

EAFT–ELETO Symposium

“National Languages and Terminology in Higher Education, Science & Technology”

Athens, Greece, 7 November 2013

Languages and Terminology in a multilingual world

Κυρίες και κύριοι! Αγαπημένοι συνάδελφοι και αξιότιμοι ορολόγοι! Φίλοι! Καλημέρα, και καλώς σας βρήκα!

Χαίρομαι πάρα πολύ να είμαι εδώ – και σαν πρόεδρος της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης Ορολογίας και προσωπικά. Θέλω να ευχαριστήσω την Ελληνική Εταιρεία Ορολογίας και τους άλλους Ελληνικούς οργανωτές αυτής της ημερίδας που άφησαν την Ένωσή μας να είναι συνδιοργανωτής. Ιδιαίτερω, θα ήθελα να ευχαριστήσω το Γιάν Ρούκενς, χωρίς τον οποίον η ημερίδα δεν θα είχε πραγματοποιηθεί με τη συνεργασία της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης. Τώρα συνεχίζω στα Αγγλικά.

Natural language is no doubt our primary means of human communication. One important purpose of that communication is to convey knowledge about the world. Some knowledge is specialized, and the language used in that context is – as we all know – referred to as “language for special purposes”, “LSP”, or just “special language”. The salient hallmark of such language is high density of terms.

There is, linguistically speaking, no difference between terms and words in general language. It is the more precise use of terms that distinguish them functionally from general words. All natural languages, therefore, have the same inherent ability to express special language.

I do not believe anyone in the audience will object to the assertion that all natural languages are equally valuable, both for their actual speakers and for mankind’s cultural heritage.

Therefore, why is it that one particular language – i.e. English – is gaining supremacy in many subject domains today, e.g. within higher education, science and technology? And it is happening globally, thus threatening to supersede other languages in those domains. Is it because there are so many people who have English as their native or second language? Is it because the countries where English is spoken are economically or technologically dominant? Is it because those countries have the upper hand politically and militarily? Or is it because those countries have had a dominating position in recent history up to our days?

Those questions are difficult to answer, and I will not even try. I will instead ask another question: Is there something about English language itself that determines its dominating position? Some would say: Yes, it is easy to learn and use. Most linguists, however, would probably argue against such a conclusion, maintaining that all languages are in principle equally difficult – or easy – to learn.

Then, what is it with the English language, and why has it gained its strong position in many essential subject domains worldwide? Obviously, a multilingual world needs remedies to overcome linguistic barriers. A common language, a lingua franca, is one solution. And there can be little doubt that English for some reason is the preferred common language in the world today.

But such a common language should not be allowed to gradually displace other languages where they belong. But that is exactly what is about to happen in various societal sectors in Europe and elsewhere. One may with resignation call the ongoing development “domain loss”, as many do. It may, however, more self-critically be termed “domain relinquishment” or “linguistic self-colonization”.

What are the effects of this development on national languages and language societies? And what can be done to reverse the development and to restore confidence and pride in our own national languages?

These are questions that I am sure will be discussed during this symposium. But I also do hope that we will be learning about concrete plans to counteract the threatening development, successful measures already taken and their positive results.

Τελειώνοντας, ελπίζω ότι αυτή η ημερίδα θα έχει ενδιαφέρον για όλους μας και θα μας φέρει χρήσιμα αποτελέσματα. Το θέμα είναι πολύ σημαντικό και πρέπει να κάνουμε κάτι με την τωρινή κατάσταση!

Σας ευχαριστώ για την προσοχή σας!