

Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber, *How Many Languages do We Need? The Economics of Linguistic Diversity*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. ix + 232 pages. \$35.00.

So as to allay suspense, the answer to “How many languages do we need?” is four (p. 181), or perhaps six (p. 186), if you are talking about how many core official languages the European Union really needs. That is indeed the topic of most of the second half of the book, where the authors repeatedly demonstrate the economic consequences and political context of the current policy of 23 official languages. For that alone, we should take note. And for that alone, those of us in linguistics and things similarly cultural are likely to take a lot of umbrage right off the bat: How dare these economists restrict our languages! They know nothing about the extreme cultural importance of language! They know nothing about what people want! They know nothing about democracy! And of course they overlook the importance of translation, as big disciplines always do!

None of those off-the-cuff critiques is wholly justified here. The economists demonstrate a deep if clichéd appreciation of how important languages are (their first chapter is “My Language is my Homeland”, at which point you suspect they are going to justify about 7,000 official languages, and hang the cost); their modeling takes in a wide range of social and political variables (in addition to properly financial costs and distributions); they do have a lot to say about linguistic democracy (their main variable is called “linguistic disenfranchisement”, which is what happens when one’s language is not official in one’s country, so once again the naïve reader would expect the economists to scream against any restriction in the number of languages – I mean, can anyone really condone disenfranchisement?); and the economists actually have quite a lot to say about translation, albeit not enough.

Economics is not yet ethics – there are no absolute values here. So when Ginsburgh and Weber start off with terms like “homeland” and “disenfranchisement”, those are relative values, things that can in some way be traded for other things. The economists, being economists, attempt to model the decision processes involved, then they test their models against quantitative data, they re-adjust the models, and so on until they think they can say something about the way people actually make decisions about value. It is that basic empiricism that is likely to upset those of us who quite like to believe in absolute values, such as having homelands and being democratically enfranchised in all possible ways.

First, the point about accepting linguistic disenfranchisement. Ginsburgh and Weber implicitly assume that a society cannot have 1,000 or so official languages because the costs would be so high that the administrative system would cease to function effectively: such a policy would create massive inefficiencies, and in low-income societies it would lead to widespread increases in levels of corruption. So someone is always going to be disenfranchised, especially in an age of migrations. The question is then who is most likely to accept disenfranchisement and why. The economists assume that people who speak several languages reasonably well would accept that only one of those languages should be official. People who speak Maltese, for example, mostly also speak English or Italian, so they would perhaps not kick up too

much of a fuss if Maltese were not an official EU language (which it currently is). Catalans would very much like Catalan to be fully official, but they are not screaming too loud about disenfranchisement, since they understand Spanish well enough.

This brings in the variable of linguistic distance, understood as the degree to which languages are similar and thus relatively easy to bridge by learning. By paying attention to this variable, perhaps you only really need one Germanic language from Scandinavia, one Slavic language from former Yugoslavia, and so on. The path is then open to rational linguistic disenfranchisement. Of course, in quantifying this technically open path, Ginsburgh and Weber naïvely have to assume that people actually want to use their neighbors' languages; they initially overlook the treacherous dynamics of national prestige: the Portuguese understand Spanish, but Spaniards famously say they do not understand Portuguese (cf. Conti and Grin 2008 for a much more subtle treatment of linguistic intercomprehension). The economics of what is possible do not map well onto the economies of nationalist desire.

The economists' very basic logic of learning capacity applies, even more provocatively, to a great many Germans whose command of English is becoming so good that they could eventually deprive themselves of a rational basis for maintaining German as an official EU language (happily there are so many Germans that those who don't know English will keep saving German for a few generations to come). Ginsburgh and Weber include statistics on the generational differences in the use of English, mapping the effective progress of a lingua franca but also demonstrating, with hard numbers, that this is only a tendency: German is still one of the languages they select as having to be official, and the practicality of an English-only EU democracy will take many years: more than half of the EU population say they do not speak English (p. 13).

Now for the democracy: Ginsburgh and Weber ask if some language communities would willingly accept linguistic disenfranchisement in return for, say, economic advantages, a "rebate". You could calculate the annual costs of having Maltese as an official language – about 500 euros per Maltese person a year (pp. 194-5) –, then offer Malta all or part of that sum, year after year, to do what they like with, as compensation for their linguistic disenfranchisement. Would they take the money, or insist on having their language flourish in Brussels? The economists calculate that if the negotiations were well structured, Malta should take the money (or whatever other concessions were offered). And so, apparently, should all the other language communities except four, although when the mechanics of the qualified majority voting system are taken into account there are two cases of doubt, so the economists generously allow that an EU of rational egoists could have six official languages – all the other language communities should rationally accept some kind of compensation for disenfranchisement. So there you have it: all us idealistic non-economist humanists are apparently imposing our absolute values on the world, insisting that people pay to have their language used in all official domains, when it is quite possible that citizens have far more important problems to solve in their lives. Perhaps individuals would appreciate giving up language rights in exchange for other things.

