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## Challenges of multilingualism in the EU

**Abstract:** The paper discusses the challenges of the multilingualism policy in the EU composed of 28 Member States and 24 official and working languages. The aim of the paper is firstly to present multilingualism as the policy in the EU as well as the diversity of EU official languages. Secondly the paper highlights multilingualism as a tool to ensure the smooth functioning of the internal market with the emphasis put on the benefits of multilingualism for European companies. Thirdly challenges resulting from the multilingual policy in the EU are discussed, encompassing in particular translation and interpretation costs, legal implications of translation and interpretation errors, future accession of new EU Member States.

**Keywords:** multilingualism policy, European Union, translation, language, official language.

**JEL codes:** F50, O52, Z13.

### Introduction

European societies are facing rapid change due to technological advances, globalisation and ageing populations. Increasingly European citizens interact with their counterparts from other EU Member States, work and live outside their home countries and their life becomes more international and more multilingual. On the one hand increased linguistic diversity is an expression of richness and national heritage but on the other, without appropriate policy, it presents multiple challenges widening the communication gap between people from different cultures and giving the multilingual access to better working conditions whilst excluding the monolingual. Moreover, language

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barriers can prevent European citizens and companies from fully exploiting the EU internal market's opportunities. Multilingualism can also be a barrier to effective cross-border cooperation between administrative services in different EU Member States [European Commission 2008, p. 5].

With 507 million citizens in 2014 and 28 Member States, the EU has 24 official and working languages, some of them with a worldwide coverage. Some 60 other languages are also part of the EU heritage and are spoken in specific regions or by specific groups [European Commission 2008, p. 4]. The official and working languages of the European Union are: Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish.<sup>1</sup> Each new EU member state when joining the Community was allowed to have its national language as an official language of the EU. The only nation that has not done so has been Luxembourg (Luxembourgish is used by the EU as a treaty language only) [Fidrmuc 2011, p. 2].<sup>2</sup> Taking into account 24 official languages in the EU, the translation and interpretation services of the EU institutions must be able to manage 552 language combinations.

According to the Eurobarometer results from 2012 [European Commission 2012a, p. 5], the most widely spoken mother tongue is German (16%), followed by English and Italian (13% each), French (12%), Spanish and Polish (8% each). On the other hand, some EU official languages are spoken by relatively few Europeans: Slovene and Estonian are spoken by approximately 1–2 million while Irish and Maltese are used by around half a million each, the majority of speakers of Maltese and Irish being fluent in English as well [Fidrmuc 2011, p. 2]. 54% of Europeans are able to hold a conversation in at

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<sup>1</sup> In 1958, the European Economic Community had 4 official languages: German, Dutch, French and Italian. Since then, with the growing numbers of the EEC and then of the EU Member States, the number of official languages has increased to 24. For cost savings, in day-to-day communication English, French and German are used as procedural languages in the EU institutions. This situation is most observed in the European Commission which has the largest translation and interpretation units.

<sup>2</sup> As stated by Fidrmuc [2011, p. 2], despite this desire for equality among EU languages, some languages seem to be omitted. This is a case of Russian, Turkish and Arabic spoken by large numbers of Europeans, yet they do not enjoy an official status even being spoken by 4.2, 2.2 and 1.6 million EU citizens, respectively. Regional languages such as Catalan, Galician and Basque are similarly not included into the category of the EU official languages even though they enjoy official or semi-official status in their own country. In the near future, the list of official EU languages could be increased by Icelandic and Turkish, the latter receiving an official status either by Turkey's accession to the EU or through the reunification of Cyprus.

least one additional language, 25% are able to communicate in at least two additional languages and 10% - in at least three. There are no signs that multilingualism is on the increase compared to the results from 2005. The five most widely spoken foreign languages are: English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%). The majority of Europeans are not learning languages; 44% of them have not learnt a language recently or do not intend to do so in the next year. 61% of Europeans claim that a key advantage of learning a new language is connected with the possibility to work in another country, 53% use foreign language at work and 47% - on holidays abroad [European Commission 2012a, p. 16]. The most important barriers to learning a foreign language mentioned by the respondents are: lack of motivation (34% of responses), lack of time (28%) and cost (25%).

The aim of the paper is to explore the challenges of the multilingualism policy in the EU composed of 28 Member States and 24 official and working languages. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section is devoted to the presentation of the multilingualism policy in the EU. In the second section the paper highlights multilingualism as a tool to ensure smooth functioning of the internal market. In the third section challenges resulting from the multilingual policy in the EU are discussed, encompassing in particular translation and interpretation costs, the implications of translation and interpretation errors and delays, future accession of new EU Member States. The following research methods have been used in the paper: analysis of the EU legislation and reports, statistical description based on secondary data.

