

LINGUISTIC MEDIATION EFFECTS OF FOREIGN-LANGUAGE LEARNING ON POLITICAL IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOR

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Abstract. In this article we conceptualize foreign-language learning as a structurally consequential form of linguistic mediation that shapes political identity and behavior across three analytical levels. Our goal is to set the research agenda beyond instrumental views of language acquisition by theorizing how language learning modulates political cognition and transformation. Our approach relies on an interdisciplinary synthesis of theories from Sociolinguistics, Political Psychology and Comparative Politics, grounded in qualitative analysis of three historical cases. From modernization through democratization and digital globalization, we demonstrate that FLL has subtle and powerful impacts altering cognitive processing and identity formation, with ambivalent implications for democratic participation and legitimacy. The principal contribution of our findings lies in advancing a mediation-based conceptualization of foreign-language learning as a political modulator rather than a neutral communication skill.

Keywords: foreign-language learning; linguistic mediation; political identity; political behavior

Introduction

Mastering a foreign language, defined as the process of acquiring proficiency in a language other than one's native tongue, transforms an individual's communicative repertoire and generates linguistic capital, a concept originating in Bourdieu's sociological theory to explain language-based skills as a valued personal resource (Peirce, 1995; Blommaert, 2010). Foreign-language learning (FLL) is therefore distinct from broader linguistic competence, which encompasses overall language ability including one's mother tongue. From a broader perspective, linguistic capital is a subset of cultural capital that can grant access to social, economic, and political advantages to those who possess it (Hymes, 1972; Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Grin, 2001; García and Flores, 2012). Importantly, FLL not only redistributes these assets, but generates new

for the learner, forming an added value to the compound cultural development. Fluency in a lingua franca like English at present or French in the past is often a required qualification for better jobs and social status, which simultaneously provides access to wider and versatile sources of information and network interactions (Grin, 1999; Casanova, 2004; Castells, 2009; Van Parijs, 2011). This bifunctionality of FLL has significant political implications at the micro-level of individual citizens, the mezzo-level of entire polities and the macro-level of regional and even global vectors of development, alike.

This article advances the central argument that foreign-language learning functions as a multilevel modulator of political behavior by utilizing three key mechanisms of linguistic mediation: cognitive, informational, and constitutive. A growing body of research shows that using a second language can alter cognitive processing, emotional response, and decision-making (Bialystok et al., 2012; Keysar et al., 2012; Pavlenko, 2012; Costa et al., 2014; Hayakawa and Keysar, 2018). Thinking in a non-native language tends to provide psychological distance, reducing emotional biases and encouraging more analytical reasoning (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Such cognitive shifts can affect how individuals evaluate political choices and arguments. Moreover, the mental discipline of language learning itself may improve cognitive skills (memory, multitasking) that indirectly influence civic skills and behaviors. Acquiring a foreign language also expands access to information and communication, potentially broadening political knowledge and perspectives.

Historically, the spread of a foreign language at the collective level demonstrated its capacity to open whole societies to external ideas and cross-border flows of information, provoking and enabling deep transformations like modernization, democratization, and liberalization. This process is initiated at the individual level, where exposure to the culture associated with the studied language reshapes the social identity of the learner. The FLL process gradually expands and deepens identification with new cultural and political stereotypes by altering perceptions of identity and belonging. At the aggregate level, widespread FLL can realign group identities and social cleavages (e.g., forming bilingual elites or growing generations with global identities, opposing more traditional and ethnically centered past generations).

In explaining the outcomes of the interactive operation of these three mechanisms, we first propose a model of linguistic mediation, which we then apply to several historical and contemporary cases at the macro level, illustrating how FLL altered political trajectories of whole societies and regions of the world. Finally, we discuss the digital age dominance of English and the ambivalent implications of this dominance for democracy, highlighting how foreign-language skills can both enhance democratic inclusion and be leveraged for public opinion manipulations or conceptual distortion.

