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LANGUAGE EQUALITY IN EUROPE: AN ANSWER IN PURSUIT OF A QUESTION

**A contribution to the conference “Language Diversity and Integration in the Enlarged European Union: Challenges and Opportunities”
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania, 12-14 May 2006**

“Among the many questions raised by the expanded membership of the European Union is the question of languages.” So began the document containing the conclusions of the Nitobe Symposium on Language Policy Aspects of the Expansion of the European Union, hosted by the Lithuanian Parliament in Vilnius on July 30 and August 1, 2005. “While the Treaty of Rome foresaw equality of status for national languages in EU institutions,” the document continued, “the challenges to achieving this in practice are considerable, now that membership has grown to 25 member states with 21 official languages, more than 25 regional and minority languages, and many sizeable immigrant language communities, all with widely varying numbers of speakers. Without a careful, systematic, and well-funded approach to managing the multilingual nature of the EU, the languages and cultural values of some of the smaller states and non-state language groups could come under threat, compromising the principle of equality among EU members and opening the way to new kinds of conflict and struggle within and between nations.”

Toward the conclusion of the symposium, Edita Angyalova, a young member of parliament from Slovakia, uttered a home truth that had perhaps escaped the attention of the academics and functionaries (though perhaps not of the politicians) present. Even the best solution to a problem, she pointed out, has little political value if no one recognizes the problem’s existence. Language equality in Europe is a case in point: many linguists regard it as important because they respect linguistic diversity. If questioned, specialists in human rights will see linguistic issues as significant and linguistic equality as something worth striving for. Supporters of the rights and opportunities of minorities may see language as an issue. But the bulk of ordinary people, including those who can be said to have influence in their societies or who make policy, either do not see language as very high on their priorities or regard it as an issue a little bit like the weather: we may not like the weather on a given day, but we know that there is nothing that we can do about it, except attempt to come to terms with it – with an umbrella, or sunblock, or a pair of gloves.

Language as a “natural” phenomenon

Let us begin with this last point – the fact that many people see language issues as essentially “natural” and unalterable. The idea, widely accepted in the English-speaking world, is perhaps partly stimulated by the very *laissez-faire*, capitalist ideology that underlies much of this world. In a universe of open competition, it is argued, languages are no different from any other commodity: the languages that succeed do so because they meet the particular needs of the community in question. Thus English, with its worldwide currency and its globalized role as a *lingua franca*, offers a greater return on investment than any other language and hence is the language preferred by language learners and invested in by governments (de Swaan 1993, 2001). To intervene in this process by attempting to promote other languages, or by insisting on equal time for a variety of languages, is in effect to interfere with “natural” forces. In the Darwinism of the language market, the forces of natural selection lead, naturally, as it were, to the adoption of English and its concomitant linguistic globalization.

By contrast, maintenance of a variety of languages constitutes an artificial manipulation of this market, a kind of linguistic protectionism. And (so goes the ideology of free markets) protectionism, by artificially distorting the value of what is in this instance a linguistic commodity, will fail in the long run. Multilingualism, its detractors would argue, is both expensive and inefficient.

It will hardly be necessary to explain to my present audience that the idea of “natural” competition among languages is itself ideologically based. Linguistics, rather surprisingly, is a science that is fueled by metaphor: we have things called “natural” languages that are in fact created and advanced by human beings (they are distinguished from “artificial” languages that are – also created and advanced by human beings). We have “living” languages, which are not actually living, but are the idioms of living people. We have things called mother tongues, whose loaded definition turns out to be more complicated than it might seem. Even the notion of “a language” is problematic as a descriptor of what is in reality a collection of linguistic behaviors. The supposed competition among languages is therefore not what it seems, but rather a competition between groups of people who identify themselves by distinctive language behavior backed up by various kinds of institutional validation.

