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Panel discussion: Language use in university teaching and research: What future do we want?

Over the past two days we have heard many facts and opinions on the use of language in university teaching and research. In this panel discussion, a number of experts from EFNIL will discuss the whole issue of the use of languages in university teaching and research both from their own perspective and in the wider context, informed no doubt by the talks we have heard over the past two days. My name is John Simpson, from the UK, and I will continue to regard myself optimistically as part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

We have four panellists today, bringing us their experience from several different language groupings and geographical regions of Europe. Please allow me to introduce them:

- Professor Gerhard Stickel is our President. He comes from Germany, and was formerly the Director of the Institut für Deutsche Sprache in Mannheim.
- Professor Francesco Sabatini, from Italy, is currently Honorary President of the Accademia della Crusca, of which he was President between 2000 and 2008. Professor Sabatini is also Emeritus Professor of the University of Rome Tre.
- Ina Druviete, from Latvia, is both a respected linguist and a politician. She has published widely on linguistics, sociolinguistics, and language planning. Ina was Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia, a post she also held from 2004 to 2006, and again in 2014, when she was known especially for her educational reform.
- Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen, from Denmark (though originally from Germany), is Director of the Danish Language Council. She is a prolific writer on language issues and has led numerous language projects over the years, including our own ELM project.

Each panellist will introduce an aspect of our topic. Sabine will introduce us to some new initiatives being taken around the world to ensure that language use in universities allows students the best environment in which to learn; Gerhard will look back at the linguistic situation in Europe over the centuries, and how this has affected communication between countries, especially on the level of

scientific enquiry; Francesco will talk about the current situation in Italy and in Europe generally, and will offer a detailed breakdown of the issues; and Ina will draw attention to the ways in which the Latvian Government seeks to ensure the development of Latvian while at the same time engaging in a dynamic dialogue with other European scholars and researchers. Each speaker may of course also address different or wider issues as well.

John Simpson: *First of all, may I introduce Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen. Sabine has been studying recent initiatives around the world to assist students faced with a bewildering linguistic situation, in which the dominance of English in the scholarly world can be regarded as a threat to the future security of their own language. Sabine, what has been the response to this issue in Denmark?*

Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen: Thank you. One answer to the question posed in the title of this panel discussion, "Language use in university teaching and research: what future do we want?", might be found in new language strategies that are being developed at Danish universities. Instead of focusing on the use of either English or Danish as the language of instruction and the language of science, Danish universities have started to integrate language competence in other languages into the curriculum of various study programmes.

John Simpson: *This sounds like a novel approach. How does it work?*

Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen: Well, the lack of interest among Danish students in foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian has, since 2005, been a serious concern, not only for university teachers and policy-makers, but also for Danish businesses. Several studies have shown that Danish companies risk losing business due to the lack of language skills amongst their employees, and suggestions have been put forward of ways to add more foreign language training to the curricula of, for instance, engineers and business managers. Thus, the University of Roskilde has extended the curriculum of students of law, economy and social sciences to include, in addition, language studies, and the University of Copenhagen has developed a completely new language strategy that encourages supplementary language studies across all faculties.

John Simpson: *Are these language strategies that Denmark has devised itself?*

Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen: The inspiration for the approach taken by the University of Copenhagen comes from the USA, from the universities of Yale and Columbia, and from Britain, from the London School of Economics. Yale and Columbia work in co-operation, sharing experts in various languages, thus supplementing each other's curricula instead of competing against each other.

Language instruction is offered to students of all disciplines on an individual or a collective basis. The focus is on lesser-used languages, and the aim is to attract a special segment of students, namely those who for some reason wish to learn a supplementary foreign language. This might be because the most interesting research is done by a research group where for instance Chinese is spoken, or because a student wants to work in a company where the majority of employees speak Finnish. Another student might need a knowledge of Bengali to prepare for field studies, and yet another one could be interested in Czech because his family emigrated from there many years ago. Following this strategy there is no reason why Turkish medical students should not be supported while working on a project with the University of Ankara in Turkish.