The Mechanics of Linguistic Mediation

Modulation of Cognition: By effectively resulting in bilingualism, the practice of foreign-language learning engages the brain in a functionally unusual way compared to monolingual communication. When individuals deliberate in a language that is not their mother tongue, their thinking tends to become more rational, systematic, and less susceptible to emotional bias. Arguably, this tendency could be attributed to a foreign language effect (FLE) on cognition and individual capacity for efficient social interactions, isolated by a systematic shift in moral judgment (Bialystok et al., 2012; Keysar et al., 2012; Pavlenko, 2012; Costa et al., 2014; Hayakawa and Keysar, 2018). Specifically, identical dilemmas do not elicit identical evaluative patterns across linguistic contexts because the language of processing reshapes the psychological architecture through which moral choices are generated.

The underlying logic of this mechanism remains contested. Some studies attribute FLE to reduced emotional resonance or psychological distance, while others question whether the effect reflects reduced mental imagery, lowered comprehension, or simply increased cognitive load. Furthermore, the magnitude and even the unidirectionality of the effect vary depending on the type of dilemma (e.g., ultra-personal vs impersonal), the linguistic pairing (which languages), participants' proficiency, and contextual framing among others (Keysar et al., 2012; Pavlenko, 2012; Costa et al., 2014; Geipel et al., 2015; Hayakawa and Keysar, 2018; Del Maschio et al., 2022).

This mechanism operates at the intersection of emotional attenuation and increased cognitive distance because native languages are embedded in interpersonal intimacy and affective memory during early socialization, implying that moral dilemmas framed in the native tongue tend to activate stronger emotional responses and invoke intuitive deontological constraints (Greene et al., 2001; Pavlenko, 2005; Harris and Berko Gleason, 2006; Greene, 2007). When individuals switch to a foreign language, this affective load diminishes, the linguistic environment becomes more detached from emotional experience and more closely aligned with analytical and deliberate processing.

Additionally, bilingualism has been associated with enhanced executive functions such as better task switching, metacognitive awareness and flexibility, which in political contexts translate to openness to added information and perspectives, which in its turn is a crucial trait for adaptable and tolerant attitudes. A multilingual person is more tolerant to alternative views and frameworks. For example, certain concepts or idioms in one language do not map neatly onto another, forcing bilinguals to understand context and nuance: a habit of mind that could make them more adept at understanding nuanced political arguments or different cultural perspectives, which is crucial for efficient diplomatic negotiations and conflict resolution (Fisher et al., 1991; Jost et al., 2003; Cummins, 2007; Fan et al., 2015; Lehtonen et al., 2018).

However, cognitive modulation via FLL can have considerable complexities. The emotional distance established by a foreign language might diminish empathic emotional responses that are sometimes necessary for a moral motivation, as in many instances rationality of utilitarian calculus can lead to the adoption of harsh policies if they appear to serve a greater good in the long run, irrespectively to the immediate suffering they could inflict (Greene, 2014; Geipel et al., 2015; Del Maschio et al., 2022). This shift does not imply that foreign-language users change their underlying moral principles. Rather, the language of reasoning modulates the salience of competing evaluative pathways. The foreign-language context reduces immediate emotional interference and allows cost–benefit reasoning to dominate, thereby increasing utilitarian choices in high-stakes dilemmas. The latter clearly demonstrates that linguistic context is not merely a channel of communication but an integral component of the cognitive and affective system through which political and moral judgments are formed.

In international bodies like the United Nations or European Union, deliberations often occur in second or third languages for many participants. While the foreign-language effect makes those discussions more analytical and less impeded by each nation’s emotional idioms, it limits the effective participation in debates to those comfortable in multiple languages, effectively constraining multilingual political discourse to linguistically functional elites (Elster, 1998; Gazzola, 2006; Nic Craith, 2006; Wodak, 2009; Keysar et al., 2012). Thus, by reducing broader public participation, this effect adds to the perceptions of democratic deficit, especially acute in the context of the EU political process (Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Phillipson, 2006; Kraus, 2008; Van Parijs, 2011; Gazzola, 2014).

