Why Bother with Languages?

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Globalization has been described as the expansion of Western values to a world scale. The planet is now seen in its totality, whether through political and military surveillance, through observation of geological and climatic change, or through massive increase in human trade, communication and travel. One of the features of globalization is the enlargement of economic zones without this necessarily bringing about the disappearance of borderlands and grey areas. Another feature is the uneven linking of different parts of the world through new forms of communication. The interconnectedness of peoples is often imposed by outside events over which they have little control. Finally, globalization has involved a reappraisal of old antagonisms (religious, ideological or nationalistic).[1]

Globalization presents a challenge for the learning of languages. On the one hand, it could spell good news. Changes in communications and markets should make Irish people, for example, increasingly aware of the need to learn another European language or a non-European language. At the same time one would expect Irish people to have a strong understanding of the role of local languages such as Irish. However, more often than not, globalization is taken to herald the spread of English-language monolingualism. Indeed, one of the vectors of globalization is basic Anglo-American English, a kind of international airport English or 'McEnglish'.

In Irish terms the dominance of English seems to have led to a cultural and economic laziness, even complacency. This complacency is supported by a European climate which favours English. According to the European Union *Eurobarometer Survey of Languages*, conducted in December 2000 among a large sample of citizens of all member states,

> 71% of Europeans consider that everyone in the European Union should be able to speak one European language in addition to their mother tongue. Almost the same proportion of respondents agrees that this should be English.[2]

In the same survey many Europeans indicated that they wished their children to learn a foreign language in order to improve their job prospects. For the majority this language is English. Such attitudes can perhaps explain the recent decline in the numbers of students choosing languages, including non-European languages, at many third level colleges in Ireland. Surveys like the *Eurobarometer* show up the 'languages deficit' in this country, where many languages are now spoken, but the majority of the population is made up of resolutely monolingual English speakers.[3]

Those outside the English language, looking in, can see that monolingualism impoverishes the language, both culturally and scientifically. To give some examples from the French-speaking context, Henri Gobard, writing in the 1970s, predicted that as English increasingly became a *lingua franca* (or *langue véhiculaire*) it would lose some of its own riches on the vernacular, referential and mythical fronts.[4] More recently, Marie-Josée de Saint Robert has commented on the loss to science that citation systems bring about when they refer only to English-language journals.[5]

Different ways of thinking and of conceiving of the world are flattened out when publication in English is a pre-requisite for a career in science. To borrow the words of Pierre Swiggers, most of our 'technical' concepts are based on 'ethnoscientific' foundations, without us being aware of this 'systematization of common sense'.[6] The analogy sometimes drawn between linguistic diversity and biodiversity is perhaps not so fanciful as it might first appear.

It is sometimes argued that before we start to learn another language we should first become literate in our own. In today's world, illiteracy is indeed a severe handicap, but it is equally a severe handicap to have a weak understanding of grammar or standard forms. As a defence of monolingualism, the illiteracy argument does not in practice hold much water. For a monolingual English speaker, learning another language in fact deepens the understanding of English and it also makes it easier to acquire other languages. Language ability is not a finite intelligence.

At a more anecdotal and personal level, I worked for several years in bilingual publishing. My degree in languages and my experience living and working in the other-language environment for some years made me proud of my abilities in editing and producing bilingual text and marking it up for further bilingual publication in other languages. However, it was a humbling experience working with colleagues who had a deep knowledge of other languages besides English and French. The addition of Mandarin or Russian gave these colleagues a whole extra grid with which to analyze the bonds between sentence structure and meaning.

