



*munduko hizkuntzen amarauna*

## **MINORITY LANGUAGES AND EUROPEAN CITIZENS**

Francis Favereau, January 2004

In reaction to Miquel Siguan's paper on « Official languages and language diversity in the European Union », it is not uninteresting to face the same question from a slightly different but complementary angle, taking here the viewpoint of a citizen that would also be a « native » and bilingual speaker in any of the tens of minority languages of Europe, or at least of the European Union as it will be presently.

First of all, taking this standpoint from any one of the more peripheral languages of western Europe, precisely the Celtic fringe as it is sometimes called (i.e. Breton, Gaelic – leaving apart Irish which has an official status or even Welsh which has achieved recognition in many ways over the last decades), let it be clear that the historical and sociolinguistic analyses proposed in the central paper need no additional remark really, as it corresponds well to the situations that we happen to have known or studied.

What is particularly accurate, in the case of Celtic languages, although it seems to be equally true in many other lesser used languages in several fringes and regions of Europe, is the fact that they have long been oral languages, as far as we can rise in the past, which was even a rule of their education in antique times. It also means that the distance between these traditional languages and more central ones, written Latin in the past, and national languages derived from Latin or very much influenced by it, is far larger than in other well-known cases, which can pose acute problems in education through written matter (terminology etc.)

Paradoxically, new technologies like computer programmes and the media particularly in the present context of globalisation, can give a new opportunity to many of these languages, even though traditional or classical education and written material in general (literary production as well as some officialdom) are essential in the preservation of these languages if we want to promote linguistic reproduction through the new generations.

### **MULTILINGUALISM**

What must be stressed, especially in the field of education at different levels, from infant schools to university courses, is the fact that millions of Europeans already enjoy a situation where multilingualism is a reality, as they know at least two « native » languages, that of their family and region or community, as well as that of the State, mastered through bilingual schooling, both languages being taught – more or less, as we know – in several cases, and one or two or more foreign languages being learned as well in schools and used through different channels, including at work for a growing number of people who must now work through the medium of English, for example, or of another international language.

This is the case not only in autonomous communities, where policies have been implemented by regional authorities (Basque and Catalan in Spain, Welsh in the United Kingdom etc.), but also at a lesser level or in a lesser degree in a number of regions where the same minority languages are spoken (in France, for example), and even in the case of a lesser-used language that has no hinterland like Breton, where the question is quantity, not model.

It is this European pattern, working pretty well as it does, in many areas in Europe, especially where two languages have been recognized as official (or semi-official) over the last twenty or thirty years, as is termed in the text, that should be proposed at least as a democratic model to larger populations of Europe, so as to respond to their demands.

Such a model of plurilingualism also corresponds to new demands among populations descending from immigrants, in order to learn the languages of the countries where their parents or grand-parents came from, their right to learn Arabic (or Berber, for example), being recently asserted by official authorities in France in the debates over integration and laicity.

## EQUAL CITIZENS

If one takes the point of view of a citizen living in any country of the European Union, would it not be paradoxical – and even unfair as well as anti-democratic – if European institutions did not promote a policy of equal rights for citizens throughout the Union, to enjoy the same basic rights and duties in terms of education and linguistic usage, diversity being its motto ?

This means that the European Union should, as is stated in the text, voice more clearly the common rights of the European citizens, which has partly been done in the past sometimes (European Charter etc.)

But the model to be achieved or to propose should be here, as in several other matters (social rights etc.), the more advanced ones rather than a lesser common denominator, ie looking upwards, not downwards.

Of course, national States – either more centralised or more federal as they might be – would remain in charge of educational policies (national programmes, for instance), where more coordination would be welcome. Some exchanges between minority languages already exist at University level (ex. *Erasmus* « Celtic studies » continued through *Socrates* flows), and they could be extended, as they depend more on faculties than on central policies.

According to the same European principles (and particularly that of subsidiarity), regional policies could be implemented in a way that would promote cooperation and even more convergence if one can agree on a common principle, as it seems and as is stressed : preserving this linguistic mosaic which belongs to the patrimony, not only of Europe, whatever may be its limits but – as over the whole world – to that of humanity.

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