

## Why the EU should change its language policy: making the case for promoting English as Europe's Lingua Franca

Gerhards, Jürgen

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# **Berliner Studien zur Soziologie Europas**

Freie Universität Berlin, Institut für Soziologie, Garystraße 55, D-14195 Berlin

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**Why the EU should Change its Language Policy**  
Making the Case for Promoting English  
as Europe's Lingua Franca

*Jürgen Gerhards*

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## Abstract

The 28 European Union member states have 24 different official languages. While the EU seeks homogenisation and convergence of the member states in many policy areas this does not apply to its language policy. The present article discusses six arguments why the European language policy should be changed and the use of English as a *lingua franca* be encouraged.

1. The current EU policy of encouraging learning different foreign languages instead of just one single *lingua franca* will not significantly improve communication between the citizens of Europe.
2. It is empirically incorrect that people's English proficiency is already sufficient as if to say that a general improvement of the English language competences is not required.
3. The claim to not only encourage English language acquisition but simultaneously that of other foreign languages as well is unrealistic, given the enormous efforts needed to learn a foreign language.
4. The enormous advantages of a common *lingua franca* for the future of the European Union are underestimated. A common foreign language would not only considerably facilitate economic trade and increase citizens' mobility within Europe but would also substantially increase the opportunities of citizens to politically participate and consequently form a European public sphere. Likewise it would strengthen trust among the European citizens.
5. It is quite an exaggeration that supporting the use of English as the common *lingua franca* threatens Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity. The countries' native languages will not be threatened but persist, and they will continue to be the main reference points for identification; they will merely be complemented by a *foreign* language. Additionally, the argument of language determining thinking and thus culture has empirically been highly contested. Promoting English as a *lingua franca* will not threaten Europe's cultural diversity.
6. Encouraging and promoting English as a *lingua franca* is not associated with high costs but can be easily realised when following the example of some smaller EU countries. Television programmes, especially those for children, which are mostly English language productions, should no longer be dubbed but be shown in the original language.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As is well-known, the European Union includes 28 sovereign nation states. Albania, Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey have been given the status of candidate countries. According to the European treaties, the official languages of the member states are at the same time the official languages of the European Union. Since some member states share the same official language and because Luxemburg has not claimed its right to make Luxemburgish one of the European official languages, there are currently 24 instead of 28 different official languages in the European Union. European language diversity has increased with every previous enlargement and will do so in future. Furthermore, the existence of about 60 autochthonous languages, i.e. languages spoken by minorities living in the nation states, further increases language diversity in Europe. Some of these minority languages have been given the status of second official language in the nation states. In addition, there are those languages of minority groups that have migrated from non-EU countries into one of the EU member states and that do not speak any of the European languages.

This Babylonian language constellation is encouraged and supported by both the European Union as well as by the nation states (Kraus 2004; Ammon 2006). While the EU presses for homogenisation and convergence of the member states in many policy areas, this explicitly does not hold for its language policy. The EU is far from pursuing a policy of linguistic homogenisation by supporting the introduction and adoption of a single lingua franca. Every law, all documents and regulations have to be published in all official languages. The citizens and the nation states can turn to the EU using their national language and they have the right to obtain an answer in this language.<sup>2</sup> The nation states insist on the recognition of their national official languages as official language in the EU. Across parties, the German parliament for instance has urged the Commission consistently that German has to be treated equally with all other official languages, and especially with English and French as lingua franca of the Commission.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a translation of an article which will be published in German (Jürgen Gerhards (2015): Verständigung trotz sprachlicher Vielfalt. Plädoyer für eine stärkere Förderung des Englischen. In: Günter Stock, Christoph Marksches and Susanne Hauer (eds.) *Zukunftort: EUROPA. Sammelband zum Jahresthema 2013 | 14 der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Berlin. De Gruyter). The article was translated into English by Friederike Molitor. The text is based on a public debate with Jürgen Trabant which took place at the Berlin Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften in February 2014.

<sup>2</sup> External and internal language policy can be differentiated, the latter referring to communication in EU institutions. The various European institutions have introduced different regulations in this regard. French is the working language at the European Court of Justice, while English, French and German are the internal working languages of the European Commission. Furthermore, the number of languages spoken has often been reduced to two (English and French) in informal proceedings.

At the same time, the EU is aware of the enormous transaction costs and friction linked to the existence of 24 official languages. In order to realise cross-border communication in spite of so many official languages, the EU pursues its aim of promoting multilingualism in Europe in various programmes. Apart from their native language, citizens shall ideally speak an additional two EU languages in order to benefit from the opening of borders in Europe and to be mobile. However, similar to the policy of equal treatment of all official languages there is no clear preference for one particular language when recommending the acquisition of a foreign language. The acquisition of smaller languages is encouraged just as much as the acquisition of widely spoken languages.

