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Multilingual Deliberative Democracy

A Theoretical Reflection on the Promise of Multilingualism for Deliberative Democracy

In recent years, there has been an increase in research on deliberative democracy to explore how deliberative practices may efficiently exist under varying conditions. In most cases, the literature has focused on divided societies, but very little research has been done to address the question of "what if this divide is linguistic". Kymlicka argues that "democratic politics is politics in the vernacular"[1], leading to the question of whether democratic politics is possible in multilingual societies.[2] Patten, among others, claims that linguistic diversity might seriously impede effective deliberative democracy.[3] After all, deliberation requires a certain amount of trust and mutual understanding.

Deliberative democracy does not arrive at collective decisions by merely aggregating citizens' desires. Instead, by means of deliberation, citizens are involved in decision-making leading to collectively acceptable decisions, even among diverse citizens[4], hence increasing the legitimacy of decisions taken. This conception of deliberative democracy is built on the notion that all perspectives and voices of society should be considered. As such, it carries significant political merits due to its capacity to promote coherence and unity, also within (linguistically) diverse societies.[5]

An interesting paradox thus emerges. Whilst deliberative democracy is believed to overcome polarisation and be suitable for multilingual societies, most conceptions of deliberative democracy assume these societies have a common language. The assumption that linguistic homogeneity is necessary for effective deliber-

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ation is a significant gap in the theory of deliberative democracy. In response, this article aims to push the frontiers of deliberative democracy by reflecting on the interplay between deliberative democracy and multilingualism.

Deliberative Democracy and Multilingualism

The importance attached to linguistic homogeneity when considering deliberative democracy starts with Habermas. Years later, this notion still lives on: "linguistic diversity can be a serious barrier to the full flourishing of this informal dimension of democracy".[6] Others even claim that "one who accepts deliberative democracy must reject multilingualism".[7]

Nonetheless, there are several reasons why one should refute the prerequisite of a common language when considering deliberative democracy. According to Kymlicka "the average citizen only feels comfortable debating political issues in their own tongue".[8] Hence, genuine public participation is believed to only be possible within linguistic nations. However, the statement can also be used to claim the opposite: if the wish is to develop a representative democratic practice that involves all citizens and ensures their full participation, deliberative democracy must take into consideration arguments and opinions in all vernaculars of the society.

Such an argument is supported by Young.[9] Although she does not directly talk about language when she claims that "the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they