Ginsburgh and Weber don't really say that out loud. They do say that "[r]especting the will of the people is a necessary condition for any sustainable success

of long-range policies in a democratic setting” (p. 28), but that anodyne principle then takes about 150 pages to become half-way critical: “the EU will have to shift its emphasis from national concerns to those of individual citizens” (p. 181). That is, ask people what they want. Yet in matters of official language policy, no one is seriously asking, it seems. All the statistics are coming from EU sources, yet the policies still assume that we all need our official languages, in the spirit of the centrally planned democracies of Real Socialism – we know what you need. No one is thinking about the kind of consulting that we find, for example, in a language policy from far away (I beg indulgence for the citation):

The number of potential clients using a particular language is not the only relevant factor when choosing appropriate languages for translation.

To ensure that printed materials are useful and culturally appropriate, it is important to consult with Indigenous and ethnic community organisations, community workers (preferably those that work in the specific field covered by the information material) and/or potential clients. (Office of Multicultural Interests 2008: 3)

The same message can be more or less gleaned from Ginsburgh and Weber: consult, before you impose. That said, the economists are for the most part far more technical than principled, burying their political thought in variable after subtle variable, building up an ever more complex model, testing their hypotheses on table after table of numbers that appear and disappear with remarkable rapidity, as in a card-shark’s chicane. Some genuinely surprising things flash from the tables along the way, if you look closely, particularly the extreme differences between northern and southern Europe with respect to the role of English as a lingua franca (p. 103), the high numbers of people in Greece and Poland who are open to the idea of a monolingual EU (p. 175), or the fact that Hungarians, for example, are very sensitive to language issues whereas the Irish are apparently not (p. 183). Such micro-discoveries are written into the nature of empirical inquiry (or the uncertainty of the statistical database), and the numerous variables themselves surely become slightly irrelevant when it turns out that the six eventually selected languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Polish) are actually the ones with the most number of speakers (p. 187). So that’s all we had to look at in the first place? Size really does matter, it seems.

Since Ginsburgh and Weber are very concerned about the actual costs of linguistic diversity, they have quite a lot to say about translation. Some of what they say is very good, and some is not so good.

First, the economists know that the odd quantitative arguments we actually get in Translation Studies are often pure pap. Everyone knows, for example, that there are far fewer translations into English than from English (just 2 to 4 percent, by most metrics, as opposed to 20% and above for most other European languages). The economists, however, know that this is at least partly a function of the huge number of speakers of English, not of any cultural hegemony as such. This is something I was involved in arguing a few years ago (cf. Pym and Chrupala 2004). But the economists

have better statistical tests than I did, and they are able to recalculate the numbers by factoring out the population variable. The result should then leave high and dry the more truly imperialistic and hegemonic languages, those for which there are far fewer intranlations than extranlations. And the winner is... yes, Norwegian. Watch out for the rampant cultural imperialism of Norwegian! The lesson should be either that the database leaves a lot to be desired (the numbers here are from the notorious quicksands of the *Index Translationum*) or that there are many other factors to be accounted for. Either way, our simple quantitative arguments (“English is hegemonic because of the low number of intranlations”) do not pass muster.

For their second point about translation, Ginsburgh and Weber stress the high cost of official translation services in the European institutions, especially the effects of the scandalous costs at the European Patent Office (p. 165). At the same time, they seem to ignore some of the more general statistics that could have most helped their cause. For example, go to “Frequently asked questions” at the DG Translation website and they tell you (in 2011) that they translated 1.86 million pages for an estimated cost of 300 million euros, “or some €0.60 for every EU citizen”. If you think that’s a good service for the price of half a cup of coffee (as they tend to mention), divide the number of pages by the number of euros: the total cost comes out at about 161 euros per page, yes per page. Now ask your local translator or translation company how much they charge per page: perhaps something between 30 and 50 euros? And now figure out how the economists, and almost everyone else, can keep allowing official discourse to insult our intelligence with the translation-for-cup-of-coffee narrative. Rather than be outraged by the cheap stories (which they should indeed pay more attention to), Ginsburgh and Weber dutifully appreciate that much is being done in EU institutions to lower the translation costs, particularly by using pivot languages and shortening the length of texts. Fair enough. But I still want to be paid 161 euros a page!

