



HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

REAL-ARBEITSBERICHT NR. 16-1

---

**English-only language policy:  
The road to provincialism?**

---

BENGT-ARNE WICKSTRÖM

Updated: 2016-11-15

REAL

Research group “Economics and Language”  
Forschungsgruppe »Ökonomie und Sprache«

# English-only language policy: The road to provincialism?\*

BENGT-ARNE WICKSTRÖM

*Andrássy-Universität Budapest*

## Abstract

In this note we outline various possible long-run effects of an English-only acquisition policy in the European Union. The point of departure is how individual behavior adapts to constraints in the environment. This leads to changes in collective behavior, which becomes part of the environment, again influencing individual behavior. Possible equilibria of this feed-back mechanism are discussed. It is argued that domain loss and diglossia may result. The process is further characterized by external effects. Looking at language knowledge as a merit good, path dependencies and multiple stable equilibria can be explained.

*Keywords:* acquisition planning, adaptive individual behavior, diglossia, domain loss, external effects, language dynamics, language policy, merit good, path dependencies

## 1 INTRODUCTION – LANGUAGE POLICY IS MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

At first glance one might think that the analysis of language policy and language use is a relatively simple cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analysis. Benefits

---

\*I thank Michele Gazzola and Torsten Templin for many constructive comments. Part of this work has been carried out during visits to the Research group “Economics and language” in Berlin, which is receiving funding from the European Union’s Seventh Framework Program (Project MIME – grant agreement 613344). This support is gratefully acknowledged.

This essay is published as:

WICKSTRÖM, BENGT-ARNE (2016). “English-only language policy: The road to provincialism?”  
In: *Acta universitatis sapientiae, European and regional studies* 9: 71–76.

would not only be the value of easy communication, but also the subjective value of the possibility of using one's chosen language in various situations. These values should be compared to the implementation costs guaranteeing the realization of the different possibilities.<sup>1</sup> VAN PARIJS'S (2011) work is in spirit a cost-benefit analysis that concentrates on the short-run effects and mainly on the efficiency gain in communication. By having a *lingua franca* or a vehicular language as the sole working language in the European Union, every citizen has to learn at most only one language in addition to his or her mother tongue, and, in addition, by choosing one of the big languages as a vehicular language the number of people having to learn no second language is maximized and the aggregated learning cost are minimized.<sup>2</sup> Hence, everyone can communicate at minimal costs.

Van Parijs is also aware of the short-term distributional effects of the only-English policy favoring the English speakers and being a disadvantage to all the others.<sup>3</sup> He also discusses various possible compensation measures. All in all the arguments are in accordance with a straight-forward cost-benefit analysis. Independently of whether the distributional issue is given weight or not, the efficiency gain is undoubtedly present, and due to the network-externality effect of language acquisition it is even more pronounced than one might think at the first glance.<sup>4</sup> What is missing in the very convincing arguments of Van Parijs, however, is an analysis of dynamic long-term effects, and in my opinion they can be substantial.

The static analysis gives us a very myopic view, since people's demand for language rights and their linguistic behavior can not be assumed to be stationary and constant. An individual's linguistic preferences can be strongly influenced by the environment the individual is born and socialized into. This environment is at least partially determined by the language policy conducted. In that way, language usage and language preferences are endogenous results of the language policy and we are faced with path dependencies in the analysis. Especially acquisition plan-

<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of language rights from a welfare economics point of view, see, for instance, WICKSTRÖM (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, this would be an argument for the biggest mother tongue in the EU, German. However, in the current situation in Europe with English being the language most widely spoken, the argument makes sense.

<sup>3</sup> In addition there are distributional effects due to the varying proficiency in English in the population of the various countries; see for instance GAZZOLA (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Had I not been forced to learn English at school, I could have made a personal cost-benefit calculus. One benefit for me was that I could communicate with quite a few additional people in the world, and the cost was the time I invested in learning it. However, the benefit to society were higher than what would have entered into my calculus, since I did not take into account the benefit accruing to every one else, who knows English, due to the fact that they could now communicate with me. Hence, the network externality property amplifies the benefits of an individual calculus and this is the *raison d'être* for the need of a language policy promoting the use of a *lingua franca*. See also CHURCH and KING (1993).

ning can be expected to have a strong influence, but also status planning cannot be neglected. We can distinguish two channels of influence. There is a direct influence on mature individuals who might change their already acquired preferences, and there is an effect on the new generations – people in their youth whose preferences are being formed – that can be expected to be more pronounced. The status-planning policy is taken to influence both groups, whereas the acquisition-planning policy, of course, impact mainly on younger people. *In nuce*, language policy has to be analyzed as essentially a dynamic problem with path dependencies that can lead to very different situations in the long run.