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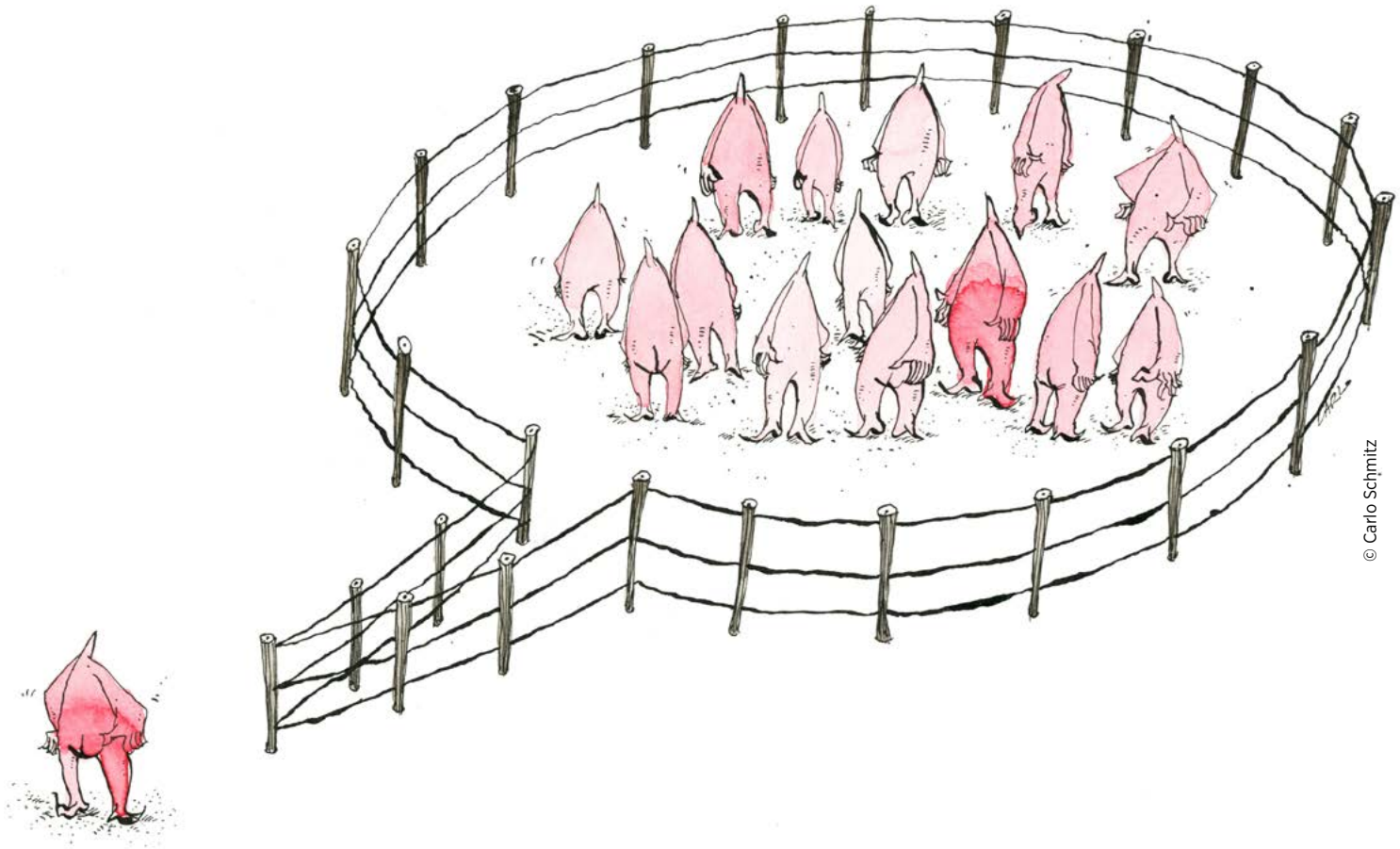
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stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other"[10], it is obvious how this is also applicable to language. Young[11] develops this argument further in the formulation of her communicative democracy theory, a format that is argued to be more inclusive and tolerant of differences than the deliberative theory. According to Young's framework, a monolingual approach in a multilingual setting is not just an exclusionary practice but also an oppressive one.

Besides Young, several scholars highlight the importance of embracing diversity for democracy since it assures inclusivity.[12] Kymlicka and Patten argue that instituting a single common language is by many perceived as "inherently exclusionary and unjust"[13], which might result in conflict endangering future dialogue. Caluwaerts and Ugarizza[14] claim that based on the "diversity trumps ability"-theorem[15], "a diverse group of problem solvers, who are not necessarily the most able, will outperform a homogeneous group of the best problem solvers".[16] Patten[17] explicitly

claims that people's communication will benefit from the use of multiple languages as it increases the accessibility to citizens who might lack competencies in the dominant state language. The inclusion of multilingualism in a democratic society hence seems to be a prerequisite, more than the need for a common language is.

