

Birger Bergh: The Mother Tongue of Europe.

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Being a Latinist, I have been asked to say some words on the Latin language in this work-shop. Maybe the most remarkable fact in the history of this language is its usage as an international European medium during so many centuries after it had ceased to be anybody's native tongue. Primarily in its written form but also in international oral communication, at least on a more official and learned level, Latin was for centuries the inevitable international language.

The establishment of various national European, or vernacular, languages on a literary level, of course played an increasingly important role for the growth of national prestige and self-identification in the respective countries. It goes without saying that these vernaculars in due course began to compete with Latin as a vehicle for international communication. This, however, was a development much disliked by many. Since this conference is being held in Stockholm, I would like to call attention to the most prominent Swedish statesman of all times, Axel Oxenstierna, Lord Chancellor of the realm for many decades during the 17th century, including the 30 Years War. In 1639, Oxenstierna suggested that all official letters from abroad, whether from kings, governments or cities, not written in Latin should be answered in Swedish. An elegant though perhaps brutal way of letting people understand that Sweden was not prepared to be belittled by anyone as far as political importance or cultural prestige was concerned. No less instructive is the lesson he taught some French diplomats, who visited Stockholm in 1644 and then, full of self-confidence and maybe a bit thoughtlessly, began to use their native French language. This was too much for Oxenstierna. He immediately switched over to Swedish, and made some of the Swedes present translate it, word for word, into Latin. The diplomats got the hint, and after a while the discussion continued in Latin, a language not only international but supranational as well.

Isn't such a language Europe is in need of today? A language which is nobody's mother tongue and therefore does not favour any of the countries of the Union, nor is it any threat to the national prestige of any country. Many people believe in this idea, and this gives me reason to say that during the last let's say ten, fifteen years, at different places in Europe but also in the US, circles and seminars have been established in which Latin, and only Latin, is accepted. International conferences are held in Latin, you have to speak Latin all the day, there is no chance to escape, either into the bar or the sauna: anywhere you will be caught by some enthusiastic Latin speaker. And this interest is flourishing not only in Western Europe. In the eighties, in a visit to the Moscow university, I was asked to give a lecture not only on some Latin problem but also in Latin. The following day all the teachers of the faculty had been commanded to appear, together with some thirty students, and at least ten of them understood the Latin language perfectly. At least they laughed where they were expected to laugh; all three times to be exact. The Latin conversation with my colleagues continued even in the foyer of the Bolsjoj Theatre, where you could see how eavesdropping KGB men with depressive, Gromyko-faces tried to look the words up in their dictionaries, in vain I am afraid. Well, they had not studied the language.

There are other signs as well, typical of the time. Some years ago, my Helsinkian colleague and friend Professor Tuomo Pekkanen, on the initiative of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, started the radio emission of news in Latin, Nuntii Latini. Of course, you may consider this a completely senseless idea,

partly because the news in question have been known to the listeners some week already. Professor Pekkanen's answer to this is that then, it is all the more easy to understand what is being said. The very point of these Nuntii Latini is to demonstrate that anything, also modern phenomena, can be expressed in Latin. At any rate, the programme has proved an international success.

It is easy to argue for the convenience of using just one language within the European Community, not least if we take the economic aspect in to consideration, and as I said, Latin has the advantage of being no one's native tongue today. Common arguments advanced against Latin include the idea that Latin is a difficult language, which is true. All languages are, but I am not prepared to say that Latin is more difficult than, for instance, Swedish, not to speak of Finnish. Those who think that we are more stupid today than, let us say, 5- or 600-hundred years ago, may speak for themselves. The argument that modern life includes much that was unknown to Caesar and Cicero is also correct - but one should beware of false conclusions. Latin is, in reality, more capable than any other language to meet the demand of new words. If you are looking for genuine Germanic words in English, you will end up in wood-cutting, pig-slaughter, cod-fishing and wild-boar hunting. Nothing wrong with such things, but for more subtle occupations and ways of thinking, we depend on the common European Latin culture which has given us words such as abstract, administration, civilization, culture, discussion, fact, institute, intellectual, part, process, quantity, reason, religion and thousand others, which by the way, in different shapes, appear in practically all European languages. In this respect, we are all already Latin speakers; what should be added is a modest portion of grammar.