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**The Way Forward - speech for 4<sup>th</sup> ELC Conference in Aarhus, 26-28 June 2003**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

**First my thanks for inviting me to your conference and for giving me the opportunity to address you today.**

It is an honour and privilege to speak to you today in a context that I have thought about, lived with and discussed so often, one might think I was beginning to suffer from "language-fatigue". I am glad to say that however much I hear and talk about multilingualism, language learning and language professions, they remain dear to my heart. I am sure that I speak for you all when I say this. We are here to defend and foster language in the broadest sense of the word; language as a means of communication, as an expression of identity and a reflection of our culture and history. I would even say that as professionals, we are the guardians of language.

Today we are assembled to talk once again about languages at the fourth conference of the European Language Council. I was present at the launch of the ELC in 1997 and recall some of the themes of major preoccupation then. We spoke about the challenge of modern life, of adapting to changing needs, preparing for the EU's biggest Enlargement in its history, about the fundamental principles of multilingualism, as enshrined in the first Council Regulation of 1958, of the commitment to respect diversity of language and culture in a society marked by globalisation and rapid development. I have no doubt that we will have more to say on these, still topical questions, today.

**But there is a new wind blowing now and if we are to keep abreast of changes and prepare for them, we would do well to see in which direction it is blowing.** I see on the agenda items such as employability, mobility, lifelong learning and the Bologna process; in every forum concerned with languages, these subjects are becoming more central and more pressing. So we need to address them.

Let me start by announcing the good news. We - and I speak for all International Organisations here - need language specialists, translators, précis-writers, proof-readers, editors and also conference interpreters. But we need the **right** ones, with the languages and skills required now. Let me illustrate the point. At the European Council in Thessaloniki where my Service was heavily represented, Ministers had a language régime of 28 languages into 11. Now, this is unlikely to become our daily bread and should certainly be seen as an exception, probably to be repeated once or twice a year at the highest political level. I am glad to say that it worked perfectly, even if our interpreters had to be ferried around in 2 buses and the whole event required a vast amount of space, as you can well imagine. 58 conference interpreters and a bevy of translators were on the spot to enable the Ministers to communicate, to discuss matters of direct concern to all our citizens and to reach decisions which will affect us all and especially the future generations. **It therefore goes without saying that the responsibility on the shoulders of this army of linguists is enormous. Once the word is spoken, it hangs there, it cannot be changed.**

So accuracy is vital, as is the ability to put into words, thoughts, ideas and proposals of a sometimes extremely delicate and complex nature. The interpreter must find these words immediately and must express him or herself as fluently and as eloquently as the speaker, conveying not only a message but also a conviction. He or she must do so in an appropriate language and in the right register whether the subject is beef-meat or high finance and whether or not, by the way, the speaker is clear or confused.

Equally, though at a rather different pace, the translator must produce a final text that conveys the author's message and intentions, must edit often poorly written material to create a coherent and elegantly written text. The translator must be able to perform this feat in all subjects, from highly detailed and complex language, be it legal, literary, scientific, technical or administrative. You need to master your own language profoundly to be able to translate this "difficult" and often arcane subject matter. **It is worth adding here that the users of language staff often have an imperfect appreciation of what is involved in producing, say, a good translation, edited text or interpreted statement, i.e. the value of the final product, which includes value added by the language staff, especially in clarifying a speaker's or an author's intended meaning.**

The somewhat worrying message I am receiving from my colleagues in translation, editing and indeed my own Interpreting Service is this:

Today's students are losing the ability to speak and write - properly - their mother tongues. They may know their foreign languages well but they no longer master the very instrument they need to pass on a message: I will quote some of the criticisms from my senior staff:

"The standard of spoken Portuguese is declining"

"Spoken Danish is peppered with English expressions"

"In France the standard of French in secondary schools is declining alarmingly....Latin and Greek are unpopular.....efficiency takes precedence over style....."

"Poverty of language is noted everywhere...sciences are more useful than languages.....language is becoming sloppy and no one cares"

"In the UK foreign language learning is no longer compulsory after the age of 14.....modern speech, even among graduates, is heavily influenced by 'junk television' and even the BBC has let standards drop"

"Language is influenced by Email and text-message style, media-speak and low-grade television programmes more and more"

"Knowledge of foreign languages is adequate but the German mother tongue sadly lacking".

