



Images of Minority Languages. Brussels, 1 June 2010.

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Below a briefing of the main interventions made during the seminar “Images of Minority Languages” organized within the framework of the European Foundation Centre’s (EFC) Foundation Week. A number of distinguished speakers presented best practise cases of how the image of their minority language has been enhanced. What can we learn from these success stories?

9.00 Opening of the seminar

Ms Wivan Nygård-Fagerudd - Chairman of the Council, Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland.

She states that the goal of the conference is to figure out how to make a minority language interesting, trendy, attractive, **VISIBLE**, in our own eyes and the eyes of our children. As invisibility almost automatically means extinction. There is no doubt about the added value of creating a positive image for regional and minority languages (RML).

9.15 Welcoming address

Androulla Vassiliou - European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

The Commissioner shares the positive view of minority languages ” they are a precious asset, something to protect and develop. At the moment there are about 60 regional and minority languages in the EU, and they are a vital part of our cultural heritage. Losing them would mean losing a part of ourselves and alienating the people who use them from the European project”.

She says that “the speakers of minority languages are often true cosmopolitans; they usually speak the most languages and are acquainted with most cultures.

To promote and defend RML it is necessary to reach young people. The European Commission makes serious efforts to support this, for example by handing out 2 million euro to translate 370 books, a lot of them in lesser used languages”.

In 2008 the Ministers of Education had stated that integration would be promoted by the use of RML.

9.30 An introduction to the topic

Mr Johan Häggman - European Commission

Language is still a competence of each member state, but the EU can have quite some influence through the funding and the use of networks.

He explains that “RML have an economic value as well; for example, companies would be gaining by advertising in these languages”. He says “the flourishing of RML leads to economic growth and jobs.

With an improved image, more people are willing to learn it, more companies use it, and the member states eagerly promote the language if the image is positive.

Spanish is a very popular language, even though German would be more useful; so more young people study Spanish”. He then goes on to present some cases throughout Europe in which initiatives in RML are popular.

The perspective of using “image” is a positive way to promote RML, less controversial than legal action and you get concrete results (the number of speakers increases).

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9.45 How peppar and playme reach out to young people

Mr Carl Haglund - Member of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages

He speaks about the popularity in Finland of free-of-charge magazines and websites for young people (in Swedish):

<http://www.peppar.fi/>

<http://www.playmeon.net/>

Someone asks about what changed after the Lisbon Treaty and Mr. Haglund answers that they still lack the tools they need. Mr. Hagman adds that even though the new “Charter for Fundamental Rights”, coming into force through the treaty, comprises two articles (21¹ and 22²) about non-discrimination and diversity, it follows from article 51³ that nothing much changes.

Someone else believes there is a contradiction between stating that “it is the competence of the member states” and in the meantime taking minority issues very much into account through the Copenhagen Criteria.

A third remark is that the EU shouldn’t remain passive in cases that are actually clear violations of human rights. For example the Poles in Lithuania that have to change their names into Lithuanian, or the Macedonians in Greece who can’t even use their own language in private because the Greek government doesn’t recognize the language.

Mr. Haglund agrees, and adds the case of the prohibition to use the Corsican language in the Corsican municipal council. But the Treaty doesn’t allow the EU to intervene, it’s up to the member states to make these decisions.

¹

Article 21

Non-discrimination

1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

2. Within the scope of application of the Treaty establishing the European Community and of the Treaty on European Union, and without prejudice to the special provisions of those Treaties, any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited.

²

Article 22

Cultural, religious and linguistic diversity

The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

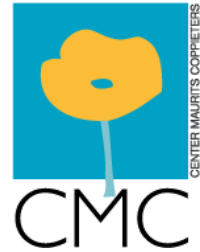
³

Article 51

Scope

1. The provisions of this Charter are addressed to the institutions and bodies of the Union with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity and to the Member States only when they are implementing Union law. They shall therefore respect the rights, observe the principles and promote the application thereof in accordance with their respective powers.

2. This Charter does not establish any new power or task for the Community or the Union, or modify powers and tasks defined by the Treaties.



10.15 The image of Catalan in the balearic islands

Prof. Joan Nuir - Economy Professor

He speaks about the history and the current status of Catalan in the Balearic Islands, starting from the time when Mallorca stood up against Franco.