Embracing Linguistic Diversity

Combining theory and practice offers several possibilities for the reconciliation of multilingualism and deliberative democracy, supporting the claim that "deliberative democracy can be compatible with linguistic pluralism".[18]

Translating linguistic diversity

Following Patten, so long as "mediators and go-betweens are able, through personal bilingualism, or reliance on translators and interpreters, to bridge any linguistic divide that they encounter, a common public language is not necessary for deliberative democracy".[19] This method has

been put into practice by the EU who, at the hand of this method, manages the 24 official languages of its supranational entity.[20]

Fiskin[21] analysed Tomorrow's Europe, Europe's first transnational deliberative poll, which convened 362 randomly selected citizens for a weekend. The project showed that multilingualism and deliberation go hand in hand when supported by translation. Aside from the EU, Fiskin also considered the example of various Texas projects, where Spanish-speaking participants were provided with headphones, also enabling multilingual deliberation.

Taking the example of Europolis, a deliberative polity-making project, Fiket provides an answer to "the question of whether citizens are able to interact and debate across languages".[22] His analysis proved that people are indeed able to interact and debate across languages. The participants were divided into small groups, each group consisting of two or three languages. A moderator was present

to facilitate the workings of that group and translation was provided, "thus allowing verbal exchange in the participants' mother tongue".[23]

Doerr[24] compares deliberative practices in the multilingual European social forum (hereafter ESF) preparatory meetings with those in monolingual national social forum meetings, concluding that multilingualism does not affect the quality of deliberation. The ESF has a wide reliance on simultaneous translation, which ensures the inclusion of all. Doerr's studies "suggest that translation could be a way to think about difference not as a hindrance but as a resource for democracy".[25]

This straightforward solution to multilingual deliberation is, however, not without its critics. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps[26] claim that although translation certainly benefits the relationship between multilingualism and deliberation, they agree with O'Leary that "deliberation takes place in languages, dialects, accents, and ethnically toned voices [so] that it is not possible to create 'ideal speech situations'"[27]. In other words, linguistic pluralism is likely to highlight the underlying political conflict.[28] Addis[29], on the other hand, questions its applicability in real-world deliberative democracy, as translation takes up time, slowing down the process, and resources – both in terms of capital and personnel.[30] This method is likely to become more and more complicated to pursue the more languages exist within the political community.

State investment to decrease linguistic diversity

A second method to facilitate deliberation in a multilingual context is for linguistically plural societies to invest in individual multilingualism. In practice, this could be achieved by educational programmes. The aim is to make citizens multilingual, i.e. the intention is for all citizens to speak or in any case be able to comprehend proposals brought forward in any of the languages used in the public sphere. Such a method has been used by the Canadian federal state to unite the French and English linguistic communities.

Addis[31] perceives state investment as an option for nations that have a limited number of languages within their borders. This situation is, however, not very realistic. It would not only require a tremendous amount of time and resources but also expects all citizens to have excellent learning and language capabilities, which is most likely not the case. It would also be difficult to convince speakers of the majority language to learn a minority language that has little value in their daily lives.

Multiplication to minimise linguistic diversity

Based on Fraser's notion of multiple public spheres, Addis[32] developed the framework of linguistic federalism: i.e. the establishment of multiple public spheres. Each linguistic community should first and primarily deliberate in their linguis-

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tic public sphere. To ensure the building of bridges between the different communities, there would be an overarching public sphere characterised by a common language. It would make the participation of minority and/or marginalised groups significantly easier and allow for increased genuine deliberation, strengthening the democratic nature of the public sphere.

The method developed by Addis shares numerous similarities with Patten's[33] territoriality principle of multilingualism: at the federal level, the state is characterised by bi- or multilingualism, whilst the regional level is monolingual. In addition, Addis' theoretical framework can to a certain extent also be integrated into Habermas' conception of deliberative democracy. Habermas argues that "the integrative force of 'solidarity' [...] should develop through widely expanded and differentiated public spheres as well as through legally institutionalised

procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making".[34] Although he asserts that these differentiated publics should all be integrated into a wider, overarching public sphere, it is clear from this statement that it is possible to find support for multiple spheres in Habermas' theory.

