

Research Projects for Europe

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THE DYLAN Project: “Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity”

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The Project

This paper presents the European research project *Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity* (DYLAN) and its main findings.¹ This project, from the European Union’s Sixth Framework Program, completed in 2011 after five years’ work by nineteen partners from thirteen countries across Europe, offers a fresh look on multilingualism in European institutions, businesses and institutions of higher education.

In this project, our focus was on the interrelationships between actual language practices, people’s representations about multilingualism, their language choices, and the contexts in which they are confronted with linguistic diversity. In order to deepen our understanding of these relationships, we have examined at close range (i) how the very diverse linguistic repertoires of speakers operating in increasingly multilingual environments develop, and (ii) how actors make the best use of their repertoires and adapt them skilfully to different objectives and conditions. Throughout the project, a special emphasis was

1 This was an integrated project from the European Union’s Sixth Framework Program, Priority 7, “Citizens and governance in a knowledge-based society” that included 19 partners from 12 countries: Université de Lausanne, Université de Genève, Universität Basel, Université de Lyon 2, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Freie Universität Berlin, Glasgow Caledonian University, Lancaster University, Université de Paris 3, University of Southern Denmark, University of Cluj-Napoca, University of Helsinki, Université de Strasbourg, Libera Università di Bolzano, University of Ljubljana, Universität Wien, Vrije Universiteit Brussels, and SCIPROM – Scientific Project Management (cf. the project website at <http://www.dylan-project.org> for an overview).

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placed on how organisations actually cope with this diversity. Careful observation of actors' multilingual practices has revealed finely tuned communicational strategies drawing on a wide range of different languages, including national languages, minority languages and *lingue franche*. Understanding these practices, both at the level of their meaning and at the level of their implications, helps to show in what way and under what conditions they are not merely a response to a problem – multilingualism often being primarily construed as such – but an asset in business, political, educational, scientific and economic contexts. In addition, the project explored issues that could not be assigned to any of these terrains, because they straddle the boundaries between them. Three such *transversal issues* have emerged as particularly relevant in the management and practice of communication in multilingual settings. They have provided much of the integrative substance of the project. The approach designed and implemented in the DYLAN project amounts to a reversal of the commonly held view that linguistic diversity is *per se* problematic. This research therefore allowed us to address the fundamental issue of whether (and, if so how), a European knowledge-based society designed to ensure economic competitiveness and social cohesion could develop and blossom despite the fact that, following enlargement, the European Union found itself more linguistically diverse than ever before.

The DYLAN project has adopted a “mixed-methods” approach, collecting and analysing different types of data such as official documents, interviews with agents working at different hierarchical levels, job ads, websites, various features of the linguistic landscape, and tape recordings of multilingual and monolingual interaction in the workplace, in various institutional settings and in teaching in educational institutions. Our analysis showed that the use of multilingual repertoires can constitute a resource for the construction, transmission and use of knowledge, providing various modes of access to information processing, and helping actors retain and classify new information. A *multilingual mode*, encouraged by a policy of multilingualism and linked to an appropriate participatory framework, seems to be one of the conditions for taking full advantage of the multilingual asset.

Main findings in brief

The DYLAN project has used many different approaches to the way in which social actors deal with linguistic diversity. It offers answers to the question of whether, in what ways, and under what specific conditions, linguistic diversity is an asset for institutions, education and business.

The emphasis was mostly placed on the position and strategies of individual actors interacting with each other in specific contexts. This focus allowed to take a close look at how communication operates in practice and in real-world situations. Some research teams have opted for a more macro-level perspective, bringing to light other types of processes, and opening up the possibility of examining how the results regarding micro-level phenomena can apply across specific cases. Therefore, not only does DYLAN deepen our understanding of communication in multilingual contexts *per se*, but it also provides an empirical basis for generalisation. For example, discussions at a macro level can incorporate micro-level knowledge and thus build on a better understanding of the nature of communication in multilingual contexts.

