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Why We Need an Internet Venue for Studying European Language Culture

Abstract

The internet venue *EuroLinguistiX* (*ELiX*) uses the term *European* as currently defined by cultural anthropologists. Language is an important factor in the (self-)definition of a civilization. It therefore seems essential to offer a platform dedicated to studies in search of a common European language culture. Works should also comprehend socioeconomic and socioecological concerns on our way toward a knowledge society. One element of such a society is the collective construction of knowledge. This is why *ELiX* offers a generally accessible discussion forum. The results should then be illustrated in scholarly articles, which will appear in the *Journal for EuroLinguistiX*. The demand for European-wide research lies especially in the fact that studies that exist so far frequently analyze only a few languages and mostly neglect an in-depth definition of a truly European-wide intersection, and they neglect a comparison of such a European-wide intersection with the features of other civilizations. Besides, there are still a lot of issues to be dealt with in more thorough studies. In the process of globalization a broad European-wide linguistic knowledge and easy access to European-wide linguistic information will facilitate future political and economic decisions and enable people to improve their intracultural behavior and communicative skills and their understanding of other parts of the world.

Sommaire

Le site internet *EuroLinguistiX* (*ELiX*) utilise la notion *européen* comme définie par les anthropologues de culture. La langue est un autre élément important dans la (auto-)définition d'une civilisation. De conséquence, il semble essentiel d'offrir une plate-forme dédiée à des études sur la culture linguistique commune de l'Europe. Les sujets traités devraient respecter des aspects socioéconomiques et socioécologiques sur notre chemin vers une société de savoir. Un des éléments d'une telle société est la construction collective de savoir. C'est la raison pour laquelle *ELiX* offre un forum de discussion généralement accessible. Les résultats pourraient alors être publiés en formes d'articles de niveau scientifique dans le *Journal for EuroLinguistiX*. Le désir de plus de recherche spécifique naît du fait que les études qui existent jusqu'à présent n'analysent, très souvent, que quelques-unes des langues européennes et, pour la plupart, ignorent la définition profonde d'une intersection pan-européenne, et elles ignorent une comparaison d'une telle intersection aux traits caractéristiques d'autres civilisations. En plus, il y a encore beaucoup de sujets qui doivent être traités dans des études plus profondes. Dans le procès de globalization, une bonne connaissance linguistique pan-européenne et un accès facile à des informations linguistiques pan-européennes rendront plus faciles nos futures décisions politiques et économiques et ils rendront possible l'amélioration de notre attitude intraculturelle et nos compétences communicatives et notre compréhension d'autres parts du monde.

Zusammenfassung

Die Internet-Plattform *EuroLinguistiX* (*ELiX*) legt dem Begriff *europäisch* eine kulturalanthropologische Definition zu Grunde. Sprache ist dabei ein wichtiges Element der (Selbst-)Definition eines Kulturkreises. Daher scheint es wichtig, eine Plattform anzubieten, die der Erörterung europäischer Sprachkultur dient. Einschlägige Arbeiten sollten auch sozioökonomische und sozioökologische Belange auf unserem Weg zur Wissensgesellschaft berücksichtigen. Eines der Elemente einer solchen Gesellschaft ist die kollektive Konstruktion von Wissen. Daher bietet *ELiX* ein allgemein zugängliches Diskussionsforum an. Ergebnisse sollten dann in Artikeln zusammengetragen werden, die wissenschaftlichen Standards genügen und dann im *Journal for EuroLinguistiX* veröffentlicht werden können. Die Forderung nach gesamteuropäischen Studien begründet sich vor allem darin, dass bisherige Studien oftmals nur wenige Sprachen untersuchen und auch keine tiefere Definition einer echt gesamteuropäischen Schnittmenge leisten, ebenso wenig einen Vergleich einer solchen Schnittmenge mit Merkmalen anderer Kulturkreise. Daneben gibt es noch zahlreiche Themenkomplexe, die eingehenderer Untersuchungen bedürften. Im Globalisierungsprozess wird ein breites gesamteuropäisches Sprachwissen und ein einfacher Zugang zu gesamteuropäischen Sprachinformationen zukünftige politische und ökonomische Entscheidungsprozesse erleichtern und Menschen dazu befähigen, intrakulturelle Verhaltensweisen und kommunikative Kompetenzen sowie ihr Verständnis anderer Teile der Welt zu verbessern.

