

# A 'EUROPEAN' DICTIONARY

## Reasons and difficulties<sup>1</sup>

### **On the reasons for the European Dictionaries**

Let me start by thanking the organizers of this 6th Symposium on Eurolinguistics and, first of all, its chairman, prof. P. Sture Ureland, who invited me to speak in Mannheim, in October 2000, and in Uppsala, this 17 September 2005.

In Mannheim, at least officially, it was the first time I encountered linguistics. In fact, as you know, I am not a professional linguist, but an historian, an historian of political thought, the editor of the 'Works' of Adam Ferguson, and, while deciphering the handwriting of the man whom Marx calls 'der alte Adam', 'der Lehrer von Adam Smith', in a difficult endeavour which lasted many years, I had necessarily to confront not only English, but also a number of modern European languages, and the classics.

Nevertheless, as an historian, since the beginning of my research work, I have always tried to read the sources in their original languages. This, in fact, seems to me the only way of apprehending the spirit of the age, along with the true meaning of what the sources actually say.

To those who object to my not being a professional linguist, to my preparation in this field as being rhapsodic, non-systematical, I will answer that the great Émile Littré (1801-1881), the editor of the celebrated *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, was far from being a professional linguist, his cultural interests being primarily philosophical and philological. And a more recent editor of dictionaries, J. F. Niermeyer, the editor of the *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, in the preface to his work,<sup>2</sup> also makes it clear that he is not a professional linguist

Therefore, I conceive linguistics as a science, without doubt, but, since my cultural interests rest mainly in politics and in social matters, I obviously emphasize the role of language in the making of society and of history.

This is the meeting point, I maintain, between linguistics and social sciences, a meeting point which has led me to conceive the idea, and to jot down the project, of five 'European Dictionaries', for which I have been campaigning for a number of years, and which as *langue de départ* or, if you prefer, as *langue véhiculaire*, have the five principal European languages.

### **On the philosophical and political reasons**

When I first came across Littré's splendid dictionary, I was struck particularly by the following sentences:

"La conception (of the dictionary) m'en fut suggérée par mes études sur la vieille langue française ou langue d'oïl. Je fus frappé des liens qui unissent le français moderne au français ancien; j'aperçus tant de cas où les sens et les locutions du jour ne s'expliquent que par les sens et les locutions d'autrefois, tant d'exemples où la forme des mots n'est pas intelligible sans les formes qui ont précédé, qu'il me sembla *que la doctrine et même l'usage de la langue restent mal assis s'il ne reposent sur leur base antique*".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, delivered in Uppsala on 17 September 2007, was published in *Studies in Eurolinguistics*, edited by P. Sture Ureland, Logos Verlag (Berlin, 2010), vol. 7, pp. 177-184. It appears now in an internet edition by kind permission of the publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Second edition (Brill, Leiden-Boston 2002), preface, p. XIII: "There is no reason to apologize for the fact that a historian, who has gained some acquaintance with charters and other documents, should have ventured on this enterprise".

<sup>3</sup> Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, en 7 volumes, ré-imprimé en 1958 par Gallimard et Hachette, Préface au tome premier, p. 116. Italics mine.

I have to confess that the same mental process took place in me, many years ago, when, trying to improve my knowledge of foreign languages, of English in particular, I began to realize that, to understand that language well, first of all I must understand the etymology of each word, particularly of the Latinate ones. This is obvious for a researcher whose mother tongue is Italian, and who is supposed to have no problems with either French or Spanish, but who, no less obviously, does have problems with German and, in general, with the languages of German origin. A first conclusion to be drawn from the above is this: *It is certainly an error to suppose that we can learn European languages as they are today, without going to the sources of European civilization and of European linguistics, as is an error supposing that we can know the present without knowing the past.*

We have to start from the concept of Europe as a 'unified entity', a concept, I admit, that is *no less 'political' than historical*, if considering that, after all, in Europe there are both the Latinate culture and the Germanic one: not to take into account the Slavic one, which we are getting to know better after the fall of the walls which for so long separated peoples having a common origin and tradition. Therefore, the next point to be made is the following one: *at the beginnings of European history we must look for unity, not separation.* The elements of distinction were emphasized by Romanticism and, with a quite different aim, by Nationalism. But we are, today, in an age which can be called that of post-Enlightenment or, better, of a new, or neo-Humanism, in an age in which we do not seek any more distinctions, in which we are discovering a different concept of mankind, and are apprehending *history* no more as a limited period, from the appearance of the first written documents, as was until recently, but as having its starting point at the origin of life, from the earliest bio-chemical processes which took place in this terrestrial globe.

