

On the reasons for compiling a 'European Dictionary'¹

A cosmopolitan world of learning

I am grateful to 'La Sapienza' University, where I graduated many years ago and where I spent my academic life, for inviting me to speak on the occasion of this Eurolinguistics Convegno.

For a start, I want to consider how the world - the world of learning, I mean - has been changing, in the last few decades.

If we consider the great historians of the past two or three generations, we find a very few eminent figures who were international figures with an international experience and a wide grasp of the European or Western world of learning.

I instance, to begin with, **Joseph Alois Schumpeter** (1883-1950), the Austrian-born economist, author of the *History of Economic Analysis*, who, after teaching for years in Germany, moved to the United States fleeing from Nazism. When one reads, in his masterpiece, his analysis of the writers on economics, it is astonishing to find how deeply he understands them all, the Italians included. Or take **Friedrich Augustus von Hayek** (1899-1992), also Austrian-born, who lived for many years in Great Britain and America; or **Arthur Oncken Lovejoy** (1873-1962), founder of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and author of *The Great Chain of Being*. Lovejoy was born in Berlin, and this explains the splendid cultural background of his masterpiece, deeply rooted in the European tradition. Likewise **Peter Gay** (Peter Joachim Fröhlich, also born in Berlin, in 1923), author of *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation* (1969), who shows such a thorough command of both the French and German worlds of learning. Add **Ernst Cassirer** (born in Prussia in 1874, died in America in 1945) and **Leo Strauss**, a student of his (also born in Prussia in 1899, died in America in 1973). All these authors, born in the German world, and subsequently, with many others, fleeing from the Nazi regime to the United States, became fluent in English and **wrote books in both English and German.**²

Meanwhile, many others, while enjoying an international reputation, lived their lives mainly in a national context, in the nation where they had been born, teaching and working for the cultural heritage of their own country and writing only in their mother tongue.

So for example **Mario Praz** (1896-1982), the most eminent of the teachers the present speaker had at La Sapienza, who had been for eight years lecturer in Italian at Liverpool University, and then in 1932-34 professor of Italian Studies at Victoria University, Manchester. Twice disappointed in trying to get the chair of Italian literature at Cambridge, as he recounts in his majestic autobiography, *La Casa della Vita* (1960) - in English translation *A House of Life* - he accepted the professorship at La Sapienza and remained there until his retirement, in the city that he loved and that he described in his *Panopticon Romano*. A splendid prose writer, his best known work, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (1930) - in English translation *The Romantic Agony* - enjoyed immediate international success, although, in my judgment, his *Storia della letteratura inglese* should not be neglected because of the splendour of the prose, which, in some parts, makes me think of James Boswell's rich use of the English vocabulary.

Or again, **Friedrich Meinecke** (1862-1954), the historian of ideas, who spent his life in Germany, mostly in Berlin, writing in German books whose originality was immediately recognized by the European world of learning. If I might add a personal recollection, I spent a whole summer, years ago,

¹ This paper was delivered for the ELA workshop at the Eurolinguistics Convegno held in Rome, at the University 'La Sapienza', on 19-21 April 2011.

² Excepting, apparently, Peter Gay, who emigrated to the USA at the age of 18, and was educated in American universities.

in a German library, reading his *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, his *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* and, in particular, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*, admiring his astonishing grasp of the French and Italian authors, especially when using, as his source for the Italians, the *Corso sugli scrittori politici italiani* by Giuseppe Ferrari.

Franco Venturi (1914-1994) also comes to mind. After spending his youth abroad, where his father, the art historian Lionello Venturi, lived in antifascist exile, he returned to Italy after the fall of Fascism and became a professor in Turin. In that city he spent the rest of his life, though his research work brought him frequently abroad, where he enjoyed a high reputation.

Does not belong in this category of scholars a singular figure, the Russian **Nikolaj Ottokar** (b. in Saint Petersburg in 1884, d. in Florence in 1957), Lord Rector of the University of Perm in Russia, afterwards professor of Medieval History at the University of Florence, author of outstanding studies on the history of Florence in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

But these great scholars represented an élite, an intellectual world in which, early last century, **Benedetto Croce** (1866-1952), one of the greatest European intellectuals of his own age, promoted the translation into Italian of the works of Hegel – a major event in Italian culture – and himself translated Hegel's *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften* in 1907. Such was the international web of Croce, such his cosmopolitan world, that he could dedicate his *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono* to Thomas Mann, his *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia* to Karl Vossler, his *Storia della storiografia italiana* to Eduard Fueter, his *Ultimi Saggi* to Julius von Schlosser, his *La filosofia di G. B. Vico* to Wilhelm Windelband, 'nel ricordo di quella che fu l'Università di Strasburgo negli anni che precedettero immediatamente la prima guerra mondiale' ('in the remembrance of what was the University of Strasbourg in the years that immediately preceded the First World War'); words nostalgic of a world of peace and of international cooperation in the progress of knowledge.