Europe and *European* can be defined in diverse manners: in a geographical way (i.e. from the Atlantic to the Ural), in a political way (i.e. the European Union), or in a cultural, anthropological way. It is this last approach that our internet venue *EuroLinguistiX (ELiX)* shall base its definition of *European* on. So how can European culture, or civilization, as Huntington (1996) says, be described and thus be contrasted with North American, Latin American, (Slavic) Orthodox, Islamic, Hindu, Sinic and Japanese civilizations¹? Ethnologists seem to agree that “blood” (or better: ethnic ancestry), language, religion and the way of life in past and present are part and parcel of the definition of a cultural identity—with varying degrees of importance. By European civilization *ELiX*, like cultural anthropologists, understands those nations that are characterized by a minor Greek and a major Latin heritage (including the rules of law), the (West) Roman variant of Christian religion (and its developments during the Reformation and Counter Reformation), the use of the Latin alphabet, the separation of spiritual and secular power, societal pluralism and individualism, a common history of the arts (in their broadest sense) as well as a common history of education and formation (see, for example, the development of the universities in the Middle Ages or the relatively recent introduction of compulsory education). With this definition the (western) European, Orthodox, North American and Latin American civilizations can be regarded as subvariants of a western civilization entity. North American civilization and Latin American civilization are certainly offsprings of European civilization. However, Latin American civilization has also adopted elements from indigenous American civilizations, while North American civilization is characterized by a coalescence of European and other chronologically secondary peoples and has minimized the importance of some ancient and medieval European elements and is also devoid of Europe’s richness of standard languages. Especially this last feature justifies separate notions of a European and a North American culture. The split between European and Orthodox civilization follows from the different developments with respect to religion, the developments in arts and philosophy, the writing system and the sociological and political status of languages. The common histories of European arts, writing systems, literature, philosophy, economy and education have already been epitomized in a number of works, although not all nations of European culture have always been integrated².

As far as language as a defintory element of a civilization is concerned, European civilization stands out among the world’s civilizations because it is not automatically associated with one specific language, such as English with North America, Spanish with Latin America (with the not irrelevant exception of Portuguese-speaking Brazil), Church Slavonic formerly and Russian nowadays with Orthodox civilization, Arabic with Islamic civilization, Hindi with Hindu civilization, Chinese with Sinic civilization and Japanese with Japanese civilization. Europe is rather marked by a diversity of languages with highly valued national languages,

¹ It is hard to conceive an African civilization due to the enormous diversity in many relevant defintory aspects in central and southern Africa (northern Africa is part of Islamic civilization). Furthermore, some countries and areas are hard to define. Is Australia a separate civilization, or does it form a separate civilization together with the other Oceanic states or shall it be subsumed under a European or North American civilization? Turkey and Mexico, on the other hand, seem to be in a phase of cultural re-definition: Turkey faces the choice of being a member of Islamic or European civilization; Mexico is trying to find ways of becoming part of Northern American civilization. These problems cannot be furthered discussed here. For a very good overview of, and reflections on, the problems broached in this article see Huntington (1996). Huntington seems to view Greece as a part of Orthodox civilization; however, it can also be regarded as a separate civilization between Latinized European and Cyrillic Orthodox culture.

² Bibliographical information can be drawn from Reinhard (2004), for instance. For the art of writing in Europe and other civilizations around the world, see Haarmann (1991); for European history, see especially the two French books by Aldebert et al. (1997) and Le Goff (1996), which have been translated into various other languages, as well as Peters (1999), which allows the comparison with other civilizations, too.

although Latin, French and English have served as *linguae francae* in Europe's history.

Given the modern throes of globalization, including the spread of English as a global *lingua franca*, however, we may ask whether delving into studies of European language culture meets current needs. After all, is the sense of a European identity truly so strong and prominent and vital at all? The European Union, on the one hand, includes nations that do not belong to European civilization in our sense (viz. Greece, Malta and Cyprus, which are at present separate culture of their own); on the other hand, it does not include nations that definitely belong to European civilization (viz. Switzerland, Croatia, the little states of Andorra, Monaco, San Marino and Liechtenstein). So we might be tempted to ask whether the European Union has become simply an economic association.

