The Status of Official Languages in the Multilingual European Union

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) comprises 27 nations and uses 24 official languages to acknowledge diversity and equal opportunity in the Union. This is an egalitarian policy, which is met with resistance and challenges due to various practices in the EU administration and management. A consecutive policy debate persisted in EU thinkers to decide the official language of the Union, while the nature of the public sphere was multicultural and multilingual.

This paper explores factors behind the hurdles to achieving linguistic equality in the EU by looking at various institutional policies and scholastic papers. The research concludes that linguistic equality is theoretically idealised to promote linguistic harmony in the bloc, however, it is practically unattainable because prominent official and working languages like English, French and German trump other official languages of the EU member states. In addition, making everything available in all official languages of the EU is quite limited to avoid cost burden.

Keywords: Linguistic equality, official languages in EU, working languages in EU, egalitarian policy, multilingualism

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Introduction

Some sort of linguistic standardization is necessary to ensure effective communication in any multilingual entity whether it is a country, union of countries, international organization or a firm. This can take two forms: linguistic centralization, where a single language is chosen as a vehicle of communication, or multilingualism, with two or more languages used in parallel[1] that necessitates translations or interpreting services etc. for its users. Examples of multilingual societies abound in history (e.g., Ptolemaic Egypt, the Roman Empire or the British Empire) and in present times that incorporate communities with different languages.

Achieving an effective and homogenised policy for language management is particularly important for the European Union which has numerous national, regional and minority languages. Since its inception, the EU has put a great emphasis on multilingualism; and in line with this policy, 24 languages have been given the status of official languages.[2] Although all official languages enjoy the same privileges, they do not have the same prominence within the EU administration.[3] For example, most documents for the European Commission are initially prepared in English, French, and German[4] and began translated into other official languages of the EU, an egalitarian promise, as mentioned in the Treaty of Rome. Also, the successive EU treaties endorsed equal 'respect for linguistic diversity' of people coming under its jurisdiction.[5]

Linguistic equality is one of the most challenging endeavours in multilingual countries. Ancient states hence preferred one language to avoid linguistic conflicts facilitating political, economic and social governance. But for developed [rich] countries, such as the USA, Canada, Switzerland, and the UK multilingualism is advocated and actualized with constitutional and policy support. For instance, Switzerland calls French, German, Italian and

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[1] G. Lüdi, F. Grin and A. C. Berthoud. *Exploring the Dynamics of Multilingualism: The DYLAN Project* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013).

[2] T. J. M. van Els. "The European Union, its Institutions and its Languages: Some Language Political Observations", *Current Issues in Language Planning* 2, no.4, (2001): 311-360.

[3] E. R. Gil. W*hy Languages Matter to People: Communication, Identity and Justice in Western Democracies, The Case of Mixed Societies* 2, (Publicacions de la Generalitat de Catalunya-Government of Catalonia Publications, 2016).

[4] A. Pym, F. Grin, C. Sfreddo and A. Chan. "Studies on Translation and Multilingualism: The Status of the Translation Profession in the European Union", *Final Report* 7, (2012), 12.

[5] http://fra.europa.eu/sq/eu-charter/article/22-cultural-religious-and-linguistic-diversity.

Romansch its national languages that are practised with such support.[6] However, actualizing many languages in the EU could remain a dream. A single language for the EU is not possible, big nations like France, Germany, Italy and others would surge with a strong backlash; *Esperanto* was therefore dropped to avoid public wrath.[7] In addition, the majority of Europeans believe in their cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies and want "unity in diversity",[8] The EU, therefore, will not go against the wishes of its citizens. To exercise this diversity, a handsome budget was allocated for translations and interpretations of official publications of the EU into the languages of every member country. For this purpose, a commissioner for multilingualism was established to protect plurilingualism in the EU to uphold and maintain lingual harmony.[9] However, the term linguistic equality in the Commission and the Directorate's policies was avoided, rendering linguistic equality sardonic. The following content investigates the status of languages in the EU through an examination of the linguistic mode of official documents, treaties, and policies to find out the extent multilingualism in the EU is realistically achieved.