The previous generation and the world today

If now we revert to the generation immediately preceding our own, the generation of our teachers, in Italy and in Rome in particular, we find, for example, **Federico Chabod** (Aosta 1901-Rome 1960), who attended the seminars of Meinecke in Berlin, and **Franco Valsecchi** (1903-1991), professor of Modern History in our Faculty of Political Sciences, who spent years in Vienna, and was defined as 'storico autenticamente europeo' (an authentically European historian) and 'un credente nell'Europa' (a believer in Europe).

Both wrote in no other language than that of their own country, trying from their national observatories to understand what Europe was, and what its history was. They were themselves 'intellectual prisoners' of a Europe of nations, of a Europe of which they vaguely, often confusedly, tried to understand the history; wondering whether there had been, whether there was, or was not, a common history, or a unified entity.

For example, when reading the *Storia dell'idea d'Europa* by Chabod, one inevitably finds that that work, much praised at its appearance,³ inevitably retains the taste and limitations of its own epoch, and, I am sorry to add, it has not much to say to our contemporary readers, although its relevance in the history of historiography ranks high.

The world of learning nowadays has been rapidly changing, following the dramatic changes in the economy and communications. It is a world in which a purely national dimension is becoming more and more meaningless, while tens of millions cross the barriers every year for business, for tourism and for learning. For a researcher it is now unthinkable to spend his entire life in the country where he was born, unless he accepts a substantial provincialism, i.e., a second-hand knowledge.

³ First edition, Edizioni dell'Ateneo (Rome, 1959); see German translation as *Der Europagedanke* (Stuttgart, 1963).

But, if in the scientific field the circulation of knowledge is rapid, owing to the common vocabulary in scientific subjects (a mathematical equation is a mathematical equation whether in English, French or German, no matter), in the field of the humanities it is quite different. Languages, for example, are deeply rooted in national traditions, having been elaborated, during the centuries or the millennia by the ‘popular element’, to cite Antonio Gramsci, the theorist of Italian Marxism, or by the poets, who express in poetry the ‘popular’ feelings’, giving them a literary form. And this was particularly evident in the age of Romanticism, although, paradoxically – a paradox that should be reflected upon - it was in the age of the ‘cosmopolitan’ Enlightenment that Latin was progressively abandoned as a *lingua franca*,⁴ and the great national literatures came into their own. So, staying in the field of moral sciences, in Great Britain writers like Hume, Smith, Samuel Johnson, writing their masterpieces in their national languages, were men of the Enlightenment, while in Germany Kant, Herder, the Grimm brothers, were themselves men of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism.

European centres

In recent years many universities in our continent have opened ‘European centres’, but the problem is whether these centres are really ‘European’, or simply aim at being so. In my experience in Great Britain, for example, most teachers in these centres write in English, obviously, but only on French literature. This is much, but, in my view, not enough to be really ‘European’, since Europe, not only geographically, but also culturally, reaches the Atlantic to the Urals. It is in fact extremely difficult to command the whole of the European tradition, even if limiting ourselves to the Western part of it, where there occurred a separation between the Latin and the Germanic element: a separation that is not as wide as many seem to believe. And, as for Russia, one should not ignore that that country had a history parallel to that of Western Europe, until the outbreak of the Revolution, at the beginning of last century.

The Russian world of learning in the 17th century realized that the culture of the country must be ‘European’, for the advancement of the country towards civilization. “*In 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*.⁵

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’.⁶

⁴ Still in 1742 Francis Hutcheson published in Latin his *Philosophiae Moralis Institutio Compendiaria* and, while teaching at the university of Glasgow, it was the opinion of a former student that “he wrote and spoke, at least we thought so, better in Latin than English”, see James Moore, *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), p. 999. In Edinburgh, in Professor’s Stevenson class of Logic, in which prize essays were submitted from 1737 to 1751, about half were written in Latin, and the other half in English. Latin survived longest in the Faculty of Medicine, where theses were composed solely in that language until 1833: see D. B. Horn, *A Short History of the University of Edinburgh 1556-1889* (Edinburgh, 1967). Similarly, in Germany, “*in die Hörsäle der Universitäten drang das Deutsche erst seit 1687 durch Christian Thomasius in Leipzig. Noch bis im 19. Jh. mußten in einigen Fächern Doktordissertationen lateinisch verfaßt werden*”: see P. von Polenz, *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache* (Berlin-New York, 1978), p. 93.

