

Scientific Lingua Franca and National Languages

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How to delimit the problem - some introductory remarks

Let me start out from the definition of two concepts, viz. bilingualism and diglossia. 'Bilingualism' means the fact that one individual is competent in more than one language. It is not important in my context that there exist different kinds and degrees of bi- or even multilingualism. Whereas 'bilingualism' is a concept that can be applied to an individual, 'diglossia' is a social concept. It means that the communicative space in a given society is projected onto more than one language. The case of the European Middle Ages will explain what is meant. Roughly until the beginning of the 17th century a large part of written communication, especially scientific communication, was in Latin whereas oral communication was in the respective vernaculars. It is clear that social diglossia presupposes bi- or multilingualism of at least some individuals in the community, whereas bilingualism does not necessarily lead to diglossia.

A quite simple calculation shows that bi- and even multilingualism must be a widespread phenomenon. There are about 6000 languages spoken around the world. They are distributed over roughly 250 countries - which results in an average of 24 languages per country (there are, *e.g.*, more than 200 living languages spoken in China). Thus bi- and multilingualism should be the norm in the countries of this world.¹

In this context, a third notion is appropriate. This term is pidgin. 'Pidgins' or contact languages by definition are second languages typically developed or learned by adults who do not share the same first language. Their structural complexity varies according to the range of communicative functions and discourse domains in which they are employed and their structural potential is linked to the extent of their institutionalisation. The term *lingua franca* refers to a special kind of historical pidgin developed and used during the crusades among Europeans and populations living around the

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¹ In order to show the importance of the phenomenon I would like to refer to Wurm, Stephen A. & Mühlhäusler, Peter & Tryon, Darrell T. (1996). *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia and the Americas*; 3 vols. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.

Mediterranean. In the title of this section the notion seems to have been applied in a figurative sense.

The result of my first step starting with definitions should be that bi- and multilingualism is the individual result of a more or less stable multilingual situation. A pidgin or a lingua franca is a reduced means of communication; it is the social outcome of a less stable, more occasional communication situation bringing into contact speakers of different languages that are not necessarily bi- or multilingual. Diglossia means that the bi- or multilingual members of a given society consider different languages appropriate for different communicative tasks.

A sin of the French Revolution with far-reaching consequences

This first consideration is the basis for a second step. By definition, 'research' and 'publication' are two sides of one coin, that is they cannot be separated. We all want the results of our research in humanities or in science to be published and discussed or echoed in the research of others. Scientific progress is linked to such discussion processes triggered by publications.

Now the heading of this chapter relates 'national languages' to a 'scientific lingua franca', and this means most probably: to English. Why should there be a problem? Since there seems to be one, this raises the question of why some Europeans are excited and even show highly emotional reactions when asked to publish not in their mother tongue but in a foreign language. This reluctance seems to be all the more questionable since, as has been shown, (1) bi- and multilingualism is a communicative necessity in a world with 6000 living languages, and (2) as a scientific lingua franca, or more precisely, one main language for the publication of research results, should guarantee a large radius of possible communication.

The reasons for our reluctance are above all things historical. Since the end of the 18th century, European nation building has led to the tendency to identify languages with nations. French is thought of as the national language of France, German is seen as the language of Germany and Austria, Italian is the language of Italy, Spanish is the language of Spain etc., thus creating, among other things, the problem of minorities and minority languages as opposed to the 'language of the nation'. Welsh in the United Kingdom, Sorabic in Germany, Bulgarian, Albanian and Romanian in Northern Greece, Albanian in Kosovo, German in Italy, Hungarian in Romania, Kurdi in Turkey and Iraq are cases in point.

We can even pinpoint the precise historical origin of this development because it is linked to the French Revolution. In 1789, French was far from being the language of France - the contrary is true. French was but a minority language in France. This is why the revolutionaries first had their written texts translated into the different languages spoken in France by a translation bureau, the bureau Dugas. Since this initiative, apart from being quite expensive, turned out to be devoid of success, they started a language policy based on two surveys. The first one, called 'Rapport Barère sur les idiomes' from January 1794, openly linked the non-French languages spoken in France with negative qualities: "Le fédéralisme et la superstition parlent bas-breton ; l'émigration et la haine de la République parlent allemand; la contre-révolution parle l'italien, et le fanatisme parle le basque. Brisons ces instruments de dommage et d'erreur."²

Although it is bare nonsense to identify a language with moral qualities, this devaluation of languages was a crucial event in European history. As a consequence, it led to the claim that French was the language of liberty in the Republic qualified as 'one and indivisible' and that this language had to be imposed on all other French *citoyens*: This claim is unequivocally formulated in the second survey on the languages spoken in France, a text known as the 'rapport de Grégoire sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française' from June 1794. According to the abbé Grégoire "avec trente patois différents, [la France est] encore, pour le langage, à la tour de Babel, tandis que, pour la liberté, nous formons l'avant-garde des nations."

