

REVIEW PAPER

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION AND POLICY

Ludmila Waschak

Hochschule Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ludmila Waschak, Hochschule Burgenland, Eisenstadt, Austria. E-mail: ludmila.waschak@hochschule-burgenland.at.

ABSTRACT

The European Union (EU) embodies one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions, encompassing 24 official languages, more than 60 regional and minority languages, and a wide array of immigrant and sign languages. This diversity reflects not only Europe's cultural and historical pluralism but also its ongoing political and educational challenges. This paper examines the complex landscape of linguistic diversity and language varieties in the EU, analyzing how language policy frameworks, educational initiatives, and institutional practices interact with broader questions of identity, integration, and governance. Drawing on official EU documents, sociolinguistic research, and legal frameworks such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the study explores the evolution of the EU's multilingualism policy and its implications for linguistic equality and cohesion. The analysis highlights the persistent tension between the EU's official commitment to multilingualism and the pragmatic dominance of a few major languages—most notably English, French, and German—within institutions, academia, and international communication. It also considers the sociolinguistic implications of this hierarchy for regional, minority, and immigrant languages. Special attention is given to language education policies and the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a tool for standardizing learning outcomes across member states. Ultimately, the paper argues for a more inclusive, dynamic, and equitable language policy—one that values all language varieties as integral to the EU's democratic and cultural fabric and recognizes multilingualism not merely as a policy objective, but as a vital resource for social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and European identity.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, language varieties, language policy, language education, multilingualism



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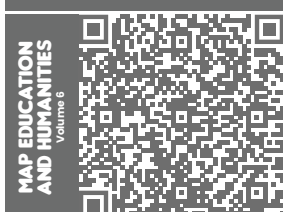
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1. Introduction

Language in the European Union (EU) serves a dual role as both a tool for communication and a marker of identity, reflecting the continent's historical, cultural, and social diversity (Extra & Gorter, 2008). The EU's foundational motto, "*United in diversity*," encapsulates its attempt to build unity across linguistic and cultural plurality. The European project, since its inception, has embraced multilingualism not as an obstacle but as an asset—a manifestation of democratic inclusion and cultural richness.

The recognition of linguistic diversity has also been enshrined in the legal framework of the Union. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), made legally binding through the Treaty of Lisbon, commits the EU to respect linguistic diversity (Article 22) and to prohibit discrimination based on language (Article 21). Thus, the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity are not merely policy preferences but fundamental European values (Bećirović, 2023).

Nevertheless, maintaining this commitment within the realities of governance, education, and communication has proven complex (Kovačević et al., 2018). The coexistence of 24 official languages, over 60 regional and minority languages, and numerous immigrant languages has created a dynamic yet challenging multilingual environment. This paper examines how EU institutions have sought to manage this complexity through evolving language policies and initiatives while addressing the tensions between linguistic equality, economic utility, and social inclusion.

2. Historical development of the European Union Language Policy

The evolution of the European Union Language Policy (EULMP) has been gradual and multifaceted. Michał Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak (2011) identify several milestones that mark its development. The first major step came with the 1997 European Council Resolution on Early Teaching and Learning of EU Languages, which laid the groundwork for the EU's language policy by emphasizing the importance of early language education. This was followed by the 2000 Lisbon Strategy, which positioned linguistic competence as essential to the emerging knowledge-based economy.

The 2001 European Year of Languages further strengthened public awareness and cross-national cooperation in language learning. This initiative helped mainstream multilingualism within broader cultural and educational policies. Between 2004 and 2006, the Action Plan on Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity was introduced, reinforcing the EU's dual objective of enhancing citizens' multilingual skills and safeguarding Europe's linguistic heritage. The New Framework Strategy on Multilingualism (2005) and the establishment of the High Level Group on Multilingualism (2006) deepened the institutional commitment to language diversity. Between 2007 and 2010, multilingualism even became a distinct portfolio within the European Commission, culminating in the *Action Plan: Multilingualism—An Asset for Europe and a Shared Commitment* (2008). This period saw the recognition of linguistic diversity as a defining feature of the EU's cultural identity and a resource for social cohesion and competitiveness.

Building upon these initiatives, the European Union Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism (2011) marked a significant turning point. Emerging from a 2009 European Commission call for structured dialogue with civil society, the Platform convened 29 representatives across four thematic areas—education, social inclusion, translation, and language planning. Under Commissioner Leonard Orban, it outlined five strategic priorities, including the promotion of multilingualism for cohesion and intercultural dialogue, support for migrant language education, protection of linguistic diversity, and lifelong language learning (European Union 2011). As Romaine (2011) argues, the Platform sought to align linguistic diversity with the EU's broader goal of fostering a shared European identity, addressing earlier critiques that EU language policy remained fragmented and "rudderless" (Nic Shuibhne, 2004). It thus represented a decisive effort to institutionalize multilingualism as a core element of European integration.

