

**Leonard Orban**

European Commissioner responsible for multilingualism

## **The Nueva Economía Fórum**

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

**Address to the New Economy Forum**

**Barcelona, 30 November 2007**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to address this Forum, which I had the pleasure to do once already at a breakfast meeting during my visit to Madrid earlier this year.

The months that have passed since then have marked a new beginning in the public debate about how languages contribute to Europe's goals in education, in competitiveness, growth, employment, in social integration and intercultural dialogue. I know that this Forum contributes to a large extent to this debate.

As we all know, languages matter to our citizens. Citizens view this policy as a means to articulate a democratic right: to understand EU policy and to be understood by the institutions. Seen from this perspective, the cost of multilingualism - roughly the price of a coffee per citizen per year - is negligible and, in any event, is the cost of democracy.

### **Multilingualism - at the heart of the European project**

Before bringing you up to date on the latest developments, I want to underline some of the principles that determine my thinking and line of action.

Multilingualism is the tool for creating bridges between people rather than seeing division.

Languages are the key to intercultural skills, to deeper understanding of the things that make us tick, languages build bridges between people and open doors to new opportunities. Conversely, turning down the opportunity to learn each others' languages can lead to serious problems for companies and societies; we have seen many examples of that. Misunderstandings, lack of trust, blocking of decision-making processes and systems, even severe conflicts in the political arena.

Multilingualism must offer new answers for citizens and for our society. Language skills should have pride of place in successful cross-border cooperation, as a way of overcoming barriers, and as the pre-condition to improve our economic and social environment.

Multilingualism is much more than pure language learning and providing legal texts in all official languages. It is intertwined in our daily lives, in questions of education, competitiveness, intercultural dialogue, justice, health, to name but a few. Therefore it requires a positive uptake in all policy areas concerned in preserving and promoting linguistic diversity throughout the European Union.

For all these reasons, I and my services are redoubling our efforts to raise the profile of multilingualism on the European stage. My conviction that languages are both a tool and an asset in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe has prompted me to consider a new strategy for multilingualism, which I intend to issue next year.

### **The context for languages and business - European diversity, skills, competitiveness**

Most people can easily agree that language issues have an essentially political dimension. What people in general don't realise is the economic impact of multilingualism.

When I took on the multilingualism portfolio nine months ago, I promised to examine how languages can help make European businesses more competitive, and help workers build their skills and employability.

What is the context for bringing languages and the world of work together? Let us try to put the pieces together.

Today's Europe of 27 is a multicultural, diverse enterprise - the result of enlargements, of the single market, of easier movement between countries, of migration and globalisation. But it's not a meaningless jumble; it's not a featureless melting-pot. It's a common home, where diversity is cherished.

Our languages characterise this diversity - 23 official languages, around 60 regional and minority languages. What I want to stress, today, is that this diversity of languages is not an obstacle, either internally or externally in our dealings with the rest of the world. Our diversity is an opportunity, and I will come back to this point later.

Let me say, though, that as with all opportunities, it must be seized. So how are we doing, when it comes to speaking each others' languages?

5 years ago, here in Barcelona, the European Member States agreed to set a goal of teaching two languages in addition to the mother tongue. The picture varies across Europe, but most countries are moving towards this goal, and the numbers of languages students learn are going up.

Our surveys show that more than half of all Europeans consider themselves able to hold a decent conversation in at least one foreign language.

What's more, 40 % of our 15-24 year-olds know at least two languages on top of their mother tongue. This is double the rate for the over 55s, so the prospects are good.

A large majority of Europeans are already making the link between languages and employability - when we asked why young people should learn foreign languages, the top answer - more than 70 % - was better job opportunities.

What about business? We already know, from a study we published last February, that languages are an issue for business in Europe: 11 % of our sample of SMEs, Spanish businesses included, admitted losing a contract for lack of language skills.

It is often suggested that a single language - English is usually offered as the example - is enough to do business in. And certainly, for practical reasons, a lingua franca has its place in the day to day running of our businesses; there is no doubt about that. But in itself it can't provide the competitive edge that we need in order to be successful in the long run.

We can use our languages to open up new trading opportunities, and gain a comparative advantage in an increasingly globalised market. Clearly, they are not an obstacle, but an opportunity that we can exploit. I know our experts will have plenty to say on this topic, and I look forward to hearing it.

In September, I had the pleasure to host a conference in Brussels on the theme “Languages mean business”. We brought together stakeholders from businesses, trade organisations, chambers of commerce and the education sector for a constructive dialogue about how to use languages to get the best from the interplay between individual skills and the labour market.

Last week in Portugal, the group that I have created in order to maintain a permanent discussion about these issues, came together for the first time. This Business Forum consists of 15 highly experienced individuals from Europe and beyond, covering branches from steel to aviation, from consulting to fast moving consumer goods.

They make up a very competent advisory board. We will integrate their ideas and recommendations in our strategy on multilingualism next year.

The strategy will also embrace the report of the High Level Group on Multilingualism, which was established through a formal Commission Decision in 2006. I had the opportunity to chair the Group meetings this year and follow the debates on topics that touch citizens' lives directly and impact on the kind of society we want to live in.

We had a session devoted to translation and interpretation - namely, public access to European legislation, the development of new technological tools and the training of highly qualified interpreters and translators.

We discussed the crucial issue of motivating Europeans to learn foreign languages, not only for work, but because knowledge of languages is individually enriching and a window to better understanding other people's cultures.

We also discussed our regional and minority languages, which are a precious part of Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity and wealth.

## **The challenges**

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have a dual task ahead of us:

- We need to make businesses aware of what they can gain from investing in language training and adopting a strategic approach to multilingual communication.
- We need to ensure that our education systems provide our young people with the language skills to make the best of the employment and trade opportunities that Europe offers; and we need to consider lifelong language learning, beyond formal education.

## **The issues at stake**

With the business conference earlier this year and through the work of the Business Forum we have started to examine the interplay of these two challenges, to establish our needs, and how to meet them, to earn the payback for Europe that investing in languages will bring.

We need to examine the need for efficient multilingual business communication from different angles: cultural aspects, an academic approach and practitioners.

In our discussions, we will approach mainly three questions:

First, how languages can aid regional development - during my travelling in border regions I see the fruits of good regional cooperation, where languages cross - indeed, where they ignore - borders.

Second, we are examining supply and demand of languages skills in companies - which needs can be addressed in the short-term; which in the longer term; who should do what when developing business language strategies; which are the best models of collaboration between business and education.

We are looking at international business communication - how to communicate outwards and the role of mobility. We are also examining how to manage internal communication, how to value the linguistic skills of migrant workers, and how to develop the interplay between language skills and intercultural skills in a multilingual workforce.

Multinational workforces are no longer restricted to multinational companies. Instead our workforces reflect the patterns we see in daily life around us, as more Europeans move around Europe to work, and more migrants from outside the EU come to our shores.

The languages hidden within companies can be a huge resource which can be tapped to the benefit of the company and to the benefit of the individual, by releasing skills and knowledge previously unused.

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe you share with me the vision about the potential of multilingualism for competitiveness and growth. Therefore I would like to invite you to help me to spread the word through your networks.

We don't only want to influence political decision makers.

We also want to reach economic and social decision-makers, businesses, both large corporations and small companies. That is why I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to discuss these issues with you today.

We have a common responsibility to bring about change in this field. It is only when we act together on many different fronts that we shall be able to make languages into a real competitive edge for Europe.

Thank you.