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ENGLISH IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Abstract. This paper presents a brief and somewhat informal discussion, in part based on participant observation, of the status and use of English in the European Union and the Council of Europe. The linguistic profile of 'Euro-English' is commented on, emphasising its nature as a special, partly de-nationalised variety which as such may be acceptable to those involved in the work of European institutions, regardless of their different linguistic backgrounds. The effectiveness of native and non-native English in such contexts is then compared, the conclusion being that the former, while in some general sense 'better', is not necessarily advantageous to its speakers but may in fact turn into a disadvantage, depending on the way it is used in large multinational and multilingual organisations.

What follows is the written version of a talk given at the international conference "The Future of Englishes", organised by the English-Speaking Union of Serbia to mark the 90th anniversary of the English-Speaking Union and held in Belgrade on 1 November 2008. Reflecting the somewhat informal spirit of the occasion, this paper is not a strictly academic treatment of the subject, ominously bristling with statistics, figures and tables, but rather a loose discussion based partly on generally known facts and partly on personal observations and experience. By 'European institutions' I mean the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CE), with their various bodies – parliaments, commissions, committees, etc.

The topic will be dealt with under four headings:

- (1) The position of English in the EU
- (2) The position of English in the CE
- (3) The profile of 'European English'
- (4) Native vs. non-native English in European institutions

(1)

As is well known, the EU is the only international organisation which, rather than choosing a small number of official languages for internal communication, has from the start granted equal language rights to all its member countries. This policy, based on a belief in the values of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe and of fully democratic procedures, worked tolerably well while membership was small, but increasingly exposed its practical weaknesses as more and more countries joined in, their national languages automatically becoming co-official languages of the EU. Given that, at least in theory, all oral proceedings and all documents of the EU bodies had to go on or be made available in all the languages, simple arithmetic clearly showed an increasingly unmanageable rise in language combinations (interpretation/translation from any one language into all the others) with the successive membership enlargements. At one stage, with 11 languages there were 110 such pairs (11x10), with 20 languages the number of combinations rose to 380 (20x19), and currently, with 23 languages, it has shot up to 506 (23x22). (And let us not forget that there are more candidates waiting in line, including the Serbo-Croatian speaking area of the former Yugoslavia, which alone stands ready to contribute four new languages to the pool: Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and now also Montenegrin!).

This situation has long since passed the point of tolerability, in view of the staggering costs of maintaining what is already by far the largest translation service in the world, the difficulties of training qualified staff for such a Babylonian enterprise, of providing enough rooms and equipment, etc. To invoke the truism that democracy costs money is not very helpful under circumstances like these, and alternative solutions had to be sought – bearing in mind the strongly political rather than practical nature of the issue. Two theoretical possibilities were understandably discarded without serious examination: introducing a dead language (Latin) or an artificial one (such as Esperanto) as the only official means of communication; and according this privileged status to only one or two of the languages already on the repertoire (English and possibly French), thus definitely giving up the treasured principle of equal rights. Keeping all the languages as official, with English as the only working language, found some advocates but did not stand a real chance either, due to national sensitivities of especially the closest rivals. (For more on the recent reform proposals see Appendix 2 in De Swaan 2007:16-18). And so, with very little elbow room left under pressure of so many tongues symbolising

the sovereignty of the member states, shortcuts had to be resorted to in order to break the deadlock by striking a workable compromise between national pride and efficient communication, between ideology and economy, without however relinquishing the philosophy of language equality altogether.

Two main steps were taken to achieve this. One was putting a loose interpretation on the term 'working language'. Technically, all EU official languages are at the same time working languages (and the distinction is nowhere explained), but using the latter label made it easier to carry out the drafting process in only a few languages and then have the main documents translated into all the rest. These few also served as unofficial in-house languages for informal meetings and day-to-day operations. The other simplifying device was using these same languages as pivots in oral proceedings, with interpretation not involving all the languages directly but going through a relay system (from any one of them into one or two and then from these into all the rest). The upshot of all this is that there are at present three *de facto* working languages: English (roughly 60 % of all proceedings), French (some 30 %), and German (up to 10 %) – with a negligible presence of any other candidates that may occasionally appear in that role. (The percentages are only a rough estimate based on different sources, because it is hard to work out precise overall statistics on internal and external language use of different EU organs).

