Language, an essential communication tool for European citizens

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If European politics are to be democratic they need a public arena offering the possibility of genuine public debate, and representing the disagreements and agreements between peoples and between citizens. Society is divided up into those few who have the right to speak out, and the general public who have only the right to silence; and into those, even fewer, who are informed because they have access to diverse sources of information, and the masses who receive incomplete, distorted and conformist news (1).

It is imperative that we establish a right to pluralist and diverse information within Europe (2). This right is a basic condition for democratic life: European citizens must be able to inform themselves and others, for they need to debate. This implies both free access to information and the right to circulate it.

Amongst many other aspects (3), building a common political arena raises the issue of the diversity of languages and the enormous role of language in human activity. When debate is confined within linguistic or national barriers, national interests tend to remain the priority, however legitimate they may be. It is in the interest of Europeans in general that we debate with each other. For this to take place the various actors in the public sphere (citizens, the press, politicians etc.) need to be able to understand one another.

From Greek to Globish

Elites have often used a different language from that of their people in order to bolster their domination over them: this was the reason for the employment of Greek in Rome, Latin in medieval Europe, and French in a large part of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. These languages have now been replaced by English – or more precisely, Anglo-American. *Globish. Globish* is first and foremost a *lingua franca,* useful for ordering a coffee from Tamanrasset to Peking, and for making proposals in Brussels. Above all, unlike traditional English, it is an extremely poor language, provoking and reinforcing an impoverished way of thinking*. Globish* could be compared with the language of the Third Reich, a German language that began to alter, to lose its vitality, to become distorted and misused; the "minuscule dose of arsenic" of each word turning it gradually into a tool for the transmission of an ideology (4, 5, 6). Is *Globish* also a language in the process of becoming altered and impoverished, distorted and misused, in order to serve as a tool for the transmission of a free trade ideology with which it is linked in a sort of natural solidarity (7)? *Globish* is the idiom of today's world elites; they have progressively imposed it as the universal language and they are intent on surreptitiously imposing their personal ways of thinking through its use. Could this not be a method for ensuring domination over populations? (8). What is more, the emergence of *Globish* has tended to marginalise national languages and downgrade sub-national languages, as we have seen for example in Spain and Germany (9). If nothing is done, the accelerated movement of English towards linguistic supremacy will be dangerous for linguistic, and above all cultural, diversity, and the political and geopolitical implications of this phenomenon are

worrying.

The use of this national language in international exchanges gives an automatic and considerable advantage to the two Anglophone countries of the European Union, Great Britain and Ireland, who not only play an essential role in the teaching of their language, but also do bear the translation and interpreting fees incurred by their partners. Non-Anglophone companies endure extremely heavy costs for professional translators and interpreters in order to be able to function on the same level as their Anglophone counterparts. It must not be forgotten that on top of direct personnel costs must be added a consequential amount of indirect and organisational costs – for example the increase in total working hours resulting from the time taken up in translation. The United Kingdom today saves around 10 billion euros per year, and 18 billion euros if you count the multiplier effect of a percentage of this sum such as returns on the funds released (10). This figure, which corresponds to around 1% of the British GDP, does not however take into account the various nominal effects such as the advantages gained by native speakers of this supremacist language in negotiations and debates taking place in English. It is interesting to compare this sum to the budget of the European Union – 116 billion euros in 2007 – or to the contribution of the United Kingdom towards this budget – 15 billion euros. It goes without saying that this is not a question of challenging the English language per se, but challenging linguistic hegemony, whatever country or group of countries might benefit from it.

Another common language, Esperanto, born over a century ago, has never managed to impose itself in Europe. It has never been able to overcome the prejudices that have always surrounded it - prejudices often based on ignorance (10).

What is a language?

Linguists teach us that languages are never neutral. Each language expresses concepts that derive from its own culture, and conveys a particular vision of the world. The phrase '*Diverse lingue sono atte a significare diversi concetti'* (11) rings true: since at least the 16th century we have known that different languages tend to signify different concepts, and that diversity of knowledge is linked to diversity of language. This is the case for the concepts of *laïcité* (secularism) and *service public*, which the French language expresses particularly well, but which many other languages translate with great difficulty, having to resort to long periphrasis. It is also the case for the British concept of *common law*, a sort of oral law hard to comprehend for a non-Anglophone, or, in another domain, *business plan*, a company planning system that the French employ as such, but without necessarily understanding the full meaning. History has also played a major role in expressions pertaining to politics. The French expressions *Etats généraux* (parliament / States General) or *cahiers de doléances* (book of grievances / complaints book), even when translated, do not have the same meaning for most other Europeans. The words for 'nation' or 'people' reflect notions that not only vary from one country to another, their meanings are sometimes entirely opposite depending on whether they are employed in, for example, German – a language in which the words have imperial and ethnic connotations – or French, in which they take on a meaning of political emancipation. Another example is to be found in English: when one speaks of *liberté* in France, the word often refers to collectively won public rights that are written up in law and guaranteed by the state. In Britain, *liberty* reflects, on the contrary, the limits to the role of public powers. These concepts and the languages expressing them are linked to particular political contexts, and influence them in return.