### **Russia and the European tradition**

In order to understand better the unity of the European tradition and of its world of learning, we should observe, for example, that Russia, as far as concerns our subject, from the fifteenth century onwards had a cultural history absolutely similar to that of Western Europe. "1685 wurde die berühmte Moskauer Slavo-Graeco-Lateinische Akademie begründet, die 'Academia Scientiarum Imperialis Petropolitana'; Publikationsorganen waren die *Commentarii* und *Acta*", as Karl Vossen puts it in his brilliant book *Mutter Latein und ihre Töchter. Europas Sprachen und ihre Herkunft*.<sup>4</sup> Later on, in the eighteenth century, Latin was displaced by French, and the 'Academia Petropolitana' became 'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Petersburg'. But the reform of the educational system at the beginning of the 19th century "gab dem klassizistischen Charakter der Ausbildung erneut Auftrieb, wobei das deutsche Gymnasium als Muster diente. So war die klassische Ausbildung zu Beginn des 20sten Jahrhunderts weit verbreitet. Tatsächlich existierte der humanistische Gymnasialunterricht bis 1917. Entsprechend gehörten Latein und Altgriechisch zur Ausstattung des gebildeten Russen".<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, as we see, the Russian educational system until 1917 was exactly the same as the educational systems of Western European nations at the same period. The outbreak of the revolution, with the explosion of irrationalism and nationalism which it caused, the fall of the Socialdemocratic Kerensky government, prevented Russia from joining the democratic sister nations of the west, and, in response to it, caused a further outbreak of nationalism and irrationalism, with consequences well known to all of us, in European history and civilization.

Although Russia was separated, for the rest of the century, from Western Europe and from America, which we can consider, and call, as no more than *Europe-Overseas*, yet its language still retains a vocabulary 20% of Latin origin. In a predictable future, through the influence of English and of European languages, this percentage will certainly expand, given the relative isolation of Russian language, also owing to the difficulty of its alphabet, and to the necessity of getting understood in a larger world.

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<sup>4</sup> Stern Verlag Jaunsen & Co, 14 Auflage 1999, *Moskau, das dritte Rom*, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Vossen, *ibid.*

## A political manifesto for Europe

It seems pointless insisting on the criticism of these pernicious phenomena of irrationalism and nationalism which, nevertheless, are a large part of human history. Nor will we emphasize the role of the *enlightened* ideas, which so often led to aberrations damaging to society and the progress of mankind, the last one being no more than the natural consequence of the advancement of learning. Emphasizing either of the two points, either *historical reasons* or *enlightened ideas*, could imply falling from Scylla into Charybdis, as Odysseus in the epic risked to do. So, for example, when the French Revolution emphasized the role of the *langue nationale*, "car on vit dans les idiomes locaux un obstacle à la propagande révolutionnaire",<sup>6</sup> and the Abbé Grégoire, on 28 May 1794, wrote the famous *Rapport sur la nécessité de détruire le patois*.

Therefore, philosophically, 'passions are the elements of life', as Pope put it, but reason is the rudder, undoubtedly.<sup>7</sup> Yet due relevance should be given to the consideration for anything is individual or particular: in a word, for what we call the *history* of mankind. This is the only way of going to the roots of our tradition, of knowing ourselves, beyond the dictates of the *abstract reason*, as the historicists and liberals used to call it. After all, as Littré wrote, "*imposer à la langue des règles tirées de la raison générale et abstraite telle que chaque époque conçoit cette raison, conduit facilement à l'arbitraire. Un dictionnaire historique coupe court à cette disposition abusive*".<sup>8</sup>

In the history of our continent we have seen the replacement of classical Latin by the dialects, shifting to national languages. These were codified by the Protestant Reformation. Hence the century of Enlightenment, having as its highest point the French Revolution and, subsequently, the reaction to it, with Romanticism and Liberalism. All these phenomena are at the roots of linguistic changes, which were the consequence of *spontaneous* movements. The difference with the present situation of Europe is that we certainly have a *spontaneous* or *natural* movement towards unification, the consequence of the new, until now unforeseen, possibility of communication among nations, produced by the technical means. Nevertheless, we have also an educational system which embraces the totality of the individuals, and renders possible a *rational* intervention, a possibility of commanding, or directing, this immense historical change, not only of European, but, increasingly, of planetary dimensions, towards its own aims, although avoiding the excesses of the "*raison générale et abstraite*."

