

WHAT LANGUAGE(S) FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

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EuroCité, Europartenaaires and Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute organised the seventh conference of the cycle "The European public space: Heading towards European elections" on the topic of "Multilingualism: strength or weakness?" in Paris on 17 June 2014.

The conference was opened by Yves Bertoncini, director of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, who spoke of the main issues related to the use of languages in the European Union and the emergence of a European public space. He explained the specific profile of the "Spitzenkandidaten" (or lead candidates) appointed by European political parties to obtain the presidency of the European Commission. With the exception of the extreme-left Greek candidate Alexis Tsipras¹, identified for his symbolic combat against austerity, all the candidates were polyglots, in other words able to express themselves in their mother tongue, in English and in a third language. As such, they symbolised what European citizens should ideally be.

The discussion, moderated and concluded by Nicolas Leron, president of EuroCité, was then conducted with²:

- Philippe Cayla, member of Europartenaaires board of directors and director of Euronews Development;
- Xavier North, delegate general for the French language and the languages of France at the French ministry of Culture.

The debate produced the following main analyses and recommendations.



1. Multilingualism in norms and monolingualism in practice

Yves Bertoncini pointed out that the EU has 24 official languages and three working languages (German, English, French). Xavier North defined multilingualism as the possibility to express oneself in one's own language and to be understood by everyone. Philipp Cayla explained the difference between multilingualism, concerning an institution publishing and communicating in several languages, and plurilingualism, which describes the ability of individuals to express themselves in several languages. These two conditions are required if we are to create a European public space, particularly the first one, because it is essential to be able to reason, to inform oneself and to express oneself in one's mother tongue (Yves Bertoncini).

So what language should European citizens use with one another and how can they communicate with one another? That is one of the central points that will contribute to the creation of a European public space (Xavier North). We need to communicate despite the language barrier. The plurality of languages present in the EU is an important asset and we need to learn how to organise exchanges between different languages in order to forge ties between European citizens. Indeed, the European Union must respect the cultures of each citizen and language is an important part of national cultures; it conveys concepts and social customs.

Nicolas Leron explained that multilingualism is a political principle linked to the very essence of the European project. The EU must use language, in this context multilingualism, to establish itself as a public authority through the creation of a public space. Multilingualism guides current EU policy, yet there

is a huge gap between discourse and reality (Xavier North). Plurality has trouble in practice and English prevails.

The primary use of English generates a distortion of competition (Philippe Cayla). In fact the use of English is an important disadvantage during a negotiation, for example, when none of the participants are native English speakers. While in such a situation, not using English has advantages. A participant's use of the language of the person with whom he is speaking stresses that participant's effort and will and generates empathy. Yet today, the only institution that is truly multilingual is the European Parliament since the European Commission has three working languages, and meetings of the Council are multilingual but confidential. In any case, English is used in 80% of institutional discussions, French in 15% of cases and German in 5% of cases.

This over-representation of English also introduces a bias in the media (Philippe Cayla). When commissioners or other representatives of European institutions speak at press conferences, they do so in English. The first documents published by institutions are published in English. Therefore, the first ones to speak about European issues are often British media, which have a reputation for being Eurosceptic. That is unfortunate in democratic terms and reflects a blatant lack of will on the part of the EU and member states.

English speakers, who are a minority in the European space, have disproportionate power. Moreover, the first debate between leading candidates in the campaign in the last European elections in 2014, a historic moment in the construction of the European public space, took place in English (Philippe Cayla). The moderators spoke in English and the candidates, with the exception of Alexis Tsipras, expressed themselves in English. That is the reason why many countries, including France, did not want to broadcast the debate live.

The language issue also affects the role of political parties, who select national citizens to be on the lists, only exceptionally opening up to candidates of other countries (Yves Bertoncini). And although national candidates sometimes speak several languages, citizens do not consider that to be the most important competence at the time of their appointment.

There is currently a great deal of pressure to use English (Philippe Cayla). It is important to ensure that European culture does not diminish, which could happen if only a single language is used, whether it be English or another language. For citizens to feel concerned and to pay attention to the debate regarding the EU, it is essential to organise debates in every language. Television stations such as Euronews, broadcast in 13 languages, are very helpful in this regard, but this type of effort requires considerable means.



2. Preserving multilingualism and strengthening the European public space

Given this situation, there are three main options: strengthen multilingualism, use Esperanto or Europanto³, use English as the single language for work and debate (Yves Bertoncini).

