

Filip Majcen

Are all languages equal?

or

How the EU deals with languages

Your excellencies, professors, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure and honour to be with you here in Warsaw today, continuing the good tradition of the Commission's Directorate-General for Translation participating in EFNIL annual conferences.

1. Introduction

Let me first tell you a brief personal story (in my Polish).

Przed pierwszym przyjazdem do Polski w dwa tysiące dziesiątym roku próbowałem nauczyć się kilku wyrażen po polsku. I nie uwierzycie mi Państwo – pierwsze dwa zdania w moim podręczniku brzmiały:

La langue polonaise a la mauvaise réputation d'être imprononçable! En effet, il faut bien reconnaître qu'elle contient – malheureusement – des sons difficiles à articuler pour un étranger; quelle que soit sa langue maternelle.

Mimo tego nie poddałem się i dwa lata temu zacząłem chodzić na lekcje polskiego.

But what is a stereotype, and what is the truth? Despite my best intentions I haven't got very far with my Polish (as you could hear), although my mother tongue – Slovene – belongs to the same language family.

But does this have to do with my lack of talent, or with the fact that Polish is indeed difficult and hard for a foreigner to pronounce and write?

I guess prejudice and stereotyping are just part of human nature. And linguistic prejudices and stereotypes are no exception.

After all, languages are part of us, part of our personality. And also through languages we develop as human beings. As Federico Fellini said: "A different language is a different vision of life".

With its great linguistic diversity you can imagine how many visions of life we have in Europe!

When preparing for this conference, I asked colleagues in our translation departments for examples of linguistic prejudice in their country.

The Greek department came up with an interesting notion: it is assumed that the evolution of a language (and in particular of the Greek language, which has been spoken and written for thousands of years) leads to its deterioration. Therefore, some people – including scholars – argue that older forms of the language are more correct, more pure, more beautiful.

Is that true?

Another way of looking at prejudices and languages came from my Estonian colleagues. Estonians think that they are reserved. While other ethnic groups consider this a negative characteristic, the Estonians themselves rather appreciate it. So the word ‘reserved’ can have negative or positive connotations, depending on one’s cultural and ethnic background.

2. Linguistic prejudice – political aspects

And languages can have a strong political dimension, probably because language is part of a person’s identity, and because of the emotional link we have with languages, especially our mother tongue.

History is full of examples of linguistic prejudice, in the sense that certain languages were deemed ‘peasant’ languages, not suitable for academic writing.

While linguists now dismiss the idea that some languages are inherently better than others, among other people these stereotypes and prejudices still occur. And when taken to extremes, these can have disastrous consequences.

The EU has a different approach to languages and diversity: the EU is a ‘family’ whose diverse members have come together in the pursuit of common beliefs and objectives. The ‘family values’, based on the rule of law, consist of promoting tolerance and diversity, the fundamental values of democracy. While striving for European unity, multilingualism is an important expression of its diversity.

The Commission remains as committed as ever to the principle of multilingualism: we want to ensure that languages are preserved, that they develop further, and that citizens can access information in their own language.

3. The role of the EU’s language services in a changing EU

A multilingual organisation like the EU needs high-quality translation and relies on professional linguists, cooperating closely with experts in the member states, to keep it running smoothly.

Now more than ever, we need to redefine the EU, but also to be proud of what the Union has delivered.

One thing that cannot be denied is that our translators – among them some eighty Polish colleagues based in Luxembourg and Brussels – have always ensured

that citizens can inform themselves about the EU and communicate with its institutions in their own language.

At EU level, each of the 24 official languages has equal status: EU laws carry equal weight in each of these languages, regardless of whether they are big or small, old or new.

Some have declared the EU language regime after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements ‘economically unsustainable’ and have called for a reduction in the number of official EU languages, claiming that this would increase efficiency and reduce costs.

But this would not be compatible with the EU’s mission, which is a political one, founded on democracy, citizen participation and human rights.

Besides, the EU’s language regime, with its current 24 official languages, costs less than 1% of the EU’s budget. This cannot be defined as economically unsustainable.

Ladies and gentlemen, last week was marked by Jean-Claude Juncker’s State of the Union address before the Members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, and by Donald Tusk’s letter to Heads of State or Government ahead of the summit in Bratislava where they reflected on the future of the EU. Nobody knows at this point what that future may look like.

Many things may change, but it is difficult to see a better alternative to our current language regime.

We will continue to work for a multilingual, diverse Europe, with realism and in the most cost-effective way possible, but always without prejudice.

Thank you for your attention!

Dziękuję za uwagę!

Bibliographical information

This text was first published in the book:

Anna Dąbrowska/Walery Pisarek/Gerhard Stickel (eds.) (2017): Stereotypes and linguistic prejudices in Europe. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2016 in Warsaw. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [ISBN 978-963-9074-68-2. 280 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>