



LATEST TRENDS IN MULTILINGUALISM, LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND IN EUROPE

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My renewed thanks to Professor Grigory Kazakov for this opportunity to take part in your important discussion today.

To introduce myself: I have just been appointed Multilingualism Officer in the Irish Diplomatic service, with a mandate to increase the motivation of all Irish diplomats to learn, and more importantly to use, other languages. I have been a diplomat for over 40 years, serving in Austria twice, Australia, Poland, Germany and the EU in Brussels. My PhD thesis, at Trinity College Dublin, was on *Language Policy in Ireland and Québec*.

The creation of my new post can be seen as a consequence of Brexit. Following Brexit, of the population of 450 million in the 27 EU countries, only 1% are now native speakers of English. The situation has a number of consequences:

a. The language which is currently dominant in the EU institutions (i.e. English) has to be learned by 99% of the citizens of EU countries.

b. The discussion of languages and language policy has been given a new impetus in many EU countries. For instance, the French Presidency of the EU has made strengthening multilingualism, and resisting the dominance of English only, into one of its priorities. In addition, our “Multilingualism Accelerator” proposal, on the use of short courses of Esperanto to improve language learning in general, has now become the most popular proposal in the entire Conference on the Future of Europe! There have been over 11,500 citizens’ proposals so far, and it is thought worthy that the most popular of all proposals concerns languages. I do not claim that the EU is about to adopt Esperanto, of course, but there is certainly an increased openness to considering Esperanto objectively, which already is huge progress. So many decisions in the past were based on prejudice against what people called “artificial languages”. In reality, all languages are to some extent artificial – they do not grow on trees! And much of the scientific vocabulary in languages such as Hungarian and Hebrew is actually younger than its equivalent in Esperanto.

c. The Irish Foreign Ministry reacted to Brexit in many ways. One of them was by creating a new position of “Multilingualism Officer”, and there has been increased discussion in Ireland on the need to learn more languages. The Irish Foreign Ministry has produced a new *Foreign Languages Policy*, which allows colleagues to study a language during hours of work.

My own work at present concentrates on a number of languages seen as particularly useful from an Irish point of view (initially the languages of our neighbours: French, German, Spanish and Portuguese).

Since Brexit, France has become Ireland's closest EU neighbour – regular sea links have increased from 12 to 44. The language traditionally studied in Irish secondary schools has been French, but Spanish has been growing in importance.

The vocabulary of Esperanto is closest to the vocabulary of French, so it is an ideal stepping stone for native English speakers who wish to learn French. To some extent Esperanto is “French without the difficulties” – no irregular verbs, masculine and feminine nouns, or nasal and other vowel sounds not present in English.

There are also important links between Esperanto and Russian. The initiator of Esperanto, Dr Ludwig Zamenhof, became a doctor at the University of Moscow, and was a fluent speaker of Russian. He incorporated some features of Slavic languages in Esperanto: e.g. Esperanto has a word *sia*, the equivalent of the Russian word *свой*, meaning “his own” or “her own”. Sentences such as “Jack asked Bill to wash his car” are ambiguous in Western European languages, but not in Russian, and not in Esperanto.

In conclusion, it can be noted that, as one of the consequences of Brexit, multilingualism and language policy are gaining in importance within the Irish diplomatic service, and to some extent in the EU diplomatic community.

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