

# Multilingualism in an Institutional and Organizational Perspective

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It is evident that the ever-greater technicality of society, the ever-greater dimension of international political organizations, the ever-greater mobility of citizens has brought about language problems, language constraints which did not exist at all in previous decades. Now almost every citizen is confronted with language problems, the moment he leaves his own village or region. In this part of your conference, we are mostly talking about organizational and institutional multilingualism, which I have already discussed in a book published in Esperanto, *La intereso kaj utilo de komuna interlingvo* (1988). These problems are basically the result of the clash of the two fundamental aspects of the use of language:

- the factor of identity (language as a criterion of identity);
- the factor of communication.

One could put it in a very easy equation: how much of my identity do I lose to gain how much of communicative skills? How strongly do I value my identity to be willing not to communicate – i.e. not to learn one or more other languages? You might say: “I will keep my complete identity *and* learn 15 languages.” That is certainly possible for an extremely small number of people in the world, very highly educated, highly skilled, highly motivated, with a multilingual upbringing, and so on, who can hop from one language to another. This is not what is relevant for the large majority of our citizens. So it is my conviction that there cannot be, at this moment, a fundamental increase of communication without a partial loss of identity.

What makes a language international or, as some French-speakers pretend, “universal”? As you probably know, there is only one language in the world that considers itself “universal”, and that is French. The others are more modest and consider themselves “international”. So what makes a language international? Only recently, in the *Zeit* was one page on the position of German in the world, and a lot of considerations about language policy, classifying languages Ú and it came out that German was in the twelfth position although it has nearly 110 million speakers. Not many people in general consider German to be an international language. It does not have the geographic extension. It is not only the number of speakers which is important; in our politicized world, it is the number of countries, states, it is the geographical dissemination, and it is more and more not the number of mother-tongue speakers but the number of second-language speakers that will determine a language’s position. As you all know, the largest language in the world is Chinese, but no one considers it to be an international language. And as has been said earlier, although it is an official language of the UN, the Chinese booth is often not occupied. And if it is occupied, the Chinese participants don’t listen to the Chinese booth because they say the interpreters don’t understand what the discussion is about, so they prefer to listen to whatever other language they know, probably English.

For whom is multilingualism a problem, in an institutional and organizational perspective? As usual in society, it is a problem for the weakest and the smallest, and it is not a problem for the biggest and the strongest. If the Esperanto movement wants to promote its position in language policy, then it does not have to convince the big ones – it doesn’t have to convince the US, or the UK or France of its position, it has to convince the other 152 states of its position – because multilingualism doesn’t affect the politicians of the UK, of France, of the US, it affects the others. You have to lobby the weak, and not the strong, in this language problem.

It is clear that in a contact between a monolingual person and a bilingual person we have this absolutely curious element that the bilingual person is the weaker, although he thinks he is the

stronger because he knows another language. But it is the contrary, because the other guy has chosen the instrument of the duel, of the fight. All political discussions are fights – there are no friendly political discussions – and the monolingual automatically has chosen the weapon with which to fight.

You can never know a second language as you know your own mother-tongue – even bilingually educated persons can't. Even when you go into very specialized discussions – which most of the political discussions are, and they always become more specialized – you suddenly see the limits of your knowledge. I challenge everyone here to hold a discussion on the nature and classification of certain plants and flowers in his second best language! To what extent learning and using Esperanto will alter anything to the technicality of things? How far can you hold a technical discussion – or how would you like to be in the veterinary commission – speaking in Esperanto about how we will try to solve the mad-cow disease? Does the use of a neutral language do anything to the increasing technicality of things when we have to discuss with each other?

Bridge translation has created very big problems. Part of the problems we have now with Finnish; we had it with Greek when I was in the Parliament: because we did not have enough translators, we had to use bridge translation. It would work sometimes – as long as you spoke very strictly according to text. But the moment you go to sarcasm, to symbolism, to jokes, it stops. Sometimes it even stops with direct translation; it almost always stops with bridge translation. That is from the modality, the level of speech, the intensity of speech. I have a very good example of that: the first time that Altiero Spinnelli pronounced the word *subsidiarity* – in Italian, of course – it was translated in French, and in German, and the others did not translate it.

I think that it is better first to promote the use of Esperanto in the intergovernmental organizations rather than in the European Union, because in intergovernmental organizations, the use of language is far more formalistic than in the European Union, more reading from text, and, especially, it has no direct political consequences, except maybe in the UN, in the Security Council. It's very different in the European Parliament: the more competent the Parliament gets, the harder the discussions are, the more real they are, the more political they are, the quicker people speak and the more politically they behave, which makes it very difficult to translate. Confucius said, and I quote very freely: "Before you start the discussion, clear out your concepts." All the translators theoretically have to get with the speakers, mentally, to clear out their concepts, and that is very difficult when you hold extremely specialized speeches.

Furthermore there is a lot of levels of language use: official language use, legal language use, political, judicial, public, private, with legal consequences, or without legal consequences, active, passive, written, spoken, and like the translation varieties you have to take all these modalities together and also construct situations, and, for each situation, devise a language-usage system. For instance, the Court of Justice of the European Communities is rarely if ever accused of linguistic discrimination, although the Court since its existence always and only deliberates in French. But the decisions and judgements are published in a very high standard, correctly translated and immediately available on the same day – because the judgements are law the moment they are pronounced. It is a kind of discrimination – not for us, as citizens or speakers, but for the development of the language. Because by discussing forty years, on high-level, legal and judicial matters in French, you develop terminology, concepts, ways of thinking and speaking, which you do not in the other languages. So maybe it doesn't discriminate against us as speakers of the other languages, but in a certain sense it discriminates in relation to the development of the legal vocabulary, jargon, specialization in the other languages.

Then how do we administratively, politically, institutionally discuss with each other? I think that to look for a solution in this way is a bit like the decimalization of measurements. It took over an century to get the whole world to measure distances with the same yardstick! And what do we see now? Except for the most powerful country in the world, the whole world counts decimal. I refuse to read American newspapers as long as they will tell me how hot it is in

Fahrenheit, and how far I have to go in miles! But why can they do that? Because they are the most powerful state in the world. And I think, if we take Esperanto as a yardstick of linguistic policy, that somehow – just as the politicians had to be convinced that it made sense to base measurements on that strange stick that was deposited somewhere in a scientific place, in Paris – if you succeed in your aims, it will be to convince the politicians that Esperanto is the decimalization of language policy.