Editorial

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What do minority languages mean? European perspectives

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“Minority language” as a notion emerged in scientific and legal discourse in the last decades of the twentieth century. Its definition has never been clear and looking at how it is used in discourse, it becomes obvious that its meaning is context-dependent. This *Multilingua* issue is dedicated to the investigation of what it means to designate a language as a minority language in the twenty-first century in Europe.

1 Context

Investigating the use of “minority language” in scientific and legal texts in European contexts – whether focusing on language use, transmission, policies, education or any other specific aspect – reveals an important web of other expressions used to refer to the languages in question. For instance, next to “minority language”, we may find “lesser used language”, “community language”, “regional language”, “local language” or “heritage language”. Depending on the context they are used in, these items share various semantic relations: synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy.

Overall, it seems the meaning of each of these notions is always determined in discourse by the actual “name giver” (Tabouret-Keller 1997)¹: with each speech act, a name may carry a new meaning. The speaker may use in discourse “minority language” or any other notion of the paradigm the way he or she

¹ Translated from French *donneur de nom*.

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intends it to mean (explicitly or not), according to his or her own social representations (Moscovici 2001) of languages and multilingualism. Our perception of our linguistic environment is fuelled by how we experience it and by collective representation of our community. Power issues between majority and minority, the way we relate to a language as a speaker or as a non-speaker and the way we view this language in relation to territory, identity, nationhood and history, are amongst the many parameters that influence our representations of the linguistic world.

The notion “minority language” is composed of both a highly anthropological concept to describe a group of people, “minority”, and a social, communicative, cognitive object, “language”. From a morphosyntactic point of view, “minority” is here both a noun and a modifier of “language”. Longer phrases can be found such as “ethnic minority language”, “national minority language”, “regional minority language”, “immigrant minority language” (Extra and Gorter 2001) giving semantic precision to “minority”, to “language”, as in “threatened minority language” or both.

The productivity and frequency of these more complex phrases further calls into question the meaning of “minority language” as a stand-alone notion: what semantic value do the extra terms add to the original name? Is “minority language” in itself not specific enough to encompass the realities of all the languages it covers? The addition of extra terms to the notion suggests that there may be different types of minority languages. However, these phrases co-exist next to other phrases such as “ethnic language”, “regional language” or “immigrant language”. In the latter, can we consider that the idea of “minority”, as the group who bears the language, is implicit? This is not always the case: for instance, “national minority language” may not mean the same as “national language”. Finally, “regional or minority language”, the long and complex phrase used by the Council of Europe (1992) in the Charter for Regional, is the result of long negotiations which show that, names used to designate idioms may vary according to geo-political contexts.

Using “minority language” as a notion reproduces the way we look at the environment. Rarely do we use the phrase “majority language”, although when we do, we set it in a specific context and there is no doubt about what it means. For Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, whose following excerpt focuses on the situation in the United Kingdom, diversity comes labelled in multiple ways by the majority:

Identities are so apportioned between the majorities and minorities in the UK that the majority has no mother tongue. ‘Mother tongue’ refers to minority languages. The majority has no one ethnicity: ethnic language refers to minority and migrant languages. The

majority is not a community: community language refers to minority and migrant languages. Ethnicity, which in the literature is variously expressed as an assertion of cultures, communal upsurges, revival of religions, voices and movements of marginalised peoples, regions and nationalities, hurts the power elites. It represents the affirmation of diversity, of indigenous identity, of organic as against televised or museumised cultures. (Pattanayak 1991: X)

From this perspective, what is a minority language in Europe? The infinity of possibilities raises a number of questions: can we talk about a European outlook on this situation, or are there within Europe many ways to look at languages in a minority situation, specific to how states, nations or regions identify themselves as entities? What position can be assumed at supra-national, national or infra-national level?

