Hans Bennis/Ina Druviete/Gábor Prószéky/John Simpson/
Moderator: Tamás Váradi

## Panel discussion
## Comparing language policies: "leave your language alone" vs. "a language must be cared for"

### Tamás Váradi: Introduction

As a matter of terminology, it is useful to distinguish between language and language use. Those who lament the relentless decline of language are, in fact, making a judgement about aspects of ongoing *language use* in the language community or a group of speakers. Language use inevitably undergoes continual change but to what extent, if at all, this affects a particular language as a system is a complex question. The dichotomy involved in the topic of this panel discussion is a tricky one, pitting two extreme views against each other. There is surely much utility in having a standard which regulates speech and writing in a given language community. In a way, a standard operates inevitably and invisibly in genuine small/local language communities in the form of their vernacular. Members of a family or a close-knit small community imperceptibly adapt to each other's speech and the issue of how to speak 'properly' among themselves hardly arises. It is only when we elevate the question of language use to the level of a whole language community that the question of different competing standards, innovations and declining features raises the dilemma formulated in the title of this panel discussion – namely, what position should we take in the face of ongoing change in language use. As for the view calling for the protection of our language (any language), let me just make two quick points. One is to observe how widespread this view is. My experience, as head of the department in our Institute whose mission (among other things) is to advise the public on language, is that ordinary members of the public in Hungary expect to be told how to speak Hungarian "nice and proper". They readily accede to the view that language is in steady decline, and they may also subscribe to the view that speakers, especially young speakers, speak a worse version of the language than their forefathers. Secondly, one intriguing question when we discuss the issue of protecting our mother tongue is to ask exactly what we are protecting it against.

# John Simpson

The British are widely acknowledged to be a strange people. I'm afraid we don't have an explicit "development plan" for our language. We do have a monarch, and so we should be used to taking commands from above, and yet we moved any effective political power away from the monarchy in the eighteenth century. We have no written constitution – which is a polite way of saying we have no constitution at all – and as a result we have no constitutional affirmation that English is an official language of the British Isles. In many ways we look backwards, to the period when we were a maritime power in the sixteenth century, or the lynch-pin of political machination in the eighteenth, or a global empire in the nineteenth. Sometimes we tell ourselves that the only thing we didn't invent was Lego.

Our language – and here I'm concentrating on English rather than the other languages of the UK – is a language rampant. Nowadays it's a global language – it certainly wasn't in many of the old days to which we look back so fondly. A thousand years ago, in the Anglo-Saxon age, English was a transportee language, brought to Britain in bits and pieces by marauders looking for new lands to satisfy their expansionist instincts. As you know, the English gradually pushed the native Celtic languages to the periphery of the territory. In those days there was no central, standard English, but just "bundles of vernacular dialects", to use Gerhard Stickel's phrase, of which King Alfred's Wessex dialect in the south eventually became the prestige form. In those days the Venerable Bede, a monk at Jarrow in the north of England, stated that in many ways southerners and northerners were mutually incomprehensible. He took the sensible precaution of writing in Latin, the language of intellectual European conversation in his day.

The first use of "English" as a word to mean what eventually became the prestige language of Britain – or the prestige language intended to unify Britain – dates from the time of King Alfred and his battles with the Vikings. But before unification could become a reality, the French re-set the parameters by invading Britain in 1066, and we then spent the next four centuries coming to terms with this – politically, socially, and linguistically.

Nowadays we look back to the time of Shakespeare at the end of the sixteenth century as a crowning moment for English. English as a language had at last come of age, after centuries of Anglo-Norman dominance. In order to reassert itself, it had had to assimilate words, speech patterns and grammatical structures. But it was changing all the time in relation to new realities: world trade and exploration, new political alignments, internal unrest (the English Civil War) – to mention just a few. We started to look forward, to a new future and a consolidated language.

It was at this point, towards the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, that some people – especially literary giants such as John Dryden, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope – began to wonder if a language

academy might be a good idea. Before English fragmented itself in its rush to be modern, the argument went, should we not establish the ground rules of language so that, once fixed, we could concentrate on everything else at the forefront of the political and economic world-view.

I had a manager once who maintained that it was impossible to change more than one aspect of a project at one time, and any effort to change more than one aspect was doomed to calamitous failure. If the English language can be seen as a project, the English people in the early eighteenth century had too much on their plate, and language standardisation was not felt to be either appetising or necessary. The chance was lost. After that – after the American War of Independence, after the opening up of Australia and South Africa to white settlement – English was on the path to becoming global, and once it had got there, there was no longer a single authority which had exclusive power to regulate the language. We didn't forge a Spanish solution, or follow the route of language planning followed by more and more of the European nations.

