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"Multilingualism and Language Choice in Society and Institutions"

Address to the Ninth International Forum on Interpreting and Translating at Court and for Public Authorities

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Ladies and gentlemen, god morgon [gumørn]!

I am delighted to be here today. I want to congratulate Språkrådet [sprookroodet] for this event. It is an excellent opportunity for exchanging ideas, in the light of recent research and of a public debate that is gaining momentum both in this country and all over Europe.

After Mrs Liljeroth's inspiring introduction, it is my pleasure to give you an overview of the European context in which Swedish language policy has a prominent place.

**POLITICAL AGENDA ON MULTILINGUALISM – MAIN OBJECTIVES**

Languages and Europe are two sides of the same coin. Our linguistic diversity - 23 official languages, around 60 regional and minority languages - is a fact of life in Europe; it connects us in a common history and culture. Appreciating our linguistic diversity is a way of creating bridges between people rather than of sowing division. Like the Baltic Sea we are close to here, which for centuries has linked the peoples around it instead of separating them. I am convinced our linguistic heritage will help us develop a European identity, enriching our local, regional, and national identities.

In today's world of globalisation, mobility and migration, multilingualism can offer new answers for citizens and for our society. I want to stress that Europe's diversity of languages is not an obstacle, either internally or externally in our dealings with the rest of the world. Our diversity is an opportunity, but as with all opportunities, we must go out and seize it.

This is why I am committed to preserving and promoting multilingualism as a key feature of the European project. I intend to help to nurture language skills in
Europe, not only in education but in other domains with natural links to languages - economic growth and jobs, justice and security, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Languages are a shared responsibility. We all play our part – European policymakers; Member States; educational systems; business; citizens. I have been spending the last year consulting stakeholders, in order to assess the needs and aspirations of each group. In September I will set out a new strategy for languages that will reflect the full breadth of multilingualism policy as I'm outlining it today.

Where languages are concerned, it is of course up to each Member State to steer and implement its own policies. However, the Union has evolved ways of working together over the years to deal with issues such as languages. The challenges are shared challenges. We can learn from one another, inspire one another, build links and share policy ideas across borders.

**WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF MULTILINGUALISM?**

What are the advantages of multilingualism? Let me highlight three today: multilingualism helps us build inclusive societies; it is a ladder to better skills and better job opportunities, opening up Europe for our citizens; and it can offer Europe an edge in competitiveness over other trading blocs.

**Building inclusive societies**

Europe has always been about more than markets or trade. Its driving force has always been the need to create solidarity for a 'coming together of the nations of Europe', in Robert Schuman's words.
Building solidarity is still a guiding principle for Europe. But after 50 years of growth, Europe is more diverse than ever. This is a challenge: living with diversity takes effort and investment.

Europe's need to attract people from other continents is undeniable. Our population is decreasing. When the Union was founded, it stood at almost a quarter of the world; by 2050 Europe will account for only 7% of global population.

Migration into Europe is thus a fact of life. But how do we deal with it? Sometimes diversity is seen as a threat. There is the risk that communities live in isolation. Tolerance is not enough any more. We must evolve towards intercultural societies, where citizens of different backgrounds share a dialogue.

Education, and the question of languages, is a key component in developing societies based on solidarity. Dealing with a school population with different mother tongues and taking account of different perspectives is a challenge for teachers and schools. Developing intercultural skills in teacher training, including for language teachers, can help us meet these challenges.

In any society, language is the key to integration. The range of languages in which education is available is an important issue in providing all pupils with equal chances.

To mark this European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, I invited a group of intellectuals to give us pointers on how languages channel intercultural dialogue.

This group, under the French-Lebanese Amin Maalouf, have come up with interesting and thought-provoking ideas. In particular, they recommend that Europeans should not only learn a language for the purposes of international communication – which in most cases, comes down to English. Everyone should
also be able to master a language of their choice, what the group calls a "personal adoptive language."

The personal adoptive language could be a number of things. For migrants, it could be the language of their host country. For people living near a border, it could be the language of their neighbours. It could be a language that an individual loves for its culture or for personal reasons.

