Developing language education policy in Europe - and searching for theory

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Purposes

There are two related but separate purposes in this paper:
- to present a critical analysis of current work at the Council of Europe on the promotion of a policy for language education
- to emphasise the need for a theoretical perspective on this and other language policy activity which might help to explain and predict the outcomes of policy-making.

In the main part I will describe one aspect of the current work of the Language Policy Division at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, and raise the question whether this is an example of policy making at supra-national level. In the conclusion, I will address what seems to me to be a lack of adequate theorising about language policy, and language education policy in particular. I do not propose a means of filling this gap, unfortunately, but hope identifying the gap will be a first step towards this.

Languages and polities

Anderson (1991) in his well-known discussion of the nation as an imagined community, points to the significance of language and argues that the close relationship between language and nation was promoted from a European, Humboldtian perspective, and was part of the ‘model’ of the nation-state which was borrowed - or as he says, ‘pirated’ - in many parts of the world. By referring not simply to language but to ‘print-language’ and the power of newspapers and books to create a sense of community, Anderson also emphasises the significance of literacy. A nation-state is thus inter alia a community of communication which needs a shared language, and usually this shared language is the one designated as the national language. Thus, linguistic identity and national identity are closely connected, wherever there is a formal, institutionalised community of communication. The connection is reinforced by schools as national institutions where one learns the national language, whatever one’s home or first-acquired language.

Yet there are also other levels of community within a nation-state which are not necessarily formalised. The organisations and institutions of civil society have differing degrees of formality, and where there is freedom of speech, these communities of communication can challenge the official discourses of the state (Kennedy and Fairbrother, 2004: 296). Nonetheless, such discourses are likely to be conducted through the same national, officially recognised language, and again we see the significance of the national language and the reinforcement of the relationship between the national language and national identity².

The significance of communication and interaction becomes all the more evident as the
nature of polities changes. For Habermas, the model which should replace out-dated concepts of ‘the classic republican idea of the self-conscious political integration of a community of free and equal persons’, is a model dependent on communication flows:

- a model of deliberative democracy, that no longer hinges on the assumption of macro-subjects like the ‘people’ or ‘the’ community but on anonymously interlinked discourses or flows of information (Habermas, 1994: 32)

This applies to the evolution of the nation-state, but all the more to the evolution of democratic processes in transnational contexts. Communication flows and the ‘informal networks of public communication’ at a transnational level pre-suppose favourable conditions for mutual understanding.

The importance of this issue is evident from the evolution of transnational civil society in response to the trend towards global governance through such organisations as the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund. The exact nature of the organisation and nature of transnational civil society and of a democratisation of global governance is not yet clear. However, it can be argued that the present legitimisation based on the notion that experts can deliberate and come to representative consensus is inadequate and should, and will, be replaced by debate in a public sphere, where a public is understood as ‘a collectivity of persons connected by processes of communication over particular aspects of social and political life’ (Nanz and Steffek, 2004: 8). Nanz and Steffek argue that ‘organized civil society has a high potential to act as a ‘transmission belt’ between deliberative processes within international organisations and emerging transnational public spheres’ (ibid: 10).

Perhaps the most likely place for this to happen first is in the political and cultural space which has been created in Europe over the last half century.

The role of the Council of Europe is important in this, because of its influence in forty-five European countries. As an inter-governmental organisation, the Council of Europe does not have a policy-making function independently of its member States. On the other hand, in practice, proposals evolve from meetings and conferences and are ultimately endorsed by member States at Councils of Ministers. As part of this process, the Council of Europe has developed in the last few decades a clear language education policy position, and this was recently stated in a draft document to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Cultural Convention. The statement is not a repetition of the many and various recommendations which have been endorsed by member States, but rather a summary of the purposes of these recommendations:

- Council of Europe language education policies aim to promote:

  *Plurilingualism:* all are entitled to develop a degree of communicative ability in a number of languages over their lifetime in accordance with their needs
Linguistic diversity: Europe is multilingual and all its languages are equally valuable modes of communication and expressions of identity; the right to use and to learn one’s language(s) is protected in Council of Europe Conventions.

Mutual understanding: the opportunity to learn other languages is an essential condition for intercultural communication and acceptance of cultural differences.

Democratic citizenship: participation in democratic and social processes in multilingual societies is facilitated by the plurilingual competence of individuals.