Europe is itself a variable concept linked to two major international organisations, the European Union, economically and politically driven, and the Council of Europe, whose primary objectives are human rights. The territorial perimeters of these two organisations differ, too. The Council of Europe includes among its competences that of linguistic rights and, more precisely, the rights of the so-called regional or minority languages. Its geographical area of intervention is vast because it includes, in particular, the Russian Federation and the three countries of the Caucasus as well as Turkey. This wider vision of Europe, allowing a bigger range of configurations and experiences in the field of minority languages, undergirds the studies in this volume, even if the case studies are all based in countries of the European Union.

Finally, in a fast-evolving Europe, in terms of migration, national or supra-national boundaries and political shifts, how relevant is the notion « minority language » when other concepts are emerging such as superdiversity, metrolingualism or translanguaging? Does its semantic content need to evolve along with an ever-changing European society? Can we think of a unique definition for “minority language” for Europe? Before we present the content of this issue, we explore the possibilities as well as the limits we face when trying to define the notion.

2 Can we come up with a definition?

The meaning of “minority language” in discourse relies heavily on its context of use and may also vary according to the language used to express it. This issue presents five articles, which describe various territorial contexts where other languages than English are used and referred to: French, Catalan, Castilian,

Dutch, Lombard, Italian, Scottish Gaelic. Although there are equivalently charged terms in these languages for “minority language”, they have their own specificities, marked by the language structure and socio-political traditions of the context they refer to. For instance, the French for “minority language” would be “*langue minoritaire*”. In the context of France, institutionalising a language as a “*langue minoritaire*” goes against the nation’s principles of indivisibility of the people. The notion simply cannot be used in legal texts, even if linguists find it a useful tool to describe certain situations. Also, looking at its morphological structure, it is rather a standard noun phrase, with a noun and an adjective that qualifies it. Its productivity using a third item is not as important as it is in English. The notion itself, though, shares ambiguous semantic relations with other names of the field just as much as “minority language” does in English: “*langue régionale*”, “*langue de migrants*”, “*langue locale*”, for instance, all share ambiguous relations with “*langue minoritaire*”. However, the French language offers an extra option that English cannot offer transparently: when adding a term to constrain meaning, if the focus is on “minority” as a group of people, rather than on “language”, the phrase will change to “*langue de minorité*”. The question then focuses on the relation between “*langue minoritaire*” and “*langue de minorité*”: are these phrases synonymous? If not, can we assume that a minority language is systematically borne by a so-called minority?

Despite differences in how we perceive languages in a minority situation and how we verbalise those views, some attempts have been made to try and come up with a common terminology. For the VALEUR project (McPake and Tinsley et al. 2007), which looked at educational provision for all languages across Europe, coining a set of names that would represent the whole spectrum of languages was a necessity. As for the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, negotiations and concessions had to be made, revealing how equivalent terms through languages may in fact hide very different connotations. To this day, we still “lack a common referential framework for the languages under discussion” as Kutlay Yagmur states it in his contribution before listing an overview of terms used across Europe to refer to immigrant minorities.

Having assessed the complexity and near-impossibility to come up with one universal definition for “minority language”, we may question our own stance and aims: what is the point of this effort? Instead of the result, should we not focus on the process of this investigation? Looking at our stance, what does it mean to look at minority languages from a European supranational level? Does it entail that all languages in Europe face the same issues? That they can be treated equally? Or does it mean that, although we recognize differences, there

are common features underlying all languages in a minority situation today? If so, it is worth investigating these common features.

Using “minority language” to describe a language means that there also lies in the context a majority language. In other words, a minority language is always defined, one way or another, in terms of power issues. The speakers of the language share specificities that differentiate them from the rest of a larger community: language and culture of course and intrinsically history (we will develop this aspect further). In terms of population, one frequent assumption is that a minority language is borne by a group of individuals numerically inferior to the majority group. However, that it is not always the case. Although most frequently demographic and power inferiority combine, in some minority language situations, one or the other criteria is enough. Wilson McLeod, in this present issue, for instance, explains that when Scottish Gaelic first became a minority language in late medieval time, it was then probably still spoken by the majority of the population, but in terms of power, the language was dominated by Scots language as the major language of the court and trade. To counterpart this, the author later mentions another situation: although Irish is spoken today on a daily basis by a very small minority of the population in the Republic of Ireland, its advocates refuse to have it labelled as a minority language, as that would diminish its power. Irish is considered in the Republic of Ireland as a national and official language and nothing else. Once again, this shows how the notion may be interpreted very differently in different contexts, which makes the outcome of a definition difficult.

