The EU and multilingualism

Democracy, transparency and the commitment to promote cultural and linguistic diversity account for the EU's unique multilingual structure based on 23 official languages. As a result of successive enlargements, the multilingual challenge has reached a completely new dimension – in terms of size, complexity, and policy relevance.

Multilingualism impacts on the lives of EU citizens and businesses in various ways. It provides enhanced business and career opportunities and offers increased mobility for students.

The horizontal nature of the concept means it has relevance to a wide range of EU policies such as employment, innovation, education and social inclusion.

Extensive multilingualism however translates into major costs. Ways of reducing them are sought mainly through relay translation and increased use of IT tools.

The complex structure of multilingualism brings some drawbacks, such as delays in implementation of new legislation, erroneous or confusing translations and conflicts arising from different legal interpretations of the different linguistic versions.

Some authors argue in favour of the adoption of an informal lingua franca, but given the high number of Europeans speaking only their mother tongue, this seems premature.

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Glossary

The word **interpreter** is used for a person who translates orally as opposed to a **translator** who provides this service in writing. A **lawyer-linguist** checks the linguistic and legislative quality of EU texts.

Context

The European Union (EU) is the only entity in the world running an official policy of multilingualism based on 23 official languages[1] (See Figure 1 for the list of languages).

In the EU, multilingualism is understood as "*the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives*"[2].

As part of the accession process, new Member States declare which of their official languages will become EU languages.

National languages are a fundamental feature of Member States' cultural identities and an important element of national sovereignty. The EU operates as a "family" whose members – coming from different cultural backgrounds – preserve their cultural identities. This is reflected in the EU motto "*United in diversity*". Multilingualism is both an expression of and recognition of this

cultural diversity. It is part of the European integration project, part of the guarantee of democracy and as such is enshrined in the EU Treaties.

Multilingualism is of high relevance to a wide range of policy areas, especially those lying at the heart of the recently launched Europe 2020 Strategy – employment, innovation, education and social inclusion.

Multilingualism was included in a Commissioner's portfolio[3] as a fully-fledged policy area, for the first time, in 2004.

In 2011, to mark the tenth anniversary of the European Day of Languages, the European Commission and the Council of Europe signed a joint declaration to reaffirm their commitment to multilingualism.

Purpose and legal basis

Objectives
The EU's multilingualism policy has three aims:

- To encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity. Indeed, multilingualism aims at preventing discrimination between citizens whose languages are spoken by a large number of people and others using less widely spoken ones.

Figure 1: EU official languages, with year of introduction

Source: European Commission, 2008.

- To give citizens access to EU legislation, procedures and information in their own languages. Multilingualism makes it possible for Europeans to participate in public debates and consultations launched by the EU, often online.

- To promote a multilingual economy. The efficiency of the Single Market is based among other things on a multilingual mobile workforce.

Legal basis
The term 'multilingualism' does not appear in the Treaties, but the concept is rooted in the basic legal texts of the EU. The first piece of legislation adopted by the Council of the European Economic Community – Regulation 1/1958 – determines the official and working languages of the European institutions.

Moreover, the same Regulation specifies that no legislation can enter into force until it has been translated into all official languages and published in the Official Journal of the EU. Citizens addressing the European institutions may use any of these languages and are entitled to a reply in the same language.

Multilingualism also reflects the EU's commitment to respecting and promoting linguistic diversity, as stated in Article 3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU and Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In addition, Article 21 of the Charter prohibits discrimination based on language.

The provisions relating to the EU language regime can only be changed by a unanimous vote in the Council[4].

Running a multilingual EU

Looked at from the supranational perspective of the EU, effective multilingualism can only be achieved if ways are found for citizens and bodies to communicate with each other – either by using a
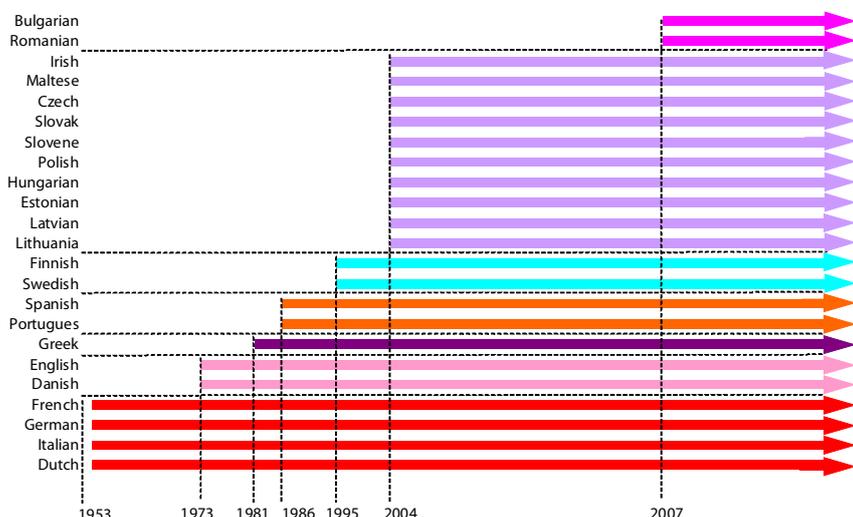
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language other than their native one, or by setting up a comprehensive translation system.

