

Commentary

on “L’italiano escluso dall’Europa”

(article published in the *Corriere della Sera* on Saturday 20 March 2010)

by

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As part of its usual reporting on activities taking place at the *Observatoire Économie—Langues—Formation* (ELF), the *ELF* website provides links to all the media sources in which the Observatoire’s work is mentioned. This includes interviews of *ELF* researchers and articles referring to their projects and publications, and covers the written press and radio programs. The significant number of entries in our “media” section bears witness to the relevance of the work carried out at the *Observatoire ELF*.

Normally, we do not comment on the articles in which our work is referred to, or in which excerpts of interviews of *ELF* members by journalists are quoted. In this particular case, however, it appears necessary to comment on the piece published on 20 March 2010 by Mr. Paolo Di Stefano, a journalist writing for the widely read Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. In this article, where the newly announced rules regarding the recruitment procedures of permanent staff at the European Commission are discussed, Mr. Di Stefano quotes Mr. Michele Gazzola, a researcher at the *Observatoire ELF*, who aptly points to some of the potentially deleterious effects of these procedures. Mr. Di Stefano also quotes Professor Francesco Sabatini, honorary president of the *Accademia della Crusca*, the Florence-based institution that is, in a sense, the Italian equivalent of similar bodies in countries as varied as France (*Académie française* and *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France*) Sweden (*Svenska Akademien* [*Swedish Academy*] and *Svenska Språknämnden* [*Swedish Language Council*]) in Sweden, or Spain (*Real Academia Española*).

Let us recall that according to these new rules, all applicants will be required to sit some examinations in a language other than their mother tongue, and that this language must be English, German or French. This provision also applies to native speakers of the latter three languages, thus placing all applicants—in principle—before a roughly equally high hurdle to jump. Professor Sabatini is quoted as saying that giving English a privileged status is “understandable”, but that it is not in the case of German or French. In our view, this pronouncement is rather problematic from the perspective of macro-level language dynamics, for three reasons.

First and most fundamentally, *no* language ought to be given any particular privilege. Hence, the special role granted to German and French isn't "less understandable" than that granted to English.

Secondly, in the case of German and French, this so-called "privilege" isn't one, because the predictable result of the new regulation is that just about *everybody* will chose to sit their exams in English, with the exception of Britons (and most Irishmen), who will make more or less feeble attempts at speaking German or French. The implementation of these new rules will simply reinforce the (genuinely) privileged status already enjoyed by English—and, increasingly, by English alone. It is most likely that only the demand for English-language training will further increase across Europe. In Britain itself, a modest increase in enrolments in German and French might appear—but this will never, by a very long shot, come close to compensating the drop in 36% in the enrolments for German (37% for French) that followed the ill-fated decision by the British Ministry of Education to drop foreign-language requirements from the GCSE (General certificate of secondary education) curriculum for the two years preceding A levels.

Thirdly, the notion that it's okay (in the name of an alleged "pragmatism") for Europe to rely on English "come lingua veicolare nelle istituzioni o come lingua ausiliaria di intermediazione" (as Di Stefano writes) constitutes a dangerous leap of faith. It ushers in an area of widespread diglossia, where English is the only language used in a number of functions—such as "applying for job at the European Commission" and "working at the European Commission"—downgrading all other languages (including German and French) to a secondary and essentially local status. The fortunes of Italian (whom Professor Sabatini certainly takes to heart) would be better served by endorsing an uncompromising multilingual *ethos*; hence, a policy that defends trilingualism is already a bit better than one granting privileges to English only. Deprived of the nominal shield of trilingualism, and of the (moderate) extent of protection that German and French can still offer, Italian would simply see its role erode faster, and recede more quickly into irrelevance.

For lack of space, we shall not embark here on a discussion of the merits of genuine, sustainable multilingualism, whether in terms of resource *allocation* (that is, efficiency) or in terms of resource *distribution* (that is, fairness). Interested readers will find several references on this question at the end of this commentary. Let us simply point out that instead of calling for the downgrading of German and French, advocates of languages and linguistic diversity would be better advised to recommend widespread multilingualism in all European institutions. Multilingualism in practice does not necessarily mean that every meeting requires simultaneous interpretation into and out of 23 official languages, or that every internal memo needs to be translated. However, it means embracing a genuinely multilingual *ethos* and developing language arrangements accordingly. A monolingual formula (whether its beneficiary is English, Estonian, French, or any other natural language) is probably the most injudicious response to this challenge.

Suggestions for further reading

Gazzola, Michele and Grin, François, 2007: "Assessing efficiency and fairness in multilingual communication: Towards a general analytical framework", *AILA Review* 20, 87-105.

Grin, François 2004: "L'anglais comme *lingua franca*: questions de coût et d'équité. Commentaire sur l'article de Philippe van Parijs", *Économie publique* 15, 33-41.

Grin, François, 2005: *L'enseignement des langues étrangères comme politique publique*. Rapport au Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de l'école, Ministère de l'éducation nationale, Paris. http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee/documents/rapport_Grin.pdf.

Phillipson, Robert, 2003: *English-Only Europe?* London: Routledge.