

Language: our past and our future. Considerations about Italian language in today's multiculturalism

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I am really honoured to take part in this important edition of IFLA World Congress about “Libraries [that] create future: building on cultural heritage”, which takes place in Italy again after forty years. I do hope that such an internationally relevant event can give a significant contribution in stimulating and disseminating a greater sensitivity and awareness in our Country for this cultural heritage, which is so rich, articulated and multilayered from both a chronological and regional point of view.

My job deals with words: spoken words, written words, transmitted and typed words. Words of yesterday and of today. I think I am not wrong when I say that my job is a very topical one, since communication is so central in today's world. And I mean verbal communication above all. Even if not everybody agrees, because most people think that images – so concise and immediate - have a greater impressive power and therefore represent in a more efficient way the fast processes which characterize our times.

An eminent colleague of mine, Gian Luigi Beccaria of the University of Torino, has recently written a little book with the title “Elogio della lentezza” (which we could translate in English as “Praise of slowness”). This means no other thing than a praise of reading. Reading enables each of us to choose the ways and times we prefer to enter the written word, and enter it more or less profoundly, according to our interests, culture and the rapport we want or can establish with the author. “In the age of prevailing speed and simultaneity, with the slow and distancing hesitation of reading, the reader's critical, civil, rational consciousness is still awakened by past and present words. They enable the reader to move away from immediateness, to express judgements about the world, to recognize the

movement of things.” When we talk about books engendering freedom, we surely mean that, too. Maybe especially that.

Up to a century ago, the history of Italian language can be considered essentially the history of a written language, and therefore a history made of books. Then everything changed. The political, economic and social transformations of the Country, from the Unity throughout the 20th century, were very significant and had deep consequences on the national language. From a language of books, spoken by a small minority (in 1861 about 10% of the population) Italian became, though quite late, the language spoken by over the 90% of Italians. The process of italianization evolved in different times, forms and ways, mostly spontaneously, caused by huge extra-linguistic factors. Political unity led indeed to the creation of a single centralized army, administration and school. That caused the unprecedented need for people who had lived in this land for centuries of using a single common language in order to communicate. This need was urged also by the industrialization and the migrations it gave birth to: millions of Italians moved from the country and the mountains to urban areas, and from the south to the north of the Country. Migration towards foreign countries brought about 30 millions of dialect speakers out of our borders from 1880 and 1910. Later on, mass media such as radio, cinema and television put in contact an ever-growing number of Italians, mostly dialect speakers, with a spoken Italian language which they assimilated more or less superficially.

In any case, Italy was and remains a typically multilingual Country. Even today over 30% of the population uses dialect as a habit, both at home and at work. We must add a 5% of immigrants, people coming from 180 different countries from all over the world, who brought here their language; and a further similar percentage of alloglot speakers (from Greece, Albania, Germany, Provence, Franco-Provençal areas, France and Catalonia) who are

historical minorities living in Italy for centuries. In this linguistically fragmented landscape, we can trace two well defined and clearly contrasting trends: one leading to the centre, the other distancing from it. On the one hand, our linguistic history is multicentric (that's why we talk of the “Italy of a hundred cities”): dialects are not only languages spoken everyday by millions of people, but were and still are living expressions of eminent literary traditions. In Milan – let me recall this very reference – we space from Bonvesin da la Riva to Carlo Porta and Delio Tessa, to the many poets such as Franco Loi who in the 20th century preferred Milanese dialect to Italian, judging it more suitable for the expressive experimentation they were looking for. But it is from the beginning of the 14th century (here is the other trend) that Dante showed an extraordinary metalinguistic, and prophetic ability as well, by stating in his *De vulgari eloquentia* that Italy would reach a linguistic unity only if intellectuals really wanted it. He was speaking of a noble literary vulgar Italian, created by poets and writers, foundation of every other vulgar Italian, a refined written language which could also be used in politics (in the *aula* “reggia”) and for justice (in the *curia* “alto tribunale”). Dante himself, as everybody knows, gave an authoritative contribution to the creation of a unifying linguistic model by writing the *Commedia*, soon admired and imitated all over Italy. Levelling trends among the many different municipal varieties came pressingly into view in the 15th century, with the developments of the typically regional courtly seignior society, which had national and international communicative needs as well. In the 15th century, well ahead of his time, the great humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote the first European systematic grammar of a vulgar Italian language, the *Grammatichetta Vaticana*, to demonstrate the equal structural dignity of his mother tongue and Latin. In the 16th century, ideal reasons and material needs related to book printing and diffusion finally led to the coding of a written literary Italian, unitary and homogeneous, easy to imitate and reproduce because of its