The EU has sought to facilitate both modes of communication – by supporting language learning in the Member States and by creating, maintaining and expanding complex interpretation and translation services.

Working with 23 languages yields 506 potential language combinations.

The use of so many official languages is the public face of the EU. Internally, the institutions operate with streamlined procedures in the name of efficiency, speed and cost.

Compromises have been found on the number of languages used in cases when full multilingualism is not possible. In those instances, the internal rules of each EU institution define the number of languages used[5].

In general, the institutions function with three working languages, English, French and German. Most documents are drafted in one of these languages and circulate internally in that language until the final version is ready for publication or transmission to another institution.

The EP, which often needs to produce documents rapidly in all official languages uses English, French and German as 'relay' languages. For example, a document presented in Latvian will not be translated

directly into all 22 other languages. Instead it will first be translated into the three 'relay' languages, leaving translators free to use one of these to retranslate the text into their main language. This limits the need for translators who can work directly from, for instance, Latvian to Greek.

EU interpreters use a similar system. For example, a Finnish speaker's words will be interpreted into a limited number of 'relay' languages. A Slovak interpreter will use one of these as the source language, thus removing the need for people who can interpret directly from Finnish into Slovak.

The institutions use lawyer-linguists at all stages of the legislative procedure to check the quality of legislative texts.

All language versions of an EU law have the same legal value, unlike UN or OECD documents, where only the original is the authentic version ("qui fait foi").

The translation services use specific IT applications to minimise the risk of human error and speed up the production of texts. Document repositories and reference databases are created so that parts of already translated texts can be reused.

Language regime of other multinational bodies

Its law-making function and the direct involvement of its citizens explain why the EU uses more languages than multinational bodies like the United Nations (UN) or NATO, which operate only at the intergovernmental level with no legislative function. The UN, with 192 members, has six official languages. The Council of Europe, with 47 members, publishes official documents only in English and French, while NATO, with its 28 members, uses mainly English, despite having two official languages.

Source: Multinational bodies' websites.

Facts and figures about multilingualism in the European Parliament

Staff translators	circa 700
Translation assistants	circa 260
Staff interpreters	circa 430
Free-lance interpreters	circa 2 500
Interpreters working during plenary sittings	800-1 000
Lawyer-linguists	75
Pages translated in 2010	circa 1 720 000

Source: European Parliament website, 2011.

The cost of EU multilingualism

Running a multilingual EU comes at a price. The total expenditure on all EU institutions' language services taken together is around €1.1 billion. This in turn represents €2.50 per

EU citizen per year, or 1% of the EU's annual budget[6].

An online public consultation carried out by the European Commission shows that a majority of Europeans find that the costs related to working in 23 official languages are justified or could even be increased. Only 7.54% wish that the EU spent less in this respect.

A special report of the Court of Auditors examining expend-iture on interpretation incurred by the EP, the Commission and the Council, concludes that the quality of interpretation generally meets needs and expectations, but a number of measures need to be taken to reduce cost, notably by avoiding late cancellations and last-minute requests.

Issues facing multilingualism

The complex structure of multilingualism at EU level generates a series of flaws. A slower decision-making process, risk of errors and increased cost are among the most frequently quoted ones.

For instance, in May 2004, the implementation of new directives on financial regulation had to be postponed because they were not translated in time. Meanwhile, the EU welcomed ten new Member States and the directives had to be translated into nine more languages, thus causing an additional delay of six months[7].

Relay translation generally helps reduce cost. However, it may also result in misunderstanding, misrepresentation or errors, which frequently makes revisions by native speakers necessary and in the end, may increase cost.

Evolution of European Commission's Directorate General for Translation (DGT)

The Commission's DGT is not only its largest department, but one of the largest language services in the world. With 2 500 staff, it absorbs 10% of the Commission's total staff. It has grown 100-fold since 1958 when it operated with four languages. It translated some 2 million pages in 2008, and this production is projected to continue to grow by some 5% per year.

Source: DGT website, 2011.

This table shows the evolution of source languages for translation at the European Commission and highlights the increasing importance of the English language:

Language	1997	2004	2008
EN	45%	62%	72%
FR	41%	26%	12%
DE	5%	3%	3%
Other	9%	9%	13%

Source: Lawmaking in the EU multilingual environment, 2010.

The issue of validity of legal documents is also important. Working groups within the Council usually discuss texts drafted in English. However, it is the translated texts that in the end become legally binding. This has prompted the creation of national coordination bodies in charge of legal terminology in recent years.

Under Article 19 of the Treaty on EU, the European Court of Justice is tasked with the interpretation of provisions of EU law, in particular when the meaning of concepts or terms used by the legislator gives rise to doubts. The multilingual nature of EU law adds a further dimension to this task, due to possible discrepancies in the different language versions of the legal acts.