## **1. Multilingualism policy in the EU**

Linguistic plurality is one of the main objectives of the EU explicitly included in the Treaty of Lisbon. According to 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”. Linguistic diversity is also protected by Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU which provides that: “The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.” Besides the general principle of linguistic diversity the EU is concerned with protecting the use of languages to enhance the participation of citizens in the democratic life of the Union and thereby contribute to its legitimacy [European Commission 2012b, p. 78]. In this context it is important to argue that the centre of EU language policy is not the preservation

of linguistic diversity for the sake of this diversity itself but the reflection of a given distribution of powers between the EU itself and the Member States (principle of subsidiarity) [European Commission 2012b, p. 79].

The most important secondary norm that expresses the importance of multilingualism within the EU is Regulation 1/58. According to Article 2 “Documents which a Member State or a person subject to the jurisdiction of a Member State sends to institutions of the Community may be drafted in any one of the official languages selected by the sender. The reply shall be drafted in the same language” [EEC Council 1958]. Moreover it is stated in Article 4 that regulations and other documents of general application shall be drafted in official languages and according to Article 5, the Official Journal of the Community shall be published in official languages. EU citizens similarly are entitled to use their language while communicating with European institutions. The regulation’s provisions highlight the equality of the official languages of the EU and preserve multilingualism within the Community.

Apart from linguistic diversity mentioned in the founding treaties and in the secondary legislation the European Commission has addressed the question of languages in several documents. Firstly in 2005 the Commission issued a New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism. The Strategy considers languages as the most direct expression of culture. “The Commission’s multilingualism policy has three aims:

1. to encourage language learning and promoting linguistic diversity in society;
2. to promote a healthy multilingual economy and
3. to give citizens access to European Union legislation, procedures and information in their own languages” [European Commission 2005, p. 3].

The responsibility to take further steps in this area mainly rests with Member States but the Commission’s role is to reinforce awareness of multilingualism and to improve the consistency of actions taken at different levels.

The main objective of another communication entitled “Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment”, released by the European Commission in 2008 is to “raise awareness of the value and opportunities of the EU’s linguistic diversity and encourage the removal of barriers to intercultural dialogue”. A key instrument to achieve this goal is communication in the mother tongue plus two languages [European Commission 2008, p. 5].

In 2008 the Council of the European Union issued a Resolution on a European strategy for multilingualism in which Member States and the Commission are invited to:

1. promote multilingualism with a view to strengthening social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and European construction;

2. strengthen lifelong language learning;
3. better promote multilingualism as a factor in the European economy's competitiveness and people's mobility and employability;
4. promote the linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue by stepping up assistance for translation in order to encourage the circulation of works and the dissemination of ideas and knowledge in Europe and across the world;
5. promote EU languages across the world [Council of the European Union 2008, pp. 3–5].

The above overview of language related issues in the EU has shown that the EU addresses multilingualism at two levels: at the level of the individual whose language rights are protected and who is encouraged to learn two languages apart from his mother tongue and at the level of Member States whose competence is to foresee language related issues connected with teaching languages, translation and the smooth functioning of the internal market that leads to increased competitiveness of European economy [European Commission 2012b, p. 83].

## **2. Multilingualism as a tool to ensure smooth functioning of the internal market**

Looking at the multilingualism policy in the EU from the economic point of view it seems of key importance to depict it as a tool ensuring smooth functioning of the internal market. The internal market is considered to be a key achievement of the European economic integration. Free movement of goods, free movement of persons, free movement of services and free movement of capital and payments together with the EU competition policy and the common commercial policy constitute a legal and institutional framework for companies operating on the internal market. Knowledge of foreign languages by European citizens can be a significant factor facilitating the access to foreign markets for companies and the opening of new labour opportunities for EU citizens looking for a job in another EU country.

In the study commissioned in 2005 by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission it is stated that across a sample of almost 2000 EU exporting companies, 11% of respondents had lost an actual or potential export contract as a result of a lack of language skills<sup>3</sup>. The high-

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<sup>3</sup> The reported research is based on surveys of approximately 2000 exporting SME's from 29 European states (EU, EEA and candidate countries) to collect data on approaches to the use of language skills [CILT 2006].

est rate of export companies that have registered losses has been observed among Turkish, Romanian, Scandinavian companies. There is also a considerable group of companies where over 11% of the samples declare having lost a contract in Spain, Norway, the Czech Republic, France and the Netherlands. Among the most common foreign language situations in which the surveyed companies have reported the losses the following reasons can be enumerated:

1. lack of English for negotiations – 11%;
2. lack of German in correspondence – 11%;
3. lack of English in correspondence – 8%;
4. lack of French in negotiations – 8%.

