

# DISTRIBUTING LINGUISTIC ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES IN A MOBILE SOCIETY

## Ag dáileadh buntáistí agus míbhuntáistí teangacha i sochaí soghluaiste

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### (1) INTRODUCTION

Language skills influence both the opportunity for and experience of mobility. For example, someone fluent in a foreign language be able to find rewarding work outside their country of origin, whilst immigrants with limited language skills may lack opportunities to participate in social life. Linguistic inequalities arise when people with different language competences share the same linguistic environment. Sometimes these inequalities may be justified, as when someone benefits from having invested in learning a new language. However, sometimes inclusion and social justice may require them to be corrected or ameliorated. Our research sought to better understand when, why and how public policies ought to address linguistic inequalities by answering two related questions.

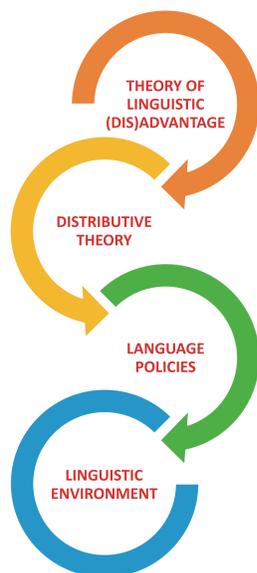
(1) How should we compare the situations of speakers of different languages who share the same linguistic environment, and in what kinds of ways might someone be linguistically advantaged and/or disadvantaged?

(2) Given that philosophers and citizens disagree about how these advantages and disadvantages should be distributed, is it possible to reach agreement about public policies to address them?

### (2) ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework we employ starts from the idea that language policies aim to modify the demolingistic and sociolingistic features of a society - i.e. the linguistic environment. By language policies, we mean any public policy with implications for language use, acquisition and status, including policies intended to promote multilingualism, mobility and inclusion.

Modifications to the linguistic environment, including but not only those induced by public policies, will usually benefit some individuals and groups, but may also worsen the situation of others, thereby creating linguistic advantages and disadvantages. These are distributive effects, and our work aims both to supply a normative theory of linguistic advantage and disadvantage itself and to establish how it ought to be distributed. The resulting normative principles can be used to assess both the effects of language policies and existing social arrangements, thereby helping policymakers to reach normatively justified conclusions about future policy goals and priorities.



### (3) IDENTIFYING, MEASURING AND COMPARING LINGUISTIC (DIS)ADVANTAGES

Linguistic disadvantages are social disadvantages that are at least partially explained by the degree of 'fit' between a person's language skills and the languages spoken and valued in their society. Someone can experience a linguistic disadvantage without labelling it as such, as when the members of a given social class are disadvantaged because employers increasingly demand language skills that they, on average, are less likely to have. Often, however, people are acutely aware of their linguistic disadvantages, as when migrants seek additional language learning opportunities or when minorities complain about the inadequate provision of public services in their language.

Some intuitive ways to identify and measure linguistic disadvantages are unsatisfactory. For example, an approach that is implicit in some policy documents and academic work is to say that one person is disadvantaged relative to another if they can communicate with fewer people. We believe that focussing on communicative opportunities is often misleading in mobile societies, since someone might have adequate opportunities for personal development, and thus not be disadvantaged, despite having relatively few communicative opportunities. An alternative approach can be found in welfare economics, which says that one person is disadvantaged relative to another if, for linguistic reasons, fewer of their preferences are satisfied. Thus, someone might qualify as linguistically disadvantaged, relative to another person, if for linguistic reasons they are unable to secure satisfactory work in their preferred field of employment, and regardless of their communicative opportunities. However, this model too may be misleading, if people limit their preferences in light of their circumstances, say if someone who cannot speak the locally dominant language is content with limited employment prospects.

