DIVERSITY – A LINGUIST'S VIEW OF THINGS

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Language policy as it should not be conducted

"Money is tight". This is an argument one is bound to be confronted with when trying to discuss the future of the linguistic mosaic of the seemingly ever-growing European Union. The number of languages spoken on the territory of the EU is, of course, sizeable. There are at present twenty-one languages (including Irish) with the status of official state languages, to which a considerable number of regional and minority languages (an estimated dozen to two dozens – varying according to what is considered a distinct variety) have to be added to complete the picture of European linguistic diversity. With every new member admitted to the EU, the degree of linguistic diversity inevitably rises and thus constitutes a reason for concern for all those who think in terms of budgets and financing. Granting equal rights to all say, autochthonous languages of the EU, evokes the image of an unnecessary waste of funds as economically plurilingualism of this kind in an ambitious political body will hardly produce any gains but will cost a lot of money which could be spend on other more profitable projects. In addition, the prolonged co-existence of many languages in an egalitarian fashion also reeks of inefficiency and slow-motion bureaucracy – two no-noes for the ideal state-to-be. In the minds of political decision-takers, therefore, linguistic diversity very likely is an obstacle which has to be overcome sooner or later to ensure the establishment of a homogeneous state of the future.

Very often, this opinion is not based on ill-will but is rooted in the still widely-held belief that too much diversity stands in the way of a common identity and that it may even lead to secession and violent conflicts between different groups of a heterogeneous community. In a way, this is a naive over-estimation of the importance of language as an identity-forming factor (paradoxically, in other respects, the same emblematic function of language is ignored completely by proponents with similar convictions). With a view to preventing the disintegration of the still largely undefined new union of states, the promotion of cultural homogeneity via linguistic homogeneity is believed to be the necessary remedy for all problems of centrifugal developments. History, however, teaches us that neither does linguistic homogeneity guarantee age-long peace nor is linguistic diversity regularly responsible for the fall of empires. Quite to the contrary, not only in the distant past, civil-war-like conflicts arise very often when, in the process of creating a nation-state, measures are taken to force otherwise loyal citizens to give up their native language to the benefit of the monopolised state language. The harsher the methods of enforcement of this language policy become, the more violent has been the response of the linguistically oppressed (the history of republican France is the paradigm case in this respect).

Even if the factor of physical violence and/or delinquency does not apply, the reduction of linguistic diversity has negative side-effects which cannot be ignored by those who strive for a unitary Europe. One could aim at diminishing the diversity by indirect means – and this is mostly identical to neglect. It is not necessary to prohibit expressly the use of certain unwanted languages. However, speakers can be discouraged from continuing to use them and handing them down to new generations just for socio-economic reasons, especially if social upwards mobility is associated with languages other than the ones formerly used at home or in a given region. Cynically, this is still the free choice of the speakers, whether or not to prolong the life of their native language: nobody is forcing them to give it up. In this way, linguistic diversity will seemingly disappear within a relative short span of time. However, language shifts (and the ensuing language death) are socio-psychologically painful experiences both for individuals and speech-communities, as the conscious disruption of an organic tradition causes conflicts, for instance, between the various generations involved in the process. It is especially unsettling to live to see how one's children's competence in the "old" language diminishes when language obsolescence sets in.

It is a known fact that in this phase self-denigration and similar phenomena affect entire populations. These stressful times have effects which are not easily overcome, because those who feel compelled to shift linguistically and let a language die might consider themselves losers in the new would-be society; as they had to give up something valuable in order to participate, whereas others at least appear to have come this far without such sacrifices. I do not have to dwell on what can frequently be observed, namely, that the value of the lost language is something the last speakers detect only when it is too late to stop the process. If the language is gone, many people who still remember that there was once a language of their own feel culturally deprived; they have not yet fully adapted to the new propagated pan-European (or other) culture whose main representative is the language to the benefit of which the "old" language was given up. This is not the best preparation for people to join happily in the new tune.

Furthermore, this constellation of disadvantageous effects is aggravated when it turns out that the sacrifice has been largely in vain, because the language shift did not lead to a better socio-economic standing for the next generation. Owing to the fact that – discounting exceptional temporary developments – economics does not allow for everybody to be a winner, this scenario of trading a language for no gain at all is not spectacularly improbable. Economically and socio-psychologically motivated malcontentment is one of the likely effects which the politically desired reduction of diversity will produce. Add to this the possibility that the reduction process will probably require several generations and might even never be fully accomplished, chances are that, for long periods, sizeable groups will be disadvantaged because, for what ever reason, they are slow to follow the trend towards language shift. For obvious reasons, I cannot elaborate on the likelihood of the social stigmatisation of language minorities and the detrimental effects this kind of segregation might have on the realisation of the European Dream. Examples of language-political failures abound in Latin America, for instance, where Spanish monolingualism propagated by the state is very often a farce behind which a system of blatant social inequality is hidden.

