

Protection and Promotion of Multilingualism in the EU

Written by Shannon Hall

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SHANNON HALL, MAY 15 2013

Although it is called the European Union, it is comprised of many different states—from Spain to Latvia—all of which have their own cultural heritage, language, and customs. Increasingly, it has become important to the EU to promote and protect those many diverse cultures and encourage its citizens to expand their linguistic knowledge. Travelling across state borders would become easier; businesses would flourish; people would develop a better understanding of the many diverse cultures that surround them in the EU. Multilingualism has the potential to enhance integration within the EU through this heightened appreciation.

Such multiculturalism in the EU can be seen as existing due to “complex patterns of immigration and invasion dating back centuries” that have “exposed them [Europeans] to different cultures and to people speaking different languages”.^[1] Often, the values of these different groups have been “adopted and integrated” into European policies and life. However, it must be acknowledged that there still remains “racism and religious tensions” between different cultural and religious groups within the EU in the postwar world.^[2]

Due to the extravagant level of destruction and high cost of war reparations, Europe sought to avoid further conflict by promoting unity between its member states and discouraging nationalism—a fundamental factor responsible for the outbreak of World War II in the first place. In 1945, the main concerns of Europe were “to rebuild war-ravaged economies, to ensure security from one another and from external threats, and to limit the dangers of nationalism”.^[3] Maintaining peace throughout Europe was the primary goal and if all of Europe could unite under a common identity, this goal could be maintained with greater success. Part of that identity lies in language, which must also be standardized throughout the EU to further the sense of unity and allow for more effective communication.

In 1958, the Council of Ministers passed a regulation declaring Dutch, French, German, and Italian as the official and working languages of the European Economic Community, seeing as these countries held current positions as member states.^[4] This meant that all government documents and addresses were required to be translated into these four languages. However, “language is also the most effective barrier to the development of a true sense of European identity”^[5] Those who are not proficient in any of the official languages lose out; there is not as strong of a requirement for minority or other languages to be translated compared to official languages. In this way, multilingualism actually contradicts itself and slightly backfires on the idea of promoting a holistic sense of European identity.

In spite of this counterintuitive element, the Business Platform for Multilingualism was set up by the European Commission in 2009 in an effort to spread multilingualism and raise awareness of linguistic deficiencies within the EU.^[6] “Each year, thousands of European companies lose business and miss out on contracts because of poor language skills and knowledge of other cultures”.^[7] The Platform would suggest solutions and “audit existing linguistic performance” within businesses, prompt “greater interest in the opportunities offered by multilingualism,” and see “language competence as an element of corporate quality.”^[8] Stakeholders from professional associations, trade unions, employer organizations, universities, and vocational education training institutions are brought together to “promote language learning for competitiveness and employability”.^[9] Communication in trade and business transactions within the European states as well as with third countries would be more efficiently utilized if a greater number of Europeans were multilingual. More business opportunities would be created due to a broadened clientele population and greater degree of mobility of business people to different areas, potentially around the world.

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Proficiency in other languages gives one the confidence to travel abroad to the country of origin of that language, and perhaps to other places as well. An improvement in language skills would help companies to enter new markets “and individuals improve their job prospects at home and abroad”.^[10]

In 2007, the European Agenda for Culture sought to promote cultural diversity and dialogue and tried to make culture a part of the EU’s international relations, viewing culture as a “catalyst for creativity and innovation”.^[11] Culture can be used as a tool for “enhancing creative encounters and increasing opportunities to produce and exchange cultural goods and services” across European state borders, in turn creating jobs and “injecting innovation and creativity into other sectors such as business and education”.^[12] The Lisbon Treaty allows for the free movement of people across state lines to work, spreading and mixing cultures and languages and allowing for the expansion of knowledge of such things by others.^[13]

Consequently, this mixing of cultures could pose a threat to some citizens who are extremely nationalistic. The preservation of language “has been at the heart of many struggles by minorities to assert their separate identity”.^[14] By integrating a second language into a culture or asserting another language as the “official” language, it threatens the native tongue and thus, the identity and cultural history of the people. After all, “language generally plays a central role in determining the character of national identity”.^[15] Will the society and its customs discontinue due to another language taking over? Furthermore, language is a crucial method of communication. If a native tongue becomes marginalized, the people who speak it do as well. In addition, the rising prevalence of English within the EU causes many of its citizens to feel threatened; in the EU-27, English is taught to “nearly 85 percent of pupils” and is increasingly taught around the globe.^[16]

The policy area of multilingualism is not supposed to threaten EU member states, but is meant to make the citizens of Europe more connected by promoting the learning of other languages outside of one’s native country. “Multilingualism is simply the view that each language spoken in the community ought to enjoy the same public recognition,” so that no one language is favored over the other and citizens of the EU can enjoy a feeling of inclusivity.^[17] What’s more, being monolingual limits one’s opportunities and interactions abroad and within the EU.