metahistorical qualities. It was indeed founded on a language born two centuries earlier, the fourteenth-century Florentine used by Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio. This was the winning model followed by Bembo. The *Vocabolario della Crusca*, first published in 1612, partly corrected this rigidly archaic formulation, which was distant from the movement of the present, and opened itself to sixteenth-century Florentine. The *Vocabolario* has therefore a fundamental importance in Italian linguistic history, because it was an instrument of identity, a deposit and therefore a treasure of language and at the same time a powerful engine of a unifying process destined to last in time. We owe especially to the *Vocabolario* the creation and diffusion of an umbrella-language, Italian as a national language, which precedes by far the creation of Italy as a single political State. It was an umbrella-language above the many varieties which kept (and still are) being used for centuries with different social and cultural communicative functions.

In our Academy, in the Library, there is a collection of great symbolic value. Its name is *Fondo dei citati*. It is made of all the books that through the centuries the Members of the Accademia della Crusca thought worthy of quotation in the 5 editions of their *Vocabolario* (1612-1923). In these books, closed in our shelves, a great part of Italian language (from the 14th to the beginning of the 20th century) is preserved. A unique and precious collection which we recently could better exploit thanks to the funds of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MIBAC). Italian is, like all other languages in the world, an important cultural good, an immaterial good, diffusely widespread among all those who speak it and write it. From its words, but also in its grammatical peculiarities, we can deduce and trace the history of Italian people, who for generations lived in this peninsula; the contacts they had with other populations and other cultures; their ability to impose their language and culture abroad, beyond the Alps and the

Mediterranean. Italian is a language which for centuries has been influenced by Latin, as its grammar shows with clear evidence. We can recall for instance the free position a word can take in a sentence, or the fact that a subject is not obligatory, or again the existence of particularly complex expressions from a morphological point of view (we just have to think to the verbal system or to the pronouns, which are becoming simpler only today). The presence of gallicisms, then, just to make another example concerning the vocabulary, is particularly rich in Italian, and it is due to an almost continuous relationship with French language and culture from the Middle Ages to the 20th century: we go from words like *gioia* and *cavaliere* to *democrazia* and *libertà*. The Accademia has recently published a *Dictionary of Italianisms in French, English and German*, written by a group of scholars coordinated by the German member Harro Stammerjohann. In this study they could trace more than 4400 Italianisms in these languages, from *bravo* to *piazza*, from *balcone* to *sonetto*, from *adagio* to *ciao*. Architectural, musical, scientific, literary terms, but also words coming from everyday behaviour. There is then a greek- and latin-based European intellectual vocabulary which was widely nourished by Italian language, especially during the Renaissance, functioning as a bridge between antiquity and modern age. Languages are therefore immaterial goods which left traces well beyond their own borders!

Italian, though, is not just an immaterial cultural good due to its long history as a (mainly written) language; it is also a material cultural good because we can easily and tangibly find it just by taking in our hands and turning over the pages of its books, especially some fundamental ones such as Dante's *Commedia*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Over 80% of the basic Italian words of our days significantly coincides with that of the Three Crowns. Italian has an extraordinary continuity and profundity in time which derives from its history. But then there are all the

other books gathered and preserved in the Fondo dei citati in the Crusca Library, which enriched the language during centuries and entered the *Vocabolario*, though “by pieces”, quotations and examples. We can therefore, so to say, materially touch Italian language, taking in our hands, turning the pages of and now even interrogating (thanks to the digitalization we made) the *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca*. We can walk through its pages and lemmatized words as if in a “language gallery” similar to the Uffizi (this striking image comes from my Teacher Giovanni Nencioni). The *Vocabolario* was a treasure and a prescriptive source *par excellence*, challenged by many, but kept on the desk and really used for centuries by all those who could write in Italy.