Treaties and Linguistic Equality
Schuman Declaration (9th May 1950) marks the inception of European integration, which was silent on the issue of languages. Similarly, the Treaty of Paris (April 1951) that established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), held no policy regarding language or languages. The treaty was written in French without explicitly declaring French as the official language translating the treaty into the Dutch, German and Italian later. Because of this, the meeting was referred to as a ministerial conference and later to an Interim Committee of Lawyers.[10] After several meetings during a gestational period of one year, the committee suggested

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[6] F. Grin. "Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland: Overview and Recent Developments," *ECMI Brief*, no. 2 (March 1999): 1-9.

[7] D. Archibugi. "The Language of Democracy: Vernacular or Esperanto? A Comparison between the Multiculturalist and Cosmopolitan Perspectives," *Political Studies* 53, no.3 (2005): 537-555.

[8] E. Kużelewska. "Unity in Diversity, The Language Policy of the European Union", *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric* 38, no. 51(2014): 151–165.

[9] European Commission, DG Interpretation, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/become-an-interpreter/language-policy/index_en.

[10] A legislative committee authorized by the Legislative Assembly to study a particular subject or subjects between sessions. Interim committees are appointed by leadership after the end of the session. http://www.oregonlaws.org/glossary/definition/interim_committee (accessed on 4 April 2023).

granting official and working language status to the four languages at the Paris Conference (23-25 July 1952).[11] The language protocol decisions for the ECSC were:

- French, German, Italian and Dutch are the working and official languages.
- ECSC must drop opinions, recommendations and decisions in the language of natural or legal persons to which they are addressed.
- One of the four official languages must be used to correspond with the Community institutions by the choice of the correspondent.
- Members possibly enjoy the freedom of choice of any of the official languages and the assembly may decide on practical issues related to the use of language.
- The national language of the defendant is used before the court proceeding, the judgment shall be published in all four languages.
- Legislative acts must be published in the Official Journal in all four official languages.
- In the case of many official languages of the member states, the language to be used shall, at the request of such State, be governed by the general use of its law.

These protocols set the stage for multiple languages with equal working and official status. However, French enjoyed a prominent position among these languages because it was an international and diplomatic language. The ECSC became a precursor to the EU which was established to resolve economic issues in European war-torn countries; with little or no consideration for cultural homogeneity or political manoeuvring in its design. If the Union of six, previously hostile countries, could hold mutual economic interests and reduce animosity, economic success would be possible, and this is what the European integration project meant to achieve, enticing other neighbouring European countries. Europeans during the 18th and 19th centuries could not envision different cultures and languages could coexist and function together.[12] The fathers of the EU

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[11] Protocol esurlerègimelinguistique de la CECA, (European Commission Archives Brussels, 24 July 1952), hereafter referred to as the "ECSC Language Protocol". Visit http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/translation_european_commission_fr.pdf (accessed on 1 April 2023).

[12] B. Porter. W*hen Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

envisaged unity in diversity; strengthening economic cooperation that would subsequently deepen mutual relations among EU countries, beyond economics. The Treaty of Rome (1958), the Bible of the EU set the stage for the development of multinational, multidimensional and supranational institutions responsible for augmentation and deeper cooperation among the member countries.[13] Articles 1 and 4, and Council Regulation 1 of the 1958 Treaty appeared in support of the previous pledge about the equal status for the national languages of all member nations in the Treaty of Paris. The onus of linguistic policies was much clear to the leaders of the union; they knew that a substantive political integration would not be possible without sound linguistic policies, EU would have been a different entity[14] if linguistic policies were not put into place. Hence, for the first time in history, German, French, Italian and Dutch became the official and working languages of the Communities, established in the Treaty of Rome; and this tradition continued with each national language as a member state joined the union over time.

The article of the Treaty that assigns and regulates the equal status of official languages is ambiguous and leaves room for many interpretations. For example, it does not clarify what an *official* versus a *working* language is. Generally, practices of the EU include, calling all languages of member states official, but working languages may not work under all conditions.[15] The desire to bring all languages on equal footing was reflected in the Treaty of Paris followed by the Merger Treaty or the Treaty of Brussels (1967) that brought together the ECSC, the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the European Economic Community (EEC) into a single European Community (EC).[16] Deepening economic cooperation and unity among European countries necessitated the inclusion of all six languages of founding member States. Europeans may have lived on the same continent and shared a common destiny, but at heart remained

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[13] S. Regia. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Heads of State and Government of the European Union in Italy for the Celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, 2017.

