

Languages and the Digital Single Market

SUMMARY

The citizens of the European Union communicate in its 24 official languages, approximately 60 regional and minority languages, and 31 national and regional sign languages. Some of these have many millions of native and foreign speakers, whereas others are spoken by just a few thousand people each.

Dominant languages can threaten the survival of 'smaller' ones with many fewer native speakers and which thus need protection. Multilingualism policy in areas such as language teaching and learning, and translation and interpretation, is necessary to facilitate communication among various language communities and for supporting languages with fewer speakers. Moreover, unaddressed language barriers hinder the economy of individual Member States and the EU in general.

The digital shift and ICT technologies open rich possibilities of expression and business, yet these are not spread equally across language communities. Smaller languages are under-represented in digital environments, which could entail their digital extinction. New technologies can facilitate language learning, translation and interpretation. However, paradoxically, the smaller languages, which could benefit the most from these technologies, are the least resourced in data, in researchers specialising in both language and technology, and in human and financial means.

Some solutions to these challenges could emerge from EU-supported and coordinated projects, a clear focus on language technologies in EU policies, and dedicated funding, provided in the clear awareness that these challenges not only have a human dimension but also economic implications for the digital single market and the economy of the EU as a whole.



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Linguistic diversity, identity and intangible heritage

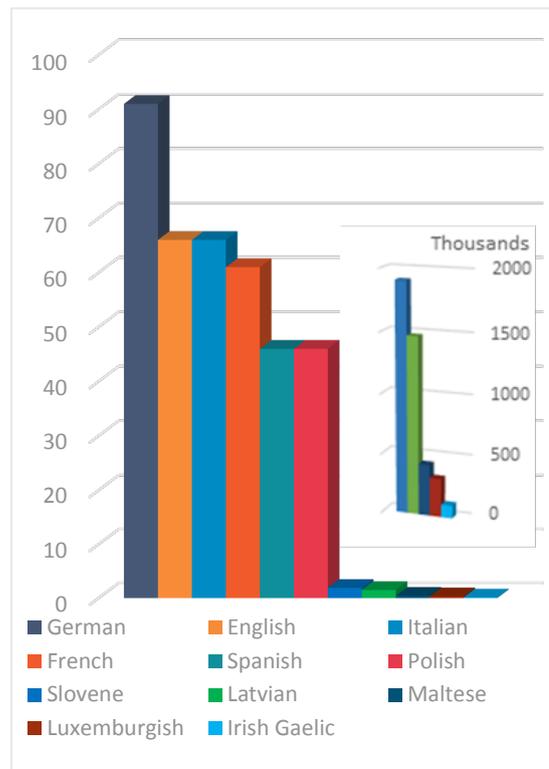
The United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) [2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) includes languages under [intangible cultural heritage](#) together with oral traditions and expressions, songs and performing arts. It aims to protect languages, many of which are at risk of [disappearing](#).

A disappearing language means the loss of an important identity factor. As shown in a 2017 [Pew Research Center survey](#), language is a core element of individuals' identity: as many as 84 % of Dutch respondents consider it the most important element of their national identity, followed by 81 % of Britons and Hungarians.

Article [165\(1\)](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union says that the EU shall respect the Member States' cultural and linguistic diversity and contribute to the teaching and dissemination of its Member States' languages. Yet, huge disparities in the number of native speakers of the EU Member States' official languages make this task difficult. For example, German is spoken as a mother tongue in Germany (the largest Member State) and Austria as well as part of Belgium, while [Irish](#) is only spoken as a mother tongue by roughly [2.5 %](#) of the Irish population (in total, a twentieth that of Germany).

