Multilingualism in Metropolitan London

REINIER SALVERDA

A description and discussion of the vast linguistic diversity in the capital of the United Kingdom

[LONDON today is an enormous Tower of Babel, where in addition to the common language, English, many other languages are spoken. On Tuesday 13 March 2001, as part of the Lunch Hour Lecture Series at University College London, Professor Reinier Salverda discussed the linguistic diversity of contemporary London, presenting recent data on the other languages spoken there, as well as focussing on the social aspects of this linguistic diversity, in particular issues of language policy and language management. The following is a slightly adapted version of that presentation.]

Introduction

On the 18th of February 2001, the European Year of Languages (EYL) was launched in Lund, Sweden, as a joint initiative of the European Union in Brussels and the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. This generated quite some interest in the British media. *The Guardian*, for example, rang a number of British institutions in London, speaking either in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Swedish or Welsh, and on 21 February reported the amusing non-conversations they had had. A good example is the following exchange with the British Council which was asked in Spanish whether they had any placements for Spanish speakers:

Guardian: *Buenas tardes. Me puede decir si hay trabajo para españoles?*
British Council: (Takes a deep breath, then in a sarcastic and moody voice) INGLAIS. (Pause). I only speak ENGLISH.
G: *Se puede hablar con alguien que habla español?* (Can I speak to someone who speaks Spanish?).
BC: (As if to the village idiot): This is the BRITISH COUNCIL. INGLAIS. INGLAIS. INGLAIS. This is English-speaking only.
G: *Hay alguien que habla español?*
BC: (In Spanish accent, shouting) NO!
G: *Como?*
BC: INGLAIS. INGLAIS. INGLAIS. Bye bye.

Straight from *Fawlty Towers*, this dialogue may poke fun at the linguistic ignorance of the telephone operator at the British Council, but it does confirm two key points: (1) that English monolingualism is well established, with English as the indispensable and dominant language of contact; and (2) that while English is necessary, it is not always enough, and lack of knowledge of other languages can lead to failed communication.

The Guardian's findings are in line with those of a recent survey on *Europeans and their languages*, which found that the United Kingdom (UK) is the most monolingual country in Europe: 66% of the British population is com-

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pletely monolingual in English, and also believes that everyone else in Europe should be able to speak English; while in France 50.7% of the population speaks French only; and in Germany just 42.8% of the population only knows German. The best-known foreign language in the UK is French (at 22%, i.e. 1 in 5 Britons knows French), followed by German (at almost 10%), Spanish (at 6%) and Italian (at almost 2%). The fifth place in this league table was, interestingly, for the Dutch language, which is known by 0.5% of the British population, still a cool 300,000 people nationally (*The Guardian*, 20 February 2001).

While all this is certainly very interesting, it is amazing to see that both this survey and *The Guardian*'s test were restricted completely to European languages, and that all other languages were absent. This absence is seriously at odds with contemporary social reality. As long ago as 1990, *The Independent* declared that "Britain is a multilingual society" (*The Independent*, 26 November 1990); and again in 1999, that "London is the multilingual capital of the world." (*The Independent*, 29 March 1999).

Over the last forty years, great waves of globalization, trade, migration and tourism have led to a vastly increased mobility of people and products, and of the languages and cultures they bring with them. The result has been a strong surge of multilingualism, making it "a powerful fact of life around the world" (Edwards 1994:1), especially in urban areas such as New York, Moscow, Jakarta, and Amsterdam, where an estimated 100 different languages are spoken today.

We find an entirely similar development in the greater London area, and it is this situation that I will be discussing here. To begin with, I will take a look at some recent language data for the domains of education, the social sector and the world of work and business. On this basis I will then consider the social aspects of this increasing multilingualism, focussing in particular on issues of language policy and language management.

Three domains

Education

My first domain is that of Education. The most recent data on languages in London schools were published last year, in the report *Multilingual Capital* by Philip Baker of Westminster University and John Eversley of Queen Mary and Westfield College. Their report, based on research carried out with Tony Allan of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), has been hailed as "an exciting landmark" (Edwards 2001:244) and "an important advance in our understanding of linguistic diversity" (Edwards 2001:246).