We, hence, have to distinguish the short-run effects of an English-only policy from the long-run effects. What are then the long-run effects? As mentioned above, the preferences for language rights and language use can be expected to change with the linguistic environment, which at least partially, is determined by the consequences of the higher status given to English by making it the sole working language on the EU level. The accompanying acquisition planning will reinforce these effects. In this note, I will concentrate on the domain losses that might occur to other languages as well as on the unintended welfare effects of changes in language use due to changed perceptions and possibilities. Finally, the dilemma in evaluating different *ex post* states will be discussed.

## 2 DOMAIN LOSS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGLOSSIA

The status of a language is relative. That is, when the status of English is increased the status of other languages will decrease relative to English. One consequence will certainly be that in schools in the EU the position of English as a second language will become stronger and stronger at the cost of other languages. The internationalization of research and the resulting strong trend towards the sole use of English in domains like higher education (especially in the natural sciences) and in research activities is further reinforced by the language policy in corporate management. Slowly, these and similar domains will be lost for the other vernaculars in the EU.

What will prevent this process to continue with one domain loss after the other leading to a situation of diglossia and ultimately even to the disappearance of some European languages?<sup>5</sup> After these domains, which are the next ones to go?

The loss of the domain and the development of diglossia also brings a loss in the richness of the concerned languages. The languages will no longer be adequate

---

<sup>5</sup> On the European level, German, French, Italian etc. might become regional minority languages with English playing the rôle of Europe-wide “national” language. The regional languages will then follow the path of Gaelic in Scotland (DORIAN, 1981) or Hungarian in Burgenland (GAL, 1979).

as vehicles to discuss themes belonging to the lost domains. Should we neglect the possibility of such a development?

### 3 CHOICE, PERCEPTION, AND PROVINCIALISM

In today's Europe English has become the first foreign language in most elementary and secondary schools; in many cases the only one. This, of course, is the result of a conscious acquisition planning and is totally in accordance with the language policy proposed by Van Parijs. This policy increases the status of English compared to other languages. A plausible consequence is that anglophone culture becomes the most, if not the only, accessible culture to the younger cohorts. The resulting cultural provincialism, of course, has positive and negative sides. The added appreciation of English-language culture in all its diverse forms is certainly a gain for us all, but the marginalization of cultures originating in other language communities is a considerable loss. More important is perhaps the loss in variety due to the strong concentration on one single language at the cost of all others.

#### 3.1 ACQUISITION PLANNING CREATES PERCEPTIONS

The next consequence of the English-only policy is that the perceptions and resulting norms of young people change. It is not unusual to here young people claim that the international norm is given by English and the local language has no particular value beyond the immediate surrounding. When talking about French institutions in German, for instance, the names of the French institutions are given in English: *Académie française* becomes the "French Academy" and not "Académie française" or "Die französische Akademie". This is slowly becoming the norm also in serious journalism.<sup>6</sup>

Do we really want this *Weltanschauung* with (US) English usage as the only international norm? Is this not the ultimate provincialism, making all references to something foreign in English and by English?

#### 3.2 ACQUISITION PLANNING CHANGES BEHAVIOR, INDUCING EXTERNALITIES

More important than the emotional side is probably that with the decline in the knowledge of other languages than English the information flows from the world becomes biased. The average European is likely to know more about life of an

<sup>6</sup> The other day, in the Austrian public radio in a review of a new staging of Wagner's opera "Das Liebesverbot" in *Teatro Real* in Madrid, the generally very competent reviewer in the German language program referred to the theater as the "Royal Theater"!