Access to Information: One of the most immediate effects of expanded foreign-language competence is widening of informational access. Proficiency in new language is the key to unlocking content from news sources that were previously inaccessible. At the individual level, this can significantly broaden individual political horizons, especially when it comes to globally spread languages, which provide access to global news and online discussions. Therefore, FLL can reduce informational asymmetry as learners are no longer confined to the narratives and knowledge circulated in their mother tongue. This often includes uncensored or alternative perspectives on domestic affairs, fostering critical and informed citizenship sharing stronger support for democratic values and liberal norms across numerous countries (Norris, 2000; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Curran et al., 2009; Van Parijs, 2011; Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Fidrmuc and Fidrmuc, 2016).

This effect surpasses English as global language since alternative internationally spoken options encapsulate distinct intellectual histories and media ecosystems. For instance, Arabic or French provide access to specific discourse in the Middle East and Africa, articulating political narratives that are absent in globalized English-based outlets. Such diversification promotes cosmopolitan communication

even further, limiting susceptibility to one-dimensional flows and developing a more nuanced understanding of international affairs, effectively bridging societies in multidirectional transmission of political ideas and patterns of participation (Curran and Park, 2000; Lynch, 2006; Norris and Inglehart, 2009; Beck and Cronin, 2010; Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Chalaby, 2019).

These informational benefits are unevenly distributed, however, potentially creating or reinforcing informational disparities between linguistically enabled elites and the rest of the population. In premodern settings, instead of enriching public debates by importing ideas, these elites take advantage from their discretionary control over the transmission, interpretation, and filtering of information to maintain and expand their own importance as intermediaries and to maximize their profit. The dragomans in the Ottoman empire are a clear example for such caste, which misused its role of linguistic intermediary for the sake of its narrow group interest, often counterweighing the interest of the empire itself (Bourdieu, 1991; Haas, 1992; Kraus, 2008; Findley, 2012; Rothman, 2014). Thus, while FLL enhances overall informational access, it also reaps informational disparities, translating into political influence.

Identity Formation: As a carrier of cultural values and group memberships, FLL can reshape the way individuals define their belonging in the socio-political world. At the individual level, this is expressed in the formation of dual or hybrid identity, as the learner starts to identify not only with their native language community but also with the cultures associated with the new language. Psycholinguistic studies show that bilingual individuals tend to report feelings of “a different person” when speaking the second language, as the different context evokes different norms and social roles (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2006; Kramsch, 2010; Grosjean, 2012; Dewaele, 2013). This process is sometimes intentional and even wishful as some learners invest in a new language with the hope of gaining access to communities of practice and imagined identities associated with that language (Wenger, 1999; Ushioda, 2010; Norton and Toohey, 2011). Such aspirations can influence their political attitudes, making them more receptive to mainstream ideas shaping political cultures associated with these languages like freedom equality and democracy.

As it happens, such cultures go beyond national borders in forming broader transnational communities with shared values and identities (Nye and Keohane, 1971; Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1996; Delanty, 2009; Blommaert, 2010; Chalaby, 2019). Consequently, these identity shifts can alter loyalty and affinity patterns expressed in greater solidarity with foreign populations and potentially becoming more critical of localistic or xenophobic politics. In colonial and post-colonial contexts, language learning was explicitly political. Local elites educated in the metropolis language (English, French, Spanish, Russian, etc.) often formed a distinct identity group, sometimes torn between loyalty to the imperial power and nationalist feelings. In some cases, this bilingual elite became leaders of

independence movements, using the colonizer's language as a tool for anti-colonial politics, yet also grappling with their dual cultural identity.

At the societal level, widespread FLL can reconfigure group identities and social cleavages. FLL introduced into an education system can produce language cohorts that share certain worldviews. A generational shift in the specific language being taught can provoke and shape a reorientation of divergent national identity towards alternative development models, producing new generations perceiving themselves as fundamentally different from their parents' generations, turning language policies into statements of identity politics and symbolism. Thus, FLL at the macro-level can facilitate identity realignment of entire nations or social strata. New linguistic capital can empower certain ethnic or social groups while marginalizing others, which can in turn influence voting patterns, party politics, or even secessionist tendencies (as language-based identities often overlap with political movements).