All language skills in all departments are used and highly estimated: instances might include a native speaker of Bengali in the computer science department or a native speaker of Yoruba in the university administration. Language instruction takes place in many forms, from lecture-based courses to personal tutoring. When one of the universities cannot provide expertise in a particular language, the other university usually can, and instruction often takes place using distance education via Skype or other digital communication tools.

John Simpson: *This sounds like a stimulating environment for learning. What is the philosophy behind it?*

Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen: The language strategies of these universities are not concerned with protecting the national language and not on the benefits of using English as a global language of science, but on the needs of the language users: they are about enabling them to reach their dreams and goals for life and to fulfil their role as citizens in their societies. If the view is based on the needs of the language users and their plans for the future, then linguistic diversity automatically comes into play. An environment that allows students to choose freely the means of expression that they consider relevant for their goals will necessarily foster language diversity, as the students will embrace the national language or any other language.

John Simpson: *And how would you go about developing a strategy like this in Denmark? Do the different competence levels of students present you with a complex issue?*

Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen: It is true that developing a language strategy along these lines is not easily done. Students at Danish universities are on very different levels regarding language skills. Some still need to improve their skills in scientific English, whereas others are ready to meet new linguistic challenges. A large

group of exchange students and immigrants have the national language as their second language and English as their third. Mapping the actual needs of students and of administrative and scientific personnel is one of the first steps to be taken. One may be surprised at the diversity that emerges from the results. Mapping the language skills actually present at a university across faculties and making these skills visible is equally important and enlightening. The experiences at the University of Copenhagen have shown already that there exists much greater language diversity than expected and consequently also a stronger demand for better language skills. Bringing these other languages into play and supporting the language users in their quests is the next step. The effects of this strategy remain to be seen in the years to come.

John Simpson: *Thank you, Sabine. We move now from a prospect of new strategies for the future to an overview of the interplay of languages in Europe in the past. This is a subject that Professor Stickel has been considering for much of his working life – and doubtless earlier too! Gerhard, perhaps you can put the question of language use in university teaching into a wider historical perspective. Did we have these linguistic problems in the past, or is this something new for us to deal with?*

Gerhard Stickel: The present national languages were not always the media of instruction and publication at the European universities. Up until the sixteenth or the seventeenth centuries, and in some countries right up until the nineteenth century, Latin was the dominant communicative medium of science and the humanities, and also the medium of teaching and discussion in higher education. This had the advantage of allowing for an easy exchange of ideas and concepts between scholars in the various linguistic regions of Europe. It allowed students of various *nationes* to study together at Bologna, Paris, Oxford or Prague. (Before the French revolution, *natio*, “nation”, was an ethnic concept rather than a political one.) Latin was also the language of politics, administration and religion, at least in most Catholic parts of Europe before the Reformation. This simplified the means of communication between the political, administrative and religious agents of the various countries and regions of Europe. Knowledge of Latin was, however, limited to a small elite. The vast majority of the people were illiterate. Literacy was closely connected to an understanding of Latin and sometimes of Ancient Greek. The diglossia of Latin and the domestic vernacular languages also meant a social division between a small number of educated scholars, administrators and clergymen and the vast majority of the uneducated masses.

John Simpson: *Many years ago we benefited from the hegemony of Latin. At what stage did the European vernacular languages begin to have an influence on the academic stage in our universities?*

Gerhard Stickel: Only yesterday we learned from Professor Librandi about how Latin was gradually replaced by Italian as a medium of instruction at the universities of this country. I myself have only rather general information on the development within the academic realm of other European countries. But in the German lands a first attempt to use German for academic teaching was made by the famous medical doctor Paracelsus in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

This remained an isolated episode because of his many academic enemies who insisted on Latin as the teaching medium. More than a hundred years later, scholars such as the jurist Thomasius (1655–1728) and the philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754) lectured in German instead of Latin, in the face of protests from their academic colleagues.

