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The role of Italian in the European institutions

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure and an honour for me to be with you today and to speak at this prestigious university, born out of the spirit of free thought. And that's the very spirit that has always sustained Berlin, which like any great metropolis is a place of progress, a test-site for modernity, a place where time passes more quickly. For any European, a visit to Berlin is always a kind of pilgrimage. This city serves as a warning and an incentive to us all. In the depths of its memory we find the deepest roots of the European project. Berlin is a city of martyrs and heroes, but it's also an eternally youthful city, and it's that irrepressible, unpredictable youthfulness which reminds us that the new Europe exists, a hive of activity for over 50 years now. If Berlin is endlessly shape-shifting, sometimes in a contradictory, hesitant way, that's because it's striving to seek out its best. The political project of the European Union is a non-stop revolution, and Berlin, a place of mixtures and meetings, is the embodiment of that.

I'm here today to talk to you about languages, and in particular about my language, Italian, and its role within the EU institutions and in the broadest panorama of languages in the European Union. As I'm sure you know, the European Union promotes linguistic diversity and pursues a policy of multilingualism, whereby European citizens are encouraged to speak two foreign languages. This is the objective set by the heads of state and government of the EU at the European Council in Barcelona in 2002, and we do our best to uphold that, using the instruments available to us.

Multilingualism is the mirror which reflects the cultural diversity of Europe, and we want to preserve this heritage. With this diversity and variety in mind, I believe my language has something to teach all Europeans, and first and foremost the Italian people, who all too often are unaware of the strength and potential of the Italian language.

Italian has never been a rigidly codified language. The cultured language created by Dante and further developed by Petrarch and the literary tradition through to Foscolo and Manzoni has always been a language which is far from the people, written and spoken only by the intellectual élite. The political separation of Italy hampered the spread of the Italian language. Incidentally, this is something we should bear in mind when we think about the removal of our internal borders in Europe. In mediaeval Italy, just as in Europe before the EU, customs barriers hindered trade, hence the need to communicate. Over the centuries, then, the overwhelming majority of Italians have always continued to speak their own dialects and regional languages, leaving the use of cultured Italian to a small minority. It was only after the unification of Italy that Italian started to be taught properly in compulsory schooling. Italy's conversion to the Italian language has been a long process, one which isn't yet complete. Dialects are still very much part of the language landscape in Italian today. As well as dialects, there are regional languages, which in the past vied with the Italian of Dante, and which have their own literature – Neapolitan and Venetan, for example. Even today, Italian fails the Italian people when they need to talk about day-to-day things, because the elevated, cultured language of the literati is poorly adapted to the stuff of everyday life. This is where dialects have always reigned supreme; in fact Italians often know the words for everyday items only in dialect, or at least they see their dialect as a more domestic language, closer to them, used at home. You might think that this is a linguistic weakness for the Italian people, and that has certainly been true in the past. However, I believe that today this has become an advantage. The Italians may not always be aware of it, but their mentality, open to linguistic diversity, is perfectly suited to the multilingual Europe we are building. The European project is all about fostering a sense of belonging in Europeans, a sense of belonging which goes well beyond languages. Today languages are powerful tools of identity which often prevent us from merging with each other. In Europe languages are

closely linked to nation-building. That's not the case in the Americas, for example, where Spanish and English are the national languages of states which are very diverse even though they speak the same language; their sense of identity is founded on things other than language. An Italian has no problem accepting the diversity of their language and all its dialects, all of which they can relate to as part of their own identity. It's quite common for us Italians not to understand the dialect of a fellow Italian, but that doesn't mean that we see them as any less Italian than we are ourselves. In other words, for us, language diversity is the very essence of our nation. And this is exactly the mindset which Europeans will need to adopt in the multilingual future which awaits us. It will still be highly unlikely that an Italian will understand an Estonian, or a German a Greek, but in spite of this in the more cohesive Europe we are building all of them will feel part of one single community of nations, and their national identity will no longer be an obstacle to this sense of community. So the fact that the Italians are used to linguistic diversity becomes an opportunity to get closer to others with an open mindset, one which is more open to learning other languages. Italians are aware of the relativity of languages; they know that their national language isn't suitable for every occasion and that dialects or regional languages are often better for effective communication. So you see how our linguistic weakness can actually become our strength. However, there's still a lot of work to be done to make Italians aware that they have this potential. Paradoxically enough, it is only by learning other languages and discovering how close the linguistic diversity of Europe is to their own that the Italians will become aware of their predisposition to languages.

