Language equality in the digital age

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The European Parliament adopted by 592, votes to 45, with 4 abstentions, a resolution on language equality in the digital age.

Parliament noted multilingualism presents one of the greatest assets of cultural diversity in Europe and, at the same time, one of the most significant challenges for the creation of a truly integrated EU, with 24 official languages and more than 60 regional and minority languages in addition to migrant languages and sign languages.

Current obstacles to achieving language equality in the digital age in Europe: Members regretted the fact that, owing to a lack of adequate policies in Europe, there is currently a widening technology gap between well-resourced languages and less-resourced languages. More than 20 European languages are in danger of digital language extinction. Parliament pointed to the increasing digitalisation of European society, which is leading to disparities in access to information, particularly for the low-skilled, the elderly, people on low incomes and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It remarked that language technologies currently do not play a role in the European political agenda, despite the fact that respect for linguistic diversity is enshrined in the Treaties.

Members also noted that:

- European lesser-used languages are at a significant disadvantage on account of an acute lack of tools, resources and research funding;
- Europe remains far behind on language technologies, on account of market fragmentation, inadequate investment in knowledge and culture, poorly coordinated research, insufficient funding and legal barriers, with the market currently dominated by non-European actors, which are not addressing the specific needs of a multilingual Europe;
- the Digital Single Market remains fragmented by a number of barriers, including language barriers.

Improving the institutional framework for language technology policies at EU level: Parliament called on the Council to draft a recommendation on the protection and promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity in the Union, including in the sphere of language technologies. In addition, Members recommended that the Commission should allocate the area of multilingualism and language technology to the portfolio of a Commissioner, who should be tasked with promoting linguistic diversity and equality at EU level.

Parliament called on the Commission to:

- consider the creation of a centre for linguistic diversity that will strengthen awareness of the importance of lesser-used, regional and minority languages, including in the sphere of language technologies;
- develop strategies to facilitate multilingualism in the digital market, and define the minimum language resources that all European languages should possess, such as data sets, lexicons, speech records, translation memories, and encyclopaedic content;
- review its Framework Strategy for Multilingualism and propose a clear action plan on how to promote linguistic diversity and overcome language barriers in the digital area.

Recommendations for EU research policies: Parliament recommended establishing or extending projects such as the Digital Language Diversity Project, among others, that carry out research into the digital needs of all European languages, including those with both very small and very large numbers of speakers, so as to address the digital divide issue.

Members asked the Commission to establish a large-scale, long-term coordinated funding programme for research, development and innovation in the field of language technologies, at European, national and regional levels, tailored specifically to Europes needs and demands. This should be done with the participation of research centres, academia, and enterprises (particularly SMEs and start-ups).

Furthermore, the Commission was asked to set up an HLT financing platform, drawing on the implementation of the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, Horizon 2020 and the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF).

Education policies to improve the future of language technologies in Europe: Parliament noted that the development of language technologies covers many research areas and disciplines, including computational linguistics, artificial intelligence, computer science and linguistics. It recommended the provision of guidelines for the implementation of cohesive joint action at European level, raising awareness among students of the career opportunities in the language technology industry. It also pointed to the need to:

- promote the use of language technologies within cultural and educational exchanges between European citizens such as Erasmus+, for example Erasmus+ Online Linguistic Support;
- develop digital literacy programmes in Europes minority and regional languages and introduce language technology training and tools in the curricula of their schools, universities and vocational colleges.

Language technologies: benefits for both private companies and public bodies: Parliament recalled that just 16 % of European citizens having purchased online from other EU countries in 2015. Language technologies can contribute to future European cross-border and cross-language communication, boost economic growth and social stability. Members highlighted the importance of investment instruments and accelerator programmes that aim to increase the use of language technologies in the cultural and creative sector. They also wanted European SMEs to be able to easily access and use language technologies in order to grow their businesses online by accessing new markets.

Lastly, Parliament called on administrations at all levels to improve access to online services and information in different languages, especially for services in cross-border regions and culture-related issues.