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Towards Multilingual Deliberative Democracy: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, I offer a theoretical and explorative overview of the relationship between deliberative democracy and multilingualism to claim that multilingualism is an asset for deliberative democracy. I argue that the traditional approaches to deliberative democracy have often overlooked the importance of linguistic diversity, partially due to the dominant narrative of the prerequisite of a common language for – deliberative – democracy. This paper examines why it is worthwhile to reconcile democratic deliberation and multilingualism, exploring the benefits and challenges of integrating linguistic pluralism into deliberative democracy. By unpacking the positive impacts of embracing multilingualism and providing insights into suggestive possibilities on how deliberative mini-publics can best accommodate multilingualism, I advocate for a more robust and inclusive deliberative democratic framework.

KEYWORDS

Multilingual accommodation;
Deliberative democracy;
Linguistic pluralism;
Multilingual deliberation;
Deliberative mini-publics

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in – the implementation of – new types of citizen participation around the globe (Scarrow, 2001; Smith, 2009). The deliberative turn, both in theory and practice, has increased the importance of dialogues, shifting the focus from a vote-based to a conversation-based model of democracy (Chambers, 2003). Deliberative democracy does not simply aggregate citizens' desires to reach collective decisions; instead, citizens engage in dialogue, understanding and respecting all perspectives, even if they challenge generally accepted beliefs and values. This conception of democracy builds on the notion that all voices of society are considered and valued (Dryzek, 2009). In other words, the effectiveness of deliberative processes is enhanced by allocating resources to promote and facilitate the discursive participation of a broader segment of society.

The benefits and drawbacks of deliberative democracy have been extensively studied and discussed in the literature (Curato et al., 2017; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Elstub &

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McLaverly, 2014; Grönlund et al., 2014; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). Equally, there has been a significant interest in researching deliberative democracy to explore how deliberative practices may efficiently exist under varying conditions and how those conditions might affect the quality of the deliberative process (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2014; Grönlund et al., 2014). However, when it comes to language, particularly multilingualism, the literature lacks a clear answer. The topic of multilingualism has received its fair share of attention in the literature on liberal representative democracy (De Schutter & Robichaud, 2016; Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Patten, 2009; 2014; Van Parijs, 2011). However, this democratic theorising is limited in the context of deliberative forms of democracy (Bonotti & Stojanovic, 2022; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Schmidt, 2014). Instead, much deliberative theorising tends to operate on idealised premises concerning language, which do not reflect the actual communicative realities (Peled & Bonotti, 2019).

Given the centrality of language to the deliberative democratic model¹, it is surprising that there is little substantive systemic consideration given to the question of multilingualism. Not less because there is an increasing awareness of what Schmidt (2014) has termed ‘ontological multilingualism’, referring to ‘the fundamental reality that virtually all contemporary nation-states have multiple language groups among their citizens’ (p. 396). According to LoBianco (2014), it is easy to forget that multilingualism has been the norm throughout history while national monolingualism is a relatively recent development. Numerous other authors reiterate the sentiment that despite the multilingual reality, a monolingual ideology reigns (Doerr, 2012; Pym, 2013; Trudgill, 2000). I argue that such sentiments also hold for deliberative democracy.

Notwithstanding the importance and ever-present nature of multilingualism, our understanding of the relationship between multilingualism and deliberative democracy remains thin. Embracing multilingualism then becomes a fundamental step toward creating a more robust deliberative democratic framework. Whereas language rights and policy are important elements in the ongoing debate concerning multilingualism, the language question must be approached independently. My aim is twofold. First, to provide a framework for considering multilingualism in the theory of deliberative democracy. Second, moving beyond theory, I explore the practical reconciliation between multilingualism and deliberative democracy by focusing on deliberative mini-publics (DMPs). I deal with multilingualism in the general sense of the word; namely, the use of multiple languages in society. To that end, multilingual deliberation is a complex and varied practice that can occur in official and non-official² national multilingual contexts, as well as on the transnational and global levels. This article does not delve into these different contexts. Instead, it analyzes the challenges and opportunities of multilingual democratic deliberation in a broad sense.

