

Esperanto in Europe: Two Proposals

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In the beginning of this year the Council of Europe asked me, as the representative of the Universal Esperanto Association, to comment on the CE's *Intergovernmental Programme of Activities for 1996*. In my contribution I tried to explain that the use of a neutral auxiliary language such as Esperanto provides the best way of meeting all standards, principles and political aims of the Council of Europe. An amended version of this paper, which represents the ideas of the Working Group on the Language Problem in the European Union, is appended to this brief contribution to the Nitobe Symposium.

Strengthening the position of minority languages through a bridge language

The European Union (EU) already consists of 15 member states with 11 official languages and about 40 autochthonous languages. When it is joined by several new members, its communication or language problem will increase even more.

Quite recently the European Civil Service Federation published a report that is worth mentioning. It begins by referring to conclusions made by the Council of Ministers of the EU of 1995-06-12:

The Council affirms the importance for the Union of its linguistic diversity, which is an essential aspect of the European dimension and identity and of the common cultural heritage. It underlines the implications, be they democratic, cultural, social or economic, of such diversity. Linguistic diversity is also a source of employment and occupation and a factor of integration. It is an asset for the Union's influence in the outside world, since most European Union languages are used in a large number of non-member States.

The report continues by saying that for EU interpretation work, this diversity requires the provision of a direct oral translation from language A to B, C, and so on. In practice, direct oral translation for all languages has not been available for a long time, and often an intermediate or bridge language (sometimes even two) is being used. This being so, it is a small step to consider a planned language like Esperanto as a bridge language. Easier to learn, it would also make the system of interpretation cheaper. It would even make it possible to translate from minority languages to official languages, or to other minority languages, or vice versa.

Facilitating democratic communication through a neutral language

Let us face European integration by looking at it afresh and consider seriously the European dimension in education. Imagine oneself in the position of a child, confronted with many different people speaking different languages. We need to be equipped with practical instruments for communication, allowing time for other necessities in daily life.

The Ministers for Education of the EU recommend that in secondary education, students should learn at least two foreign languages. But who are the ones who will accomplish such a difficult task? How many, or rather how few, would actually be capable of using these languages for international communication? In fact, most schools in the EU choose English as the (compulsory) first foreign language as it seems to be *the* international language of the moment. However, English is very difficult to learn. Its phonetics offer great problems and its orthography is notoriously inconsistent. The syntax is remarkably intricate once the learner moves beyond very simple constructions, and English or American is extraordinarily difficult to pronounce.

It is very likely though that if the EU accepts one *national* language (whether officially or not) as a means of international communication, this will not only threaten language diversity and the existence of minority languages, but national/official languages could easily become minority languages! In contrast, a *neutral* language such as Esperanto for international communication would not threaten the existence or status of any language or culture. The advantages are:

1. neutral: every language retains its status;
2. democratic: a practical international language for everyone, therefore no particular national language or culture is imposed;
3. it is far (about five or ten times) easier than English or any other language;
4. knowledge of Esperanto facilitates study of other languages;
5. financial benefit: costs would be lower in all aspects of international communication.

As for the European citizen, everybody could have a common, and easy-to-use *neutral* tool for international communication, if taught Esperanto during the last two years of elementary school before starting to learn other languages. Esperanto has an additional *propaedeutic* advantage: it facilitates the learning of other languages. Moreover, students (especially those who are less gifted in learning languages) could lessen their burden and with the time and energy gained, choose either other subjects or focus on one or more other foreign languages and cultures, *not* necessarily the (now compulsory) English/American and their culture. This would most certainly support the status and use of minority languages.

Of course there are many prejudices against a “planned language” and these will have to be dealt with. Esperanto has been used for over a hundred years as an international language, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The languages of this region will certainly not be favoured by the present linguistic policies of the EU. If Esperanto can be accepted as a tool for democratic international communication for future generations, it will protect language diversity and grant dignity and equal value to all languages, including minority languages.

Recommendations

In the past, several successful experiments have been conducted on teaching foreign languages more quickly and efficiently by first introducing a logically conceived planned language such as Esperanto. It seems, however, that they have still not convinced the teachers and policymakers.

Therefore it is suggested that the following experiments be launched:

- a) an experiment (the NEIGHBOUR project) within the European Union or even the member states of the Council of Europe, aimed at teaching Esperanto as an introduction to second-language learning;
- b) experimental use of Esperanto as a bridge language for interpretation.