Whilst listing the main reasons for which language difficulties have occurred the respondents have mentioned the lack of staff speaking languages (63%), followed by a lack of follow-up (10%) and lack of confidence (8%) [CILT 2006, pp. 17–19].

The companies surveyed were also asked to identify the languages they used in major export markets. English was identified by 51% companies in the sample, German – 13%, French – 9%, Russian – 8% and Spanish – 4%. It is surprising that English has been reported as the language used in major export markets only by a half of the respondents. Taking into account that the quoted results come from 2006 it is likely that nowadays the percentage of companies using English as the language of export markets would be higher as the use of German and French are less important (according to data provided by the Eurobarometer survey from 2012). Another aspect of the study concerned the influence of the language competence of the staff on the company's choice of export markets. On average only 13% of the total sample of firms claim that their staff's language skills had influenced the decision to start exporting in a particular country. The higher level of influence is observed in the new EU Member States such as Latvia (27%), Lithuania (26%), Romania (29.8%), Hungary (23.9%), but also Portugal and Spain (25% each). Whilst tackling the issue of additional expertise in languages in the following 3 years 42% of surveyed companies expect to identify such a need. Not unexpectedly English is mentioned by 25.8% respondents, German – by 17.8%, French – by 13.2%, Russian – by 11.7% and Chinese – by 4% of respondents [CILT 2006, pp. 35–36].

It seems interesting to combine the research results presented with the report *Competing across borders. How cultural and communication barriers affect business* [Economist Intelligence Unit 2012] which explores the challenges companies face when they have to operate in increasingly international markets, especially in the period of economic downturn. Based on a global sur-

vey of 572 executives the study has identified the diversity of languages across countries (27% of respondents) and the poor quality of translation (23% of respondents) as one of the most likely factors to cause the greatest misunderstanding in cross-border communication in the organization. Differences in cultural traditions and norms of workplace behaviour have been quoted as the most important factors in this case.

Whilst indicating a language that the company's workforce will have to know to execute expansion plans in key overseas markets in the next five years the surveyed executives enumerated English as the most important business language (68% of respondents), followed by Mandarin (8%), Spanish (6%), Russian (3%). Amongst other European languages the following were mentioned: Portuguese and French (2% each), German and Italian (1% each). This dominance of English is also reflected in other studies but the image of multilingualism seems to be more complicated than the current belief that English is the only market language. SME's are increasingly using the specific language of the export market to establish themselves in new, emerging markets. The languages used in the context of the exporting activities of SME's vary from one country to another. For example Swedish SME's make use only of three market languages: English, German and French while Irish or Danish SME's – of 8 market languages [Bel Habib 2011, p. 6].

The selected results concerning the use of foreign languages by companies in their cross-border communication and export strategies show the importance of language skills for the expansion plans of the companies as well as a measure to make their workforce more effective. In this context it can also be assumed that knowledge of foreign languages can be viewed as a tool for the effective functioning of the EU internal market.

### **3. Challenges for multilingualism in the EU at the institutional level**

Implementing extensive multilingual policy in the EU is firstly expensive. The total cost of translation and interpretation in all the EU institutions (including the European Commission, European Parliament, Council, Court of Justice of the European Union, European Court of Auditors, European Economic and Social Committee, Committee of Regions) is around 1 billion Euro per year. This represents less than 1% of the EU budget or just over 2 Euro per citizen. Spending about 2 Euro per year to ensure that every EU citizen has access to

the EU legislation in his/her native language seems good value for money. However the average cost across the EU is not necessarily the indicative figure to take into consideration as the number of people speaking EU official languages differs substantially. In this context Fidrmuc and Ginsburgh [2007, p. 1361] propose the taking into account of the average cost per member of a linguistic group. Looking at the multilingualism policy costs from this perspective it is obvious that the average cost of translation and interpretation of the EU documents is much lower per member of the English linguistic group than per member of the Maltese or Irish linguistic group as the English speaking population is much more numerous than Maltese or Irish speaking communities. However as linguistic plurality guaranteeing equal access to the EU legislation for all EU citizens in their official languages is one of the main principles of the European Union the challenge is not to limit the number of the EU official languages but rather to find management tools facilitating a proper functioning of this multilingual community whilst taking into account annual costs of multilingualism in the EU.