⁵ Stern Verlag, Jaunssen & co (14 Auflage, 1999), ‘Moskau, das dritte Rom’, p. 207.

⁶ Vossen, *ibid.*, p. 208.

But if Russian language is discouraging to deal with for West-European scholars, the first trouble being with its Cyrillic characters, nevertheless Russia knocks at the doors of Europe, and becomes every day more and more 'European', although there are still too many barriers - the inheritance of a dark past - ,with the Western part of our continent.

The European tradition

The difficulties of commanding the whole of the European tradition, even for the greatest scholars,⁷ are obvious. Every scholar inevitably concentrates upon the tradition of his own country, where he has his cultural roots, and it is extremely difficult, for example, to write with equal adequacy in two different languages, and to know equally well two different traditions, unless they are very similar, like French, Italian and Spanish, for example, which share in common a Latinate vocabulary.

No less true is it that nowadays, within our industrial society, we have, and we can compile, instruments of consultation which help us in our endeavours. These instruments, or multilingual dictionaries, are necessary to boost consciousness of the unity of the European continent: a consciousness that is on the way, and must be recognized and supported by the world of learning.

It is a common observation that bilingual dictionaries are now becoming more and more old-fashioned in modern Europe. Ours is in fact no more a 'Europe of Nations', as the Romantics used to believe.⁸ It is substantially a unified entity, in which at least the world of learning should try to command, as far as possible, the whole of our cultural tradition.

And, in my experience as an historian of political ideas, having always tried to cite the sources from their original languages, I have particularly felt this difficulty. But I have also realized that our tradition is on the whole a common one, and it is not impossible to command the whole of it, providing one uses proper instruments of consultation.

A process of simplification and unification of European languages is in fact slowly taking place. These languages are progressively discarding words that are not shared in common, or are not mutually understandable. They are gradually adopting a vocabulary that is as common as possible to them all. In a couple of generations the vocabulary of the principal languages in Europe and the West has moved a great deal nearer to being simplified and unified. The aim of *2.000. The European Journal*, that is now in its twelfth year, is that of moving alongside these changes, observing and monitoring these tongues, simply because we are convinced that Europe has much to say in this third millennium.

Therefore, it will gradually become, and is indeed already, nonsensical to buy, say, a French-English, or a Spanish-English, dictionary. One should rather think of a *French-European Dictionary*, of a *German-European Dictionary*, and so on. We are moving towards a unification of the vocabulary of the European languages, as I have repeatedly explained,⁹ and bilingual dictionaries will become less and less useful, in the near future.

People must now realize that the concept of *national* languages is being progressively replaced by the concept of a *European* language. In this way, for example, my mother tongue, Italian, should be considered, and studied, no longer as the language of the Italian nation, but as a *European* language, in the sense that it is no more than a variant of a common tradition which, after only five centuries of separation, following the Protestant Reformation, needs now to re-unify with the rest of Europe, emphasizing what is common, and not what separates us.

⁷ Even the great Mario Praz, for example, seems to have had no substantial knowledge of the German world of learning, having concentrated upon English, Italian and French literature. Nevertheless in advancing age he had some interest in Russian language, for his *Filosofia dell'Arredamento* 2nd ed. Rome, 1964 (in English translation *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*, Thames and Hudson (London, 1984).

⁸ 'una d'arme, di lingua, d'altare/ di memorie, di sangue e di cor', with these words the Romantic poet Alessandro Manzoni defined the concept of nation in his ode 'Marzo 1821', strophe 4, lines 7-8.

⁹ See '*2000. The European Journal*', year IV, Dec. 2003; VI, Dec. 2005; VII, Dec. 2006; VIII, June 2007; IX, June 2008.

