

# Multilingualism, an emerging value

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## Abstract

Multilingualism is not a promise, but a reality. The coexistence of various languages is a characteristic trait of the internationalised company. In addition, it is expected that educational changes, human mobility, research and new technologies will favour social change towards a greater awareness of linguistic diversity and of the need to act assuming a multilingual environment. The EU has presented a document on how it plans to manage multilingualism within the Union itself, and this represents a great institutional step in the assumption of this new context. In the same way that the linguistic behaviour of companies is related to governmental changes, it is also related to social changes.

## Summary

1. Multilingualism in the European perspective
2. Factors simplifying multilingualism
3. Context and agents promoting multilingualism in the company
4. The management of multilingualism from the company
5. References

## 1. Multilingualism in the European perspective

For the first time an official document of the European Commission makes reference to multilingualism as a value to be promoted to all effects. The commissioner Jan Figel was responsible for the document presented in November 2005 to the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions and entitled "A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism".

The philosophy of the document is based on the idea that linguistic diversity is an intrinsic trait in the European Union, and that it is necessary to develop European policies that go beyond the 20 official languages. The EU is therefore committed to promoting the use of the approximately 60 autochthonous languages in Europe (apart from the 20 official languages), as well as those spoken by communities of immigrants.

According to the document presented by Jan Figel, multilingualism means both the capacity of a person to use various languages and the coexistence of various linguistic communities in the same geographic area. In this setting, the document wants to guide the European Commission in a new area of action which involves the promotion of the use of all languages. The main strategy of this new area of action being proposed is for European citizens to learn various languages.

In this perspective, the Commission's policy for multilingualism must pursue three objectives:

- Encourage language learning and promote the linguistic diversity of society.
- Favour a competitive multilingual economy.
- Provide citizens with access to legislation, processes and information about the European Union in their own language.

As for the first point, the report makes it quite clear that language learning must go beyond English. The first objective defined in this paragraph is that all European citizens should understand and be competent in various languages. This implies promoting the learning of more than one foreign language in schools in order to favour the mobility of workers and students between states.

As for the support given to languages called "regional", "local" or "minority", the document proposes the creation of a network of centres for linguistic diversity to continue the task carried out by projects such as Lingua or Mercator. However, the document does not clarify the relationship that should exist between policies designed for the promotion of the knowledge of the national/foreign languages and those destined to the promotion of regional languages in European educational systems.

The second point of the document is the most interesting, as the fact that an institution such as the EU officially focuses on the linguistic question in the business world represents an innovation on the linguistic scene. Obviously, this fact should be considered as a reflection of the growing importance of this relationship between multilingualism and company since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which has become more evident in the last few years.

In spite of the document referring to the need to respect the linguistic rights of consumers in the labelling and communication of services, the objective of this paragraph is to indicate the importance of improving the linguistic qualifications of workers. At the same time, it emphasises the need to promote and improve the translation and interpretation services working for companies. The actions proposed with this purpose in mind consist of a series of studies to analyse the situation of the translation market and the linguistic needs and qualifications of European companies. As well as the development of multimedia tools and various language technologies, automatic translation and the creation of dictionaries and thesaurus in electronic format.

The final point of the document makes reference to promoting multilingualism in European institutions themselves, so that citizens can find communication in their own language. It is understood that this refers to the 20 official languages, and not the others. Obviously, we can consider that there is an open path towards these other languages, if we bear in mind that the table of the European Parliament has approved the application of the Spanish Government on the use of Catalan, Galician and Basque in the written communications of citizens with the chamber and also in the translation of the legal texts.

## 2. Factors simplifying multilingualism

The 20<sup>th</sup> century will pass into history as the century of the expansion and consolidation of national languages as the most obvious effect of modernisation of the State. As Miquel Pueyo explained in *Three schools for Catalans* (1995), the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the moment of culmination of the development of the mass education as one of the main factors promoting the national language above autochthonous languages without a state. The result of this process, however, does not represent the complete elimination of the languages without a State, but simply their regression and/or disappearance from more formal or public environments. In some cases more than in others.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century, on the other hand, is marked by a revival of stateless languages thanks to the development of the state of law and universal rights at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rationalisation of the modern state has finally also become a point of support for the defence of linguistic diversity. Not to recuperate space from the dominant language, but to seek a way to share spaces.

