

Lost in too many translations



SECOND LANGUAGE
Amitai Etzioni wants to see a concerted effort to make English Europe's default second language. JARLE HETLAND

It may be wrong culturally and difficult politically, but our limited linguistic capacity and the EU's needs suggest that English should be the EU's second language, writes Amitai Etzioni

The European Council should revisit its call for schools to teach "at least two foreign languages from a very early age." The resolution's main flaw is that it fails to suggest that one of those should be taught in all European schools. Especially notable is the absence of guidance as to whether such a common language ought to be taught as a second or as a third language, a matter of more import than first meets the eye.

Its significance derives from a little-known fact that runs counter to common wisdom; namely, that it is very difficult to become proficient in a third language. To gain fluency even in one additional language can take four to ten years – or more. Most will never

get around to learning a third language properly. Hence, if a school system chooses to teach a language not chosen by other European nations, graduates are unlikely to be able to work with citizens of the rainbow of neighbouring European nations.

In Finland, for instance, students are required to learn two foreign languages, and students are free to take English as a second or third language. They often prefer Swedish. That sets them apart from Norwegians and Swedes, most of whom are taught English as a second language.

Evidence of the difficulty of gaining fluency in third languages is the reality that people in multilingual countries are not multilingual. Only about 18% of Canadians know both English and French, and most Swiss have no more

than two languages.

Nor is learning at a very early age the key, as the European Council believes. True, children learn languages readily – but the vocabularies they acquire are minuscule.

So if few become proficient in three languages, it matters what the second language is. The Council's reluctance to acknowledge that students would greatly benefit from learning one and the same second language has political as well as practical and financial costs. For one, it leaves the EU institutions with no single authoritative text for legal transactions or treaties.

Two examples: in 2006, Jean-Claude Trichet, president of the European Central Bank (ECB), outlined a change of policy using rather simple words: "strong vigilance." In Spanish, though, this became "*extrema vigilancia*", which led Spaniards to worry that the central bank was facing galloping inflation.

Formulating the Preamble to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights led to a conflict between Germany, which

favoured including a reference to religious heritage, and France, which opposed such a reference. The English term "spiritual and moral heritage" was adopted, scripted in the French text as "*patrimoine spirituel et moral*" while in German the text read "*geistig-religiöses und sittliches Erbe*".

Thus, Germany gained through translation what it failed to achieve at the negotiating table.

Then there is the cost: a full 13% of the EU's administrative costs – about €807 million per year – go on interpreting and translating into all 23 of the EU's official languages.

Much, then, would be gained if all could agree on a common second tongue to be taught across the EU. Whether or not it is 'right' in terms of social justice and cultural history or compatible with the uncomfortable place of the UK in Europe, the only serious candidate is English.

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Bulgaria needs a stronger dose of the EU

A no-nonsense approach to Bulgaria and its problems with corruption will be better in the long run, writes Martin Zaimov

Bulgaria, subject of a potentially humiliating Commission monitoring report due out next week, is accused, along with Romania, of having failed to meet the justice and governance standards required of an EU member state. There may be painful financial consequences. Good.

Only organised crime can benefit from a drift back into the miasma of *laissez faire* corruption of the old days.

Despite more than 1,300 years of existence as a state, for most of its history Bulgaria has been part either of the Eastern Roman Empire or of its successor, the Ottoman Empire. Half of the last century was not especially

independent, either, under the spell of Soviet communism.

The last 20 years have been a rare interlude of genuine freedom and independence, with the creation from scratch of most of the institutions of a 21st century liberal state. But a political elite with a Byzantine, Ottoman, or Soviet mindset is still prone to massive and routine abuse of power.

Of course the European Union does in some respects resemble an empire, with member states as its more-or-less autonomous regions under a central authority, the largely unaccountable and unpopular Commission. But it is a wonderful structure, highly resilient and well-adapted to the power of both the general public and domestic

politics. In Bulgaria it exercises a most welcome civilising role.

This does depend, of course, on European officials not accommodating corrupt domestic practices. The water concession in Sofia used EU infrastructure funds to paper over the cracks in this scandalously inefficient EBRD-funded project. Even after eight years that was supposed to bring know-how and much needed investment, no significant improvement has been seen, the reputation of private sector solutions has been seriously dented, water quality has deteriorated, losses in the antiquated pipes remain above 60%, and customers and retail investors continue to be abused by unscrupulous officials. The concessionaire (with the EBRD as major shareholder) nonetheless charged a staggering 17% on its subordinated loan, and the municipality was only deterred from abrogating the contract when EU

officials made sticking with it a condition for €50 million in funding.

This episode was surely an aberration. Overall the EU's stance, however difficult to enforce, is very beneficial to Bulgaria. The more rigid, the better. It is the vital external lever which decent Bulgarian politicians and officials need to avoid sliding into an Italian model of acceptance, and the despairing, openly-admitted goal of minimising the Mafia's role in public policy.

Continuous pressure from Brussels will help the Bulgarians eliminate old habits of unscrupulous abuse of power. Bulgaria badly needs EU funds for its economic development. But we need to accept that clean politics and institutions are a priority if they are to be forthcoming.

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