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Does multilingualism matter for the European Union?

“(The European Union) ... shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe’s cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced.”
(Treaty on European Union, Article 31)

“The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education ...while fully respecting (the Member States) cultural and linguistic diversity.”
(Treaty of Lisbon, Article 165.2)

“The Union action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States.”
(Treaty of Lisbon, Article 165.2)

“Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.”
(Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 21.1)

Ladies and gentlemen,

first of all I would like to thank the European Federation of National Institutions for Languages (EFNIL) on behalf of the European Commission for having invited us once again to your Annual Conference.

My name is Javier Hernandez Saseta and I am the Head of the unit called Multilingualism and Interpreter Training support at Directorate-General for Interpretation of the European Commission (DG SCIC). I would also like to thank you personally for the opportunity you are giving me to share interesting ideas and participate in interesting debates with you.

I know what question you are asking yourselves and what answer you are going to look for in my intervention: does Multilingualism and Language Policy matter for the EC and, in general, for the EU Institutions?

In Europe, linguistic diversity is a fact of life. Languages are an integral part of the European identity and the most direct expression of culture. In an EU founded on the motto ‘United in diversity’, the ability to communicate in several languages is an important asset for individuals, organisations and companies. Languages not only play a key role in the everyday life of the European Union, but they are also fundamental in order to respect cultural and linguistic diversity in the EU.

Respect for linguistic diversity is a fundamental value of the EU, as are respect for the person and openness towards other cultures. This is incorporated into the preamble to the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), which refers to ‘drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe [...] confirming [the] attachment to the principles of liberty, democracy and respect for human rights’. In Article 2 of the TEU great importance is given to respect for human rights and non-discrimination, while Article 3 states that the EU ‘shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity’. Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) emphasizes that ‘Union action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States’, whilst fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1) TFEU).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, adopted in 2000 and made legally binding by the Treaty of Lisbon, prohibits discrimination on grounds of language (Article 21) and places an obligation on the Union to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22).

The first 1958 regulation determining the languages to be used by, the then called, European Economic Community has been amended according to accessions to the EU and defines the official languages of the EU, together with Article 55(1) TEU. Every citizen of the EU has the right to write to any of the institutions or bodies of the EU in one of those languages and to receive an answer in the same language, pursuant to Article 24 TFEU.

So the more direct and simplest answer that I can give you to the question mentioned before is short and clear: YES, multilingualism matters for the EU and matters a lot, not least because from a legal point of view we are obliged to guarantee linguistic diversity and multilingual communication.

EU language policy is based on respect for linguistic diversity in all Member States and on the creation of an intercultural dialogue throughout the EU. In order to put mutual respect into practice, the EU promotes the teaching and learning of foreign languages and the mobility of every citizen through dedicated programmes for education and vocational training. Foreign language competence is regarded as one of the basic skills that all EU citizens need to acquire in order to improve their educational and employment opportunities. The EU therefore supports the idea that every citizen should master two foreign languages in addition to his or her mother tongue. The EU also works with Member States to protect minorities, on the basis of the Council of Europe’s European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Although Language Policy, Language Planning and language teaching, as you know, are not a competence of the EU, the EC and the other Institutions are here to help and share with the Member States, with the Governments but also with civil society, all our linguistic expertise and knowledge.

The aim of our actions, as far as languages are concerned, is threefold: strive to protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity, help to promote language learning and guarantee a transparent and democratic EU decision-making process.

For the linguistic services of the EU – the translation, the interpretation and the Publication Office (in charge of the publication in all the official languages of documents and information for the general public) – a transparent and democratic EU decision-making process is their “raison d’être” and their inspiration.

As you can imagine, for translators and interpreters, language constitutes the basic working tool. They are experts and specialists first and foremost in their mother tongue and, secondly, in the passive languages they work from.

Through their work in the EU Institutions interpreters and translators contribute to creating and setting linguistic standards, thereby also helping languages to develop and consolidate.

Think of all the languages that did not have a tradition of presence in international fora and that, after becoming an official language of the EU, have incorporated new terms and expressions capable of referring to new realities and experiences that did not exist before. Languages have to reflect new settings and realities but also languages help to create some of those new realities and settings. Translators and interpreters are the ones directly in contact with those new realities for the new languages and therefore the ones that consolidate this process. They contribute broadly to the process of the setting of new linguistic standards.

By allowing this multilingual communication in the EU Institutions, the linguistic services make them clearer, more accessible, more understandable, more transparent.

