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Is there a future for linguistic diversity in Europe?

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First of all, let me say how pleased I am to be here with you at the University of Rennes. During my term of office as Commissioner, which started in January 2007, I have visited all the EU Member States, without exception, and quite a few regions. Everywhere, the linguistic diversity of Europe has been obvious to me. I did not want to end my term of office without coming to Brittany, with its wealth of cultural and linguistic heritage. I have heard a lot about the beauty of this region, and about how highly it values its history and language. That is why I am happy to be here in Rennes for the first time.

I wish to thank the organisers of this event, which gives me the opportunity to explain the European Commission's language policy to you in detail. I know that, in this region, the words "language" and "multilingualism" arouse great interest.

You suggested that I speak about an intentionally provocative issue: "Is there a future for linguistic diversity in Europe?". That is a very good question. Some think that it would be easier to have a lingua franca, to agree on a single language, such as English. Others even think that regional or minority languages, and sometimes national languages which are "of minor world importance", will have no place in tomorrow's world. I believe exactly the opposite. Let me tell you why:

My presentation focuses on three aspects:

1) the European Union has respected linguistic diversity from the start;
2) three years ago, we moved up a gear;
3) the future is not one of monolingualism but of multilingualism.

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I will start with a truth which must be repeated again and again: the Europe of today defends diversity. And our language is a fundamental element of this diversity. It is part of our inner identities, whether national or regional. I am convinced that accepting differences strengthens unity and cohesion. It has sometimes mistakenly been believed that diversity is an obstacle to the development of Europe. Today, we see that the opposite is true. It is the cement of our Union. Without respect for diversity, unity is impossible. The different nations cannot join together in a common project in which they do not acknowledge each other.

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The European Commission's commitment to multilingualism is long-standing.

Let us remember that it was the Treaty of Rome in 1957 which established the European Community, and that the first regulation of Community history, Regulation number one of 1958, established the principle of linguistic equality. Indeed, this Regulation specified that "each of the four languages in which the Treaty is drafted is recognised as an official language". Of course, Europe had only the six founding Member States at the time, and only the four corresponding languages (French, German, Italian and Dutch). However, over 50 years later, the principle remains the same (even though there are now 27 Member States and 23 official languages). This linguistic equality underpins our common project.

This principle of linguistic equality is a principle of democracy. The criticisms that Europe leads to standardisation are wide of the mark; our goal is rather to respect and promote differences! However, this multilingualism
also serves our interests. Europe was quick to understand that its languages are assets in cultural, social and also economic terms. I will return to this a little later.

Over the years, Europe has therefore taken initiatives to promote languages and linguistic diversity. Of course, Europe must take action within the limits of its competences. In this field, the Member States are the decision-makers. In Brussels, we can only guide, advise, suggest and encourage! But by no means legislate … that is the task of the Member States or the regions, depending on their national constitution and the resulting distribution of power.

I am speaking from experience! The European Commissioners are sometimes asked to intervene in fields in which they have no competence. Despite the expectations of some, I am not able to require that a specific language, such as Latin or Greek, be learned, or to set the number of hours devoted to language teaching. Or reform the education system… our limits are set by the principle of subsidiarity, with which you are familiar. However, we can influence a number of developments. We can bring ministers or senior officials together round a table, and we can also support interesting projects. We have the power of persuasion. In this sense, we have a very strong influence in the medium and long term.

But let us return to history.

I would like to remind you of a few major stages:

- the Lingua programme (1990-1994) was the first and only exclusively language-related programme in Community history;

- in 2001, the European Year of Languages conveyed the European Union's keen interest in language-learning to the general public;
• in 2002 in Barcelona, the Heads of State and Government launched an appeal for the learning of at least two foreign languages;

• between 2004 and 2006, a "language action plan" implemented specific measures to promote languages;

• in November 2005, the Commission adopted a first Communication on a new strategic framework for multilingualism.

However, we do not just communicate and deliver messages! We also provide financial assistance. Multilingualism is currently supported by two important programmes: the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Culture Programme. Both cover the 2007-2013 period.

All this shows you the extent to which multilingualism has always been a keystone in European development. And from 2007 onwards, we have quickened the pace.

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The establishment of a multilingualism policy sent out a strong message. It was a message in favour of respect for diversity and the appreciation of differences. Over the last few years, this portfolio has been a highly sensitive political issue. There are many instances in Europe of linguistic issues which have become major talking points. I could refer to Belgium, Spain or Slovakia and to many other examples. I could also talk about institutional multilingualism, in other words the in-house language regime of the European institutions. Another sensitive issue! For three years, I was deeply involved in all these discussions.

During my time in office, I have introduced more measures to promote multilingualism. When I say multilingualism, I mean two things essentially: respect for linguistic diversity and language-learning.
September 2008 was the high point of my time as Commissioner: on my initiative, the European Commission adopted a major strategic Communication on multilingualism, setting out our long-term commitment to multilingualism. I wanted to be both ambitious and forward-looking. This Communication is the result of an extensive consultation of European society. The 2005 Communication created a firm foundation, but I wanted to go further. I wanted to draw inspiration from original ideas from a wide range of social groups. I wanted to benefit from all our experiences. Working groups have played a fundamental role in fuelling reflections.

