

EU institutions

How the choice of EU working monolingualism affects the other languages and language use: the obvious inconsistency between policy and politics of multilingualism in the EU institutions.

The EU institutions must work effectively with 23 working languages, while also ensuring the equality of all its member state languages. Naturally, the practice of EU institutions is that they can not be used equally in all situations. There is a conflict with respect to the principle of linguistic diversity and the actual, often pragmatic decision taken for a largely monolingual regime.

Language diversity and the special case of procedural languages

The term “working language” is of huge importance for the project. In principle, the official and working languages of the European Union shall be one (of the) official languages of the member states. This is stipulated in the founding documents of the Union and one of its most important language policy principles. In practice, however, the various institutions evolved different working language rules. However, these different internal rules are in practically no case agreements in writing. Also missing are recommendations or guidelines for the use of certain working languages. They are oral, informal or non-public agreements. The fact that these agreements are not always as clear as commonly assumed was shown by the discussion about the language regime for the 2010 newly established European External Action Service (EEAS). The first website of the EEAS and the first EU internal vacancies require language knowledge only for English and French, and despite the continued opposition of the German Foreign Affairs Ministry this has not changed.

In most publications, however, the term “working languages” is used when in fact those languages are described in which the political discourse actually takes place within or between the EU institutions. In most cases these languages are English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. For our research, we have therefore assumed that “working languages” basically mean the procedural languages. These languages are meant to be used actively and not only as translation targets. A demonstrable commitment to certain procedural languages, however, seems neither possible nor desirable from the political side.

Language choice for the EU institutions

The language choice for different communication purposes in the EU institutions shows the hierarchy of the procedural languages. English is by far most often chosen as a foreign language. The analysis of the following oral and written contributions shows the tendency of an English-only regime within the EU institutions:

1. Attitudes towards procedural languages of EU parliament officials

Officials estimate to spend about 90% of their working time communicating in English, although they don't wish to work only in English.

2. Language choice in plenary and parliamentary committees

The analysis of language choice in plenary and parliamentary committee meetings shows a relatively low-rated use of English. Due to the strong commitment of the parliament for using mother tongues, only in 11.6% of oral contributions a foreign language is used, which in all cases is English. Notably members from Eastern European countries tend to choose rather English than any other foreign language.

3. Documents of Interparliamentary Delegations

Based on the 23 official languages, there would be a 4.3% expected share of English documents. Actually 97% are written in English, 53% of them exclusively. Other languages copies, especially French (30%) and German (23%) are mostly translated protocols and agendas.

4. Language choice of Commissioners for EU parliament speeches

18 of 27 Commissioners always use English for parliament speeches, regardless whether English is their mother tongue or not. 7.4% of all speeches are native English contributions, for 55.9% English as a foreign language is used.

Language choice from the EU institutions

The hierarchy in the procedural languages is disclosed by the analysis of external communications of the EU, although any such hierarchy contradicts the multilingual principle of the Union and the attitudes of institution officials.

1. Websites of the Commission and of Parliamentary Groups

Most websites cover all information only in English. Their language navigation service is very limited, only the site of the former Commissioner for Multilingualism showed an outstanding variety of languages. English is the only language all sites are provided in, but translation services are available for all official languages. Irrespective of the national composition of group members, links from other EP sites to group sites are always in English.

2. Commissioner Press Conferences

In principle, for press Conferences of commissioners the entire apparatus of the Directorate General for Interpretation is available. Nevertheless, only English is used, regardless of biographical characteristics, as a foreign language. 11.40% of all statements were held in native English, for

78.6% of all statements English as foreign language is used. Only 13% of all conference statements were held in another foreign language than English. Due to the fact that Spain then held the EU council presidency, some commissioners chose the Spanish language.

3. EU submissions to Deutscher Bundestag

According to an internal estimate of the German Parliament's administration, the majority of pages of EU submissions to the Bundestag is not translated into German. Almost a third of all members of the German Parliament think to be able to fulfill their work in plenary without always reading the relevant EU submissions. After all, 29.6% say to exercise their duties fully, although they miss important content, due to English language submissions.

The inconsistency between policy and politics of multilingualism in the EU institutions

1. Language competence and language use

Although 88.9% of all EU Commissioners said they are able to speak another foreign language than English, which is mostly French or German, only 12.9% chose another foreign language, mostly French or Spanish, in press conferences.

2. Language diversity and language proposition

In all cases, the principle of procedural language diversity is implemented less frequently than expected. The use of languages for communication within and between various EU institutions is not a consequence of strategic policy decisions, but often of short-term pragmatic reactions. This development is also intruding into political areas in which such language choice decisions cannot be taken with the same pragmatic freedom, namely the national parliaments.

Neither the plurilingual claim of the Council (mother tongue + 2) is put into broad practise nor are the multilingual basic rights of language diversity observed. European language diversity seems to be such an obstacle for multilateral communication within the institutions of the EU that the multilingual policy of the EU is not widely honoured.

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