With the benefit of hindsight, seven ideas stand out, and they can be used to propose a synthesis of the project's main findings. They help in the search for ways to achieve a *balance* between different languages in multilingual contexts – a valid concern in a European Union that is justly proud of its diversity. Among the languages to be taken into account in this balancing exercise, a language of wider communication such as English obviously plays an important role owing to its current worldwide influence. At the same time, this evolution presents collective actors, in particular decision-makers from the public or quasi-public sector, with a particular challenge – namely, that of facilitating effective communication in an age of globalisation while preserving linguistic diversity. What our findings suggest, however, is that a useful way for European society to find its way towards this balance is to expand the very notion of balance. Instead of defining it with respect to languages, it can be formulated with respect to the *use* of languages. Putting it differently, the notion of balance between languages may be complemented by that of a balance between monolingualism and multilingualism emphasising complementarity, continuity and integration. The seven ideas which help to flesh out this notion of combined balances, are the following:

1 Overcoming the perception that a single language must always be chosen

In many circumstances in life, we choose to operate within the confines of one identifiable language. In other cases, a message will be translated and conveyed in several languages in parallel. This does not mean, however, that the situations in which we choose to use one language and those in which, in contrast, we explicitly draw on several languages, are radically different from each other. In many cases where the use of a single variety might have been expected, we observe, in fact, the co-presence of a range of different languages. For example,

English and German may be used for laboratory work in a multinational corporation, despite there being widespread social representations according to which English only would be used. This indicates that the choice of languages for communication should be viewed in a more flexible, perhaps somewhat casual way: if communication is what ultimately matters, both in terms of its efficiency and its fairness, there are many situations where it can benefit from allowing languages to mix and combine in speakers' practices. This already occurs in practice, but the practice may become more effective if it is recognised as an intrinsically valid strategy.

2 When apparent monolingualism conceals other languages

Thus, even *prima facie*, strictly monolingual interaction may contain, not far below the surface, elements of multilingual competence, revealed through a series of features, including manifest instances of code-switching and less visible but no less revealing traces of multilingualism, such as syntactic interferences. Consequently, sharply distinguishing "monolingual" from "multilingual" interaction may be a convenient simplification, but a simplification nonetheless, which may constrain our understanding of the actual processes at hand. The general implication, therefore, is the following: let us remain aware of linguistic diversity even in the seemingly least diverse communicational contexts.

Even discourse produced in one language may only be superficially monolingual, in the sense that beneath the outward expression of this discourse, the many mental stages of its elaboration have taken place in another, or possibly many other languages. This layered elaboration probably has particular relevance for scientific and academic discourse, because the development of analytical thought embodied in written or oral productions can proceed differently depending on the linguistic resources exploited in the process. Our findings suggest, however, that it is also applicable to utterances in other communicational contexts, such as interaction within multinational firms or supranational organisations. The (re)discovery of the layers beneath the monolingual glazing may be seen as an exercise in "thick description", as suggested long ago by Geertz (1973) in his approach to the interpretation of cultures. It also reminds us however, that we should beware of appearances. "Thick standardisation" – a notion proposed by Usunier (2010) following the notion Geertz's "thick description" – focuses on the complex dynamics between diversity and standardisation, the presence of the "different" within the homogeneous, and the diversity which exists within uniqueness. From the outset, the use of a standardised form, reflecting the desire to reach a certain threshold of mutual comprehensibility in the broadest sense, must

be understood in full awareness of the potentially deceptive character of standardisation. Deceptive standardisation may sometimes lead to a failure to understand an utterance even when one believes one does. Therefore, the use of a single language (whether English or any other) can create a false impression of shared meaning, when in fact actual meanings may differ and reflect deeper linguistic layers.