In London today, about twenty five percent of school children speak something other than English at home (Connell 1999), and that 'something other' can be extremely varied. Precise numbers may be difficult to establish (Edwards 2001:243), but at the latest count Baker and Eversley found that no fewer than 300 languages are spoken in the greater London area today, by more than 850,000 children across all 32 boroughs. To put this figure in perspective, we may note that 850,000 children is roughly the size of the total population of a city like Amsterdam. Back in 1987, in the last languages survey of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the total number of other languages was estimated at 172, so there has been a strong increase, of about 130 languages over the last thirteen years of the twentieth century.

There are still "many unknowns" in these language data (Baker & Eversley 2000:65). For example, the independent schools were not included in the survey, so the numbers of children speaking Welsh, Chinese, French, German, Maori and Japanese may well have been under-estimated. There are interesting problems here, to do with the reliability of the data that were collected, and with the question of how representative they are. Real data are only available for thirteen percent of the London population, and for the rest of the population one has to rely on estimates and extrapolations. The Census Office does not collect data on languages, unfortunately, and so one has to develop other techniques, and in this respect the team behind *Multilingual Capital* has been quite inventive and innovative (cf. Storkey 2000). They have identified instances of under-reporting of e.g. Welsh and British Sign Language (BSL), as well as of misreporting, when e.g. English-based Creoles are sometimes lumped together with, and reported, as English. In the near future, it is expected that new techniques will make it possible to correlate knowledge of other languages with educational achievement – and that would really be an important breakthrough.

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When we now take a closer look at the 300 languages in London, we note that the large majority of the languages listed in *Multilingual Capital* have a very low number of speakers – often only 1, and usually well below 100. But there is an incredible degree of linguistic variation here, from Abua and Basque to Itigo and Malinka, and this brings along problems of language identification and classification as e.g. when Tok Pisin, the creole language of Papua Niugini, was mis-classified as a Germanic language (Baker & Eversley 2000:8).

On the next rung up the ladder we find languages spoken by between 100 and 1,000 school children speakers each. In this category we find not just well-known languages such as Albanian, Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, German, Finnish, Hebrew, Hungarian and Japanese, but also far more exotic languages such as Acholi, Edo, Efik, Ga, Hausa and Korean. Here again, this is by no means an easy or straightforward matter, as the report demonstrated when it erroneously identified the languages of Belgium as French and Flemish instead of French, Dutch and German (Baker & Eversley 2000:67).

The next category is that of languages with between 1,000 and 10,000 speakers in London schools. In this category we find well-established European languages such as French, Greek and Italian, but also sizeable numbers of school children speaking Akan, Farsi (Persian), Igbo and Kurdish.

Finally, at the top end we find languages that are spoken by more than 10,000 school children each: Arabic, Bengali, Creole, Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish and Yoruba. Altogether, these languages are in daily use by a school population of some 185,000 children across the greater London area.

The great advantage of having these data is that we can now begin to address further issues. The key question here is: What is one to do when faced with such an enormous linguistic diversity? A linguist in London today awaits a task that is of a totally different magnitude and complexity than that of Professor Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, who claimed that he could place any man by his accent within six miles, but in London within two miles, sometimes even within two streets. But what is a teacher to do when he or she comes across a single speaker of a language as exotic as Akan, Igbo, Acholi, Ga or Lingala? Just establishing the name of the language can already be a daunting task. But the work does not stop there, and a full linguistic audit (cf. Reeves & Wright 1996) may be necessary – but how is an untrained teacher to do this? Then again, how does he or she find further information about a particular language? What resources and support systems are availabe? Where and how can one contact other speakers of the language in question? And then, once communication is established, how do we deal with the mental and cultural universe that comes with the language these children speak at home – a language that may bring along a different sense of the world, of play and fair play, of food, health, music, of meanings and stories, of values and beliefs? And let me stress that problems such as these can sometimes be far more severe for languages with only one or a very few speakers than for languages spoken by larger groups.

