

European issues
n°541
23rd December 2019

Speaking European

Stefanie BUZMANIUK

The European Union is neither a State nor an international organisation like any other. From the outset its unique character demanded the creation of a language regime that would meet particularly high standards.

With twenty-four official languages its multilingualism is different from that of any other international entity, such as the United Nations, which has six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish). Nor does it resemble the multilingualism of a federal state such as the United States, which has only one official language. The Swiss model would be the one which European multilingualism would most closely resemble: an identical official status for all constituent languages. This multilingualism is radically inclusive but also highly complex. It therefore gives rise to lively discussions with a wide range of arguments in support - laudatory, pragmatic, and critical.

The complexity of the Union's language regime is reflected in concrete examples: 2.2 million pages are translated each year in the [Commission](#), about 43% of the staff of the [Court of Justice](#) work in the translation and interpreting services. With twenty-four official languages, there is a total of 522 possible translation combinations.

At first glance, [the costs of this language regime](#) are considerable: all translation and interpretation services combined generate costs of around €1.1 billion per year, which, however, represents less than 1% of the EU budget. This cost should therefore be put into perspective: it represents only about €2 per citizen per year.

While European multilingualism has often been criticised for being too costly, the former Commissioner

for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban (2007-2010), defended it, stressing that this financial effort represents the [price of democracy](#).

In addition to democratic considerations, there are many other reasons for European multilingualism – historical, legal and practical. Looking at its foundations and the reasons that led to its continuation, it is obvious that another choice in language matters would not have been appropriate for the European Union, whose motto is: "United in diversity".

EXTENSIVE MULTILINGUALISM IMPOSED BY HISTORY

The first negotiations for the creation of the ECSC were largely conducted in German as the main players were all German-speaking: Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Italian Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi, Luxembourg-born French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman (coming from a region that was historically multilingual) were perfectly bilingual, as were Dutch Foreign Minister Dirk Stikker, and his Belgian counterpart Paul Van Zeeland and Luxembourg's Joseph Bech. Initially, therefore, the choice of language was German.

The [1951 Paris Treaty](#) did not define a language regime for the European Community. It was not until the Treaties of Rome in 1957 that a reference to the issue of language became part of a legislative text. Article 217 states: "*The rules governing the languages of the institutions of the Community shall, without prejudice to the provisions contained in the rules of procedure of the Court of Justice, be determined by the Council, acting unanimously*". Each State present at the negotiating table had one vote to take the crucial decision on the linguistic future of Europe. This article is therefore the foundation of the European language regime, which has been addressed on an

inter-State and non-Community basis. In accordance with this provision, the Council decided on the language arrangements by means of a regulation, as it adopted *Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community*.

Clearly, the German language could not have been the only official language because of the temporal proximity of the two world wars. Choosing the German language would have been politically impossible. French would not have been accepted by the Flemish because of Belgium's linguistic diversity, nor by the Italians because of equality issues. After the war, the founding countries tried to avoid any potential conflict. As the language issue had a direct impact on the question of national identity, the choice to opt for multilingualism encompassing all languages was both the most obvious and the least conflictual. European multilingualism thus began with four official languages: Dutch, French, German and Italian.

THE RECOGNITION AND REGULATION OF MULTILINGUALISM IN THE TREATIES

At present, several treaty provisions regulate the language issue more or less explicitly. The official languages are listed in Article 55(1) TEU, which provides that the Treaty be drawn up in twenty-four original versions^[1], i.e. without any translation requirements. This implies that the twenty-four languages have equal status and that the twenty-four texts have the same legal value. Pursuant to Article 342 TFEU, any change to this language regime would have to be adopted - unanimously - by the Council.

Under Article 3(3) TEU, the European Union "*shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced*". In addition to protecting the languages themselves, the European Union has included the protection of the speakers of languages in the Treaties: the principle of linguistic non-discrimination is established in Article 18 TFEU and can be found in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (CFEU).

Article 24 TFEU directly governs the way in which the European institutions work regarding the use of the twenty-four languages. It gives European citizens the right to communicate with the institutions in the twenty-four Treaty languages and obliges the institutions to reply to them in their respective tongue. This right granted to citizens and the obligation incumbent on the institutions is found in Article 41 of the CFEU, which confers on Europeans the right to good administration. According to the texts, this is only possible if there are no language barriers - a strong argument for 24-language multilingualism.

