

Leonard Orban

European Commissioner responsible for multilingualism

**"Integration, expansion, globalisation
- a new multilingual challenge for Europe"**

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

European Language Council – Forum 2008

Vrije Universiteit Brussels, 5th December 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be speaking here today.

Let me first thank the **European Language Council**. For over a decade now you have drawn together expertise from across Europe, to cultivate and champion multilingualism. *Your* objectives dovetail with *our* objectives. And we are delighted to be working alongside you.

Let me also very warmly thank the Rector of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, **Professor De Knop** and **this University** for hosting this event. And, last but not least, I want to thank the **President of the European Language Council, Wolfgang Mackiewicz**, for his life-long commitment to languages.

It was just over a year ago, that Wolfgang **Mackiewicz** presented the report of the **High Level Group on Multilingualism**. That was an important point in our journey, in many ways.

The report managed to articulate something that all of us in the field had felt for some time: that **multilingualism** had finally "**come of age**".

What do I mean by this? Allow me to elaborate.

Multilingualism: then and now

Think back to fifty years ago. Old enemies gathered together to build this Union on the ashes of their conflicts. Putting languages on an equal footing was not empty symbolism. It was a tangible sign of their **commitment to dialogue** - the kind of meaningful dialogue which underpins our project.

Some looked on with incredulity. And with each wave of enlargement sceptics argued that the principle would eventually have to give way. But our commitment to

respecting linguistic diversity has held. And we have come to see multilingualism not as impractical, but as imperative.

We have also come to appreciate it as source of richness in itself. As George Steiner said, **Babel is not a burden; it is a "mysterious and immense blessing."**

I am sure that **Jacques de Decker** will have more to say on this, when he speaks of languages, cultures and identity. And it is true that we should reiterate this message, underlining the importance of respecting linguistic diversity.

But that is not my message for today.

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In recent years there has been a shift in our approach to multilingualism.

There is widespread recognition that times have changed; that we should step up a gear; that multilingualism can

no longer be just about **respecting** different languages - it must be about **learning** and **speaking** new languages.

Because **languages are not just expressions of identity**. They are also a means towards greater social cohesion, greater prosperity and better job prospects. They can help us fulfil some of our overarching aims - the **renewed social agenda** and the **Lisbon process**. And they can help prepare us for the challenges of the future.

This is why multilingualism is now recognised as a **policy area in its own right**. This is what I mean when I speak of multilingualism coming of age. And this is the thinking behind our latest strategy, adopted by the Commission just last September.

The Communication: changing realities

I don't want to dwell too long on the Communication itself. I am sure you are all familiar with its main thrusts. And I am sure you all appreciate the urgent need for such a strategy. Europe is changing in many different ways:

Never before have so many languages been spoken in our Union: **23 official languages**; some **60 regional and minority languages**; and some **175 migrant languages**. But more to the point, never before have the speakers of different languages lived so close together.

Languages can help us draw the best out of this diversity. They are tools **migrants** can use to gain access to the **job market** and to participate in the **life of the community**. By providing new insights they can **dispel our prejudices**; they can make us more **tolerant** and **understanding**. These are the attitudes upon which a strong and sustainable society is founded.

Let me thank **Jacques de Decker** and the 'Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue' I commissioned. You provided many invaluable contributions to our thinking in this area.

I also believe our strategy should be seen in the context of **new economic realities**. The current financial crisis calls for immediate and bold measures. But we must not lose sight of the need for longer-term thinking and investment. We should strengthen Europe's economic capability to prepare ourselves for the crises of the future. This is where languages can play a role.

Language strategies can help European business take full advantage of the **Single Market** – the biggest in the world. And they can also help it succeed further afield. Look beyond the present crisis, to bigger transformations on the horizon. **Dynamic new economies** are emerging. They are putting together the language strategies needed to succeed in a more globalised market. At the moment languages skills are **advantageous** in business; soon they will be **indispensable**. With world languages like Mandarin Chinese and Hindi, European Business can

embrace the consumer explosion in these countries and conquer new markets. This will benefit us all.

But of course we do not want just to **compete with third countries**; we also want to **cooperate with them**. And multilingualism is a natural platform on which we can achieve this. This is why the Communication emphasises the role of multilingualism in our **external relations**.

In short - our societies are **more multicultural**; our world is **more multipolar** and so we must adapt by becoming more **multilingual**.

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I believe this is recognised across Europe. Our new strategy appears to have really struck a chord - at every level:

- The **Commission** has responded favourably, recognising the need to mainstream multilingualism through a range of policy fields.

- **Member States** have vocally endorsed our strategy. Look at the Council Conclusions of May 2008 and the Council Resolution of November 2008.
- **Stakeholders** in **business** and **civil society** have shown strong approval.
- And during our consultations we have encountered great enthusiasm amongst the **public** towards our ideas.

Now we must match this enthusiasm, by moving from words to action. All of us can see that we have a strong mandate for what we are trying to achieve. What matters now is that we harvest what we have sown.

But how? Allow me to outline the next steps we will be taking.

Moving forwards

Firstly, let me emphasise that **existing EU programs** will continue to be the foundation of our work. Through programs like **Lifelong Learning** we will:

- provide support for language teaching, encouraging a broader range of languages
- increase student and teacher mobility
- and help develop innovative methods of language instruction, adapted to different target groups

But this alone will not help us achieve our objectives. It is vital we bring all the different stakeholders on board; that we help them help each other; that we help them learn from each other.

We intend to draw up an **inventory of best practice** in language-teaching across Europe. As always, our diversity is our greatest asset. Across Europe, one can find a whole range of different methods and techniques for teaching languages. Member States should be able to tap into this knowledge and experience, and learn from each other.

And I am not just referring to formal education systems. There are excellent practice in fields like **vocational**

training and **language training for migrants**. This too should be shared. Languages should be for everybody, at every stage of their life.

We want to build on the success of our **Business Forum**, and create a permanent platform for business to develop its own responses to the language-skills deficit. Let me thank **Mr Waqas Hussain**, one of the distinguished members of the original Forum, for his valued participation.

Likewise we want to foster dialogue amongst **civil society** organisations and **academia**. Let me stress in this context that we are committed to cooperating with existing networks like yours. Organisations like the **European Language Council** are pivotal to our success.

We should also look to harness the power of the **Media** and of **new technologies**. The Media in particular play a pivotal role in informing public opinion. And so they can help depict and reflect our more complex societies. They can raise awareness of the need to learn new languages.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by reiterating my main message.

We have already got the ball rolling. But to succeed, we need the involvement of all stakeholders.

This is what today's conference is about: generating debate and discussion on multilingualism; and above all, providing an opportunity for you to **define the roles** of your **respective organisations** and **project groups**; to discover and establish the best ways we can work together to make Europe more multilingual.

I would say that today is not so much about why, but how. Today should not just be a platform for *exchange* - but also a platform for *change*.

Thank you for your attention.