The Types of the European Plurilingualism: Gateways to Creation of Transnational Identities?  

Bořivoj Hnízdo

Abstract:

This article is to address the current plurilingualism in the member states of European Union. It seeks to answer three main questions: whether the process of globalization and European integration leads to the increase of plurilingualism amongst the EU citizens; whether there are any plurilingualism models within EU that may be associated with transnational European identities; and whether there is a certain plurilingualism model that could create some sort of an all-European identity. The article as a source material uses a number of sociological data on language knowledge and teaching in EU countries. The data serves as a basis of the actual analysis, which is to predict several plurilingualism models within the European language communities. The answer to the first question may be „yes“ via studying factual materials. It could also be argued that there are some types of bilingualism within EU that contribute to creation of a certain transnational identity within EU upon „macro-regional” (as “central-European” or „western-European”) as well as on „cross-border” level. As per the trilingualism, it always concerns a „micro-regional” or a local identity. None of the aforesaid types, however, has so far created an all-European identity. On the contrary, it may be argued that, due to their diversity, these types may function politically as a monolinguistic nationalism basically going against the European integration process.

Keywords:

European Union, plurilingualism, political identity, language policy.

The topic of this article is to map the current plurilingualism in the European Union (EU) countries. The aim is to analyze the plurilingualism as an aspect that may overcome the condensed national identity in communities in the individual European countries.

In this article, I have premeditated three theses, which I will attempt to defend or defeat. First, the issue of globalization and European integration might increase the plurilingualism amongst the EU

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citizens. Second, there are certain plurilingualism models within the EU that might be associated with certain transnational European identities. And third, there is a certain plurilingualism model that might create an all-European identity.

As far as the terminology is concerned, the non-professional and, sadly to say, often the official documents issued by the EU institutions (A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism: 2005) confuse the terms “plurilingualism” and “multilingualism”. In this article, I distinguish these terms as it is common in the current socio-linguistics and amongst political scientists dealing with language policies (Spolsky: 2004). The plurilingualism is understood as an individual's capacity to speak more than one language, whereas multilingualism is rather associated with an environment where more than one language is spoken. First language (L1) means a language that speaker considers its best-handled and utilizes it the most often. Frequently, but not always, this means mother tongue. Second language (L2) is a language speaker uses in everyday communication but it is not his or her first language. Foreign language (L3) is then used by the speaker only every so often, sometimes more often, sometimes only during vacations spent abroad (Kachru: 1988). This terminology is purely socio-linguistic and does not consider the level of knowledge of the language concerned. Knowledge of a foreign language may often be much better in some speakers than the knowledge of a second language in some other speaker. What I understand as being bilingual is such an individual who uses two languages upon the first and the second language level. A trilingual is then such a person who uses three languages on the same level (Weinreich: 1953). What I understand as a small language community is the one whose first language is not taught on a large scale as a foreign language in EU schools, whereas a large language community is the one that speaks a language often taught in the EU as a foreign language. However, it is only English, German, French, Spanish, Russian and Italian that is taught in elementary and secondary schools within the EU in more than 95 % (Eurydice: 2005). What I mean by allophone community is a community whose first language is not in the position of the official language on any level in its domestic country. Regional language community is then such whose first language is recognized as a regional language with or without an official status (e.g. it exists as a teaching language in state schools).

The main sources used for this article is mainly „Eurydice, informační síť k vzdělání v Evropě“ (Eurydyce: Information Network to European Education, 2005) and the document „Europeans and Their Languages“ published by the European Commission in 2006. The numbers and statistics published in the latter document are very subjective as the answer to the questions like „what foreign languages do you speak?“ are affected by various political cultures of respondents and depend on generational, social or national differences. However, the data may still be used as it is a
statistically extensive document that uses outputs of nearly 29 thousand respondents from 27 EU countries along with Croatia and Turkey.

Approximately one half of all EU citizens is monolingual, i.e. they are only able to speak one language, which is usually their mother tongue. However, this is biologically unnatural. Today’s medical science favors the opinion stating that it is natural to be plurilingual (Jackendoff: 2002), which is a significant change. Not too long ago, it used to be asserted that early plurilingualism may cause various problems to an individual, at least a deceleration of learning the first language or the level of its knowledge.

Latest researches show that an individual is born with a brain prepared for plurilingualism (Lust, Foley: 2004). However, if a child lacks the contact with two or more languages until it is five years old, its brain changes and then it is more difficult to learn other languages. Therefore, the reasons for so many Europeans being monolingual are not biological but social and political ones.