These practices have resulted in the initially 'integral multilingualism' gradually developing (some would say: degenerating) into 'selective multilingualism': all languages are still represented only at the top of the hierarchy (plenary sessions of the European Parliament and the European Commission, meetings of the Council of Ministers, main decisions and declarations, public proclamations and the like), with the lower levels tending to rely on the few privileged ones and increasingly on English. Incidentally, this pecking order is relatively recent. In the earlier periods English had lagged far behind French but gradually overtook it towards the end of the last century, as more countries became members where English tended to be more popular and more widely taught; as one shrewd observer succinctly phrased the apparent paradox, "The more languages, the more English" (De Swaan 2001:144). This trend of non-native speakers gaining the upper hand in laying down the course of English, clearly observable in the world at large, is likely to continue, so that the percentages given above as crudely reflecting the current picture can be expected to change yet more in favour of English in the coming years. (For a detailed critical examination of EU language policy, including

the major relevant documents and position statements, see Phillipson 2003; also Kraus 2008).

(2)

Compared with the rich linguistic landscape of the EU, the CE is pretty much a barren field, with only English and French as official (and the possibility of the occasional use of German, Italian and Russian as additional working languages). Translation and interpretation facilities are available to all bodies of the organisation; on the higher levels they are made use of regularly, and on the lower ones if such a need arises. On the whole English predominates here too. There seem to be no overall figures on the relative representation of English and French, but in this instance (as opposed to the EU) I can offer some impressions based on participant observation. An important part of CE activities is the regular work of numerous international expert committees in different areas, and I happen to be a member of one such – the Committee of Experts on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. During the first two years of my mandate there I have heard very little French, as this particular body, composed of some two dozen experts and Charter secretariat members from as many countries functions almost exclusively in English, this being the language of choice for practically all of them. Interpretation services from and into French are available and may be engaged, for the entire proceedings or parts of them, at the request of even a single member. In my experience this in fact happened only twice, when the full four-day proceedings were interpreted (by two interpreters taking turns) for the benefit of one member who actually knew enough English but preferred French. I mention this merely to show that linguistic equality is taken very seriously in the CE as well, but also that it can be quite costly even with only two languages involved. And I should add, of course, that this particular committee is not necessarily representative of the linguistic practice of CE bodies generally; however, it does seem to suggest a strong current preference for English over French.

(3)

As to the kind of English used in European institutions, sometimes referred to as ‘European English’ or ‘Euro-English’ (ironically also ‘Euro-speak’), it is perhaps best regarded as a local variety of what used to be termed International (or World) English. Such non-native varieties, including the

currently rather popular but different notion of Lingua Franca English, have attracted considerable attention in recent years, giving rise to much controversy. It is neither necessary nor possible to engage in a discussion of this large topic here. (For a general overview the interested reader may look up sources like McArthur 1998, Leech/Svartvik 2006, Jenkins 2007 or McKay/Bokhorst-Heng 2008). It will suffice to state merely that 'Euro-English' is to a certain extent developing its own features, especially in lexis and terminology, which often make it difficult for outsiders to understand. For example, I have had trouble grasping the special meaning of words like *conditionality* or *outsourcing*, frequent in Euro-jargon. The latter, in fact, is my negative favourite, if I may put it that way. When I first encountered this neologism it struck me as morphologically ill-formed and semantically opaque (which, needless to say, also goes for the verb *to outsource* and related grammatical forms). It took me a while to realise that it meant something like enlisting paid outside help with excessive tasks on the agenda of a particular body, a meaning which I could hardly consider even remotely transparent. So when it was suggested by senior CE officials that 'outsourcing' might be a good way of overcoming the shortage of qualified staff and the matter was brought up for discussion in my committee, I spoke out against the proposal – but could not help feeling that my negative reaction was partly due to my dislike for the word: shades of Benjamin Lee Whorf! (For anyone interested: the proposal was rejected, though I am sure not for linguistic reasons...).

On the whole, however, I share the view expressed by many that 'Euro-English', as a variety distinct from 'national English', whatever its shortcomings, plays a useful role in verbally uniting the entire European community by giving everyone a sense of ownership of English on an equal footing, as opposed to feeling permanently overshadowed by the privileged native English speakers among them. Which brings me to my fourth and last section.

