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WHICH LANGUAGE POLICY FOR WHICH EUROPE? THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION FOR THE EUROPE WE WANT

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a great honor and pleasure to address you today, and I appreciate the fact that the European Language Council's view of Europe includes the Council of Europe as well as the European Union. Both are, I believe, essential in building the kind of Europe we want, and that is a part of my talk here today.

This talk will seek to bring together three elements: Europe, education and – surprise, surprise – language. Let me start by making a simple but important point about Europe. When the Council of Europe speaks about Europe, we really mean *Europe* – all of it. The Council of Europe has 47 member states, and 50 states are party to the European Cultural Convention, of which we will celebrate the 60th anniversary later this month. To us countries like Georgia, Iceland, Russia, Switzerland, and Turkey are every bit as European as EU members like Belgium, France, Greece, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. You will have noted that in both groups, countries were mentioned in alphabetical order, and they are and should be held to the same standards – notably those to be found in the European Convention on Human Rights.

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The Europe we want, then, encompasses all of our continent and it is defined by adherence to fundamental values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law rather than by creed, color, or economic system – or for that matter by belonging to a specific language group.

This is not to say that these values are universally respected throughout Europe today or that any European country has reached perfection. We are guided by our values. But if we are guided, it also means we are still traveling. There is little need for a guide if you are sitting still. Values are partly aspirational – think of the Ten Commandments. Practices evolve. We cannot conceive of democracy without the right to vote for women, and yet, measured by this yardstick, there was hardly a democracy anywhere in the world only a century ago. Or rather, I believe there were four or five. History has few if any examples of societies that continued to be successful after they lose their aspirations and ambitions.

Europe, then, is a geographic reality and a set of common values. It is also a heritage that is sometimes a common heritage and sometimes one that is shared by only some Europeans. It is a history that is sometimes glorious and sometimes problematic. And Europe is a future that we believe we will develop together in spite of the divisions of our past. It is a Europe that looks ahead but that is also conscious of its past.

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Education, then. How do we know whether we are not only Europeans, but *educated* Europeans? By one yardstick, we should look at the employment statistics, since the purpose of education seems widely to be considered to prepare for employment or, perhaps, in the *currentspeak*, to ensure the employability of graduates.

Preparing for the labor market *is* important, and make no mistake about it. But saying something is important does not mean saying it is the only thing that matters. Preparing for employment *does* matter but so do preparing for life as active citizens in democratic societies, personal development, and developing and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base¹. None of this can be done without education, and all four purposes are of equal value.

Ambrose Bierce was an early 20th century American journalist who had the misfortune of riding into the Mexican Revolution never to be heard from again. Before he did, however, he left a book called the *Devil's Dictionary* – and dictionaries should appeal to linguists.

Ambrose Bierce may have given a better and briefer view of education than what we generally find in current debate. This is his definition:

Education, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding².

Education needs to prepare us not only for the economy in which we will work but for the world in which we will live. And this world will be international, not in the sense that we will all live for a period in a foreign country but in the sense that it will be impossible not to be influenced by events and trends from outside of one's own country. That is true even for the considerable majority whose experience of foreign countries and cultures will not include a period of actually *living* abroad and even for those who might have preferred not to be exposed to foreigners and their ways. Isolation and strict monoculturalism will not be options, and Europe will be the richer because of it. Isolation will be impossible – and it will be undesirable. Identities will more than ever be multiple: local, national, regional and global, all at the same time.

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¹ These are the four major purposes of education as outlined in the Council of Europe's Recommendations CM/Rec(2007)6 on the public responsibility for higher education and research and (201)13 on ensuring quality education and developed in "Higher Education as a "Public Good and a Public Responsibility": What Does it Mean?", in Luc Weber and Sjur Bergan (eds.): *The Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research* (Strasbourg 2005: Council of Europe publishing. Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 2), pp. 13 - 28

² Ambrose Bierce: *The Devil's Dictionary* (Hammondsworth and New York 1967: Penguin (original edition 1906)): 105

So if strict *monoculturalism* is not an option, is dedicated *monolingualism*? In a strict sense, probably not. Efforts to keep a language free of foreign influence are rarely entirely successful and are often directed at weeding out the most recent foreign influences while happily accepting older foreign influences as part of our own linguistic heritage. In Romance languages like French and Spanish, recent acquisitions from English may feel threatening and foreign but older acquisitions from Greek may feel almost home grown. In Germanic languages, Latin borrowings and cognates may be old but may still not be felt as completely acculturated.

But, yes, if your native language is a widely spoken one, and especially if it is English, you may be able to get by somehow by pretending that if you want to talk to foreigners, it is *they* who have a language problem.