Nationalistic movements of 19th and 20th century often programatically stood out against using other but the „national“ language. Position of a „national“ language played nearly a dominant political role in most of the European nationalistic movements. Even where the position of a „national“ language was not pronouncedly of key importance for the national identity, the role of a „national“ language had its own firm place within the entire national movement (e.g. the Irish). Eventually, even the nationalistic movements of the end of the 20th century, which led to disintegration of Yugoslavia, enforced introduction of „national“ languages in Serbia, Croatia and Bosna i Hercegovina, although the language differences certainly did not represent the most significant issues between these communities.

Political monolingualism in Europe peaked after the end of WW II when the plurilingualism seemed to be, for whatever reason, politically inappropriate in a number of countries regardless of the political system, e.g. in fascistic Spain, in democratic France, in communist Romania, apart of the strong Russia-language enforcement policy in the officially multilingual Soviet Union. The second and, specifically, the last third of the 20th century launched a change of this status. Rapid economic development of Western Europe calling for labor force, mass tourism development and the fall of the „iron curtain“ were the most significant moments for a change in the Europeans’ need to learn foreign languages. For many Europeans, the economical, social and political climate of the European integration and world globalization only highlighted the importance of knowledge of more than one language. This trend is currently very obvious. In 2001, less then a half of the citizens (47 %) in 15 EU member states was able to speak other language but their mother tongue (Europeans and Foreign
Languages: 2001), whereas in 2006, the number increased to 56 % in 25 EU countries. The number of those who speak two languages increased by 2 % to 28 % and those speaking three languages increased by 3 % to total 11 %, which is certainly not a negligible number any more.

The European trend towards plurilingualism is obvious in generational differences. While 40 % of EU citizens between 15 to 24 years of age is able to speak two foreign languages, this ability decreases with age; therefore, it is only 19 % of them in the category of citizens aged 55 years and more. The same applies in the educational point of view – 46 % of university educated EU citizens speaks another two foreign languages (in students, the number even increased to 50%), as opposed to 9% of those that dropped out of school at the age of 15.

Main areas of use of the foreign languages prove that it is mainly the European integration process and, at the same time, the globalization that contribute to plurilingualism spreading within EU. It is supported by traveling abroad (50%), watching films, television and listening to radio (26%), communicating with friends (25%) or communicating at work (25%). 83 % of Europeans have no doubts about the need to speak foreign languages; 32 % of EU citizens need to use foreign languages at work and 35% need it when traveling abroad.

What is the status of knowledge of foreign languages within EU? Citizens over 15 years of age use English as their first foreign language, which is spoken by 150,2 millions of EU citizens; French spoken by 57,2 millions EU citizens keeps the second place and at the third is German spoken by 53,1 millions of EU citizens. It is then followed by the Russian language with 25,6 millions of speakers and Spanish with 22,9 millions. The last language, which may be statistically significant from the European point of view, is Italian spoken as a foreign language by 10,7 millions of EU citizens over 15 years of age.

However, the knowledge of foreign languages within EU is very distinctive from the geographical point of view. Several plurilingualism models may be traced within the EU language communities. The knowledge of more than one language is much more frequent in small language communities within the EU than in the larger ones.

There are three main types of plurilingualism in small language communities. The first one, so-called a „Luxembourg” plurilingualism, is based upon one first language (i.e. Luxembourgish language spoken by 77% of citizens of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg); upon two other languages (i.e. French spoken as a foreign language by 90% of citizens in Luxembourg and German spoken as a foreign language by 88% of citizens); and on one foreign language (i.e. English spoken by 60% of citizens in
However, the Luxembourg type is rather unique and hard to find, except of some allophone communities in other EU states.

The second type of plurilingualism in small language communities may be called a „Dutch“ type (Hnízdo: 2007). This is the type where one second language co-exists next to one first language (it is English spoken by 87% of Dutch citizens) and one foreign language (it is German spoken by 70% of Dutch citizens). Except of the Netherlands, this group also includes Denmark and Malta. The Danes even use the same languages like those being used in the Netherlands (86% of Danes speak English and 58% speak German). English is spoken as a second language also by 88% of Maltese citizens, whereas Italian is a third language spoken by 66%. For example, Sweden is very close to the Dutch type as the English is also spoken as a second language (by 89% Swedes), however, „only“ 30% of Swedes speak a third language (it is German). Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians are also getting close to the Dutch model; however, their second language is Russian followed by English spoken as a foreign language by 46% of Estonians, 39% of Latvians and 32% of Lithuanians.

The third type of plurilingualism occurring in small language communities within the EU may be called a „Flemish“ type, which may also include e.g. the Fins or the Slovenians. This type is typical by using one first language and no second but two foreign languages. For example, the Flemish speak French and English as foreign languages, the Fins speak English and Swedish and Slovenians speak Croatian and English or German.

