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PHD SUMMARY

Deliberative democracy amidst the Tower of Babel

Insights from Luxembourgish deliberative minipublics

Lisa Verhasselt[1]

Abstract

The thesis examines the role of language in deliberative democracy through multilingual citizens' assemblies in Luxembourg, a multilingual society with many non-national residents lacking voting rights. While deliberative democracy values inclusivity, authenticity, and consequentiality, language's influence on these principles is often overlooked. Most research emphasises deliberation quality but neglects how multilingualism affects who participates, how participation unfolds, the impact on participants, and public acceptability. Using a mixed-methods, mixed-epistemological case study of two assemblies – Biergerkommitee Lëtzebuerg 2050 and Klima Biergerrot – the dissertation explores experiences and attitudes toward multilingual processes. Applying an operational matrix based on input, throughput, and output legitimacy, it finds that these assemblies approximate deliberative ideals; namely, promoting inclusivity by embracing linguistic diversity, upholding authenticity through meaningful multilingual discussions, and enhancing consequentiality by enabling preference shifts and public support. However, linguistic diversity also introduces complexities, highlighting the need for further empirical research.

Keywords: Deliberative democracy, Citizens' assemblies, Multilingualism, Luxembourg, Input-throughput-output legitimacy

It has been almost three decades since James Bohman observed that the theory of deliberative democracy had 'come of age' to address more practical concerns of feasibility (Bohman, 1998). Since then, it has become an increasingly influential model of democratic decision-making, evolving in various directions while maintaining core commitments to inclusivity, authenticity, and consequentiality (Pilet et al., 2023; Curato et al., 2019; Bächtiger et al., 2018; Curato et al., 2017; Mansbridge, 2015; Dryzek, 2010a, 2002; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008). However, the thesis finds that deliberative democracy continues to sideline certain everyday realities of democracies, notably linguistic diversity. Accordingly, the thesis begins with a central assessment: Language and, by extension, multilingualism have been undervalued in both theoretical and empirical deliberative scholarship. This gap carries considerable practical consequences; as Roberts et al. (2023) note, the lack of comprehensive research complicates the effective design and implementation of multilingual deliberative processes, which are increasingly vital across numerous contexts.

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights, the thesis seeks to reposition deliberative democracy by emphasising the central role of linguistic considerations. First, language directly shapes representation by influencing accessibility and public perception (Gerring et al., 2024; Funk & Hinojosa, 2023; Piller, 2016; Fowler et al., 2014; Schildkraut, 2013a, 2013b; Phillipson, 2012, 1992, 1988; Schieffelin & Doucet, 1998; Phillips, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). Second, deliberation is inherently linguistic – occurring in and through language itself (Casullo, 2020; Lupia & Norton, 2017). Third, multilingualism enriches cognitive and epistemic diversity (Droz et al., 2023; Berthoud & Gajo, 2020; Trudgill, 2000). Finally, linguistic considerations are crucial in designing deliberative processes that are context-sensitive and fit for purpose (Böker, 2017; Rubin, 2014; O'Flynn, 2007; Wheatley, 2002, 2003). Consequently, the thesis underscores that language is not just a means of communication; it fundamentally shapes participation by including or excluding individuals based on their linguistic repertoires, structures engagement by influencing who can contribute meaningfully, and impacts public perception through the symbolic prioritisation of certain languages. In a world marked by linguistic diversity, understanding how language structures deliberative practices is essential to achieving inclusive, authentic, and consequential democratic engagement.

Despite this, when deliberative democracy engages with language, the focus typically centres on how multilingualism affects the quality of deliberation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018; Caluwaerts, 2012; Fiket et al., 2011; Fishkin, 2009). The thesis contends that such emphasis likely arises from two related assumptions: first, that multilingualism inherently challenges democracy, and second, that a shared language is both expected and preferable. As a result, scholars often frame multilingualism as a complication to be managed rather than a vital dimension of – contemporary – societies. The thesis thus calls for a fundamental rethinking of how language is

conceptualised within deliberative democracy. Rather than viewing linguistic diversity as a source of disorder – invoking the chaos of the Tower of Babel – recognising and incorporating linguistic considerations can enhance the real-world relevance of deliberative processes, enabling them to effectively navigate the complexities of diverse societies while upholding democratic ideals. To this end, the thesis develops an operational matrix grounded in the input–throughput–output legitimacy framework, integrating a context-sensitive understanding of multilingualism and employing a mixed-method, mixed-epistemological approach (Elstub & Pomatto, 2022; Escobar, 2022).

