


<p>Multilingualism in Europe: A Far-Fetched and Far-Flung Dream</p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Linguistics</p> <p>Keywords: multilingualism, nationalism, culture, identity, globalism, pluralism, lingua franca, unity.</p>
<p>Aysar Yaseen</p>	<p>The Arab American University - Jenin (AAUJ)</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Abstract</p> <p>What is it that unite people? We are united when we understand each other. We are united when we are able to communicate since communication denotes the ability to make the other able to understand our feelings and wants. It is not the economy neither it is an army that unite us. It is language. Through language, one can understand and be understood. Europeans should apply the American paradigm in order to be strong and effective in the international community and use a single language as the lingua franca. With regard to national languages, the European Union should encourage, and finance the learning of as many languages as possible by its citizens to consolidate the sense of identity. However, the slogan "Unity through Diversity", raised by linguists promoting multilingualism in Europe these days, is misleading and unattainable.</p>		

Introduction and Historical Background

Is Europe really united? Do Europeans envisage ‘unity’ in the same way that Americans envisage their unity as citizens in the United States of America? Clearly, they do not. Europe consists of several countries which are culturally, socially, politically, and linguistically diverse and each of which has its own sovereignty. Each country has its own president, constitution and political and economic systems. Territorial unity, to my understanding, means internationally recognized borders, one (and only one) president, a single political system, a single economic system and above all a single language. People are united if and only if they share one language and what follows from it, a social culture and to a lesser degree of importance, at least in the case of Europe, a unified religion. A shared language is a crucial factor in promoting unity; ultimately, when people share the same language, they share the same culture. Could Europe be unified in this way? Europe is a mixture or a composite of different cultures and languages and these cultures have been marked by a series of bloody disputes throughout history to consolidate pan-regional and pan-national identity and to put an end to any tribal or ethnic affiliation. Old dynasties and empires in Europe were replaced by modern nation-states with their names shared with the languages used within their boundaries. In other words, language is closely bound up with nationalism. Could European identity have a linguistic base?

The first thing that attracts us when we study the American paradigm is diversity. The American society is diverse regarding cultures and national languages and this adds richness to the society, but it is united when it comes to the official language. Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Greeks introduce themselves as Arab-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Italians-Americans, and Greek-Americans respectively. They are all proud of their heritages, cultures, religions, and languages which they speak fluently as the government supports, finances, and encourages the learning of these languages. At the same time, they are proud to be Americans who speak the English language that unites them. What is wrong with "One language, One state" model for the EU?

Some doubt that the model cannot be applied to Europe, or not in the foreseeable future. Holt & Gubbins (2002) contend that this transformation is not likely to loom on the horizon. This is because of two reasons. First, the nature of language variation, and second, consequences of European colonialism.

In modern Europe, European countries went through several wars in which European citizens' lives and infrastructures were devastated. Most recently, during World War II, the Nazi onslaught on most European countries left behind survivors haunted by fear and resentment, and hundreds of thousands dead to be mourned; in addition, national economies were destroyed. In retaliation, allied powers destroyed German cities including Berlin and parts of the city were bombarded by tons of explosives. But though the scale of destruction was new, the aggression was not. Italy invaded Greece in 1940, and declared war on Germany in 1943. In early 19th century France invaded Switzerland and Austria. Norway was ruled by Denmark for almost 400 years in the 15th century Danish was considered the official language with Norwegian as a dialect of that language since sociopolitical criteria is the parameter that determines the status of a linguistic variety (Masthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap, 2000). Some of these tensions resulting from the imposition of an occupier's language or the bringing together of different language groups in state formation remain troublesome today. In Belgium, the dispute between Flemish and Walloon communities which has become politically divisive has linguistic origin. We might worry therefore if it is easy for the Europeans to forget and forgive or to turn the page of a history full of wars and blood or if multilingualism offers the best way forward? If it is thought that it does, then what is it that the Europeans are going to be united around?

Former Eastern Bloc countries are considered monolingual and their languages are considered valid only within their territorial or geographical borders. Learning new languages in these countries is considered a new trend which is more appealing to younger generations than the older ones. Learning new prestigious forms of language will expose these youths to totally new cultures which in most cases are viewed as prestigious as well as attractive. Taking into considerations the constraints and censorship which were imposed on these people during the communist regimes, it is not surprisingly that young people want to learn new languages (and eventually new cultures) and move to other more established democracies. Learning new prestigious languages and cultures makes these generations susceptible and vulnerable to the strong sense of individualism where the individual's interests contradict those of his social world. Alienation becomes inevitable. Youths become tempted to move to new European countries and shun their homelands hoping for better standards of living. Countries such as France and Germany have to deal with the influx of new comers and devote extra resources to cater for their needs. While in the countries of origin we see demographic imbalance, fragmentation of families and the loss to these countries of their younger generations. Other immigrants retain their native languages and accept assimilation.

Colonized people who get the chance to live in the country of their colonizer find refuge in indigenous languages as identity marker. They learn and/or use the standard language of the country (the exogenous language) for economic and financial reasons while using the indigenous language in other contexts. This does not preclude identity. On the contrary, it can be additive and does not mean loss of older forms. Familiarity with the colonizer's language even affects the migrant's choice for his/her new home (Holt & Gubbins, 2002). For example, immigrants from Morocco, Algeria, Congo and other countries which were colonized by France and Belgium find it attractive to come to France and Belgium and not to Germany or Finland for linguistic reasons; the language restricts movements as well as opening doors.

