

Assessing the effects of language policies: the case of the EU

Michele Gazzola

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

Microdata from Eurostat - SILC, LFS, AES, SES, CIS, EHIS and HBS

4th European User Conference

Mannheim, March 5-6, 2015

Organized by German Microdata Lab, GESIS, in cooperation with Eurostat

This article deals with the evaluation of the effectiveness and the fairness (or linguistic justice) of the current language policy of the European Union (EU). By linguistic justice I mean the distributive consequences of language policies on the relative position of citizens and stakeholders. More precisely, I address the following question: what would be the allocative and distributive effects on European residents of a change of the current multilingual language policy of the EU, which is founded on the formal equality between 24 official languages? Using statistical analysis and microdata provided by Eurostat in the Adult Education Survey in 2011 and 2013, I correlate data on the knowledge of first and second languages of EU residents with data on their age, income, education and social status. I calculate the percentage of EU residents who do not understand a given language by country and by socio-economic status in at least 20 European countries. Then, I use this percentage as an indicator to identify who would win and who lose if a restrictive language policy were adopted by the institutions of the EU (e.g. an English-only or an English-French-German language regime). I show that a change in the current language policy of the EU would have significant distributional consequences among countries and social groups, and I show how these distributional consequences have changed between 2011 and 2013. Results reveal that a drastic reduction in the number of official and working languages of the EU would disadvantage not only (and quite obviously) the residents of some countries; it would also be particularly detrimental to EU residents with a low level of education and low income, and to the socially excluded. Hence, empirical evidence shows that providing multilingual communication through 24 official languages is more valuable for the weakest sections of society. In this perspective, multilingualism contributes to the social cohesion in the EU. By contrast, data show that monolingualism (e.g. an English-only language policy) or a language regime based on three languages only would create significant inequalities among EU residents based on their social status. The approach adopted in this paper is interdisciplinary: it relies on sociolinguistics, language policy and planning, and the evaluation of language policies. This paper presents the results of a two-year research project funded by the European Commission.

Keywords: Multilingualism, European Union, Evaluation of Language Policies, Linguistic Justice

References

Gazzola, M. and F. Grin (2013). "Is ELF more effective and fair than translation? An evaluation of the EU's multilingual regime." International Journal of Applied Linguistics **23**(1): 93-107.

Gazzola, M. (2014). The evaluation of language regimes. Theory and application to multilingual patent organisations. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

Ginsburgh, V. and S. Weber (2011). How many languages do we need? The economics of linguistic diversity. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Kraus, P. A. (2008). A Union of diversity: Language, identity and polity-building in Europe, Cambridge University Press.

Phillipson, R. (2003). English-only Europe? Challenging language policy. London, Routledge.

Van Parijs, P. (2011). Linguistic justice for Europe and for the World. Oxford, Oxford University Press.