32   Towards a linguistic world order

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ABSTRACT

The unexpected effect of globalisation is an increased general interest for language diversity, both in Europe and worldwide. In the EU, *multilingualism* has become a political priority, languages are important. Nonetheless, continuing advance of English in daily life is observed in practice, even in the EU. Living with many languages in a continental organisation such as the EU, or in a wider global setting, is not obvious. Politicians and 'citizens' who are accustomed to live within a state with one national language must adapt, psychologically and in practice. The world must find solutions for this problem or challenge. There is a need for a new linguistic world order, with new 'rules of the game'. In November 2006[1], during the EAFT Summit, some first ideas about this order were launched. This presentation is a continuation and elaboration of these initial ideas.

Προς μία γλωσσική παγκόσμια τάξη

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η απροσδόκητη επίπτωση της παγκοσμιοποίησης είναι ένα αυξανόμενο γενικό ενδιαφέρον για την γλωσσική διαφορετικότητα, τόσο στην Ευρώπη όσο και παγκοσμίως. Στην ΕΕ, η *πολυγλωσσία* έχει γίνει πολιτική προτεραιότητα, οι γλώσσες είναι σημαντικές. Εν τούτοις, στην πράξη παρατηρείται συνεχής προώθηση της αγγλικής στην καθημερινή ζωή, ακόμη και στην ΕΕ. Το να ζει κανείς με πολλές γλώσσες σε έναν ηπειρωτικό οργανισμό όπως είναι η ΕΕ, ή σε έναν ευρύτερο παγκόσμιο περίγυρο, δεν είναι κάτι προφανές. Οι πολιτικοί και οι «πολίτες» που είναι συνηθισμένοι να ζουν μέσα σε ένα κράτος με μία εθνική γλώσσα πρέπει να προσαρμοστούν, ψυχολογικά και πρακτικά. Για τούτο το πρόβλημα ή τούτη την πρόκληση ο κόσμος πρέπει να βρει λύσεις. Υπάρχει ανάγκη για μια νέα γλωσσική παγκόσμια τάξη, με νέους «κανόνες του παιχνιδιού». Το Νοέμβριο του 2006, κατά τη διάρκεια της Συνόδου Κορυφής της EAFT, πρωτοδιατυπώθηκαν κάποιες πρώτες ιδέες γι' αυτήν την τάξη. Τούτη η παρουσίαση αποτελεί συνέχεια και επεξεργασία αυτών των αρχικών ιδεών.

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[1]   Towards a Linguistic World Order; European Association for Terminology (EAFT) Summit, 13 November 2006, Brussels

0   Introduction

Whereas languages die at a rate of one every two weeks, other languages are used to exercise political and economic power. Language diversity is the term used to say that there are about 6000 languages spoken globally, but there is no term referring to the immense differences in the positioning of these languages in our global society. 900 million people speak Mandarin, in China, and, randomly chosen, 10 speak Khakas in the same country. Yes, all languages are equal, but at both ends of the sociolinguistic scale some are very unequal. The effect of globalisation is that in many domains inequalities are on the rise: in politics, in the macro-economy and in the personal economy, in the media. And in linguistics: what was unequal in the first place becomes more unequal.

This paper deals with this issue. It assumes that most people share the view that a museum of dead languages is much less interesting than the global museum of living languages that can be enjoyed today. But if languages and the people who speak them are subject to the *laisser-faire* way of life, that is, left at the *merci* of the stronger forces in their environment, then many of them have no chance to escape the museum of the dead. What is needed? A general ethical attitude such as is behind the human rights issue, a model that indicates how languages and the people who speak them can live together in a wider setting, and political action to enforce measures that are needed, educational, economical and legal.

1   The knowledge of words leads to the knowledge of things
(Plato, Theaetetus)

It is appropriate to start this paper with a citation of one of the most lucid writers the world has known, who lived 2400 years ago but has not lost compactness, focus and clarity of expression. In a superb way, he synthesised the worlds of knowledge and of words by going back to their origins. Probably in his time, as in ours, the world of words had in many instances been dissociated from the world of facts, and he felt pleasure in showing his students that behind the words they believed in, were other words and yet other words that could be pulled away like curtains for a screenplay. The ultimate pleasure for him and probably his students if they did not drown in bitterness was to arrive at the point where both parties agreed about a presentation they considered the truth.