Social cohesion: equality of opportunity for personal development, education, employment, access to information and cultural enrichment depends on access to language learning throughout life. (Council of Europe, 2004a)

This statement can be taken as a policy position and in the sense that it creates a consensus which is endorsed by member States, the Council of Europe can be described as a policy-making body.

Turning to the European Union, we can see a more obvious policy-making function as nation-states gradually give up some of their power and adopt a more international, or at least European, perspective. In such circumstances, the notion of a national language and linguistic identity is weakened and there is encouragement for other, ‘foreign’, languages to be given a status as part of the creation of identification with a community. This is made very clear in the EU’s White Paper of 1995:

Languages are also the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe.

(…) Multilingualism is part and parcel of both European identity/citizenship and the learning society.

(European Commission, 1995: 67)

What we have here then is a statement where the word ‘European’ could be substituted by the name of almost any nationality, and the parallels with the role of language in an imagined community are clear. It is also clear that, as in the nation-state, the levels of communication are not only those which are formal and institutional, but also include those of civil society.

The subsequent recommendation for practice is that European citizens should speak their mother tongue(s) plus two other languages, and this implies that a knowledge of three or more languages – perhaps to different degrees and in different ways – will create a sense of European identity and citizenship, and a potential for participation and integration into an international/ European society and polity.
This position had changed by 2003, when a weaker statement was issued. Although it still uses the White Paper as one of its sources, the focus now is on effective participation and social cohesion; the reference to identity no longer appears:

(1) knowledge of language is one of the basic skills which each citizen needs to acquire in order to take part effectively in the European knowledge society and therefore facilitates both integration into society and social cohesion; a thorough knowledge of one’s mother tongue(s) can facilitate the learning of other languages
(2) knowledge of languages plays an important role in facilitating mobility, both in an educational context as well as for professional purposes and for cultural and personal reasons
(3) knowledge of languages is also beneficial for European cohesion, in the light of EU enlargement
(4) all European languages are equal in value and dignity from the cultural point of view and form an integral part of European culture and civilisation. (European Commission 2002)

Here is an emphasis on mobility but the professional / economic purposes are linked to the personal, and the specific issue of enlargement from 15 to 25 countries is given prominence.

In summary, it appears that the European Union approach to language education postulates some, unclear, relationship between national language/ mother tongue learning and foreign language learning; second, a causal relationship between language learning and identity/ citizenship; and, third, a conditional relationship between language learning and participation in European society. Learning several languages is at least a pre-condition and perhaps a causal factor in the evolution of citizenship in the narrow sense of being an elector, and in the broader senses of an affective bond with an international society and a participation in the economic, political and cultural life of the society.

What makes the European situation different from nation states is that it is not expected that people should be native speakers of all the languages they might acquire as part of becoming European citizens, even though there are powerful forces encouraging people to acquire as high a level of competence as possible. The success of a European imagined community of communication pre-supposes plurilingual competence so that discourses at formal level and in civil society can take place, can be extended beyond the national frontiers, to European level. Thus, association of native speaker competence with identification with a polity is put in doubt, and replaced by plurilingual competence.

The alternative, of creating a shared lingua franca – which at this point in history could only be English – is not politically acceptable since there would be accusations of linguistic imperialism and/or allowing unequal and unfair dominance to native speakers of English. Whether these are justified or not, a lingua franca would not be efficient. Transnational discourses cannot rely on a single, taken-for-granted, shared language and its meanings. The discourse which is necessary is not simply a matter of establishing an agreement on and/or an exchange of information such as might be achieved through a
lingua franca. The issues which arise in social discourse are shot through with contemporary and historical nuances, and the relationship between language and thought, between language and world-view is crucial. When people engage in cooperation in civil society, they do so as social beings whose social identities are embodied in the languages they speak. To use a lingua franca is reductive of their social identities and diminishes them as human beings.

Policy Profiles - a tool for policy implementation?

We have then in Europe two supra-national bodies with their language education policy. However, policy without implementation is ineffective, and from this point I will focus on the Council of Europe and the question of whether it has this function too.

Over the recent period of two to three years, the Language Policy Division in Strasbourg has created a new 'service' offered to member States. The Language Policy Division helps member States which invite it to do so, to review and develop their policies for language education. This activity has a broad remit, to include the teaching and learning of all languages in a polity: from a learning perspective, first languages, second languages, foreign languages; or put it in sociological terms, minority and regional languages, national or official languages, immigrant languages, foreign languages. The polity may be a country but can also be a region or city with its own language education policy.

