

# Linguistic diversity and new communication media in a multicultural Europe

---

MARIA DA GRAÇA PINTO

University of Porto (Portugal)

“Multilingualism and New Learning Environments” was the title of a conference organised by the Freie Universität Berlin and the European Language Council in Berlin (28-30 June, 2001), as part of the European Year of Languages 2001.

The programme of the conference included different contributions which outlined topics such as multilingualism, multiculturalism, the new role of languages, e-learning in languages, and implications for ICT-based learning and language learning. The importance of the above-mentioned topics, regarding today’s European Union space, led us at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto (Portugal) to organise a conference entitled “Linguistic diversity and new communication media in a multicultural Europe” (21-22 February, 2002). For this effect, the organisation invited speakers who, due to their experience in the field, could share with us their thoughts on the forementioned topics and discuss their concerns with us. The invited speakers were 8 in number. In this volume only 6 of the 8 contributions are published because we were not able to include the lectures by Prof. Bernd Spillner, from the University of Duisburg “Gerhard Mercator” (Germany), and by Dr. Susanna Annese, from the University of Bari (Italy).

On the one hand, this volume conveys concerns regarding the balance between the apparent need of a “language of contact” and the “defence of national languages”, as well as the respect for the cultural and linguistic plurality in Europe and the non-existence of a European declaration which explicitly states its linguistic goals in order to protect cultural and linguistic identities.

On the other hand, other contributions deal with the importance of the existence of agents responsible for cultural mediation in a multilingual and multicultural Europe and reveal more or less sceptical attitudes concerning the role played by ICTs nowadays.

In a multilingual and multicultural Europe, Prof. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu calls our attention to the difficulty of conciliating the use of a single language which may enable international communication and the necessity of protecting the other languages, mainly the minority ones. She even remarks that it seems difficult to solve this dilemma without being either demagogic or autocratic. Moreover, bearing in mind the effects of the prevalence of a “lingua franca”, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu reminds us of the globalisation process – as far as the language is concerned – undertaken by the new technologies which will propose a “globally accepted language”, a

“global language”, a “Basic English”, with the inevitable English interferences on the other languages. According to her, the problem lies in how to balance the identity of the different European languages and the language of the international communication media, without a “dictature de politique linguistique”.

As for modern teaching methods, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu presents a critical view with regard to their role when she comments as follows: “Je pourrais évoquer l’argument de certaines expérimentations faites depuis longtemps déjà, pour démontrer qu’aucune méthode ne s’est avérée être «la meilleure» [...].” Regarding the methods based upon the new technologies, she concludes that “ce qui compte ce sont la *compétence* et surtout la *motivation de l’enseignant*, et en premier lieu, dans ce monde actuel, la *motivation de l’élève*, d’où il peut s’ensuivre l’effort dédié à cet apprentissage.” (this volume, p. 9).

Once again, the problem lies in which language or languages to teach in a plurilingual European. Her concluding remarks advocate the respect for the identity of each language in order to preserve its specificity and to protect it against the “invasion” of different linguistic interferences. Moreover, she suggests that it is up to us (linguists, psycholinguists and educators) to make the native speakers, the media professionals and policy makers aware of the importance of respecting their language.

Prof. Miquel Siguan starts his lecture by associating European Union with a common economic space and by considering that cultural and linguistic aspects are concerned with the competence of each of the member states. In his opinion, European diversity and linguistic plurality should always be respected. After drawing a global view of the linguistic scenario of Europe since the Middle Ages, Miquel Siguan shows us the language situation at the beginning of the 21st century in the European Union and also includes in the European language mosaic the languages of immigrants. It goes without saying that, according to the author, this linguistic scenario also contributes to increase the interest of Europeans in learning foreign languages. Another aspect which is shared with us has to do with working languages vs. official languages. Although the number of working languages is small, plurilingualism is somehow respected by the European institutions when they publish their documents in the different languages. Nevertheless, he advocates a regulation which respects cultural and linguistic pluralism.

Other topics dealt with by Miquel Siguan are concerned with language teaching, information systems, the protection of minority languages of European and non-European origin, norms concerning the knowledge of the language of the country where people work and participate in elections, and the language of the texts which accompany the different products commercialised in different countries. He also refers to the “cultural exception” which concerns the protection of European culture(s) by the audiovisual media. To conclude, Miquel Siguan thinks that it is desirable for the European Union to make explicit the linguistic goals of the policy it wishes to accomplish, bearing in mind the different aspects he outlines.

Prof. Diane Ponterotto also shows a concern regarding the language policy of the European Union in the contemporary era of globalisation. She outlines two movements: one of contact and another one of defence of natural languages. The first position requires a global auxiliary language, i.e., English, and the second position safeguards the diversity of languages. A sort of dichotomy is referred to: standardisation vs. multilingualism; imperialism vs. nationalism. The author presents some data on the endangering effects of imperialism with regard to some

languages and adds that the risk of extinction of some languages may also happen in Europe. Diane Ponterotto calls our attention to the serious problem the European Union is faced with. It “embraces the cause of diversity”, defending minority rights in a multilingual Europe, and, on the other hand, “supports theories and practices of cohesion” implying a language of contact: English. In her words, “the global language [and] its adoption for inter-European communications would perhaps accelerate the difficult road to cohesion of the new Europe” (this volume, p. 31).

