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Argemi, Aureli

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Majority or Minority Languages? For a new discourse on languages

Aureli Argemí

Enough of discriminatory terminology

There are majority languages and there are minority languages. This distinction between the two types of language is not only made as if there was evidence to support it, but also as if it was an acceptable and accepted one; at least for a part of the many people who represent civil service institutions and the media.

To begin with, it is taken for granted in this division that majority languages are the ones most widely spoken whilst the minority ones are least so. The truth, however, often dispels this assumption. It all depends on the parameters employed. For instance, there are those who claim that Catalan is a minority language in the Spanish state, where Spanish is precisely the majority language spoken. But within the autonomous community of Catalonia, Catalan is the majority language spoken, where it is so as the mother tongue, accompanied by Spanish, which, in this same community, the citizens who speak it are in the minority.

This perspective of the reality leads one to immediately believe that this division and the corresponding terminology bear a certain political content, that it is not neutral. A further example will illustrate my previous statements: the people living in Catalonia - where Catalan, after much upheaval, has been granted status as the official language besides exist as the mother tongue - are people who have the simultaneous right and obligation to understand Spanish as well, the official language of Spain. In other words, from the institutional perspective, if from no other, Catalan speakers, whether they wish to or not, must be bilingual: the subjects of a State in which Spanish is the predominant language of the majority, and members of an autonomous community or autonomous communities where a language is spoken which, within the entire set of communities constituting this State, becomes peripheral and minority. In this sense, Catalan has had to endure the constant pressure from another language, deemed a majority one, being actively used beside it in its territory (a situation which has not been experienced in Spanish territory; Spanish is not shadowed by another language).

We could expand the debate and create any number of combinations on the meaning of the terms “majority” and “minority” in the case of languages. We will always come to the same conclusion: the concepts “majority language” and “minority language” have very little to do

with what they appear to mean. Moreover: they are distinctions in which, even if there is nothing else, discrimination, which goes against the fundamental principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is always a feature of the condition of minority language. The division of the languages harbors strong ideas and the excuse to consider them without respecting the right to equality in the framework for human rights.

This is the reason why, as if it was common in a democracy, majority languages are considered to be treated in legal and political spheres as languages which ensure the equality of the inhabitants in certain territories defined by state borders; a set of borders which thus determine the meaning and the scope of linguistic equality and in their capacity as borders place limitations on the citizens. From the perspective of those who speak minority languages, the majority languages are presented to them as the predominant ones whilst their own language continues to be dominated, to say the least, because they are not allowed to develop like the majority ones are. Therefore, the terminology employed for these linguistic circumstances comes to be a reflection of how some people, who think their language is superior, behave towards others who, from a linguistic perspective, are to settle for being subordinate subjects.

These classifications have many consequences. I will highlight a few which I believe to be particularly important: in many parts of Europe the classification of languages is directly proportionate to the political situation and the laws in and under which the speakers are living. For instance, the Slovenian language is treated, within the Republic of Slovenia, with all the necessary requirements so that it remains well protected from any discrimination; or rather, to all effects, it is considered as the majority language. The same language becomes a minority one on the side of the border, in Italy, since it is situated in a country in which Italian is the language of the majority. The rights of the Slovenian speaker thus cease to govern. The greater acceptance is of the fact that, during the 20th century, many Slovenian speakers, due to the wars and peace treaties which have modified the borders, have had to transcend from an age of total recognition of their tongue to one full of restrictions or simply over which there has been a constant guardian.

This form of schizophrenia may be even more apparent in European institutions. In effect, the European Union (EU) presents itself to the world as an international organization which wishes to stand out because of its decision to develop the union of its member states on the basis of respecting and promoting diversity between them (both culturally and linguistically, in particular). The EU does not try, therefore, to bring about the conditions for unity between the member states with the implementation of homogenous concepts. However, in the linguistic sphere the implementation of this fundamental principle is part of a policy that, to some extent,

lacks coherency. EU institutions practice a doctrine which conveys no message that languages are to be considered either majority or minority (sometimes described as “regional languages”), in line with the policies established by its member states which most of the time are subjected to homogenous ideas regarding the languages. Just about all of the different recommendations and statements by the EU Parliament in favor of linguistic pluralism and the protection of languages under the threat of dying out take this direction and fall into the same trap, as well as the “European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages” from the Council of Europe. In spite of these stances taken, there are sentences which declare it to be a principle that all languages are to be respected equally because those who speak them are equally dignified.

In conclusion to this section, it would appear that there is no way to discover the key or the secret to leaving the cul-de-sac into which linguistic policies justifying such discriminatory terminology as “majority language” and “minority languages” lead us. In all cases, it is necessary to open up new pathways and see if, by way of other terms, we can reflect more accurately the equality between languages which is the right of all human beings.

