

EDITORIAL:

On the occasion of our third “Languages and Communication Forum” on 6 October 2005 in Copenhagen, Director-General Karl-Johan Lönnroth, of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Translation, delivered a very reassuring report about the “construction of a multilingual Europe”¹. The report provided a very thorough treatment of its subject matter which left the listener in no doubt that the principle of a multilingual Europe remains unchanged and that this policy is still one of the basic tenets of the European Union.

The Director-General turned against those advocating a single official language, to wit English, within the Union. This would violate the treaties based on respect for cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe and not on language standardization. Everyone has the right to communicate with the Union in their own language. There is no reason to oblige citizens to learn a single given foreign language in order to be able to communicate with EU institutions.

It is, however, important for cultural and economic reasons that all Europeans learn at least one or two foreign languages. The European Council² recommends that two foreign languages be taught at school level, precisely in order to avoid all the pupils only choosing English.

The Director-General drew up a list of the problems and advantages of multilingualism, he also emphasized the responsibilities resting on our institutions, the authorities of the Member States as well as upon ourselves as individuals.

He enumerated the various measures adopted by the Union to encourage multilingualism, whilst pointing out that it was the responsibility of member states to institute school policies that would allow the implementation of the Commission’s 2003 plan of action³ along with the 2002 Barcelona recommendations.

Finally, he expressed the hope that EU political decision-makers who support the policy of multilingualism would put their money where their mouths were and face up to the cost of the necessary educational measures.

¹ Karl-Johan Lönnroth, Director-General: “The building of a multilingual Europe”. Directorate-General for Translation, European Commission. Kommunikations- og Sprog Forum, Copenhagen, 6 October 2005. http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/translation/about_us/dg/dg_en.htm

² The Barcelona Resolution of 2002 (Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council.) <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=DOC/02/8&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>.

³ The European Commission’s Action Plan for Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity, 2003. http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/policy/index_da.html

We are, unfortunately, bound to note that this is often far from being the case. Many governments have felt obliged to commission reports and plans for action from various experts; they do not, however, follow the experts' advice. We had hoped that the Director-General, in his report, would have broached the issue of democratic problems arising in the absence of adequate legislation.

An article published recently in the Danish journal "Language and Society"⁴ discusses, for instance, the situation in Sweden: in 2002 a panel of experts, appointed by the Swedish government, delivered its final report⁵ meant to provide the basis for language legislation. Adoption of the legislation has been postponed every year since. The use of English has, meanwhile, become increasingly widespread in Sweden. The business world is convinced that national competitiveness is directly proportionate to the number of firms that select English as their main working language. In certain departments of the Swedish National Bank, English is already the only working language. Universities are attempting to make the use of English by researchers compulsory in all their theses and articles. The Foreign Ministry goes so far as to advise Swedish members of the European Parliament to forgo their own language and register themselves as English speakers in order to keep interpretation costs down.

We do know that, in recent years, eminent researchers have warned the politicians on several occasions that the language issue is becoming a problem of democracy in that today's language divide could become tomorrow's social divide.

According to the above-mentioned article, it is now the head of the Swedish Language Board, Olle Josephson who is justifiably worried. He predicts that, in the worst case, Swedish society will undergo a complete collapse in terms of language. As the ruling class entrenches itself behind the English language, the least enfranchised Swedish citizens of foreign origin, numbering about one million, will neither be able to use their mother tongue nor attain a sufficient level of proficiency in Swedish to cope. This would leave the majority in the middle feeling threatened by both sides.

"It won't be pleasant" says Olle Josephson.

We agree with him wholeheartedly.

The Editorial Board

⁴ Jørgen Christian Wind Nielsen: *Kuldsejler Sveriges sprogpolitik?* Sprog og Samfund; Nyt fra Modersmål-Selskabet, Nr.3, September 2005.

⁵ "Mål i Mun – Förslag till handlingsprogram för svenska språket." Betänkande av Kommitén för svenska språket, Stockholm 2002. Statens Offentliga Utredningar. ISSN 0375-250X.