



From revolutionary monolingualism to reactionary multilingualism: Top-down discourses of linguistic diversity in Europe, 1794–present



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ABSTRACT

Key documents in EU-level multilingualism policy since the enlargements of 2004 and 2007 reveal a number of paradoxes: the *multiplicity* of languages is seen as a problem or challenge to be overcome, while the *diversity* of languages is seen as a form of inherited cultural wealth. Comparing a policy document from 2007 with one from 1794, I show that such paradoxes are deeply entrenched in top-down European discourses about linguistic diversity dating back to the French Revolution. The dissolution of internal boundaries in today's neoliberal EU has necessitated the fortification of the external boundary—that between Europe and elsewhere.

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1. Introduction

Diversity is good. If diversity is good, super-diversity¹ should be even better—much better. And yet messages about linguistic diversity have a contradictory quality: if a lack of diversity is a bad thing, too much diversity can be bad, too. For the past twenty years or so, consumers of mass media have been repeatedly warned² about a global crisis in linguistic diversity: every two weeks another language dies, usually in a remote and (until recently) unspoiled locale, when a superannuated last speaker passes away. Meanwhile, major cities (in Europe) seem rapidly to be filling up with people who speak a vast and unmanageable number of distinct and unintelligible (to us) languages, who insist on doing so, who persist in doing so—there goes the neighborhood.³ This suggests that distance may be a factor. Is linguistic (super-) diversity more easily appreciated from afar?

Probably it depends on who's talking about it, and to whom they are talking. Diversity talk⁴ is a type of managerial discourse that can be encountered today in a wide range of institutional domains in the US, Europe, and elsewhere. Such discourses are organized around key terms and concepts that function as what Urciuoli⁵ (2009; 2010:56) has called *strategically deployable shifters*: these are terms whose conceptual content—and whose reference to real-world objects—shifts in

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¹ Vertovec 2007, 2010; see Blommaert and Rampton 2011 and references therein.

² See Moore et al., 2010, p. 6 to get an idea of the growth in media coverage of “endangered languages.”

³ See Blommaert 2013.

⁴ I am indebted to Asif Agha (p.c.) for this apposite phrase.

⁵ Building on the work of Silverstein (1976), who built on the work of Jakobson (1990 [1957]); the term ‘shifter’ was coined (in English) by Jespersen (1922: 123–124).

subtle but important ways, depending upon who is using them, when, where, to whom, and to what ends. ‘Language’ itself is obviously one of these shifters. ‘Diversity’ is another, ‘multilingualism’ another. ‘Multiculturalism’—the seemingly exhausted term that ‘super-diversity’ is meant in part to replace (Vertovec 2010)—certainly belongs here as well.

To say that these terms are ‘shifters’ is not to suggest that they are somehow inherently ambiguous (or worse, ‘polysemous’)—quite the opposite. It is merely to say that their meaning(s) can only be recovered by attending to the circumstances of their interested use. Like all indexical expressions, they not only reflect aspects of the contexts in which they are used, they help to create those contexts, in and by their very use. In that sense, they are the opposite of ambiguous: they are, as Peirce so memorably formulated it, compulsive (Peirce, 1958–1966: 2.305). The problem for analysis is that terms like ‘diversity’, ‘multilingualism’, and indeed ‘language’ itself compel our attention to different things on different occasions of use.

My primary focus here is on how diversity talk manifests itself in top-down discourses of linguistic diversity in contemporary Europe, specifically statements of policy and principle pertaining to European multilingualism that are articulated “at EU level”—i.e., those emanating from one or more of the three major institutions of the European Union (EU): the European Commission (EC), its executive branch; the Council of the European Union; and the European Parliament. I will argue that recent (post-2004) EU-level language and multilingualism policy represents a continuation and a further development of a very old European socio-political project, the one formerly known as language standardization. Indeed, as Susan Gal observes in a recent paper, contemporary EU language policies seem to be animated by language ideologies that are “strikingly similar to those developed by European nation-states over the last century and a half” (Gal, 2006: 22).

