

## **Terminology in times of economic and political globalisation**

**Jan Roukens**

### **ABSTRACT**

The consequences of globalisation increased interest for language diversity, in Europe and hopefully worldwide. *Multilingualism* has become a political issue in the EU, although its position is still fragile. Will the increased interest for language and cultural diversity be in time? In some domains the answer is clearly NO, irreversible destruction has already taken place. What about languages? There is a chance, because languages are probably the strongest most sustainable elements of the human cultural heritage. But being strong may not be strong enough. Continuing advance of English at the expense of other languages in daily life is still a reality, worldwide. Economic and political globalisation continue to break down the worlds cultural heritage with astonishing speed, in the interest of providing a *level playing ground* for the large national and multinational interests. Social traditions and agricultural biodiversity have fallen for the global rolling mill. The rich European academic system has already collapsed into 'Bologna' of *bachelors* and *masters* where English is promoted as the preferred vehicular language and *mobility* has become the *raison-d'être* of the uniform university.

Living with many languages in a continental setting, such as the EU, or in a wider global setting is not obvious. But the problem should not be exaggerated; People the world over have always lived with neighbours or 'foreigners' speaking other languages. The difference with the past is that the UN asks not to fight, but to communicate peacefully. The citizen may have a problem solving the associated communication problems on its own. There is a need for an agreed linguistic world order, including 'rules of conduct' and 'best practices'.

## **Η ορολογία σε καιρούς οικονομικής και πολιτικής παγκοσμιοποίησης**

**Jan Roukens**

### **ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ**

Οι συνέπειες της παγκοσμιοποίησης μεγάλωσαν το ενδιαφέρον για τη γλωσσική διαφορετικότητα στην Ευρώπη και ελπίζουμε παγκόσμια. Η *πολυγλωσσία* έχει καταστεί πολιτικό θέμα στην ΕΕ, αν και η θέση της είναι ακόμα εύθραυστη. Το ερώτημα είναι: το αυξημένο ενδιαφέρον για τη γλώσσα και την πολιτισμική διαφορετικότητα θα προλάβει; Σε κάποιους τομείς η απάντηση είναι καθαρά ΟΧΙ: έχει ήδη επέλθει μη αναστρέψιμη καταστροφή. Τι γίνεται σχετικά με τις γλώσσες; Υπάρχει μια ελπίδα, γιατί οι γλώσσες είναι ίσως τα πιο ανθεκτικά διατηρήσιμα στοιχεία της ανθρώπινης πολιτιστικής κληρονομιάς. Ανθεκτικά ναι, αλλά ίσως όχι αρκετά ανθεκτικά. Η συνέχιση της προώθησης της αγγλικής εις βάρος των άλλων γλωσσών στην καθημερινή ζωή παραμένει μια πραγματικότητα σε παγκόσμια κλίμακα. Η οικονομική και πολιτική παγκοσμιοποίηση εξακολουθούν να κατεδαφίζουν τους κόσμους της πολιτιστικής κληρονομιάς με εκπληκτική ταχύτητα, με το ενδιαφέρον να εξασφαλιστεί ισόπεδο γήπεδο

για το παιχνίδι των μεγάλων εθνικών και πολυεθνικών συμφερόντων. Οι κοινωνικές παραδόσεις και η αγροτική βιοποικιλία έχουν πέσει στο παγκόσμιο «ελασματοουργείο». Το πλούσιο ευρωπαϊκό ακαδημαϊκό σύστημα έχει ήδη καταρρεύσει σε *πτυχία* και *μεταπτυχιακά* τύπου «Μπολόνια», όπου η αγγλική προωθείται ως προτιμώμενη γλώσσα-όχημα και η *κινητότητα* έχει γίνει ο *λόγος ύπαρξης* του ομοιόμορφου πανεπιστημίου.

Το να ζεις με πολλές γλώσσες σε έναν ήπειρωτικό περίγυρο, σαν την ΕΕ, ή και σε έναν ευρύτερο παγκόσμιο περίγυρο, δεν είναι κάτι προφανές. Αλλά το πρόβλημα δεν θα πρέπει να το μεγαλοποιούμε· οι άνθρωποι σε όλο τον κόσμο ζούσαν πάντοτε με γείτονες ή «ξένους» που μιλούσαν άλλες γλώσσες. Η διαφορά από το παρελθόν είναι ότι ο ΟΗΕ τους ζητάει να μην πολεμούν, αλλά να επικοινωνούν ειρηνικά. Ο πολίτης μπορεί να έχει πρόβλημα στο να επιλύει μόνος του τα σχετικά προβλήματα επικοινωνίας. Υπάρχει ανάγκη για μια συμφωνημένη γλωσσική παγκόσμια τάξη, που θα συμπεριλαμβάνει «κανόνες συμπεριφοράς» και «άριστες πρακτικές».