Is this a British cultural peculiarity? Why do the British appear not to want planned and regulated language change? It would make English much easier to learn, goes the argument. As a global language, English has a duty to be universally comprehensible. By not intervening in language change, we are opening ourselves up to chaos. Are the British, the Americans, the Australians and other speakers of English really so foolish? Will this lead English down the road taken by Latin after the Renaissance, to becoming a musty backwater of language, useless for general communication? Is there any hope for English?

And yet – and there is always an "and yet" – English is flourishing, on almost every continent of the world. Does that mean that it doesn't need controlling and regulating? Is there some ecological balance which starts to reassert itself, maintaining comprehensibility while still allowing the language to adapt and grow without state control? The *Oxford English Dictionary*, we might note, insists that its role is to observe language, rather than to seek to regulate it.

It might be nice to think that there is a natural regulatory balance, but it would be foolhardy. The truth is various: on the one hand, English is a language made up of bits of other languages, so everyone thinks they can learn it (even though any language is very difficult to speak idiomatically). In addition to this, there is the economic argument. American culture and economic power has been admired for the past century. Non-English speakers would like a part of this – and one key to this magical world of luxury and influence is through its language. But more than this, I think that there are several hidden factors which tend towards the cohesion of language despite the absence of central control. The encompassing factor is the fact that language is our major communication tool, and if we allow that tool to veer so far out of alignment that it is no longer usable for communication, then the power of language lapses entirely.

Furthermore, there are controls to the fragmentation of language, and these lie in cultural forces such as the national education system, the media, to some extent even religion. Each of these tends to promote an implicit standard, silently but still effectively – as effectively as Dr Johnson's dictionary silently promoted a standard spelling system in the mid eighteenth century. The growing homogenisation of the media and educational curricula give English a stability even though centralised, governmental control is absent. And that "compromise within the community", to use Professor Eichinger's words, seems to suit English speakers. We can pretend we are free to change and adapt our language as much as we like, but underneath there are magnetic forces which hold us back from the brink of chaos. This is a compact which has worked for over a hundred years – maybe more – but it is not necessarily a compact which will last forever. Do the internet and social media support this compact, or are they the alien powers that will sink English? Are any of these arguments valid, or simply provocative? I leave you to discuss…

## Ina Druviete

If I have to take a position, language must be cared for. Prescriptive and descriptive linguistics are both OK, but every nation has to find the right balance between them according to their traditions and their language situation. As we know, there are two main approaches in language policy discourse; the first treats languages as mere instruments for communication, in some cases rejecting the ideological aspects of language and querying the concept of the nation state with its official language as a unifying factor; the second sees language as a symbol of national/ ethnic identity. These discussions do not cease, because at their core they touch upon perennial questions such as "what is identity?"

It is important to emphasise that the question of identity does not have any direct origin-relationship with the actual hierarchy or legal status in a situation where there are competing languages. Language as identity is mostly understood to be a 'non-negotiable' yet difficult to define value, which has anchored itself in the ingrown or learned level of social consciousness. This ideal also fits in with the existing real-time situation, and may be observed both in attitudes to language and in linguistic behaviour.

It is important to keep in mind that different cultures and linguistic communities tend to have different kinds of prescriptivism. As my colleague Dace Strelēvica-Ošiņa has stated in her brilliant book on prescriptivism (*Kāpēc mēs gribam, lai valoda ir pareiza* [*Why we want correct language*], Rīga 2011, 286):

> It is useful to classify prescriptivism in three main types – (a) human-oriented prescriptivism, where the correctness of the language is associated with social stratification, i.e. the "correct" language is thought of as an attribute of the upper classes; (b) language-oriented prescriptivism, motivated by the wish of an indi-

vidual or an ethnic group to protect their language from supposed deterioration, especially if this is caused by the interference of foreign languages, i.e. the use of a "correct" language is associated with patriotism and national identity; (c) error-oriented prescriptivism, based on the tendency to stigmatise and eliminate certain language errors and mistakes: every culture has some particularly "popular" language errors that receive the most attention from prescriptivists.

Countries that have been subjected to foreign dominance are likely to have so-called language-oriented prescriptivism. Therefore one cannot directly apply the anglophone theories of descriptivism and anti-prescriptivism to these situations. Traditions, popular opinion and even stereotypes also count for a lot, and models of language standardisation cannot be voluntarily changed within a short period of time.

