Regionalism

Vanessa Biard-Schaeffer

Imagine that you have to draft a paper in a foreign language, intended to be read by a GS audience. You would probably face a number of difficulties with regard to several linguistic functions; for instance:

1) You may not know which words in the foreign language correspond to those popping up in your mind in your mother tongue;

2) You may not know precisely to what extent or to which degree these words may be equivalent or to which degree your translation is accurate;

3) Once you have selected the words you may want to use, you realize that their place in the sentence - the order in which they are presented - in the foreign language does not follow that of your mother tongue;

4) You may also notice that the order of words or subtle alterations in phrasing and/or spelling could modify the core meaning of the words you have selected;

5) Once you have miserably succeeded in conveying what you think is the root idea of your draft, you may realize that your audience has understood half of what you wish you could have communicated to them;

6) That's probably why you may end up ruminating over the comments you received after you had the floor, perhaps beating yourself up over your linguistic failures;

7) Conclusion: are your ideas worth that pain and the pain you are about to inflict on others, especially if you already have troubles with your own mother tongue?

Since General Semanticists may sometimes turn into sadistic individuals as they fight for the 'perfect' word in a 'perfect' world, I have freely chosen to inflict this pain on myself but I gladly invite any semanticist to excuse himself from it, if he or she chooses to do so.

Once upon a time there was a magnificent land surrounded with water which we now call "Europe". Europe means different things to different people:

1) the continent itself;

2) the countries which have joined the EU institutions;

3) these countries plus a couple of others which, historically, people have felt to be "European";

Roughly, the European linguistic areas follow the former lines of the Roman Empire, originating from Latin countries in the south. Where the Romans settled, Roman customs were exported together with a legal, linguistic and ritualistic legacy which was later altered or carried on by the Catholic Church.

For instance, Gisela Williams describes the following ritual which has been practiced in the Abruzzi region (New York Times, 08/13/2006):

"Finally, after Mass, several men holding a towering painted wood statue of San Domenico filed out of the church. They bent down and, momentarily, the snake handlers hid the effigy from view. When the statue was raised again, there was a collective gasp and a brief awed silence. The saint was suddenly alive with slithering snakes.
Many townspeople say that the rite honors San Domenico, but many historians contend that the ritual is actually a repackaged pagan tradition that is more than 3,000 years old and was originally inspired by the healing snake goddess Angitia, who was worshipped by the local Marsi tribes."

In another "Latin" country, more specifically the south of France, we find the Pyrenees; 400 km stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Mediterranean with mountains and valleys. The border between France and Spain runs along the Pyrenees (The Treaty of the Pyrenees was a treaty signed in 1659 to end a conflict between France and Spain that had begun in 1635 during the Thirty Years' War).

Along this border, as in the rest of the country, you find several local 'regions':

- administrative :
1) "departments" which were constituted by Napoleon: each area was governed by a Prefect and had to be small enough for one to ride across it on horseback in one day;
2) "regions": which were designed in the seventies to face two issues, namely a growing concern for regionalism and the hope for designing 'larger' and more sustainable projects;

- Cultural, historical, emotional:
These regions or areas have been determined by past wars, treaties, geographical boundaries –mountains, rivers-, etc.

Some administrative "regions" match up to the "cultural" ones while others do not, be it on purpose or by accident (eg to avoid separatism). For instance, "Languedoc-roussillon", which is an administrative region, comprises part of Languedoc and part of Roussillon, and "Roussillon" covers what is culturally named Catalunia of the North (an area around the city *Perpignan*).

To sum up: you have the Pyrenees which includes a few regions covering different areas with different names corresponding to different perceived cultures and pasts.

Now, if you find an area called "Catalonia of the North" you may expect a "Catalonia of the south". If you look at the map, you will notice that the Catalonia of the North corresponds to French territory while that of the south comprises what the Spanish call "Catalunya". What has happened?

Actually, the territory has been organized, reorganized, shaped and reshaped according to politics, wars, marriages, alliances, etc. Put simply, it took centuries for France, Spain and other countries to form one single country with defined frontiers. The frontiers of modern France were roughly settled in the 19th century.