This metaphor of natural processes, so destructive of rational discourse in linguistics, is widely applied in other fields, among them economics. As Hamel points out in a recent article (Hamel 2006), the concept of a kind of actor-less globalization, moving forward with the burgeoning support of the upwardly mobile, has replaced old notions of imperialism. Imperialism was a consequence of the collective intentionality of the imperialist powers, argued the Marxists. They and others laid bare the rhetoric of empire for all to see – the notion of a will to civilize, reluctantly taken up – of the white man’s burden, borne on the white man’s shoulders – yet also of imperial grandeur. By contrast, say its apologists, globalization just happens. But of course, so did imperialism, if we analyze the rhetoric of its heyday, this rhetoric of reluctance that alternated with a

rhetoric of expansionism. In short, globalization is a consequence of political choices consciously made. And, like imperialism, it brings not just regimentation, not just exploitation, but also new opportunity and hence moral ambiguity. It would be quite wrong to see the international expansion of a given language as *merely* linguistic imperialism, since such expansion also opens opportunities for wider communication that may benefit individuals in other ways, or indeed may provide the idiom of resistance. On the one hand, then, the spread of English advantages its native speakers and those for whom it is the language of government, providing them with inherently unfair privileges; on the other hand it offers everyone else a chance to participate in the powerful anglophone economy and to utilize its global knowledge network. There are many advantages in the English-speaking world for the enterprising subaltern. This ambiguity is hard even for the politically sophisticated to reduce to a coherent political position.

Linguistic equality

But even linguistic equality is a concept more easily grasped in the abstract than in practice. If we think of languages as institutions – as reified constructs occupying a particular position in civil society – we can perhaps conceive of devices for equalizing their influence. But while the institutional aspect of established languages is important, indeed all too often neglected, language is an attribute of the individual, whose goal is to maximize its utility in order to maximize his or her influence. Our educational systems train young people in the art of rhetoric – the art of writing well and speaking well – in order to give them maximum advantage in linguistic encounters. The educational system as a whole may be devoted to affording everyone equal facility with language, but the education of the individual is concerned with advantaging that individual, also linguistically. Thus, the individual's relation to language is anything but egalitarian, even if the institution known as a language may be subject to restraint and constraint as a collective within the larger society. As Bourdieu (1991) has made clear, all societies are characterized by unequal distribution of individual linguistic power. Emphasis on learning foreign languages also stresses their utility to individual students as devices for “getting ahead.” Thus our citizens are not readily inclined to accept notions of linguistic equality when all their prior training, indeed their very sense of themselves, is based on the acceptance of inequality and the exploitation of linguistic advantage.

It is here that efforts at language revival or at the conservation of minority languages tend to falter and fail. Parents can readily grasp in the abstract that it is politically and culturally advantageous to preserve the old customs and to maintain a sense of cultural identity different from that of the majority, but they want economic opportunity for their children, and, in cases where the two are seen to be in opposition, economic opportunity trumps individual identity. The key, of course, is to devise ways of preventing such dichotomies, of creating conditions in which cultural identity and economic advantage can be seen to coincide. But this is not easy, not even when the context is that of entire nation states. The countries of western Europe are already witnessing language shift as knowledge of English improves to a level allowing the Dutch to read novels in English, or the Swedish to watch television in English, or the Germans to teach university courses

in English in order to increase market share in the competition for foreign students. Impoverishment of the local culture is an inevitable accompaniment of such shift, but it is hard, politically, to resist.

The integrated structures of the European Union might be expected to hasten such language shift, despite the fact that the ostensible policies of the EU promote multilingualism. The Treaty of Rome stipulated (Article 217) that “The rules governing the languages of the institutions of the Community shall ... be determined by the Council, acting unanimously.” This resulted in the recognition, at least in theory, of the equality of all languages of government in the EU’s member-states. It was argued, and continues to be argued, that if EU decisions have the force of law in the member states, they must be accessible in the languages of government of those states.

But the Treaty of Rome is now almost fifty years old: it was signed in 1957 when the European Union consisted of six member states with a mere four languages. It is true that the language policy remains essentially unchanged in an EU with four times as many languages, but appeals to the early practices of the EU as justification for the continuation of those practices could perhaps lead to the conclusion that the entire language policy of the EU requires re-examination under the changed circumstances of the present day. Regardless of the formal principles embodied in the Treaty of Rome and applied in the years following its acceptance, in practice numerous policies, formal and informal, have the effect of promoting languages of wider communication, such as French and English, in the EU’s deliberative bodies and in its bureaucracy (Ammon 2004:402).¹ (Minority languages in the member states are, of course, out of the picture altogether.)² If, even in the early days of the European Community, equality of languages was hard to maintain in practice, it is now virtually impossible: compromise is inevitable under all kinds of circumstances – and compromise for practical purposes little by little gains ground over the objections of those who appear to put principle before getting the job done. I need hardly add that, viewed from the outside, this approach – getting the job done in spite of the language rules – is likely to win the sympathy of the press and the public.

