The quality of a multilingual policy in contact areas

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ABSTRACT

Describing the situation in contact areas would provide no food for thought, as all participants know about present day policies and can find plenty of documentation about them. I shall rather discuss the *quality of policy/ies* for multilingual areas. It requires

a. a clearly defined *vision* of the concept of 'multilingual society',

b. the consequent *mission*, i.e. the practical and realistically attainable aims of political action

c. a balance between actual *demand* and possible *supply* of multilingualism

d. precise *time schedule* and *action plan*, to be checked at definite times in order to decide whether objectives have or have not been reached

e. a definition of *factors and terms of flexibility* in the time schedule and action plan above, so that failures, if any, may be analyzed and a re-definition of the time schedule and action plan may follow

f. a *governance model*, where 'model' indicates an *abstract* structure of governance, and the factors and terms of flexibility in its implementation in different contexts.

Once the main lines of the quality of a multilingual policy are drawn, participants can apply them to the multilingual areas they are concerned with.

The participants in this conference know a lot about the European, national and regional policies in multilingual areas, and they all have ideas about the quality of such policies. What parameters are these ideas based on? The purpose of this paper is to reflect on what we shall call TQP, *Total Quality Policy* – borrowing an acronym from the language of management. In fact, many ideas in this essay are derived from studies concerning strategies in marketing and management.

Keywords: total quality policy, language policy, multilingualism, linguistic minorities

1. The *vision* of a 'multilingual society'

In order to define the lines of TQP, a 'vision' of the object of the policy is required. This vision becomes the main benchmark, the cornerstone of the whole system of objectives, actions and evaluation parameters we call a 'policy'.

There are at least six different visions of what a multilingual society is, plus a 'blind vision', the most widespread oxymoron in today's Europe:

a. multilingualism is a precious thing, difference is a positive value, multilingual societies are more productive, flexible, open to the future than monolingual ones: most official documents adhere to this vision , most political parties claim this vision – apart from the French *Front National* and some so-called 'liberal' parties – but in most cases it sounds rhetorical, and the way of checking whether this vision is sincere is simple, just ask 'why?', and most answers will be unconvincing;

b. multilingualism is a heritage of the past, and the best thing to do is to let minorities die out with dignity, without suffering, taking whatever time is needed. In other words, no euthanasia, but a stop in nurturing illusions: multilingual societies are doomed. This is the actual although unexpressed vision in many countries which include small multilingual regions;

c. multilingualism is a heritage of the past, and the right thing to do is look to the future and not to the past. In the best case this vision leads to euthanasia; in the XX century it led to linguistic genocides, as in the case of the so-called dialects in Italy, of Occitan and Francoprovençal in France, and so on;

d. multilingualism is a scourge, but for international reasons, as in the case of the Slovenian and Italian minorities along the border, they must be 'protected' – provided protection is not too expensive and is reciprocal. European borders offer an anthology of different implementations of this vision;

e. multilingualism is a problem, the sooner it is solved the better – even though this may mean splitting up Belgium, for instance; this a radical vision which can gain momentum as Europe becomes more and more integrated: if European legislation prevails over national ones and if the economical and monetary policy is decided in Frankfurt, why keep expensive and complicated multilingual countries alive?

f. multilingualism is everywhere, in all cities and villages where immigrants live. This is the blind vision I referred to above: instead of building up a vision, most societies close their eyes and think of immigration as a social phenomenon, not as a case of widespread and extremely complex multilingual society. The basic idea is: give time for generations to flow one after the other, and the problem will disappear.

The official vision in Europe today is of the 'a' type. I come from the country of Machiavelli, and so I am entitled to doubt whether official visions correspond to actual visions, which I presume to be more 'd' type ones.

My vision belongs to group 'b'. As I wrote above, I come from the country of Machiavelli, so there is not much room left for optimism in my analysis: I see present minorities as doomed, and today's small and medium size languages becoming minority languages in a few generations, followed by the 'big' languages. My vision poses two open questions: will Europe have one or two mainstream languages, i.e. English or English + German, and how long will it take before present day minority languages disappear, 'small languages' become minorities, and 'big' languages become the weak ones in a bi- or trilingual

continent. I am afraid it will take far shorter than we can imagine. The reason why I'm here and the reason why I've spent most of my professional and scientific life in promoting multilingualism and in keeping the teaching of Italian alive in the world by providing higher teaching quality is to slow down the process.

2. The *mission* of a multilingual TQP

This is a very simple point:

a. given a vision of what the value of a multilingual society is,

b. on the basis of the analysis of the *actual* context, being careful to avoid wishful thinking,

the practical and realistically attainable aims of political action are defined: this is the *mission* of TQP.

Ancient Romans said that *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur* and this is the key of a TQ mission in a TQP: *Mission Impossible* is an effective title for a film, but it means failure for a policy.

Don Quixotism is the risk of missions based on a grand and noble vision and on a poor and superficial analysis of the actual context.

3. The balance between *demand* and *supply* of multilingualism

This is a simple point for economic policy: it is TQP when the supply meets the demand perfectly, it is superb TQP when it creates a demand from scratch, so that a never-heard-of product becomes a *must*.

