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PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL DIFFICULTIES FOR NGO ACTION FOR LANGUAGE EQUALITY IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

World economic and social interaction favours the use of the English language as a medium of communication in spheres of life that were previously the domain of other "national" languages. However, due to geographical, cultural and linguistic dispersion merely informing participants about language change, and associated social and economic problems, is extremely difficult. Promoting action for language equality in a European context is then hampered by the theoretical and practical limitations of non-governmental language organisations that have little tradition of working together.

LANGUAGE ACTORS

This paper examines responses by several non-governmental language associations to two very specific language problems that result from the increasing use of English between speakers of both different and the same languages:

- 1) language discrimination
- 2) the obligatory use of English.

I have chosen to ignore a wide range of other issues more related to the traditional activities of official and semi-official language organisations such as the Taalunie (Dutch Language Union, <http://www.taalunie.org>) and the Svenska språknämnden (Swedish Language Council, <http://www.spraknamnden.se>). Furthermore, no mention is made of issues such as the introduction of English-medium instruction in European schools (often funded by the European Commission) or the promotion of English-medium universities in Europe to draw in fee-paying Asian students. No mention is made either of European Commission proposals that favour the use of English for specific purposes (European patent, European Office for Designs and Models, International Accounting Standards, etc.). Such "technical" issues often originate in proposals by powerful organisations such as the European employers' association UNICE (<http://www.unice.org>). Non-governmental language organisations in Europe have rarely acquired an understanding of legislative procedures at national and European levels so as to be able to follow such "technical" matters relating to language.

Those language organisations that have worked out positions with respect to the two specific problems of (1) language discrimination and (2) obligatory English will be detailed below. Additionally, the positions of the European Esperanto-Union (<http://www.lingvo.org>) and the World Esperanto Association (<http://www.uea.org>) with respect to action for language equality in these specific domains will also be given.

LANGUAGE DISCRIMINATION (ENGLISH MOTHER TONGUE)

"The International Court of Justice is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations .. We are looking for a highly efficient secretary for a very busy English-speaking Judge .. English mother tongue .. Knowledge of French; knowledge of Dutch an asset .. The Hague, 30 November 2001."

"Council of Europe is looking for an experienced Press Officer ... You are a native English speaker with a good knowledge of French. ... This post is open to nationals of all of the Council of Europe's 43 member States." European Voice, 15/03/2001, p. 22

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 21 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibit discrimination on the basis of language, national or social origin, birth or other status. On this legal basis, the European Esperanto-Union (EEU) began informing politicians, in December 2000, of the practice of hiring only "English native speakers" for jobs theoretically open to all. The EEU has since December 2000 registered over 350 such advertisements by European and international organisations (2,500 organisations in Brussels alone). There have been around 15 questions in the Belgian, French and European Parliaments. The replies by ministers and European Commissioners confirm the discriminatory nature of terms like "English native speaker". Commissioner Günther Verheugen, for instance, answering on behalf of the Commission to questions E-2901/01 and E-2944/01 on 3 December 2001 noted that "The vacancy notice ... issued by the Phare & Tacis Information Centre on Enlargement ... did indeed make reference to the recruitment of a "native speaker of English". The Commission readily agrees that such a wording was inadequate ... This apparently discriminatory wording should have been formulated differently in order to make clear that considering the nature of the vacancy to be filled, a high standard of knowledge of a particular language was required ... Even though the person recruited is in fact a native English speaker, he also has many other qualities, including language abilities, in that he has a very good knowledge of another EU official language."

Despite the relatively clear legal position, there are several theoretical and practical limits to NGO action for language equality with respect to job announcements for native English speakers.

1) The lack of financial resources rules out the systematic collection of information by smaller language NGO's as to the number and context of adverts for "English mother tongue speakers" in relation to other languages. Such non-governmental organisations also lack the professional expertise and resources to relay information to the media. Additionally, it is extremely costly and difficult to "prove" a case of language discrimination. It is possible, for example, to prove that all persons invited by the Council of Europe to the interviews for the above post of "Press officer", on 20 June 2001, were "native English speakers". Nonetheless, there are few organisations with the will and money to undertake legal action against the Council of Europe.

2) Despite the fact that the European Commission, for example, fully or partly finances many European organisations in Brussels, the Commission can claim that these organisations are legally independent (as indeed are the Commission's offices Tacis/Phare and Socrates/Leonardo). "The Commission is not competent to start proceedings against private companies and non-governmental organisations (NGO's) in relation to Community-law on free movement of workers. Therefore, it is up to the migrant workers who feel discriminated to start proceedings against the relevant companies or NGO's." That is the answer given by Anna Diamantopoulou on behalf of the Commission (13 March 2002) to question E-3572/01.