It was only in the second half of the eighteenth century that the development of German as a language appropriate for all sciences and the humanities was finally achieved. Latin was not entirely abolished in the academic world until some decades ago. The theological departments of a few universities are said to have used Latin for some of their instruction in the recent past. At several universities, doctoral dissertations in several fields of the humanities could be written in Latin until recently, though only a very small number of students made use of this. However, these are only a few meagre remnants of the great history of Latin in the academic world of the German-speaking countries.

John Simpson: *The emergence of the vernacular languages was good in terms of national identity, but presumably this began to cause problems in cross-boundary communication?*

Gerhard Stickel: The development of the vernacular language as a medium of instruction and discussion in science and for the humanities was not the same for all European languages. Some languages gained a wider use and distribution than others. Scientists of smaller linguistic communities had to use another language when they wanted to be internationally recognised. Hungarian and Finnish scholars, for instance, used to publish in German until the last century, whereas Polish scientists and scholars preferred French.

John Simpson: *But in the modern world we are seeing the old hegemonies being replaced by the dominance of English. This erects barriers to the free flow of scientific and even general discourse. How much of a problem is this?*

Gerhard Stickel: It is important to remember that in the past the developing diversity of the various European languages and their increasing use in university teaching and research did not hamper progress in science and learning. In fact, it stimulated this progress. Nowadays, linguistic diversity in academia seems to be gradually going into reverse. There are obvious practical reasons for the increasing use of English as a kind of modern Latin in various scientific disciplines (I should say that I do not like the term *lingua franca*, which is often used in this context). Along with the modern communicative tools, it allows for a fast international exchange of scientific topics, questions and results. It also supports the mobility of researchers and students of these fields. However, the dominant use of English puts scientists with other native languages at a disadvantage. At first sight this might seem to be only a minor problem, since physics, chemistry and other sciences have additional semiotic means, such as mathematic formulae and graphic tools, by which to convey meaning. The explanatory wording between diagrams and formulae can be in rather simple English. The problem, however, is the tendency towards an exclusive use of English in several disciplines. This keeps the other European languages from keeping up to date with the progress made in science, where new terms and discoveries are only expressed in English.

John Simpson: *You have identified advantages in the growing diversity of languages within Europe. But surely the vernacular languages other than English suffer as their scope for development and experimentation is restricted by the dominance of English.*

Gerhard Stickel: This problem is even greater in the humanities that have only a small number of standardised terms and units. There, the basic concepts, terms and processes have to be verbally developed and explained. As a result, the creativity of the individual scholar is highly dependent on the language he or she uses. Research creativity is said to be about 20% higher in the native language of the individual scholar than even in a well-mastered foreign language. In addition, teaching and research in the humanities is also related to important works and theoretical traditions that are connected to individual languages. Since English is not a neutral medium but, especially in the humanities, is connected with certain trends the so-called mainstream in the Anglophone countries its increased use may lead to a loss of important European traditions of learning. It is a well-known fact that many European scholars follow their British and American colleagues in citing only from Anglophone literature whenever they publish in English.

John Simpson: *So is there an answer to this linguistic dilemma? How do we have the best of both worlds in the field of academic enquiry and teaching?*

Gerhard Stickel: In order to retain the advantage of the use of English as an international vehicular language and to minimise its disadvantages, teachers and researchers in all fields of higher learning should cultivate an advanced bilingualism by using both English and their native tongue in their teaching and publications. They should also encourage their students to adopt this bilingualism. In some fields of the humanities, even bilingualism is not sufficient: students and researchers in subjects such as Romance, Germanic, Slavic or Finno-Ugric philology, in history or in comparative literature need more languages than just their own vernacular and English. They will doubtless need even more languages in the future, unless the situation is brought under closer control.

John Simpson: *Professor Stickel, thank you very much for taking us through the history of linguistic dominance and diversification in Europe over the last thousand years and more.*

I'd now like to move closer to the present, and to invite Professor Sabatini to explain to us something of the situation as currently experienced in Italy.¹

Francesco Sabatini: Perhaps I can begin by extending my warmest greetings to those EFNIL members who are here today, particularly the President, Gerhard Stickel, and John Simpson and Johan van Hoorde, who have been my colleagues since the inception of the Federation.

