

8. Schools in the multilingual city

Not every language is equal

Orhan Agirdag

European cities are becoming more and more diverse in terms of language. Multilingualism is also increasingly evident in the classroom in the Netherlands, as more and more students speak another language than Dutch at home. Moreover, the mass media and the internet have familiarised many young people with English already before they receive any formal instruction in that language.

While linguistic diversity enriches society and the education system, it also poses new challenges. On the one hand, multilingualism is promoted by the EU as a crucial catalyst for citizenship, education and the economy. But this policy is only *partially* incorporated at the national and municipal level. While languages such as English, and to a lesser extent French and German, are increasingly valued in education, immigrant languages are seen as the ultimate obstacle to integration. This essay is about the paradox of multilingualism.

EU and Member States in favour of multilingualism

According to the EU, multilingualism is something fundamentally good that should be encouraged. EU policymakers cite four reasons why they promote multilingualism. Multilingualism is supposed to boost intercultural dialogue, stimulate citizens of the Member States to cultivate EU citizenship, offer new possibilities to citizens to study and work abroad, and open up new markets for EU companies that want to do business outside of the EU. In other words, multilingualism is seen as a stimulus to the EU economy, to educational mobility and to civic education.

For these reasons, the EU is trying to protect linguistic diversity and to encourage its citizens' knowledge of languages. The goal is for all Europeans to learn at least two other languages besides their mother tongue, preferably from a very young age. The objective of 'mother tongue plus two languages' (1+2) was laid down by government leaders at the summit of Barcelona in March 2002. It should be noted that the EU itself does not have authority in the area of education, but it does promote language education, multilingual education and exchanges between different educational systems in different languages through a number of programmes.

The endeavour to promote multilingualism is also gaining acceptance within various Member States. To date, most Member States' educational systems have been monolingual. This does not mean that no other languages are taught in these schools as a separate subject but rather that the instruction of regular subjects is typically given in one language. Even in bilingual regions (such as Brussels), parents must choose whether to send their children to a monolingual Dutch or French school. EU Member States are nonetheless trying to introduce multilingual education as a result of the European directive of 1+2 languages. Although still a recent phenomenon, in 2015 around 130 schools in the Netherlands offered multilingual education. This means that about half of the lessons at such schools – including regular subjects such as maths and geography – are given in English. In other words, not only is English (as a subject) taught at school, the students are also taught *in* English (language of instruction). Since 2014, multilingual education is no longer only possible in Dutch secondary education: various primary schools have launched bilingual education at the initiative of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. According to State Secretary Sander Dekker, all primary schools should be given the opportunity to use English, French or German as the language of instruction for up to 15% of their teaching time. In the future, Dutch children will earn a living in a world in which it is more important than ever that they speak English well, in addition to

Dutch. It is therefore crucial for students to begin learning the language at the earliest possible age.

More recently, Minister Lodewijk Asscher of Social Affairs and Employment said that he wants to make multilingual after-school care available for children from ages 0 to 6 in English, French and German. In a letter to the Lower House, he argued that multilingualism is an advantage for young children because they become aware of language comprehension and learn to deal with differences already from an early age. In short, the Dutch government is clearly of the opinion that multilingualism (English, French, German) offers cognitive, economic and social added value.

Why multilingualism at school?

The positive view of multilingualism and multilingual education is based on important scientific evidence. A majority of linguists argue that concepts and skills that are developed in one language are transferred to a second language through a so-called 'common underlying proficiency'. Multilingual education would therefore not hinder but actually stimulate the learning of the Dutch language.

From a neurological perspective, bilingual children are said to develop cognitive mechanisms with which they constantly control which language they speak. This cognitive controlling takes place in the brain. The earlier a child begins with the training of this cognitive controlling mechanism, the better its brain will develop. The brains of bilingual children are therefore better trained than those of monolingual children. This difference is even measurable when people grow old: bilingual people are on average affected by Alzheimer's disease much later in life.

Also from a sociological perspective, multilingualism is a plus. This is the case for all students but particularly for minorities. For them, the knowledge and the preservation of their mother tongue can function as 'multicultural capital', for their native

language plays a crucial role in the development of communicative and emotional ties with their families and the community. Due to such social relations, cultural and economic resources within the community are deployed in order to improve the educational performance of the children. One example is the homework assistance that is being organised by many associations of ethnic-cultural minorities.

There are also many (international) studies that have examined the effectiveness of multilingual education. The results are summarised in various metastudies, and without exception they demonstrate that multilingual instruction has beneficial effects on the educational achievements of foreign-language-speaking students, although the magnitude of the effects is modest.

One type of multilingualism is not like the other

Although the positive effects of multilingualism and multilingual education are not in dispute, not all multilingual repertoires are valued in the same way. For example, in 2013 a student at the Metis Montessori Lyceum (then known as the Cosmic Montessori Lyceum) in Amsterdam was suspended because he had repeatedly been 'caught' speaking Turkish at school. The student brought the issue to court, but the judge ruled that the school was justified in suspending the student. The judge also concluded that the school's rules of conduct requiring the use of Dutch as the working language both within and outside the classroom was not in conflict with the principle of non-discrimination. According to the judge, the ban on speaking one's mother tongue was justified because the school in this way minimised the formation of groups according to ethnic background.