In Search of Fairer Terms

The efforts to open up new pathways in the directions stipulated have multiplied in the last few years. I think one of the most important, most extensive and most coherent ones was that by the people who drew up the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, passed in Barcelona on the 6th June, 1996 (www.linguistic-declaration.org). This is a document which was produced by several people from around the world, experts in languages, linguistic policy and linguistic rights, and presented at the University of Barcelona following a lengthy combined effort of two years and made possible by the co-employment of new communication technology.

This text materialized from the belief that the language problem, the treatment and the consideration of languages is not a product of how we see languages, but our views on the speakers and their rights; that is, the aforementioned Declaration was drawn up based on the notion that the linguistic rights of all must be the basis for the implementation of any fair policy which invokes linguistic equality. Or, to put it another way, if no policy can guarantee the full exercise of one’s linguistic rights, then it cannot be democratic. So what must take priority then is the means by which we can combine the complexity of language in the world with the rights to language of each and every one of us and of the language communities with which different people identify themselves. The languages must be sure to be treated equally, in harmony with

the principle that their speakers, their subjects, enjoy exactly the same rights.

One of the obvious consequences of this position adopted in favor of the preference of linguistic rights is that the definition of these rights, on which the terminology to express them must be founded and justified, cannot be subjected to the political status or status in administration that languages today are, nor to criteria which depend upon the speaker's name or status. For this reason, the aforementioned Declaration, in proclaiming equal linguistic rights for all, fully emphasizes the lack of a clear relationship between the division of languages into "majority" and "minority," and also into "official" and "unofficial" and into "national," "regional" and "local"...Divisions which, no matter how true they remain to the facts, are flawed because of the ever-present discriminatory elements against languages they bear. In all cases, to the authors of the Declaration these divisions are employed politically as justification for the need to place restrictions, if not impose practices, on linguistic rights, and they are seeds for the development of clashes between languages, no matter how true it is that the territories in which the languages are spoken may differ and function differently.

Another important feature of the Declaration is its adoption of a position in favor of the inseparable interdependence between the collective and individual dimensions of linguistic equal rights. To express this another way, the linguistic rights of the individual can only be exercised on the principal that all languages generate interaction between people who, together, constitute a specific language community; a community which is the very heart of their identity. Moreover, the Declaration states that exercise of linguistic rights can only be justly effective if the collective rights of all language communities are mutually respected and also, should it be the case, those of language groups (the latter understood to be so under Article 1.5 of the Declaration as "any group of persons sharing the same language which is established in the territorial groups of human beings who speak the same language within the territorial space of another language community but which does not possess historical antecedents equivalent to those of that community").

In all of this it is clear that the state borders which normally determine the classification of the languages have been surpassed by an alternative way of viewing linguistic spaces: if, on one hand, the connection between the individual and collective rights of people and language communities has nothing to do with the changing State borders, then on the other hand, those State borders themselves cannot shape individual and collective rights.

Consequently, in light of the prioritization of linguistic rights, the manner in which the political and legal requirements are created so that all languages, with no exceptions, can fully

develop within their linguistic territories must be reconsidered. Here is where the Declaration shows us the need to situate beforehand, or re-situate, the languages in their own space; it is a more apparent need at a time when the globalization of the world is transcending state borders more and more each day, along with the spheres and references these encompass.

The Declaration draws our attention to a set of criteria which must serve as a means of ensuring respect for and exercise of the linguistic rights of all. Here are the most important ones (followed by some comments):

The first criterion is based on the fundamental principal that any language bears the speaker's identity and is an expression of it, a definitive element of their own individual and collective identity. In order to respect this principle fairly, there must be a guarantee that all the speakers of any language may express themselves in it and develop, without any obstruction or restriction, in their own land. For example, Frisian must have all the necessary entitlements so that those who speak it as their native tongue have all the facilities and enjoy all the security to use it from day to day, until it becomes the language required to live in Frisia. No other language is to clip the wings of the Frisian one, nor is any law or linguistic policy to allow other languages to become as important as or more so than Frisian itself in its own territory.