He shows the remarkable evolution of population in the Balearic Isles; apparently more and more people are living there that were born somewhere else. This makes it even harder to maintain Catalan on the islands, and so they started a project called "Obra Cultural Balear". He then goes on to present this project. <http://www.ocb.cat/>

A representative from Aland asks about the situation of the other Spanish regional and minority languages.

The professor says that the percentage of speakers for Catalan is high, and that there are a lot of protection measures.

For Basque this is low, but thanks to schooling and the Basque government it is going up. He adds that the Basque Country is independent from a fiscal point of view. There is a very high level of devolution, and they have a Basque TV that more or less equals the Spanish TV (in audience numbers). The Basque have 3 school systems, one Basque, one Spanish and one hybrid, from which people can choose.

Galician is quite high as well (the language is very close to Castilian), and it has gained momentum since the government got more autonomy.

He concludes that the difference in development comes from the ability of governments to impose measures to promote the language. In the same vein, it should be clear that a better image of a language will make more people vote for the parties that stand up for that language.

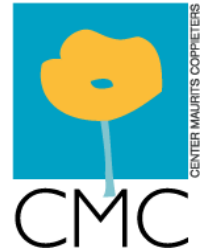
10.45 Making co-existence trendy in the carpathian basin

Ms Kinga Gal - Member of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages

She starts by remembering the Trianon Treaty that made Hungary lose 2/3 of its territory and 50% of its inhabitants after WW I. She gives some numbers about the Hungarians still present in the other countries (500.000 in Slovakia, 1.500.000 in Rumania, 300.000 in Serbia, 30.000 in Slovenia, Croatia and Austria, etc.).

She denounces the current situation of an eternal one-way-story, where the minority has to receive culture, language and tradition from the majority. In order to safeguard the rights of the minority people the step in the other way should be taken as well. But it is a big and difficult step.

Someone in the audience asks what civil society and foundations can do, and Mrs. Gal says that they are, or should be, the most important actors in these issues. In her region, civil society was killed off during the Communist period. So now, people wait for the state and politicians to do something, and that doesn't work. She says that it's still a big problem to get people to come together and solve issues, ask questions and demand action, while they should be fulfilling the role of "the other side of the balance of power".



11.45 The good, the bad and the ugly. Some notes on factors affecting the image of minority languages
Mr Jeroen Darquennes - Head of the Multilingualism Department at the University of Namur

Not much systematic research has been done on the topic of the image of RML yet, but he will try to give some notes. He explains that from the 17th to the 19th century language could be seen as part of a process of demarcation ("We vs. Others"). This attitude established a real hierarchy of languages, through processes of stigmatization (of dialects and other languages), glorification of the own language and rationalization (looking for objective reasons why the own language was the best). Later he sees the emergence of language policy, language "marketing" or "branding" as a part of a state formation process. The idea was to have one language, one nation, one state. This resulted in the peripheralization/marginalization of certain language communities, through a difference in institutionalization, legitimization, status and prestige of their languages. A big role was played by "language-in-education" policies.

In the second half of the 20th century there was an ethnic renaissance, with waves of devolution and regionalization. Yet, regional and minority languages are still often seen as folkloristic, traditional, dull, not cool... Dealing with the question of how to improve that image, he gives a couple of factors that play a role (even though the specific context should always be taken into account): institutionalization, status and legal rights.

This should amount to a visibilization of those languages, and a positive perception (here, an important role can be played by the media).

He gives the example of Sorbia, where youngsters discovered the local language and started using it for radio programs and hard-rock music. Where in the past people used to see Sorbian as a very folkloristic language, the appreciation went up a lot with this evolution. It is however not sure whether the effect will persist.

12.15 The added value of svenska.nu

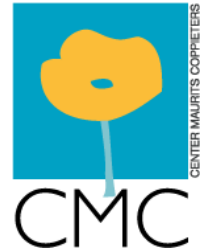
Ms Gunvor Kronman - Managing Director of Hanasaari-Hanaholmen (The Swedish-Finnish Cultural Centre <http://www.svenskanu.fi/>)

She presents the Svenska Nu project as a way to make Swedish seem "fun and useful" to young people. They go to schools with all kinds of workshops and activities, using different teaching methods, and the demand for what they offer appears to be much higher than what they can deliver.

