

Foreword to Celtic Englishes IV

Liebe Frau Prof. Tristram, liebe Kolleginnen und Kollegen,

Is mór an chúis áthais dom an seimineár “The Celtic Englishes IV” a oscailt go hoifigiúil thar ceann Ambasáid na hÉireann. Is mór ag an Ambasadóir Seán Ó hUiginn, agus ag gach éinne san Ambasáid, an sár-obair atá déanta thar na blianta ag an Ollamh Hildegard L.C. Tristram chun an réimse léinn seo a chur chun cinn. Ise a bhunaigh an réimse, dise an chreidiúint faoina fheabhas atá ag éirí leis. Gabhaim buíochas freisin libhse ar fad as a bhfuil déanta, agus á dhéanamh, agaibh sa ghort seo. Is mór an obair ar son na hÉireann, is go deimhin ar son na dtíortha Ceilteacha eile, a dhéanann sibh chun an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a choimeád ar léarscáil acadúil na Gearmáine.

Es is mir sowohl eine grosse Ehre als auch ein grosses Vergnügen an der Eröffnung des Konferenzen “The Celtic Englishes IV” teilzunehmen. Als Vertreter der irischen Botschaft will ich Sie für Ihre wichtige wissenschaftliche Arbeit, und für Ihre jetzige Anwesenheit recht herzlich bedanken. Der Botschafter, S. E. Herr Seán Ó hUiginn, hofft Sie alle bei seinem Empfang heute Abend in Grunewald begrüßen zu dürfen.

On behalf of the Embassy, it is a great pleasure to congratulate Frau Prof. Tristram on the wonderful work she has done, and continues to do, on “The Celtic Englishes”. I would also like to thank all of you who have in any way contributed to the success of this project over the years. It has had a significant impact in keeping Ireland and the other Celtic countries on the academic map in Germany.

My other remarks here this morning will be delivered in a personal capacity, and neither the Embassy nor the Irish Government are in any way responsible. But I am sure you will agree that academic development needs the freedom to be provocative by sometimes advancing unorthodox viewpoints. Mine concerns European linguistic diversity. 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.

The “Celtic Englishes” project takes place with the European context, and it is important that we sometimes look at the “big picture” even though its relevance to our work may not be immediately apparent. I would therefore like to take a broad look at some recent linguistic developments in Europe, and to conclude with some amusing uses of the English language, mainly, but not only, in non-English-speaking countries.

Many of you will be familiar with the following excerpt from “The Disinherited Mind” by Erich Heller, but I think it is worth recalling, as we live in an EU which spends more time discussing pig prices and banana quotas than the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity.

“Confucius was once asked what he would do first if it were left to him to administer a country. The Master said: “It would certainly be to correct

language." "Surely," they said, "this has nothing to do with the matter. Why should language be corrected?" The Master's answer was: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; if morals and art deteriorate, then justice will go astray; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in hopeless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything."

Is European linguistic diversity in any danger? If it is, then the fate of the Celtic languages will quickly assume a pan-European relevance. Many feel that this is already the case. I would like to briefly mention four examples:

1. In a lecture in Berlin last November Prof. Ulrich Ammon spoke of "German as a Scientific Language", and outlined its sharp decline from its position as one of the major scientific languages of the world to virtual non-existence in this sphere. He mentioned, for instance, that at present in Germany less than 1% of university theses in the natural sciences are written in German.
2. A recently-published novel by Dr. Kurt Gawlitta, "Der verkaufte Mund", is set in Germany in 2010. A new political party, the "Free Market Party", proposes to make English co-equal with German for all official purposes. The book begins with the dismissal of an employee who refuses to speak English with other Germans at all times while at work, which is the policy of the multinational company he works for. Opposition to the new linguistic order in Germany comes, interestingly, not from the nationalistic right, but from the Greens, who have added linguistic and cultural ecology to their list of concerns.
3. One website (<http://lingvo.org>) lists over 750 jobs in European organizations in Brussels reserved for "native English speakers".
4. Of particular interest is another recently-published book, "**English-Only Europe?** – Challenging Language Policy", by Prof. Robert Phillipson, Research Prof. in the Dept. of English of Copenhagen Business School. Phillipson explores the role of languages in the process of European integration. After looking at current policies, he argues the case for more active language policies to safeguard a multilingual Europe. The book sets out Phillipson's vision of an inclusive language policy for Europe, and describes how it can be attained.

