

# 2009 China-EU Multilingualism Conference

Beijing, 30-31 March 2009

## EU KEYNOTE SPEECH

**Multilingualism - the fundamental principle of the EU's language policy and language education policy**

*Wolfgang Mackiewicz, Freie Universität Berlin (DE)*

Commissioner Orban,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Colleagues and friends,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to participate in this, the 2009 China-EU Multilingualism Conference, and I thank the organisers of the Conference for inviting me to deliver the EU keynote speech.

The title of my speech may convey the impression that the European Union has a comprehensive, consistent, and inalterable language policy. Even though today we are closer to having a comprehensive language policy in the EU than ever before, it is worth making the point that the EU's language policy is a dynamic construct, related to a variety of fields of action. The EU's language policy, such as it is, has been developed by the European institutions over a period of more than fifty years, and the development of this policy continues. It also needs to be said that the institutions – notably the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council – have at times held different views on matters pertaining to language policy and language education policy.

However, there is one fundamental principle underlying all these developments in the Community over the past fifty years: multilingualism.

### ***The language regime of the European Union***

It all started on 15 April 1958. On that day, the Council of the newly established European Economic Community, one of the supranational structures which eventually led to the creation of the European Union, passed its very first regulation, determining the languages to be used by the EEC. In other words, before they got down to real business, the Member States addressed the issue of which languages should be used in the new political entity. They adopted a formula which implied the equality of the official state languages of the Member States, giving them the status of official and working languages of the EEC. At the time, the EEC had six Member States – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands – and between them they had four official languages: Dutch, French, German, and Italian.

In practical terms, Regulation No 1 meant, above all, three things. (i) Authorities and residents in the Member States had the right to correspond with the Community's institutions in any one of the official languages. (ii) Documents sent by the institutions to authorities and residents in a given Member State had to be drafted in the language of the State in question. (iii) "Regulations and other documents of general application" were to be drafted, and the Official Journal of the Community was to be published in all the official languages. This principle was retained at each accession of new Member States. It can only be changed by a unanimous vote of the European Council.

From the perspective of European history, Regulation No 1 was revolutionary in that it said farewell to linguistic hegemony. The nation-state, as a rule, adhered to and promoted the principle of one official language – to the extent that certain states claimed that their own specific language was superior to others. The supra-national European Communities, to which Member States voluntarily transferred part of their sovereignty, could only function properly if the regulations adopted by the Communities could be understood in the Member States. Hence it was absolutely necessary that a small language like Dutch enjoyed the same status as large languages such as French and German.

What all this meant was that the European institutions had to adopt and operate a multilingual regime, and in order to do so they had to set up translation and interpretation services. The European Union of today has 27 Member States and 23 official languages – Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Slovak, Slovene, Romanian, Spanish, and Swedish. The European Commission has Directorates-General for Interpretation and for Translation, which also serve the Council. The European Parliament has its own Directorates-General for Interpretation and Translation. In addition, there is the Translation Centre for Bodies of the European Union, which caters for the Union's decentralised agencies, centres, and institutes of various kinds.

I cannot deal with the various facets of the multilingual regime put in place and practiced by the Union, for example with the question as to for what types of meetings what kind of language regime is used. Suffice it to say that the expansion of official languages combined with the expansion of the policy areas for which the Union has sole or shared responsibility has put the EU's language services under considerable strain. Without any doubt, these services are unparalleled as regards their size and quality. Moreover, they have a major role in maintaining the various domains in smaller EU languages, for example through updating terminology. They thereby make a major contribution to the vitality of the EU's official languages.

So then, at the beginning of the European project, multilingualism was limited to the language regime put in place for and executed by the institutions. The Member States were seen and treated – and probably saw themselves – as monolingual entities and societies, or as – in the case of Belgium – being comprised of monolingual communities.