The pitfall in Addis' method is his failure to answer one of the first questions he asks in his introduction: "How would a theory of deliberative democracy resolve a contest when that contest is over the very means of deliberation?".[35] It seems likely that the theory proposed by Addis is only realisable in states where linguistic diversity is territorially characterised, in addition to an accepted common language, and a strong link between the spheres.

Reconsidering deliberative democracy

A further method to incorporate multilingualism is to reconceptualise the theory of deliberative democracy. The biggest share of literature on language and democracy considers language to be a communication tool, hence the focus on a common language to create a shared understanding between individuals.[36] But what if one were to turn this definition on its head and instead of focusing on the common language, move the attention towards the notion of a shared understanding.

Such a proposition fits with Archibugi's claim that "an effort to understand each other is most important".[37] Shabani likewise believes that the end goal should not be "to promote linguistic homogeneity but to serve the communicative goal of political deliberation".[38] Whilst Patten points out that "most deliberative democrats would not advocate such a demanding ideal [linguistic homogeneity] of citizen deliberation".[39]

The Europolis deliberative polling experiment has shown that deliberation based on a mutual understanding is possible.[40] During the experiment, the participants were reminded to speak slowly to not only facilitate translation but also mutual understanding. The research concluded that "the higher listening requirements of the plurilingual setting might thus have worked positively for the deliberative

quality".[41] Such a conclusion corresponds to the finding that listening is a key function to achieve inclusive deliberation.[42]

Lingua franca

The fifth method is the creation or institution of a lingua franca. Van Parijs[43] proposes to adopt a lingua franca to ensure linguistic justice and to foster democratic stability.[44] Such an argument is reiterated by cosmopolitan deliberative democrats who also promote the use of "a lingua franca as a more desirable model than multilingual democracy".[45] Those in favour of a lingua franca believe that it saves resources, makes it easier, and faster, to reach decisions, and most importantly improves democratic deliberation.

Others believe that multilingualism is a strength that should not be eroded by a lingua franca. For Doerr[46], multilingualism goes hand in hand with inclusivity and ensures that all voices are heard in the deliberation. According to Nanz[47], the problem with introducing a lingua franca is that it stems from the assumption that linguistic difference endangers democratic deliberation, which is not the case as the above analysis had shown.

Discussion: Multilingual Deliberative Democracy in Luxembourg

This text argues that multilingualism can and should be integrated into the theory of deliberative democracy. Such a finding is significant as multilingualism has become an indispensable part of the majority of – if not all – political societies. There is hence a high demand for processes such as deliberative democracy to function in a multilingual context. Luxembourg serves as a perfect example of a country officially and inherently characterised by multilingualism, finding a way to incorporate multilingual deliberative democracy. In the last two years, Luxembourg has witnessed two such processes at the national level: the *Biergerkommitee* and the *Klima Biergerrot*.

Early 2021, the Ministry and the Minister of Energy and Spatial Planning launched a citizens' committee, the *Biergerkommitee*, as part of the larger consultation entitled *Luxembourg in Transition*. The *Biergerkommitee* aimed to provide an answer to the question of how the territory of Luxembourg and its border regions can achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The assembled group of 30 participants was chosen to best reflect the diversity of Luxembourg in terms of age, gender, level of education, professional background, and country of origin – including cross-border commuters.