Applying this matrix, the thesis examines two national-level citizens' assemblies in Luxembourg, a country characterised by three official languages – Luxembourgish, French, and German – alongside widespread societal multilingualism. As Kalocsányiová (2017) notes, it is widely believed that no one in Luxembourg is monolingual, a claim supported by data showing that 83% of residents speak three or more languages (Eurobarometer, 2012). The country's high proportion of non-national residents without voting rights adds further complexity to democratic participation, making Luxembourg a compelling microcosm for studying linguistic diversity in deliberative democracy. As a 'most likely' case (Levy, 2002), if multilingual citizens' assemblies cannot succeed here, their feasibility elsewhere is called into question – hence, "if not here, then where?"

Within this context, the Biergerkommitee Lëtzebuerg 2050 (BK) and the Klima-Biergerrot (KBR) provide contrasting approaches to multilingual deliberation. The BK used Luxembourgish, French, and German, requiring participants to passively understand all three, with no translation provided. The KBR, by contrast, operated in Luxembourgish, French, and English, requiring fluency in just one language and providing simultaneous interpretation and language-based focus groups. Despite sharing a national and climate-related focus, the assemblies' divergent linguistic designs offer a valuable lens for understanding how language shapes inclusivity, authenticity, and consequentiality in deliberative processes.

The overall picture emerging from the thesis is largely positive. It finds that multilingualism enhances representativity and fosters inclusion, especially when language choices resonate with the community's diversity. However, the design and management of linguistic elements are critical. Inclusivity depends not only on offering multiple languages but on how linguistic diversity is integrated: relaxed linguistic criteria can widen participation but demand adequate resources, while stricter criteria may exclude non-dominant language speakers. Multilingual deliberation also supports authenticity, allowing participants to engage under fair and equal conditions. Notably, participants' knowledge sources often aligned with their language use, enriching deliberation (Droz et al., 2023; Nawaz, 2023; Stein-Smith, 2021; Berthoud & Gajo, 2020; Trudgill, 2000). Yet equitable access to information across

languages remains challenging and may benefit from technological assistance. The research also finds that multilingual deliberation can be consequential, reshaping participant preferences – an effect stronger in in-person than online settings – and garnering broad public support, although perceptions differ: nationals tend to be more sceptical than non-national residents.

At the same time, the research acknowledges that linguistic diversity introduces challenges and can (continue to) contribute to exclusion. Nevertheless, the continued marginalisation of language in deliberative design reflects a misplaced emphasis on what is considered 'practical.' the thesis highlights a symbolic dimension of multilingualism often neglected in scholarship and practice: for participants, organisers, and the wider public, language frequently serves as a marker of identity, inclusion, and respect rather than merely a logistical tool. Thus, the assumption that efficiency and simplicity should always prevail is questioned, challenging dominant views that treat linguistic diversity as a barrier. Building on the systemic turn, the thesis argues that democratic processes must be rooted in their specific social, linguistic, and political contexts. Importantly, it does not advocate blanket multilingualism or a universal template. Rather, it calls for a context-sensitive framework where linguistic considerations are vital but assessed relative to each process's scope, purpose, and social landscape. Furthermore, echoing Parry et al. (2024), it contends that deliberative integrity requires confronting structural inequalities, including those embedded in language.

In conclusion, through the cases of the BK and the KBR, the thesis offers a nuanced understanding of how deliberative mechanisms can embrace linguistic diversity while resonating with participants and the wider public in heterogeneous contexts. While Luxembourg's linguistic landscape is distinctive, the underlying principles of inclusivity, authenticity, and consequentiality carry broader relevance. The findings, while cautious about overgeneralization and calling for further research, offer three interconnected insights with wider applicability. First, deliberative democracy should reconsider the Tower of Babel – not as a symbol of division, but as a metaphor for linguistic richness – recognising that meaningful democratic engagement requires grappling with complex, often messy realities. Second, deliberative processes must move beyond one-size-fits-all models, adapting instead to the distinctive needs, characteristics, and aspirations of the communities they aim to serve. Third, drawing on the 'toolbox' approach (Saward, 2021; Warren, 2017; Held, 2006), the thesis argues that attending to language can help bridge gaps left by traditional representative structures, broadening participation and inclusion for groups often marginalised in mainstream forums. Ultimately, sustaining inclusive, authentic, and consequential deliberative processes demands not only innovative procedures but also a deep, context-sensitive understanding of the social and political dynamics that shape democratic life.

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