The keys to success:

- Enthusiasts to carry the project
- A user-focused method, taking into account what your audience is interested in
- The combination of culture/traditions and language
- Pedagogic cooperation with teachers and experts
- Positive media exposure
- Broad financial and political support

After a question from the audience, she reveals the budget of the project: 600.000 euros, mostly from private funding (1/3 is a subvention from the Swedish and Finnish authorities combined).



Someone else remarks that this kind of action shouldn't just come from the demand side, but also from the decision-makers (from the majority) who should give official support, and Mrs. Kronman states that both are needed. Without a strong demand from the minority, nothing will really change.

A third person says that most support from the EU is going to the strongest minorities. Under the principle of subsidiarity, the weak minorities (the ones that are threatened with extinction) should be supported more than the ones that already get a lot of money.

In a response to a question from the floor on what's happening about endangered languages and problems in getting funding, Davyth Hicks from Eurolang and who is the Secretariat for the European Parliament Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages, announced to the conference that Eurolang has been drafting a parliamentary resolution with the MEP Francois Alfonsi addressing the problems faced by Europe's endangered languages. The resolution will be led by Mr Alfonsi and will be published shortly.

12.45 Relevance of today's topic for the foundation sector: Why is this seminar part of the EFC Foundation Week?

Mr Berndt Arell - Director, Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland

(not available)

14.30 Selling Welsh to the young through projects

Mr Meirion Prys Jones - Chief Executive of the Welsh Language Board

He says that it is necessary for his organization to persuade Welsh children (they are bilingual) to use Welsh outside their classes. The image of the language should go from that of an old gramophone, to that of an Ipod.

There had been a dramatic decline in the knowledge of the Welsh language until the '70s, but then it recovered and now there is a slight increase. The social status of the language is going up, and people are slowly starting to be proud of it (even though some kid still said that he would rather be seen running around naked through the school yard than to be heard speaking Welsh, ahum).

The work of planning and improving the image of the Welsh language is necessary, but he says they shouldn't be seen doing it. They work through many other agencies, and try to use the links between language and sports (e.g. use Welsh-speaking rugby players as icons), music, modern communication (facebook etc.), youth organizations (such as [Urdd Gobaith Cymru](#)) and culture (often forgotten, but very important).

He explains they are now aiming to improve the informal use of Welsh by pupils in their schools, as the rule still seems to be that "English is the language we speak between friends". Language use will follow when the combination of confidence and fluency is present, these two factors should be targeted in projects.

Mr. Prys Jones concludes that the image of a language has to be planned, subtle and on a long-term basis.



15.00 Improving the image of german minorities through projects

Mr Jan Diedrichsen - Director of the Federal Union of European Nationalities

He starts by saying, what most people don't know, that German has the most language communities throughout Europe, before the Roma and the Russians.

He talks about the "Europeada" project, a soccer tournament between European minorities, that got in the national news in Germany.

Nowadays, German appears to be hip among the Danish people, the image of the language is really improving. Also, after a research ordered by the Danish government, it turned out that the presence of the minorities in the Danish border region had a number of benefits, not just soft matters such as diversity and cultural richness, but also economic surpluses.

16.00 The dynamism of Catalan among young people

Mr Oriol Junqueras - Member of the European Parliament

He begins to explain that language creates structures in the brain, and thus influences the way we view the world.

Catalan is not a "minority language", with 9 million users it is the 13th most spoken language in the EU, 10.000 books are written in Catalan every year; it is a very vital language. Yet, it is not recognized as an official language in the EU. If Andorra were to become a member state though, Catalan would immediately get that official status, even if Andorra only has 200.000 inhabitants. This is a democratic weakness of the EU. When a member state asks for the official status of a language, the others agree. But the Spanish state won't ask for Catalan.

In Catalunya, the share of migrants from outside the EU in the population has risen up to 29%, and Catalan can play a role as a social force for integration.

At the moment 31% of the people from 15-29 years old have Catalan as their mother tongue, while 51% views Spanish as its mother tongue. With the socialization of children in Catalan the use of the language increases. In the media, it is to be found on the radio and in specialized magazines, more than on TV or in the general magazines. Music plays an important social role.

There is a wide social use of Catalan among the young people.

17.00 Conclusions

Mr Björn Teir, - Chairman of the Board, Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland

He concludes that what foundations can do to support change shouldn't be underestimated. They have the capability to create something new, that can then be picked up by society and put into action.