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MULTILINGUALISM – A NECESSARY, ABSENT COMPONENT IN EUROPE 2020?¹

The title of this address is *Multilingualism – a necessary, absent component in Europe 2020?* – with a question mark. Before I move on, I should like to make two introductory remarks: First of all, the European Commission's 2020 strategy is about delivering growth that is 'smart', 'sustainable' and 'inclusive'. In this context, being smart means improving the European Union's performance in education, in research & innovation, and in the digital society (Europe 2020). And the increase in collaboration and interaction foreseen within and beyond Europe, begs at least one crucial question of interest to us here today: Are Europeans linguistically prepared for these endeavours to a sufficient degree?

Secondly, in the last decade, open borders and improved infrastructure has characterised developments in Europe. And at the same time as the 2020 policies and strategies have been developed and promoted, we have witnessed an increase in migration and cross-boarder interaction for professional as well as private reasons. As a consequence of these developments, individual citizens need to possess competences and skills in languages and intercultural communication to a much higher degree than we have ever seen before (cf. e.g. European Commission 2007; Lauridsen 2009). Educational systems from primary through tertiary education have a special responsibility for enabling and facilitating students' development of their multilingual and intercultural competences and skills. It is therefore interesting to see to which extent policies are in place and implemented so that European countries and their educational systems prepare their citizens in an adequate way for living and working in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural society.

In what follows, I will briefly summarise European policy documents in the area of languages and compare them with what seems to be the reality on the ground. I will then address the role of English and the concept of multilingualism. Finally I will discuss the role that Higher Education Institutions could or should play in order not only for the political ambitions to be realised at European, national or regional levels, but also for the benefit of individual European citizens.

Let's look at the European policies first. If we go back to the mid-1990s, it was recommended that a national language education policy should aim at offering

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European citizens the opportunity to learn two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue, the underlying assumption being that citizens have one first language – in those days called mother tongue, and that foreign languages were learned in the course of compulsory education (European Commission, 1995). This is reiterated in the Commission's *New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism* ten years later (European Commission, 2005), in which it says that the Commission's long-term objective is 'to increase individual multilingualism until every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue'.

However, especially since the turn of the millennium, socio-economic and political developments have contested this aim more and more. First of all, migration into and across the European continent is changing its linguistic landscape (European Commission, 2007). Secondly, the most recent European surveys (European Commission, 2012a and 2012b) show that EU Member States are still far from the goal of communication skills in the first language plus two additional languages for all European citizens; and thirdly, the role of English as a *lingua franca* is increasing. These facts put together seem to indicate that it is time to evaluate the link between policy and practice – or reality – in the area of languages.

Today, there are 24 official and working languages in the European Union. In addition to this, there are regional and minority languages, and it is estimated that more than 400 languages are spoken in Europe every day. On the one hand, we have multilingual individuals who may not be able to identify their first language (mother tongue) as they have grown up in bi- or even tri-lingual families and may, in addition to that, have moved between countries during their childhood and youth, that is, during their primary and secondary school years. Some of these young Europeans have maybe two or more 'first languages' as well as a certain – or even advanced – level in one or more other languages (European Commission, 2007). – They are really multilingual.

But the continuum of language skills is very wide. At its another extreme, young people of the same generation may not even have one first language in which they are fully literate; in fact, when it comes to literacy, in 2010 it was estimated that one in four European 15-year olds is a low performer (European Commission, 2010).

This multilingual and multicultural scenario obviously presents new challenges for European higher education that have so far not been sufficiently addressed. The first decade of the millennium, coinciding with the EU enlargement in 2004 and the first Commissioner who had Multilingualism as part of his responsibility (2004–07), saw a string of Commission documents focusing on *linguistic diversity*, in the second half of the decade rephrased as *multilingualism* (cf. also Darquenne, 2011). However, the years 2007–10 when Commissioner Orban's sole brief was multilingualism, coincided with the onset of the European economic crisis, and since then the focus of attention seems to have shifted from languages for citizenship and individual development to language competences for employability, mobility and growth.