Hybrid identity becomes unavoidable in this context. Holt & Gubbins (2002) argued that the concept of "otherness" is linked to that of "sameness", i.e. in knowing who we are like we also know who we are not like. In other words, we have to cross boundaries to join others. We have to identify with others, and this is achieved through mastering and knowing others' language(s). This is not a call to shun old language and culture. It is a call for multi-languages affiliation parallel to keeping allegiances with the past and the indigenous culture. So the past is acknowledged under the umbrella of loyalty to the new language and culture.

Language and culture vs. politics and economy

I view unity from two different but intertwined perspectives. First, the surface structure where language and culture lie, and second, the underlying structure where politics and economy lie. The surface structure is in congruence and compatible with the deep structure and is an offshoot of it. In other words, if people are politically and economically united, it becomes easy and feasible to be linguistically and culturally united. However, language can provide surface unity across many different deep structures. Does Europe concede that unity is not just a matter of economic flourish? Europe today is neither politically nor economically united. Economic disparities are no secret among European countries. Some European countries such as France and Germany are considered privileged with abundant natural and human resources. Politically and militarily, Germany, Britain, France, Italy are years ahead of other European countries and are considered major players in shaping the global policies and powers. In economic terms, there are still major obstacles to a sense unity for each country seeks to advance its own interests. Political differences are no less divisive. More often than not, unity becomes feasible when differences are leveled or become minimal and not when escalated and deepened. Different European countries adopted different political and military stances regarding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the ongoing conflict in Palestine while there are different understandings, definitions, and interpretations of the newly coined and widely used term “terrorism”. When compared with the rock solid official stance of the United States of America, European positions often seem ambiguous as every European president had his/her own interpretation and perspective. Some European countries, under the influence of the USA, adhered to the American line. supported the US either by sending troops or making financial contribution. Other countries expressed their precautions and reservations. Some former Eastern Block countries adopted neutral positions. Given such differences, how can Europeans perceive themselves as united?

Nationalism and Globalism

European countries speak different languages which belong even to different families. Ultimately, Europeans have different cultures and identities. The current linguistic situation and cultural diversity consolidate heterogeneity among the European nations. However, Holt & Gubbins (2002) argued that identity does not necessarily reflect reality, but is rather a social construct; as a result, humans can change identities based on their affiliations. In other words, identity is socially formed and changes according to political and economic affiliation. Smith (1991) stipulated that the self is a composite of multiple identities, and that these identities may change and/or vanish. Wright (2000) argued that nationalism caters for the interests of groups and individuals, and globalism caters for the interests of neighbours. Furthermore, Wright (2000) contends that according to nationalism, there is a need for an international language and that does not by any means pose a threat to the indigenous or national languages. On the contrary, globalism flourishes with the cohabitation of linguistic and cultural pluralism.

Europe's Multilingual Project

Multilingualism refers to the ability to attain knowledge of two or more languages in addition to the native language and to operate effectively in them. The definition can be easily applied to a single country because the native language is usually self-evident. But what is the native language of Europe? Though each European country has its own native language, but the Union as a whole has no mother tongue language in the sense the term ‘mother tongue’ is perceived by linguists.

At the level of each European country as an independent geographical entity, multilingualism works perfectly. Each country can issue its own laws regarding promoting the learning of other languages; furthermore, it can place restrictions on which languages to be chosen as second, third, fourth, etc. For example, France can issue laws and subsidize systematic procedures for learning foreign languages. French is the mother tongue by default, then the largest portion of the government subsidies goes to promote learning English as a second language followed by German, Italian, etc. If, as we have seen, language unifies, should not something similar be done? Let's assume that the answer is 'yes'. Which language is to be considered as the mother tongue? In what order shall we place the other languages? Any attempt to rank languages would be divisive. Several factors such as prestige, superiority, inferiority, supremacy, sovereignty, etc., must be accounted for, and this leads to more disputes. Moreover, each country, not just in Europe but all over the world, is proud of its culture. Preferring one language system over another would be thought to favour one culture over all others, and it is unlikely that members of the EU would be able to reach a consensus on which language to be considered as a mother tongue and to be learned by all citizens within the Union as an official language. The consequences should be clear: first, a debate on this issue will deepen the division between these countries because each will seek to promote their sense of nationalism and identity. Second, languages that are spoken in more than one nation state (German most obviously, but also French and Dutch) would be thought unduly privileged. In short, if the European Union is not politically and economically united first, multilingualism will not be able to create unity through diversity.

Though people as well as states can be united if they share the same language. This is only the case if they are first politically and economically united. Political and economic unity is a prerequisite for other types of unity. The slogan 'unity through diversity' is misleading when the more basic kinds of unity are missing.

Conclusion

If Europe is to be a major player in the world and to compete with the sole super power (The USA), it has first of all to be politically and economically united, i.e. all member states need to be governed by a unified body of law, following the American paradigm. This entails mimicking the American paradigm. Europe has to have one president, one constitution, one political and military apparatus, a unified economic system, and so on. Within this framework, a single language shall be considered native or mother tongue for all citizens as the language of a new state, The United States of Europe, rather than one of twenty-five member states. English would have the advantage of already being a world language and well qualified to be a lingua franca. Individual citizens would no doubt continue to use their indigenous language and learn other languages as well. Moves into the realm of a multilingual society without giving supremacy to one national language over the other languages would mark a transition from a national to a global perspective.

References

1. Gubbins, P., and Holt, M. 2002. *Beyond Boundaries: Language and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, and Sydney: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
2. Mesthrie, R., Swann, J., Deumert, A., and Leap, W. 2000. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
3. Smith, Anthony D. 1991. *National Identity*. London, New York, Ontario, Auckland, and Victoria: Penguin Books.
4. Wright, S. 2000. *Community and Communication: The Role of Language in Nation State Building and European Integration*. Clevedon, New York, Ontario, and Artarmon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.