There is only one type existing in the large language communities within the EU. It is a so-called „German“ type where the first language also serves as the language of international communication; there is no second language but one foreign language (in Germany and Austria, it is English that is spoken by 56% of Germans and 58% of Austrians). In other large language communities, we cannot really speak of an extensive plurilingualism. What is also typical is the practice when the first language exists also as a language of broader communication; however, the second nor the third language are really spread within the community. The English language community serves as a good example but it is also typical for the Spanish and Italian communities and, in smaller range, also for the French and Portuguese communities. Everyday use of a second or a foreign language is often concentrated in these communities only to border areas which are bilingual (e.g. in South Tyrol or in Alsace). The only exception is ethnical Russians in Baltic countries. Once the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became independent states, the Russians were forced politically to accept the position of Russian language in these countries as a minority regional language (Shegedin: 2004).
Regional language communities are nearly always plurilingual. The only difference is whether the language community is regionally “major” and fully politically emancipated or whether it is a “minor” regional language community that is politically not fully emancipated. In the first case, these are for example the Catalans with Spanish as their second language, ethical Hungarians in South Slovakia with Slovak as their second language or ethnical Russians in Estonia with Estonian as their second language. The examples of the second group might be Sorbs in Germany or Croatians in Austrian Burgenland where the „national” language is often in a position of the second language (Šatava: 2001).

As per the allophone population in the EU countries, it generally applies that it is often more plurilingual than the population in a given state. Aside of its first language, the population is forced to speak national and second languages of countries and regions where they live. However, there are some exceptions. Native English speakers in countries where English is in a position of the second language (e.g. in Netherlands) often have the local national language as a foreign language. On the other hand, the Arab community in the officially bilingual Brussels uses only French, not Flemish, as its second language (Economist: 2007).

What is the situation of bilingualism in the EU countries? The most frequent type of bilingualism in the EU citizens is a combination of their first language with English as their second language. 31% of those in the EU who speak English as a foreign language use it on the daily basis. That means that approximately 50 millions of citizens of the EU member states are bilingual as they use English along with their mother tongue.

This type may be called the „Northern-European plus“ type as it is spread within the entire northern part of the EU. The indication „plus“ indicates a tendency to spread this type to central Europe and to Baltic states as well as the existence of its expansion within certain parts of southern Europe. This bilingualism is the most obvious in the Netherlands and in Flanders, in Sweden and Denmark (and in non-EU Norway) and also in northwestern part of Germany and in Finland. Recently, it has started to occur also in large cities of central Europe and Baltic states (Hnízdo: 2006). In southern Europe, it may be found rather sporadically, e.g. in Cyprus, Greek islands, Malta or in the southern part of the Iberian peninsula.

The second type may be called „Central European“ that occurs when speakers daily use also German along with their first language. There is approximately 11 millions of such speakers within the EU; they live mainly in the border regions of German-speaking countries (Hnízdo: 2006).
The last type that is significant from the EU point of view is the one we can call the „Western European“ in which bilingual EU citizens daily uses French along with their mother tongue. This type, however, is not that populous with its 7,5 millions of EU citizens. Again, the population of this type lives mainly in the regions geographically neighboring with the French-speaking European countries.

The nature of the other types of bilingualism is not as significant within the whole Europe. Although there are 4 millions of EU citizens using the Russian language along with their mother tongue (in particular Baltic states and much less also in central Europe, mainly in Poland and in Slovakia, or somewhat also in Bulgaria); however, this „Eastern European“ type is spread mainly within the countries outside (or so-far outside) the EU among Ukrainians, Belorussians or Moldovans. Should we also include these countries, this type of bilingualism would be then currently as populous as the type with English as a second language within the EU.

On the other hand, very regional is „Iberian“ type of bilingualism for approximately 4,5 millions of EU citizens that use Spanish as their second language. These are mainly the non-Spanish speaking communities in Spain. The „Istrian“ bilingualism of Italian as a second language speaking Slovenians and Croatians has nearly micro-regional nature.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that the „regional“ type of EU bilingualism also occurs very often within the EU when speakers, along with their first language, also daily use a second language which, identically as their mother tongue, does not belong to any large European language community. These are often ethnical minorities of national communities living in the territory of the neighboring country or citizens of officially bilingual states, such as Finland. The most frequent examples of such „regional“ EU bilingualism is Finnish-Swedish, Hungarian-Romanian, Turkish-Bulgarian, Hungarian-Slovakian or Polish-Lithuanian.

Bilingualism is generally spread amongst approximately 17% of EU citizens. That may be, though, a rather large number, approximately 85 millions of inhabitants, but it also means that 83% of EU citizens daily communicate only in one language of its own, mainly national, community. Bilingualism may thus contribute to a certain transnational European identity; however, this aspect is strongly minority-related.

