Interdigitations

ESSAYS FOR IRMENGARD RAUCH

EDITED BY GERALD F. CARR, WAYNE HARBERT, & LIHUA ZHANG

PETER LANG
New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Boston
Bern • Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Vienna • Paris

1999
Europe's linguistic diversity and the language policy of the European Union
Helga Bister-Broosen and Roland Willeyns

1. Introduction

Being a federation of 15 countries, the European Union (EU) has to find a solution to cope with the 11 official languages in use. As of today and according to Decree #1 of the E.E.C. of 15 April, 1958 all official languages of the member states are official languages of the EU. As a consequence, a constant translating and interpreting activity is in full bloom. Almost two million pages are being translated yearly and 570 full time and some 1600 free lance translators are working on a regular basis. The various institutions of the Union (the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Parliament) have some 10,000 meetings a year in which the services of interpreters are used. For 9 languages there are 72 combinations, which compels the presence of 27 interpreters at every meeting. In the case of 13 languages, 42 interpreters would be needed at every meeting (Volz 1994: 90). Yet, the daily practice is somewhat different. The full interpreting system is only used for a limited number of meetings. In many cases interpretation is asymmetrical, i.e., from all official languages into only some contact languages. It is, then, taken for granted that all participants are able to understand at least one of these contact languages (Volz 1994: 90).

EU-decrees, which are the laws of the Union, pass into the legislation of the member states immediately and automatically. They must, therefore, be translated into every official language since, to safeguard judicial security, these translations cannot be left to the legislature of every member state. Yet, translating judicially binding documents is only one part of the linguistic activities. In parliament representatives from 15 countries have to debate, as must the officials of those states, in the innumerable commissions and committee meetings each and every day. Further, the citizens themselves have a right to address the EU meetings directly, and it seems inconceivable that some would have the privilege to do so in their mother tongue, whereas this would be denied to others. In parliament one does not see why those representing Greek or Danish constituencies would not be allowed to use the language of those they represent, whereas politicians elected in France or Britain could do so without a problem. Why should a Belgian or Swedish “Eurocrat” not be allowed to prepare and present his dossiers in his Dutch or Swedish mother tongue and so on? It would only be fair that all of this, which is common practice now, would remain possible in the future. Yet, the more countries join the Union, the more languages are involved, the more urgent it becomes that the Union find a solution to the increasing number of practical problems the enforcement of the present rights involves. At the same time, however, the Union’s basic principle, viz.
that all citizens enjoy equal rights, must not be violated, and equal rights inevitably include equal linguistic rights.

Finally, we must bear in mind that there is no precedent of a multilingual institution having had to cope with a similar language problem (Baetens Beardsmore 1994). Consequently, there is no experience, nothing to draw on, nothing to go by. Additionally, the problem is not necessarily to be resolved in the best possible, in the most efficient or practical way; it is to be resolved in a way acceptable to all 15 countries and 11 language groups involved. And that is the really tough challenge.

2. Internal functioning of the EU-institutions

As far as the actual internal functioning of the various EU-institutions is concerned, we mainly refer to the results of an enquiry carried out by Schloßmacher (1994) among a sample of members of the European Parliament (n=119) and officials and employees of the Council of Ministers, of the European Commission and of the European Parliament (n=373) of all member states, prior to the entry of Sweden, Finland and Austria into the Union.

- On all levels French and English are by far the dominating languages. 90% of all communication is carried out in those two languages by officials and employees. The other seven languages share the remaining 10% and it is striking that the use of German hardly significantly supersedes the use of the other six languages. In internal communication the share of French and English is two thirds for French and one third for English. In external communication though, i.e., with partners outside the EU, the opposite occurs. Schloßmacher (1994: 109) states "Französisch ist die führende Weltsprache für den Gebrauch in den Organen der Europäischen Gemeinschaft, Englisch aber die Weltsprache für den Gebrauch in der Welt." There is no significant difference between written and oral communication, with the one exception that, in writing, German is used even less than it is orally.

- In oral communication Members of Parliament use English more often than French; they use German more than officials do and in general MPs use their own language considerably more than the administration does.

- In written correspondence with the EU-cases, MPs are using languages other than French or English ten to twelve times more often than the staff does. But then, as Schloßmacher rightly observes, there is no language requirement for MPs, whereas for staff there is!