[14] S. Wright. *Community and Communication: The Role of Language in Nation State Building and European Integration* (Multilingual Matters, 2000).

[15] F. Coulmas. *A Language Policy for the European Community: Prospects and Quandaries* (Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991).

[16] A. Von Bogdandy. "The Legal Case for Unity: The European Union as a Single Organization with a Single Legal System," *Common Market Law Review* 36, no.5 (1999).

Germans, French or Italians,[17] largely due to their different cultures, languages and national sentiments.

The Single European Act signed in 1986, which set a goal for the creation of a single free market and closer political cooperation, brought first major amendments to the Treaty of Rome. Much echoed economic cooperation, maintained diversity with consolidated common policies, but gave no insights into a linguistically egalitarian union. It extended cooperation among the member states by uplifting social and living standards for citizens of comparatively smaller European states, but far away to incorporate the linguistic sensibilities of citizens of the European Community who were experiencing the unique integration process.[18] Culture for the European Community was recognized as a marginal area of importance until 1992 when the Treaty on European Union (Maastricht Treaty) was signed, extending cultural integration with diversity,[19] mainly focused on signifying and respecting all the languages and traditions of various nations in Europe.

The Treaty of Amsterdam (October 1997) with its third major amendment in the Treaty of Rome mainly fixed loose ends left in the Maastricht Treaty. This treaty like the previous ones voiced linguistic, religious and cultural diversity but did not explain how to manage this diversity. Article 6(3) stated, "The Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States", patent wording that preserved the EU's cultural diversity.[20] Lisbon Treaty of 2007 incorporated diversification of culture and languages with a promise to protect and safeguard European cultural heritage in Article 3(3).[21] This treaty allowed the free movement of people across state lines for work, to spread and mix cultures and their languages and allow the expansion of knowledge, however, it could not carry out the EU's

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[17] G. Faye. W*hy We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance* (Arktos, 2011).

[18] A. Moravcsik. "Negotiating the Single European Act: National Interests and Conventional Statecraft in the European Community", *International Organization* 45, no.1 (1991): 19-56.

[19] R. Lane. "New Community Competencies under the Maastricht Treaty", *Common Market Law Review* 30 (1993):939.

[20] C. Mătușescu. "National Identity in the Legal Framework of the European Union", *Transdisciplinarity and Communicative Action* (2015), 447.

[21] https://www.coe.int/en/web/herein-system/european-union.

commitment to cultural diversity.[22] The Treaty of Nice, signed on 26 February 2001, prepared the EU for future eastward enlargements, welcoming applicant states with unprecedented Christian populations that differed enormously in their cultural, religious and linguistic sensibilities and idiosyncrasies. The treaty upheld the spirit of diversity and heterogeneity but little about egalitarian linguistic and cultural policies.[23] Furthermore, the EU adopted a multilingual policy in March 2001 through Barcelona Objectives in European Council, which promoted the practice of learning two European languages other than the mother tongue by the citizens and students to strengthen cultural understanding.[24]

Institutional Arrangements for Linguistic Equality
Linguistic services to the EU and its institutions are formidable and for this purpose, the Commission has established Directorate General (DG) Translation and DG Interpretation. Working at full capacity, the two directorates engage 90 translators and 80 interpreters (including freelancers) for all official languages. The European Court of Justice and the European Parliament have their arrangements, as until May 2004, the EU had hired approximately 6,000 interpreters and translators to serve its various institutions.[25]

But these institutional arrangements furbish multilingualism more than linguistic equality. Pragmatically speaking, it is an unattainable aspiration for the EU and elsewhere in the world where translations are carried out in other national or local languages. This is compounded by the fact that each EU state may have more than one language, and not all of them can become national languages in the EU. The Directorate General of Multilingualism charts out policies and recommendations for more than one language in member states and gives incentives for the promotion and strengthening of the tradition of multilingualism but has no mechanism in practice to bring equal status to all languages. The institutions and the

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[22] Y. Volman. "The Lisbon Treaty and Linguistic Diversity: Policy and Practice in the European Institutions, in E-Book (eds.), *Multilingual Europe, Multilingual Europeans* (Brill, 2012), 37-56, at ps://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789401208031/B9789401208031-s005.xml.

