

European policy on multilingualism: unity in diversity or added value?

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the third millennium, and in particular with the adoption of the Barcelona objective on 16 March 2002, which recommended the teaching to all of “at least two foreign languages from a very early age,” multilingualism has been a recognized part of European policy. The Barcelona objective was followed by a series of papers and reports elaborating on this strategy, beginning with the New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (2005). The language philosophy of these proposals oscillates between considerations of identity and functionality. One orientation is clearly based on priorities such as the protection of minority languages and the promotion of diversity alongside the importance of multilingualism for intercultural dialogue - the substantiation in language, in other words, of one of the key principles of the European project, expressed in its motto ‘united in diversity’. On the other hand, beginning with the ELAN Report (2006), the Pimlico Report (2011) and the Study on Foreign Language Proficiency and Employability (2015), there has been an increasing emphasis on the functional utility of multilingual competences for business and trade, and in particular the notion that foreign language skills provide a competitive advantage, “added value”, for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This paper provides an overview of European policy on multilingualism as it emerges in European policy documents and attempts to chart the underlying language philosophies guiding them.

Neither language nor language policy has ever been at the heart of the European project. The birth of European institutions in the 1950s concerned institutional and economic issues rather than cultural (and still less linguistic) ones. The transformation of the European Union from a 15-state entity in 1995 to one of 25 and then 28 states (2004-2013) had little impact on language policy. At the

time of writing, apart from some isolated comments,¹ the British exit from the European Union has not been considered from the point of view of its impact on language use in the EU.

This neglect of language issues within the framework of the development of a new kind of political entity, the European Union could be considered curious in light of the crucial symbiosis between language and political institutions in the formation of nation-states. The nation-building paradigm of nineteenth-century Europe was strongly based on the notion of an essential “fit” between national identity (from Herder onwards strongly linked to the sharing of a common mother tongue) and the state (see, for example, Gellner 1983; Anderson 1983). This fundamental link between language and political institutions, never absolute but always significant in the case of the nation-state, is inapplicable to Europe, whether considered as a “family of nations”, to use Margaret Thatcher’s term, or a federation of nations becoming an “ever closer union”.² This is clearly due to the federal nature of the European experiment, based on an acceptance of diversity and thus the inappropriateness of any move towards a common language. Instead, a democratic political entity such as the European Union, relying on communication between nations and citizens in a large number of languages which are, to a considerable extent, mutually incomprehensible, should surely require a serious and forceful policy regarding multilingualism.

According to some, this need has been perceived more by some of the citizens of Europe than their representative institutions (De Mauro, 2014: 80). But it would not be true to say that these institutions have paid no attention at all to issues of language. There have been, for example, moments when foreign language competence was specifically promoted, for example, in the “Lingua” programme of the early 1990s (subsequently subsumed, along with the “Erasmus” programme into the “Socrates” programme), which aimed to promote language teaching and learning and in particular, for a time at least, minority languages (Wright, 2016: 145; Gubbins, 1996: 124-25) Language has also been the specific focus of a number of European policy documents, and these will constitute the principal focus of this article.

Two underlying attitudes can be found in this documentation. The first sees language as a fundamental right, as an element of cultural inheritance tied essentially to spatially-defined linguistic or ethnic groups. As such, all languages

¹ See for example, the comments made by Danita Hubner, chairwoman of the European Parliament’s constitutional committee, who suggested that, with Brexit, English might be dropped as an official language (Boyle, 2016), and Jean-Claude Juncker, who in a speech in Florence on 5 May 2017 put forward the view that “slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe” (Rankin: 2017).

² The expression “ever closer union”, to be found in many of the founding documents of the European project such as the treaties of Rome, Maastricht and Lisbon, was a specific target of the British Prime Minister David Cameron during the negotiations between Britain and the EU before the “Brexit” referendum of 23 June 2016.

need to be protected as guarantors of Europe's pluralism and as a demonstration of the equal treatment of difference within overarching European institutions – a substantiation of its principle of being “united in diversity” (Curti Gialdino, 2005: 129-136). A second, more recent approach has focused instead on the usefulness of competence in foreign languages for economic competitiveness and thus for growth and employment.

Early in the history of the institutions of what was to become the European Union, the issue of language was approached in order to avoid equivocation and the possibility that any one language or languages should rise to anything like hegemonic status. Indeed, the very first procedural regulation of the European Community, the “Regulation No 1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community” of 15 April 1958, laid down that the four principal languages of the six nations that had joined the European Economic Community should all be considered both as “official languages” and as the “working languages” of the European institutions (“Regulation”, 1958: 59)³. This principle, that all national representatives have the right to express themselves in their native languages, has been maintained ever since,⁴ although the “procedural” or “working” languages of the institutions of the European Union used in everyday documentation have now been effectively restricted to English, French and German (Kruse & Ammon, 2013: 174).⁵ This rights-based approach extends beyond the regulation of language use in European institutions to the relations between citizens and these institutions. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2002) lays down, under article 41 regarding “the right to good administration”, that “every person may write to the institutions of the Union in one of the languages of the Treaties and must have an answer in the same language.” (“Charter”, 1992: 7).

