

EUROLINGUISTIC UNION

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My first visit to the Europe over the seas was when I was an undergraduate, and I spent a summer at a youth camp in the Alps, for an organisation called Concordia. The task was to build a bridge across a river. There were about twenty of us from different countries. It was the moment I realised that not everyone who spoke French spoke it the way I'd learned it in school. A couple of the lads were Algerians, and their usage was fascinatingly different from the Parisian version I'd been told was the correct one.

The experience fuelled my growing love affair with languages. I'd come across dialects and accents before, of course, having grown up in Wales and moving to Liverpool, and then London, so I knew English had a great deal of variation, but nobody had ever told me there were different kinds of French, expressing an intriguing range of identities.

I should have guessed. During my first year reading English at University College London, I had been introduced to the Germanic family of languages to which English belongs, and learned some Gothic, Old Norse, and Frisian. I was also introduced to comparative philology, and the discovery in the eighteenth century that most of the languages of Europe were related in one huge Indo-European family. The metaphor of the 'family'

appealed to me, and the associated notions of 'parent', 'mother', and 'daughter' languages. Languages were feminine, evidently, like ships, and (I learned in the Alps) wheelbarrows (*brouettes*). It seemed that I should not just study them. The metaphor suggested I should love them too.

That wasn't difficult. Languages mean peoples and peoples mean cultures and cultures mean differences, and it was always the differences that I fell in love with. And what a fine linguistic playground Europe was – and is. The European bit of Indo-European was the most practicable place to start, and it wasn't long before I found out – discovery within discoveries – that not all the languages of Europe belonged to that family. Basque, for instance; an isolated survivor from an age that pre-dated the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. One of the great mysteries in the history of language. For a while I collected number systems, but counting from one to ten in Basque was nothing like any of the other languages I knew (*bat, bi, hiru, lau . . .*).

Europe is like that. Turn a corner and a new language or accent or dialect greets you – especially these days, with so many world cultures present through immigration. I later became a specialist in English language studies, but Europe was always there. Of the over 600,000 words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, about eighty per cent of them come from non-Germanic languages, with Latin, Greek, French, Spanish and Italian being leading contributors. There was a linguistic union long before the political one, which will remain, whatever else happens. And whenever I explore a new production on the English language stage, I know the languages and peoples and cultures of Europe are waving to me from the wings.