

Caomhnú na hÉagsúlachta Teanga san Eoraip/Feabhas ar
fhoghlaim na dteangacha
**Conserving Linguistic Diversity in Europe/Improved Language
Learning**

Goodenough Conference, London, 17 February 2006, Seán Ó Riain

As my perspective is rather different from that of most of you, perhaps you will allow me a few words to clarify “where I come from”. My background is a Ph.D in “Language Planning in Ireland and Québec” from Trinity College, Dublin. I have worked for some 26 years as an Irish diplomat on five postings: Vienna, Canberra, Warsaw, Berlin and now Brussels, where I now deal with EU relations with the Western Balkans and with Latin America at the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU. For two years I was Irish Government representative on the Council of Europe Inter-governmental Committee which drew up the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages, opened for signature on 5 November 1992, and had a small role in gaining German government support for the conferral of EU official working language status on Irish in 2005.¹

The views I express here are personal. My remarks will deal with conserving linguistic diversity in Europe; a rather unorthodox method of improving language-learning in general, and not only at the university level; and finally the *ab initio* teaching of Irish in Berlin

1. Conserving Linguistic Diversity in Europe

a) Growing Dominance of English

Despite the EU’s support for a policy of multilingualism, in practice the tendency towards an ever-increasing use of English at the expense of all other languages continues² and, since the last EU enlargement on 1 May 2004, is accelerating. Since returning to Brussels last September after an absence of four years, I witness this development daily in the Council’s Working Groups. From a kind of French-English condominium we have moved to almost total English dominance. This micro-level practice in Brussels is obviously reflected at macro-level throughout the EU. It is clear that a common language has many positive aspects and may appear a necessity in an EU which has 21 official working languages. However, a number of questions spring to mind:

1. The use of English gives a considerable advantage to the 13 % of EU citizens who are native English speakers, and to speakers of closely related languages (German, Dutch, Danish and Swedish), over all other Europeans. How can this be reconciled with the concept of equal opportunity for all, a key factor in gaining popular support for

¹ Council decision of 13 June 2005: This brings the total to 21, set to increase to 23 with Romanian and Bulgarian accession. The decision on Irish will be implemented from 1 January 2007, and translators and interpreters are being recruited at present.

² See Professor Robert Phillipson (2003) *English-Only Europe? – Challenging Language Policy*” Routledge.

European integration?³ An eminent professor⁴ proposes a radical solution aimed at restoring communicative equality: ban sub-titling and dubbing of English-language films on all European cinema and TV screens!

2. How can the use of English as a European lingua franca facilitate the EU policy of promoting linguistic diversity, if over 90% of young Europeans study English in preference to all other European languages, even those of their closest neighbours?⁵

3. As over 80% of native speakers of English do not live in Europe, how can its use contribute to the strengthening of a European identity in harmony with national and local identities which is a *sine qua non* of European integration?⁶

4. A point which is easy to forget at university level, where most colleagues speak a number of languages fluently: To master English to the level of a native speaker requires years of residence in an English-speaking country, or unusual linguistic talent. Is the dominance of English not reinforcing the privileges of an élite who are rich enough, or talented enough, to achieve this?⁷

English is a beautiful language, with a superb literature, much of it produced by my fellow-countrymen. It may be likened to a red rose, which is an almost universally popular flower. But the popularity of a garden full of red roses, where there is no other flower, is at least questionable, and we Irish are familiar with the tendency of English to displace other languages.

b) Human Rights, Language Rights?

In the past half century the Council of Europe has created a system of international law, based on individual human rights and fundamental freedoms. Progress in the general human rights area has, however, not been paralleled by progress in the area of language use in international communication, which continues to be regulated by the “might is right” principle (familiar to Irish speakers – “*cloíonn neart ceart*”): the dominant languages are used and the concept of equal rights and opportunities is ignored. It seems natural to some that 63 million native speakers of English, or 64 million French speakers, should always have the right to use their native language for international communication and that 90 million Germans, 57 million Italians, etc. – in all well over 70% of Europeans – should never have this right.⁸

³ The French and Dutch referenda which decisively rejected the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 showed, among other things, the weakness of a European identity at popular level.