Secondly, if European linguistic diversity is in danger, can anything be done about it? Phillipson thinks that EU action is both possible and likely to be effective, and I am inclined to agree. The most difficult hurdle is convincing people of this, as prejudices tend to be far more difficult to break down than the Berlin Wall. To be effective, thinking has to be innovative and forward-looking, and has to finally break away from the old romantic notion that languages are in some way similar to plants and animals, and that to consciously intervene in them in any way is in some sense wrong.

A recent article on "Anti-Americanism" by Prof. James Ceaser of Virginia makes an interesting point, in a non-linguistic context, but this approach can be very productively applied to languages, and can play a key role in conserving Europe's linguistic diversity:

"Conservative romantics responded that nothing created or fashioned under the guidance of universal principles or with the assistance of rational science was solid or could long endure. The great conservative Joseph de Maistre argued that no system or government built according to any rational plan or principle could ever work. Instead of human reason and rational deliberation, these romantic thinkers placed their confidence in the organic growth of distinct and separate communities; they put their trust in history. By surviving and prospering the United States had refuted the charges of the inherent political fragility of societies founded with the aid of reason."

Given the will at EU level to think and act innovatively, a language initiated with the aid of reason in Warsaw 117 years ago, could prosper as the United States has done, and make a major contribution to preserving Europe's linguistic diversity, and to preventing the domination of smaller languages throughout the EU by their larger neighbours.

Moving from the European to the Irish level, I never cease to be amazed at the efforts to which some of my fellow-countrymen go to minimise the importance of the Irish language, and thus further reduce linguistic diversity. The marginalisation of Irish-language literature by English-speaking Irishmen is startlingly revealed by the following, from *Irisleabhar Mhá Nuad 1996-97*, "Féilscríbhinn an Doibhlinigh". Prof. Jean-Claude Polet of l'Université Catholique de Louvain, compiler of the ambitious "Patrimoine littéraire européen", a French-language anthology in 12 volumes of European literature from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the beginning of written literature to the 20th Century contributes an essay entitled "Breandán Ó Doibhlin et le patrimoine littéraire européen". He writes ((p 337 and 344-5; my translation):

"The Irish language literature of Ireland, on its own, provides 324 pages, or **4.89%**, of the "Patrimoine littéraire européen" (Europe's Literary Heritage). ... The "Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing" (i.e. writing in Ireland), 1991, ... devotes only 258 pages out of a total of 4,044 pages, or **6.38%**, to Irish language literature."

Agreed, it would be difficult to find any 2 Europeans who could agree on what proportion of this work should be allocated to each literature, but it is striking, in my view, that a Belgian professor considers literature in the Irish language to be over 100 times more important than do the English-speaking Irishmen who compiled the first three volumes of the Field Day Anthology! Prof. Polet has himself drawn attention to this extraordinary fact, and in an effort to understand it, has noticed a correlation between the 6.38% proportion and the fact that some 6% of the present population of Ireland use Irish regularly (a little over 6% of children attend Irish-medium schools, for instance). If he is right, this is an astounding case of the thoroughly colonized mind projecting the present state of affairs into all of Ireland's past.

One is reminded of Hugh MacDiarmid's lines:

“But I have faith in Scotland's hidden powers:
The present's theirs;
But all the past and future's ours.”

Amusing uses of English in various signs and speeches

1. Copenhagen airport: “We will accept your luggage, and send in all directions”.
2. Hong Kong hotel: “Patrons are encouraged to take advantage of the chambermaids.”
3. Paris Hotel: “Partons are requested to please leave your values at the front desk.”
4. Oslo: “Ladies are requested not to have children at the bar.”
5. Hong Kong laundry: “At very busy times, the Management reserves to right to execute customers in strict rotation”.
6. Newly-appointed Danish female government Minister: “I will not go into detail today, because I am at the beginning of my period”.
7. Following a visit to China a former Secretary-General of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs changed his title from “Secretary” to “Secretary-General“, as he had been described in interpretation into Chinese as the “eternal typist”.
8. Former US President Jimmy Carter at the start of his visit to Poland: “I have come here to get to know the Poles better.” Interpreter (in Polish): “He has come here because he carnally desires Polish women.”
9. At the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, a newspaper cartoon showed President Clinton as a cowboy being asked by a posse: “Which way?” His reply: “It all depends on what precisely you mean by “which” and “way”.
10. Finally, to show that the phenomenon also extends to second-language speakers of French: A South American ambassador, an excellent French speaker, produces loud laughter among the native French speakers when he described “la politique de Cuba” as “la politique du Cuba”.

I wish you a very enjoyable and productive conference.

References

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