

Jeremy Evas is a doctor in language planning theory. He has been head of language research and technologies of the Welsh language Board since 2003. Evas is also the author of a number of publications on the role of new technologies in promoting minoritised languages and on bilingualism in Wales. His fields of research include second language acquisition, and it is possibly for this reason that he speaks, masters or understands English, Welsh, French, Spanish, Breton, Catalan, Italian, German and Galician. He appeared at a conference organised by the Linguam2n-UOC Chair in Multilingualism.

What can be done to increase the use of Catalan and other minoritised languages in the information technologies?

The greatest problem facing the minoritised languages is that people don't know the technologies that are available in Catalan, Welsh, Breton or Gaelic. And those who do know that they exist, don't have them installed. A complicated download process has to be followed, when they should come straight from the shop preinstalled by default. This is why we have to promote it and provide assistance. The fewer obstacles that are put in the way of the users, the better. It is, in fact, simply another step towards normalisation.

And beyond the lack of knowledge of these applications, there's another more psychological and technical reason, which is that generally speaking we're afraid of computers, we lack confidence. Yet all it takes is a couple of clicks to preinstall your language. We spend 8 hours a day in front of a computer. I don't understand why we can't spend 8 hours in front of a computer in Welsh. It's very simple and it doesn't cost a thing!

And does this apply to other machines?

The computers or mobile phones that we use in Catalonia or the United Kingdom are the same. The language is merely the content. And the technology lets you have a website updated in 20 languages. Therefore, there's no reason why we can't have them in Welsh, Catalan, Basque or Irish.

Is bilingualism a problem for the development of these minoritised languages?

What happens with minoritised languages is that they have certain complexes and they lack confidence in themselves, in their being useful. They need to break down barriers because people aren't used to using them in areas like formal or employment spheres. But I'm an optimist. It will all come.

Anything else?

We need to break down these myths. The excuse that having computers in Welsh is too expensive, when it doesn't cost a thing. Thinking that it's too difficult to use them, that you don't know the language well enough or that the terminology is too complicated. You only have to try it, see that it's fairly intuitive and that everything's in the same place. As an excuse, you could also argue that your home or office is bilingual and that you can't share the computer with someone who doesn't understand it. You can have profiles in English and Welsh. Ultimately, it's so simple!

But in a globalised world, where English and Spanish are so predominant, is translating into all these languages profitable?

It would not be moral to think that everyone knows or should know English. In addition, in the globalised world in which we live, we already speak of glocalisation, where the cultural traits of the local fact are reaffirmed. There's more interest in regional or minoritised languages. Technology allows large-scale multilingualism.

And in this regard, Microsoft has had a significant change in attitude. Bill Gates was aware that its image and reputation could be affected if it did not have this awareness. They wanted to keep their customers satisfied, anywhere in the world, and it's obvious that there wasn't enough with English. Now, they provide a free user interface in Catalan, Basque, Welsh or Breton.

What are the main differences between Catalan and Welsh?

First of all, the number of speakers, which is much higher in Catalan. There are nine million or more of you, others have tens of thousands. There is also more of a language regulatory and planning tradition. More online resources, more software and browsers in Catalan. Despite this, there are examples in Wales that show us how a language community can grow, thanks in large part to the work of language volunteers, who translate social networks such as Facebook, among other things.

What is the next challenge for Welsh in the new technologies?

The fact that the Welsh government has worked to have Microsoft Office in Welsh has meant that six or seven thousand civil servants can use it if they want. We're now working so that it gets into schools so that technology in Welsh is available from the age of 3 to 21, when you're at university.

In addition, at a technical level, machine translation and speech technologies are the two new things that we should be looking at.

Is Welsh in a better position in terms of new technologies than it is in the street?

Like many of the minoritised regional languages in Europe, the social use of Welsh was receding and heading towards a slow and painful death. But that has changed.

Numbers of Welsh-speakers rose for the first time in the 2001 census to 21% of the population, some 600,000 people, especially due to the popularity of Welsh-medium schools and the large number of adults learning the language. But there's still work to be done so that our language is normalised in every sphere. We're going through the same situation that Catalonia experienced, only some years later.

Is free software the great opportunity for the minoritised languages while proprietary software is the great handicap?

I don't think it's as simple as free software such as OpenOffice: yes, proprietary: no. because even if that were the case, it is evident that the great majority of people use the private Microsoft Office/Windows. In fact, the policy of the Welsh Language Board is that whatever the software you use, we would like you to be able to have it for free in your language. And we now have Firefox, Google and Microsoft translated.

Is the UOC a good tool for the normalisation of Catalan on the web?

Catalan is completely normalised at the UOC and all its courses are available online in Catalan. It's a model that we should be looking at in Wales. There's a lot of pressure to implement it in our university sector because the geography of our country, which is very mountainous, does not help communication between north and south. That's why distance learning, videoconferencing, are questions that we have to foster, and the UOC is an example to follow.

Is the Atlantis project website useful for these languages in the European Union?

The project by Professor Miquel Strubell serves to allow the 21 minoritised languages in the Union to be able to share digital tools as well as experiences that have proved successful and others that haven't worked. In this sense, the Linguam²n-UOC Chair in Multilingualism is doing very good work, with a good practices guide for sharing over the internet. There are also the language volunteers and Softcatal². It makes sense for networks to be created between the different language associations instead of multiplying isolated experiences.

And what do you think of the ".cat" internet domain?

In Wales, we're working hard, following the example of the .cat, which has been pioneering and successful. The coalition government between the Labour Party and the pro-independence Plaid Cymru, which won in 2007, promised to create the .cym domain for the Welsh language. However, the process for applying for it is laborious and is done through the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). The application has not yet been submitted and this depends on the ICANN. Parallel to this, the Scottish government is also looking into it for .sco and the Bretons for the .bzh domain.

It's a clear example of the construction of a national community in the twenty-first century. First, in the nineteenth century, it was the National Library of Wales, then the University of Wales, and, since 1982, the S4C television channel. Now, the natural evolution leads us to the need for a virtual domain.

Profile

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