

# LANGUAGE AS A VALUE IN A PRAGMATIC WORLD: GLOBAL AND NATIONAL APPROACH

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the perception of language and languages in the economy-oriented contemporary world and its specific features in such language-centered countries as Latvia. Two main levels could be discussed concerning the ‘intellectual’, ‘symbolic’ and practical treatment of language: a global (supra-national) and a national one. In majority of countries special laws have been adopted or national level programs have been enacted in order to protect the most significant elements of respective national identities – folklore, traditional ways of life, beliefs and languages in particular. At the beginning of the 21st century, economic and political goals of the European Union have been associated with the ideas of European culture and European identity. At the same time, the popularization of the languages, histories, and traditions of the member states have also been emphasized. The Republic of Latvia belongs to the countries where the diversity of thoughts and viewpoints on language are ever present and intense in both the political debates and even in many informal conversations. The paper gives an insight in Latvian language policy against the background of global and European sociolinguistic processes and wide usage of so-called international languages, English in particular.

**Key words:** multilingualism, identity, language policy, international languages, official languages

## VALUES, IDENTITY, LANGUAGE

‘Values’ are among the key concepts used in humanities and social sciences during the last decades, and the problem of finding appropriate definition for this term is a long-lasting one, too. The Latvian philosopher Maija Kūle points out that ‘values are culturally historically determined, objective as they are compatible with the trend of a particular period, they are given labels which are grasped by public opinion, they are in tune with a cultural historic paradigm and are reflected in national identity’ (Kūle, 2018: 434).

This definition involves one more widely used unanimously treated concept – the ‘national identity’. Due to vagueness and overexploitation of this term in both

academic and public discourse, a certain negativism towards it has sometimes been observed in the scholarly community: either rejecting the notion as such or avoiding the respective terminology. Despite being aware of the fact, the term *national identity* has been used with a high frequency and this concept laid the background for several programmatic documents and legal acts at the global, regional and national levels. The American sociologist Carol L. Schmid showing that language is more than a means of communication underlined that

national identity refers to a sense of belonging to – but not necessarily reinforced by – a common culture, customs, language, heritage, and political institutions. At the same time national identity consists of a sense of distinctiveness from other people who may or may not share certain of these characteristics. (Schmid, 2001: 10)

During the previous two decades anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers focused their attention on various elements of a collective identity while sociolinguists dealt with the sociolinguistic aspects of the identity. The idea about any indisputable links between national identity, values and a language have been developed in tens of monographs and hundreds of research contributions (e.g. Joseph, 2004; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Evans, 2014, 2018; Ehala et al., 2018). Analyses of the sociolinguistic aspects of national identity imply the task to single out and highlight those identity components that are of a linguistic nature. Sociolinguistics allows us to view the situation of some specific language as part of community identity in the broader context of the evolution of global academic thinking.

## LANGUAGE AS VALUE AT THE SUPRANATIONAL LEVEL

Alongside with solving common problems that apply to the whole mankind, the identity preservation of each individual country or each ethnos is becoming even more significant. Globalization does not mean homogeneousness, it means mutual enrichment and linguistic diversity:

Linguistic diversity is part and parcel of the diversity of life in nature and culture. Any loss in linguistic diversity is a loss in the vitality and resilience of the whole web of life. Every time a language disappears, along with the cultural traditions and cultural knowledge it conveys, it's a piece of the planet's living fabric that gets torn off, leaving all of the living world more fragile, more vulnerable, and with fewer options for the future. (Online 1)

However, the globalization processes determine the success of the efforts to protect languages, even for the mid-sized ones. The researchers involved in a multidisciplinary research project *Mobility and inclusion in multilingual Europe* (2014–2018) recognized:

A fragmented approach to the management of linguistic diversity is increasingly unsatisfactory as a result of two major trends. The first of these trends is globalisation, which increases the frequency of interlinguistic contact. Linguistic diversity has become an inescapable feature of modern societies, at the workplace, in the classroom or during one's free time, and it pervades economic life (production, consumption, and exchange). The second major trend is technological development, particularly in information and communication, both of which are intimately connected with language skills and language use. (Grin, 2018: 16)