I am keenly following the current debate in Sweden, about your approach of dual language teaching to migrants, as this is an issue of interest at European level.

Some of the ideas in the Maalouf report may provide an impetus for a slightly different debate. The report is eloquent on how to cherish bilingualism and upgrade the unique language skills of Europe's migrant population. In the future, I hope that we will be able to benefit more from a naturally multilingual workforce, one that extends beyond the most widely taught European languages.

**Secondly, languages for skills and jobs**

This brings me to my second point, languages for skills and jobs.

Across the Union, we are undertaking widespread reforms to create a Europe of growth and jobs. Language skills open up better job opportunities for European citizens, both at home and by enabling them to access jobs across the Union. And a Europe where we speak each others' languages is a more welcoming Europe for people on the move.

All levels of education play their part here. Let me refer today to how higher education in particular can prepare young Europeans for careers which may take them to all corners of Europe.
In our Communication on modernising universities in 2006, the Commission underlined that the relationship between universities and business needs reforming. Europe has been falling behind its main competitors in terms of our capacity to innovate, and in our skills levels. The fact that, in many parts of Europe, business and universities tend to live in separate worlds is one of the factors in this innovation and skills gap – and this includes language skills.

The High-level group on Multilingualism, academics who have been discussing Europe's language needs, recently produced their recommendations, which reinforce this message. They recommend that students and professors should have more opportunities to study abroad; that all university students should have the chance to learn languages, either formally or non-formally; and that stronger links between universities and business organisations would help fine-tune language and intercultural skills to business needs.

One important tool for today's students is of course the European Union's successful Erasmus programme, which celebrates its coming of age this year. Our feedback from students and employers shows that an Erasmus or similar period abroad develops young people's personal and academic skills enormously, and makes them more employable.

Every year, Sweden receives and sends several thousand Erasmus students from and to almost all EU Member States. This is a positive sign and good news for Swedish industry. Your small but strong economy will always need to rely on a continuous supply of well-educated and multilingual young employees.

Languages and competitiveness

And now, to come to my final point: languages make a real contribution to Europe's competitiveness.
We know, from a study we published last year, that languages are an issue for business in Europe, but for the wrong reasons: 11% of our sample of SMEs admitted losing a contract for lack of language skills. One-fifth of Swedish companies recognised that insufficient language skills had cost them business; almost two-fifths felt their lack of intercultural skills was a challenge.

But let me add, quickly, that this does not necessarily mean gloom for the Swedish economy! It is potentially a reflection that in Sweden you are well aware that these skills matter, and want to remedy any gaps you perceive.

The study demonstrates that knowledge of English, as a foreign language, is not enough. Companies want to learn other European languages, or world languages such as Mandarin, or Russian, to conquer new markets. However, in many cases, businesses lack the know-how to put language strategies in place.

There is also mobility. Worker mobility in the EU remains relatively low - around 2% of working-age EU citizens currently live and work in another Member State. And unfortunately, lack of language skills puts people off moving to another country.

At the end of last year, therefore, I set up a Forum on business and languages, who will shortly provide their recommendations for language strategies to improve competitiveness, employability and mobility.

According to the Business Forum it is time to move away from the idea that simplified global English is enough. Using just one or two languages not only restricts trading opportunities. It can strangle company innovation too. Companies are increasingly taking a partnership approach, developing business opportunities with other interests, with research, or with universities for example. Businesses will want to find the right partner for the job; they may
need to develop their language capacities so that lack of language skills is not a barrier to innovation and fresh ideas.

This should encourage us to look at the range of languages we offer in schools and universities, ensuring that we provide enough choice to meet business and individual career needs.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me repeat how pleased I am to be here today.

Successful language policies need to involve all the actors, and to bring together the expertise that exists across Europe. The picture I am building up of language skills and language needs in Europe is enriching our future strategic Communication. Many Swedish practices - for example, your commitment to inclusion, your emphasis on using plain language, the present debate on language planning - are initiatives that have caught our interest at EU level.

Therefore, I will follow the debate about the Swedish and Nordic approach with particular attention. I wish you an interesting and rewarding conference.

Thank you.