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CHAPTER 3

Democracy

A threat to language diversity?

Mauro Tosco

University of Turin

This chapter argues that democracy has both theoretical and practical implications that negatively affect the maintenance of language (and cultural) diversity. Attention is paid to the levelling effects of welfare policies, which tend to depress the speakers' interest in language preservation and transmission and which typically negatively affect the quality of revitalisation programmes. The presentation discusses the practical and theoretical problems posed by possible ways out such as a voluntary, self-imposed "boundary maintenance" policy (Fishman 1991) and "the creation of linguistic fortresses or ghettos" (Laponce 1984) in order to protect a minority language. Further, it argues that the democratic state – in itself just the last instalment of the nation-state – may have a special problem with multilingualism, and that language diversity possibly fared better in past forms of government.

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country
made up of different nationalities
(Mill 1882: 310)

I start with a platitude: policies directed at the preservation and revitalisation of language diversity should aim at fostering the *use* of endangered languages, i.e., at securing (and possibly extending) intergenerational language transmission. This is their goal and their only measure of success (as we are aptly reminded, e.g., by Fishman 1991).¹

If this is a truism, one cannot help being struck by the curious lack of a principled, theory-driven analysis and explanation of the universal *failure* of such policies: language rights are benignly bestowed and language policies upon language policies are promulgated – and even, sometimes, implemented. Still, language upon

1. This may actually be contested: e.g., language documentation and the preservation of a modicum of language identity are legitimate goals; another can be, to put it bluntly, the creation and securing of academic positions in language endangerment.

language falls into disuse – often, exactly the same ones that were the prime target of protection.

Why is it so? Just another case of “unintended consequences”? After all, it is well known that welfare policies supposedly aiming at increasing the general well-being of individuals and groups occasionally (often? usually?) backfire and lead to opposite results.

I assume that the reduction of language diversity in the modern and contemporary Western world is positively correlated with the tremendous increase in the state apparatus of control and intervention. I elaborated on this concept in a number of articles (Tosco 2011a, 2011b, 2014 – with reference to Africa; 2015 – with reference to the Arab world; 2016) and will take it for granted here.

It is my contention in this chapter that there are principled reasons for such a generalised failure, and that they are embedded in democratic ideology and practice. A caveat is in order: not a single language will be mentioned nor cases of language demise be discussed. My case rests instead entirely on logical reasoning.

1. The difficult life of the objects of the third kind

Language is, as most convincingly demonstrated by Keller (1994), an object of the third kind. It is neither natural nor planned: natural phenomena are unintended; artificial phenomena are planned for a specific purpose. Objects of the third kind are neither natural nor planned, but “grow” involuntarily out of a multiplicity of instances of a behaviour that is logical and aimed at something else. Language is therefore an instance of the “invisible hand” operating in human actions (cf. also Ullmann-Margalit 1978). An example of such objects of the third kind are, in Keller’s beautiful example, the footpaths which “spontaneously” come into existence to connect various points of interest, e.g., in his example, the buildings surrounding a green area in a university campus. The footpaths are not the result of anyone’s intended plan, but the unintended consequence of everybody’s logical behaviour (to reach a certain point in the minimum amount of time and with the least effort). Such a solution is “klug, ökonomisch und durchdacht ‘angelegt.’ Ganz offensichtlich ist seine Struktur sinnreicher als die Struktur der von den Architekten geplanten Pflasterwege” [‘clever, cheap, and thoughtfully ‘laid out’. Quite clearly, its structure makes more sense than the concrete footpaths designed by the architects’] (Keller 1994: 99).

Other objects of the third kind are towns which grow “naturally” (*vs.* those which are planned), common and customary law (*vs.* positive legislation), “natural” currencies, such as gold and other precious metals (*vs. fiat*, paper money), and market phenomena in general.

If there is one thing the modern states do not like it is objects of the third kind. In a way, one can even view language planning and language policies as facets of a wider *fight against objects of the third kind*: centralised, top-down town planning and Keynesianism and interventionism in economics are other instances, with more far-reaching consequences (cf. von Mises (1996: 786 foll.).

What all these developments have in common is the will to change objects of the third kind (“natural”-artificial objects) into objects of the second (“artificial”-artificial objects). And such a will is all the more effective in contemporary nation-states, as the following sections will show.

