

EDITORIAL:

In an article recently published in the Guardian, Professor Nigel Vincent of Manchester University unveiled the results of his university's research into the disappearance of languages. According to the Professor, ninety per cent of the about 6000 languages now in existence will have died out by 2050. This represents nothing less than the linguistic equivalent of an ecological catastrophe with the difference, however, that although most people are well aware of the dangers that threaten them in the ecological sphere, they are generally unaware that we are allowing languages to die out. Appositely, Professor Nigel Vincent points out that each language is the repository of the culture of its speakers and that, each time a language becomes extinct, there is a corresponding loss in the world's cultural diversity. He does, however, point out that four per cent of the 6000 languages now extant are spoken by 96 per cent of the world population and that, of these around 240 languages, about ten of them are spoken by more than a 100 million speakers each. These latter languages have nothing to fear, he says, it is the so-called minor languages that need help in order to survive.

One could then ask oneself the question of whether those languages deemed by Manchester University as likely to survive the first half of this century are entirely unthreatened? We do not believe this to be the case, even for national languages spoken by several millions. While it is true that these languages do not run the risk of a sudden death, they might find themselves gradually impoverished which, in the long-term, could do untold harm. It is generally acknowledged that, in order to survive, a language must be complete, i.e., an instrument of communication which allows the unfettered treatment of all aspects of modern society. For the same reasons, however, that will drive about 5000 languages into extinction over the next fifty years (hunger for success, prestige or, simply, just letting go), certain countries are imperceptibly giving way to another, more dominant language, Russian, for instance, in some parts of the world just like English in others. This process is taking place as the countries in question do not even make the effort to equip their national language with tools such as technical and scientific terminologies necessary to make it truly operational.

The Guardian article illustrates the urgency of the measures to be adopted as well as the necessity for each country to adopt and implement a language policy. These policies, without in any way casting doubt on the necessity of learning and using foreign languages, must also necessarily pre-empt the needs posed by the future defense and development of the national language.

In Europe, one might have hoped for some encouragement in this general direction from the European Union since it, in 2001, celebrated the "linguistic diversity of Europe". At the same time, it proclaimed that this diversity was an

”essential component of the cultural heritage of Europe as well as of its future”. Hence the surprise when Brussels used a 1978 Directive on the labelling of foodstuffs against France which could forbid a nation to impose its own language on such labelling and oblige her to accept ”the possibility that another language, easily comprehensible to the consumer, be used”. This provoked the following remark from Claude Duneton, writer and linguist, in the columns of le Figaro dated 27 July:

”This is an element in the low-intensity war fought in Europe by those believers in a single language which could not be any other than English in view of its strength at present. In fact, neither Finnish, nor Flemish, let alone Greek can be considered to be languages ”easily” comprehensible to the European consumer...

This leads to the recognition of, if not the creation of, two European citizenships. One that speaks and understands English and one that is left out. Such a situation would favour an educated élite while condemning the greater mass of Europeans to illiteracy.”

The Editorial Board

DEADLINES

Any contribution to be published in the International Journal ”LSP and Professional Communication” should reach us within the following deadlines:

April (Vol.3, No.1, April 2003): **December 1st 2002**

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