

# Celebrating Linguistic Diversity or accepting an 'English-Only' Europe?

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## **Abstract**

One of the 'fundamental rights' of the European Union (EU) is 'respect for linguistic diversity'. This diversity is celebrated as a major element of a 'European identity' and is perceived as conforming to the confederal EU concept of seeking 'Unity in Diversity'. To a remarkable extent the EU puts this principle of respect for linguistic diversity into practice; thus, Maltese and Irish (spoken by relatively few people who generally speak English as well in bilingual states) are legally recognised as 'official' and 'working' languages of the EU. The EU also proclaims ambitious aims to create a multilingual EU citizenry within which everyone would be able to speak 'at least' two languages in addition to their mother-tongue. However, such ambitions confront the geolinguistic reality that English becomes increasingly dominant as the second language of continental Europeans, while the learning of foreign languages continues its steep decline in the United Kingdom. Moreover, notwithstanding its 23 official *de jure* languages, English is now, *de facto*, the dominant 'working language' within the EU. Some welcome this trend and advocate that English is officially adopted as the EU's common (not single) transnational language. However others fear that this will lead to the 'linguistic exclusion' of numerous citizens (many of whom do not speak English) from transnational European affairs and continue to insist on a highly multilingual regime within EU institutions. The author concludes that, although the geographical spread of English at the expense of other languages appears unstoppable, the EU must continue to do all in its power to respect linguistic diversity in its official activities. It also argues that Member States continue to insist on the use of national languages within national territories and that, in giving official status to languages such as Maltese and Irish, the EU is strengthening such 'minority' languages and resisting trends towards an 'English-only' Europe.

Keywords: European Union, geolinguistic diversity, respect for diversity, unity in diversity, dominance of English language, linguistic exclusion, multilingualism.

## **The European Union's Celebration of Geolinguistic Diversity**

The 'The Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union' requires 'respect for linguistic diversity' (OJEC 2000). This principle is embedded in various EU treaties, regulations and policies (references). Thus the European Commission, echoing the demands of the EU Member States, proclaims that:

'Linguistic diversity is one of the EU's defining features. Respect for the diversity of the Union's languages is a founding feature of the European Union' (Commission of the EC 2003: 12)

Reflecting the EU's confederal motto of 'Unity in Diversity', this commitment proposes integration through a shared value of respect for cultural differences. This strategy contrasts with traditional approaches to state- and nation-building where governments have usually sought to reduce cultural diversities in their search for political unity. Thus, most European states historically adopted a single official 'national language' to facilitate the construction of a shared 'national identity' designed to bring their diverse regions together into a cohesive

political-geographical entity. France, originally composed of linguistically diverse regions, provides a classic example of this 'one state - one nation - one language' strategy of integration (Judge, 2000), but many others adopted a similar strategy of eradicating geolinguistic diversity. Thus, despite recent concessions to official multilingualism in some of its regions, the historical architects of the United Kingdom imposed the 'King's English' across the state territory to replace its various 'minority' languages and dialects. The 'melting-pot' integration strategy of the United States of America also requires linguistic homogenisation through the adoption of English by its multilingual immigrants. Today the 'English-only' movement in the USA remains determined to maintain this strategy faced with the influx of immigrants, notably from Spanish-speaking Latin America. It thus remains committed to the USA motto '*e pluribus unum*' (one out of many...unity out of diversity) whereas the EU has adopted the ideal of '*in uno, plures*' (many in one...unity in diversity).

But how far is the EU ideal of respect for linguistic diversity put into practice? In many ways, it has been to an extraordinary extent. The six founding states of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 established the practice of making all the official languages of Member States the official languages of European institutions as well. In 1958, the first EEC regulation (no. 1/58) adopted by signatories of the Treaty of Rome (Article 217) reinforced this principle by allowing Member States to exercise what is effectively a 'national veto' on matters of language policy both at EU and national level. Thus, following the 2007 enlargement, these EU law regulations now require that:

'The official languages and the working languages of the institutions of the Union shall be Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish & Swedish.'

In addition, 'regional-national' languages such as Catalan, Basque, Galician and Welsh may be used in EU institutions in certain situations

This remarkable degree of official multilingualism requires that all EU legislation is translated into all 23 'official languages' of the EU. There is also interpretation and translation amongst all of these languages in major public debates in the European Parliament and within the Council of Ministers (although lack of trained personnel still makes this ideal impossible for Irish and Maltese); furthermore, all EU citizens have right to communicate with all the EU institutions in their national language. Thus, respect for linguistic diversity is greater within the EU more than in any other multinational body such as the U.N. Also, while the Indian Federation is broadly comparable in size and linguistic diversity to Europe, only English & Hindi are officially used to facilitate communication amongst its diverse states with their many languages.