There is no doubt that English is the most widespread and powerful language in the contemporary world (the first global *lingua franca*), and most contributions on global language policies deal with the impact of English (e.g. Crystal, 2003; Blommaert, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011; Wee, 2013; Phillipson, 2018). One of the recent publications by Chan (2016) provides the evidence of the influence of languages using 20 indicators to measure five basic opportunities afforded by the language. *The Power Language Index* (PLI) is an assessment of the influence of a language on the global stage. It lists 124 languages on their overall importance as well as their strength in creating opportunities in geography, economy, communication, knowledge and media, and diplomacy (Chan, 2016). English occupies the first place overtaking the next most important language – Mandarin – by more than two times. The next most powerful languages are as follows: 3. French, 4. Spanish, 5. Arabic, 6. Russian, 7. German, 8. Japanese, 9. Portuguese, 10. Hindi, 11. Cantonese, 12. Italian, 13. Dutch, 14. Malay, 15. Polish. It should be noticed that the titular languages of the Baltic States occupy rather high positions: Latvian as the 50th, Estonian as the 56th, Lithuanian as the 57th. Against the background of global linguistic diversity (according *Ethnologue* calculations, 7117 languages in 2020, see Online 2 ) such results demonstrate the potential for long-term viability of these languages despite the fact that nowadays even mid-sized national languages can be endangered. In order to maintain them, well-considered language policy systems need to be developed both within the national states and at the supra-national formations. Even the author of this economy-based evaluation of languages reminds us that 'a language is much more than just a collection of words. It is intertwined with culture and is an emotional aspect of human character' (Chan, 2016: 5).

In a globalized world English has become the preferred second language in most countries. While common international language has some advantages in facilitating cross-border communication, the globalisation also leads to a more prosperous society in which more and more people are interested in other cultures. This increased interest in other cultures and languages could, to some extent, balance out the trend of using only one dominant language. Education systems around the world should contribute to the learning of foreign languages and cultures (Grenier, 2015). However, as R.Wilkinson indicates, 'policies to

promote internationalization may lead to a context where the instructional language is English only' (Wilkinson, 2016: 108).

There are universal tendencies for the spread of English throughout the whole world accompanied by efforts of international bodies, such as the UN, the UNESCO, many different language preservation NGOs, such as *Ethnologue*, *Terralingua*, *Endangered Language Fund*, *Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages*, *Sorosoro*, to find a balance between the economic and symbolic value of languages. These organizations collect information, address both governments and the general public, but even the UN declarations and resolutions if not signed by the respective States are not binding. In 2009, Bernard Spolsky concluded that

supranational organizations are able to support notions of human and civil rights including rights relating to language, without being called on to implement them and face their practical consequences. [...] their main influence is in spreading and supporting beliefs about diversity, multilingualism and human or civil rights that can bolster the campaigns of language activists aiming to persuade their national governments. (Spolsky, 2009: 224)

Although the decrease of the world's linguistic diversity has slightly diminished during the last ten years, the global community has still not found tools for finding a compromise between different value systems concerning languages.

## LANGUAGES AS VALUE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

As Latvia has been a Member State of the European Union since 2004, the general philosophical and legal approach of this unprecedented union of countries to the language situation in the member states needs to be studied taking into account their relative autonomy with respect to cultural, educational and language policies. The equality of all official languages and citizens' language rights have been established already in the first Treaty of Rome (1957) and confirmed in the latest documents accordingly. The political and economic goals of the EU have always been associated with the ideas of a common European identity. Languages (24 official languages (including English with somewhat unclear formal status at the present moment), about 80 minority or regional languages, hundreds of diaspora and migrant languages at present) are to be valued as part of Europe's cultural richness. These philosophical guidelines have been developed during the most active decade in the EU's language policy which began in 2001 when the *European Year of Languages* was declared; in 2004, a special portfolio of Commissioner for Multilingualism was allocated. In 2005, a very important report by the European Commission *a New Strategy for Multilingualism* was launched treating languages as an integral part of lifelong learning and for enabling an effective intercultural dialogue. According to this document, the EU multilingualism policy has three aims: to encourage language

learning and promote linguistic diversity in society; to promote a healthy multilingual economy; to give citizens access to the European Union legislation, procedures and information in their own languages.

During the following years, several other programmatic documents concerning languages, development of multilingualism and language protection have been created (e.g. *High Level Group Report on Multilingualism* (2007), *Multilingualism: an Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment* (2008), *Conclusions on Language Competences to Enhance Mobility* (2011), *Conclusions on Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences* (2014), *Report on Language Equality in the Digital Age* (2018)), yet the decrease of activities in the language domain has been observed. There has been no special commissioner dealing with language issues since 2007; nevertheless, a complex of problems related to the legal status of languages in the European Union institutions still exists, the coordination of language management in the member states is carried out mostly by NGOs and professional organizations. The existing programmatic documents and guidelines could be considered as long-term, and only some aspects (as language competence indicators, CLIL, early childhood education, language education for migrants) need to be developed within the present stage.

