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Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity in the European Union

Just two days ago on 22 November 2005 the European Commission adopted an important Communication entitled “A new framework strategy for multilingualism”.¹ The Communication is the very first to be published on the subject and it sets out our strategy and proposes new action to be taken both by Member States and by the Commission itself. What are we to understand by ‘multilingualism’? On the one hand, in organisational terms, the term “multilingual” describes the particular linguistic set-up prevailing in the European Institutions, which are legally and morally bound to operate in more than one language. It is vital for the Union's democratic legitimacy – and for the transparency of its decisions – that no citizen be excluded by language from taking part in its democratic structures. All the Institutions of the Union reflect – and must continue to reflect – Europe's multilingual nature. On the other hand, “multilingualism” in the European Union is also the name given to an explicit policy designed to encourage people to acquire more language skills and to build an environment that favours the full expression of all languages.

When President Barroso appointed his first Commission, a year ago now, he took the innovative step of appointing, for the very first time, a Commissioner with a specific reference to multilingualism in his portfolio. Ján Figel' is responsible not only for Education and Culture, but also for Translation, the Interpreting Service and the Official Publications Office. This ensures that all aspects of multilingualism policy are spearheaded by a single Commissioner. This is an important development and, moreover, an acknowledgement of the fact that multilingualism lies at the very core of European values. It needs a coherent approach, and it needs a Commissioner to take charge of it.

The Commission's objectives in this policy field as set out in the new Communication are threefold:

- The first is to step up our work to encourage all citizens to learn and speak more languages, in order to improve mutual understanding and communication: the more citizens who speak foreign languages, the more Europe's many languages will be bridges, rather than barriers.
- Secondly, the Communication underlines the major role that languages and multilingualism play in the European economy.
- Finally, the third objective is to maintain the multilingual nature of the European Union's institutions, based on the work of our professional linguists in the interpretation and translation services, so that we continue to ensure effective communication between the Union and all its citizens.

The Commission wants to do a better job of providing citizens with access to information about the European Union in their own languages, especially about legislation, procedures and policies. And consistent with this new approach, it has just launched a Web portal on languages.² The aim of this portal, part of a wider initiative of the Barroso Commission to

¹ COM (2005) 596 final: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/com596_en.pdf.

² <http://europa.eu.int/languages/en/home>.

improve communication with European citizens, is to provide an easy point of entry for the general public to information about languages from the European Union. The navigation tools and all the introductory text in the portal itself are provided in the 20 official languages, and this reflects the Union's commitment to multilingual communication with its citizens.

The European Union is now home to 450 million people who speak about 80 indigenous and many more non-indigenous languages, each of them unique. Multilingualism is part of what makes the European Union what it is; the peaceful co-existence of people from many different language communities is an integral part of our society. In keeping with the Union's motto, 'Unity in diversity', the Commission's language policy is crystal clear: we are committed to maintaining that diversity in European society. The European Union is no 'melting pot' (on the model of USA). On the contrary, our aim is to preserve ethnic identity, highlight and defend our cultural roots.

We need to find ways of encouraging all citizens to appreciate, and learn from, the rich diversity of languages and cultures that surrounds them. It is common enough to find individuals who can speak two or more languages – both in multilingual communities and in situations of language contact. This year on 26 September, the European Day of Languages, the European Commission published the results of a Eurobarometer survey which was conducted last June and which focuses on knowledge of languages among European citizens.

Results include the following:

- 50% of the European population say they can speak a foreign language (approximately the same result as in 2001, when 47% of the EU15 population said they could speak at least one foreign language).
- The figures vary considerably from one country to another: 29% of the Hungarian population, 30% of the British and 36% of the Portuguese, Italian and Spanish populations say they can only master their mother tongue, whereas 99% of Luxembourg's population is at least bilingual.
- English is known as a second language by one third of the EU population. It is followed by German (12%), which has overtaken French (11%) as the second most spoken foreign language in the EU due to the fact that it is widely used in the countries which joined the EU last year.
- The 2004 enlargement has lifted Russian to fifth place in the list of the most widely spoken foreign languages in the EU. This is due to the presence of important Russian-speaking communities in the Baltic countries, and to the fact that the language was widely used in Eastern and Central Europe.
- Students are the most likely to speak a foreign language: almost 8 out of 10 students can converse in at least one foreign language.

