

The role of language in the mobilisation of Ethnic and Immigrant minorities

Context of the Research

Language is often at the centre of the political mobilization of minorities within a majority group. It is a political issue and a cultural resort for minorities - playing a decisive role in the social integration of ethnic fringe groups and immigrants. However, these languages are hardly protected in any way.

This project has examined language policies through comparative studies of ethnic minorities in Germany, France, Italy, Great Britain and Spain. The minorities involved are: the Frisians and the Turks in Germany, the Corsicans and the Tunisians in France, the Welsh and the Urdu speaking in the United Kingdom, the Sud-Tyrolean and the Chinese in Italy, the Catalans and the Moroccans in Spain.

Language policies are embedded in the social and political environment. Therefore, the project has dealt with the institutional framework conditions of language policies and the political discussions within the groups concerned. The main emphasis is on future minority language policies in the European Union with the aim of seeing what intervention is needed outside the sphere of just language preservation, training and development.

Key Conclusions

1. In spite of the European Union minority language policy, the situation of minority languages remains extremely diversified across Member States.
2. The vitality or minority languages or their risk of disappearance varies according to each national context. There is no common European model for a minority language, but its existence may depend on a number of specific forms of legal recognition like:
 - Being recognised as co-official language.
 - Whether permission is allowed to teach the minority language.
 - The optional or compulsory nature of teaching the minority language.
 - The diffusion of media programmes for the protection and the maintenance of minority languages.
3. In each national context, many factors play a role in the situation of minority languages like the: -

- Historical-political and cultural conception of the nation, which has imposed itself in the nation-building process.
 - History of minorities' formation during the nation-building process.
 - Demographic evolution of majorities and minorities.
 - Geographical position of the minorities.
 - Status of the language relating to whether it is: -
 - An official nation-state language
 - A minority language
 - A less used language
 - A written or oral language
 - A language having a "koiné" or not
4. The historical-political and cultural conception of the nation, which has imposed itself in the nation-building process, is an extremely important factor: Nation-states tend generally to link the language issue to the question of the national identity, whose expression is the constitution.
 5. The debate that has taken place in the different countries at the moment of signing the European Charter on minority languages has shown great differences in the way of conceiving the relationship between the national language and the minority languages.
 6. Inside the European Union, the nation-state is still the main place where policies towards minorities and minority languages are defined and where the recognition and promotion of such languages may be guaranteed. The relationship between national identity and national language is still a main feature of the European nation-states, generally inscribed in the Constitutional order.
 7. Differently from what happened for Regional minorities, the right for immigrants to maintain their language has not been recognized in any of the countries considered. Some measures have been taken, but they have never been systematic or continuative. Measures for the protection of immigrant minorities' languages have often been taken through bi-lateral agreements with the countries of origin - that is through relationships among States. That means that immigrant minorities' languages have not been considered as cultural and linguistic heritage of the receiving country. More recently, the protection of these languages has been considered as part of a general approach promoting intercultural education in schools.
 8. Until recently, migratory policies have been characterized by assimilation or denial of the migratory fact. The abandonment of the assimilation's paradigm has not really opened to the recognition of cultural and linguistic pluralism. As far as the new

migrations are concerned, the focus is on cultural difference. In spite of the will of the European Union, to develop a common migratory policy, there is no common definition of the position of the immigrants in the different European societies. Immigrants and their descendents are “ethnic minorities” in Great Britain, whilst they are immigrant minorities or French of foreign origin in France. Germany is slowly coming out from the “Gastarbeiter System” (temporary migration model), while Italy and Spain have become new immigration countries.