The relationship between deliberative democracy and linguistic pluralism is an unsettled question that requires further exploration and examination. Beginning from this foundational position, the present article first addresses the gap in the literature. Numerous democratic theorists have adopted a linguistically homogenous narrative, which they assume is best for – deliberative – democracy. However, I argue that this assumption needs to be challenged to fully reap the benefits of deliberative democracy. I explore the challenges and benefits of combining deliberative democracy with multilingualism, finding that the need to reconcile multilingualism is a necessity for democratic

deliberation. I then analyze five methods to accommodate multilingualism. Given the breadth of deliberative democracy, I specifically examine how multilingualism can be integrated into deliberative consultative processes in a controlled space (i.e. often referred to as deliberative mini-publics). DMPs have been selected as a specific focal point for investigating the interplay between multilingualism and deliberative democracy due to their role as mechanisms designed to facilitate deliberative democracy in practice. The aim is not to provide a one-size-fits-all method for multilingual deliberative democracy nor multilingual DMPs. Instead, I offer a, theoretical, overview of the underexplored relationship between multilingualism and deliberative democracy. By examining both the theoretical foundations and practical implementations, this article seeks to provide a holistic view of how multilingual deliberative democracy functions, with DMPs serving as crucial mechanisms. The central argument of this article is that the engagement between deliberative democracy and multilingualism is necessary and worth the effort.

The (UN)Spoken Prerequisite of a Single Common Language

The assumption that democracy requires a single language is not new. The idea dates to the ancient Greeks who believed that non-Greek speakers were barbarians and incapable but also forbidden from partaking in the Athenian democratic political scene. Many authors have since highlighted the potential problems that language barriers (might) cause for democracy (Barry, 2000; Tan, 2017). John Stuart Mill expressed his view over 160 years ago that a shared public opinion cannot exist if citizens ‘read and speak different languages’ (Mill, 1998 [1861], p. 428). The concept of linguistic pluralism is seen as a hindrance to democracy because it is regarded as complicating the establishment of a public sphere, perceived as a necessary condition for democracy. This understanding of language and democracy views language as a mere instrument for communication, in alignment with the instrumentalist theory of language, as opposed to the constitutive view that sees language as intrinsically tied to one’s identity (Bauman & Briggs, 2000).

When it comes to deliberative democracy in particular, Habermas’ writing acted as a catalyst for the interest in deliberative democracy since the mid-1990s (Rosenberg, 2007; Valadez, 2001). Habermas’ work, heavily influenced by the philosophy of language, perceives communication to be indispensable as deliberative processes are built through bargaining processes and argumentation. Habermas places importance on the belief that everyone in a political community must share a method of communication; what brings individuals together is ‘the linguistic bond that holds together each communication community’ (Habermas, 1998, p. 306).

Whilst Habermas did not claim that multilingual political dialogue and democracy are unthinkable (1996a, 1996b, 2005, 2008; Kantner, 2004; Nanz, 2006), theorists such as Ipperciel (2007) have concluded that ‘there is no democracy without communication in a public sphere,’ and that ‘there can be actual communication only in a common language’ (p. 400). Those adhering to the need for a common language believe that ‘linguistic diversity can be a serious barrier to the full flourishing of this informal dimension of democracy’ (Patten, 2007, p. 24). Some even go as far as to argue that ‘one who accepts deliberative democracy must reject multilingualism’ (Addis, 2007, p. 129). In most

conceptions of deliberative democracy, multilingualism is then treated as an obstacle to democracy.

More recently, there has been a shift towards newer conceptualizations of deliberation, aiming to portray more realistic models of deliberative democracy and thereby moving away from ideal speech situations (see Bächtiger et al., 2010). Newer approaches suggest expanding the modes of communication in deliberation to include, among others, storytelling, reciprocity, respect, and humour (Dahlberg, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000). Mendonça et al. (2022) challenge the traditional understanding of deliberative democracy and its reliance on verbal communication, by highlighting its visual, sonic, and physical dimensions. Such non-verbal dimensions of deliberation ‘can convey meaning independently of the verbal dimension’, thereby promoting inclusion (p. 167). Democratic innovations like playgrounds and ateliers (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021) are likewise promising avenues for accessible and inclusive participation. Yet, despite the shift away from rational and linguistic communication as the sole means of deliberation, multilingualism has received limited attention in these newer strands of deliberative democracy. Tellingly, there is no reference to multilingualism, linguistic pluralism, or linguistic diversity in *A Systemic Approach to Deliberation* (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012) nor in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

There seems to be a long-living presumption, partially assumed to be grounded in Habermas’ version of deliberative democracy, portraying a common language as a prerequisite to reaping the benefits of such a democratic model. The presumption that a common language is necessary for deliberative democracy is, however, not unique to this model but rather reflects a tendency to naturalise monolingualism (see Blackledge, 2000 on monolingual ideologies in multilingual states) and view multilingualism as a deviation from the norm (Beardsmore, 2003). Put differently, linguistic diversity is often perceived as an issue that can only be solved by decreasing the number of languages (Liddicoat, 2023).

