

Language conflicts in the European Union

On finding a politically acceptable and practicable solution for EU institutions that satisfies diverging interests

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For EU institutions, having a single internal working language – for which English is the only candidate – would be the most efficient solution and, to all appearances, in the best interests of each member state and language community whose language is excluded as a working language. However, for member states from the large non-anglophone language communities, such a solution seems barely acceptable and, in addition, would not correspond to the EU's official language policy on the preservation of language diversity. This is because "English only" is expected to inevitably transcend the borders of internal institutions and further limit the function of the remaining widely-spoken languages, especially as a lingua franca and in foreign language teaching. This contribution presents the conflict of interests between the smaller and the larger language communities in having only one or several institutional working languages for the EU and sketches out a possible solution which would serve both political and communicative demands.

Keywords: European Union, institutional working languages, language interests, language conflicts

Für die EU-Institutionen wäre eine einzige interne Arbeitssprache, für die nur Englisch in Frage käme, am effizientesten, und sie läge allem Anschein nach auch im Interesse derjenigen Mitgliedstaaten und Sprachgemeinschaften, deren Sprachen von den Arbeitssprachen ohnehin ausgeschlossen sind. Für die Mitgliedstaaten der großen Sprachgemeinschaften (außer Englisch) erscheint eine solche Lösung aber kaum akzeptabel, und sie entspräche auch nicht der offiziellen EU-Sprachenpolitik des Erhalts der Sprachenvielfalt. Es ist nämlich damit zu rechnen, dass "English only" unvermeidlich über die internen Institutionen hinaus wirken und die übrigen großen Sprachen funktional weiter einschränken würde, vor allem als Lingua franca und im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Der Beitrag stellt die Interessenskonflikte zwischen den kleineren und den größeren Sprachgemeinschaften der EU bezüglich nur einer oder aber mehrerer institutioneller Arbeitssprachen dar und skizziert eine mögliche Lösung, die sowohl politischen als auch kommunikativen Erfordernissen gerecht wird.

Stichwörter: Europäische Union, institutionelle Arbeitssprachen, Sprachinteressen, Sprachkonflikte

Preliminary remark

The following is in part a reply to Theo von Els' (2005) proposal in this journal for a solution for the European Union (EU) working language problem, especially his suggestion to reduce institutional working languages for informal oral consultations to a single one, English: "in oral – and particularly informal – consultations . . . a restriction to a single working language could be the best solution"; "such a reduction is politically desirable"; it "is in the interests of the EU but also of all individual citizens"; and "*Without any doubt, English will be the working language*" (2005: 277f, italics in the original). I refer in the following to the *member states* of the EU as well as to its *language communities* (some of which comprise several and others only parts of member states) and I allege that not only the former but also the latter have particular language interests. Thus, interests diverge with respect to the EU institutional working languages between the smaller and the larger language communities (smaller or larger within the framework of the EU). Theo van Els and I happen to be members of the smaller (Dutch) and the larger (German) language communities respectively, and each of us argues, in my judgment, in line with the particular interests of his (type of) language community but tends to perceive his view as coinciding with more general EU interests. This seems to be worth pointing out, though I am convinced that we both, in our scholarship, try to abstain from personal involvement and to maintain a neutral, "objective" perspective. We may, however, both sense problems for our own language community more acutely than outsiders. Therefore even on the scholarly level, the presentation and discussion of views from different backgrounds seems important for arriving at a fair solution.

Outline of the EU language situation

Not every reader will have seen van Els' article, so it may be helpful to sketch once more the EU language situation as far as it seems relevant for the present discussion. Some more recent data is added here, and emphasis differs somewhat in both cases.

Since its foundation with six countries in 1952, the EU has continuously expanded and changed its name several times. In May 2004, ten countries joined at once, increasing the total number of member states to 25. Two more will join in 2007, and preparatory talks are going on with still others, especially with the successor states of Yugoslavia and of the western Soviet Union, and with Turkey.

Most of the newcomers have added their own national official language to the official EU languages, which amounted to 20 in 2006 (with three more to come in 2007 and 2008 among which, belatedly, Irish). According to the EU language charter (Council Regulation No. 1), each member state has the right to request that any of its national official languages be given the status

of official EU language. This status entails, among other privileges, that all EU “regulations and other documents of general application” are translated into the language. Also, any official EU language may be used in EU parliamentary debates and formal Council proceedings, with interpretation provided in each case into all other official EU languages. Finally, they are meant to be used for communication between the EU institutions and the governments and other institutions of the member states. In that sense, all the official EU languages are, at the same time, EU institutional working languages, and Council Regulation No. 1, indeed, refers to all of them as “the official languages and the working languages”.