At the end of 2006, the Commission convened a High Level Expert Group in the field of multilingualism. The rapporteur for the Group was Mr Wolfgang Mackiewicz, Honorary Professor of English Philology at the Freie Universität Berlin. A high-quality report was submitted to me in 2007. A number of the group's proposals were included in my Communication of September 2008.

In 2007, I also set up two groups of which I had high expectations. These two groups greatly enriched European thinking on multilingualism.

The first group was the "Group of Intellectuals" chaired by the Franco-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. In January 2008, this group submitted a report which was welcomed on all sides. I highly recommend that you read it. Mr Maalouf brilliantly underlined the role played by multilingualism in intercultural dialogue. He "invented" the concept of an "adoptive personal language", thereby inviting everyone to learn a "language of the heart". This report is one of the most uplifting to have been produced by an expert group for years.

The second group was the "Business Forum" chaired by Viscount Davignon and composed of entrepreneurs and language experts. A report entitled "Languages Mean Business!" was submitted in July 2008. The Davignon
Group showed that, in the business world, multilingualism is not a handicap but an asset. For buyers, it is enough to speak English. For sellers, however, it is better to speak the buyer's language.

I also launched an on-line consultation open to all European citizens. This consultation has been a tremendous success, backing up my idea that Europeans are keenly interested in linguistic matters.

Of course, I have also consulted the representatives of governments, associations, the education sector, trade unions and civil society. I wanted everyone to be able to express an opinion so that this Communication would be as consensus-based as possible. The European Parliament has followed this work closely and MEPs have contributed to the reflections.

In January 2008, I also convened the first conference of ministers responsible for languages in Brussels.

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So what does this strategy for the future involve?

In this Communication, we analyse the role which multilingualism can play in all areas of life. I wanted to respect the competences of the Member States while making sure that no subject was taboo: languages and business, languages and migration, integration, the external dimension, translation, new technologies, involving the language world in decisions, language-learning, etc.

I started with a basic observation: today's reality is one of globalisation, technological progress and an ageing population. These phenomena have brought about fundamental changes in European society. We can all see this in our everyday lives. More and more Europeans travel and have contact with other countries. Increasingly, they do not live in their countries of
origin, and are therefore confronted with multilingualism more than in the past.

Statistics also play an important role in this discussion. The European Union today has 500 million inhabitants, 27 Member States and 23 official languages. It also has some 60 regional languages, not to mention languages which have been "imported" from the other continents and have become a reality for us. Migratory movements have clearly contributed a lot to this linguistic variety, resulting in at least 175 different nationalities on our continent. Multilingualism is therefore evidently a new dimension of the European project.

In this context, migrant workers need to learn the language of their host country in order to achieve responsible, active integration into our societies. It also allows them to progress and succeed in their careers. This is a very important aspect of our policy, inspired by the Maalouf report.

The teaching of two languages in addition to the mother tongue is likewise of fundamental importance. The principle had been laid down at the Barcelona European Council in 2002. Mastering three languages, including one's mother tongue, is in my opinion an instrument of cohesion in Europe. As I mentioned, the reflection group convened under the chairmanship of Amin Maalouf further defined this concept. It launched the idea of an adoptive personal language which all Europeans should speak in addition to the international language of communication (generally English, although not always!). Some consider this notion of "1+2" to be unrealistic. They think it would be better to concentrate on learning one language. I have two things to say to them: first of all, in today's internationalised society, anyone who does not speak several languages will increasingly find themselves in difficulty on the labour market. Secondly, I think that we need to set ourselves ambitious objectives, even if they require long-term effort. Raising the bar very high has already allowed us to achieve impressive
results in all Member States. I believe that we must aim higher rather than lower.

Another important subject: languages and business! In the words of the Davignon report: "In a Union where diversity is cherished, a lingua franca can never be enough to satisfy every communication need". Better language skills can be a crucial advantage for our businesses. Recent studies requested by the Commission show that European businesses without sufficient in-house linguistic expertise lose contracts everywhere in the world. New language knowledge is necessary if we are to conquer the new markets. Language knowledge is also one of the keys to employment. A candidate with language skills will be able to find a job more easily and progress in his or her career.

Communication also relates to teaching: successful multilingualism of course requires a modern and effective teaching system. In my opinion, the traditional method of teaching languages has not lost any of its importance or value. However, we must also explore any new options. Other less formal methods of teaching which are more flexible and specifically targeted should not be neglected. I am aware of the ongoing discussions in France on this subject. I have often heard French people say that, despite all their efforts and all the courses they have followed, they still do not speak foreign languages properly. I also know that things are moving in the right direction. This calls upon us to think about traditional teaching methods and how to renew them (good practices exist elsewhere). They can be a good source of inspiration. Indeed, the Communication of September 2008 sets out the plan to collect good teaching practices from all over the European Union. I know that this University encourages the discussion on learning methods.

