

Languages Open doors

PREPARATIONS by the EU and the Council of Europe to launch the European Year of Languages (EYL) early next year are gathering momentum. The aim of this joint initiative – with which UNESCO will collaborate as well – is to convince people to learn more languages (visit the Website <http://culture.coe.int/AEL2001EYL>; e-mail: philip.thalgott@coe.int).

The winning formula has been identified by the Luxembourg-born, EU Education Commissioner Viviane Reding as “1+2”, meaning mother tongue plus two more languages (of which, I dare add, one must be English, now universally accepted as Europe’s lingua franca). Being able to communicate in two or three languages is a must in the new Europe. Languages open many doors.

The Council of Europe’s modern languages section has set up a network of co-ordinators covering 47 member states, i.e. practically the whole of Europe (Yugoslavia will surely join now that it has got rid of its dictator).

A second meeting of the national co-ordinators will be held in Manchester on October 19-21 (educationists Mary Rose Mitsud and/or Alfred Mallia will probably represent Malta). The meeting will be co-organised by the London-based Centre for Information and Language Teaching and Research (CILT).

Lid King on behalf of CILT, Joe Sheils on behalf of the Council of Europe and Mark English on behalf of the EU will play a leading role. The well-known linguist David Crystal will address the meeting, honouring the participants with his presence.

The real protagonists, however, will be the co-ordinators themselves. They will expound their strategy to raise awareness of the EYL objectives among all strata of society and to involve the media.

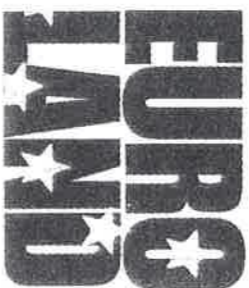
Environmentalists (Greenpeace enthusiasts in particular) have managed to convince the world at large of the need for biodiversity as a means to preserve our ecosystem. The same thing should happen in the realm of culture, of which languages are a major ingredient.

Cultural diversity is a richness to be protected and enhanced at all costs. There are about 6,000 languages, including major dialects, in a world made up of 189 independent states. But languages, and especially dialects, can die out, and a number of them fade away every year.

A species which dies out threatens the survival of many others. This is the case in the environmental ecosystem. It is also the case in the linguistic ecosystem.

I have just received the 23rd edition of the annual review *RID – Rivista di Dialettologia Italiana*, published at Bologna university. Among other scientific articles, it carries a 28-page essay on *La questione dell'italiano a Malta in alcuni studi recenti*.

My first impression is that it is a good summary of what has been said and written already. But the author, Sandra Covino of the Perugia



by G.M.

University for Foreigners, is right in saying that Maltese studies are hardly known in nearby Italy. Her article is, therefore, quite useful. The bibliography at the end is remarkably *vaše, but a stronger focus would perhaps have yielded better results.*

The Italian Cultural Institute in Valletta, ably led by Dr Rosanna Cravena, does its level best to make Maltese scholarship better known in Italy, and vice-versa. A case in point is Dr Ugo Mitsud Bonnici's presentation at the Institute, on October 19, of Gerard Bugeja's latest scoop, the 16th century poem titled *Invocazione di Malta*.

Equally interesting is the lecture to be held on Thursday at the Institute by Professor Richard Bösel on *Borromini e l'Universo Barocco*. I have always thought that most

Maltese are lucky in being trilingual (Maltese, English, Italian), and that they have an aptitude for languages. Our education authorities should have no qualms in enhancing and diversifying our knowledge of languages.

Besides serving as an efficient training of the mind, languages open wide to us the doors of European citizenship towards which – despite setbacks, such as the Danish “no” to the single European currency – we are all heading.

Worldwide history teaching

A SEMINAR on history teaching in Japan and the Russian Federation will be held by the International Society for Educational Information (ISEI) and the Council of Europe (contact: alison.cardwell@coe.int). Russia has been a CoE member for the past four years. Japan has observer status at the Council, no doubt to keep abreast of what goes on in this European focal point.

The seminar will be held in Tokyo on October 25-28. It is a follow-up to previous meetings on the teaching of history in border areas, held at Khabarovsk and St Petersburg in 1998 and 1999.

At St Petersburg Japanese and Russian historians had met, perhaps for the first time, to discuss the ways in which Japan is portrayed in Russian history textbooks and the ways in which Russia is portrayed in Japanese history textbooks.

Such educational encounters do not fit the headlines, but there is no arguing about their importance in the long run.

40 ambassadors meet in Luxembourg

SOME 40 ambassadors to the Council of Europe (including Dr Joe Licari) met in Luxembourg-Kirchberg on September 22-23 to discuss cultural matters, with special reference to the Cultural Routes project housed and co-financed by Luxembourg.

The meeting was chaired by the Hungarian ambassador, Janos Perenyi. Council of Europe senior members Klaus Schumann, Raymond Weber and José Maria Ballester spoke on cultural routes, cultural co-operation and heritage preservation in the globalisation era.

The Cultural Routes project was launched by the Council of Europe in 1987, following a recommendation by the Parliamentary Assembly to revamp the Santiago de Compostela pilgrim route. Millions of pilgrims travelled to Santiago from all over Europe, thus acquiring a feeling of belonging to distinct communities linked together by common religious and cultural values.

The concept of a cultural route was then extended to domains ranging from Cistercian monasteries to the Vikings, from the Baroque to the Troubadours. Cultural routes serve as an excellent tool to promote cultural networks and co-operation and to enhance sustainable tourism.

The problem with these cultural routes – a dozen of them had been identified and set up by the Council of Europe – is how to keep them alive and kicking.

At a recent seminar in Strasbourg on citizenship, EU education director David Coyne stressed that, if he could, he would use all his directorate's funds to support those who work on concrete local projects, rather than to finance studies of what might be done. I fully agree. I admire those who do things rather than keep telling us what they want to do.