Since 2010, responsibility for multilingualism has been integrated into the portfolio of the Commissioner for Education, Culture, and Youth, signaling an effort to link language policy more closely with educational and cultural objectives.

3. The Sociolinguistic landscape of the EU

The European Union's linguistic ecosystem is unparalleled in its complexity. While there are 24 official languages, more than 60 indigenous, regional, and minority languages (RMLs) are spoken by roughly 40 million citizens (European Commission, 2017). Languages such as Basque, Catalan, Frisian, Galician, Saami, Welsh, and Yiddish represent centuries of cultural continuity. Additionally, immigrant communities have introduced languages from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, reshaping Europe's urban linguistic landscapes.

Despite formal equality among official languages, a functional hierarchy persists (Ammon, 2006). English, French, and German dominate the European Commission's day-to-day operations, with Italian and Spanish serving as secondary working languages (Ammon, 2009). This hierarchy reflects broader socio-economic and political realities, as these languages are associated with Europe's most powerful economies. Documents circulated among EU institutions are often drafted in English, and digital platforms, including the Commission's website, display a similar imbalance in linguistic availability (Phillipson, 2010).

Nevertheless, the right to use one's native language in both written and spoken communication remains a cornerstone of EU policy. The Regulation on the Use of Languages in the Institutions (1958) grants each member state one official language, but as the Union expanded from 4 to 27 members, the logistical complexity of translation and interpretation has multiplied. Efforts to grant co-official status to regional languages such as Catalan, Basque, and Welsh further highlight the EU's evolving approach to inclusivity, though challenges of implementation persist.

Minority languages within the EU can be classified in various ways. Felföldi (2011) distinguishes between officially recognized languages that are not EU official languages (e.g., Letzeburgesch), languages spoken in a single member state (e.g., Sorbian in Germany), transnational minority languages (e.g., Catalan), languages associated with a kin-state (e.g., Hungarian), and deterritorialized languages (e.g., Romani, Yiddish). These classifications reveal not only linguistic diversity but also the complex political, social, and historical factors shaping language use and recognition.

4. Language education and the promotion of multilingualism

Education has been a key domain for implementing multilingualism policies. The EU's long-term objective, reaffirmed at the 2017 Gothenburg Summit, is for every European citizen to learn at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue by the end of secondary education. However, implementation has been uneven across member states.

According to Eurostat (2015), 97.3% of lower secondary students in Europe study English, while 33.8% learn French and 23.1% German. Spanish, Russian, and Italian trail significantly behind, with participation rates of 13.6%, 2.7%, and 1.1%, respectively. The European Survey on Language Competences (Costa & Albergaria-Almeida, 2015) revealed marked disparities between students' proficiency in their first and second foreign languages, leading the European Commission to recommend stronger measures to improve language teaching quality, particularly for second foreign languages.

The dominance of English has also extended into higher education (Polz & Bećirović, 2022). While national languages often remain the official medium of instruction, particularly in Nordic countries, much of the academic reading and research is conducted in English. This trend has effectively rendered the natural sciences monolingual, raising concerns that English's dominance may limit epistemological diversity by marginalizing alternative linguistic and theoretical frameworks (Macedo et al., 2003; Phillipson, 2003).

To promote multilingualism, the EU has implemented several action programmes. The Erasmus+ Programme (2014–2020) supports mobility for students and professionals while offering Online Linguistic Support (OLS) to enhance host-country language acquisition. The Creative Europe Programme (2013–2020) contributes by funding literary translation, subtitling, and dubbing of European films, facilitating intercultural exchange. Additionally, the European Day of Languages, celebrated annually on 26 September, and the European Language Label, which rewards innovation in language teaching, continue to foster awareness and appreciation of Europe's linguistic diversity.

5. Policy frameworks and institutional challenges

The EU's multilingual policy framework is anchored in several foundational documents and strategies. The Action Plan 2004–2006, the Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (2005), and the Action Plan on Multilingualism (2008) collectively emphasize three key priorities: promoting language learning among EU citizens, supporting the multilingual economy, and ensuring citizens' access to legislation and information in their native languages (European Commission, 2003; 2005; 2008).

Despite these ambitions, a persistent tension exists between symbolic and functional multilingualism. While Article 6 of the Regulation on the Use of Languages allows EU institutions to determine their working languages, thereby legitimizing a functional distinction among the Union's official languages (Arzoz 2008: 178; de Witte 2008: 179), few have exercised this right formally. The General Court's ruling in Joined Cases T-124/13 and T-191/13 found that requiring proficiency in English, French, or German for EU recruitment was discriminatory, since no official regulation designates these as *de jure* working languages. This underscores the contradiction between the EU's official multilingualism and its *de facto* linguistic hierarchy.

Furthermore, linguistic diversity is complicated by migration and demographic changes (Bećirović et al., 2019). Policy discussions increasingly highlight the need to integrate immigrant children by balancing proficiency in the language of instruction with the maintenance of their home languages. At the 2018 Brussels Consultation on Languages in Education, three main priorities were identified: enabling immigrant students to acquire functional proficiency in the school language, maintaining literacy in their mother tongue, and learning additional European languages. These principles informed the European Commission's 2018 Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Languages, which advocates the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a benchmark for curriculum and assessment alignment across member states.

