

If language policy issues are explosive, how should they best be handled?

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In the institutions of the European Union (EU) certain national languages function as official and working languages. One might assume that the management of multilingualism is unproblematical when the EU is explicitly committed to linguistic diversity and to the equality of EU languages. The reality, however, is rather more complex. Language policies tend to be covert, and the complexity of operating with 11 languages, soon to be 20, is immense. Pragmatic concerns such as the availability and quality of translations and interpretation loom large. More seriously, there has been little effort to explore how far existing language policies affect fundamental issues like language rights, efficiency of communication, and the implications of a hierarchy of languages.

Politicians, the users of the language services, appreciate that much is at stake, and know that language policy is politically sensitive. At a meeting of the members of the European Parliament from France, held on 11 June 2003 to discuss the *Rapport sur la diversité linguistique au sein de l'Union européenne*, prepared by Michel Herbillon, the president of the group, Pierre Lequiller, stated that language policy is an 'explosive' topic.

In the academic world, assessments of the management of linguistic diversity in the EU vary considerably, but some scholars are convinced that all the measures and rhetoric aimed at maintaining multilingualism merely serve to strengthen English:

No-one is fooled by fiery declarations in favour of multilingualism, which is nothing but a smoke screen for the spread of English (*Robert Chaudenson*, influential French linguist, Director of the Institut de la Francophonie)¹.

The European Union: the more languages, the more English (*Abram de Swaan*, Dutch political scientist who has elaborated a theory of the global language system)².

NGOs in several countries are worried about the way English is invading territory traditionally occupied by French, German and other languages. Some French NGOs (Le droit de Comprendre, Groupement d'associations pour l'action, Avenir de la langue française, Association pour la sauvegarde et l'expansion de la langue française, Défense de la langue française, Résistance à l'agression publicitaire) wrote to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, chair of the European Convention on the Future of the Union (the body preparing a draft Constitutional Treaty) on 5 June 2003 to plead with it to take up language policy issues, and declared:

Our political authorities have been silent about a fundamental element of the culture and identity of our peoples, namely the issue of languages. This vacant territory has been taken over by the eurocrats of the Commission and the Commissioners, who are seeking to impose a choice of languages without having consulted either the citizens or their representatives. What they have chosen has obviously been English, the sole language for 'Europe'.

On the European Day of Languages, 26th September 2003, a similar appeal was sent to the Convention by NGOs from a wide range of countries: 'Europe will be multilingual or not at all.'

¹ Robert Chaudenson 2003. Geolinguistics, geopolitics, geostrategy: The case for French. In Jacques Maurais & Michael A. Morris, eds. *Languages in a globalising world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 291-297.

² Abram De Swaan 2001. *Words of the world. The global language system*. Cambridge: Polity, heading of chapter 8.

We call on the citizens of non-anglophone countries to galvanise as much political influence as possible in order to combat the evolution of Europe towards unilingualism. The self-colonisation currently taking place undermines the values of equality and equal dignity.'

Yet another instance of grassroots pressure being applied to political leaders is the approach to the Convention by the Europa Diversa group in Barcelona, whose carefully worded text makes specific proposals for how the explosive issue might be addressed³. This is an extremely constructive document that essentially makes three sets of proposals:

- ?? they specifically draft two clauses that would serve to strengthen cultural and linguistic diversity in the EU Treaty, they propose EU Actions to promote linguistic diversity, they recommend extending EU language programmes to all autochthonous languages, and they urge the instigation of public debate on reform of the rules for language use in EU institutions.
- ?? They recommend that each EU institution should be entitled to decide on appropriate language policies (for instance flexibility in arranging asymmetrical production and reception in interpretation when appropriate) provided that the policies respect treaty-enshrined criteria of legal certainty, and principles of accessibility to the citizen, and democratic choice.
- ?? They distinguish between three main types of language use: internal working languages for use by employees of EU institutions (who can be expected to function multilingually), binding documents and political representation (where it is imperative that all official languages are used), and languages of service to the citizens of Europe (where a much wider range of languages should be permitted for interaction between citizens and EU institutions).

The Convention did not react to any of these proposals.

