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Linguistic Diversity and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

This paper aims to show the strong links existing between the respect and promotion of linguistic diversity and the social cohesion, making use of worldwide known linguists' contributions during a congress on Cohesion and Peace through the Dialogue, organized by the UNESCO Centre of Catalunya in March 2009.

The process of building a European community necessarily involves the management of diversity; Europe is made by many, different cultures, religions, ways to organize the environment, languages. The purpose of constructing a cohesive society made by all these different elements should be pursued through an articulated and democratic education to the respect of this diversity, both in formal and informal contexts. In this sense, European institutions are making decisions toward the acknowledgement of cultural and linguistic diversity, but they are still just words, being practice really different. On the other hand civil society is getting more aware of the implications of linguistic diversity and of the need to manage it by changing the approach to languages and multilingualism. We have examples of good practices for the revival of endangered languages from all over the world, which can help us in thinking to what should be done in our societies in order to make all the different languages speakers (and thinkers) feel part of a common big community, the European one.

We have Europe: a continent with diverse peoples and a project: make of them a cohesive community with an active citizenship. But the question is how to integrate all these cultures and languages in order to make them dialogue and feel part of a bigger group? History gives us the experiences of political elites who tried to unify a diverse population under one flag, by inculcating them the feeling of belonging to the same community, in other words, trying to build a Nation for their State. While declaring to pursue all citizens' equality, these elites imposed one cultural and linguistic model to their governed. Diversity was seen as a danger for State's and Nation's integrity: citizens were supposed to assimilate what was chosen to be the national culture, learn and use the *national* language, and finally feel all equal, all the same.

The European States' myth of the unity – one State, one Nation, one culture, one language – was exported worldwide. The expert of African languages and literature and president of the UNESCO Executive Council, Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai, speaking during the mentioned Congress, illustrated African States' attitudes towards linguistic diversity: in some cases it consists of an attempt to suppress, in others to assimilate, tolerate or ignore local languages, making them die in silence; sometimes governments act to safeguard them but in a lower status in front of the national, official language, usually the colonial one – French, English or Portuguese.

The consequences are very similar both in Africa and Europe: in spite of the policies of

homogenization, diversity is still a fact. In Africa people currently speak three or four languages; in Europe, where States are older and their measures produced stronger effects, people are monolingual or, in some cases, bilingual (even if one of their languages, the unofficial one, is often considered a dialect) but different ways to conceive the world – that languages has the can express very well - persist. Moreover homogenization failed to preserve conflicts, as shown by minorities' claims for more autonomy or independence, that often bring political crises – as it happened in Belgium, where the government resigned because of a contrast on Flemish population's linguistic rights – and in some cases even armed conflict, as in the Basque Country. On the contrary, these conflicts are often caused by homogenization's policies, because refusing to recognize diversity, States' governments do not respect minorities' rights and exclude a big part of the population, which don't identify itself with the official culture.

This is a very important lesson that we should take into account if we want linguistic communities to be active in the political life at the European level. A community doesn't have to be monolithic, in fact if different contributes of diverse cultures and languages are accepted and encouraged, it's more likely that citizens feel part of it, given that the respect and the promotion of linguistic diversity – as well as cultural, religious, bio-cultural diversity - bring mutual comprehension and social cohesion.

Colette Grinevald, teacher of linguistics at the University of Lumière Lyon 2, illustrated in the Congress other reasons – besides its role in pursuing social cohesion – that make linguistic diversity so important. Languages express cultures, identities, particular ways to apprehend the realities; they embody human history and knowledge; they carry and at the same time produce this knowledge, and are the basic mean to spread it. This is the reason of the importance of multilingualism, meaning not only the competence to speak many languages but also the awareness of the linguistic diversity as a fact, an inevitable characteristic of our societies. Linguistic diversity is worth to be considered and promoted not just because we cannot avoid it, but even, and overall, because it represents an advantage for our communities as many voices, many perspectives which compare themselves can more likely find a commonly shared solution to social and political problems. Moreover promoting multilingualism is useful from a functional point of view, being a very important factor of personal, social and economic development. There are studies which demonstrate that multilingualism contributes to value creation, thus improving economic performances.¹

European institutions have introduced these ideas in their politics. The European Cultural Convention (1955) aims to safeguard European culture through promoting the mutual understanding and reciprocal appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity and including national contributes to European common cultural heritage. In this framework two new institutions have been created: the Language Policy Division and the European Centre for Modern Languages. The first aims to assure mutual understanding in Europe and secure economic competitiveness and to develop a sense of inclusion and shared democratic citizenship among European peoples. It promotes the acquisition of several languages in the course of lifetime and the use of minority languages in all levels of education; its main role is to produce tools and standards for States to elaborate language policies.

The task of the European Centre for Modern Languages is to implement language policies and to promote innovative approach to the learning and teaching of language education.

The European Union represents an opportunity for local communities to introduce their requests in the political agenda. The Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe worked in the elaboration of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which firmly prohibits unjustified language discrimination and promotes the use of minority languages in all levels of education, media, legal and administrative contexts, economic and social life, cultural activities and trans-frontier exchanges.