APPENDIX

The Language Problem

(Contribution to the Intergovernmental Programme of Activities for 1996
of the Council of Europe)

Summary

This contribution or paper deals with the language problem and maintains that the present concept of “multilingualism” develops in practice into a *laisser-faire* situation which finally results

in domination and discrimination in the fields of communication, languages and cultures – a development which poses a serious threat to long-term cohesion in a multinational community. The paper continues by questioning whether we have the most adequate tools for communication at our disposal. Which options exist? There are three fundamental options in theory to help solve the language and communication problem.

Option A: All national or official, regional or minority languages have to be treated the same;

Option B: One common (national/official) language must fulfill the function of interethnic communication;

Option C: One common but neutral auxiliary language is adopted alongside the native tongues.

The option of a neutral auxiliary language such as Esperanto meets all standards, principles and political aims of the Council of Europe extraordinarily well. If the advantages of an auxiliary language were simply an interesting hypothesis, the issue would still be too important not to test this hypothesis experimentally. Three experiments are proposed:

1. NEIGHBOUR-project

Because successful experiments in the past on teaching foreign languages more quickly and efficiently by means of a logically conceived auxiliary language such as Esperanto have still not convinced teachers and policymakers, these experiments should be tried again.

2. Esperanto as a bridge language

Experimental use of Esperanto as a bridge language for interpretation should be launched. In the end, this will serve to provide more guarantees for the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity.

3. Esperanto as a bridge language in military cooperation

Use of an easier-to-learn and neutral common language could be of great help in improving communication among cooperating armed forces.

1. Introduction

The Council of Europe now consists of more than 30 member states where a great variety of languages are being used, be they national or official languages or regional or minority languages. Official languages of the Council itself are English and French, although other languages are being used or can be used during parliamentary and other meetings. Since new members have joined the Council of Europe over the last few years, its communication or language problem has increased significantly.

A neutral language as a second, international language alongside the native tongue will improve communication between citizens and international institutions; will contribute to the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity; will strengthen the importance of minority languages; and will develop the European dimension in education so as to strengthen European citizenship. Such an easy-to-learn auxiliary language will greatly support the achievement of the political aims and principles of the three “domains” put forward by the Council of Europe in its Programme of Activities for 1996.

2. Principles and political aims of the Council of Europe

These “domains” of the proposed Intergovernmental Programme clearly reflect the principles and political aims the Council wishes to achieve. No doubt both member states and citizens will support the promotion of a more “pluralist democracy”, “human rights and the rule of law”, more “social cohesion and quality of life”, as well as “cultural cohesion and cultural pluralism”.

However, nothing has been said in the programme about the language or communication problem. The language problem is more than just the “protection of national minorities and their languages” (ACTIVITY I.11) or “language learning for European citizenship” (ACTIVITY III.2). This last-mentioned activity is intended to help member states take effective measures to enable all their nationals to learn to use languages with a view to improved mutual understanding and tolerance, mobility, and access to information in a multilingual and multicultural Europe.

3. The language problem: what does it mean?

“Elaborating teaching and learning methodologies”, “developing programmes for the initial and in-service training of teachers”, “designing teaching/learning materials” and other measures as mentioned under ACTIVITY III.2 are objectives for improving this mutual understanding and tolerance, mobility, and access to information. It will certainly help, and this being the case we should all welcome these proposals.

However, it will do little toward solving the language problem; due to the lack of an easier tool for communication, it will not improve communication between all citizens.

The language problem concerns all situations where a citizen, an official or a representative of one of the member states cannot use his or her native tongue.

People solve the problem partly (or they believe that the problem will be solved) by accepting interpreters and translators, or the use of the language of the counterpart, or the use of a common known language (but not one of the languages of the persons concerned).

If one is not allowed to use his or her native tongue, it will weaken one’s position in comparison with the counterpart, who is allowed to use his or her native tongue.

Now, certain principles and political aims are here at stake, such as human rights (no discrimination on the grounds of language), identity, language and cultural diversity, political cohesion, quality of life, etc.

4. Options for handling the language problem

4.1 Two foreign languages, with in fact English as the first

Ministers for Education recommend that in secondary education, students should learn at least two foreign languages. But who are the ones who will accomplish such a difficult task? How many, or rather how few, will actually be capable of using these languages for international communication? In fact, most schools in Europe choose English as the (compulsory) first foreign language, as it seems to be the international language of the moment. There is not much interest in other languages.

However, English is very difficult to learn. Its phonetics offer great problems, and its orthography is notoriously inconsistent. The syntax is remarkably intricate once the learner moves beyond very simple constructions. The language is even pronounced in different ways by people from different parts of the world.

