THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PREDICAMENT

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The European Union now boasts a common currency, but so far lacks a common language. In fact, there hardly is a language policy for the European Parliament, or for the Commission's bureaucracy, let alone for "l'Europe des citoyens", for civil society in the European Union. Of course, from the beginning the official languages of the member states were recognized as languages of the Community, and later of the Union. At the time, the six founding members contributed four languages: Dutch, French, German and Italian, an almost manageable number. Without much discussion, French was accepted as the working language of the Community's budding bureaucracy, as it had been the language of diplomacy until the end of World War Two and the sole language of the European Coal and Steel Community that preceded the EC. In those postwar years, the Germans and the Italians kept a low profile and the Dutch (even when counting in the Dutch-speaking Flemish of Belgium) were not numerous enough to insist much on the use of their language in the administration, moreover, beyond the Low Countries Dutch was taught hardly anywhere as a foreign language.

The first great expansion of the European Community in 1973 brought in the British, the Irish (almost all of them native English speakers), and the Danes who for the vast majority had learned English in school. In fact, English quickly became another working language of the Commission's bureaucracy and an informal lingua franca in the European Parliament. The Germans still did not much push their language and, being generally more fluent in English than in French, they may have helped to promote English[1]. Gradually, English caught up with French in the everyday dealings of the EU's officials and it now has become the most frequently used language. German comes a far third, other languages hardly play a role in day to day communication[2].

With the addition of Greece in 1981, of Portugal, and Spain in 1986, and of Austria, Finland, and Sweden in 1995, the set of official languages in the European Union grew to nine and then to eleven, a quite unwieldy number. In 2004, as Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Slowakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Malta, and Cyprus (without the Turkish controlled area) joined the Union, the number of official languages of the EU rose to 21[3]. Three other candidates may soon be admitted, Bulgaria, Romania and possibly also Croatia, all bringing their own languages with them, and Turkey, too, may well join one day. This plethora of official languages in the Union has prompted much alarm, but so far rarely any serious debate.

From the nineteen sixties on, secondary education had been rapidly expanding throughout Europe. Quite independently from one another, the member states realized sweeping reforms of their secondary school systems in order to accommodate the growing numbers of high school students. In the process, most countries reduced the number of compulsory foreign languages taught, henceforward prescribing only English, or leaving the choice entirely to the students who almost everywhere opted for English anyway[4]. As a result of the expansion of secondary education there are now more citizens in the Union who have studied one or more foreign languages than ever before. Quite a few of them speak French, German, Spanish or Italian, but of course the numbers of English students have grown most spectacularly.

The great majority of high school students in Europe studies a single foreign language, (the all-European average is 1.2) and, indeed, the one language they learn in overwhelming numbers is English[5]. According to European Union statistics, already in 1992/'93, almost ninety percent of secondary school students were taught English as a foreign language in the EU (excluding Ireland and the UK). French as a foreign language was taught to 32%, German to 19%, and Spanish to 9%. Young people (15-24 years) in the European Union, when asked (in 1997) what languages they speak well enough to carry on a conversation, mention English most often (50%), French (18%), and German (13%), another 31% answer that they do not speak any foreign language at this level of competence[6].

These young cohorts in the course of time boost the level of competence in foreign languages for the population as a whole. There is a slow but steady increase in the number of foreign language speakers in the EU. In the "old" Union of 15 members, foreign language skills are more common than among the ten new members[7]. Even so, about half of the citizens of the enlarged EU speak at least one foreign language and this percentage steadily increases. About one third of them have learned English as their foreign language.

Of the 365 million EU citizens over fifteen years of age about half now speak English as their home tongue or as a language acquired later. Apart from mother tongue speakers, German and French are spoken by 12 and 11% percent respectively, Spanish and (since the enlargement of the Union) Russian are the acquired languages of 5% each[8]. As far as number go, only German comes close to the position of English when its 71 million native speakers (over fifteen, in the federal Republic and Austria) are taken into account, bringing the total percentage of all German speakers to 32% (the corresponding proportion for French is 24%). But German is the first foreign language only in Czechia and in Hungary (ex aequo with English). Moreover, English expands much faster, since it is so widely taught in schools.