The evolving multilingual reality of Europe calls for a more inclusive approach to language

policy—one that moves beyond the binary opposition of "official" versus "non-official" languages. To achieve this, the EU must strengthen institutional recognition and support for regional, minority, and immigrant languages, while promoting bi- and multilingual education models that integrate linguistic diversity into everyday learning contexts.

Such a policy would also require enhanced funding for research, documentation, and revitalization of endangered languages, as well as the expansion of media representation and digital content in minoritized languages. Promoting multilingualism in the digital sphere—where English dominance is even more pronounced—could contribute to more equitable access to knowledge and participation in the European public sphere (Dautbašić & Bećirović, 2022).

Ultimately, linguistic diversity should be viewed not as an administrative burden but as a democratic resource. A multilingual Europe can foster creativity, intercultural competence, and solidarity—values central to the European project.

7. Conclusion

Multilingualism remains both a defining feature and a persistent challenge for the European Union. The policy framework developed over the past decades reflects the EU's foundational commitment to linguistic diversity, democratic inclusion, and cultural respect. From the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), which enshrined the respect for linguistic diversity (Article 22) and non-discrimination on linguistic grounds (Article 21), to the subsequent initiatives under the European Commission's multilingualism portfolios, the Union has consistently articulated its ambition to balance unity and diversity. Yet, the implementation of this vision has been shaped by tensions between ideals of equality and the pragmatic dominance of a few major languages, particularly English.

The European Union's efforts to safeguard linguistic diversity extend beyond its 24 official languages to include over 60 regional and minority languages, spoken by approximately 40 million citizens. Policies and frameworks, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992) and various EU action plans, underscore the recognition of these linguistic communities as integral to Europe's cultural mosaic. Nonetheless, the socio-political and economic hierarchies that underpin language

use in institutional and educational contexts reveal persistent asymmetries. English, French, and German continue to dominate as procedural languages within EU institutions, reflecting historical power relations and economic influence. Italian and Spanish, though granted “support” status, operate within this same hierarchy. This linguistic stratification, while practical for administration, risks reinforcing inequalities among EU citizens and member states.

Language education policies have been a central instrument in promoting multilingualism, with significant initiatives such as the Erasmus+ Programme and the Action Plan on “Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity” (2004–2006). These programmes have facilitated mobility, intercultural exchange, and linguistic competence across member states (Mašić & Bećirović, 2021). However, empirical studies, including the European Survey on Language Competences (Costa & Albergaria-Almeida, 2015), highlight uneven outcomes, particularly regarding proficiency in second and third foreign languages. While nearly all secondary school students learn English, far fewer achieve comparable competence in other European languages. This imbalance reflects the broader societal tendency to privilege English as the lingua franca of education, science, and business (Cogo & Dewey, 2012) –often to the detriment of linguistic pluralism.

The predominance of English in academia and scientific communication poses a particularly pressing concern. As Dendrinos and others have noted, the “monoglossic” nature of scientific discourse in English may constrain the diversity of intellectual frameworks and epistemological approaches that different languages can bring. The issue is not merely linguistic but epistemic: when knowledge production is mediated through a single dominant language, the plurality of perspectives essential to innovation and democratic exchange may be diminished. Addressing this challenge requires conscious efforts to foster multilingual scholarship, translation, and language-sensitive research dissemination.

Recent consultations, such as the 2018 Brussels meeting and the European Commission’s Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to Language Teaching and Learning (2018a; 2018b), signal renewed attention to these challenges. The emphasis on adopting the CEFR as a shared standard, improving

teacher education, and supporting immigrant students’ bilingual or multilingual development demonstrates an awareness of the complexities of Europe’s linguistic landscape. Yet, as English continues to dominate everyday and institutional communication, the EU faces the delicate task of ensuring that multilingualism remains a living reality rather than a symbolic commitment.

Looking forward, several areas warrant deeper consideration. First, greater coordination between language policy and migration policy is necessary to integrate and valorise the languages of immigrant communities as part of Europe’s linguistic capital. Second, the EU should strengthen mechanisms for supporting minority and regional languages not only through cultural preservation but also through digital, educational, and economic inclusion. Finally, more empirical research is needed on how multilingual practices affect cognitive development, social cohesion, and democratic participation in the EU context.

In essence, the future of multilingualism in the European Union will depend on whether policy can evolve from a primarily administrative concern into a dynamic cultural and educational project. The challenge is to ensure that linguistic diversity is not merely managed, but actively sustained as a core component of European identity and citizenship. As the EU continues to navigate globalization, migration, and technological change, multilingualism—if supported robustly—can serve not only as a symbol of diversity but also as a strategic resource for social innovation, intercultural understanding, and democratic resilience.

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