3. Decisions on languages

Given this situation, many people have been looking for possible alternatives. Because of the fact that using all languages on an equal basis would be too expensive and cause too many technical problems, every now and then solutions
are advocated to abandon the official use of all languages. Before engaging in this discussion, however, we will try to establish whether the financial and technical problems are really as considerable and as consequential as is often pretended.

Although the European Parliament (EP) spends one third of its budget for language related costs, the total cost of translating and interpreting in all departments of the EU, as of today, is some 85 million dollars a year, which amounts to less than 2% of the total budget of the EU (Naets 1994: 46). In other words, the financial cost is by no means as dramatic as it often sounds. The fact, for example, that the member states cannot make up their minds as to where the EP is ultimately to meet results in a constant commuting between Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, which costs more than all of the language expenses put together. The leasing of a new parliament building in Strasbourg alone costs 55 million dollars a year, not to mention the cost of two other fully equipped buildings, one in Brussels, the other one in Luxembourg!

The cost, therefore, is not a major obstacle. What about practical problems? Could they ever be more ponderous than the ones resulting from being forced to make a choice between languages? A paramount question to be resolved would be: supposing that some languages should be denied some of the official functions they now possess, on which basis are we going to make the decision, who will be the losers? The problem is urgent, primarily as far as oral language use is concerned, and it is in this domain that a decision on the relative importance of languages would be needed.

It is very tempting to try to find a scientific solution to the problem since, on the basis of various parameters, it should not be impossible to determine the status of one language as compared to others. Some of the criteria often quoted are: the numerical strength of the languages (i.e., the number of native speakers), their economic strength (gross national product of native speakers), their extent of usage in economic, political and scientific communication, the number of countries in which they are used as official languages, the contact status of a language, i.e., to what extent a language is in asymmetric dominant use or used as a lingua franca and the extent of their being learned and instructed as foreign languages. Ammon (1991 and 1992) has analyzed and documented all those variables in detail. His most important conclusion is that trying to put the statistics to a practical use reveals that they cannot possibly serve the purpose. The status of a language within the EU may be different from its status on a world scale. English, of course, is the most poignant example in this respect. Economic arguments are not a solely decisive factor either, as the status of German reveals. Further, statistics frequently appear to be much less important than other factors which are much harder to quantify, viz. attitudes and other psycholinguistic factors. French often appears to receive an attitudinal bonus, whereas Spanish and Portuguese are handicapped in this respect and are prevented from playing the important role one might expect on the basis of their international status and number of speakers.

In general, we observe that various languages score differently depending on which criterion is used, and we lack a standard or measure able to estimate the
relative weight and value of various alternatives. The inevitable conclusion is that none of all possible variables or criteria is convincing enough to eliminate certain languages or to favor other ones.

4. Reactions to the present use of languages

The description of real language use within the EU has revealed at least two amazing things: a) that French is used considerably more than English; b) that the use of the other languages is incredibly restricted. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that some member states and/or some language groups are not too happy with this situation. We will now discuss a few examples of how they react to or try to influence the present situation.

4.1. The French

Ton Huijssoon, a collaborator of the central press office of the EP, explains the dominance of French by reminding us that the French culture is decidedly more aggressive than that of the British. The British and the Irish, he adds, do not really “insist that English be used quite as often as French” (Huijssoon 1993). This “aggressive” language policy is deliberately monitored from Paris. All French officials and collaborators of the EU have strict orders never to attend meetings if no French interpreting is available nor to work with documents that are not drafted in French. During missions abroad of EP-committees, it often happens that particular language groups do not insist on interpreters in order to reduce the cost. Yet, never has a French delegation shown the same preoccupation with the EU’s finances, since they categorically refuse to travel without their interpreters (Duthoy & Fasol 1993: 26). A related example of the French obstinacy, having nothing to do with the EU directly, is the following: during the final hours of the Fourth World’s Women conference in Peking in September of 1996, delegates were trying to draft the so-called “Peking Declaration”, the ultimate UN resolution on women’s rights. To the already impressive body of problems they encountered in reaching an agreement was added yet another by the delegates of the French-speaking world, who refused to collaborate until all preliminary texts were translated into French. They resumed their collaboration only after the translations were e-mailed from New York. The French determination is also demonstrated by the fact that Paris offered crash courses in French to 800 officials from Austria, Finland and Sweden, even before those countries had joined the Union.