Finally, when people must decide what language to learn, they will take into account the assumed language choices of everyone else. In this respect, choosing a foreign language is much like buying a DVD-recorder or a computer operating system. Consumers will go for the standard, or in this case the language, they think most other people will prefer. Once these expectations have reached a certain "tipping" point, they tend to be self-fulfilling and self-accelerating[9]. Such mutually reinforcing expectations are quite impervious to government policy, short of massive intervention. The EU policy, which pays lip-service to the diversity of languages and the protection of the smaller idioms, is ineffective, self-contradictory and not quite sincere. In fact, it contributes to the spread of English as the vehicular language of the Union: "the more languages, the more English…". For English will increasingly appear to be the only effective means of wider communication available[10].

For the present purposes, four domains of communication are to be distinguished within the European Union. In the first place, the official, public domain: the plenary sessions of the European Parliament, the external relations of the European Commission, the meetings of the European Council in its different compositions. In these instances, the founding treaty applies, which recognizes all official languages of the member states as official languages of the Union, twenty-one at present. Moreover, the principle holds that decisions by the EU should be published in all these languages, since they directly affect the citizens of the constituent states.

In the second place, there is the domain of the Commission bureaucracy, where the officials have more or less informally adopted a few "working languages" in their everyday contacts and internal correspondence. The same applies to the preparatory commissions of the Parliament and the meetings of the parliamentary parties. The smaller the committees, the lower in the hierarchy, the fewer the languages being used and interpreted. In fact, the twenty-one official languages of the Union are used for public and ceremonial occasions and for official documents, but only two languages, English and French are used for informal communication in the corridors of Parliament and in the meeting rooms of the Commission bureaucracy (German lags far behind, in third position).

The preceding two domains both belong to the "Europe of the institutions". The next two are part of civil Europe, the "Europe of the citizens".

The third domain, is that of transnational communication, for commerce and finance, high technology and science, the arts and finance, popular entertainment and tourism, diplomacy and law… Several vehicular languages compete for predominance, depending on the sphere of interaction and the region of the EU. Yet, in the past half century almost all of these spheres of interaction, many of which used to be the province of French or German, now have reverted to English. Similarly, the Mediterranean countries that once employed French for their communication across

borders now increasingly opt for English. The countries of Central Europe, where German predominated as a vernacular and Russian was imposed during the Soviet period, now turn to English. Only in Bulgaria and the Baltic, Russian remains as a minority language and a *lingua franca*. Even there, younger generations increasingly chose English for their contacts with the West.

The fourth level is that of domestic communication within each member country. In all of them, the official, national language is the mother tongue of the large or even the vast majority, taught in school at all levels, protected by the national state in every which way.[11] Nevertheless, these "central", official languages increasingly coexist with a "supercentral"[12] language used for transnational communication. In all fifteen countries of the "old" EU this language of wider communication is of course English, in Central Europe there is some competition from German, in Eastern Europe Russian is still present and in Southern Europe French. But anyone in search of one language that fits all spheres and regions will be best off with English.

Within each member country, however, the central, national language will continue to function in most spheres of domestic social interaction. As long as each state acts as the protector of its national language there is no immediate threat from the supercentral language, not even when a large majority of citizens has learned it as a foreign language. Yet, the fact that so many students now learn a foreign language, most often English, which all the while gains in prestige and attractiveness, increasingly becoming a necessity for a successful career, in the long run may work towards an erosion of the domestic language, making it seem stale and flat, unexciting, and unsuited for the purposes of high modernity. Moreover, one can now communicate with almost anybody in the home society in this supercentral language also. The indigenous language more and more will come to appear redundant. Why still bother to teach it to one's children, aren't they much better off at an international school with English as the language of instruction? Unless a countervailing movement to protect the national language emerges (a reaction that is quite likely) and prevails upon the government to adopt the appropriate measures, the national language might begin to wither away. But as long as the state continues its patronage of the national language, a condition of diglossia, a precarious equilibrium between two languages in different domains within one society, will prevail.

"The subject of languages has been the great *non-dit* of European integration"[13]. But, in this case also, not taking decisions amounts to taking "non-decisions"—and these will affect the European language constellation as incisively and lastingly as any explicitly adopted policy ever could. The Union's mute inaction is accompanied by a non-discussion, interspersed by an occasional conference or publication that necessarily must remain rather ineffectual (like this one, I am afraid). On the rare occasions that the European language issue is raised nevertheless, a cabal of experts in the relevant disciplines and of representatives for the affected interests, will use the occasion for a high display of convictions and commitments, most of them equally pious in their respect of the language rights of each and every party involved as pretentious in their ambitions for a grand scheme of European cultural *rapprochement*[14]. But one can not earnestly promote the two at the same time.