Multilingualism must be promoted in all spheres of society. We have also broached the issues of means of communication, the press and cinema with subtitling. Translation and interpretation play a key role in the dissemination
of language knowledge. Today's new technologies allow more advanced use of computer-assisted translation. The same can be said for multilingual communication via the Internet.

I attach particular importance to translation. Literary translation benefits from support under the Culture Programme. The Commission is eager to explore all possible ways of pushing even further ahead in this field. Indeed, translation is a little-known and scarcely recognised art. Yet translators play an essential role in the transmission of culture. In certain famous cases, the translation has been said to be an improvement on the original.

We also have a number of external communication objectives. I believe that we must step up our efforts to promote European languages outside the EU. It is not just a matter of winning markets but of sharing values. Likewise, it is in our interest to encourage the learning of widely-spoken languages from third countries on our territory. I am thinking in particular of Arabic and Chinese, although there are many others!

Lastly, through this Communication, I wish to engender a regular, in-depth dialogue. The Communication refers to the establishment of this "structured dialogue" with our partners in the world of languages.

In short, it presents the Commission's vision of languages. It is paving the way for the Europe of languages in the medium term.

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Of course, we have to be aware of the realities. The European Commission cannot do things by itself. This is a field in which the Member States and regions have decision-making power. They have the last word. However, thanks to our discussions, ideas and financial support, I am already pleased to see that our ideas are progressing. They contribute to the consolidation of multilingualism in Europe.
This Communication is not simply lip service to the cause. It is by no means a futile initiative. We will make sure that there is careful follow-up. It just so happens that this Communication was adopted while France held the EU Presidency. It was also under the French Presidency that follow-up work was first undertaken. The Council of Ministers meeting in November 2008 strongly approved of this Communication. The Council called on the Commission to forge ahead, thus providing very significant encouragement.

Since then, we have already progressed along a number of lines.

Literary translation is the first line of approach. It is in fact a subject of major interest to France. Last spring, I organised a conference on literary translation involving experts from all over Europe. The aim was to exchange views and to put forward some ideas to the Commission. We wanted to involve the world of translation in our future policies. This conference was chaired by Mr Barroso, which shows the personal interest of the President of the Commission in this project. Future initiatives are to be envisaged on the basis of this conference …

I also launched two permanent platforms which started their work this autumn. One is dedicated to the theme of "languages and civil society" while the other relates to languages and business. This ongoing dialogue aims to enrich Community policy.

We also wish to focus on early language-learning. This is one of the keys to our progress. After a conference held last September, a working group was also created to deal with this issue. It must help us to prepare policy recommendations for the Member States, which are to be ready in 2011.

Moreover, 2011 will be an important year. A high-level seminar will take place in Barcelona. The aim will be to measure how far we have moved towards achieving the Barcelona objectives (1+2).
What place do regional languages have in this context?

You have seen that the Commission's message is clear. We want to respect and promote them. The Commission believes that each language has its place. It is not just about preserving heritage. It is a matter of respect, of attachment to values and also, as I have said, of social and economic enrichment. Each language contributes to our common identity.

I believe that globalisation is unavoidable. It is already part of daily reality, even though some dispute its legitimacy. Linguistic and, more generally, cultural diversity helps to make the globalisation process safer. If globalisation means uniformity and a single model, it triggers strong reactions of rejection. If, on the other hand, it respects the identities of populations, it will be more easily accepted. And I am happy to see all the efforts being made here to give the Breton language its rightful place.

That is why I think that multilingualism is the future of our societies. I am not a dreamer. I know that languages of international communication on a world scale are useful and necessary. I do not deny the role of English and its importance. But I believe that a monolingual Europe is culturally and socially unacceptable. It goes without saying that it is also politically inconceivable.

Another future challenge is posed by internal multilingualism, although that is not today's subject. I am also at the head of the Commission's translation and interpretation services, which are the biggest in the world. Internal multilingualism generates significant costs and requires a lot of staff. This is also one of the future challenges of enlargement. There again, we hear it said that using a single language would make communication easier. My reply is that the costs of internal multilingualism are the price of democracy. It is a choice which places citizens on an equal footing. It ensures that no Member
State has an advantage over the others when it comes to access to Community legislation and information or in the context of negotiations.

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By way of conclusion, I wish to say the following: the theme of languages has always been an important one in this country. It has also become important in many Member States. Governments are becoming more and more receptive. They are open to the Commission's overall message, which takes a cross-section approach to languages. The times when only the cultural dimension of languages was taken into consideration are now over. In its bid to promote diversity and through its programmes, the Commission can offer a lot. And I believe that our positions have strengthened the situation of all those languages which could have been threatened by the European project. Instead, we have confirmed their legitimacy and shown them that they are firmly anchored in a multilingual Europe.

Thank you,