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Politicians on language policy

Reflections on the basis of an opinion poll
among Finnish candidates for the European Parliament

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Language policy was one of the issues during the election campaign which remained almost completely away from political agenda. The need of language skills was discussed but none of the universal “vote match machines” had a question about language policy but vote match machines of two parties, Coalition Party and Swedish People’s Party had a language question. Only the candidates of these parties answered to them. Only Finnish Esperanto-Association asked the candidates about language policy. Various vote match questionnaires are popular in Finland and the candidates are very responsive, because of the Finnish voting system: the success of candidates is based on individual votes they can collect and therefore candidates are willing to answer in various questionnaires. One of the candidates who refused to answer to the questionnaire told that she had replied already to 17 questionnaires.

Also Alamedia’s (Aamulehti, MTV3) vote match machine had question about languages: “Person who will be elected to the European Parliament should know in addition to Finnish, Swedish and English still another European language”. Alamedia’s vote match machine divided candidates clearly. It is however not sure to which question the candidates replied: was it a question about the language skills of individual candidates or a question about the usefulness of language skills. Moreover the question was formulated so that the knowledge of Finnish, Swedish and English was taken as granted and the knowledge of an additional language was presented as a condition for those who should be elected. Also the formulation “another European language” would likely not be understood as Lithuanian or Estonian, or not even Polish or Dutch, but most likely as French or German.

The confusion of the question was visible also in comments: in spite of which alternative was chosen, candidates expressed opinion that knowledge of languages is useful but it should not be an absolute condition. Some who disagreed with the statement commented that English is enough, while some others emphasised the equality of all languages, had opinion that knowledge of only Finnish should be enough, pointed out that knowledge of three European languages is enough or opposed the knowledge of Swedish. So, similar answer could be based on completely different view on language policy.

Some candidates mentioned languages which would be useful, most often they were French and German, some mentioned even Spanish and Italian. Several expressed opinion that one common working language, for example English, would be useful.

Swedish People’s party had a question “All language groups should be able to speak their own languages in the European parliament”. The candidates of this party support equality of languages and position of Finnish and Swedish relatively strongly. Of the candidates of the party, 13 (out of 20) agreed completely with this statement, while only 2 disagreed somewhat. The average on scale 1-5 was 4.4.

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Coalition Party had a question “The position of Finnish language should be secured among the big languages. It should be possible to speak Finnish in the main organs and official meetings also in the future.” Of the candidates of this party (18 responses) only five agreed completely with this statement while three disagreed somewhat with it. The average on scale 1-5 was 3.8. Those who disagreed told that English is enough, the elected members should know one of the major languages and that interpretation is too expensive.

Questionnaire of Finnish Esperanto-Association

Finnish Esperanto-Association send a questionnaire on language policy and Esperanto to approximately 180 candidates, which included practically all the candidates of parties represented in Finnish parliament and most of the candidates of Communist party and Liberals. Four minor parties did not provide the e-mail addresses of the candidates and were excluded from the survey. Some candidates also did not have e-mail address.

In total 80 candidates responded to the questionnaire and two more send comment. In total one over one third of all 227 candidates answered. Most actively answered candidates of Social-Democratic Party, Left-Wing Alliance, Greens and Coalition party of which at least half of the candidates responded. Also Communists and Liberals answered actively, but candidates of Centre party and Christian-Democrats were not very active. Five candidates who were elected answered to the questionnaire (Eija-Riitta Korhola and Piia-Noora Kauppi from Coalition Party, Kyösti Virrankoski from Centre Party, Esko Seppänen from Left-Wing Alliance and Satu Hassi from Greens).

Finnish Esperanto-Association sent a similar questionnaire to approximately similar number of candidates also in 1996 when Finland elected its first members to the European Parliament. In 1996 similar number of candidates (69) answered and activity among parties was very similar.

In 2004 the questions were:

On the scale 1-5 how important are these issues to you (1 not at all important, 5 very important):

- Equality of all national languages in the European Union
- Defence of the position of Finnish and Swedish languages
- Setting up a working group on language policy on high level
- Experimental use of Esperanto in the work of European Parliament, for example as a pilot language in translation

The candidates were also given possibility to express their opinion on language policy and tell about their contacts with Esperanto.