The role of the Language Policy Division is made clear in this extract from the guidelines which govern the activity:

Language Education Policy Profiles

The Council of Europe has launched a new activity to assist member States who so wish in reflecting upon their language education policy. The aim is to offer member States the opportunity to undertake a 'self-evaluation' of their policy in a spirit of dialogue with Council of Europe experts, and with a view to focusing on possible future policy developments within the country. It should be stressed that developing a language education policy profile does not mean 'external evaluation'. It is a process of reflection by the authorities and members of civil society, and the Council of Europe experts have the function of acting as catalysts in this process.

(Council of Europe, 2004b - my emphasis added)

The purpose is clear: that the Language Policy Division does not interfere in policy development but facilitates self-analysis.

The process involves several stages:
- after a preliminary organisational visit, a Country Report, by or on behalf of the authorities, is written to describe whatever issues the authorities consider
important
- a group of three to five experts visits the country for a week, talking with representatives of stakeholders in education, and produces its own Experts’ Report
- this Experts’ Report is circulated within the country to whomever the authorities wish, including all the stakeholders whom the experts had met
- a one day the round table discussion is held between all stakeholders invited by the authorities and the experts, where issues of accuracy, of comprehensiveness are raised, and where the stakeholders can exchange views
- in a final stage a Language Education Policy Profile is produced by the expert group (mainly by the group rapporteur) in consultation with the authorities, and published jointly by the authorities and the Council of Europe.

Throughout this process, the expert group reminds the readers of its report and of the final profile about the policy position of the Council of Europe, and about the instruments it has produced which are useful for the implementation of policy. These include the Common European Framework of Reference, the European Language Portfolio, and the Guide for Language Education Policy. Thus the experts, as catalysts, bring to the notice of the authorities and other stakeholders the policy and instruments which all member States have endorsed, and there are a number of criteria which underpin the Experts’ Report:
- that language education must be considered holistically, overcoming the separation between first, second, foreign languages
- that the promotion of plurilingualism and diversity is axiomatic in all planning
- that curriculum design and pedagogy must reflect and be determined by the holistic vision of a language education
- that language education is tied to education for citizenship in all multilingual polities, of which European countries and Europe as a whole are clear examples.

Thus far, then, the role of the Council of Europe through its experts involves in principle a catalytic function. On the other hand, in practice, it is clear that member States and stakeholders within a country are not as aware as they might be of Council of Europe policy and instruments. The catalysts in fact bring new elements to the process, which cause a re-assessment of existing assumptions, even though the Guidelines explicitly say that there is no external evaluation. These new elements are particularly characterised by the European perspective and not just a national, regional or local one. This includes for example an emphasis on the teaching of all languages irrespective of their social status, with a strong emphasis on diversification of language learning opportunities throughout life, resistance to the dominance of English as a lingua franca, a transversal, holistic vision of convergences in the languages curriculum among national, minority, foreign and other languages.

Further factors in this catalytic process are the role of the Experts’ Report, written independently by the experts bringing both Council of Europe perspectives and their own expertise to the analysis, and also the role of the experts, in particular the rapporteur, in
the authoring of the final profile. Both of these allow opportunity for a new and ultimately evaluative perspective on the assumptions of the authorities and other stakeholders. This perspective has in practice been welcomed and encouraged by the authorities in most cases hitherto. There is none the less a delicate balance of power to be sought in the final Profile, since it has to be acceptable to and published by the authorities and the Council of Europe.

**The Council of Europe as a policy making body?**

I pointed out earlier that the Council of Europe is an entity which has language education policies, even though in principle these are the formulation of the views of member States and not independent European policies. It also has instruments which can be used in the implementation of those policies. On the other hand, it does not have an obvious function in the implementation of policies; it cannot send out directives to member states in the way that the European Union can.

Does the Council of Europe none the less have the characteristics of a policy making body? One way of addressing this question is to use Cooper’s and Ager’s frameworks for analysing language policy, to see if and how the Council of Europe fits into them.

