

Meeting notes

MORNING SESSION

Opening of the event

Ms Odile Quintin, Director-General for Education and Culture, welcomed participants to the first ever public hearing on multilingualism. This event offered a unique opportunity to listen to civil society views and to take their needs more into account in our attempts to shape a more comprehensive policy. Ms Quintin thanked the stakeholders for taking such a close interest in multilingualism, which was also borne out by their participation in the online consultation some months ago.

Making the most of Europe's linguistic diversity

Commissioner Orban set out the context of multilingualism policy, which aims to respect and promote European linguistic diversity. An increase in the number of official languages from 4 to 23 within a single supra-national organisation already means a significant change. In addition, over 60 regional and minority languages are spoken across the member states. 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 have official status, our policies should not disregard them, as they have a real impact on our societies.

Commissioner Orban touched upon the wide consultation process, which will lead to a new Commission Communication this September. He outlined the main goal of this policy, which is to cover all linguistic issues, including the situation of regional, minority and migrant languages, teaching the language of the host country to speakers of other origin and the learning of non-EU languages.

Mr Orban presented the three main aspects of multilingualism. The first is the economic dimension, i.e. the potential of languages to contribute to growth and jobs. According to mid-term forecasts of the skills needed on the labour market, we will see a demand for greater skills and higher qualifications at all job levels. This has serious implications for employment: those without appropriate qualifications, including language skills, will find it more and more difficult to secure jobs.

We need to invest therefore in language education and remove all obstacles that stand in the way of greater mobility for workers by recognising skills and studies acquired in other European countries and providing services, including education, in several languages, to help them settle down.

The second key theme is **the socio-cultural dimension of languages**. Language skills provide the bridge between various communities. Equipping migrants or minorities with skills in the host country language means ensuring that they have access to education, work and services. Conversely, allowing them to preserve their language of origin means that their differences are

recognised and valued, and that we expect them to share in the building of our societies on an equal footing.

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 are at the forefront of this initiative.

The third key theme is the **teaching and learning of languages**. Linguistic diversity presents a number of challenges both for formal and for non-formal education: from the organisation of the classroom to the choice of languages that are taught or learning languages for the job.

A rewarding challenge – How the multiplicity of languages can strengthen Europe

Mr Jacques De Decker, a journalist and permanent secretary of the Belgian Royal Academy of the French Language and Literature, presented the proposals of the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue. He thanked the Commissioner for entrusting the group with such a challenging task and for the support they had received. He briefly presented the chair of the Group, the writer Amin Maalouf, and the other Group members.

The report has the merit of being the first to tackle such a fundamental issue as the link between linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe. Multilingualism is the key feature of Europe. While most European nations have been built on a platform of their language of identity, the European Union can only build on a platform of linguistic diversity. A common sense of belonging based on linguistic and cultural diversity is a powerful antidote to the various types of fanaticism against which all too often the assertion of identity has slipped in Europe and elsewhere, both in years gone and today.

Europe is now pondering its identity, keeping an open mind vis-à-vis itself and the rest of the world. Europe's identity is neither a blank page, nor a pre-formulated one. It is a page which is in the process of being written. There is a common artistic, intellectual, material and moral heritage of untold richness, with few equivalents in the history of humanity, which deserves to be cherished, acknowledged and shared. Each and every European, wherever he or she may live, wherever he or she may come from, must be able to access this heritage and recognise it as his and hers, with no hint of arrogance, but with a legitimate sense of pride.

The European Union should advocate the idea of a *personal adoptive language*. This freely chosen language should differ from one's language of identity, and also from one's language of international communication. The *personal adoptive language* would not be a second foreign language but, rather, a sort of second mother tongue.

Every language is the carrier of a memory and a literary heritage, and the expression of a particular cultural identity. Preserving all the languages of our heritage, including ancestral ones such as Latin and ancient Greek, and those counting as minority languages, is inseparable from the very idea of a Europe of peace, culture, universality and prosperity.

