



**2008 CEL/ELC FORUM**  
**Integration, expansion, globalisation –**  
**a new multilingual challenge for Europe**



**Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Campus Jette**  
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***Wolfgang Mackiewicz***  
***CEL/ELC President***

Stimate domnule comisar Orban,

Geachte heer Rector,

Geachte excellenties,

Chèr(e)s collègues et ami(e)s,

Meine Damen und Herren

When our friend and colleague Piet van de Craen coined the expression “multilingual challenge” more than ten years ago, that challenge appeared by no means easy to meet. Following the 1995 expansion, the Union had eleven official languages. In a number of Member States, regional languages were gaining in strength, and in one Member State there was beginning to be an uneasy relationship between speakers of the two major official languages, both of them official EU languages.

However, most of those involved in the founding of the Conseil européen pour les langues / European Language Council and participating in the first Thematic Network project in the area of languages felt that given the right policies, strategies and practices, the multilingual challenge would not be insurmountable. We subscribed to the Commission’s formula of 1+>2. We developed concrete proposals for teacher education, for the training of translators and interpreters, and for language provision for students of all disciplines – to mention just a few of the areas that we felt called for innovation and improvements. We also subscribed to the Commission’s policy of placing special emphasis on the learning and teaching of the Union’s less widely used and less taught languages.

In spite of the fact that Europe had experienced waves of migration and mobility in post-War decades, individual multilingualism was back then still very much seen in terms of communication between citizens resident in different monolingual Member States or regions in Member States, and of respect for languages spoken in other Member States or regions. This, then, was at the heart of the multilingual challenge Mark I – to respect and promote the linguistic diversity characteristic of Europe’s heritage, and to facilitate communication between citizens living in different Member States through quantitative and qualitative improvements in language learning and teaching.

Ten years on, multilingualism has assumed a different meaning, a different dimension.

Today, multilingualism is practically everywhere in Europe. We all live in multilingual societies; and more people in Europe than ever before are bilingual or even multilingual. And that is by no means all.

- As a result of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, the number of official EU languages has more than doubled – a major challenge not only for the EU’s language services, but also for commercial agencies, not to mention EU citizens. Moreover, the two enlargements and increasing integration have resulted in a rise in mobility within the Union; many Member States are now host to large communities of speakers of other EU languages.
- Due to increased migration into Europe, there are now migrant language communities in all the Member States.
- Globalisation and internationalisation have given rise to what the Commission calls the external dimension of multilingualism. In other words, the multilingual challenge of today includes major non-European languages.

In view of these and related developments, the Commission’s High Level Group on Multilingualism came to the conclusion that the multilingual challenge has reached a completely new dimension in terms of size, complexity, and policy relevance – in other words, the multilingual challenge Mark II.

Policy relevance. I think it was for very good reasons that President Barroso created a multilingualism portfolio. Multilingualism has become a transversal issue of great and overarching importance. It is rightly regarded as being relevant to growth and competitiveness, employment and prosperity, social cohesion and security – to mention just a few important policy fields. And because of this, multilingualism is also a challenge for non-educational stakeholders.

Another indication of the heightened importance of multilingualism to the European project is the fact that over the past three years, the Commission has released two Communications on Multilingualism and convened three expert groups on multilingualism – apart from commissioning a number of studies and conducting a consultation. As a result of these activities we now have a host of fresh ideas, analyses, recommendations, and proposals for concrete action.

This Forum reflects the new multilingualism policy context. Through this Forum, we hope to reach an even clearer understanding of the nature of the new multilingual challenge and of its implications for education. In what ways can – and should – education authorities, schools, and higher education institutions respond to the new challenge? This is the background to the morning sessions, when presentations by members of the three aforementioned expert groups will be followed by a round table of representatives of organisations from the field of education.

In the afternoon we shall hear reports on current network, development, and research projects in the area of languages. I think it is encouraging that two major research projects on multilingualism were launched under the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme. To what extent are these education and research projects attuned to the new multilingual challenge? What are the opportunities for collaboration between these projects – and with other projects, for that matter? What new projects do we need?

The presentations will be followed by a round table of high-ranking representatives of the Commission's Directorates-General for Education and Culture, Research, Interpretation, and Translation. The four DGs have addressed and will, I am sure, continue to address the new multilingual challenge within their own specific areas of

responsibility. Their reflections and proposed actions will be of direct interest to educators and researchers alike.

I am confident that by the end of the day we shall have reached an even clearer understanding of

- the nature of the multilingual challenge Mark II,
- what we in our own specific areas of responsibility can and should do in response to this challenge, and
- what issues had best be addressed at a European level – be it in current projects, through new projects, or through further elaboration of language policies and language education policies.

I am sure that Anne-Claude Berthoud will provide plenty of food for thought when at the end of the day she seeks to “imaginer l’avenir”.

This Forum is one of many meetings this year devoted to the issue of languages. This weekend alone, two major meetings on multilingualism are being held in Austria. On the one hand, this is encouraging; on the other hand, I can sense a danger. Of course, language has a lot to do with identity – personal, social, and cultural identity. And yet we may even have to take a fresh look at this relationship between language and identity. But what I am increasingly worried about is that – not unlike in the past – language is becoming a ball in power games played by populist politicians, or even a matter of ideologies propagated by academics of one orientation or another. I should like to take this opportunity to appeal to you all also to reflect on the wealth and the opportunities inherent in the new multilingualism we are surrounded by.

Before I conclude, I should like to exercise my privilege as ELC president and coordinator of the MOLAN project to thank

- our Commissioner, Mr Leonard Orban, for his great kindness in accepting our invitation to speak to us this morning; Commissioner, this is your second appearance at an ELC conference within fourteen months. We feel greatly honoured, and we look forward to your speech with keen anticipation;
- I should like to thank you, Rector de Knop, and your University, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, for hosting this Forum. VUB occupies a special place in

the history of the Conseil européen pour les langues / European Language Council;

- I should like to thank all our speakers and panellists for their great kindness in accepting our invitation. I know that you would all have had perfectly good reasons for declining our invitation, as all of you belong to that special class of multi-task and multi-role players.

In fact, I should like to thank all of you for your joining us here today.

Thank you for your attention.