



Language Policy Division
Division des Politiques linguistiques

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The ‘Common European Framework of Reference for languages’ (CEFR) and the development of language policies: challenges and responsibilities

The CEFR in relation to the policy aim of the Council of Europe

Presentation by Dr. John L. M. Trim, Project Director

May I first express my gratitude for the great and unexpected honour bestowed upon me by the Council of Europe in associating this important occasion with my name. This gesture, as I see it, is less concerned with the work of one single individual, as it is a recognition and celebration of the coherence and continuity of effort by literally thousands of language professionals, educational administrators and most significantly, of language learners, for which the modern language projects of the Council have provided a focus over the last third of the last century, and still do. Beyond this, it recognises that as we attempt to define and tackle the issues of our own time, we build on the insights and achievement of past generations, many of which we take for granted and pass unnoticed. Some names stand out: Quintillian, Comenius, Otto Jespersen, Harold Palmer, Leonard Bloomfield, and more could be mentioned than there is time to cite.

Our work arose from the Council’s major project on modern languages in the 1960s, animated by Sven Nord. It is a cause for regret that some valued colleagues, notably Jan van Ek and Denis Girard, are no longer with us, and that others, particularly Antonietta de Vigili, for long the driving force of the projects, though present in spirit, are unable to attend. It is a particular pleasure that so many others are still active and creative such as Daniel Coste, whose brilliant paper on the contextualisation of the Common European Framework of Reference, elegantly expresses the aims and values he has brought to our work since the conception of *un niveau – seuil* in the 1970s, and Brian North, who joined us as fellow member of the authoring group of the CEFR, bringing new experience, energy and insight in the 1990s.

In his paper, Daniel Coste drew attention to some of the wider concerns of the Council of Europe: ‘La promotion du plurilinguisme se situe elle-même, pour le Conseil de l’Europe, sous l’égide des valeurs plus générales, touchant à la démocratie, à la citoyenneté, à la compréhension interculturelle, à la cohésion sociale’. He points out that there are few references to these values in the CEFR itself. I should like to develop this a little further.

I have always held that the continuing language programme within the Council of Europe must be rooted in the nature, aims, values and *modi operandi* of the Council of Europe itself.

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation, based essentially on the voluntary cooperation of member states, with limited human and material resources. Work in the language field, as in any other, must therefore commend itself to member states by the practical usefulness of its products in relation to national needs and policies. It is not an academic institution or a foundation for conducting or funding research. Thus the CEFR cannot be imposed on member governments unless they all agree to its use, nor can that use be more strongly disciplined than they are all willing to accept, given the principle of subsidiarity, often jealously guarded in matters of the national education system. The work may, of course, appeal directly to the field through publications and meetings such as this, though there again, success depends on major institutions seeing its use as in their own (enlightened) self-interest. If they are so convinced, they are more likely to be willing to invest their own resources, human and material, in participation in projects which promise useful outcomes. The CEFR, as other Council of Europe projects, relies heavily on such investment of time, effort and material resources. The unforced cooperation of language professionals and educational administrators of all kinds, at all levels, was an outstanding feature of our projects and the excellent personal and working relations among them have been the greatest source of personal satisfaction in my professional career.

It is, I think, proper that work sponsored by the Council of Europe should serve the long-term aims and interests of the organisation. These include:

- the promotion of international understanding and cooperation not only by the mediation of translators and interpreters, indispensable though that is, but by the direct interaction of whole peoples. The role of language in this respect is self-evident but the action-oriented approach of the T-level series and the CEFR is based on this consideration. The Council of Europe has promoted language learning not for its own sake, as a mental discipline or as an aspect of elite personal culture, but as a tool for everyday social interaction among fellow Europeans, promoting and facilitating vocational and educational mobility. Much of the enthusiastic take-up of the CEFR has been due to its perceived value as a basis for the comparability of language qualifications to make mobility easier.
- Another basic CoE aim is the strengthening of democratic structures and procedures. In this respect, modern language projects have set out to strengthen the self-awareness of learners and their effective freedom of thought and action, with social responsibility. The CEFR is conceived as one tool that will give all those working in the language field greater autonomy based on knowledge, understanding and skill and as a basis for the negotiation of objectives and methods between teachers and learners. It is also intended to facilitate communication and interaction among independent agents while increasing rather than limiting their freedom of action.

The maintenance and development of linguistic and cultural diversity is a Council of Europe aim, enshrined in the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* on Minority languages in a typically cautious fashion. There has been some backlash recently against societal multiculturalism as divisive, reinforcing separatism and blocking the integration of immigrants and encouraging ghetto formation. Here the concepts of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism, largely developed by Daniel Coste, are of real value, since they take a holistic view of linguistic and cultural competence, to which all linguistic and cultural experience contribute. Both at individual and societal levels the concept is dynamic, since the components from the experience of different language and cultures interpenetrate and interact, forming something new, enriched and in continual development. This approach meets better the realities of globalisation than various forms of purism which regard each language and culture as a separate entity, to be preserved and protected against the threat offered by alien forces. Most users of the CEFR have applied it only to a single language but its descriptive apparatus for communicative action and competences, together with the 'can-do' descriptors of levels of competence, are a good basis for a plurilinguistic approach to language across the curriculum, which awaits development.

This Forum has shown the dynamism of the Council's work in the language field as, in any view, a necessary ongoing aspect of its major policy objectives and I wish my successors – and yours – every

success in the years ahead, as, through your teaching and example, you make your own distinctive contribution to the realisation of our common vision for Europe – a space in which ordinary people can meet, get to know and like each other, and work together harmoniously and effectively. Good luck!

Dr John L.M. Trim was Project Director for over thirty years.
He made a substantial contribution to the work of the Council of Europe in the area of language policy.