

In the air

# O Solitude, white mother

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Since 1st May, the citizens of the European Union speak 21 official languages: eighteen Indo-European, including Anglo-Saxon, Baltic, Germanic-Scandinavian, Romance and Slavonic, two Finno-Ugric and Maltese, which has Arabic origins.

In addition, the 3.9 million km2 of our European Babel resound to hundreds of other languages and dialects, non-official but none the less thriving; the sociolects that characterise the background or social status of their speakers; the technical jargon spoken by different trades and professions; the special languages that develop within families and couples, based on shared experience and private mythology; and of course 455 million idiolects, the personal form of speech unique to each human being.

The European Union may (perhaps, one day) speak with one political voice, but the voices of its citizens will never lose the diversity that is both a huge chest of cultural treasure and a Pandora's Box of potential misunderstanding.

The enlargement is a great linguistic adventure for everyone concerned.

For us, denizens of the „old“ EU lands and tongues, there is the excitement and pleasure of discovering the unfamiliar, often unique, characters of the new languages, or the poetry, say, of the names of the months in Czech (January: month of ice, September, month of leaf-fall); the new authors and poets whose works should soon (we hope) begin appearing in our bookshops; the sound of new languages in the streets – and new variants of the vehicular languages (French, German and of course, English), as the new Europeans speak them with their own particular linguistic habits.

The adventure is different, surely greater, for the people who will be leaving home to make their life in other countries and above all, in other languages.

For someone who has never done it, it must be hard to imagine the difficulty involved in abandoning your own language and trying to settle down in someone else's. Luxemburgers, of course, who from childhood on are constantly called upon to speak and write not just their mother tongue but at least two other languages as well, have more understanding than most of what it feels like.

But it is hard to exaggerate the differ-

ence between living in your mother tongue and living in an adopted language, even if you speak it „like a native“. I'm tempted to say – though it sounds melodramatic – that a mother tongue is like freedom: you only appreciate its importance once you no longer have the use of it.

I've often wondered what it means psychologically that there are many more „fatherlands“ than „motherlands“, while – as far as I know anyway – there are only „mother tongues“, no „father tongues“.

I think it is easier to leave your country than your language: after all, the language you speak is at the heart of your identity. When you live in a language that is not your mother tongue, your identity changes – in some cases you may lose it altogether.

I moved to Luxembourg and stopped living in English a quarter of a century ago.

Luxembourg has become my home, but English is – always will be – my linguistic home, my mother tongue, the language I know from the inside, in which I am certain of what is „right“ and what isn't – the words I use to describe to myself the world about me, to tell myself the ongoing story of my life.

And yet during the years away, your version of your mother tongue no longer follows the day-to-day evolution of the language in its home environment. There are things you don't understand reading the newspapers or talking to family and friends: phrases from „soap operas“, things said by the celebrities my compatriots seem obsessed with, slogans from current advertisements – plus all the other things that form the common ground for communication in a society – are absorbed by the language. Your own language evolves differently: it is exposed to other influences – not least the language(s) you live in – and becomes less rooted in daily life, more abstract – more idiosyncratic, as you mostly speak it alone in interior conversations or solitary musings.

Lettres et terminaisons permettant d'identifier les nouvelles langues  
Degré d'utilité

LANGUE	Lettre/terminaison	Utilité	Remarque
EUROPEENNE	FRONTIERES: Da, Da, Na/Ne, Za/Za à Oa	3	Préfixes très caractéristiques des langues slaves
EUROPEENNE	LETTRE L	1	Lettre unique au polonais
	LETTRE W	3	Lettre très caractéristique en polonais; permet de distinguer des autres langues slaves
	Groupe de lettres en, n, h, m	2	Groupe très fréquent en polonais
	Terminaison OW	3	Terminaison caractéristique en polonais
	Terminaison g	3	Fort indicateur de polonais mais existe également en lituanien
	Terminaison -GG	2	Terminaison qui n'existe pas sous cette forme dans les autres langues slaves
EUROPEENNE	LETTRES Š & Ź	1	Lettres caractéristiques du tchèque
	LETTRE H	3	L'absence de h et la (grande) absence de g suggèrent un autre en tchèque ou slovaque
	Terminaison HD	3	Terminaison caractéristique qui permet, d'ailleurs, de distinguer du slovaque -áda
EUROPEENNE			Le slovaque ne dispose d'aucun caractère spécifique
	LETTRE Ľ	3	Caractéristique propre au slovaque et à l'absence également dans les autres langues slaves
	LETTRE Á	3	N'existe pas dans les autres langues slaves mais caractéristique en allemand, en hongrois
	LETTRE Ö	3	Existe en français et en portugais; peut se rencontrer au slovène dans des dialectes, d'autres voyelles que le Ö peuvent pointer l'origine croato-slave
	LETTRE Ć	3	Voyelle tchèque et slovaque
	Terminaison -HD	2	Terminaison caractéristique qui permet, d'ailleurs, de distinguer du tchèque -áda
EUROPEENNE	LETTRES V & G	3	Multifonctionnelles, le slovène n'a pas de caractère qui lui soit propre. Une Ź et la terminaison -GG sont caractéristiques de l'italien

When you live in a foreign language you live differently. The way you react to what other people say is less spontaneous because it has to be processed by the brain and your answer may need thinking about. How you perceive others is doubtless less complete, as it is harder to identify their background and to appreciate what it is in their language (the images they use, their vocabulary ...) that makes them unique as human beings – the famous sociolect and idiolect.

For the same reasons, the reverse is true: it is harder for others to perceive you in the complete, immediate way another native speaker could; in a foreign language, you often have to fall back on words that convey more or less what you want to say instead of the mot juste (!) you would use in your mother tongue to express yourself (your self) more exactly. In your own language you can run and jump and play games whereas in another language, even if you are able to run, you are always aware that you may trip or fall. And if you are hesitant or slow or stumble over a word, not everyone in our fast-living society remains patient ...

I wonder how many of the 455 million Europeans live, or will live, in a language they do not consider as their mother tongue, including those who have to speak the language of their country rather than their region; how many Europeans are emigrants from their linguistic home...

And what has „O Solitude, white mother“ got to do with all that? Nothing really: „solitude“ and „mother“ were simply the first two words I came across in Lithuanian and Baltic means „white“. The resulting phrase just took root in my mind and began to grow flowers and leaves.

Yet somehow it feels relevant ...