The EU also promotes multilingualism beyond its supranational institutions through programmes including Lingua and Socrates. Moreover, its leaders articulate ambitious multilingual aims; thus, the European Council (EU Heads of Government) held in Barcelona in March 2002 expressed the desire that

'...all (higher education) students should study abroad, preferably in a foreign language, for at least one term, and should gain an accepted language qualification as part of their degree course'

and the need to take

'...further action to teach at least two foreign languages to all (EU citizens) from a very early age' (Commission 2003:4-8)

The European Commission produced an *'An Action Plan'* designed to put these multilingual ideals into practice (Commission 2003). There is also EU support for minority languages, including ones as fragile as Cornish, which ceased to be passed naturally between generations over 200 years ago and which, at best, can claim only a few hundred speakers today (Morris, 2008). In particular, it finances the work of the *European Bureau for Lesser Known Languages* (Ó Riagáin 2001:22-24). All this leads to the conclusion that EU really does 'celebrate' its linguistic diversity and takes multiple measures to both protect and promote it.

## **Respect for Linguistic Diversity in the EU: Ideals and Realities**

But how justified is it to celebrate this EU 'respect for linguistic diversity'? Is there a cosmetic element in these policies which disguises a reality where such diversity is diminishing rather than flourishing? Is it really possible to create multilingual Europeans in a 'language market' where the overwhelming majority of non-native Anglophones choose to learn English as their second language? While European rhetoric may be 'celebrating diversity', are 'linguistic market forces' leading inexorably to what a prominent linguist has termed an 'English-only Europe' (Phillipson 2003)

In reality, notwithstanding its 23 *de jure* 'official' and 'working' languages, some languages are *de facto* 'more equal than others' within in the workings of the EU. English, French and German enjoy a privileged status as genuine 'working languages' in the hidden 'corridors of power' of the EU beyond the public view of plenary sessions of the European Parliament. Gradually, English has emerged as the most dominant working language of all, having overtaken French. For example, it increasingly dominates as the original drafting language for EU legislation; EU laws are ultimately translated into 23 languages but, on the lengthy and complex path to this final form, much of the negotiating work often takes place in English. Before the UK's entry into the European Community in 1973, some 60% of 'original' EU texts were written in French and about 40% in German. Following EU enlargement into eastern Europe in 2004, more than 60%+ of such working texts are now in English and proportion continues to rise at the expense of French (about 30%) and German (less than 5%). The *European Central Bank* based in Frankfurt, and *EUROPOL*, based in The Hague are just two examples of European bodies which use English as their 'working language'. Moreover, there is some evidence of the beginnings of a more profound linguistic shift to English in that some non-native speakers of the language (notably some Dutch and Scandinavian MEPs) ignore the interpretation facilities available to them in EU meetings and speak directly in English to other participants (Wise 2004).

A striking example of a 'linguistic shift' to English in EU affairs occurred in 2006 when a prominent French business leader, Ernest-Antoine Seillière (President of the EU employers' association UNICE, now significantly renamed *BusinessEurope*), addressed a major EU meeting in English despite the availability of excellent interpretation facilities. In response, President Chirac of France left the meeting with his ministers in protest against what he perceived as Seillière's lack of respect for 'linguistic diversity'. Nevertheless, Seillière continued in English, which he described as 'the accepted business language of Europe today' (BBC News, 2006). It is not only from France that such protests emanate. In 2001, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs joined his French counterpart in formally protesting to the European Commission about growing dominance of English in EU affairs. This followed threats from the German government to boycott EU meetings where language facilities were not provided for German-speakers (Independent, 1999).

Among the wider general public, the EU's '1+2' language policy (see above) makes little progress confronted with the ever widening geographical diffusion of English. School students in continental Europe increasingly opt for English in the 'language market' (Calvet 2002) in order to obtain what they perceive to be the 'linguistic capital' necessary to obtain access to:

- employment (the need to speak English in a globalised economy);
- many elements of higher education (academic texts in English, exchange programmes, post-graduate courses in English, international conferences, etc);
- prestige (a sense, however misconceived, that a 'modern' person must speak English).