However, following LoBianco (2014) it is important to remember that multilingualism has been the norm throughout history, whereas national monolingualism is a relatively recent development. Van Els (2005) focuses on the European Union (EU), arguing that ‘all the member states display a plurality of languages’ (p. 268). More precisely, certain countries in the EU have more than one official language such as Finland, Ireland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Additionally, some countries have one or more ‘additional autochthonous languages’ (p. 265), such as Frisian in the Netherlands and Germany. Migration is also contributing to, the growth of, multilingualism in the EU. Globally, multilingualism’s vitality has increased due to factors such as globalisation, including migration and settlement (Valentine et al., 2008). Hence, multilingualism is a particularly salient issue that deserves attention.

Integrating Multilingualism: Challenges and Chances

In a critique of the virtual ignorance of multilingualism in deliberative theory, I claim that deliberative democracy needs to embrace multilingualism.

Following Phillipson (1992, 2012) language can mark an individual as the other and result in being rendered invisible in the public sphere. Schieffelin and Doucet (1998)

argue, in a similar vein, that language ideologies often go hand in hand with images of ‘self/other’ or ‘us/them’. Put differently, language can promote equality and inequality, as it gives or denies access to power (Mamadouh, 1999). In Young’s (1990) work on oppression and exclusion, she criticises a monolingual public sphere in a multilingual society. 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 stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other’ (Young, 1990, pp. 58–9), her statement is nevertheless equally significant to language. Kymlicka and Patten (2003), when considering multilingual representative democracy, likewise claim that instituting a single common language is perceived as ‘inherently exclusionary and unjust’ (p. 16), which can result in conflict and create or increase a divide between the population, endangering future dialogue. What this shows is that any theory, or practice, dealing with language, and multilingualism, must do so carefully.

A related obstacle circles back to what Young (1996) notes in the formulation of her communicative democracy theory, a format of democracy argued to be more inclusive and tolerant of differences than the deliberative theory:

The social power that can prevent people from being equal speakers derives [...] also from an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others. (Young, 1996, p. 122).

Young’s observation concerns intra-linguistic differences but is equally applicable to multilingual societies. Individuals may be hesitant to speak in a language that is not their own since they might not adhere to linguistic and cultural norms as done by native speakers, rendering their argument – possibly – less effective. According to Peled and Bonotti (2019) ‘one’s speech – particularly one’s accent – can have a powerful impact on how one is perceived and treated by others [...] and this impact can have significant implications for democratic life’ (p. 411). To minimise linguistic biases, such as accent bias, they suggest a ‘language-aware democratic theory’ (Peled & Bonotti, 2019, p. 414).

Consequently, a framework for deliberative democracy that embraces multilingualism should address linguistic power balances and strive to provide equitable platforms whilst minimising linguistic power imbalances. This can be achieved by ensuring those involved in the deliberative process are equipped with intercultural communication skills to effectively navigate multilingual interactions, creating an inclusive and respectful environment where linguistic differences are acknowledged. Furthermore, developing language policies that promote linguistic equity ensures that no language is privileged or marginalised in the process. It is also important that all relevant documents and materials related to the process are available in the languages used to ensure equal access to information and resources.

A challenge particularly related to the theory of deliberative democracy, which centres around discourse and understanding, and multilingualism is that the lack of a common language among members of a deliberative process can make communication strenuous and unlikely. In this view, multilingualism poses an obstacle to deliberative democracy, as the success of deliberation and its spillover effects are dependent on individuals’ ability to comprehend each other. According to Fiket et al. (2011), multilingualism raises the bar for deliberation as the threshold for mutual understanding is set very high. Additionally,

Doerr (2012) emphasises that multilingual settings have an increased risk of misunderstandings.

