

# Six years of European co-operation projects in the area of languages: The Brussels Dissemination Conference

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## **Brussels, 23 September 2000: a special occasion**

On 23 September 2000, a European conference was held in Brussels which marked the end of the first phase of Thematic Network type co-operation activities devoted to the area of languages. The activities started in December 1994 with the launch of the SIGMA Scientific Committee on Languages (12/94-10/95). SIGMA was followed by the project for the creation of the Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council (03/95-02/96). Next came the first full-fledged Thematic Network, the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages (TNP1, 09/96-08/99), which led on to the one-year project for the exploitation and dissemination of the results of TNP1 (TNP2, 01/11/99-31/10/00), of which the Brussels Conference formed part. All these projects were supported by the European Commission under the Union's higher education action programme.

The European Commission must have sensed that the Conference was going to be a rather special occasion. No fewer than six officials from the DG Education and Culture and from the interpreting and translation services attended; also present were representatives of the Parliament's interpreting and translation services and of the French Ministry of National Education. Two of the universities that have played a leading role in all the projects, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (BE) and the Freie Universität Berlin (DE), were represented by vice-presidents.

The tone of the Conference was set by M. Domenico Lenarduzzi, Deputy Director Education and Culture, in a keynote speech delivered at the opening of the meeting. M. Lenarduzzi gave his personal assessment of what had been achieved through the language projects over the years. He singled out the DIALANG Project for the development of language tests in 14 European languages on the Internet and the project for the joint development of a European masters in conference interpreting as two important initiatives launched from within TNP1. He appealed to the universities to give greater emphasis to the language issue, for example by enabling students to take their degree examinations in more than one Community language.

## **A politically motivated definition of the area of languages**

M. Lenarduzzi described the approach adopted for the Thematic Network type language projects as revolutionary. It is certainly true that from the very beginning, i.e. from SIGMA on, the point of departure was political rather than academic. The starting point was not a theoretical definition of what we called "the area of languages" or "language studies", but the conviction that the promotion of plurilingual and intercultural competence and of linguistic and cultural diversity are of crucial importance to European integration and to life and work in the Union and that higher education has crucial responsibilities in this respect. At the very first meeting of the SIGMA Committee it was, therefore, decided to focus on the transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills and on language mediation. This approach reflects one of the central aims of thematic network projects: to address the frequently observed disconnection of higher education programmes from changing needs in the social, professional, and economic environments. In a pragmatic fashion a number of programmes and elements of programmes were singled out that were felt to be particularly relevant to the issue at hand:

- modern language degree programmes, area studies programmes, and programmes combining language study with the study of other areas
- teacher education
- the training of translators and interpreters and the training of trainers

- applied linguistics
- the delivery of courses or of parts of courses in one or more than one other language
- language provision for non-specialists, including linguistic preparation and support for student mobility.

What becomes clear from this list is that language study is not just relevant to language and language-related degree programmes but potentially pervades the whole of higher education.

### **The first Thematic Network Project: an exercise in awareness raising**

TNP1 set itself the aim of bringing about reorientation in the programmes and provision mentioned above; the idea was to urge universities in general and faculties, departments, and other units specialising in languages in particular to respond to the challenges posed by a multilingual and multicultural Europe - a tall order indeed. Even though we did not manage to get anywhere near the original aim, one should not underestimate the impact achieved. Some 130 experts from universities in the Member States, Iceland, Norway, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Switzerland and from European associations, sitting on nine subproject scientific committees for three years, turned their minds to the issue at hand, identifying strengths and weaknesses in current policies, programmes and modes of delivery, developing recommendations (including course outlines and examples of good practice), and preparing or launching curriculum development projects, notably projects for the joint development of professionally oriented postgraduate modules and European masters type programmes. At two major conferences and a considerable number of workshops, those participating in the project discussed their findings with a large number of TNP external academics as well as with representatives of the non-academic environments. At the same time, there can be no doubt that in some respects we remained inside our academic fields of specialisation and failed to reach those we wanted to reach: policy-makers and decision-makers inside and outside academia. The dissemination project offered a welcome opportunity to reach out to a wider audience.

### **The dissemination project**

TNPD was to achieve two objectives. Additional stakeholders both inside and outside academia were to be involved in TNP type activities, and the results of TNP1 were to be synthesised and expanded under themes directly related to needs resulting from European integration.

TNPD had project partners in all the new participating countries, notably in the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Contacts were also established with a substantial number of academic and professional associations, with European student associations and with representatives of the social partners. Perhaps most important, four influential academic associations agreed to become project partners: the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA), the Association of European Universities (CRE), the European Association for International Education (EAIE), and the Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA). It was the presence of representatives of these associations on the central Scientific Committee and at the Conference that introduced a new political dimension to the project: the bottom-up approach favoured in TNP1 was complemented by a top-down approach; the academic experts engaged in the project were urged to relate their views to more general developments in higher education, such as the move towards internationalisation and the restructuring of programmes in the wake of the Bologna Declaration.

