

Gerhard Stickel

## Opening and introduction to the conference theme

Arvoisat vieraat, hyvät kollegat,

Kiitos tämän vuoden konferenssin järjestävän organisaation johtajalle, Pirkko Nuolijärvelle lämpimistä avaussanoista täällä Helsingissä. Tahtoisin myös puolestani toivottaa teidät tervetulleiksi EFNIL:in 13. (kolmanteentoista) konferenssiin. – Heille, jotka ehkä epäilevät lukua: kyllä, tapaamme tänään todellakin jo 13. kertaa EFNIL:in yhteydessä! Perustustilaisuus oli vuonna 2003 Tukholmassa, siten vietämme tänään myös 12. EFNIL:in vuosipäivää.

Ärade gäster, kära kolleger

Jag vill instämma i de vänliga välkomstorden som Pirkko Nuolijärvi redan framförde som direktör för värdorganisationen. Även jag har den stora glädjen att hälsa er alla välkomna till den trettonde årliga EFNIL-konferensen. För er som är vidskepliga, vill jag bara säga att det faktiskt är den trettonde årliga konferensen, om vi räknar det konstituerande mötet i Stockholm 2003 som den första. Men på samma gång är det EFNILs tolv-årsjubileum.

Honoured guests, dear colleagues,

I would like to add my own welcome to the kind words of Pirkko Nuolijärvi, who has just greeted us as director of the host organisation. It is with enormous pleasure that I welcome you all to the 13th annual conference of EFNIL. For the superstitious ones among you: it is indeed the 13th annual conference – counting the founding meeting in Stockholm 2003 as conference no. 1 – but it is at the same time only the 12th anniversary of EFNIL.

Innumerable conferences and seminars have been held over the years for scholars, educators, journalists, and politicians anxious to promote the cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe. Despite their good intentions, many of these meetings have ended up producing no more in the way of change than an anthology of the papers read or a joint declaration (and sometimes even this was unpublished). An organisation such as EFNIL, which has emerged from its initial enthusiasm and survived for a dozen years, shows – as I hope you will agree – some evidence of durability and sustainability. It gives me great hope for the next dozen years of EFNIL. I am encouraged, too, to see some approval for our federation's goals and encouragement for our future work by the presence of several representatives of the European Commission and of the Finnish government.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Permanent Secretary Anita Lehtikoinen, from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, for her warm welcome address and her good wishes for this conference. I also thank Mrs Peggy Heikkinen, Vice-Chair of the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity, for being here with us today. From what she said in her address, there seems plenty of scope to develop a fruitful cooperation between EFNIL and the NPLD.

I would also like to extend a special welcome to Mrs D'haen-Bertier, the Director of Interpreters at the European Commission, and Mr. Christos Ellinides, Deputy Director General for Translation at the Commission. Both will be actively contributing to our conference by reporting on their important activities in the service of the European Union: I thank you for your participation and contributions in advance.

I am also delighted that we have two more guests from the Directorate General for Interpretation: Miss Anne-Laure Hubert and Mr. Javier Hernández-Saseta, head of the multilingualism unit. Javier has been a friend of EFNIL for several years.

I also welcome Mr. Jesper Schou-Knudsen, the head of the Nordic Language Coordination group. There is no doubt that we should learn from the practical linguistic cooperation between the Nordic countries.

Let me also welcome Ms. Nicoletta Mariolini, the Federal Delegate for Multilingualism in Switzerland. I am encouraged to consider her presence as an indication of enhanced co-operation in future between EFNIL and several Swiss institutions. Ms. Mariolini will also contribute actively to our conference programme, as will Dr. Georg Rehm, the representative of META-NET, another important European language organisation with which EFNIL is cooperating.

We need to start the detailed work of the conference soon, and much as I would like to continue to name all of our other guests personally, I hope that in the interests of the conference you will all accept this general welcome. And now I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to the hosts of this conference: Pirkko Nuolijärvi, Anna Maria Gustafsson and their colleagues and helpers. The fact that we all are here shows that your preparations have been a great success. I will save the rest of my thanks to you for the end of the conference.

