Multilingualism as keyword across time and space in the discourse of the Council of Europe

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Linguistic diversity in Europe has been an object of discourse within the Council of Europe since the earliest debates on languages took place in this newly created European institution. Indeed, this institution, throughout its historical discursive production, adopted a stance on the language issue in Europe that promotes linguistic diversity and language learning as part of a general discourse on democracy and European citizenship, treating cultural and linguistic diversity as a powerful asset for the creation of a pluralistic and democratic Europe. In this context, the term ”multilingualism” became a keyword in William’s sense (1983). In this paper, I will focus on the circulation of this keyword across time and discursive spaces within the Council of Europe and will analyze three discursive events (1) The Motion for a recommendation for the Establishment of a European linguistic community based on the application of Anglo-French bilingualism; 2) The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages; and 3) Recommendation No. R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states concerning modern languages). These events reveal the Council of Europe’s interest in multilingualism at three historical moments, as well as the framing of the issue in three different institutional genres.

By tracing the labyrinthine interrelationship between these events, I will investigate the political and ideological usage of the term ”multilingualism” developed in this institutional context (i.e. in the network of discursive spaces that compose the Council of Europe), while also taking the broader historical context into consideration. I will show that historical usage of this keyword is a compromise between international and inter-institutional negotiations which contributed largely to transformations in how this word was subsequently used: from multilingualism as a communication obstacle to multilingualism as a guarantee of equality, understanding, and unity, and a political ideal to be achieved via education.

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