Personally, I have always thought that it was not a sin to study Latin and Greek. Such study inevitably involves lengthy discussions and the analysis of highly complex texts. It seems to me that this is at least as mind-expanding and intellectually challenging as studying the workings of the Faraday cage! For that

matter, reading Beowulf and trying to understand and analyse the "Chanson de Roland" was just as much of a brain tease as working out a mathematical theorem. But apparently, Professor de Zwaan believes that, not only are studies in philology and literature declining and considered out of date, but that they are not even being replaced by a thorough study of modern languages. Surely this is something of a paradox? Perhaps, then, we should start thinking about adding languages to science studies.

I think my message is clear. **Standards are dropping and we are seeing that a whole generation is losing the ability to express itself either verbally or in writing - effectively an a-lingual generation.**

And yet, at the same time, the needs in the language professions are becoming more acute, the level required to work for an International Organisation remains necessarily high. We already have problems in finding staff with the requisite language knowledge, skills and qualifications; if we are to find the kind of quality we continue to seek, we will have to begin by sending out a clear message to decision-makers, to authorities, schools and universities. I urge you in the ELC to do just this: make your views known and issue after your meetings and conferences hard-hitting communiqués calling for decisions. The writing is on the wall : **beware of a society which no longer has the ability to express itself! And act now to stop the rot!**

This leads me on to another worrying trend, closely related to what I have just mentioned. We believe in the principle and in the application of multilingualism in the EU and the UN. We practise what we preach, moreover. But, despite our commitment and our endeavours to find and help train the linguists of the future, we realise that their task is more complex, more challenging than ever before, partly also due to the fact that delegates, politicians, legal experts and civil servants are also suffering from this impoverishment of language. More and more, English dominates. Often enough, it is not English as spoken by the BBC World Service (still managing to keep up standards) but a mixture of American slang, Euro-speak, or simply jargon, with acronyms proliferating and scant regard paid to syntax or style.

With each Enlargement, talk has turned to cutting the language régime. The Swedes and Finns thought they could manage in English but very soon realised that they would be the losers if they did. A delegate conducting negotiations of a delicate and sensitive nature will certainly make his or her point more clearly and succinctly if using a mother tongue. This they soon understood as, no doubt, our future members will. After all, the use of a language in our EU family is a democratic right and just as voting is a fundamental right and a responsibility, so too is protecting and valuing all our languages equally. **This message needs to be spelt out clearly to our political masters; they ignore it at their risk and peril.**

The cost of multilingualism in our Institutions is not high, contrary to popular belief: it is a mere 2 Euros per citizen per year, 0.8% of the EU Annual budget. The cost of NON multilingualism may well prove to be a great deal higher. In the light of the current obsession with cost-cutting, those political masters should perhaps give the consequences of neglecting language some serious thought.

I call on you to unite and more specifically to undertake together - with the help of our Institution, for we are ready to play our part - a scientific or econometric study on "the cost of non multilingualism in Europe" or, to put it less aggressively, "the contribution of multilingualism to the European construction". The aim would be to highlight how multilingualism affects the decision making process in economic and democratic terms. Such a study would echo the report produced many years ago by Mr Cecchini, Director General of the Commission, well before the introduction of the Single Market - and when many were having doubts - on "the cost of a non-Europe".

I realise that the title of my talk is "The Way forward" and you may be wondering when I am going to outline that way. I thought it useful to situate the present landscape first, however and to see, with you, how we may best tackle the problems we face, together and soon.

Which brings me to my third and final point. The way forward, ladies and gentlemen, is, as I just said, together. This means you, the language specialists, teachers in schools, in universities and us, the employers, particularly the International Organisations. The employers bear the same responsibility as the academic world to guide, to point the way and to participate actively in training the next generation. Indeed, they have every interest in doing so since they are now realising that there is a serious shortage of qualified language staff. The language services of the main International Organisations have been meeting once a year for many years to exchange information and discuss mutual problems. They do so in the context of the unfortunately-named "IAMALDP : Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications, set up by the United Nations precisely to create a forum for the language and conference services to meet and exchange ideas. If for no other reason, this creature deserves some consideration, since it is the only forum of its kind, with its Working Groups, each dealing with a particular field. 2 years ago, I attended the annual Meeting and was invited, on behalf of my Service, to become a full member - previously the EU and others had had observer status. At the same time, as all new boys in any institution, I was given a hefty task to accomplish. I took it on readily.

