Joint NPLD/EFNIL Position Paper on the Multilingual Digital Single Market

“Languages are not only a means of communication. They also have embedded in them people’s values, aspirations and hopes.” (European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity 2015, NPLD)

“Many European languages run the risk of becoming victims of the digital age as they are under-represented and under-resourced online. Huge regional market opportunities remain untapped because of language barriers.” (Multilingual Europe: A challenge for language tech. MultiLingual. April/May 2011, page 51/52)


www.rigasummit2015.eu
The aim of this position paper is to highlight that the European Union needs to reaffirm its commitment to linguistic diversity as part of its plans to establish a Digital Single Market in Europe and to ensure that all the languages spoken in Europe are supported and promoted within these new digital developments for the benefit of both European citizens and European economy.

Choosing a multilingual approach to the Digital Single Market does not only benefit the development of stable societies and robust and prosperous economies, it also strengthens and upholds the cultural cornerstone of Europe – our national, regional and minority languages.

This position paper is set within the present context of the European Union, where ensuring robust and competitive economies, a Digital Single Market and a highly skilled and mobile workforce are at the forefront of the political agenda.

We call for well thought-out policies and initiatives to ensure that the creation of prosperous economies and cohesive societies in Europe is supported maximally by the multilingual potential of its citizens and at the same time strengthens the vitality of all languages in use. The survival of language varieties whether they may be national, regional or minority languages depends on their presence in the digital world. Inclusive policies that reflect and acknowledges the present linguistic diversity in Europe, and which provide the opportunity for all the languages of Europe to flourish within the Digital Single Market would also have a stabilising influence and would underpin the work of ensuring lasting peace, prosperity and equality in Europe.

We welcome the plans of the European Commission to establish a Digital Single Market in Europe. Many borders and obstacles have already been removed or are addressed in the current Digital Single Market objectives. Still, overcoming the language barriers remains a major task if we wish to see a truly unified European economy and society.

Linguistic diversity is and must remain a cornerstone and treasured cultural asset of Europe. However, language barriers cause the European market to be fragmented and to fall short of its economic potential. Almost half of the European citizens never shop online in languages other than their native tongue, access to public e-services is usually restricted in terms of languages and the richness of European educational and cultural content is confined within linguistic communities.

Fortunately, in order to overcome these barriers, Europe does not need to abandon its treasure of language diversity – on the contrary. Technological development has brought us solutions to automate translation, interpretation, multilingual information retrieval and other multilingual processes. Although not perfect, these technologies already bring immense benefits enabling multilingual and cross-lingual access to websites and e-services, extracting knowledge out of multilingual data and boosting efficiency of translators.

Yet more still needs to be done, online machine translation and language technology services are dominated by a few of the world’s largest languages. This situation neglects European languages with less economic power. As a result almost half of Europe’s citizens are digitally disadvantaged and cannot use their mother tongue in the digital arena.
The market alone, due to its preference for short or medium term investments, fails to address the European language challenge which calls for an immediate and concerted EU action. Europe needs a strategy to remove language barriers, not by creating linguistic and cultural hegemony, but by making the Digital Single Market a real contact zone between languages and cultures, thus enabling European businesses and people to communicate in their own language, and providing equal digital opportunities for all European language communities.

Only if the Digital Single Market strategy foresees the use of technological solutions for bridging the language barriers, the full potential of the Digital Single Market can be unleashed. These solutions should include, among others, a set of digital services for an ever increasing range of languages available to all European citizens, businesses and organisations. These key enabling digital language services will allow technology and service companies to create numerous commercial solutions to cover a variety of market needs and requirements.

In the context of the European Union’s plans for a Digital Market, we would wish to see the Union combine its positive vision regarding linguistic diversity and its plans for a Digital Single Market into concrete, tangible and far-reaching measures.

Europe will remain a multilingual society and therefore all languages in Europe need to have sufficient technical support, otherwise many citizens will become marginalised and their languages will not survive into the digital age.

1. The potential of language technology will increase dramatically across the world in the coming years. If Europe wishes to become a world leader and an economic beneficiary from these developments it must invest now in being at the forefront of developing language technologies. Through a focused, concerted, major interdisciplinary LT research effort, Europe at the same time can preserve its precious languages.

2. In order to fully realise the potential of a single digital space and market place, language technologies, need to be developed for all the languages of Europe – national, regional or minority languages – to encourage the free flow of information, ideas and knowledge and to ensure the spread of goods and innovations to all citizens. Language agnostic technologies must also be rolled out to ensure the inclusion of European languages in technologies which already exist.

3. Language technology will be a key enabler in the next waves of the IT revolution; therefore we need to ensure that the basic building blocks for these developments in for all European languages are in place now.

4. Language technology will also help Europe to ensure citizens’ rights, at it provides means for all Europeans to communicate with public bodies and have access to public web services in their preferred language, regardless of what status this language enjoys.

5. Linking a positive and inclusive policy regarding multilingualism and linguistic diversity with strategic investments in the development of language technology for the Digital Single Market will bring about a quantum leap in the evolution of IT, put Europe in a leading position in a core area of economic growth and allow all our languages to thrive in the digital age.
The European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL)

The European Federation of National Institutions for Language is a body consisting of the central or national institutions for research, documentation and policy relating to the officially recognised standard languages within the states of the European Union (EU).

The purpose of EFNIL is the collection and exchange of information about the officially recognised standard languages of the EU, the provision of expert advice about language policy in the EU, the preservation of linguistic diversity within Europe and the promotion of plurilingualism amongst the citizens of the EU states. EFNIL also maintains an interest in the minority and regional languages of Europe.

EFNIL has published an overview of language legislation and practices in Europe – the European Language Monitor (ELM) which is updated by the member institutions on a regular basis.

More information on EFNIL and ELM can be found on www.efnil.org and www.efnil.org/projects/elm.

The Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD)

The Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD) is a European wide network working in the field of language policy & planning for Constitutional, Regional and Small-State Languages (CRSS) across Europe. NPLD includes Governments both national and regional, Universities and Associations as its members.

NPLD’s main goal is to raise awareness at a European level of the vital importance of planning for the sustainability of linguistic diversity in Europe. NPLD also aims to facilitate the exchange of best practices among governments, policy makers, practitioners, researchers and experts from all over Europe. The network also wishes to develop new practices as our understanding of how to sustain less widely used languages continues to grow. NPLD believes strongly that the European Union should invest in the future of all the languages of Europe especially in relation to the development of language related technology.

For more information on the work of NPLD go to www.npld.eu.