Multilingualism: The language of the European Union

SUMMARY

Some 7 000 languages are spoken globally today. However, half of the world’s population shares just six native languages, and some 90% of all languages may be replaced by dominant ones by the end of the century.

The harmonious co-existence of 24 official languages is one of the most distinctive features of the European project. Multilingualism is not only an expression of the EU countries’ cultural identities but it also helps preserve democracy, transparency and accountability. No legislation can enter into force until it has been translated into all official languages and published in the Official Journal of the EU. Crucially, the provisions relating to the EU language regime can only be changed by a unanimous vote in the Council of the EU.

The EU is committed to promoting language learning but has limited influence over educational and language policies, as these are the responsibility of the individual EU countries. A 2012 poll suggests that a slim majority of Europeans (54%) can hold a conversation in at least one foreign language, but worryingly, nearly half of all Europeans (46%) cannot, and only four in 10 pupils attain the basic level of competence allowing them to have a simple conversation in a foreign language.

The European Parliament is committed to ensuring the highest possible degree of multilingualism in its work. Based on the 24 official languages that constitute the public face of the EU, the total number of linguistic combinations rises to 552, since each language can be translated into the 23 others. Currently, over 1 000 staff employed in translation and over 500 in interpretation care for the translation and interpretation needs of the 751 Members of the European Parliament. Internally, the EU institutions mostly use just three working languages: English, French and German.

The overall cost for delivering translation and interpretation services in the EU institutions is around €1 billion per year, which represents less than 1% of the EU budget or just over €2 per citizen.

Following the success of the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe designated 26 September as the European Day of Languages.

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Global linguistic diversity

Between 6,000 and 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today. Giving a precise figure is impossible, since the borderline between a language and a dialect is not well defined. Strikingly, 97% of the world’s population speaks about 4% of the world’s languages, while only about 3% speaks the roughly 96% of remaining languages. Half of the world’s 7.7 billion inhabitants share just six native languages. Some 3% of the world’s languages (255) belong to Europe. The highest number of living languages – 2,165 – is found in Asia.

Unless current trends change, some 90% of all languages spoken today may be replaced by other dominant ones by the end of the century. The Unesco Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger reveals that 40% of languages spoken in the world are endangered (see Figure 1). Worryingly, at least 2,000 of the world’s endangered languages have under 1,000 speakers, and 4% have disappeared in the past 70 years.

Running a multilingual EU

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’. The EU’s multilingualism policy has three goals:

- to encourage language learning and promote linguistic diversity. Indeed, multilingualism aims to prevent discrimination between citizens whose languages are spoken by a large number of people and others using less widely spoken ones;
- 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;
- to promote a multilingual economy. The efficiency of the single market is based, among other things, on a multilingual mobile workforce.

Did you know that…

There are 68 different indigenous languages in Mexico, further subdivided into 364 variations. Ayapaneco is one such language. Having survived the Spanish conquest, wars, revolutions, famines and floods, it now faces extinction, as the two persons left who can speak it fluently refuse to talk to each other...


Figure 1 – Degrees of language endangerment

Note: Data from the original source do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of endangerment</th>
<th>Intergenerational Language Transmission</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe or data deficient</td>
<td>Language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely endangered</td>
<td>Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severely endangered</td>
<td>Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically endangered</td>
<td>Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., family).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extinct since 1950</td>
<td>There are no speakers left (included in the Atlas if presumably extinct since the 1950s).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even though the term ‘multilingualism’ does not appear in the Treaties, 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 back in 1958, determined the official and working languages of the European institutions, and specified that no legislation could enter into force until it had been translated into all official languages and published in the Official Journal of the EU. 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. Citizens addressing the European institutions may use any official language and are entitled to a reply in the same language. The EU language regime can only be changed by a unanimous vote in the Council of the EU. From a broader perspective, multilingualism is of high relevance to a wide range of policy areas, such as employment, innovation, education and social inclusion.

Following the success of the European Year of Languages (2001), the Council of Europe designated 26 September as the European Day of Languages. It was introduced in a Commissioner’s portfolio as a fully fledged policy area for the first time in 2004.

Preserving diversity

National languages are a fundamental feature of a country’s cultural identity and an important element of its sovereignty. The EU operates as a ‘family’ whose members preserve their cultural identity, a principle that is reflected in the EU motto ‘United in diversity’. When acceding to the EU, new Member States declare which of their languages will become an official EU language. Currently, the EU has three alphabets (Cyrillic, Greek and Latin) and 24 official languages (see Figure 2), which are listed in the Treaties (Article 55(1) TEU). Alongside official EU languages, national sign languages and the languages spoken by the immigrant or refugee populations complete the linguistic picture of the EU.

EU countries are also committed to the preservation of regional or minority languages. The critical threshold for the survival of a language is estimated at 300,000 speakers. According to Unesco, there are 221 endangered regional and minority languages in the EU (see Figure 3). However, they are not languages spoken within a particular state. Their protection and promotion is ensured by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe in 1992, and signed and ratified by 17 EU countries.

