

Guy Berg

Active multilingualism in Luxembourg The use of languages in a stable polyglossic economy

Abstract: Aktiv Méisproochegkeet zu Lëtzebuerg. De Sproochgebrauch an enger stabiler polyglosser Economie

Mat senge ronn 480.000 Awunner gehéiert d'Groussherzogtum Lëtzebuerg zu deene klengsten nationalen Economien an Europa an ass déi Economie mat dem héichsten Undeel un Auslänner (43%). Donieft ginn ca. 40% vun allen Aarbechtsplazen am Land vu Frontalieren besat, déi Dag fir Dag aus Frankräich, der Belsch an Däitschland an d'Land erapendelen.

Déi lëtzebuergesch Economie gëtt charakteriséiert vun enger aktiver Méisproochegkeet an engem komplexe sozialen Ëmfeld.

D'Basis vun dëser sproochlecher Diversitéit läit an der traditioneller an institutionaliséierter Triglossie, déi tëschent Lëtzebuergesch, Franséisch an Däitsch besteet, an déi ënnert anerem och an der Schoul enseignéiert gëtt.

Déi wirtschaftlech a sproochlech Diversitéit vum Land ass net d'Resultat vun der moderner Globaliséierung, mee geet zeréck op politesch Entwécklungen am 19. Joerhonnert, wéi déi héréditéiert territorial Méisproochegkeet ersat gouf duerch eng gewollten institutionell Méisproochegkeet. Duerno hunn italesch, an nach méi spéit portugisesch Immigranten weider Sproochen an d'Land bruecht.

Déi jonk national Economie wor vun Ufank un op auslännescht Kapital ugewisen, a laang Joerzénge iwwer huet déi dominant Sidérgie si an en enke monolithesche Corset gedréckt. An der Zäit nom Zweete Weltkrich konnt d'Economie sech méi a méi diversifiéieren, absëns duerch d'Installatioun vun US-amerikaneschen Entrepenen an duerch den Opbau vun der Banken- a Finanzplaz Lëtzebuerg.

Weinst der geographescher Lag vum Land op der Intersection tëschent dem germaneschen an dem romanesche Kulturraum an domat tëschent zwee enorme Wirtschaftsraim gëtt eng aktiv Méisproochegkeet vu quasi allen Acteuren als Viraussetzung fir all Zort vun Activitéite betruucht.

Nieft den dräi traditionelle Sprooche vum Land huet och Englesch a bestëmmte Secteuren, wéi dem Finanzsektor, eng dominant Positioun. Am Einzelhandel dominéiert Franséisch, en Ëmstand, dee vun der autochtoner Populatioun ëmmer erëm kritiséiert gëtt.

Eng offiziell Sproochereguléierung gëtt et zu Lëtzebuerg net, grad esou wéineg wéi speziell Richtlinien iwwer de Gebrauch vun de Sproochen oder aner legal Dispositiounen. Och d'Sproochegesetz aus dem Joer 1984 mecht do keng Exceptioun; mat him gëtt déi traditionell a gewuessen Triglossie vum Land confirméiert.

D'Erfahrung huet gewisen datt d'Feele vu legalen Dispositiounen a Moosnamen der wirtschaftlecher Diversifizéierung zegutt kënn an d'Economie stäerkt. Grad esou ass op sproochlech Plang erwise datt dës laang an intensiv Sproochekontakt-Situatioun net dozou féiert, datt eng vun de concernéierte Sproochen eliminéiert gëtt, mee datt si am Géigendeel vu groussen Notzen ass fir déi nach jonk Nationalsprooch Lëtzebuergesch.

The sociolinguistic and economic realities of Luxembourg can be roughly described in a few key statistics: some 480,000 people of all nationalities are living on a territory of 2,586 square km. The capital, Luxembourg City, accounts for some 86,000 inhabitants, and is the country's greatest agglomeration. Luxembourg is one of Europe's small-

est economies and the one with the highest percentage of foreigners (43%). The most important group of foreigners is that of Portuguese immigrants, with 17.7%. The country's labour market is characterised by an extremely high number of cross-border workers (120,000), coming in day by day from France, Belgium and Germany. These cross-border workers hold 40% of all jobs. The large employers are – apart from the financial institutions – groups with Luxembourgish roots, such as the steel group *Arce-lorMittal*, the air-carrier *Cargolux*, the media groups *RTL* and *SES Astra*, together with American firms like *Good Year* and *DuPont de Nemours*, as well as various retail groups from Luxembourg, France, Belgium and Germany.