Thus, between 2002 and 2006, the average percentage of secondary-school students within the EU-27 choosing English as their foreign language rose from 73.6% to 85.7% (Eurydice 2008). In most countries, the percentage is higher than 90% and increasing; see Table 1. English is also the language most known by Europeans across the widest geographical area (Eurobarometer 2005). Overall within the EU-27 (plus Croatia and Turkey) in 2005, some 34% claimed an ability to 'converse' in English as a foreign language, a proportion way ahead of its nearest competitors in the European 'language market', namely German (12%), French (11%), and Spanish (5%) and Russian (5%); see Table 2. But it is important to note that a *substantial majority of continental Europeans do NOT speak English* and that the *ability to speak this so-called 'international' language varies geographically*, with the northern European peoples noticeably more proficient than those speaking Latin languages in southern Europe; see Table 3.

Table 1: Percentage of secondary school children studying English, French and German as a foreign languages in EU-27 and Turkey 2002-2006 (Source: Eurydice 2008)

	ENGLISH	ENGLISH	FRENCH	GERMAN
	2002	2006 + / -	2006	2006
Norway	100.0	100.0	18.6	29.3
Sweden	100.0	100.0	17.6-	25.6
Denmark	98.1	100.0 + (increase)	15.3+	84.0+
Netherlands	98.0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Finland	99.0	99.3+ (increase)	11.6-	22.0-
Austria	98.6	98.8+ (increase)	12.9+	....
Spain	97.1	97.5+ (increase)	35.6-	2.1+
France	96.0	97.5+ (increase)	....	17.1-
Greece	97.6	96.9+ (increase)	38.1-	23.1+
Latvia	92.6	96.5+ (increase)	1.9+	22.4-
Slovenia	90.5	96.4+ (increase)	5.1+	47.8+
Italy	84.3	96.3+ (increase)	35.9+	7.2+
Germany	93.9	96.0+ (increase)	25.1+	....
Estonia	90.0	95.0+ (increase)	66.3-	30.0-
Romania	86.4	95.0+ (increase)	86.5 -	10.9-
Cyprus	99.8	93.9- (decrease)	67.6-	1.6+
Malta	96.8	93.9- (decrease)	37.1-	8.2+
Lithuania	78.6	90.1+ (increase)	4.3-	24.3-
Iceland	82.4	87.3+ (increase)	9.4+	17.9-
Czech Republic	67.4	81.4+ (increase)	6.2+	34.5-
Poland	77.8	80.3+ (increase)	5.0-	42.8-
Portugal	52.9	80.2+ (increase)	63.1+	0.9+
Bulgaria	64.8	75.4+ (increase)	12.2-	25.9+
Slovakia	68.1	74.2+ (increase)	4.5+	42.6-
Belgium (Dutch-speaking)	70.6	70.7+ (increase)	96.8-	23.3-
Turkey	66.1 (2004)	67.3+ (increase)	0.7-	6.5+

Belgium (French-speaking)	68.2	67.1+ (decrease)	....	.....
Hungary	51.2	64.2+ (increase)	3.2-	4.0-
Luxembourg	62.5	64.0+ (increase)	99.2+	99.2+
<b>EU-27 (+Turkey &amp; Iceland)</b>	<b>73.6</b>	<b>85.7+ (increase)</b>	<b>23.8+</b>	<b>15.4+</b>

In sharp contrast to these geolinguistic trends in continental Europe, the learning of languages continues to decline sharply in

Table 2: Languages spoken in addition to mother-tongue in 2005 (EU-27 plus Croatia and Turkey), (Source : Eurobarometer : 2005)

<b>English</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>German</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>French</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Spanish</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Russian</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Italian</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Polish</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Dutch</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Others</b>	<b>3%</b>

Table 3: Ability to converse in English in different European countries, 2005, (Source : Eurobarometer : 2005)

83-87%	Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark
71%	Cyprus
60-66%	Luxembourg, Finland
51-56%	Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Belgium
41-44%	Estonia, Croatia, Greece
34%	France, Latvia
25-29%	Italy, Romania, Portugal, Lithuania, Poland
20-24%	Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Spain
16-18%	Hungary, Turkey

British schools and universities (Garner, 2002 & 2008). Students in England are no longer compelled to study a foreign language beyond the age of 14 and the great majority abandon the effort completely in the latter stages of secondary school. Clearly, most native English-speakers perceive little or no interest in learning a foreign-language in an international world dominated by their mother tongue.