Let us assume that EU politicians simply discount such scenarios as impossible in Europe. Since I am merely speculating about things to come, there is not much sense in arguing with this Eurocentric point of view. What is disconcerting about this attitude, however, is the fact that even the imminent danger for the entire EU project caused by anti-diversity policy does not make politicians re-consider their positions (only if the danger is more real because serious problems have actually come up will there be a chance for a reversal of the present "undeclared" policy). As a matter of fact, there are no compelling non-economical reasons to discourage the preservation of language diversity. It is even the other way round: allowing for language diversity and supporting it will save Europe a lot of trouble and prevent us from inadvertently creating misery and discontentment (Nichols 1992, Stolz 2000).

The arguments put forward by those who want to safeguard linguistic diversity in Europe (or elsewhere on the globe) are often of the defensive kind. Stereotypically, one encounters such catch phrases as "once a language dies a unique piece of human culture is lost". This is most probably true. However, so far, we have not been able to demonstrate what this means in a spelled-out fashion. Perhaps "culture" like "language" is a term with which the administrators of budgets cannot be easily lured into anything. "Language" is enough – why have "languages"? Everything (including all cultural features) can be expressed in each and every language, and so forth. With a view to countering such platitudes, what is required of the activists of linguistic diversity is to indicate at concrete data which suggest that the loss is such that it cannot be made up for by putting select show-pieces on display into a museum or by archiving the facts. Rather, the system in which the data occur has to be kept alive in order to use it and/or them as resources for something associated with economical progress, in the long run. At the moment, one of the few areas in which politicians of all convictions are ready to invest funds is cognitive science because of the expected impact the findings from cognitive research may have on information technology. Neurology and cognitive science are, of course, studying the human brain – and that is where language capacity and the necessary neuronal processes of speech perception and production are situated. In a manner of speaking, language is exactly there. Alas, not all of us want to become cognitive scientists and I declare myself unfit (and unwilling) to change my trade. However, it is nevertheless in the cognition-oriented discourse where linguistic diversity might find support, albeit a support we still have to construct by ourselves.

Linguistic arguments supporting language diversity

Relativism and universalism are the two great scientific-philosophical schools of thought in linguistics, whose balance of power changes with every new generation of researchers. While universalism is often associated with a rationalistic/naturalistic/objectivistic standpoint, relativism itself is a much more diffuse and at times rather opaque conglomerate of diverse approaches. Thus, one has to be careful when it comes to choosing relativistic ideas in order to further the cause of linguistic diversity, although that is what has to be done. With a mild dose of relativism, one can put forward some cognitively-minded hypotheses which might affect the intentions of the decision-takers.

The general line of the argument runs like this:

> In a given language X, we encounter phenomenon A, which is not known in this form in language Y, which represents the major languages of the EU. Phenomenon A deserves to be studied in more detail because it promises us new insights into the workings of the human brain (which in turn are necessary to determine the optimal shape a computer, etc., should have). Phenomenon A cannot be studied in isolation but must be observed longitudinally in the interaction of fully functional systems.

Admittedly, this is tantamount to stretching the argument to its utmost, but modification and attenuation are two things which are normally not well received by those who are supposed to spend money on projects. We must know the languages better to understand how best to model their capacity onto information-technological devices. For this purpose, the co-existence of many diverse languages is a kind of natural laboratory which only needs to be kept working (which, of course, cannot be had for free!).

This may sound fine but the major problem is to find something that can be presented as a convincing pertinent example. Clearly, one cannot simply quote from linguistic literature without taking into account that this language for special purposes is not designed to be understood by philological laymen (politicians included). Thus, the phenomenon should not require too technical a description (although some formulas are always helpful when one has to prove one's scientific foundations). It also cannot be harmful to connect the phenomenon to similar phenomena in better-known languages where, however, they are covert. Thus, one could also claim that a thorough analysis of the structures of the lesser-used languages helps us to understand what goes on in the major ones.

One possible candidate for this showcase function is possession (Heine 1997, Baron et al. 2001). In a variety of European languages – all of them representatives of the lesser-used ones – the formal distinction of several kinds of possessive relations is grammatically obligatory. The usual linguistic terms for such possession splits is alienability correlation, normally implying that there is a semantically-based divide for items one can possess (in the widest sense of the term), namely those which can be disposed of by the possessor (= "alienable") and those which cannot (= "inalienable"). Systems of this kind are commonplace outside of Europe whereas, for a long time, European languages were considered to lack this distinction. This latter assumption was based on a superficial inspection of the major languages of Europe (Stolz, Kettler and Urdze in press). However, alienability correlations are attested in various places on the European map. For brevity's sake, I will have to make do with just a glimpse of two cases.