It is important to note that identity changes from FLL can be double-edged. On one hand, adopting a lingua franca can foster inclusion in global or regional governance. On the other hand, it can threaten local identities and provoke backlash. Political behavior often reflects this ambivalence. Those who embrace the new language might champion more internationalist policies, whereas those who feel their mother tongue or heritage is devalued may mobilize nationalist or protectionist sentiment. In contemporary debates, the rise of English in business and academia has led to concerns about erosion of national language and identity, fueling movements to protect the native language. The conceptualization of FLL as a powerful modulator of identity politics, hence, makes it instrumental in the competition between global powers shaping spheres of influence and segmentation even in the globalized world and the connectivity of modern technology. Its origins, however, can be traced back in history even to ancient times, contributing to critical conjunctures that led to the formation of the present world as it is. We now turn to just several cases among many, illustrating how FLL-mediated changes in information, identity, and cognition have played crucial transformative roles in concrete political contexts.

Cases of Political Change Driven by FLL

Francophone Elites Modernizing the Ottoman Empire: The late Ottoman Empire provides a clear example of foreign-language learning acting as a catalyst of political change. For centuries, the Ottoman language (Turko-Persian) had dominated the administration and high culture. Starting in the late 18th and accelerating in the 19th century, the elite of the empire progressively studied French (Fortna, 2003; Zürcher, 2004; Hanioglu, 2008; Findley, 2012; Rothman, 2014). This shift was part of a broader process of Westernization and reform, culminating the Tanzimat era, 1839 – 1876, during which the empire sought to modernize its institutions in an attempt to stave off decline.

At that time, apart from being the language of diplomacy, French was the carrier of liberal ideas and revolutionary ideologies, granting access to the vast corpus of European Enlightenment thought, science, and political theory. Visionaries, like architect of the Tanzimat - Mustafa Reşid Pasha, were heavily influenced by the works of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Condorcet, Voltaire among others in inspiring the promotion of constitutional and administrative reforms. French press and periodicals brought to the francophone elite the latest scientific discoveries, ideas, and debates on popular governance, gaining momentum with the revolutions of 1848. Simultaneously, domestic periodicals in French like the *Journal de Constantinople* were the transmitters of local developments to the rest of the world (Çelik, 1993; Koloğlu, 1994; Fortna, 2003; Zürcher, 2004; Hanioglu, 2008; Findley, 2012). Furthermore, laws and official gazettes were published in French alongside Turkish as a standard, reaching European audiences and signaling the Empire's prospects for reforms. Some crucial documents such as the Ottoman Reform Edict of 1856 and even the first Ottoman constitution of 1876 were drafted or first published in French, underscoring how deeply these informational inputs had influenced national political developments (Shaw and Shaw, 1977; Zürcher, 2004; Hanioglu, 2008), and in practical terms, established French as the gateway to modernity for peoples inhabiting the late Ottoman Empire.

Learning French effectively promoted new ways of reasoning about state and society in purely cognitive terms, since French intellectual tradition at the time prized secular rationality and legal egalitarianism, sharply contrasting with the Ottoman traditional mindset rooted in Orientalism and Islamic law. French-speaking reformers internalized concepts like citizen, nation, or constitution, which did not have exact equivalents in Ottoman Turkish of the time and arguably shifted cognitive frames from loyal subjects to the sultan, towards legally equal citizens with granted political rights.

Starting with dragomans and diplomacy, the later spread of French learning among the elites gradually reconfigured their identities, traditionally tied to religion by large. The emergent Europeanized and secular new Ottoman identity, often referred to as *Osmanlılık* (Ottomanism), emphasized a shared civic identity over religious diversity and contradictions. By the beginning of 20th century, a knowledge of French became a status marker of the "modern" Ottoman citizen and at least in Istanbul most of the official circles spoke French, cutting across ethnic lines (Çelik, 1993; Kayali, 1997; Fortna, 2003; Hanioglu, 2008; Rothman, 2014). In fact, the two major factions opposing the Sultan's autocratic rule – the Young Turks (mostly officers and intellectuals) and the Armenian constitutionalists – both used French to coordinate and spread their ideas (Suny, 1993; Koloğlu, 1994; Kayali, 1997; Hanioglu, 2008; Rothman, 2014). Thus, a francophone imagined community of reformists emerged, united not by ethnicity or religion but by language and a vision of a Europeanized polity in line with liberal trends in politics, advocating