In the months leading up to the Conference, six small-size task forces, each including an expert from Central or Eastern Europe, synthesised and expanded the most relevant TNP1 results under six topics grouped together under two broad themes:

#### **Language, Mobility, Citizenship**

European Citizenship

Mobility and co-operation: the needs of students and of the labour market

New learning environments

## **Language Studies for Professional Life**

Training in translation and interpreting

Education of teachers and trainers for a multilingual Europe

Language studies at advanced level for non-language professionals

The sub-themes were defined in such a way that they did not simply correspond to one specific type of programme or provision. For example, the theme of "Education of teachers and trainers for a multilingual Europe" was to combine school teacher education, the training of trainers of translators and interpreters, and the training of university language teachers. What the three strands have in common is the need to relate the training of language specialists to professional requirements. The six full-length papers drafted by the task forces, which are comprised of brief overviews of the respective issues, recommendations, and examples of good practice, will be published shortly under the title Language Studies in Higher Education in Europe - 2000-2005. This document is to serve as a framework of reference for policy-makers and decision-makers across Europe.

## **The Brussels Conference: a political event**

The new political dimension was also reflected by the format of the Conference. The original plan of holding a one-and-a-half-day conference was abandoned in favour of a one-day event. All the Conference participants stayed together throughout the day, which meant that for the first time the links between the various language and language-related programmes became fully visible. The opening and closing sessions apart, the Conference was structured into six thematic sessions, in which core recommendations from the six draft papers were presented in five- to ten-minute statements. This meant that the discussion of each of the statements was limited to some 40 minutes, as a result of which interventions were brief and to the point.

The theme of European citizenship was introduced by Robert Crawshaw (Lancaster University, UK). Drawing on recent Commission documents propagating "active citizenship", Crawshaw argued that universities "must recognise and accept that their social responsibilities as institutions of higher education are not restricted to delivering academic teaching and research but also include transmitting the knowledge, values and skills required to exercise active citizenship". He presented a set of recommendations designed to promote the development of plurilingual and intercultural competence among all students and he urged universities to develop and implement clear, integrated policies for institution-wide language learning - an idea that was picked up by a number of speakers during the following sessions.

Anne Räsänen (Jyväskylän yliopisto, FI) introduced the theme of Mobility and co-operation, which had been taken up in the opening session by Madame Lagier of the French Ministry of National Education, who outlined her Government's proposal for an action plan designed to promote mobility of young people and teachers and trainers in the Union. Räsänen proposed a set of concrete measures designed to increase the number of mobile students and the quality of student mobility. She argued "that all members of staff and both mobile and non-mobile students have to be sensitised ... to European diversity, including tolerance regarding language ability and other academic cultures". She too called for the development of institutional policies - policies designed to promote mobility. Räsänen's presentation triggered a lively discussion, which touched, among other things, on the evaluation of ERASMUS student mobility and on the need for clear terminological distinctions (recognition of course credits vs. accreditation of programmes).

Valère Meus (Universiteit Gent, BE) reflected on the potential inherent in the new learning environments - information and communication technology and the presence of speakers of other European languages in our universities - for language learning in higher education, including the learning of the less widely used and less taught languages. He expressed the opinion that the utilisation and exploitation of the new learning environments for language learning purposes required inter-university co-operation, a methodological revolution, objective reference standards across languages, and a new definition of the tasks of the teacher.

The session on the training for translation and interpreting, introduced by Daniel Toudic (Université de Rennes II, FR), quickly developed into a discussion about the new challenges facing the profession

and, as a result, the universities engaged in the training of professional translators and interpreters: the expansion of the Union and the advances in new technologies. The representatives of the Commission's and the Parliament's translation and interpreting services reiterated their adherence to the principles laid down in the Treaty and to the practices applied by the services. The idea of recognising different levels of mediation competence in parallel to the Council of Europe scales for language proficiency and of offering introductory courses in professional translation and interpreting to students on modern language degree courses did not find favour with a majority of the specialists present.

Anne-Claude Berthoud (Université de Lausanne, CH) summarised the results of the TNP1 subproject on teacher education. Arguing that bilingual or multilingual education marked a breakthrough in language education at school level, she stressed the need for promoting this kind of education through appropriate initial and continuing teacher education and through targeted research. Berthoud and Piet Van de Craen (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BE) summarised the project for the joint development of an Advanced Level Programme in Multilingual Education and a research proposal submitted under the 5th Framework Programme, both of which originated from the subproject.

Barbara Moser Mercer (Université de Genève, CH) and Eckhart Hötzel (Université Marc Bloch, FR) presented the results of the work undertaken in TNP1 on the training of trainers of translators and interpreters - trainer profiles and training modules, the latter of which are designed to be delivered in the distance teaching mode.

Whereas in the case of language specialists it is possible to relate programmes directly to professional requirements, this does not yet seem to be the case with non-language professionals. Elisabeth M. Lillie (University of Ulster, UK) reported on the findings of a survey conducted within TNP1 among public and private enterprises and on the outcomes of workshops conducted with representatives of the professional and economic environments; the picture presented was inconclusive. This is why the CEL/ELC will seek to extend its contacts with these environments. Lillie also presented a project for the joint development of an Advanced Level Programme in Applied Language Studies, which is to provide young graduates and practising professionals with professionally relevant knowledge and skills.