Most recently, we have seen a Commission staff working document, accompanying the communication *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* in 2012 (European Commission, 2012c) as well as the Communication from the Commission, *European higher education in world* (European Commission, 2013). In the latter it is stated that 'proficiency in English is de facto part of any

internationalisation strategy for learners, teachers and institutions (...)', but also that 'multilingualism is a significant European asset: it is highly valued by international students and should be encouraged in teaching and research throughout the higher education curriculum'.

Individual multilingualism and intercultural communication skills seem to be considered important for the employability of graduates everywhere. And while it may be a very well-considered decision to use English as the *lingua franca* or *lingua academica*, it unfortunately seems to be to the detriment of multilingualism and linguistic diversity. The question is therefore how the concept of multilingualism as well as the unique position of English can co-exist.

The linguistic state-of-affairs that I have just outlined, should be seen in the light of the Europe 2020 agenda and the forecast that, by 2020, 35% of all jobs will require high-level qualifications, combined with a capacity to adapt and innovate, and at least 40% of 30–34-year olds should have completed tertiary or equivalent education (European Commission, 2010). In the same document, *Youth on the Move*, languages are considered a key competence for the knowledge economy and society (European Commission, 2010, p. 6). A little further on it says that 'Studying and working abroad is particularly attractive for young people. The majority of 'mobile' people in the EU are between 25 and 34 years old. This age group tends to have better knowledge of languages and fewer family obligations' (European Commission, 2010, p. 10). The underlying assumption here seems to be that, to a large extent, languages are learned at school, and the younger age cohorts are linguistically prepared for mobility.

This, however, is contested in more recent documents, e.g., in the European Commission's 2012 document *Language Competences for employability, mobility and growth* (European Commission, 2012c). Here it is obvious that we are still a long way from the goal of one plus a minimum of two languages for all European citizens. Respecting vast differences across Europe, the Commission proposes a benchmark according to which, by 2020, at least 50% of 15-year olds should attain the level of independent user of a first foreign language (compared to the present 42%), and at least 75% of pupils in lower secondary education should study at least two foreign languages (compared to the 61% at present). Note here the difference between 'attaining' a certain level of competence in one language and 'studying' two languages.

Against the backdrop of these figures, without question, the learning of languages will continue to be a major challenge across Europe. It cannot be taken for granted that the majority of young Europeans will be able to communicate in two languages in addition to their individual first languages and thereby be able to move across linguistic and cultural borders for work or study without problems in the foreseeable future. Therefore, the learning of languages must continue to be an option. Also after compulsory education.

So while the concept of one plus a minimum of two languages for all citizens is still the overarching aim within the European Union, Commission documents show that we are still far from the realisation of this aim, and the benchmarks proposed for 2020 are much more modest.

While the EU has enshrined in the treaties that European citizens have a right to communicate with the official bodies of the Union in one of the official languages, and while the official policy is still to promote linguistic diversity or multilingualism, the

fact of the matter is that the reverse trend is also there. English has a special role in communication across Europe, not only in international business, travel and tourism, but in many different kinds of interaction – including education and research. And because English seems to be so ubiquitous, many people tend to think that they do not need other languages.

In the *First European Survey on Language Competences* from 2012, it appears from the conclusions that in 'most educational systems, the first target language is English, and even in educational systems where it is the second target language, performance in English tends to be higher than in other languages. Further evidence of the particular status of English comes from the students' questionnaire responses, their reported perception of its usefulness, and their degree of exposure to it and the use of it through traditional and new media' (European Commission, 2012a, p. 91).

In the special Eurobarometer on *Europeans and their languages* (European Commission, 2012b), it appears that two out of three Europeans (67%) consider English one of the two most useful languages for themselves. Moreover, English is the most widely spoken foreign language in 19 of the 25 member states where it is not the official language (i.e., excluding the UK and Ireland, and before Croatia became a member of the EU in 2013). English tops the list of the five most widely spoken foreign languages (38%), followed by French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%). 25% of Europeans are able to follow radio or television news and reading a newspaper or magazine article in English; 26% indicate that they are able to communicate online in the language. However, while English seems to be the most pervasive language in many contexts across the European continent, there are vast differences, and – as the Eurobarometer figures also indicate – almost two out of three Europeans (62%) do not have English.