for constitutional government, equality of citizens, and scientific progress, in conscious emulation of French and generally European models of modernization, clashing conservative factions and the largely traditionalist masses. In sociological terms, francophone linguistic capital granted its possessors access to international support and the prestige of European culture, bolstering their political claims, but at the expense of an identity gap with ordinary people prone to the Islamic-Ottoman tradition. This tension would later surface in a nationalist drift, which revolted against liberal cosmopolitanism in favor of a more populist, Turkish-language-based identity. The latter could be attributed to the uneven distribution of the linguistic capital, which raised concerns with legitimacy not only of the reforms, but of their promoting elites as well. Nonetheless, the Ottoman case demonstrates the power of foreign-language learning as a driver of political modernization led by elites.

Role of FLL in Post-War Democratic Realignment: After World War II, English rapidly ascended to the position of global lingua franca, profoundly affecting political alignments and behavior, especially in Europe and parts of Asia. It replaced French as the most spread language of international politics as a direct geopolitical outcome of the war with the United States emerging as a superpower and the British colonial authority still intact in many regions.

In war-torn Europe, under the American-led Marshall Plan and subsequent Cold War programs, learning English became tantamount to plugging into the mainframe of reconstruction and democratization. The formation of the United Nations (1945) and NATO (1949) established English as a primary working language of the new international order and diplomacy: for instance, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 had been bilingual, but by 1945 – 1946, most international conferences and treaties were primarily in English (Milward, 1984; Hobsbawm, 1996; Gaddis, 2005; Mazower, 2013; Phillipson, 2014). In US occupied territories of Germany and Japan, English teaching was promoted at the school level as part of democratization reforms. Outside the communist bloc, it quickly became essential in graduate studies as the latest scientific advancements were now mostly published in English. The United States Information Service provided English-language materials to millions, facilitating libraries and cultural centers across the Western world, exposing its populations to democratic ideas, capitalist economics, global liberal discourse, and accelerating their integration into the international order led by the US. In brief time, a wide spread of considerable English proficiency was achieved, granting the affected societies unprecedented access to information and knowledge for multispectral reconstruction, democratic consolidation, and general liberalization.

These processes led to the formation of a common supranational identity denoted as the Western Civilization, embracing shared principles and conceptions for development. This identity substituted the mainly nationalistic and ethnocentric pre-war European identities and introduced connected vocabulary, essentially

based on English as a common language. Learning English in the Western countries became more than a practical skill, but a statement of belonging to the modern free world as opposed to the Soviet bloc. American cultural exports of the sound recording and cinematographic industries inundated Europe heavily influencing youth, with casual English even before formal instruction, framing it more like a second national instead of just foreign language.

This process resulted in a subtle and sustainable shift in identity. The new generation of Western Europeans socialized in the 1950s–60s identified with a transatlantic culture championing freedom and consumer prosperity, differentiating from the older generations of the interwar period. Politically, this contributed to much stronger and sincere pro-American and pro-democratic sentiments, opening the door for the upcoming globalization. Asia, while contextually different, exhibited a common thread of English-learning as factor fostering cosmopolitan, outward-looking identities in the post-WWII generations.

The spread of English brought about changes in political communication and attitudes, as well. Its consolidation as the default language for scientific discourse and managerial practices arguably introduced a more pragmatic and technocratic mindset into European governance, resulting in a more empirical and problem-solving approach to politics (contrasting with the ideology-driven one of the interwar period). The very lexicon of post-war development and governance often entered other languages via English, carrying conceptual approaches with them. On the individual level, the adoption of a “universalistic” frame brought a certain detachment from local ethnic or historical feuds encouraging more impartial and rational dialogue (Milward, 1984; Delanty, 2009; Van Parijs, 2011).

The European Union’s decision-making process is an eloquent example. Even though the EU has twenty-four official and three working languages, English gradually became dominant in many committees and general meetings by the 1990s. Negotiating in English often forced nonnative speakers to articulate positions in more clear and rational way, reducing the emotional weight as compared to their mother tongue in similar context, creating a specific technocratic mode of public speech that was later introduced at the national level in the member states thus penetrating national political traditions to an extent, that could be now described as an Europeanization of public speech (Gazzola, 2006; Saurugger and Radaelli, 2008; Wodak, 2009).

