

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The present paper is trying to present the situation at present regarding the need of a common language in the European Union and if this problem could be solved. Since the English language is most widely used in Europe, it would seem normal for it to become the European language. There are still other important facts to consider and the most important is that the European Union stands for equity, yet will there be equity if English becomes the European language?

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1. The need of a common language

The European Union (EU) is an existing formation which is, at least according to its own doctrine, moving towards federalism. In many respects, the European Union already is a federal state, with less independence and autonomy for its constituents than the states have in the United States. If the EU ever becomes a true empire with prominent role in the world, the language of the empire will hardly be any of the national languages in the EU, except possibly English. It is more probable that the builders of the empire will realize the need for a relatively neutral universal language, and adopt Esperanto or some other constructed language for official purposes. In fact, such a choice would be extremely rational at the present stage of the EU, since now a considerable portion of EU expenses are used for translation and interpretation between the official languages of the EU. A single official language of the EU might or might not be adopted by people worldwide as a universal language for everyday communication, including communication on the Internet.

2. English top language in Eu schools

Half of European children learn a foreign language in primary school, with English the most popular choice, a European Union study showed yesterday. The study covered the 25 EU countries, as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Bulgaria and Romania, for the school year 2002-03 and found that the learning of at least one foreign language had accelerated over the past five years. English is particularly popular in central and eastern Europe. Overall, German and French are the second most popular. Most east European countries push Russian and English and do not accept ancient Greek or Latin as alternatives. Across the continent, English, French, German, Spanish and Russian account for 95% of languages taught in secondary school.

EU leaders agreed three years ago to make learning of at least two languages from an early age a goal, saying it would give Europeans a competitive edge in seeking better jobs. Luxembourg

requires three: German, English, and French. Foreign language study is obligatory across Europe from secondary school onwards, except for Ireland and Scotland.

In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, David Crystal draws attention to some startling figures. English is present on every continent. In over 60 countries, it is used officially or without the sanction of government and is prominent in 20 more. More than 150 million people receive English language radio shows. A phenomenal 80% of the information stored electronically around the world is in English. Crystal also says that "over 50 million children study English as an additional language at primary level; over 80 million study it at secondary level (these figures exclude China)."

3. English universal language on the Internet

Generally speaking, English is the universal language on the Internet, but it has no official status, and it will never have. The reasons for the position of English are the imperialism and economical and political importance of English-speaking countries. Linguistically, English is extremely unsuitable for international communication, and the actual wide use of English tends to polarize the world into Internet users and Internet illiterates.

The spectre of an Internet-charged global English riding roughshod over other languages is haunting the world. This spectre first appeared in the mid-1990s, when more than four-fifths of the first generation of Web pages were written in English. Today, even though more languages are represented, English remains the default tongue of international discussion online, as well as of e-commerce, and many people continue to fear the consequences of this dominance for linguistic diversity.

The importance of the Internet grows rapidly in all fields of human life, including not only research and education but also marketing and trade as well as entertainment and hobbies. This implies that it becomes more and more important to know how to use Internet services and, as a part of this, to read and write English.

Of course, the majority of mankind cannot use the Internet nowadays or in the near future, since they live in countries which lack the necessary economical and technological infrastructure. But the Internet causes polarization in developed countries, too: people are divided into Internet users and Internet illiterates, and as the use of the Internet grows and often replaces traditional methods of communication, the illiterates may find themselves in an awkward position.

In general, it is easy to learn to use Internet services. The worst problems of Internet illiteracy are, in addition to lack of economical resources of course, wrong attitudes. Older people are usually not accustomed to live in a world of continuous and rapid change, and they may not realize the importance of the Internet or the easiness of learning to use it.

But although Internet services themselves are, generally speaking, easy to learn and use, you will find yourself isolated on the Internet if you are not familiar with English. This means that knowledge or lack of knowledge of English is one of the most severe factors that cause polarization. Learning to use a new Internet service or user interface may take a few hours, a few days, or even weeks, but it takes years to learn a language so that you can use it in a fluent and self-confident manner.

4. EU language problems

The European Union has declared 2001 its 'Year of the Languages'. It is a way of celebrating the variety of official languages used by the member states of the EU, and of assuring equal recognition to all these languages. As of the beginning of 2001, the Union consists of 15 member states. This means that all official documents must be translated into all the members' recognized languages, and representatives of each member state have a right to expect a speech in their language to be interpreted. And each member state has the right to hear ongoing proceedings interpreted into its own language.

Languages of countries that can well be admitted to the EU in the foreseeable future are Albanian, Bosnian, Catalan (the official language of Andorra in the Pyrenees), Croatian, Serbian (for political reasons, the two slightly different varieties that made up the language we used to call Serbo-Croatian prefer now to emphasize their distinctness), and Moldavian (close to Romanian). It will probably not be long before Turkish is another one of the official languages, and this will bring the EU total up in the vicinity of 30 languages. Have you multiplied yet to get the number of

combinations? Does between 800 and 900 (even 400 sounds pretty outlandish) combinations still seem within the reach of any organization, no matter how well-meaning?

