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**Beyond the 23 official languages: New perspectives in  
the European Commission's strategy for Multilingualism**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to open this Conference, particularly in the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. This memorable birthday is celebrated all over Europe this whole year and in particular this week, as the Treaties that created the European Union were signed in Rome on the 25 March 1957. For us linguists it is important to bear in mind that the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of European togetherness also marks the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of European multilingual cooperation. Languages as you know have been, and continue to be, essential in the construction of Europe, and that feature makes the European Union truly unique among international organisations.

That is why we don't have one Birthday logo but twenty-three. That is why Article 1 in Regulation number 1 from 1957, which is the main legal basis for the institutional language regime of the European Union, has been revised six times, once for every consecutive enlargement. That is why the European Commission and the other institutions have at their disposal the

world's largest, most skilled and technically advanced translation and interpretation services. And that is partly also why President Barroso decided to make multilingualism a Commission policy sector in its own right. I am going to speak very briefly about legal multilingualism, i.e. the use of official languages by the institutions. Then I would like to move on to other aspects of the Commission's strategy for multilingualism with emphasis on language learning, the promotion of linguistic diversity in Europe, the link to intercultural skills and the importance of languages for European business.

The debate about the official languages is by far the most well-known aspect of the Commission's strategy for multilingualism. It has always been a controversial issue, which is reflected from time to time through the European press and in the debates of the European Parliament. The debates on languages always seem highly political and provide good newspaper headlines. Maltese and Irish have full official status although the numbers of people who actually understand these languages are equivalent to the population of medium-sized European towns. In addition to the 23 official languages a Council decision from 2005 opened up for the possibility of using co-official languages under certain circumstances, for which the costs of translation and interpretation have to be covered by the Member States concerned. This has so far only been used by Spain for the three regional domestic languages Catalan, Basque and Galician, but it is likely that further Member States will follow suite. What about Turkish, given the special situation of Cyprus and the fact that the European Commission wishes a complete reunification between its two populations? What about Russian in the Baltic states? And what about the costs?

It might be interesting to devote a few minutes to the question of costs. The total expenditure budget of the European Union for 2007 is just over EUR 126 billion. 126 billion is a lot of money, but to put this into perspective large Member States like Britain and France spend 5-6 times that amount at home, while the Swedish Government spends a bit less at 100 billion. Out of the 126 billion, 6 % is spent on administrative costs, including staff. Out of the 6 %, 1 % is spent on multilingualism, both translation and interpretation in all institutions. That is a little over 1 billion euros per year after the latest enlargement. Even with the continuous increase of the number of official languages the cost per EU citizen has remained some 2 euros, the equivalent of two cups of coffee (or one here in Stockholm!). Is that too much? I don't think so.

But there is much more to multilingualism than the linguistic regime applied by the EU institutions.

Multilingualism has a significant horizontal dimension and an important contribution to make in the areas of growth, jobs, competitiveness, lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue, to mention just the most obvious ones. Languages have always played an important part of virtually every policy area that is being handled by the European Commission. It was however not until after the European year of languages 2001 that a more structured policy began to take shape. Important milestones were the adoption in 2003 of the Action plan for language learning and linguistic diversity and the inclusion of multilingualism as part of the portfolio of Commissioner Figel in 2004.

Since the beginning, the key policy messages have been that learning a lingua franca alone is not enough, that every citizen should have the

opportunity to add at least two languages to his or her mother tongue, that linguistic diversity should be encouraged and promoted at all levels of society and that languages should be part of our strategies for life long learning.

Taking stock of the actual situation across Europe today we can see that we still have a very long way to go in relation to our objectives. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, only 28 % of the Europeans believe they can carry out a reasonable conversation in two languages in addition to their own, whereas 44 % declare themselves to be monolingual. The most widely spoken second language is not surprisingly English. Only 14 % have learned French or German as a foreign language. The situation is slightly better in the youngest age groups, but we who are gathered here today all know that the situation is far from satisfactory as regards young people's motivation to learn other languages apart from English and even the level of English is very mixed.

The European Commission's possibilities to remedy this situation are unfortunately limited. Education lies firmly within the competences of each Member State. We do what we can through the so-called open method of co-ordination, which means mainly policy development, co-operation with national experts such as yourselves, plus communication through many different channels. But not even the most brilliantly elaborated policy will be able to achieve the intended effects if motivation is lacking. If the benefits of language learning and linguistic diversity are not adopted by the general public, nothing will change. That is why we need new and creative ways to

communicate our messages through the education, business and cultural sectors.