2. The unstoppable aggrandisement of government

State intervention in modern democratic societies finds its foremost means of expression in welfare policies, whose extension and functionality can serve as rough indicators of government and society intertwining.

On the government’s side, welfare is an obvious advantage, and not only because it enables the government to pay off the voters who put the government in place, thereby securing their continuing favour.² Recipients of welfare will come to be dependent on government, and will regard as dangerous any change in government (because this could mean a reduction in the level of their subsidies). The attachment of the people to their government will therefore be strengthened, if only as part of an implicit *quid pro quo*.

Different from pre-state political entities, any kind of government activity in a modern nation-state can only be financed by money provided, generally involuntarily, by the citizens. Extension of government activity therefore requires an intensification of taxation. Although in principle the citizens may be more than willing to pay, extension of taxation increases the likelihood of resistance. Governments generally resort to debts and inflation in order to avoid direct taxation without having to reduce spending, but these may only be provisional solutions. Territorial aggrandisement (either through the costly solution of war or through political unification) is a likely way out: as political competition (i.e. the availability of areas with lower taxation) is reduced, the cost of resistance (e.g., through emigration) is increased; this makes taxation and the extension of government power less risky.

2. Conversely, the only hope of the opponents (the party or parties who lost the election) to become in their turn the next power holders is to convince the citizens that they will embark on an even better (i.e. more fruitful for the recipients) welfare scheme. In order to do this, they can only engage in more redistribution. This may pose unsurmountable limits to any scheme for reducing government aggrandisement.

Therefore, unification (the “extension” of government) may provide a way to escape the limits of taxation (its “intensification”).³

Like any other kind of government activity, a modern welfare system can therefore only be guaranteed through the regular inflow of the taxpayers’ money. An efficient welfare system is tantamount to a radical programme of wealth redistribution, in which, ideally, citizens will get back what they paid in taxes, minus what is needed for the machinery to operate: the costs derived from tax collecting, assessment of the needs and of the recipients of welfare, and redistribution.

What are the consequences of welfare when applied to language and cultural diversity? What are, in such cases, its unintended consequences?

3. Language and welfare

First, we may observe that, as different languages exist because at least partially different cultures exist, it is also probable that the economic results of the different communities will be different. The link between wealth, redistribution, and language is well expressed by Laitin as follows:

[T]he principle of equality requires not only that social stratification be kept at a minimum, but that regional disparities in wealth, participation, and political influence be minimised as well. Language has a bearing on the issue of regional inequalities because linguistic competence often sets the limits to political participation and, therefore, to access to the government by the citizenry.

(Laitin 1977: 12)

While within any community (i.e., among the speakers of any language) even striking wealth differences will certainly exist, it is also probable that the average wealth levels of different communities will be different. A logical consequence of a (successful) welfare system is therefore that its extension will negatively affect the existence of different cultures and language groups by blurring the economic and historical reasons of wealth inequality and this even before welfare touches upon language use in general and language groups in particular.

But there are more practical aspects of state-subsidised language welfare which make it a poor solution to language endangerment, and they involve the attitude of the community members towards their language.

To see how a minority language can easily become a casualty of massive state intervention we must first of all accept that economic considerations do play a role in matters of language policy.

3. On the reasons why governments may be willing to abandon part of their power through political unification, see Hülsmann (1997).

Much of the literature on language protection steers clear of any economic reasoning at all; such a position is closely associated with a starkly anti-market stance, which may be taken as the mainstream view and can be exemplified by Rannut (1999):

human rights – linguistic human rights included – act as correctives to the free market, they should guarantee that the basics needed for survival and for the sustenance of a dignified life overrule the law of supply and demand. Thus they should be outside market forces. (Rannut 1999: 101)

and Skutnabb-Kangas (1999):

[H]uman rights, especially economic and social rights, [...] act as *correctives to the free market* [...] Among the necessities from which “price-tags should be removed” are not only basic food and housing [...], but also basics for the sustaining of a dignified life, including basic civil, political *and cultural* rights. (Skutnabb-Kangas 1999: 197–198; emphasis by Skutnabb-Kangas)