The idea is widespread that all of these languages are equal in status on the EU level, but they never have been in reality. Regulation No. 1 itself provides the legal basis for inequality in Article 6, which states: “The institutions of the Community may stipulate in their rules of procedure which of the languages are to be used in specific cases.” Most institutions, especially their preparatory committees, use only the same small subset of languages regularly, which in practice always includes English and French, sometimes German, and occasionally Italian and Spanish (though other languages are not rigorously excluded). In some cases preference for these languages has been declared (e.g. for the Commission), and in other cases their preferred use is based on convention (i.e. based on function). These languages, with their status declared or only based on function, have come to be referred to, informally, as the *EU working languages*, which implies that the remaining majority of the official EU languages are to be classified as *merely official languages*. I will use this terminology in what follows. It is important to keep in mind that the distinction is not always clear-cut, and that there are also hierarchies of status, i.e. working languages of different order according to frequency and taken-for-grantedness of use (English being for the most part the working language of highest order). Nevertheless, the distinction between the working languages and the (merely) official languages has become more pronounced as the community has expanded, and it has also become an issue of growing concern.

Besides the official EU languages (in the wider sense, i.e. working languages and merely official languages), there are numerous other languages in the EU which can be subsumed under various language types according to status, function and language rights of speakers but which I will not deal with here. The overall number varies depending on definitions or, especially in the case of immigrant languages, on the number of speakers considered relevant for inclusion in the statistics. The number of indigenous languages alone is around 70 in practically any count. Official EU comments or policy guidelines regularly praise the multitude of languages as part of the Community’s cultural “wealth” and stress the need for their maintenance (this was especially the rhetoric during the European Year of Languages in 2001), while nonofficial observers occasionally characterize it as a “predicament” or source of communicative “chaos”.

Especially for the institutions, the latter impression is not entirely surprising, in spite of the distinction between working and merely official languages, and use only of the former in many domains. The use of all the official languages for written communication with member states and for formal sessions requires translation and simultaneous interpretation, respectively, on a huge scale. The use of more than one working language for oral communication in informal meetings, where as a rule no interpretation is provided, can be difficult. There is a long history of proposals for making communication more efficient by reducing the number of languages employed, ideally to a single one, for which various possible candidates have been suggested, among them Esperanto and Latin, with English as the only one really taken seriously. Van Els' (2005) proposal is in line with this history.

EU linguistic diversity has also been seen as a hindrance to economic progress or political integration and real democracy. To overcome it, recognized think-tanks have supported the idea of a single institutional working language, but also a single *lingua franca* outside the institutions to enhance the growth of regional mobility and of a common public sphere, especially through the media. Jürgen Habermas (1998: 105, 115), among others, has supported this viewpoint in order to denationalize the EU and spearhead the emerging epoch of "postnationalism" that he envisions, and he has proposed English as the necessary unifying language for this. Andreas Beierwaltes (1998), however, has favoured continued subsidiary use of several languages, and Vivian Manz (2002: 209f) even claimed, with reference to Switzerland, that real democracy can unfold through parallel discourse in different languages.

In such discussions, the EU institutional working language(s) and its *lingua franca*(s) outside the institutions have often – if only tacitly – been seen as converging, at least in the longer run. Though there is no absolute necessity for such a convergence, since internal governmental or administrative communication can perhaps be handled as an isolated domain whose output then would be translated into other languages, such separation of domains seems difficult. It does not function well in the present EU, where the institutional working languages serve, at the same time, for press releases (with the exception that the language of the rotating institutional presidency may also be used) and are even employed sometimes – contrary to regulations – for communication with member states, for which the regular protests of the German government against being addressed in English are ample proof. Generally, convergence between a community's institutional working languages and its *lingua francas* appears practical, though there are communities which function otherwise, especially some African countries (e.g. with English as the government's working language and Swahili the prevalent *lingua franca*). Within the EU, however, contacts across governments and administrations – central (EU), national (member state), regional (autonomous region) and communal (town) – and the economy, the media and citizens are so intensive that such a functional division seems difficult to maintain.

Even now, there is no doubt about the growing predominance of a single language, English, inside and outside the EU institutions (for data of various kinds, see Berns 1995a,b; Ammon 1996; de Swaan 2001: 144–75; Phillipson 2003; van Els 2005; Seidlhofer, Breiteneder and Pitzl in press). The smaller language communities are not entirely opposed to the predominance of a single language, since it simplifies their choice of foreign language studies and use. The large language communities, however, tend to be concerned, since the spread of English entails, with some likelihood, the attrition of functions of their own language, especially as regards the EU institutional working language or *lingua franca*. Concern is not really about language “death”, at least not for official national languages, not even in the case of the smaller language communities, let alone the larger ones; this kind of fear is dramatically overstated in van Els (2005: 270f). Fear of loss of function is, however, widespread among the large language communities or their linguistically sensitive citizens and is not based on mere imagination.