a) Icelandic/Faroese

In the two insular North-Germanic languages, Icelandic and Faroese, nouns, when possessed, require the use of distinct grammatical constructions according to a variety of parameters, among which semantic criteria are especially important. In pronominal possession (= constructions in which the possessed item – the possessee – is represented by a noun and the possessor comes in the shape of a pronoun), Icelandic employs five different constructions and Faroese makes use of six (Stolz and Gorsemann 2001). Simplifying, the distribution of constructions over possessees is as follows for Icelandic (the fifth possibility, pre-nominal position of the possessive pronoun is restricted to emphasis and so-called heavy possessees):

N[¬def] Pro:

(1) *pabbi minn*

father my
'my father'

N[+def] Pro:

(2) bíll-inn minn

car-the my
'my car'

N[±def] *á* Pro:

(3) hár-ið á mér
hair-the on me
'my hair'

N[±def] *í* Pro:

(4) hjarta-ð í mér
heart-the in me
'my heart'

The prepositional phrases are used especially with body-parts, which are considered typical instances of inalienable possessees. In the two other cases, the possessee lacks the suffixed definite article if it is a kinship term (another class of so-called inalienables), whereas alienable items are normally made definite by the appropriate suffix. This system is also replicated in a peculiar way in predicative possession, i.e. in those constructions which are equivalent to English transitive *have*-constructions. In this realm, Icelandic employs three different constructions, namely, the verbs *eiga* 'to own', *hafa* 'to have' and the complex verb *vera með* 'to be with', all of which can be considered translation equivalents of some uses to which 'to have' is put in English. Note that the distinctions made in pronominal possession and those of predicative possession do not neatly map onto each other in a one-to-one fashion (Stolz 2004).The principle characteristics of the *have*-verbs are:

eiga:

(5) hann á aukaömmu
he owns step-grandmother
'he has a step-grandmother'

hafa:

(6) hann hefur áhuggjur
he has concern
'he is concerned'

vera með:

(7) hann er með sprungna vör
he is with split lip
'he has a split lip'

Again simplifying, *eiga* is the *have*-verb to be used with legal possession and kinship terms. *Hafa* is most often used with abstract concepts but also with inter-human relations beyond kinship. *Vera með* is employed with body-part terms. The verbs cannot simply replace one another, i.e. the distinctions are grammaticalised.

b) Maltese

In the Afro-Asiatic language Maltese, alienability is largely confined to adnominal possession. When the possessor is represented by a pronominal element, there are two constructions on offer for the native speakers of Maltese. One involves the marking of the possessor via suffixation on the possessee, the other operates on the basis of a prepositional phrase.

Possessor suffix:

(8) missier-i

father-my

'my father'

prepositional phrase:

(9) il-kelb tiegħ-i

the-dog of-me

'my dog'

Possessor suffixes are restricted in use to combinations with inalienable possessees – most prominently with body-part terms and kinship terminology whereas all other items are best construed with a prepositional phrase introducing the possessor. Unexpectedly, Icelandic, Faroese and Maltese have something in common (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1996, Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2002).

However, on closer scrutiny, it has turned out that possession splits – not always of the same size and internal organisation – can be found in a variety of other languages of Europe, among which the Celtic languages, Scots-Gaelic and Breton, as well as Norwegian, stand out. Less elaborate systems are attested in Albanian, Georgian and Portuguese, while traces and covert versions can be detected almost everywhere in Europe from Italian via French to Russian. Thus, one may take the Icelandic-Maltese evidence as a starting point for a thorough-going re-analysis even of the better-known languages of Europe because the topic itself has not belonged to the canon of traditional grammar writing.

On the cognitive side, the above examples are suggestive of something that cannot be done away with as an unimportant idiosyncrasy of just one marginal language. Rather, the systematic distinction of certain categories in various languages supports the idea that distinguishing one kind of possession from another one is a potential universal of human languages and thus belongs to those phenomena which should be accounted for in any model of the cognitive apparatus. Clearly, these possession splits are semantically motivated (which is not true of every attested possession split), which connects them to human categorisation capabilities. If a machine is supposed to replicate these capabilities of the brain (for whatever purposes), it has to have a module in which types of possession are distinguished. If the languages in which these systems are more clearly visible are given a hard time to survive, chances are that valuable data for cognitive science will be lost. This is true not only of possession but of many more linguistic phenomena. By no means does it suffice to record the data as they are at a given point in time, but it is necessary to let them develop freely (inter alia to see whether they can compete with other options or resist change) (Sherzer and Stolz 2003, Brincat, Boeder and Stolz 2003).

These are, of course, only preliminary thoughts which have to be integrated into a fully-blown strategy, which should contain linguistic and socio-political arguments in order to convince decision takers of the necessity of linguistic diversity. I hope to be of help in the development of this strategy in the not-too-distant future.

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