Adoption of a single EU language has sometimes been considered, but democracy, transparency and accountability require that all EU citizens understand clearly what is being done in their name.
Moreover, respect for linguistic diversity is enshrined in the Treaties (Article 3(3) TEU) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (Article 22).

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 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 (see next sections).

Language learning

The EU is committed to promoting language learning but has limited influence over it, since educational and language policies are the responsibility of the individual EU countries. In 2002, the EU leaders set themselves the objective of ensuring that Europeans would be able to communicate in two languages in addition to their mother tongue. Education ministers renewed this commitment in May 2019, by adopting one of the components of a new package of legislation, namely a text recommending the acquisition of a first foreign language for social or professional purposes and, if possible, a second foreign language to enable interaction with a certain degree of fluency.

But where exactly does the EU stand in terms of multilingualism? Looking at the state of language learning across the EU is very much like considering whether a bottle is half empty or half full. The results of a 2012 poll suggest that a slim majority of Europeans (54 %) can hold a conversation in at least one additional language, a quarter (25 %) can speak at least two and one in 10 (10 %) is conversant in at least three. However, quite worryingly, this poll also shows that nearly half of all Europeans (46 %) cannot speak any foreign language well enough to hold a conversation. This state of affairs was confirmed by a 2012 European Survey on language competences, which concluded that foreign language learning in Europe is poor.

Indeed, the results of the survey showed that only four in 10 pupils reach the ‘independent user’ level (see box) in the first foreign language, indicating an ability to have a simple conversation. Further, only one quarter attain this level in the second foreign language. A large proportion of pupils – 14 % for the first language and 20 % for the second – do
not reach the 'basic user' level, meaning that they are unable to use even very simple language. There are also substantial differences in EU countries' performance: the data show that the share of pupils reaching the level of 'independent user' in the first foreign language varies from 9% (England) and 14% (France) to 82% (Malta and Sweden).

The majority of Europeans do not describe themselves as active language learners, and around a quarter (23%) have never learned a second language. Over two-thirds of Europeans (68%) have learned a foreign language at school. Interestingly, a 2018 survey shows that while on average 80% of respondents (with wide differences among countries) can read and write in more than one language, only 66% say they would be able to follow a (higher education) course in more than one language (see Figure 4).

Limited linguistic competence therefore remains one of the main obstacles to benefitting from the opportunities offered by the EU education, training and youth programmes. Conversely, enhancing EU citizens' command of foreign languages will enable them to benefit more from the opportunities offered by the single market.

**Multilingualism in the European Parliament**

The European Parliament is committed to ensuring the highest possible degree of multilingualism in every possible aspect of its work. For instance, the right of each Member of the European Parliament (MEP) to read and write parliamentary documents, follow debates and speak in their own official language is expressly recognised in the Parliament’s Rules of Procedure. Similarly, all parliamentary documents are published in all of the official EU languages, which are considered equally important. Special provisions exist for certain languages recognised by the constitution of a Member State, even if they are not the country's official EU language(s).

Meeting the translation and interpretation needs of 751 MEPs is a considerable challenge. Currently, over 1,000 staff are employed in translation services and over 500 in interpretation. With 24 official languages, the total number of linguistic combinations reaches 552, since each language can be translated into the 23 others. As it is not always possible to translate directly from a source language...
into a target language (for instance, from Maltese into Bulgarian), a system of ‘relay’ languages has been in use since 2004. It involves translating the text first into English, French or German and only then into another language. This system is also applied in interpretation. Sign language interpretation is also provided in plenary debates, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the EU in 2011.

Verifying the linguistic and legislative quality of the texts is the job of the Parliament’s team of 75 lawyer-linguists. Throughout the legislative procedure, working with their counterparts in other institutions, they ensure the highest possible quality of legislative texts in all EU languages.

The 24 official languages of the EU are its public face. Internally, the institutions operate with streamlined procedures in the name of efficiency, speed and cost, and in general use three working languages: English, French and German. The translation services use specific IT applications to minimise the risk of human error and to speed up the production of texts. Document repositories and reference databases are created so that parts of already translated texts can be reused (see box).

In 2018, the Parliament’s translation service processed over 2.7 million pages. If piled up, they would be nearly as high as the Eiffel Tower.

The total cost for translation and interpretation services delivered in all of the EU institutions stands at around €1 billion per year. This represents less than 1% of the EU budget or just over €2 per citizen. EU institutions continually strive to improve efficiency and maximise the use of resources to keep the cost of these services at reasonable levels.

ENDNOTES

1 Slovakian Ján Figel was appointed Commissioner responsible for education, training, culture and multilingualism.
2 An agreement on the use of Basque, Catalan and Galician has been concluded between the EU institutions and the Spanish government. The United Kingdom government has a similar agreement concerning the use of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. In these cases, translations are provided by the government of the Member State concerned, at its own expense. Interpreting from (but not into) Basque, Catalan/Valencian/Balearic and Galician is provided upon request for certain Council formations with regional representatives attending, as well as in the plenary meetings of the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee. The costs for these services are met by the Member State concerned. The Welsh and Scottish authorities have a similar arrangement.

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