

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Multilingualism'

(2009/C 77/25)

In a letter dated 4 February 2008, Ms Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an exploratory opinion on

Multilingualism.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 July 2008. The rapporteur was Ms Le Nouail-Marlière.

At its 447th plenary session, held on 17 and 18 September 2008 (meeting of 18 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 144 votes to eight, with 13 abstentions.

Summary of the opinion and its conclusions

— Considering that this subject is growing in importance, both in political and economic terms, the Committee regrets that instead of putting forward a concrete programme that follows up on the 'New framework strategy for multilingualism' adopted in 2005, the Commission has chosen to present a new strategy for the last part of its term of office.

— The Committee calls on the Commission and Member States to speed up the discussion on the objectives before specifying the initiatives to be pursued through coordination in the fields of culture and education.

— Regarding the choice of the first foreign language taught and learnt, it encourages the Member States and the Commission to promote the choice of languages other than Anglo-American English, and to promote the learning and use of European languages in extra-Community exchanges.

— The Committee notes the close correlation between European citizens' language needs, the European employment strategy, and the convergence objectives pursued by the EU Structural Funds, in particular the Cohesion Fund. It therefore calls on them to use these funds to help people to improve their command of their mother tongue, as well as two additional living languages, and even to make this a priority in the use of the funds. It adds that this objective should comprise two qualitative aims: to preserve the vitality of European languages, and to diversify knowledge of languages to include non-Community languages that are useful for the cultural, social, political and economic relations that Europeans engage in, as they help to promote knowledge of other cultures, as well as peace and friendship between peoples.

— Noting that little is being done for the people who have the least prospect of finding declared work with proper social

protection, or for those who live a long way from urban or tourist centres, the Committee calls on the Commission and Member States to make sure that the initiatives they undertake do not lead to discrimination and differences in treatment, nor to further exclusion and thus renewed frustration. In order to achieve this, it advises them to consult the social partners and civil society organisations actively engaged in that area.

— Given that the Commission is keen to conduct a consultation among its internal departments, the measures recommended should take into account the context of improvements to regulations, in order not to jeopardise SME competitiveness.

— The Commission and Member States should endeavour to evaluate both informal and formal learning undertaken, as part of the European certification system, in order to be able to assess its value and facilitate the transfer and recognition of qualifications for individuals and employees alike, whatever their status.

— In the context of social consultation the Committee also calls on the Member States and the Commission to provide support for language-based professions such as teachers, translators and interpreters so that the official languages can be used more fully in public communication. It points out that needs have not yet been adequately met, either here or in the business field.

1. Introduction

On 6 September 2006, shortly before the creation of a new Commission portfolio on multilingualism and intercultural dialogue and the appointment of Commissioner Leonard Orban, the EESC adopted an opinion on a 'new framework strategy for multilingualism' ⁽¹⁾.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion of 26.10.2006 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism; rapporteur: Ms Le Nouail-Marlière (OJ C 324 of 30.12.2006).

Some time later, on 25 October 2007, the Commissioner attended the Committee plenary session, on the invitation of the EESC president, Mr Dimitriadis, and expressed his interest in the Committee's work.

In the light of his plan to present a new strategy in this area, the Commissioner asked the Committee to draft an exploratory opinion.

The Committee therefore proposes to:

- assess the follow-up to the previous Commission strategy and the recommendations it made at that time;
- sum up the measures taken by the Commission;
- respond in the more general context of the broad public consultation organised by the Commission and the hearing of 15 April 2008, in time for the Commission to take its recommendations into account in the communication due to be published in September 2008.

2. General comments

2.1 The Committee notes that this subject is growing daily in importance, not because it is currently fashionable, but because of the very real context of globalisation, bringing together an ever increasing number and range of players. New situations call for new solutions and responses. The world is changing in the economic and technical fields, as well as socially, politically, culturally and in terms of public life. Certain ever-present or long-standing phenomena are now growing in intensity and visibility, even becoming critical.

2.2 In very diverse areas, at work and in business dealings, in leisure and tourism, the cultural dimension is moving in ways that the EESC must attempt to understand from all angles, so as to understand the concerns of our fellow citizens and make practical and intelligent suggestions to the institutions, in particular by taking part in consultations and triggering debates.