The leading professional organization is the *European Federation of National Institutions for Language* (EFNIL) (see Online 3). All the Member States of the European Union have institutions (as the *Latvian Language Agency* and the *University of Latvia Latvian Language Institute*) representing Latvia in this Federation since 2003) whose role include monitoring the official language or languages of their country, advising on language use, or developing language policy. The EFNIL provides a forum for these institutions to exchange information about their work and to gather and publish information about language use and language policy within the European Union. In addition, the Federation encourages the study of the official European languages and a coordinated approach towards mother-tongue and foreign-language learning, as a means of promoting linguistic and cultural diversity within the European Union.

One of the most discussed issues during many EFNIL fora is the role of English and language competition in the member states. The so-called Brussels Declaration states that 'English is used as a working language in certain professional, educational, and other social contexts in Europe, and while the practical value of this is acknowledged, it is considered of the utmost importance to maintain, strengthen, and further develop all national/official languages of the European countries in all their functional domains' (EFNIL, 2005: 2). Several EFNIL conferences have dealt with the tendencies of the domain loss, in tertiary education and research in particular, for the EU languages other than English due to the widespread use of English. The Florence Resolution states:

This growing attitude represents a very real linguistic, cognitive, and cultural risk. English is not a neutral all-purpose medium of

communication. By the predominant or even the exclusive use of English, important traditions, concepts and methods developed in other languages are ignored or forgotten. In addition, the mainstream of the various disciplines determining those themes and problems considered most relevant can easily become dominated by speakers from Anglophone countries. (EFNIL, 2014: 1)

During the last decade the coexistence or confrontation of English and national languages in the academia has become the key issue in practical language management not only in Europe (see e.g. Hultgren et al., 2014; Wee et al. (eds.), 2013). Robert Phillipson argues that in

European countries in which there are high levels of proficiency in English, an increased use of English can be seen as linguistic capital accumulation, for the individual and the group. The repertoire of languages in use is expanded, i.e., additive bilingual- or multilingualism is being established. By contrast, if English replaces a national language in key functions, in academia, politics, business, or cultural life, to the point where other languages are downgraded and excluded, what has taken place is linguistic capital dispossession. (Phillipson, 2018: 298)

In 2019, the European Commission announced the higher education institutions from all over Europe that will be part of the first European Universities alliances – united by a common view on Europe and on the educational mission of European universities and a strong belief in its multiculturalism and multilingualism (European Commission, 2019). The regional anchoring will give the alliances capacity to spread the values of Europe within the surrounding areas and to ‘bring Europe home’. The University of Latvia has become a member of the FORTHEM alliance (*Fostering Outreach within European Regions, Transnational Higher Education and Mobility*). The alliance is aware that in order to strengthen European identity through education and culture one of the main tasks is to foster multilingualism which is understood as a variety of language resources, including mother tongue skills and national language skills, as well as proficiency in several other languages. However, the creation of these alliances has caused a renewed debate about the use of national languages and the role of English in studies and research. Therefore a special research lab called *Multilingualism in School and Higher Education* (including multilingual and multicultural school environments as a resource and integration of CLIL) is being developed under the auspices of the University of Jyväskylä. The preparatory document suggests that while not excluding the possibility of using English as a *lingua franca* in a few cases, the ambition of the network is to promote multilingualism among both national and regional languages. As such, language tuition in the languages of all partner universities will be provided at each institution, and both students and staff will be incentivised to attain a level of proficiency in at least one partner university

language, to enable them to participate in short-term or long-term cooperation actions in that language (Online 4).

Researchers from six other universities have expressed a strong interest in the proposal of the team from the University of Latvia about comparative studies of multilingualism in tertiary (higher) education and research, and such a project is being developed for evaluation and approval.

## LATVIA: BETWEEN INSTRUMENTAL AND INTEGRATIVE VALUE OF LANGUAGES

In 2011, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia adopted the *Guidelines of National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy (2012–2018)*. National identity was described in this document as

a part of a person's identity connecting him or her with other persons having similar national cultural features. Language, the body of values, models of behavior and cultural symbols and social memory are the foundation on which a person's affinity with their nation and mutual unity of those belonging to a nation are formed and maintained. National identity includes the idea of each nation's uniqueness but not superiority, distinctiveness from other nations, the idea of the unity of people belonging to a nation, and the idea of a nation's continuity. (Online 6)

This document had been based on the previous State Research Programme *National Identity (language, Latvian history, culture and human security)* (2010–2013). At present even two State Research Programmes dealing with identity and values are implemented (*The Latvian Language and Latvia's Heritage and Future Challenges for the Sustainability of the State* (2018–2021)). Why research on the national identity, its cultural and linguistic aspects in particular, was and still continues to be proclaimed as an academic priority?