³ The Regulation no. 1 made no clear distinction between “official” and “working” languages, as is noted by Labrie (1993: 81). The distinction remains, however, in the everyday practice of the EU, although, as Phillipson points out, the term “working language” is used in a number of different senses (2009: 147). For an extended discussion of the Regulation, see Labrie (1993: 74-86).

⁴ This results, as is well known, in substantial costs (almost 1% of the annual EU budget) in terms of translation and interpretation (Phillipson, 2002: 114).

⁵ According to Grin (2006: 86), there has been a “progressive, though presently not official, drift toward the dominant, or even sole, use of English as a working language of European institutions” something borne out by the research presented by Kruse & Ammon (2013: 166-67). Grin further points out that, in purely economic terms, this “amounts to a massive transfer in the direction of native speakers of English, paid for by everybody else”, the result of “net savings” from not having to invest time and money in learning other languages and from their quasi-monopoly of the market in English-language text-editing and language teaching (Grin, 2006: 86-7). See also Phillipson (2006: 355).

The founding moments of European institutions, then, recognized multilingualism as a core practice.⁶ Whether this multilingualism in official documents is fully functional, however, is open to discussion. Already in 1993, when there were only nine official languages, it was objected that it was impossible to avoid discrepancies and ambiguity in so many different languages and versions (Labrie, 1993: 139), something which is of course even more the case when we consider the 24 official languages in use today. In any case, for our present concerns it is enough to note that although language issues were the focus of some attention for the early builders of Europe, their interest was to a large extent “internal” - they were primarily concerned with working procedures within the institutions. Language “policy” in this documentation, in other words, appears as a technical and practical regulation regarding the procedures and communication of central institutions, or as an administrative right, and not as a strategic statement of aims and objectives (see Phillipson, 2002: 107).

If this may be considered the starting point for the orientation of European institutions towards language, the period following the Maastricht Treaty began to put greater emphasis on language competence as an element of education policy within the Union (“High Level Group”, 2007: 5). This new emphasis culminated in the adoption of the Barcelona Objective passed by the European Council of 2002. As part of the European Council meeting of 15 and 16 March 2002, within the overall section, “Education,” it recommended that school systems should aim “to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age.” (“Presidency conclusions”, 2002: 19). The Barcelona Objectives were a response to the Lisbon Strategy, which aimed to promote sustainable economic growth within the European Union. The recommendation of the European Council thus not only encouraged multilingualism as a key basic skill (on the level of literacy and arithmetic, it would seem) but also, importantly, wedded linguistic competence to economic growth within the overall framework of the push towards a “competitive economy based on knowledge” (“Presidency Conclusions”, 2002: 19). The founding principle of this second approach to multilingualism, then, sees competences in foreign languages not within the framework of the rights of the speaker but as part of a general strategy of economic growth through the development of the key immaterial infrastructure of education and knowledge.

This objective was subsequently taken up in a number of ways by European institutions (see “High Level Group”, 2007: 5). Multilingualism was first included officially in the responsibilities of a minister of the European Union in 2004, at the time Jan Figel, as part of a portfolio dedicated to “Education, training, culture and multilingualism.” In 2007, under the presidency of José Manuel Barroso, a

⁶ For an overview of the use of languages in European institutions until 2002, see Phillipson (2002: 105-138). For European policy on multilingualism, see Rindler Schjerve and Vetter (2012).

Commissioner for Multilingualism was set up and the post was given to the Romanian Leonard Orban. In 2010 the responsibility for multilingualism was reabsorbed into the portfolio of Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, and since 2014 multilingualism as a specific responsibility seems to have been lost. It should be noted that responsibility for multilingualism has now passed from the Directorate General for Education to the Directorate General for Employment. The move would seem to reinforce an awareness that language competence is not only a right or a basic skill but an important factor in economic growth and labour mobility. This shift in emphasis, in fact, has been the object of specific criticism on the part of the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity, an organization particularly linked to the promotion of minority languages. A member of this Network, the Dutch politician Jannewietske de Vries, sees it as evidence of a “utilitarian, market-oriented approach to the languages of Europe, which will only prioritize big, hegemonic languages” (De Vries, 2014).