Cooper (1989) provides an ordered a list of questions which can guide policy analysis, and I present these here with application to the Council of Europe and its Policy Profile activity:

**Question: What actors?**
An inter-governmental organisation acting with national (or regional or local) authorities. Hitherto, actors have been individuals, groups or agencies at or below national level, but the two supranational bodies, the EU and the CoE have now become active. Ager (forthcoming) argues that the European Union is a special case where policy is formulated in general terms and not pursued in detail because of the political sensitivities. The Council of Europe is more precise in its formulation and, through the Policy Profiles is seizing the nettle of influencing member States,

**Question: attempt to influence what behaviours?**
The CoE attempts to influence production of policy at national (etc) level with respect to planning language acquisition and, indirectly, attitudes towards plurilingualism,

**Question: of which people?**
of national (etc) authorities making policy for language acquisition at national or regional level,

**Question: for what ends?**
following Ager’s (forthcoming) distinctions, at the level of unattainable but necessary ‘ideals’, the CoE sets ideals which are
(a) language related: to increase the diversity of languages in society and the diversification of languages learnt in the curriculum
(b) non-language related: to promote education for democratic citizenship, and an understanding of linguistic otherness

secondly, with respect to ‘attainable, but long-term objectives’, the CoE provides
(a) language related instruments of various kinds to support language acquisition planning (the Common European Framework, the European Language Portfolio, the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe) and planning for regional and minority languages (The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities)
(b) non-language related instruments for planning education for democratic citizenship (e.g. Draft Common Guidelines on Education for Democratic Citizenship) although at this level there is as yet no proper coordination between language and non-language related activities

but, at the third level, the Council of Europe does not become involved in ‘short term objectives’ such as curriculum planning,

Question: under what conditions?
against a background of European integration, economic mobility and human capital theory, and a move towards an international civil society; the geographical and political space in question is however no longer limited to the nation-state, but extends to Europe as the totality of all member States of the CoE,

Question: by what means?
unlike some states in both past and present, the CoE does not use force or bribery, but its authority as an inter-governmental organisation, and its reputation gained through language-related work over several decades,

Question: through what decision making process?
through the formulation of Europe-level policy by recommendations – for long-term objectives – and a process of agreement to the recommendations at meetings of ministers of education and/or Heads of State and Government; and through reference to these and the instruments for implementation in the Experts’ Report and the Profile,

Question: with what effect?
in completed studies so far:
- in Norway, with impact on current education reform at the level of long-term objectives and with some impact on details of curriculum planning

- in Hungary, with input to new policies and plans countrywide for language teaching, and thus at the level of long-term objectives.
It seems therefore that of the Council of Europe, working with member States (or other polities) fulfils some of the characteristics of a policy making and policy implementing body, even though it has no direct power over implementation. If we consider the three levels of ‘ends’ in Ager’s definitions, then the ‘ideals’ are present in the discourse at European level and have begun to infiltrate the discourse of national bodies. The parallel although not identical position of the European Union no doubt contributes strongly to this. At the level of long-term objectives, the use of the *Common European Framework* in planning national curricula is evident in some countries. In the case of the Country Profiles, the impact will doubtless vary from case to case and is yet to be seen over a number of forthcoming cases. At the level of short-term and immediate objectives, the Council of Europe does not expect to have impact but there may be some evidence that this happens through the Country Profiles; there are as yet too few cases to draw any conclusions.

It is thus possible to turn now to the Ager’s (2001) model for analysing the motivations behind language policy-making to see if this can throw further light on the role of the Council of Europe.

Ager focuses on questions of identity and the motivation in policy making to maintain or develop (national) identity. If we take some of the elements of his model which deals with identity sequence, attitudes, and purposes, it becomes evident that the Council of Europe is acting in some respects in a way similar to the nation states with which Ager is concerned:

**Identity promoted in the policy:**
- what identity: the construction of European identity underpins Council of Europe policy
- what ideology: the Council of Europe promotes the equality of all languages and the correction of inequalities by supporting linguistic and regional minorities, and by promoting relations among nation states

**Attitudes in the policy:**
- there is emphasis on the attractiveness of plurilingualism
- there is action taken through the policy profiles and the instruments to promote plurilingualism

**Purpose of the policy:**
- there is an explicit pursuit of linguistic diversity, of international citizenship, and of cohesion among member states.