A helpful answer to at least some of these questions is offered by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (CILT), which in addition to its linguistic expertise also offers an excellent library, a good website, and an online *Community Languages Bulletin* with useful resource lists. There is also the National Register of Public Service Interpreters, maintained by the Institute of Linguists, which has published a useful dictionary with information on some 400 different languages (Dalby 1998). Other useful resources are the foreign language departments in London universities, where one can find specialists in the languages, literatures and cultures of very many language communities all over the world. At SOAS, for example, a register has been built up of all the 10,000 living languages of the world (*The Guardian*, 22 July 1997; Dalby 1999). An even more international resource is the Internet, that treasure trove of information on languages, language learning, translation services, access to unusual fonts, scripts and alphabets.

Going beyond the level of resources, we may observe that many of the 850,000 school children mentioned above will both acquire English and retain their own language. They will thus become bi- or even multilingual. Such bilingualism can offer great advantages and benefits, and many people may profit from it, intellectually and economically. Who knows – given the appropriate training and education, the only speaker of Tok Pisin in North London could one day become a leading linguist, or a doctor, an educationalist, a businessman or a writer in Papua Nugini – or here in London.

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As for the benefits of bilingualism in general, Colin Baker, a leading expert in this field, stated that "Knowing two languages frees the child from thinking the name is the object and the object the name" – "Bilingualism encourages richness of thought. With different associations attached to similar words in different languages, the bilingual child may be able to think more creatively" – "Speaking in several tongues is normal, and the evidence from psychologists points increasingly to its advantages" (*The Guardian*, 9 September 1997; cf. Baker & Prys Jones 1999, Baker 2000). Or, as Viv Edwards put it: "Bilinguals have the potential to make a very important contribution, both within a multilingual Europe and in an increasingly global economy" (Edwards 2000:226). We should, therefore, not waste, but on the contrary nurture and develop the linguistic talents of these young school children.

To some extent, the National Curriculum already aims to accommodate this linguistic diversity. No fewer than 19 languages are specified under the National Curriculum, but it has to be noted that "community language teaching remains the main responsibility of the ethnic minority communities themselves" (Edwards 2001:253). Support from Local Education Authorities for mother tongue classes in other languages has always been minimal, and schools offer only very limited possibilities for these other languages. Many minority communities therefore lay on their own extracurricular language classes on Saturday mornings, in e.g. Urdu, Gujarati or Dutch, to ensure that the children retain or acquire their parents' languages. Often also people have to resort to the post-school sector for language learning – sometimes after they have got the message at school that they are no good at languages.

These and other obstacles have been highlighted by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in its report *Languages: the next generation* (2000). The Nuffield report details the dire predicament of foreign language learning and teaching in this country: the Government has no coherent approach to languages; French is still the most important foreign language in the UK, even though the country needs competence in many other languages as well; but the school system is not geared to achieving this; English is not enough, but nine out of ten school children stop learning languages at the age of 16; the UK desperately needs more language teachers, but many universities are closing down language departments, leaving the sector in deep crisis.

Against these negative trends, the Nuffield Report has stressed the importance of life-long language learning; advocated the use of technology in the revival and expansion of language learning; and above all, made a resounding case for languages to be recognised as a key communication skill in the modern school curriculum, alongside numeracy, literacy and information and communication skills (cf. CILT *Community Languages Bulletin* No. 6, p.9).

Social services

My second domain is that of the National Health Service (NHS), the Social Services and the Police. The NHS has taken on board the point that language is a major factor affecting the successfull delivery of its services. Today, its Breast Awareness Programme, its Cervical Screening Programme and its Tuberculosis Centre provide newsletters and information sheets for their target groups in 24 languages other than English: Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian, Greek, Serbocroat, Albanian, Czech, Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Amharic, Somali, Tigrinya, Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Chinese and Vietnamese. In addition, Prof Louis Appleby, the National Director of Mental Health Services in the NHS, has recently called for the training of psychiatrists in cultural competence, identifying the development of a mental health strategy for the ethnic minorities as a top prority (*The Guardian*, Letters, 2 March 2001). Living between two languages and two cultures can be great fun, but it can also bring along peculiar problems of alienation and schizophrenia. And it is better to take these seriously and develop suitable approaches.