These declarations of principles and measures are small steps towards the right direction, but they are not enough. First of all there are still resistances to the recognition of the equal level of all languages, in the discourses and overall in practice. Indeed, while the Language Policy Division deals with mother tongues, first languages, foreign and second languages and minority languages, in other context an unjustified hierarchy of languages persists; for instance, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages refers only to historical languages, so excluding those which are commonly defined as “dialects”, as well as immigrants' languages.

There is no scientific definition able to exactly describe if a linguistic variety is a language or a dialect, being this distinction political. Say that one is a dialect and not a language means to put it in a lower level in front of “proper” languages, to affirm that it is just a local, maybe even less cultured variation of a main language. Linguapax honorary president Felix Martí pointed out Spanish authorities' attitude towards Catalan language: the two languages have a co-official status, at least in Catalan regions, though actually it does not implicate the safeguard and promotion of Catalan, on the contrary it perpetuates a hierarchy in which Spanish has the strong position. The same happens at the international level, inside and outside Europe, where in fact English, followed by French and Spanish, are dominant, and other languages are confined to smaller, less important contexts.

Another barrier to overcome is the big contradiction according to which while finally recognizing – even if at a still incipient stadium- the dignity of all historical languages, we don't value the linguistic contributes of the immigrant population. They are languages with a foreign origin but spoken inside our societies. Instead of recognizing that they represent an added value to our cultural wealth and thus promoting them, we often produce a discourse very similar to the myth of the national language we already referred to: the fear that diversity would be an obstacle to the unity and integrity of a Nation. The terms change but the concept is the same: now we are afraid that immigrants could contaminate our culture, so we pretend that they learn and speak our languages, but we totally ignore theirs.

Yai's suggestions for Africa is valuable for Europe as well: we need to understand that any new language that begins to be spoken in a society comes to belong to its cultural heritage, and that its promotion does not represent an alternative to local language safeguard, but an addition to it, for the purpose of linguistic diversity that, as we said,

favors the social cohesion.

Another big lack in language and education policies concerns the sign languages. Although they are commonly considered visual imitations of spoken languages, sign languages are proper linguistic systems, with their own vocabulary, grammar, lexicon, expressions. The only difference from spoken languages is that they are based not on sounds but on visual signs. Deaf people are, in this sense, a linguistic minority, unfortunately more minorized than many others. A really inclusive language policy cannot forget to manage this diversity, and the way deaves can activate themselves as citizens with full rights.

There is the need to break this sort of prejudices and to treat all languages equally, in principles but over all in practice.

Indeed the major problem to be solved is the distance between the official discourse and the daily practice. During the Linguapax Award Ceremony, Robert Phillipson,² in receiving his prize, pointed out that, in spite of 23 official languages, European Union's activities actually take place in one or two languages, i.e. English and French, and even if documents are available on all the 23 languages, they are all “undisguised English”. In the European transnational context English is indeed used as *lingua franca*, after that we find other few languages – French, Spanish – that are all majority, official/national, spoken European languages, while there is no use of minority languages, i.e. local, sign or immigrants' languages. This attitude perpetuates the linguistic imperialism of majority languages, English over all, a monolingual or bilingual culture, languages hierarchy and, as a consequence, the exclusion of a big part of the population from political participation.

There are good practices promoted by the civil society worldwide to spread awareness and respect of linguistic diversity, to preserve and revival endangered languages, to promote multilingual education and multilingualism in formal and informal contexts,³ that can be taken as examples to build really inclusive language and education policies in the European context, in order to activate the participation of all linguistic communities, that is fundamental for the mutual understanding of diverse peoples, for social cohesion, and in ultimate terms, for peace.

As Felix Martí advises for Catalonia is extendible to other contexts: we need new theoretical models for languages coexistence based not on hierarchy but on languages equality; weaker languages must be protected and the cultural market, which now only favors stronger linguistic communities, has to be balanced in order to assure the use of smaller languages. We should deeper study the links between multilingualism and economic development, between juridical and political recognition of all languages and social cohesion and share these studies. Education policies have to include minority languages, use them in every context and encourage its use in formal and informal contexts.

¹ See, for instance: Grin, Francois, Claudio Sfreddo, y Francois Vaillancourt. *The Economics of the Multilingual Workplace*. Taylor and Francis, 2009, or ELAN's study *Are Catalan businesses multilingual*

enough?, available online at http://www10.gencat.cat/casa_llengues/binaris/opuscle_ELAN_tcm302-122718.pdf

2 Robert Phillipson's speech is available at:

[http://www.linguapax.org/fitxer/243/Speech%20of%20Robert%20Phillipson_Linguapax%20Award%202010.p](http://www.linguapax.org/fitxer/243/Speech%20of%20Robert%20Phillipson_Linguapax%20Award%202010.pdf)

[df](http://www.linguapax.org/fitxer/243/Speech%20of%20Robert%20Phillipson_Linguapax%20Award%202010.pdf)

3 See the UNESCO registered good practices at:

http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00145#Registered_good_practices; and the Linguapax websites www.linguapax.org