In past issues of the journal,¹⁰ - now all on the internet and therefore available to everybody - I have emphasized the role of the Latinate vocabulary in modern European languages, and particularly in the English language, which is officially classified as a Germanic language. Its vocabulary is nevertheless at least up to 70% of Latinate origin. Not that I should need to repeat, here, what I have abundantly demonstrated elsewhere. I wish just to add that, in the Hungarian Diet, as Karl Vossen writes in his *Mutter Latein*, “*im Parliament wurden die Debatten noch bis 1843 ausschließlich in Lateinischer Sprache geführt*”.¹¹

Certainly, I am an historian of political thought, and not a professional linguist. And, if I am not, ‘*je vous en demande pardon d’avance*’, *avec les paroles de mon vieil ami, Monsieur de Voltaire*.¹²

Nor was the great **Émile Littré** (1801-1881), the author of the celebrated *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, a professional linguist, his interests being primarily philosophical and philological. And a more recent editor of dictionaries, **Jan Frederik Niermeyer**, the editor of the *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, in the preface to his work, also makes it clear that he is not a professional linguist.¹³

Therefore, I am probably justified in my ambition of promoting and supporting, as much as I can, this demanding project, even though it raises some perplexity on the part of professional linguists. And I flatter myself that I am justified in this for the very reason that I have, hopefully, a comprehensive social and political idea of European history, and am moving from the cultural concept of ‘civilization’, of the advancement of learning, of what the Italians of the eighteenth century called *civilizzazione*. So, I can reassure the professional linguists, telling them that I am far from encroaching on their own territory, because, as I willingly admit, I am not sufficiently equipped to compete with their own, sophisticated analyses, my aim being a different one.

I am moving, in fact, from a comprehensive idea of European history and civilization, from a particular feeling, hopefully, of the idea, or concept, that *our* present moment needs this particular cultural achievement, also realizing that future generations, at a different stage of the advancement of civilization, will have to face different cultural needs. My point of departure is therefore different from that of the linguists, no less than my aims.

Multilingual dictionaries

When we consider the history of plurilingual dictionaries, we see that, until now, they have been mostly bilingual,¹⁴ obviously because they reflected the concept, still current but on the wane, of *nation* and of *national languages* and, consequently, that of the relations *between* nations. But we are now facing a different concept, that of Europe and of the European world of learning, *that we must consider as a unified entity, with a common history and tradition*.

During the last few decades a number of polyglot dictionaries have been compiled, but they represent only a first step, only an attempt, non-systematic and lacking a basic concept of what is needed. But their having been compiled proves, in my judgment, also the effectiveness, or validity, of my project.

They are the following ones:

- 1) *Polyglot Dictionaries based on the ‘One-Language-System’*, Otto Holtzmann Hg., vol 1, ‘General Technical Terms’ (Oldenbourg, München und Berlin, 1937);

¹⁰ See here above, note 8.

¹¹ Vossen, op. cit., p. 200.

¹² See Adam Ferguson, *Correspondence*, in two vols, edited by V. Merolle (London, 1995), I, 116, letter 72 to William Robertson.

¹³ “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”, second edition (Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2002), preface, p. XIII.

¹⁴ Merely erudite is the *Calepino*, or *Ambrosii Calepini Dictionarium Undecim Linguarum*, First edition 1502, last edition by Jacopo Facciolati, 1772.

- 2) *Elsevier's Nautical Dictionary*, Third completely revised edition English/American, French, Spanish, Dutch, German (1994); in the editions 1965-6 and 1978 Italian was comprised, but it disappeared in the 1994 edition, to be replaced by English/American;
- 3) *Harrap's 5-Language Dictionary, English-French-German-Italian-Spanish* (Harrap's Books Ltd, Bromley, Kent, 1991);
- 4) *Größes Euro Wörterbuch, Grund-Wortschatz Deutsch, English, Französisch, Italienisch, Spanisch*, in 5 Sprachen (Buch und Zeit Verlagsgesellschaft MbH, Köln);
- 5) *Europa Wörterbuch Simultan Dictionary, Deutsch English Französisch Spanish Italienisch*, Eurobooks by Lechner (Geneva, 1999);
- 6) *Visual 5-Language Dictionary, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian* (Dorling Kindersley Ltd, London 2006);
- 7) *Visual Five-Language Dictionary. English French German Spanish Italian* (Oxford UP, 2006);
- 8) Orefice Giuseppe Alberto, *The 5 Language European Dictionary*, Sperling & Kupfer (Milano, 1973; London Editions Ltd 1977, distributed by Croom Helm);
- 9) Gourseau Monique and Henry, *Six Languages Dictionary*, Mosaik Verlag (Berlin, 1993; Geocenter International as *European Dictionary*);
- 10) Last, Harper-Collins have put on the internet an online English to French-Italian-Spanish Dictionary, that seems to be the most advanced attempt towards a multilingual dictionary, although still lacking the concept of an organic, systematic project. It is, in fact, *the product of technology, not of culture*.

