

# Lesser-Used Languages and Esperanto: Towards a Common Program

Allan Wynne Jones

*European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages*

We're all to a greater or a lesser extent conditioned by our environment. Personally, I live in a small market town in mid-Wales where some 60 percent of the population is bilingual. This is somewhat more than the percentage of Welsh-speakers throughout Wales – around 20 percent of the population of Wales are fully bilingual. This compares very much with the greater Basque country. Professionally, I'm not a linguist, but I work in an area of growing relevance to language experts: the relationship between language, culture and economic development. This work is based on the growing belief that linguistic cultures and their values and norms affect people's attitude to enterprise, in its widest sense, and their economic behavior in particular. And Unesco amongst other organizations has programs which are also exploring this particular field. So you can see that as an individual I am more comfortable with the implementation of policies than with theorizing and developing policies, and this to some extent will influence what I propose to say later in commenting on the earlier presentations.

Institutionally I am six months into my three-year term as president of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. As I suspect that most of you aren't familiar with the Bureau, I have the chairman's permission to give you a thumbnail portrait of the organization and its ideas. And indeed the Bureau is the only international organization to my knowledge which is solely dedicated to the question of linguistic diversity. I say that with no particular satisfaction, but I think that is a question that needs to be addressed at a worldwide level. The Bureau is an organization which by the way has two working languages, French and English, but makes great use of German, Italian and Spanish in our publications.

First of all I'd like to tell you something about the lesser-used languages circumstances of the European Union, and I hope this is not too repetitive for too many of you. Whereas worldwide there are something like 6000 languages still alive and spoken – and I understand that the majority of the people living in the world are in fact bilingual from earliest childhood – the position in Europe is somewhat different and somewhat simpler because although there are around 100 linguistic communities on the European continent, there are around 50 linguistic communities within the European Union, and about 40 of those can be regarded as using a minority or a lesser used language. And indeed there are said to be between 30 and 50 million citizens of the European Union who daily use a language which is not the language of the state in which they live. We're rather vague on the statistics because of course many of the states will not allow a question on language competence to be used in their census. So a great deal of this is on the basis of guesswork.

As far as the Bureau is concerned, we recognize the existence of five categories of territorial languages, and I must emphasize that our meaning is territorial and not immigrant languages. First of all there are the state languages of independent states within the European Union, like Irish and *Lëtzebuergesch*, which to some extent can be regarded as lesser used within their states. Then there are what you could call unique languages, languages that are minority languages that are spoken only within one member state, and my language, Welsh, is an example of that. There are several minority languages which are spoken in two or more states. For example, Sámi, Irish, and Basque are spoken in two member states. We recognize also the cross-border minorities: the Danish-German situation, and the Italian-German situation, as well as strictly non-territorial autochthonous languages spoken by the Gipsy and Jewish communities. Of course, within the 40 or so linguistic communities we're talking about, there are tremendous variations in terms of the status of those particular languages. If any of you is particularly interested in reading the most

recent document on the state of the minority languages of the European Union, the *EuroMosaic* summarizes that position. I think it would be fair to say that the picture presented in that particular document is a very dark and bleak picture. And for the most part, with the exception of possibly around ten of those languages, most of the trends regarding language competence and certainly language use are downward trends, so it is a very worrying situation. That is the context within which the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages operates.

Can I then, as I promised, give you a thumbnail picture of what we are and what we do? I should say that we're very unhappy with this definition "Lesser-Used". We regard it as a very negative, pejorative term, and if our speakers continue to think of themselves as speakers of lesser-used languages, that doesn't say very much for the future of those languages. Collectively, we are working towards trying to redefine that particular category and possibly, eventually, to rename the organization. Our head office is located in Dublin; we have an information office in Brussels; we have only 10 full-time staff; and our annual income is in the region of 1 million ECU, but I should say that this particular income is not guaranteed, it's not repeated, because usually, what happens annually is that the Council of the Ministers of the Union throws out the minority-language budget line, and it's only reintroduced each year through the good offices of members of the European Parliament. The total spending of the European Union on programs that involve lesser-used languages is only 4 million ECU in the last budget. So it is a very very small budget in comparison with other spending items. In addition to these offices, we have a voluntary network of committees and language sub-committees in the various member states. And the sort of enthusiasm, of idealism that is evident in some of those meetings is certainly the same sort of feelings that I have experienced here with you today.