There is evidently also concern about linguistic inequality at the highest political level in Spain. The banner headline at the photo opportunity for European leaders after the Copenhagen summit in December 2002, at which the conditions for accepting new member states were negotiated, was 'One Europe' - in one language. This slogan was peculiarly appropriate in ways that the Danish hosts did not intend, because all the negotiations with the potential member states, including the mountains of paper work, took place in one language, namely English. Even with countries where German has traditionally been strong, like the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. It is also worth recalling that German is the mother tongue of nearly a quarter of EU citizens, English of only 16%. The Spanish Foreign Secretary, Ana Palacio, wrote in *El País*, on 16 December 2002:

The motto 'One Europe', solely in English, requires a reflection. Even though Copenhagen did not face the question of languages, this is one of the pending subjects that sooner rather than later must be debated for the very survival and viability of this project of Europe with a world vocation. Within it, Spanish, one of the official UN languages, spoken by more than 400 million people in more than 20 countries, must take on the place it is entitled to.

She did not specify what its rightful place should be, nor could she, since this has never been clarified. Until the 1970s, despite the myth of the equality of EU languages, French was *primus inter pares*. Since that time, English has been progressively elbowing French out of that position, to the point where two-thirds of draft EU documents are now initially prepared in English. But analysis of how multilingualism ought to be tackled at the supranational level is politically sensitive, as any number of minor political crises have shown (see examples in Phillipson 2003).

All of Europe is experiencing an intensive phase of integration and Englishisation. In the nests of continental European languages English is a linguistic cuckoo, taking over space occupied earlier by other languages in the domains of science, business, higher education, the media,

³ <http://www.lingupax.org>.

and popular culture. New patterns of communication are forming, as policies on the economy, military and foreign affairs, trade, agriculture, the environment, and countless other domains evolve under the pressures of globalisation, new technology, and European integration. In the EU the privileged place of French at the pinnacle of the EU linguistic hierarchy is being taken over by English. English is being marketed as the solution to all of Europe's communication problems. This is occurring:

- in *political discourse*: 'English is the world's lingua franca' Lord Renton, House of Lords, 14.10.2002, echoing a widespread mantra, but since three-quarters of humanity have no command of this language, they are evidently not regarded as needing a lingua franca;
- in *academic discourse*: English is 'the language of the proto-European state', Laitin and Reich⁴, 'the lingua franca of the European Union', Abram de Swaan, who cannot be unaware that there are many lingua francas in the EU⁵;
- in *international cultural diplomacy*: 'English no longer belongs to the English-speaking nations but to everyone', the British Council⁶, a claim that conveniently ignores British benefits, political, economic and cultural, when its language also happens to be the language of the only super-power in the contemporary world;
- in *applied linguistics*, 'The ascendancy of English is merely the outcome of the coincidence of accidental forces', Bob Kaplan of the US, whose wisdom and insights into language planning and language policy are disseminated in a string of books⁷;
- in rather undiplomatic *diplomacy*, 'The most serious problem for the European Union is that it has so many languages, this preventing real integration and development of the Union.' The ambassador of the USA to Denmark, Mr Elton, 1997;
- in more blatant *linguistic imperialism*, 'English should be the sole official language of the European Union.' Director, British Council, Germany, cited in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 February 2002.

There are many factors that account for paralysis in EU language policy formation:

- *different cosmologies* in national linguistic cultures,
- *confusions of terminology*, for instance such terms as lingua franca, multilingualism, and working language being used in different senses in political and media discourse,
- *linguistic human rights* are a recent development in international law,
- *criteria* for guiding equitable supranational language policy are under-explored,
- *EU institutions are inconsistent* in living up to the ideals of multilingual equality both in communications between Brussels and member states, for instance EU websites typically have all information in English, much in French, and little in other languages,
- *overall responsibility* for language policy in the EU is fragmented: it is a primary responsibility of each member states, rules of procedure are made in the Parliament, by the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, language policy is a concern of the Directorates-General for Education and Culture, for Translation, and for Interpretation (the EU translation and interpretation services are impressive in many respects, but subject to an economic rationale, and see themselves as a service function rather than policy-making, and are detached from international research),
- *alternatives* to linguistic nationalism and market forces have not been explored, e.g. studies of the comparative advantage of English in the European linguistic market, or the potential of Esperanto as a pivot language in interpretation and translation,
- *power politics* and economics are ultimately what is decisive.

⁴ Laitin, David D. and Robert Reich 2003. A liberal democratic approach to language justice. In *Language rights and political theory*, ed. Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten, Oxford: oxford University Press, 80-104.

⁵ de Swaan, op.cit., 174.

⁶ This refrain occurs frequently in the discourse of senior staff.

⁷ Robert B. Kaplan 2001. English – the accidental language of science? In *The dominance of English as a language of science. Effects on other languages and language communities*, Ulrich Ammon (ed.). Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 3-26.