For immigrants, this *personal adoptive language* should coincide with the country in which they have chosen to live. A thorough knowledge of the national language and the culture that comes with it is essential if they are to integrate into the host society and play their part in economic, social, intellectual, artistic and political life. In parallel with this and, reciprocally, as it were, it is vital for the countries of Europe to understand how important it is for all immigrants to preserve their language of origin. Immigrants' languages of identity could be some of the languages that Europeans themselves would be encouraged to adopt.

Your say taken into account

Mr Vladimír Šucha, Director for Culture, Multilingualism and Communication, presented the main outcomes of the online consultation, which attracted a very high number of responses (2 419). Among the participants there were 1 865 individual respondents and 554 organisations. Altogether, they represented 58 different countries, of which 22 were from other continents. Responses were received in all official languages of the EU. Around half of the individual respondents described themselves as education, research or training professionals. The majority of respondents answering on behalf of their employers represented either education institutions (254) or non-profit-making organisations (148).

Participants agreed that:

- language policy within the EU warrants special attention;
- the linguistic diversity of the EU is an asset to be safeguarded;
- more could be done to include and value regional and minority languages;
- the media should promote an intercultural society model;
- investing in language skills pays off;
- the two most important factors for successful language learning are an early start and direct experience of the country of the target language;
- integration is less problematic for migrants who preserve their language of origin; and
- the cost of working in 23 official languages is worth paying.

Open discussion

Ms Quintin thanked the speakers and invited comments from the floor. Representatives of the Committee of the Regions and of the European Economic and Social Committee opened the debate.

Mr Pella (Committee of the Regions, Belgium) outlined the key role of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) in linking the European decision-making process to the local level. He summarised the recommendations put forward by the CoR to promote multilingualism: local partnership, valuing local languages, non-exclusion, solidarity between generations, early language learning, informal learning, 'healthy multilingualism' within the European institutions and opening up to third country languages – both the languages of neighbouring countries and those of our trading partners. He agreed wholeheartedly with the Commissioner that multilingualism must be a cross-cutting policy, with the Commission acting as a catalyst by way of extensive partnerships at all levels, with the focus on competitiveness and social inclusion.

Ms Le Nouail Marliere (European Economic and Social Committee, Belgium) introduced herself as the employee representative within the Committee. As drafter of the Opinion delivered by the Committee on the previous Communication on Multilingualism she was pleased that the ideas put forward in that opinion had been taken up.

She highlighted some of the key recommendations in its future Opinion: respect and promote linguistic diversity; involve all stakeholders and all generations; widen the range of languages taught; support informal language use (family, local environment); raise awareness among parents of the importance of language choice for their children.

Migrants should be invited to learn the language of the host country, which in turn should promote migrant languages. The social partners should be involved in the advisory groups on language issues, particularly in the workplace where language issues can have serious

consequences for the safety of workers and their customers. The relationship between wages and language skills should also be an issue for collective bargaining and social dialogue.

Mr Thuriot (University of Reims, France) asked about the Commission's position concerning regional and minority languages and how the personal adoptive language relates to the three-language model of UNESCO (mother tongue, national language and communication language): is this a fourth recommended language?

Mr Kappenberg (Leibniz University of Hannover, Germany) Mr Kappenberg (Leibniz University of Hannover, Germany) said that the media should be more aware of linguistic diversity, especially regarding words that contain letters from other European alphabets, i.e. with diacritical marks. He enquired how the EU can raise awareness of 'multi-alphabetism' among the public and especially among the young generation of Europeans.

Ms Giannini (Rector of the University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy) said that everyone had the right to express himself/herself in a language other than a lingua franca. To promote this, more emphasis should be placed on the linguistic dimension of university studies, including through grants to learn languages abroad. As regards the personal choice of languages and social inclusion, there is much scope for action, which should be adjusted to local financial needs.