The diversity and rich variety of opinions demonstrate the interest European citizens have in this issue, reflecting their shared humanity.

2.3 In its above-mentioned opinion, the Committee recommended that:

- 'the Commission should give *the Member States* precise indications about the *links which could be established and additional measures which could be taken in the national plans*, stressing that multilingualism or plurilingualism can help to promote cultural and political integration, and foster understanding and social inclusion;
- in order to achieve long-term results, *the language training on offer* needs to be coordinated at EU level, with the potential pool of language skills spanning a wide range of languages;

— *multilingualism in the professional, cultural, political, scientific and social fields should be developed and promoted;*

— *the experts involved in this work should be drawn not just from the ranks of specialists in social and scientific disciplines but should also include linguists, interpreters, translators, teachers and other language professionals;*

— *greater account be taken of today's young and older adult generation in developing this action, via *life-long learning* and, when the Commission reaches the programming stage, through *their cultural rights*;*

— *the Commission not only draws on university research but also on the work carried out by the networks of *associations working* in this area, and that it supports the grassroots initiatives taken within the civil society network'.*

2.4 Overall, the EESC pointed out the need to involve as many people as possible in these language learning, practice and skill strategies and to find realistic means of achieving that. It warned against creating new forms of social discrimination. It called for thinking to include the full range of languages available, so that the EU would not become constrained by language, cultural and economic barriers. It recommended striking a balance between economic, cultural and public interests, and working hard to catch up in the area of employment and work.

2.5 The Committee also recalled that language and cultural areas had evolved alongside political and economic groupings in the world, and that unfortunately the tendency for certain languages to become extinct went hand in hand with the assimilation or disappearance of certain social or political groups. Europe faces the same challenges as other world regions: firstly, the tendency for one language to dominate transnational relations, and, secondly, a diverse range of regional languages and the same threat that certain languages may disappear. One key difference, however, is the status of official national languages within this unified political and economic grouping (just how unified it is depends on one's opinion on EU integration).

2.6 Although the EU would face the same identity crisis irrespective of its cultural and linguistic approach, the integration process has developed certain plus-points: for instance instruments to promote social and territorial cohesion, common criteria for representative and participatory democracy, and social models founded on a degree of solidarity.

2.7 Nevertheless, demographic challenges and cultural interests when combined can raise a number of major issues, that must not be sidestepped: what interest do Europeans have in their own languages, in sharing them, preserving them, bringing them alive and not letting them die, in other words in speaking them among themselves and with others?

3. Specific comments

3.1 The Commission began a public consultation process on 14 September 2007, which ended on 15 April 2008 with a conference during which it presented various findings to a number of associations and organisations active in culture or education, garnered from the following sources:

- The Group of Intellectuals chaired by Mr Amin Maalouf
- The 'Business Forum', chaired by Mr Davignon
- The 'ELAN Report: Effects on the European Union Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise', by the National Centre for Languages, UK
- Formal consultation of the Committees (CoR and EESC)
- Consultation of the Member States: Ministerial Conference, February 2008
- Recommendations of the High Level Group on Multilingualism
- Contributions received via the on-line consultation.

3.2 A number of challenges were mentioned during the discussions:

- Economic challenges
- Political challenges (multilingualism and regional integration)
- Challenges in the cultural domain (multilingualism and interculturalism)
- Personal and collective communication can lead one to consider that language is just one more communication tool. What future for literature?
- Multilingualism and plurilingualism: is it necessary for people to be plurilingual in a language environment that is becoming monolingual?
- The Council of Europe has stressed the need to protect minority languages and facilitate their use, in order to combat nationalism: multilingualism serving diversity should not present a danger of exclusion.
- A large number of participants mentioned frustration and inequality in the area of languages, European languages up against each other in the EU and the world, contrasting national cultural policies.
- Cultural rights and social rights? Many participants wondered what resources would be available for such commitments. Reference was made to the special case of the Roma, their integration in general and the possibility of learning and preserving their language in particular.
- The right to work in one's own language at work without having to acquire a level of knowledge which is dispropor-

tionate to the requirements of the job, as well as the safety issues that a badly managed or unmanaged multilingual environment could give rise to.