So, contrary to what is often assumed, the majority of Europeans do not master English – even at a modest level. However, when it comes to – especially young – professionals, the picture does seem to be different. Among them, proficiency in English may be taken for granted to a higher extent; but it cannot be considered a given everywhere.

Let's now turn to the concept of multilingualism.

There are several definitions of the term multilingualism; in the report of the High Level Group on Multilingualism (Commission of the European Communities, 2007), for instance, it is understood as 'the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives'. A working definition might therefore be for the individual to be proficient in three or more languages and to have at least one (first) language in which this individual is proficient and fully literate at the end of compulsory education.

Now please allow me to sum up what I have said so far: 20 years after the policy of mother tongue plus two languages was introduced, there is still a long way to go before that goal has been reached for the majority of Europeans. Migration and mobility has resulted in a much more complex linguistic landscape. In the same time span, English has obtained a special role of the generally accepted *lingua franca* in many spheres of life, a development that has led many people to believe that English is enough, and that they therefore do not need to learn more languages. Consequently, in some countries we have seen a dramatic fall in the learning of languages, whereas

in other countries, the reverse is fortunately the case, and quite a few young people are interested in learning other languages. That at least is encouraging, and the range of languages offered to and taken by students at Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania stands out as an example to be followed by others.

So where are we now, and how should we proceed?

Well, there are some facts that we must address head on. Whether we like it or not, they are here to stay:

We all form part of global society and to interact on the global arena, we need languages. In this context, English is necessary, but English is not enough. An individual needs full literacy in at least one language in order for these skills to develop beyond a certain initial stage and in order for this individual to develop the academic reading and writing skills, necessary in higher education.

So, if Europe is to develop smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and reach the targets set in the European Union's 2020 strategy, languages is a key issue. We therefore need to consider the concepts of societal and individual multilingualism. In society we must ensure that citizens have the opportunity to learn a range of languages – and not restricted to the traditional major European languages. When it comes to individual multilingualism, we must ensure both that the individual has the opportunity to develop full literacy in at least one language, and that the individual has the opportunity to develop skills in more languages in our compulsory education systems. But let us not forget that the European Commission may recommend actions to be taken at member state level; however, it is up to the individual countries and regions and to their educational institutions to develop their own policies and action plans. In accordance with the subsidiarity principal, that cannot be done at European level.

Education is the responsibility of national or regional governments, and it is therefore also the responsibility of our national or regional governments to ensure that the citizens of their respective countries or regions and, in particular, their children and young people become literate and learn languages to a level where they are able to navigate in an increasingly multilingual global society.

The responsibility of higher education institutions is to develop the professionals of the future – the ones who will have to ensure the sustainable development of Europe – also after 2020. These young people – our graduates – must be multilingual, and to the extent that they do not have a sufficient proficiency level when they leave secondary education, the tertiary system must take over.

There are obviously various different ways of doing that. One recommendation would be for a given higher education institution to take stock of the language learning situation in its own country or region in order to assess to which extent the provision of language courses are needed, and to decide whether or not this should form part of the curriculum of its programmes. Whatever the outcomes of such an assessment would be, a Higher Education Language Policy would be appropriate. If such a language policy is in place, it can guide initiatives to be taken both within and in addition to the curricula of the programmes offered by a given higher education institution. A couple of years ago, the Conseil Européen pour les Langues / European Language Council established a working group that developed a report with recommendations on Higher Education Language Policy – abbreviated HELP! Anyone interested may want to read and be inspired by this report (Lauridsen, 2013).

Higher education institutions and their graduates have a crucial role to play in the growth of their country and of Europe. It is the responsibility of university leaders to accept this responsibility and ensure that their graduates are properly prepared to be part of this development – not only in physics, medicine, law or economics, but also when it comes to languages and intercultural communication skills.

So, yes multilingualism is a necessary component in Europe 2020. And there are very general recommendations at European level. However, these recommendations have to be translated into national, regional and institutional policies and also implemented in the individual countries, regions, and institutions. And while there are beacons of light, there are also an unfortunate amount of white spots on the map of Europe where such policies are not in place and appropriate language provision is absent. This situation needs to change as a matter of urgency if we are to reach the goals of Europe 2020.

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**DAUGIAKALBYSTĖ – BŪTINAS, BET TRŪKSTAMAS KOMPONENTAS
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