

Speech by Marco Benedetti Interpreting for the European Institutions: multilingualism in action (28/11/2012)



Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to have this opportunity to speak to you today. Thanks to the Hong Kong Baptist University-and the EU Academic Programme who have invited me to speak to you today as part of an important EU Academic Programme.

I will be dividing my speech into two parts. Firstly, I will give you an overview of multilingualism in the European Institutions and then I will focus on use of languages in the Directorate General for Interpretation of the European Commission.

When the European Union was created more than 50 years ago, it only had 6 Member States and 4 official languages. These were French, German, Italian and Dutch. Right at the outset, separate interpretation and translation services were created to ensure multilingual communication in its decision-making processes.

Today, in 2012, we have 27 Member States and 23 official languages – the most recent, added in 2007, being Bulgarian, Romanian and Irish. Translation and interpretation is provided on a daily basis into and out of all these languages.

This situation is unique in the world, and the extra work it involves may at first sight seem to outweigh the advantages it provides, but there are good reasons for it. They can be summed up in one word - Multilingualism - the belief that languages are an important expression of identity and belonging.

At the outset of the European project, the very first legal act passed concerned the use of languages. Article 1 of Regulation number 1 of 1958 - which has been amended at every enlargement to include the languages of the new Member states – stipulates that the official languages of the Member States are the official languages of the European Union.

Not once in the past 50 years has this principle been challenged or called into question.

For the interpretation services, this means that we are legally obliged to provide interpretation in all EU meetings where participants need it. In our case, what started out as a fairly small interpretation service in 1958 has now become a Directorate General of the European Commission. I suppose you could call my DG a living example of multilingualism in action. But there's more to it than that. Let's look more closely at this concept – multilingualism

The term 'multilingualism' has at least two meanings:

1. one refers to the languages spoken by individuals

2. the other refers to the languages in use within a community of speakers.

Professional interpreters are an example of the former, whilst countries like Switzerland or Belgium are examples of the latter.

In its language policies the European Commission seeks to achieve both social and individual goals, and it does so in two main ways:

1. through promoting language learning
2. and through translation and interpretation.

I will say more about the language services in the European Institutions in a moment. But first, let's look at the cultural, societal dimension of Multilingualism, which, as I say, includes the promotion of language learning across Europe.

Although it's true that language skills are not evenly spread across countries and social groups in Europe, still it is clear that the ability to speak the languages of our fellow Europeans makes us more open to their cultures, and ultimately makes each one of us more European.

In Europe we believe that multilingual societies are essential for the prosperity of every country and for the recognition and respect of the cultural identity of everyone living in Europe, and that multilingualism truly is an asset.

We know that language is the most direct expression of culture. Language makes us human and gives each of us a sense of identity. But language is also the key to accessing other cultures and to understanding other people's way of thinking.

Modern European societies are facing rapid change as a result of globalization, technological progress and an ageing population. The increased mobility of Europeans is one significant result of this change.

For example, at present, ten million Europeans work in a Member State other than their own. People have more and more contact with foreigners. As a result, life for Europeans has become more international and more multilingual.

There are now about 500 million EU citizens, and, as I said earlier 27 Member States and 23 official languages, with 3 alphabets, (Latin, Greek and Cyrillic). Some of these languages are spoken worldwide. This is the case for English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

The Union's heritage is also made up of some 60 other languages spoken in certain regions or by specific groups, an example being the co-official Spanish languages, Catalan, Basque and Galician. In addition, migrants have brought a whole range of other languages with them. It is estimated that at least 175 different nationalities are represented within the Union.

The languages spoken in the EU have very different roots. Most of them belong to the family of Indo-European languages whose main branches are the Germanic, Romance, Slavic and Celtic languages. Greek, Lithuanian and Latvian are a little more difficult to classify, but Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian come from the group of Finno-Ugric languages. Maltese, meanwhile, is close to Arabic with Italian influences.

Ever since ancient Roman times, our continent's strength has lain in its ability to allow for a free dialogue of cultures, made possible by the use of different languages. That is why we want to continue to protect the full legitimacy of each of these languages. The European Union encourages diversity, and a single lingua franca can never meet the communication needs of its citizens.

It would be naïve however not to recognise the extra challenges that this brings with it. While this increased linguistic diversity is a source of benefits and wealth, it is also an additional challenge if it is not accompanied by appropriate policies. Indeed, without such policies it could create a lack of dialogue between people of different cultures.