However, the true cement and "national sovereignty" came out of linguistic and educational standardization. In short, school became compulsory around the beginning of the 20th century and children were being educated in an official language - French. Parents and families were proud that their children would access further education and, perhaps, lead better lives. Altogether, the teaching of local 'dialects' was prohibited, be it by parents themselves or by the day to day use of French for the conduct of all governmental and official matters.

Gradually, people substituted French for dialects which were from different origins – essentially those with Latin and/or German roots-, though still retaining local accents and vernacular expressions or images (even syntax) relative to former linguistic habits.

Since the formation of the European Union, there has been a confrontation between two separate regional philosophies as some countries believe in regionalism and decentralization (like Germany), for different motives:
- lack of faith in centralized government;
- regional folklore;
- belief in the past - what I call the "Paradise Lost" Syndrome;
- Etc.;

Other countries believe in centralization (like France), for different motives too:
- lack of faith in local bodies;
- national folklore;
- belief in one single past;
- Etc.;

Some countries are decentralized to some extent but are also wary of regionalism out of fear that it may lead to a dismantling of the entity called "nation". Spain is a very good example; since the Franco regime collapsed, Spain has given more strength and opportunities to regionalism while being confronted with violence and upheavals from extreme regionalists.

As France and Spain share borders, both countries are confronted with growing regionalism from the Basques and the Catalans. Some of them wish for what they call "unification" of areas which are on both sides of the frontier.

Regionalists actively work for the spread and use of local dialects to the extent that Spanish is now taught as a second language in schools within the Spanish Catalunia. They fine shopkeepers who do not label their products in Catalan and/or physicians who do not write in Catalan. In France, the past is being revisited by activists, in the name of culture… with some ludicrous results.

These individuals and groups want to revert to Catalan, Basque or local dialect only, relegating French or Castilian to being second languages or erasing them altogether.

The European Union, in the name of cooperation, has promoted such conduct in the hope of substituting nations for weaker entities which would compete with each other…

The main issue though is that by making Catalan or Basque seen as the 'true language' of the French areas –now grouped under "Languedoc-Roussillon", territorial expansion can take the form or linguistic terror. To make it simple, if you do not speak Catalan, you do not "belong" to the territory in spite of your belongings or activity in the region. In short, regionalism and linguistic war are thus serving 3 purposes:
- strengthening already existing networks;
- widening their area of influence;
- short-circuiting the capital –be it Madrid or Paris- to get EU funds directly;

From a GS perspective, you can have diverse opinions on these matters:
1) linguistic diversity is good, thus regionalism should be promoted;
2) linguistic standardization is good in that it facilitates mobility and cooperation - thus regionalism should be discouraged;
3) both the above assertions are correct, depending on the level you choose (framework) and your value system;

The framework seems very important, as I am going to explain. The French Republic is constitutionally opposed to regionalism –in the sense that it refuses local dialects as valid languages for administrative and legal issues-, but on the international scene, France promotes cultural diversity to justify existing trade barriers and domestic regulations for cultural goods and services. It becomes very difficult for the state to oppose "local diversity" while promoting "international diversity" at the same time. As a GS-trained individual, I can live with these seemingly contradictory attitudes as I substitute "cultural diversity" for "French" as the more probable motive behind these existing trade practices.

The irony is that US firms seem to have found ways to access EU funds for the movie industry by using the existing legal mechanisms that have grown out of pro-diversity cultural policies!

In short, "diversity" probably is a multi-ordinal term, used for different purposes according to different and separate motives. In an Aristotelian framework as our indo-European languages convey, it is very difficult to oppose "diversity" on one level and accept it on another. At the end of the day, as "diversity" is a proposition that has highly positive connotations, it is extremely difficult to say: "I am against diversity (…)". The way to avoid such traps could lead to the discovery of other expressions or stretching Aristotelian logics to the full to make the ludicrous aspects of such stretching perceptible:

1) **I know** that Catalan, as a language, and French are both children of the same languages;
2) So, yes, Catalan is linguistically closer to French than to Castillan (Spanish);
3) **Since** it is easier for a minority to adapt to the majority than the reverse, and French being more used than Catalan (be it locally or internationally) and given that very few people speak Catalan in France;
4) **Then** I suggest Catalan in Spain learn French as a mandatory third or second language;

I have already suggested this type of solutions to a French audience and the result was a lot of laughter. I wonder if Catalans and Spanish or French have different laughs… if so, we might end up fighting for the "right" type of laughter.