However, research on the interplay between representative democracy and linguistic pluralism shows that individuals are more likely to participate in democracy and do so effectively if they can use their preferred language. Patten (2001), among others, explicitly claims that communication will benefit from using multiple languages in the public sphere as it increases accessibility. Kymlicka (2001) notes that ‘the average citizen only feels comfortable debating political issues in their own tongue’ (p. 213). If we were to turn the sentence around, that would mean that if the average citizen can only debate in their language, they will be excluded from democratic participation and the public sphere if it excludes their language. While multilingualism might raise the bar for deliberation, it offers opportunities to strengthen the accessibility, inclusiveness, and representativeness of the deliberative system.

Although there are challenges to achieving multilingual deliberative democracy, incorporating multilingualism can enhance the most salient advantages of deliberative democracy. The reconciliation of multilingualism with deliberative democracy demonstrates a commitment to cultural sensitivity and recognition of linguistic diversity. By embracing multilingualism, more citizens can contribute to discussions, fostering more robust and participatory democratic practices. Multilingual deliberative democracy promotes inclusivity and empowers individuals to actively participate in deliberations, leading to a more representative and equitable decision-making process. Incorporating multiple languages enriches the deliberative process by allowing for a more comprehensive examination of the issue(s) to be deliberated. Namely, different languages have unique vocabularies and nuances (Trudgill, 2000), thereby enriching the deliberative process, and possibly even leading to more well-rounded and informed outcomes. Consequently, multilingual deliberative processes may encourage trust in and acceptance of the consultation process, ultimately increasing the legitimacy of the outcomes and the overall system. A multilingual approach may also foster understanding and empathy among the participants of a deliberative consultative process, nurturing social cohesion.

Whilst it is important to be conscious of the issues that come with multilingualism, the inclusion of multilingualism in deliberative democracy seems to be a prerequisite, more than the need for a common language. Rather than focusing on a common language, recognising and embracing multilingualism should be a priority in both theory and practice. It should not be viewed as a problem requiring a solution but rather as a reality to be accepted and incorporated.

Embracing Linguistic Diversity

Having discussed the importance of including multilingualism in deliberative democracy, the question of how to embrace linguistic diversity in a deliberative setting must be considered next. I focus on DMPs to consider how the reconciliation between multilingualism and deliberative democracy can occur. Processes such as citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ juries, and deliberative polls offer a small-scale example of how lay citizens engage in deliberative practices (Dryzek, 2010; Fung, 2003). They operate under the assumption that these so-called mini-publics can

have a tangible impact on the larger system. Mini-publics are currently one of the most widespread deliberative practices, implementing the principles of deliberative democracy. Moreover, DMPs are designed to include a diverse range of participants, ensuring representativity, and as multilingualism is one facet of diversity, several DMPs have dealt with and integrated multilingualism. A better understanding of how mini-publics can deal with multilingualism can contribute to the presence of multilingualism at the practical and theoretical levels and will improve our understanding of multilingual deliberative democracy *per se*.

When it comes to promoting multilingualism in DMPs, one must take a thoughtful approach as there is no universal solution for multilingual deliberation. I identify four different scenarios in which we are likely to encounter multilingual consultative processes. First, multilingual deliberations can occur in official multilingual nations like Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, India, and South Africa. In some of these cases, participants may have, at minimum, a passive understanding of the official languages. Second, it can take place on the national, regional, or local level where a majority language coexists with – multiple – minority and/or indigenous languages, as is the case in Asia for example. Third, multilingual deliberation can occur in nations, regions, or even cities, that are legally and/or ideologically monolingual yet linguistically heterogeneous, for example, many of today's major cities, the so-called cosmopolis (Sandercock, 1998) such as New York, Berlin, or London. Fourth, in an increasingly interconnected world addressing global common challenges requires cross-national and thereby cross-linguistic collaboration. Multilingual deliberation can then also occur at the transnational, international, or global level between citizens of different states on issues like climate change, migration, and public health. Although each of these four contexts offers both challenges and opportunities for multilingual deliberation, this article analyzes multilingual deliberation in general, thus without delving deeper into each of these contexts.

Additionally, multilingual deliberation can be hindered or facilitated by three empirical factors. Firstly, the number of languages affects the ease of cost: a lesser number of languages is likely less challenging and costly. Secondly, linguistic proximity between languages can facilitate multilingual deliberation. Thirdly, territorial separation between languages can lead to separate public spheres, resulting in less exposure to other languages and hampering multilingual deliberation (Bonotti & Stojanovic, 2022). It is also worth noting that the past significantly impacts present language situations, thereby impacting multilingual deliberation.