Our long-term objective is a steady increase in the rate of individual multilingualism until every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue. Hence the slogan, Mother Tongue Plus Two. The role of the European Commission is to encourage Member States and others to promote individual multilingualism to the benefit of the economy but also for personal fulfilment. Increasingly, the ability to understand and communicate in several languages is seen as a required skill and a key asset.

A multilingual society requires that European citizens have good language skills in order to take advantage of the freedom to work or study in another Member State. Because the European Union is all about communication – the free movement of people, ideas, money and goods.

The European Union's role in the fields of education and culture is not to replace action by Member States, but to support and supplement it. According to the Treaty, Member States retain full and absolute responsibility for the content and structure of their education and training systems. The Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes are there to complement the work that the 25 Member States undertake themselves and to encourage people from different countries to work together. Through these programmes, the Commission invests over € 30 million per year in practical projects that stimulate the enthusiasm of language learners and their teachers. These include school exchanges, language assistantships, teacher training and awareness raising initiatives. These resources are limited and we must use them to try to encourage national and regional authorities to do more to promote language learning and linguistic diversity. There is also considerable investment in mobility through the Erasmus action, the Youth programme, and the town-twinning action. The Commission regards mobility as a key factor in motivating people to learn about their neighbours, and to learn their languages. For the new generation of programmes it has been proposed that the amount of funding for mobility activities should be significantly increased.

Covering the period 2004 to 2006, the European Commission's Action Plan for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity is, in effect, the blueprint for our policies. The Action Plan sets out three broad areas for action which we see as crucial for the future:

- Extending the benefits of language learning to all citizens (from early language learning right through to adult education).
- Improving the quality of language teaching.
- Creating a more language-friendly environment. The key areas for action here are: fostering an inclusive approach to languages, improving language awareness via the media and of course the Internet, which has a unique potential for delivering language learning and facilitating contact between speakers and learners of a very wide range of languages; and improving the supply and take-up of language learning opportunities.

The newly published Communication on multilingualism proposes that national, regional and local authorities should make a sustained effort to promote an awareness of the capital importance of linguistic diversity and that Member States should adopt national action plans to promote multilingualism with a set of clearly stated objectives for language teaching at the various stages of the education system. It also proposes the introduction of further improvements in foreign language teacher training, adequate provision for early language learning, and more teaching of school subjects through a foreign language (the approach known as Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL). It also asks Member States to review training programmes at universities to ensure that they equip students in the language professions with the right skills.

Promoting linguistic diversity means actively encouraging the teaching and learning of the widest possible range of languages in our schools, universities, adult education centres and enterprises. It means making sure that our language teachers are trained to the highest possible standards and fully understand the languages and cultures they teach. In order to help

them prepare better language teachers, the European Commission has recently published a report from the University of Southampton, on the European profile for language teacher education.³

We already have a pretty clear picture of the way languages are taught and learned in our schools across Europe. Eurydice, the organisation set up by the European Commission to collect, compare and publish information on education throughout Europe has published a report entitled “Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe”⁴ and it will be updated every two years. Of course, the needs and objectives vary from region to region and the picture emerging from this analysis is a complex one.

At the 2002 EU summit in Barcelona, the Heads of State and Government of the Member States called for children to learn at least two foreign languages from an early age. Apart from enabling children to speak other languages better as adults, starting early has been shown to have a positive effect on pupils' ability with their native language. The Eurydice report shows that throughout most of Europe, children are indeed beginning to learn foreign languages at an early age – during primary education for most – and the age at which they start learning is getting lower. In most countries, more than half the children in primary education are learning a foreign language.