3) There are theoretical limits to co-operation between the NGOs. The French language association, Défense de la langue française (<http://www.langue-francaise.org>), chiefly wishes to defend the position of French as an international language. That makes it difficult for this French association to attack language discrimination at institutions such as the Council of Europe that still give a privileged position to French. For historical reasons, German language associations devote more attention to "non-political" issues such as the use of English words in German. There is then little tradition of inter-lingual co-operation with respect to language action.

OBLIGATORY USE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE



The European Commission often states a clear "preference" for participants in a number of EU projects and programmes to communicate in English with EU officials. With enlargement approaching, the European Commission is seeking further measures that "rationalise" language practice in terms of a language hierarchy. One method is the "obligatory" use of English in communication with the Commission.

Article 5 of the Multi-annual Financing Agreement (SAPARD) concerning language

1. Any communication between the Commission and the Slovak Republic related to this Agreement shall be in English.

The SAPARD agreement was signed with identical language conditions for all candidate countries. Paragraph 2 of article 5 obliges candidate countries to "provide texts in English expeditiously following a request from the Commission." Other provisions of the agreement appear to deny officials in candidate countries, and in the European Commission, the right to communicate and justify their actions to the Commission in "official" languages. Obviously, article 5 of the SAPARD agreement contravenes, regulation number 1, adopted by the Council of the European Union on 15 April 1958, that determines the languages to be used in the European Economic Community. Amended with the various acts of accession, the actual words of the regulation still read, "the official and working languages of the Community's institutions are Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish".

Adoption of English by the Czech-Polish-Slovak brigade

On 15 March 2002, the Czech Chamber of Deputies narrowly approved the establishment of a joint Czech-Polish-Slovak army brigade. Although, the Czech Republic and Poland have been NATO members since 1999, the Slovak Republic will probably join the alliance at a NATO summit in Prague in November 2002. The brigade's official language will be English. The brigade, composed of three battalions, should be ready for deployment in 2004-2005. The European Esperanto-Union objects in principle to the use of English as a means of international communication between Czech-Polish-Slovak citizens. Practical objections arise from:

- a) the financial implications (the US Commercial Service has continually spurred US companies to profit by teaching military English, (<http://www.usatrade.gov>).
- b) the social implications as English is being stressed as a selection criteria for special army courses as well as promotion.

Traditional language organisations such as the Taalunie (Dutch Language Union, <http://www.taalunie.org>) and Svenska språknämnden (Swedish Language Council, <http://www.spraknamnden.se>) have up until now been primarily engaged in actions to promote their respective languages. Those language associations with a "wider reach" have traditionally reacted to encroachments by English on what is seen as partly their "sphere of language dominance" in Eastern Europe. The Verein Deutsche Sprache (association for the German Language, <http://www.vds-ev.de>) and the Association Défense de la langue française (French language association <http://www.langue-francaise.org>) have positions on Eastern European languages. In September 2001, German language associations including the Verein Deutsche Sprache, passed a resolution calling for the EU to adopt Polish, Italian and Spanish as further "working languages" in addition to German, English and French. No mention is made of other Eastern and Central European languages. The association Défense de la langue française consistently defends the use of French as an international language (plurilingualisme). Little systematic action by these associations has been taken with respect to specific European Commission actions that oblige the use of English.

As regards obligatory English, the European Esperanto-Union is not in a financial position to take legal steps against the Commission for the contravention of Regulation Number 1 (on 15 April 1958) of the Council of the European Union. Neither is it possible to test the legality of the Czech government introducing English as a working language for its soldiers. In reacting against the obligatory use of English, the European Esperanto-Union has begun informing politicians, journalists as well as related organisations in the hope of raising awareness. We are at an initial stage of activity which hinders contacts with politicians (messages are deleted unread, telephone calls are not answered, press databases need to be drawn up, etc.). The general position of the European Esperanto-Union is to promote solutions that do not contravene current language legislation and respect the basic principles of language equality (Prague Manifesto).

CONCLUSION



Basic co-operation between associations for language equality is very much in an initial phase. Non-governmental language associations are not yet accustomed to working across language borders. Furthermore, traditional associations that defend "national" languages often do not yet fully accept the principle of language equality. This hampers co-operation by French and German associations, for example, with organisations representing less "powerful" languages. There are, however, a few small signs of interaction. In December 2000, the Institut für Deutsche Sprache brought together and organisations representing "Europäische Hochsprachen" to discuss language politics. A week earlier, colleagues from the Verein Deutsche Sprache went to visit the Défense de la langue française.

The greatest change though is the perception that the English language is encroaching on domains previously occupied by other "national" languages. In January 2002, for instance, Svenska språknämnden (Swedish Language Council, <http://www.spraknamnden.se>) published a study on domain loss and initiated a debate on Swedish language policy in the Riksdag in March 2002. The Verein Deutsche Sprache has initiated public discussion on the influence of English words in the German language as well as a debate in the Bundestag on 25 January 2002.