Latvia could serve as model for language-oriented prescriptivism, which does not always involve purist tendencies. Some historical reminders.

The first ideologists of the national awakening devoted attention to both the legal status and the linguistic aspects of language policy. The claims for giving official status to Latvian and the struggle against the alien influences in Latvian became a major task for the newly-developed Latvian intelligentsia, the so-called neo-Latvians (J. Alunāns, K. Barons etc.) and their followers (especially A. Kronvalds). When national awakening movements began, appeals for protection of the Latvian language and praise for its value became common (e.g. "Keep ye, Latvians, thy language in place of honour, and you will do well on Earth, because he who does not respect himself, will not be respected by others either" (J. Alunāns)). The purifying of the language from German elements went hand in hand with creating a modern Latvian word-stock and extensive borrowing from the international word-stock. During the 1960s and 70s the main emphasis was on the elimination of German influences both in language use and language quality; the negative attitude towards Russian influences began in the 1980s when there were plans to russify the Baltic provinces.

By the beginning of the 20th century Modern Latvian was a reality – a relatively stable, standardised and codified language with a developed literature imitating modern Western trends, but also producing highly original works. By the turn of the century the first professionally educated Latvian linguists began to carry out the standardisation of Latvian on scientific grounds. The first Latvian linguists (Velme, Mīlenbahs) were graduates of Tartu (Dorpat) University and thus were influenced by German philosophy and sociological linguistics. The concept of an uninterrupted process of language development, of language change as a necessary factor in the living power of the language, the close connection between the language and the sociopolitical background of its speakers, all formed the theoretical background for language planning.

There were some traces of purism, indeed. Purism was mostly directed against German and Russian influences, while classical language elements were generally

welcome. The variety of Latvian use and texts was growing, newspapers and magazines proliferated, the volume of translation was growing, Latvian word-stock spread rapidly and was modernised, and Latvian acquired all the signs of a well-developed, stable and functioning language.

During the Soviet occupation Latvian linguists, teachers and writers paid a lot of attention to the usage of a rich and correct Latvian as a symbolic protest against the Russification policy. Books in Latvian were printed in huge numbers, and the quality of the standard language in books and printed media as well as audiovisual media was carefully maintained despite the shrinking of sociolinguistic functions. After the re-establishment of independence, the high prestige and linguistic quality of Latvian allowed us in 1991 to restore the lost functions within a short period of time.

Standard language should be developed by conscious efforts. Numerous human activities are standardised; so is language. There is a system of linguistic norms and expectations. Both norms refer to various varieties and registers of Latvian. Latvian is in general well standardised. However, it is neither possible nor necessary to standardise everything in the language. Language is not only a means of communication. It has its own expressive function and bears the individual's idiolectal idiosyncracies. A certain prescriptivism is expected in the education system and the media.

Language as a whole is a living thing, but we should still carry out codification and language planning (terminology). Of course, there is a more liberal attitude to linguistic processes (like borrowing and slang) and changes nowadays. There are many processes affecting the development of Latvian today. Language hierarchy has changed in Latvia, and asymmetric bilingualism is precluded to a great extent. Globalisation leads to a huge growth in translation and increased hybridity, with contact languages having a strong impact; openness and liberalism partially destroy the strict register borders and promote innovations. The change of the main contact language from Russian to English happened very fast in the early 1990s.

Openness and democracy brought about a certain change in language use norms and conventions – a more colloquial style of general language used by most media, and freer use of substandard lexis in the printed media (formerly taboo). It would be impossible to say whether this is a transfer of English conventions, and therefore a contact-induced change, or the result of what could be called the democratisation of social language and more democratic speech conventions. There is a confusion or blend of styles in many media. This shift applies to both the written/oral divide as well to the class/educational register. In addition it is impossible to ignore the general switch from textual reading to visual images, from traditional sources of information to postmodern ones, which contribute to the above. As the Head of our State Language Commission Andrejs Veisbergs has stated, in general we are seeing an enhancement of the linguistic potential inherent in the language

rather than an externally conditioned change to traditional patterns. In a democratic and open state with secured freedom of speech it is neither possible nor necessary to effectively control all aspects of the development of language. Language change is not a sign of decay; it is a natural sign of a living language. With secured state language status, Latvian can be expected to develop and accommodate the needs of its users while retaining its rich heritage.