The Barcelona objective first found more concrete expression in the document produced in 2005 entitled “A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism”. Despite the functional context in which languages were included in the Barcelona document, the preamble to this document still highlighted cultural and identity-related aspects of language. Going beyond what might be regarded as the simple guaranteeing of equal rights to the official languages of Europe, the focus instead was on seeing the linguistic diversity of Europe as a positive trait, as a multiplicity which was characteristic of, and beneficial to, the European project. It stressed, in fact, that the European Union was not a “melting pot in which differences are rendered down but a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding” (“New Framework”, 2005: 2). The paper indicated a number of specific actions aimed at the promotion of multilingualism which still form the basis for European policy: the promotion of national strategies, better teacher training, early language learning, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), the promotion of languages in higher education, the development of the academic discipline of multilingualism, and the setting up of a European Indicator of Language Competence. One section of the document, however, entitled “The Multilingual Economy”, specifically developed, for the first time in a European policy document, the functional link between language competence and economic growth. It reported in particular that there was “some evidence that European companies lose business because they cannot speak their customers’ language” (“New Framework”, 2005: 8). Added to this was a recommendation that deficiencies in language competence constituted a brake on the mobility of labour, a crucial element of the single market.

The New Framework in turn gave rise to a series of working groups and policy documents aimed at fleshing out and coordinating European policy on

multilingualism. The first of these was a High Level Group on Multilingualism, consisting of 11 experts, which was set up in 2006 with the specific objective of providing “support and advice in developing initiatives, as well as fresh impetus and ideas for a comprehensive approach to multilingualism in the European Union” (High Level Group, 2007: 7). Again, despite the new focus on language competences as functional to economic growth, this was only one of the key areas covered. The group also focused on language as integral to intercultural dialogue and social cohesion, particularly in the context of increases in migration (“High Level Group”, 2007: 10).

The second working group to follow this theme was the Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue chaired by the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf. Its focus, as indicated in the title, was precisely the need to enhance intercultural dialogue within Europe, but language was central to its deliberations. Its report endeavoured to see the language issue as a challenge but also as an opportunity, and to explain how “the multiplicity of languages could strengthen Europe,” as indicated in the report’s subtitle. In particular it argued that it was necessary to combat the creeping dominance of English as the *de facto* language of international dialogue, which “would be damaging to the economic and strategic interests of our continent and all our citizens irrespective of their mother tongue” (“Rewarding Challenge”, 2008: 5). To combat this, the group proposed the somewhat quirky solution that European citizens should develop, alongside their mother tongue, a “personal adoptive language” in which to be able to communicate on a European level.

A third group, whose work stands as a more specific testimony to the new economic interest in the promotion of languages, was the Business Forum for Multilingualism. The Forum first met in 2007 and produced a set of recommendations in a published report entitled “Language Means Business” (2008). It was followed by a second Forum in 2009, set up by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. The Forums followed the format of a “structured dialogue”, the latter including 21 representatives from four different areas of interest: intermediate business groups (Chambers of Commerce, Business Europe, etc.), Higher Education Associations, specialist bodies and networks, as well as the European Economic and Social Committee. Already in 2007, the first Forum warned that Europe was “running the risk of losing the war of competences, as emerging economies mainly in Asia and Latin America rapidly acquire language skills and other skills necessary for competing successfully on tomorrow’s markets” (“Language Means Business”, 2008: 8). If there was no substantial intervention to improve language skills within Europe, the greater language competence of entrepreneurs from other areas would give them a significant competitive advantage on world markets. This group too came out strongly against the complacency of relying on competence in English as a *lingua franca*. English was a basic skill, but knowledge in other languages could provide an important competitive advantage.

Language competence, moreover, was not just one element amongst many. For this Forum, it was a basic, transversal element to be taken into consideration at all levels: “The challenge is to integrate multilingualism firmly in all strategies aiming at developing human capital for the future” (ibid.).

The policy statements produced by different bodies as a development of the New Framework, then, while operating within the broad framework of culture, identity, and solidarity, began to highlight the need to invest in language competences as part of the creation of the human capital necessary to sustain a knowledge-based economy in the context of global competition. This focus on business, growth, and employment can also be found in three research studies commissioned by the European Union.

The first of these was the *ELAN Report. The Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, published in 2006 and used by the Business Forum for its recommendations. This developed the view that a significant amount of business was being lost to European enterprises as the result of the lack of the necessary language skills. It admitted that English was a key language for gaining access to export markets, but argued that competence in other European languages, such as Russian, German, Polish (for Eastern Europe), French (for much of Africa), and Spanish (for South America), constituted the crucial competitive added value. It indicated, specifically, four factors in language management as crucial to the success of exporting SMEs: the elaboration by each firm of specific language strategies, the recruitment of native speakers, the selection and training of staff with languages skills, and the use of translators and interpreters (“ELAN”, 2006).

The second study was the *Pimlico Report on Language Management Strategies and Best Practice in European SMEs*, published in April 2011. The report began with a quotation from Willy Brandt, the former German chancellor which cleverly sums up the need for foreign language skills in commerce:

*If I am selling to you then I speak your language, aber wenn du mir etwas verkaufst, dan mußt du Deutsch sprechen.*⁷ (“Pimlico”, 2011: title page).