Today even Italian entered the “language tempest” caused by globalization, as my predecessor Francesco Sabatini defined it, and must face new challenges, the competition of other languages and more in general multiculturalism, which requires above all self-protection and openness towards the Other as well. Europe is very engaged in this direction because it considers multilingualism as a funding element of its own identity, coherently with the principles of its constitutive treaties. This implies that every European State must preserve its language and make it well known within and without its borders, by promoting individual plurilingualism especially at school but also in life-long learning programmes, and by requesting from every citizen the knowledge of at least three European languages.

Last May, during an International Congress about European Languages organized in Florence by the Accademia della Crusca, the European Commissioner for multilingualism Leonard Orban and the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf (President of the commission nominated by Orban and created to trace some Guidelines for the future European linguistic policy) reaffirmed that all our languages constitute a great

common heritage which has to be preserved in its whole. The Maalouf Report is significantly entitled “A rewarding challenge. How the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe” and expresses a clearly non-hierarchical vision of all European languages, a vision destined to open new real perspectives towards their substantial (and therefore not only ideal) equality. It is a very relevant document, whose timeliness is greater if we think that nowadays in our continent, for different reasons, some languages tend to extend their power on the others, in evident contrast with the principle of *unity in diversity* which inspires the building of the common European house. We risk that some languages progressively lose their superior functions, related to scientific research, literary expression, academic teaching. In this project meant to improve multilingualism and multiculturalism, which are part of its history, Europe presents itself as a model and a unique example worldwide.

Languages, as past and present experiences teach us, can dramatically separate populations if we consider them as closed monolithic expressions of identity, and they can also become powerful aggressive instruments of rejection of the Other. But languages can also unite different populations, especially if we consider them as parts of a multiple linguistic competence, essential elements of knowledge of our conversation partner, and useful bridges for the intercultural dialogue which we all invoke, but which is still far from being accomplished. The challenge of European multilingualism is a challenge of peace, an opportunity for all people. In the Maalouf Report we read comforting words: “The European Union [and I am quoting] has already committed itself to building up a knowledge-based society, which is diverse and harmonious, competitive and internationally outward-looking, and to promote the knowledge of languages; it has amongst other things expressed the wish that two foreign languages be taught in every country at as early an age as possible. Within this

perspective, our reflection group aimed at an approach which would take account of the complexity of the language issue at the start of the 21st century”. The proposal made by the Maalouf Report [end of quote] (which can be read also on the website of the Accademia della Crusca, at www.accademiadellacrusca.it) has therefore a great ideal value, but at the same time is very precise and tangible. Every European citizen should know three languages: his/her mother tongue, a safe harbour facing the changing world, but also a “secretary” language, somehow an essential *lingua franca* able to guarantee a communication overcoming differences (a role which now can be only performed by the English language) and finally a personal adoptive language, a “bride” language, which can be any language (English included, of course), which everybody decides to choose, know, adopt, marry and love profoundly. Only in this way, by recognizing the statute of languages not as simple means of communication but as cultural goods, as identity cards of persons and populations, as different ways of knowing and analyzing reality, can we avoid the risks of an excessively simplifying monocultural homologation disrespectful of history. In the Accademia website we wrote “language is our history, our future”. A significant coincidence, if we consider the theme of this congress. We have no need to insist too much, especially here, on the idea that we can't reach a deep knowledge of a language without the books which express its highest functions, those of science, philosophy, poetry. Libraries as barns, someone said at the presentation of this Congress. Languages can therefore be considered as our bread: all the Crusca symbology, from its very name (meaning “bran”) to the “pale” (wooden shovels) of the Academicians, to its emblem, the “frullone” (the vessel used to separate superfine flour from bran), its motto “il più bel fior ne coglie” (“she gathers the fairest flower”), is evidently related to the theme of bread. I am therefore pleased to finish my presentation by showing you some images of the Accademia as a hearty invitation to come and visit us in our beautiful Florentine seat.