The dilemma of promoting English: the example of Germany

All the EU member states have themselves furthered the predominance of English, including those with large languages of international function. The latter especially, however, have started to have mixed feelings about English predominance, fearing that, as a consequence, the international standing of their own language may suffer. Germany has this problem – and also Austria with the same national official language – and so do other EU member states with large languages, namely France, Italy and Spain.

Germany has been more eager than the others to promote English (as a foreign language) within the own country. As early as 1937, during the Nazi period English was generally upgraded, partially for racial reasons (it was a language of the “Northern race”) to replace French as the first foreign language in school curricula. Further upgrading was unavoidable in US-controlled West Germany after the war. The role of English as the primary foreign language was extended to the east after unification in 1990, and its functions were extended across the entire country beyond mere foreign language and peripheral domains like air traffic control.

The deep entrenchment of English in German society was pointed out e.g. by Margie Berns (1995a,b) in her studies of the role of English in the EU, which she specified in terms of Braj Kachru’s three-circle model of World Englishes (e.g. Kachru 1985). This can be depicted as follows:

- 1) the “inner circle” countries with English as a first language and a private function, which are also “norm-providing” (e.g. Britain and also Ireland);
- 2) the “outer circle” countries with English as a second language and an official function, which are at the same time “norm-developing” (e.g. Singapore – but no country in the EU); and

- 3) the “expanding circle” countries with English as a foreign language and only an international function, which are “norm-dependent” (e.g. France).

There seem to be mainly three sets of criteria involved in this typology with three largely parallel features, moving from the inner circle outwards, namely:

- a) individuals’ order of learning English together with, presumably, different degrees of identity function: as a (1) first, (2) second, (3) foreign language;
- b) the communicative function of English for individuals and institutions: (1) private, (2) official, (3) international; there may be an implicational order, so that ‘private function’ implies ‘official’, which in turn implies ‘international’, but not vice versa;
- c) society’s normative capacity with respect to English: (1) norm-providing, (2) norm-developing, (3) norm-dependent.

These criteria are not meant to be clear-cut, and operationalization may vary. Berns (1995a) found Germany together with Luxemburg and the Netherlands closest to the inner-circle countries within the former EU of twelve states, though she did not put it squarely next to them (into the outer circle) but suggested “creating an area of overlap of the outer and expanding circle”, where she placed Germany and some other EU countries. Her reasons for finding Germany closer to the English-speaking core countries than the expanding circle were “the functions it [English] serves . . . in various social, cultural, commercial and educational settings” (Berns 1995a: 9). She also envisioned the possibility for countries like Germany of moving further towards the inner-circle countries in the future and even developing their own norms of English, i.e. German English, which would allow for an identity function (Berns 1995a: 10; also 1995b). The advantages would be that citizens would have functional command of English and no longer be hampered in participating in global communication, or much less so than today.

The potential downside of such a development has long been overlooked but has begun to be perceived recently. Parallel to the upgrading of English within the country, Germany has continued to promote its own language abroad (cf. e.g. Ammon 1992), because it also values it as a channel for international relations, in addition to English and other foreign languages. However, as Germany’s capacity to communicate internationally in English grows, the international function of its national language might diminish. Promotion of English may thus have the undesired side-effect of undermining the international standing of German with the disadvantages this entails. The ongoing promotion of English in Germany has recently met with criticism of various sorts, among which concerns about the negative impact on the international standing of German have become increasingly pronounced.

The most conspicuous recent steps for upgrading English in Germany have been the following:

- a) In school, English has become a general subject, starting in most of the country's 16 states at primary level – while it was formerly a subject only of the more elitist streams (*Gymnasium*, *Realschule*) and of higher education.
- b) At the tertiary educational level, so-called 'International Study Programs' or 'International Degree Programs' (mostly with British spelling: Programmes) were introduced in 1997 with English as a medium of teaching or co-medium with German (cf. Ammon and McConnell 2002). These programs, which are still expanding, are another step along the path towards English as the working language of German scientists which they took years ago when they started to choose English as their additional and often main language of publication.
- c) In business, English has become the official company language or is co-official with German in German firms, especially for global players.

While these changes seemed initially widely acceptable, they have recently run into criticism from various sides. As to (a), introducing English as a general school subject from primary school has officially been defended as meeting the need to prepare youngsters for the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe.¹ Such reasoning was questioned as not being consistent with the actual policy of preference for just a single language. Imposing English on all pupils as their first foreign language – with the exception of western border regions which offer French – hardly serves linguistic diversity. A more defensible justification would be preparation for globalization or international communication in Europe, for which English could be claimed to be the most useful language.

