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Introduction

Dear representatives of the European Commission,
Dear special guests and invited speakers,
Dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure and privilege to stand here and welcome you to the 18th conference of the *European Federation of National Institutions for Language* EFNIL, the collaborative platform of the official languages of various European nations.

At our previous conference two years ago in Tallinn I admitted that it was with some nervousness that I welcomed you. This is certainly also the case today, be it for different reasons. Due to the covid pandemic we have not been able to organise a conference for two years now. And finally here we are. A new live conference! What a pleasure to stand in front of you, see your faces, hear your voices, feel your enthusiasm!

For our Croatian hosts at the *Institute of Croatian Language and Linguistics*, preparing for this event has been particularly difficult, due to the uncertainties surrounding travel and other problems related to the pandemic. They deserve a warm round of applause for all of their efforts, with this marvellous result.

Given this uncertainty, we had to keep all possibilities open and opted for a hybrid conference with both live and online attendance. Please allow me to also welcome all our colleagues and friends who are with us online. I hope they will feel part of our language family and feel something of the friendly, collaborative atmosphere.

And indeed, ladies and gentlemen, here we are in the beautiful Dalmatian area of Croatia. This evening we will have the opportunity to visit the old historic centre of Dubrovnik. There is a link between Dubrovnik and Tallinn, where our last conference took place. Both cities are unique historical places, recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites.

Dubrovnik has always been a maritime centre of commerce and as such, a place of encounter between people of different origins, with a variety of languages as well as different cultural and religious traditions. This makes this area a symbolic place for an EFNIL conference. EFNIL tries to be a model of understanding and collaboration between language communities within Europe.

It is with great pleasure that I welcome the representatives of the European Commission. And indeed, it is with great pleasure that we heard the video messages by the Minister of Culture and Media and by the Minister of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia, Ms Obuljen and Mr Fuchs respectively. We

consider the presence and contributions of all of these authorities as an honour and thank them for their lively interest in our work.

I would have loved to have welcomed Ms Obuljen and Mr Fuchs in person, but we understand that their work agendas did not allow them to come to Cavtat. I thank them for their nice words.

Draga ministricice Obuljen Koržinek, dragi ministre Fuchs, hvala vam odsreca na ohrabrujućim riječima koje ste nam uputili kao predstavnici Vlade Republike Hrvatske. Drago nam je i ponosni smo što imamo Republiku Hrvatsku, a osobito hrvatski jezik kao dio naše europske jezične obitelji.

Let me turn back to English now and to the topic of this conference. Today and tomorrow we will be discussing the role of our national language institutions in the digital age. The relationship between the mission of our institutions and digitalisation is a complex one. It is obvious that the digital revolution has had and is having a great impact on research and the scientific study of language, as well as on the production of language resources such as dictionaries, terminology databases, and text corpora. Our work is clearly influenced by digitalisation, and the nature of this influence on language planning and research will be one of the subthemes during this conference.

But we also have to look at the other side, that is the ICT sector and the challenges it has to cope with. Among these there is certainly also the language challenge, if solutions for communicative and other needs are supposed to be universally available for all consumers worldwide. That means that language resources and linguistic expertise can help the industry to improve its products, to cross language barriers and to increase the power and impact of its innovative solutions. That is a second perspective that will be discussed today and tomorrow.

The third perspective is political in nature in relation to language use. How is the digital revolution influencing the status and position of our languages? Almost all products, solutions and technologies are available in English and in some other big and powerful languages, but not, or not automatically, in languages with a smaller home market. This certainly means that the digital revolution risks creating or reinforcing power differences between languages and language communities. For relatively small languages there is the risk of loss of functional domains if people are offered solutions and innovative types of support in English but not or not to the same extent and with the same quality and impact in their home language. For these languages it is not evident that the free market will develop all solutions itself, which as a consequence could imply a more active role for the public sector. The issue of equal opportunities for all languages is, without a doubt, one of the bigger political challenges and will, of course, be a topic of discussion at this conference.