So once again: is there something like a European identity? To me it seems that there is. The existence of a European identity is obvious, for instance, when a French and a Finnish student talk to an American and feel that they are different, that they are "non-American". The question of a European identity arises when the issue of Turkish membership in the European Union is brought up and leads to emotional reaction. The sense of European identity is at issue in criticism against an over-Americanization of Europe and in the demand for a more consequent respect for human rights in nations outside Europe. (And others may view Europe as the one civilization that has always tended to colonialize others, or the one civilization where religion is playing a less and less important role). In sum, notwithstanding their diversity the nations of European western civilization also feel a certain common cultural identity. And it is vital to be aware of this European identity as it is vital to be aware of, and understand, other civilizations' identities. It is vital for recognizing Europe's place in the world, its weaknesses, strengths and chances in the transition from an information society into a knowledge society (cf. also Böhme/Steer 1986). Each civilization must be able to adjust to its own and the world's changing economic and ecological environment, it must be able to detect its own strengths and potential responsibilities that make other civilizations view it as equally important, so that all people can live peacefully and fruitfully next to each other and prevent the realization of Huntington's (1996) scenario of a clash of civilizations. If focus is put too rapidly on a global world without respecting local cultural particularities, miscommunication and misunderstanding will soon arise. Reflections on the future of a civilization must definitely not only respect political and economic considerations, but also cultural awareness—as elder statesman Helmut Schmidt (e.g. 1998, 2002) rightly emphasizes.

I have already mentioned that whereas common developments in arts, philosophy, law, economy and education in their most encompassing senses are plainly visible, a similar common core is not immediately obvious when the topic of language is touched upon. But language—as I have said—is an important factor in the (self-)definition of a civilization. It therefore seems essential to offer a platform dedicated to studies on common European language culture—also in delimitation to other language cultures around the globe. Topics of such European-wide works need cover diachronic and synchronic aspects of linguistic structures, communicative conventions, language contacts, the sociology of languages, the role of language in other fields, and so forth. These issues must, at least in part, also consider socioeconomic and socioecological aspects; humanities, like science, must never forget that they have a duty to society, too, and cannot only live just for their own sake.

In order to achieve these goals a thematic internet venue seems particularly apt. First, financial cuts in the humanities all over Europe have made it necessary to look for alternative, less expensive ways of publishing. Second, an internet venue—especially if it is free—is easily accessible to everybody; and since most people working in the humanities are still paid by

society's taxes, everyone has the right to have access to academic results (moreover, attention, which is an important currency of our age³, can be gained faster). Third, a thematic internet venue such as *ELiX* facilitates changes that are necessary due to the fact that the majority of civilizations has now reached the stage of an information society. One of Europe's chances for revitalization certainly lies in the change toward a true knowledge society. A knowledge society must not only offer fast presentation and access to information, but it must try to turn this rapid input from potentially many people with different experiences into larger and structured knowledge⁴. One element of a knowledge society should be a collective construction of knowledge through a collective exchange of ideas and information, and the call for a communicative collection of knowledge has recently been voiced by Jean-Pol Martin (e.g. 2002 and [in print]). This is why I have always tried to combine teaching and researching (cf. Grzega 2003), for instance in the form of research websites created by students. This is why I would plead for many more thematic journals and forums in order to avoid that too many ideas go unnoticed, because they appear in unbundled, unconcentrated places of publication—a goal which I have already attempted to reach with my journal *Onomasiology Online* (<http://www.onomasiology.de>). And this is why *ELiX* offers a discussion forum that is accessible to all who are interested. It can be used to discuss big and small ideas with people from all over the world—linguists and those principally used to non-linguistic contents and methods alike. New ideas are often born at the fringe of a discipline, in “no man's land”, and must then (rather quickly) be brought to the center of attention (sometimes having to be adapted on the way to the center) (on this see also Mathews/Wacker [2002] and Luhmann [1970]). The results should then be illustrated in articles up to academic standards, which will appear in the *Journal for EurolinguistiX (JELiX)*. The advantages of an internet venue certainly do not mean that printed books will slowly disappear. Books also have, for instance, an aesthetic value. But the main function of academic research is primarily to serve society as quickly and as well as possible, which at the moment can predominantly be fulfilled by an internet venue.