Nevertheless, not all effects were positive, as the ambivalence of FLL appeared in the form of new inequalities and cultural tensions. English fluency often correlated with higher socioeconomic status, creating a form of new social divide. While elites conversed in English at international meetings, domestic politics still had to be translated back to the vernacular for the public, sometimes making international agreements suspect at home. Similarly, attempts to broaden English education and import American practices in Japan

were met with concerns about losing local uniqueness. Thus, while English FLL undeniably facilitated a pro-democratic, internationally cooperative shift at the broad level, it also introduced a subtle layer of technocracy and elitism in participation. Political behavior in this period showed high voter trust in pro-Western leaders but as more people learned English and became informed, civil society also began to assert itself, showing that language could empower dissent as well. The overall effect of post-WWII spread of English was to enhance democratic capacities but its dominance also concentrated soft power in the hands of its native speakers and those who mastered it, a point we will revisit regarding conceptual influence and distortion.

The Post-Communist Shift from Russian to English: The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc in 1989 – 1991 triggered one of the most rapid and consequential foreign-language learning shifts in modern history. Since Russian was the imposed lingua franca across the region during the Cold War and its knowledge a marker of loyalty, essential for upward social mobility, the fall of communism provoked an almost immediate repudiation of Russian-learning and a turn towards English as the preferred second language.

This linguistic pivot had profound political meaning. Under Soviet influence, Eastern European citizens had been largely confined to their own local languages and Russian-language media spreading state-controlled propaganda. With the end of communist censorship, large masses of people, especially youth, eagerly enrolled in English language classes. In Hungary, for instance, Russian was removed from the compulsory curriculum in 1990, marked by students' celebrations in the streets (Verdery, 1996; Extra, 2001; Grenoble, 2003; Pavlenko, 2008; Kontra, 2025). The “linguistic vacuum” that followed was quickly filled by English across Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Baltics, and later other ex-Soviet states, reflecting the orientation toward the West and America (Verdery, 1996; Neustupný and Nekvapil, 2003; Phillipson, 2006; Hogan-Brun et al., 2008; Pavlenko, 2011). Within a few years, a massive portion of the population could directly access Western newspapers, literature and eventually the internet, which by the mid-nineties was largely English based.

The result was a dramatic expansion of informational access to liberal democratic ideas and practical knowledge. Transitioning politicians and activists learned from Western experiences; emerging civil society groups connected with international NGOs without a language barrier. Crucially, removing Russian curbed the influence of Soviet media and disinformation in those societies, at least for a time. Language policy was thus both symbol and instrument of geopolitical reorientation. Throughout the whole region, the turn away from the East and toward the West is most substantively manifested by the turning away from Russian and toward English (Howard, 2003; Hogan-Brun, 2005; Phillipson, 2006; Pavlenko, 2008; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Voltmer, 2013).

The post-communist language shift was an overt exercise in identity reconfiguration. Russian had been perceived as an expression of the Soviet domination – “the language of oppression” (Brubaker, 1996; Verdery, 1996; Grenoble, 2003; Phillipson, 2006; Hogan-Brun et al., 2008; Pavlenko, 2008). Abandoning it was a way for these nations to reclaim and assert their independence. Replacing Russian with English signified their aspirations of rejoining the European political family and the Western civilization in general, especially in Poland and the Baltic states. As younger generations across the region became accustomed to English, their European identity solidified, which facilitated the large popular approval of NATO and EU accession (1999 – 2007) as a macropolitical process.

The gradual restoration of the ambitions of the Russian Federation to regain influence and control in the region, especially following the 2008 global financial crisis, which strongly affected the EU’s economic capacities and potential to withstand its power positions in the global competition, was paralleled by an increased interest in Russian language learning. Chinese also appeared as an available option not only through the expanding network of Confucius institutes in the CEE countries, but also in growing number of high schools and university programs. Once again, FLL became an expression, but also a carrier of identity cleavages, contributing to a divide that later became politically salient.