Luxembourg's economic diversity is strongly encouraged by the government, and is accompanied by an active multilingualism embedded in a complex social context. The basis of this linguistic diversity is founded on the traditional, stable and institutionalised triglossia that exists between Luxembourgish, French and German. Within this triglossic situation, Luxembourgish functions as the national language, and is spoken by the native Luxembourgers in everyday life as the common language for all purposes. It is complemented in most public areas by French and German as the written languages. In economic affairs, this triglossia is becoming broadened out further by the use of English and, to a certain extent, Portuguese.

Children become familiarised with Luxembourgish not only at home, but also through early-schooling programmes. Socialisation comes later, in primary school, where they learn to read and write in German. Education in French starts with the second year of primary school. Luxembourgish is also taught, but in a less formal manner. English can be added as a fourth language, but only at secondary level. Furthermore, most secondary schools also offer Italian, Spanish, and sometimes Russian.

This collective and institutionalised multilingualism, actively promoted by school education, may be considered as one of the reasons for the stability and constancy of Luxembourgish society, which is a society unfronced by xenophobia, social conflicts and social exclusion, despite the high percentage of foreigners. Multilingualism may also be considered as one of the reasons for the rapid and dynamic growth of the country's economy. The economic and linguistic diversity of the country is, indeed, not a result of modern globalisation, but goes back to political developments in the early nineteenth century.

It was at the beginning of post-Napoleonic Europe at the Vienna Congress of 1815 that the Duchy of Luxembourg was reinvented as a 'Grand Duchy'. Its territory consisted of the possessions of the medieval Duchy, but without various eastern parts that were ceded to Prussia. The traditional division of Luxembourg into a French-speaking part in the west (the so-called *quartier wallon*) and a German- or Germanic-speaking part in the east (the so-called *quartier allemand*) was inherited by the new Grand Duchy. Administration was carried out in both these languages, but Luxembourgish itself did not figure at all in official life.

Throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, Luxembourg worked hard to build up its political and economic independency. The young economy, with its dominating

agricultural sector, was highly dependent on foreign money. The first banking institutions were established with money that came in from Germany and Belgium, while the first railways were owned by French companies.

Luxembourg, the capital city, was a military fortress held by the Prussians, while at the same time the rest of the Grand Duchy was linked to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, held in personal union by its king, who was also the Grand Duke of Luxembourg. The basis of the modern parliamentary monarchy was founded in 1848, when the country received its first Constitution. The languages used in Parliament were French and German – as opposed to the Luxembourgish and French of today.

The partitioning of the country in 1839 made Luxembourg lose all its French-speaking territories. These were ceded to Belgium, leaving the remaining territories to correspond more or less to the former *quartier allemand*. From that moment on, the Grand Duchy was diglossic, with Luxembourgish and German as its languages. The country, however, did persist with its traditional trilingualism, although the use of French was no longer a necessity, but rather the expression of a deliberate political choice. In a word, territorial multilingualism came to be replaced by institutional multilingualism. The Education Act, which was passed in 1912, contributed to the further fostering of trilingual and triglossic education in primary and secondary schools.

Growing political independency led to growing economic diversification, dominated by a flourishing and prosperous steel industry. The constant increase of production generated strong internal migrations to the steel-mills in the south of the Grand Duchy, followed by waves of immigration from Italy, and later on from Portugal. Linguistic integration took place, and is still taking place, in Luxembourgish and French.

The early twentieth century is marked by the country's joining up with international structures, such as UEBL, the trading union with Belgium, and BENELUX, the economic union with Belgium and the Netherlands.

Following the Second World War, Luxembourg became one of the founder-members of the United Nations and of the European Economic Community, the latter of which in 1952 established its head-quarters in Luxembourg City. Although the European Commission later left Luxembourg for Brussels, Luxembourg has remained the seat of powerful European institutions, among which are the European Court of Justice, the European Court of Auditors, the Secretariat-General of the European Parliament, the European Investment Bank, and the European Statistics Office. All these institutions offer some 8,000 jobs, which are held by nationals from all the 27 member-states of the European Union.

The growing international dimension of the tiny national economy is fully backed up by the Government, and has led to the establishment of international groups and of electronic service-providers such as *Google*, *Yahoo*, *Apple* and *Amazon*, for which Luxembourg is head-quarters to their European business. The targeted consolidation of Luxembourg as a financial centre with more than 80,000 jobs has completed this development.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, Luxembourg appears to be an open-minded and cosmopolitical economy, characterised by intense international business links, contact with which is not bound by any official language regulation, but free to operate in the language or languages of its choice.