Therefore, multilingualism is encouraged within the EU through various policies and regulations. “Language policy issues are especially important with regard to education, as multilingual education could be viewed as a democratic tool safeguarding active citizen participation in an intergovernmental forum”.^[18] The EU may be more democratic if citizens knew multiple languages, allowing for increased participation in public affairs and an increased awareness of issues present in neighboring countries.

“A democratic linguistic foundation is of paramount importance in EU integration processes in order to ensure a democratic union.” A mere 44 percent of Europeans “claim to be able to hold a conversation in a foreign language”.^[19] Such a language deficiency “is cause for concern for the European Commission, which targeted multilingualism as a priority for EU states at a summit in March 2002”.^[20] Maintaining the individual languages of each European state is of importance in prolonging that culture and in including every language in EU politics. Traveling would be easier and less daunting, and people would be able to experience life in other countries from a different perspective and gain a better understanding of others’ cultures. This would possibly make them feel more unified, more “European.” There still remains an imbalance with regards to linguistic equality. “The linguistic resources of minorities are made invisible and consequently marginalized” while “official and working” languages are required during the translation of political documents.^[21] The term “minority language” does not refer to little-known languages, but rather “those existing as mother tongues among sizeable population within the member states, but which are not the official languages of those particular member states.” Examples of these would include Frisian, Basque, Welsh, and Catalan.^[22] Even with a significant number of people speaking these languages, they sit on the outskirts of what is considered to be an official language and do not necessarily gain national recognition within the EU.

Hence, the policy area of multilingualism was established and applied to “protect and promote minority languages and linguistic diversity” by maintaining that everyone should learn two new languages in addition to their current language.^[23] Because the EU is so multicultural, multilingual employees in the corporate world are important assets

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to have; they can communicate with more business partners and expand their customer base to include more people. Creative resources can be more widely shared and collaboration among a wider variety of countries could be more likely, spawning new innovations in technology, industry, and business. Workers would more readily and freely move between countries for employment, bringing new ideas to the table and spreading their knowledge, making for a richer and more colourful European society. Through such benefits, the EU may become more integrated as a whole, its citizens of different countries interacting more and more with one another.

Schooling will play a vital role in creating a multilingual European society.

“Based on a three-language model, it is possible to sustain a secure ethnic identity or identities via teaching through the mother tongue(s), as well as by acquiring at least one lingua franca and additional languages through carefully planned and well-organized multilingual education”.^[24]

English is now widely taught in schools as a second language and the EU has set up an “educational exchange” program called Erasmus.^[25] This program “has allowed students and faculty to study and work in universities outside their home countries” and “has encouraged cooperation between European institutions of higher education”.^[26]

Through this experience, people of one country have the opportunity to see what life is like in another country, allowing them the chance to enhance their appreciation of countries other than their own. This would aid in solidifying the feeling of inclusion and gratitude of living in the EU, while also giving them the chance to pick up an additional language. Ties could be built between persons of different cultures and societies, interracial marriages performed, permanent residence taken up. The learning exchange program could be very eye opening, much like study abroad programs for college students.

Multilingualism makes the transition from one country to another that much easier; the ability to talk to locals makes one feel more incorporated into the society and is a useful skill for navigating a new setting.

“Monolingualism not only discourages migration but also poses a handicap to multinational businesses by making it more difficult to build exports, and stands as a potent reminder to Europeans of their differences, making it more difficult to understand the way other European societies think and work”.^[27]

Hence the formation of the Business Platform for Multiculturalism and the encouragement of students and citizens to pick up an additional language or two other than their mother tongue. Due to the enforcement of policies and the implementations of such programs as Erasmus and Socrates Phase II,

“Language training has improved, with almost all secondary school pupils in the EU now required to learn at least one foreign language, and more states requiring two languages”.^[28]

Functional spillover, where cooperation in one issue area functionally creates pressure for cooperation in another related area, can be seen in multilingualism policies.^[29] Changes and effects on business plans, trade, education, culture, politics, and social life in general can be seen as a result of the influence of multilingual policies and programs.