In line with present-day practice, the summarising and the evaluation of the results of the Conference and of the projects that had led up to the Conference was entrusted to an outsider: Professor Claude Truchot of the Université Marc Bloch (FR). Truchot, who was General Rapporteur at the Council of Europe Conference "Linguistic diversity for democratic citizenship in Europe" held in Innsbruck in May 1999, summarised his comments in eight points, which are printed here in full (see Appendix 1).

The fact that the Conference marked the end of almost six years of European higher education co-operation in the area of languages was underlined by the many words of gratitude expressed at the beginning and the end of the Conference. The general feeling prevailing at the Conference was one of partnership - partnership not only between the universities that had participated in the projects, but also between the European Commission and the universities.

**Thank you M. Lenarduzzi**  
**Wolfgang Mackiewicz**  
Brussels, 23 September 2000

As some of you may know, M. Lenarduzzi is going to retire next spring. This will, therefore, be the last of our conferences to be attended by M. Lenarduzzi in his capacity as Deputy Director General of the DG Education and Culture. It would be foolish for me to even attempt to describe what you, Sir, have done for Europe. Permit me to say just this. The historic development of European co-operation in the field of education that we have witnessed and been involved in for near-on fifteen years now would not have taken place without you. We have every reason to be grateful to you for what you have done, for what you have achieved. Speaking personally, I should like to say that you gave me a sense of purpose and direction such as I had not known before. I regard it as a great privilege to have met you and to have become friends with you. Thank you, M. Lenarduzzi.

## Appendix 1

### Eight points

#### **Claude Truchot**

Université Marc Bloch, FR  
Rapporteur général of the Brussels Conference.

As I have not participated in this TNP, throughout this day I have been an outside observer who is very interested in your work. Among the observations that I could make, I felt that eight points were important.

#### *1. Mobilisation*

One could not but be impressed by the mobilisation initiated by this project, many hundreds of people took part: 123 institutions including 115 universities, 8 associations, a great number of countries not only from the European Union but also from Central and Eastern Europe. We are not in a closed group of experts, but in a framework of reflection and of collective creation.

#### *2. The philosophical and moral basis*

You have devoted much time and effort to defining your approach, by situating it in the perspective of an "active European citizenship". For citizenship to be active and not limited to the common feeling of belonging or to symbolic manifestations, some objectives such as linguistic diversity, equality of opportunities of access to knowledge and use of languages, and the equality of languages vis-à-vis their accessibility to knowledge, are essential. The same is true in the equality of access to the digital culture, that of the future.

#### *3. The quality of the debate and of reflection*

It is not easy for an outside observer to enter into a debate in which the participants are people who are accustomed to working together for many years, as there is a lot of implied knowledge in what is said. But one is inclined to get involved, as this debate has yet to really develop. The participants are not the spokespersons of their own interests, of their own "hobbyhorses". There is an atmosphere of sharing; each tries to think laterally. Because of this fact the outside observer finds reference marks and can follow them. S/He is conscious of the need to go further, to better define the concepts (for example "accreditation" and "recognition").

#### *4. The area of languages*

I noted the concern to give shape to the "area of languages", to define it, to structure it. This concern to materialise it in the university institution is all the more appreciable as, outside of the specialist field, the knowledge of languages is a domain that has not been sufficiently valued by universities in the past. Considering it, at best as a practical necessity, also assimilating it in the commercial sector, the university had left this task to other teaching institutions. However the objective of linguistic diversity can only be achieved if the university genuinely takes back ownership of the totality of the area of languages and becomes a major actor in linguistic policy.

#### *5. A reference document*

I note that one reference document, "The teaching of languages in higher education in Europe 2000-2005", is in preparation. It is fundamental for the future of the project that universities can refer to such a document to develop the area of languages.

#### *6. The university in society*

The observer is also conscious of the desire expressed by the participants to go from theory to action, to give material form to what has been elaborated here. To do this, it is certainly necessary to become better acquainted with the linguistic practices in society, the reason why we educate our students. That is not something which is well known. It is better to encourage studies that make practices clearer, in trying to not stay at the level of generally accepted ideas that often govern language choices in educational systems, but in going out into the field and observing the often very different realities.

### *7. Linguistic policy*

Setting up projects also means that universities develop their own linguistic policies. That was expressed here. This is a future task that the ELC has given itself. This is fundamental but difficult, as the higher education institutions are not accustomed to thinking of themselves as actors in linguistic politics. However, the nature of language teaching practised and the languages used in university teaching, can have a considerable impact, practical but also exemplary, in society.

### *8. Staying mobilised*

The projects that were presented here should take shape. This is already the case for some of them. I have noted the development of DIALANG, the European Masters. There is reason for optimism. But there are also examples of good projects that have remained on file, because a follow-up could not be organised, and because the participants involved did not want to take responsibility for them. It is therefore necessary that those that created these projects stay mobilised. That is not an easy task, but it is essential.

I must admit to having hesitated before agreeing to play the role of observer. I do not know if my observations were useful or pertinent. In any case I have learned a lot. For that I thank you.