In the meantime, the European Commission continues to encourage young people in its advertisements to learn "many different languages", with the predictable result that after having made all those efforts, they will still be unable to understand each other, since they all speak many, but, alas, quite often not the same languages. As statistics show, young Europeans have been wiser than the EU and studied *en masse* the one language that maximizes their chances at mutual understanding. As in its efforts on behalf of "the lesser used languages", the Commission is simply disingenuous, since most likely the English and French speaking officials of the EU in their heart of hearts would much prefer young people in Europe to understand one another, just the way they themselves do.

The present *modus operandi* in matters of language in the EU is not so much the result of explicit policy, but rather the continuation for lack of better alternatives of the initial arrangements, when the European Community numbered six members with four languages and French by dint of its birthright was the one working language that all parties had accepted. The principle that every official language of a member state would be an official language of the Union, treated on an equal footing, was maintained with every enlargement, even today with twenty-one languages and three more to be added (Bulgarian Romanian, and later, Croatian).

As a result, the Union is forced to spend considerable effort and great expense on simultaneous interpretation from and into all recognized languages during public ceremonial events, such as the sessions of the European Parliament and the major meetings of its commissions, and also on the translation of all official documents in the Union's twenty languages (adding in

some cases Irish and Catalan). In informal encounters, officials or members of parliament, are tacitly allowed to continue to use French and to increasingly resort to English as their working languages. Since 1990 Germany has quietly demanded that German be included among these working languages, and recently it has insisted in public on the use of German in EU meetings[15]. From time to time a member state instructs its delegates to require —at least in public— an equal status for its national language. But behind closed doors, when decisions must be reached, the participants want to avoid the handicap of expressing themselves in a language that is not widely understood and prefer to use either or both of the two working languages.

In all these respects, the dynamics (and the inertia) of the European language constellation are very similar to those of other multilingual and multinational entities, such as India, Nigeria, or South Africa, both at the institutional level and in the context of civil society. Language groups will resist the official adoption of a language that is identified with another ethnic or national group, even if its widely used throughout the territory, even if it generally spoken in their own ranks, on account of a "language jealousy": an unwillingness to grant the other language recognition and afford its native speakers the prestige, symbolic capital, and communicative advantage that go with it. This is a quite understandable and even justifiable position, but all the same it is as paralyzing as it is inefficient. Moreover, under such conditions, politicians and individual citizens publicly will tend to take a high-minded stance in defense of their group language, while in private they are wont to discretely exploit all the advantages that the other, widely-spread, language has to offer, using it to carry on their own affairs and choosing a school that will teach it to their children. David Laitin aptly identified this tendency with Mandeville's "private vice and public virtue".[16] This market mechanism explains very well why English (and in some cases French) has survived in so many former colonies, against all nationalistic preferences, and why it has expanded into the first second language on a European continent where it is no one's first language.

There are, however, good reasons why the European Parliament in its public sessions should continue to allow the official language of every member state to be used and translated into every other official language. This principle was laid down in the treaties that determined the conditions of accession to the Union. It is a symbolic expression of the fundamental fact that the member states continue to be independent entities in a common Union. Moreover, since the decisions of the Parliament directly affect the citizens of the member states, it is a matter of fundamental democratic principle that they should be translated in all the official languages in which national laws, too, are written so that the citizens can understand them. But there is a third reason. The members of the European Parliament represent the voters of their respective countries and if at any point they wish to speak the language that their constituency understands they have every right to do so. Quite likely, they also want to persuade their fellow parliamentarians and whenever it suits them, they will speak a language that is directly and widely understood in the benches. Thus, as a European parliamentary culture evolves, it may well produce a linguistic etiquette, allowing the use of national languages for the home front and promoting the use of all-European languages for mutual debate.

There also is a weighty pragmatic argument in favor of the use of all official languages of the member states. It creates opportunities for interpreters, translators and therefore for potential cultural mediators between any two European languages and, hopefully, the corresponding societies. The same reasons apply to the publication of documents in all official languages, especially those that affect national laws. This is an unintended yield of the expense of translation. Such costs comprise approximately one third of the administrative budget of the EU, or two to three euro's per citizen per year[17].

If full multilingualism is a matter of constitutional principle in the public and external affairs of the Union, in the closed meetings of parliamentarians and officials, thankfully, pragmatism has prevailed from the outset: French and later also English are the languages of internal deliberation and correspondence, German is sometimes included. Depending on the status of the meeting and the prestige of the participants more or less interpreters are made available. Other cost cutting measures are being tried or considered: translation only on express demand, or even charging of the costs of translation to the delegation asking for it.