This is not to say that the resolutely monolingual will have an easy time – or that they *should*. In the same way that I find it difficult to think of someone entirely ignorant of computers, at least at a user's level, as adequately trained, I find it difficult to consider someone speaking only his or her native language adequately educated. To make an obvious point: if we were all monolinguals, international cooperation would be impossible.

Literacy is often considered as a precondition for being educated, and in our culture it *is*. You cannot function well in modern Europe if you are illiterate, and the number of functionally illiterate persons is disturbingly high. They comprise not only those who are unable to decipher the writing system of their native language but those who are unable to make sense of simple texts, such as shorter notices in the newspaper or an instruction notice. And yet, there *are* cultures in which a high level of education does not presuppose literacy. Oral cultures were perhaps the norm in our past. In mediaeval Iceland the *lqgsqgumaðr* was judge and law professor, and he – never she - knew all the laws by heart because he would have been unable to read them if they were written down for him.

We learn foreign languages to speak with people who do not speak our own language and to read works in the original. In addition to serving a very practical purpose, learning foreign languages opens windows to new cultures in ways that even the best translation cannot achieve. Language is the medium through which we reflect but it also provides material for reflection. Realizing that concepts you have taken for granted can be expressed differently should be an *eureka* kind of experience.

Why do Germanic speakers believe they are or have *right*, whereas Romance speakers believe they have *reason*? Why do Slavic languages attach such importance to whether an action is perceived as either punctual or completed or rather of indefinite duration or repetition that they have grammatical forms to distinguish aspects in all tenses? Why do Turkic languages have no grammatical gender distinction in pronouns and nouns whereas most Germanic languages attach such great importance to gender that they have three of them? Why do Lithuanian family names have distinct forms that show whether a woman is married or not, and why are there no similar distinctions in the male form of family names – and how does a system like this adapt to the modern reality of divorce and remarriage? And why does a language like Kazakh have a very rich vocabulary for family relations, so that your sister in law is жеңге (*zhenge*) if she is the wife of your older brother but келін (*kelin*) if she is the wife of your younger brother or your son?

This is of course not the place to attempt to answer these and similar questions. I seek refuge in the often quoted saying of Henrik Ibsen: “I only ask the questions – my vocation does not lie in providing the answers”.

My point is rather one about the connection between languages and education: learning foreign languages enables us to communicate and that is important enough. But learning foreign languages should also help us reflect on who we are and on the world in which we live. That is perhaps what makes learning languages an issue of *education* and not only of *training*. We relate to the world through language. If we think and speak only in in brief main clauses and write only in capital letters with liberal use of exclamation marks, we are unlikely to develop the nuanced view of the world that a pluricultural, democratic Europe will require.

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If we want to be active, democratic citizens, we need to be able to think and to write, to speak and to listen. All of these are language related activities and all require education – and *education*, not just *training*. We develop and express our views and ideas through language. We also discover and evaluate the ideas and opinions of others through language. We may ultimately reject an idea but democracy requires that we try to understand it before we decide whether we accept it or not. In history teaching, the Council of Europe has developed the concept of multiperspectivity. Put simply, for history teaching this means that my history is not only mine but also yours and that your view of my history may be very different from my own. One country’s heroes may be another country’s villains. But multiperspectivity does not mean that anything goes. There are views that are unacceptable. No amount of multiperspectivity can justify the Holocaust or other crimes against Humanity.

Language learning should also develop our ability to see the world from different angles. If we learn another language well, we will probably also discover fresh angles from which to see the world. We can all think of words in our own language or in foreign languages that express a concept so precisely and with such connotations that they are either untranslatable or can be translated only through cumbersome constructs that convey little of the feeling of the original expression. The story goes that the song title “Ain’t misbehavin’” was translated with the equivalent of “I do nothing wrong”. Well, yes, but I am not sure this actually applied to the translator. And how would we translate *Lebensfreude* or *Schadenfreude* and keep the juice of the German originals?

If we develop multiperspectivity, we will also be weary of overstandardization. Granted, if you read texts from the time before the orthography of a given language was codified, you can see the point of official spellings. There have of course also been situations in which linguistic details took on immense importance. In parts of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, whether you asked for *kruh* or *hleb* if you wanted bread could decide not only whether you were served but also, in the most extreme situations, whether you preserved your health.