4.2 Theoretical options for solving the language problem

From the theoretical and logical point of view, there are three principal or fundamental options for solving the language and communication problem.

Option A: All national or official, regional or minority languages have to be treated the same;

Option B: One common (national/official) language must fulfill the function of interethnic communication;

Option C: One common but neutral auxiliary language is adopted alongside the native tongues.

When considering these options we have to take into account that the following types of circumstances can be present:

- contacts between citizens of different nationality (languages);
- contacts between citizens and international organisations like the Council of Europe or the European Union;
- contacts between officials within an international organisation having different native tongues.

In this context we do not take into account regional or minority languages, as this will not influence the outcome.

Option A

Neither citizens of Europe nor the best qualified officials or representatives of member states are able to master all languages being used in all member states of the Council of Europe, not even passively. Within the institutions there are too many physical, human and financial constraints for such a solution. The only possibility at the moment is to produce (major) documents in all languages. The need for efficiency in daily work and decision-making requires a more rational approach.

Option B

One language is a rational, efficient and logical solution at first sight. The often-negative public image of a “tower of Babel” and of an overweight bureaucracy could be replaced by a positive recognition of a rationally organised and efficiently working organisation. A quicker decision-making process would certainly lead to greater public support.

However, which language is to be promoted as the common language? Citizens and officials with another native tongue would feel discriminated against. This is real discrimination on the grounds of language and therefore a violation of human rights. Language is also culture, and other languages and cultures would acquire secondary status and become threatened. It is also in contradiction with “the right to use a regional or minority language in private and public life as an inalienable right in conformity with the principles embodied in the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and with the spirit of the Council of Europe’s Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental freedoms” (Preamble of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of 1992, Council of Europe).

Everyone would feel an obligation to learn the common language and would be less inclined to learn other languages, with subsequent damage to linguistic and cultural diversity. This would not only lead to a cultural domination of those who can speak and write in their mother tongue, but also bring economic advantages to this language group. Nowadays this dominating language is English.

Another form of domination lies in the power held in all member states by governments, parliaments and other governmental institutions, armies, cultural groupings and science. Their representatives, and those of the nongovernmental organisations, constitute only a small part of the total population and are usually the people who have learned English. It must be kept in mind that on a world scale, English nonetheless seems to be on the decline, today being spoken by about 8,5% of the world’s population in contrast to 11% in 1950.

Option C

A neutral language that is not the language of any member state, such as a planned language on the model of Esperanto, has not yet been seriously considered by the political decision-makers for interethnic and international communication.

The option that meets all standards, principles and political aims of the Council of Europe best is the option of a neutral auxiliary language, for the following reasons:

Democratic cohesion. As stated in the programme proposed by the Council of Europe in 1996 (page 3): “numerous factors of instability pose a threat such as: unresolved minority problems, national tensions, intolerance, outstanding questions of citizenship, uncontrolled migration flows, inadequacy of transfrontier dialogue, and so on, all requiring urgent concerted action”; “even in the countries where democracy has long been established, malfunctions and forms of ‘democratic deficiency’ are appearing and are liable to undermine the institutions and frustrate the citizens’ expectations”. On page 4 the Council proposes “preparation of new instruments”. A neutral auxiliary language should be considered as a new instrument, as the present system of communication is a form of so-called democratic deficiency. The present system will not bring the improvements in communication that will meet the desired aims and standards of modern society and of international organisations.

Equality. All languages and cultures, including regional or minority languages should enjoy the same rank, as they are essentially of equal value.

Language and cultural diversity. The preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity, the safeguarding of cultural and linguistic groups' identity will be best guaranteed by use of a neutral common language.

Non-discrimination. Everyone can best read and express himself in his mother tongue. No one will enjoy an unfair advantage in this regard.

Efficiency. Use of one neutral, common auxiliary language for international or inter-ethnic relations will increase efficiency.

Other languages. Knowledge of other languages is always a welcome addition. Introduction of a neutral, easier-to-learn auxiliary language will provide more opportunities of learning other languages, such as the language of one's neighbouring country or a regional language.

5. Other options?

It will be clear that more than these three theoretical options are available, for example the use of two, three, four or five national languages as common languages. The objections, mentioned above, would merely make themselves felt that much more. There is no fundamental difference.