### ***The EU's exclusive language learning policy in the nineties***

Multilingualism assumed a new dimension in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which established the European Union and introduced EU citizenship. The

promotion of language learning and of individual multilingualism, combined with an emphasis on linguistic diversity, became a major political issue at EU level. In fact, language learning became a corner stone of the EU's educational policy. Two documents released in 1995 can be regarded as milestones in the Union's language education policy: the European Commission's *White Paper on Education and Training*, and the *Council Resolution on improving and diversifying language learning and teaching within the education systems of the European Union*.

The following, truly prophetic sentence in the White Paper must be one of the most frequent quotes from any EU educational document. "... it is becoming necessary for everyone, irrespective of training and education routes chosen, to be able to acquire and keep up their ability to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue" – the famous 1+>2 formula. Four things stand out in this quote. (i) The learning of other languages is to serve the aim of acquiring communicative ability. Elsewhere in the White Paper, the Commission adds that language proficiency has to be backed up by the ability to adapt to working and living in environments characterised by different cultures. (ii) Proficiency in foreign languages is important for all citizens, and not just for an elite. (iii) Learning one foreign language – for example a *lingua franca* – is not enough. The goal is the acquisition of multilingual proficiency, not bilingual proficiency. (iv) Emphasis is placed on the learning of Community languages, that is to say, official languages of the European Union, not on the learning of foreign languages in general. In other words, at that time the Commission adhered to an **exclusive** language education policy, in line with the principle adopted in April 1958 for the Community's language regime.

Why this plea for proficiency in three Community languages? Three reasons were given:

- it was regarded as a precondition for citizens to be able to benefit from the occupational and personal opportunities provided by the border-free Single Market constituted by the EU;
- it was seen as an important factor in promoting mutual understanding among Europeans, and in promoting European identity;
- it was seen as being important for personal development.

In other words, language learning and individual multilingualism were directly linked to the Union's economic and general political aims. Still, at that time, the main emphasis was on benefits to the individual.

The Council Resolution focused less on the why than on the how, and it made it clear that in language learning and teaching – like in education in general – the principle of subsidiarity applies. In other words, in the EU, prime responsibility for education rests with the Member States, or the regions, as the case may be, and with individual higher education institutions to the extent that they are autonomous in determining their programmes and offerings.

Reaffirming the principle of the equal status of the languages of the Union, and stressing the need to ensure that all Member States' languages and cultures are disseminated as widely as possible, the Council drew up a long list of recommendations, most of which are as relevant today as they were then. The following measures proposed would seem to be particularly noteworthy.

- enhancing communication skills through virtual and physical mobility of both pupils / students and teachers, including opportunities provided by open and distance learning;
- promoting innovative methods such as intensive periods of teaching and learning, bilingual teaching in content classes, and early teaching of modern languages in primary education;
- promoting language learning in technical / vocational education and in adult education;
- improving pre-service and in-service teacher education, including the training of primary school teachers in languages and teaching methods;
- exploiting resources in the outside community for extracurricular activities.

### ***Towards an inclusive language policy***

The EU's language education policy gained a new and powerful momentum as a result of the Lisbon Strategy adopted by the Member States at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. The heads of state and government recognised major new challenges resulting from globalisation and the emergence of a knowledge-driven economy. They set a new strategic goal for the Union: to become, by 2010, the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. They recognised the crucial role that education and training would have for achieving this goal, and called for a modernisation of education and training systems in line with the new goal. One of the concrete targets set by the Council was a European framework which should define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning, among them foreign languages.

Less than a year later, the Education Council, in which the education ministers of the Member State governments meet, responded to the Lisbon Presidency Conclusions with a report on the concrete future objectives of education and training systems. One of the immediate objectives identified was "Improving foreign language learning". The following quote signalled a new direction in EU language education policy: "The learning of foreign languages as part of education and training is important not only for the cultural enrichment of the individual but also as a contribution to mobility and European competitiveness." By 2001, the learning of and proficiency in foreign languages had come to be regarded as being important for the EU's economic performance; and because of this, it was logical that the exclusive emphasis on the learning of EU languages, which had been characteristic of the Commission's and the Council's language education policy in the nineties, was dropped. It was the beginning of a new, inclusive EU language policy. This was reinforced by the Barcelona Council of March 2002, which called for improving the mastery of basic skills, "in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age"; it also called for the establishment of a linguistic competence indicator. Because of the newly recognised economic relevance of language skills, it was becoming necessary to get a clear idea of the skills levels of young people in school education across the Union.