While warnings of linguistic confusion if children were confronted with a second, or in the case of immigrant children a third, language as early as in primary school were easily dismissed; others – not much better founded – received more attention, like concerns about growing language mixing (*Sprachvermischung*, *Denglisch*). They were sometimes combined with fears, alluded to rather than expressed explicitly, about the German people's dwindling loyalty to their own language or a loss of national identity tied up with it. Thus the *Verein Deutsche Sprache*, Germany's most popular private language organisation, demanded that English should be accompanied at the primary level "by additional teaching content which could stabilize students' [national! U.A.] identity".² This sort of criticism was, however, only supported by a few conservative politicians and not taken seriously by academics. It was also not supported by the smaller but more prestigious private language organisation *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache*, which counts many professional linguists among its members.

In the case of the latter, the concern is more about undermining the international standing of the German language by teaching too much English

and at too early an age. Would foreigners not lose interest in studying German as a foreign language under the impression that communication with Germans, at least those engaged in international contacts, would in future entirely be possible in English? Teachers and professors of German as a foreign language in particular expressed such concerns, though often privately rather than in public. Around 15 to 20 million people study German as a foreign language world-wide, and it is a school subject in over a hundred countries (StADaF 2005–2006). Professors and teachers of this subject are worried about the potentially negative impact on it from the ever more intensive teaching of English in Germany. They form a substantial section of the 22,000 members in 90 countries of the *Verein Deutsche Sprache*.³ Teachers and professors of other foreign languages (except English), especially of French, tend to harbour similarly adverse feelings against any promotion of English.

As to (b), the tertiary educational level, in the winter semester of 1997/98, 'International Study Programs' with English as the language of instruction started at German universities, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Federal Ministry of Science and Education, and have since expanded. The main reason given for their introduction was to make German universities more accessible to foreign students by using the language most of them know. Other European countries, especially the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, introduced English for university teaching even earlier for similar reasons. The 'International Study Programs' in Germany are also offered to German students, who, as well as German professors, should benefit by improving their English language skills (for an overview of such programs in Europe, see Ammon and McConnell 2002).

These programs came under heavy fire for their language choice early on. Some scientists objected for practical reasons, such as feeling excluded by not having acquired sufficient English language skills themselves or, in the case of the applied sciences, needing to use German with clients. Others warned against the possibility of a foreign language being a handicap for studies and research, with the president of the *Verein Deutsche Sprache*, Walter Krämer, even claiming that a preference for English instead of their own language was among the reasons why German scientists' share of Noble Prizes has declined. An objection based on the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stressed the superior cognitive potential of linguistic diversity over just one language, English. Occasionally, feelings of national humiliation surfaced from an awareness that German, too, once ranked among the prominent international languages of science.

An objection related to the latter point was again raised by the departments of German as a foreign language, namely that many foreigners learned the German language because they wanted to study at a German university. This motivation for studying German would be destroyed by study programs in English, which thus dealt a blow to the departments of German as a foreign language abroad and the international standing of the German language.

Such reasoning was taken seriously by the German Academic Exchange Service as well as by universities, and language requirements for the programs were modified. Foreigners are once again expected to learn the German language before or during their studies. The reasons publicly offered for re-establishing the German language requirements are students' need to survive in their German-speaking surroundings and for access to classes taught in German. Perhaps the more important but less publicised reason was, however, to avoid damaging German departments abroad and the international standing of the German language. The German language requirements guarantee the continued value of preparatory German language studies abroad (cf. contributions to Motz 2005).

As to (c), the domain of business, most large German firms have made English their official company language, some as the sole official language, like Daimler-Chrysler, others co-official with German, like BMW or VW, though smaller firms, even those the size of Porsche (to stay with the automotive industry), have often maintained German as their sole official language. The choice of English as the company language has mostly been seen as a matter of practicality and as such has been widely accepted in Germany. However, objections have been raised, too. Employees feared devaluation of their qualifications if they could not meet the foreign language requirements. But national political concerns also played a role, as in the case of a Lufthansa employee who refused to use English at Frankfurt Airport ("on German soil in a German company") but lost his law case against his employer. Again, complaints were made by German departments abroad, who expressed concern that knowledge of German lost its value for applicants to German companies if they abandoned German as their official language. Recently, the German government also seems to have perceived company language as a political issue.

There seems to be a growing feeling in Germany in various quarters about the incompatibility between the country's endeavours to maintain German as an international language, on the one hand, and the upgrading and expansion of English on the other. Thus, when Prime Minister Ottinger of the state of Baden-Württemberg demanded, during a public panel discussion, that more Germans should be provided with solid skills in English to prepare them for globalization, he raised a storm of protests from various sides. The continued upgrading of English and its growing role within the country have nourished an aversion to further steps in that direction. It has also increased concerns about the greater predominance of English as the EU institutional working language, especially as the sole working language. Other EU member countries with large and international languages, especially France but also Italy and Spain, seem to nourish similar reservations.