Languages appear, develop, absorb influences, merge, change, disappear.[7] Globalization means that it is by no means a foregone conclusion that English will retain its dominant position, even if it happens to be currently dominant in Europe or the US. At the end of the twentieth century, the British Council commissioned a study of the English language. As the author of the study, David Graddol, observes, 'no language in the twenty-first century would have the hegemonic position that English had in the twentieth century'. In some measure this is due to the change in relations between geographic and virtual space. Graddol argues that if since the Renaissance we had the habit of studying the relationships between languages from a geographical point of view, chaos theory suggests rather that in a world without borders, languages would be better studied in terms of flux.[8]

In concrete and practical terms the contrast between flux and geographical stability of nation states has implications for the question: who is the student of languages? Periods spent abroad have become increasingly important in third-level education. Up to now, this has meant travel within the EU and more recently travel from the U.S. and China into Ireland. There is now a new dimension to this question: as more immigrants come to Ireland, from central Europe, from Africa, they register to study their whole degree here. These students are strongly motivated to learn other languages and to acquire literacy and grammar skills. They do not necessarily view the French language, for example, in geographic opposition to English or see it as being tied to one nation state. For this reason, delivering lectures in the language means that the student from Nigeria or Russia is not disadvantaged in relation to the Irish student. However, as we shall see further on, some of the language teaching exercises, for example, translation between French and English, need to be reviewed in the light of these and other changes.

A significant proportion of our students consists of Irish people who come to study languages after having spent some time living or working abroad. Education is increasingly being seen as a process of lifelong learning and not something to be abandoned at a certain age. Students of languages are therefore not a homogenous group: they are becoming increasingly varied in background, age and life experience. Because students of languages are a varied group, their motivations in wanting to study languages are varied also.

Why learn languages? Many first year students say they wish to become fluent in French and to travel. Quickly they realize that communicating successfully and confidently in another language, interpreting complex messages and producing messages themselves, whether orally or in the form of a coherently shaped text, is not that easy. However, they are also sufficiently motivated by this challenge to continue to want to pursue their social and economic goals. By the time they complete their degree they are usually able to function in an environment where the other language is spoken and written. From this initial social and economic motivation they often discover that another language is the key to wider sources of information, in newspapers, books and on the internet. It can bring unexpected personal growth, changing the sense of self and increasing cultural awareness.

How does one learn languages? At the risk of generalizing, the third level students of today are audio-visual people, far more so even than their counterparts of ten or fifteen years ago. Their oral and aural skills are good, as is their ability to exploit the internet as a source of information. This means that ever more demands will be made on the resources of the computer centre and the language centre, for audio and video material and for interactive language learning tools. Since the Second World War, language education has increasingly moved away from being mainly book based, and being a passive knowledge of how to decode foreign texts. Instead it has become a matter of enabling the student to encode texts in the language and produce sentences in real-life situations.[9] Since the 1960s, language teaching has incorporated many audio-visual tools. In this respect it has preceded other subjects in the humanities in adapting the new technologies of the twentieth century to its needs. The pendulum has probably swung far enough in this direction insofar as it is literacy and textual skills that now need to be strengthened and reinforced.

While the student of today apprehends the world audio-visually, literacy in the first language and other languages is very often weaker. Neither are students versed in the old humanistic skills of grammar, rhetoric and logic, all of which are still vitally important in communication. These latter skills are acquired through regular, repeated and cumulative production of exercises in small group situations, which is the reason why language learning is both time intensive and teacher intensive. This learning at home equips students with the tools they need to communicate effectively when they spend periods of time in the other language environment.

There are two broad tendencies in the modern student's approach to knowledge, both stemming from the idea that knowledge is information. First, there is the idea that information is undifferentiated: it can be presented in unconnected chunks, by bullet points and by hypertextual links. Thought and argument are not always perceived to be important or primary. Teaching students to write short texts in French involves helping them to structure arguments, organize ideas, marshal evidence and build

transitions. Constant commentary and feedback on texts of their own creation enables students to acquire an awareness of structure or lack of structure in others' arguments. The same goes for oral presentations. The ability to critically evaluate the way information is presented is a valuable transferable skill.

Learning another language involves learning how to think in the manner of that language and culture. Latin languages, for instance, are more strongly marked by classical rhetoric than English. In practical terms this means stressing the overt structure of the text and constantly providing signposts, link-words, and logical connectors for the reader or listener. This is a strong cultural difference which forces English speakers to clarify their thinking. It also gives students an insight into how French, Italian or Spanish speakers express themselves.