## The world of learning

Concerning the world of learning, in apprehending the new situation, we have unfortunately to complain of delays which are the consequence of the fact that researchers work on the story of the past, often neglecting the future. Should we recall, here, the owl of Minerva in Hegel's philosophy, the owl that begins flying only at the sunset, when the events have already taken place (meaning that philosophy is the *conscience* of the past, and not an active intervention on the present)? Certainly an association of philology with history and politics is what we need, in order to understand and to foresee what, prophetically, we can call <the destiny of Europe>.

A certain consciousness of the problem is in its making, as appears from some books published in the last few years particularly in the German speaking world. So, for example, *Eurolatein*,<sup>9</sup> whose contributors wish "eine Neuorientierung des unterrichts in den klassischen, nicht *toten*, sondern höchst lebendigen Sprachen",<sup>10</sup> or a "multilinguales, paneuropäisches Lexicon, das von einem

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<sup>6</sup> See W. von Wartburg-H. E. Keller-R. Geuljans, *Bibliographie des Dictionnaires Patois Galloromans* (Genève, 1969), *Introd.*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Ep. 1, 1.170.

<sup>8</sup> Littré, *Préface au tome premier*, p. 121. Italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> H. H. Munske-A. Kirkness, Hgg., *Eurolatein. Das griechische und lateinische Erbe in den europäischen Sprachen* (Reihe Germanistische Linguistik, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1996).

<sup>10</sup> J. Volmert, 'Die Rolle griechischer und lateinischer Morpheme bei der Entstehung von Internationalismen', in *Eurolatein*, p. 233.

mehrsprachigen, internationalen und interdisziplinären Team/Kollektiv erarbeitet wird".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Mario Wandruska maintains that "das Deutsche ist durch das Lateinische .... zu einer europäischen Kultursprache geworden".<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless his book, although a brilliant literary achievement, gives no more than what we can call parallels between European languages. The *political* concept of their being a unified entity is altogether missing from it, Wandruska still being *prisoner* of the past, the product of a *Europe of Nations*, as all of us, at least of our generation, are. Nevertheless, concerning this author we willingly admit that, in conceiving a <europäische Sprachbund>, he *leaves the door open*. The world is changing, he realizes, and along with it the languages. Therefore, let everything change.

We need now to take steps forward towards the consciousness of a European linguistic unity, abandoning, at the same time, the concept of nations and of national languages, which are old fashioned, in a world so quickly changing, and which are no more than the legacy of restricted, nationalistic groups.

Our aim is cultural and, at the same time, political. It is essentially that of recovering what is possible to recover of our cultural heritage, in order to transmit it to the future generations. The philosophical premises which lead our actions, what we can call our 'mental equipment', as we have said above, is a neo-Humanism, moving from cosmopolitan ideas, with all its implications as for what concerns the life of society and the world of learning. This is our political manifesto, this is our idea of Europe, for which we have been campaigning for years, with our little journal.<sup>13</sup> These are the reasons why we have founded our own journal, and the reasons why we have conceived the idea of *European* dictionaries, whose aim is that of influencing the cultural and political life of European society, and of Western tradition.

It is now up to colleagues, to the world of learning, to the institutions, supporting our endeavour. A man, taken singularly, cannot work miracles of any kind. But we will console ourselves with the Kantian ethics of the duty for the sake of the duty, with Immanuel Kant's words, that "eine Handlung aus Pflicht hat ihren moralischen Wert nicht in der Absicht, welche dadurch erreicht werden soll, ... sondern bloß von dem Prinzip des Wollens, nach welchem die Handlung, unangesehen aller Gegenstände des Begehrensvermögens ('ability to desire'), geschehen ist".<sup>14</sup>

### **On the difficulties**

Therefore, as we have seen, there are both political and cultural reasons for the endeavour I am campaigning for.

*The political reasons.* Can we think of the European Union without this kind of dictionaries? Or shall we consider it simply as a federation of Nation-States, which will stay forever the same, similar to islands with their own boundaries, with linguistic barriers which prevent people from communicating?

