

**EU OFFICE TO HONG KONG AND MACAO**

**[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]**

**Vincent Piket**

Head of the EU Office to Hong Kong and Macao

**Speech by Vincent Piket at Speak Dating**

European Day of Languages 2014

**Festival Walk, Hong Kong, 26 September 2014**

\*\*\*

I am delighted to represent the European Union at the celebration of the European Day of Languages 2014 in Hong Kong. The European Day of Languages is celebrated globally. Every year, millions of people in the European Union member states and elsewhere take part in activities to promote linguistic diversity and the ability to speak other languages. And I am very glad that this year we are marking the European Day of Languages also in Hong Kong.

The European Union has always worked on promoting unity in diversity. Languages are one of the key features of cultural identity. The EU's motto "Unity in diversity" is a reflection of the multilingualism which lies at the heart of the EU. Through promoting multilingualism, the EU put its effort to raise public awareness of the languages used in Europe, to promote cultural and linguistic diversity and to encourage people to learn languages.

Yet, learning languages is not only limited to students and young people. One of the main messages of the European Day of Languages is that language skills are a necessity and a right for everyone. This is what the European Day of Languages is all about! By bringing to light creative and original ways to learn and practise languages out of school, the Speaking Dating event shows that it is never too late to learn languages and that language can also be a bridge between people.

The European Day of Languages was first celebrated by the Council of Europe and the European Commission in 2001 as part of the European Year of Languages. Since then, it has become the most prominent yearly action aimed at raising awareness of language learning and linguistic diversity. With some 225 indigenous languages in Europe and between 6000-7000 languages spoken around the world, the Day is a reminder of the many benefits of language learning, and how it can break down cultural barriers and open the door to new friendships and professional opportunities.

When the Second World War ended in 1945, maintaining peace throughout Europe was the primary goal and if all of Europe could unite under a common identity, this goal could be maintained with greater success. Part of that identity lies in language, which must also be standardized throughout the EU to further the sense of unity and allow for more effective communication. With the promotion of multilingualism, travelling across state borders would become easier; businesses would flourish; people would develop a better understanding of the many diverse cultures that surround them in the EU. Most importantly, multilingualism serves as a bridge to other people and open access to other countries and cultures, promoting mutual understanding. As Nelson Mandela said, *"If you talk to someone in a language he or she understands, that goes to the person's head. If you talk to somebody in his or her own language, that goes to the heart."*

The EU's multilingualism policy is laid on the cornerstone of democracy. Today, the European Union has 24 official languages. They all enjoy equal status. Within the EU institutions, all legislative and other official EU documents are translated into these languages. This guarantees that all citizens can understand the laws which apply to them, and that they can be well informed and take part in public debates. By installing the position of Commissioner for Multilingualism in 2007, the Union created a new mandate dedicated to the promotion and protection of multilingualism in the member states.

Translation and Interpretation is important to maintain multilingualism. The EU budget for this work amounts to 2 billion Euros per year. That is a huge amount of money, of course. But I would say that multilingualism is worth that money. At the end of the day, it is only 4 Euros per EU citizens: the price of two cups of coffee per citizen!

\*\*\*

So let's cherish multilingualism as a tool for promoting mutual understanding. For developing one's personal potential. And for allowing citizens to take part in public, border-crossing debates and trends. A little bit of that we will do today in our Speak Dating event. I would like to congratulate all partners, and especially the Goethe-Institute as coordinator, for co-organizing this Speak Dating Event to commemorate the European Day of Languages.

Thank you very much.

-----