4.2. The Germans

Other language groups have been less successful, not in the least because trying to preserve a situation is easier than trying to change it. Such is the case of
German. Several official reactions prove that the German government as well as both Houses of Parliament (the Bundestag and the Bundesrat) are looking for ways to stop the current discrimination against German. As early as 1984 Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl wrote a letter to the then Chairman of the EC-commission (Gaston Thorn), in which he deplored "the tendency to limit the use of working languages to only French and English" which, as Kohl pointed out, is very harmful and discriminating. He therefore implored the Chairman to instruct all his departments to secure the full use of the German language as stipulated in the Community's language regulation (Volz 1994: 95).

Apparently the effect of this appeal was minimal since some ten years later, on 31 March 1993, the Bundesregierung again officially protested the discrimination against the German language and once more insisted on equal treatment with English and French, in order to secure, among other things, equal rights for German industry in its competition with the partner countries (Volz 1994: 96).

Furthermore, on 9 July 1993, the Bundesrat urged that German be treated on an equal basis with English and French, which "continue[s] to enjoy privileges in daily work in all departments"; the Bundesrat is determined to react firmly against any discrimination inflicted on the German language and calls upon the Bundesregierung to ensure that all documents be available in German at any given moment. The Bundesrat threatens: "Der Bundesrat wird seine Beratungen in den Ausschüssen über entsprechende Vorlagen der Bundesregierung erst aufnehmen, wenn die zu verabschiedenden Dokumente dem Bundesrat im regulären Verfahren in deutscher Sprache zugeleitet worden sind" (Volz 1994: 97).

One of the striking characteristics of the official German reaction is that, although their protest is based on universal principles of non-discrimination, the sole practical demand is that German be treated the same as English and French. The fact that other languages are also being discriminated against is not even mentioned. And although it is quite natural and legitimate for German officials to defend the rights of the German language in the first place, they should at least try to avoid giving the impression that nothing is wrong with discrimination as long as German is not on the side of the disadvantaged.

4.3. The Dutch-speaking community

Further, the German protest is limited to a threat or even a mere warning. To our knowledge nothing has been done so far to actively change the situation. This conviction (or hope) that "speaking up" might suffice is apparently not shared by the Dutch-speaking community. The defense of the position of Dutch is coordinated by the "Nederlandse Taalunie", an international body to which both the Belgian (resp. Flemish) and the Dutch governments have handed over their prerogatives in linguistic and cultural affairs (Willeyns 1984).

Its actual main concern is to safeguard the position of all official languages in the European Union, i.e., to see to it that their position will not be harmed or belittled in any way (Beleidskader 1993). Although the governments and the parliaments in Belgium and Holland have issued statements similar to the German
ones just quoted, they obviously do not want to rely solely on this kind of protest. Instead the Taalunie made the decision to concentrate its financial and other efforts on language technology, mainly on programs for automated translation, which, in the current state of the art, often tend to neglect all but the three "major languages" of the Union. Only through an intensive use of language technology, the Taalunie feels, will the Union be able to continue its active multilingualism and at the same time see to it that the cost remains within reasonable limits (Van den Bergh 1994).

The danger that lesser used languages will soon considerably lag behind on the language technology level is very real indeed. The automated translation program "Syntran" is used by almost all of the EU institutions and its further development is financed, as far as the so-called larger languages are concerned, by the EU directly. Not so for the other languages which, as the prime ministers of Flanders and the Netherlands have proclaimed, constitutes discrimination against those languages (Willemyns 1996). The only way for them to be included is if the governments themselves are willing to partly pay for the considerable cost. The Taalunie, therefore, has decided to participate financially in the incorporation of Dutch in Syntran as well as in "Eurolang", an experimental and technologically very advanced new system for automated translation (Actieplan 1994).

As a further step, the Nederlandse Taalunie has started negotiations with language planning organizations in other EU-countries in order to combine their efforts and to develop common strategies (Willemyns 1994). The German language community would probably be well advised to join the effort initiated by the Nederlandse Taalunie. At the same time, though, Germany and Austria may want to use the weight of the fact that they not only constitute the largest language group in the EU, but also that Germany is by far the main contributor to the EU's budget. The sympathy and cooperation of other language groups will be secured if they can be convinced that German ambition is not restricted to changing a discrimination by two into a discrimination by three.