The Platonian phrase comes close to a foundation of terminology, if it wasn't limited to words of what we call a language. Our knowledge of things is not necessarily conveyed to us, or by us, by means of language. Many more systems exist and are actually exploited to

communicate knowledge of things, such as sounds, imagery of several kind, physical objects such as smoke may serve communication, electrical and radio and light signals and the representations in computers, symbolically represented by zeros and ones. Even if all these systems and languages live next to each other quite autonomously, they are intimately linked by referring to the same universe of knowledge (of things), sometimes referred to as world knowledge. If one is allowed to use the word 'synonym' for different representations of the same meaning in this many-dimensional representation space, there is certainly a wealth of synonyms and quasi-synonyms among the many 'terms' defined in this space. Some of synonyms apply to the many languages in this space, but they may also apply to terms defined in a language on the one hand and a computer or any other representation on the other hand.

The characteristics of the space of representation systems are important for the identification of synonyms and other relations between the various terms, and for the need to identify the 'strengths and weaknesses' of the collection of systems[2] to represent the knowledge we want them to represent. This issue is the subject of further research and will not be elaborated in this paper. However, it has some relevance for the issue raised in this paper: the living together of many languages. Because it suggests an abstract space in which all languages 'live' together on an equal footing, and that the basic issues of concern are the provision of links between (the terms in) these languages and the very fundamental question whether these languages on their own or together are capable of representing the knowledge we want them to represent. And ultimately, if languages do not suffice, other systems may help.

2   The need for a linguistic world order

Even if there are more terms than there are in terms in language, the latter are an increasingly important constituent of language. They are the most dynamic component of our languages and far outnumber general lexemes. That is, in languages that are spoken by economically and scientifically developed communities such as those in Europe, but probably in less scientifically developed communities as well. The reverse is also true: if terms in a particular language do not develop at a pace commensurate with knowledge development, that language does not develop as it should and loses ground in being capable of expressing concepts in a modern society. As a consequence, parents may not

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[2]   The collection of systems might be identified as U(niversal)-Language or Σ-Language

choose such a language for the education of their children, thus contributing to the further decline of their language.

This is the main challenge for most language communities in today's international environment: to ensure that their languages and in particular their linguistic terms are continuously adapted to the changing requirements and the pressures of other languages and language communities. The situation is complex. It might be expected that every language community, of which there are about 6000 worldwide, will promote its language to the utmost. Language, after all, is a persons' mental skin that allows being part of a community of human beings.

But the assumption is not always true, some people are prepared to moult and exchange skins. The pressures not to maintain a language and particularly its usage may be endogenous and/or exogenous, they may be confined to particular societal sectors or layers or be of a more general nature. Maintaining a language under pressure is partly an economical issue. Is the expenditure for maintenance of the scientific vocabulary of a language justified? Are the costs of learning more languages justified; is it not cheaper and more effective to learn just that one language, English for example? The answers to such questions are often linked to the size of a language community: the larger the community that shares a language, the lower the 'cost' per individual.

A concrete example of both exogenous and endogenous pressures on a language is what happens in the science and higher education domains these days, in particular but not exclusively in Northern Europe. The changes have taken place in only a few decades and frighten those concerned with their languages and societies. It can be argued and even justified by historical evidence, that the language used by the intellectual classes will gradually drip down into the whole society after an intermediate period during which language difference served the demarcation between 'upper and lower'. Fact is that, whereas since four centuries higher education in the people's language emerged from the long period during which such education was confined to the happy very few that had acquired a sufficient knowledge of Latin, many universities in Europe now oblige their students to follow an increasing part of their science studies in English, use American and English study material exclusively and be examined using English. Some universities even press their students to speak English on their campuses, as a sign of their international orientation and to please foreign students. The pressures behind this (r)evolution are largely endogenous, but they are in response to general exogenous pressures or rather seductive

forces associated with 20th century American advances in science, the economy and political influence. There is no difference between Australian aboriginals sending their children to a white boarding school and Dutch parents sending them to the English-speaking university.