⁴ Professor Philippe van Parijs, Universities of Louvain and Harvard, at a conference in the Lithuanian Parliament in Vilnius, 31 July 2005.

⁵ Chiti-Batelli, A. (2000) *L'Union de L'Europe au tournant du siècle*. Nice: Presses d'Europe, p 108. This is not confined to Europe: see Crawford, J., (2000) *At War with Diversity – US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

⁶ Frank, H., und Selten, R. (2005) *Für Zweisprachigkeit in Europa*. Paderborn: Akademia Libroservo.

⁷ See Piron, Claude, (1994) *Le Défi des Langues* (1994). Paris: L'Harmattan.

⁸ An Austrian colleague recently mentioned this problem: during the present Austrian EU presidency he has to preside over a Council Working Group in English, where he will inevitably be compared to his British predecessor who could chair the group in his native language.

c) Economic Effects of the Domination of English

The « Grin Report⁹ 2005 » calculated at €17-18 billion the annual amount of money earned by the UK economy¹⁰ due to the international position of the English language. It goes without saying that it is not the English language, but the fact of international dominance by one ethnic language, that is the subject of Grin's criticism. The Report predicts, in the present European context (my translation)

«an accelerated convergence towards English linguistic hegemony. Such a development, however, is inefficient in terms of the allocation of resources, unjust in terms of the distribution of resources, dangerous for linguistic and cultural diversity, and worrying as regards its geo-political implications

The Grin Report, therefore, looks at three scenarios: «English only », « multilingualism », and « Esperanto ». He concludes:

«the « Esperanto » scenario appears to be the most advantageous, as would lead to net savings, for France, of close to €5.4 billion p.a. and, for all of Europe, of about €25 billion annually.

The frequent rejections of Esperanto make the implementation of that scenario impracticable in the short term. On the other hand, it could be recommended in the framework of a strategy to be implemented over a generation. Two conditions are critical for its success: first, a huge information campaign aimed at overcoming the prejudices against this language – which are in general based on simple ignorance – and at helping mindsets to evolve ; secondly, effective co-ordination between states in order to implement this scenario. Over 85% of the population of the EU 25 has a direct and obvious interest in this ...»

d) European Identity in harmony with national and local identities?

In 1994 a German politician¹¹ referred mockingly to the proposed common European currency as “Esperanto money”¹². Today this “Esperanto money” is used daily by over 300 million people and is stronger than the American dollar – a practical example of what even 12 EU countries can achieve when they put the common European interest ahead of selfish national interests. At no stage during the negotiations leading to its adoption was there a serious proposal to accept the D-mark, the strongest national currency, as a common EU currency. It was clear to all that the new currency should be seen as their own by **all** Europeans. But the EURO notes are a further reminder of the lack of a language to express our common European identity: apart from the word “EURO” in the Latin and Greek alphabets, no other word appears on them.

⁹« *L'enseignement des langues étrangères comme politique publique* », by Professor François Grin, University of Geneva, published in September 2005 at the invitation of the Haut Conseil pour l'Évaluation de l'École. See http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee/documents/rapport_Grin.pdf.

¹⁰ The benefits to the Irish economy are not covered by the report.

¹¹ Peter Gauweiler, now a CSU member of the Bundestag.

