



# 2012 CEL/ELC Forum



## Rethinking Multilingualism: Challenges and Opportunities

Brussels, 30 November - 1 December 2012

### Introductory remarks – changes, challenges, opportunities, new activities and innovation – recommendations directed at different levels

*Wolfgang Mackiewicz*

Mister Chairman, beste Piet,

Monsieur le directeur,

Geachte excellenties,

Executive Director Martyniuk, dear Waldek

Meine Damen und Herren,

Cari colleghi e amici,

This is the third Forum of the Conseil européen pour les langues / European Language Council – after 2008 and 2010. The theme of our 2008 Forum was *Integration, expansion, globalisation – a new multilingual **challenge** for Europe*. Two years later, our theme was *The Multilingual **Challenge**: the next generation*. And today and tomorrow we shall be talking about and reflecting on *Rethinking Multilingualism: **Challenges** and Opportunities*.

As you can see, the CEL/ELC is obsessed with **challenges**. But I do hope that you have noted an important addition to our agenda – we are not now only talking about challenges – we are also talking about **opportunities**.

This Forum marks the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday of the CEL/ELC. Our association has always sought to take note of changes in higher education, and, more recently, in education in general, and of changes in the non-educational environments, because we firmly believe that these changes more often than not have implications for the area of languages. And when I say “area of languages”, I do not just mean language learning and teaching, but also the training of translators and interpreters, teacher education, and pertinent research.

So then, what are the changes we are confronted with today?

In the speech I gave at the Warsaw Multilingualism Conference in late September last year, I more or less said the following.

*Since the turn of the century, and especially in the past five years, the social landscape of Europe has changed radically as a result of the following and related developments:*

- *globalization*
- *internationalization in many fields of human activity, including enterprise, higher education and research*
- *the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007*
- *the continuing revitalization of regions in Europe, including cross-border regions*
- *increasing intra-European mobility and intra-European trade*
- *migration into Europe*
- *major advances in technology*
- *the creation of a European Higher Education Area and of a European Research Area*

These developments have transformed the linguistic and cultural fabric of European societies, as well as individual language profiles and language use.

Today, all EU Member States, in fact, all countries in Europe are multilingual and multicultural societies. Across Europe, several hundred languages are spoken and used: official EU languages, other official European languages, regional European languages, and non-European languages – referred to as migrant languages and languages of the wider world, as the case may be. A significant number of people in Europe, including children and young people in formal education, only have a limited command of the language of the region or country where they reside. Moreover, roughly one quarter of all 15-year-olds living in the Union is practically illiterate. At the same time, a new generation is emerging of young multilingual people who have two or even three first languages, but are not necessarily fully literate in both or all of them. And while it is true that more languages are spoken in Europe today than ever before, it is equally true that more English is now spoken in Europe than at any time in the past.

Through these developments, the multilingual challenge present in the EU has reached a completely new dimension – in terms of size, complexity, and policy relevance. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in interlingual and intercultural communication. Whereas this was formerly primarily seen in terms of interpersonal exchanges between people residing in different countries, it is now a major issue at organizational, local, regional, national and international level.

With these and related changes and developments in mind, the CEL/ELC Board last year decided to set up the following three working groups –

- a Consultative Group on “Rethinking Multilingualism”;
- a Working Group on Higher Education Language Policy;
- a Special Interest Group on the Future of language degrees.

The “Rethinking Multilingualism” Group did not, of course, question the CEL/ELC’s overarching aim to promote individual and societal multilingualism. However, the Group came to the conclusion that the assumptions underlying the Commission’s traditional concept of multilingualism have been overtaken by developments – and

this both with regard to individual and to societal multilingualism. For example, the mother tongue plus two formula was based on the assumption that people live in monolingual and mono-cultural states or regions, and that their mother tongue is the official language of the state or region and the language of schooling. Today, the mother tongue is frequently not the “perfect” language, and the language of schooling is not the student’s mother tongue. The Group came to the conclusion that it would be more appropriate to abandon the distinction between mother tongue and foreign languages, and to speak of languages in general. One could perhaps speak of a person’s first language or languages, the language of schooling and so on.

In the spirit of my Warsaw speech, the Group sought to identify changes in the following domains and to understand the reasons for these changes –

- the linguistic fabric of EU Member States and other European countries
- language use – both of individuals and in organisations
- language professions
- individual language profiles / repertoires

The Group went on to look into the implications of these changes for

- formal language teaching and learning, particularly in the school sector,
- informal and non-formal language learning and the validation of such learning,
- teacher education,
- language mediation,
- languages in and for higher education, and
- languages in the production / creation, construction, transfer, and application of knowledge.

The Group sought to describe the challenge or challenges resulting from these changes and to suggest measures that might be taken in response to the challenge or challenges – all the time bearing in mind that situations vary considerably across Europe, and that no one size fits all. The same, by the way, holds true for the other two groups.

Higher education language policy has been on the CEL/ELC’s agenda from the very beginning. And yet the Board thought it necessary to convene yet another group devoted to this issue because members were convinced that the dramatic increase in the internationalisation of higher education had important language-related implications that called for new reflection and action. In this, the Board was aware of the fact that for various reasons – including financial considerations – many higher education institutions that have made internationalisation a core aspect of their mission and vision, have been reluctant to take the linguistic – and cultural – implications of internationalisation into consideration. The Group developed a kind of typology of HE language policy with a view to assisting leaders of and management teams in higher education institutions in the development of their own specific institutional language policies.

Until last year, the CEL/ELC had never concerned itself with modern language degree programmes. The Board decided to do so in view of the fact that language degrees have come under pressure in many European countries to the extent that in a number of countries, language departments are closing and the future of language degrees is called into question. The Group sought to gain a proper understanding of these changes, and it addressed questions such as – What opportunities for

development are available? What issues must be addressed? And what strengths do language degrees have? In line with CEL/ELC philosophy, the Group is suggesting that language degrees have to respond to new needs and that further research is needed to establish more precisely what the new needs are.

The programme of this year's Forum is based on the agendas of our three working groups. We want to use this Forum for raising awareness among our members and other stakeholders of language-relevant changes, of new challenges as well as of new opportunities. We are keen to receive feedback, and to hear about examples of innovative practice in the area of languages. We hope that the Forum will put us in an even better position to provide orientation to policy-makers and decision-makers at various levels. Finally, I also hope that the outcomes of the Forum will help the CEL/ELC to redefine its direction over the next decade, and that we shall be able to launch a number of European projects directly related to the challenges recognised.

I must admit that in our groups we may not yet have paid sufficient attention to advances in technology. Language technology is bound to play an ever greater role in language use, language learning, the delivery of higher education programmes and provisions, and in language professions.

Before I conclude, I should like to thank all our session co-ordinators and session chairs, speakers and panellists for their great kindness in accepting our invitation. I should like to express special thanks to the Institut Libre Marie Haps for hosting our Forum. It is a well-known fact that it has become nearly impossible to organise events of this kind at Brussels-based higher education institutions. Thank you, Director Huvelle, and thank you, Philippe Moreau.

More thanks tomorrow.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!