

Minister Pär Stenbäck (Finland): LANGUAGE and CONFLICT

*Speech at the conference "Protecting Language Rights Promoting, Linguistic Pluralism"
Organized by the University of Ottawa, Official Languages and Bilingualism Institute and the
International Association of Language Commissioners, May 20-21, 2015 in Ottawa.*

Ladies and gentlemen, mesdames et messieurs

When I started to draft this contribution to the conference, I heard in the news that an American school in New York had been forced to offer an apology because it had allowed the oath of allegiance to be read in Arabic, among other languages. The protesters obviously saw the Arabic language as the language of the enemy.

A foreign language has traditionally been seen as the instrument of the oppressor, if introduced by the dominating power as way of destroying the linguistic and cultural fabric of a conquered nation. In 1916, my young mother was obliged to take 8 hours of weekly lessons in the Russian language. During the last gasps of the Russian Empire, the forceful cultural russification of Finland was intended to materialize by gradually making the Finns Russian-speakers. This policy ended in rebellion and Russian became a detested language for many generations in an independent Finland.

But the language of the colonizer or occupier is not always the symbol of resistance and repudiation. Take a look at the situation in Africa and India. English, French and Portuguese are, to a great degree, the unifying instrument of communication, both on the national level and between nations with a similar history. The linguistic reality of countries like Cameroon (270 languages), Nigeria (427 languages) or India (380 languages) have made the languages of the former masters into an instrument for cohesion and nation-building.

Do tension between languages lead to real and violent conflicts? Not being a researcher, I am not competent to offer a general theory or model of language-based conflicts; history and present societies offer a highly varied picture. I see a pattern according to which language is one factor in group conflicts, but usually not the only one. Others are ethnic ties, socio-economic status and the level of tolerance towards differing groups in a society.

Of course an oppressed language as such has explosive force and can be a dynamic factor in organizing people for resistance. However, present and pure examples worth mentioning are not too many. I can refer to the struggle of the Basque people in Spain and France; its unique language has offered a strong marker in the struggle for autonomy/independence, but there are also elements of ethnicity and territory involved.

The unfolding Ukrainian story contains a linguistic dimension: Russia claims to defend the Russian-speakers against discrimination by Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament took a rather unwise decision when abolishing Russian as an official language in the east; never mind that the President did not ratify it, it was the wrong signal. This example points at an important aspect: The absence of language rights is often used as an excuse for military intervention or other forms of aggression. The European history of the last century is brimful with examples of this. One empire, the Austrian-Hungarian, had almost broken apart before WW1 due to tensions between languages and nationalities. The Peace of Versailles aimed at creating national borders for nations with a minimum

of linguistic minorities; it utterly failed to do so. The excuse for Hitler's first invasions was the existence of German-speaking minorities in neighboring countries.

Rather daring parallels have been drawn between Hitler and Putin, based on the declared Russian policy of claiming its right to intervene if it deems that Russian-speakers are ill-handled in another independent country. This is seen as an existential threat by the three Baltic nations with their Russian minorities, two of them rather large ones. Nevertheless, after fifty years of occupation and a heavy penetration of the Russian language in all spheres of society, the Baltics have tried to compensate, declaring their three languages the official and national ones, without granting formal minority or equal status to Russian. If Russia will insist with this interventionist approach, a return to pre-war conflict models seems unavoidable and scaring.

The obvious medicine against language-based conflict is, of course, law-based rights offering equality for speakers of different languages. It is political wisdom and foresightedness to regulate such matters early, in order to prevent the outbreak of unrest and break-away policies. When this wisdom is lacking, it can have disastrous consequences; just one fairly recent example from Georgia in the Caucasus region. When achieving independence in 1991, Georgia was a classic multi-lingual country that inherited the Soviet myth of denial of nationalism among its peoples. The new-born Georgian nationalism demanded a break with the past, and the many minorities, Ossetian, Abchasian, and Armenian etc felt the pain, being denied many services in their own languages. Georgia suffered dearly for this, losing the loyalty of its minorities that became an easy prey for external propaganda and for break-away activities, supported by external intervention. Much of this could probably have been avoided by showing tolerance, supporting radio, TV and newspapers in minority languages.