However, language policy is not an overarching EU policy, but is “the responsibility of the member states” and varies across borders.^[30] Therefore, “the EU has very limited influence in this area as the content of educational systems is the responsibility of individual member states”.^[31] Educational standards and learning requirements for students vary from state to state; the languages taught are bound to be different and some systems only ask that a student learn one extra language instead of two. Despite this fact, “a number of EU funding programs actively promote language learning and linguistic diversity,” providing some cohesion and a united effort across all of Europe to promote language learning.^[32] “Every country of the European Union” has some institutions that “coordinate, advise and help develop policies concerning their official language or languages,” making multilingualism not only a statewide issue, but also an EU-wide issue.^[33]

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Programs at the EU level help contribute to the spread of multilingualism within states and provide a growing awareness of just how important language learning is. The goal of the Socrates Phase II program, passed by the European Parliament in 2000, is to

“promote a Europe of knowledge and encourage lifelong education through learning foreign languages, encouraging mobility, promoting cooperation at the European level, opening up methods of access to education and increasing the use of new technologies in the field of education.”[34]

Socrates Phase II was supposed to be implemented through eight measures, one of which is called “Lingua,” or “language learning”.[35] The main concern of the Lingua program is “promote targeted learning and teaching of languages” by gathering teachers and students from both informal and formal institutions to motivate and inform “European citizens about language learning” for the purposes that were previously stated.[36]

Another piece of legislation is the European Year of Languages, passed in 2001, which sought to “use an awareness and education policy to encourage people of the European Union to learn several foreign languages.”[37] This goes along the same lines as Socrates Phase II, raising “awareness of the wealth of linguistic diversity within the European Union and of its value in terms of civilization and culture”.[38] If more people are aware of the benefits of being multilingual and if language learning is promoted throughout all European schools, new possibilities would abound for its citizens and corporations. “Translation and interpretation, language teaching . . . is one of the fastest growing areas of the economy”.[39]

Other similar legislation dates all the way back to 1982, when the European Community set up the Bureau for Lesser Used Languages in Dublin, Ireland, to distribute “funds to ‘worthy’ cultural and educational projects that promote the development and retention of minority and regional languages”.[40] Keeping language diversity alive is important for preventing marginalization and for representing the history of a people.

The European Charter for Regional Languages was established in 1992 to help with the equalization of languages. Although

“10 percent of all EU citizens speak regional or minority languages, they still receive substantially less financial support, proportionally, than those fortunate enough to speak an official language, who can take advantage of a plethora of programs”.[41]

The charter began “a system of relationships between signatory countries and their constituent linguistic minorities,” that would provide access to education, public services, media, economic and social life, and cultural activities for minority speakers.[42] However, France refused to sign the charter, stating that “they would not acknowledge the presence of minority languages”, and it was left up to each individual member state to determine the “degree of protection the charter provides,” so nothing was firmly enforced.[43] This legislation was not Community law, but an intergovernmental agreement and held no real sway over protecting minority languages or promoting multilingualism.[44]

In 1996, the European Year of Lifelong Learning and the European Commission’s Green Paper made it onto the political scene. The objective of the European Year of Lifelong Learning was “to make the European public aware of the importance of lifelong learning, to foster better cooperation between education and training structures,” and “to stress contributions made by education and training to the equality of opportunities”.[45] The Green Paper “concluded that learning at least two community languages was essential if European Union citizens were to benefit fully from the opportunities offered by the single market”.[46]

Regarding further legal and treaty aspects of multilingualism, “Article 290 of the Treaty [Maastricht] offers protection by prohibiting discrimination based upon language”.[47] This is slightly contradictory to the EU’s establishment of official languages, which gives the impression that a linguistic—and thus, cultural—hierarchy exists. “The rhetoric of the equality of EU languages dovetails with the reality of some languages being more equal than others”.[48] Some kind of policy for better maintaining this ideal equality would need to be implemented.