In 1996 questions one and three were exactly the same and the question about Esperanto was on experiments in teaching Esperanto in the framework of the EU. In 1996 there were also questions about strengthening of national identity and common European identity.

On the basis of these questionnaires it can be concluded that Finnish candidates to European parliament strongly support the idea of equality of all language groups but the support for equality has fallen since 1996. The share of those who had completely same opinion was 86% in 1996 but only 67% had this opinion this year. The average on scale 1-5 was 4.8 in 1996 and 4.5 in 2004. It should be noted that sampling method was different and it might explain the difference because it is much easier to reply by e-mail than by sending a letter and therefore e-mail might increase negative answers more than positive.

Table 1. Distribution of responses on “equality of national languages”

	1996 (n= 69)	2004 (n= 80)
Very important	86%	69%
Somewhat important	12%	20%
In between	3%	6%
Not important	--	3%
Not at all important	--	3%

Quite many candidates supported idea that all the languages should be equal but few told clearly that English or some other one language should be used instead. Some others proposed a model of several working languages, which according to others was the worst alternative. For example, Eija-Riitta Korhola had this opinion.

The results of the questionnaire of Finnish Esperanto-Association might be biased towards those who support equality of all languages, but on the other hand, for example candidates from Coalition party who supported preservation of Finnish language in party’s own questionnaire, answered less actively to Esperanto-Association’s questionnaire. There is also an interesting incongruence in answers: some candidates who are ready to reduce the position of Finnish in party’s own questionnaire, have an opinion that equality of all national languages is somewhat important to them. This kind of incongruence can be explained by the fact that candidates would like to please everyone and also because candidates might not have clear view of language policy and their replies are influenced by situation.

It seems that in theory many candidates are for equality and support the idea that multilingualism is a good idea but in practice the equality could be reduced on the basis of the need to reduce costs and increase efficiency, which would mean the use of one or several major languages instead.

Some candidates also supported the idea that also languages which are not official languages (like Catalan) should be given official status. Others emphasised the role of mother tongue, but pointed out that information is lost in interpretation. In some responses equality was seen as contrary to the efficiency while other candidates would like to improve efficiency but not in the cost of equality.

Analysis of results

Analysis of responses with the statistical methods reveals some connections between the answers. Correlation was extremely high (.84) between equality of all national languages and preservation of the position of Finnish and Swedish, as one would expect. This means that those who were for equality of all languages were also ready to defend the position of Finnish and Swedish. There were also smaller correlations between experiment to use Esperanto and both equality (.33) and support for Finnish and Swedish (.37). Support for high level working group on language policy correlated mainly with the preservation of Finnish and Swedish (.36), but not with equality.

Also those who supported wide language skills in Alameda’s questionnaire were more interested to support high level working group but not equality or position of Finnish and Swedish.

Left-wing candidates were in general more positive towards equality of languages and the use of Esperanto. True Finns (only one candidate answered), Communists, Left-Wing Alliance and Greens supported Esperanto more than average, while Centre Party, Liberals and Swedish People’s Party supported Esperanto less than average, while Social Democrats, Coalition Party and Christian Democrats supported in on average level. In comparison with 1996 the greatest changes had occurred among candidates of Liberals, Coalition Party and Social-Democratic Party.

Equality of national languages was supported most actively by True Finns, Communists, Swedish People’s Party, Left-Wing Alliance, Social-Democratic Party, Green Alliance and Centre Party, while candidates of Coalition party, Liberals and Christian-Democrats were more ready to reduce equality. On the other hand, even the candidates of these parties supported on average somewhat the equality. In comparison with 1996 the drop of support of equality was greatest among candidates of Liberals and Coalition Party (in 1996 all responded from this party put it as very important).

In Almamedia’s survey also minor parties of extreme right (parties Fatherland – Finland and Blue-whites of the Finnish People) opposed the idea that members of EP should know an additional language.

A factor analysis confirmed the result that equality and position of national languages as well as support for Esperanto form one factor which could be called Equality. The other factor, which has its most strong loading in support for wide language skills and support for high level working group, could be called as elitist regulation. The result can be interpreted so that the multilingual elite supports a working group, the aim of which would be to reduce the number of official languages.

