

ELNA UPDATE

Quarterly Newsletter published by the Esperanto League for North America 1/1999
PO Box 1129 • El Cerrito CA 94530 • USA ISSN 1081-6224

EUROBABEL

The launch of a common European currency invites the question: Should there now be a common European language?

Saturday, February 6, 1999

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Special to The Globe and Mail

London – The Portuguese embassy in London does not know how many Portuguese speak Finnish. Neither do I, but we agree that the number is probably small, not least because Finnish, along with Hungarian and Basque, is among the most difficult and least useful European languages for most other Europeans to learn.

It may be too early to speak of a crisis. But we can no longer ignore the international shortage of Finnish-speaking Portuguese. This is because when Finland, Sweden and Austria became the newest members of the European Union on Jan. 1, 1995, Swedish and Finnish were added to the EU's previous total of nine official languages (Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish).

The need for documents and speeches in 11 languages, each to be translated into all 10 other languages, means that Finnish-Portuguese and Portuguese-Finnish are only two of the 110 [Actually there are 220: do the math! – ed.] translation directions for which the EU must now cater.

With six more countries – Cyprus, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Estonia – set to join in the next wave, and others clamouring to follow, the already unmanageable European-language mountain can only get worse.

With the introduction of the euro on Jan. 1, there is a growing argument for adopting a common European language. The problem, of course, is that the language issue is, as one EU official puts it, "a bit delicate." Any move in the past to restrict the number of official languages has been vigorously fought by the EU's smaller countries, such as Denmark and Portugal. "It is seen as a fairly sacred right to conduct debate in their own language," says a spokesperson for the European Parliament.

Thus, when Alain Lamassoure, then France's minister for European affairs, suggested in 1995 that the EU might need to consider reducing the number of working languages to five from 11, the result was an uproar, with those countries that felt threatened issuing furious resolutions in their respective languages.

Mr. Lamassoure responded that he had been talking about the future, when even more countries would be in

the EU. "The theoretical maximum is something like 27 countries," says Eyra McNally, a Welsh-born, Esperanto-speaking, Labour Party Euro MP. The original European Economic Community had only six members and four official languages: French, German, Italian and Dutch. The mature version could end up with more than 20 languages and 400 [Actually 760 – ed.] directions of translation.

Even in the days of only nine languages, the European Community translated more than three million words a day, at a cost of about 50 cents a word – not bad for words such as "agricultural" and "intergovernmental," but pretty steep in anyone's language for words such as "I" and "the." Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, in his 1994 book *The Search for the Perfect Language*, explored the medieval idea that there once existed a language that perfectly expressed the essence of all things, and that current languages are its decadent, post-Babel descendants. So why can't there be an international language once again? "There already is one – it's called English," says David Crystal, author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. [And pretty certainly a native speaker of English – ed.] "Pretty well everyone out there is already learning it from the age of six on." Yet in any contest to choose an official European language, realpolitik suggests that English is a non-starter, for the simple reason that the French would rather swallow a jug of warm spit each morning before breakfast than face a statutory requirement to speak English.

Mr. Eco likes the sound of Esperanto, the best known of the artificial or "planned" languages. But several languages, alive and dead, planned and organic, could all claim credentials for the job of common European language. Here are the main candidates:

PROVEN LANGUAGES

Latin

The mother, if not also the father, of at least the Western European languages, Latin also was the lingua franca of prayer and power and culture and commerce across Europe for at least 1,000 years after the fall of Rome. And it remained the working language of ritual and bureaucracy in the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. On the downside, Latin has been gradually shed from most school curriculums across Europe; even the Vatican no longer uses it on a daily basis. Its long use as the language of the privileged also might prompt objections of political incorrectness. On the upside, Latin is concise, clear and proven as an international language. Its revival also would be the best news for unemployed classics teachers since the

Punic wars. It already has shown its scope as a language for the media age in Finland, where a radio station broadcasts in Latin once a week.

Yiddish

"Yiddish has never been a serious candidate," says Mr. Crystal when I reveal my own preference for the common European language. Why not? Like the EU itself, the largest component of Yiddish is German; unlike Esperanto, it also boasts a 1,000-year track record as a working international language, spoken and written in a dozen countries by the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. While Latin, English, French and German are all languages of conquest and colonialism, Yiddish, according to Isaac Bashevis Singer, the late Nobel Prize-winning Yiddish writer, is "the tongue of martyrs and saints, of dreamers and cabalists-rich in humour and in memories." It combines polyglot roots with unusual expressiveness. Mr. Singer was fond of demonstrating its richness by reciting 100 Yiddish synonyms for "a poor man."