In the following section, I discuss five methods that have been developed to deal with multilingualism and their practical application in DMPs. (Dryzek, 2010; Fung, 2003). The five methods investigated are the following: (1) investing state resources to facilitate and increase individual multilingualism, (2) using a lingua franca, (3) implementing multiple public spheres, one for each language community, with an overarching public sphere, (4) ensuring translation between the various languages used, and (5) reconsidering the core of deliberative democracy theory to reconceptualize a shared language into a shared understanding. By analysing these methods and their intersectionality with DMPs, this article aims to give an overview of several possibilities for the reconciliation between multilingualism and deliberative democracy, providing evidence for the claim that 'deliberative democracy can be compatible with linguistic pluralism' (Addis, 2007, p. 123).

State Investment to Decrease Linguistic Diversity

To promote effective communication in multilingual settings, investing in individual multilingualism at a societal level is a useful approach. This involves the creation and offering of educational programmes that allow individuals to become fluent in each language used in public discourse. The aim is for all citizens to be multilingual, enabling them to at least understand proposals but preferably also be able to communicate effectively in any language used in public discourse. Addis (2007) perceives state investment as a viable option in countries with limited language diversity. He believes that it would be possible for a state that has only two or three languages ‘to make all of them national languages and to require that linguistic regions teach them all as a subject in school so that at the national level there could be institutional bilingualism or trilingualism’ (Addis, 2007, p. 148).

Many countries worldwide have adopted various approaches to language education programmes, including Belgium, Brunei, Canada, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Hawaii, Indonesia, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Nepal, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Spain (for an overview see Abello-Contesse et al., 2013; Adendorff, 1996; Arthur, 1996; Beardsmore, 1993, 1995; Canagarajah, 1995, 1999; Commins, 2003; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2008; Gonzalez, 1996, 1998; Lin, 1996, 1999; Martin, 2003). This has led to the widespread incorporation of such programmes into language policies at the regional and national levels. Due to the varying contexts in which educational experiments and policies have been launched, there is not one fixed method for language education. The range of language education models comprises teaching official languages, minority languages, or foreign languages. Types of bi- or multilingual education include heritage language education, immersion education, dual language programmes, and content and language-integrated learning (Abello-Contesse et al., 2013). Whilst multilingual education policies have been successful in some countries, for other countries it has further complexified the landscape (Horner & Weber, 2008; Kirss et al., 2021; Lasagabaster, 2011; Shohamy, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

The Biergerkomitee Lëtzebuerg 2050 is a multilingual DMP that was organised in Luxembourg in 2021. The consultative process was conducted in the country’s three official languages (Luxembourgish, French, and German) without translation or any other means of facilitating multilingualism. The participants were encouraged to use the language (or languages) that suited them best during the deliberations. Neither participants nor moderators remarked on any issues or struggles with the multilingual aspect of the deliberative consultative process. As Luxembourg heavily invests in its multilingual education system, state investment is likely to have, partially, played a role in enabling multilingual deliberation in the Biergerkomitee (Verhasselt, *Forthcoming*). To that end, it can be qualified as a positive example of state investment facilitating multilingual deliberative democracy.

The practice of language education has shown that bi- and/or multilingual educational programmes and policies are diverse and dependent on the context. Consequently, for language education to be successful, it is crucial to develop language education programmes that are appropriate for the specific context. State investment in multilingualism at the systemic level could have positive outcomes if done correctly. It could then encourage and support multilingual deliberation, albeit in the long run as it is important to note that this type of investment takes time to see results.

Lingua Franca

A lingua franca is a tool of communication, referring to a common language used for communication between people who do not share a mother tongue (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339). The concept is not a new one and has been used in the past, such as Latin in the Roman Empire and by the Roman Catholic Church. However, in some cases, the introduction of a lingua franca has led to the suppression of other languages, such as French in Senegal (Weidl, 2022), or even the extinction of languages, such as the demise of indigenous languages in Uruguay (Bertolotti & Magdalena Coll, 2013). In other instances, a lingua franca has been introduced without erasing languages. In Dagestan, for example, Russian has been introduced top-down as the lingua franca, without erasing the different Dagestania languages (Dobrushina & Kultepina, 2021). Some bottom-up efforts have also been made, such as Sango and Lingala in Africa (Samarin, 1955, 1987). Nowadays, English is widely used as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2015; Phillipson, 2012; Siemund, 2023).