In this paper I show that these ideologies can be traced even further back, to the very dawn of European nation-state-hood. I will compare two very different kinds of texts from two very different periods in the history of European language policy: A decree addressed to all the citizens of France by the National Convention in Year II of the Revolution (1794), and a “think piece” written in 2007 by a committee of literary eminences at the behest of the European Commission and addressed to a target audience that the online EU Bookshop labels “Specialised/Technical.”⁶ On the question of ‘linguistic diversity’ the two texts are diametrically opposed: the 1794 Decree calls for the universal adoption of French by all citizens, and the annihilation and extirpation from French soil of all the forms of speech (‘dialects’, *patois*, etc.) that diverge from the national standard. The 2007 policy proposal, written partly in response to the recent (2004, 2007) enlargements of the European Union (EU), celebrates linguistic diversity as an essential part of “the European idea,” and proposes ways of promoting increased multilingualism among Europe’s citizens, all the while worrying how to reconcile support for “diversity of cultural expression” with “the need to assert the universality of essential values.”

These two texts, I will argue, provide two “snapshots” from very different periods of what it means to “see language like a State,” to borrow Silverstein’s phrase (this volume; cf. Scott, 1998). In both texts, ‘linguistic diversity’—understood as the multiplicity and intersection of distinct denotational codes—is seen as presenting problems by its very existence. In both texts, capital-L Languages are defined by contrast with their communicative Others—‘dialects’, ‘jargons’, *patois*, *lingua francas*, etc.—and imagined as fully-equipped Standards, each with its own history and territory, writing system, literature, dictionaries, and above all, schools.

In both texts, the spectre of miscommunication—caused perhaps by speakers with less-than-perfect fluency in a/the Standard, and/or through their use of an inherently flawed verbal instrument—is viewed with undisguised horror, and is seen as a threat to governance and social cohesion. Both texts offer, inter alia, brief potted narratives of malaise, variously involving social chaos, feudal oppression, unfreedom (slavery), social disintegration, war and bloodshed, religiously motivated terrorism—narratives, in other words, of how bad things were “before” (the Revolution; the establishment of the EU), and/or of how bad things will be in the future, if the prescriptions contained herein are not followed. Most important of all, in both texts citizens are exhorted to make a *free choice* that is nonetheless *compulsory*: to abjure some communicative media (and, by implication, the communicative practices associated with them), and to “adopt” others. What emerges from the comparison is a remarkably consistent picture of what ‘linguistic diversity’ looks like when seen by a specifically *European* state (latterly, supra-state).

The ‘European project’ as currently constituted differs, of course, from earlier and more familiar language standardization efforts in that it attempts to encompass a multiplicity of European languages—the 24 official and working languages of the 28 EU member states, as well as the 60 + officially recognized “regional or minority” (and/or “lesser-used”) languages. EU policymakers have had rather less to say about the widespread use of English as a *lingua franca*, and the estimated 440+ “additional” languages currently being spoken across Europe by migrants from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere.⁷ As will become clear, this is in part because they have had difficulty deciding whether these languages count as ‘European’ or not—or whether they count as ‘languages’ or not.

But there is no doubting that contemporary language policy elites in the EU are committed to the idea that ‘diversity’ is a good thing—the motto of the European Union, after all, is Unity in Diversity.⁸ The question is: what does their use of ‘diversity’ encompass and what does it elide, or erase? Consider the following, from a European Commission communication entitled *Multilingualism: an Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment*:

⁶ <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/a-rewarding-challenge-how-language-diversity-could-strengthen-europe-pbNC3008147/>.

⁷ For these numerical estimates, see the 2006 report of the VALEUR (Valuing All the Languages of Europe) Project of the Centre for European Modern Languages/Centre européen pour les langues vivantes, available at www.ecml.at/mtp2/valleur.

⁸ For translations into all 24 Official Languages, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motto_of_the_European_Union.

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