Nevertheless, many languages, not least the more widely spoken ones, come with different accents and idiomatic expressions and I wonder why international institutions, including my own, are so reluctant to see that it matters little whether you prefer “color” or “colour” but it matters a great deal that you are consistent within your chosen standard. My English is mid-Atlantic, my French certainly influenced by the fact that I live in Alsace, and my Spanish is

inspired by the version spoken on the other side of the Andes rather than on the plains of Castilla - and I see no reason to change any of that. And if this presentation is published on the web site of the European Language Council, I hope you will preserve my US spelling.

May I also raise a hobbyhorse of mine? For practical purposes, when two or more people from different language backgrounds meet, we need to find a common language of communication. Nevertheless, there are ways of acknowledging and honoring diversity even in this situation, and one way is to respect the original version of proper names, including place names. Changing place names, sometimes beyond recognition, can hardly be passed off as a sign of respect and it also demonstrates a double ignorance on our part. On the one hand, it shows our inability to cope with the sounds and letters of other languages. On the other hand it shows the limits of geographical education since we can only distort the names of places we have actually heard about.

Democracy, in sum, requires respect for diversity. It also requires clarity of thought and expression. It is only through language that we can inform and clarify but we can just as easily use language to obscure and misinform. What might be technically precise and easily understandable language to specialists in a field is often impenetrable to outsiders. Language education should, among other things, teach us to adapt the way we express our ideas to those we want to understand them. Whether through sloppiness or conscious attempts to obscure, we can use language to say less than the full truth while appearing to hide nothing. Think of the specialized higher education institution that told students that “with a qualification from our school, you will have a diploma that is highly valued on the labor market”. That was probably not a lie but only as long as the student stayed within the quite narrow segment of the labor market for which the school prepared. What it did not say was that it was not recognized by the authorities of the country in which it was located and therefore its diplomas were of no value in other parts of the labor market or for the purpose of further study at another institution.

Or we can speak in such impenetrable ways that our interlocutors simply give up. Think of Sir Humphrey of *Yes, Prime Minister* fame.

The Council has developed, and will continue to develop, policies to strengthen linguistic diversity and language rights, deepen mutual understanding, consolidate democratic citizenship and sustain social cohesion.

Promoting plurilingualism is one of the traditional strong points of the Council of Europe and our work in the area of language education has developed in response to changing needs and priorities. The early emphasis on successful communication skills has gradually shifted toward a stronger focus on languages for active participation in democratic societies and languages for social cohesion. Focus has shifted from foreign languages to the linguistic integration of adult migrants and the importance of competences in the language/s of schooling for equity and quality in education.

The work on language policy carried out in Strasbourg is particularly well known for developing tools and standards to help member states develop transparent and coherent language policies. Among the major policy planning instruments are the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The role of the European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, as an enlarged Partial Agreement, is to

encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching and to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

The work we have done on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is an inspiration but we are now working on developing descriptors for competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue. The current project is much broader and much more complex – and we are only at the beginning. This is not the time to describe this project in any detail but I would like to make one point: developing competences for democratic culture and intercultural dialogue is an undertaking that encompasses all parts of education, from pre-primary to higher and across disciplines – and of course including language education.

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As I hope to have shown, language, education, and the Europe we want for ourselves and our children are intimately linked. We cannot build our societies without language because we cannot build them without developing and conveying ideas. Language is a *necessary* condition for human society but for many reasons it is not a *sufficient* condition. Language can convey ideas that improve our societies but can equally well propagate ideas that degrade them. Language can inspire or destroy. It is education, including language education, that gives us the competence to decide where we want our societies to get and how to get there in ways that are sustainable and ethically sound.

Seneca said: *non scholae, sed vitae discimus*³ – we learn for not for school but for life. That is perhaps a lesson that European education institutions as well as European education policy makers have sometimes forgotten, in spite of the traditionally strong standing of the classics in our universities. That standing is being lost, and there is now a stronger emphasis on providing education that is “useful”. The view of what is “useful” is, however, quite narrow. We may no longer learn for school, but the view seems to be that we should learn for business rather than life and society. I would rather follow the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul, who says:

And so I find our education is increasingly one aimed at training loyal employees, even though the state and the corporations are increasingly disloyal. What we should be doing is quite different. It turns on our ability to rethink our education and our public expectations so that we create a non-employee, non-loyal space for citizenship. After all, a citizen is by definition loyal to the state because the state belongs to her or him. That is what frees the citizen to be boisterous, outspoken, cantankerous and, all in all, by corporatist standards, disloyal. This is the key to the success of our democracy⁴.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, Europe needs you because of who you are: educators *and* linguists.

³ In *Epistolae morales*, 106,12.

⁴ John Ralston Saul: *A Fair Country. Telling truths About Canada* (Toronto, Ontario 2009: Penguin Canada): 318