Languages all have their own history, built on how they relate to speakers of many generations, to cultures and territories. The relationship between language and territory is an aspect which raises conflicting views when defining minority languages. For some, a language which faces minority issues in a context but is a majority language in another context cannot be called a minority language.

More fundamentally, for some, minority languages are understood and defined through the history they share with a precise territory and its people. Historical settlement of a language is then seen as the ultimate criterion making a language a legitimate minority language. The European Charter (Council of Europe 1992) excludes “migrants’ languages” in its definition of “regional or minority languages” as it concerns only languages that have been “traditionally used within a given territory”. How far do we need to go back in time to start talking about history? When can we start talking about tradition? How relevant is tradition to present practices? This conception of “minority language” is one where history, ethnicity, territory and culture are pre-requisites to define the notion in relation to the past, present and future. In this case, what minority languages *once were* seems an important element of definition, almost as if,

some languages may be called minority languages today because of what they are, but, even more so, because of what they once were and no longer are.

Finally, on the pragmatic level, what does it mean to designate a minority language as such? And mostly, what does it mean to extend official recognition to a minority language? In relation to the past, present and future, can we say that “minority language” is both the result of a sociolinguistic and political process as well as a transitional label for a language, longing to evolve into something else? This would mean that labelling a language as such may have a knock-on-effect on its political and sociolinguistic future.

Our introductory attempt at defining what minority languages are has shown that there are actually many ways to do so. As this issue will demonstrate, many interpretations of “minority language” are possible and the notion is polysemous. Despite the lack of a stable definition, “minority language” is a term that is frequently used in the literature to describe and characterise specific situations. It is obvious that we recognize common features with other languages described as such.

3 Presentation of this issue

This volume explores a number of interpretations of “minority language”, whether applied to specific European contexts or focused on some conceptual aspects of the notion.

Wilson McLeod focuses on Scottish Gaelic exploring its relevance as an ethnic language or as a national language depending on how both its speakers and broader Scottish society relate to it as an element of the nation’s identity or culture. Juan Jimenez Salcedo presents the case of the Catalan language in Catalonia, one of Spain’s Autonomous Communities, and in the Principality of Andorra, an independent kingdom sharing borders with France and Spain. The author explores how in both areas, although legal frameworks are in place to promote Catalan, the language remains minoritized due to power inequalities with Castilian, the *lingua franca*.

Alain Viaut looks at how the notion of “linguistic minority” can help the understanding of minority languages, looking at texts such as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, which still has not gained legal recognition, and taking the Alsatian language situation as a case study. Paolo Coluzzi focuses on the Lombard language, through the attitudes and representations of its new speakers. From a typological point of view, both Lombard and Alsatian are classified as dialects. However, because they are associated to

strong cultural group identities by their speakers, they function as autonomous languages. Their relation to the standard majority language is nevertheless different, which also influences their definition: Alsatian speakers are totally distant to the German language, whereas Lombard speakers are also fluent Italian speakers. As a result, Lombard language is more and more seen as a language on its own, an *Ausbau language*, and Alsatian as a remote dialect of German.

Finally, Kutlay Yagmur tackles the issue surrounding the many labels used to describe languages as well as linguistic minorities in Europe, suggesting that they reflect a fundamental hierarchy in the way groups of people and their languages are perceived. He calls for more acknowledgement of immigrant minority languages to support the social inclusion of ethnic minorities.

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