Because of the country's geographical position at the intersection of Germanic and Romance cultures, and thus between two enormous retail markets, active multilingualism is considered by almost all economic operators to be a precondition for any activity.

Traditional triglossia still dominates in the national administration. Most official bodies can be seen as protected sectors, inasmuch as jobs there depend on the ability to speak and write the three languages, Luxembourgish, French and German.

A general differentiation between the oral and written use of language is helpful for understanding the linguistic particularities of the country. Native Luxembourgers use only Luxembourgish for oral communication, as this is their mother tongue. The last three decades have additionally seen the development of a strong tendency to use Luxembourgish also in written communication, instead of French or German. Government bodies, retail-banking institutions, insurance companies, and other service-providers use French or German as their written languages, as well as sometimes Luxembourgish, depending on the wishes of the customer, whereas oral communication normally takes place in Luxembourgish.

The preference of the big economic operators is for French and English, the internationally used languages, since the tiny home-market is very largely dependent on export business. Small and medium enterprises by contrast, whose customers are often local residents, prefer the traditional languages of the country.

Actually, language-choice in a precise economic language contact environment depends to a large extent on the type of contact and interaction inside the enterprise or institution, as well as between these and their customers. If the owner of the enterprise is a native Luxembourger, French, Belgian, or Portuguese, then internal correspondence and correspondence with his customers will be in French. The oral languages will most likely be French and Luxembourgish. If the owner is German, internal correspondence and correspondence with customers will probably be in German. Spoken languages will be German, Luxembourgish and French.

In hotels, restaurants and pubs, the most commonly used language is French. French, German, and Belgian supermarket retailers in Luxembourg behave as though the country is simply French-German bilingual. Product information in shops is in French, or in French and German. This is true also of advertising.

Commercial advertising in national TV-broadcasting is carried out almost exclusively in Luxembourgish, sometimes in French, in national radio-broadcasting only in Luxembourgish. Newspaper advertising is done in all three languages, occasionally also in English. Advertising by posted leaflet is done usually in French and German.

Active multilingualism is considered by all economic operators as a precondition for any activity. Multilingualism is one of the reasons why foreign operators establish

themselves in Luxembourg. In this border region between Romance and Germanic cultures, the knowledge of both French and German is a vital necessity to many economic operators, who must be able to satisfy their French-speaking as well as their German-speaking customers.

The need to know three or more languages is clearly reflected in newspaper job advertisements. These advertisements are published in French, German, Luxembourgish, or English. The language chosen for the advertisement provides a tacit preselection of possible applicants. Job descriptions normally ask for knowledge of the three languages of the country, plus English. More unusual language-profiles, such as Dutch, Danish, Italian and others, also appear.

This linguistic diversity has proven itself to be rather uncomplicated in everyday life. However, in retail sectors such as supermarkets, shops and restaurants, the dominant position of French currently comes in for criticism, as many native Luxembourgers are annoyed at not being able to order a product in their mother tongue, but instead being forced to order in French.

Despite some criticism, the government has never seen any need for language-regulation in economic affairs. No official language-regulation exists, nor are there any guidelines as to language-use, or any compulsory legislation. There are no prescriptions or codes of conduct concerning the use of one or more languages, neither for the internal management of an enterprise, nor for any external contacts with other economic operators, or with customers.

The Languages Act, which dates from 1984, simply confirms the country's traditional triglossia. It defines Luxembourgish as the national language of the Luxembourgers and enshrines the use of French and German in State administration. Language-use in affairs of the economy is not, however, affected by this Act.

In conclusion, I would say that this government reluctance in language matters does not come about by omission, but rather by purpose. The country's economic prosperity is partially due to this common and unregulated active multilingualism, which gives all economic operators the possibility of flexible, diversified and cross-border development.

The experience of the last two centuries has shown that the absence of any language-guiding measures fosters economic development and diversification and supports the welfare of the whole economy. There is evidence also that this intense and long-term situation of language contact does not lead necessarily to the exclusion of any of the languages concerned. The Luxembourgish triglossia model proves instead to be highly beneficial to Luxembourgish, which is the young national language of the Grand Duchy. Today Luxembourgish is as vital and productive as it was never before – despite, or rather thanks, to the multilingualism that surrounds it.