That the NHS is developing these language services follows from the Patient's Charter, which states that as a patient one has the right "to have any proposed treatment clearly explained to you before you decide whether to agree to it". So, if a patient speaks Urdu or Bengali, Korean or Acholi, and the doctor does not, an interpreter is clearly needed (Young 1996).

Along the same lines, the Charter for the Benefits Agency speaks of the needs of the ethnic minorities. As a result, agencies and councils now often provide leaflets and instructions in languages other than English. For instance, in the North London Borough of Haringey, Council Tax information normally comes in

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English, but the Council also offers information booklets in ten community languages: Bengali, Chinese, French, Greek, Gujarati, Italian, Kurdish, Somali, Turkish and Urdu. The same goes for its leaflets on *How to Make a Complaint* and *Rubbish Collection*, and for reminders sent out by local libraries. In addition, the Haringey One Stop Shops, working together with the Haringey Interpretation and Translation Unit, provide help with access to council services in 192 different languages (*Haringey People*, April 1997). All this can be of crucial importance at the point of first contact, e.g. with refugees, who may have no idea how this country works.

Similarly, the London police are involved in a European trial of a multi-lingual touch-screen kiosk which offers information on police services in ten different languages. Beyond this, when the police have to question someone from the ethnic minorities, they are under obligation to have an interpreter available for communication. The reason for this is that, as the Runciman Royal Commission on Criminal Justice stated, a conviction may be overturned on appeal if it could be shown that at any vital stage the defendant did not understand what was said (Young 1996).

As we see, in these three domains – health care, social services and the police – principles and practices have been developed in order to deal with contact situations where language may cause problems. A very helpful resource in this respect is the Language Line, set up in 1996 by Lord Young of Dartington, which offers the help of telephone interpreters to those who have run into insurmountable linguistic difficulties. A case in point is that of a Korean child seriously injured in a road accident in London, where the doctors could only get permission to operate from the parents by using a Korean telephone interpreter (Young 1996). Clearly, it is good to talk and it is good to have this sort of emergency linguistic first aid available when people are trying to resolve problems to do with languages.

The world of work

My third domain is the world of work and business. In Spring 2000, there were an estimated 482,000 foreign workers active in the London economy. This "Ready availability of a well-educated multilingual workforce" (Edwards 2001:247; cf. Baker & Eversley 2000:71), of speakers who know more languages than just English – is a great selling point for London. Multilingual recruitment is business. In the City, banks and many other multinational companies have discovered that, under globalisation, they are often in contact with overseas clients who do not always speak English, "and even being able to take a phone message in another language is a vital skill that may decide whether a deal is made or lost" (*The Times*, 3 February 1999). Outside the City, linguistic minorities are increasingly setting up their own businesses: shops, restaurants, solicitors' offices, import/export companies, travel and translation services. Enterprise thus emerges as an interesting channel for integration into this nation of shopkeepers.

Business is international, and by no means all of it is conducted in English. Business will often go to those who know their languages. Many British businesses have already come to understand that their profitability may increase through what is called 'customer-friendly multilingualism'. For example, on its flights to Amsterdam, British Midland gives safety instructions both in English and in Dutch, and British Airways offers air-sickness bags with instructions in 12 different languages. The Victoria and Albert Museum offers courses in Chinese and in six languages of the Indian subcontinent. Its current exhibition is advertised through a great banner stating – in Chinese characters that turn out to be English letters – 'Art for the people'.

To really make this notion of 'customer-friendly multilingualism' work, though, one will need to do a thorough linguistic audit of the language needs and resources of the organisation or institution involved, and also of the target audience it is trying to reach. This point applies to a business like British Airways and a museum like the Victoria and Albert just as much as to the field of education. Thus, for example, the City and Islington College now attracts customers for its adult education courses in English as a Second Language (ESL), by advertising these in a brochure in 12 different languages: Somali, Italian, French, Spanish, Turkish, Hindi, Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Bengali and Russian.