When the new Commissioner for Multilingualism, Mr Leonard Orban presented his political agenda at his first press conference a month ago, the areas that he singled out for action from the start of his mandate were

- Competitiveness, growth and better jobs
- Lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue
- Multilingual communication with the citizens

I have already covered the last point in my introduction and shall conclude my presentation with a few words about mainly competitiveness and life long learning.

At his press conference Commissioner Orban unveiled the results of a study of the impact of languages on business, which showed that language skills can significantly improve export success for European companies. Across the sample of nearly 2000 exporting businesses, 11 % of the respondents had lost a contract as a result of lack of language skills. The average loss per business over a three year period was €325 000.

Europe's 23 million small and medium-sized enterprises provide 67 % of total private employment, which corresponds to some 75 million jobs. Therefore, it is obvious that even a marginal improvement of a proportion of these companies' export performance will have a huge impact on growth and jobs across the European Union.

Recommendations from the study include improved business-education partnerships and the dissemination of successful models, more opportunities for work experience abroad and strengthening of language teaching within education and training at all levels.

A considerable part of the sample were envisaging further expansion abroad and could clearly see for themselves an increased need for language skills. Not only English, but gradually an increasing number of other languages are in demand, such as German, French, Russian and Spanish for small companies and other world languages such as Mandarin, Urdu and Arabic for the large international firms.

Interestingly, according to the Eurobarometer study on Europeans and their languages, 73 % of the respondents said improved job opportunities is the number one reason why they believe that it is useful to learn languages. By comparison, 23 % are primarily interested in other cultures and only 18 % state the ability to communicate with family and friends abroad as their main motivation.

We believe that the prospect of improved job opportunities is a motivation factor that needs to be much more emphasized in the future. Commissioner Orban intends to contribute to this by organising a conference on languages, business and intercultural skills later this year and creating a Business Forum on languages in order to open a dialogue with stakeholders all across Europe.

On the more traditional aspect of the strategy for multilingualism that most of you probably know the best, lifelong learning and the links to intercultural

skills, my colleague will discuss this more in-depth later in today's programme. Let me just highlight the fact that the new generation of programmes has been launched 2007. The first call for proposals will be a trial run that only covers this year. The next call will cover the years 2008-2010. As you are probably aware of, the old Socrates and Lingua programmes as we used to know them are now history. There is however a very strong language component in all four sub programmes that you know from previous years: Comenius for primary and secondary schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational training and Grundvig for adult education. In addition to this, and this is new for the Life Long Learning Programme, there will be a transversal programme called Key Activities Languages. Applications for grants from this programme have to concern projects that apply to more than one sub sector. The total programme budget for 2007 is EUR 784 million, with similar amounts available in subsequent years.

Another novelty compared to previous programmes is that all languages are eligible under the Life Long Learning Programme. The non-European world languages are even given priority in the evaluation and ranking of proposals, as are projects promoting inter-cultural dialogue through for instance the promotion of migrant languages.

That brings me to the last point on the new agenda for multilingualism. As some of you might be aware of, 2008 will be the European year of Intercultural Dialogue. We would like multilingualism to give a concrete contribution to the output of that theme, through projects, studies and debates. There are obvious links, considering that languages are a prerequisite for deeper understanding of other cultures and maybe the most concrete expression for

our rich cultural diversity. The first steps have been taken, for example through the preparation of a new working group of experts, artists and academics who should elaborate on these questions.

There are plenty of ideas and increased political momentum for multilingualism on the European level. I would just like to emphasize once again that nothing that we do in Brussels will lead anywhere at all if it is not followed up nationally, regionally and locally. In particular national Governments are essential if we are to create a sense of urgency and purpose for the development of far-reaching language policies. I conclude with two quotes from the last Framework strategy for Multilingualism:

- "Multilingualism is essential for the proper functioning of the European Union."
- "...the Commission considers that the situation can and must improve and therefore urges Member States to take additional measures to promote widespread individual multilingualism and to foster a society that respects all citizens' linguistic identities."

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the last 50 years the challenges related to European integration have changed considerably. Whereas in the 1990s the completion of the internal market and the removal of the barriers to it were in the centre of our interest,

it is now the empowerment of our civil society and the enabling of our citizens to make full use of the opportunities the European integration project offers, which pose the challenges for the future. We know that multilingualism can be an asset in meeting those challenges. With your help, we shall be able to make a concrete contribution.

Thank you.