It is my intention to convey the Italian perspective on the 'linguistic future' of our universities, both here in Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

The talks given here yesterday and this morning have demonstrated very clearly, and with an abundance of supporting evidence, the dangerous situation we find ourselves in if we are too quick to follow, without checks and balances, the fashion of teaching in what is termed an international language (more specifically, English), instead of our national language. This fashion is especially prevalent in Italy and it is getting out of control.

We can only make predictions and give indications for the future if we can identify precisely what the dangers are. Here too we must observe the maxim *primum non nocere* ('above all, do not harm'). This principle of ancient medicine remains relevant in other spheres, as espoused in the 'non-maleficence' propounded in the bioethics of the American philosopher Tom L. Beauchamp.

1 I am grateful to Kate Precious for translating Professor Sabatini's contribution into English for these proceedings.

John Simpson: *Can you give us a summary of the principal issues facing the Italian language and other European languages in this period of English dominance?*

Francesco Sabatini: Yes, certainly. The dangers we face concern a number of issues:

- The quality of teaching, which will vary according to the mastery of English of both the individual tutor, who must teach in what will be, for a large percentage, an unfamiliar language, and the student, who must understand it. This will vary not just from person to person but from country to country.
- In many fields, the cost in terms both of financial resources and personal effort will be disproportionate to the dividends it will pay when future endeavours are likely to be carried out in the native language.
- A reduction in the use of the national language as a tool for analysis and deductive reasoning, particularly in the sciences and technologies. The relegation of the national language to being primarily a tool for the expression of emotions. (This was considered by Leibniz in his time to be a common limitation of national languages, as Professor Stickel has reminded us.)
- A general weakening of the appeal of studying the national language, if not linked to professional objectives.
- A degree of discrimination, which could become widespread in the community.

John Simpson: *These are very serious issues, as we have heard throughout this conference. Professor Sabatini, what in your view should we be doing to counteract these dangers?*

Francesco Sabatini: Assuming that these dangers are real, even if the extent will vary from one country to another, I believe that we must apply the following policies to our teaching methods:

A. In schools and places of further education:

- Great care should be taken to ensure a solid grounding in both the written and spoken form of the national language as a priority in all subject areas (keeping teaching in English to an absolute minimum in only small sections of the curriculum).
- A solid grounding in English but not to the exclusion of other subjects.
- Teaching of a second foreign language to a basic level, or encouragement to practise intercomprehension with speakers of similar languages.

B. In university teaching and scientific production:

- undergraduate courses should primarily be taught in the national language with only parts of the course or seminar being taught in English.
- the opposite should apply to postgraduate courses and doctorates, whilst ensuring that part of all courses are still taught in the national language.
- English should be reserved for only the highest specialisms, such as doctoral theses and scientific publication.

John Simpson: *It is often maintained that the present situation as regards English is parallel to the situation in medieval Europe when Latin was used as the prestige language of scholarly discussion. Do you share this view?*

Francesco Sabatini: This is not a view I share entirely. In fact, I believe we must challenge the increasingly widespread viewpoint that, in superior cultures, English is taking on the same role that medieval Latin held right up until the beginning of modern times. This arises from a misrepresentation of history (whether deliberate or accidental), since an analysis of the relationship between Latin and the European national languages actually reveals the opposite to be true. It is necessary to understand the facts, which I will summarise under two headings.

Firstly, during the medieval period, and even later, Latin enjoyed a unique position. No other language was as culturally significant or possessed the same tradition of rule-governed writing which could be taught. The vernacular Romance and Germanic languages, while demonstrably capable of producing expressive literature (mostly poetry) and being used for functional purposes (contracts, business and other administrative documents) did not possess the necessary lexicon and syntax to be suitable for philosophy, law or science (such as it was at the time). In addition, they did not have standardised spelling or grammar. At this point in history, these languages were still absorbing from Latin the mass of lexical and grammatical elements that would allow them subsequently to take on the same functions as this 'master' language.