Language itself can be good business too. In fact, there is a considerable market for languages in London, with many interesting niches. The *Floodlight* and *Hotcourses* guides

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list courses in more than 60 different languages. *Linguaphone* advertises self-study courses in about 30 major European, Middle and Far Eastern languages. Other companies may offer translation services, cultural events, festivals, newspapers, magazines, PR and advertising, and books in foreign languages (cf. 2000:222). Within walking distance of University College London one can find specialist language bookshops such as *The Asian Bookshop* and the *Librairie du Maghreb*. The bookshop of Grant & Cutler, in Central London near Oxford Circus, sells books in more than 150 different languages, from Afrikaans, Albanian and Arabic to Uzbek, Vietnamese, Yiddish and Zulu. Here one can find atlases, encyclopedias, dictionaries, phrase books, teach yourself courses, grammars, readers, audio books, multilingal games such as *Flummoxed*, cook books, bibles, biographies, works of history and politics, magazines and newspapers, and the classics of literature in those foreign languages. A good runner up is Foyles Bookshop on Charing Cross Road, with books in some 70 different languages. Further listings can be found on the Community Languages website of CILT.

My last point in this domain concerns the case of Eurostar. Very early on, this company identified the need for language training in French and Dutch of its drivers and cabin crew. To this end, Eurostar set up its own Language Training Team. Its language managers worked with some of the new universities to design a new language-learning program for a difficult target group, "train drivers who could drive trains but had mostly left school at an early age with few qualifications, and who had to learn French to a level that they could converse with a French or Belgian signalman over a radio telephone whilst travelling at over 300 kmph and to absolute safety standards". In other words, this was a group of people who in the normal educational system would have been viewed as very unpromising material indeed. Yet, it was done succesfully, via on-the-job training in French and Dutch. The Eurostar employees were thus enabled to meet the requirements of their job – and having picked up their French and Dutch, they then went on to develop other interests involving those languages (cf. *Business Language* No.15 (March 1999:2–3,7).

All this demonstrates, I believe, two key points: (i) the economic significance of bilingualism and of languages other than English, and (ii) that we can overcome the various obstacles I outlined earlier – if we have the vision, the motivation, the business sense and the commitment to invest in innovative language teaching programs.

Matters of policy

As we see, the schools, the health service, the social services and the police, and many businesses are all making efforts to adapt to the new multilingual reality of London society. They have identified needs and resources, and developed new and interesting practices of multilingual communication. So, perhaps, *The Guardian* was simply ringing up the wrong British institutions, and in the wrong languages. If it had phoned the Victoria & Albert Museum in Chinese or Hindi; or the City and Islington College in Albanian and Somali; or Eurostar in Dutch; or Haringey's One Stop Shop in Acholi or Greek, the results may well have been quite different. These institutions have clearly taken on board the point that English is necessary and great – but not enough.

The same cannot be said for the domain of policy making. Official policy on the other languages has always been rather haphazard and contradictory (Edwards 2001:253). There appears to be a mismatch between what is happening in the real world of London today and in the sphere of policy making.

Why is this so? One factor may be that existing policy reflects the expectation that English is the global language *par excellence* (Crystal 1997, cf. McCrum 2001), and that as a consequence there is no need for other languages. The internet is often pointed to as an example. Indeed, the Prime Minister is on record as having said: "We have the language of the e-economy." But here again, one needs to consider the ongoing trend towards multilingualism. It is estimated that within another few years, English-language sites will make up just half of the world wide web, and that by 2007 Chinese may well be the largest language on the internet.