Many EU administrators feel that to a great extent this diversity can be canceled out by ever-increasing reliance on the computer translation that is already in heavy use. It is certainly true that if we couldn't count on computers to do a lot of the translation 'heavy lifting', even the most idealistic administrator would never even dream of saddling an organization with an enterprise that would quickly absorb a major part of its finances and energy.

The rapidly increasing profusion of languages in the EU is quickly becoming intolerably clumsy and prohibitively expensive. And this doesn't even count the additional expense caused by printing in the Greek alphabet and soon in the Cyrillic (Bulgarian and Serbian). Everyone agrees that all languages must have their 'place in the sun' and their diversity celebrated. But common sense suggests that the EU is going to be forced to settle on a very small number of working languages, perhaps only one, and the linguistic future of the EU has become the subject of intense debate. To some of those responsible for preserving the strict equality that is the EU's lifeblood, it is a disturbing thought that the strongest candidate is the one with an already well-established dominance in the world: English.

Media coverage of language policy tends to be misleading. Branding multilingualism in the EU as "Babel" is false, since the translation and interpretation services provide effective communication across languages. The terms "official language" and "working language" are often confused. For instance, the director of the British Council in Germany is on record as suggesting that English ought to be the "sole official language" of the EU. This is a preposterous idea, since the EU is based on the principle of the equality of member states and their languages. English is in no valid sense "the lingua franca of Europe". There are several. But of course the current preeminence of English brings advantages and influence to those with a command of English, whether as a first or second language. It is important to keep separate the "Europe" of member states and the "Europe" of the supranational EU institutions.

The cost of the language services at all the EU institutions is currently 0.8% of the total budget, amounting to a mere €2 per head of population per annum. Translating written documents (literally millions of pages of text every year) is vital when documents take legal effect in member states. Texts must be promulgated in the dominant language of each state. This is crucial for the legitimacy of the EU operation. Up to 80% of national legislation involves implementing decisions that have already been agreed on at the supranational level. Such texts are the outcome of an immensely complicated series of steps of legal drafting and consultation, in capital cities and in EU institutions. Participation on an equitable basis requires the use of the languages of all the member states, but in the initial drafting of texts and in informal contacts, English has pride of place.

5. Solutions

Machine translation and constructed international languages are alternative but not mutually exclusive solutions to the problem of communication between people with different native languages. They can be combined in several ways. A constructed language might form the basis of a semantics-oriented machine translation system. It could be used as an intermediate language, thus reducing the problem of making $m \times n$ translators from m languages to n languages into the problem of making $m+n$ translators.

5.1 Machine translations, an alternative

An alternative view of the future is that after a few years or decades, no universal language is needed: machine translation will allow you to use your own language. If the machine translation tools had sufficient quality and speed, you could sit on your terminal writing your news article or a message in, say, Finnish, and another person in New Zealand would read your text in English, due to automatic translation "on the fly".

During the last few decades, quite a lot of predictions and even promises have been presented regarding machine translation, but useful software and systems for it have not been available until recently. This has caused disappointments and pessimism to the extent that many people consider machine translation as definitely unrealistic.

Actually, machine translation is operational for a wide range of texts, although corrective actions by human translators may be necessary. Corrections are needed to resolve ambiguities which exist due to the limitations of the software and to fix errors caused by the fact that translation of human languages requires extralinguistic information.

Currently the operational machine translation software is essentially based on syntactic analysis, so that semantic information is implicit in the dictionaries used by the software. An alternative approach, based on some kind of semantic analysis in addition to syntax, does not appear to be practically applicable yet.

5.2 A constructed language

It would be highly desirable to have a constructed language for international communication. It is well known that a large number of attempts to that effect have been made, with little results. Advocates of the basic idea have hardly agreed on anything but the basic idea, and most constructed languages have had no use as a language. People who strongly support the idea have typically designed their own proposal, a perfect language, and they do not want accept anything that is not perfect - "best" is the worst enemy of "good".

The very idea is not inherently unrealistic, but it can only be realized if strong economical and political interests are involved, such as the intended creation of a European or Japanese-Chinese empire. The best that the advocates of a constructed international language can wish is that such empires emerge and that the United States remain as an important power, so that the world will have a few strong empires which cannot beat each other but must live in parallel and in cooperation. In such a situation, it might turn out that it is unrealistic not to agree on a common language which is not any of the national languages.

The role of the Internet in this hypothetical development would be to create the informational infrastructure for the discussion of the construction of the language, the very construction work, spreading out information about the language, the use of the language, and continuous development of the language. Most probably the language would first be used in parallel with English, and the initial use would be for such purposes like international agreements where national languages are clearly insufficient. For instance, if you need to formulate an agreement between two countries, you definitely need a neutral common language instead of having the text in two languages, each text allowing its own interpretations.

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