A second example of both endogenous and exogenous pressures concerns the situation in Africa south of the Sahara, a continent that unlike North America and Australia has been able to retain many viable original languages, up to now. A closer look reveals that the majority of these African countries which were colonised until about half a century ago, with the formal exception of Liberia, have adopted the language of the former coloniser as the official language of the country. Generally, the official languages are the language of law, government, higher levels of education, the elites and big business. The majority of the people does not speak or even understand the official language, and is definitely not able to read or write it. Some statistics: of all 40 sub-Saharan African countries, Africa, 36 adopted a European language (French, English, Portuguese), 3 Arabic and 12 an indigenous language as one of their official languages. South Africa with 11 official languages is an exception and not included in the statistic [2].   External and internal political pressures to freeze the situation are enormous, for a variety of reasons. That the African languages are victimised, and democratic and even economic development as well, seems of lesser importance. The continued efforts of UNESCO and some African politicians may seem to be largely symbolic, they keep the ashes glowing [1].

3   The language framework of the European Union

Improving the situation for languages under pressure requires continued efforts. Because of the urgency of the problems in some world regions, significant steps forward on the medium term are indicated. The processes to achieve results are political and multilateral. A global organisation, probably UNESCO that already adopted the International Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions [3], may carry such a political process forward. The Charter for regional and minority languages [4] of the Council of Europe. has political weight and serves as another inspiring example.

The unique and simple language framework of the European Union might be 'exported' and serve as a basis for orientation and regulations on the global scale. The moral foundation of the EU is taken up in the preamble of the EU Treaties. The

representatives of the member states declare to sign the document "*desiring to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions*". In other words: every nation is considered unique and has rights that do not differ from those of another nation. This principle remained valid after the EU expanded to embrace 27 states. And on 'culture', the language regime now embraces 23 'official' EU languages and a large number of regional and minority languages. EU laws and regulations are available in all 23 official languages, all language versions being equally valid. Another principle of great importance is that the EU institutions communicate with citizens in the language chosen by the citizen – even though the choice is limited to the official languages. Execution of the external multilingual policy of the EU could still improve, in particular with respect to communication with citizens via EU websites.

Whereas the EU had shown to be concerned about its communication with citizens and organisations in the member states, not earlier than 1996 an initiative was launched recognising that the EU has a role in promoting language communication among the citizens of Europe [5]. This MLIS programme was concerned with the general support for multilingualism in Europe, but its main focus was on the preparation of the electronic networks and media to accommodate all the languages of Europe, and to facilitate inter-lingual communication over the networks. Promotion of terminology and other language resources 'at the fingertips' was one action line of the programme. In 2004, multilingualism was included in the portfolio of the European Commission as a distinct policy line. The EU has taken some responsibility for 'living together linguistically', whereas the member states and the regions remain responsible for their languages.

Some conclusions can be drawn from this short summary and the preceding analysis. There is no ready-made recipe to accommodate the language problems and needs on the globally. The identification and elaboration of the problems is a first step and contributes to the awareness that solutions are necessary. Solidarity among nations and people concerning language, as indicated in the EU Treaties, is a first and necessary step forward. And no language is better, more elegant or more precise than other languages. People speaking a particular language are not better than people speaking another language. If languages are not yet equipped to deal with the intricacies of modern times, they should be enriched and adapted. Languages that lack a written form – there are still many - should be supplied with a system to write the language. Languages not equipped with the terminologies of science

and business, should be enriched with such terminology. Money transfers between nations and communities should benefit material as well as immaterial goods, such as languages.

Some tough and less pleasing observations need also be made. A language spoken by very few persons is probably doomed to disappear as a living language anyhow. Languages that are not supported any more by the people speaking them, are also doomed to disappear. The world and larger regions need vehicular languages for communication across language boundaries. If English is a vehicular language on the global scale, so be it. But vehicular languages should not advantage some people over others, which is the argument used in support of Esperanto. Vehicular languages must not replace the mother tongues, and may not have the full functionality of the full language they are derived from.

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