

Multilingual speakers of European minority languages

Durk Gorter

(University of the Basque Country/IKERBASQUE – Basque Foundation for Science)

Three essentially monolingual frames dominate the debate on multilingualism in Europe. First, English is perceived as the global language and finds an increasing presence in society. As a consequence the adoption of a single language, English, for communication in specialized domains, among others, multinational corporations, higher education, or international travel, becomes the preferred choice and keeps out other languages, while disregarding the language backgrounds of the persons involved.

Second, the ideology that supports state languages implies that Europe is fundamentally seen as a conglomerate of states, and this political reality should be the basis for language practices as well. Thus, the official language of a state should be the major vehicle for communication at the national level but also be equally recognized and uniquely favoured in international communication.

Third, the idea that speakers of all languages, including minority languages or any other mother tongue have equal rights and should be supported for use in as many domains as possible, as an issue to be considered on its own.

Multilingual practices in Europe by and large are a sort of awkward middle way of policies based on those three frames, but lacking a clear sense of direction or rationale. The underlying monolingual mindset is a determining factor. More recently ideas about the complexity of multilingualism, in which languages are no longer seen as fixed entities, may flourish in the research literature, but they gain only gradually a minor influence among policy makers or in society at large. Several myths with regard to multilingualism are persistent and can be found everywhere in popular and even in academic discourse.

Unique minority languages such as Basque, Catalan, Frisian or Welsh seem to have obtained an important public support and their use as everyday languages in social life is accepted, but also contested, at least in the European regions concerned. Their speakers often try to secure a sustainable future through intergenerational transmission and they support language policies for such minority languages in education, workplaces, public spaces and beyond. In many situations, the use of the minority language, the dominant language and English are always negotiated, which creates new challenges for minority groups and changes the ways in which minority languages are used.

The macro developments at European level, changes due to globalization, or technological innovation, influence increasingly dynamic and diverse ways of being a multilingual speaker of a minority language. These changes in multilingualism present new demands for the learning and use of the minority language, the state language and alongside often English. Such developments and transformations concern Basque, Frisian and other minority languages in Europe.

In this paper I want to analyze the changing practices of minority language users in the context of language education, the workplace and in public space. Data come predominately from research projects in the Basque Country, Spain and in Friesland, The Netherlands. I also aim to present some solutions on the use of multiple languages and to identify areas for further research and debate.