Other articles in the Treaties can also be interpreted as a basis to justify extended multilingualism, even if they do not explicitly refer to the language issue. Article 2 TEU thus sets out the fundamental values, in particular those of democracy, equality and respect for the rights of those belonging to minorities, which are necessary for an understanding of the Union's multilingual language regime.

Active participation in democratic life is only possible if citizens have access to legal documents, political debates and information in a language in which they have sufficient capacity for understanding and expression. This is a particular problem when it comes to the notion of the "*Spitzenkandidaten*" during the European elections: these "lead candidates" should be able to speak and be understood by all European citizens. However, none of them speaks all twenty-four languages. This time round some spoke up to 7, others only 2!

Legally founded on the principle of equality, the European Union is committed to providing its services to all citizens. Citizens can only benefit from these services if they are informed about them in a language they understand. So, everything should be translated. This is not always the case however.

Let us take the example of Malta, which has a population of around 494 000, which is very small compared with Germany, France or Italy: the inclusion of Maltese as an official language of the Union is a good illustration of the respect of pluralism in Europe, as established in

[1] Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, Gaelic, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovakian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish

Article 2 TEU. In a pluralist society, a language regime with a single official language, for example English as a *lingua franca*, is inconceivable.

In addition to the legal obligations regarding language laid down in the European Treaties, the Union is also obliged to comply with national laws when exercising its legislative function and therefore publishes European laws in all the languages of the Union (Official Journal, Eur Lex).

AN INCREASINGLY UNILINGUAL REALITY

However, the linguistic reality of the Union is moving away from the texts and is not proving to be as multilingual as expected. Instead of being an entity in which all twenty-four official languages are used equally, more and more the Union is developing a language policy limited to the three working languages, or even a unilingual regime and, to be more precise, English-speaking.

English is widely used as a *lingua franca*. The prevalence of English in the conduct of inter-State relations is not a European, but a global phenomenon, which can be observed in many fields, whether in the political, scientific or commercial sphere. In Europe, it was reinforced during the 2004-2007 enlargement.

It is a fact that other languages are losing ground to English. One of the most obvious examples of this is probably the [use of French](#) and German within the institutions. Until the 2004 enlargement, the presence of French in the Union was very strong, since French was widely taught in all Member States. This has changed drastically: the use of French is in sharp decline because the citizens of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are more often English-speaking, or even German-speaking, than French-speaking, with the exception of Romania, where French is traditionally very widespread. As a result, the number of texts initially drafted in French has fallen sharply, from 40% for Commission texts to only 5% in 2014. The percentage of texts initially drafted in French in the Parliament was 23.77% in 2014. In the Council, an effort is being made to make the conclusions of

meetings available in all languages, even if the English version is the first to be published. With regard to the Council's six-month presidency, the choice of language strongly depends on the Member State holding it. Finland, which currently holds the Presidency, has set up a website in five languages: the two national languages (Finnish and Swedish) and the three working languages of the Union (French, English and German).

The over-representation of English has been all the more criticised as the European Union now finds itself in the era of Brexit. In September 2019, European institution officials expressed their discontent. In an [open letter](#) to the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen - trilingual in German, French and English - they asked for her support, noting that their ability to work in French was becoming increasingly limited and that the continued use of English was undermining the European Union's multilingualism.

This request did not come from French-speakers alone. Members of the German Bundestag, for example, underlined the difficulty of receiving documents in English from the European institutions. For them, this often means an additional workload and potential misunderstandings that can ultimately have legal consequences[2].

The European institutions have the right to determine their internal language practice. The Commission uses three working languages; the Court of Justice works mainly in French because European law follows the Romano-Germanic and not the Anglo-Saxon tradition; the Central Bank has used English as its working language since its creation. The concept of "the working language", with a reduced number of languages, compared to the official languages, allows the institutions to be more efficient. While permanent translation or interpretation in all official languages seems ideal, in practice this proves impossible.

Not only is written and oral communication between officials impoverished and limited because of the constant use of only one language, but the objective of greater efficiency is not achieved - on the contrary,

[2] Ammon, Ulrich & Kruse, "Does translation support multilingualism in the EU? Promises and reality - the example of German", *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 23: 1, 15-30, Jan. 2013.

this can create major problems, misunderstandings, important linguistic over-simplifications or misunderstandings. In addition, in order to provide all the interpretations, it is sometimes necessary to use a relay language, often English.