In this verdict, the added value of multilingualism is not only forgotten but actively devalued. Multilingualism is seen as something that leads to the formation of groups – something that impedes civic education. How the judge can reconcile the ban on speaking one's mother tongue with Article 30 of the Convention

on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a big question, because the CRC states that: 'In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language'.

This is not an isolated incident; it is consistent with the current zeitgeist. From the beginning of the 21st century there has been a clear anti-immigrant attitude discernible in the Netherlands. In many Dutch schools, it is implicitly or explicitly forbidden to speak immigrant languages; nor would they be included in the curriculum as is the case with English, French and German. In 2004, an end was even put to two important initiatives for immigrant children: Education in One's Own Language and Culture (*Onderwijs in Eigen Taal en Cultuur, OETC*) and Education of Immigrant Living Languages (*Onderwijs van Allochtone Levende Talen, OALT*). Since then, the government has not taken a single structural initiative to enhance the value of immigrant languages such as Turkish or Arabic in the education system.

On the contrary, when referring to the multilingualism of non-Western population groups, people often speak in terms of a handicap. Students from these groups are seldom spoken about in terms of multilingualism but rather in terms of their deficiency in the language of their adopted country. It almost seems as if these students have *less* rather than *more* cultural baggage due to the fact that they speak an extra language. But how is it that the discussion has suddenly changed from 'good' to 'bad' multilingualism when it comes to immigrant languages?

It's not the economy, stupid!

One could argue that the paradox of multilingualism can be understood from an economic perspective, for is it not logical for languages that have economic value to be given more attention?

This argument rests on the assumption that immigrant languages have no economic value, but this assumption is incorrect.

Research indicates that immigrant languages do indeed have economic value. Immigrants who master their mother tongue earn more than those who forget their mother tongue. Anyone walking through the streets of Amsterdam Southeast or New West would understand perfectly why this is so, for the thriving ethnic micro-economies revolve to a large extent around these languages. Even outside these ethnic enclaves, immigrant languages have economic value. Almost every month I receive an email from a colleague looking for a foreign-language pollster, data encoder or translator.

Immigrant languages are also relevant for the international economy. Trade between the Netherlands and Turkey has tripled in the past decade. The Netherlands is one of the most important investors in Turkey. Numerous Dutch companies have a branch in Turkey, primarily in the food, energy and technology sectors. Within these sectors, knowledge of the Turkish language is invaluable. And yet according to the Court, a school may suspend you if you speak this language in the classroom.

White and black languages and institutional racism

The social and political estimation of a language clearly does not correspond with the economic added value of that language. The ethnic association we attach to these languages – the ‘colour’ of these languages – offers a better explanation for the apparent paradox of multilingualism. There is in effect a distinction we can make between white and black languages. White languages are languages of white population groups (English, French or German), while black languages are those of coloured population groups – languages such as Turkish, Kurdish and Sranan. And to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, a language can only be worth as much as the speakers of the language are worth in the political and social space.

In other words, the fact that black languages are less valued – and even actively devalued – can be understood as an expression of *institutional racism*. Institutional racism should not be confused with individual racism. This is not, after all, about individuals who (consciously) discriminate, nor is it about the intentions of individuals. The exclusion of black languages often occurs with the best of intentions – for example, in the hope of counteracting delays in the learning of Dutch among immigrant children and of preventing the formation of ethnically based cliques. But if colonialism has taught us anything, it is that the good intentions of a civilising offensive do not make up for the negative consequences of our actions.

What is institutional racism, then? It has something to do about the rules of the game played by institutions such as the education system and politics. Institutional racism occurs when the rules of institutions are systematically to the disadvantage of coloured population groups. One example of this is the way in which the Dutch education system valorises the linguistic repertoires of Dutch, English and even Frisian students but takes no positive action on the language of Turkish students.

Conclusion

Before we can speak about citizenship and civic education, we must first ensure that we as citizens are equal. By excluding the linguistic and cultural repertoires of a specific ethnic minority, we implicitly give these fellow citizens the message that they are second-class citizens. One way in which we can move beyond institutional racism is to reinterpret Europe's policy of a mother tongue plus two languages (1+2). When people refer to a mother tongue in relation to the EU, they tend to think of the national language of the Member State. But in cities such as Amsterdam, many children have a non-European mother tongue. In other words, one's mother tongue can also refer to black languages such as Turkish, Sranan, Kurdish or Arabic. The European city

of tomorrow will most certainly be multi-coloured and multilingual. If we want to fully exploit the potential of linguistic diversity, we must ensure that all the colours of multilingualism are valorised in our schools, and not only the white languages.

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Further reading

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