Van Parijs (2004) proposes that a lingua franca can promote linguistic justice and democratic stability (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014). Cosmopolitan deliberative democrats reiterate such an argument, promoting the use of ‘a lingua franca as a more desirable model than multilingual democracy’ (Archibugi, 2005, p. 537). Advocates for a lingua franca believe that it improves democratic deliberation by simplifying communication and decision-making processes, as it saves resources and makes it quicker to reach decisions.

A lingua franca can, however, create or exaggerate linguistic power balances if the lingua franca in question is for some the mother tongue. Giri (2011) takes the example of English as a lingua franca and claims that the predominance of English constitutes a powerful tool for linguistic superiority and may harm linguistic diversity. In addition, the concept of a lingua franca is, nevertheless, often associated with the belief that multilingualism is a threat to – deliberative – democracy. Simply put, the idea behind a lingua franca is that a common language is necessary for effective communication. As per Hülmbauer et al. (2008), a lingua franca rests on the belief that we need to ‘find a common voice in order to bridge language barriers’ (p. 26).

While a lingua franca may offer a solution for dealing with multiple languages, it can also undermine multilingualism by emphasising the importance of a single language. This article, however, argues that we need to move away from the single-common-language-ideology. Therefore, if we want to promote multilingualism in DMPs, relying on a lingua franca may not be the best approach.

Multiplication to Minimize Linguistic Diversity

An alternative approach is linguistic federalism. Based on Fraser’s notion of multiple public spheres, Addis (2007) developed the theory of linguistic federalism. The underlying idea is to establish multiple public spheres to accommodate linguistic diversity, where each linguistic community can first and mainly deliberate in their respective linguistic public sphere. An overarching public sphere, possibly connected by a lingua franca, would link the different communities. This method shares numerous similarities with Patten’s (2003b) territoriality principle of multilingualism, where the state is bi- or multilingual at the federal level, and monolingual at the regional level.

However, there are two issues to consider. First, we need to ensure that information can flow freely between the various public spheres to maintain an effective relationship between the lower and higher levels. Otherwise, it could lead to the isolation of linguistic communities. Second, as put forward by Archibugi (2005), ‘it would certainly infringe all principles of democracy if the various groups were to be defined on the basis of religious, economic, or cultural criteria. So why should we consider the creation of linguistic confines as less atrocious?’ (p. 546). An additional observation is that while the method discussed may work in officially multilingual states or multilingual scenarios where languages are territorially divided, it may not be feasible to implement linguistic federalism in other contexts. However, the main issue with Addis’ method is that his theory fails to address a crucial question posed in his introduction: ‘How would a theory of deliberative democracy resolve a contest when that contest is over the very means of deliberation?’ (Addis, 2007, p. 119). It is unclear who and how the decision should be made on which common language should be used in the overarching public sphere. One solution could be to use a *lingua franca*.

The 2009 European Citizens’ Consultations are one example of a DMP based on linguistic federalism incorporating a *lingua franca*. The then 27 Member States organised national mini-publics where the participants deliberated in the official language of their respective Member States. These national mini-publics were followed by a European summit, bringing together 150 participants from the national consultations. The European summit, characterising the overarching public sphere, used English as a *lingua franca*. Accordingly, the 150 individuals were selected because of their proficiency in English. This led to the exclusion of numerous individuals who, although interested, could not participate because of their limited proficiency in English. Additionally, the process suffered significantly from the loss of information between the different levels (Kies et al., 2013).

Rather than introducing a *lingua franca*, a solution may be to use translators or interpreters to ensure that deliberation can occur between different communities without any linguistic barriers. But the question that arises is, why not use translation right away to bring people together instead of creating separate linguistic entities?

Translating Linguistic Diversity

One of the most straightforward approaches to addressing multilingualism is by using translation services that help facilitate communication across different languages. Following Patten (2003a), 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’ (p. 379). This may explain why translation is the most popular method utilised during multilingual DMPs.