So, too, the Oxford University Press, that is putting on the internet its bilingual dictionaries, lacks a systematic concept, a cultural aim. But what is unsystematic is in the long run rarely successful. In a world so rapidly changing, innovation is in fact the fundamental quality in any field, in that of business no less than in that of learning. Therefore, something new should be produced, to be put on the internet, given that what we already have is neither enough nor long-lasting.¹⁵

Intellectuals authentically European

The problem now is how to train intellectuals to be authentically European. What we can do, I believe, is essentially to compile a new, systematic, fundamental instrument of consultation, in order to boost the idea of the unity of European languages and tradition, mainly in order to help the training of young generations.

Certainly, one could object that we are trying to elaborate a language of learning, while we should simply *recognize* the movements of the spontaneous, uncontrollable forces of society, and limit ourselves to record them. In sum, the learned poetry of John Milton, as against the 'popular element' of William Shakespeare.

If this is true in principle, it does not apply to my case, because, as I have said above, the process of unification of the European languages is on its way, and the instrument of consultation I am proposing to compile will be limited to the task of accompanying it, of boosting the consciousness of it: certainly, not that of creating a new, purely literary language. After all, this is self-evident, nor does it need a particular demonstration.

An appeal to the European world of learning

Certainly, with my project I have committed myself to the work of twenty men and, in some moments, I think of Samuel Johnson, who, when compiling his *Dictionary*, Lord Chesterfield having refused his

¹⁵ See furthermore *Beiks European Dictionary*, that is a combination of dictionaries, English, French, Spanish, German, without a soul, and *Eudict*, itself a collection of free online dictionaries. Last, Erhard Steller, *Wörterbuch der Europäischen Sprache* (Ex-Libris, 2010).

support, felt like ‘a man struggling for life in the water’. My first submissions to publishers have in fact been fruitless, on the ground of the difficulties of the market, also alleging the economic recession, and so on. The internet is furthermore a severe competitor, and many publishers, instead of planning new productions, are simply putting on the internet what they already have, it being considered risky to undertake investments that promise an uncertain return.

At the same time, I receive from distinguished colleagues the exhortation to go on, along with their commitment to provide their help and advice, while the so-called institutions stay idle, and mostly squander enormous sums for useless purposes. But the battle becomes more exciting now, in a moment of difficulty, in which I feel called to demonstrate the validity of my endeavour.

Particular dictionaries, like the great literary works, mark in fact a distinctive, turning point, in the history of civilization, and represent the end of a period and the beginning of a new one. So Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary* for English, so the Grimm brothers’ *Wörterbuch* for German, and so on. And, no doubt, we are at a turning point, at an historical moment that represents in Europe the substantial disappearance of the idea of ‘national’ states, of national ‘traditions’, which are being replaced by the idea of *European* civilization.

Some colleagues and, with more reasons some publishers, fear that I am conceiving a purely academic product, i.e., from a commercial point of view, something that cannot really conquer the world of learning at large, and risks to remain on the shelves of libraries. Must I repeat that I cannot, and do not want, to compete with the great Émile Littré, with the Grimm brothers, or even with the too often neglected, but splendid, eight-volume *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* by **Niccolò Tommaseo** (1802-1874)? That I am not equipped for such a kind of work, and am not aiming at such a work? The part that I have compiled up till now - about 20%¹⁶ of the total - proves, on the contrary, that I am working for something that aims at influencing civilization, and not just a limited number of scholars: something that should certainly stay on the shelves, but of any educated person, students, teachers, knowledgeable people. Whether I will succeed or not remains *in mente Dei*, in the mind of God, it being difficult to predict what will happen in the future, and it being impossible that one man can perform the work of a team of scholars. But the progress of learning, the progress of mankind, is something in which I deeply believe, something that is worth all our efforts, something that helps us avoid what Immanuel Kant called “the natural laziness of mankind”.

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Summary

The author, an historian of political ideas, makes the case for polyglot, five-language dictionaries, which, he believes, must help in the formation of the European cultural union that is on its way.

He observes that European languages are slowly unifying, this being a *necessary* process, and maintains that it is up to the world of learning to accompany it. While, in fact, early last century international experience was limited to a small number of great intellectuals, nowadays it is the common destiny of many scholars, and the necessity of having proper instruments of consultation and of education, such as multilingual dictionaries, -in a world in which English has replaced French, as French in its turn had replaced Latin as lingua franca,- appears more and more evident.

¹⁶ See on the internet, under *European Dictionary*.

The author ends by making an appeal to the European world of learning, to colleagues and to institutions, to join him in his efforts towards the compilation of the first of these polyglot dictionaries, -the one on the basis of English as *langue de départ*- it being impossible for one man to perform the work of twenty men.