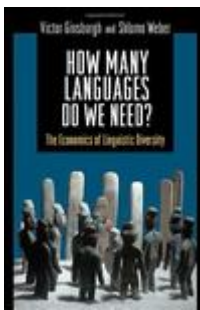


The Perils of Polyglottism

A review of



How Many Languages Do We Need? The Economics of Linguistic Diversity

by Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber

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Ludwig Zamenhof, the polyglot creator of Esperanto, evidently believed that strong cultural and linguistic identities, what we would call *nationalism*, were a source of both personal and social unhappiness. Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber, authors of *How Many Languages Do We Need? The Economics of Linguistic Diversity*, argue that the corollaries to such identities are multiple languages and cultures interacting in the global economy, to the economic detriment of all. The evidence supports their claim.

Within a country, Ginsburgh and Weber argue, “extensive use of various languages and excessive multilingualism restrict the ability of citizens to communicate with each other and dilute the sense of national unity and identity” (p. 26). Familiar examples are cited—India, Ghana, Nigeria—to which one might consider adding the United States.

One solution is to impose an official language or languages on a multicultural society, raising the political and economic issue—standardization versus disenfranchisement. The

authors ask whether linguistic standardization, for example, the imposition of one or a few languages on a linguistically diverse population, leads to stability; the more permissive nonstandardization clearly leads to linguistic and cultural diversity but may lead to economic disenfranchisement. Considering the late 20th-century history of Quebec or the more recent history of Sri Lanka might give one pause ere supporting monolingual standardization; however, taking account of all the economic factors discussed in *How Many Languages Do We Need?* one would likely come down on the side of standardization, as do Ginsburgh and Weber.

Is it the case that linguistic rights (freedom to function in one's native language and participate in one's native culture) counterbalance economic prosperity such that the more a government supports such human rights, the less economic prosperity will ensue? The answer seems to be yes, if one accepts the data and arguments in *How Many Languages Do We Need?*

Although this book focuses on economic outcomes, Ginsburgh and Weber do take economic theory to a personal level in the discussion of the costs of learning a second (or third) language. The basic economic principle is this: Benefits to an individual increase in proportion to the number of other individuals with whom he or she can talk (share a language). Such benefits are weighed against costs; for example, how hard it is to learn the other language.

Other factors play a role, for example, my willingness to learn your language declines proportionately to your willingness to learn mine. Distance is a key concept, both geographically, which influences emigration and immigration, and linguistically, which influences ease of second language acquisition (learnability) according to shared language structures. Clearly, extrinsic motivation plays a larger role in *How Many Languages Do We Need?* than does intrinsic motivation, seen in particular when different languages come in contact. Creole languages are mentioned early in *How Many Languages Do We Need?*, but a more extended discussion is warranted.

If the members of one economic group are unable to communicate with the members of another economic group and there is an impetus to trade, there may be deleterious economic consequences. We have known for a very long time that one of the strategies used by societies to deal with this situation is the evolution of a *pidgin* language, which later may evolve into a *creole* language, which in turn may become a standard language. In the context of pidginization and creolization, learnability is not the key factor because the structures of all languages involved in such social contact are simplified, reducing the costs of learning a pidgin or creole language for each individual.

Globally, linguistic diversity is remarkable, notwithstanding the quasi lingua franca status of English. The *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* website (<http://www.ethnologue.com/>) provides a table of the distribution of languages by area of origin as of the year 2009 (http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=area), which I summarize here.

Africa: 2,110 languages, 30.5 percent of all languages;

Americas: 993 languages, 14.4 percent of all languages;

Asia: 2,322 languages, 33.6 percent of all languages;

Europe: 234 languages, 3.4 percent of all languages;

Pacific: 1,250 languages, 18.1 percent of all languages.

Several interesting discussions supplement the primary focus of *How Many Languages Do We Need?* For example, the number of books translated into or from a particular language give some indication of the dominance of that language in multilingual communities. It may surprise some readers to learn that, as dominant as English is in the European Union (EU), proportionately to the population more books are translated from Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and French than from English. On the lighter side, as an example of a traditional EU-wide social–commercial function, the EuroVision song contest is evidently conducted primarily in English with some French. A recent winner of the contest hailed from Ukraine.

Although the analysis at population levels is persuasive, more details in particular cases would likely have increased interest in the major themes. For example, consider the situation in Canada. French is not simply the majority language of Quebec and the second, minority language of the rest of Canada. There are two major dialectal versions of French in Quebec, standard and *joual*, each of which differs dramatically in intelligibility to other native speakers of French, for example, people from Haiti, Morocco, Algeria, or France. An analysis of the economic consequences to speakers of *joual* in Québec would likely contribute interesting data to Ginsburgh and Weber's thesis.

After World War II, measuring diversity became popular in many fields, including psychology. From the mid-1950s, Joseph Greenberg's research on linguistic diversity became well known and furnished some of the data for this book. Some of the facts are interesting in and of themselves, regardless of the economic consequences. For example, Papua New Guinea records 830 different languages, whereas it is stated that North Korea is monolingual. I have doubts about the latter claim, considering the reasonable expectation that there was Chinese immigration during and after the Korean War.

Linguistic and economic diversity issues in the EU are the focus of much of *How Many Languages Do We Need?* The EU is clearly diverse: There are currently 27 countries in which 234 languages are spoken; on the other hand, there are 23 officially recognized languages. Applying their economic equations—balancing costs against disenfranchisement—led Ginsburgh and Weber to solve the linguistic diversity issues of the EU with a six-language solution: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Polish.

One may wonder why Polish is part of the solution. As explained by Ginsburgh and Weber, it is a combination of calculating the costs of the 23 language solutions currently extant in the EU against varying degrees of linguistic disenfranchisement for a nested core of two to 11 proposed language solutions. Should Turkey be added to the EU, as is currently under discussion, it is likely that a different language solution would make economic sense; the tools for arriving at that solution are available in this very interesting book.
