

## **EDITORIAL:**

The language policy of any given nation does not simply boil down to merely striking the right balance between the national tongue and the ever more ubiquitous English language.

Nowadays the importance of languages other than English is beginning to be reflected in job advertisements, this is true of trade, manufacturing, the world of finance and even of the public sector. Within companies, languages have turned out to be an important competitive factor. Brochures, advertisements, web-sites, etc., all in a variety of languages are now the rule rather than the exception. The business world has even borrowed an IT term, “localisation”, to describe the “global adaptation of a given product to a foreign language market”.

So what strategies are followed by the various sectors in order to cope with this situation?

Systematic research in the field of company linguistic practice is, unfortunately, a somewhat rare phenomenon. We have, in a previous edition of our journal<sup>1</sup>, pointed to the studies undertaken by the Direction Générale de la Langue Française (DGLF) in 2001 on linguistic practice within French companies. The results of these studies do not seem to have been published, however, another report on the same subject, the so-called “Tasca Report” also from the DGLF (General Delegation for the French Language) was the result of an exploratory mission in some of the major French companies and saw the light of day in 2003<sup>2</sup>.

The report, albeit restricted to the situation in France of a few given companies, does point to a situation that turns out to be similar to that found in other countries.

As for the linguistic policies of companies Tasca concludes thus: “The existence of a true linguistic policy derived from profound reflection leading to strategic options is a rarity. [...] Pragmatism reigns supreme” and she adds “among the consequences of this pragmatism is not least the dominant position of English outside of as well as within the borders of France.”

One chapter of the report is devoted to linguistic usage within company structures. The finely shaded big picture does show that although French still prevails at board of directors’ and work’s council level in particular, English is increasingly used by senior management, executive committees and even at work meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> LSP and Professional Communication, Vol.2, No.1, April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Tasca: “Le rapport Tasca sur les pratiques linguistiques des entreprises françaises”, July 2003. <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/dglf/politique-langue/rapport-tasca.html>

The author finds that, on the whole: “English” has taken hold and is deemed to be indispensable in a growing number of functions inside the companies; she does, however, also point out that this “English”, as a “vehicle of universal communication” imposed by the increasing internationalisation of trade is, in fact, “a much impoverished form of current American English that has invaded the worlds of trade, diplomacy, research and technology”. Everyone acknowledges the dearth it represents: “a small vocabulary along with a general absence of nuance that weaken the ability to negotiate. [...] However, people make do with it” and the apparent necessity of this “English” is no longer a subject of debate.

On the other hand, however, “it is felt” that it is necessary to extend the use of French and to learn the local languages, whether it is Chinese, Polish or Spanish. The realisation that the customer base of a given country is better approached in its own language and that communication is vastly improved by a sound knowledge of the potential customer’s culture, is apparently beginning to dawn on companies. It is also true that “the more a company channels its activity outwards, the greater the multilingual requirement”.

The key to an international career in French business would lie in, according to Catherine Tasca, a mastery of “English” such as it is and French along with a third language.

Véronique Radier, in an article published in the *Nouvel Observateur*<sup>3</sup>, reaches the same conclusion: “One foreign language is thus indispensable, in an ever more competitive job market, however, two or maybe even three languages are undoubtedly much better”. What languages those might be remains to be seen, this would depend to a certain extent on the countries in question. In France, German is an obvious choice, according to one of Véronique Radier’s sources, “there is a shortfall of about 150,000 German-speaking professionals”, this is also true of Italian. All the while there is a rising demand for so-called “exotic” languages such as Chinese, Korean and even the Scandinavian languages.

Foreign languages other than English have, over the past fifteen years, slowly but surely been evaporating away from secondary and higher education. Young people, convinced that English alone will be enough, abandon other languages and due to the lack of students and teachers, courses are stopped and faculties close down.

The formulation and implementation of national language policies so as to revive language teaching at all levels can not happen soon enough, it is the essential prerequisite to drag a truly multilingual Europe out of the realm of wishful thinking into that of reality.

The Editorial Board

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<sup>3</sup> Véronique Radier: “Les langues....toujours plus”. *Nouvel Observateur*, Hebdo. No.2031, October 2003.