If the over-representation of English poses problems within the institutions, the challenges are all the greater in terms of external communication with citizens. A simple search on the European Commission's website shows that only a small part of digital communication with citizens is translated into the twenty-four languages. Very often, the first pages of a topic are translated into all - or a large part - of the official languages. However, as the user advances on the website, it becomes obvious that the content is only available in German, French, English or Spanish, which have the largest number of speakers. Commission and Parliament press releases are, in most cases, only available in a limited number of languages. Only the Central Bank follows a strict translation policy in this respect and makes its press releases, especially those from Governing Council meetings, available in all languages as soon as they are published.

Another concrete example showing that multilingualism is often no more than a slogan can be found in the communication of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) with European citizens: the documents to be filled in exist often only in English, which is a violation of the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

THE CHALLENGES

This unilingual practice goes against the Treaties - in particular as far as Article 24 TFEU and Article 41 CDFEU are concerned: often with the current language situation, good administration cannot be ensured within the European institutions. This causes problems at various levels.

Firstly, the function of a language as a communication tool is essential. In a democracy, communication serves in practice to inform people about policies, for them to participate actively in open debates, or to express a political position. In a unilingual regime, such as the

one that is now taking shape in the Union, a large proportion of citizens are excluded from communication regarding European democratic life. If only English were to be used as the *lingua franca* in the European Union, half or more of Europe's citizens[3] would be excluded from the democratic process because they do not speak and understand English sufficiently.

In current language practice, far too many citizens are unable to obtain information easily on the day-to-day activities of the European Parliament, whose website is still too often accessible in French and English only.

Secondly, the current system impacts the balance of power between the various European players. A language is not just a means of communication; language skills are also key to power[4], especially in a political context where influence is linked to successful communication. The effect of a speech and spontaneous reactions in both oral and written communication is not the same if the speaker feels uncomfortable with the language or has a poor command of it and makes mistakes in vocabulary and grammar.

Thirdly, language helps understand, express and construct a reality. Anthropologists and sociolinguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf argue that language has an influence on the way we perceive the world[5]. Languages construct different realities in a broad sense, but also in a political sense. It should be noted that a *lingua franca* is a language that is used by non-native speakers. Often their immersion in this language is less than in their first language or mother tongue. As a consequence, the political reality they express in what is not their original language may be less accurate. Hence the need for good translations.

In addition to its practical functions, a language also has emotional functions that promote the construction of identity, not only of the individual, but also of the collective. It is through a language that a sense of belonging is formed. Support for European integration has never been stronger among the European population, but some citizens still feel distant from a Europe they find difficult to understand. For example, the [Standard Eurobarometer 91](#) of June 2019 shows

[3] Special Eurobarometer n°386 by the European Commission: "The Europeans and their Languages", 2012 (Annexes)

[4] Bourdieu, Pierre & Fumaroli, Marc & Hagège, Claude & De Swaan, Abram & Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2001. "Quelles langues pour une Europe démocratique?", *Raisons politiques*. 2: 2, 41-64.

[5] Sapir, Edward. 1985. *Culture, Language and Personality: Selected Essays* by Edward Sapir. Berkeley : University of California Press

that 54% of respondents feel that the adjective "remote" describes the European Union. A truly inclusive European language policy is imperative if we hope to bring citizens closer to the Union and if we want to respond in a credible way to the criticism that the Union is an inaccessible project, reserved for insiders.

However, European multilingualism does not work in one direction only. While it is undeniable that the European institutions have a crucial role to play, European citizens must also contribute. Their foreign language skills will open doors, empower them and enable them to experience European reality through different languages. A European identity will necessarily be multilingual and a "European political space" will be possible with multilingual institutions and citizens.

Brexit, the investiture of the new Commission and the negotiations on the multi-annual budgetary framework 2021-2027 represent an opportunity to rethink and strengthen the European multilingualism policy. With its linguistic diversity and solid legal base, the Union has the opportunity to become a champion of multilingualism. This will bring it closer to its citizens, it will be more democratic, and it will strengthen its drive for innovation, because multilingualism is one of the building blocks of the hyper-connected and highly-communicative world of today and tomorrow - in a digital world where languages are less subject to national borders.