Institutional policy and individual practice

I earlier suggested that there is a difference between policies governing the *institution* called language, and linguistic practices by the *individual*. EU personnel tend to be

¹ I am, of course, concerned here with the central administrative and governance mechanisms of the European Union, not with linguistic arrangements *within* individual EU member states – a still larger and more complex issue.

² Ammon 2003 makes a useful distinction among three levels of linguistic practice: minority languages, official EU languages, and working languages of the EU’s political bodies. The ill-fated draft constitution of 2004, rejected by French voters in May 2005 and by the Dutch in June 2005, gives scant attention to language issues, barely touching the divisive question of minority languages in anything but generalities. The Council of Europe has taken the lead in assisting minority languages, with the support of the EU. The two set up the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages (EBLUL) in 1981, and the EU has supported the Council’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992), but, understandably, has avoided mandating policy within the member states on this issue.

relatively accomplished linguists, with a command sometimes of several EU languages, normally the most prestigious, and normally including English. They are often very proud of their linguistic skills. Their informal linguistic practices inevitably tend to revert to the language in which they are most likely to be able to transact business, that is to say English.³ Expecting them to follow the linguistic principles of the early EU, namely multilingualism, is unrealistic in an EU with more than twenty languages. And if the formal language policies do not work, it is hardly surprising that they choose to ignore them. Thus the formal policies of inclusion remain in place, but merely serve as a device to ignore exclusionary practices – and the more the European Union grows and takes in additional languages, the easier it becomes to justify exclusionary and discriminatory practices in the EU's political bodies on practical grounds.

In a recent paper in South Africa, I advanced the suggestion that symbolic devolution (in this case the expansion of the official languages of South Africa from two to eleven including nine African languages) may have the effect of facilitating operational centralization. Without a highly intrusive, and accordingly extremely expensive, language policy, involving all three forms of language planning (Cooper 1989) and requiring a willingness to place limits on the use of certain languages in order to encourage others, the hierarchization of official languages in South Africa is all but inevitable – and the larger the number of languages involved, the greater the trend toward the emergence of a single *lingua franca* (Reagan 2001, Wright 2002, Webb 2004).

I use this term *lingua franca* advisedly: as I have already noted, English is primarily regarded worldwide not as the language of the oppressor, however we choose to define the notion of oppression, but as the language of opportunity, indeed of liberation (see for example Du Plessis 2000:103-104), among other reasons because it is seen not so much as empowering the native English-speaker as providing a means of communication across other languages. In a sense, it is the very inclusion of African languages by affording them constitutional recognition that enables this perception and hastens the *operational* emergence of English (as Du Plessis 2000:106 remarks, “Government is ... promoting monolingualism, even though it is supposed to work out a multilingual policy”).

In a much cited article in 1990, Carol Myers-Scotton coined the term “elite closure” to describe “a type of social mobilization strategy by which those persons in power establish or maintain their powers and privileges via linguistic choices... [E]lite closure is accomplished when the elite successfully employ official language policies and their own nonformalized usage patterns to limit access of nonelite groups to political position and socioeconomic advancement” (Myers-Scotton 1993). In both the South African and the European context, we are witnessing a version of elite closure, in which the rhetoric of multilingualism runs one way and the practice of monolingualism runs another: in the case of Europe, those in charge are members of an elite in which language difficulties are minimal. The public at large seems to be more or less willing to allow them to handle linguistic issues as they think fit.

³ On the distinction between formal policy and informal practice, see Tonkin & Edwards 1984 and Tonkin 1996.