PLANNED LANGUAGES

Esperanto

Last year was a good year for Esperanto, the international language invented in 1887 by Ludwig Zamenhof, a Jewish doctor in Warsaw. This was primarily because William Auld, the Scottish-born poet who writes in Esperanto, became the first Esperanto writer to be nominated for a Nobel Prize in literature. This year could be even better if Mr. Auld wins the prize.

According to Mr. Crystal, "Esperanto has passed its sell-by date." [I don't recall ever seeing one: it seems fresh to me! – ed.] But with the European-language mountain teetering under the weight of its own contradictions, the sense among Esperantists is that the revolutionary moment may be at hand. "The lobby for Esperanto is substantially growing," says Brian Barker of The [British] Esperanto Society. The Esperanto Society identifies the requisites of an ideal international language as follows:

1. The language should have been used successfully by many people around the world.
2. It should have had a long trial period to ensure that it is no flash in the pan.
3. It should have proved attractive to internationally minded politicians, since political decisions may settle its fate.
4. It should be easy to learn.
5. It should be pleasant to listen to and to read.
6. It should have developed an organic life of its own – a corpus of literature, thought, history and social conventions – but not be identified with any particular ideology or nation.

To no one's surprise, only one language meets every requirement. Perhaps the highest accolade paid Esperanto came from the secretary of the French Academy. "Esperanto is suitable for expressing the subtlest shades of ideas and emotions... It satisfies even the most suspicious and stubborn intellect." Then again, this may have been just another symptom of the French belief that anything would be better than English.

Klingon

Klingon is the spoken and written language of the Klingon Empire, as in the Star Trek television and movie series, and the only known attempt to create an intergalactic language. It has been estimated that "half the quadrant" is learning Klingon in anticipation of the Klingons' arrival. If so, it is a tribute to the skills of Mark Okrand, the American linguist hired by Paramount Pictures to write the Klingons' dialogue for Star Trek III: The Search for Spock (1984). Mr. Okrand got carried away and invented an entire language. A Klingon dictionary containing 1,500 words and an outline of its grammar now is published in more than 20 countries. But would Klingon make a good common European language? "No, not at all," says Bob Denton, a leading British Trekkie. "It's too abrupt, harsh and guttural. It is hard to speak and extremely hard to learn." That is not even taking into account the fact that different Klingon provinces have different dialects.

STREET LANGUAGES

Jive, Valley talk, Franglais and Cockney rhyming slang

Given an open mind, the possibilities are endless. Am I the only one, for example, who would like to hear a senior European commissioner address the plenary session of the European Parliament in jive or Valley talk? Or Jacques Santer, president of the European Commission, make a keynote speech in Cockney rhyming slang?

Might it not be fitting for German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to acknowledge the de facto role of French and English as the EU's two main working languages by addressing the next intergovernmental conference in Franglais?

NATIONAL LANGUAGES

English

The best argument for adopting English as the common European language might be the figures published recently by the European Commission showing that four out of five secondary school students in the EU are actively learning it.

"When the Eastern European barriers came down, it was interesting to see that everyone started to clamour for English-speaking materials and courses," says Mr. Crystal. "Poor old German, which was the lingua franca in a lot of former Communist Europe, was immediately put under pressure, while the same thing was happening to Russian in the former Soviet Union."

And in the European institutions themselves, "you'll often find informal meetings taking place in English," says Eyra McNally, the Euro MP. "I was at a meeting and everyone just made the effort and spoke English."

But Esperantists are not impressed. Not only is English hard to spell, pronounce and learn, they say, here's the clincher: It was recently banned as the language of administration in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. [Obviously the real "clincher" is that its widespread official use within the EU would give inappropriate advantages to members of one of the nation-states. – ed.] Even in Europe, French is spoken on a daily basis in more countries and

German by more people.