Serious exploration of these issues requires book-length treatment⁸ (Phillipson 2003), so that all that can be attempted here is a few emblematic examples.

The different national language ideologies and conceptual universes that underpin the way we see national languages and affect the way we describe them derive from quite distinct traditions, on the one hand the national romantic tradition, *jus sanguinis*, based on the ideas of thinkers like Herder in Germany and Grundtvig in Denmark, and on the other the rationalist republican tradition, *jus soli*, citizenship, as in France since the Revolution. These inevitably affect levels of awareness about language policy issues and bi-/multilingualism between and within each EU country.

There is a good deal of conceptual muddle in many references to language policy. Thus English is often seen and described as a *lingua franca*. However, this should not mislead one into believing that English is disconnected from the many 'special purposes' it serves in key societal domains, and where it might be more accurately described as a *lingua economica* (in business and advertising), a *lingua academica* (in research and higher education), or a *lingua cultura* (in Hollywood entertainment, and as a school subject). The ubiquitous function of English as a *lingua americana* is due to the massive economic and cultural impact of the USA, and English as a *lingua bellica* and empire increasingly visible. There are clear ideological dangers in labelling English as a lingua franca if this is understood as a culturally neutral medium that puts everyone on an equal footing. In addition it is a dangerous term if the language in question is a first language for some people but for others a foreign language. It is also a quite false term to refer to a language that is taught as part of general education, which must be concerned with cultural norms. Ironically there is a remarkable historical continuity in the way a term that originally derived from Arabic and was used to refer to the language of the invading Crusaders, who were all seen as Franks (*lisan alfiranj*) seeking to recover the Holy Land from the infidel, and that currently is often attached to English as the language of the crusade of global corporatisation (marketed as freedom and democracy), and which is engaged in an epic confrontation with Islam in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are also clear continuities in the way dominant languages have been legitimated over the centuries and which serve as mythologies of the unfree linguistic market. This is epitomised in Rivarol's memorable pithy 'Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français' (1782, in his prize-winning essay for the Académie de Berlin), signifying that in an intrinsically superior language, imprecision is impossible whereas it is true of all other languages. This was transmogrified in the postcolonial age, when western governments were seeking to maintain their economic dominance, into 'Là ou on parle français on achète français', with English being marketed in comparable terms, with trade following the flag⁹. The French government has protested for a decade about the inappropriacy of 'bad' English when used as a second language: 'Ce qui n'est pas clair, c'est l'anglais international.' The French government has also tended to have a very selective view of language rights, attempting to fit national and supranational norms within a French national agenda, as is frankly admitted by Yves Marek, counsellor to Jacques Toubon, Minister of Culture and Francophonie, and later of Justice, 1996 'in the field of linguistic rights, like in other fields of human rights, there is no right but only ... politics'¹⁰

I would not wish to single out the French for particular opprobrium. They merely tend to be more explicit about language policy agendas than other governments. They are also aware that they are fighting a rearguard battle to retain French at or near the top of the EU hierarchy of languages, a task that is becoming progressively more difficult. This can be seen in the recent experience of three French members of the European Parliament¹¹. They tabled a motion on a financial topic not in French but in English: 'What was at stake was too important. We had to shift to English in order to be heard'. Specifically the issue was the words 'standard' (in French =

⁸ Robert Phillipson 2003. *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London: Routledge.

⁹ See Robert Phillipson 1992. *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, especially chapter 9 on arguments in linguistic dominance.

¹⁰ See the analysis in Phillipson 2003, Box 2.5.

¹¹ Bourlanges, Herzog, Berès, reported in *Le Monde* of 17 February 2004.

normal) and 'normal'. 'The problem could only be solved by resorting to English.' - English as the default language, at least in financial affairs.

In several continental European countries there are conflicting perceptions about what is happening. On the one hand many people who are secure in their national linguistic identity (Danish, German, Swedish, ...), and who are also proficient in English, are unaware that the increased use of English is problematical or do not regard it as in any way a threat. On the other, there is increasing concern about the impact of English on national languages, and on speakers of other languages. Studies of domain loss in the Nordic languages have been published in each of the relevant languages, and confirm that there is a serious problem, hence a need for more proactive language policy formation. The overall picture has been summed up in Swedish, in a popularising form, complete with a 15-page English summary¹². As the text is a far from precise or correct translation from a Swedish source text, it ironically confirms the existence and nature of the problem of inequity in international communication.