If we see the European Union as in effect a single mega-state, we may ask whether the maintenance of de jure multilingualism (on the grounds of non-discrimination, for example, i.e. essentially tolerance-based) does not facilitate de facto monolingualism, as the strongest language – English – drives other languages into a hierarchy of exclusion (the view of Phillipson 2003 and others; and see Ammon 2004). This hierarchy of exclusion threatens even the major languages other than English (as Ammon 2001 suggests). Is the EU moving gradually towards a situation in which English dominates and other languages are pushed to varying degrees towards the periphery? Perhaps the EU's difficulty with the language issue merely a symptom of a wider linguistic homogenization linked to globalization (see Maurais & Morris 2003; Tonkin & Reagan 2003)?

The new EU members are mostly small states with limited economic and political power. Their languages have little international currency. They want to preserve cultural identity, but realize that, to succeed economically and politically, they must acquire the current lingua franca, English. English is seen as a means of entry into the international arena: it is taught in schools, given broad attention in the media, and associated with particular imported cultural products – music, film, television.

Putting language policy on the public agenda

There are some experts who maintain that, unfortunate though this turn of events may be, it is inevitable, and perhaps a small price to pay for functioning governance. They argue that it is best simply to improve knowledge of English among the non-English-speaking populations. Others suggest that the best that can be hoped for is to shift some of the burden on to the English speakers by imposing limits on the use of English under certain circumstances (Van Parijs 2004, for example – but see François Grin 2004), or by attempting to tax English speakers to support the acquisition of English by those for whom it is not a native language (an approach similar to that of a government that chooses to maintain regional languages primarily at its expense; see for example Ammon 2004). These suggestions, admirable though they may be in themselves, presuppose the existence of sufficient opposition to the monolingual drift of the EU to merit compensatory action. But there are precious few signs that such interest exists, and accordingly these palliative measures seem unlikely to be mooted, let alone implemented.

So the response to Edita Angyalova's observation that the solutions to the EU's language difficulties seem to be running far ahead of the public's perception of a problem must surely be assent. Until we can put firmly on the *public* agenda the question of the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity, and until we can determine what compromises the public is willing to entertain to maintain it – possibly at the expense of economic and political integration – we cannot expect the search for solutions to make much progress. The recent rejection of the draft constitution of the EU should perhaps put us on notice that the public may be wary of headlong integration and of the loss of national and local identities. Such sentiments may also be related to the current political shift against immigration into EU countries. But neither of these political developments

can offer much confidence that the issue will receive the sustained and serious weighing of the options that it requires. Indeed there is precious little leadership evident among the governments, which seem mostly content to go their separate ways to preserve the relative standing of their languages against those above and below them in the linguistic food chain, thereby creating a hierarchy of exclusion with respect to English.

Edita Angyalova's comments were in part directed at the proponents of Esperanto as an ingredient in the linguistic mix in the EU – a potential player that has of late received rather more prominence and attention than in earlier times (Pool & Fettes 1998, Grin 2005, Christiansen 2006, Fettes 2003a & 2003b) and around which EU members could profitably coalesce. But it is significant that also in the Esperanto community there seems relatively little willingness to analyze the current situation, and indeed the changed global linguistic landscape, in ways that extend beyond simple opposition to EU monolingualism. In this, as in other situations, lack of policy is itself policy, and the failure of the EU states to address cultural diversity collectively may condemn them to watch its gradual dissolution separately.

The participants in the symposium in Vilnius undertook to raise the quality and intensity of public and political debate on the issue, stating:

In order to generate the necessary political will behind such a common framework, much more effort is needed to raise the level and intensity of public and political debate over language policy. The disadvantages of the current system, the vested interests that sustain it, and a range of positive policy alternatives need to be formulated in ways that can be discussed by ordinary people, reported on in the media, and addressed in practical terms by elected politicians. Long-term political constituencies and coalitions for the promotion of language equality, diversity, and sustainability need to be developed.

To that end, they have created a web-based Nitobe Center to stimulate debate, to mobilize and coordinate those interested in the issue, and to conduct and disseminate relevant research. I hope the Nitobe Center, dedicated less to solutions than to articulation of the problem itself, will win the support of those eager to see a European Union open to cultural and linguistic pluralism, indeed a model for the democratic management of a culturally complex global society.

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