Among more than seven thousand world's languages the objective positions of the Latvian language are comparatively strong. According to the number of speakers (appr. 2.3 million) Latvian belongs even to the world's 200 "largest" languages. The competitiveness of the Latvian language is also strengthened by its position in the state and local government institutions, the armed forces and the education system, including higher education, as well as the growing number and proportion of speakers of Latvian as a second language among minorities (according the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia for 37.7 per cent of population home language was other than Latvian in 2017, see Online 5). The status of the official language in the European Union is a significant incentive for the sustainability of Latvian terminology. The constitutional status of the Latvian language, the Law on the State Language and its implementing rules have provided the necessary legal framework for the use and freedom of the official

language. More detailed information on the recent language situation in Latvia is available in Druviete and Veisbergs (2018) and on the website of the Latvian Language Agency (Online 7, see also *Language Situation*, 2017).

However, in Latvia's ethnodemographic and geopolitical situation, only statistical data and legislation are not sufficient to understand the language situation, as they do not give a complete picture on language competition with the two languages with much higher economic value (Russian and English). Measurable parameters of the language situation should be analyzed in a broad historical and international context and in close association with language attitudes, or in other words, within the system of values among various societal groups. These values depend not only on traditional narratives, which in Latvia often include stereotypes about Latvian as an endangered and disappearing language, but also on the public awareness of languages and their competition, both in the world and in Latvia. Maybe these facts have to do with the so-called identity construction already since the 19th century? E.g., even in the *Preamble of the Constitution of Latvia* (2014) the Latvian language has been mentioned three times making Latvia a unique case in the world. Does it mean the special position of the Latvian language within the complex phenomenon of the (national) identity?

The studies of the Latvian language situation provide a complete quantitative analysis of language skills and language use in various sociolinguistic domains, however, language-related attitudes still need to be studied more deeply. Therefore one of the sub-projects for the State Research Programme *the Latvian Language* is dealing with the qualitative studies of language attitudes (including public opinion about language issues, linguistic stereotypes, identity construction, etc).

## CONCLUSIONS

In the context of maintaining the global linguistic diversity the role of humanities is increasing all over the world. the field of humanities has a double mission, which is not only to strengthen the national state and to enhance the understanding of its most significant elements (history, language, literature, public opinion, etc.), but also to make a contribution to the global knowledge pool. Universities are the bearers of any nation's cultural identity; they link participation and development, traditions and innovative approaches in both sciences and humanities. As OECD indicates, 'R&D comprise creative and systematic work undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge' (Frascati Manual, 2015: 44). Innovation in its modern meaning is a new idea, creative thoughts, new imaginations in the form of device or method, application of better solutions that meet the new requirements of society. Innovation may refer to the non-economic change processes. Sociolinguists who are exploring the new forms of innovation may strengthen the evidence base for



the language policy actions, including language studies. However, it is evident that multilingualism (societal multilingualism – functioning of several languages at a society level and individual multilingualism or plurilingualism – functional ability to use more than one language at the individual level) is one of the most relevant features of the contemporary global society.

Usage of English as one of the leading components in both societal and individual multilingualism is a global reality in almost all the European countries, although there is no reliable theory on how the models of national/English language coexistence function in different sociolinguistic domains, especially in the higher education and research. The ex-president of Latvia prof. Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, urging scholars to study the identity issues, pays attention to a very important point:

It would be a grievous error to label all attempts at defending national interests and identity as extremist and chauvinistic, especially with respect to language and culture. After all, national interests with respect to security, trade, and profit are considered rational and justifiable, so long as they do not lead to excessive protectionism and serious barriers to international trade. Reasonable concern for both these domains is perfectly legitimate and should not be too quickly labelled as bigotry, racism, xenophobia and isolationism. (Viķe-Freiberga, 2018: 52)

Treatment of language as a value, usually as a symbol of national and/or individual identity alongside with treatment of languages as a means of communication and economic assets would help to maintain global linguistic diversity. Is language both a global and national value in the pragmatic world? Would it continue to be a value even in a situation where the other global challenges as climate changes, migration or pandemics prevail? Researchers still have to find answers to these questions.

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