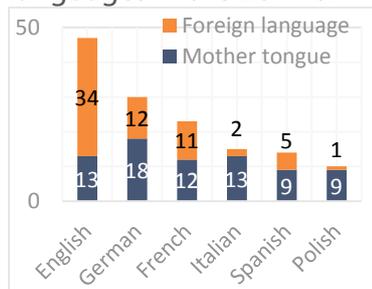
The Council of Europe's [Charter for Regional and Minority Languages](#), ratified by [17 EU Member States](#), aims to protect European regional and minority languages. Some [128 European languages](#) feature in the Unesco World Atlas of Languages in Danger due to a [declining native speaker population](#). Languages with huge populations of native and foreign speakers, English being the leading example, exert pressure on 'smaller languages' and weaken their status; yet, the majority of EU citizens believe that all languages should be treated equally, which means that [films should be subtitled](#) and citizens' language skills should be a [policy priority](#).

Population of EU most/least spoken official languages as mother tongues, in millions



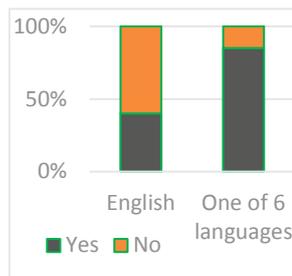
Source: [STOA study](#), EPRS, 2017.

Most commonly used languages in the EU in %



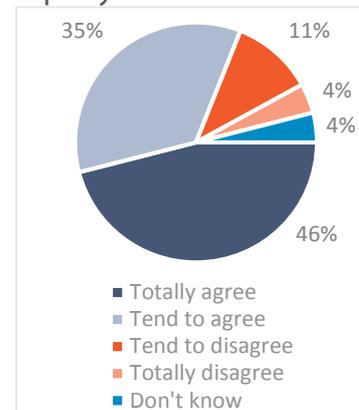
Source: [European Commission](#), Europeans and Languages, 2005.

Estimated % of EU population speaking a foreign language



Source: [STOA study](#), 2017.

All languages spoken in the EU should be treated equally



Source: [Eurobarometer 386](#), 2012.

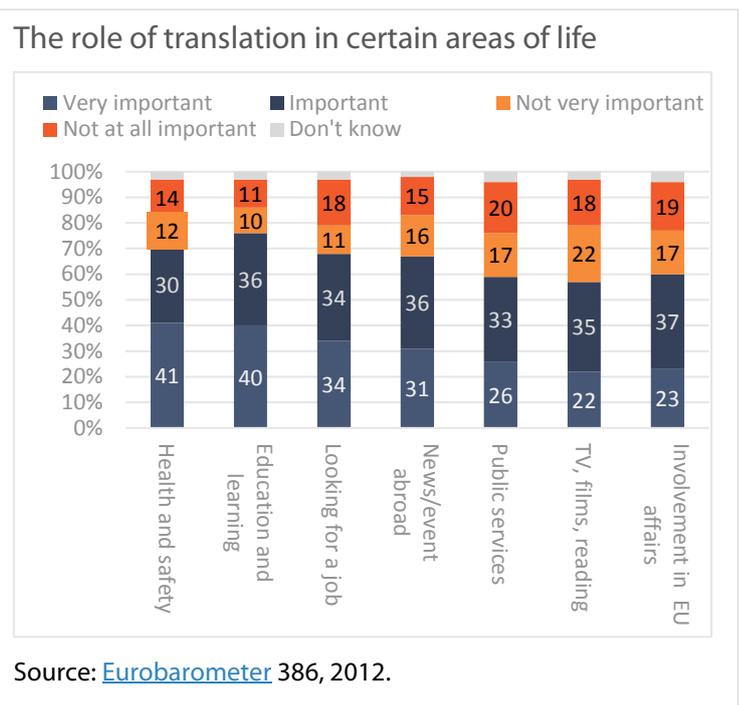
Multilingual society and the economy

The EU promotes multilingualism, and has set goals such as the 2002 Barcelona objective for all its citizens to communicate in their [mother tongue and in two other languages](#) taught from an early age. A September 2008 Commission communication on '[Multilingualism: an asset for Europe](#) and a shared commitment', and a November 2008 [Council resolution](#) on the European strategy for multilingualism, also highlighted the opportunities offered by ICT for language teaching and learning as well as for translation and interpretation.

Proficiency in the mother tongue (the country's official, regional or minority language) plus two other languages is a long-term objective that faces barriers, has economic implications and involves [huge regional differences](#): 80 % of Hungarians compared to 20 % of Dutch people do not speak English, and almost half of the EU population is monolingual.