Can countries with modern, well-developed language legislation avoid conflict and tension between language groups? Not always. The aspirations of a strong and self-conscious language group with far-reaching rights can see its future laying in independence or in a very high degree of autonomy. Catalonia comes to one's mind where the old language and its future is the mobilizing factor. The dominating language can, to a certain degree, appease those who demand a break-away, but today we see a revival of language-based secessionism. Scotland is not such a case, even if the past and an almost forgotten language play a role in the drive for independence. Europe offers contradictory cases: Belgium is already practically divided along language lines and political tension is present and visible. Switzerland has successfully regulated its language issue; three languages at national level, mono-language or bilingual cantons. Finland regulated its language issue when becoming independent, introducing two national languages in the constitution and left language quarrels in the 1930'ies behind it after WW2. It is well-known that when a minority population is small, it stops irritating the majority.

Language will remain a potential element in group conflicts world-wide, if the issue of language and minority rights is not taken care of in an appropriate way. Language is partly a factor in several bloody conflicts, say in Sri Lanka, Sudan or Kurdistan. Recent Moroccan policy shows preventive wisdom: Three Berber languages, or dialects, are now being recognized as minority languages, part of the cultural heritage. South Africa is a potential powder-keg with its dozen or so widely spoken languages, but it has recognized their existence and created rules for their use.

As these examples show, language strife is a factor among others leading to conflict, some of them bitter, deadly and long-lasting ones. How can we prevent language issues to become a recurrent

reason for hostilities of every kind – in a globalizing world where migration is leading to even more linguistically mixed societies?

Let me try to outline a practical toolbox combined with some central principles, based on several of these examples. I will not explain and analyze them, only expose them for further consideration.

1. Using a traditional Red Cross expression: Prevention better than cure. When hostilities flare up, it is always difficult to extinguish the fire.
2. Preaching respect for another language (and culture) is the main responsibility of all community leaders when the situation is tense.
3. Realizing that language majorities seldom, if at all, can embrace a minority language in a whole-hearted way; there will remain a silent expectation that the minority should accept the supremacy of the bigger language.
4. Political promises and goodwill is fine, but legislation is better. Even better if the relation between the languages are defined in a constitution or a Magna Charta, hard to abolish overnight.
5. Rights based on a defined territory is the strongest guarantee, hazy declarations of equality without legal repercussions for breaking language peace have no lasting value.
6. A minority needs spokesmen with gravitas among the majority, personalities who are ready to stand up against populism. Hate speech must be punished without delay.
7. If a minority is not self-sufficient when it comes to mono-lingual institutions, the state shall finance them on equal terms as enjoyed by the majority.
8. A minority without education in its own language is heading for assimilation or rebellion.
9. A language threatened with extinction or drastic decline, has the right to apply or demand extraordinary measures to safeguard its existence.
10. A minority shall have access to news and opinions in all media produced in its own country and in its own language; being dependent on information from foreign sources will lead to diminished national cohesion, perhaps secessionism.
11. Majorities must accept that devolution and autonomy is way of preserving a state, not necessarily a step towards secession.

Who is going to use this toolbox for peace between language groups and who is going to supervise that the principles are adopted by nation states around the world? There are several international and regional conventions which are integral parts of international law. They have been drafted and ratified out of a wish to safe-guard minority rights and languages. As Europe has been the scene of so many language-related conflicts in history and the European Union wishes to be seen as the promoter of soft power in the interest of peace, let us ask if the Union is a role model for the rest of the world. The preliminary answer is that EU has a weak mandate and a lack of political will when it comes to active support and defense of minority languages. For a comprehensive answer, one has look at the limitations and possibilities of European institutions.