## **1 Economic globalisation: what we fear is what we get**

In 2007 I presented the 'banana metaphor' at the end of my presentation for the 6th Conference «Hellenic Language and Terminology». In words. Now I am able to illustrate the words with some tasty illustrations from the internet.

In the country where I was born, Indonesia, several hundred types of bananas grew, and they still do. You find them in all sizes, colours, shapes and tastes. With globalisation on the move since many years, I expected to get at least some of this Indonesian wealth presented to me in the Belgian shops. No way! I can still only chose between two very familiar standard bananas, grown in Middle-America by large North American fruit companies, and shipped to a myriad of places worldwide My conclusion: globalisation did not bring greater diversity and more choice of goods, or greater diversity of producers/suppliers, but made it cheaper to distribute and sell these standardised products to a much larger number of consumers, via a limited number of global distributors. In fact the local growers in Indonesia or any other country where bananas grow are denied access to our countries and homes by a few 'multinational' companies that control the chain from their mass plantations to our fruit bowls. That, in a nutshell illustrates the purpose and the reality of the much hailed *globalisation*.



Figure 1

*The globalised banana. Left: a collection of 'natural' banana's, still to be found in the countries where they grow. They are sold in local markets, but even there they are threatened by the globalised banana produced by large multinationals. They will probably disappear altogether in a few decades. Right: 'standard' banana's sold in supermarkets all over the world.*

Not only bananas. All the crops cultivated since the beginning of the agricultural evolution which spread over the globe over some 5000 years, fall victim to the greediness of a few large corporations predominantly North American and European that control standardised production and, increasingly, the provision of property-protected seeds. To increase profits for the monopolistic enterprises, the diversity of variants of a particular crop will be reduced to the bare minimum. Eventually the variation of crops themselves will be reduced. Biodiversity organisations estimate that the variety of crops grown by farmers in Europe has been reduced by 90% in the last century. Small farmers the world over lose the economic basis for their existence. They will take the knowledge of growing particular crops with them to their new post-industrial jobs, or to unemployment. Larger farmers will be offered the option to produce the standardised single products on their lands, for one or the other multinational company. During the transition to the globalised production the enormous diversity of products that emerged in 5000 years will be lost, even if the most of the variants

could be bought in local markets only. What has been gained in the globalisation process: the availability of standardised products globally, thanks to a coalition of a few multinationals hiring tenants as local producers, and global distributors optimising their profits depending on local opportunities.

## **2 Globalisation: more than the economy, stupid!**

Economic globalisation is not only typical for the globalisation process in general, economic globalisation openly claims to be the driving force of the whole process even if politicians present globalisation as an enrichment of life for the citizen. Some large dominant nations or groups of nations, such as the EU, exploit the term to maximise their political grip on economically weaker nations and to pave the way for their large multinational enterprises and other stakeholders. Worldwide multilateral organisations have been set up by the 'West' to establish and maintain the detailed rules of the global trade game and to ensure that old and newcomers adhere to the rules that have proved to be so beneficial for the large companies. The World Trade Organisation has been set up by the US and Europe specifically to implement the economic globalisation agenda. The WTO now includes other nations, but they were admitted only after they promised to adhere to the original ground rules.

The main objective of multinationals supporting the economic globalisation agenda is to establish a so-called 'level playing field' in the global market. Wikipedia:

*"A level playing field is a concept about fairness, not that each player has an equal chance to succeed, but that they all play by the same set of rules. A metaphorical playing field is said to be level if no external interference such as government regulations affects the ability of the players to compete fairly."*

The vocabulary of the globalists is predominantly Anglo-Saxon, the words but also the underlying concepts. It is the classical definition of a free and open market, where companies and products compete and nobody else than the trade partners have the right to interfere. Even *government regulations* are taboo in the purist interpretation of the level playing field.