MEP Sógor said that we should not only focus on the big languages or those of third countries. We should primarily target indigenous EU languages, including regional and minority ones. The people who speak these languages also have cultural and economic potential: their languages often correspond to those of neighbouring countries, which are crucial for good relations and business. They should have the right to raise their children in their mother tongue: these languages are declining and this should be stopped.

Mr Orlandi (Association for linguistic democracy, Italy) remarked that some of the outcomes of the public consultation – greater respect for linguistic diversity and more languages taught at school, including migrant languages and regional and minority ones – did not reflect the reality of fewer and fewer languages being taught in school, and English being imposed as a lingua franca. The idea of a personal adoptive language is fine as long as this is about promoting 'cultural' rather than imperialistic languages. Mr Orlandi made proposals both at Member States (a yearly report on linguistic diversity to protect linguistic integrity) and at European Commission level (antitrust for languages). He stressed the importance of speaking European languages and Esperanto rather than just English, which only serves the interests of the USA.

Mr Riemersma (Mercator network, the Netherlands) asked how the much more detailed recommendations and proposals for research projects of the High Level Group on Multilingualism relate to the more generally formulated recommendations of the Group of Intellectuals and to which extent the activities of the Council of Europe in the field of language policies and education are taken into account.

Ms Lipičnik (Government Office for European Affairs, Slovenia) spoke about multilingual communication with citizens. She thought it important for there to be more balanced use of all official languages. For the moment, there is a wide gap between widely spoken languages, which are very well equipped with all kinds of instruments and commercially well supported by the language industry, and the languages of some new Member States with a small number of native speakers.

For reasons of transparency and equal treatment, a common denominator of languages used in interpreting regimes should be defined at EU level, establishing common guidelines on language regimes used at informal ministerial and other levels under each Presidency.

Mr De Callatay (EPA - European Parents Association) said that raising awareness was an important and long-term objective and that the idea of a personal adoptive language was a good way of achieving this.

Ms Steurs (Department of applied language studies of Lessius / University of Leuven, Belgium) stressed the importance of stimulating students to take the opportunity of the Erasmus and Socrates exchanges, as well as the general importance of exposure to the original language: for example through subtitling original programmes.

Mr Jones (Scenario Films Ltd/Babylon, United Kingdom) fully supported the idea of a personal adoptive language and underlined the importance of subtitling.

Mr Fischer ('Poiein Kai Prattein / create and practice' organisation in Greece) called for a more nuanced consideration of English: it is much more than an – through its global use – impoverished yet imperialistic lingua franca. The EU desperately needs a language: English has brought major advantages to the USA.

Ms McGeever (student from Dublin, Ireland) underlined the importance of raising students' awareness of the advantages of studying languages.

Mr Rus (Intercultural Institute of Timisoara, Romania) recommended access to public services in several languages: in regional and minority languages, and the languages of other EU nationals and third-country immigrants. He argued that the best way to underscore linguistic diversity is to support the rights of individuals to speak their own languages.

Ms D'Ambrosio (Federation of European Publishers, Belgium) presented the Federation's position paper. The document calls for more support for translation, including into non-European languages, and greater visibility for books written in less widely used languages. The document also advocates more support for publishers by way of the creation of networks of those publishing in foreign languages and establishing 'pan-European' study programmes.

Mr Roukens ('Stichting Nederlands' – a non-profit organisation supporting the Dutch language in Belgium, the Netherlands and the European Union) noted that many languages in Europe are losing ground to English, whereas governments see and watch. A lingua franca such as English makes sense for international communication, but problems arise when such language starts to replace national languages. In business, research and entertainment, English is advancing as the language of daily use, and the role of national languages is diminishing. Some university departments do not offer master classes using the national language any more. These secondary effects of EU programmes should be monitored.

Nonetheless, the EU still needs to present itself as a truly multilingual organisation on the internet. The 'head' languages of the EU websites today are English and French. German leads the thin 20-odd languages tail. The EU institutions should lead the way and provide equal access for all citizens to the EU websites irrespective of the EU language they use.