There are other factors which, coinciding with political factors, simplify the visibility of linguistic diversity and reinforce the position of minority languages, such as new technologies, as well as the learning capacity of new generations. And obviously, these factors will not stop the disappearance of a large number of languages from the world over the next few years. UNESCO has estimated that of the six thousand languages spoken on the planet, 90% will disappear because their speakers belong to threatened cultures and natural environments or will be completely assimilated by another dominant language. Neither is it clear that linguistic assimilation does not bring about new variants, new linguistic models, as is the case of the mixture of Spanish and English in the south of the United States.

On the other hand, State languages must compete with a fully consolidated *lingua franca*, English. Specially countries with fewer inhabitants (and therefore speakers), as is the case of Nordic countries who have had to assume English as a second language to better participate in the world, and so have already included it as quite normal in the educational system. This is also a strategy of competitiveness that affects companies with a will for projection into international markets.

Multilingualism is a product of convergence of bilingualism (national language/local language) and of state plurilingualism (Switzerland, Belgium, etc.) and the globalisation of the use of English as a language for international communication. These factors must be enhanced by human mobility, which has led to a notable presence of other languages in Europe: Arabic, Armenian, Amazigh, Urdu, Turkish, Chinese... Even though this is not an aspect internalised in European educational systems, it is noted in some business sectors, such as banks, because of the effect of the market growing of money transfers. And also by the public sector, which incorporates some the immigrant

languages in their communications with citizens (specially in large cities such as London or Barcelona) and in informative documents specifically designed for these citizens.

### 3. Context and agents promoting multilingualism in the company

Therefore, the context in which multilingualism develops in a company is the result of the influence of different factors and social agents. On the one hand, the legislation of European states after the Second World War progressively developed legalisation and promotion of the use of minority languages or those of the various nations included in the same state, even though some have not been able to overcome a very residual situation, and in spite of the resistance of some of the "large" states (especially France).

In any case, in Europe there are arguments that support the promotion of linguistic diversity beyond State languages, which are reflected in the European Charter for Languages, and the increasing presence of organisations, research centres and theme networks dedicated to the study, planning and management of the coexistence of State and regional languages.

In the business context, there are regulations that oblige certain linguistic uses, especially in aspects related to information for the consumer or customer. This legislation mainly affects the official languages of the states, but some aspects have also been developed in the case of non-state languages as is the case of Catalan. Therefore, in many cases, companies are obliged to use more than one language to communicate with customers/consumers. It goes without saying that internationalisation of the markets adds more complexity to these linguistic uses.

In this sense, it is necessary to consider how linguistic planning influences the dynamics of linguistic diversity. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century any linguistic policy is destined to encourage multilingualism, if we consider that minority languages in Europe have more resources than ever to bolster their weakness (research, planning, media, new technologies...). In turn, it is difficult to think of a situation where the recuperation of space by regional languages would be a hindrance to the expansion of State languages. The conclusion is that the coexistence of more than one language in the same territory can not be ignored by companies once they have entered the dynamics of using various languages on an international scale.

In turn, the spaces that have been monolingual to date are open to two factors of introduction of the diversity of linguistic uses (even though not necessarily for the same type and level of use): the introduction of a different language or languages for international relations (mainly English, but not exclusively so) and the significant presence of speakers of other languages, especially when there are very localised communities of speakers of a foreign language (European or not). This means that the use of this language becomes extensive to some public areas, for example, in the case of cultural advisors, or specific communications from Public Administrative bodies to immigrant groups. In some specific cases foreign languages are also incorporated into the business environment when the workers or management are foreigners.

Evidently, in all areas, education has had an important role in the preparation of people to confront the learning and use of non-mother tongue languages. Furthermore, research in linguistic matters has made possible the understanding and normalisation of the phenomenon of linguistic diversity, as well as strategies for the management of multilingualism, which are applied in various areas of society.