The bi-lingual dictionaries are the product of a Europe of Nations, which will be soon superseded by a Europe of individuals, or of persons, which is in the making, as everybody can see, and in which will disappear any distinctions of nationalities. Anything that is national will be regarded more and more as a regional peculiarity, which will not interfere in the functioning of our common Nation-State. Nationalisms are the product of bygone ages, which no one will be able to revive, at least in a predictable future. Therefore, *the project I am proposing, of five-language dictionaries, is only a first step*, to be followed by more projects, in which will take part more national cultures, and which will be promoted by other teams of scholars.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Kirkness, 'Zur lexicographischen Dokumentation eurolateinischer Wortbildungseinheiten', in *Eurolatein*, p. 255. Nevertheless, he adds, "eine solche Polyglotte ... ist jedoch auch im neuen Europa voll noch eine Utopie".

<sup>12</sup> Mario Wandruska, *Die europäische Sprachen-gemeinschaft*, 2. Auflage (A. Francke Verlag, Tübingen und Basel, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See Frits van Holthoorn, 'The European Convention: a System for negotiations', in 2000. *The European Journal*, IV, no. 2, Dec. 2003, and 'Fortuna, Occasione, Virtù, and the European Convention', *ibid.*, V, no. 1, June 2004,

<sup>14</sup> I. Kant, *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Werke*, in sechs Bänden, hg. von Wilhel Weischadel, Bd. IV (Darmstadt 1998), S. 26; BA 14.

*The cultural reasons.* Europe is less a Babel than one could think, as history and philology demonstrate. Ours is, obviously, a language of learning, and cannot conceive of following the one thousand rivulets of the dialects and of local speeches, which are in the dominion of local communities, of local magazines and newspapers (the so-called <vulgar> element in history). The *history* of a word proves the unity of our tradition. *Etymology is the soul of a word, and of linguistics itself.*

When I first went to London, the Oxford dictionary<sup>15</sup> I bought had the etymologies, but they disappeared in later editions. More recently they have been rediscovered, all over in Europe, but I do not take for granted that this is owing more to the consciousness of the unity of our history than to the cultural industry, which makes a business in publishing bigger -and more expensive- books.

For example, the *Grande Dizionario della lingua italiana*,<sup>16</sup> which was started fifty-five years ago, has the etymologies at the end of each entry, not at the beginning. This means that the etymologies were conceived as a completion, not as a premise, of the work. But the more recent *Zanichelli etimologico* seems to be very successful in replacing, particularly in the educational system, the monolingual dictionaries of the Italian language, and this is quite promising for the project I am campaigning for.<sup>17</sup>

The *Robert de la Langue Française* does not have the Greek etymologies in Greek letters. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*,<sup>18</sup> last but one edition, did have them, and the publisher stated, in a note, that "the etymologies of all words in the body of the dictionary have been revised by Dr G. W. S. Friedrichsen..... this major undertaking represents more than eight years' work by Dr Friedrichsen". Unfortunately, they have been suppressed in the subsequent edition, to be replaced by Roman type. This means cutting the links with our past, means knowing less and less who we are, and from where we come.

The splendid *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, by contrast, does have Greek type, and this is highly gratifying for the world of learning.

Last, a few words, which should be obvious, on the difficulties of compiling the proposed dictionaries.

As for the technical difficulties, they certainly exist, but they are far from being insurmountable. For example, for the Littré "l'impression dura 13 ans, de 1859 à 1872".<sup>19</sup> Today, thanks to the computers, just a few months ago the Oxford University Press was able to publish simultaneously the sixty volumes of the new edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Therefore, a little team of scholars, led by an editor who knows, at least in part, Greek and Latin and the principal European languages, could cope with this task.

It is now up to the institutions supporting our endeavour. But the politicians are more concerned in giving money to so called 'foundations', which give very little to the world of learning, but which are led by friends who support them, than to sound endeavours. The usual battle of knowledge against ignorance, of science against superstition.

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## Abstract

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<sup>15</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, fifth edition (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964).

<sup>16</sup> UTET, Torino 1961-2002.

<sup>17</sup> The *Grande Dizionario italiano dell'uso*, in six volumes, edited by Tullio de Mauro (UTET, Torino 2000), has the etymologies at the beginning of each entry. Nevertheless, apparently there is no particular cultural or political aim in this editorial decision.