9. The lack of a European definition of minorities and of the lack of implementation of a general policy at European level has let the nation-states to implement specific policies for their own minority languages. These policies have selected some minorities, neglecting others; moreover, these policies have generally been reactive to the emerging of claims processes and/or to the international context (this is particularly the case of Italy for the German-speaking minority).
10. The linguistic elaboration is often the result of the minorities’ mobilization around languages. This mobilization has allowed the development of new interesting theories about “diglossia”, about polynomic languages and as well of didactic theories, about bilingualism and full immersion.
11. It must be stressed the close link between linguistic theoretical development and political engagement.
12. Language has been a main issue in the struggle of different regional minorities for people like the Catalans, the Corsicans and the South-Tyrolean. However, the claim for the language has almost been combined with other type of demands, concerning autonomy, control of their own resorts, or even independence. This specificity for regional minorities explains the main differences with the immigrant minorities, whose demand is mainly non-discrimination and integration. This is a reason why the learning of the language of the receiving country is generally more important than the preservation of the language of origin - at least for the first generation.
13. Another concern is the type of demands concerning the language. Are the demands presented by the regional movements shared by the all population or just by a small elite of militants? There are extremely different cases. The normalization of the minority language, its co-official, its compulsory introduction in school, the bilingual education or the immersion practice, are, in any case, quite controversial issues that have raised protests even in Catalonia. One thing is the demand for preserving the language as an element of identity, another one the structural change of the toponomastic, the school system and the media system.
14. However, a minority language is co-official only in the Catalan case, where Catalan is the language of the Autonomous Province. In the other contexts, forms of co-official languages are complex. For example, in South-Tyrol, German is the co-official language, but only the German-speaking minority has a German school, while the Italians go to an Italian school. At the same time, Germans learn Italian and Italians learn German.

15. It is as well extremely important to understand the public-private relationship in the implementation of the measures protecting the minority languages. The demand of having the minority language in the public school, co-officially, during some hours, is very different from the demand of having support for private teaching in associations or community schools. There is a difference, for example, between the option of the Corsicans, who want Corsican in the public schools and the one of the other regional minorities in France, who opted, in the 1970s and 1980s, for private bilingual schools known as 'Diwan' (Brittany), 'Calendretas' (Occitania), 'Ikastolas' (Basque region), and 'Bressoles' (Catalonia).
16. A very controversial aspect concerns bilingualism and methods for teaching the two languages, from total linguistic immersion to bilingual education: the debate among the educationalists is complicated by the political positions.
17. An important issue that has emerged is the relationship between regional minorities and immigrant minorities. Minorities may feel threatened by the immigrants. This is the case in Corsica, where there appears to be growing racism. Minorities do not always accept multiculturalism, being preoccupied by the maintenance of their own identity.
18. In order to overcome this conflict, the linguistic struggle may acquire a new meaning, as it is expressed in Catalonia, but also in Wales, South-Tyrol and even Corsica. The minority language is considered not a language of an ethnic group, but as a public language, a language of a common space, thus guaranteeing pluralism.
19. The linguistic struggle doesn't necessarily mean that language is used by the minority as exclusive, to re-affirm the ethnicity: language and ethnicity can be divided, as it is the case now in Catalonia. The local language is an instrument to differentiate themselves from the nation-state, to defend a culture, but it is as well offered to the newcomers - the immigrants - as a proposal for a "sentimental integration". Newcomers are invited to participate to the construction of a more just and solidarity society.
20. It has however appeared that immigrant minorities may as well be mobilized to develop multilingual competences both in the national language and in the minority language (maintaining as well their language of origin), when this multilingualism is perceived as a better chance for their integration and promotion.

Key Recommendations

1. There is a need to renew European minority language policy based on the principles of international human rights and on the idea of cultural and linguistic pluralism.
2. Such a policy needs to be capable of progressively including immigrant languages in a general frame of protection and recognition, encouraging educational experiences and promoting multilingualism through new pedagogical instruments.

3. Each European citizen should be able to speak three languages.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: "The role of language mobilisation processes of ethnic and immigrant minorities". The Final Report was completed in December 2004.

The project's web site is at: - http://www.emz-berlin.de/projekte_E/pj27_1E.htm

Key Publications

Campani, Giovanna, *"Lingue, minoranze, immigrati in Italia. L'impossibile multiculturalismo"* Liguori Editore, Naples,

Research Institutions

University of Florence, Italy

Berliner Institut fuer Vergleichende Sozialforschung, Berlin, Germany

IUFM, Institut Universitaire de formation des maitres, Toulouse, France

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