6. Esperanto as an auxiliary language

Esperanto is the most widely used of the planned languages.¹⁶ For the sake of convenience we are here dealing only with Esperanto. This does not exclude the necessity of considering other planned languages. If it were to be decided to introduce a common auxiliary language, and if this should be a planned language, it would be necessary to justify this choice thoroughly. We are now dealing with Esperanto not only because it is the most widely used planned language, but also, by providing information about one such language specifically, in the hope of dispelling some of the common prejudice against planned languages generally – a prejudice which often prevents open and objective discussion on the subject. We will restrict ourselves to the following aspects.

6.1 Easier to learn

Esperanto is relatively easy to learn for speakers of all languages. With one year of study it is possible to achieve a level that can be reached only after four to five years for languages such as English, French or German. It is furthermore possible to write and speak the language fluently after one or two years of serious study, which cannot be achieved with other languages.

6.2 Passive knowledge

Within one year it is possible to achieve a passive mastery enabling access to virtually all written documents and books in the language; it will also be possible to understand spoken Esperanto reasonably well. If summaries of scientific publications were published in Esperanto, this passive knowledge alone would provide scientists with easier access to information about their subjects.

6.3 Pedagogical aspects

Experiments have shown that a language-orientation course based on the concept of a logically conceived planned language such as Esperanto facilitates the learning of foreign languages, and therefore possesses a propaedeutic value. Teaching Esperanto in the elementary school for two years will make the phenomenon "language" and the "structure of the mother tongue" more transparent and ease the learning of the next foreign language.¹⁷

In addition, Esperanto can be used in a practical way sooner than any other language. Within only six months, students reach a level at which they can begin to use Esperanto for international correspondence, or for school trips or holidays in other countries. This is an enormous impetus to their motivation, and it favours a European and international dimension to their education generally.

6.4 Characteristics

Esperanto is both a spoken and a written language. Its lexicon derives primarily from Western European languages, but words from other sources are constantly being added. Its syntax and morphology show strong Slavic influences and have much in common with isolating languages like Chinese, as well as agglutinative languages such as Turkish, Swahili and Japanese. The weaknesses of ethnic languages have deliberately been avoided, while many of their strengths and commonalities have been borrowed. Those who speak the Romance languages, for example, already know about eighty percent of the roots and words in Esperanto, while Slav-speaking peoples know about fifty percent. In its earliest stages, more than a hundred years ago, the language consisted of about a thousand roots, from which at least ten or twelve thousand words could be formed. It has developed rapidly since then. Today, the largest Esperanto dictionaries contain between 15 000 and 20 000 roots, from which over 150 000 words can be formed.

6.5 Pronunciation

Since the Esperanto orthography is phonetic, every word is pronounced just as it is spelt. Word stress falls on the next-to-last syllable. This poses considerable advantages in contrast to English. A Chinese, Latin American or European will have very similar pronunciation.

6.6 Neutrality

When two persons in a dialogue use a “neutral” language such as Esperanto, neither has an advantage, in contrast to the situation in which one of the speakers is using his mother tongue.

6.7 Grammar and literature

The simple and logical concept of Esperanto is one of its main characteristics. Compound words are very common, as are words formed from a root by the use of prefixes or suffixes. There is only one article, *la*. Nouns end in *o*, adjectives in *a* and adverbs in *e*. The plural of nouns and adjectives is formed by adding *j*. All forms of verbs end in *as* in the present tense, *is* in the past tense, *os* in the future tense, and *us* in the conditional.

The flourishing literary tradition in Esperanto has been recognized by PEN International, which has accepted an Esperanto affiliate. Some 300 titles, both original and translated, appear each year in a wide range of fields. Over a hundred magazines and journals are published regularly.

6.8 Precision and terminology

Esperanto can be used for social and economic purposes as well as for cultural activities. Everything that can be said in a national language or a minority language can also be expressed in Esperanto. Furthermore, just as mechanical and scientific developments have resulted in new words and new terminology in every language, so also has the technical vocabulary of Esperanto been enriched by such additions.

6.9 Easier instrument for communication

Esperanto offers an easier tool for international or interethnic communication. However, even the use of this neutral, common language is not a guarantee for peace, as was hoped for by many Esperantists at the beginning of this century. Recent examples of use of one language in a warring area – e.g. in Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia and Ruanda – show us that, regrettably, where a common language is in use it does not exclude war or acts of violence.

6.10 Results and quality of language teaching

Introduction of a relatively easy-to-learn auxiliary language would save much time and energy. This time and energy could be put to better use by those who are less gifted or interested in languages but strong in other areas, where they could get better results untroubled by the encumbrance of learning languages. This would facilitate the learning of other foreign languages for those who have a specific interest in them, while still equipping all students with an adequate instrument for international communication.