For the third domain, that of civil Europe, no explicit language policy exists. Instead, it was education policy that determined the spread of languages in Europe. Most often, national governments decided on the curriculum without minding the consequences for the European language constellation in its entirety, nor did they realize how the policies of other countries might interact with their own in shaping the overall situation in Europe. As a result of the deletion from the

curriculum of German, French and Spanish as compulsory subjects in so many countries, English became the most studied language in secondary schools across Europe.

European countries separately can do little to counter this trend. The French government has tried long and hard, but all the time it contributed one of the largest contingents of students of English (and the UK taught French to more students than any other country). It is very doubtful whether the institutions of the European Union are in a position to change the course of the language constellation in Europe. The wisest policy in this case seems to be no policy at all. The citizens of Europe will pick their own languages to learn and will find their own ways to cope with their language differences. Almost all of them will adopt English for transnational communication. Many of them will use their passive understanding of a closely related language when meeting with the inhabitants of a neighboring country; this "stratégie de l'intercompréhension" will much be facilitated if language teaching in high school better prepares the students for it.

When it comes to the fourth level, that of the separate countries that make up the Union, English will continue to spread as the first second language in the member states. Sooner or later the moment will arrive in one country after another that one can speak English, fluently, with practically every fellow-citizen. What is more, all functions that carry prestige may be fulfilled by English. At that point, people might begin to neglect their mother tongue, and, finally, not even bother any longer to speak their mother tongue with their small children who then will learn English as their native language. In the end, the indigenous language might entirely disappear. Some might consider this outcome with equanimity, to others it would seem disastrous[18]. At the very least it means that the entire collective cultural capital, the totality of texts in that language that were ever registered in any form, becomes inaccessible[19]. As long as the state protects the national language, it may not be in much danger of extinction, but the prospect, even if it seems remote and unlikely, needs to be recognized and evaluated. At the very least, it seems sensible to remain alert to the threat.

In conclusion, for symbolic and for constitutional purposes, there are compelling reasons to maintain all languages of the member states as official languages of the Union. For everyday informal use in the corridors of Parliament and the Commission, French and English will most likely continue to predominate. In the day to day contacts between citizens of the Union, English will increasingly function as the means of transnational communication, while in the relevant regions French, German, Spanish, and Russian will probably play a secondary role, often in dialogues of passive understanding. At the fourth level, that of the respective member countries, diglossia will prevail, as long as governments remain alert and citizens continue to do what they have always thoroughly enjoyed: to talk about everything they like with everyone they choose to in the tongue they speak best, their own.

This outcome seems to do justice both to the great variety of languages in Europe and to the need for efficient communication. Moreover, it appears that it will come about more or less by itself, as the largely unplanned result of the myriads of spontaneous language choices by the representatives, officials, and above all, the citizens of the European Union.

NOTES

[1] Cf. Irene BELLIER, "Moralité, Langue et Pouvoirs dans les Institutions Européennes", *Social Anthropology* 3.3 1995, pp. 235-50, esp. p. 245; Ulrich AMMON, "The European Union", p. 262. Nevertheless, since at least 1991, Chancellor Kohl has regularly insisted on the adoption of German as the third language of the European Commission's bureaucracy (*International Herald Tribune*, January 3, 1992).

[2] Cf. Michael SCHLOSSMACHER, "Die Arbeitssprachen in den Organen der Europäischen Gemeinschaft. Methoden und Ergebnisse einer empirischen Untersuchung" in: Ulrich AMMON, Klaus J. MATTHEIER and Peter H. NELDE (eds.), *Sociolinguistica, International Yearbook of European Sociolinguistics* vol. 8 *English only? in Europe*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1994, pp. 101-122; see also Virginie Mamadouh, *De talen in het Europese parlement*. [Amsterdamse sociaal-geografische studies, 52] Amsterdam, Instituut voor sociale geografie, Unversiteit van Amsterdam, 1995.

[3] Cyprus was the only new member that did not add a language of its own. Irish was accepted as late as 2005 as an "official" language of equal standing with the other twenty.

[4] Cf. Jean-Pierre VAN DETH, *L'enseignement scolaire des langues vivantes dans les pays membres de la Communauté européenne; bilan, réflexions et propositions*. Bruxelles, Didier, 1979.

[5] *Key Data on Education in the European Union*. Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1996, pp. 54-5.

[6] *Les Jeunes Européens* [*Eurobaromètre*, 47.2], European Commission, 1997 pp. 39 sqq.

[7] Special Eurobaromet *Europeans and Languages [Special Eurobarometer*, 237, September 2005].er

[8] Idem.