## **3 Globalisation and language**

Are languages interfering with globalised trade relations? Of course they do but, as a recent Dutch 'official' advice to the government, prepared by the organisations of business enterprises *and* trade unions stipulate:

*"Internet and the subsequent further spreading of English as a global vehicular language led to an unprecedented lowering of communication and transaction costs, leading to an increasing number of services (Note: services!) that can be traded internationally"*

This is the single reference to (a) language in the entire 200-page report. Likewise, there is no reference to culture except in 'culture and recreation' where culture is a service that can be sold. Although our national and European politicians have bags full of intercultural dialogues in university campuses and other forums brought to the people by globalisation, a comprehensive report for the Dutch government about globalisation does not discuss culture and language at all.

It is a popular idea that the internet has promoted English as an international vehicular language. But compare internet with the telephone, which has not prompted people to speak English. The user of internet decides what language to use. Dutch universities decided *not* to install the excellent Dutch version of Windows in their campuses however, misled by the old idea that technology speaks a language, English. Tourism was instrumental in promoting the use of English in many places. International scientific conferences and publications did the same for the scientific community. And the multinationals themselves have contributed to the advance of English, in particular in the business and trade context. Many multinationals decided not to use English as a language to use externally only, but to internalise the language, making English their 'company language'. Speaking it in the board rooms and in other meetings and places and insisting that all internal mail and documents use English. The *level playing field* was thus extended outside and inside and for these companies speaking English is the norm. Other 'peripheral' languages are tolerated for sentimental reasons. Multinational companies and their national political companions are the driving forces behind this movement, but many international NGOs and supra-governmental institutions have jumped on the English-only bandwagon.

#### **4 National languages and the European Academia**

The reasoning of the economical and political elites was straightforward and simple: instead of changing the language of large populations, 450 million people in the EU alone, it is more efficient to ensure that the national elites in the EU member states speak English well. And equally important, that they speak the English of their professions: of the exact sciences, the economy or the social and medical sciences. After all these elites have the influential positions in the industrial and business enterprises concerned and the networks surrounding them, they will form a societal layer from which the use of English will be dripping down to

the 'common' people in the course of time. The use of English by the elites on top of the fact that the majority of them have graduated from university, have side effects from which the globalisation stakeholders benefit. The elites will tend to take the same or similar political positions on important issues that have an impact on their commercial and ideological interests, even if the majority of the populations have different opinions.

In practical terms: since the beginning of the 1990s a movement was launched to change the various national systems for higher education in the EU and turn 500 years of intellectual development into a *level playing field* wherever feasible. This was what became known as the Bologna process or in more abstract terms the development of the European Education Area. This standardisation process was justified over and over again by the driving forces behind the movement, the university boards selected from the nations' elites, by the need to adapt to the requirements imposed by the globalisation. The scientific and educational staff were persuaded with the argument that international scientific communication, oral and written, were conducted in English since quite some time and that many textbooks were of American origin, even if sometimes in translation. The only group that could not be convinced according to a recent Europe-wide study were the students. Only an average 25% of the students support the language change, 90% of the boards of high schools and 75 % of the scientific staff (8).

The goal of the many national elites with respect to the use of English in higher education is to conduct all lessons and instructions in English and to turn university campuses into English-speaking enclaves. The transition takes time but may be achieved in a decade if there is the political will. But fortunately this condition is not met in many European

countries, particularly in the Southern parts of the EU where the predominant languages belong to the Roman, Greek and Slav families. But the opposition is slowly growing in the Northern and Eastern parts of the EU, among the people and even among parliament members. The main problem is public awareness: the parents sending their children to Dutch universities are not aware of the fact that most of the lessons will be in English, and that their children will not be allowed to finish their studies in Dutch anyhow. Even if 90% of the graduates will find a job in the Netherlands as a teacher, lawyer, medical doctor, engineer in a public or private company, civil servant, economist, etc. This is the law of globalisation, interpreted by the leading business and political elites.