[23] H. Cardinal & W. Hildebrand. *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream is that Our Peoples will One Day be Clearly Recognized as Nations* (University of Calgary Press, 2000).

[24] Volman. The Lisbon Treaty and Linguistic Diversity.

[25] J. Fidrmuc and V. Ginsburgh. "Languages in the European Union: The Quest for Equality and its Cost", *European Economic Review* 51, no.6 (2007): 1351-1369.

states can guarantee each citizen the right to speak his/ her language, but equality seems to be an idea far from reality.

The industrial and economic boom on the European continent and its social welfare system consequently appealed to workers and people across the globe, looking for a secure life, resulting in rising immigration of various backgrounds, cultures and languages in Europe. English became a lingua franca in Europe for being the most effective medium of communication globally. It's not a language that asserts itself to be the most useful but it's people who drive to learn some major languages to seek their economic, political or other vested interests.

Ground Realities

Despite cultural states is not a favoured idea in the EU and citizens thinking in terms of nation-states, nevertheless, ethnic affiliation and linguistic identity are very close to their hearts.[26] Except for the elite class, the rest of the Europeans are committed to upholding their languages. Introducing a single currency, establishing a unitary free market, free movement of labour across Europe, and delineating the European continental boundary have practically happened easier than establishing an egalitarian use of many official and working languages in the EU. The policy adopted in the Treaty of Paris that all languages of member states shall be official and working languages has aligned with the charter of human rights of the EU, which prohibits any kind of discriminatory policy to promote equal status to every nation in Europe. To respect cultural diversity, the multilingual policy is logically more applicable in the intergovernmental and transnational structure of the EU. All EU languages are officially equal and all written documents and working papers of the EU originally in English, French and German are translated into the 24 official languages. Members of the European Parliament or Commission and other summits have the right to speak in the language of his or her choice. There is a continuous debate on languages as a medium of cultural diversity and its competent idea of a common European language.[27]

The citizens of EU states want to stick with their national languages, not out of the desire to speak and communicate in them, but for their

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[26] E. J. Hobsbawm and D. J. Kertzer. "Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today," *Anthropology Today* 8, no.1 (1992): 3-8.

[27] European Parliament, Language Policy: Fact Sheets on the EU.

apprehension of losing their identity in a massive cauldron of European unification.[28] If this fear was distilled out, the EU would not have had the officials and working languages' debate, would not have spent a huge budget on translating and interpreting content, and would not be appeasing public aspirations; it would merely become a Christian club. The EU constitution and treaties allow all citizens to understand, address and receive content in their languages, but for formal internal communication, 24 official languages do not enjoy the prestige of working languages, except two institutions, the Council of Ministers and European Parliament that use all languages with the help of translators during the sessions as working languages. English and French often supersede other languages. Less prominent languages are used when they hold symbolic meaning. This fact has created ambiguity for working languages and their linguistic equality in the EU.[29] With the financial, labour-intensive and time-delay pressures of translating content into all languages, one option that is being entertained is partial translations into a few but not all languages. There is an asymmetry between the languages of the EU, which means the speakers of the small languages rely on translation into one of the major languages.[30] The other option would be to delay translations to other languages,[31] however, these options are not without their caveats.

Considering it against the fabric of democracy, EP emphasizes inclusion of all formal languages, however in reality uses a few working languages in its verbal or written communications. This results in the exclusion of many members who speak non-used languages but are involved with parliamentary consultations; member parliamentarians note discussions and informal chats in the parliament corridors are nevertheless crammed with English and French.[32] This is also evident from different surveys of the European Commission and its offices, where civil servants from all member

[28] E. R. Gil. Why Languages Matter to People: Communication, Identity and Justice in Western Democracies: The Case of Mixed Societies, Vol. 2 (Publicacions de la Generalitat de Catalunya-Government of Catalonia Publications, 2016).

