Which language for Europe?

About the author

Daniele Archibugi is a director at the Italian National Research Council (CNR), and professor of innovation, governance and public policy at Birkbeck College.

More than half of Europe's citizens did not vote in the elections for the European Parliament, but the institution faces more challenges than those of credibility. One of the great challenges faced by the Parliament is the number of languages it uses: after the admission of Bulgaria and Romania these now total 23, practically one per European state. Etymologically, the word Parliament derives from a word actually meaning "speaking", but if the members of Parliament speak 23 different languages, what kind of Parliament can this be?

The European Parliament is not the only one to use several languages: the Belgian parliament, for instance, has two and the Swiss use four. However the MPs of these individual countries are able to understand one another without the need for interpreters. (Despite its tremendous linguistic diversity, India's parliament has only two official procedural languages - English and Hindi. If they feel unable to address the assembly in either of the two languages, members are allowed to speak in any of the country's nearly two dozen languages, with translation provided.) This is not so in the European Parliament: the work of the Assembly and the Committees entail the MPs being assisted by a team of interpreters. The possible language combinations have increased with the growing number of languages. You need a calculator to work out how many they are - 23*22 - a total of 506! This requires the help of 403 full time interpreters and several thousand external collaborators so that Euro MPs can speak and listen in their own language.

It is no easy task, even for the European Parliament, to find translators from Finnish to Greek, or from Portuguese to Bulgarian. However, Eurocracy is ingenious, and to reduce costs it uses double translation: those who speak less widely known languages are first translated into the principal languages (English, French or German) and then retranslated into all the other less common languages. One wonders how much the substance of the MPs speeches is altered by the second or third translation.

Woe betide anyone trying to include a truly amusing joke in a parliamentary speech: it is nothing like the British House of Commons where the quips and the responses make the parliamentary debates more lively than a stage play. If an unwary MP cracks a joke in the European Parliament you first hear the roar of laughter of those following the speech in the original language and then one after the other of those listening in the first, second and umpteenth translation. However, the linguistic machine manages to work: the Parliament has only 403 interpreters, even if they are also helped by several thousand external collaborators; no one is prevented from speaking and listening in their own language.

But not even 23 official languages are enough to keep everyone happy. The linguistic minorities are also demanding to be able to use their own language. Among the more insistent are the Catalans, on the grounds that they alone make up nearly 10 million Europeans, practically twice as many as the...
Danes and Finns, four times more than the Slovenes and 25 times more than the Maltese. Similar demands are made by the Basques and the Corsicans. And then what about the approximately thirty million "third-country citizens" living in Europe and who speak all the languages of the planet?

It seems impossible that all these demands can be met. Some are now calling for the number of official languages to be reduced, or indeed to raise English to the status of sole official language of the Parliament. But to formally accord this privilege to the language of two states could lead to resentment being felt in all the other states. To tell the truth, even Ireland must be a little skeptical; it demanded successfully that Gaelic should become an official language. If we account that only a few Irish are able to understand and even fewer to speak Gaelic, it is clear that language policy, in this instance, has been used as an instrument of identity rather than of communication (for a further discussion of language and identity in the EU, see Patrizia Nanz, *Europolis: Constitutional Patriotism Beyond the Nation State* [7], Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007; and Peter A. Kraus, *A Union of Diversity: Language, Identity and Polity-Building in Europe* [8], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

But a lingua franca is desperately needed. The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, has suggested reviving Latin [9], an idea that would place all the MPs in a condition of equality (and certainly of similar difficulty), although Latin would further alienate the people from European institutions.

Will English become the single official language of the European Parliament, defeating its many diplomatic resisters? After all, English is already the most popular second language in the world as well as in Europe (see Eurobarometer, *Europeans and their Languages* [10], February 2006). But it is one thing to use English in business, tourism and education, and quite another to grant a special political privilege to the language of one of the 27 member countries. To ask the Euro MPs to speak a foreign language would enormously restrict the number of those eligible for election. There would be a risk of creating an assembly of technocrats that is distant from the people's needs. And certainly it does not help that English is also the language of an EU member state with a large density of euro-skeptics and which has not adopted the European currency.

But the march of English as lingua franca is difficult to stop. Even in the Swiss Parliament it is increasingly common to hear MPs of the French and German cantons communicating in English.

Perhaps the European Parliament should try to be part of the solution rather than of the problem. If all European students would study English as a second language, then in a couple of generations, both the MPs and their electorate would finally be able to understand each other. This might well be the most far-sighted measure to propose to the new European Parliament to bring back to the European polls at least some of those who stayed at home.

Source URL: https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/which-language-for-europe

Links:
[1] https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/which-language-for-europe
[3] https://www.opendemocracy.net/view_content_by_region/europe.jsp