The attraction of English as the sole EU working language

Theo van Els (2005: 276) convincingly argues that in the case of "only a single working language . . . the language handicap of non-natives, as opposed to

... a number of working languages, is significantly reduced." The reason is not just that they then "only need to develop competence in one foreign language", but that "this one foreign language will also become – and to an increasing extent – the property of the non-natives." This "appropriation of the working language by non-natives does not take place when there are two or more working languages, and in that case native speakers would not need to give up the ownership of their language." "Ownership" of the single working language, English, would come with the increased mastery as well as with the fact that, in the EU institutions, the non-natives would form a clear majority vis-à-vis the natives if there were one instead of several working languages.

Other advantages would be comparatively small as long as the reduction in the number of working languages was limited to informal oral use. These advantages could, however, provide strong motivation for expanding the reduction of working languages beyond informal oral use. The EU employs thousands of translators and interpreters (in 2006, there were 1,650 permanent plus an uncounted but large number of freelance translators, as well as 500 permanent plus 2,700 freelance interpreters), more than any other government or political organisation world-wide. They are mainly needed for the parliamentary debates and formal meetings, as well as for written communication with member states. Part of their work, however, appears superfluous in light of the reasons for reducing the number of working languages for informal oral use; formal and written communication could also be enhanced in many a situation by the choice of a single language, whereby participants would increasingly become its "owners"; and extending the reduction in working languages beyond informal oral use could thus save the EU a large amount of money (figures for costs in Gazzola 2002, 2006; a detailed list of working languages in Gazzola 2006: 67; Carli and Felloni forthcoming).

Outside the political institutions, the market, similarly, exerts pressure towards the reduction of the number of lingua francas. Reduction to only one language would entail similar advantages as in the case of institutional working languages. Communication would be enhanced, costs of translation, interpretation and foreign language studies would be reduced (for business, academia, diplomacy, etc.), and the non-natives would need to develop competence in just one foreign language. In the long run, this language would change from a lingua franca (in the sense of a foreign language) to a native tongue of wider communication.

In light of these attractions of a single working language, one wonders why institutional multilingualism has continued so long. An explanation, or an important part of it, is – in my view – a conflict of interests, which van Els does not seem to be aware of. His proposal is most appealing to the smaller language communities, which see no chance for their language functioning as an institutional working language. The larger language communities, however, are less enthralled. They are, in fact, afraid of losing their language's remaining share of the working language function. This seems to

be the overall picture at least, though there are exceptions. For example, the German EU parliamentarian Michael Gahler (2004), from a large language community (large within the scope of the EU), favours the reduction of working languages to only English because he believes that the French will always just use the Germans to support their language without, in turn, ever really supporting German. And a number of high-level politicians from the new central and eastern European member states, i.e. from small language communities, expressed a preference for three working languages (English, French and German), having had enough, they said, of a single working language, Russian.⁴

The larger language communities who enjoy working function are concerned about losing it. Van Els offers no other explanation for this concern than fear of the loss of mother-tongue advantage in communication: "Anyone who is obliged to communicate in a language other than their mother tongue in a situation where the working language is the mother tongue of the other participants is inevitably in a disadvantaged position" (van Els 2005: 273f). Though this fear is probably there, another one is most likely weightier, namely fear of the loss of prestige or "standing" of their own language as a consequence of loss of working language status or function. As Uriel Weinreich points out (1963: 79, footnote 36), "multiple prestige rating . . . which allows it [a thing, e.g. a language] to be ranked in a hierarchical order is so often derived from several mutually irreducible sources." One of these in the present case is the status or function as an EU institutional working language. Any reduction of this function, if only for informal oral communication, entails lowering the language's standing or prestige – not only within the EU but beyond, as far as that reduction is perceived. And this lowered standing will be perceived widely because it will not escape the attention of the media.

Countries generally appreciate the raising, and conversely hate the lowering, of the prestige of their own national official language, which for them is the symbolic expression of national identity or the bond of nationhood (cf. e.g. Coulmas 1991; Wright 2000). Telling examples in the case of EU member states are Malta, which insisted on its national language having the status of official EU language, and Ireland, which recently followed this course by insisting on the same status for Irish. For both countries the prestige of their language must have been the crucial motive since they could just as well have communicated in English.

For the EU member states with large languages there is, in addition, a more down-to-earth motive for clinging to language prestige which is often overlooked. Any loss of prestige could, they fear, negatively affect the language's attraction as a subject of study, which makes van Els' proposal hard to digest for them, especially if studies already show a tendency towards such a decline. Realisation of his proposal would appear to these countries as just another step, small as it may seem, in a vicious downward spiral of lowering the international standing of their language. To imagine

the scope of these concerns one should be aware of the fact that the national language still functions, to a considerable extent, for maintaining international economic, political and cultural relationships. Therefore various motions in the German Parliament demanding an increase in or maintenance of the EU institutional working language function for German have always been supported by all political parties.⁵ The underlying interests are also evident in the history of conflicts about the EU working languages.