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However, “all EU languages are to be treated on an equal basis with respect to publication of official EU documents” and citizens have the right to “communicate with institutions in an EU language of their choice”.^[49] Everyone of every language is capable of reading EU publications since they are made available in whichever language a country desires, theoretically leading to a more informed citizen body, but only if everyone takes an interest in EU matters in addition to their own national problems. Usually, though, citizens tend to pay little attention to European politics and favor their own country instead, which is counterproductive to the goal of obtaining a population who labels itself as “European” first and their specific nationality second. This support for numerous official languages depicts just how “complex and at times contradictory” the EU can be in “trying to project and develop” their ideal “European” identity.^[50]

In the case of the policy area of multilingualism, integration would mean encouraging people to appreciate the many states that make up the EU, through learning different languages. Mobility would increase, groups that were once unable to interact could now do so, ideas could be shared, and a better understanding of other people would follow from an increase in multilingual citizens. Enhanced communication and knowledge in the EU would bring every member state a little closer together, helping people to see that they are all European.

Multilingualism within the EU does not come without its challenges, however. The declaration of “official” versus “minority” languages creates a sense of inequality among people and may further animosities between certain cultures. Recognizing national languages while simultaneously supporting regional languages “puts the EU in the dangerous and volatile position of not only taking away sovereignty from above, but facilitating the regions to slice it away from below”.^[51] Despite this, “linguistic standardization may be necessary to prevent communication from becoming excessively costly, complicated, or outright impossible”.^[52] It can also provide such benefits as “increased trade, enhanced economic cooperation and improved communication”.^[53] Still, multilingual societies face other problems such as “promotion or suppression of languages, political and economic impact of such policies and their fairness”.^[54]

Citizens whose language ends up being suppressed become disenfranchised while those who speak languages that are then declared “official” obtain an advantage. Therefore, the EU must proceed with care in pursuing multilingualism, making sure every language is treated with equal respect. Those “prevented from communicating in the language of their choice may be unwilling or unable to fully participate in the political process” and thus will have less influence over EU policies as their voices will not be heard.^[55]

The promotion of multilingualism is a tricky area, but “language skills are essential for equality and integration,” especially in today’s world of “increasing mobility, globalization of the economy . . . the need to learn languages and develop plurilingual and intercultural education”.^[56] People will be better able to communicate, travel, and understand each other by widening their linguistic knowledge. “Only eight percent of Europeans consider language learning unimportant,” which means that the language policies have a greater chance of being effective and more people would be willing to work toward a more multilinguistic society.^[57]

Policies do not come without winners and losers. People who are fluent in “official” languages and do business abroad would benefit from this policy; multilingualism would help boost their business by drawing in more people and the official languages of the EU are more prevalent in political matters than other regional languages. The European Court of Justice uses French as its main language, so those who can understand French profit here. The trade sector would also win out because of the ability to trade between more countries; since communication between different countries would be clearer, the doors to trade would open wider. Additionally, the EU as a whole would gain an advantage from multilingualism; a sense of unity would further integrate member states and citizens would be one step closer to labeling themselves as “European.”

On the other hand, minority language speakers and those who are monolingual would suffer. They would see inequality and decreased opportunities to interact in social and political affairs, unlike the official language speakers. Monolingual speakers may feel isolated and would not as readily travel abroad as would a bilingual or multilingual person. Very nationalistic people may also feel that their native identity is threatened if the EU pushes a foreign language-learning requirement on them.

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However, citizens must realize that to be a part of the EU means to give up some sense of identity with one's own country in favor of a broader identity of what it means to be "European." State governments give up some of their decision-making power in place of pooled sovereignty under the EU. Through learning other languages, one's mind is opened to the broader possibilities and values that foreign languages bring; they should not feel that it infringes upon their heritage.

"Fostering language learning enhances communication among EU citizens. It promotes intercultural understanding. It offers great personal and professional opportunities and real access to the rights conferred by European citizenship, in particular the right to live and work anywhere in the EU".[58]

Multilingualism may promote unity, but "viewed holistically, the EU is comprised of cultural and linguistic minorities, so there is no one national (or pan-national) people, culture or language, and there can never be one".[59] The best the EU can do is promote the understanding and learning of other people and their languages in the hopes of forging harmony between its people. After all, the EU was established to keep the peace in Europe, but nothing exists without its complications.

