

Leonard Orban

European Commissioner for Multilingualism

**"Making the most of Europe's linguistic
diversity"**

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

Public Hearing

Brussels, 15 April 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased that you have accepted my invitation to this public hearing on multilingualism, and that you undertook a journey in order to share your views with us. I would also like to greet those who are following this hearing on the Internet. Thanks to our translators and technology, you can listen to our discussions today from any part of the world.

Languages – a responsibility for all of us

After a year of heading the languages portfolio, I would like to say how impressed I am with the general public interest in this field. The outstanding participation in our on-line survey on multilingualism last autumn was clear evidence of this. In fact, I am not surprised by the success of our meeting today.

Two month ago, on the occasion of the first ministerial conference ever to be organised on multilingualism, in Brussels, I could notice the high interest shown, by the Ministers, in this field.

I want to emphasise that multilingualism is important for all of us. For national education authorities, who all share the commitment made by Ministers in 2002 to teach two foreign languages on top of the mother tongue. For Europe's decision makers too: languages have enjoyed special attention right from the start of the European project. The very first regulation adopted by the European Economic Community dealt with languages, placing the four official languages of the six founding countries on an equal footing. This principle of equality has been maintained with each enlargement, leading to the current recognition of 23 official languages.

Catering for an increasingly multilingual Europe

Expanding from 4 to 23 official languages within one single supra-national organisation is already a significant change. But our community is even more multilingual than that. Over 60 regional and minority languages are spoken across

the member states, as well as the official languages. Many of our regions are even more diverse, thanks to the presence of migrant communities.

This impressive number of languages used within the Union reflects both the successive enlargements of the EU, and the pace of globalisation. Even if these many languages do not all have official status, our policies should not forget them.

This change in the linguistic composition of Europe has had an impact on our societies. To name but a few examples: the growing number of children whose first language is different from the language they are taught in calls for new approaches to classroom organisation. Basic public services have to cater for more and more people who do not speak the official language of a country. The presence of customers of foreign origin creates new demands in goods, which opens up new business opportunities.

In short, our cultural and linguistic environment has undergone radical changes, which need to be reflected in our policies. As these examples illustrate, their scope goes far beyond education. This calls for an across-the-board approach to languages covering all the areas where they have an impact. We must adapt our policies, to take account of, and make the most of, our linguistic diversity.

The important role of local actors

This is the context for the consultation process we set in train last year, getting the views of a range of groups and organisations, national administrations, and the general public.

Today's event is a milestone in this consultation process. Why? Because this is the first opportunity for citizens and the Commission to openly debate EU language policy together.

And your voice carries particular weight in this field. Since the educational aspects of languages fall within the competence of Member States and within your national contexts, you are well placed to influence the development of your education systems. If the Commission, thanks to its central role, can encourage and coordinate initiatives and policy developments across the Member States, it is up to you, the

national, regional and local decision-makers, to have them fine-tuned to suit the local context.

I will therefore highly value your contributions to today's discussions. The outcomes will be reflected in our new strategy on multilingualism, to be adopted in the autumn.

Of course, I already have a few ideas about what I shall be putting into the communication. These ideas are the outcome of my own thinking, enriched by the many meetings which I have already had on the subject. This communication is going to be ambitious. I feel that the Commission's messages have to live up to the high level of expectation. All aspects need to be addressed, in an open and unprejudiced manner. The communication will have to contribute real added value, not simply a philosophical discussion about multilingualism but specific, practical proposals.

I can say straight away that I am particularly attached to certain themes. Without wishing to cover all of them, let me just give you a few examples. First of all, we must fully exploit the potential contained in the idea from the Maalouf group, building on the Barcelona 1+2 principle, of proposing a personal adoptive language. I am very keen to hear what you have to say on this topic.

The communication will also have to address the subject of migration. I believe that it is vital for migrants to be able to learn the language of the host country quickly and well - for professional and social reasons, and more generally to ease integration. At the same time, it seems reasonable that migrants should be able to maintain or even deepen their links with their culture of origin.

Just a few days ago the Commission proposed that 2009 should be dedicated to creativity and innovation. In the field of languages, too, we need to unleash the potential of innovation and new technology.