3.3 *The Commission's general objectives for promoting linguistic diversity, presented during the hearing*

3.3.1 Diversifying language skills within the EU (English is not enough)

The aim of Multilingualism Commissioner, Leonard Orban, as stated during his speech at this hearing and on other occasions, is clearly to attempt to reverse the trend towards 'English only'.

3.3.2 In the social field:

- underlining the role of languages in social cohesion;
- facilitating migrant integration, encouraging them to learn their host country's language, encouraging them to use, and preserve their mother tongue and pass it on to their descendants, and treating migrants' languages as a resource and a source of enrichment.

3.3.3 In the economic field:

- developing language skills with a view to improving workers' employment prospects and companies' competitiveness;
- weaving a multilingualism strand into all European policies, starting with a survey (inventory).

3.3.4 Multilingualism and EU foreign policy:

The Commission confirms the 'Barcelona objective', namely the decision to promote knowledge by every citizen of their mother tongue plus two modern languages, and goes one step further to specify the mother tongue plus one international language and one personal 'adoptive' language (a concept inspired by the report from the group chaired by Mr Amin Maalouf).

3.3.5 Ways and means:

The Commission wants to promote the informal 'business literacy system', which facilitates comprehension and ease of access, but has provided few details. According to the Commission, it means exposing European citizens to elements of foreign languages for instance in buses or other public places and involves learning by 'familiarisation'.

3.3.6 Concerning the future:

The Commission hopes to use structural cooperation in the context of a medium-term strategic framework between the Member States and to bring European value added to the development of this policy.

3.4 ELAN Report ⁽²⁾

The ELAN Report explores the benefits for businesses of having a multilingual, skilled workforce. However, it does not give a typology of needs according to jobs and positions held, or by economic sector. The Commission ought to ask the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, based in Dublin, (or another European organisation) to produce a more detailed typology of the vocational needs of both companies and workers.

3.4.1 Report from the Business Forum chaired by Mr Davignon ⁽³⁾

This report, published at the end of June 2008, shows why from the point of view of the Business Forum it is important to invest in language skills. It sums up what has already been done to promote languages in business and makes recommendations to businesses on how to improve their performance in the area of multilingual business communication, stating that they should: take stock of existing language skills within the company; revise recruitment policies and development strategies within HR management; invest in language training; employ native speakers of different languages; use language technology and work with translators, interpreters, communicators and cultural mediators; and enhance international mobility for staff. The report also addresses recommendations to Europe and its institutions and to local, regional and national governments. It argues in favour of multilingualism.

3.5 Report by Mr Amin Maalouf's group ⁽⁴⁾

The Committee approves the Commission's initiative of consulting a group of distinguished intellectuals, whose report was described by the group's representative at the hearing on 15 April as 'probably the best written and easiest to read of all the Commission reports ever produced', which is true in some ways. It puts forward the idea of learning one international language and one 'personal adoptive language', in other words a language which one learns out of personal interest rather than for economic reasons. Although a bold recognition of the role of languages as vectors in culture and communication, this assumes that everyone is equally interested in languages and has the time to devote to them, which is by no means the case, for cultural reasons but also because the majority of European citizens cannot afford to engage in what Pierre Bourdieu has defined as the requisite cultural practices.

It is true, for example, that a growing number of Europeans, or at least young Europeans, see the point of speaking living foreign languages, both European and non-European, but a

⁽²⁾ ELAN report: 'Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise', at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/elan_en.pdf.

⁽³⁾ Business Forum report at http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/news/news1669_en.htm.

⁽⁴⁾ Report by the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue, chaired by Mr Amin Maalouf: 'A rewarding challenge. How the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe', at http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/pdf/doc1646_en.pdf.

growing number are also experiencing ever greater difficulties in making a living and raising their children. Without reducing everything to the class struggle, it remains a fact that European society is segmented and the cohesion funds should be used for example to help attain the Lisbon objectives.

The potential contribution of adult education and Grundtvig programmes, as well as lifelong learning, should be evaluated and calculated during discussions between the Commission departments, before being presented to the Member States, the Council and Parliament. This would ensure a European added value to complement the Member States' responsibility for education.