In keeping with Luxembourg's multilingualism, the participants were free to speak one of Luxembourg's three national languages. The participants had to have a basic command of Luxembourgish, French and German as the organisers believed that such a requirement would make it possible to dispense with translation and facilitate deliberation. Although it can be claimed that the prerequisite of having a
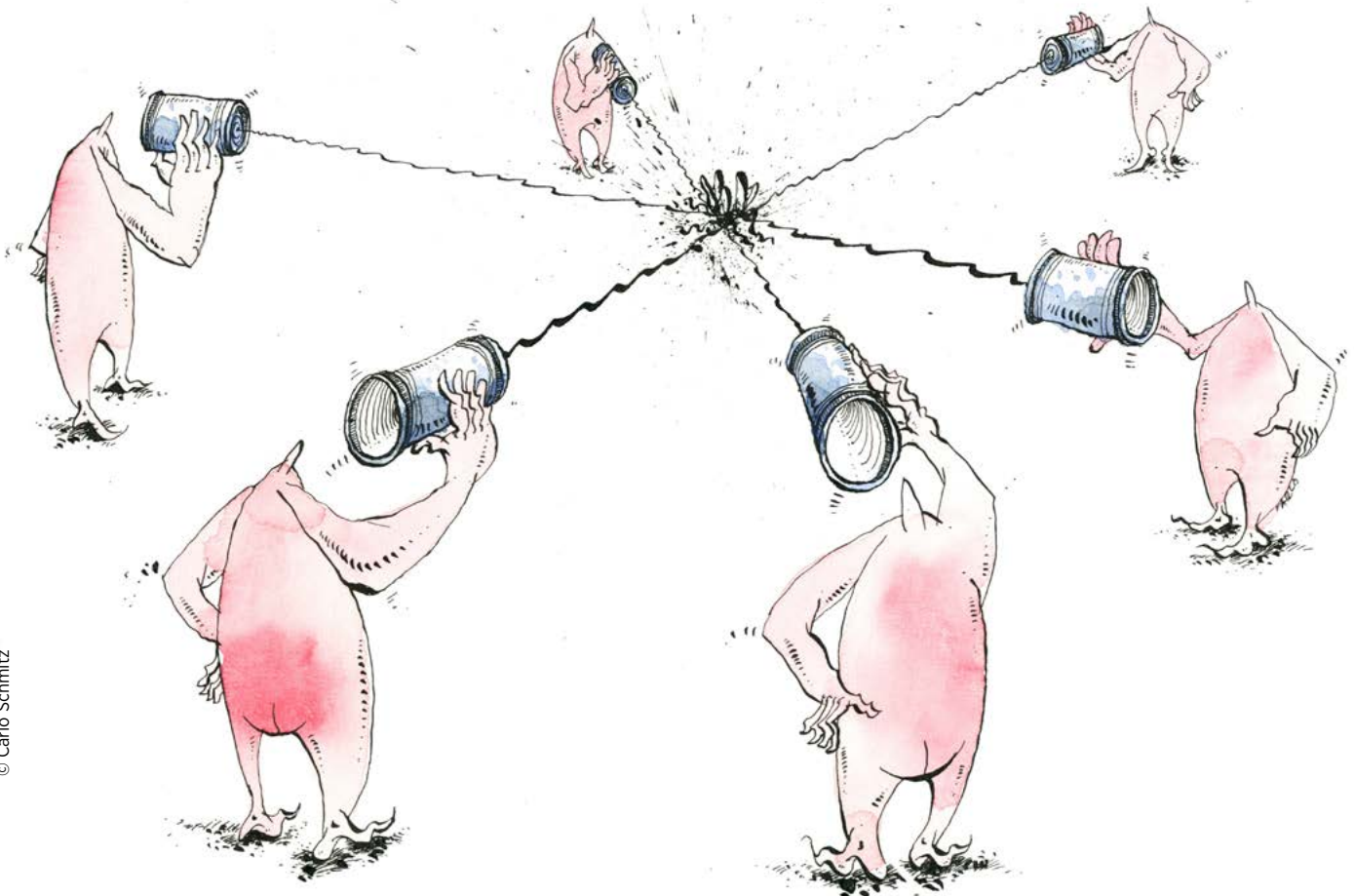
passive knowledge impacts or even minimises the representation of the participants and consequently the process, the opposite seems to be the case for a country such as Luxembourg. In fact, multilingualism will be closely tied to the core of deliberation in cases where a country is officially multilingual, which is the case for Luxembourg and the *Biergerkommitee*.

