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Speech in honour of EFNIL's president Gerhard Stickel

Dear Dr Stickel – dear president – dear Gerhard,

it is both a pleasure and a hard duty for me to say a few words to you on behalf of the executive committee and all EFNIL members. A pleasure, because it gives me an opportunity to reflect upon your merits and the many things that you have achieved. A hard duty, because during quite a number of years as president and vice-president, we have become close colleagues – even personal friends – sometimes maybe a bit like an old couple – so I am very moved and also very sad that your time as president of EFNIL has come to an end.

All EU member states and associated states have institutions which, in one way or another, are entrusted with the task of monitoring or curating the official language or languages of their country and providing information about language policy, language change and language use. The European Federation of National Institutions for Language has become a forum for all these institutions within which they can discuss their work and exchange and disseminate information and knowledge about language use and language policy in Europe, as we did today. EFNIL supports the study of the official languages of Europe and of education in these languages as a mother tongue as well as a foreign language in order to maintain and strengthen cultural diversity in Europe and to overcome language barriers.

EFNIL was established almost precisely 15 years ago at the first general assembly in 2003 on October 14th in Stockholm. Already then, there were 30 delegates. All EU states were represented as well as delegates from Norway and Iceland, who had an observatory status. Some of them are still with us: Pirkko Nuolijärvi, Jean-François Baldi, Ludwig M. Eichinger, Johan Van Hoorde and John Simpson.

Before that, in 2000, you, Gerhard, invited a secret society representing nine language institutions to Mannheim. A year later you met again in Florence and after that in Brussels to pave the way for EFNIL as a new organisation. So it is fair to say that you have been involved with EFNIL for at least 18 years, conceiving the idea, maturing it and finally making it fly.

More countries have joined as the EU has expanded, and right from the start the members of EFNIL cooperated on organising international conferences on the languages of Europe, issuing resolutions and recommendations, publishing academic articles and initiating language policy projects.

There are hardly any other European organisations for language in which so many EU member states and associated states are represented. Therefore, EFNIL is one of

the important contact points for the European Commission and other EU institutions for themes such as linguistic diversity, language policy and language technology.

Since 2003, you have been the president of this organisation, leading its executive committee – on a completely voluntary basis. You have played a central role in the planning of the annual conferences and as the main editor of the proceedings that have been published at Peter Lang in Frankfurt since 2007.

Thanks to your personal dedication, it has been possible to bring together, on a regular basis, almost all EU states as well as a number of associated states, which means that by now membership of EFNIL is associated with great prestige, and that EFNIL is regularly invited to participate in, to cooperate with and to contribute to important European projects and events organised by the European Commission and the European Parliament.

You were director of the Institut für Deutsche Sprache in Mannheim for more than a quarter of a century from 1976 to 2002, where you also served as a member of important commissions of the German academic exchange programme and the Goethe Institute – taken together, you have acted in a leading position on behalf of language for more than 41 years.

As a member of the executive committee, I have had the chance to follow your work and to be impressed by your tireless and intense efforts to strengthen and develop our organisation.

I think that your enormous knowledge of languages and long-time experience in teaching and lecturing on language inside and outside Germany has impressed all of us, and many of us have been blown away by your ability to hold part of your welcome addresses in the language of the hosting countries – even if the language was only vaguely known to you – and sometimes even in more than one language, such as your opening address in Helsinki, which was held in Finnish, Swedish and English.

But Gerhard, I believe that the secret to your success with EFNIL and many other projects in your life is not only your thorough knowledge of languages and your skills in linguistics but also the fact that your kind, open and humorous manner and your modest conduct are able to make everyone feel welcome and appreciated in your company.

Dear Gerhard, all good things come to an end – to quote Chaucer, who apparently coined this phrase 700 years ago in the 12th century. Well, you are not that old – yet – and actually when I look at you, it seems that you could easily take on another round of being president. But we all respect your decision, you highly deserve to step down, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for everything that you have done for EFNIL and for the languages of Europe.

However, we hope that this will not be the last goodbye for you and us. We have decided to award you the permanent title of honorary president of EFNIL, and we hereby invite you to participate in all future EFNIL conferences. We truly hope that you will accept this honour and we are looking forward to welcoming you in our midst again next year.

Bibliographical information

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<http://www.efnil.org>