Conflicts about the EU working languages

Such conflicts can be dated back to the founding period of the EU, when France tried to establish French as the sole official and working language, a move that was, however, fended off by the other countries (Hemblenne 1992: 112). Later, in the early 1970s France twice vetoed Britain's membership, most likely in fear of competition for working language status, among perhaps other reasons. It is general knowledge among EU officials that French President Pompidou extracted the promise from British Prime Minister Heath that British EU officials would always be equipped with French language skills before he accepted British membership (Stark 2002: 53). As English has nevertheless become the predominant EU working language, some supporters of French have tended to become resentful. Anna Maria Campogrande, for example, raised the alarm in a circular⁶ against this anglophone conspiracy, using expressions like "le nazisme . . . d'aujourd'hui" on the occasion of Neil Kinnock's acceptance of the chair of the British Council after he left his post as the EU Commission's Deputy President, where his promotion of English had been notorious.

Germany accepted the predominance of French, and later English plus French, as the working language for a long time. This changed, however, after German unification and the country's recovery of political autonomy in 1990. Germany then began to insist that the German language community was (in terms of native speakers) numerically superior by far in the EU, especially after the accession of Austria in 2004, and also hinted at the fact that Germany – with the biggest economy in the EU – had always contributed much more to the EU budget than any other member state. It also pointed out recently that, according to newer figures, German was ahead of even French as a foreign language in the EU (though only marginally, and way behind English); see Table 1 for recent figures.

Former German chancellor Kohl achieved some improvements in the status of German, as when, in 1993, it became an internal working language for the Commission (together with English and French), but status upgrading hardly translated into function (Schloßmacher 1997; Hoheisel 2004: 77) and continued to be challenged. When Finland took over the Council's Presidency in the fall of 1999, it refused to make provision for interpretation of German at the informal Council meetings. Germany and Austria boycotted the meetings

Table 1. The five numerically strongest EU languages, based on the official EU survey conducted in May–June 2005⁷

Language	% of EU population	% native speakers	% foreign language speakers
English	47	13	34
German	30	18	12
French	23	12	11
Italian	15	13	2
Spanish	14	9	5

until Finland relented (Kelletat 2001). The following Council Presidency (by Sweden) excluded German from being a working language at informal expert meetings. Germany agreed to limit working languages to a single one, which was accepted by a majority of the member states (against the French vote), with the language chosen being English.

Following this and other events, the French and German foreign ministers signed an agreement of linguistic cooperation in June 2000 which states that both countries support each other whenever the working status or function of their languages is unduly disregarded. One of several occasions of coordinated action was the proposal by Neil Kinnock, the Commission's Deputy President, in 2001 to draft preparatory papers for the Commission only in English in future. France's and Germany's foreign ministers, Védrine and Fischer, protested against this proposal in a joint letter, whereupon the proposal was withdrawn (Hoheisel 2004: 77).

Italy and Spain have also striven towards achieving working status and function for their languages. They managed to get working language status (together with English, French and German) at the Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market, located in Alicante (Spain). They also demanded obligatory use of their languages in the agreement on joint EU patents (together with English, French and German) and thus, in effect, blocked its ratification, since the use of five languages proved too expensive.⁸

Even smaller language communities have occasionally craved working language status or function. When Spanish and Italian were accepted for the EU Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market, claims for Dutch, at that time next in size in the EU behind Italian and Spanish (today Polish would be next) were raised by the lawyer Christina Kik (perhaps encouraged by the Dutch government), who fought an extensive if ultimately unsuccessful legal battle to include Dutch (Kürten 2004: 103–19).

Abram de Swaan (1999: 23) has formalized the mechanism (or social law of action) of these conflicts in what he called "voting cycles". The overall tendency is for each member state to seek working function or status for its own language. If, however, it sees no chance of that, it prefers a working language regime which is as restricted as possible, ideally just a single

language. The actual working language regime is, one can conclude, the result of the balance of power between all the competing states. The working languages in place so far are – in declining order of importance – English, French, German, and, on an equal footing, Italian and Spanish, but with other languages being allowed on occasion.

Objections to English as the only EU working language

When approaching this issue, it seems useful to construct a simple typology of EU member states according to their national official language:

- I) English
- II) French, German, Spanish or Italian, roughly speaking a large language of international standing
- III) Other.

Any strict delimitation of II from III could probably be called into question. In some cases of type III the EU member state is small but its language is large and widely studied (e.g. Portuguese), in other cases the language is small but still studied in a number of countries (e.g. Dutch).