Such trends have led Juliane House, among others, to argue that the EU policy of respect for linguistic diversity *'... is both ineffective and hypocritical, and its ideas of linguistic equality and multilingualism are costly and cumbersome illusions'* (House, 2001). A Professor of Applied Linguistics in Germany, she maintains that that English has become a *'stateless'* and *'de-nativised'* language that *'Europe must embrace'* as a *'useful tool'* for transnational communication. Professor Norbert Walter, Chief Economist of the Deutsche Bank Group, agrees:

'To ensure that the new Europe continues to make headway and people understand each other, they must have a common (second) language. English must be taught everywhere.' (Walter, N (2002)

Some prominent French intellectuals express similar arguments; thus Alexandre Adler accepts that :

'English, spoken by Europeans will become the single (sic) language of (transnational) communication, alongside of which national languages will also be used.

(L'anglais, parlé par les Européens deviendra une langue unique de communication, à côté de laquelle les langues nationales garderont leur utilisation') (Adler 2000)

In similar vein, Alain Minc, a liberal French intellectual bluntly states that:

'English is « the natural language » of Europe'  
'L'anglais est 'la langue naturelle' de l'Europe' (Minc 1989)

Larry Siedentop, a political scientist from Oxford University, develops the argument in political terms as follows:

'If a truly European political class is to develop... (there must be)...the formal acknowledgement that English has an indispensable role to play as the second language of Europe.' (Siedentop 2000: 146; see also 132-4)

Thus, English is the most valued 'commodity' in the EU's 'linguistic market' in that it provides its speakers with 'linguistic capital' facilitating access to: 'economic capital' (jobs); 'cultural capital' (common language of intellectual elites and much transnational popular culture); and symbolic capital' (use it to display one's prestige, status, modernity in the modern international world, etc) (Bourdieu 1982 & 1991).

But is this reality a threat to 'respect for linguistic diversity' within the EU? In some ways it undoubtedly is, as demonstrated by the language used in this European conference and the fact that applications for EU funding often necessitate knowledge of English. There is no way that all the 23 EU languages are respected in such activities and processes. Thus, those who master English, whether or not they are native speakers of the language enjoy a great advantage in many domains of European activity. The dangers of non-English-speakers (still a majority of Europeans) being 'linguistically excluded' from diverse transnational European activities are real and should not be ignored.

However, despite this de facto dominance of English in the international sphere, Europeans will still be celebrating the geolinguistic diversity of their continent far into the foreseeable future. There are several reasons for this conclusion. First and foremost, EU Member States keep a firm national grip on language policy both within their separate national territories and within the EU institutions. This enables them to defend a complex set of different monolingual and multilingual spaces within which Europe's diverse languages retain both their utility and prestige. Recent developments concerning two of the EU's smallest and most fragile national languages –Maltese and Irish- illustrate the point. When joining the EU, Malta insisted that Maltese become a full EU 'official and working language', despite the fact that it is spoken by less than 400,000 people and that most of its population also speak English, which also remains an official language of this mini-state. Consequently, EU membership has strengthened Maltese by creating a new 'linguistic niche market' for the 'national' language in which a new 'industry' is flourishing; namely the one needed to translate the mass of EU legislation into Maltese and simultaneously interpret debates in the European Parliament and elsewhere. Thus, not only has Maltese gained in prestige, but it generates new jobs for those who speak the language well. In this way, the EU is strengthening 'minor' languages rather than eroding linguistic diversity. Similarly, the Ireland's belated decision to insist that Irish become an official EU language since 2007 (for three decades it had been content to accept English alone as its official EU language) has added another support the revival of its 'national' language which, with less than 100,000 mother-tongue speakers scattered mainly in isolated and fragmented geographical zones (*Gaeltacht*) on its western periphery, is struggling to survive (Hindley 1990).

The continuing importance of national languages within national territories can also be noted in the Netherlands whose multilingual inhabitants are noted for their openness to English and other languages. While some native Dutch speakers (not the Flemish) may ignore interpretation facilities in some EU meetings and speak directly in English (see above), within

the Netherlands itself demands that immigrants learn the national language have become more insistent (Timmermans & Myers 2009). This mirrors a situation across the whole of the EU. English may be spreading ever wider as Europe's *de facto* common language (although strong doubts remain about the degree to which most people in most regions will master Basic English) but, within the geographical territories of its diverse nation-states, national languages will *de jure* continue to flourish and be defended.

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