

## **EDITORIAL:**

As part of the series of annual meetings held by our society (DSFF), a Scandinavian symposium entitled “International Communication – globalisation and localisation” was held in October 2004. About a hundred representatives from various areas concerned (such as businesses, the public sector, universities, national and international organisations), exchanged, in plenary session as well as at three workshops, views on the following suggested topics: the importance of languages for competitiveness in trade and industry; the necessity to improve foreign language skills in both the public and the private sector; the position of languages in primary, secondary and higher education; the role of the “new” languages in international communication; etc.

What were the conclusions reached by this symposium?

As our chairman stated in her opening speech, the general outlook has already improved since the approval of the 2002 symposium resolutions. In the wake of our “White Paper”<sup>1</sup> published in June 2003, the Danish Ministry of Culture published its own report entitled “Languages at stake”<sup>2</sup> in September 2003. This report, among other things, emphasised the importance of languages, LSP and terminology, its publication was followed by a debate on language policy in the Danish Parliament.

This was in exact accordance with our aims, namely to raise a political debate with a view to making chief actors within international communication, such as business leaders, aware of the complexity and significance of language problems at both economic and cultural levels.

It would seem that our strategy has paid off. In any case, the attitude of the participants and the content of their contributions were far more faceted and qualified than hitherto.

The importance of English as a working language in most international contexts was naturally acknowledged along with the ensuing necessity of proficiency in English, a state of affairs no one would deny. For the first time, however, companies admitted that the mastery of languages other than English along with

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<sup>1</sup> Hvidbog om erhvervsliv, sprogpolitik og konkurrenceevne. (White Paper on business and industry, language policy and competitiveness). DSFF, Copenhagen 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Sprog på Spil – et udspil til en dansk sprogpolitik. (Languages at stake – an outline of a Danish Language Policy). Danish Ministry of Culture, Copenhagen 2003.

knowledge of the corresponding cultures was crucial for communication in various non-anglophone countries.

The worry expressed about the poor quality of English in use was another “first”. The biggest surprise, however, was the no less than massive demand for higher proficiency levels in the use of national language.

This means taking education systems to task which is, of course, an entirely different problem.

Effectively, what is the point of insisting on the necessity of multilingual capacity if the “goods” cannot even be delivered in terms of teaching the mother tongue? This question was emphatically underlined at the symposium.

As this was a Danish-Scandinavian symposium, one could think that this was merely a local phenomenon, geographically limited in scope, were it not for the results of the 2003 PISA survey<sup>3</sup> published in 2004. One of the areas of the survey was the reading ability of pupils aged 15 to 16 in 41 countries, mainly OECD member states. The pupils were placed in six categories according to their scores. Categories 0 and 1 comprise the lowest levels that correspond to functional illiteracy.

The sum of percentages in these two categories (0 and 1) goes from 5 to 63 per cent for all countries; whereas in a dozen countries who barely managed to stay within the international average, the percentage varies between 16 and 22 per cent. These figures are somewhat surprising for the countries in question: Switzerland 16 per cent, France 17 per cent, Denmark 17 per cent, Austria 20 per cent, Germany 22 per cent, etc.

This ranking matches rather well with the results of the first, 2000 PISA survey and those of earlier, similar surveys.

However, a drop is to be noted in the case of certain countries, France, for instance, which was at the top of the list just behind Finland in a 1991 OECD survey, is now well in the middle. For instance, category 0 has grown in France from 4.2 per cent in 2000 to 6.3 per cent in 2003.

What conclusions are to be drawn from these surveys? Is education poorly organised? There are those who think precisely that; it is, however, a bitter pill to swallow in those countries who flatter themselves for having the best education system in the world.

In any case it is hard to see how foreign languages will be taught at a worthwhile level to populations where over fifty per cent have a mastery of their mother tongue

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<sup>3</sup> PISA 2003 (Programme for International Student Assessment). OECD 2004.

that, at best, is barely adequate and, at worst, non-existent. Overall, the situation is worrying and it might just be high time that the philosophy and attitudes that have underpinned education policy over the past thirty five years be subject to revision. During the seventies the Council of Europe wanted to introduce a credit unit system for language teaching. The project was shelved, however, the Council's report on the project, published in 1981<sup>4</sup>, does reflect the spirit of the period in which reforms in Europe were carried out.

The report condemned the "elitism in traditional language teaching at school", criticised "the progressive difficulty of the intellectual discipline" that "filtered the different strata of the middle classes through competitive examinations (overt or 'norm-references')" and concluded that:

"The great masses of the population are totally untouched by activities which are concerned exclusively with values, knowledge and skills which appear to have no relevance to their lives."

It was also at this time that comprehensive schools were introduced along with "pupil centred" teaching methods and the like. These principles are still adhered to in practice.

Nowadays, governments are nonetheless beginning to feel uneasy and are considering reforms. No-one, however, seems to have the nerve to question prevailing teaching methods and oppose the so-called "experts" who, even today, proclaim that "education can never be subject to an obligation to provide results"<sup>5</sup>.

Luckily, there are those in positions of responsibility within education who have qualified and more finely shaded views on this subject. Two professors at the French national teacher training institute, l'École normale supérieure, reached the following thought-provoking conclusion in an article published recently in *Le Figaro*<sup>6</sup>:

"How can one rebuild an effective national education system whilst retaining ineffective teaching methods?"

The Editorial Board

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<sup>4</sup> Modern Languages (1971-1981). Council of Europe, Strasbourg 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Meirieu (Director of the Institut universitaire de formation des maîtres de l'académie de Lyon): "École: les échéances dérisoires et les autres". *Le Monde* 25/11-04.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Christine Bellosta and Franck Debié, senior lecturers at the École normale supérieure: "Critique de la raison pédagogique". *Le Figaro* 5/2-05.