This is an even more radical interventionist policy – as implied by the reference to food and housing among the state-guaranteed goods and by the following excerpt, where control over the economy is seen – *tout court* and with some disregard for historical facts – as a *sine-qua-non* of sovereignty:

The earlier tests of the sovereignty of a state had to do with the extent to which the state had political control over *the economy*, the military and culture, and the extent to which it was self-sufficient and sovereign and could provide for its citizens. (Skutnabb-Kangas 1999: 199; emphasis added)

A more balanced stance is taken by economist François Grin, who explains how “[M]arket forces do not necessarily result in the demise of all other languages, even in the long run, because market dynamics contain a built-in system of checks and balances” (1999: 182) and how

market forces may well contribute to the spread of a language; but their very logic implies limitations on their homogenizing tendencies by generating mechanisms that reward behaviours which maintain diversity [...] Ultimately, market regulation is largely a system of checks and balances, and it would be missing the point to claim that market forces are only, and by their very nature, detrimental to diversity; the real problem is not market exchange as a form of rationality, but the unequal power structures within which market exchange takes place [...] [U]nhampered market forces may provide built-in safeguards against linguistic uniformity; unfortunately, they offer no guarantees for the preservation of minority languages with little economic clout. (Grin 1999: 179)

If we bring economic considerations into the evaluation of “language welfare”, we have to recognise first of all that it is difficult to find sound arguments in favour

of subsidising a minority language without assigning intrinsic values to language diversity. Church and King (1993), using a game-theory model and assuming the absence of “any intrinsic value of a particular language” (“no one cares if one language disappears, and no one prefers communicating in one language rather than the other”), arrive precisely at the conclusion that “it is never optimal to subsidise the learning of the minority language. Also, there exist ranges of values of the cost of learning for which subsidisation of majority language acquisition may be called for” and “a need for some sort of coordinating policy that ensures that the minority language group becomes bilingual” (Church and King 1993: 343).

But even admitting that languages have intrinsic values, subsidising them has its problems:

subsidisation of the [language] policy itself (which would amount to earmarked transfers that lower the cost of carrying out activities in the minority language) is problematic. The reason is that direct subsidisation of minority language policies may well result in an artificial increase in its vitality; the policy may imply expenditure not corresponding to what members of the minority community themselves would be willing to spend on their language. By the same token, direct subsidisation may also fall short of the amount of resources they would be ready to devote to this end – if they had them. (Grin and Vaillancourt 2000: 108)

Therefore, “the distribution-based rationale for subsidising minority language policies is exposed to criticism because of its allocative implications:” “justice” alone, note the authors, may be a weak argument, and not only because different actors have differing opinions on what is “just,” but also because a just solution can be detrimental from the point of view of an efficient allocation of resources. It is better, Grin and Vaillancourt argue, to seek a remedy on allocative grounds directly: if linguistic diversity is valuable, they argue, “just like an unspoiled natural environment,” and if language as a commodity has “unusual features,” then

we are in presence of a case of “market failure” justifying government intervention. In short, supporting minority languages may often turn out to be more defensible not because it is (distributive) *fair*, but because it is (allocative) *efficient*. (Grin and Vaillancourt 2000: 108; emphasis in the original)

Following on the parallel between language commodities and environmental commodities, Grin argues that “clean air or unspoiled landscapes, as such, have no market value, and they cannot be bought or sold [...] Nevertheless, they have economic value, because the enjoyment of clean air and unspoiled landscapes generates utility”. And, he continues, “as they do not have market value, unhampered market forces are likely to induce behaviours that will result in the destruction of those assets (or an inadequate supply thereof, which is analytically the same thing)” (Grin 1999: 180).

This would be a case of market failure, necessitating state intervention, whereby “policy intervention is indispensable to avoid the undersupply of environmental goods and, for similar reasons, of linguistic diversity” (Grin 1999: 180), and thus creating a “regulated” context, i.e., “a situation in which market forces are constrained by public policy measures” (Grin 1999: 180).

Obviously, Grin and Vaillancourt’s argument stands and falls only insofar as one accepts that market failures exist, and that language and other commodities (such as the environment) are cases in which government’s intervention is justified by market failure.⁴

Grin concedes that such public measures are not necessarily mandatory in nature (as in the case of the legally prescribed use of a language):⁵ they may make use of market mechanisms, as would be the case of fiscal benefits offered to “those firms that have a particularly commendable language-use policy” (Grin 1999: 180).