Let me refer to 2 recent events in which the interpretation services of the EU have been directly involved and that have been a clear example of multilingualism in action at the Institutions.

On the 13th of September, President Juncker pronounced his State of the Union address, during which the Commission reviews its achievements over the last year and assesses its objectives for the year to come, in front of the Plenary Session of the EP in Strasbourg. This speech and the debate that took place afterwards was interpreted live and also recorded in all the official languages of the EU. The State of the Union is about ensuring transparency as well as political accountability and at the heart of this process, in order for the whole exercise to be followed and understood not only by all the MEPs but also by all the citizens, are the interpreters.

On the 14th of September, one day later, President Juncker also took part in a debate with three “youtubers”, who, whether we like it or not, are civil society influencers, to discuss the State of the Union. This event constituted another opportunity for a lively debate but also time between the President and young people across Europe. Our interpreters were also there.

President Juncker is an extraordinary polyglot, you know that, but with the help of the interpreters his voice and his message could reach every single citizen in Europe and in a language he or she could understand.

Is it easier to understand now why, for the EU Institutions, Multilingualism and the work of the translators and the interpreters still matters?

It is true that Multilingualism has disappeared from the Organisation Chart of the Commission, but this does not mean that it is not there. Rather, it has now been mainstreamed and is an integral part of all our other actions and policies, particularly education and learning policies (but not only, because it is also present in our cooperation, trade and international policies).

It is true that in times of uncertainty and budgetary constraints, the way our actions and our policies are organised have to undergo a process of rationalisation and careful planning but the multilingual vocation of the Institutions and of its work and influence in the Member States is always there.

And now, before finishing let me refer to a project that we are developing at DG Interpretation and that I am convinced could be of great interest to you as National Institutions for Languages.

Over the last 50 years, DG SCIC has built a wealth of expertise and knowledge in conference interpreting and conference interpreting training methods and tools. This expertise has contributed to ensuring the highest possible quality interpreting in-house, which is essential to the EU decision-making process as we have seen before, as well as helping to build capacities outside.

SCIC now has the reputation of a world-wide standard setter and driver. Therefore it has a strong convening role to play and can, and should, attract and connect the relevant people from different disciplines, and encourage them to share information and knowledge and exchange best practices.

The creation of a modern, dynamic, web-based platform on which to do this – the Knowledge Centre on Interpretation – fits perfectly into the Commission's approach of collaborative working and knowledge sharing as well as into the wider digital agenda and could contribute to other Commission political priorities, related to the area of justice and fundamental rights and migration policy. Given the current context of migration, other types of interpreting are becoming an essential part of everyday life and are increasingly seen as a way of guaranteeing fundamental rights. So for example, humanitarian interpreting (e.g. at asylum centres in Lesbos) safeguards the fair treatment of refugees, legal interpreting ensures migrants have proper access to the Justice system, and Public Service Interpreting (PSI)/community interpreting protects access to health care and education for all migrants.

Whilst SCIC's core business is conference interpreting, there is a social responsibility and a moral obligation to open up and provide this opportunity to share and exchange knowledge on interpreting. It has become clear that there is a real need and demand for this kind of platform and support network.

The Knowledge Centre on Interpretation (KCI) will be a single go-to space for anyone, anywhere, requiring information on any kind of interpreting and related disciplines. It should become *the* world reference on interpreting

The KCI will be a platform of exchange, in which we will be able to (1) manage our knowledge in a more modern, dynamic environment, (2) exchange knowledge and create synergies and (3) disseminate knowledge and standards. It will be built around three inter-linked pillars: (1) Knowledge (this first pillar will house all our existing tools and material, contributions from other users (like documents, guidelines, or best practices). (2) Partnership (this pillar will be a space to foster and enhance existing partnerships) and (3) Innovation (this pillar will focus on new and emerging knowledge, and will be subdivided into projects/incubators and cross-disciplinary research).

DG Interpretation's partners around the world will also be able to interact with our KCI as users or as contributors, and as you can anticipate, EFNIL and its National Institutions will be able to go there and get information on the latest developments on interpretation or contribute with data and information worth being shared.

I will be more than happy to answer any of your questions related to the KCI or with any other subject I have touched upon in my intervention.

Once again I would like to thank you for your kind invitation. EFNIL has been and will continue to be a very valid partner for the EU Institutions. It allows us to take the pulse of the languages situation in the Member States. The 24 languages that are embedded in the EU linguistic services genes.

Continue your hard work on your respective languages, they are our primary working tool and count on us for its development and evolution in the context of the European Institutions.

Thank you very much.

Bibliographical information

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