Inauguration

Doede Sijtsma

written within the project “Language Bridges”,
a sub theme working group of the
INTERREG IIIC Regional Framework Operation “Change on Borders”
Copyright Information:
Any sort of reproduction - including excerpts - is permitted only when indicating the exact source. Please quote as indicated in the following example: Marzena Górezka, “Mehrsprachigkeit in der Lubliner Region”, 2 Thematisches Forum “Mehrsprachigkeit in Grenzregionen” (2004), at www.eurac.edu
Ladies and gentlemen,

Doede Sijtsma
Kontaktadresse des Autors: d.sijtsma(at)prv.gelderland.nl

My name is Doede Sijtsma and I am proud to represent the Province of Gelderland as chair of a Theme Forum in the Change on Borders programme. Firstly, on behalf of the Province, I would like to express our gratitude to the Autonomous Province of Bolzano / South Tyrol for organising this meeting, the first within Theme Forum number 3. The subject due to be discussed today and tomorrow is one very close to your hearts, as demonstrated by the careful preparations which have preceded this meeting, and the way in which you have designed your website and the information you have made available to us all, via that site. In preparing for this meeting I was struck by the highly multilingual nature of your website. You have made every effort to use a range of languages to improve communication. But not everyone is equally successful.

Several weeks ago, a parliamentary committee of the European Parliament questioned the Dutch representative Mrs Kroes about her suitability to succeed Mr Monti as European Commissioner for Competition Policy. In terms of content, and for anyone who closely followed the newspaper reports - which I’m sure you all did - I need not explain what went on. However, by way of introduction to this meeting, I would like to bring up another aspect of that session, namely the language used. Mrs Kroes decided to speak part of the time in English - or at least her variant of English. Was this necessary and was it desirable?

To start with the first question, my answer is no. It was certainly not necessary. The European Union is renowned above all others for allowing speakers to use their own language, without having to worry about the translation of their words into Greek, German, French, Polish or any of the other languages of the institution.

And now to the second question. Was it desirable? To that question, too, I must reply in the negative, for two reasons. Firstly her decision was not desirable from the point of view of the interpreters. After all, it is difficult enough to interpret a more or less grammatically correct conversation. How
much more difficult must it then be to interpret a conversation in which a form of English is spoken, based on Dutch grammatical rules, which then for example has to be converted into comprehensible Finnish.

Secondly, because by opting for her own variant of English, Mrs Kroes voluntarily and quite possibly unintentionally gave away one of her most important political weapons, her mother tongue. She made no use of her innate knowledge of the Dutch nuances, a language in which she is eminently capable of elucidating the finest of points, and answering the most difficult questions with the necessary refinement. After all, in politics the finer points are often decisive ...

I can hear you asking whether Mrs Kroes should perhaps in the future refrain entirely from speaking English. And once again, I must reply in the negative. Of course she should use her broken English for discussing questions, establishing relationships, speaking to groups, holding work discussions or ordering pizzas and the like, all in an unofficial capacity, but in all situations involving the finer points of political nuance, she must above all and exclusively use the most subtle instrument upon which any politician can call for reflecting his or her version of reality, namely their mother tongue.

Today and tomorrow, this Theme Forum will deal with a number of aspects of language, above all in areas where the participants do not share the same language, for example in border regions with major differences on either side of that border, in border regions which themselves are already multilingual or in countries with more than one official language.

This meeting is to be the first in a series that deals with aspects of cross-border cooperation relating to ‘The promotion of socio-cultural integration between border regions and closer contacts among individual citizens’. In six meetings, we will deal with the aspects of ‘Strengthening of social cohesion in border regions’, ‘Training, education and cross-border mobility’ and ‘Culture, media & people-to-people activities’.
I would now like to wish everyone a pleasant and informative meeting, and express the hope that we will all learn and profit from one another’s experiences and knowledge.

And by the way, should you be wondering whether I wrote this piece myself, I did indeed. However, I then had it translated, and I hope very much the translation is a good one. Later, over a cup of coffee, I look forward to talking to many of you perhaps in my broken English or maybe my Rudie Carell German or for my part, simply in Dutch.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for your attention.

Doede Sijtsma
Published in the *Thematic Forum “Plurilingualism in Border Regions”* series:

1/2004


2/2004


3/2004


4/2004


5/2004