Now, I would like to say just a few words about the theme of our conference. At last year's conference we discussed the use of languages in the academic world. This year we turn to another relevant area of language use in our countries. In agreement with our Finnish friends, we have chosen as the general theme for this year's conference: *Language use in public administration – theory and practice in the European states*. Communication between citizens and the institutions responsible for public administration is essential for the smooth functioning of national life at all levels. The challenges for effective administrative communication are especially great in multilingual countries, and in particular in those with

more than one official language, or with vibrant minority languages alongside the official language or languages. Should everyone be able to communicate with the authorities in their own mother tongue, and how should we facilitate this? What actions can be taken to avoid bureaucratic jargon and gobbledygook in official communications, and especially in official documents and forms? (I thank our friend John Simpson for the useful expression *gobbledygook*.) The increasing use of digital media by authorities can also cause additional problems for some citizens.

This conference will hopefully provide us with a more detailed picture of the present linguistic situation regarding communication by and with the institutions of public administration in various European countries. We have therefore invited the members of EFNIL to present reports on the language use of administrative institutions in their own countries, including that of the law courts and other judicial authorities. We hope that the linguistic descriptions will also be linked to any significant social change factors in recent years. Such changes might include increased immigration or an enhanced awareness of citizen's rights in relation to communication with the administrative and judicial authorities.

Let me take my own country, Germany, as an example: unlike the administrations of officially multilingual countries such as Finland, Luxemburg, or Belgium, the German authorities are essentially monolingual, with only a few exceptions in small regions with linguistic minorities. German is legally stipulated as the language of public administration and the law courts. As in other countries, the language use of public administration and legal authorities has developed grammatical, lexical, and idiomatic characteristics and peculiarities that often make official texts hard to comprehend for many people. In the past this came to be persistently criticised, and it was strongly argued that in a democracy the language use of public institutions and their agents should allow for the informed participation of the citizens concerned. In the 1970s, public servants, lawyers, judges and linguists cooperated with the aim of creating a "bürgerfreundliche Sprache", a citizen-friendly language. This led to remarkable improvements in public announcements, and in the published decisions of various authorities – including the law courts. Even oral communication between citizens and administrators improved. Since the 1980s and 90s this development has been augmented by a requirement for gender-neutral attitudes and expressions to contribute to overturning old prejudices and allow women to be as visible as men in public language. Because of the structure of German word formation, these attempts have led at times to the wording of some official texts becoming unnecessarily complex and strained. The jostling demands for linguistic equality on the one hand, and for clear and comprehensible language on the other, have not been completely resolved even now. However, there are signs that linguistic compromises are emerging.

At present there are more urgent problems, especially the often difficult communication between the authorities and an increasing number of immigrants and refugees. Public servants of various administrations meet speakers of more than a hundred different first languages who know little German or who have no German at all. A great variety of measures are employed to overcome these linguistic barriers: forms, announcements and explanations in the languages of at least some of the immigrants' languages are provided; interpreters are engaged; and courses are offered in the German language. However, the measures taken vary from one federal state to another, and sometimes from one city to the next. Coordinated action across different organisations is rare. German authorities and the indigenous citizens are only slowly learning that monolingualism is not the one-and-only, necessary state of communication within a society.

I will not enlarge on this now: we will have ample opportunity in these two days to discuss comparable linguistic problems in other European countries, and hopefully we will develop proposals for solving them. It will be interesting and useful for our members from officially or predominantly monolingual countries such as Germany, France and Italy to learn from their colleagues from countries that have a long bilingual or multilingual history.

The institutions of the European Union present an extreme case of a multilingual administration, where speakers of 24 different official languages are expected to communicate both with each other and with the citizens of the 28 member states. The language use of the EU institutions is vital for the smooth functioning of political, social and economic communication within multilingual Europe. We are, therefore, very glad that representatives of the Commission have accepted our invitation to present reports on the legal conditions and the practical reality of their work in the fields of interpretation and translation. Though most members of EFNIL are trained linguists or philologists, we have little experience in actual interpretation and translation. Therefore, we look forward to learning from professional experts about strategies developed to support the multilingualism of European institutions – which is a matter that today concerns all Europeans.

**Bibliographical information**

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