

**Leonard Orban**

European commissioner responsible for multilingualism

## **"Multilingualism and the new demography of Europe"**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

**National Centre for Languages Symposium, the House of Lords**

**London, 13 July 2009**

Baroness Coussins; my Lords, ladies and gentlemen,

As Commissioner for multilingualism, I enjoy visiting the UK. You may be an island, but there is always a lively debate about languages. I am particularly happy that today you are discussing community languages. This is also a key part of my strategy which the Commission adopted a year ago.

Let me start this way around: what is Multilingualism? It is far more than just a series of languages, existing side by side. It is a vision built on the conviction that languages build bridges, not barriers. That languages can be tools for social cohesion and for dialogue between different cultures.

Our first aim is to make decision-makers aware how much has changed since they themselves were at school.

Today language diversity is all around us; we cannot keep languages shut in the classroom anymore.

### **The impact of EU enlargement**

Part of our language diversity is due to the growth of the European Union itself. With 500 Million citizens, it is today the proud possessor of 3 alphabets and 23 official languages, not to mention 60 regional or minority languages.

The UK was one of the early champions of enlargement – even if you were a little surprised by the numbers of people who turned up from Eastern Europe! It has been quite a learning process for local authorities to cope with so many people not necessarily fluent in English. But the lessons learned will have long-term value for serving the diverse populations which have become a permanent feature of modern Europe. Many imaginative solutions – such as multi-

language leaflets, or linguists acting as facilitators - can be excellent inspiration for others.

### **Skills for mobility**

While we have seen many people coming to Britain from Europe, perhaps we have not seen enough UK citizens travelling in the other direction.

Mobility is something the Commission has always encouraged. It can offer a host of fresh openings for students and job-seekers to further their careers and explore new horizons.

But have we equipped our citizens and their families to profit from this new freedom? Our surveys show that many people are held back from planning a career abroad by a lack of language skills.

One way of helping them is to push ahead with the Barcelona goals of teaching all schoolchildren 2 foreign languages. But this is not enough for those no longer being in school.

There are people like specialist workers - plumbers, nurses - who had too little language training.

There are professional people who need languages in their careers, but have no access to teaching. And older people wanting to move abroad or travel.

And what about the unemployed, or unskilled? Let us not end up with a "languages divide": with people with languages who can reap the benefits of Europe and globalization, and others who cannot.

We should provide language-learning for everyone, throughout their lives, and not just focus on language students. If we share best practice, these courses can be innovative, tailor-made and attractive. We also need more exchanges for teachers, too, to upgrade their skills abroad.

I am delighted to learn about a new qualification that the government is introducing from 2011 – the Diploma in Languages and International Communication. I very much support this project aiming at young people aged 14 to 19.

As set out just now, the opportunity to gain applied language skills; developing intercultural understanding is vital in today's global world.

### **A plea**

While I am on the issue of language teaching, I would like to make a plea on behalf of the many people from the UK who have contacts with the European Institutions. They usually take it for granted that they can read documents and follow meetings in English.

At the moment I am proud to say that our translation and interpretation service can cope. We deal with hundreds of meetings and thousands of documents every day.

But many of our staff are approaching retirement. If we are to maintain this service, we need more English-mother-tongue graduates, and they need to have a thorough knowledge of other languages.

At one point, I know, the government cut back on language teaching – I am glad they seem to have changed their minds.

**I urge you keep the flow of talent coming!**

### **Skills for a Globalised World: Business**

I was talking about EU enlargement. But of course, enlargement is just part of the much wider process we call ‘globalisation’.

Take our companies. They compete for business today, not just in Europe, but throughout the world. But if they want to take their sales pitch abroad, it has to be in the local language.

Firms who don’t have these skills are losing contracts – and the Commission has figures to prove it. In order to tackle this issue, I am setting up this autumn a permanent Business platform to help firms boost their language potential.

### **Languages in Global diplomacy**

Watching the news, such as recent meetings of the G20 and the G8, brings home to us how much our countries depend on one another – for trade, energy, answers to climate change – even for peace.

Countries need a wide network of human dialogue and contacts if partnerships are to last longer than the latest headline.

The UK, of course, has close ties with English-speaking countries such as the US, Canada and Australia. But these language-links need to be broader-based. Many other European languages have world-wide coverage – Spanish and Portuguese, for example –and many languages spoken by immigrants can play a useful role.

The Commission itself is a very active player in this area. I signed language co-operation agreements with both India and China earlier this year.

### **Mainstreaming of language issues**

I haven't even mentioned languages in media or culture, but I have tried to show that languages are relevant in many aspects of our lives, and should be a natural component of other policy areas.

Just last week, I was pleased to see that two new initiatives from my fellow commissioners gave languages a starring role: A Youth green paper promoting cross-border mobility and a Justice proposal to protect the rights of suspects in criminal cases. While the first is aiming at increasing mobility, the second shall establish minimum standards for interpretation and translation in court proceedings.

These proposals clearly demonstrate that languages are no longer pigeon-holed as purely school subjects

### **Languages and Immigration**

Immigration can be a marvellous influence, invigorating and enriching communities. Just think how the Notting Hill Carnival has become part of

London tradition, and is now the second largest street festival in the world after Rio. And the fact that many famous Britons actually have roots elsewhere.

But throughout Europe, we see that immigration can also lead to tensions, isolation and prejudice. And when languages are badly managed, they can become a barrier to mutual understanding.

During a debate in this chamber earlier this year, Lord Davies made the good point that new citizens cannot play their full role in society nor enjoy its benefits if they are not familiar with the English language. I strongly agree: it is vital for immigrants to learn the language of the host country.

**BUT**, this is not the whole story. For each speaker, their language is inseparable from who they are. And immigrants bring linguistic resources into the community which are often untapped.

Having more than one language in the classroom can motivate classmates to open up to other cultures, and perhaps to learn other languages, too

Many companies make too little use of the potential in their multi-cultural workforces – they could draw on these language and cultural skills to explore new markets.

Above all, languages are not just a communication code. Exposure to another language, especially a language spoken by people you meet on a daily basis, opens up your mind to different ways of seeing the world.

This is just the sort of mental flexibility that modern societies need, where people will be changing jobs during their careers, and coming into contact with other countries and cultures.

This aspect was well reflected in the report entitled 'A rewarding Challenge' established by the group of intellectuals chaired by the French-Lebanese author Amin Maalouf.

For immigration it argues strongly in favour of a two-way process – immigrants learning the language of the host country while their own language and traditions are encouraged. Real cultural roots are also seen as an antidote to fanatical allegiance to a more abstract, often intolerant cause.

While politicians and decision-makers agree that immigrants should learn their language, the idea of encouraging immigrants' own languages does not attract a complete consensus. Some people feel that integration should take pride of place.

Personally, I feel that an initiative such as 'Our languages' is just the sort of thing we should be encouraging in Europe. It tackles real issues in an imaginative way.

It is a constructive approach to language diversity. Instead of 'either/or', you are saying 'both together' - **IT IS** possible for newcomers to embrace British culture without rejecting their family or cultural roots. I am sure this project will not only help young people to thrive and prosper, but will also benefit the wider community as well.

I have been focussing on the broader benefits of multilingualism, but in conclusion, it is worth making the point that multilingualism does not only make sense, it makes money. We are currently in the throes of a severe economic downturn.

When we are making decisions –about which budgets to cut, for example – let us not forget that monolinguals are a dying species.

Throughout Europe, multilingual individuals, multilingual companies, and multilingual societies are certainly more prosperous. Spending money on wise language policies, even in a recession, is not a cost, but an investment in our future.

Thank you for your kind attention