

Speaking volumes

Dr Antje Wilton, AILA Europe Coordinator at the University of Siegen, assesses the role of linguistic diversity as a resource towards social, political and economic development...

In the previous issue of *Public Service Review: European Union*, Professor Daniel Perrin discussed the societal relevance of applied linguistics, highlighting three fields of particular salience: language competence, language modes and multilingualism. Turning the spotlight now onto the latter topic, it is the linguistic diversity of Europe that poses challenges as well as chances for applied linguistics as a discipline concerned with people's linguistic needs.

Language and communication are part of our everyday and working lives. We use language – among many other purposes – to exchange information, to establish and maintain relationships, to structure and coordinate social action and to shape and communicate our individual and social identity. For many people in Europe, mastering the challenges of their everyday and working lives does not only involve the use of one language, but two or more languages.

Europe is characterised by its cultural and linguistic diversity, which has a long history; its early manifestations were visible in archaeological and epigraphic evidence dating back to the formation of the civilisations of antiquity. The public perception of this long-standing existence of cultural and linguistic diversity is perhaps obscured by the tradition of telling history in terms of states and national languages, giving the impression that nations, as well as the languages associated with them, developed largely independently of each other. However, the reverse is true: the cultures and languages of Europe have always existed and developed in a network of relationships, patterns of contact and conflict, mutual influence and ongoing change.

Influences and advances

In the last 2,000 years, Europe has seen a number of developments that have influenced the way languages were and are used. Technological advances – from the invention of the printing press in the 15th Century to the recent spread of the internet – accelerated the dissemination of information and knowledge and shaped communication practices and patterns. Migrations within Europe, but also into Europe have continually changed settlement patterns and cultural and linguistic power relations. The rise of literacy among the population is linked to the development of standard varieties of the

vernacular languages and the institutionalisation of state education systems in the different regions of Europe, with foreign languages now being an integral part of all curricula. The formation of nation states in the 18th and 19th Centuries fostered what is known as the national language ideology. To express and defend their national identity, nations claimed one particular language as theirs and argued for its supremacy over other languages.

After the disruptive effects of World War II and the division of Europe into two power blocks, the formation and gradual expansion of the EU as an economic, political and administrative unifying force has shaped the linguistic situation in Europe. With the western part of Europe orienting towards the United States and the eastern part to the Soviet Union, English and Russian languages have gained considerable influence in the respective regions, their importance being reflected in their use as *linguae francae* and their integration into the school curricula.

Against the background of these historical developments, one of the key tasks for the EU is the handling of this linguistic diversity in order to enhance cross-border communication and providing contexts in which linguistic diversity is seen as a resource and not as a hindrance. This is indeed a formidable challenge, precisely because languages shape and express identity on many levels: individual, social, and national, and not predominantly at the supranational level that the EU may be perceived to work at. Therefore, language contact can and often does mean language conflict, affecting not only social relations on a micro level but also affecting political and economic developments.

Applied linguistics as a discipline is concerned with people's linguistic needs and has many issues on the agenda that are related to the effects of multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Particularly burning issues in today's Europe are the following:

Language and migration

In recent decades, mobility within the EU has greatly increased, and migration patterns from outside Europe into the EU have continually changed and become more flexible. Keeping in touch with one's country of origin is facilitated by modern communication technology and affordable transport. Consequently, society displays

various patterns of multilingual language use, reflecting such high mobility. Research into the distribution and use of languages in urban areas as well as more rural regions is an important task in applied linguistics and is needed as a prerequisite for the provision of language facilities in education and public service.

Minority languages

Besides the well-established and widely recognised national languages, many regions in Europe have languages spoken by a minority of a given community. Some of those minority languages, such as Basque and the Celtic languages, are much older than any of the modern national languages and are deeply rooted in a particular area, shaping the identity of a region and its inhabitants.

Many indigenous languages in Europe are on their way to or have already achieved some status, are part of bilingual education programmes and have gained regional importance alongside the wider national languages. Nevertheless, the transmission of lesser-used languages from one generation to the next is often to a large extent the responsibility of the families. Therefore, supporting and advising families in bringing up their children bilingually is an important task for applied linguists.

However, it is not only speakers of indigenous minority languages that need support in developing their multilingual skills. Speakers of immigrant minority languages often experience that their languages have a very low status within the wider society, and need support in developing and maintaining their multilingual skills rather than being forced to turn to the exclusive use of the national language of their environment.

Language policy

Linguistics issues connected with immigration also affect Europe on an administrative and political level. A very important topic in this respect is the variety of practices in European countries in testing immigrants' language skills for citizenship. Policymakers influence the way in which a language is represented within a certain society or speech community. Decisions to give immigrants access to the countries of the EU, to include a minority language in the curriculum, giving it the status of an official language, or making available media and public services in that language, have a direct impact on the vitality and status of a language and the linguistic patterns within a society. It is imperative that policymakers are well informed – also by applied linguists – about the needs and perceptions of the society or speech community in question.

Education and literacy

More than 90% of Europe's population is literate in at least one language. However, linguistic diversity calls for the promotion of multilingual literacy. Applied linguists are involved in many programmes throughout Europe fostering the development of multilingual literacy education, aiming to give young speakers of minority languages the opportunity to learn to read and write in their native language. Multilingual speakers with fully

developed skills in as many languages as possible are an asset to any internationally operating workforce. Contrary to popular belief, it is not only a good knowledge of English that ensures professional success, but the exploitation of multilingual resources.

English as a *lingua franca*

A large part of research into sociolinguistic issues revolves around the spread of English in Europe and the rest of the world. The pragmatic supremacy of English in Europe on a supranational level is relatively new, compared to other areas of the world. The position of English in Europe and its use as a *lingua franca* in many international contexts continually sparks off heated debates about the perceived dangers and benefits of such a development. The use of English and its relation to other languages within EU administrative bodies and the supremacy of EU legislation are important issues in applied linguistics as they shape not only European public discourse, but also affect, for instance, legal and other terminology in the languages of member states.

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Pan-European measures

For all these issues, close cooperation among European applied linguists is imperative. This gives applied linguists the chance to expand research activities and to implement successful measures on a pan-European level while taking local and regional conditions into account.

Pan-European cooperation is a way of addressing issues in applied linguistics that cannot be adequately dealt with either on a worldwide or a national level. The issues discussed here are distinctly European and should therefore be treated on a European level and be brought to the attention of the European scientific community and the European public. Furthermore, implementation of programmes and projects that directly influence people's everyday lives need to be tailored to their specific needs. Hence, not only close cooperation between applied linguists is called for, but between scientists and practitioners, researchers and decision-makers alike.

European linguistic diversity needs to be used as a unique resource for the people of Europe and Europe's social, political and economic development.



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