In the EU institutions Italian has the status of official language, like all the national languages of our respective countries. The language regime of the European Union was defined in the very first regulation, which states that all our languages are official languages. This means that all EU legislation has to be translated into all languages and that the European citizen has the right to contact us in his or her own language, and to receive a response in that same language. Naturally, we provide translation and interpretation in their own language for the representatives of civil society who come to Brussels as delegates to participate in our work. Nevertheless, the EU institutions work rather differently internally. For practical reasons we use the so-

called working languages, namely French, English and German. The working languages system is quite controversial, though, and it isn't consolidated. It wasn't negociated, it's not defined in the treaties, because this is an area where the institutions are free to make their own decision. It is simply a custom, but one that isn't without contradictions, and as this is an open area there is always room for new developments. And this is where Italian has forged a new and unexpected role for itself. As many of our interpreters have Italian as one of their working languages, what we can see today is that our language has become a kind of bridge between languages. In meetings where many languages are used and it's not feasible to cover all possible language combinations, interpreters often take relay from Italian. The Italian language has almost certainly acquired this new function thanks to its prestige as a language of culture; people are attracted to the language because of the world it reflects. This is why, when Italian politicians come to Brussels and ask us what can be done to defend the Italian language, I always tell them that the best thing they can do is to speak it. To speak a language is to produce a thought in that language, to develop concepts and to reason in it. This is how a language is kept alive. Moreover, this is exactly how the Italian of the literary tradition was kept alive for centuries despite the political division of Italy – because it never stopped being the instrument of Italian thought, and never stopped being used by thinkers and writers to express the complex reality around them.

The more Italian is spoken in our institutions, the more its position of importance will be tenable, because to speak Italian is to create knowledge in Italian, and to enrich it with the new policies which are put together in Brussels, and to spread it as a language of communication between other languages.

I'd like to emphasize that this is not some kind of Machiavellian defence of a calculated ignorance of languages, aimed at forcing others to learn our language to make it possible for us to understand each other. Any responsible citizen today should be able to speak at least one foreign language, and I'm quite sure that in due time this will become a civic duty for all Europeans. But if every language is to have the space and opportunity it needs to prosper and develop in Europe, the way forward is sharing, not competition. The sharing of neighbouring languages and of

one international language is the model of multilingualism which we pursue. So the interpreter is there to respond to other needs which are more specific but equally essential in an international context. I'm sure you'll appreciate that our ideas don't come across as effectively when we have to express them in a language which is foreign to us but which may well be the mother tongue of the person we're speaking to.

If we can continue to have high-level Italian interpreters available, interpreters who know several languages, it will be easier for Italian to develop its role as a language bridge which today sets it apart. This is the only way for us to defend our language in a systematic way, contributing to the objective of multilingualism in Europe, whilst at the same time helping free languages from their borders, something which can only be of benefit to the Italian language. In today's language landscape, so heavily dominated by English, a language can only be spread if it responds to new, more sophisticated, requirements. Italian can draw on its cultural strength and occupy a space which is inevitably left empty by any language of international communication, because of the perfunctory way in which the latter are learned, by the superficial way they are spread and by the atomization of those who speak them.

In this new context of multilingualism we can clearly see the dichotomy which has been created in the learning of languages. The fact that more attention is being paid to language knowledge does mean that Europeans are starting to speak more languages, but this is having a negative impact on the language professions. In other words, more and more people speak a foreign language to some degree or other, but fewer and fewer people have the level of knowledge of a foreign language that we need.

What I have said about the fortunes of Italian really applies to every other European language, and this is a reflection of the form our multilingualism should take. Every single one of our languages, even the smallest, has its own 'backyard': an area beyond its borders where for all sorts of reasons it is spoken or understood or even just accepted as familiar. Because of cultural affinities, for historical reasons, because of similarities, migrations or other flows of ideas or people, it matters not.

Today our language produces its own multilingualism whenever it is shared, whenever it piques curiosity. European multilingualism will no doubt be a hybrid beast which will develop differently depending on languages and regions. It's not so much deciding which languages to promote that's important; it's more about having the right mentality. And the right mentality is exactly that of the Italian tradition, which ultimately recognizes the transcience of language as a phenomenom and its variability.