The *ELiX* bibliography and the link collection reveal that there are already a number of works on various “Eurolinguistic” topics: the structure of European languages, historical-sociological issues of European languages, language purism, language politics, intercultural communication, foreign language teaching. Any attempt to gather a selection of works would unjustly ignore the other important works, so I content myself with referring to the *ELiX* section “Varia”. Beside the European-wide works listed there, hundreds of further studies have been published on a selection of European languages. Viewing this amount of works, we may therefore wonder whether there is a need for a “Eurolinguistic” venue. One aspect that blatantly underlines the need for further linguistic studies is that existing studies frequently analyze only a few languages and mostly neglect an in-depth definition of a truly European-wide intersection, and they neglect a comparison of such a European-wide intersection with the features of other civilizations to uncover global convergences and divergences. Besides, despite the many studies there are still many topics to be approached by more thorough studies that may open up ideas for new methods and questions. I would like to list but a few thoughts:

1. In the field of multilingualism the EU portfolio has already gained some familiarity (Brettmann 2001). But further work—also with respect to foreign language teaching—should delve into the competence of “semicomunication” in written and spoken language (both actively and passively), a concept introduced by Haugen (1953, 1966), especially applied to Scandinavian societies (cf. the annotated state-of-the-art contribution and bibliography by Braunmüller/Zeevaert 2001), but now gradually also linked to

³ On the role of attention see also Luhmann (1970) and, more recently, Franck (1998).

⁴ On this point and other aspects concerning the future of information societies cf. also Nefiodow (1996) and Händeler (2003).

Romantic nations (cf., e.g., Klein/Stegmann 2000). Such work must then not only encompass lexical analyses, but also grammar analyses that combine synchronic and diachronic descriptions.

2. Lexicological divergences need further investigation. One aspect may be to work out denotative differences between formally similar words (so-called “false friends”); another may be to compare connotative differences with denotative equivalents among European languages (I’m thinking, for instance, of the negative associations the British have with *federal*, whereas for Germans *föderal* has a positive connotation—this became obvious when Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder recently commented on the constitution of the European Union).
3. If Europe does not want to decide on one single language—and two great architects of the European Union, France’s ex-president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (in the draft of the EU constitution text) and Germany’s ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt (e.g. 2002), declare themselves staunchly in favor of the preservation of the current diversity of official languages—, then the consequences, e.g. the heavy load of translation work, should be searched for new economic chances. We may imagine the teaching of translation skills (including the understanding of cultures and subcultures), specific translation services or translation machines with which we may surpass the achievements of other civilizations.
4. Although a lot of work has already been published on intercultural communication, most of it has either been theoretical or restricted to just two or a few languages. There are only few larger contributions (Axtell 1993, 1998, 1999, Collett 1993, Fichtinger/Sterzenbach 2003, Mole 1998, Morrison/Conaway/Borle 1994), and they tend to give communicative strategies rather second-class, or superficial, treatment and are used primarily for business communication. A new objective could be the construction of a basic linguistic and meta-linguistic catalogue of European communicative strategies and skills, a catalogue of European *Do’s and Don’ts*. These must include pragmatic knowledge of both form and content, meaning that not only the different formal structures of politeness shades must be taken into account, but also the various (sub)cultures of lying, humor, small talk, language in the media, language in politics, language and economy, language and law, political correctness, etc. The danger of misunderstanding grows when people visibly master the phonetic and grammatical acceptability without equally improving their knowledge of pragmatic acceptability, which is unfortunately not directly visible or audible⁵. And it must encompass a study of cultural markers, too. By cultural markers we understand words and phrases (e.g. acronyms, symbols, names of person and institutions, holidays) that are of high cultural relevance and whose connotations can only be understood with a knowledge of cultural background; this should frankly include both positive and negative shared aspects. One way that comes to the fore in search of information for such a *Do’s and Don’ts* catalogue is the collection of “critical incidents”, i.e. events of misunderstanding due to intercultural differences. Here the discussion forum can be especially conducive since anybody can add their little anecdotes. The collection of critical incidents may later lead to an error analysis and a categorization of misunderstandings (which, however, should also consider the possibility of unnoticed misunderstandings⁶).
5. Works on intercultural communication can include paralinguistic and non-verbal communication. Although gestures and mimics have already been dealt with quite well by Morris (1979) and Bremmer/Roodenburg (1992), there is again a void to be filled as regards the definition of a common European core and a contrastive analysis of Europe and the other civilizations.

⁵ The fact that phonetic and grammatical fluency in a foreign language makes the foreigner expect you to master cultural deep structure, too, also occurs in Hunfeld’s theory (e.g. 1989: 71).