Secondly, when the national languages attained this level of maturity (from around the 16th century), all the higher humanist and natural science fields began to abandon Latin in favour of the national languages, with the caveat that Latin was sometimes used to bring their message to a wider audience. Therefore, the arrival of true modern science (theoretical, critical and experimental) was accompanied mostly by the language that every thinker and researcher felt to be rich with register and the necessary ideas. And lessons, whether at university or not, followed suit.

John Simpson: *Thank you, Professor Sabatini, for expressing so clearly both the Italian and the wider European perspective. Different European countries have different*

attitudes to the amount of change that can be brought about by legislation. I come from a tradition where, for a number of reasons, legislation is not explicitly apparent in the sphere of language planning. Our last speaker, Ina Druviute, comes from the world of one of Europe's ancient but smaller languages, and has been extremely active in promoting its future.

Ina, we have a situation within Europe at the moment in which one language is dominant. Is a single strategy throughout all European nations – including the UK perhaps – possible to ensure that our different languages maintain their form, functionality, expressiveness, and even their beauty?

Ina Druviute: I would like to begin by considering the question whether it is possible to develop a common European approach to the expanding use of English in higher education at all. Who are these “we”, that seem to want a definite future? Multilingualism involving English is a global reality in almost all European countries, although there is no reliable theory accounting for how models of national languages and English coexist in different countries, and so no policies have been designed and implemented to bring this about. All countries are unique with regard to their language situation, and countries are unique with regard to their approach to English in different sociolinguistic domains.

John Simpson: *There must be differences within the Baltic states as to the choice of language in university teaching.*

Ina Druviute: There are indeed marked differences even among the Baltic states. Estonia is moving towards a dominance of English in MA and PhD studies and research, while at the same time allocating state-financed study places for work principally in Estonian; Lithuania and Latvia prefer a more moderate approach. Indeed, Latvia could be called a language-centred country and society, which embodies a “language as heart and core” approach both in official language policy and in public opinion.

There are obvious historical, geopolitical and psychological reasons for this, and these attitudes cannot be changed voluntarily in a short period of time, even if policy-makers, scholars, NGO activists or others would like to do so. Only twenty years have passed since Latvian speakers were subjected to overt or covert Russification and the sociolinguistic functions of Latvian were restricted. The re-established Republic of Latvia put a lot of well-considered and systematic effort into ensuring the maintenance of Latvian in a very competitive language situation. Both historical experience and the high profile of language issues in everyday discourse heavily influence attitudes towards the English language as a newcomer in Latvia's language market.

John Simpson: *Latvia has certainly experienced much change over the past few decades, and it must have been hard to develop new strategies for the changing realities. What is the situation in Latvia now?*

Ina Druviete: According to the data collected in the Adult Education Survey (2011), carried out by the Central Statistical Bureau, 95% of Latvian adults aged between 25 and 64 know at least one foreign language, but 5% do not know any foreign language (judged by speakers' own self-perception). According to the latest data available from the EU Statistical Office Eurostat (2013), at least one foreign language is known on average by 65.7% of the EU population. As regards knowledge of foreign languages, Latvia is third in the European Union, immediately after Lithuania, where at least one foreign language is known by 97.3% of the population, and Luxembourg, where at least one foreign language is known by 98.9%.

The above-mentioned survey states that the majority of the Latvian population – 46% – know two foreign languages. This is followed by 36% of the population who know one foreign language. However, three and more foreign languages are known by 13% of adults. The majority of adults – 57% – know Russian; 49% know English; but only 18% of the population know German. At present two foreign languages are compulsory in all general education and vocational schools. The first, obligatory foreign language is English; the second foreign language is a matter of free choice. Since the school year 2014–15 English has been taught from the first grade in schools. The final, centralised examination in English is obligatory for all graduates of secondary schools.