Our remit was to set up and chair a new Working Group on Training of Language Staff in 5 key areas: translation, précis-writing, editing, proof-reading and conference interpreting. We set about researching these professions by means of questionnaires and emails, found ourselves the flavour of the month, if I may say so and, together with a group of stalwarts from, among others, the UN, ITU WTO and OECD, came up with some interesting results. First, we canvassed not only the IOs (some 80) but also the universities with which my Service enjoys close contacts. We took stock of employers' needs on the one hand and universities' training in translation and interpreting, on the other. What we discovered was a huge gap between the two and a resolute desire to narrow that gap.

The IAMLADP Meeting in Vienna in 2002 approved our report and gave us a mandate to take further our work, concentrating on staff exchanges, pooling resources between IOs (in training for revisers, for instance), taking further co-operation between IOs and universities, and looking at the large and longer term question of the status of language professions. This we have just completed, we hope, to the Meeting's approval, to be seen in Geneva next month.

Our findings have been interesting and in some cases, eye-opening. Universities have now been able, through our Working Group, to participate actively in our investigations. This makes sense, particularly in the light of the need to bridge the perceived information gap. **We now intend to make more focused and systematic this co-operation, through a forum, perhaps a Standing Committee which will serve as a communication channel between training centres and IOs.** Now, more than ever, the trainers of language staff and those who may employ them in future must collaborate and do so effectively. For example, universities need to know better what the IOs' needs are in terms of new skills, in IT, languages and managerial training, for example, while employers have every interest in making themselves, job requirements and workplaces known to students and teachers.

Inevitably, we hear the plaintive cry, particularly from other IOs that they do not have the resources to send staff out to attend careers days, or to receive students and teachers, to take on trainees or interns. However, we believe that we have provided a comprehensive inventory of what some of us already do and others could do with virtually no cost and a minimum of goodwill. We hope that they will take heed and implement some of the schemes we propose and indeed put into practice.

The need for language staff, like all other staff, to keep abreast of new developments has also emerged and our findings on staff exchanges have revealed that once again, with almost no outlay, employers and teaching staff can benefit massively from exchanges. In the European Masters in Conference Interpreting, bringing together 19 universities, such exchanges already exist; several IOs routinely plan language staff exchanges into their annual planning. Without any exception, as long as the conditions were right, these exchanges have been a resounding success. The staff member benefits from a change of scene, can learn different methods and experience another working environment. He or she returns to base-camp with fresh ideas and can pass these on to the benefit of all. The Organisation benefits from new blood, motivation increases productivity and in some cases, a particular language need for a period of time. It is a shining example of life-long learning that any IO can, if willing, take the plunge to implement. A list of possible exchange formats now exists with feedback from both staff members and supervisors. It is a large return on a small investment and as such, should please budgetary authorities too, ever anxious as they are to increase output and cut input.

Last but not least, our WGT now intends to take further the recognition of language professions, in the short and long term. In the longer-term, we may well take up the whole issue of recognition of the title of translator and interpreter, taking on board the work already achieved by professional organisations in this field.

In the more immediate future, as I already mentioned, we would hope to highlight the value added of language staff to a given document or interpreted statement, but this value added needs to be demonstrated, explained to the "users". Sometimes we need to impose ourselves to be appreciated for our true value. **By narrowing the gap between language staff and users, we foster mutual understanding and contribute to improving that essential element we need to survive - quality.** I can only commend to you IAMLADP and hope that in the fullness of time, a more user-friendly name can be found for this friendly animal!

Ladies and gentlemen, I have, I hope, given you some food for thought. I have certainly touched on some sensitive spots too. My intention is not to alarm or depress you, on the contrary, I believe that by looking at facts fairly and squarely, we can work out a strategy for the way forward together and so avoid being taken unawares. If there is a will, there is a way. I speak for my own Institution and for other International Organisations, you for your members. We are both interested in action, not in hot air.

Of course, culture, education and languages are still in the hands of the member states and even the future Convention for the EU still requires a unanimous vote where these sensitive subject are concerned. However, the Commission has no desire to take over from the member states, but rather to support and complement them. In fact, very shortly, it will issue a communication entitled " promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: an action plan 2004-2006".

So with one voice we can call loudly and convincingly enough for a change. Our paths are converging into one: it is this path I would hope we will tread together.

Thank you for your attention.