### ***A new, comprehensive and inclusive multilingualism policy***

Over the past seven years, the European Commission has developed its language policy and language education policy even further. "Communication in foreign languages" is now recognised by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament as one of eight key competences for lifelong learning, alongside such competences as

digital competence, learning to learn, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness and expression. The increasing importance of individual and societal multilingualism was further underlined by the fact that in the current European Commission, which came into office in 2004, multilingualism became a portfolio in its own right. On 1 January 2007, a member of the Commission – Commissioner Leonard Orban – was given sole responsibility for multilingualism. Moreover, in 2006, the European Commission convened a High Level Group on Multilingualism, and Commissioner Orban in turn set up two expert groups to look into the relevance of multilingualism to business and to intercultural dialogue respectively.

All this is clear evidence of the increased importance that the EU now attaches to language policy – or rather, multilingualism policy. In fact, the explicit emphasis on “multilingualism” expresses the new, inclusive nature of the EU’s language policy.

Before I present the main features of this new, inclusive language policy, I should like to briefly mention the societal, political, and economic developments and changes to which this policy constitutes a response.

- the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007;
- increasing intra-European trade and mobility of workers;
- globalisation and internationalisation in many fields of human activity;
- increasing collaboration between the EU and third countries;
- revitalisation of regions within Member States, and of cross-border regions;
- migration into the Union – to the extent that practically all Member States are now migration countries;
- rampant developments in ICT, facilitating, among other things, instant communication from practically any place in the world to any other;
- creation of a European Higher Education Area and a European Research Area, and an internationalisation of universities and research institutes;
- the advent of knowledge-based economies.

As a result of some of these developments, the linguistic landscape of the Union and of Europe as a whole has changed dramatically, and these changes continue. The number of official EU languages has more than doubled since 2004. Many Member States are now host to large communities of speakers of other EU languages, just as there are migrant language communities in all the Member States. The workforces of enterprises and the student bodies of universities across Europe are becoming increasingly multilingual. Overall, the number of languages spoken in the Union has increased beyond what anyone could have imagined only ten years ago. In other words, all the Member States have become multilingual and multicultural societies.

Against this background, it becomes clear why the Union’s new multilingualism policy relates to both the individual and society. In the words of the Commission’s High Level Group of Multilingualism, multilingualism means two things.

- the co-existence of different language communities in one geographical or geo-political area or political entity; and
- the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language.

As regards societal multilingualism, the diversity of languages in the Union is regarded as a value in its own right – a source of wealth -, which should be maintained and promoted. Respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is considered a core value. Language is seen as an expression of culture, and as a crucial aspect individual and social identity. At the same time, increasing linguistic diversity is regarded as a challenge, which calls for the development and implementation of effective policies, strategies and practices.

Today, the inclusive nature of multilingualism is stated explicitly. The EU values all languages – the official EU languages, regional languages in Member States, such as Catalan and Welsh, migrant languages, such as Bengali, Hindi, and Turkish, and languages of the wider world, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. Of course, there is some overlap, in that languages of the wider world may also be migrant languages.

Multilingual competence is no longer seen solely as facilitating communication, understanding and dialogue between the peoples of the Union. It is equally important for communication and dialogue between different groups at local, regional and national level and for international communication and dialogue. If anything, the intercultural dimension of individual and societal multilingualism is given greater prominence than ever before.

The EU continues to stress the benefits of multilingual competence to the individual in terms of opportunities on the labour market, and access to other cultures as well as to services and rights. At the same time, the importance of multilingualism for the European project in general and for the Lisbon agenda in particular has become a centre piece of the EU's language policy. Multilingualism, that is to say, the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage with more than one language is seen as being of crucial importance to the Lisbon goals of competitiveness, growth, better jobs, social cohesion, and international dialogue, trade and cooperation.