<sup>18</sup> In two vols (Oxford UP, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Littré, p. 89.

The author, an historian of political thought, makes the case for multilingual, 'European' dictionaries, which should replace the present, bi-lingual dictionaries.

He maintains that at the origin of European civilization is unity, not separation, and that separation was the product of Reformation and of Nationalism.

Nowadays 'European' dictionaries, on a rigorously historical basis, are what European Union needs, to help all of us realize the unified entity of our civilization. The etymologies, in particular, which are the 'history' and the 'life' of words, going to the roots of our history, help us understand how erroneous is thinking in terms of distinction and of separation.

Dear Francis,

I haven't heard from you for a while, certainly because, since August, you haven't come across a book, or a cutting, to submit to my attention, as you usually do, to try to improve my knowledge of English. Anyway, everything is okay, I am sure.

As for myself, I have been awfully busy, first of all writing the paper here enclosed, and which, I am sure, you will have a look at, before I deliver it to the Uppsala board for printing; and, secondly, correcting the proofs for the Ferguson book, which is finally at the printer's. I have really been in a state of hibernation for three months, and just now I begin to see my own way, reappraising the world around myself.

In the meantime I have signed the contract for a two-volume book, 'Adam Ferguson. A Reassessment', which I am editing with Eugene Heath, of the New York State University at New Paltz. The journal is also in proofs, with an article on Arpino's Cicero Certamen, by Desmond Fennell. As you see, a lot of work to do.

For the rest, three days ago Berlusconi said that he had been against the war in Irak and, with Gheddafi (!), he had tried to convince Bush and Blair (B+B+B). Yesterday he was at the White House, and declared that Bush fears the victory of the center left in Italy. The White House denied such a statement. Berlusconi said that Bush should visit Italy before the next general elections, to be held in April (to support the center-right, obviously), but I am sure that Bush will not. His advisers are not so crazy, I assume. Clearly, Berlusconi has gone to Washington to convince his friend Bush to do so. The man actually does not realize what he says, but my countrymen have abundantly realized what he is.

In August the Senate passed the law, common called salva-Previti, to prevent Previti, who was sentenced in two distinct trials in Milan, from being jailed. A couple of weeks ago the law should have been approved by the Parliament, but the revolt of the public opinion (although people are abundantly deceived by TV), convinced one of the coalition parties, the former Catholics, to demand that the passing of the law be postponed. So it has been done, but I am not sure that they will not approve it. In any case, this is 'the last straw', which will cost them dear. Although lacking a correct information, people are not so silly as to be permanently deceived. Therefore, if they pass the law, there will be a revolt of the public opinion; if they don't dare, and Previti is jailed, Berlusconi will be forced to resign before the elections.

In the meantime in Rome another, distinct trial, has been started against Previti, for bribing judges. We will see if the man will try the hand-cuffs.

Greetings to our friend Sir Bernard.

Sincerely

Rome 1-XI-2005

Dear Francis,

many thanks indeed for improving my English in the Uppsala paper.

As for Leopardi's Zibaldone, his is a great prose writing, and summarizes the 'Romantic' view of the languages, so distant from our age of 'sophisters and calculators' (Burke)! I will keep his pages on German language, to cite them in the 2006 Berlin symposium. Possibly, I should buy the Zibaldone, to have it within reach in my shelves.

In Italian newspapers I have read that 'La Sapienza' is ranked 125th among the world universities, while, as usual, at the top we find Americans and English (fine headline of a student's little magazine: 'USA al top, Italia al flop'). I see, now, that in the section 'Arts and Humanities', it is ranked 14th. Merit of '2000. The European Journal', as you suggest. And of your visit to Rome, obviously.

The two vice-principals of 'La Sapienza' have repeatedly assured me that they support my joint project with the 'Enciclopedia Italiana' but, until now, there is no news.

As for the law salva-Previti, it has been passed by the Senate, but deeply modified, and substantially ineffective. Previti protested, but the public opinion was against the law. We will see if the man tries the handcuffs (also in the name of his mentor, Berlusconi). Certainly, in the history of this country we had never seen such a dirty period. At the next elections these people will be swept away. Nevertheless, at the far left there are too many imbeciles and wretched people, who have already disgusted 'moderate' electors.

The December issue of the journal is now in proofs, and you will receive it before Christmas.

Sincerely

Rome 16-XI-2005