3 A range of communication strategies in contexts of linguistic diversity

People move through all kinds of multilingual contexts, and are constantly confronted with a whole range of very diverse interactional situations. Depending on the situation, the most appropriate communicational strategy will not always be the same. They adopt a wide range of strategies, and they do so in an extremely variable, flexible and dynamic way, constantly reassessing and readapting the solutions chosen in the course of an activity. In some cases, the best thing to do is to operate with reference to explicitly differentiated languages. Consider, for example, a job interview where an applicant whose first language is, say, Arabic, needs to convince his potential employer that he has acquired fluency in English and can be entrusted with chairing a high-level scientific workshop with international partners. In this case, “English” has to be used, perhaps even *staged* (in the French sense of *mis en scène* or German *inszeniert*) as distinct from the applicant’s first language. This, however, need not apply to all contexts and language users, including those who need to draw on “English” and other languages. Let us consider the case of a Moroccan scientist working in a research laboratory together with German-speaking and English-speaking colleagues. He may be led to interact with his team in a combination of German, English and French, and this combination may take on a degree of hybridity in which the labelling of utterances as “German”, “English” or “French” may end up having limited relevance.

People use multilingual repertoires as a communicative resource in interaction; moreover, they use this wide range of multilingual strategies in a systematically patterned way, including the strategy of *intercomprehension* in which each participant speaks (or writes) his or her language and understands the language of the partner. What our research suggests is that the communicational processes at hand bank not only on inter-linguistic similarities, but also on the existence and patterned exploitation of language repertoires straddling established languages.

What is more, the relative degree of activation of different components of this repertoire may vary according to the nature and context of interaction. Partners

have to find a trade-off between two competing principles, both of which are necessary components of efficient communication: speakers have to make rapid progress while accepting a degree of opacity (the “progressivity principle”), but at the same time, they must ensure that they understand each other by means of time-consuming reverse movements (repair sequences) and translation (the “intersubjectivity principle”). The former principle is forward-looking and tends to minimise the resources used, whereas the latter is backward-looking and tends to require more of those resources. At work meetings, the former principle is reflected in participants’ focus on the shared activity, allowing them to take approximations in stride (“let it pass”). The latter principle is reflected in repairs and in the use of translation, entailing a return to what has just been said, and hence a degree of redundancy.

4 Two different continua

Thus, interactional situations may be arranged along a continuum, at one end of which we find those situations where maintaining a sharp distinction between languages is the appropriate strategy, and at the other end of which we find situations where these boundaries largely dissolve.

Depending on the issue considered, it can prove useful to recall that this notion of a communicational continuum may be sliced more finely and can apply to two distinct dimensions. The first focuses on the very process of choice of an actor’s linguistic repertoire, and stresses the continuity and complementarity (rather than the opposition) between unilingual and multilingual implementations of this repertoire. This multilingual implementation is, in turn, susceptible to diverging interpretations embodied in distinct sociolinguistic traditions. The second focuses on the linguistic elements used in this process, where two types of situations can be identified and also arranged along a continuum: at one end, we find situations where elements of speech can be unambiguously assigned to one language or another (this, incidentally, may arise in both unilingual and multilingual contexts); at the other end, languages blend into each other to the point where it becomes unconvincing, or artificial, to assign elements of speech (say, a given lexeme) to one or another language; inter-linguistic boundaries become blurred and we could, for example, talk of a “pan-romance” continuum. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of continua allows us to distinguish between code-switching (whether deliberately used for effect, or without any particular calculation) and trans-linguistic marking, in which speakers fall back on what they know better (typically, their L1 or a strong L2) to plug gaps in whatever language they are using.

5 Consistent handling of different manifestations of multilingualism

Multilingualism can mean a great many different things, and it can also, as we have just seen, appear where it was not expected and may be hardly visible. It is also well known that multilingualism may characterise a person, a group of people, an institution in its formal operations (what is often called a *language regime*) or informal workings, or a broader society. Obviously, working on one or another form of multilingualism is not the same. The findings of DYLAN help us, however, to establish common conceptual ground for the consistent handling of multilingualism across its different manifestations. This observation is not without implications, whether for scientific inquiry or policy development, in particular because it provides an essential conceptual tool for connecting micro-level and macro-level analyses of actors' responses to the challenges of linguistic diversity.

6 Reassessing the notion of lingua franca

The term *lingua franca*, perhaps because it is quite loosely mentioned in public debate on multilingualism, provides a good example of a notion which should be reconsidered in greater depth thanks to the findings of DYLAN. Let us return to the distinction made just above between two types of continua, and start by observing that “lingua franca” can be a rather imprecise notion taking on very different meanings depending on the context. Relatedly, the use of a *lingua franca* can drift into monolingualism (and its apparent simplicity), but if the users' language skills in it are less developed, the “lingua franca” will turn out to be a hybrid code.