And this coin has two sides – the language learning / language competence side, and the language mediation side. As regards language learning, the following issues are highlighted:

- in continuation of the EU's language education policy in the nineties, language learning is seen as a lifelong activity, covering all sectors of education and training, and including learning outside formal educational settings and in occupational environments;
- also in continuation of the policy of the nineties, the EU stresses that everybody should have access to language training – including migrants, who should be provided with the necessary means to learn the language and culture of the host country, adults, and people in disadvantaged situations;
- migrants should also be given the opportunity to develop their first language;
- an individual's level of proficiency will vary between the four skills and between the different languages he or she has, and this in accordance with the individual's social and cultural background, environment, needs and/or interests;
- as part of a framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training, the Commission is pressing ahead with its implementation of the Barcelona indicator, whereby

pupils in secondary education will be tested on their proficiency in two foreign languages.

Of course, individuals can only be expected to learn that many languages, and because of this, language mediation, notably translation and interpretation, has gained heightened importance for economic performance and social cohesion. This is why the Commission is now urging Member States and higher education institutions to make the training of court translators and interpreters a priority. Moreover, translation is also regarded as an indispensable means of enabling EU citizens to access literary works written in other languages.

What all this means is that multilingualism has become a transversal policy - and this in two respects.

Multilingualism is relevant to a wide range of policy fields, including education, culture, youth and research, lifelong learning, employment, enterprise and industry, competition, trade, justice, the information society and media, regional policy, consumer protection, and health.

Multilingualism has also become a transversal policy at EU level, in that our Commissioner is responsible for all the services dealing with multilingualism, including translation, interpretation, and publication. And there is logic in this. A shortage of interpreters may arise if young speakers of the EU's major languages are unwilling to learn foreign languages.

Of course, more so than before, the EU's new inclusive language policy is bound to give rise to the question as to which languages should be taught and learnt. The question poses itself to both individuals, and authorities and institutions. In the nineties, Europeans were encouraged to learn not just major official EU languages, but also smaller Community languages, such as Danish, Finnish, Greek, for example. To some extent, this is still the case. But the Commission and the Parliament are beginning to think aloud about other priorities.

In a recent resolution, the Parliament reiterated the political priority of the learning of EU languages, "one of which will be the language of a neighbouring country and the other an international 'lingua franca'" – one would assume English.

The Commission, under the heading "the external dimension of multilingualism", recently highlighted the potential of EU languages spoken in third countries – one would assume French, Portuguese and Spanish.

However, what is really new about this "external dimension" is the fact that the Commission now explicitly seeks to promote the teaching and learning of non-EU languages in Europe.

And this is no less revolutionary – the Commission is eager to promote the learning of EU languages in third countries. In line with the EU's decision to open its education systems to the world, the Commission's policy on multilingualism has now assumed a global dimension – MULTILINGUALISM MUNDUS – multilingualism not just in and for Europe, but in and for the entire world.

### ***From policy to practice***

Developing sound policies is one thing, getting them implemented is another. Here the Member States and other stakeholders have a decisive role. And yet, the EU has an instrument that can serve as a powerful incentive to stakeholders – its action programmes, such as the current Lifelong Learning Programme. It would need another speech to explain the aims and activities envisaged under this programme with regard to multilingualism. Speaking personally, what I can say is that through successive network projects in the area of languages funded by the Commission, colleagues from across Europe and I have been able to bring innovation to higher education programmes and provision in partner institutions and beyond, and to contribute to policy development at EU and Member State level.

### ***Concluding remarks***

In my speech, I deliberately dug into the history of the EU's language policy. I did so because I was keen to show how in its policy development the EU repeatedly responded to social, political, and economic changes, and to needs resulting from these changes, while adhering to the fundamental principle of multilingualism. I know from personal contacts that the EU's multilingualism policy is increasingly attracting attention in quite a few third countries. However, I also know from personal contacts that there are valuable experiences and expertise in non-EU countries. This is why I am looking forward to the contributions that colleagues from this country are going to make today and tomorrow with keen anticipation.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION