Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Multilingualism'

(2008/C 257/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
— highlights that throughout the European Union, the regional and local tiers bear responsibility for the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity. They are ideally placed to build a constructive partnership with language-teaching institutions in order to devise teaching and training courses that meet specific local needs and demands;
— believes that, given the importance of linguistic diversity in the European Union, the intention when creating a multilingual society must be to maximise the benefits of diversity and minimise its drawbacks;
— believes that everyone in the EU, while preserving his own mother tongue(s) as the badge of his own cultural heritage, must in the course of his life additionally acquire an active and passive knowledge of a shared second language and a third language chosen on the basis of cultural affinity or the social and economic mobility requirements of the country or region of origin;
— highlights that with a view to achieving the objective of ‘mother tongue plus two’, the regions must play a leading role, especially in implementing the education programmes;
— proposes that all regions be encouraged to set up local multilingualism forums which would monitor local social, economic and educational trends and put forward measures to raise public awareness and motivation in relation to lifelong learning of ‘mother tongue plus two’.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. congratulates the European Commission on the powerful impetus given to the multilingualism agenda by the creation on 1 January 2007 of a portfolio dedicated to it and assigned to Commissioner Leonard Orban. Given the importance of this portfolio and the challenge which it represents, it should be strengthened so that it can develop and effectively achieve the objectives assigned to it;

2. underscores the priority that multilingualism has in the European policy agenda — a priority which embraces every area of Europe's social, economic and cultural life.

3. endorses the work programme set out by Commissioner Orban, who considers multilingualism to be instrumental in achieving a more integrated Europe and increased dialogue between cultures;

4. believes that, given the importance of linguistic diversity in the European Union, the intention when creating a multilingual society must be to maximise the benefits of diversity and minimise its drawbacks, rather than merely exploiting diversity as the means to an end;

5. draws attention to the study of the high-level group on multilingualism set up in 2005 and endorses the action it calls for, namely:

— more work to raise awareness, especially through information campaigns targeted at parents, young people and organisations in education and culture;

— initiatives to improve people's motivation to learn new languages, especially through extracurricular, leisure and informal activities;

— greater attention to the cultural and linguistic potential of immigrants as part of the goal of both integrating migrants into the host society and enabling them, through their multilingualism, to achieve their full individual potential;

— and extending European multilingual activity to the languages of third countries in order to maximise European competitiveness;

6. points to the findings of the on-line consultation initiated in September 2007, which makes the following key points regarding action on multilingualism:

— language learning is a key element for retaining or raising the individual's chances of employment;

— the best way to encourage language learning is to begin early in the education process and to provide incentives for spending time studying and working abroad;

— making teaching methods as effective as possible requires above all work on non-standard methods of transferring linguistic competence that take the needs of the individual on board;

— linguistic diversity is best respected at local, national and European level by learning more about the culture behind the languages to be learned or encountered;

— language makes a big impact on the economy, since it is easier to do business with a foreign company if one knows the language of the country in which it is located;

— a good way of improving language skills at work is to promote language courses in the workplace, provided it is viable for the workplace in question;

— the use of more official languages in the work of the European Union and the administrative costs this entails is seen as desirable to boost the institutions' multilingual ethos;

7. highlights and endorses the proposals of the group of intellectuals for intercultural dialogue established at the European Commission's behest and chaired by Amin Maalouf, affirming in particular:

— that in bilateral relations between the peoples of the European Union, preference should be given to the use of the languages of these peoples;

— that it is important for the European Union to champion the idea of a foreign language chosen by the individual;

8. stresses that the promotion and safeguarding of cultural and linguistic diversity is a top priority. In the European Union, linguistic diversity should be also understood as the recognition and use of:

— the official languages of the EU;

— the official languages of the EU Member States;

— the minority languages spoken but not officially recognised in the EU Member States.

The Union and its Member States should promote linguistic diversity in their respective fields of activity;
9. Throughout the European Union, the regional and local tiers bear responsibility for the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity. The regional and local levels are also responsible for education, training and adult education, as well as being one of the social partners and coordinating regional and local growth and development;

10. When training continues throughout the career, the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' grow in importance, partly because the world of work with its diverse opportunities requires better language skills;

11. Regional and local authorities are ideally placed to build a constructive partnership with language-teaching institutions in order to devise teaching and training courses that meet specific local needs and demands;

12. maintains, therefore, that regional and local authorities are the best equipped to satisfy the various local language needs, without prejudice to any support they might receive from central/national authorities;

General comments

13. considers that Europe must build its social and economic cohesion by making the most of the opportunities afforded by mobility, globalisation, European culture and the sense of European citizenship;

14. A key way this can be achieved is by eliminating the linguistic hurdles that countries and individuals have to face, since:

a) knowledge of foreign languages greatly enhances professional, educational, cultural and personal mobility. The European Union will never be a true union if its people fail to achieve a greater level of internal mobility;

b) knowledge of languages markedly improves competitiveness by enabling new contacts to be made, practices to be exchanged, products to be sold and services to be provided. Globalisation opens up commercial and labour markets. Knowledge of foreign languages is one of the requirements for setting up partnerships and establishing closer partnerships with other Community countries and companies and thus being able to use the opportunities of globalisation;

c) language is the most immediate expression of culture and helps to improve communication between the people of Europe. ‘European culture’ cannot be based on the acceptance and passive establishment of a mosaic made up of the cultures of the Member States (a multicultural society), but is consolidated through the comprehensive cultural encounter between citizens and the affirmation of the value of differences and of cultural identity (an intercultural society);

d) promoting active citizenship, the institutional involvement of the regions, consulting and listening to the people and social inclusion are all needed to ensure more effective European action on the legislation front which must be increasingly supported and shared by the regions and individuals. The European Community must therefore speak the language of its own citizens in its documents and in its external and inter-institutional relations so that they can be understood, so that local institutions (local and regional authorities) are able to interact and so that members of the public can get the message and participate in the life of Europe and act as a sounding board for the strategic objectives proposed;

15. Regarding the open-coordination method in respect of multilingualism, the Commission must be at pains to involve not only the national level of administration, but also the local and regional ones, since it is often these that bear most responsibility for implementing the relevant measures in their area;

16. In this connection, attention must also be given to the respect and dignity of non-official languages spoken by minorities, which — no less than the official languages — constitute an element of the diversity of regional culture that must have its place in European programmes of inclusion;

Recommendations and key actions

17. considers it important to enshrine the aims of Europe's multilingual policies in the 'mother tongue plus two' objective;

18. believes that everyone in the EU, while preserving his own mother tongue(s) as the badge of his own cultural heritage, should in the course of his life additionally acquire an active and passive knowledge of a shared second language and a third language chosen on the basis of cultural affinity or the social and economic mobility requirements of the country or region of origin;

19. The choice of the third language must be made not only from what are considered the official languages of the EU, but also from European minority languages and, above all, non-European languages that offer major cultural, economic and social opportunities for the growth of Europe's competitiveness;

20. proposes that the following key recommendations be adopted as priorities in Europe's multilingual policy and implemented in order to motivate the population, preserve diversity and put local and regional bodies centre-stage in the choice of approaches to learning:
Regional involvement

21. Local and regional authorities are key players, not just because many of them have political and administrative powers in the sphere of education and training, but also because of their ability to better monitor the situation of public multilingualism and trends in the application of relevant Community directives and programmes. It is at regional and local level that powers acquired and measures carried out are tested, which can give a strong impetus to European political action;

22. With a view to achieving the objective of 'mother tongue plus two', the regions must play a leading role, especially in implementing the education programmes;

23. In any country, each region may have its own specific historical, civic, cultural, social and economic characteristics;

24. Regional diversity must be encouraged, which means that regions must be called upon to provide language on the basis of studies and research, surveys of cultural traditions carried out by local authorities and regions, the wishes of the general public, and the socio-economic outlook and requirements of the region;

25. It would thus be possible to monitor consistency between local needs and current educational programmes and to take advantage of flexibility at local and regional authority level to adjust educational initiatives that have not produced the results hoped for;

26. The language selected must be freely chosen. In case a Member State has more than one official EU language, the learning of the other language(s) has also to be encouraged;

27. believes that the multilingualism policy should also include a significant external component. Promoting European languages beyond the EU is of interest both culturally and economically. In the same way, the EU should be open to languages from third countries, such as Chinese, Arabic, Indian languages, Russian, etc.

28. We would therefore propose that all regions be encouraged to set up local multilingualism forums which would monitor local social, economic and educational trends and put forward measures to raise public awareness and motivation in relation to lifelong learning of 'mother tongue plus two';

29. Programmes to include migrants must also be strongly promoted. Knowledge of the relevant languages they and their children need in order to develop their full potential in European society must be encouraged and facilitated, while ensuring that their right to preserve their language of origin is fully respected. The languages they should learn and acquire are the official EU language of the territory as well as the co-official languages of the areas or regions where they live, as laid down in their constitutional provisions;

30. In short, local, regional and national institutions must encourage the education system to include a broad range of languages in the education curriculum. Education systems should cover a broad range of languages tailored to regional social, economic and cultural requirements;

31. believes that language skills are a key factor in competitiveness. Studies have shown that European businesses lose markets by not having the relevant language skills;

32. thus calls on the Commission to keep up its efforts in this area;

Better linguistic integration

33. As far as smaller languages and languages spoken by a minority are concerned, it should be remembered that these help to boost the basic European cultural value of diversity and should therefore not only not be placed at a disadvantage in this process but should be a particular object of protection;

34. The designation 'minority' or 'smaller' must not become a reason for discrimination against the language;

35. proposes the promotion of debates to establish more appropriate terms that better reflect the actual situation;

36. Thus it is important to continue the process of officially recognising minority languages which represent firmly rooted European traditions and cultures;

37. This would allow official recognition by the EU, so that it would translate its own texts into more languages than the current 23, thus fostering direct dialogue between Europe and its citizens;

38. The European process of officially recognising languages and regional diversification will enhance social inclusion;

39. welcomes the conclusions of the European Council of 13 June 2005 allowing the use within the EU bodies and institutions of languages other than those recognised as official languages under Regulation 1/1958;
40. Languages that are not recognised as official languages, either at European or local or regional level, must nevertheless continue to be covered by programmes to protect cultural identity;

Intergenerational solidarity

41. There is also the problem of how to support citizens in the lifelong learning process;

42. Although it may be easier to ‘direct’ language learning at school and help today’s young people not to later lose the intercultural linguistic awareness acquired at their desks, the problem becomes more complex with generations who have left the education system a long time ago and have never followed a multilingual training process. It is also important to secure access to language learning for the older generation, many of whom have never engaged with other languages, either in their everyday lives or for professional reasons. This would enhance their means of expression in their old age, leading to a more fully engaged European citizenship on their part;

43. It is therefore necessary to promote systems of learning that are not only affordable (the cost of language courses often hinders the delivery of education to older people), but also available to people who have mobility problems or cannot make the active commitment required in terms of time;

44. points out that efforts must be made to learn as correctly as possible a foreign language, especially in view of the ever growing migrant community;

45. It is important to stress, therefore, that less rigorous ways of learning do exist which enable people to acquire rudimentary language skills with which they can understand and be understood. These methods of learning should be promoted by national, regional and local educational institutions and funded by the EU to disseminate learning opportunities and bridge the generation gap in language learning;

46. This also means supporting alternative forms of learning through multimedia by promoting media transmissions in the original language with subtitles (e.g. TV programmes, films, news), as well as broader use of computer language courses or online translation programs. In other words, a sort of lifelong ‘self-learning’;

47. In young people and children, on the other hand, the motivation to learn new languages must be kindled at an early age. Language learning should begin as early as possible — so that children become familiar with the sounds of a foreign language — because this makes it easier for them to learn the language faster and more comprehensively;

48. Progress in language acquisition at primary and secondary school should be developed. The education process must provide more opportunities to speak a foreign language at primary school and to learn a third language at secondary school;

49. University education must provide facilities for perfecting or further improving a person’s linguistic skills, which also means boosting the Erasmus and Socrates programmes;

50. But universities must open their doors not just to mature students who want to brush up their language skills but also to businesses, which must be helped and encouraged in enabling their staff and management to take on the challenge of learning new ‘commercial’ languages by promoting partnerships between businesses and universities;

51. It is also necessary to develop translation and interpreting courses that involve not just institutions from the general public to the regions and the European Parliament: promoting and rewarding cities that can present their own websites and external documentation in several languages is a good incentive for local institutional multilingualism, but also points of contact with the general public;

Interdisciplinarity

52. Multilingualism can be promoted on the basis not just of education and training but through recreational activities;

53. For example, learning more languages through sport or culture is a way of raising awareness among a wide range of people, from children to adults;

54. Music songs are already in themselves a global and multilingual market: it would be useful, for example, to promote events such as EuroMusic Open Day focusing on lyrics in songs;

55. Circulation of literary works in bilingual editions (original and translation) should be stepped up, not just on the initiative of individual publishing houses but also through public partnerships set up to encourage local and regional governments to promote private multilingual initiatives;

EU institutions

56. accepts the need for ‘institutional’ multilingualism within the EU. EU institutions should therefore ensure without delay that at least passive interpreting from EU official languages is provided to enable participants in discussions to express their views in their own languages;
57. feels that preserving cultural diversity means guaranteeing a system of formal and informal translation into all official European languages. It is absolutely necessary in encouraging multilingualism that bilateral communication takes place in the languages of the participants at informal meetings too.

58. For formal meetings and for working and official documents there must be translation into all the official Member State languages. Respecting each Member State as a cornerstone of the EU, the EU in return must be accessible by giving each of them, in accordance with their respective constitutional provisions, the documents through which an active European citizenship can be exercised:

**EU external borders**

59. Multilingualism must not be limited to developing social and economic mobility within the EU, but should also allow European citizens to become open to markets and cultures outside Europe;

60. This is also important in the light of current trends that are pushing the EU towards increasingly closer economic and cultural contacts with markets such as China, Russia and Japan;

61. Improved EU external competitiveness thus also depends on upgrading education and training courses in non-EU languages;

62. The selected third language can also be chosen from all the languages that European countries use in their contacts, bearing in mind especially the languages of emerging non-EU countries and the cultural profile of countries with which Europe is building up its trade relations.


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