Nevertheless, translation is not without its critics, with some arguing that it can slow down proceedings and require significant resources, both in terms of capital and personnel (Patten, 2003a). Yet, studies have shown that translation can be a valuable tool for promoting multilingualism and deliberative democracy. Doerr (2009, 2012), for example, concludes that translation can help to embrace multilingualism and improve the quality of deliberation. Her studies suggest that ‘translation could be a way to think about difference not as a hindrance but as a resource for democracy in linguistically heterogeneous societies and public spaces, without presupposing a shared language or

lingua franca, nor a national identity’ (Doerr, 2012, p. 1). Doerr additionally highlights that translated deliberative processes benefit from procedural slowness: since the process was not as fast-paced, participants had a chance to better listen to each other, thereby increasing the quality of deliberation.

Additionally, examples such as Europolis, Tomorrow’s Europe, and the Conference on the Future of Europe have demonstrated successful interaction and debate across multiple languages, supported by simultaneous translation. These cases showed that multilingualism and DMPs go hand in hand when supported by translation (Fiket et al., 2011, p. 6; Fishkin, 2011). At the national level, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2018), in their analysis of the Belgian G1000 and its multilingual character, conclude that ‘confrontation between members of different linguistic groups can lead to a respectful, inclusive and rational dialogue’ with simultaneous translation present (p. 96). Also at the local level, projects in Texas have shown that providing translation for Spanish-speaking participants can enable multilingual deliberation (Fishkin, 2011).

One area that deserves attention is the potential of artificial intelligence. That is, technology could play a paramount role in enabling translation in all situations and contexts. If developed properly, artificial intelligence has the potential to assist and facilitate multilingual deliberation, such as automatically translating written and spoken language. According to Cabrera (2022), machine technologies can contribute to a democratic model that emphasises deliberation. Machine translation could be useful for asynchronous online deliberative forums to ensure that written contributions are translated, and ideas can be exchanged more easily. However, current speech-to-speech technologies are not yet able to facilitate ‘intensive, face-to-face deliberation across language barriers undertaken with human interpretation’ (Cabrera, 2022, p. 12; Isernia & Fishkin, 2014). Cabrera (2022) also emphasizes that machine translation would ‘fundamentally be more inclusive than a single lingua franca and/or official monolingualism, given their accessibility and relative ease of use’ (p. 13). I argue that this argument also applies to translation *per se*.

Reconsidering Deliberative Democracy

A theoretical approach to reconcile multilingualism and DMPs is to reconceptualize the theory of deliberative democracy. A sizeable share of the literature focuses on a common language to create shared understanding between individuals. But what if we turn this definition on its head and shift our attention toward a shared understanding instead? This can be achieved through means other than a common language, which although the simplest is not the only possible option. This proposition aligns with Archibugi’s (2005) claim that ‘an effort to understand each other is most important’ (p. 537). Shabani (2004) likewise believes that the end goal should not be ‘to promote linguistic homogeneity but to serve the communicative goal of political deliberation’ (p. 208). Hence, it is important to not overstate how multilingualism ‘impedes the process of democratic deliberation’ (Patten, 2001, p. 703).

Multilingual DMPs based on a shared understanding are likely to be most effective in official multilingual nations where participants have at least a passive understanding of the other language(s). Examples of such nations include Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Luxembourgish Biergerkommittee 2050 is an excellent example of a multilingual deliberative consultative process based on a shared understanding, partially

facilitated by state investment in multilingual education. Participants were required to have a passive knowledge of the country's three official languages: Luxembourgish, French, and German. During discussions, members were free to use the language they were most comfortable with, eliminating the need for translation. This language-neutral environment was appreciated by both participants and moderators, who claimed that the multilingual aspect of the deliberation worked well. Many even argued that the use of multilingualism was a plus (Verhasselt et al., 2024).

However, several factors may impact the effectiveness of multilingual deliberative processes based on shared comprehension. These factors include the number of languages, linguistic proximity, and territoriality. Hence, interpreters/translators can be an added value to facilitate cross-linguistic communication and understanding among participants. The Europolis deliberative polling experiment showed that deliberation based on mutual understanding, coupled with translation, is possible (Fiket et al., 2011). Participants were reminded to speak slowly to ensure comprehension, in addition to facilitating translation. Fiket et al. (2011) conclude that 'the higher listening requirements of the plurilingual setting might thus have worked positively for the deliberative quality' (p. 24). This corresponds with the finding that listening is crucial to achieving inclusive deliberation (Della Porta, 2005; Doerr, 2009, 2012; Young, 1996).