One can devise other plans to make the use of minority languages advantageous for their speakers; for example, one can advocate “affirmative action” (or “positive discrimination”) policies, whereby those communities which preserve their ancestral languages and cultures are “paid” in the form of social benefits. In a way, this would be tantamount to paying people not to integrate into the mainstream culture. Although the mainstream-culture taxpayers will tend to object to such measures, one can well imagine that a majority of them will be willing to compensate for past and present disadvantages of the minority cultures; the additional fact that the minority language speakers are often demographically weak would make the financial burden comparatively sustainable. Other problems could arise, e.g., by making all those potential mainstream-culture members willing to enter the minority culture in order to get a financial advantage. One would have to ban the possibility of entering a minority community, while at the same time preserving a reasonable degree of freedom of movement within the mainstream culture.

But even admitting that all these problems are successfully solved and all opposition quenched indefinitely, it is arguable that all this will be of no avail to minority languages, simply because the community to which they give expression is no longer a vital one: in fact, it will be even more dependent on the in-flow of money from the mainstream culture. The end result will be language as folklore and as a museum item.

If we leave aside these preoccupations and decide on subsidising minority languages, we will still face the obvious problem of choosing the recipients. It is

4. Both assumptions are weak at best. The current flourishing of research on market solutions to environmental problems seems to point to an altogether different direction.

5. “Mandatory” is of course just a gentle word for “coercive” (although the problem of coercion lies at the very heart of political theory, it is apparently a taboo word when talking about democracies).

probable that only a minority of the languages will be targeted as the “rightful” ones; they could be the strongest ones (and in principle the most dangerous for the government’s well-being and for the preservation of the status quo); conversely, it could well be that relatively small and innocuous minorities, which by themselves pose no threat to the power holders, may be selected as suitable targets, with the added advantage for power holders of showing their benign interest in language diversity.

In either case, government agencies will first and foremost engage in revitalisation activities which cannot by their very nature (or rather: given the public nature of their property) be carried on by individuals and private companies: street signs and other public signs are among the typical examples. They fulfil that symbolic function of the minority language which is often the first target of minority activists and which certainly plays an important role in rising pride for their language among the speakers.

The problem, as aptly pointed out by Fishman (1991), is that such policies often stop at symbolic functions. Like many other more practical actions in favour of language revitalisation, they are (and they should be seen as), means, not goals. As means, they are by their very nature not focused on intergenerational continuity and transmission. In the end, the community language will become a sweet souvenir of bygone days – a language that, as Laponce (1984: 162) put it, having lost its value as a medium has become “une langue de boutonnière”.⁶

Rather than carrying on the production of cultural goods by themselves (such as, in the first stages of revitalisation, primers, dictionaries, language courses), as was done in 20th-century socialist countries, government agencies of modern democracies will subsidise their production by language activists’ groups. A first consequence of public funding will be the reduction of the marginal interest of any unfunded activity. Subsidised publications and activities will have their bill footed by government agencies, and will be free from the burden of being economically competitive, while private, grassroots work could soon be driven out of the market: after all, who pays for a good primer if primers are provided free of charge? Their only hope of survival will be to vie in their turn for public subsidy. Very often they will get their slice of the cake, but on merely political grounds rather than on the basis of the quality and efficacy of their proposal.

As a result, the overall quality and efficacy of the language preservation activities will decrease (cf. also Tosco, 2018). Rather than looking at the favour and utility of the proposed activity for the community, or its benefit for intergenerational transmission, activists will gear their work towards the attainment of government

6. Here and below, Laponce’s original French wording will not be translated, as an English edition of the 1984 French original is available (*Languages and Their Territories*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1987).

support. Squeezed between intellectuals and politicians, language revitalisation yields its place to folkloric research and academic debate – the scientific investigation of variation included, of course. Although the speakers may feel pride in the interest that “their” language raises, it is very much doubtful that they will use the language in the realm of modern life as a consequence of the dialectologists’ and folklorists’ work.