¹² *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23 February 1994.

e) **The Role of the Universities: Need for objective analysis and a European debate**

Many tolerate a situation which they recognise as far from ideal because they think that there is no alternative. The concept of an inter-ethnic language as a viable option is as taboo in our society as was that of the market economy in the former Soviet Union. In breaking down such taboos, the universities have a key role, and happily some are beginning to play it. In Berlin the GIL/Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik¹³ has some 80 members, all university professors or lecturers, and has published 12 volumes of the proceedings of its annual conferences. New disciplines such as “interlinguistics” and “esperantology”¹⁴ are becoming harder to ignore. The language question has not been formally addressed at EU inter-governmental conferences because it is seen as too politically sensitive. But opposition to “English only” is slowly emerging: defenders of national languages such as *VDS/Verein Deutsche Sprache*¹⁵ and *Défense de la Langue Française* have begun to cooperate. The topic of language diversity is gradually edging towards the European agenda: in November 2005 the European Commission published its first “Communication on Multilingualism”.¹⁶

f) **An Alternative to « English only »?**

In 1995 Hungary granted official recognition to Esperanto as a « living language »¹⁷ for the Hungarian equivalent of A levels: now some 7-8,000 students present themselves for examination each year, making Esperanto the third most popular foreign language, behind English and German.¹⁸ A Google “Esperanto” search on 2 February 2006 produced 106 million hits. Despite this progress, prejudice against Esperanto remains strong, just like prejudice in favor of roman numerals, which succeeded in delaying the adoption of our present, far more effective, system for several centuries. In April 2004 the European Parliament has its first plenary vote on a reference to Esperanto in a document on multilingualism in the EP: a majority voted to remove the reference, but its retention was supported by 43% of those present. In June 2004 the first MEP who speaks Esperanto fluently was elected - a young Polish woman, Małgorzata Handzlik.

¹³ <http://www.interlinguistik-gil.de/index.html>. See “The German interlinguistics society Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik” by Seán Ó Riain in *Language Problems and Language Planning* 27:269-277, Fall 2003.

¹⁴ See Dr Sc Detlev Blanke (2003) *Interlinguistik und Esperantologie – Wege zur Fachliteratur (Paths to the scholarly literature)*: University of Bamberg: Deutsches Esperanto-Institut.

¹⁵ A novel by the Berlin President of VDS, Dr Kurt Gawlitta (*Der verkaufte Mund*, IFB Verlag Paderborn 2004), foresaw the introduction of English as an official language in Germany in 2010 : it seemed far-fetched when written, but seems less so now in view of recent comments by Baden-Württemberg PM Oettinger - see *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 12 January 2006.

¹⁶ <http://europa.eu.int/languages/servlets/Doc?id=914>.

¹⁷ No reputable linguist who has studied the phenomenon now maintains that Esperanto is an “artificial” language: Mario Pei wrote that to call it that “is like referring to an automobile as an “artificial horse”. Detlev Blanke has written of the 28 stages through which Esperanto has gone on its way from a project to a fully-fledged language with its own diaspora speech community, and even its native speakers, or *denaskuloj* – in about 1,000 families. See also Gledhill, C. (1998), *The Grammar of Esperanto – A corpus-based description*. Munich: Lincom Europa.

¹⁸ Speech by Ambassador G. Nanofvsky in the Lithuanian Parliament, Vilnius, during the 4th « Nitobe Symposium » on 31 July 2005.

2. Improved Language Learning

Not only is Esperanto easier to learn than other languages, but it is possible to reach the same level in a *month* of Esperanto study as in a year's study of English or French (Piron, op.cit: 189). Eichholz (1982: 604)¹⁹ shows that English-speakers with no previous knowledge of Esperanto may recognise up to 70% of a given text.²⁰ Linguists generally recognize that a second language learned well, irrespective of which language, can accelerate the learning of subsequent languages - the so-called « propedeutic effect». A report by the Finnish Ministry of Education in 1984²¹ lends further support:

“The results of teaching experiments show that *an introductory Esperanto course considerably improves the success of students in the study of foreign languages.*”

This conclusion is supported by an Italian Ministry of Education circular of 1993²², and by research conducted by the Cybernetic Faculty of Paderborn University²³: in one experiment²⁴, group A were taught English for 800 hours over 5 years, group B, of similar age and academic ability, were taught Esperanto for 104 hours, and subsequently needed only 635 hours of English tuition to reach the standard of group A *in English*, i.e. group B reached a working knowledge of both languages, while saving 61 hours. Further experiments showed that the time saved in this way may be up to 50% more than the time taken by the Esperanto course.