4.4. The European parliament itself

Even before Sweden, Finland, and Austria had joined, the language problem had been the concern of the European Parliament (EP) itself and in May 1992 it issued a statement saying, among other things, that "an enlarged Union will, through its policy, directly influence the destiny of more than 350 million citizens. Judicial security, cooperation and democratic control urge that the official language of every single member state be an official language of the Union. Every citizen and every representative must have the right to be heard in the language of their country". Yet, the EP acknowledges that it will be necessary to find new and more flexible solutions to the problem of language use within the institutions of the Union and, that it might be important to envisage the possibility of officially limiting the number of "working languages".
Consequently, the EP has been organizing hearings, has financed research and commissioned specialists' reports (Baetens Beardsmore 1994). After the French minister for European Affairs, Alain Lamarousse, had suggested that five languages should be appointed as working languages, the EP, on 19 January 1995 unanimously voted a resolution, the main points of which are:

- the equal official status of all 11 languages is a basic principle of the EU;
- appointing working languages would downgrade a considerable amount of EU-inhabitants to "second class citizens";
- multilingualism is one of the core values of European culture and civilization;
- all citizens must be able to address each and every EU-institution in their own language;
- technical and financial arguments in this respect are irrelevant and shall not be considered.12

5. Conclusions

Evaluating all the information and taking into account the linguistic habits already firmly established, a number of conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made.

1. All languages must keep their status as official EU-languages. Not only should all official documents be available in all languages, it should also be guaranteed that every person or institution can continue to use his own language in his relations with any EU department.

2. The (active and passive) use of all languages must be guaranteed and promoted in the EP. Foreign language proficiency should never be allowed to limit the democratic rights of the electorate and the elected. In all formal meetings the use of all official languages has to be made possible technologically and practically. Yet, in some cases, asymmetrical translation might be acceptable. Potential financial problems could be overcome by eliminating other costs, which should not be extremely difficult. Stopping the ridiculous and extremely expensive commuting between Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg would be one of the most obvious solutions.

3. Yet, in everyday practice, it will be inevitable that relying on so-called working languages will remain a common habit. Trying to combine this situation with the democratic rights of the speakers of all languages, we suggest the following. As far as documents are concerned, and taking into account the judicial aspect combined with considerations of efficient functioning, the only way to restrict the cost of translation is:

- to limit the number of documents being issued in the first place
- to formulate stringent rules as to the relative priority of documents (not all documents have to be available in all languages at the same time)
- to stimulate the development of language technology (automated translation)
• to promote high quality standards and continued training for translators. As far as interpreting is concerned, symmetrical translation is essential in all formal meetings but asymmetrical interpreting has to be accepted in others. For interpreters a similar effort has to be made regarding high quality standards and continued training.

(4) One should be very much aware, though, that similar restrictions will always have consequences going far beyond language use proper. Even the huge majority of those displaying ample multilingual competence and skills feel more at ease using their mother tongue. Consequently, having to debate complicated and often very technical, yet important issues in another language always works to the detriment of the non-native speaker. Even those very competent in a foreign tongue will experience the lack of possibilities of nuance and stylistic or rhetorical differentiation which native speakers are very comfortable with. It will restrict their persuasiveness and limit their democratic right to participate with equality in debate. Those being able to make use of their mother tongue will inevitably acquire a much more powerful position and get an undeserved advantage!

(5) Therefore, in order to stimulate multilingual skills in all EU officials and employees and an enhanced foreign language competence within the Union at large, we will need a real foreign language policy in all member states, a policy ensuring that foreign language instruction in all countries be not only intensified but also rendered more communicative and more effective. We are confident that foreign language teachers and other experts will find ways to achieve this goal, provided that governments actively promote positive attitudes toward foreign language usage and are determined to create a real multilingual environment in every country.

Notes

1. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
6. German and French are an official language in three member states; Dutch, Swedish and English in two; the remaining ones in only one country.
7. In this respect, as Ammon (1991) rightly observes, only English is really important; French lags far behind and German further still.
8. De Standaard, 16 September 1995

References

Actieplan 1994 Publicatieblad van de Nederlandse Taalunie # 30.
Schlößmacher, Michael

Van den Bergh, Greetje

Volz, Walter

Willemyns, Roland