Another factor may be that monolingual attitudes and persuasions have become entrenched. *The Guardian* of 12 February 2001 quoted an ordinary Londoner, John, as saying: "If you just go out here on to the street you'll hear Chinese, Yugoslavian, Polish, Hungarian, South African. I guarantee you'll hear a dozen people before you hear someone speaking

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English. So their attitude is, 'We're surrounded by foreigners, what can we do against them?" John is not alone, as we saw during the election campaign, when William Hague played to this gut feeling with his attack on foreigners and foreignness; or when we had a spot of Welsh-bashing in the English media recently. A very different perspective on this is offered by Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Education: "On a personal level, learning another language opens the mind and teaches tolerance – two essential qualities for living in harmony. By learning a language, any language, we come closer to a foreign culture and learn to know and appreciate each other and to accept our differences. It is the key to building a European identity far removed from the cliches of intolerance and racism." (*The Guardian*, 20 February 2001).

Where *The Guardian* was right, however, was in showing that quite a number of respected British institutions are lagging behind the schools, the hospitals, the social services, the police and many businesses. They appear to be stuck in a cocoon of monolingualism, and have not yet adapted to the increasingly multilingual society of today.

Personally, I feel that this criticism also applies to the university sector, where to date knowing a foreign language is not a general entrance requirement. Also, we have no idea of the actual language needs and resources of the people in a university such as UCL; rumour has it that there are speakers of over a hundred different languages, but it would take a full linguistic audit to establish whether this indeed the case. More in general, I believe that the universities can make a much stronger contribution to the study of multilingualism. This problem is already attracting interest from linguists, educationalists and demographers in a number of London university departments, but a lot of this effort is scattered. We could make a much stronger contribution by providing what London really needs, a Centre for the Study of Multilingualism that can serve a triple strategic purpose:

- **in research** we need more and better data, and a thorough sociolinguistic profile of multilingual London that can stand comparison with the one we have for New York, in *The Multilingual Apple* (1997) by García and Fishman
- **in training** we need a well-defined MA degree course for Language Management and Linguistic Auditing, which enables people to assess and address the language needs and resources of individuals, communities, companies and institutions
- **in policy-making** it is very nice that the Greater London Authority's website says welcome in 13 different languages, but what we really need is effective, evidence-based policy making in this field

In this respect, London should follow the example of Sheffield, which from 1994 onwards has been working hard to becoming a multilingual city. The aim is that within ten years every young person in Sheffield should be fluent in English and in another language, whether European, Creole, Asian or African (cf. Edwards 2000:222–223). Is it too much to ask for a similar Ten Year Plan for London as a Multilingual City?

In closing, I return to the European dimension with which I began. At the level of provision, it often makes sense to establish European language links, for example between the 10 speakers of the Berber language in the London school population and the thriving community of some 200,000 Berber speakers from Morocco who live in the Netherlands.

At the level of European policy making, it is worth noting that Linguistic Diversity has now been included in the European Charter for Fundamental Rights. The Declaration of Nice in December 2000 contains two articles on language – one that calls for respect for linguistic diversity, and another which bans discrimination on the basis of language. In between these two commandments, there is an interesting grey area, a space for the development of fair and workable language policies that can be implemented on a local, national and European level. The principles of last year's Oegstgeest Declaration on regional, minority and immigrant languages (cf. Extra & Gorter 2001:447–449) already go a long way towards filling in the space opened up by the Declaration of Nice.

And so do the London developments that I have discussed here. The emphasis in London is less on rights and regulation than on reliable information and sensible practice. The starting point is that of communication; the aim is to develop principles and practices that work; customer-friendly multilingualism is encouraged; and effective language management is being developed for all kinds of sociolinguistic domains. To my mind, these lessons from the London situation make a serious and valuable

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contribution to the European debate on multilingualism, and provide a good starting point for a much-needed Code of good practice for multilingual environments.

Conclusion

The future is for those who are bi- and multilingual. There are great societal, cultural and economic benefits for the United Kingdom in having and rewarding people with good language skills. There are already many such people in London, and very many more are currently being educated. There are great opportunities here, as the shining example of Lord Young and others demonstrates. But there is still far too much waste of valuable and much-needed linguistic talent in this society. We can do a lot better, and it is to be hoped that the European Year of Languages will give a further strong impulse here. ■

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