From the all-European point of view, bilingualism of type L1 (national language) + L2 (English) is the most significant one. In this type, an increase of its multitude and geographical expansion may be assumed, which is also confirmed by some researches (Eurydice: 2005). If we may call this type a „Northern European-plus“ in terms of its expansion, the trends show that soon enough it will be
more appropriate to call it a „Continental-minus“ given its expansion to other parts of Europe (Europeans and their Languages: 2006). It will not be called European but Continental because it does not concern the British islands where English is a first language. Minus then means that, first, it is not going to expand to monolingual large language communities of western Europe and, second, there will still be bilingual communities without English existing within EU whose multitude will not be much smaller than the bilingualism with English as the second language.

Therefore, bilingualism does not serve as an instrumental tool for the creation of an all-European identity. Expansion of English does not lead to this objective either. For that matter, the expansion of English is associated with the globalization itself rather then with the process of European integration. Europeans learn English also because it is a global and worldwide language which not only helps them to communicate with other EU citizens. This type may, however, contribute to a certain “Continental” identity, specifically among small language communities within EU.

Other big European languages do not lose their role within the European context where they can create a Western-European identity (with French as L2), a Central-European identity (with German as L2) or an Eastern-European unity (with Russian as L2). Since the „Eastern-European“ type of bilingualism remains prevalent mainly outside the EU, the „Western-European“ and the „Central-European“ types represent examples of bilingualism that create a transnational identity and, at the same time, are associated with the process of European integration. Europeans learn these languages (it applies specifically to German language) mainly because they are languages of wider European communication. The interest to learn these two languages amongst the EU population may also serve as a future indicator of the interest the EU citizens in further development of the European integration.

If the bilingualism is not the path to an all-Europe identity, could the trilingualism be an answer, in particular since the EU plurilingualism policy is best contained within the phrase „English is not enough“ (A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism: 2005)? Probably not. There are three main reasons for that. First, the daily use of three languages will never occur too frequently in Europe. Second, the trilingualism currently existing within the EU is typical for its large variability of language combinations and the dominance of English is not really significant there. And, third, the trilingualism currently existing within the EU shows a boldly regional and even local nature, which is definitely not all-European.

The trilingualism may often be found on the „outskirts“ of the current EU, e.g. in Vilnius (Lithuanian, Russian, Polish), in Kluż or Temeswar (Romanian, Hungarian, German), in Malta (Maltese,
English, Italian) or in San Sebastian (Spanish, Basque, French). The trilingualism often occurs also in the „central“ part of the EU, i.e. in Benelux countries. The Brussels itself is transforming into a trilingual city, when beside French (used also by some allophone communities) and Flamish as official languages, usage of English is expanding mainly within the „European district“ (Economist: 2007). However, this trilingualism cannot be called a „European“ one but only the „Brussels“ one as the trilingualism looks different in the not-so-far away Luxemburg (German, French, Luxemburgish). The same applies to the Netherlands with the Dutch, English and German as the most frequent language combination.

To conclude, it could be stated that the answer to the first thesis in this article is positive. The process of globalization and European integration leads to an increase of plurilingualism within the EU. It is supported mainly by the facts that the young generation learns foreign languages more than the older generation and that the use of knowledge of foreign languages is caused mainly by frequent traveling and staying in other EU countries as well as by an increasing use of languages at work due to expanding contacts with other workplaces in other EU states.

The answer to the second thesis is also positive. Plurilingualism leads to formation of certain transnational identities within the EU. Bilingualism may create a certain „macro-regional identity“ where the second language belongs to the big languages’ group (e.g. „Central-European“ identity or „Western-European“ one) or a „cross-border identity“ where both languages belong to the same category in terms of their significance – those are either two big languages (e.g. „South-Tyrolean“ or „Alsacean“) or two small languages (e.g. „South-Slovakian“ or „Transylvanian“). As far as the trilingualism is concerned, its identity is always strongly „micro-regional“ or local one regardless of what languages are spoken.

Nevertheless, the answer to the third thesis is negative. No plurilingualism model has so far helped to create any all-European identity. Quite the opposite; with its diversity, the plurilingualism may function in the same way as the national monolingualism, i.e. as a significant obstacle to creation of the all-European identity. From the all-European point of view, this issue is apparent for example in the existence of two largest groups of bilingual EU citizens: one of them uses English as a second language as opposed to the other group that uses other language instead. This article mentions some other examples of plurilingual diversity that may have a counter-productive effect with respect to the formation of a unified political identity of EU (e.g. the „Western-European“ type versus the “Central-European“ type). The knowledge of several languages may be necessary for most of the inhabitants of this planet, specifically for the EU being strongly multilingual area; however, from the political point of view, this is not the way to form the all-European identity.
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