[29] V. Mamadouh. "Supranationalism in the European Union: What about Multilingualism," in *World Political Map Conference on Nationalisms and Identities in a Globalized World* (Maynooth and Belfast, August 1998).

[30] F. Coulmas. *A Language Policy for the European Community* (Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991).

[31] T. Van Els. "The European Union, its Institutions and its Languages: Some Language Political Observations," *Language Planning and Policy in Europe* 2, (2006): 220-256.

[32] F. Coulmas. *A Language Policy for the European Community*.

states work only in English, French and sometimes German is used for internal written and verbal communications. Moreover, in the last few decades, excessive use of English has negatively affected the use of German. Among civil servants' a duopoly of French and English has also been noticed; members of the northern states prefer to speak English whereas members from southern states prefer to use French.[33]

European Court sets its language policies, which could be distinguished at three different levels. First, in litigations, the plaintiff can opt for any language, unless it is one of the EU bodies, in which case the defender chooses the language (French). Second, the language in court would be French (despite the immense pressure from others to use English instead). Third, all official publications of the court would be available in all EU languages; and in case of ambiguities, the language used in a proceeding is considered authentic.[34] The Central Bank of the European Union uses English for its internal communication and communication outside with other institutions and bodies of the world; however, all important documents are translated into every EU language. Since English is used in international banking, the use of English for the Central Bank is generally acceptable for all.[35]

Conclusion

The EU, a *plurilinguisitic* entity in principle, treats all languages of member states on egalitarian grounds declaring them official and working languages, but in practice, this fundamental right is virtually non-existent. English, French and German remain prominent working languages of the EU. A visible discrepancy prevails between averred linguistic diversity and its practice. One can safely say the use of languages of member states of the EU works paradoxically. Some point out that the EU is a market-oriented and motivated entity, therefore a language policy is based on an ordinary market mechanism gain, not an inclusive process of social and cultural integration.[36]

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[33] T. J. van Els. "The European Union, its Institutions and its Languages", *Current Issues in Language Planning* 2, no.4 (2001): 311-360.

[34] H. Koch. "Legal Aspects of a Language Policy for the European Communities: Language Risks, Equal Opportunities, and Legislating a Language", *Analysing Intercultural Communication* (1991): 147-161.

[35] Ibid.

[36] F. Grin. Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland – Overview and Recent Developments, 1996.

The current linguistic map of the EU suggests that English dominates the continent. And those who consider, English, as a usable public property, must take concrete actions for its expansion.[37] Indeed, recent surveys suggest, the use of English by non-English speakers in many regions of Europe is increasing. Similarly, according to the Education First-English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) in 2022, ten EU member states Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark, Croatia, Finland, Poland, Sweden and Austria rank highest in their use of English. In the Netherlands only, 95.6% of the population uses English.[38] The EU has accepted English as a dominant medium of expression due to its global reach and networking.

Many Europeans accept the fact that linguistic equality could be a cherished principle but not a goal that needs to be achieved. Linguistic equality is merely a cultural need and mostly does not involve monetary and financial benefits. In addition, Europeans are preparing for *global cosmopolitanism*. English has become the lingua franca of this preparation and people of the world, have started seeing it as a source of potent communication. Moreover, Eurocentric individuals suspect language may be the only barrier to establishing a true sense of European identity.[39] The attempts at bringing equal status for languages of European states are looked at with doubts by nationalists. Multilingualism in the EU was created to protect minority languages and promote linguistic diversity by advising everyone to learn two other languages of their choice in addition to their mother tongue. The learning system is arranged at the school level. The EU's claim of implementation of working and official languages with an equal status is purely an idealistic version of the founding thinkers of the integration project. Respect for every language and tradition of the European Community and nation is a reality. The EU means to manage the differences, not to merge identities and cultures.

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[37] G. Quell. "Language Choice in Multilingual Institutions: A Case Study at the European Commission with Particular Reference to the Role of English, French, and German as Working Languages," *Multilingua* 16, no. 1 (1997).

[38] https://www.iamexpat.nl/expat-info/dutch-expat-news/dutch-ranked-best-non-native-english-speakers-fourth-year-row.

[39] A. Breiteneder. "English as a Lingua Franca in Europe: An Empirical Perspective," *World Englishes* 28, no.2 (2009): 256-269.