



Message to language teachers at the REAL Seminar From Leonard Orban, European Commissioner for Multilingualism

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you and to be able to speak to you about languages and multilingualism in Europe. I am sure that you, more than any other group, will understand my message – and hope that you will also agree with it and support it. I know that the ideas and questions I am dealing with here will not be unfamiliar to you.

First and foremost I would like to stress that the history of Europe is also the history of its languages. Like me, you know that linguistic diversity is the everyday reality in our countries and in our towns, that our languages are an integral part of our identity and that they are the most clear expression of our individual cultures. I hope, too, that you share with me the idea that this “natural” linguistic diversity in Europe is a huge asset, which we should exploit and use to our advantage. In a world where the possibilities of communication technology seem to grow each day and where distances - both real and virtual – are more easily covered, the ability to communicate in several languages is an added value for our citizens, for organisations and for European business. I am committed to the preservation and promotion of this fundamental characteristic of the European venture.

Our European multilingual policy has three major strands:

- to contribute to economic competitiveness, to more and better work opportunities;
- to encourage the lifelong learning of languages and to promote linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- to develop a forum for European political dialogue, through multilingual communication with its citizens;

Let us begin with the first of these strands: multilingualism clearly supports European economic competitiveness and contributes to the attainment of the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, which is to make the economy of the Community the most advanced in the world. A study recently instigated by the European Commission underlines that there are real commercial opportunities in Europe which remain undeveloped due to the lack of language skills in businesses. To better understand how we can strengthen linguistic competence in business, in order to help to penetrate new markets and improve the employment prospects and mobility of European workers, I have decided to create a business forum on multilingualism, which will take place in the second half of 2007. This forum will be preceded by a conference entitled “Languages Mean Business” which will be held on 21 September 2007 in Brussels and will be devoted to the theme of languages as a competitive asset for Europe.

These events will allow us to better define the links between linguistic competence and business performance in order to improve them. We must also bear in mind that multilingualism itself represents an important sector of activity and creates many jobs.

The second objective of our multilingualism policy is to encourage the lifelong learning of languages and to promote linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue in Europe. Our message is clear: it is never too late to learn or to brush up on a language, with all the benefits this brings with it. This objective of encouraging language learning and linguistic diversity is one of the specific objectives of the Lifelong Learning programme, the European education and training programme.

In the framework of this programme a number of linguistic activities and initiatives will be financially supported in different sectors of education: for example partnerships between schools, assistantships, professional development of teachers, linguistic upskilling and mobility in Europe, networks, conferences and research studies, information campaigns, and multilateral projects like REAL. All languages in the world are eligible in the programme.



We must remember too that language learning is an important channel for intercultural sensitivity and understanding. There is thus a need to guarantee the contribution of multilingualism to intercultural dialogue. 2008 will be the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. We have just created a group, Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue, which met for the first time on 29 June. Its role is to define the contribution of multilingualism to the Year, as well as its subsequent contribution.

The third strand of our policy is to develop a forum for European political dialogue through multilingual communication between citizens and our institutions. In order to achieve this we rely on the translation and interpretation services of the European Union. Translation and interpretation allows citizens of all Member States to read and understand the laws to which they are subject and allows their democratically elected representatives to defend their interests and their ideas without language being a hindrance. To improve communication between citizens of the Union, the European Commission will strive, within its means, to extend the linguistic cover of its websites.

It is clear that the multilingualism portfolio within the European Union has a distinct transversal dimension: it interacts with other Union policies such as culture, education, communication, social policy, employment, justice, freedom, security etc. Consequently we need to examine in depth the contribution of multilingualism to the elaboration and development of community policies - both internal and external - and to promote its positive effects as far as possible.

To do this I intend, in the second half of 2008, to present to my colleagues the Ministers of Education of the Member States, a statement which will set out the basis of a new strategy for multilingualism in Europe. The results of the work of the groups mentioned above, such as the Business Forum on Multilingualism or the group working on intercultural dialogue, will feed into this statement, as will the conclusions of the report on our 2004-2006 Action Plan for Languages, to which many Member States contributed.

In addition, towards the end of this year, my department will organise an online consultation, open to everyone, on multilingualism in Europe, the results of which will be taken into consideration in the new policy statement. I invite you now to take part in this consultation; you are some of the best placed people in Europe to help us in the creation of this new strategic framework for multilingualism.

The importance of a project like REAL seems to me to be evident in what I have just outlined. The creation of a European network of language teacher associations would be a great step forward for the promotion of multilingualism in Europe. This network would, among other things, allow for the wide diffusion and a better understanding of the importance of language learning in our society and could become a key player alongside national and European authorities. It would highlight linguistic and cultural diversity and would certainly give a great added value to the languages cause. You have already made the first step in this direction; I can only urge you to continue on your way.

I wish you every success,

Leonard Orban,
European Commissioner for Multilingualism