(4)

The relationship between native English (NE) and non-native English (NNE) has likewise become a controversial issue, and the very notion of the native speaker, especially in its idealized form associated with Chomskyan theoretical linguistics, has become an object of critical scrutiny in some quarters, notably including sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Once again, the general arguments advanced in the accumulated recent literature cannot be reviewed in this paper (but see e.g. Singh 1998,

Davies 2003, Graddol 2006). The same goes for more specific proposals concerning pronunciation, the linguistic level where non-nativeness is most readily revealed (on which see e.g. Jenkins 2000, Dziubalska-Kořaczyk/Przedlacka 2005, Paunović 2007). I have myself long held the view that there are more important tasks in English language teaching than insisting on an absolutely 'native-like', 'accent-free' pronunciation, a view stressing proficiency over 'nativeness' (Bugarski 1986). However, this implies no denigration of the native speaker, and I certainly do not go along with the hasty coroners announcing his death (alluded to in the alarming title of Paikeday 1985). He is far from dead, of course, even as a teaching goal to be handled with care, but is no longer the sole unquestioned authority or norm always and everywhere, so one should rid him of his conventional but largely unwarranted mystique.

Focusing now on the language rather than on its speakers, while it stands to reason that NE is in some sense 'better' than NNE (being the original thing and not a necessarily imperfect copy, and the like), the point should not be overdrawn. Not all speakers on both sides speak alike (in fact, few of them do), so that a cline of proficiency cuts through the distinction, and a really good representative of NNE can be more effective than a relatively poor speaker of NE. There are indeed major contexts where taking the absolute priority of NE for granted, without any reservation or closer examination, is a simplistic and highly questionable, not to say plainly false position.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the day-to-day work of large multinational and multilingual organisations, such as the EU and the CE, including some native English speakers and numerous groups or individuals of other language backgrounds, with a knowledge of English ranging from excellent to quite weak, even nonexistent, when interpretation must be relied on quite heavily. Under such circumstances – and this is my main point here – the apparent exclusivity of NE is not necessarily an advantage, and unless properly exercised and controlled may in fact turn into a distinct disadvantage, from the point of view of overall understanding and efficient communication.

Probably the most insightful and revealing source to consult on these matters is the recent study of Wright (2007), based on interviews, observation and questionnaires conducted in the European Parliament, where the author investigated the usage and attitudes of members of different national and language backgrounds with regard to English (and French too, but that part falls outside my topic). In a nutshell, her findings confirmed the thesis just set forth. Some of the native English speakers,

typically monolingual ones, displayed a variety of regional accents, speaking fast and carelessly in their usual conversational style, generally oblivious of their audiences and not even attempting to accommodate to their frequently limited understanding of English, or to take into account the fact that their speeches were being interpreted. Many of them often employed idioms and metaphors with distinctly Anglo-Saxon cultural associations, which did not help much either. (Incidentally, the refusal to make any concessions was very much in evidence in the French case too, where many delegates wished to demonstrate French high culture by resorting to literary allusions; an amusing instance – not to the poor interpreter, certainly! – was the use of the adjective *Tartuffesque* on one occasion, a reference to Molière which must have been lost on almost everyone present). Such practices, in addition to slowing down interpretation, are also counterproductive in that the speakers often do not get their messages across, which should surely be the whole point of their being there, while those listening may be repelled and even offended by the smugness of the allegedly privileged native speakers.

In sharp contrast to this, fluent non-native speakers typically speak more slowly and carefully (with a ‘foreign’ but mostly cultivated and more easily comprehensible accent), concerned not so much with demonstrating verbal skill or cultural knowledge as with making themselves and their points fully understood. This shows that in such contexts (which, by the way, also include many academic lectures and discussions, multinational business meetings and much else) mutual understanding among non-native users of English takes precedence over prowess in imitating native models, and that careful and competent NNE is more readily comprehended, along with the messages it carries, than carefree, even irresponsibly used NE.

It is precisely this role that ‘Euro-English’ is tailored to fit on its large and expanding home ground. No longer being merely, or even primarily, the national language of one European state, it cannot be simply written off as bad English, a corrupt version of ‘real’ English (an affectation common in outmoded elitist and purist rhetoric). At present it may still be more of an idea, an attitude of mind, than a coherent and workable tool, a distinct and linguistically fully describable variety of international English. However, it is being jointly developed by its users for their communicative needs and cultural practices as citizens of Europe, transcending particular nationalist ideologies and biases, and these people are to that extent its authentic ‘owners’. (For English in general it could then be said that it ‘belongs’ to some speakers as a first and to others, increasingly, as an additional

language). It may be some years before 'Euro-English' fully takes shape, but its future in some form, under this or another name, seems assured: the supranational polities which the nations of Europe have been building as their common roof are here to stay – and with them, it appears, this somewhat unorthodox idiom as *primus inter pares*.

In conclusion, English is doing very well in European institutions, as in Europe and the world generally, despite certain problems inevitably brought about by its very spread. Facing such challenges and constantly adjusting to new situations may, however, give it new strength in its progress as a global language.

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