French

Life was simple for the French in the early days of the EEC, when the francophone trio of France, Belgium and Luxembourg made up half of the EEC's original membership while also housing its three administrative and power centres: Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg. French, in short, was not only the former language of international diplomacy and long-time lingua franca of Europe's educated classes, but the only game in town. The French mistake was not to have had French designated the EEC's official tongue. French has been on the retreat from English ever since. A suggestion by France's foreign ministry in the mid-1990s that European countries should require their schoolchildren to learn two foreign languages was an implicit acceptance that, if only one were learned, it wouldn't be French.

German

German is not only the language of Europe's richest and most powerful country but also the language spoken on a daily basis by more Europeans than any other. This is not to mention its own track record as a language that once dominated most of Europe's intellectual, scientific, commercial and artistic life. And German would have a sort of geographical logic, by providing a natural bridge between the languages of Western and Eastern Europe. It is also, of course, the language of Goethe, Schiller and, er, Hitler.

Finnish

Finnish would certainly be a surprise choice as the common European language. But think of it this way: the lack of Finnish-language skills across Europe, combined with the language's fiendish difficulty, would require the creation of a European-wide Finnish-teaching and publishing industry resulting in the biggest European jobs boom since the Marshall Plan.

The choice of Finnish would lend conviction to European expressions of support for minority languages. And Finland's traditional role as a buffer between Western Europe and the former Soviet Union would lend it a suitable neutrality. On the downside, an enhanced Finnish role would seriously antagonize the Catalans, already miffed that their language, spoken by more people than either Finnish or Danish, has no official status.

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LANGUAGE AS HUMAN RIGHT

The National House of Culture in the center of Tokyo hosted a symposium last October in recognition of the 50-year anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The symposium was called "Language as a Human Right- Ideas and Practice of Linguistic Rights". In all 119 people participated, including 36 non-Esperantists. Many specialists in linguistics and linguistic rights were present, including TUNODA Tasaku, professor at the University of Tokyo, a Unesco Commissioner in

charge of an internet database about threatened languages of the world.

The concept of linguistic rights is but little known in Japan, so the symposium aimed at introducing the idea in Japan. Most likely this was the first Japanese event, whether in Esperanto or not, which used the phrase "linguistic rights" in its title. In order to avoid mere juggling of abstract theories and to keep the discussion rooted in real-world problems, some specialists in the language of the Ainu people (the indigenous tribe of the northern Japanese island called Hokkaido), as well as some experts on the linguistic situation of Koreans living in Japan. LEE Cheong-yeong, former president of UEA also participated in the symposium.

This symposium was organized by two graduate students of sociolinguistics, KIMURA Goro and USUI Hiroyuki, who obviously were thinking of the Nitobe symposium during the UK in 1995. But even within Japan there was a recent precedent: in autumn of 1997 during the regional congress of Esperantists in Hokkaido [in which I had the honor to participate - ed.] there was a symposium during which several representatives of the Ainu community addressed issues of linguistic rights. Kimura, who participated in the Hokkaido symposium, was so impressed that he immediately began planning a similar event in Tokyo. It is worthy of note that at that time there was already a group of graduate students in sociolinguistics (mostly Esperantists) who were planning the theoretical basis of such a symposium, which further motivated its two main initiators.

The symposium began with an address by YAMASAKI Seiko, president of the Japan Esperanto Institute. Then after an introduction by Usui, Professor HARA Kiyosi, a specialist in the Breton language, drew attention to the fact that discussions of linguistic rights (for example in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) have been greatly influenced by groups of European minorities which have insisted with international solidarity upon co-existence and cooperative rights, not national independence.

Next came a report from Professor NAKAGAWA Hiroshi about the revival of the language of the Ainu people. The language of this Japanese indigenous ethnic group has only a handful of native speakers. Twenty years ago nobody thought that a revival movement would ever get started. However during the 80s Ainu language courses were organized, and a movement began to abolish the law which discriminated against the Ainu. The new law on this matter, which became valid in May 1997, still presents many problems. But by means of this new law, now money is flowing from the state budget for courses in the Ainu language, and so the Ainu begin to regain a positive image of themselves and their language.

The third lecturer, HUZII Konosuke, dealt with the fact that in Japan there is no law which addresses the status of Japanese Koreans relative to their use of their ancestral language. There are no Korean-language media or instruction in Japan, so Koreans are allowed to learn only Japan-

ese. The government must formulate a clear linguistic policy for people of diverse origins.

