

*Official Languages*

Whether the world is enriched by having a smaller or a greater number of languages is a matter open to discussion.

According to some people, it would be of the greatest advantage if we had only one language. It is a fact that when a larger number of people understand a language, the quality of national and international communications can be improved. On the other hand, from the cultural point of view, the disappearance of a language is an irretrievable loss. One's position in this debate depends on one's point of view, but the fact remains that the languages already widely spoken are already gaining at the expense of the minority languages.

What is the reason for this phenomena? In the past, it was said that one of the reasons laid in the increasing number of political alliances. At the present time, however, that factor is of less importance compared to the vast improvement in education together with the recent revolution in the communication media.

According to King Stephen The First of Hungary, a kingdom, where only one language is spoken, is weak and powerless. For most nations, the necessity for a certain measure of bilingualism is not always justified for educational purposes.

In fact, a person leaving his country cannot expect in most cases that his language will be spoken elsewhere.

People from Norway, Yugoslavia and Rumania, for example, who for some reason or other must cross the frontier and their number is increasing due to better means of transport cannot expect to be understood in foreign countries and, conversely, they cannot be expected to speak the national idiom of everyone they meet. They must therefore learn one or more of the most widely used languages, which permits them to communicate with a greater number of people, not only with those who speak their own language, but also those who like themselves had, for the same reasons, to learn those languages.

Mr. Speaker, we can imagine at the present time that the political and industrial power of the nations for which those languages are official vouches for their authority and their prestige. Those languages are English, French, German and Russian, and to a lesser extent, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, Italian and some others. As compared with the latter and what they represent, the great majority of languages of the world have little to offer

[Mr. Dumont.]

to the millions of people who everyday achieve a greater degree of knowledge and who will try to learn everything that the modern world can offer in the field of knowledge and information.

In the case of an independent multilingual country, the adoption of a language as the national language, to the exclusion of others, can even bring about a civil war. In order to be convinced, one has only to meditate on the recent failure of the Indian government when it tried to impose a national language to India, and the uprising generated by the new language policy.

Thus certain countries must face the following problems: give official status to local languages, or keep the language of the colonizing nation as the official language. To solve both problems, there is but one imperative solution: to adopt some degree of bilingualism at the national level, and this requirement, in most countries going off on such a venture, will affect a sensible percentage of the population and help those countries to be recognized all over the world.

That necessity does not automatically hinder the intellectual life of those nations. Today, an author or a scientist who belongs to a linguistic minority must often write in a priority language to make his ideas or findings known to a wider public. Such a trend gives the priority languages in an even stronger position. A large proportion of scientific papers released in the Netherlands or in highly civilized countries, in the technical field for example, are published in English, French or German.

● (5:20 p.m.)

One can therefore wonder whether those whose mother tongue is a priority language have any need for bilingualism, since theirs is the language of the country where they live and work. Besides, it enables them to acquire the knowledge they need and since, finally, it is spoken and understood in many countries, they would like to visit, why should they need another language?

Such considerations lead people to give too much importance to their mother tongue. Such linguistic chauvinism often disturbs those who took the trouble of learning a second language, perhaps less important than their own.

If Dutchmen learn English, why do not Englishmen learn Dutch? Is it because English is better than Dutch? It is true that we can consider English as a great language,