Many important processes, however, encompass features located upstream or downstream from actual interaction. As part of these processes, users may draw on other languages which feed into their idiolectal form of the *lingua franca*. This may be the case, for example, of a scientist who mainly works in German or Japanese and is presenting research results in English at an international conference. “Lingua franca”, in other words, is not a simple, straightforward category, but may often be an instance of “thick standardisation”, in which the underlying elements, stemming from other languages, inform the visible or audible utterance. Here again, one implication is that standardisation (in the specific sense of actors' gravitating, or even opting for, a given language such as a *lingua franca*) may be deceptive and give rise to illusions regarding the degree to which actors actually understand each other. Communication will be more

reliable if allowance is made for these complex, intrinsically multilingual processes.

7 The multilingual asset

Let us in closing return to a question that has animated the entire research adventure of DYLAN: to what extent and under what conditions can “multilingual solutions” be an asset, that is, not merely a response to a problem, but a genuine advantage for private-sector businesses, for European institutions and in the realm of higher education? The ambitions behind this type of question are not minor, since they hark back to the strengthening of economic performance, to the fairness with which various languages and their speakers are treated and to the conditions in which knowledge is constructed and transmitted.

The assets of multilingualism are multiple. The use of multilingual repertoires is a resource for the construction, transmission and use of knowledge by providing various modes of access to information processing, and helping actors retain and classify new information, changing our perception of processes and objects, deepening and “fine-tuning” conceptual understanding, revealing hidden or implicit meanings, and “unfamiliarising” supposedly familiar meanings, shedding new light on concepts approached from multiple angles and allowing a closer look at words and a deeper reflection on the linguistic substance of concepts in the languages used. Dealing with a team that displays cognitive diversity, truly different ways of encoding and sensing, has a direct bearing on the modes of operation of this team, and may therefore be correlated with the effectiveness of that team. Linguistic diversity, therefore, may be one of the most concrete drivers of creativity and innovation. The use of multilingual repertoires also affects the way in which participants organise their interaction, it influences the extent of their participation and has an impact on the construction of leadership, and has an impact on ways of negotiating, agreement and disagreement, the construction of expertise, problem-solving and decision-making.

The DYLAN project was not intended to provide quantitative measurements of the link between the adoption of multilingual solutions and the degree of economic, academic and political performance. Therefore, it does not deliver numerical illustrations of the actual extent to which actors’ communicational strategies may actually promote fairness, or the increase in scholarly accomplishments that multilingualism can favour. Nonetheless, its findings provide indispensable stepping-stones for such developments. More specifically, they show how these multilingual solutions actually work in real-world interaction, how context affects the choice of solutions, and how the links between multilingual

solutions and various outcomes can be operationalised with reference to established criteria of choice. Among the latter, efficiency and fairness are widely regarded as crucial, which is why one DYLAN team also showed how information about multilingual communication can be summarised in a consistent system of indicators allowing for the comparison of outcomes.

Key publications

The findings of the project were and are being published in various peer reviewed journals and books. Here are the first book publications:

- Berthoud, Anne-Claude, Francois Grin. & Georges Lüdi. (eds.). 2013. *Exploring the Dynamics of Multilingualism. The DYLAN project*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- Gazzola, Michele. 2014. *The Evaluation of Language Regimes. Theory and Application to Multilingual patent Organisations*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- Höchle, Katharina. 2014. *Construction discursive des représentations de stages professionnels dans des entreprises de la région du Rhin supérieur. Une étude de cas*. Tübingen, Francke.
- Hüning, Matthias & Ulrike Vogl. (eds.), 2011. *Standard Languages and Multilingualism in European history*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- Mondada, Lorenza & Luci Nussbaum. (eds.). 2012. *Interactions cosmopolites : l'organisation de la participation plurilingue*, Limoges, Lambert Lucas.

Note: Link to the project website: www.dylan-project.org