From what has been said above, the member states of type III have a tendency to prefer English as the sole EU working language, since they see no chance of their own language gaining this function. Member states of type I would also have no qualms about English only.

The member states of type II are in a different position. They are afraid that upgrading English as the EU working language would entail downgrading their own language in this function with, as a consequence, loss of prestige and attraction as an object of foreign language studies and a diminishing of its international standing. These concerns appear particularly real with respect to languages which have their main base (of native speakers and as the official language of countries) within the EU, namely German and Italian. Spanish and French are, in contrast, firmly established outside Europe. An additional concern for type II member states is the loss of mother-tongue advantage in practical communication which, however, could perhaps be compensated for by “ownership” of the single working language (in van Els’ sense) in the long run. Loss of prestige and attraction for foreign language studies and, consequently, the international standing of the language would, however, be permanent.

Why are governments so concerned about the international standing of their national official language, especially about it being studied as a foreign language? The reasons must be the same, conversely, as those for trying to spread or promote their own language abroad (for an overview, see *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 95/1992 and 107/1994). The main advantages countries hope to gain by successfully spreading their language

abroad seem to be the following (with the weight of each factor varying from case to case):

- enhanced international communication (with foreigners who know the language)
- improved economic contacts abroad (with foreigners who know the language)
- improved image of the country abroad (via individuals studying the language and, in so doing, improving their view of the country)
- spread of the country's culture and values (via individuals knowing the language and engaging with the country's media)
- gain in human capital (individuals who know the language are more inclined to work in or for the respective country)
- further attraction of the language as a subject of study (the language's improved communicative function and prestige increases its attraction for foreign language studies and thus establishes a self-enhancing feedback)
- economic profits through the 'language industry' (higher sales of teaching materials and of services and commodities tied to the language)
- strengthening of national identity and pride (the high international standing of the language is a source of pride in the nation and its culture).

Such advantages, and perhaps others, are certainly not generally perceived in their entirety. Awareness of them is, however, discernible in language conflicts and language policy discussions about the international standing of languages and the EU working languages.

A fair and practicable multi-lingual solution?

What would be a fair compromise between the diverging interests of the various EU member states and language communities which at the same time guarantees the smooth communicative functioning of the EU institutions? There is no simple answer to this complex question. (For various attempts based on different premises and with the focus sometimes more on economic exchanges or a common public sphere than on communication in the institutions, see Pool 1996; Laitin 1997; Ross 2003; Kraus 2004). Politicians may feel the question to be too complex and too sensitive for an explicit policy and, therefore, would rather let "the market" decide.

Scholars dealing with the subject tend to stress the need to base EU language policy on "principles" (or "values" or the like). However, I have not seen any comprehensive proposal of such principles, not to speak of its transformation into everyday communication in the institutions. Postulating principles (or values) like "communication must function" (or "work must be possible"), "burdens caused by language diversity must be equally distributed" (the call for "linguistic fairness" or "justice"), "all languages

must be maintained" (the language ecologists' credo), or simply "a majority vote of citizens (or member states) should decide" and the like are doubtlessly useful as general guidelines but are only of limited help when it comes to practical politics.

A preliminary condition for a fair solution is, in my view, awareness of the potential bias of language planners, who themselves are members of involved language communities. Thus, being German myself and a member of a type II language community, my views should be scrutinized for bias, for example my suggestions that:

- A plurality of working languages would be more in line with the deeply entrenched preference for multilingualism throughout the EU than a single working language.
- Languages of large language communities in the EU (with a great number of native speakers) should not be excluded from working language function, since native speakers in other cases tend to be the main focus of language rights.
- Nor should languages widely spoken as foreign languages in the EU and, consequently, serving as a lingua franca be excluded (if only for practical reasons).
- Preserving the international standing of a language counts as a legitimate value which deserves to be respected, as does, unquestionably, maintenance of a language – if, in both cases, the respective language community itself values it.

In the case of the EU institutional working languages, the conflicting interests of the larger and the smaller language communities (types II and III) need to be considered with particular care. Any fair and fully acceptable solution would require compensation. There is more to be compensated for, as already discussed, than costs of language learning on which "linguistic justice" usually focuses (van Parijs 2002). Such compensation should comprise a financial component. One possibility could be letting the working-language communities, or their member states, shoulder all the costs of the EU language services. The excluded member states could use the money thus saved to promote their own languages; there should, however, be no possibility for countries to simply pay their way into the club of working languages. (For criteria of selection, see below.) Such compensation is missing in the recently introduced (May 2004) "Market Model for Interpretation" (or "Interpreting on Request") for the preparatory bodies of the EU Council and COREPER (*Comité des représentants permanents* 'Committee of permanent representatives'). It provides up to €2 million from the EU budget for each official EU language for interpreting and obliges member states to finance additional interpreting, if they feel the need for it, from their own coffers. Unsurprisingly, general interpreting, i.e. for all the meetings, has been requested only for the larger languages (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish), presumably not

only because their member states can afford it but also because they aspire to institutional working language status.