7. Experiments

Full introduction of a neutral planned language as Esperanto seems attractive, but it is probably a bridge too far if there are no experimental results indicating that a communication system using a planned language can comply with the requirements of today's society. Decision

makers will have to be aware of these results and of the various related aspects of a planned language. The following projects should accordingly be launched.

7.1 NEIGHBOUR-project

At the previously mentioned one-day seminar in Brussels, attention was given to the use of a planned language as a pedagogical instrument for easier learning of further languages (see also 6.3 above). Since teachers and policymakers have not yet been convinced by past experiments on teaching foreign languages more quickly and efficiently by means of an auxiliary language, it is suggested that a new experiment along these lines be launched within the context of the Council of Europe, in close collaboration with the European Union. A working group on the language problem in the European Union is preparing such a project under the acronym NEIGHBOUR, to be funded i.a. by the European Action Programme "Socrates".

7.2 Esperanto as a bridge language

Quite recently the European Civil Service Federation of the European Union in Brussels published a report that is worth mentioning. It begins by referring to conclusions made by the Council of Ministers of the EU of 12-06-1995: "The Council affirms the importance for the Union of its linguistic diversity, which is an essential aspect of the European dimension and identity and of the common cultural heritage. It underlines the implications, be they democratic, cultural, social or economic, of such diversity. Linguistic diversity is also a source of employment and occupation and a factor of integration. It is an asset for the Union's influence in the outside world, since most European languages are used in a large number of non-member States."

The report continues by saying that for interpretation work in the European Union, this diversity can be guaranteed if we set aside the fact that an interpreter is expected to give an immediate oral translation of words spoken in language A, B or C, etc. In practice, this has not been the case for a long time, and often an intermediate or bridge language (sometimes even two languages) is being used. The report says that it is a mere technical question as to which language should be selected as a bridge language. This is a matter for the "cabins".

This being so, it is a small step to consider a planned language such as Esperanto as a bridge language. Easier to learn (five to ten times easier, depending on the language) it would even make it possible to translate from minority languages to national or official languages or to other minority languages, or vice versa. Therefore experimental use of Esperanto as a bridge language for interpretation should be launched.

7.3 Esperanto as a bridge language in military cooperation

Nowadays more cooperation exists than ever before between armed forces for special operations like UNIFOR or within the context of specific alliances like NATO or on a bilateral or multilateral level. Efficient communication is essential in such cooperation. Use of an easier-to-learn common language such as Esperanto could be of great help in improving this communication and cooperation. Soldiers and not only officers should master the common language, which will contribute to the *esprit de corps*. Therefore a specific project in this context should be launched.

8. Conclusions

The present concept of "multilingualism" develops in practice into a *laissez-faire* situation which finally results in domination and discrimination in the fields of communication, languages and cultures – a development which poses a serious threat to long-term cohesion in a multinational community.

Let us face the above-mentioned "domains" of the Council of Europe by looking at them afresh, seriously considering new instruments of communication. Policymakers should imagine themselves in the position of a child, confronted with many languages. The future generation should be equipped with a practical instrument for communication, allowing time for other necessities in daily life. Let those who have had the privilege to be educated in one or more foreign languages consider how much time and energy have been invested in his or her language learning. Notwithstanding new teaching methods and more possibilities for practising, an average

student will not succeed in producing a faultless text even following a vast amount of study. A native speaker will still be necessary to correct it.

Our society is developing from an industrial society into a society of information and communication. Let us think about the question whether we use the most adequate tools in a world of globalization. If the advantages of an auxiliary common language such as Esperanto were simply an interesting hypothesis (which is not the case, as more than a hundred years of experience have proven its practicality), the issue would still be too important not to test this hypothesis experimentally.

[16](#) “...of nearly a thousand language projects during the last four centuries, only a handful of them have really been practiced by a significant number of people and that up to now only the ‘Internacia Lingvo/Esperanto’ has reached international dimension”: Seminar organised by the Hanns-Seidel Foundation in collaboration with members of the European Parliament and a working group on the language problem in the European Union on September 29th, 1993 in the European Parliament in Brussels.

[17](#) Frank, H., Die Wesensmerkmale des Paderborner Modells für den Sprachorientierungsunterricht. In Carlevaro, T. and G. Lobin, *Einführung in die Interlinguistik*. Alsbach: Leuchtturm-Verlag, 1979.

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