(Re)defining linguistic diversity: what is being protected in European language policy? Legal and sociolinguistic insights

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Linguistic diversity is complicated. It involves two main elements: a headcount of ‘languages’, plus variation and variability within them. In this paper we use legal and sociolinguistic perspectives to show how European language policy claims to protect these, but falls short on both counts.

The legal perspective examines the politics of union, details of accession, and the institutionalisation of multilingualism. The workings of the European Union create a multilevel language hierarchy. Working languages are topmost, followed by official languages, while non-official languages occupy a transitional level of recognition. This hierarchy largely privileges national languages, principally English. Meanwhile allochthonous (‘immigrant’) languages are largely discounted, despite outnumbering autochthonous (‘indigenous’) languages around four to one. This legal analysis demonstrates an early stumble for linguistic diversity: even constrained to a headcount of ‘languages’, most are neglected.

Next, from a sociolinguistic perspective, we show how diversity can decline even among protected languages, using two case studies: Cornish, a young revival; and Welsh, an older and more established example. We present ethnographic data showing how the Cornish revival could only proceed after agreement on singular standardisation. We then review dialectological data on Welsh showing how its internal diversity has declined significantly, fuelled by the normative reproduction of standardised Welsh in education. Holding up these examples to our definition of linguistic diversity serves to extend our overarching critique.

We conclude that linguistic diversity in practice is neglected in European language policy, through exclusion of most of the languages spoken in Europe, and neglect of language-internal diversity within protected languages. Linguistic diversity is something far more abstract than the limited goals of existing policies; it transcends language boundaries, and may be damaged by programmes of planned intervention. Thus ‘linguistic diversity’ may ultimately belong outside the discourse of language policy.

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