If culture in general is a public good, more or less freely provided by the government, speakers of minority languages will get used to having things done by politicians – who appear so well disposed and ready to solve other people’s problems with other people’s money. They will therefore lose interest in the preservation of their language, and activity in favour of the languages and cultures will take the form of lobbying in order to have a language “protected” or “saved” from above – often, paradoxically, from the very agent of its present endangerment.

4. Neutering diversity

The more providing and caring the welfare state is, the more difficult it is to free oneself from its loving embrace.

As the aim of redistribution is to reduce the differences in living standards among citizens, there is no principled reason for the object of redistribution to be restricted to the inhabitants of a certain area: on the contrary, if redistribution is ideologically justified as a (partial) fulfilment of positive, universal rights, the more extensive (as well as intensive) the redistribution, the better.

There are therefore good logical grounds for the universalist and egalitarian tendencies of the welfare state. But are these same tendencies also working against linguistic and cultural diversity?

First of all we must remember that care for linguistic and cultural diversity may well be associated with a strongly nationalistic and monolingual language policy. In fact, it typically was: as detailed in Tosco (2018), this move is characteristic of contemporary nation-states but was theorised, conceived and carried on for the first time during the French Revolution. The very birth of dialect studies as an academic discipline in the early 19th century is linked to and can only be understood with reference to the ideological climate of the nation-state.⁷

7. After all, linguistic diversity may show the wealth of the national language. In order to do so, minority languages need to be properly tamed, for example classifying them alongside the national language: a case in point is represented by the never-ending controversies surrounding the classification of the Northern Italian languages/dialects, which often see Italian scholars pitted against the rest of the academic world (cf. Brasca, this volume).

In Tosco (2018) I argue that a “democratic language death” is perfectly consonant with the ideology of the nation-state (“[L]a folklorisation de la différence est le corollaire d’une politique d’unité nationale”; de Certeau, Julia, & Revel 1975: 178).

We thus arrive at what Fishman (1988) aptly calls the “folklorisation” of language: languages lose their communicative value and are reserved to irrelevant domains. In this way, diversity is neutered and made politically and ideologically irrelevant, bypassing the need to eliminate it altogether.

The values of the democratic state are not at odds with a policy aiming at the neutering of languages.

In many Western European countries, where the integrationist tendencies of the nation-state have worked more effectively and for longer, the speakers of the minority languages often regard themselves no longer as members of a different community, identified by a peculiar language, culture and habitat, but simply as members of the wider national community.

The network of the national socioeconomic interests has emptied local differences of any value, and the original community does not exist anymore. People can still take pride in the trivia of regional symbolism (the regional cuisine or the local history, for example), and even in their accent of the state language. The original language, if not gone for good, is considered a “dialect” of the national, state language, or as a *cultural* marker of distinctiveness within the broader economic, political and social national community.

The problem is that, as a marker of distinctiveness, language is very costly and inefficient.

In order for a language community to survive, its members must be willing to use the language among themselves and to transmit it to later generations. However, once the members of the community are also members of the larger language community of the nation-state, i.e., when they have become bilingual, and are therefore able to engage in a wider communicative net, the communicative usefulness of the original language is largely lost.

To actively use a minority language within the community means to create a separate network independent of the larger, nation-wide one: this would be tantamount to linguistically discriminating against all the other members of the larger linguistic community. Such a discriminatory behaviour will not only be communicatively useless; it will also be morally and ideologically untenable – according to the moral and ideological standards of the modern nation-state, which the members of the former minority have assimilated.

The use of the minority language would therefore come to signal, even if only covertly, a separatist attitude (either culturally, politically, or both). To use it outside the community, as, e.g., when first meeting a foreigner, could be construed as

an act of discrimination. Separatism and discrimination are precluded, because they are antithetical to integration (and separatism is of course antithetical to any government's best interests). Such a preclusion is ideological – stemming as it does not from an analysis of what is best for the smaller or larger community, but from the ideal premises upon which democracy is based, such as: openness, inclusion, equality.

Being ideological, the ban on the creation of language barriers “from below”, i.e., on the part of the speakers of the minority language, is aprioristic and incontestable: to oppose it means to put oneself out of the larger community and its values, out of the democratic ecumene.

