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Multilingualism: a policy for uniting Europeans

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here this evening in this distinguished centre of learning to present my **strategy for multilingualism** in the European Union.

I am also delighted that this occasion is organised under the aegis of the FT Business and the European Cultural Foundation. Because if I were to sum up the benefits of multilingualism for Europe today, these are its twin poles: **languages for business, skills and competitiveness; and languages bridging our cultures.**

Multilingualism has shaped the European project from the very start. Just over 50 years ago, old enemies came together to build the Union on the ashes of their former conflicts. The fact that they put the languages of the founding states on an equal footing was not empty symbolism. It was a real commitment to the **dialogue** which underpins Europe.

With each wave of enlargement, sceptics have argued that the principle of multilingualism will have to give way eventually. But our commitment to respecting linguistic diversity has held firm. And we have come to see multilingualism, not as impractical, but as imperative.

We have also come to appreciate it as a source of richness in itself.

Languages are not only a means of expression. Multilingualism is also a means to greater social cohesion, greater prosperity and better job prospects.

This is why I am committed to preserving and promoting multilingualism as a **key feature of the European project**. And this is the thinking behind the Commission's latest strategy in this area that we issued last autumn.

I am convinced that a knowledge of languages benefits Europeans. A successful multilingualism policy can strengthen citizens' life chances: it can boost job prospects. It can open up access to rights and services. It can create bonds of solidarity in Europe, because it creates paths to dialogue between people and cultures, laying the foundations for strong and united local communities.

Languages for intercultural understanding

Never before have so many languages been spoken in the Union: 23 EU official languages; some **60 regional and minority languages**; and hundreds of migrant languages. But more to the point, never before have the speakers of different languages lived in such close proximity.

Europe's diversity of languages is not an obstacle, either internally or externally, in our dealings with the rest of the world. This diversity is an opportunity, but as with all opportunities, we must go out and seize it.

Certainly, diversity is sometimes perceived as a threat, and communities end up living in isolation, with the risk of xenophobia and mistrust. We need to get to know each other better. By learning other languages we discover other values, beliefs and behaviour. Our languages are our single most important bridge to each other, towards understanding and exchange. They are an instrument for tolerance and respect.

By nurturing language skills in Europe, we are encouraging people not only to use languages to develop their own talents and skills, but also to appreciate the way in which linguistic and cultural diversity forms a network that binds us closely together.

Approached in this spirit, linguistic diversity is a precious asset; increasingly so in today's globalised world.

A very relevant text in this area was written by a group I set up, chaired by the French-Lebanese writer **Amin Maalouf**. Their report, entitled '**A Rewarding Challenge**', demonstrates how our multiplicity of languages can serve to consolidate Europe. The Malouf group pointed in particular to the fact that: 'A common sense of belonging

based on linguistic and cultural diversity is a powerful antidote against the various types of fanaticism towards which all too often the assertion of identity has slipped in Europe and elsewhere, in previous years as today'.

The need for good language policies

However, just as a knowledge of languages is an enormous asset, the other side of the coin is also true – without good language policies, our linguistic diversity can be an obstacle preventing citizens from taking advantage of the European freedoms to live, work, study or trade in another Member State.

In fact, lack of other languages is the most common reason holding people back from living this aspect of the 'European dream'. Lack of knowledge of the national language is also a serious obstacle for migrants trying to integrate into a new society.

This is why my Communication proposes **strategic measures** so that everyone can benefit from the advantages of multilingualism. And this is why we intend to mainstream multilingualism across the European policies that are intertwined with languages: lifelong learning, employment, social inclusion, competitiveness, culture, youth and civil society, research and media – to name just a selection!

... especially during the crisis

Our strategy should also be seen in the context of new economic realities. The global **economic crisis** is the biggest challenge on the horizon. However, we must resist any short-term reflex that seeks to divert resources away from long-term priorities such as education.

The crisis only makes the input of education and training, of skills and innovation, even more critical than before: to help people survive the crisis by retaining and improving their skills; and to prepare ourselves for the new opportunities that recovery and a changed economic order will bring.

Languages as skills

And even before the current crisis, our economies were changing. Europe has moved from producing goods to trading in ideas, services, and knowledge.

The reforms to create a **European Area of Higher Education** – or the Bologna Process, as it is known – involving 46 European countries, have focussed attention on the European dimension of higher education and on the question of preparing graduates for an international jobs market.

The nature of work is changing. We are moving from a job-for-life perspective to one where people will switch job several times. We have to prepare people for jobs that are themselves evolving; for jobs that don't even exist, as yet... In this fast-changing landscape, people don't just need knowledge and technical skills; increasingly, employers are looking for a range of cross-cutting abilities that especially focus on communication and language skills.

We need choice and opportunities to learn languages, starting in schools and universities, to equip our young people for the labour market, and broaden this provision into lifelong language learning, so that workers, professionals and entrepreneurs can develop and refresh their language skills.

The role of universities

Universities have a crucial part to play in creating a **Europe of knowledge**. This goes for languages as for any other field, where universities have enormous cultural and technological knowledge to share with society. They need to fill this role fully, providing language tuition to students, regardless of their specialisation, offering courses in language industries, and cooperation at European and international level to attain and maintain standards of excellence in teaching and research.