The second pervasive idea concerning knowledge as information is that information is free and unmediated. Teaching students the value of intellectual honesty, of citing, and of using sources correctly alerts them to how others can manipulate and abuse sources. Part of the value of studying any subject at university level lies also in discovering through the library and the work of its staff that not all sources of knowledge are conveyed by electronic means. Reference books, dictionaries, newspapers, and periodicals are invaluable tools in language learning.

From the teacher's point of view, these two assumptions about information (that it is both undifferentiated and free) need to be met and challenged. As teachers we need to rethink, recast and update some of the exercises of the humanities degree in languages. I have mentioned the fact that, with increased immigration into Ireland, it can no longer be assumed that the student's first language is English. (It should never have been assumed given the fact that there has always been a minority of native Irish speakers in the student body.) For this reason, repeated translation from, say, French into English and English into French, is no longer a very useful exercise at undergraduate level. Instead, précis-writing, comprehension exercises, and short reports on audio-visual material teach students far more about the argument and organization of texts and the problem-solving skills required in the understanding and production of linguistic messages. The old translating exercises assumed degrees of literacy which are no longer always present. It is the teacher's task to devise exercises that build literacy and grammatical accuracy in the language being taught.

It is something of a cliché to say that humanism was about valuing the whole human being and that the humanities were about equipping people to be citizens of the world. It could be said that one of the pedagogical goals of the Renaissance humanists was to replace information with knowledge and learning. The humanities language degree still carries the traces of this ambition. It aims to equip students with procedures for expression and understanding in another language. In his seminal book on multiple intelligences, *Frames of Mind*, Howard Gardner summarizes the distinction between knowledge and information well:

> In the study of skills and abilities, it is customary to honour a distinction between *know-how* (tacit knowledge of how to execute something) and *know-that* (propositional knowledge about the actual set of procedures involved in execution). Thus, many of us know about how to ride a bicycle but lack the propositional knowledge of how that behaviour is carried out. In contrast,

> many of us have propositional knowledge about how to make a soufflé without knowing how to carry this task through to successful completion. While I hesitate to glorify this rough-and-ready distinction, it is helpful to think of the various intelligences chiefly as *sets of know-how*—procedures for doing things. In fact, a concern with propositional knowledge about intelligences seems to be a particular option followed in some cultures, while of little or no interest in many others.[10]

No amount of propositional knowledge will equip a person for communicating or doing business with someone from another culture.

There are strong economic arguments for studying languages. Many employers actively seek to recruit language graduates, often preferring these graduates to students with more overtly vocational degrees in business and computing.[11] In practice, a B.A. degree in languages is increasingly becoming a foundation degree, often followed by a year's further education. Some language graduates train to become teachers, in this way contributing to society as a whole. Others, after further training, pursue careers in administration, tourism, journalism, information technology, and business. This is to look at the economic arguments from the student's point of view. However, there are also strong economic arguments for the need for language graduates in Irish society as a whole.

The old adage that you can buy something in your own language but that you need to sell a product to somebody in their language seems to be ignored by the Irish business community. In this respect Ireland has been protected by the mantle of Anglo-American cultural dominance and been cushioned by recent economic prosperity. This situation will probably not last. Employees and workers in central Europe have far greater language skills than their counterparts in Ireland and it will not take long before multinational companies transfer to central Europe and elsewhere. Even in the current buoyant climate, happening to know the lingua franca as a native speaker is not sufficient for understanding the client or customer. It can even be a handicap, blinding one to an understanding of cultural difference or what it is like to be the client transacting business in another language.

It is worth considering how a university degree with a significant language component can justify its existence in a climate where English rules. During the 1980s and 1990s there was a widespread belief that one could study 'business' French, German, Japanese or Arabic. From my personal experience of having taught 'business' English to degree students during the 1980s in France, I came to the conclusion that in reality these students were developing much the same basic skills as the students who were described as 'specialists', but simply with business vocabulary bolted on. The 'specialists' were students who were studying English with cultural elements: English literature, cinema and political and social institutions. Both 'specialists' and 'non-specialists' still needed the core knowledge of the old degree (grammar, and oral and written expression) before they could do anything else. Sadly for the 'non-specialist' business English students, it was often those who were 'specialists' who went on to work in English-speaking environments and who found more fulfilling employment.

