Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment

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PURPOSE: to propose a framework for action to improve multilingualism in the European Union.

BACKGROUND: the EU has some 500 citizens, 27 Member States, 3 alphabets and 23 official languages. While this increased linguistic diversity is a source of benefit and richness, without adequate policies, it presents challenges: it can widen the communication gap between people and increase social divisions; it can also prevent EU citizens and companies from fully exploiting the opportunities offered by the single market and be an obstacle to effective cross-border administrative cooperation.

The 2005 Commission communication "*A new framework strategy for multilingualism*" (see INI/2006/2083) reaffirmed the value of linguistic diversity and revealed the need for a broader policy to promote multilingualism. That is the purpose of this Communication, relying on experience gained by the EU in this area and reintegrating multilingualism into the wider context of EU action in terms of social cohesion and prosperity.

CONTENT: the aim is to **minimise the obstacles that EU citizens and companies encounter** and to respond to the challenge set by the Union of "mother tongue plus two", defined by the Member States in Barcelona (i.e. enabling citizens to communicate in two languages in addition to their mother tongue). The measures proposed by the Commission to fulfil these objectives can be summarised as follows:

(1) Multilingualism for intercultural dialogue: in this area, the Commission proposes to:

- **value all languages** and to not distinguish between them: in order for this to happen, it is essential to, first of all, master the national language(s);
- **overcome language barriers in the local environment** by encouraging the provision of information in several languages through Points of Single Contact, which will be established by the end of 2009 under the Services Directive.

In order to fulfil these objectives, **the Commission** will: (i) run awareness-raising campaigns on language learning for intercultural dialogue; (ii) monitor citizens' language skills through the Language Indicators and Eurobarometer surveys; (iii) exchange good practices, train and network legal interpreters and translators and develop specific translation tools. As for **Member States**, they shall: (i) make efforts in order to have Points of Single Contact under the Services Directive working in several languages to facilitate cross-border provision of services; (ii) facilitate access to targeted courses of the host country's language(s) for non native speakers.

(2) Multilingualism for prosperity: in order to benefit from the linguistic diversity of the Union, the Commission proposes measures in the following areas:

- **languages and competitiveness**: better language skills could prevent 11% of exporting EU SMEs from losing business. Strategies must therefore be drawn up to improve language skills in companies;
- **languages and employability**: linguistic and intercultural skills increase the chances of obtaining a better job. Skill in several languages fosters creativity and innovation as well as worker mobility;

In this context, **the Commission** will: (i) promote mobility among students, apprentices, workers and young entrepreneurs; (ii) disseminate the results of an ongoing study on the link between language skills, creativity and innovation; (iii) create a permanent platform for exchange of best practice. As for **Member States**, they shall: (i) value and further develop language skills acquired outside the formal education system; (ii) encourage trade promotion organisations to develop specific programmes, in particular for SMEs, that include language training; (iii) supplement EU mobility schemes with specific support at national and local level.

(3) Lifelong learning: action at EU level shall focus on two aspects: offering opportunities to learn languages to as many citizens as possible and improving the quality of language learning:

- **more opportunities to learn more languages**: in nearly half of the Member States, students still do not have the opportunity to study two languages during compulsory schooling. An effort is therefore needed to motivate students and adapt teaching methods to their needs. Moreover, language learning outside formal education should make increased use of the media, new technologies, cultural and leisure activities. Efforts are also still needed to increase the number of languages taught, bearing in mind local conditions;
- **effective language teaching**: it is essential that teachers be allowed to spend time abroad in order for them to improve fluency in the languages they teach and hone their intercultural skills. The trend of the past five years has been to advance the introduction of language learning in primary education, while content and language integrated learning has gained ground, especially in secondary education. In many settings, languages are taught by non-language specialists who are not always fluent in the language they teach. Teaching staff should therefore receive better training and the teaching of a foreign language by a "national" of that language should be encouraged so as to ensure the quality and effectiveness of teaching.

In this context, **the Commission** will: (i) use EU programmes to support teaching of more languages through lifelong learning, teacher and student mobility, language teacher training, school partnerships, and research and development; (ii) draw up an inventory of best practice in language learning in the Member States. As for the **Member States**, they are invited to: (i) **provide genuine opportunities for all to master the national language(s) and two other languages**; (ii) make a wider range of languages available to learners to allow individual choice and match local needs; (iii) enhance the training of all teachers and others involved in language teaching; (iv) promote mobility among language teachers.

(4) The media, new technologies and translation: the media and new technologies can contribute to the promotion of intercultural dialogue and facilitate language learning. Moreover, human and automatic translation is an important part of multilingualism policy. For instance, the Internal Market Information System (IMI) is being developed to allow Member States to exchange information in all official EU languages. In terms of human translation, the Commission will explore ways of optimising synergies between initiatives and programmes supporting translation, with a view to facilitating access to our common cultural heritage and to support the development of a European public sphere.

In this context, **the Commission** will: (i) support subtitling and the circulation of European media productions; (ii) support projects developing and disseminating language and communication technologies; (iii) hold a conference on the role of translation in promoting intercultural dialogue; (iv) extend the scope of IMI. As for the **Member States**, they are invited to: (i) work with stakeholders to promote multilingualism through the media - notably by supporting film subtitling - and the circulation of cultural works in Europe; (ii) stimulate and encourage further development and use of new technologies supporting multilingualism.

(5) The external dimension of multilingualism: the core objective is to promote the teaching and learning of EU languages abroad through exchanges of expertise, good practice and joint stakeholder groups. Concrete steps in this direction have already been undertaken with non-EU countries.

In this context, **the Commission** will: (i) develop partnerships and enhance cooperation on multilingualism with non-EU countries; (ii) promote the teaching and learning of all EU languages abroad. As for the **Member States**, they are invited to further enhance networking and cooperation among relevant institutes to better promote EU languages abroad.

Implementation: multilingualism policy has a wide range of stakeholders, at local, regional, national and EU level. The Commission will pursue structured dialogue with five strands:

1) it will work together with Member States through the Open Method of Coordination within the Education and Training 2010 process and aim to reinforce multilingualism in the new strategic framework for cooperation after 2010. To this end, it will expand the remit of the Working Group on Languages to cover all aspects of multilingualism;

2) it will create a platform with the media, cultural organisations and other civil society stakeholders to discuss and exchange practices to promote multilingualism for intercultural dialogue;

3) it will set up a permanent framework for cooperation with the relevant stakeholders;

4) it will gather and disseminate good practice and systematically promote synergies. It will review progress regularly, for instance by holding an EU language conference every second year;

5) it will mainstream multilingualism in relevant EU policies.

Lastly, in partnership with Member States, the Commission will carry out a global review in **2012**.