5. Language-preserving boundaries?

Faced with the problem of preserving or recreating a communicative network for minority languages, Fishman argues:

it is precisely because most modern democracies engage in conscious or unconscious cultural genocide, and precisely because they do so via many of their most central and most prized and admired social, economic and political processes, that LS [: language shift] is so common and that RLS [: reversing language shift] is so difficult to attain and so heartbreaking to pursue. [...]

Modernisation and democratisation lead to increased interaction between individuals from different cultures [...] and, therefore, to increased impact of the strong on the weak. Modernisation and democratisation erode ‘parochial’ cultural differences, even religious differences, and lead to universal dependence on the same media, political parties, educational institutions and programs, and economic endeavours, which, although they may be ideologically fractionated, are, nevertheless, not segmented along ethnocultural lines but along highly generalised socioeconomic and sociopolitical lines [...]

The result of such nominally ‘free access of everyone to everything and everywhere’ is that the majority culture [...] is endemic and omnipresent; and minority cultures, having very little, if any, public legitimisation and private space, thereby constantly decline in survival potential, the more their members participate in ‘the greater general good’. For ethnocultural minorities, the predictable outcome of such untrammelled participation in ‘the greater general good’ is dependency interaction [...] it is easy to argue that modernisation and democratisation themselves are the enemies of RLS because *they undercut the very cultural and identity distinctions on which minority language maintenance must be based.*

(Fishman 1991: 62–63)

In Fishman's opinion such a view is misguided, and the problems that modernisation and democratisation engender for minorities "can be coped with and ameliorated by means of *recognizing cultural democracy as a component and as a responsibility of the general democratic promise*." (Fishman 1991: 65). Still, it is perhaps not by chance that, after having expounded the dangers of democratisation for minority languages quoted above, Fishman continues with a section on "Boundary Maintenance". And something very akin to "state-mandated discrimination" seems advocated by Laponce (on the basis of the Quebec experience), who argues that

la dynamique dominante des langues en contact étroit c'est de s'exclure, de s'éliminer, de se vaincre totalement. *Entre langues, l'état normal, c'est l'état de guerre*
(Laponce 1984: 64; emphasis ours)

les langues s'imposent par la force, lors même que cette force n'est pas utilisée
(Laponce 1984: 192)

Laponce remarks on the different attitudes of majority and minority languages (i.e., of their speakers):

La langue dominante [...] a intérêt à ce que le plan social [...] soit dépourvu de barrière, d'écluse, ou de remblai. À l'inverse, la langue dominée voudra que le flot de la langue supérieure soit endigué et détourné. La langue dominante parlera liberté et égalité, la langue dominée dira frontière, sécurité, exclusivité, privilège. En l'absence de remblais naturels, on érigera des barrières artificielles à l'aide de lois et d'institutions.
(Laponce 1984: 36–37)

L'importance qu'on attache à l'identité spécifique est une source fréquente d'incompréhension entre le groupe dominant et la minorité linguistique. Le premier ne comprend pas que le second attache tant d'importance à sa langue [...] aussi, et indépendamment de l'opinion qu'il porte aux langues autres que la sienne, parce qu'il ne s'identifie que très faiblement à sa propre langue. On ne pense pas plus à sa langue, si elle est dominante, qu'on ne pense à sa santé si elle est bonne. Or le minoritaire, pourvu qu'il soit conscient de son état minoritaire, est, de ce fait, en mauvaise santé linguistique, et cette mauvaise santé contribue à la virulence de son identité spécifique, de cette identité périphérique qu'il accroche à son parler différent.
(Laponce 1984: 41)

Which way out? Laponce's answer is radical:

La création de forteresses ou de ghettos linguistiques peut fort bien entraîner des coûts économiques ou sociaux regrettables, coûts qui résultent d'une mise en marge des centres de décision que contrôle l'ethnie la plus puissante; mais, du point de vue de la protection de la langue, le point de vue qui nous intéresse, c'est la seule tactique qui, à long terme, ait de fortes chances de réussir.
(Laponce 1984: 144)

Are Fishman's boundaries and Laponce's "linguistic ghettos" acceptable (even granting they are possible) in modern democratic states? Is such an outspoken stance for separation still "democratic"?