In correctly seeking further to reduce the costs of translations, Ginsburgh and Weber make much of their linguistic distance variable: “The fact that all large language families are represented [in their six official languages] implies that translations to other languages belonging to the same family would be made somewhat easier” (p. 186). Well, yes, every little bit helps. But what they should have been looking at here is the impact of new translation technologies: the use of translation memories is supposed to raise productivity (although there is surprisingly little sign of it in the EU numbers), and the incorporation of data-based machine translation should be doing much more to reduce many costs. The trick here is that the statistical algorithms of data-based machine translation tend to depend more on the raw size of the databases than the syntactic and lexical proximity of the languages, so the economists’ star variable may not apply so well. Indeed, the absence of language technologies must be regarded a fatal flaw in many of these calculations.

Also on translation, Ginsburgh and Weber are quite good in questioning the doctrine that all official translations have equal legal validity, and are therefore not really translations. Their survey of rulings by the European Court of Justice shows that the presumed source text can retain priority in circumstances where there appear to be translation errors, and that “the Court does not have a clear policy to resolve such

cases” (p. 173). The economists provocatively conclude: “If so, why should the EU bother about the translation of all legal documents into all official languages? (p. 173). Hmm... we’ll have to think about that one.

Many readers will experience this book as a constant debate threatening some long-cherished beliefs. One suspects that many of the provocations might be tamed through more careful attention to what the term “official language” can entail: Ginsburgh and Weber generally accept (despite the above question) that legally binding texts must be translated into many languages, but it is not clear how far that extends into the use in parliaments and meetings.

A more general problem is that the economists’ models might more or less explain what should happen if all actors were rational egoists, but do not say why their recommendations have not yet come true. There are many possible reasons for this. For example, the economists are basically following the money, without a developed appreciation of the economies of symbolic, social and cultural capital (to draw on Bourdieu’s categories). If Hungary is very sensitive to language and Ireland is not, we might want to know why. As it stands, the democratic appeal to “individual citizens” sounds very naïve when we see to what extent public opinion is influenced by political parties and national governments, to the point where, if I remember correctly, some countries actually voted in favor of a European Constitution that no one understood. Far more attention should perhaps be paid to the social groups that have professional interests in official multilingualism, partly those from what Hobsbawm dismissed as “the lesser examination-passing classes” (1990: 118) that cling onto national vernaculars, but also the expert intercultural groups, the “global teams” (Ginsburgh and Weber p. 144) who professionally move information between languages and thus logically want to promote linguistic diversity. One might ask who these expert groups are, and why they want to sell us a Europe full of translations for half-a-cup-of-coffee.

In short, the economists may have too simple a model of the organizational subject. This is a little like Alan Greenspan admitting a “flaw” in his economic model, at the time of the 2008 stock market crash: “I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interest of organizations, specifically banks, is such that they were best capable of protecting shareholders and equity in the firms” (reported in *The New York Times*, October 23, 2008). Ginsburgh and Weber could be succumbing to a similar flaw in assuming that the self-interest of national governments and supranational administrative units will somehow protect the linguistic interests of citizens.

It is good and timely to say that “the EU will have to shift its emphasis from national concerns to those of individual citizens” (p. 181). But there are many vested interests along the way. The people leading the debates and producing the numbers – apart from a few renegade economists – are often those who have most to gain from non-economical degrees of linguistic diversity.

## References

- Directorate General for Translation. 2011. *Frequently Asked Questions about DG Translation*: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/faq/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/faq/index_en.htm). Updated 28/02/11.
- Conti, Virginie, and François Grin (eds). 2008. *S'entendre entre langues voisines: vers l'intercompréhension*, Geneva: Georg.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Office of Multicultural Interests. 2008. *The Western Australian Language Services Policy 2008*. Perth: Office of Multicultural Interests.  
[http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi\\_language.cfm](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_language.cfm). Accessed October 2011.
- Pym, Anthony, and Grzegorz Chrupala. 2004. "The Quantitative Analysis of Translation Flows in the Age of an International Language". In Albert Branchadell & Lovell Margaret West (eds) *Less Translated Languages*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 27-38.

Anthony Pym  
MIIS. 460 Pierce Street  
Monterey, CA 93940. USA