It could for example exacerbate social divisions by giving multilingual people access to better standards of living and working and excluding those who are monolingual from the labour market. It could prevent both citizens and businesses in the European Union from taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by the Single Market.

This is why the European Commission seeks to promote multilingualism and ensure all languages are respected. Strictly within its remit, for several years Europe has been taking initiatives to promote languages and linguistic diversity.

From its inception, multilingualism policy has been closely linked to education and learning policy and to respecting the principle of equality of languages. The 2002 Barcelona objective of being able to speak in our mother tongue plus two other languages was one of the key instruments for achieving this.

There are practical benefits to language learning as well, of course:

- foreign language skills open up job opportunities
- and the language industry is the fastest growing industry in the world.
- knowledge of languages gives us the freedom to work and study in another Member State.
- and it's worth mentioning that 'language issues' are also crucial for the integration of migrant communities.

Let me turn now to Multilingualism in the European Institutions themselves.

On one level, the European Institutions are themselves living proof that the "European project" can move forward in several languages. Every day in our institutions, thousands of people of different nationalities work together. The secret of this understanding does not lie in using a common language. That would deprive Europe of its cultural richness. Through the use of a variety of languages, free expression can be given to every culture, and nations and communities can preserve their roots and traditions.

But then what about the European Union translation services and Interpreting services, such as the Commission's Directorate-general for Interpretation, which I have the privilege of leading? Why do we need all those translators and interpreters in Europe?

And just to give you an idea of what we are talking about, let me tell you that I am in charge -in DG Interpretation - of some 550 staff interpreters and many more free lancers, servicing some 60-70 meetings a day in Brussels and elsewhere!

Why such a big service – by far the biggest in the world?

The answer, again, is Multilingualism - Multilingualism which offers ownership of the European Project.

Unlike the United Nations, for example, the European Union passes laws that are directly applicable to its citizens and its businesses, who are entitled to be able to access these rules and regulations in a language they understand. The same goes, too, for national courts who may not adopt legislation that runs counter to Community law.

In more general terms, EU citizens have the right to contribute to European integration. They are encouraged to exercise this right and must be able to do so in their own language. This is particularly clear in the European Parliament, whose members are elected by European citizens and whose job it is to discuss legislative proposals but also in the many groups of experts and representatives of different sections of society which help the Commission in its work. It is also true for the meetings in the Council of Ministers.

When our translators and interpreters work on legislation, correspondence, meetings and other communication needs, they are also working towards maintaining the democratic legitimacy of the EU. It would not be possible for people to feel ownership of the Union if the Union did not speak their language.

So, dear Friends, I have tried to explain how Multilingualism is important in Europe

- for cultural, social and democratic reasons

If we want to promote prosperity in our countries, respect the linguistic identity of each citizen and ensure the smooth running of the European Union, it is essential that we support the idea of a multilingual society. Improving the language skills of all citizens helps to achieve the political objectives of Europe and to preserve and create societies based on cohesion and respect for one other. It reinforces our identity as European citizens based on the idea of "unity in diversity". And the language services of the Union help foster democratic ownership of the European Project. Languages are the fertile ground in which European identity grows.

But, of course, they are what sparks its competitiveness. There is a very practical dimension to Multilingualism which we cannot forget. Although multilingualism may be a challenge for European businesses, languages can provide a real competitive advantage.

According to a European Commission study, gaps in language skills are still a major shortcoming of the European economy.

Every year thousands of European companies lose contracts and business through lack of language skills. The study found that 11% of the sample of small and medium enterprises questioned had lost a contract due to lack of language skills.

The study also shows that small and medium enterprises stand significantly to increase their exports by investing in foreign languages.

Moreover, the study confirms that knowledge of English, as a foreign language, is not enough. Companies need to learn other European languages such as Spanish, or other world languages such as Mandarin, or Russian, to conquer new markets.

Indeed, in many European Union countries, English is deemed to be a core skill rather than a foreign language.

It is certainly clear that language skills greatly improve the chances of finding a better job. The mastery of foreign languages gives people a comparative advantage on the labour market. Companies are looking increasingly for people who know several languages to facilitate trade both within the European Union and with the rest of the world.

In addition, according to the experts, being able to speak several languages fosters creativity and innovation. Using several languages is an excellent mental workout, and one, which boosts cognitive agility.

Through learning languages themselves – multilingual people discover that problems can be tackled in a thousand and one ways depending on the linguistic or cultural context. This is a skill that can then be applied to all areas of life.