Ms Thalgot (Council of Europe, France) welcomed the results of the online consultation, which convey positive messages concerning other cultures and languages. We need to open up to migrants' languages and consider immigrants as partners. Citizens seem to be aware that it is not enough to know English. The Council of Europe cooperates with the European Commission on language issues.

Meirion Prys Jones (Network for the Promotion of Linguistic Diversity, UK) asked about the EU's position regarding subsidies for the promotion of regional and minority languages.

Ms Brotto (Headmistress of a secondary school, Italy) said that it was striking from the results of the online consultation how little importance was attached to the health sector in connection with languages, especially if we consider the linguistic and intercultural challenges health workers now face in our multicultural societies. She called for a language-friendly environment, going beyond education and also involving the sectors of health, justice and public services, working out guidelines and objectives together with stakeholders.

Mr Carlsson (Vocab AB, Sweden) reported that Swedish students are unwilling to choose language subjects because they are perceived as difficult. It is therefore necessary to promote the learning of more languages and to raise awareness of easy ways of going about it at the same time.

After listening to the questions from the floor, **Ms Quintin** gave a number of clarifications concerning the support offered under the Lifelong Learning Programme and the upcoming green paper on education and migrants.

Mr De Decker remarked that many of the points raised concerned the defence of all languages against a single one. He agreed that subtitling is a powerful tool for learning languages, as borne out by the fact that, within one and the same country, Belgium, subtitling results in better active language skills for one of the language communities. He noted also that languages disappear at a rapid rate, resulting in a trend of linguistic homogenisation. Legislation may help to counteract this process but, in any case, languages can only be learnt by motivation, not by decree. The term 'adoption' refers to a personal decision to learn a language.

Wrapping up the morning session, by Commissioner Orban

The Commissioner said that he was impressed by the quality and the richness of the debate. He said he wanted to summarise the contributions by setting them in the context of current reflections and policy developments.

He apologised for the lack of more interpreting booths, which meant it was impossible to provide interpreting in all official languages. This does not mean, however, that EU languages are not all considered equal; this is at the core of the European project. We have to bear in mind that there is no other institution like the EU in the world: it guarantees access to legislation in the official languages of all member states. This comes at a cost but this is kept below a ceiling 2.5 euros per citizen a year. This does not allow all 23 languages to be used in all contexts. We have to find a pragmatic balance to ensure that we translate what citizens need.

In the field of languages, the EU has no power to legislate. Nevertheless, most Member States expect the Commission to promote multilingualism. Some do not see the need to accentuate multilingualism policy. These expectations need to be reconciled. Europe's added value lies, firstly, in providing an external look at national practices, and secondly, in promoting the exchange of these practices across Europe. There are a wealth of local, innovative initiatives that could be usefully disseminated and adapted to different contexts. Thirdly, although no additional initiatives for multilingualism are envisaged, there is still scope for gearing existing European programmes to greater promotion of multilingualism. These programmes are open to financing for all languages, including minority ones.

The Commissioner took note of the great interest shown in subtitling, although this is an issue for the Member States. He mentioned also that English had no primacy over other languages. It is necessary for people to know an international language in which they can communicate.

This should be completed by a language of adoption, which would be chosen and learnt 'with heart and soul'.

The Commissioner also reflected on the remarks about the limited language choice of courses on offer for student mobility, including the Erasmus programme. Although the situation could still be improved, we should not forget that, on the top of better language skills, students bring home a better understanding of different cultures. And this, after all, is the objective of Europe: understanding and living in peace with each other.

AFTERNOON SESSION

Participants could choose from among 3 parallel thematic workshops moderated by Mr Šucha, Mr Hartung and Ms Crabb, respectively. The three themes were "A: Languages, intercultural dialogue and social inclusion"; "B: Languages mean business – employability and competitiveness through languages"; and "C: New challenges in language learning within and outside formal education systems".