## Gábor Prószéky

Language is a neutral living thing. Even if we ignore it, it is still there. Thus, it is not language, but language users that need to be cared for. That is, language (as a special form of organisation) and language users must not be treated in the same way. Language as such cannot be influenced by controlling rules, but users can. That's why education is very important. Some forms of widespread change in language usage (e.g. new words, unconventional constructions) are seen by many people as signs of the deterioration of language. We should help to dispel such myths, but in order to do this, well-educated teachers are needed who can speak about language from an academic background.

We should also distinguish between written and spoken language. While the written language is easier to standardise, spoken language use resists standardisation. We must not forget that written language today means two different things: the ordinary written language, the form of which is regulated by orthographies, and the so-called "written spoken" language where orthographical rules do not apply, and which is full of unusual and sometimes funny abbreviations, smileys and various emoticons. The question is whether the relations among the above three forms of language will remain the same in the future or whether they will influence each other. For example, elements of the "written spoken language" may start to appear in "classical" written texts and may cause the boundaries between genres to dissolve. The ability to differentiate between genres should be taught in schools.

Language policy is also important, particularly if a given language is spoken in more than one country. In the case of Hungarian, sub-languages of administration vary in the neighbouring countries where Hungarian is spoken. Standardisation, in general, should deal with terminology and orthography (up to a certain level for the wider public, and in detail for professional proof-readers).

## Hans Bennis

Main thesis: Although languages themselves are objects that should be left alone, the language user must be cared for.

In general, it is my view that language institutions should be reluctant to make use of norms if these are prescriptive rules that aim to instruct the language com-

munity what language users should do or not do, in order to protect the language or to influence the language by interfering with innovations that may be taking place. Most of these prescriptive norms are intended to prevent the language from changing, since language change is often considered as deterioration. This may involve issues such as vocabulary change by adopting words from other languages, changes in the inflectional system, word order issues that are prevalent in the spoken language etc. A language is a natural object that develops through interaction with a changing society, with the changing needs of language users and with the changing nature of the language community. From research, we know that languages are dynamic systems that evolve over time with various influencing factors. For instance, research has shown that expanding languages such as English, Chinese, Quecha, Arabic or Swahili show a loss of their morpho-syntactic richness in the process of expansion. Although language users may consider language change in this sense a degradation of their language, it is not the task of the language institution to fight against such changes. The decline of a language is itself a normative and subjective concept. Moreover, fighting language change or trying to protect the language itself is a waste of time, given that the natural development of the language can hardly be constrained by prescriptive language experts. In my view, the official language institutions should not follow language developments in such a way that they prohibit changes that are broadly accepted within the language community. I favour instead the somewhat contradictory concept of 'descriptive norms'. This applies both to the vocabulary and the grammar of languages. As such, the descriptive norm relates rather to the use of a particular language by a language user, and not so much to the language itself.

Language users ask for advice about how to use their language. This is what language institutions can and should focus on, in my opinion. In order to do so, these institutions should first make available a description of the standard language (grammar, lexicon, spelling), taking into account that language is a dynamic and variable system. Secondly, language institutions should give advice to individual language users on specific questions, taking into account again that language is a variable system, and relating the advice to the dynamic description of the language. In this way the language user receives guidance with respect to the language that he/she should/may use in the national domain.

The standard is the language that is widely accepted by speakers as the variety that is generally used in the official national domain. This is by no means a simple issue. Dutch, for example, is a language that has the status of a national language in three countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, and Surinam (not to mention a number of Caribbean islands). It is remarkable that three national varieties of Dutch have been developed: Netherlands Dutch, Flemish Dutch, and Surinam Dutch. The question thus arises: what is standard Dutch? The language community expects the Taalunie to develop a perspective on this issue. There are various solutions. First, we might take one of the national varieties as the standard variety. Given

that most of the speakers live in the Netherlands, it is often the case that Netherlands Dutch is taken to be the standard. Alternatively, we may abandon the very idea that there is one standard language and accept that Dutch consists of three (or more) standard languages. Finally, we may accept the view that standard Dutch is a language with a number of national varieties. Each of these choices has different consequences for language policy. It is the Taalunie's task to take these issues seriously and look for solutions in collaboration with organisations in other domains (politics, education, culture, economy etc.) operating in the language area.

It is my view that variation (synchronically or diachronically) is inherent to all languages, and therefore the language community should accept the existence of variation within the standard language. This position implies that language institutions should see language variation as an issue that deserves a prominent position on the agenda. Dialects, regiolects, sociolects, and ethnolects are important varieties of a language that are directly related to the identities of language users. This means that a language institution should be involved with varieties of the language in order to support local, regional, social, and ethnic identities within the language area; and also because a language variety is often considered to be an important ingredient of the cultural heritage of the users of that particular variety.