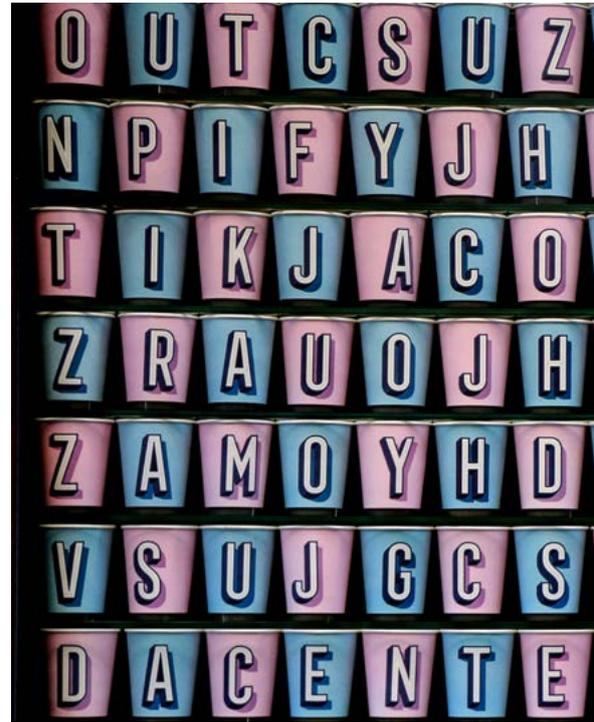


05/10/2022

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following comments are the
author's personal opinion)

BLOG
— **POST**

Which language(s) will the European elites speak in the future?



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On 16 June 2022, the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), the recruitment body for the European Union's institutions, published for the very first time a notice of competition for the recruitment of European officials that limited the determinative assessment exercises of the selection procedure to English only. A few days ago, another notice of competition was published that is just as restrictive. This leaves little doubt regarding the EPSO's intention to apply a language system preferring English in all European public service competitions in the medium term.

The EPSO's message is clear: there is now little incentive for Europeans wishing to enjoy a career in EU institutions to commit to learning a European language other than English. Furthermore, in the long term, European officials will be called on to work in a single language - English.

The EPSO's decision to rely exclusively on English for the recruitment of European officials conflicts with the EU's treaty-based obligations to respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, to ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced and to develop the teaching and dissemination of the languages of its Member States. Indeed, restricting the recruitment process to English only is in stark contrast with the EU's motto ("United in Diversity").

More broadly, the EPSO's decision is another example of the **decline of multilingualism in the European institutions**. An overwhelming majority of work documents are now written in English and only some are translated into the other official languages. It appears to be increasingly difficult to argue that English, French and German are still the European Commission's three working languages, as this institution currently favours English. Moreover, advocacy of multilingualism has disappeared from the portfolio of the European Commissioner for Culture, Education and Youth. One of the first decisions taken by the new European Public Prosecutor a few days after officially initiating its work was to select English as its working language.

In this way, the EPSO's decision speaks to the **tension between the temptation for an admittedly economical English-based monolingualism on the one hand, and the effort of multilingualism on the other. In recent years, this has almost always been resolved in favour of the former and to the detriment of the latter.**

However, following Brexit and as the prospect of new States joining the EU has been reaffirmed, advocacy of multilingualism in European institutions seems, now more than ever, essential if we are to protect European feelings of belonging and expertise.

Multilingualism is not a fantasy of polyglots or simply a matter of principle.

The attractiveness of our universities and our language learning programmes is at stake. Young Europeans aiming for a career in the European public service have little incentive to enrol at the Free University of Berlin or the University of Bologna rather than at Boston or Cambridge (where, incidentally, it will cost them tens of thousands of Euros to study), if the major language within the European institutions is exclusively English. Our languages are our common heritage and Europeans choosing to maintain this should not suffer from fewer professional opportunities in the public service. Under no circumstances has **multilingualism ever meant giving up English, a sound knowledge of which is clearly necessary today**. While banking on the command of other European languages certainly does not derogate from satisfactory knowledge of the English language, the opposite is much less the case.

Furthermore, multilingualism conveys a mindset, an ability to learn and a capacity for openness. Learning several foreign languages not only develops cognitive and memory capacities but also enhances the perception of nuance and the ability to grasp other ways of thinking. In view of the tremendous rise in non-western diplomacy, such qualities will most likely be decisive when conducting the EU's future foreign policy.

Lastly, **multilingualism preserves the ties between European elites and citizens**, at a time when many movements that are highly critical of European commitment are gaining sway, specifically over the grievance that the EU administration has little regard for its citizens¹. It is no coincidence that the European institution in which multilingualism is in less of a decline – the European Parliament – is actually the body that directly represents EU citizens. **Multilingualism does tend to promote a feeling of belonging to the EU. In addition, it curbs linguistic inequality**, both between Member States – within

¹ The [Rapport sur la diversité linguistique et la langue française en Europe](#), led by Professor C. Lequesne, highlights this.

which the capacity to favour English language learning varies greatly – and between EU citizens, only a fraction of whom has the opportunity and resources to become proficient in English.

What is at stake today is crucial, for at least three reasons.

Firstly, as the United Kingdom is no longer in the EU, English is no longer the leading official language in any Member State (English is the second official language in Ireland and Malta).

Secondly, the EU's remit continues to grow, as does its budget and the number of officials working for it, meaning that careers within the European institutions will attract an increasing number of Europeans.

Thirdly, the prospect of new States joining the EU has been reaffirmed, regardless of the timeframe involved. Once they have become EU Member States, part of the administrative and academic elites of these countries will try to join the European public service. The language system that the European institutions enact today may significantly influence the future academic and language programmes on offer in candidate countries.

Practical avenues for bolstering multilingualism in the European institutions seem to be relatively well identified. The primary idea is to **strengthen interpreting and translation in the work of the institutions**. The success of the multilingual platform used for citizen consultations as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe shows that technological advances open up new perspectives in this regard. The idea is also to **retain a genuinely multilingual language system for the recruitment of European officials**, unlike the strategic decisions made by the EPSO in recent years. It is also important to **step up language learning and in particular the multilingual aspect of the Erasmus+ programme**, which can sometimes turn out to be an exclusively English experience.

Above all, from a French standpoint, the point is less about defending the special place of our language within European institutions and more about championing the other languages of the Union. French still enjoys a certain status in Europe. The French language is used for deliberations by the Court of Justice of the European Union and is one of the two languages used during working sessions pertaining to the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In addition, French is one of the two official languages of the Council of Europe and of NATO.

That said, while we continue to fight for the safeguarding of this status, we must also understand that **French is the last survivor of multilingualism within the European institutions**. While it is currently the last of the EU's other official languages apart from English that negotiators will still dare to use spontaneously when an interpreter is unavailable, it may be that the end of multilingualism heralds a point of no return in the decline of French. This is why we must now advocate for the other EU languages and for a multilingualism that is truly pluralistic.

In short, some Member States share the objective of preserving linguistic diversity and see themselves in writer Milan Kundera's statement that Europe offers "maximum diversity in minimum space". We must encourage them to get behind the gamble and mindset of multilingualism.

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Ce projet reçoit des financements du programme Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) de la Commission européenne sous le numéro Project 101051576 – IJD 2022.