Due to the accessibility of data it is not possible to assess translation and interpretation costs of all EU institutions during last decade (from the biggest enlargement in 2004). Consequently the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) – the in-house translation service of the European Commission – has been chosen to evaluate the number of translated pages in the period 1997–2013 (Table). In 1997 when the EU had 11 official languages the total number of pages translated by the DGT was 1.1 million whilst 16 years later this number was more than 2 million pages (the number of official languages being increased to 24). Moreover the total number of pages translated by the DGT has increased by 59.33% in 2013 (the number of pages translated in 2004 being considered as 100%). It also seems interesting to analyze the share of original texts drafted in the procedural languages (English, German and French). In general an increasing importance of texts drafted in English is observed in this case. In 1997 the share of texts drafted in English accounted for 45.4%, in 2004 – 62%, in 2008 – 72.5% and this tendency is growing. The share of texts drafted in French has decreased from 40.4% in 1997 to 11.8% in 2008 (the respective data for German being 5.4% and 2.7%).

Secondly implementing multilingual policy in the EU also takes time: translation of official documents into all official languages can take several months which results in delays in the adoption of EU documents (legal decisions only become valid once they have been published in all official languages) [Fidrmuc 2011, p. 3; European Commission 2012c, p. 3]. The problem of translation delays has been observed especially in the period of

### Number of pages translated by the DGT (1997–2013)

Year	Number of official EU languages	Number of pages translated by the DGT	Number of pages translated by the DGT (2004 = 100)
1997	11	1 125 709	88.60
2003	11	1 416 817	111.51
2004	20	1 270 586	100
2005	20	1 324 231	104.22
2006	20	1 541 518	121.32
2007	23	1 762 773	138.74
2008	23	1 805 659	142.11
2012	23	1 760 615	138.57
2013	24	2 024 481	159.33

Source: Author's calculations based on the data provided by the Directorate-General for Translation.

the largest enlargement of the EU when the number of official languages increased from 11 to 20. Even if this situation had been anticipated by the translation services of the EU main institutions delays and errors in translation of the *acquis communautaire*<sup>4</sup> have been inevitable. In 2004 media in the new EU Member States informed the public about several errors of translation in different parts of the *acquis*.<sup>5</sup> Afterwards some delays and errors still persist in translation services but due to the complexity of the multilingual system some problems will persist.

Thirdly the challenge for the multilingualism policy in the EU is also connected with the future accession of new EU Member States. As has been already mentioned in the introduction the enlargement of the EU by such candidate countries as Iceland, Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or Turkey will widen the number of EU official languages. Accession of new EU Member States will thus result in an increase of

<sup>4</sup> It is the responsibility of the authorities of particular Member States to translate the *acquis communautaire* by the accession date.

<sup>5</sup> Some examples of diverse translation errors in the EU legislation translated into Polish can be found in the paper: *Nie czytać po polsku*, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10.01.2005 [Matulewska & Nowak 2006, p. 32].

translation and interpretation costs of the EU institutions in order to respect the principle of the linguistic diversity in the Community and of the equal status of all official languages.

## Conclusions

The EU is committed to safeguarding linguistic diversity and to promoting knowledge of languages, encouraging all citizens to be multilingual with the long-term objective that every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue. At the EU level learning of foreign languages is promoted especially as a potential tool to increase the language skills of European citizens on the labour market and to boost the competitiveness of the European economy. The results of the studies quoted in the paper have shown the importance attributed by European companies to the knowledge of foreign languages in export strategies and cross-border communication. According to these results the dominance of English is highly visible as the business language. Nonetheless other European languages such as French, German, Spanish or Russian are still of importance, especially for the SME's.

Whilst looking at the challenges of the multilingualism policy in the EU it seems to be of key importance to indicate its cost as the major issue. Even if the annual cost of all translation and interpretation services in all EU institutions is still about 1% of the EU budget this figure is not indicative. The analysis of the number of pages translated by the largest translation service in the EU – DGT has shown that this number is still increasing. Obviously this fact is connected with the latest enlargements of the EU and the necessity to translate all EU legislation into the increasing number of official languages. But at the same time some solutions have to be found in all translation and interpretation services of the EU institutions to effectively spend their budgets in particular in the period of downturn when administrative savings have to be found at the EU level. In this context some scholars claim that the multilingualism policy of the EU should be limited to 2–3 languages in order to diminish administrative costs connected with the implementation of this policy. Such a suggestion seems to be rather difficult to implement taking into account the principle of linguistic diversity in the EU and the equal treatment of all 24 EU official languages. The compromise is rather to be found in the better management of translation and interpretation services (for some de-

tails concerning DG Translation Management Plan for 2014 see [Directorate-General for Translation 2014]).

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