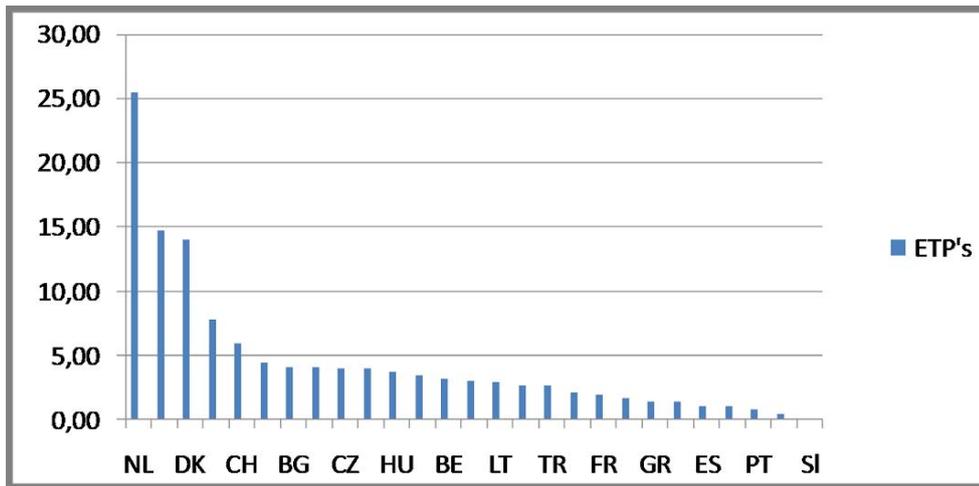


Figure 2

*English Taught Programmes (ETPs) in European higher education - the UK and Ireland excluded - . The programmes were offered in the national languages before. The diagram is derived from 2007 data collected by Bernd Wächter and Friedhelm Maiworm for the ACA (8). The figures should be considered indicative for the relative prevalence of ETPs in Europe, because of uncertainties due to the survey method used. In most countries higher education is broader than university education. For the ETP champion in Europe, the Netherlands, the figure of 25% would rise to 50-60% if applied to universities only. The universities needed a decade to arrive where they are today.*

### **However difficult, Go!**

The main assumption is, that their languages are carved into the hearts and minds of the European peoples and that they will not allow their own elites or some foreign power to take those away from them.

This is an important but insufficient condition for the survival of language diversity in Europe. It must be recognised that some objective factors have propelled English ahead of all other languages in Europe, in particular in the academic and scientific domains. These factors must be neutralised or at least brought back to bearable proportions.

Most important is a reversal of political priorities, from the economic and financial domains which are in the lead now, to the holistic view which takes into consideration social, cultural,

ecological and economic aspects of life. If the economic powers continue to define the agendas and their execution and politicians continue to follow as we observed, we better forget about cultural and language diversity and about diversity altogether. To change this order of priorities sounds impossible. But one can hope, maybe many small steps will lead to the balanced governance.

International scientific communication has increasingly been conducted in English. There is a rationale behind this, if everybody speaks and writes only one 'foreign' language, it is not necessary to know other foreign languages as well. However, if the scientific community argues that *because* English is widely used in international forums, English might as well be used in national and regional contexts, say as the instruction language in the national higher educational system, a line is crossed that should not be crossed. As the danger obviously comes with the exclusiveness of the language in international communication, the counter strategy may be the promotion of a limited group of preferred international scientific communication languages in a large region, say the EU. The choice may be linked in Europe to what has been decided for the internal language regime of some EU institutions: French, German and English. A pre-condition for the adoption of any regime of this kind must be that all other national languages get full European and national support to develop as scientific communication vehicles in their own environments.

The key to understanding a scientific or technical discourse is knowledge of the terms and expressions which are pertinent for the domains concerned. Creative research and innovation are likewise impossible without the deep knowledge of the terms and their meaning and the assumption that other researchers share this knowledge.

In society various levels of communication can be distinguished, from exchanges among those involved with scientific work themselves to, ultimately, communication to the general public about scientific achievements or technical specifications or the outcome of a medical examination. Each domain of discourse requires its appropriate way of expression and terminology, compatible with the context of the language used in that discourse. It is the responsibility of the national governments in association with the professions to ensure that the terminology is available and known. The national educational systems have a courageous and entrepreneurial role to play in this respect

At last some light should be shed on the potential role of the EU. This organisation which is crucial when it comes to the maintenance of diversity, whether biodiversity or language diversity or cultural diversity, has not really been challenged in this paper so far. We

therefore end this paper with a plea to the political responsible parties to start implementing in a significant way what has been promised by its founders and written down in the first and the subsequent European Treaties:

***The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore***

***The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under the provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures***

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