The report focused on identifying and describing models of best practice in 40 European SMEs selected for having experienced significant trade growth thanks to their adoption of a language management strategy, the “planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate effective communication with clients and suppliers abroad”, in accordance with the recommendations of the ELAN report. It cited 14 different measures adopted by these SMEs including common ones such as professional translation/interpretation, language training and staff mobility. Three measures, however, emerged as particularly influential: multilingual website adaptation, the recruitment of native speakers, and the use of local agents to solve language problems. General characteristics underlying successful export companies included functional capacity across a range of

⁷ “...but if you sell me something, you must speak German.”

languages, high level competence in English, and a pervasive internationalism underpinning their human resource strategy (“Pimlico”, 2011: 4).

The third document, issued late in 2015, was the *Study on Foreign Language Proficiency and Employability* (2015) which, within the overall policy context of Education and Training 2020, analysed the needs of employers for foreign language abilities across all 28 members of the European Union. This paper confirmed the overall perception of the importance of English as a lingua franca and in general as the most required language for companies, but it too indicated competence in another European foreign language as the crucial added value for competitiveness. The document added little to the previous ones; its importance can be found in the specific policy recommendations it put forward for public bodies and educational institutions. In line with the functional value placed on languages as a factor in economic growth through competitiveness and labour mobility, it recommended greater attention to language competences across the curricula – not just, in other words, to foreign language and literature departments, but to all areas of education. And national governments should have the overall responsibility to “support higher education institutions in ensuring that vocational and language degree courses reflect the breadth of need for foreign languages by employers” (“Study on Foreign Language Proficiency”, 2015: 104, 107).

What can we conclude from this survey of documentation regarding the policy of the European Union on multilingualism? It shows, it would appear, a gradual increase in awareness of the importance of language competences and the need for a coherent and comprehensive language policy. The purely procedural interest of European institutions in regulating language use with the objective of guaranteeing equal rights has given way to a series of institutional discussions which have broadened the scope to include issues of culture, intercultural, solidarity and in particular communication in the world of economic exchange. But the sense of a single, focused interest in investing in multilingualism is arguably still missing. The recent draft joint report of the European Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, *New priorities for European cooperation in education and training*, dedicates no specific attention to foreign language competences, considered only as part of a series of “other competences” such as digital awareness and creativity to take their place alongside other “basic skills” (“New Priorities”, 2015: 3).

Language policy in Europe took as its starting point, as we have seen, the right to express oneself in one’s mother tongue and consequently the equal rights of all national groups committed to the European project to have their own language recognized and guaranteed. As a shield against the expansion of any one language as a result of political or economic dominance, and a safeguard against any linguistic hegemony, this is surely a necessary baseline. But it constitutes a static principle, one which by its nature does little to enhance the development of

the plurilingualism of European citizens. It is, moreover, strongly linked to an idea of a nation as co-extensive with its principal language, one which downplays the extent and importance of competence in minority languages but also, more seriously perhaps for the specifically European dimension, strengthens the idea of a European polity based on the cooperation of distinct nation states rather than the “ever closer union” enshrined in the preamble to the Treaty of Rome. The recent emphasis on the need for foreign language competences in an increasingly interrelated European economy based on knowledge and human capital and not on economies of scale may instead open up a wider debate on language use and language policy in Europe. It may, for example, re-open a debate on the relation between language and political institutions with specific reference to the particular case of Europe. Tullio De Mauro recently stressed the extent to which multilingualism has always been significant part of European history and culture (De Mauro, 2014: 25-26). He also made the point that whereas autocratic states are relatively uninterested in the language competences of their subjects, democracies cannot avoid a strong concern for the capacities of their citizens to communicate, as this is part of the ontological make-up of a participatory democracy (De Mauro, 2014: xi). The imminent withdrawal of Britain from the European Union will lead to a situation in which the principal working language of European institutions will be divorced from the principal nation it “represents” (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of which language Ireland uses as its official language). It may be the moment to go beyond the (necessary but not sufficient) defensive position of “official languages” and commit to a recognition of multilingualism not only as central to European identity (being united in diversity) but also as a crucial functional tool for the enabling and enhancing of communication amongst its citizens. Multilingualism contributes to economic growth and guarantees effective participation in political processes. The crucial added economic and political value that multilingualism provides should put it at the heart of the European project.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Rafael Lozano Miralles for initial orientation in the area of multilingualism in European Union policy and the useful indications of the anonymous referees. An earlier form of this paper was presented during the conference ‘Languaging Diversity’: 3rd International Conference on Language(s) and Power conference in Macerata, 3-5 March 2016.

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