If we consider the sequence of events, however, there is a difference. Nation states are the realisation of a bottom-up desire of ethnic groups with an existing identity for a national identity and political power (Edwards, 1994); the Wilsonian principle of post-1918 and its presence in the Treaty of Versailles was one very important reflection of this. After 1945, the Council of Europe started from an ideal of cultural cooperation and mutual respect among nations, as stated in the summary of the Cultural Convention:
to develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of their cultural diversity, to safeguard European culture, to promote national contributions to Europe’s common cultural heritage respecting the same fundamental values and to encourage in particular the study of the languages, history and civilisation of the Parties to the Convention.

(http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/cadreprincipal.htm)

This has been formulated since then in terms of social inclusion, citizenship and mobility for individuals, and in the creation of a European identity: ‘The Council was set up to (…) promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values and cutting across different cultures’ (www.coe.int/T/EN/Com/About_COE/). In this it is joined by the European Union, even though the latter had a different starting point.

There are also other differences between the Council of Europe and the nation-state as represented in Ager’s model, in particular the relationship with other comparable entities, and the possible integration with other entities. There are no comparable entities which, in the case of nation states, are the external ‘threats’ which help maintain internal unity.

Moreover, whereas a nation-state will usually seek to identify and promote one language – so that it becomes or remains a national language – this is clearly not the case with the Council of Europe, which substitutes plurilingualism for monolingualism or, in multilingual territories, the dominance of one language.

There are then similar but not identical processes and purposes at work here to those which Ager identifies, and the points in which his model does not apply are the indications of difference.

Conclusion

The Council of Europe has, in short, the characteristics of a policy-making and a policy-implementing body. It is comparable to the nation state and other policy bodies in this respect even though it operates at different levels and has different means at its disposal. The question which then arises is whether it is possible to predict the outcomes of this activity and it is here that I fear there is a gap to be filled.

Our need in the case in question is to predict whether a policy of plurilingualism and diversification as proposed by the Council of Europe will be accepted and implemented by member States. They have endorsed it in principle but principle does not necessarily end in practice. Theory which helps to predict whether a policy will be successfully implemented in a given set of circumstances might also allow us to identify inhibiting factors, and to change these in order to facilitate implementation.

One example exists with respect to the teaching of foreign languages, a necessary but not sufficient aspect of Council of Europe policy. This is a paper by Trim (1994) in which he identifies a range of different conditions which are more or less likely to lead to successful policies for foreign language teaching. This could perhaps be extended to
encompass plurilingualism, diversity and diversification in the curriculum. Implicit in Trim’s paper is an attempt to produce a taxonomy of language situations. A taxonomy is crucial to prediction, but needs to embrace the multilingualism within a polity in a holistic way if it is to help in prediction of the success of policies of plurilingualism. This might lead to predictions of the following kind:

- in language situations of type A, plurilingualism can be attained by implementation of a policy of type X.

However, language situations need to be theorised in a sociological perspective too, since policies exist in the interplay of entities holding power. One approach would be through Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction through education, which would suggest that language education policies are subject to the efforts of certain groups in society to maintain their cultural and social capital through education and education policies.

The potential for successful implementation of language education policies can also be analysed using economic theory. Grin (2004) has led the way in applying economic theory of costs and benefits to policies, as a means of helping authorities and other stakeholders to make decisions. It is also possible to envisage an analysis of language and education policy from the perspective of the debate about the marketisation of education, and whether education should be treated as a public good. This debate has been particularly vehement in anglophone countries.

These and other approaches need to be explored not only in the context of Council of Europe policy work, but perhaps the significance of this work makes the need all the more urgent.

References


Breidbach, S. *Plurilingualism, democratic citizenship in Europe and role of English*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.


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1 I am very grateful to Dennis Ager for comments on and suggested additions to a draft of this paper. I remain of course responsible for its contents.
2 This analysis is deliberately simplified, and has to be modified mutatis mutandis for nation states where there are more than one national language or where the speakers of a minority language are accorded legal rights to use the language in public discourse.
3 All the work currently being carried out in the EU on the development of a ‘Europass’ for languages’ or in Strasbourg on a ‘European Language Portfolio’ is a sign of the recognition by European authorities, and the national authorities which support them, that plurilingual competence of some kind is crucial.
4 I take a ‘weak’ Whorfian/Humboltian position which cannot be developed and defended here but for which there is supportive empirical evidence in Levinson (1997).
5 See Breidbach for a further discussion of levels of public fori and the language combinations which might be required.

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