This is why Grégoire formulated the outlines of a language policy that has ever since been applied in France. The basic idea is to create a uniform language in order to have, with this 'language of liberty', a means of communication for all French *citoyens*: "[...] on peut uniformer le langage d'une grande nation [...] Cette entreprise qui ne fut pleinement exécutée chez aucun peuple, est digne du peuple français, qui centralise toutes les branches de l'organisation sociale et qui doit être jaloux de consacrer au plus tôt, dans une République une et indivisible, l'usage unique et invariable de la langue de la liberté."

This *péché originel*, this original sin of the French Revolution, that is the identification of a nation with a language, and the corresponding devaluation of other languages, had quite negative consequences. Above all it created the

² This text and the following citations can be found in Certeau, Michel de, Julia, Dominique & Revel, Jacques (1986). *Une politique de la langue: la Révolution française et les patois; l'enquête de Grégoire*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque des histoires).

problem of linguistic minorities claiming their right to become themselves nations independent from the nation in which they are but minorities. Think of Basques, Catalans, Galicians, Québécois, speakers of Kurdi, Kosovo-Albanians, etc.

Former centuries had fewer problems with languages.³ Witness the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire. At this time no problems with languages and communication were reported in spite of a most variegated ethnic and linguistic composition. People communicated as bi- and trilinguals, or, according to the situation, in a slightly pidginized contact language called 'Ottoman Turkish'. As a consequence of the European nation building processes that took shape in the 19th century, these independence problems based on languages came into existence in the Balkans, too.

How to handle the problem

What can we do in such a situation? The most important insight in order to avoid - or at least to reduce - the problems that have been outlined is taking into consideration that the excellence of our mother tongues is but a myth and that in order to really communicate already within the borders of Europe, languages such as Spanish, French, or English, perhaps even German, are mandatory. A diglossic situation with one specific language serving as the carrier of written research in science and humanities is by no means a threat to the survival of our respective mother tongues.⁴ As Europeans we have to be bi- or trilingual anyway. As Europeans we even have the advantage that two of the most widely distributed languages in the world are at the same time European languages, namely English and Spanish.

My very first insight has already invited us to take a step back, reconsidering and re-evaluating a perhaps not too favourable historical

³ The survey given by Arno Borst in his monumental habilitation thesis shows that the consequences of the Tower of Babel were above all seen as a theological and philosophical challenge: Borst, Arno. 1957-1963. *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*. 4 vols. Re-impression of the original [published between 1957 and 1963], München 1995 : dtv. Starting out from the Middle Ages, the multiplicity of languages lead for instance to attempts aimed at overcoming the negative consequences of Babel by constructing a new, universal language rather than giving one particular language this role. Cf. Eco, Umberto. 1993. *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*. Roma: Laterza. (Fare l'Europa).

⁴ This holds all the more as only a small sector of written communication is concerned. Between 1066 and 1350 English as a language survived nearly three centuries of French based literacy accompanied into the bargain by Latin charters - without losing its identity. To the contrary: it owes even a most important part of the wealth of its vocabulary to this French dominated period.

development. The same thing now holds for the second insight I would like to put forward or perhaps even to bring about. In my view, a situation of social diglossia is as normal as is individual bilingualism. As was mentioned time and again in this ALLEA-meeting, a large part of research done in early modern times was published in Latin - witness Isaac Newton, René Descartes or G.F.W. Leibniz. Even when these researchers wrote in the vernacular, their correspondence used to be in Latin.

Later on, starting with the end of the 17th century, French took the role of Latin. At the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, German had a fair chance bargained away by the Nazis. Actually English has taken this role. The only major difference with respect to the diglossic situation at the beginning of early modern times is that today the language developing into the most important means of research publication is not an extinct, but a living language.

The benefits of such a process are enormous. They are above all in the radius of communication available. The disadvantage for most of us is that we are forced to write in a foreign language. But this should be regarded as normal given that a world (and even a Europe) with many languages presupposes bi- and multilingualism.

In my view, the only major problem remaining is the extent to which our oral teaching should be in vernacular or in a foreign language, too. As an expert in literacy, my advice would be that, while in principle teaching is possible in any language, texts produced in undergraduate studies should preferably be written in vernacular (otherwise the vernacular language could lose some of its qualities as a language of written research and of written science).

At the latest from doctoral theses onward, the results of true research (in science this means starting from articles in journals), we should be reminiscent of the benefits of scientific diglossia, thus writing preferably in English. Nevertheless, the choice of the appropriate language will always depend on the particular situation.⁵

⁵ Two cases of my own recent experience illustrate this relativity. The first one is the supervision of a doctoral thesis whose subject was the grammar of Gusiilay, an indigenous language spoken in Senegal. Since the intention behind this thesis was to make the respective ethnic group literate, French was best choice. As a Senegalese, the author was well acquainted with this language since French is the most important and most widely spread language of communication in Senegal. - The second example is a Mexican student with a doctoral thesis on word formation in technical texts. Since the university career of this student will be in Latin America, Spanish was the ideal carrier language in this case - it has the additional merit of being the second widely spread Europe-based language in the world.

There is only one way to escape from the necessity to publish in English the results of research done both in humanities and in science: ones research has to be so outstanding on a global level that its excellence makes students coming from abroad learn European vernacular languages as Spanish, French, German, Swedish, Italian or Russian. Unfortunately, at present time these domains of research are not too numerous.