Which brings me on, now, to those peculiar people for whom Multilingualism is a Profession! – not to say, an obsession!! - The language professionals in the European Institutions and, in particular, in the Directorate-General of the European Commission.

As I have already said, we are the largest interpretation service in the world in terms of number of interpreter-days and provide interpretation for some 60 to 70 meetings of our various client Institutions on an average day, to which some 800 interpreters are assigned. We provide 150,000 interpreter-days for 12,000 meetings annually.

Our interpreters work at meetings in the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Council – the summit meetings of heads of State and Government – as well as other EU bodies and agencies.

Who are these interpreters? What are the skills and qualities required of a professional conference interpreter? Maybe there are some interpreters or aspiring interpreters here today. I wonder if you recognise yourself in the profile I have put up on the next couple of slide

In DG Interpretation, we look for good communicators, people who are intellectually curious, well-informed, quick-witted, able to 'get the point' of an argument or a discussion.

Of course, it goes without saying that they must know their languages to a very high standard - both their 'passive' languages (the ones they interpret FROM) and their 'active' languages (the ones they work INTO- usually their mother-tongue). Our interpreters have to be able to listen, understand and communicate in a faithful, fluent and convincing way.

At the same time, interpreters need stamina and flexibility to be able to adapt to sometimes stressful situations where they have to make the most of what meeting delegates serve up! It can be both a frustrating and an exhilarating job, requiring great patience and humility alongside the talents of a 'performer'.

(Yes, interpreters are ...'special' people! - And I have the job of managing 550 of them!)

In fact, I am responsible for many more interpreters than that. Alongside our staff interpreters, who are EU civil servants, we also have some 3000 free-lance interpreters on our books whom we call upon regularly to service meetings alongside staff, doing exactly the same job in the same working conditions.

Whether staff or free-lance, our conference interpreters will have followed a professional, post-graduate training-course. My service works closely with interpreting schools in Europe – and further afield – providing support and guidance as requested, within the limits of our capacity.

We have spent a lot of time and effort over the past decade raising awareness in so-called EU 'candidate countries' about the need for professionally trained interpreters. But our reach extends beyond Europe, with cooperation programmes with mainland China, Vietnam, Russia, Africa the US. We also have contacts with interpreting schools in Taiwan. And over the years, we have enjoyed occasional cooperation with the Language services of the Hong Kong Administration.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, my service has pioneered the European Masters in Conference Interpreting, a consortium of Universities cooperating in interpreter training, curriculum design and teacher exchanges.

- Interpreter-trainers from my DG also provide teaching assistance at these and other schools.
- We host an annual universities conference in Brussels.
- And recently we have developed a new teaching tool in the shape of our 'speech repository' which contains a growing stock of practice and test speeches given and graded by interpreters in our various language units. This is a much-appreciated training tool for students aspiring to join the profession.

One other important activity that I will briefly mention, which DG Interpretation organises, in collaboration with the European Parliament, is "Virtual Classes".

Virtual Classes are special videoconferences during which experienced interpreters from the European Commission and the European Parliament observe and assess the performance of students at different European Universities.

Although places are limited, Virtual Classes are a useful supplement to traditional pedagogical assistance.

Colleagues, I am conscious of time-and I would like to leave some time for questions from the floor. So let me conclude by saying this - turning once more to the aspiring interpreters in our audience:

Currently, there is actually a shortage of interpreters for some languages, in particular English, not only in Europe, but also worldwide. In my service, we are therefore actively looking for the next generation of interpreters for the European Institutions, at a time when many colleagues are reaching retirement age.

My Directorate General has recently taken some initiatives to attract young people to the profession of conference interpreter – and we have done this, in particular through Facebook and You-tube. We have posted short information videos showing interpreters talking about their experience and the main features of their profession.

This had had quite an impact. For example, eight times more candidates applied for the course at Riga University after we posted our video for Latvian, the first one we produced, on the daily life and work of an interpreter! Similar videos now exist in many other EU languages.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I have spoken at some length and I hope some of what I have said has been of interest to you.

I have tried to explain the Multilingualism policy of the European Union and the rationale for such a policy.

I also wanted to say something about what it means to me and to the European Commission's DG for Interpretation to work in a multicultural and multilingual environment, giving you a flavour of MULTILINGUALISM IN ACTION really is.

And I hope, too, that I might have been able to encourage any aspiring interpreters out there to seriously consider interpreting as a profession.

Thank you very much for your attention. If you have any questions, I will be happy to try to answer them.

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