The fact that states which traditionally have had a *laissez faire* approach to language policy are getting more involved in status planning for national and international languages is a sign that language policy is gaining a higher profile. What is problematical is that many of the pressures involved lie beyond the control of the nation-state, which may therefore be addressing symptoms rather than causes. It is likely that increasing European integration strengthens the forces of globalisation, Americanisation, and Englishisation rather than constraining them.

It goes without saying that many factors contribute to the current dominance of English. They can be broadly grouped as structural (the interlocking of English with the global economy, finance, and the military-industrial complex; British and American promotion of English; investment in the teaching of English in continental education systems, i.e. push and pull factors) and ideological (imagery of English created through the media, popular and elite culture, connotations of success, necessity etc)¹³.

Englishisation is manifestly a dimension of both Americanisation and globalisation. Americanisation has gradually gathered speed over the twentieth century, and been marketed in recent years as globalisation. This is a rubbery concept that seems to imply actions in the interests of the whole world, whereas Pierre Bourdieu points out that the reality is quite different¹⁴:

"Globalisation" serves as a password, a watchword, while in effect it is the legitimacy mask of a policy aiming to universalise particular interests and the particular tradition of the economically and politically dominant powers, above all the United States, and to extend to the entire world the economic and cultural model that favours these powers most, while simultaneously presenting it as a norm, a requirement, and a fatality, a universal destiny, in such a manner as to obtain adherence or at the least, universal resignation.

Recognition of English as a threat to the languages and cultures of member states is beginning to influence the formulation and synchronisation of language policy at the supranational level. During the 1990s EU policy-making has moved slowly into the areas of education, language and culture, along lines that the Council of Europe has been recommending for at least a decade. The Commission document *Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*, of August 2003¹⁵, is designed to curb an excessive focus on English in education systems and the wider society. It states (pp. 4 and 8): 'learning one lingua franca alone is not enough... English alone is not enough... In non-anglophone countries recent trends

¹² Renée Höglin 2002. *Engelska språket som hot och tillgång i Norden*. Copenhagen: Nordiska Ministerrådet.

¹³ For elaboration see Phillipson 2003, chapter 3.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu 2001. *Contre-feux 2. Pour un mouvement social européen*. Paris: Raisons d'agir, 84.

¹⁵ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2003) 449.

to provide teaching in English may have unforeseen consequences on the vitality of the national language.' The policy statement, which it is now up to member states to react to, advocates life-long foreign language learning, including two foreign languages in the primary school. It strives to bring language policy higher up on national agendas, and to raise awareness of linguistic diversity. It endorses the notion of an inclusive 'language-friendly environment'.

But there are major constraints that impede the formulation of language policy:

- ?? Levels of awareness about language policy issues and bi-/multilingualism range widely between and within each EU country.
- ?? There is a poor scholarly infrastructure, with masses of university posts in a language or in linguistics, but very few in sociolinguistics, multilingualism, minority languages, language planning, or language rights, and little research funding for such issues. There is also too little collaboration between sociolinguists, economists, and lawyers.
- ?? There is a poor bureaucratic infrastructure, nationally and supranationally, meaning few civil servants with appropriate qualifications.
- ?? There are unclear responsibilities at the national-supranational interface, on overall policy for languages or for language planning matters like terminology.
- ?? Coordination among national language bodies (language academies, language boards concerned with a specific language) across Europe is in its infancy.
- ?? English is a chameleon, a 'national' language and an integral element of the dominant economic system.

One of the main purposes of my book *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy* (Routledge, 2003) is therefore to clarify the nature of some of the problems, suggest criteria for guiding more equitable language policies, and how we can learn from the experience of countries that have specified the goals and assumptions of language policy. There is a need to clarify principles of linguistic human rights¹⁶, and how language rights are evolving in EU case law. We need to intensify cross-disciplinary research into the ecology of languages, into language policy and implementation, equality in communication, multilingual language pedagogy, the maintenance of diversity, and the economics of language, including the role of technology in language use and learning.

My worst-case scenario (and I elaborate this in the book) entails

- ?? domain loss and the impoverishment of continental languages, which become progressively mere second-class languages,
- ?? in international communication, 'dumbing down' is engaged in by speakers of English both as a mother tongue and as a foreign language,
- ?? the gulf between English-speaking 'haves' and non-English-speaking 'have-nots' widens, there is linguistic apartheid globally through the consolidation of what Nehru feared in India, the emergence of an English-knowing caste,
- ?? there is further elimination of multilingual diversity.

