

European Universities' Network on Multilingualism

Background document

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The process of change appears to have accelerated profoundly in recent years. The processes of **globalisation** and **modernisation** are promoting entirely new social contexts that demand changes in our understanding of society and our willingness to confront the relevant issues. Within this context language education appears to be largely unaware of the demands that confront it. This is true not only at the primary and secondary levels of education but also within higher education. A major emphasis of this series of symposia is that language education must be decompartmentalised and non-language disciplines must engage with the relevance of language for their practices.

Globalisation involves a new context for the **flow of financial capital**. The speed of financial transactions is considerably enhanced, mergers and acquisitions involve vast sums, and the flow of capital is now global. Associated with the circulation of financial capital is the **circulation of human capital** in the form of migration. Not only are demands made for the recognition of a citizenship of residence, but also for an acknowledgement of the relevance of a diversity of languages and cultures for even the most intransigent of political regimes. Yet the wealth of **multilingual contexts** is often ignored in the public domain, and education consistently fails to exploit these valuable resources. The incomer tends to be treated with suspicion or as a threat to outmoded narratives about language and cultural purity.

The shift from industrial economies to **knowledge economies** involves quite different working environments. Within the Taylorism of industrial society work was organised in such a way that the worker was essentially silent and isolated. Language was irrelevant for work. Within the knowledge economy this focus changes. Work is organised around **team working** and **learning by doing**. Interaction comes to the fore and with it language plays a formidable role in the working process.

It is argued that we are moving from modernity to **late modernity**. Within the industrial society of modernity our alignment with institutions and our identities were largely conditioned by tradition. Social differentiation emphasised social class, the sexual division of labour, the nuclear family and large scale public and private bureaucratic organisations. The modernisation process incorporates a democratising force that allows institutions to be transformed while undermining the structures of industrial society.

Within **reflexive or late modernity**, class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles dissolve. Since the social and political organisations and institutions in industrial society relied on these forms of collective consciousness, they also are dissolved. This 'detraditionalisation' is accompanied by a surge of **individualisation**. Class commitments and the

European Universities' Network on Multilingualism associated solidarity are replaced by individual trajectories of social mobility, breaking down class identities. The state as the mainstay of belief and justice and as the basis of political alignment and identity reduce in relevance leading to a fragmentation of cultural identity.

Individualism refers to how the individual is freed from the constraints of tradition and the associated integration with the institutions of industrial society. Individuals are no longer forced into togetherness but choose their alignments. It involves a dis-embedding that is accompanied by a re-embedding. Tradition no longer shapes society and behaviour, so there is a greater need for a reflexive process. Relationships are negotiated within new contexts and new social movements emerge, especially those based upon multiculturalism.

Even if one does not subscribe to this account of social and cultural change, the arguments of postmodernism are equally disturbing. They present a convincing case for the ideological nature of the Enlightenment thought, its link to specific objectives and institutions and how it has generated profound bases of inequality and injustice.

Language education is in many places confronting these processes of change in a both piecemeal and often unreflective way. Language education is undergoing a crisis as a consequence of the ways this social, economic, political and cultural restructuring is placing new demands on the use of language. On the one hand the orthodox context for language learning is no longer adequate; on the other hand, the educational system is failing to address the needs of different institutions and contexts for language capacity. The orthodox context for language learning has involved the teaching of 'foreign' languages in the school classroom, often devoid of any practical exposure to real situations of language use. Languages are learned by reference to an imposed normativity that derives from idealised contexts that pertain to standardisation. On the other hand, the rapid process of technological, social and cultural change is making such contexts increasingly redundant as the focus shifts from the syntactic focus on standard to a concern with the semantic basis of use.

The origins of this crisis are to be found in the new demands placed upon citizens and institutions as a result of the new economy and its relationship to globalisation. Relationships between languages are also changing. The misplaced belief that English is becoming a global language leads some to insist that a knowledge of this language is sufficient for anyone entering the global market. Partly as a result of this claim we find that the status of some *lingue franche* is changing. At the same time, the multilayered governance characteristic of the current political context in Europe incorporates a strong emphasis on devolved government focusing upon regions within each state. This contributes to a re-evaluation of the relevance of regional languages for a variety of uses. The segmentation of labour markets that derives from a tendency to equate labour within multinational companies with English results in a form of diglossia that undermines the salience of some state languages. Language group relations

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are in a state of flux. Yet the response of those institutions responsible for language learning is simplistic and monolithic: they systematically fail to relate the contexts and scope of language learning to an understanding of change.

On the other hand, evidence increasingly points to a profound pattern of linguistic diversity associated with work in the knowledge economy. It is argued that multilingual working practices are relevant for the **generation of knowledge**. Economists increasingly point to the link between language and marketing. How **economic value chains** are extended - and how they incorporate on-shoring and off-shoring - suggest that the contexts associated with such developments increasingly cut across a range of linguistic environments. Evidence from actual working environments suggest that within the knowledge economy a range of different languages is constantly in use, even if there is also the use of different *lingue franche*. The emphasis within working environments is on semantics and mutual understanding rather than upon syntax and purity. We know far too little about this as things stand.

Not only is the construction of what kind of language should be taught misplaced; but the resources available for the teaching of languages are totally inadequate. Far too many teachers teach languages without having had the opportunity to use the relevant language in a real world context. As the pendulum shifts from a concern with traditional languages to a preoccupation with the so-called 'global' languages, teachers are displaced or are asked to engage with the teaching of languages with which they have an inadequate familiarity. The liberalisation of the education process results in demand-side emphases that restrict the role of central planning and its relationship to the supply side of the equation. Competition between disciplines and languages prevails. The current emphasis on early language learning is particularly ill-informed both by reference to the capacity of teachers to engage with the new scenario and an understanding of what it is trying to achieve. It places new demands on the organisation of language teaching and learning that require particular emphases on continuity and context. Even where the learning process is extremely successful there remain problems associated with shift to the link between use and practice.

As a consequence it is hardly surprising that in some states students often reach University with little real knowledge of any language other than the mother tongue. This is compounded by an ignorance of the relevance of language for the academic practices of the University staff. They constantly use language but rarely reflect upon that use. Language has a relevance for many disciplines that is beyond the grasp of perhaps most of the faculty and - tragically - in the current financial climate, it is often the explicitly language-related activities that are among the first to face cuts.