The versatility of foreign language learning options and the growing need of learning at least two for those seeking a competitive advantage at the labor market produced a considerable cognitive/attitudinal impact on how people thought about politics and engaged in civic life. The cognitive shift to pragmatic problem-solving and institutional design, as opposed to the dogmatic rhetoric of the communist past, was accompanied by higher predispositions to pluralism and trust in international institutions. Learning more than one new language, especially embedded in distinct civilizational and cultural frameworks, fosters a certain adaptive mindset and openness to change. Navigating the ambiguity of translation and appreciating different expressions for concepts provide the flexibility of thinking, necessary for proactive political participation.

This grand linguistic shift catalyzed the integration of Eastern European countries with the West by building democratic systems at a pace that surpassed many expectations. It facilitated the entry of Western advisors, the flow of aid, and the education of tens of thousands of students from the region in Western universities. Those returning home often became leaders and reformers, further entrenching democratic consolidation in their communities. However, the late 2000s already demonstrated inherent backlashes from marginalized segments that felt left behind and excluded from the new prosperity. Within a decade, political entrepreneurs exploited this tendency, portraying the English-framed and EU-oriented elite as out-of-touch, fueling a populist reaction (Orenstein, 2001; King, 2002; Vachudova, 2005; Favell, 2008; Kriesi, 2008; Van Parijs, 2011).

In sum, the post-communist example vividly demonstrates FLL as a lever of political transformation that opened Eastern Europe to global knowledge and aligned their information space with the democratic world. It enabled these nations to redefine themselves as part of the West, facilitating the largely successful democratization of the whole region.

The Digital Era Lingua Franca

The exponential proliferation of the internet and digital communication in recent years has elevated English to an unprecedented status as a culmination of the historical trends discussed above, but to a certain extent it presents new dynamics related to the ambivalence of FLL's impact on democratic quality. At present, English is already unavoidable in online content and platforms, ranging from social media to academic publishing, making its proficiency virtually a necessity for a fully-fledged participation in the global digital society (Norris, 2001; Swaan, 2001; Crystal, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011; Ammon, 2012; Couldry and Hepp, 2016). This new role magnifies the stakes of the three mediational mechanisms and introduces the concern of conceptual dilution regarding the meaning of complex ideas such as democracy, when used in a globally universal setting, presupposed by the universality of the language as a driver.

On one hand, more people than ever are acquiring basic English skills because usage of modern technologies incentivizes it. Even a rudimentary ability to read English allows one to use computers and smart devices and although language interface packages are growingly available, certain English vocabulary and usage habits have already been rooted deeply in the modern information society. The abundance of available information and the constantly minimizing costs of access have created an unparalleled global public sphere of political deliberation, empowering citizens worldwide to learn and participate in rapidly universalizing democratic practices. On the other hand, the cost of this universalization is deflation of the core meaning of democracy and a subtle replacement of democratic processes with abstract and mimics. Paradoxically, growing eagerness for active participation in protest demonstrations and other forms of collective action becomes a trendy behavior substituting the expression of articulated civil positions. Instead of fostering nuanced debate, the expanding general use of English simplifies and flattens conceptual understandings of democratic attributes, stripping their deeper and culturally specific meanings undermining both local democratic practices and the integrity of global civic engagement, which opens the door for miscommunication and manipulation (Crystal, 2003; Crouch, 2004; Warschauer, 2004; Tarrow, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2015; Mair, 2023).

As online communication often happens in a simplified register of the language, sometimes referred to as "Globish," which maintains mutual understanding among

non-native speakers, limited vocabulary flattens expression, making discussions superfluous and mechanical, with effort concentrated on mastering the jargon instead of communicating values (Nerrière and Hon, 2009; Crystal, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2013; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014; Jenkins, 2015). The exponential expansion of automated translation based on large language models (translation algorithms or AI chatbots) catalyzes this process even further. Not surprisingly, authoritarian regimes and kleptocracies have exploited this tendency in constructing the contemporary representation of façade democracies worldwide. Since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, this phenomenon is gradually projecting in the field of intergovernmental relations and in effect, core democratic concepts (legitimacy, sovereignty, justice etc.) are articulated in increasingly cynical manner by growing number of international players (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Woolley and Howard, 2018; Koehn, 2020; Bender et al., 2021; Pomerantsev, 2025).