John Simpson: *Legislation – with which you have been particularly involved in recent years – has led to a new view of the balance of languages in Latvia. How does this work?*

Ina Druviete: The *Law on Institutions of Higher Education* (2006) allows our universities to develop additive multilingualism, while at the same time protecting Latvian as the main language in education. Section 56 states:

(3). The study programmes of state-funded institutions of higher education shall be implemented in the official language. The use of foreign languages in the implementation of study programmes shall be possible only in the following cases:

- Study programmes which are acquired by foreign students in Latvia, and study programmes which are implemented within the scope of cooperation provided for in European Union programmes and international agreements may be implemented in the official languages of the European Union. For foreign students, the acquisition of the official language shall be included in the study course compulsory component if

studies in Latvia are expected to last longer than six months or to exceed 20 credit points.

- Not more than one-fifth of the credit-point component of a study programme may be implemented in the official languages of the European Union: in this part final and state examinations may not be included, nor the writing of qualifying, bachelor and masters works.
- Study programmes which are implemented in foreign languages are necessary for the achievement of the aims of the study programme in conformity with the educational classification of the Republic of Latvia for such educational programme groups: language and cultural studies and language programmes. The licensing commission shall decide the conformity of the study programme to the educational programme group.

This formulation ensures that Latvia does not repeat the approach of most European states, which have almost lost their official languages in higher education and science and are now trying to restore their functions. However, this approach has been subjected to criticism, too.

John Simpson: *And the future? How does Latvia expect to build on this foundation?*

Ina Druviete: In 2011 the Latvian Parliament (Saeima) adopted amendments to the *Law on Institutions of Higher Education* that will introduce several important changes in regulations concerning the activity of institutions of higher education; these changes are aimed at improving the quality of education. The Law sets forth stricter rules for developing and licensing study programmes and for the selection of academic staff. Since 1 September 2014, at least 5% of the academic staff of each institution of higher education must have been foreign visiting professors, visiting associate professors, visiting docents and visiting lecturers who have held an academic position at an EU-accredited institution of higher education outside Latvia during the previous five years. There are no language proficiency demands for visiting professors; however, in order to occupy permanent positions among the faculty, high-level Latvian language skills are required.

The point is not about how “to reconcile national language pride with English language usage”² but how to maintain language, in this case specifically the Latvian language, in a situation of marked language competition with two world languages (Russian and English) with much higher economic value. If the language functions poorly in certain sociolinguistic domain (in this case – in higher education) this

2 Wee, L./Lim, L./Goh, R.B.H. (eds.) (2013): *The politics of English*. (= Studies in World Language Problems 4). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, chapter 16 “Conclusion”, 308.

domain loss has a direct impact on several other domains (e.g. science) and the quality of the respective language in general (e.g. terminology processes, academic writing, scientific popular literature et al.). Taking into account a hierarchically subordinated education system (pre-school, basic, secondary, vocational, higher, lifelong education) linguistic transformation in one phase inevitably would be followed by changes in language teaching and learning ideologies and practices throughout the system. Therefore Latvian sociolinguists, being aware of the detrimental effects of subtractive bilingualism in higher education, urge governments to take appropriate steps in order to protect the full-blooded functioning of the official languages in all phases of systems of education and also of research.

John Simpson: *Thank you, Ina, for that description and explanation of Latvia's detailed language strategy.*

This panel discussion has brought together many of the themes of the conference as a whole. Over several conferences, and indeed from the very beginnings of EFNIL as an organisation, we have been aware of the problems of language dominance – in terms of language diversity, language development, the maintenance of functionality in numerous domains, and indeed in many other areas. Within EFNIL this has never been an “elephant in the room”, but has always been openly discussed by all parties. This conference has been an opportunity for members to explain the effect of linguistic dominance within the university system, but of course linguistic dominance affects many other aspects of life. Different countries have different views on how to handle the issue, and it has been good to hear – both from our panel of experts and from the floor – what solutions are being sought and how our combined experience can be brought to bear on what might otherwise remain an intractable issue. Thank you all for your contributions today.