Current EU policy is based on acquiring shared language skills (Xavier North). This means that each European citizen should learn, in addition to his or her native language, two other European languages. It is a good policy but requires more extensive reflection because for the moment, this means learning English and another language, often Spanish (Phillipe Cayla). Other European languages, such as Italian or Polish, are left by the wayside. Being a polyglot is a considerable advantage. A citizen attending the conference considered that "plurilingualism is the only way for a European citizen to be monolingual".

Translation is another alternative, which is already being used, enabling intercultural dialogue (Xavier North). As Umberto Eco has said, the EU language is translation. It is costly, but the social, political and cultural costs of abandoning multilingualism would be immeasurable. Preserving diversity requires collective action. Translation should be developed via

an “Erasmus of ideas” that would take the form of support for translation (Xavier North). Such development would create a horizontal scheme of bridges and networks.

A considerable budget is already devoted to literary translation, subtitling and surtitling for live shows. This budgetary line is included in the EU cultural programme and amounts to approximately €30 million (Xavier North). Unfortunately, it is not enough to give significant impetus to the actual practice of multilingualism, especially since funds are dispersed and strategic actors have trouble identifying them. It is important to group these funds together under a single programme. However, this problem is not being addressed because institutions consider languages to be instruments, simple tools of communication, while they should have a real vision and want to give meaning to the opacity of the world. A citizen attending the conference stressed that in addition to translation, which concerns written documents and works, interpreting is also key.

Commissioners should therefore express themselves in their own language (Philippe Cayla). And instead of having debates in a single language that few citizens understand, except for a minority elite based in Brussels and London, it is important to invite elites who speak national languages to express themselves, including members of the European Parliament, commissioners and other representatives of institutions. That is why it is important to choose our representatives well: they must be European citizens capable of speaking several languages and be able to travel throughout the EU in order to take part in debates in national languages.



3. Overcoming obstacles and resistance

One of the major obstacles to multilingualism is that member states are not all equal when it comes to this need. Maltese people currently use English, which is their second official language, more than Maltese. In Belgium for example, it is sometimes crucial to speak a language other than national languages (of which there are three: French, Flemish and German) in order to be considered a “neutral” candidate, who does not support any community in particular (Yves Bertoncini). Guy Verhofstadt, who very often speaks English, is an example.

The issue of multilingualism also raises the issue of minority languages in the EU; there are more than 40 languages in France alone, which is already a much higher number than the 24 official languages of all the EU countries, another citizen participating pointed out. With regard to regional languages, this is a French exception (Xavier North). France is one of the richest countries linguistically speaking and it is paradoxically for this reason that it is one of the most united countries, because citizens have also been required to overcome differences. Moreover, the French language has had a decisive role in the construction of the nation, which was endorsed through national education. Yet, everyone is free to express themselves in their regional languages, which is the principle of freedom of expression.

A citizen participating added that one of the obstacles to the emergence of a European public space is the existence of words that are impossible to translate, such as “*laïcité*”. Therefore, to be able to understand one another, communicate and exchange, everyone needs to make an effort to speak other languages, especially citizens, and not leave it to professionals to develop a pan-European vision. Citizens should get involved and conduct genuine exchanges, through Erasmus for example.

It is at European level that we must launch cultural activities, address education issues and organise the free movement of people but also of ideas and of works in order to develop a genuine feeling of belonging to the EU (Xavier North). Unfortunately, today the opposite is happening (Philippe Cayla). Directorates General for Translation and Interpreting, and Culture, only consider multilingualism as a means to facilitate access to employment. They seem to merely have a

utilitarian approach to languages, which is also one of the reasons why English is most often used.

Moreover, it is clearly a question of budget, but especially of method. It is necessary to go through European programmes working with national institutions and the civil society, through a distribution of funds via calls for tender. It is necessary to delegate management to European programmes. A citizen participating explained his initiative, a

French-German journal publishing scientific articles in two languages so that ideas could circulate and researchers could share things via the publication. He hoped that this micro-project could similarly be conducted in other languages.

Basically, the EU, its member states and its citizens need to make a choice between utility and culture (Nicolas Leron).

1. GUE/NGL: Group belonging to the European United Left/Nordic Green Left.
2. Alain Wallon, sociologist and teacher at ISIT (Higher Education Institute of Translating and Interpreting), former head of unit in the Directorate General for Translation at the European Commission, agreed to participate but was unable to attend at the last minute.
3. Esperanto and Europanto are languages that are entirely built on the basis of all world languages, with regard to Esperanto, and all European languages, with regard to Europanto.

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