Reports from the workshops and open discussion

The outcomes of the working groups were presented to the plenary by the following rapporteurs: Ms Brotto, school head and adviser to the Director General of the International Relations Department at the Italian Ministry of Education for Group A; Prof. Clijsters, director of the Department for Romance Languages of the Faculty of Applied Economic Science at the University of Hasselt for Group B; and Prof. Ebke from the National Department of Didactics and Teacher Training in Tübingen for Group C.

Participants in the "*Languages, intercultural dialogue and social inclusion*" group pointed out that immigrants need to learn the language of the host country – there are member states where this is even a condition for acquiring nationality. However, this alone is not enough to help them integrate: teachers, too, should be aware of the cultural background of immigrants and not just convey the dominant culture.

Inter-cultural dialogue should not only focus on migrants but also on the traditional regional and minority communities: we should tackle linguistic diversity within and along our own borders.

The first common language we all share is non-verbal: arts, crafts and films can therefore open us up to other cultures.

Within the workshop on "*Languages mean business – employability and competitiveness through languages*", questions discussed related to employment and competition. The role of EU financing programmes in this area is to initiate development, complementing what is done at national and local level, but never to substitute for action undertaken in the member states. Intermediary organisations, such as chambers of commerce and trade unions, are to link the policy level with the daily needs of enterprises and employees. There is no one-size-fits-all solution: clusters need to be built at regional and local level with all the stakeholders concerned. The linguistic richness of Europe should be tapped for its economic welfare and competitiveness.

The group on "*New challenges in language learning within and outside formal education systems*" reflected on the best ways of encouraging learning. One of these was that language learning should be introduced as early as possible and in a playful way, awakening pupils'

interest and motivation. Parents should convey a positive attitude to multilingualism to their children.

It was established that immersion programmes are more successful than a few language classes a week and should be used especially in countries that have more than one national language. Another important way of raising motivation is Content and Language Integrated Learning. The potential of ICT should be made more use of for language learning: ICT and language skills could have a reciprocally beneficial effect.

Language skills are the 'equipment' for communication and language learning should therefore be seen as a means rather than an end in itself if it is to be successful.

The lack of teachers with a high standard of language skills could be in part offset by the presence of language assistants. Within the Comenius programme, this has proven to be not just a good means of supporting language teaching but especially of raising interest in other cultures, even outside school, within the community. A similarly positive experience was that of "student ambassadors", whose support in helping children to learn languages is particularly encouraging because of the small difference in age between them and the pupils.

Conclusions

Ms Quintin thanked the rapporteurs and highlighted some of the main points to emerge from the discussions.

She said that linguistic diversity presents challenges that require due and timely action. Diversity results both from the European project and globalisation and needs to be addressed across the board. This means not only cooperation between the local, regional, national and European levels but also across the various sectors, such as business, trade unions, education, civil society, cultural organisations, and especially the media.

Multilingualism is not about combating the 'dominance of English' but promoting the learning of languages and valuing them for the cultural riches they represent. All languages should find their place in this policy: EU official languages, regional and minority languages and migrant languages alike, as this is what will foster inclusion and openness.

Education obviously has a central role to play in promoting multilingualism. Direct experience is a key factor when it comes to learning foreign languages. It is therefore very important to start with languages as early and with as much direct exposure as possible. School partnerships and language assistants can provide valuable support in helping to develop students' motivation and inter-cultural skills. Alongside the better known Erasmus and Leonardo programmes, Comenius, the school cooperation programme, has been very instrumental in this respect.

As regards migrants, we need to adopt a two-way approach, i.e. not just expecting migrants to acquire the language and culture of the host country, but rather encouraging them to preserve their languages of origin and allowing interaction between the various cultures.

We all need to assume our share of the responsibility in responding to these challenges, which are both social and economic in nature. The interest manifested in the consultation process and its outcomes confirm that promoting linguistic diversity is the right way to go. The three axes of education, social cohesion and competitiveness carry particular weight in this policy. The outcomes of the discussions at the public hearing confirm the need to work together towards the ambition of creating a Europe where diversity contributes to unity, as our differences are our strength and foster the emergence of common values.