Why maintaining multilingualism is better for social inclusion

August 25 2016

Research from the EU-funded MIME project has rejected the idea that reducing the number of official EU languages would be more effective, efficient and inclusive. Rather, they argue that such a policy would exclude approximately four out of five Europeans from having a deep understanding of official EU information.

The EU-funded MIME project is a four-year project that is studying multilingualism in Europe, with a particular focus on its implications for inclusion and social mobility, and as such is a prime position to be able to offer solutions and suggestions to possible conflicts over official language use in the EU. In a recent study led by the project's coordinator, Michele Gazzola, the argument for consolidating the official number of EU languages was rejected as being socially divisive and would lead to many millions of European citizens being linguistically excluded.

From 24 to one (or three)?

The study was responding to a growing argument over recent years that the EU should fully acknowledge the role of English as the continent's prevailing language, with the most radical commentators arguing that English should become the EU's sole official language (possibly regardless of the recent Brexit vote). Less radical observers instead have argued for a trilingual policy based on English, French and German.

Using data collected by Eurostat on almost 170 000 residents and their language skills in 25 EU Member States, the study showed that if English became the sole official language of the EU, 45 % of residents would have no access to legal documents, EU institutional websites and to streamed debates carried out in the European Parliament, due to not being able to understand English. In essence, they would become linguistically excluded, which could be viewed as a form of political disenfranchisement.

Additionally, when looking at EU residents who are neither native speakers nor proficient in English, the proportion of residents who would have difficulties in understanding political and legal EU documents increases to 79 %. This is four out of five Europeans. Thus, contrary to what is commonly believed, proficiency in English is not a basic skill in Europe, not even amongst younger adults.

Indeed, over 30 % of respondents aged 25-34 have no knowledge of English, which is admittedly lower than the average of 45 %, but 74 % of respondents in that age group do not speak English at a native or proficient level. This corresponds closely to the average for the whole population at 79 %. In essence, these percentages indicate that the young are more likely to speak foreign languages than the older generations, but that doesn't mean that they better master them.

Although less drastic, an EU language policy based on English, French and German would also be highly exclusionary too, as it would disenfranchise 26 % to 49 % of residents, depending on the indicator used, and these percentages are going to increase considerably after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

Maintaining multilingualism

Instead, the study argues that multilingualism is not only the most

effective policy to convey information about the EU to its citizens, but it is also the only truly inclusive policy. It is also a cost-effective policy, at 1 % of the EU's budget. A reduction in the EU's official languages would have regressive effects, particularly the least-educated EU citizens (17 % of respondents with a university education had no knowledge of English, compared to 47 % of respondents who only finished secondary education). Thus, a contraction in official EU languages would hit the poorest Europeans – residents in the higher income brackets are much more likely to speak additional languages than those in the lowest.

With Eurosceptic movements and parties gaining prominence across Europe, perhaps it has never been as urgent as now for the EU to ensure that it can effectively communicate with all of its citizens through their native languages. To do this, there must be clear political support for an inclusive language policy that places top priority on fostering multilingualism.

More information: Project website: www.mime-project.org/

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