[9] This is the point of departure for the theory of language spread presented in my *Words of the World; the Global Language System*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), which treats languages for analytic purposes as "hypercollective goods".

[10] Cf. my "Celebrating many tongues? in English" *International Herald Tribune*, 23 September 2003.

[11] Some member states use more than one language that is official in the Union: Luxembourg has French and German (its indigenous Luxembourgish is not an official language of the EU), Belgium has French and Dutch, Ireland has English and Irish, Finland has Finnish and Swedish. Other languages that have a statutory position in a member state are not considered official by the EU: Basque, Galician and Catalan in Spain, Frisian in the Netherlands, Russian in the Baltic states… Major immigrant languages such as Turkish, Moroccan Arabic and Berber, or Pakistani Urdu equally remain devoid of official status.

[12] The terms "central" and "supercentral" refer to the second and the third tier in the model of the world language system presented in my *Words of the World*.

[13] This has not changed at all: "There was much talk of milk pools and butter mountains, of a unitary currency, of liberalizing movements for EC citizens and restricting access for outsiders, but the language in which these issues were dealt with remained itself a non-issue". See my "The Evolving European Language System: A Theory of Communication Potential and Language Competition", *International Political Science Review* 14.3, July 1993, pp. 241-256, p. 244. See also my *Words of the world; The Global Language System*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001.

[14] A telling example is the "Oegstgeest declaration: Moving away from a monolingual habitus" Approved 30 January 2000 at the International conference on regional, minority and immigrant languages in multicultural Europe, convened by the European Cultural Foundation. See Appendix to Guus EXTRA and Durk GORTER *The Other Languages of Europe: Demographic, Sociolinguistic and Educational Perspectives*. Clevedon, etc.: Multilingual Maters, 2001. For a critique, see my "Endangered Languages, Sociolinguistics, and Linguistic Sentimentalism" in *European Review*, 12.4, October 2004, pp. 567-580.

[15] There can be no doubt, that Germany as the most populous nation and a founding member of the Union is entitled to have its language treated on an equal footing with English and French. However this would compel Spain to insist on equal treatment for Spanish, which among the languages of the EU is second only to English as a world language. This would force Italy as a founding member of the Union to demand the same position for its language and then, unavoidably, the turn would come for another founding member, the Netherlands, and so on until all members would have formally secured the position of their language in the EU and everything would be exactly where it is now: all official languages are also formally working languages but only two are actually used on a day to day basis. This is a clear instance of a "voting cycle" (cf. my *Words of the world*, pp. 169-71.

[16] Cf. David D. LAITIN, *Language repertoires and State Construction in Africa*. Cambridge, Cambridge, UP, 1992, pp. 152-3.

[17] Even so, with 21 languages and more to come, some time- and money saving reforms are being introduced for the European Parliament: the use of "bi-active" or "two-way" interpreters, and the adoption of a few "relay" or "pivot" languages as a bridge for translation from and into the lesser used languages. Cf. NN "Managing multilingualism in the European Union: From Political debate to language policy evaluation", to appear in *Language Policy*, 2006.

[18] "What is lost when a language is lost?", Joshua Fishman asks and he himself answers: "…the sociocultural integration of the generations, the cohesiveness, naturalness and quiet creativity, the secure sense of identity, even without politicized consciousness of identity, the sense of collective worth of a community and of a people…", cf. Joshua FISHMAN, "On the Limits of Ethnolinguistic Democracy" in: SKUTTNABB-KANGAS, Tove and Robert PHILLIPSON (eds.), *Linguistic Human Rights; Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*. Berlin/New York, Mouton De Gruyter, 1994, pp. 49-62, p. 60.

[19] Cf. my "Language, culture and the unequal exchange of texts", chapter 3 in *Words of the* World, pp. 41-59.

RESUMEN

El dilema lingüístico de Europa

El autor analiza los problemas que ha supuesto el incremento de las lenguas oficiales de la Unión Europea a medida que iba incrementándose el número de los países miembros de la misma, así como las dificultades que supone mantener un uso equilibrado de las diferentes lenguas. La realidad ha dado lugar a diferencias entre el uso prioritario impuesto para algunas de ellas (inglés y francés) en los ámbitos parlamentario y burocrático (la Europa de las instituciones) mientras que el resto quedan relegadas a los contextos comercial y cultural en general, así como el de la comunicación diaria (la Europa de los ciudadanos). Sin embargo, tal situación actúa en contra del teórico multilingüismo que, por definición, caracteriza a la Unión Europea.

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