The author considers Global English from different points of view – including naturally the “Global English as a kind of user-friendly «technese»” (this volume, p. 32) – and calls our attention to the risk of the omnipresence of the English language. She goes on to refer to cohesion and diversity as two main goals of the new Europe and as, according to some critics, “a source of potential conflict”, and concludes her speech on cohesion and diversity after discussing some positions which should be overcome. She even proposes the existence of “languages of contact” instead of one language of contact (this volume, p. 35).

According to her, plurilingualism does not mean English for all plus any other language because that would lead to the dominance of English. And European citizens should be open to the learning and speaking of many languages. Moreover, the concept of multiculturalism and the nature of diversity should be considered from a political perspective rather than from an economic or linguistic one. Indeed, according to Diane Ponterotto, the survival of peoples, their cultures and their languages mainly depends upon the defence of civil and human rights and the respect for differences.

Prof. Stefania Stame reports her experience regarding the role of a cultural mediator/interpreter in multilingual and multicultural societies in a doctor-patient interaction context. Her contribution helps to emphasise the importance of establishing European policies to regulate the way the minority communities coming from outside Europe should be handled. It is worth outlining that the mediator/interpreter referred to by Stefania Stame is not only someone who is relating to two different linguistic systems. S/he is also in charge of establishing the relationship between two different communicative/cultural and representational systems.

The author shows the communicative strategies of mediation and the different roles played by the mediator: someone who is not only translating but also interpreting, trying to get closer to the patient and to the doctor, and reformulating the speeches. In the realm of reformulation practices, Stefania Stame gives some details of the corrections, “boucles de correction”, concerning the approximation between the mediator and the patient as well as the interactions where the mediator is seen as the point of convergence for the other two participants.

This kind of experiment – in which the mediator plays a very active role not only with regard to discourse activity but also to the coordination and the organisation of the dialogue – contributes to improve our knowledge about the way dialogue is organised in general. Furthermore, it may give the professionals who are more directly engaged in the process the opportunity to be aware of what is happening.

Prof. Andrée Tabouret-Keller starts her lecture with the definition of the terms “culture” and “pluricultural”, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, “communication” and “information”, linked with the expression “new communication media”. After clarifying the above-mentioned notions, she presents four small surveys concerning the use of the new technologies by four different groups of participants. She begins by referring to the use of the new media by two

institutions: the Council of Europe and the *Ecole Centrale de Paris*. Her conclusion is that the media play a very important role in both institutions. Nevertheless, the author warns that interpersonal communication is essential when any final decision has to be taken and when student training is concerned.

The other two studies report the use of the new media by a group of young people and by a group of retired engineers. According to Andrée Tabouret-Keller, the four studies raise more questions than they answer. On the one hand, she outlines the impact of the new media on the private users and institutions. On the other hand, she reminds us of aspects such as: the language used to access documents, the anonymity, the effect of the language of chats on the written style and the effects of the new media at school and at home.

Andrée Tabouret-Keller concludes that ideally the new media should offer different possibilities of solidarity. But she draws our attention to the fact that we may ask whether the individualisation linked to the use of the new media is not going to counteract the potential new contacts. In that case, in her words, pluriculturalism would be a hope rather than a reality. Furthermore, she reminds us that nowadays “près de la moitié [des sociétés humaines] ne bénéficient pas (encore) d’un accès assuré à la lecture et à l’écriture” (this volume, p. 57).

With regard to my own lecture, I consider aspects such as electronic writing and its implications, the Internet as a possible global medium, electronics and education, the network culture, the implications of multi-form Internet representations, the Internet as a linguistic revolution, the properties and potential of electronic language, and the computer-based learning setting.

To a certain extent, I share Crystal’s (2001) way of thinking. I see the new technologies of communication not as a threat but as something that should be considered a complementary means to traditional ones. They should help to create the conditions to improve knowledge and to instigate skills which may have been used in a less effective way up to now. As for teaching, the new technologies should help the teacher to show his/her students/pupils how to transform information into knowledge and to be more interactive in a learning setting. In addition, one should also be aware of the way the electronic text works in order to understand the reasoning form which supports it. In other words, the use of new technologies may intensify, both in the teacher and in the student/pupil, the necessary distance between the subject and object of study, leading to the necessary critical attitude which teachers are expected to create in students. Although computers and the Internet are far from being used by the majority of the world population, we cannot ignore that they are more and more used in our societies. Therefore, it is possible that in the near future teachers will be faced with a generation of students who are more familiar with the Net than they themselves. In conclusion, new and old technologies should be used alongside each other. They are in no way incompatible and they certainly stimulate complementary abilities.

To summarise, what came out from the main lectures was the defence of linguistic diversity and multiculturalism, and the recognition that conditions should be created for the enhancement of communication among peoples. As for new technologies, much more research has to be done in order to give an answer to the questions which were raised during the conference. It is possible that in the foreseeable future we will be in possession of data which either confirm some of the expressed fears or, on the contrary, reveal us a new reality, not only in terms of literacy, which, as citizens and teachers, we cannot ignore or live without.