In social and cultural policy this point is the most delicate, because the demand for (the survival of) multilingual societies may be

a. *well perceived*, and this is the easy situation; the mission in this case is: keep the positive perception going, do not take it for granted that it will go on spontaneously; the problem is that full perception can be found in the bilingual area where two macro-areas overlap, for instance the bilingual border between Slovenia and Italy, but it is far more difficult to find in the two macro-areas, the rest of Slovenia and the rest of Italy; however fully perceived the demand for multilingualism is in the multilingual area, it may receive no corresponding supply if the situation in the rest of the macro-areas does not belong to type 'b', below;

b. *not perceived yet*, but perceivable if actions are implemented to arouse the awareness of the values of multilingualism and of the risks of homogenization;

c. *not perceived at all*, or perceived as something belonging to the past, the contrary of 'modernity'. Many young people *today* perceive the defense of small multilingual groups as a waste of money, and feel the 'modernity', i.e. the appeal, of an open

Europe where languages are lesser and lesser a problem because "you can go everywhere if you speak English". It takes no Machiavelli to foresee what will happen in a generation's time in this context. The mission in this case is not impossible, but it takes a real TQP supported by money and by long term consistency in political action to move type 'c' towards type 'b', above.

Situations 'b' and 'c' pose an ethical problem: do opinion makers and policy makers have a right to contrast 'c' on the basis of their own ideals? Is it ethical to create a non-existing demand, so that opinion and policy makers can supply it? Has an élite the right to 'educate' the masses? Both Marxist and Liberal societies have long discussed and even experimented it.

Apart from the ethical questions, the fact is that offering multilingualism, without analyzing the nature of the demand for it, is suicidal policy, the opposite of TQP.

4. Precise action plan and time schedule

This factor of TQP translates the theoretical points above into actual political projects.

All action plans and time schedules need to be

a. coherent with the mission,

b. realistic with regards to the demand/supply relation in the context where they will be implemented,

c. cohesive as far as their steps are concerned, each step closely and carefully knitted and interwoven with the step(s) before, the step(s) that will be implemented contemporaneously, the step(s) that will come next; textual cohesion turns words and sentences into a text, and cohesion is a necessary condition for an action plan as well: it is *un système où tout se tient*;

d. As for the timing, an action plan has to be logically and precisely designed as far as the sequence of steps is concerned.

What makes the difference between a good action plan as the one described above and a TQ action plan is the presence of a system of measures intended to check the respect of the time schedule and to monitor the actual outcomes of the actions. In TQP the time schedule and actions must be

a. checked *at definite times* and not *sometimes*, and all participants in the actions are to be aware of this process of control, so that no one has the possibility of slowing down the whole action plan or to miss an objective without anyone noticing and taking actions to prevent it; and

b. monitored against *pre-defined* and *well known* benchmarks.

'Definite' is the key word: all participants in a TQ action plan must know that objective '*x*' must be met before day '*y*' and will be evaluated according to parameters '*z, j, k*'.

Yet policy belongs to the field of social sciences, it is not a hard science, indeed it belongs to what Abraham Moles calls *les sciences de l'imprécis*: this means that the result of checking and monitoring may be, and most probably will be, different from what was expected: what gives quality to an action plan is not the mechanical correspondence between what is expected and what actually happens, but the fact that a system of checking and monitoring is used to track the roadmap, to have feedback in order to prevent wishful thinking from seeing the world as one would like it to be.

These means checking and monitoring are pre-definite, but their results must be evaluated in a flexible way.

5. Factors and terms of flexibility

Soft sciences are called 'soft' because the have a certain degree of flexibility. Yet, 'soft' does not mean 'liquid': a 'certain' degree of flexibility does not mean an unlimited degree of flexibility, such as that found with water.

As I said above, it is highly probable that time schedules cannot be respected to the day and that objectives are not fully attained: a rigid attitude works according to a pass/fail dichotomy, a flexible attitude contributes to TQP by predicting explicitly what kind of negative events will be 'acceptable' on the basis of flexibility factors that can explain and justify partial failures or delays in attaining objectives and to suggest deviations from the mainstream action plans and time schedules. Typical factors of this kind are

a. the continuity, rather than the amount, of funds;

b. the possibility of accessing mass media to support a positive idea of multilingual societies;

c. the accelerations and slowdowns due to national and local elections, independently from the winner, but because elections tend to radicalize problems, and multilingualism is a typical (local) election problem;

d. unpredictable tabloid paper events concerning scandals or crimes involving members of the two language communities; and

e. the death of a key figure in a community;

and so on, in a list of possible events which is well known to the participants in this conference.

Flexibility is of paramount importance in defining the good quality of policy, but flexibility is quite different from anarchy and improvisation.

6. The governance model

A model is an abstract conceptual structure: the theory of relativity is an abstract model and in its final claim (at the speed of light time goes to zero) it will never be experimentally proved.

A model does not include details: the model of a skyscraper does not include windows and doors and does not indicate the materials and colour of the walls: it is an abstraction of the skyscraper, its 'volumetric idea'.

Governance in TQP is defined by a model: "in order to carry out this policy, the best decision-making panel is made of…" and then a list of professional, administrative, intellectual, political terms, not the names of professionals, administrators, philosophers, politicians and so on.

We all know that even in the best of all possible worlds the ideal model cannot be turned into the actual model: compromise is necessary to gain support and to secure funding, and real life persons are not as perfect as they should be to fit in with the characteristics of all the different professional figures described in the model.

Life is not based on ideal models, but TQP is: *the model is there for everyone to see what perfect governance should be like* and to contribute, as far as possible within human, social, financial and political constraints, to let the 'dream come true'.

The *awareness* of the distance between reality and the ideal is a key point of the governance of TQP ("This is the best group of people we can gather"), and it stands as the sole barrier against the main poison of TQP, that of wishful thinking ("This is the best group of all"). Actors in a TQP must be aware that they represent the best *available* governance.

7. Conclusion

However complex this definition of the characteristics of high quality policy for multilingual areas may seem, indeed it is not complex at all: it can even be considered commonsense.

Yet, if we analyze policies we all know very well – as indeed we are doing in this conference – applying the parameters above may show that TQP is not common. And this may make my pessimistic Machiavellian vision come true sooner than expected unless better policies are defined and implemented.