average family in Kalamazoo than in Katowice. This does not really further European integration. The reporter working in Madrid speaking no Spanish beyond ordering a restaurant meal, is bound to look for sources speaking English and will in that way get a rather biased view of what is happening in Spain, relying mostly on the elites of society. This is a clear negative external effect of the English-only policy, causing considerable social costs. If the increased ease of communication in some domains compensates for these social costs is, of course, a matter of individual tastes. To make people aware of the consequences of the different alternatives is, however, a matter of efficiency.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.3 AN EXAMPLE

When I went to school in Sweden about 50 years ago, we learned some elementary Danish and Norwegian, and the same was true with respect to the three Scandinavian languages in the other two countries. This small investment was enough to overcome the initial hurdles and paving the road to an almost native passive knowledge of the other Scandinavian languages. When a Swede and a Dane met, they could hence communicate on a rather sophisticated level – each speaking his or her native tongue.

Today young people learn mainly English at school, achieving as a rule an intermediate command of that idiom. When Danes, Norwegian, and Swedes meet today, they as a consequence often follow the path of least resistance, conducting simple conversations in English. The result is a rather limited level of communication. Furthermore, out of myopia very few young people then make the rather small investment needed to learn the basic differences between the three Scandinavian languages. They hence never achieve the potential benefits of mastering them passively at an almost native level. The community feeling of being part of Scandinavia is slowly lost, and the access to the cultural and political life of the other two countries becomes very limited.

Also this is a negative external effect of the only-English language policy in Scandinavian schools.

## 4 MERIT GOOD, *EX ANTE* AND *EX POST* EVALUATION

A fundamental problem facing us when discussing the desirability of a specific language policy is that the policy influences the preferences of the people subjected to the policy. On the other hand, those preferences are the basis for the evaluation. Hence, an *ex ante* and an *ex post* analysis can give very different results. In other

---

<sup>7</sup> When it comes to tobacco products, our politicians have realized this. Maybe all providers of English courses should be forced to add a sentence to their advertisements: “An English-only policy is dangerous to your cultural health”.

words, we are dealing with path dependencies.<sup>8</sup> This is closely related to the concept of merit good.<sup>9</sup> This basically says that there are goods or activities that we at the time of consumption might not like, but after the consumption activity are happy that we consumed, for instance education.

An English-only policy that after many generations leads to diglossia or even the death of many vernaculars, as outlined in Section 2, might then by the then living individuals be hailed as both wise and visionary. How many descendants of Cornish speakers today mourn the loss of Cornish as a living language?<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, a rational argument and justifies the acceptance of the linguistic evolution of the world over the last many thousand years. The question that remains, however, is whether it is a sensible policy to actively and consciously promote such an evolution. The welfare loss discussed in the previous sections will at least apply to many individuals during the transition affecting quite a few generations of Europeans. Do they not count?

## REFERENCES

- CHURCH, JEFFREY and IAN KING (1993). “Bilingualism and network externalities”. In: *Canadian Journal of Economics / Revue canadienne d’économique* **26**: 337–345.
- DORIAN, NANCY C. (1981). *Language death: The life cycle of a Scottish Gaelic dialect*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- FERDINAND, SIARL (2013). “A brief history of the Cornish language, its revival and its current status”. In: *e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies (Thematic issue: Cultural Survival)* **2**: 199–227.
- GAL, SUSAN (1979). *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Linguistic Change in Bilingual Austria*. New York: Academic Press.
- GAZZOLA, MICHELE (2014). “Partecipazione, esclusione linguistica e traduzione: Una valutazione del regime linguistico dell’Unione europea”. In: *Studi Italiani di Linguistica Teorica e Applicata* **43**: 227–264.
- MUSGRAVE, RICHARD A. (1956/1957). “A multiple theory of budget determination”. In: *Finanzarchiv* **17**: 333–343.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see WICKSTRÖM (2016).

<sup>9</sup> For the original source, see MUSGRAVE (1956/1957).

<sup>10</sup> According to FERDINAND (2013), about one in 1000 people in Cornwall has some knowledge of the language today, and presumably at least they do care.

VAN PARIJS, PHILIPPE (2011). *Linguistic justice for Europe and for the world*. Oxford political theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WICKSTRÖM, BENGT-ARNE (2016). “Language rights: A welfare-economics approach”. In: *The Palgrave handbook of economics and language*. Edited by VICTOR A. GINSBURGH and SHLOMO WEBER. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 22: 659–688.