Finally, we can consider that the existence of more and more sophisticated translation tools and aids has been determinant in the consolidation of multilingualism as an economic, social and political horizon. Written translation has undergone a radical change over the last few years, as revealed by the European Union of Associations of Translation Companies (EUATC). According to a survey carried out by this association in November 2005, apart from the quality of translations, what is most valued by customers is the rapidity of the service.<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that new information technologies (ICT) have revolutionised the methods used in the translation sector, gaining in agility and speed.

The development of ICT and the capacity for storage of information means that the same product can offer various linguistic versions at the same time. This flexibility is also reaching computer

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<sup>1</sup> The results of this survey may be consulted at <http://www.euatc.org>.

programs, applications for simultaneous translation, and information management. Companies like Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Philips, etc. are working with applications that can operate simultaneously in dozens of languages, including Catalan. This type of companies have assimilated the logic of *globalisation* and *localisation* of their products. That is, they create global products, standard software that they sell all over the world and in each market, and then they add the *localisation* data. This is the concept that defines the process of adaptation of a product to local needs (normally linguistic). This means that the final product becomes multilingual or potentially multilingual.

In order to find applications that are more and more automatic and flexible, there are companies that develop automatic translation programs, interfaces that select the language (such as teller machines) and various formulas for linguistic pre-selection and negotiation. One example of the application of these multilingual formulas is the working system of the meteorological services of Television of Catalonia, which produce information for many European and non-European countries. Using a system of pre-translation and application of phrases according to the value of each variable, the weather information is simultaneously translated (downloaded to the corresponding pages) into phrases and comments in different languages.

It is clear that a revolution is taking place in translation systems. These systems enable offering services simultaneously in various languages, especially in sectors that have an Internet interface, and there are also companies that offer services with cutting edge technical support. Internet has greatly influenced the change and accelerated the processes of translation, up to the point that there are a large number of lucrative and non-lucrative initiatives that take advantage of the capacity of Internet to involve many people in the same project and generate fast translations of a product. Softcatalà is a perfect example of the translation of computer programs into a language such as Catalan that is not always readily available on the market. But we could also speak of how the Internet enables certain people to coordinate with each other to translate their favourite television series in 24 hours. Or how people who have emigrated from their country of origin continue to form part of the same communication group thanks to new digital formats for television, radio and the press. People living in the same area have access to sources of information from all over the world, in a large variety of languages. Undoubtedly, Internet has greatly influenced this technological change in the area of multilingualism. According to Ola Persson, founder of WordFinder Software, in the future, dictionaries will also be applications for Pocket or Palm PCs, and function through subscriptions to the Internet.

But multilingualism is not exclusively for computer programs and digital applications, but also extends into other markets. The internationalisation of companies brings about new linguistic needs, both in communication with customers as well as in the internal structure, which becomes more plurilingual through the incorporation of staff, managers, or simply the fusion of companies from different countries. There are few sectors which, in one way or another, can eschew the use of various languages.

In this sense it is important to stress that new technologies have changed both the method and the concept of employment. That is, translation companies have not changed only because they have incorporated new working methods (automatic translation, thesaurus, Internet services, etc.), but because the relationship between languages has changed. In the translation sector, some companies are no longer limited to offering translation services from one language to another, but they offer linguistic management services which include an integral vision of the various needs of the company in this area.

#### 4. Managing multilingualism from the company

We are faced with a new tendency where linguistic planning and management are also entering companies and are no longer exclusive to government bodies. This transition of translation to linguistic management is favoured by various factors, some of which we have already mentioned: especially a new context of accelerated internationalisation, and the introduction of ICT into translation services. But there are also changes in the companies themselves that favour greater sensitivity to multilingualism. In particular, over the last few years multinational companies have adopted criteria of social responsibility which also include attention to local languages and cultural diversity. In spite of it being very difficult to move from good intentions to real actions, the fact is that there is a change of approach that supports a new way of considering linguistic uses in companies. The factors that could promote converting this approach into specific linguistic practices