Six EU official languages – English, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Polish – are the mother tongues spoken by the largest groups of EU citizens, while English, German, French and Spanish are the most popular foreign languages in the EU. Nevertheless, 15 % of citizens, representing more than half the population of [11 Member States](#), do not speak any of them. In such situations, translation is one way of overcoming language barriers for citizens and businesses operating in the European single market and particularly in the [digital single market](#). The 2012 Eurobarometer 386 survey showed that translation enjoys overall acceptance.

According to a 2017 European Parliament [study](#), lowering language barriers could facilitate access to public services, raise citizens' participation in public life, and increase the number of cross-border e-shoppers more than four times, helping overcome the [fragmentation of e-commerce](#). In 2008, the European market for translation, interpretation and localisation was estimated at €5.7 billion with a [10 % yearly growth rate](#); the global language technology industry overall is projected to reach a value of US\$65 billion by 2020.



Languages and technology

ICT can be challenging for languages, particularly those that are [under-represented](#) on the internet and risk [digital extinction](#), a fate most European languages could face. That said, ITC can also be beneficial, as language technologies and data computing offer solutions for language learning and translation among the EU's 24 official and 60 regional and minority languages.

In the EU, where the majority of citizens are not able to communicate in a foreign language, quality translation is of crucial importance, but costs money and time that small businesses cannot afford. Human language technologies help address this problem, but are hindered by the lack of, or limited, access to necessary linguistic data that would allow [data analysis](#) and the necessary processing. This applies most of all to smaller languages, where data are scarce; furthermore, all users of languages [other than English](#) are disadvantaged, since language technologies are [mostly US-developed](#).

Language is also essential in [content creation](#) and curation, a rapidly growing sector that is an important factor in eliminating the digital divide. The Unesco General Conference in its 2003

Recommendation concerning the [Promotion and Use of Multilingualism](#) and Universal Access to Cyberspace calls for international cooperation in automated translation services to overcome language barriers, promote human interaction on the internet, and provide web diversity.

The EU and language technology

A [Strategic Agenda](#) for the Multilingual Digital Single Market drafted at the 2015 Riga summit defined a programme consisting of innovative technology solutions for businesses and public services, language technology services, platforms and infrastructure, and priority research themes.

To address the challenges highlighted above, the European Commission supports research and innovation projects through funding from the [Horizon 2020](#) research programme. It also finances infrastructure for language resources and processing tools through the [Connecting Europe Facility](#) (fund for infrastructure investment, CEF). A number of recent initiatives have paved the way for bringing together communities that are fragmented according to the language they speak. Among these are the earmarking of [€5 million from CEF](#) for automated translation of public services in the EU, the securing of Horizon 2020 funding for the [European Language Resource Coordination](#) network and data project, and many other initiatives such as [CRACKER](#) – Cracking the Language Barrier Federation, the Multilingual Europe Technology Alliance network [META-NET](#), involved in language technology research and engineering, and the Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure [CLARIN](#) projects.

MAIN REFERENCES

[Language equality in the digital age](#). Towards a Human Language Project, Scientific Foresight Unit, EPRS, European Parliament, March 2017.

[European Strategy for Multilingualism](#): Benefits and Costs, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament, September 2016.

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An EP call for language technologies

On 11 September 2018, the EP adopted its own-initiative [resolution on language equality](#) in the digital age, pointing to the lack, among EU priorities, of language technology, which is necessary for the removal of language barriers, for sustaining equality among EU citizens regardless of their language, and for enabling businesses and public services to thrive in a multilingual EU.

The EP is concerned that smaller languages, which would benefit the most from language technologies, lack the tools and resources to do so while at the same time risking digital extinction. For businesses, this could translate into lost opportunities.

The EP calls for coordinated EU research on language technologies, open access and the re-use of public/private-sector information and data related to language resources, which should also be made interoperable. Such actions should be undertaken and coordinated at EU, national and regional level.