⁶ On a first typology of misunderstandings cf. Falkner (1997) and the review by Grzega (2001).

6. Pan-European studies may also concentrate on the differences between scholarly (founded) knowledge and popular (and in part unfounded) knowledge, or assertions, and the “translation” of scholarly knowledge into general popular knowledge. Wirrer (2003), for example, has recently tried to draw Europe’s linguistic map as it appears to be conceived by laypersons; further studies will have to include empirical surveys on such topics as well.
7. While regional and minority languages have meanwhile elucidated in a relatively high number of studies, it should not be forgotten that there is also the phenomenon of national varieties, which concerns those countries where German, French, English, Italian and Swedish function as official languages. Among these, the national varieties of German seem to differ the most. The differences between British English (or English English, Scottish English and Welsh English) and Irish English are rather few, but research may include comparisons to American English as well, since this is the variety of English that mostly functions as the European *lingua franca*. I have already pointed out in a number of articles (cf., e.g., Grzega 2000) that contrastive analyses not only have to compare language systems, but also language uses, i.e. pragmatic differences.
8. While national sign languages are receiving more and more academic attention (also in the form of dictionaries and grammars), linguists and native “speakers” might also think about the creation of a European sign *lingua franca*.

These are just a few ideas. Some of them reveal that it also seems mandatory that *ELiX* seek to build bridges to everyday problems in other areas such as politics, the media, law, ecology and—maybe the most important field of all—economics. In addition, I would like to underscore once again that it is also of paramount importance to carry out contrastive analyses with other civilizations.

The results of academic work should finally not only produce articles for our *Journal for EuroLinguistiX*, but should be “translated” into non-technical language and thus rendered into common popular knowledge among Europeans. The “intercultural translation” of academic prose into non-technical speech is another field where Europe could try to seek new strengths, although it must be accepted that at the moment Americans seem to be in the leading position in this respect. Specific focus may be laid on foreign language teaching. In some European countries, for instance my own home country of Germany (cf. Schmidt 1998), scholars feel uncomfortable expressing academic results in generally intelligible language. But they should face that there is a huge popular interest in national and international language issues that is documented by articles, essays or letters to the editors in newspapers and magazines as well as popular-science magazines all over Europe. To this end the complexity of scholarly results must be reduced to the form of “basic Eurolinguistic knowledge”. A general “basic Eurolinguistic knowledge” will be fundamental to keep orientation and identity in the process of globalization. It is this basic knowledge that I am considering in a book project on European language culture, which shall be composed in a generally intelligible style. Although some nations are more “European” and less individual than others and thus richer in examples, it shall also be free from nation-centered content or nation-centered lists of examples so that the book can attract all, or at least most, interested Europeans. It is my aim to define part of the common core of European language culture, compare it to other civilizations and cover, or at least touch on, part of the above-mentioned voids of linguistic research⁷.

⁷ At present I have the following chapters in mind: a chapter entitled “Latin—French—English: Three Periods of European Language and Vocabulary History”, a chapter on Arabic, German and Italian as minor important languages in European-wide history, a chapter on “false friends” in the group of internationalisms and how they should be dealt with in foreign language teaching, a chapter on European communicative strategies and the development of metalinguistic competences for intercultural communication including the already mentioned competence of “semicommunication” and an insight into communication guides from earlier epochs, a chapter on “European history and language culture” (which will connect linguistic developments

In this brief opening article I have referred less to linguistic works, but rather to sociological, political, philosophical, and economic contributions. These references seemed important to me for illustrating the necessity and the goal of the internet venue *EuroLinguistiX*. In the unavoidable process of globalization a good and broad European-wide linguistic knowledge and easy access to European-wide linguistic information will facilitate future political and economic decisions to be taken and will enable people, both the scholar and the layperson, to improve their intracultural behavior and communicative skills and their understanding of other parts of the world. Without getting too philosophical, we could argue that a better understanding of linguistic and communicative similarities and divergences will nevertheless teach us to learn from other civilizations and—as Michael Jackson has put it—to make the world a better place for the entire human race, for the European and other civilizations. If *EuroLinguistiX* could help to achieve this, I would be happy.

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with historical-social-political events), perhaps a chapter on common myths about European languages, and a chapter on convergences and divergences in the connotation of words.

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