My best-case scenario entails

- ?? successful trilingual education for all,
- ?? far more people have harmonious national and supranational linguistic identities,
- ?? language policy is a high priority in all key societal domains,
- ?? there is symmetrical equitable communication nationally and supra-/internationally,

¹⁶ There is an increasing flow of potentially relevant research. Some of the conceptual issues in normative political science are being pursued, see Kymlicka, Will and Alan Patten (eds.) 2003. *Language rights and political theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Also Kymlicka, Will and François Grin 2003, *Assessing the politics of diversity in transition countries*. In *Nation building, ethnicity and language politics in transition countries*, ed. Farimah Daftary and François Grin. Budapest: Local Government and Public Service Initiative, Open Society Institute.

- ?? there is a strengthening of a balanced ecology of languages,
- ?? the reduction of English to equality¹⁷,
- ?? acting on 45 recommendations in the final chapter of Phillipson 2003 that are designed to strengthen national and supranational language policy infrastructure, multilingual policies in EU institutions, language teaching and learning, and research in these fields.

Specifically in EU institutions, my best-case scenarios would entail

- ?? strong constitutional provisions on language,
- ?? a reform of EU multilingual procedures,
- ?? Europe-wide policy elaboration, consultation, and implementation process involving
 - o clarification of criteria, goals, means, and concepts,
 - o liaison between expert and grassroots constituencies, and between supranational, national, and subnational stakeholders.

Unfortunately there is little sign of EU institutions taking a lead in exploring how the management of multilingualism can be analysed, and specific scenarios elaborated and explored. A 'Colloque sur le multilinguisme dans les Institutions Européennes et en Europe' was held in Brussels on 27-28 January 2003. It was organised by the EU Commission (General Secretariat), with the participation of the linguistic services of the Parliament, in liaison with the 'Observatoire international de la langue française' and a 'Consortium des Instituts Culturels Européens en Belgique' (bringing together the Alliance Française, British Council, Goethe Institut, Instituto Cervantes et al). The plan was for a follow-up a few months later in the European Parliament, and for the many fundamental language policy issues to be seriously addressed. In fact the only follow-up has been a record of what was said at the meeting, which was produced by one of the three organizers, the Observatoire, after half a year on 1 August 2003. The Consortium has attempted to dialogue with EU officials and take things forward, but without success.

I have a nagging worry that when the initiative is taken by those concerned with the promotion of a particular language – English, French, German, or any of the other EU languages – it is possibly a case of the language bomb manufacturers posing as guardians of a multilingual peace¹⁸, a role that employees of the language services of the EU see themselves as performing. The people working for and with multilingualism in the EU are of course totally committed to a diversity of languages, but language policy measures need to be seen in much broader terms, in relation to hierarchies of language nationally and in the global market, as well as when some of these languages interact in EU institutions.

One can compile a depressing list of neglected needs:

- ?? apart from attempting to cope with the challenge of the languages of the new member states, no EU bodies are undertaking policy analysis of multilingualism or linguistic diversity, there are no think tanks, there is no coordination of activities,
- ?? the Convention on the Future of Europe did not take up the language issues, and the provisions on language in the draft Constitutional Treaty are weak,
- ?? there is little activity at the national level to formulate international language policies, except for a continuation of nationalistic policies, where the French and the British are the most active,
- ?? there is no funding for research on the potential of Esperanto in education and/or as a bridge language in translation and interpretation,
- ?? there is little if any development work of an analytical or visionary kind.

¹⁷ This is my adaptation of Neville Alexander of South Africa's quest under apartheid to reduce Afrikaans to equality.

¹⁸ This is exactly parallel to the five permanent members of the 'Security' Council of the United Nations being the biggest manufacturers and exporters of military hardware. Put in more folk cultural terms, it is, as the Danes say, a matter of putting the fox to take care of the geese.

We are left then we a great deal of fluidity in language policy in Europe, an unresolved tension between linguistic nationalism and europeanisation, competing global and local agendas, an under-class in Fortress Europe of non-citizens with marginalised languages. There is simultaneously an increase of grassroots and elite bilingualism, but a largely uncritical adoption of English as the *lingua economica/americana*. There is a rhetoric of language rights, which could lead to a Europe in which, as the Dalai Lama puts it, 'All language communities have the right to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage'. However, as Shakespeare reminds us, 'Words are no deeds'. We need action. We need to ensure that if language policy is explosive, we bring in as many linguistic bomb disposal experts as possible. We need to create conditions for linguistic peace.