Both Enlightenment and Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers are opposed to the specific character of languages. Enlightenment philosophers fought the "prejudices" rooted within them. The political extension of this philosophy can be witnessed in the linguistic politics of the Reign of Terror that took place in France five years after the Revolution: the aim was to destroy not only the semantic prejudices concealed within the diverse languages existing at the time in France, but also those to be found in the French language itself. This last objective failed: the French language was not cleansed of its essential 'Frenchness' (9). In Anglo-Saxon philosophy what has a tendency to count

most is the concept rather than the word or the language. This universal rule of concept prevails whatever its form of expression - whatever the apparel, the language it is dressed in. To translate is simply to change clothes. But the definition of a universal characteristic is yet to see the light of day.

Contrary to these concepts, linguists believe that what counts in each language, what characterizes it, is the ambiguity contained within it: ambiguities load words with meaning in literary contexts, but also in technical and political ones (4, 12). Taken to an extreme, linguistic nationalism over-evaluates the specificities of a nation's language and its vision of the world, and denies the fact that other languages can be equally precious and rich in meaning. A language is therefore a tool for communicating, useful for translating a certain number of concepts, but also an ideological tool, adapted to expressing certain concepts and not others.

Linguistic possibilities for communication among Europeans

In order to safeguard the sovereignty of European citizens and to promote the construction of a forum for public expression, the languages that are the means to the achievement of these priorities must allow for individuals to express themselves and to be understood, without imposing concepts that are foreign to them and without affecting Europe's cultural diversity. Therefore imposing one national culture, whatever culture it might be, should be out of the question, particularly when this culture is not European but essentially American – as is the case for *Globish* (13).

Several non-mutually exclusive solutions are conceivable:

- To work towards an English *lingua franca* emptied of its cultural identity – but is this possible? Linguists have doubts, as seen above, and emphasize the poverty of thinking that would derive from it. English with its cultural inheritance removed will end up tending towards Anglo-American. The economic, cultural and political cost of the linguistic supremacy of one national language would be considerable.

- To encourage the predominance of several languages within Europe: for example, German, French and Anglo-American (14). But this would hardly change the situation: other European languages would be gradually eliminated, and there is no guarantee that these measures would prevent the ultimate supremacy of *Globish.*

- To reinforce European recommendations for systematically teaching two foreign languages in each member state and making it obligatory, or teaching all Europeans three or four European languages to the point of fluency, something that exists already in several African countries. This scenario would be as economically costly as promoting English alone, but would considerably reduce preferential treatment and linguistic inequality amongst Europeans. There would be a definite risk of instability and erosion in favour of Anglo-American unless very strict accompanying measures were applied (10).

- To promote a general inter-comprehension within each family of languages, for example among speakers of Latin languages, Slavic languages or Germanic languages, a situation that already exists in the case of Scandinavian languages. This could be a short-term or a long-term solution (13). By inter-comprehension we mean the capacity to understand a foreign language without necessarily the ability to speak it or to write it: individuals would speak and write in their own language but would understand and read other languages in their linguistic group (15). However if this would encourage exchanges within a linguistic family, it would still not be sufficient for a truly European public forum for communication. A first habit to adopt would be to prefer long but unambiguous expressions to synthetic terms and expressions that are interpreted differently according to various regions and cultures.

- To assign Esperanto the role of common language for coming generations. This is an artificial language, a little like the modern Hebrew established in Israel. Esperanto does not belong to any one country and its use would not give any particular country or countries symbolic and

economic advantages over the others. Its adoption would translate out as a net saving of around 25 billion euros for the whole of Europe, including Great Britain and Ireland, and close to 5 billion for France (10). Esperanto is far easier to learn than any other language: it is estimated to take around 1500 hours to reach a competent level in English, but between three and ten times less time to attain an equivalent level in Esperanto as a second language, all other languages becoming optional. This language has hardly been able to develop a cultural tradition capable of enriching ways of thinking, but could it not become the language of culture, consolidating the bonds between European citizens? The 1985 Unesco general conference recognised "the great possibilities offered by Esperanto for international understanding and for communication between diverse peoples and nationalities". The all too frequent rejections of Esperanto should be overcome through information and an effort of common will.

In any event it will require strong political will in order to institutionalize these means of direct exchange and common identity among European citizens, as it is only state intervention that has permitted certain languages such as Hungarian, Finnish, Czech, Estonian or modern Hebrew to adapt to today's world, and even to survive (7).

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