

Cher représentant du Ministère de l'industrie, dear President and Members of the Organising Committee, dear participants,

Thank you very much for having the honour of being invited to this conference. For somebody that started his career in the early 80ies in informatics it's a real pleasure being here today.

Congratulations to the authorities of Morocco and the city of Marrakech for the excellent organisation of this event.

I am sending you the best regards of my Commissioner, Leonard Orban, who for other professional obligations cannot be here.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Although much of the discussion at this conference is going to be technical in nature, and we shall probably be hearing more about interfaces than dialogue, everyone here is in some way involved in trying to make it easier for people to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The five previous editions of this conference have all been held in Europe. Today, migration and globalization are making our communities increasingly multicultural, and we need to communicate far beyond the borders of the European Union.

We can see this being reflected in some of the contributions to this conference, which are by no means confined to the European Union.

2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. So it is particularly fitting that this year's conference should be taking place here in Marrakech. The Commission attaches much importance to the issue of intercultural dialogue. Languages play an important role. It is probably the best way to dive into a different culture by mastering the other ones language, being able to communicate, understand and reading literature as history of a country.

Therefore Commissioner Orban welcomed the idea born by the advisory group chaired by the French Lebanese writer Amin Malouf, that we in Europe should take account of the added-value of the languages of the migrants – obviously not an uncontroversial idea to which I will return in a moment.

Coming back to this conference, the European Commission has been actively involved from the outset in this initiative, giving support to these meetings, and also to several of the projects that are going to be discussed.

But this is only one part of a much bigger picture. I would like to briefly explain the other aspects of the Multilingualism portfolio.

What is the reason that the European Union subscribes to multilingualism. It has to do with the equality of Member States, their languages and thereby the different identities. The functioning of multilingualism is set down in the Union's ever first adopted regulation and constitutes a democratic right to understand and to be understood in your mother tongue. But is also important for legal certainty and as it is inevitable for citizens. For companies it secures a level playing field, both inside and outside the EU. And it is another symbol for the EU's foundation on cooperation between MS.

There are 5 dimensions to this portfolio.

Firstly education, where we are aiming to strengthen the understanding that language knowledge is an asset. That probably is easier when one starts to learn early. But we also need modern and attractive ways of language learning. There comes technology into play that can

support these processes. That has to go hand in hand with alternative ways of motivation. There is scientific evidence that enhanced use of language families facilitates language learning. And let's not forget, also teachers need more support. All these aspects are covered by the Lifelong Learning programme that also includes support to regional and minority languages. But let me stress that the main aim is to create bridges rather than divisions. I would like also to underline that education is first of all a responsibility of Member States but the EU can provide a good platform to learn from each other.

The second aspect concerns the intercultural dialogue. This is not because of the 2008 European Year of intercultural dialogue but because of the fact that globalisation and migration are shaping our societies including vigilant discussions about what our identities constitutes. This much needed dialogue is a challenge in fighting any form of what was called to be a possible clash of civilisation. This issue concerns the EU itself but also beyond. Again one can easily see the bridge-building function of languages. For this reason the Commissioner welcomed the idea of the Amin Malouf lead advisory group proposing that migrants should learn the language of the host country while society should take benefit from the other languages and cultures. In line with that principle the group proposed what they called a personally adopted language, one where your interest goes beyond learning the language as such but is close to your heart.

The third angle is the economic dimension, where once more globalisation is a determining factor. It is true to say that whole areas of life such as technology, science or financial markets seem to rely on English only. But a study from last year demonstrated that still 44% of our population is monolingual, namely their mother tongue. And let's be honest with each other. When we are holding our exchanges in the corridors, we are often saying what we can and not necessarily what we want to say. Linguists call that form of English meanwhile Globish. To stress the economic value of language skills a business forum chaired by Vicomte Davignon is seeking to identify best practices of companies in making use of the language skills of their employees and their strategies for a language policy.

And then, fourthly, there is technology. I know what translators and interpreters will say. But no, it's not about replacing the human brain by a machine. It is about efficiency gains and support to deliver better quality. It is necessary to broaden the scope by looking at issues such as court interpretation, multilingual health services – including the 112 emergency number – and also local governmental services. Finally it is a question of long-term sustainability of a system that is likely to see a further increase of the number of official languages rather than the other way around.

Finally there is also an external dimension. As other parts in the world already do, we should engage to teach and train people in languages beyond the EU languages. This is a question of openness and cooperation. Others have already shown interest in our system of multilingualism. We are in closer contact with China, India, South Africa and Russia.