If children are learning languages younger, are they learning two languages, as the Barcelona summit encouraged them to? Almost everywhere in Europe it is possible for pupils to study two or more foreign languages, and in 20 of the EU's 25 countries it is mandatory that they do so. However, in general, children begin to learn their second foreign language later than their first: less than half of all pupils between the ages of 10 and 14 learn two or more foreign languages.

Although pupils are beginning to learn languages younger, the overall proportion of teaching time allotted to languages has changed little in the past ten years. In general, in countries where language learning is compulsory, around 10% to 15% of teaching time is dedicated to languages. Luxembourg, with 34%, is an honourable exception.

95% of pupils learn the five most widely spoken languages: English, French, German, Spanish and Russian. Often, states reinforce this trend by specifying compulsory foreign languages, and in 13 countries, English is obligatory. English is learned by far more pupils than any other language. Even where it is not compulsory, at least 90% of pupils in most countries learn it. What is more, the popularity of English is growing, particularly in central and eastern Europe.

After English, the next most popular language generally depends on the geographic area where pupils live. In the nordic and eastern countries it is German; in the southern countries of Europe it is French; and in the Baltic States it is Russian. Throughout most of Europe, French and German compete for second place.

The awareness of the importance of language learning does not need demonstration; it is rather on the second aspect of our policy – linguistic diversity – that the approaches adopted by local, regional and national authorities, but also by parents, students and teachers, are less unanimous.

³ European Profile for Language Teacher Education University of Southampton: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/profilebroch_en.pdf.

⁴ <http://www.eurydice.org/Documents/KDLANG/2005/EN/FrameSet.htm>.

The Commission rejects the assertion that it is enough for citizens to learn just one *lingua franca*. A citizen who limits himself to learning a *lingua franca* will not acquire the intercultural skills that come from learning a foreign language in the full richness of its cultural context. In any event, the needs of European industry and commerce will simply not be met by education systems that produce young people who are only able to communicate in their mother tongue and in English. This is the message that we have to get across – and especially to parents. In a border-free European Union, a significant proportion of the workforce needs to have practical, useable skills in understanding other languages and cultures. We must do more to make sure that European companies do not lose business because they cannot speak their customers' languages.

What's more, there is a growing 'language industry' in Europe that has a real contribution to make to the European economy. This includes not only companies that provide translations, but also, interpretation, editing, proofreading, localisation, subtitling, assessment and certification and many more. Language teaching alone is a multi-million Euro sector. Training programmes in higher education and elsewhere need to be continuously updated to ensure that students acquire the right skills, are offered the right tools and are given insight into real working conditions.

Eurobarometer has given us a picture of the European public's *perceptions* of its language skills. The Eurydice report on language teaching in schools gives us in great detail the *quantity* of language teaching going on in schools throughout Europe. But what how do we measure the *quality* of the results of that teaching? If we want to measure improvements in language learning, we need reference points. As yet, there is no existing standardised survey of language skills across the European Union, and we need to collect accurate and up-to-date data on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching systems.

This will be achieved through the European Indicator of Language Competence, designed to measure overall foreign language skills in the Union. It will involve the administration of specially developed tests of competence to a sample of pupils in education and training establishments in each Member State. In line with the Barcelona Council's wishes, for each candidate in the sample, the indicator should measure skills in at least two languages other than mother tongue.

The newly published paper on multilingualism, which Mr Figel' introduced to the press the day before yesterday, sets out clear proposals for the work which needs to be tackled. For example, the Commission is planning to establish a high level reflection group on multilingualism, consisting of a small number of independent experts to assist it in analysing the progress made by Member States, to provide support and advice in developing initiatives, and to provide fresh impetus and ideas on multilingualism. There are also plans for a ministerial conference on multilingualism to allow Member States to share progress made and plan future work. In 2007 the Commission will be reporting on what it and Member States have achieved in the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity.

Multilingual policy brings Europe closer to the citizen and citizens closer to each other. Multilingualism is at the very heart of the European project. The better we understand and respect each other in our diversity, the stronger the Union will be, and the richer we will be as individuals. The role of the Commission is to promote and respect that linguistic diversity, and to make the multilingual nature of the Union more transparent, legitimate and efficient.

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