[1] McCormick, John. 2011. *European Union Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 301.

[2] McCormick, 301-302.

[3] McCormick, 76.

[4] Caviedes, Alexander. 2003. "The Role of Language in Nation-Building Within the European Union." *Dialectical Anthropology*. Vol. 27, no. 3/4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790689> (November 10, 2012).

[5] McCormick, 47, 50.

[6] "Business Platform for Multilingualism: Report for the period of September 2009-June 2011." (3)

[7] 2012."Languages for Business and Employability." June 27. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/languages-of-europe/languages-for-business_en.htm (November 11, 2012).

[8] "Business Platform for Multilingualism: Report for the period of September 2009- June 2011." (8)

[9] 2012. "Start of the Business Platform for Multilingualism." June 27. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/news/20090925-start-of-the-business-platform-for-multilingualism_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[10] 2012 "Start of the Business Platform for Multilingualism." June 27. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/news/20090925-start-of-the-business-platform-for-multilingualism_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[11] 2012. "European Agenda for Culture." November 8. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/european-agenda_en.htm (November 11, 2012).

[12] 2012. "Our Policy Development: Skills and Mobility." March 26. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/skills-mobility_en.htm (November 11, 2012).

[13] Ibid.

[14] McCormick, 47, 50.

[15] Caviedes, 250.

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[16] McCormick, 391.

[17] Patten, Allen. 2001. "Political Theory and Language Policy." *Political Theory* (October): 699. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3072535> (November 10, 2012), 699.

[18] Christiansen, Pia Vanting. 2006. "Language Policy in the European Union." *Language Problems and Language Planning*. <http://www.esperanto-jongeren.nl/pdf/EuropeanUnion.pdf>. (November 10, 2012), 28.

[19] Christiansen, 22.

[20] *The Irish Times*. 2006. "Spread the Word, EU is Keen to Promote Multilingualism." February 28: 9. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/Inacademic/> (accessed November 13, 2012).

[21] Christiansen, 22.

[22] Caviedes, 257.

[23] 2012. "Multilingualism." June 7. http://europa.eu/pol/mult/index_en.htm (November 11, 2012).

[24] Christiansen, 21.

[25] McCormick, 391.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Cini, Michelle. 2010. *European Union Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 444.

[30] "European Union National Languages." <http://www.eurfedling.org/> (November 12, 2012).

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid. [34] 2007. "Languages: Socrates-Phase II." February 19. http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/general_framework/c11043_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] 2005 "European Year of Languages 2001." December 6. http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11044_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[38] Ibid.

[39] 2012. "Multilingualism." June 7. http://europa.eu/pol/mult/index_en.htm (November 12, 2012).

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[40] Caviedes, 259.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Caviedes, 258.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] "European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996)." http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11024_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[46] 2005. "European Year of Languages 2001." December 6. http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11044_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[47] Caviedes, 256.

[48] *Guardian Weekly*. 2003. "Union in Need of Language Equality." February 5. <http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/inacademic/> (accessed November 13, 2012).

[49] Fidrmuc, J., Ginsburgh, V., & Weber, S. 2007. "Ever Closer Union or Babylonian Discord? The Official Language Problem in the European Union." William Davidson Institute. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/58802259?accountid=11667> (November 10, 2012), 3.

[50] Caviedes, 256.

[51] Caviedes, 260.

[52] Fidrmuc, J., Ginsburgh, V., & Weber, S. 2007. *Ever Closer Union or Babylonian Discord? The Official Language Problem in the European Union*. William Davidson Institute. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/58802259?accountid=11667> (November 10, 2012), 5.

[53] Fidrmuc et al., 5-6.

[54] Fidrmuc et al., 5.

[55] Fidrmuc et al., 4.

[56] 2011. "Joint Council of Europe/European Commission Declaration to Mark the 10th Anniversary of the European Day of Languages." September 26: 1. http://ec.europa.eu/languages/news/pdf/joint_declaration_european_day_of_languages_en.pdf (November 24, 2012).

[57] 2012. "Multilingualism." June 7. http://europa.eu/pol/mult/index_en.htm (November 11, 2012).

[58] 2005 "European Year of Languages 2001." December 6. http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11044_en.htm (November 10, 2012).

[59] Caviedes, 254.

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