

Johan Van Hoorde

Introduction

Dear Minister of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia,
Dear Commissioner-designate of the European Commission,
Dear dignitaries and guests,
Dear EFNIL colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure and some nervousness that I stand here before you to welcome you to this 17th conference organised by EFNIL, the European Federation of National Institutions for Language. EFNIL is the platform for collaboration and the exchange of ideas and practices concerning the official languages of the various countries in Europe, both EU and non-EU members.

As I said, it is with a sense of nervous tension and stress that I stand here as President of EFNIL for the very first time. I myself am surprised that I dared to follow in the footsteps of my distinguished predecessor Professor Gerhard Stickel, who had led EFNIL following its creation in 2003. We are glad to have Gerhard amongst us again in his new capacity as Honorary President, to which he was nominated last year. As non-native speakers of English – or perhaps I should say as native speakers of offshore English – we intend this title to mean *président honoraire*, *président d'honneur*, that is, as an honorific title signalling his great merits. Welcome, Gerhard, we are glad to have you with us.

Stress, yes, but positive feelings still prevail. It is a great pleasure and even a privilege to stand here and welcome the political dignitaries of our host country, Estonia, of the designated European Commission and a former member of the European Parliament. We are happy that this conference has piqued their interest. This interest is of great importance to us, since we have an ambition to put our expertise as language planners and experts to the service of our societies and more particularly to the service of the European project of collaboration and harmonious co-existence between the nations of this continent, in full respect of their diversity. This collaboration implies interaction between peoples and nations and such interaction cannot exist without language – or “without languages”, as I should say. It is from this language perspective that we look at Europe and try to identify ways to contribute to the overall goal. Therefore I thank our special political guests for their beautiful, encouraging words.

Thank you Ms Reps, Ms Simson and Mr Kelam for your nice, encouraging words, as representatives of the Estonian government, the new European Commission, and the European parliament, but also as important political actors belonging to Estonia and the Estonian language community. According to the Dutch Wikipedia pages, even with its relatively small language community of slightly over 1 million speakers, Estonian is one of the European languages which can be considered fully fledged i.e. a language that is used in all sectors and domains of human activity, e.g. in legislation and government, jurisdiction, education, literature, media, leisure and so on. Estonian is the state language of Estonia and since it became a member of the EU, it has also been a member of EFNIL. We are grateful to be here as guests in your country and happy to see that your language is lively and present and one of the official languages of the EU. As we know, none of this is self-evident, for reasons that are closely connected with the history of the 20th century.

Palju tänu, minister Reps, Euroopa volinik Simson ning Europarlamendi endine liige härra Kelam, kaunite ning sütitavate sõnade eest!

Hollandi-keelse vikipeedia järgi on eesti keel üks väiksema kõnelejaskonnaga täieõiguslikke keeli Euroopas, mida kasutatakse kõigis eluvaldkondades: õigustloomes, halduses, hariduses, kirjanduses, meedias ja nii edasi. Eesti keel on Eesti riigikeel, Eesti ühinemisel Euroopa Liiduga ka liidu ametlik keel. Eesti on EFNIL-i liige.

Oleme tänulikud, et saame Eesti külalistena siin viibida. Näeme ja kuuleme rõõmuga, et teie keel on elujõuline ning kuulub ELi ametlike keelte hulka. Nagu me teame, pole see kõik nii enesest-mõistetav põhjustel, mis on tihedalt seotud lähiajalooga.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to return to English.

I am also grateful that I can welcome you all to the beautiful town of Tallinn. The city centre as a whole is a UNESCO world cultural heritage site and rightly so. I hope that you will have the occasion to visit Tallinn and to fully admire its beauty. Passing the historic walls and walking through the streets in the very heart of Tallinn creates an awareness of the history of Europe and of how our present is linked with our past. Tallinn was one of the cities that were members of the Hanseatic League, an important commercial and defensive confederation of merchant guilds and market towns in north-western and central Europe. As such, the Hanse can be seen as an early example of economic co-operation on an international scale. It can be considered a predecessor of the European Union, especially in its economic and trading aspirations. Thus Tallinn is without doubt an ideal location for our conference about language and the economy.

The relationship between these two entities is not a simple one-to-one relationship, and certainly not of a mono-directional nature. We can distinguish various ways in which language and economy intertwine or influence one another.

First of all, language is itself a scarce and quantifiable resource, one that can be and is subject to cost-benefit considerations, that is, choices, processes and dynamics which can truly be considered as belonging to the realm of the economy. For this reason we can speak about the economy of languages and of language economics to refer to the scientific study of these processes. This is certainly an aspect that will be discussed in the course of this conference.

Language is also the base material of various groups of professionals and businesses making their money from language services. These groups include language teachers and trainers, copy-writers, correctors, editors, translators, interpreters and developers of specific language tools. These professions can truly be considered as belonging to an overall language sector, which should be considered an economic sector in its own right. In many countries, there is an increasing awareness of the economic value of this language sector or “industry”. In the Dutch language area, it was my own institution which published the first survey of the sector, which showed that language professionals are active in almost all sectors and branches of our economy. It would be a good idea if there were comparable surveys in other countries and language areas, in order to gain a better understanding of the sector on a European scale.

Another important aspect for this conference within the context of Europe is multilingualism, the acquisition and use of foreign language skills. Needless to say, Europe is a multilingual socio-cultural space and market. In order to be successful in this context, institutions and businesses need to address the language issue. This is part of what is called localisation. In order to conquer markets and to convince consumers, one literally has to speak the consumer’s language. From a socio-political point of view, the challenge is to find a good balance between the need for the mobility of persons and goods in a single European geopolitical and economic space and the need for social cohesion and the integrity of the languages, cultures and countries which constitute the linguistic and cultural patchwork called Europe.

The programme of this conference will allow us to discuss all these aspects and many more. There is also one horizontal aspect I want to mention explicitly, an aspect that permeates and conditions the themes of all the sessions. This aspect has to do with differences in power, opportunities and prestige. It is self-evident that the power and prestige of languages are closely connected with the economic – and, of course, also the political and, to a certain extent, the military – power of the language area and countries in question. That I am speaking English here in Tallinn to you as an audience with almost no native speakers provides good evidence for all of this. The social, political and economic conditions of countries and regions constitute socio-economic ecologies and these can be favourable or unfavourable to particular languages. The papers will cover a variety of these ecologies from north to south, east to west, with differences in size and different traditions. There’s also the overall European perspective represented by the lan-

guage services of the European Commission, for which the trade-off between the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of their services on the one hand and respect for the equal dignity and visibility of all of its official languages on the other constitutes a major challenge.

These are the issues which will be covered in this conference. Ladies and gentlemen, let me now finish this brief introductory sketch. I hope and trust that this conference will stimulate your own ways of thinking about language and its economic impact and that this will help you to be successful with your core business at home. If we succeed in this, EFNIL will have accomplished its mission.

Now it is time to start the real work and explore the depth and details of our conference topic. I am delighted to introduce Professor Florian Coulmas, who will link economic theory and the diffusion of languages. Professor Coulmas is considered one of the foremost authorities on the subject of language and economy, and is indeed one of the fathers of the discipline. The first edition of his book *Die Wirtschaft mit der Sprache* and its English version, *Language and economy*, date back to 1992. This book discusses the many ways in which language and economy interact and how linguistic conditions facilitate or obstruct the economic process. For this reason he is the ideal speaker to open our conference.

Bibliographical information

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