The *Biergerkommitee* can be classified as a deliberative practice reconceptualised based on a shared understanding rather than a common language. In that regard, the decision was made to alternate between the three languages and let the participants decide in which language to communicate. Like the Luxembourgish population (or at least the majority), the *Biergerkommitee's* members are used to practicing code-switching on a daily or regular basis, which can be said to facilitate deliberative democracy based on a shared understanding.

By the end of 2021, Prime Minister Xavier Bettel announced a second citizens' committee: the *Klima Biergerrot,* the first of its kind in Luxembourg in terms of size. The *Klima Biergerrot* was launched early 2022, almost exactly a year after the *Biergerkommitee*. The selected 100 citizens – also chosen to best represent Luxembourg's society , including cross-border workers – are divided into 60 effective members and 40 substitute members. The actual work of the *Klima Biergerrot* is expected to last until mid-2022. The aim is to submit proposals by the summer break for what Luxembourg can do in its climate policy beyond what is already in the national energy and climate plan (i.e. PNEC).

Whilst the *Klima Biergerrot* also functions in a multilingual manner, it nevertheless differs from the *Biergerkommitee*. Instead of Luxembourg's three official languages, the *Biergerrot's* members are free to communicate in Luxembourgish, French and English. German is not part of the citizens' committee, although it is from time to time spoken by the participants. Yet, there was no particular prerequisite to have a basic command in all three languages because there is simultaneous translation available. The members of the *Klima Biergerrot* deliberate both

in a plenary group and in smaller focus groups. Simultaneous translation is only available during the plenary meetings; from Luxembourgish to French and from Luxembourgish to English – or vice versa. For the meetings in the focus groups, the organisation chose to divide the participants based on their language abilities. This resulted in two Luxembourgish focus groups, one French focus group, and one English focus group. By placing the members in language groups, there is (little to) no need for translation. In case there is translation needed, this is handled in a similar manner as in the *Biergerkommitee:* either the multilingual moderators translate, or the participants translate, or the group deliberates on the basis of a shared understanding.

For deliberative democracy to make good on its promise to include everyone and be a representative democratic system, it needs to accept multilingualism.

The *Klima Biergerrot* can thus best be defined as a deliberative practices integrating multilingualism at the hand of translation. When the participants meet in their focus groups, the deliberative practice does, however, not function by way of translation but rather a common language and to a certain extent, a shared understanding. Since the *Klima Biergerrot* is still on-going, we will have to wait for the process to have ended to draw conclusions about its multilingual characer. In addition, a comparison can then be made between the *Biergerkommitee* and the *Klima Biergerrot*.

Conclusion

The above analysis has highlighted the beneficial nature of deliberation for multilingual societies; for deliberative democracy to make good on its promise to include everyone and be a representative democratic system, it needs to accept multilingualism. The incorporation of multilingualism is likely to increase participation, strengthen representation

and inclusivity, which benefits the overall democratic process. Such findings are particularly significant for officially multilingual countries, such as Luxembourg, where the policies and practices for deliberative democracy should match with the existing language policies.

With regards to accepting multilingualism into the theory of deliberative democracy, five practices have emerged: translation, education, multiple public spheres, a reconceptualisation of deliberative democracy, and a lingua franca. When considering which of these practices might hold the most promise, it seems to be translation and a reconceptualisation of deliberative democracy based on a shared understanding, or even a combination of the two. Additionally, one could consider the role technology might play in ensuring translation and creating a shared understanding, maybe even minimising the need for ideal speech situations.

This research paper has shown that the above solutions, although they have their merit, seem to point to a bias in the literature; namely, there is a tendency to see multilingualism as a problem that needs fixing when it comes to integrating it with deliberative democracy. This article does not refute the claim that it is indeed "a condition that need(ed) to be addressed"[48], but also argues that to properly scrutinise multilingual deliberative processes more attention is needed when it comes to measuring such practices. One next step could be to develop a matrix to measure multilingual deliberative democracy and test it empirically. ◆

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