the unique perspective on the world which each language offers and which would be lost if languages were not protected.

A very influential view is the one defended by the communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor. According to Taylor, liberal democratic states should endorse what he calls a 'politics of recognition', i.e. they should acknowledge and protect the distinct identities of specific cultural groups. This justifies granting linguistic minorities (e.g. French-speaking Quebecois in Canada) special rights enabling them to implement policies (e.g. in matters of education) which aim to protect their linguistic identity. These special group rights, however, are often rejected by liberal political theorists, such as Brian Barry, who consider them as a threat to the rights and freedoms of individuals, especially those who do not share the language (and/or the political goals) of the surrounding community.

One political theorist, Will Kymlicka, has provided one of the most interesting attempts to reconcile the communitarian emphasis on linguistic (and, more generally, cultural) group rights with the liberal concern for protecting individual liberty and autonomy. According to Kymlicka's theory of liberal culturalism, our language and culture ought to be protected because they provide us (individuals) with a range of options from which we can choose and thanks to which we can exercise our individual autonomy.

Furthermore, like so-called 'luck egalitarians', Kymlicka believes that the state should rectify inequalities resulting from people's unchosen circumstances. Individuals do not choose their mother tongue. Therefore, the kinds of difficulties (e.g. financial, educational, etc.) that speakers of minority languages experience in attempting to protect their linguistic identity are underserved and ought to be offset by granting them special rights in matters of language policy and legislation.

What is distinctive about Kymlicka's approach to the problem of language policy is that he also emphasises that we can only participate in democratic political deliberation in our mother tongue and that democratic politics can only be 'politics in the vernacular'. This, however, creates a tension between the idea that the state ought to protect linguistic diversity and the idea that all citizens of a polity ought to share a common mother tongue for public deliberation to be truly democratic. Given that all countries in the world are to a greater or lesser extent multilingual, assuming or demanding linguistic homogeneity as a precondition for democratic deliberation seems to be unduly restrictive and to potentially justify the forced linguistic assimilation of language minorities.

Democratic deliberation is certainly important, at least in liberal democracies. Citizens should not simply cast a vote every few years, but also discuss and exchange views about public policies in order for the latter to be justified. The tension in Kymlicka's account, however, can be avoided by acknowledging that citizens can participate in public deliberation in a language that is not their mother tongue (I am doing this right now) and that this deliberation can grant legitimacy to those laws and policies (endorsed by Kymlicka himself) which have the scope of protecting linguistic diversity.

Language policy in the European Union

Nowhere have these kinds of issues, and the kind of tension encountered in Kymlicka's account, been as prominent as in recent discussions about the language policy of the European Union (EU). As the EU's motto 'unity in diversity' well summarises, since its inception the EU has been constantly driven by two opposite and contrasting goals. On the one hand, it has endeavoured to preserve its cultural and linguistic diversity. On the other hand, it has aimed to legitimise its policies and institutions by encouraging a democratic debate among its citizens carried out across linguistic boundaries.

Increasing deliberation among EU citizens can certainly improve the EU's legitimacy, but in what language should this deliberation be conducted and, consequently, what language(s) should the EU and its member states encourage their citizens to learn? Some authors, such as Philippe Van Parijs, argue that English should be adopted as the EU 'lingua franca' and that all EU citizens ought to be proficient in this language. This solution would not be without problems and would be considered unfair by many EU member states. However, it might be the best available option as serious moral and practical issues would also arise from adopting alternative solutions such as 'lingua franca pluralism' (all EU citizens ought to be proficient in more than one lingua franca, e.g. English, French and German) or the use of Esperanto. The former, it is often argued, would be fairer but less efficient (and, however, still biased in favour of a limited number of languages). The latter would be neutral and impartial but, according to many, very impractical.

So far, the EU's measures regarding language policy (e.g. Erasmus, Comenius, etc.) have been driven by the 'MT + 2' formula, i.e. the idea that each EU citizen should be proficient in two foreign languages as well as in their mother tongue. The results of the EU measures in this area have so far been mixed. However, there is increasing optimism regarding the contribution that, according to recent research, receptive multilingualism (i.e. reciprocal understanding between two speakers using their respective mother tongues) can provide to communication among EU citizens.

It is not clear what the future of the EU's language policy will be. What is clear, however, is that the issues at stake are not only practical but also involve deep disagreements about the normative foundations which justify different policy solutions. Political theory has an important role to play here.

For a longer discussion of the topic covered in this article, see Matteo Bonotti, 'Politics without the Vernacular: Liberal Culturalism and the Language Policy of the European Union', Politics, 33(3), 2013

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