At the individual level, the digital lingua franca environment has produced what some call networked individualism, where a person's identity is less tied to their immediate community and more to thematic networks of primary interest. It has fostered a global civic consciousness on issues like climate change, human rights, and inequality, that can be empowering for swift formation of global action coalitions but also weakening for traditional forms of civic engagement and diluting local democratic cultures in parallel with the rapid internationalization of extremist narratives.

Conclusion

This article has argued that foreign-language learning should be treated not as an auxiliary social skill or a neutral instrument of communication, but as a structurally consequential mechanism through which political behavior is shaped across individual and societal systemic levels. The analytical leverage of this claim lies in reconceptualizing language acquisition as a form of mediation rather than transmission of political meaning and ideas. It reconfigures the cognitive architecture through which such ideas are processed, the informational environment in which they circulate and the identities through which political allegiance and meaning are constituted. Taken together, these effects position foreign-language learning as a latent but powerful driver of political transformation.

At the cognitive level, operating in a non-native language alters the balance between affective intuition and analytical deliberation, which does not amount to a transformation of moral values themselves, but to a systematic recalibration of how competing evaluative pathways are activated. In political terms, such modulation has ambivalent consequences. It enhances compromise and technocratic problem-solving, particularly in multilingual institutional settings in parallel to the attenuation of emotional resonance and risks legitimizing decisions that are procedurally rational yet socially alienating or ethically abrasive. The mechanism therefore does

not inherently democratize political judgment, but conditions the style of reasoning through which political choices are made, effectively redistributing moral salience rather than redefining moral substance.

Although historically its expansion has facilitated modernization and democratization and even led to geopolitical realignment by opening domestic publics to external ideas and practices, most of these benefits came at the expense of new asymmetries. Linguistic capital concentrates informational power in the hands of those capable of navigating transnational discourses, transforming them into modern “dragomans” not only translating messages, but intermediating between communities and effectively – setting agendas. As our historical examples have demonstrated, such asymmetries can initially accelerate reform but could later provoke crises of legitimacy or populist backlashes as linguistic advantages quickly foster durable social hierarchies, integrated and amplified by anchoring cognition and information within durable frameworks of belonging.

The resulting identity realignments explain why FLL repeatedly appears at critical junctures of political transformation throughout history. These mechanisms rarely operate in isolation, but reinforce one another, producing cumulative political effects that function both as catalysts and carriers of broader structural change. It must be underlined however, that these outcomes are contingent rather than deterministic. The same linguistic shift that empowers reformist elites and democratization could later undermine their legitimacy, facilitating technocratic exclusion or cultural homogenization.

The contemporary digital revolution introduces a qualitatively new stage of the modulation effects as the unprecedented dominance of a single global language in online communication has magnified the reach of linguistic mediation in political participation. In this context, foreign-language proficiency no longer guarantees deeper political understanding, but instead facilitates participation in flattened discourses which are easily instrumentalized. Ironically, the same linguistic infrastructure that enables global civic mobilization also enables the rapid diffusion of propaganda and performative dissent, effectively resulting in an epidemic spread of façade democracies with technologically manipulated public spheres.

The central implication of our analysis is therefore that FLL as a modulator is not inherently democratizing, but that it is structurally consequential and normatively indeterminate. Its political effects depend on how linguistic capital is institutionally distributed and embedded within broader social structures. Its conventional treatment as a politically neutral educational activity obscures its substantial role in redistributing power precisely by modulating and reshaping identities and judgment, in scale and magnitude comparable to the teaching of History. Therefore, its proper recognition as a strong political mediator opens analytical space for more deliberate language policies and educational strategies that mitigate exclusion while preserving the cognitive and informational gains of multilingualism. Our appeal is

therefore for a policy-research agenda that moves beyond instrumental views of language acquisition and confronts its constitutive role in the formation of political order in contemporary world.

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