I also feel that the external dimension of multilingualism is also crucial. In my view, our policy needs to be proactive. We should be promoting our languages, our linguistic assets, outside Europe. At the same time, economic realities and our desire to open up to the wider world suggest that it is going to be essential to encourage the learning within the EU of external 'non-EU' languages: Chinese, Hindi and Arabic, to name but a few.

Finally, I would like to touch on the matter of languages and competitiveness. You know that in the wake of the 'Languages mean Business' conference in September 2007, I set up a working group chaired by Mr Davignon. This group is due to publish their ideas in coming weeks, and I am eager to see what they are proposing.

So, a lot of different subjects for discussion. And your suggestions are very welcome. Now, what are the arrangements for today's meeting?

The themes of the discussion

Our reflections takes place in three workshops, and will focus on three key themes : the economic aspect of multilingualism, the socio-cultural dimensions of languages; and of course the current challenges in language teaching and learning. The floor will of course be open for any other themes you wish to address. To give you a brief indication of what we are looking for from the different workshops:

First, the economic dimension, and the potential of languages for contributing to growth and jobs. In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the economic importance of multilingualism. Let me quote two recent publications from the Commission.

The first is a study we published last year on languages and business in Europe. One in ten SMEs surveyed had lost a contract for lack of language skills. The average loss per business over a three-year period was €325 000. Don't forget that Europe's SMEs provide two-thirds of total private employment. Even a slight improvement in export performance would have a measurable impact on growth and jobs across the EU.

We also have a forecast from this year on the skills Europeans will need in the years to come. By 2015 the economy as a whole will generate more than 13 million new jobs, with a continuing shift to the service sector.

Even more significantly, we will see a demand for greater skills and higher qualifications at all job-levels. Europe will actually gain 22 million jobs at the highest and medium qualification levels, but jobs for low-skilled workers will drop by 8.5 million. This has serious implications for employment: those without appropriate

qualifications, including language skills, will have more and more difficulties in finding a job.

In order to respond to an increasingly demanding labour market, we need to invest in language education and to remove all obstacles that stand in the way of greater mobility for workers. We need to recognise skills and studies acquired in other European countries; we need to equip workers with language skills so they can take up jobs abroad; we need to provide services, including education, in several languages, to help them settle. Our surveys tell us that lack of adequate language skills is the main obstacle which holds people back from planning a career abroad. It stands in the way of workers and their families alike.

The second key theme today is the socio-cultural dimension of languages.

Language skills are the bridge to creating dialogue between communities. Equipping migrants or minorities with skills in the host country language means we are opening up access to education, work and services. Conversely, allowing them to preserve their language of origin means that their difference is recognised and valued; that we expect them to share, on an equal footing, in building our societies.

2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The year is dedicated to helping everyone in the Union to deal with a more open and diverse environment by promoting mutual respect, and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to play a full role in society.

Languages belong in the forefront of this initiative. I invited a group of well-known intellectuals –writers, translators and journalists – to reflect on the ways languages can contribute to the dialogue between cultures. I would like to thank Jacques De Decker, who has come here today to present their report to you.

In the end, I would like the ***third theme to be dedicated to the language learning process***. Both within and outside the education system, language learning today faces a number of important challenges. I would rather not develop this subject too much, as I am keen on listening to your opinions, which I consider to be essential in this field.

Then Vlado Sucha, Director in the Education and Culture Directorate-General, will present **the on-line survey** which we carried out last year. The insights from citizens and stakeholders across Europe, and even beyond our borders, will help shape our discussions in the plenary and the three thematic sessions.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time is ripe for a new strategy on multilingualism. The overall goal is still to promote linguistic diversity as the clearest expression of the Union's motto 'unity in diversity'. The close links between language, culture and identity are at the heart of this aim. The economic and socio-cultural dimensions of language argue strongly in favour of a lifelong learning approach to multilingualism.

But it is not the Commission alone that will achieve a multilingual Europe. Multilingualism is a cross-cutting policy, involving people at every level of society. It is my intention to be the catalyst of this policy; the genuine European added-value is in shaping a framework all stakeholders can endorse and develop. This is why today's debate is important for all of us.

Thank you for your attention.