Since 1921 a whole series of experiments²⁵ have shown that Esperanto has particularly well-developed propedeutic qualities, for two reasons:

1. Its regularity and ingenious system of prefixes and suffixes for the formation of complex words. Esperanto is learned from 6-10 times more quickly than a national language, and this rapid progress tends to encourage the student.
2. The fact that over 99% of its vocabulary is derived from the international word stock of languages such as French, Latin, English and German.

Thus, far from being the adversary of other languages, as prejudice would have us believe, Esperanto in short, preliminary, propedeutic courses, could improve and

¹⁹ Eichholz, R. and V. (1982) *Esperanto en la Moderna Mondo/Esperanto in the Modern World*. Bailieboro (Ontario): Esperanto Press.

²⁰ Try it: *Inteligenta persono lernas la internacian lingvon rapide kaj facile. Esperanto estas la moderna, kultura lingvo por la internacia mondo. La simpla, praktika, fleksebla Esperanto estas la solvo de la problemo de ĝenerala interkompreno. Esperanto meritas seriozan konsideron.*

²¹ *Opetusministeriön Esperantotyöryhmän Muistio*, p 59. Helsinki 1984.

²² Published in *Bollettino Ufficiale del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione*, no 21-22, 25 May-1 June 1995, p 7-43.

²³ Frank, H. and Lobin, G. (1998) *Sprachorientierungsunterricht/Lingvo-orientiga Instruado*. München: Akademia Libroservo.

²⁴ Frank, H. (1982) *Sprachkybernetik/Lingvo-kibernetiko*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.

²⁵ See the useful bibliography of such experiments in Corsetti and La Torre (2001), « Is a Clear Structure an aid to language learning? » in *Planned Languages: From Concept to Reality*, ed. K. Schubert, Brussels: Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst. See also www.springboard2languages.org: an introduction to foreign languages through Esperanto.

accelerate learning. An interesting corollary is that the less language-learning ability a student has, the more the Esperanto course appears to help, by giving a taste of success to students who have only known failure. This has huge implications across Europe, not least for my own country: Irish has been an obligatory subject at primary and secondary level since 1922. According to research by Dr John Harris, some 30% of pupils meet their learning targets in Irish in the non-*Gaelscoileanna* sector (some 94% of the total); almost 70% do not and the latter's lack of progress often discourages them from studying either Irish or any other languages. The propedeutic Esperanto method would, of course, need to be investigated in a pilot program to see how it would function in the specific conditions of Ireland. It may not be the most relevant at university level, where talented linguists may be expected to form a far greater proportion of each beginners class, but might not such short courses have a role in improving language-learning for the 70%, and for their equivalents throughout Europe?

3. Teaching *ab initio* – Irish in Berlin

The following, taken from personal experience while on a posting at the Irish Embassy in Berlin, illustrates that regional and minority languages can awaken a surprising amount of interest, and not always close to their home territories. In October 2004 the Humboldt University²⁶ Language Centre in central Berlin decided, with the financial support of the Irish Government, to re-launch the teaching of Irish *ab initio*, to undergraduates and any others who wished to study it. The course had 25 places. Within 6 hours of its Internet launch the course was sold out - over 50 people were interested in learning Irish in a city one hour's drive from the Polish border! The course continued throughout the academic year, and was re-launched at two levels in October 2005. Can something be learned from the teaching of Esperanto? The virtues of the direct method, of using the language to teach the language, rather than over-reliance on translation into the students' mother tongue. The *Cseh*²⁷-method of teaching Esperanto was developed by Romanian priest Andreo Cseh to teach classes of workers who had no common language.

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²⁶ In a related development, Prof. Sabine Heinz now lectures in Celtic Studies at the University.

²⁷ See <http://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cseh-metodo>. The [Internacia Cseh-Instituto de Esperanto](#) at The Hague continues this work.