

Speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Graz 16 September 2005

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The worst fate of a poet is to be admired without being understood, wrote Jean Cocteau in *Le Rappel à l'ordre*. We can certainly admire poetry in translation, but only the original can reveal the deepest meaning and emotion.

Language is a key to understanding not only poetry but also to understanding one another. The architects of European reconstruction after the war were quick to realise that the more Europeans understood each others' languages and learnt about each others' cultures, the better the chance of their living harmoniously together.

This concept was already evident in the European Cultural Convention of 1954. The provisions of the Convention in language matters are simple, yet far-reaching in their implications: states undertake to promote the reciprocal teaching and learning of each others' languages. From this simple starting point has developed all the work on languages carried out in the framework of the Council of Europe in the intervening 50 years: the states party to the Convention (now 48) have worked together in successive language education programmes since the 1960s in Strasbourg and now also for ten years in Graz. Our international programmes have provided a platform for promoting innovation and stimulating cooperation between policy makers and practitioners across Europe.

I do not need to remind such an expert audience of the results of this cooperation – these include a range of policy recommendations and policy instruments designed to strengthen linguistic diversity, defend language rights, deepen mutual understanding, consolidate democratic citizenship and sustain social cohesion.

And the European Centre for Modern Languages, in this lovely city of Graz, is one of these results and, allow me to say, one of the most successful results of this cooperation. I salute the vision of our Austrian friends, many of whom are present here today, who saw the importance languages would play in the new constellation of Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall, who understood the interest of a permanent structure dedicated to the improvement of language teaching and learning and whose energy and commitment brought the idea to fruition here, with the support of the initial group of ECML member states, notably France.

The Council of Europe is grateful to Austria for continuing this commitment, and grateful to the Federal Education Ministry, Land Steiermark and Stadt Graz for their unique tripartite financing of the Centre's infrastructure and to the Verein EFSZ – the Austrian Association – for managing it.

From the original core of 8 member states, the ECML Partial Agreement has now grown to include 33 countries and I am pleased to know that the Centre welcomes other countries to participate in activities whenever there is room. Of course, the benefit of language learning is not restricted to a part of Europe only and I therefore strongly encourage the remaining countries to join the Partial Agreement. Strong membership will be even more important as the

Centre helps to put into practice the decisions of the Summit of Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe Member States held last May, particularly those relating to democratic citizenship and intercultural dialogue.

The creation of the Centre was inspired by the need to support the transmission of the instruments and policies developed in Strasbourg down to the classrooms of the member states. So, in accordance with its Statute, the Centre has made its niche out of disseminating good practice and encouraging innovation in language education, doing this particularly by training multipliers and by developing networks of specialists in the field.

To be effective in this function, the Centre has to come up with concrete results that can be easily understood and applied by practitioners in language education at the national level. The Centre has achieved this through its 40-or-so quality publications and the direct experience of the more than 5 500 participants who have been involved in ECML activities since the beginning, experience which they then take back home and pass on to their colleagues.

And so, amongst language teachers throughout Europe, the name of Graz has become synonymous with good practice in language education as the ECML's reputation as an unrivalled centre of excellence has grown. Since the Centre's stakeholders are demanding people in demanding professions who are not easily satisfied, it is clear that this reputation has certainly been earned by dint of dedicated work.

In concluding this brief look back over the past, I am conscious of the debt that the Council's hugely influential work in languages owes to the guidance of John Trim over several decades. I take this opportunity to thank him for his truly unique contribution.

On this celebration day we are not only praising the ECML's past achievements. The European Centre for Modern Languages has wisely chosen to set these festivities in the context of a forward-looking workshop examining the needs of tomorrow's language teachers.

And so we look to the future: the ECML is now reaching maturity after its cycles of early growth and consolidation. This maturity must be reflected in the substance of its third medium-term programme, beginning in 2008. This programme should take into account the priorities identified by the recent Summit while remaining faithful to the Centre's two key missions:

The first is "the implementation of language policies". What a delightfully vague and frighteningly broad mission to have!! It is clear that the Centre has a vital role to play in supporting the translation into practice of the policy tools and instruments developed in Strasbourg. The Centre's current projects on the implementation of the European Language Portfolio are a good example of the valuable role the Centre can play in supporting its member states in their ongoing efforts to improve the quality of language learning and teaching, and I look forward to further initiatives of this kind.

The second mission defined by the Statute is "the promotion of innovative approaches to the learning and teaching of languages". This means that the Centre must remain a laboratory for new ideas, with a scope broad enough to cater for those who are exploring creative methods or developing innovative instruments in language education. It is therefore important that the procedures used for selecting activities for its programmes are flexible enough to allow the Centre to take up major issues rapidly when they arise.

The final comment I would like to make concerns the Council of Europe's place in the European institutional space, and of course its co-operation with the European Union. The European Year of Languages in 2001 has given rise to a series of initiatives which have reinforced our relations. Our concern is to avoid any risk of duplication in our language programmes, and we will, of course, continue to work to ensure appropriate complementarity and synergies in this area.

We know what the ECML's added value is – it has become the Centre's trademark:

collaborative work by international teams of experts
focused activities involving practitioners from the wider Europe
concentration on practical, results-oriented approaches
participation of multipliers selected for the strategic positions they occupy by the member states.

BUT, on top of all this comes the secret ingredient, only apparent to those who are lucky enough to work with the ECML: and that is the expertise and seasoned experience – both on content and educational aspects - of the Centre's staff. ECML collaborators know that, throughout their involvement in the programme, they will be counselled, assisted and supported – and equally admonished if they stray out of line! This is what makes the ECML a unique place in the world of language education.

And so I would like to end by congratulating all those whose efforts, past and present, have created and maintained this marvellous facility, made it live and enabled so many people to undergo the "Graz experience".

We live in a world where we are expected always to do more and to do it better. For once, let us stop and appreciate what has been achieved and say "Well done – you've done a good job!"