Overall, there is a benefit to a version of deliberative democracy centred on a shared understanding rather than a common language. The more recent models of deliberative democracy: (i) those expanding the modes of communication to include storytelling, reciprocity, respect, and humour (Dahlberg, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000); (ii) those highlighting the importance of visual, sonic, and physical dimensions of democracy (Mendonça et al., 2022); (iii) those focusing on unique deliberative forums like playgrounds and ateliers (Asenbaum & Hanusch, 2021) show promise for reconsidering multilingual deliberative democracy based on a shared understanding by moving away from relying solely on rational and linguistic communication for deliberation.

Conclusion

This article discussed how the reconciliation of deliberative democracy with multilingualism has received only a fraction of the theorising it deserves. The widespread belief that monolingualism is the norm and that multilingualism challenges that norm might explain this shortcoming in the literature. Namely, such a dominant narrative assumes the prerequisite of a common language for – deliberative – democracy, which has led to multilingualism being ignored or undervalued. Yet, the authors who, explicitly, argue for a common language provide little evidence or explanation for why a single common language would be more beneficial than linguistic pluralism nor for why multilingualism would be a hindrance. More recent conceptualizations of deliberative democracy have expanded beyond the ideal speech situation and narrow – verbal – understanding of deliberation, but still do not adequately consider multilingual deliberation. The virtual absence of critical examination of the relationship between multilingualism and deliberative democracy is hence no surprise. However, in a world characterised by linguistic diversity, deliberative democracy should embrace and promote multilingualism.

I have explored the relationship between deliberative democracy and linguistic pluralism in four ways. First, I have analysed how the theory of deliberative democracy considers linguistic diversity, finding that there are significant oversights in this regard. Second, I have considered the theoretical and practical reasons to refute the need for a common language. Third, I have examined the benefits and challenges that are brought about by integrating multilingualism. Finally, I have provided suggestions for a multilingual path forward. This article concludes that multilingualism presents both a challenge and an opportunity for deliberative democracy. Multilingual deliberative democracy offers a promising pathway to enhance inclusivity, participation, and overall democratic efficacy. However, multilingual deliberation is complicated, and it necessitates striking a balance between inclusivity and practicality. By recognising and addressing the potential barriers that multilingualism can create and embracing the richness that multilingualism brings to the table, the potential of multilingual deliberative democracy can be harnessed, and the added value it generates is priceless.

In this article, I additionally sought to answer the question ‘How to embrace linguistic diversity in a deliberative setting’ by focusing on DMPs. I have identified five potential methods to reconcile multilingualism and DMPs. In conclusion, the reconceptualization of deliberative democracy based on a shared understanding can form the foundation for a new operationalisation of deliberative democracy. Depending on the situation (i.e. number of languages, linguistic proximity, and territoriality), (automatic) translation and visual aids can support multilingual deliberation. State investment, i.e. multilingual language education policies, could be beneficial on a systemic level if correctly and successfully implemented. In the longer run, they could contribute to a reconceptualized notion of deliberative democracy, possibly also aided by translation.

In closing, this article argues that multilingual deliberative democracy should not be seen as a problem that needs to be fixed, but rather as a reality that should be embraced. In doing so, this paper defends the enthusiastic multilingual model (Bonotti & Stojanovic, 2022); which asserts that ‘multilingual democratic deliberation is considered desirable for its own sake’ (p. 475). Although multilingualism presents challenges, it is essential and a necessity for more inclusive, informed, and effective deliberative democratic systems. By embracing multilingualism, we can overcome language barriers, enhance democratic legitimacy, and develop innovative practices that value the voices and perspectives of all citizens, regardless of their – linguistic – backgrounds. This article aims to contribute to the development of novel deliberative democratic practices that better respond to the complexities of – modern – societies by advocating for a multilingual deliberative democratic framework. There is, nonetheless, much work that remains to be done in developing and fleshing out the conception of a multilingual understanding of deliberative democracy. Nonetheless, I am hopeful that this article has cleared the way for making it appear a vital and worthwhile endeavour.

Notes

1. The author acknowledges that communication cannot solely be reduced to oral language, with body language also playing a significant role. It is, nevertheless, important to highlight that oral language cannot be entirely replaced by body language, certainly not in deliberative consultative processes.

2. ‘Non-official multilingual contexts’ refers to entities that are legally and/or ideologically monolingual yet linguistically heterogeneous.

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