We should aim for a situation where all graduates in Europe

- are able to communicate in at least two languages other than their mother tongue,
- know how to learn new languages effectively,
- have the confidence to learn a new language when the need or opportunity arises,
- have first-hand experience of working and learning in other countries and in collaborating with other countries, and
- are familiar with other cultures and intercultural skills.

Allow me to say that the LSE language centre is a model for language learning in higher education, especially given the variety and flexibility on offer - between extra curricular courses, degree options and 1-to-1 private and group tuition.

Stronger links between universities and business organisations – such as the Commission supports with our University-Business Forum - can also help fine-tune language and intercultural skills to business needs.

The EU's very successful **Erasmus exchange programme** has demonstrated over and over again that studying abroad improves language and intercultural skills and boosts job prospects. We should be multiplying the opportunities, for apprentices and entrepreneurs as

well as students, so that all young Europeans can benefit from being part of a multicultural, multilingual society without borders.

Languages for business

We also know that poor language skills are affecting Europe's businesses.

A study we commissioned shows around one in ten small enterprises in Europe losing business because of a **lack of language skills**. Small businesses provide about two-thirds of total employment in Europe. So even a marginal improvement here would impact on growth and jobs across the EU.

And the study confirms that knowledge of English, as a foreign language, is not enough. From a jobs perspective, as more people master English, it will be the second or third language that will make the difference for employers.

And while English is still the "lingua franca" of international business, **demand for other languages is growing**. Companies need to acquire other European languages, or world languages such as Mandarin, Russian, or Japanese - which you teach here, of course - to conquer new markets.

As we all know: with English you can buy anything in the world. But if you have something to sell, you had better learn your client's language...

This becomes even more important for keeping afloat in the crisis: we know that companies which export tend to be more resilient in an economic downturn. And that export strategies will involve communicating across language barriers. This presents as many challenges as opportunities, but with good management, SMEs have plenty to gain. If we can get this message across to everybody, from potential young entrepreneurs to trade promotion organisations and governments, languages really will 'mean business'.

EU stakeholder platforms

It might seem to some that multilingualism is about students and teachers. Yes, students and teachers are at the heart of language learning. But effective multilingualism policies call on a wide range of stakeholders – education authorities, of course; regional and local governments; business and professional organisations; academic and research institutions; voluntary organisations and NGOs.

Sharing and spreading information about what works best is a vital part of building consistent, excellent policies for multilingualism.

This is why I will be setting up **two platforms in 2009**, to deepen cooperation with language stakeholders. The platform with civil society stakeholders will share ideas and experiences for promoting multilingualism for intercultural dialogue. The permanent platform for the Business community will focus on how to address the mismatch between business needs and education provision.

Some words on the UK

Finally, allow me to make a few remarks about the language situation in the UK. Cultural and language diversity have become part of daily life in this country. From visiting English schools I have seen first-hand what a challenge this entails for teachers and the educational system. But at the same time, this diversity constitutes a priceless asset.

A good mastery of English is vital for social and professional integration. English is the glue that holds this society together. But at the same time, all these inputs from outside act as an enrichment.

The UK is in many ways a special case in the EU. Owing to the dominant position of English, many people consider it to be a *lingua franca*. For them "English is enough".

I know that, despite this, the UK is in the forefront in the EU of developing novel ways of furthering language learning and dealing with multilingualism in local communities. However, the strength of English brings with it a **serious risk for native English-speakers**. They tend to devote less effort to learning other languages. This puts them at a disadvantage on the labour market compared to other Europeans, who are more at ease with foreign languages.

A **2005 survey by the European Commission** showed that almost 66% of UK respondents did not speak any language other than their mother tongue - by far the highest proportion of all EU countries taking part. This is a far cry from the EU goal of all citizens being able to speak their own language plus two additional languages.

This British peculiarity is even a problem for my area of responsibility in the Commission. The Commission is facing such a **severe shortage of native English-speaking interpreters** that meetings are being cancelled. It is also possible that the Commission will have to cut the number of translated documents because of the dwindling number of British students with degrees in French and German. If we don't do something very soon, there will be more and more non-native English speakers obliged to interpret into English.

This is why I take each visit to the UK as an opportunity to plead the cause of language-learning and multilingualism. Learning a language is a culturally enriching experience. But it is no longer an intellectual

luxury reserved for an elite. It has become an essential for a healthy labour market and a competitive economy.

I do not believe that the situation is beyond repair: I can see positive developments in the UK. Amongst the innovative projects I have referred to, I am always very pleased to be able to visit UK-based schools and projects that showcase best practice of multilingualism in action, such as the Arsenal Double Club project.

Conclusion

Just to conclude, let me remind you that this is the **European Year of Creativity and Innovation**. We want to use this year to create an environment in Europe that recognises innovation and creativity as drivers of economic and social change and as keys that unlock the potential of every citizen.

Multilingualism has its part to play – for example, the links between **multilingualism and new technologies** open up exciting new possibilities that we must investigate further.

But I am sure you will agree with me that knowledge of languages not only opens doors to new opportunities. It also opens the way to new and creative thinking – since multilingual people are aware that

problems are perceived and tackled in different ways depending on language and cultural backgrounds, and can harness this ability to find new solutions.

As George Steiner has said, "Babel is not a burden but a mysterious and immense blessing." I am convinced that multilingualism is a real asset for Europe. It will be a determining factor in our ability to build a harmonious and prosperous society. Perhaps it is even a prerequisite for such a society.

So I call for us to work together, to nurture our linguistic diversity and build the Europe we desire.

Thank you.