Above I described the socio-political problem from the perspective of the interest of our languages and their future. The same problem can also be approached

from another perspective, one that is even more important, at least from a social point of view. It will be clear to everyone that technological innovation not only risks creating power and functionality differences between languages but certainly also between individuals, between a social and knowledgeable upper class and less favoured social classes. The covid-19 pandemic has made this very clear. Schools were closed down and live lessons in the classrooms had to be replaced by online lessons with modern communication platforms. Many pupils from lower social classes found themselves excluded because they had no laptops or good internet connections. This social aspect should be taken into account if our policies are supposed to be committed to inclusive citizenship, avoiding all types of exclusion and social discrimination. Without a doubt, language is one of the dimensions – albeit not the only one – of this social challenge. Our national languages are the language varieties that are by far the most widespread among the population at large and, hence, guarantee the best possible access to information and knowledge. To put it simply: if products and services were available only in English and some other privileged languages but not in all the others, this would reinforce the social gap between an elite that can use them and all the others that lack the language competence and would remain deprived of them.

Dear participants, there will be ample space to discuss all of these important aspects from all of these different angles. There is one political aspect that is not explicitly part of the programme but to which I want to draw your attention, be it only briefly. In discussing language planning in the digital age, we tend to focus almost exclusively on the influence these two phenomena can have on each other, that is what technology can mean for languages and language research and how language expertise and language resources can support digital innovation. There is a danger, that in doing so, we lose track of what could perhaps be the most powerful impact.

This regards the way the digital age tends to modify the social habits and interaction patterns of human beings and, in doing so, their language needs and indeed the very construction of their cultural and social identities. I am referring to the nexus between offline and online communication and human interaction. Up to fifty years ago or so, all our social and communicative interaction took place in a physical space, composed of concrete geographical places, from local to regional to national and – only for a very small minority – beyond the boundaries of the nation state. This is no longer the case, as the famous Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells has demonstrated. The *space of places* which has been the scene for human interaction is being replaced by what he calls a *space of flows*, where offline and online interaction intertwine. Modern humans are part of complex and variegated networks of both offline and online interaction. As a result our social and personal identities are increasingly fragmented, idiosyncratic identities that are, to a much lesser extent, defined or inspired by our direct social environment, i.e. our home

town, our language community, our nation state. In other words, the new social interaction patterns challenge the old paradigm of largely monolithic identities, with one language, one set of values and norms, and one model of what is socially acceptable, shared by almost all members of a geographically based community.

Needless to say, this new social reality will have serious consequences for the linguistic competence needed by individuals to be fully part of this globalising digital age. More and more they will need and use complex linguistic repertoires that go beyond one (standard) variety of one national language. This change might be the most powerful one that will force us as language institutes to reconsider the status and position of our languages in view of the social and communicative needs of our citizens.

Dear participants, I hope to have convinced you of the importance of the topic of this conference as well as of the richness of the aspects and perspectives that are potentially involved. Let's now start with the conference. We have an exciting programme with stimulating keynote speakers and excellent national reports.

I am delighted to introduce our first keynote speaker, Mr Philippe Gelin. He is head of the sector on Multilingualism at the DG for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, better known as DG Connect. We consider his presence with us today as a sign of support from the European Commission and as a promising base for further contacts and collaboration. Dear Mr Gelin, you are, without a doubt, an expert in the field of digital technologies and how these influence communicative and social behaviour. You have long-term experience in all relevant subdomains, be it scientific research, applied industrial research or technology development and – for many years – as a policy agent for the European Commission. Mr Gelin, the floor is yours.

References

- Castells, M. (2020): Space of flows, space of places: Materials for a theory of urbanism in the information age. In: LeGates, R. T./Stout, F. (eds): *The city reader*. London: Routledge, 229-240.

Bibliographical information

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