Maintaining several working languages would need strict regulation; otherwise, the pressure to squeeze some or all of them out except English would continue. These regulations should comprise:

- control of the distribution of skills in the working languages among institutional personnel (to be arrived at through language requirements for new employees and schooling of present staff);
- topical specialization for personnel with skills in working languages other than English and structuring meetings so that the languages can actually be used;
- provision for translation and interpretation for all working languages into the others, including for the informal meetings;
- a code of conduct allowing nobody to speak only their native tongue, i.e. their member state's national official language (in order to additionally soften the disadvantages of the excluded).

These regulations are by no means specific enough to guarantee that they will function effectively. Nor do the kinds of compensation suggested really help to keep work going, which would of course be absolutely necessary, though they would probably make such a policy more acceptable. The practical organizational and technical difficulties appear enormous. It seems to be an open question whether they can really be overcome. Van Els' proposal is based on the assumption that they cannot, or at least not at a reasonable cost. This would have to be seriously tested before any final decision was taken. The Swiss governmental institutions work with three languages in informal meetings (German, French and Italian), of which one (Italian), however, often has only a token function. Not explicitly eliminating this language – and even sometimes admitting the fourth national language, Romansh – is considered essential for “language peace”.⁹ It would have to be tested whether the EU, with its much bigger resources, cannot actually use and maintain more working languages. But even granting some of them only a token function, including oral informal use, would probably be more acceptable for the larger language communities than explicitly excluding them.

Such considerations should be part of careful planning to achieve acceptance, something which is often neglected in scholars' language policy proposals, and which therefore tend to be technocratic. It is not very useful to conceive of schemes for language use based on their communicative functionality if they are unacceptable to large sections of the citizens or member states. Questions of acceptance would need closer scrutiny before a proposal like van Els' could be acted upon.

Practical (communicative) as well as political aspects of any proposal for the EU working language regime need more careful examination. This will

in fact be the task of a research project for the next five years carried out by Michael Schloßmacher and myself (see Schloßmacher 1997 for previous work on the topic) as part of the comprehensive project on multilingualism in the EU, "Linguistic Dynamics and Management of Diversity", financed by the EU.

The two main criteria for selecting EU working languages should be, in my view:

- a) numerical strength in terms of number of native and non-native speakers within the EU,
- b) international standing beyond the EU.

These criteria would qualify the following languages in the following order:

- 1) English (a – 2, b – 1)
- 2) French (a – 2, b – 2) / German (a – 1, b – 3)
- 3) Italian (a – 2, b – 3) / Spanish (a – 3, b – 2).

It is not entirely surprising that these are none other than the actual current EU working languages. My proposal in all its incompleteness would, however, entail three improvements over the present state of affairs:

- compensation for the excluded languages,
- stability (through regulations whose effectiveness would be monitored),
- agreement among member states – if it could be reached – instead of continuing debate and mistrust.

Notes

1. "Unsere Kinder müssen auf ein sprachlich und kulturell vielfältiges Europa vorbereitet sein." *Schulverwaltung NRW*, No. 1/2003.
2. "... durch flankierende Maßnahmen, insbesondere identitätsbildende Lehrinhalte in den Fächern Deutsch, Geschichte, Sozialwissenschaften, zu begleiten". *Verein Deutsche Sprache e.V. Region 46 nördl. Niederrhein – westl. Münsterland*, August 12, 2002.
3. Cf. e.g. "Werden Sie Mitglied im Verein Deutsche Sprache!" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 30, 2005: 47.
4. The Czech, Slovak and Latvian commissioners Vladmir Spidla, Jan Figel, and Andris Piebalgs, quoted in "Dolmetschen in Babylon", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 1, 2005: 3.
5. For example, "Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und FDP 'Deutsch als Arbeitssprache auf europäischer Ebene festigen – Verstärkte Förderung von Deutsch als erlernbare Sprache im Ausland.'" September 24, 2003, *Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 15/1574*.
6. Circular sent by Anna-Maria Campogrande@skynet.de, January 19, 2005.

7. See http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_237.en.pdf.
8. "Patents. Still Pending" *The Economist*, May 22, 2004: 70. In 2005, Italy protested against limiting the Commission's press conferences to English, French and German plus the language of the reporting Commissioner and won a partial victory in getting other languages admitted from time to time. ("Wieder Sprachenstreit in Brüssel", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 26, 2005: 8).
9. Oral communication by Markus Nussbaumer, head of the German section of the central Swiss language services.

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