Finally TANI Hiroyuki, an Esperantist and specialist on the Mongolian and Uighur languages, presented the relations between linguistic rights and Esperanto. He argued that the linguistic imperialism of the large languages is nothing other than the highest step of linguistic nationalism; and that Esperanto offers an alternative to them both by contributing to the formation of a tolerant, multi-lingual society. This is also the goal of attempts by small languages to guarantee linguistic rights for themselves.

There are plans that a non-Esperantist sociolinguistic publisher will publish the reports of this symposium. This has not happened in Japan during the last three decades. The workgroup which coordinated this symposium within the Japan Esperanto Institute intends to continue with similar efforts, thereby enabling the expansion of the normally tight-knit Japanese Esperanto movement, initiating dialogues with various non-Esperantist groups, so that these latter may recognize that the Esperanto movement is not a collection of Utopia-chasers, but rather people who are occupied with current problems.

USUI Hiroyuki (representative of the workgroup which sponsored the symposium) (this is excerpted from the report which appeared in the January issue of *Revuo Orienta*)

ENGLISH DROPPED IN HONG KONG

Reports indicate that many secondary schools in Hong Kong that have used English as their language of instruction are being required to switch to Chinese, following a government decree in late 1997. Some in Hong Kong fear that this move will lead to a significant erosion of English literacy in the city. More than 230 secondary schools have switched to Chinese from English in the past two years, bringing the total to 310 schools where basic instruction is now in Chinese. However, 114 schools have been given permission to retain English as their language of instruction, after demonstrating to inspectors a high level of English competency and usage by staff and students. Of course, not everyone in Hong Kong is pleased with the language change. Recent polls indicate that over 70% of parents feel that an English-language education would better prepare their children for the future. In response to the criticism, the Chinese government has substantially increased the funding of English instruction programs in Chinese-taught schools. Most commentators believe that ultimately all of Hong Kong's public schools will use Chinese for their basic instruction. [*The International Educator*, Feb 1999]

ESPERANTO NEWS

NEW RECORD FOR *PASPORTA SERVO*

Every year for the last 25 years, the World Esperantist Youth Organization (TEJO) publishes *Pasporta Servo*, a list of Esperantists who host visiting Esperantists. This is one of the most popular services of TEJO. This year *Pasporta Servo* reached a new record of participants: 945 hosts in 76 countries are included. Anybody who is listed in the booklet, or anybody who purchases it, can stay for free for a few days at the dwelling of anybody listed.

This project also shows to the outside world that Esperanto is useful. Many people learn Esperanto just so they can travel using *Pasporta Servo*, thereby having close, meaningful contact with the residents of foreign lands, rather than staying in hotels and only talking with clerks in broken English.

For more information about *Pasporta Servo*, see <http://home.wxs.nl/~lide/paspserv.htm>

For general information about TEJO, look at <http://www.esperanto.org/internacia/tejo>

MORE NEW WWW SITES

YAHOO! A NEW NET-CLUB!

There is now an Esperanto "club" at <http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/esperanto>

Here you can post messages, chat, announce your own web-pages, etc. It is worthy of visiting at least once, and as more people visit, it becomes even more worthy! It is a fun place to hang out on the Web. Beginners are welcome. (From Christopher M. A. Zervic, President of the Esperanto Society of Chicago)

ESPERANTO WEATHER

Care to see weather forecasts in Esperanto? Check out: <http://esperanto.wunderground.com>

ESPERANTO COMMERCE

A new site deals with international trade in Esperanto: <http://komerco.com>

ESPERANTO CALENDAR

For a complete list of all the international meetings in Esperantio, have a look at: <http://www.hungary.net/esperanto/kalendar.htm>. In 1998 there were 2627 visits to the site, making it one of the most popular in Esperantio.

ESPERANTO IN THE AMERICAS

For an ongoing discussion of the role of Esperanto in the Americas, go to: http://www.dejanews.com/~esperanto_tutameriko

NOTE: For some people who receive this mailing, this could be the last! Please check the six-digit number on the top line of the mailing label: if it starts with "1998", we invite you to rejoin ELNA and thereby continue to receive newsletters through the rest of 1999. If it says "info", we invite you to join so that you might receive also the bi-monthly bi-lingual newsletter *Esperanto USA*, and the 1999 Esperanto Book Catalog.