The Committee notes that this does not solve the question of the choice of English as the leading living language, apart from leaving it entirely up to the Member States and parents, and that the Commission does not properly raise the issue for debate. 'English is not enough' is all very well, but it remains the language accepted by the EU for international communication. The proposal is a start, not a solution. The Committee would draw the attention of the Commission, the Member States, the Council and the European Parliament to this point.

3.6 CoR draft opinion ⁽⁵⁾

The CoR's opinion concluded that the language issue was of the highest importance for local and regional authorities because it affected not only issues of employment but also the coexistence of Europeans and non-Europeans at all levels of society and in all economic sectors, from health ('labour shortages') to tourism, and including personal services, education in schools and at pre-school level, and the integration of migrants. It is also a crucial factor in the life of a growing number of regions. The CoR rightly called for cohesion funds to be used and wished to be consulted ahead of any strategic decisions.

3.7 Commission report on the implementation of the Action Plan 'Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity' ⁽⁶⁾

The Committee fears that denying the need to allocate European funding will lead to inertia, or a succession of measures that bears no relation to the evolving needs, and that the result will be disappointing in the medium and long term. The Committee calls on the Member States to think about this: television is not enough and informal learning has to be measurable. The Committee acknowledges that the coordination method chosen by the Commission would be a step forward administratively, but would not necessarily bring it any closer to the citizen.

⁽⁵⁾ Committee of the Regions opinion on multilingualism; rapporteur Mr Roberto Pella (CdR 6/2008).

⁽⁶⁾ COM(2007) 554 final/2 of 15.11.2007.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The Committee believes that, while obviously well-intentioned, the Commission is merely rehearsing the arguments and is not proposing any substantial action by the European Union beyond urging the Member States to adapt their educational systems.

4.2 **The Committee recommends that the Member States continue the approach that takes into account diversification into languages of international communication other than English.**

4.3 **The Member States should continue to promote local (whether in linguistic or geographical terms) and family ties in the European languages they offer at all levels of education: nursery, primary, secondary, higher and life-long learning, ensuring diversity.**

4.4 **Adult education, as envisaged by the Commission ⁽⁷⁾, should take into account the need to get more people involved in the effort required to meet the target of learning two living languages in addition to their mother tongue, by adapting the supply and stimulating people's interest and motivation by practical measures at local level, by drawing on the expertise of civil society organisations on the ground and professionals in the public and private sector, by promoting social and civil dialogue, and by ensuring that new initiatives do not create unfair discrimination between citizens with limited access to intercultural exchange.**

4.5 The democratisation and informal learning advocated by the Commission should be **carefully evaluated as part of the European certification system, in order to:**

- measure the impact of the actions taken by the Member States, the Commission and the other governmental and non-governmental bodies involved;
- ensure the transfer and recognition of qualifications for citizens and employees, whatever their status.

4.6 **Local and regional authorities should have a practical role in developing the educational provision of the future that is commensurate with the Commission's ambitions.**

4.7 Given that companies and employees are directly affected by the Commission's conclusions relating to firms' economic needs, the Member States and the Commission should **encourage the social partners to raise the issue in the social dialogue in order to discuss the problems together and find the best solutions and appropriate practices.**

⁽⁷⁾ See, for example, COM(2006) 614 final and COM(2007) 558 final.

4.8 **Immersion in the living language environment, which is necessary for speaking a language and an integral part of consolidated learning, must be allowed and encouraged at all levels and for all social groups. The need is perhaps particularly acute for those social groups least exposed to transnational exchanges**, i.e. those who are least mobile, and practical means and resources must be found for them. Nobody can be forced to travel, but some people have **fewer resources** than others. English is not enough, nor is television.

4.9 In the case of the **languages spoken by migrants**, it is important to stress that these **constitute a valuable resource**. There are several different schools of thought here. Some believe that migrants have a duty to learn the language of the host country in order to integrate or even to enter EU territory, while others believe that migrants have the right to learn the language of their host country in order to be able to work, live and defend their rights there and that the authorities have a responsibility to organise language teaching. Either way, there is a big gap between theory and practice. Experience shows that best practices have not always been promoted and, on the contrary, many associations have had their grants cut. The educational challenge is now enormous, because people do not learn in the same way at different ages. In this connection the Committee recommends **research into the intercultural exchange that underlies all language learning** ⁽⁸⁾. The Committee stresses the need to consult and involve professionals in the field of education from nursery education to life-long learning, including adult education. The two parties most closely concerned are students and teachers. This also applies to the future validation of informal skills ⁽⁹⁾.