Practitioners argue that existing case law points to the possibility of claiming compensation for losses caused by the incorrect publication of EU legislation, and may even prevent it from being enforced.

In spite of the criticisms expressed, experts affirm that the importance of multilingualism for the achievement of European integration outweighs the administrative inconvenience, delays and costs inherent in having to work in the official languages of all 27 Member States.

Impact on citizens and businesses

The practice of multilingualism and language-learning is deemed important for a variety of reasons, including personal development, intercultural awareness, study, business and career opportunities.

Having skills in multiple languages tends to increase job opportunities. The Erasmus programme offers the possibility to study abroad for three to 12 months and the qualifications acquired are recognised by the home university. The EU's long-term objective is to increase individual multilingualism until every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue.

If current trends remain unchanged, geographical mobility will become a distinctive feature of the working lives of a large number of Europeans, which in turn, will make multilingualism an important aspect of sustainable employability.

Intercultural communication skills are increasingly important in marketing and sales strategies. Although English is the world's leading business language, other languages could provide EU companies with a competitive edge.

Research points to missed business opportunities because of lack of language skills, which restrains EU companies' access to local markets.

A report investigating the challenges faced by micro-companies[8] against the backdrop of the economic crisis concludes that companies increasingly need language skills to analyse foreign markets and communicate with foreign partners.

According to a recent study, the language industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and has been one of the most resilient during the economic crisis. In the EU, it is set to grow by 10% annually, resulting in an approximate value of €16.5 billion[9] in 2015.

Figure 2: Turnover of translation and interpretation business by EU Member State (€ million)
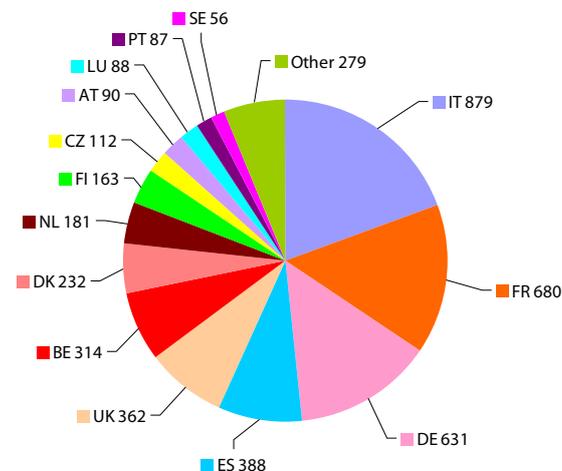
Data source: European Commission, 2009.

EU, why not a *lingua franca*?

Democracy requires good communication among citizens, for which linguistic diversity could be a barrier. Some experts argue that the EU is conducting a hypocritical language policy. They suggest a distinction between a 'language for communication' and a 'language for identification'. English as a *lingua franca* is seen as a language for communication, while native languages can play a role in identification with specific communities.

While many authors agree about the inevitability of English as an informal *lingua franca*, some of them consider that this would be unfair and undemocratic towards non-English speakers. Only 38% of EU citizens speak English well enough to hold a conversation, according to a European Commission report. In addition, 44% of Europeans speak no language other than their mother tongue.

With the percentage of English speakers still being quite low, the reliance on a *lingua franca* outside the EU institutions seems premature at this stage and might put at risk the core democratic values of the EU.

Further reading

[Library Information Sources](#) on Multilingualism, 2010.

[Entreprises bruxelloises et langues étrangères: pratique et coût d'une main d'ouvre ne maîtrisant pas les langues étrangères](#)/TIBEM, Bruxelles, 2006.

[Companies work better with languages](#)/Forum for Multilingualism, Brussels, 2008.

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Endnotes

[1] In addition to the 23, Catalan, Basque and Galician have official language status within Spain, so certain EU texts are translated from and into these languages at the cost of the Spanish government.

[2] European Commission/[High-level group on multilingualism](#), Brussels, 2007.

[3] Slovakian Jan Figel was appointed Commissioner responsible for Education, training, culture and multilingualism.

[4] Article 342 of the [Treaty](#) on the Functioning of the European Union.

[5] For a detailed comparison between institutions, see: [The application of multilingualism in the European context](#)/ Athanassiou, P., ECB Legal Working Paper N°2, European Central Bank, Frankfurt, 2006.

[6] Data quoted in a Commission [press release](#) from December 2006. Contacts with officials from the EP's DG Translation and DG Interpretation pointed to the lack of updated information. However, they expressed the opinion that the data was still accurate.

[7] Information quoted in: Scenarios beyond unanimity/Fidrmuc J., Ginsburgh V., Weber S., In Langues et construction européenne, Cahiers du Collège d'Europe N°10, Bruxelles, 2010.

[8] Micro-companies employ around 37.5 million people in the EU (data [Eurostat](#), 2005).

[9] This figure includes the industry sectors of translation, interpretation, software localisation and website globalisation, language technology tool development, language teaching, consultancy in linguistic issues and organisation of international conferences with multilingual requirements. In addition, it includes language-related activities performed in corporate environments.