PROPOSALS FOR TRUE EUROPEAN MULTILINGUALISM

- The European Union must invest - at least €1 billion - in research and innovation in language technologies that would facilitate translation and interpreting.

The European market for the technologies of the future is still [too fragmented and lacks resources](#). However, progress in this field of technology would represent a major step forward.

- Crucial help for all translators and interpreters working in the institutions. The three working languages could

be used equally because the permanent use of English would no longer be necessary.

- Speeches by politicians and other important announcements during the election campaign could easily be transmitted in all twenty-four languages.
- The removal of language barriers would benefit the digital single market.

The European Union has enormous expertise with the best language specialists already working in the institutions. An increasing number of Masters degrees in language technology exist in European universities (e.g. at the Universities of Uppsala, Strasbourg or at INALCO in Paris). In addition, the Union's extremely vast corpus of texts (which is moreover used as a basis for software such as DeepL - a German company that is more efficient than both Microsoft or Google) would make it possible to build simultaneous translation and interpreting software perfectly suited to European communication.

The need to invest in language technology was also mentioned in [The Brussels Statement on multilingualism](#) at the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications in May 2019, which was chaired by the Parliament's language departments (DG LINC and DG TRAD) and the Commission (DG SCIC and DGT).

Real financial commitment is therefore expected by many political actors and language experts so that the European Union can become truly multilingual. This is essential to help the Union transform the way it communicates in the future. With the Horizon Europe programme (following the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme with a budget of €100 billion to be launched in January 2021), a financial effort like this would be entirely feasible.

- Helping Europeans go beyond translation *via* digital technology

Umberto Eco said that "the language of Europe is translation"[6]. This is often true. But to be truly "united" in diversity, Europeans must be able to go beyond translation, to understand and speak other European languages. The Union has the means to support its citizens' language learning efforts and has every interest

[6] Umberto Eco, *Dire presque la même chose. Expériences de traduction, (Saying almost the same thing. Expérience in Translation)* Grasset Paris, 2007

Speaking European

in moving in this direction. The Treaties give it the legal foundation to do so, particularly Article 165(2) TFEU, which gives the Union powers in the field of language teaching and dissemination.

To best meet the objectives laid down in the Treaties, the creation of a digital platform of European languages accompanied by an application for mobile devices is an option to consider. The aim of this platform would be to promote intra-European mobility by firstly offering language courses in all twenty-four official languages to enable the achievement of specific goals: learning a language for an Erasmus semester, continuing one's higher education, setting up a business in another Member State or discovering another European culture, etc.

In addition, the platform should contain an online translation tool for the same categories and for all twenty-four languages. By combining language learning and translation, this platform should support Europeans in their linguistic endeavours, particularly if they wish to study, live or work in another Member State.

A call for projects for the creation of such a platform should be launched. It would respond to recent advances in artificial intelligence in the field of language learning and translation. The Horizon Europe programme would include such a project in the two categories of the new investment programme "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society" and "Digital, Industry and Space".

- Using the twenty-four official languages to communicate with citizens

This proposal is simple and should go without saying. It would involve the translation of all the European Institutions' web pages, without exception, into all the official languages. The Union's digital presence must reflect its reality - which is multilingual - so that it is accessible to all.

This would mean that any forms to be filled in or direct communication with citizens should be available in all twenty-four languages. Meeting this requirement would represent simple compliance with Article 24 of the TFEU.

- Political debate in twenty-four languages

MEPs and representatives of other EU institutions should abandon generic English. English will always remain a Union language - even after Brexit - but the other languages need to be upgraded. EU officials have a responsibility to speak their first language and should not always have to use a lingua franca, and they should make the effort to learn (or say a few words) in a language they may not know as well. This has important symbolic value in certain circumstances.

We might also wonder why speeches and debates cannot be held in several languages at once? The former President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has shown this; the new President, Ursula von der Leyen, seems to intend to continue the exercise. Her tweets written in several languages already show a certain willingness to revive European multilingualism.

Stefanie Buzmaniuk

Head of Publications of the
Robert Schuman Foundation

You can read all of our publications on our site :
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.