One could argue that if, as per Laponce, the 'creation of fortresses or ghettos is the only long-term successful solution in order to protect a language', language protection is in principle impossible in a modern democratic state.

Still, the maintenance or downright creation of language barriers, although of a less radical variety and maybe more in line with Fishman, is not entirely unknown in the literature. Writing about the Australian languages, Fishman, noting that "[a] very few, fortunate (i.e. governmentally benignly neglected) Aboriginal languages are genuinely linked to the intergenerational mother tongue transmission process", adds:

Self-help and self-regulation in everyday intergenerational mother tongue transmission contexts, safeguarded by *boundary setting and boundary preservation*, are the *sine qua non* of RLS [: reversing language shift]. Money and planning along such lines by national authorities are unlikely, given the ethos of shared participationism that dominates both democratic and authoritarian regimes today.

(Fishman 1991: 277; emphasis ours)⁸

It is true that Fishman's boundaries are voluntary and self-imposed ("without sociocultural separation, without the most stubborn maintenance of *voluntary boundaries* between Xmen and Ymen and between Xishness and Yishness the future of Xish is problematic"; Fishman 1991: 110; emphasis mine), but the compatibility of self-segregation with the universalist ethos of democracy remains dubious at best.⁹ Democratic nation-states are based upon the principle of the equality of citizens before the law and in political representation: the citizens are sovereign; but, as sovereignty is indivisible, people must be indivisible, too. Internal fortresses and ghettos have no place, and neither do separatist dreams.

8. Austin (2014), e. g., reports on the successful revitalisation of Diyari in Australia. Still, '[T]he Diyari language is unique in Australia in having been the subject of intensive interest and support by outsiders (missionaries, linguists) as well as by native speakers for almost 140 years'. This resulted inter alia in 'a large amount of translations and language documentation materials', and, maybe most importantly, 'a continuous period of active literacy' which lasted until the 1960s. The 1990s saw the rise of a Dieri Aboriginal Corporation and recognition among others of land rights. Much later, the group benefited from a grant from the Australian Office of the Arts in 2012–2013. Although most heartening for language revitalisation programs, Diyari can hardly be considered a "typical" endangered language.

9. We have to leave aside here the fascinating question of the religious nature of political ideologies, as most clearly argued by Voegelin (1997).

Much more common in the literature is the plea for a language-based territorial unity, federated to others within a state, and responsible for the implementation of welfare in that area. As advocated by Laitin (1992) for Africa, this could quell the separatist tendencies on the one hand, and realise a measure of plurilingualism on the other. As a side-effect, it would bring along the extra bonus of “bringing the citizens closer to the power”, thereby realising a measure of nationhood.

A sort of “cultural federalism” is likewise suggested by Nettle and Romaine (2000). The languages the authors have in mind are generally on the recipient side of wealth redistribution within their respective states. Admitting that such communities are granted cultural and linguistic autonomy within their respective nation-states, they will therefore still be dependent on the central government for economic sustainability – thereby violating the authors’ wise warning that “[N]o language or culture can endure if it is dependent on another for its intergenerational transmission” (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 189).

6. Conclusions

In the end, the crucial question remains: does democracy accommodate minorities more easily than other forms of government and other political ideologies?

For one thing, democracy is not programatically built upon the unification of different peoples or groups under a common ideology or faith, as was typical of the multinational empires (cf. Tosco 2015 for the Islamic empire). Democracy may *accommodate* diversity, but it is the last instalment of the nation-state and it is still built upon nationhood: while the nation was traditionally interpreted as the political embodiment of a single people (and a single language), it is often viewed nowadays as the creation of civic bonds and shared economic interests. Still, these bonds and interests entail the subordination or downright elimination of particularisms and local differences.

Second, as we have seen, the redistributive and egalitarian ethos of modern democracies entails the development of mechanisms of wealth distribution that, even when purportedly geared towards the preservation of language diversity, often end up favouring the demise of minor languages as means of societal communication and their change into mere symbolic elements of cultural diversity.

In the end: has democracy a special problem with multilingualism? One does not necessarily have to subscribe to the quotation from Mill which opened this article to raise the question and to ask whether the ideology sustaining the modern Western states is conducive to the maintenance of language diversity or, covertly or overtly, to its suppression.

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