

Initiatives in the area of multilingualism on a European level

Origins in the Council of Europe

The highlight of the European Year of Languages in 2001 was the European Day of Languages, which was celebrated for the first time on 26 September 2001 in all 45 member states of the Council of Europe (CoE). Following its success, the CoE decided to declare the European Day of Languages to be celebrated every year. The event aims to alert the public to the importance of learning languages throughout life, as well as at school, promote the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe as well as increase inter-cultural understanding and mobility.

On 26 September 2006 the Council of Europe has marked the 6th European Day of Languages. However the origins of the promotion of languages within the CoE go further back in history. The first inter-governmental conference on European co-operation in language teaching took place in 1957, a first major project being launched only 6 years later. In 1994 the European Centre for Modern Languages was established in Graz, Austria (www.ecml.at).

The CoE has established a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which provides a tool for setting standards to be reached at successive stages of learning and for comparing language levels internationally. The CEFR provides a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications. It is increasingly used in national curricula for the comparison of language certificates obtained in different European countries.

A European Union Council Resolution in November 2001 recommended the use of this instrument in setting up systems of validation of language competences.

Multilingualism in the EU

The European Union is founded on the principle of ‘unity in diversity’: diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs - and of languages. Article 22 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, adopted in 2000, says that the Union shall respect linguistic diversity. Article 21 prohibits discrimination based on a number of grounds, including language. The EU says it regards respect for linguistic diversity as one of its core values.

According to a Eurobarometer from February 2006 on Europeans and their languages, the number of EU citizens who can speak at least one foreign language has increased from 47% in 2001 to 56% in 2005. An increasing number of Europeans also find that language skills are useful (83%).

In March 2002, the heads of state and government of the European Union meeting in Barcelona called for at least two foreign languages to be taught from a very early age. In 2003, the European Commission committed to undertake 45 new actions to encourage national, regional and local authorities also to work for ‘promoting language learning and linguistic diversity’.

The Commission has taken the opportunity of the 2006 European Day of Languages to establish a High Level Group on Multilingualism, in response to a 2005 Communication “A new framework strategy for multilingualism”, which called for a high level group to advise the Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism Ján Figel. Member states will have to report on the actions they have taken towards the objectives of a ‘Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity’ Action Plan in 2007. The aims of the

Commission's multilingualism policy are to encourage language learning, to promote a healthy multilingual economy and to give all EU citizens access to EU legislation in their own language.

Concrete examples of European Commission support include the LINGUA programme that began in 1990, the Socrates (including the well-known Erasmus student mobility programmes) and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, and a range of language learning measures such as bursaries to enable language teachers to be trained abroad, placing foreign language assistants in schools and funding class exchanges to motivate pupils to learn languages. The new programmes to be implemented from 2007 (Culture 2007, Youth in Action, Lifelong Learning) will continue to promote multilingualism.

An ongoing challenge

However, not everybody seems to see the increasing number of languages the EU has to manage in a very bright light. One of the issues at stake is interpretation costs. The European Parliament has adopted a report in September 2006 on the millions of Euros wasted annually through interpreters' services being booked but not used when officials either cancel at the last minute or simply don't attend sessions. Others strongly criticise the move of the European Commission to only issue internal "working documents" in English, French and German. Only legislative or other official documents are translated into all official languages once they are adopted. The European Ombudsman recently urged each country holding the Presidency of the EU to also translate their official websites into German. The translation service of the Commission struggled to translate the complete *acquis* into the languages of the 10 new member states prior to their accession in 2004...

Multilingualism is an ongoing challenge for the EU. Each member state, when it joins the Union, stipulates which language(s) it wants to have declared official languages of the EU. So, while expanding to 27 members and accepting Gaelic as another official language on 1 January 2007, the EU has increased its official languages to 23! It has recognised the importance of its special language policy by appointing one of the two new Commissioners who joined the EU this year (Leonard Orban from Romania) to be responsible for multilingualism and inter-cultural dialogue.

The Council of Europe website for the Day illustrates some of the initiatives undertaken across Europe to promote language learning and to celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity:
www.coe.int/EDL

Logo of the EDL:



For more information on languages in the EU: <http://europa.eu/languages/>