This autumn the Commission will be gathering together all the various policy strands into a Communication on Multilingualism. This will set out our policies to safeguard and promote linguistic diversity in line with the idea of unity in diversity.

Allow me a side remark as I can imagine that this issue is of interest to some of the attending participants. The Commission adopted on 20 May its proposal for the structure and functioning of the Mediterranean Union. As the responsible Commissioner, Mrs. Ferrero-Waldner, pointed out this initiative is meant to foster the multilateral relations with the Mediterranean countries. In addition it will complement the bilateral relations of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The new impetus this gives to the already since 12 years existing so-called Barcelona process is the recognition that despite some encouraging results there remains much to be done. To conclude on this point the priorities of this proposal are:

1. stepping up the cooperation at a political level,
2. finding the right balance of responsibilities and
3. giving the projects a profile that citizens can see the added value.

Ladies and gentlemen, Coming back to the issue of this conference, we have, as I have indicated, our own internal need for translation and interpretation. Coping with massive information flows in a multiplicity of languages is a mammoth task in itself. Within the institutions, a series of enlargements have taken the number of official languages we have to deal with to 23.

Fortunately, a number of technical advances which have been worked on for years are at last bearing fruit, making it possible to save both time and money. Gone are the days where all a translator needed was a pen or a Dictaphone and a well-thumbed dictionary.

The European Union has been something of a pioneer in this field. Since the problem is a very urgent one for us, there has been a great incentive to look for solutions. The Translation Service has been very pro-active in the use of computers, and today they are equipped with state-of-the-art tools to assist them in their work.

Many of the texts they translate are based on previous texts or existing legislation. This has enabled us to create a very effective translation memory device. Today when our translators write a sentence, similar phrases from previous translations pop up in the form of suggestions.

This technique of re-using previously translated words or passages saves a considerable amount of time. It also ensures that terminology is used consistently – which is obviously vital in legislative texts.

We also use machine translation in the Commission – our ECMT system processes nearly a million pages in a year. It is partly used by translators to help in their work. Obviously, the raw output has to be edited to a greater or lesser extent.

Of course these are only two of the many tools available to translators, and experimentation is not confined to translation: interpretation is covered, too. In spite of years of work on speech recognition, nobody has so far perfected a speech-to-speech device which can actually replace interpreters. However, the Interpretation services have developed a number of other tools for multilingual communication, Multilingual web- streaming, chats, and videoconferencing are already commonplace, and other tools, such as a multilingual speech repository, provide aids for interpreter training.

So you can see that in looking for answers to our own internal language needs, we have found ourselves leading the way in the implementation of new language technologies. The Commission has been keen to share these new technologies with others: our policy is to re-use our information resources to get the maximum use from them. First we made our terminology and translation tools available to all staff across the institutions. And more recently, some of our instruments and resources have been made available to the public at large.

In June of last year, the vast IATE terminology database was opened up to the public. This is an in-house store of wisdom containing over 8 million terms and covers all the official languages of the EU. The content is constantly fed in by the language departments, after going through a rigorous validation procedure.

And at the beginning of this year the Commission's translators and in-house scientists released another treasure-trove to the public: our huge collections of sentences gleaned from legal documents. These cover technical, political and social issues in 22 languages (there is no Irish as yet). In this translation repository it is possible to find sentences with their equivalent in all other official languages. Elsewhere such resources are scarce for languages such as Latvian or Romanian, and they are practically nonexistent for the less common language-pairs.

These developments demonstrate how our internal policy of multilingualism can reach beyond the immediate needs of the institutions, and provide resources to researchers such as you. This is a clear case of mutual benefit, since we in turn profit from the work that you do.

Ladies and gentlemen, in a few moments we are also here to celebrate a man who was a true pioneer of the discipline of Computational Linguistics.

This will be the third time that this prize will be awarded: it is a fitting memorial to a man who loved both literature and mathematics, and who scorned artificial boundaries between subject areas. Antonio Zampolli was one of the first to yoke together linguistics and computer science into an entirely new discipline. From his university department in Pisa he devoted his career to spreading the word about his passion.

He was also eager to establish an enduring basis for international co-operation in this field. He played a major role in masterminding the creation of the European Language Resources Association (ELRA), and, of course, these extremely successful LREC conferences.

In the work that he inspired, a shared interest in translation always brought people from different backgrounds closer together. This, of course, is the whole essence of translation, and I very much hope that that it will be the case today.

I should like to end by wishing this conference much success.

Thank you for your kind attention.