4.10 The languages spoken in Europe comprise the regional and national languages and the languages spoken by migrants. They make a major contribution, and the management of cultural diversity in Europe will be characterised by two challenges: promoting European cultural diversity, and tolerance and respect for migrants. EU social and territorial cohesion is no longer just a matter of economics or politics; in future (and already today) it is inextricably bound up with its cultural dimension.

4.11 **Like the languages that are native to Europe, the languages of migrants should be passed on to their descendants, and as no language can survive without being spoken, migrants should also be seen as resources for transmitting or teaching their native language to those who want to diversify their communication skills.**

⁽⁸⁾ See <http://www.newcomersinturkey.com> — Mr Noureddine Erradi has worked for many years for training centres for migrants in the Netherlands and has produced educational tools for trainers and policy advisers in local and regional agencies and authorities.

⁽⁹⁾ SOC Section opinion of 11.9.2008 on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET), rapporteur: Ms Le Nouail-Marlière (CESE 1066/2008).

4.12 This means that civil society in Europe today has other aspirations and it is not enough to preach the benefits of being plurilingual in a multilingual environment; civil society will want its own initiatives within associations to be recognised, its needs to be acknowledged and, in all cases, adequate resources to succeed, whether of public or private origin.

4.13 This also means that **the social partners must agree to take the long-term view and jointly decide on the qualifications required, the types of education and lifelong learning to be provided, and the public and private investment to be considered, while taking care to improve business competitiveness.**

4.14 If language learning is also regarded as essential for competitiveness and for meeting the Lisbon Strategy targets, the above recommendation becomes particularly compelling.

4.15 Articles 21 and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights promote linguistic diversity and prohibit discrimination on grounds of language. The Commission should **determine which Member States have legislation on the subject, referring cases to the Fundamental Rights Agency if necessary, and examine whether the fact that Member States apply different systems creates distortions and unequal treatment between Europeans, particularly as regards mobility, recruitment, etc.** A distinction should be made between two levels that are relevant here: the degree of linguistic knowledge needed to perform the job-related tasks (contact with members of the public or clients who are foreign), and the communication of the instructions necessary for carrying out the tasks in the language of the person performing them.

4.16 As regards the implementation of this in particular, the Committee will look carefully at what the Commission proposes in the strategy it is due to present in September 2008 and the progress compared with its previous strategy.

4.17 On the matter of the cultural rights of European citizens and non-European residents and the EU's external

cooperation the Commission should perhaps **draw on the UNESCO convention on diversity and propose guidelines identifying the consequences for Europe of its ratification by the Member States, working with associations and NGOs that are already active in the field of culture.**

4.18 Mobility is promoted by the social partners and hailed by a number of employers, workers and public authorities, including the Commission, as a panacea for unemployment and labour shortages. Linguistic obstacles still receive too little attention. One such obstacle is the difficulty, in the context of life-long learning, of pursuing both vocational training and achieving set language objectives; another is parents' inability to enrol their children in the school of their choice when they move around for work, e.g. in the case of the Roma in various European countries or some groups of Italians in Germany. The Commission should not just leave it up to the Member States, but should request information about discrimination on linguistic grounds between children of different European nationalities in schools.

4.19 Mention should also be made of the difficulties encountered by Member State administrations in applying the directive on the posting of workers. The social partners have also experienced problems of comprehension on the ground, which the Commission is aware of but which need to be properly discussed by the parties concerned (Commission, Member States, social partners, local and national authorities, employment services, etc.), as discussed above ⁽¹⁰⁾.

4.20 Finally, more thought should be given to the language regime of the Community institutions as it applies to documents other than official communications. The Committee notes that this is still a difficult issue because many public documents are not translated, raising yet again the question of resources. One obvious example is the web pages that follow the European Institutions' website homepages, in particular those of the European Council and the EU presidency.

Brussels, 18 September 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

⁽¹⁰⁾ EESC opinion of 29.5.2008 on the Posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services — Maximising its benefits and potential while guaranteeing the protection of workers, rapporteur: Ms Le Nouail-Marlière (OJ C 224, 30.8.2008).