

EDITORIAL:

The three language fairs that our society, the DSFF, organized in 2001, 2003 and 2005 on the occasion of the European Day of Languages, proved to be so successful that the decision has been taken to arrange them every year from now on. The fourth fair, “Communication and Language Forum”, was arranged this year by a co-founder of the DSFF, the Association for Professional Communication and Languages, and held in Copenhagen on 26 September.

The whole point of the European Day of Languages is to raise public awareness about the importance of learning foreign languages.

It appears that this particular initiative has not been without effect: according to the European Commission, the number of events organised in connection with the European Day of Language has risen constantly since its launch in 2001. Much else besides has evolved over the past five years thanks, in part and not least, to the initiatives taken by the European Council and the EU: the Barcelona recommendations of 2002¹, the EU plan of action for language teaching in 2003² and, not least, the concrete measures in areas such as education, student mobility, financing of class exchanges, twinning arrangements with practical language outcomes and the like. All of this carried out by means of the Lingua and Socrates programs. It seems that, during this period, it has also dawned on governments that it just might be necessary to set up a language policy. Reports are published, studies are launched and resolutions passed. The latest of the latter, the “Declaration on Nordic Language Policy” was adopted by the Nordic Council of Ministers on 1 September this year³, is of particular interest for a variety of reasons. It recommends a single policy for an entire region comprising five nations and three self-governing areas with at least eight languages, of which six are “complete”. The language policy recommended for Scandinavia, that rests on the principle of parallel languages, should ensure that all the citizens of a given Nordic country can read and write the language or languages current in the area where they live and that everyone is able to communicate with the inhabitants of other Nordic countries in one Scandinavian language. Furthermore, everyone should acquire a high level of proficiency in one internationally oriented language and a reasonable level in a further foreign language.

The Declaration describes the means that will have to be deployed in order to reach the goals outlined above. These mainly concern the reinforcement of language teaching at school. It is also clear that, based on the model drawn up above, the Nordic area is seen as a leading area in terms of language policy.

One can deplore the fact that this type of declaration is only one of intent and that it is not legally binding, however, it does reflect the fact that, over the past five years, the

¹ Cf. editorial no.10 (LSP & Professional Communication Volume 5, Number 2, October 2005).

² European Day of Languages 2006. Interview with Commissioner Ján Figel'.
<http://europa.eu/languages/en/document/90>

³ Deklaration om nordisk språkpolitik. Ministerrådsforslag vedtaget af Ministerrådet for Uddannelse og Forskning på MR-U 2/06 mødet, afholdt den 1. september 2006.

various signatory countries have done much to tighten up and improve their foreign language teaching.

The available statistics do provide some indication of this.

The 2005 Eurobarometer Report on “Europeans and their languages”⁴ shows that the percentage of EU citizens reporting high skill levels in at least one foreign language has risen from 41 per cent in 2001 to 56 per cent in 2005. Ján Figel of the European Commission says in a recent interview, however, that this particular study was based on peoples’ own evaluation of their language proficiency. He goes on to say “What we really need is hard data on the efficiency of school systems in teaching languages to the European citizens of tomorrow.” Mr Figel underlined the fact that the EU had made a substantial effort to introduce a European scale to measure linguistic competence. In about two years from now, the first set of reliable data concerning the language proficiency levels of pupils leaving compulsory school should just have become available.

In the meantime, other statistics show the progress made since the start of the new millennium. The 2005 Eurydice study⁵ indicates that the teaching of one foreign language at primary level has been made compulsory in almost all member states.

The teaching of this foreign language continues throughout primary school and, normally, a second foreign language is taught from the seventh form onwards.

Whereas language teaching at primary level thus seems to be on the right track, other levels within education should be looked at. A 2005 Eurostat study⁶, carried out in 28 European countries, shows the number of languages that each pupil is taught from the sixth form to the Advanced Levels. The study shows that the number of languages taught to each pupil from the sixth to ninth forms is unchanged at an average of 1.5 languages per pupil since 2000. There is, however, a drop of about 20 per cent at the Advanced Levels over the same time span from about 1.38 languages per pupil to about 1.13.

Should this trend continue, there is a real risk of it starting a chain reaction. There has, already at the time of writing, been a sharp drop in the number of language students enrolled at the universities. This means that, in the fullness of time, multilingual Europe will experience a serious shortage of language specialists, teachers, translators and researchers at all levels and in all areas of modern society.

The Editorial Board

⁴ Special EUROBAROMETER 243 “Europeans and their Languages” (Summary).
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_sum_en.pdf

⁵ Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe - 2005 Edition.
<http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=049EN>

⁶ Foreign languages learnt per pupil. Secondary education (average). Eurostat 2005. General and regional statistics. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1073,46870091&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&p_product_code=CCA13072