Table 2. Rotated factors:

	Factor 1: Equality	Factor 2: Elitist regulation
Equality of all national languages in the European Union	.91	
Defence of Finnish and Swedish	.92	
Working group on language policy on high level	.45	.66
Experimental use of Esperanto in the EP	.60	
Knowledge of still another European language		.86

Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation.

Candidates and Esperanto

The relationship of candidates to Esperanto was also very mixed: many confessed that they know language policy of European Union too little in order to be able to comment this issue. Many

candidates had positive reaction at least on principal level: it would be nice if we had a common language, Esperanto should be supported. On the other hand, many saw the practical possibilities of Esperanto rather weak in the current situation.

Some candidates commented European language policy by stating that big nations favour their own languages and pursue language policy which favours them. According to some candidates (for example Matti Wuori) the possibilities to include more languages to European Union would be very small. Some told that a language which not a mother language could not be able to function as a medium for translation or that position of Esperanto should be strengthened first on the national level. Two candidates preferred other planned languages: one told that Ido would solve some problems of Esperanto, while still another supported Lojban.

Many candidates mentioned some contacts with Esperanto. They had friends or neighbours who were Esperantists. Four of the candidates: Matti Wuori and Jehki Härkönen from Green Alliance, Alpo Rusi from Centre Party, Marianne Marenk from Coalition Party and Kimmo Eriksson from Liberals had studied Esperanto in the past. On the other hand, no one of them mentioned knowledge of Esperanto in the Finnish Broadcasting Company's (YLE) vote match machine which included the information about the knowledge of languages of each candidate. Some others told about plans to study it. On the web-pages of two members of European parliament was something about Esperanto: Uma Aaltonen from Greens (who failed to be re-elected) has Esperanto version of her colouring book for children and Eija-Riitta Korhola from Coalition Party (who was re-elected) had palindroms in Esperanto in her web-pages (sent there by an Esperantist).

It is also remarkable that, with a different question, the results differed significantly from those in 1996.

Table 3. Distribution for the support of Esperanto

	1996 (experiments with teaching of Esperanto in the framework of EU)	2004 (Experimental use of Esperanto in the work of European Parliament)
Very important	26%	11%
Somewhat important	35%	29%
In between	35%	34%
Not important	4%	18%
Not at all important	---	9%

Conclusion

Language policy or language politics has not been among political issues during EU election campaign and therefore it is not surprising that responses by many candidates did not reflect any clear and well-formulated lines. On one hand equality and preservation of their own national languages received support, on the other hand there was a tendency towards regulation and use of several languages. The support for Esperanto is somewhat connected with the support for equality,

while emphasis for wide language skills functions as an opposition to the equality and preservation of the position of Finnish and Swedish.

Reason for this result is mainly the position of language policy in Finnish political discourse. In Finland language policy is usually understood as a question on the compulsory learning of Swedish and in relation to this, the position of Swedish as the second official language. Language policy is absent in connection with the European Union and the position of Finnish language as one of the official languages is not thought. If languages are mentioned in connection with the European Union, the knowledge of French (e.g. the Finnish commissar should know French) is the most often mentioned issue.

The lack of political interest to languages may have very serious effects. It has led to a situation in which opposition to the EU is connected (although very loosely) with the defence of Finnish language, while the support for the EU is connected with the preparedness to reduce the position of Finnish. This may lead to a situation in which Finnish language may not have any positive, constructive role in the European Union.

References:

EU-election questionnaire of Finnish Esperanto-Association and responses to it:
<http://www.esperanto.fi/eurovaalikysely.html> (available in Finnish, Swedish and Esperanto; the responses only either in Finnish or Swedish).

Vote match machine of Finnish Broadcasting Company: <http://www.yle.fi/vaalit/em.php>

Vote match machine of Almedia: <http://www.mtv3.fi/vaalikone/> (the page was closed in the beginning of July 2004).

Vote match machine of Helsingin Sanomat: <http://www.vaalikone.fi/euro2004/etusivu.jsp>