In other words, we Italians have always known unconsciously that languages don't belong to states or academies, but to those who speak them. Today we tend to overlook the democratizing power inherent to the learning of a language. To learn a language is to escape one way of thinking and discover another, but it's also more than that. The British linguist David Crystal wrote: *"Language is an immensely democratizing institution. To have learned a language is immediately to have rights in it. You may add to it, modify it, play with it, create in it, ignore bits of it, as you will."* This is the freedom that the Italians have made enormous use of, mixing their dialects in a process of mutual cross-pollination between the formal language and the vernacular.

It's no coincidence that none other than Dante Alighieri, the father of our language, should have written:

"The vernacular is that which we learn by imitating our wet-nurses, with no need for formal instruction. There also exists another kind of language, at one remove for us, which the Romans called *gramatica* (grammar). Of the two, the vernacular is the more noble because it was used first by the human race, and because the whole world employs it, although with different pronunciations and different words."

This is the way the concept of language is understood in the Italian subconscious, an instrument open to all, a single phenomenom, one with purely superficial differences, one which unites us all.

To go back to our institutions and the way they work, these five decades have seen several generations of interpreters pass through our booths. A service which at the

outset worked in four languages now uses 23, with an ever-increasing number of meetings because of the growth of the Union and of the sphere of activity of the institutions. Our work is the current without which nothing would work. No negociations could take place between delegates, ministers and heads of government without the invisible work of the interpreters. The interpreters are not just essential for communication; they also play another, more subtle role, as ambassadors of a culture and as custodians of our respective national identities. Someone who works as an interpreter for us is not just an interpreter; they are a collection of symbols that we need, because we need to be solidly grounded in our respective identities if we are to be able to fearlessly embrace the difference embodied by others. We have to accept who we are before we can agree to change.

In the coming years we will have to face problems linked to handing over from one generation of staff to another. There is a risk that we will find ourselves in lean years in which we will not be able to satisfy completely demand.

To put it more simply, we will have to follow more closely the training of young interpreters that will come and take the place of colleagues who are retiring.

We need interpreters who know Italian because of its role as a bridge, but not just Italian. We need professionals with the skills and qualifications necessary to work for the European institutions. We need enthusiastic and enterprising individuals, motivated, willing to travel, but above all aware that theirs will be not just a job but almost a mission. These individuals will have to work on the most sensitive areas of the European project, namely national identities and their languages, cultural diversity and the secret channels which feed into this in all its variety.

A career with the EU institutions offers many opportunities to young people, and not just in the language sector. Living in an international environment and being part of the political laboratory in which the new Europe is being created is a unique and fascinating experience which opens endless new and exciting horizons.
With all my years of experience I think I can safely say that the open-mindedness and the intellectual curiosity which tend to be trademark characteristics of those who, like

us, have chosen language-based professions, have undoubtedly contributed to the European project.

In other words, I am sure that, whilst remaining true to the imperative need for precise translation, our interpreters have been able to infect even the most sceptical of delegates with their enthusiasm and their European spirit.

Like each of our respective languages, Italian has a specific place in the political and linguistic ecosystem of our institutions. We shouldn't forget that throughout the complex and tormented history of Europe, our languages have always spoken to each other. There has always been translation; there has always been this incessant contact which leads to contamination between languages, and thanks to this never-ending dialogue solid bonds have been created between these languages. It's safe to say that none of our languages would be what they are without all the other languages which surround them. Even the languages which are most widely spoken today need the vitality and variety of all the other languages around them in order to develop fully and express the thoughts not just of their own societies but also of those who listen and watch and use them as a point of reference.

By way of conclusion, as an Italian let me come back to the thinking underlying the construction and history of my language: infinite varieties, but at the same time an undeniable unity. The Italian language wouldn't be so eloquent and rich if it weren't enhanced by its variety. And since language is political, in the same way it is impossible to imagine Europe without its diversity. At the end of the day, the European project speaks one single language, the language of tolerance, of compromise, of mediation, of diversity and of change, and because of the complex nature of everything it has to express, this single language has inevitably taken on different forms over time. And that, in the end, is what the interpreter does: point out the secret paths which show us that we all speak the same language, a kind of universal Italian, both cursed and blessed by its propensity for change and by its inexhaustible capacity to adapt.