Why should this have been so? It is a mistake to believe that grammar, literacy and communication skills plus an added-on component of business vocabulary fully equip a person to work with English-speaking or Arabic-speaking customers. The old humanist degree had many cultural components, originally literary texts, but increasingly the cultural canon has been expanded to include politically and historically important texts as well as artefacts of popular culture, such as cinema, songs, and literature. The advantage of this kind of degree is that it can provide the student with a short cut to the social practices, values, and shared references of the language being learned. In other words, culture is not so easily separable from business as it was once thought.

Ireland now is inescapably a multicultural society, even if these cultures seem at times to exist in parallel universes. This is why it is more important than ever for the government to invest in language teaching and learning at all levels of the education system. An economy can only prosper if there is stability and a sense of citizenship within it. Lack of communication and a complacent attitude engendered by English monolingualism are hardly the way to foster an understanding of cultural diversity. To quote the words of Susan Bassnett, a specialist in translation studies, and pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Warwick:

> When you learn another language, you start to have access to another culture, to another way of thinking, for languages articulate reality in different ways. If you never learn another language, you will never know how vast the gap can be between people, so you can never see the need to start bridging the gap.[12]

One might add that learning another language does not happen instantly or overnight: it is challenging, rewarding, frustrating at times as well as being enjoyable.

The university and similar institutions such as teacher training colleges have an important role to play in society. I have mentioned in passing the demands made on university infrastructure: the library, the language centre and the computer centre. The university has at times been represented as being hidebound by tradition and as being unresponsive to immediate short-term market demands and trends. However, the university, by virtue of strategic planning and long-term thinking, can carry such infrastructure through time. Investment by the taxpayer in language teaching at third level is an investment in infrastructure which benefits the whole of the economy and society.

In conclusion, globalization, particularly the changes that it has brought to the economy and communications, means that Irish people can no longer afford to be complacent about their English-language monolingualism. These changes make the worth of studying and investing in languages at university level more apparent than they may have been up to now. From the student's point of view having another language means having another social skill. Literacy, oral ability, grammatical accuracy, in addition to cultural knowledge of another language, can all promote an individual's economic, personal and social advancement. Language learning also represents an important element in lifelong learning. From the point of view of the economy, a workforce with language skills is important in a global economy. Languages that may have up to now lacked the prestige of the so-called 'big' languages are currently being valued more as new markets are opening up. Finally, in

relation to society, globalization means that travel, immigration and cultural diversity are here to stay. Learning languages does not prevent wars but it does promote citizenship and mutual understanding.

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[1] Philippe Moreau Defarges, *La Mondialisation*. 2nd ed. (Paris: P.U.F., 2002).

[2] http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/languages/eurobarometer54_en.html, 'Executive Summary', p. 6.

[3] The expression is used in a document by the U.K. Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT): http://www.cilt.org.uk/eylreport.htm, 'agenda', p. 2.

[4] Henri Gobard, *L'Aliénation Linguistique*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1976).

[5] Marie-Josée de Saint Robert, *La Politique de la Langue Française*. (Paris: P.U.F., 2000), pp. 65-71.

[6] Pierre Swiggers (quoting Whitehead), 'À l'Ombre de la Clarté Française', *Langue Française*, 75, 1987, pp. 5-21.

[7] For the avoidance of biological metaphors to describe languages, see Louis-Jean Calvet, *La Guerre des Langues et les Politiques Linguistiques*. (Paris: Payot, 1987). Also, *La Marché aux Langues: les Effets Linguistiques de la Mondialisation*. (Paris: Plon, 2002).

[8] David Graddol, *The Future of English?* (London: The British Council, 1997). Quoted in Jacques Maurais and Michael A. Morris, eds. *Languages in a Globalizing World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 17.

[9] Ali Al-Kasimi, 'The Interlingual/Translation Dictionary', in R. R. K. Hartmann, ed., *Lexicography: Principles and Practice*. (London: Academic Press, 1983), p. 158.

[10] Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 68-69.

[11] http://www.cilt.org.uk/eylreport.htm, 'Speaking up for languages', p. 8.

[12] http://www.cilt.org.uk/eylreport.htm, 'Speaking up for languages', p. 12.