Following this example, once the linguistic rights of the Frisian people have been respected, we cannot overlook the fact that, due to a set of circumstances, certain languages have acquired functions which penetrate Frisian-speaking territory: Dutch and German co-exist in this territory and have become modes of communication within Frisia and abroad, and they establish and broaden economic and cultural co-operation...with the surrounding areas. Even though, German and Dutch undeniably have more international standing than Frisian as languages, are more widely spoken and have a much higher number of speakers, they cannot be used to substitute Frisian or, from the perspective of identity, be imposed upon the space which belongs to Frisian speakers. In other words, these languages must not have to exist in an oppressive manner, nor encourage a system of institutionalized bilingualism within Frisian-speaking territory, as it is at the moment. (Everyone knows, or it can easily be proven, that bilingualism, sooner or later, ends up with the more dominant language overpowering the weaker one; in this case, German or Dutch over Frisian). From the perspective of defense of and respect for the linguistic rights of the Frisians, in their linguistic territory, Dutch and German must always be languages which are to be used merely for certain practical functions only, on the basis that they do not become the mother tongue of the Frisians. (To overcome the ideological impact behind the institutionalized bilingualism – a way to prolong the majority-minority languages issue- the Frisians must be educated in the sense that they must learn to

speak more than two languages).

These approaches are even more applicable to the linguistic territories which are far from Frisia, but which, on economic grounds especially, have acquired ever-essential worldwide communication functions. By this I mean English, primarily. However, English is not to be taken by the Frisians as the language of the future. It simply must be a considerably free language in its functions, becoming, for the moment, at least highly essential in the context of globalization.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of globalization is generating immigration on a massive scale from the Third World to the First World. Each one of these immigrants, who comes with their own native language, is turning the linguistic spaces of the First World into multilingual ones. (This makes pure bilingualism virtually a thing of the past). The existence of this multilingualism calls for the practice of new policies and ways to deal with the issue of language, in a context in which, however, the observation of linguistic rights must still be the principle of a democratic co-existence. Admittedly, the linguistic rights of the immigrants, who are far away from their own language communities, cannot be manipulated so that speaking the language of their new community can slow down or become an obstacle to their inclusion in society. On the contrary, these languages must be one of the most recognized channels for making the participation of our new residents in society possible. To avoid misunderstandings, newcomers must be suggested to accept that the identity of the community, of the language community, in which they establish themselves, takes priority over the idea that languages are judged on their pragmatic value. For example, Catalan is the language of social non-exclusion for newcomers to Catalan-speaking territories and no other language, such as Spanish or French, in spite of the larger number of functions than Catalan they perform. The new residents must have the facilities, language ones naturally, for them to one day, if they do so wish, to become Catalan, like the rest of the people who belong to a nation in which Catalan is the native tongue.

The Declaration aids a better understanding of linguistic rights, the abidance by them as a guideline for peaceful co-existence and the consideration of languages not as a sphere for disagreement and conflict, but as a factor in a respectful united diversity. It is undoubtedly difficult to implement a coherent linguistic policy with all of the fundamental principles I have just cited. There is a need for drastic changes to a mentality which is dominant around the world and which is highly reluctant to accept the exercise of linguistic rights. Unfortunately, the issue of linguistic rights is still one to be resolved. For this reason, I believe it is as necessary to explain the more we understand about linguistic rights, the better we can acknowledge them and

the more we can preserve the dignity and the equality of all people and of all populations.

I bring this piece to a close by coming back to what I wrote at the beginning: the most widespread terminology about languages (if they are majority or minority, regional or national, etc) deprives us of understanding in depth the nature of the issue of language today, in a world which is not focusing on identity in language but on the powers which they seek in linguistic homogenization, a way for their interests and a single line of thought to triumph. New terms must be created which expand on what languages are and what they mean in relation to the speakers of them and to the fact that linguistic diversity is one of the riches of humanity.

I propose, at least where Europe, and more specifically the European Union, is concerned that the question of language is approached from the perspective that all European languages are equal and necessary in order to form and respect all the pieces which make up what we know as Europe: a mosaic of different pieces which, together, constitute Europe itself and outline that the EU wants to act on the terms of a progressive and co-operative democracy between the various countries of Europe. The EU has already proclaimed, in constitutional language, its desire to be a diverse organization of people, language and cultures. It is only possible to accomplish this if full respect is shown for every aspect of human rights, amongst which are those of language. It is therefore the responsibility of all the EU member states to tailor their policies on language to the basic principles of the EU (union in diversity) and to discuss the fact that, with the consequences that changing the established order and dispensing with the classification of languages into majority, minority and other discriminative terms would envisage, all of the languages in Europe become equal in the end.

In a borderless Europe, in line with what the EU aspires to be, languages must be considered without the application of adjectives, just simply as European languages, and the policies that can make this happen must ensure that it continues to remain this way with everybody respecting linguistic spheres, the functions of the languages and, ultimately, promoting respect for the rights of our fellow men and co-existence in diversity. It is the task of new technology, in all circumstances, to accommodate these approaches.

Biographical Note

Aureli Argemí is President of CIEMEN and a member of EBLUL. He is co-author of L'Estatut que Voldia (Mediterrània 2005).