For public policy purposes, it may be preferable to instead compare people according their ability to access an objective or socially agreed upon list of valued resources or outcomes. One possibility is to say that one person is linguistically disadvantaged relative to another if, for linguistic reasons, they have access to fewer resources. This model can be applied by examining which public services are provided in different languages and what kinds of incomes are available depending on a person's language skills. Alternatively, instead of asking about what a person has, we could instead ask what they are able to do and be, such as whether someone can achieve good health or have control over their own environment. According to this model, linguistic disadvantage arises because a person, for linguistic reasons, lacks the capability, or the effective freedom, to achieve socially valued outcomes. Although all four models have their merits, we believe that the final approach is the most promising when it comes to understanding the distinctive challenges faced by mobile citizens and societies.

| Model                       | Advantages   | Disadvantages   |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Communicative Opportunities | Based on a widely shared intuition, hence broadly accepted. Easy to apply.                                   | Sometimes counterintuitive.   |
| Preference Satisfaction     | Based on a widely shared intuition, hence broadly accepted. Powerful moral justification.                    | Sometimes counterintuitive results, as in the case of adaptive preferences.             |
| Resource Access             | Compares individuals and groups according to identical and publicly available criteria.                      | Difficult to reach agreement about the relative significance of different resources.    |
| Capabilities Approach       | Compares individuals and groups according to identical, morally significant and publicly available criteria. | Difficult to reach agreement about the relative significance of different capabilities. |

### (4) JUSTIFYING LANGUAGE POLICIES IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Different theories of social justice deliver different recommendations about the distribution of linguistic advantages and disadvantages. To explore how language policies can be normatively justifiable in light of continuing disagreement about principles of social justice we selected four prominent theories of justice and identified their implications for the distribution of linguistic advantages and disadvantages. These are identified in the accompanying box. As the example discussed there suggests, we should often expect citizens and policy makers to disagree about which principles of social justice to apply when considering language policies. Such disagreement is not irrational, but instead arises from the fact that normative judgments require a wide range of complex and potentially conflicting evidence and ideas to be applied.

Morality and prudence both direct us to find common ground amongst different theories, since only this will provide the basis for feasible, stable and morally justifiable language policies in complex societies. Consequently, in our work we have identified three ways in which convergence amongst different normative theories might be achieved.

(1) Different theories can agree on the same policy for different reasons.

(2) A policy that is optimal for one theory might also be an acceptable 'second-best' for another, if it is an improvement on the status quo.

(3) A theory might contain no reasons to favour a given policy but also no reasons to reject it.

#### DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE AND LANGUAGE POLICY

**Utilitarianism** requires aggregate welfare to be maximised.

**Egalitarianism** requires some or all linguistic inequalities to be eliminated.

**Prioritarianism** insists that the welfare of the least advantaged be promoted.

**Sufficientarianism** requires no one to fall beneath a minimal welfare threshold.

Different theories suggest different recommendations about language policy problems. For example, consider the European Union's policy of recognising 24 official languages. **Utilitarianism** recommends reducing the number of official languages if translation and other operational savings outweigh the associated adoption costs experienced by those who must learn a new language. Although it is more efficient to require fewer people to invest in language learning, utilitarianism is indifferent about how this burden is distributed. Meanwhile, **egalitarianism** is not indifferent about this, and instead requires the costs of supplementary language learning be socialised, for instance through public subsidies. In addition, some egalitarians also recommend equalising language recognition, so that all languages with enough speakers be officially recognised. This might require withholding recognition from less widely spoken languages. Contrastingly, **prioritarians** have distinctive reasons to oppose withholding recognition from languages spoken by less advantaged Europeans, even if doing so promotes overall utility, since some symbolic and democratic costs cannot be compensated. Finally, **sufficientarians** must also reject withholding recognition from certain languages if it would reduce their speakers beneath a social minimum.

### (5) CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting on the various recommendations suggested by different theories of social justice is valuable when considering language policies, since it brings to the fore important considerations that might otherwise be neglected. Notwithstanding this, language policies in mobile and inclusive societies will need to gain the support of people who disagree about what justice requires. There is often considerable scope for finding common ground, even when theories appear to make competing policy demands. Furthermore, when common ground cannot be found, advocates of each of the theories will often have strong 'internal' reasons that might be sufficient to motivate compromise, for instance based on concerns with stability or public deliberation.



# MIME

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