What does the Bureau do? Principally, we have four aims. First of all, we try and seek political and legal support for our languages and for the speakers of our languages at Union, state, national and regional levels. And in fact, within the European Parliament, there is an Intergroup for minority languages with whom we work very closely, and they are the main contact point between the Bureau and the European institutions apart from the small unit within DG XXII which is responsible for implementing the minority languages budget line. We also try to ensure finance for projects which involve minority languages, we promote an exchange of information and ideas between institutions and speakers of the languages. And we support the creation and activities of associated structures like the Mercator network, which some of you might know about. The overall aim of all these activities, in my opinion, is to strengthen the attitudes of individual speakers of minority languages towards their own languages and towards other speakers of their own languages.

I haven't got time to go into our programs here today, but just to tell you that we try and have a program, publications, some sort of project or activity, in all the principal domains within which minority languages are used. Our attention these days is being directed more and more towards the work and economic domain, and also growing attention is being paid to the whole question of the relationship between minority languages and health care, for obvious reasons.

Now I'd like to give you some very general comments on today's activities. And in making my comments, I confess that I have to be very careful not to be carried away by the enthusiasm and idealism of this gathering. As I said, these are qualities which are of course very much in evidence when speakers of lesser-used languages get together, and they often lead you to making commitments and promises that are beyond your expectations. And I ask myself, first of all, what issues do Esperantist and minority-language speaker have in common, other than this sincere, harmonious approach to language problems? I think that in a general sense our aims are compatible with yours, although the Bureau, to my knowledge, has never been asked to discuss or formulate a policy in relation to Esperanto.

The first issue on which I think there is some sort of mutual agreement is our mutual desire to promote not only linguistic, but cultural diversity. I think that it's vitally important to recognize the significance of cultural values and activities of each and every linguistic community in the

world, however small. In this way we can preserve the diversity of ideas, of different ways of looking at the world. For me it would be an enormous tragedy if we were able to preserve all existing minority languages but lose their cultural values due to globalization. I think that there is a great danger that even if we are able to preserve a large number of the world's minority languages, we could end up speaking different languages but saying the same things.

Secondly, I think we have a mutual interest in promoting this worldwide discussion on questions of language, especially in a cross-cultural and intercultural context. I'm amazed at the ignorance of otherwise well-informed people who fail to differentiate between language attitudes, language acquisition or competence, and language use – and especially the frequency of use in a variety of domains. Robert Phillipson referred to some of those questions this morning. And I think we need together to explore ways in which we can work together to expand this discussion and to raise the quality of the information available in this particular international-language debate.

Thirdly, we have to reassure the speakers of state languages, which are not languages of wider communication like English, Spanish, and French, that we – that is Esperantists and minority language speakers – present no threat to their existence, for many of the political leaders and users of these languages feel themselves and their languages to be under threat. So I think that we need to explore mutually the question of language rights and territoriality together.

Fourthly, we mutually need to have a unit within one of the international institutions – probably Unesco – which is permanently devoted to the relevant questions of language planning, ensuring that intercultural communications and the existence of an international language are not incompatible with linguistic diversity in the world. In order to achieve this, as a first step, I think we need to identify the power bases which will obstruct or enable that to take place. And you've already been identifying the member states of these organizations as providing the major obstructions, and in that context I think that many of these international institutions can be regarded as members' clubs, and they will protect the membership of their particular club.

Fifthly, if we have a mutual aim to ensure linguistic diversity within the European Union, then, as a first step, there should be an attempt to clarify the basic issues which exist between Esperantists and the Bureau for Minority Languages, and I would welcome the staging of a conference which explored some of these issues and agreed upon basic policies. However, because of funding complications, I think that the initiative of this conference would need to come from Esperantists rather than from the Bureau itself.

In this final paragraph I'm addressing some of the ideas that Hans Erasmus identified and brought to your attention a few minutes ago, especially in terms of the experiments and pilot projects that he spelled out so competently – and by the way I cannot in any way disagree with any of the broad comments that Hans has said. Finally, I do confess that I've been affected by the enthusiasm of this event.

The following is very much a personal proposal, which may sound terribly naive to some of you, but it's based on my experience in language-related businesses. In business, if you want to achieve something, you have to have a plan, stating out what you want to do, in financial terms identifying the resources you require, and when you're going to do what – in other words, a business plan, or a program plan. Now pardon my ignorance if this sounds idealistic, but maybe a group of Esperantists should sit down and write a 50-year, or a 100-year program, to try and identify what you would like to have happen within a 50 or 100-year timespan – and it was Yvo Peeters who suggested the 100-year time span, bearing in mind what has happened with the measurement system. A plan – and I emphasize that this is something that minority-language speakers and Esperantists have in common – of what we want to achieve linguistically, and what steps in terms of persuasion, education and resources we need to take. As a starting point maybe, a cost-benefit analysis of a major international institution could develop some of the pilot ideas that Hans Erasmus was talking about. So there we are you see, I've absorbed much of your idealism and enthusiasm, and in that at least you've achieved something!