This language policy finds approval by many linguists, cultural studies scholars and social scientists (Krauss 1992; Hale 1998; Crystal 2000; Phillipson 2003; Kymlicka 2007; Nic Craith 2008; Shuibhne 2008) who consider linguistic diversity as something being worth to protect and which should be saved from the trends of globalisation, unification and standardisation as well as from the dominance of the English language. Jürgen Trabant (2014) has recently spoken out against the trend of Anglicisation of Europe and the triumph of global English (“Globalesisch”), making a clear case for the preservation of linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

Is the language policy of the European Union still reasonable and are the arguments forwarded by linguists, cultural as well as social scientists sufficiently convincing? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to encourage English language acquisition as a foreign language more systematically than before?

In the following I will discuss several arguments explaining why it makes sense to turn away from the principle of encouraging the acquisition of several foreign languages and instead to support the teaching and learning of a single lingua franca. The line of reasoning is based on the work of other scholars (Kibbee 2003; de Swaan 2001, 2004, 2007; Van Parijs 2004, 2011) and my own work (Gerhards 2010/2012, 2011).

## **2. Is communication in Europe facilitated by encouraging the acquisition and use of several foreign languages?**

Following EU language policy, the people in the 28 countries should ideally learn two different foreign languages so that the *bilateral* opportunities for communication within Europe would surely be substantially facilitated. Thereby, however, a linguistically unbounded Europe will certainly not be realised though. A German who learnt Flemish and a Pole mastering Latvian have both improved their foreign language skills, but this does not allow them to communicate with each other. The more languages there are, the more possible language combinations people can choose to learn as foreign languages, and the lower the chances that people speaking the same foreign languages meet. Philippe Van Parijs (2004, 2011) calculated the possible combinations for differing numbers of languages and could show that on the basis of 24

official languages choosing two foreign languages does not significantly improve communication opportunities in Europe. Encouraging the acquisition of *one* foreign language by contrast would substantially improve communication between European citizens.

There is little doubt that the likely candidate for a lingua franca can only be English due to its already dominant position. In a Eurobarometer survey from 2012 the citizens of the then 27 EU countries were asked which foreign language they speak well enough to have a conversation in.<sup>3</sup> When adding those with English as their native language to this number, we obtain the share of EU citizens able to communicate in this specific language. More than half of the EU citizens, i.e. 51.1 per cent say that they speak English as a foreign language well enough to have a conversation in, or whose mother tongue is English. By a large margin, German ranks second with 27.1, followed by French with 24.4, and Italian with 15.1 per cent.

The communicative advantage of English further increases decisively when considering the number of native English speakers outside Europe and the number of other non-Europeans with English as a second language. Admittedly, English is not the most spoken native language (which is Chinese) but it is by far the most spoken foreign language (Van Parijs 2011). Following Abram de Swaan's (2001, 2007) reasoning, English will expand exponentially: Assuming that the dominant function of foreign language acquisition is communication with others, it is only rational for any citizen to firstly learn English because there are already so many people able to speak it. On the basis of the decision made for a specific language, in a second step a new constellation emerges for all those that decide to learn a foreign language at a later point. The number of English speakers and thus the people available to communicate with will have increased in the meantime, meaning it will become even more rational to pick English for those who only then choose to learn a language. This mechanism explains why differences in using specific languages can translate into ever larger quantitative differences over time.

When comparing the different generations in the EU countries from the above mentioned survey with each other, we can get an impression of the dynamic expansion of English. The share of people stating they speak English well enough to have a conversation has continuously increased from one generation to the next (Gerhards 2010/2012).

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<sup>3</sup> The numbers are based on an analysis of the Eurobarometer dataset no. 77.2 which is available for scientific purposes. I have analysed another Eurobarometer survey from 2005 elsewhere in which the same questions were asked (cf. Gerhards 2010/2012, 2014).

### **3. Is the general level of English competence in Europe not high enough already, suggesting that more encouragement to learn English is not required?**

English is the most spoken language in the EU countries. Does this fact allow us to assume that more promotion of English learning has become obsolete as assumed by Jürgen Trabant (2014: 53ff.)? There are two arguments against this:

1. In the Eurobarometer survey mentioned earlier, 51 per cent of the EU citizens use English as their mother tongue or speak English as a foreign language on a level being able to converse. This also implies that almost half of the EU population does not speak English, who accordingly remain mostly excluded from communication with other Europeans. Additionally, there are considerable differences across countries in the number of citizens speaking English. While for instance about 80 per cent of the Swedish and the Dutch state that they are able to speak English in their everyday lives, the share is only between 21 and 29 per cent in Hungary, Spain or Portugal. Apart from such country differences, my own analyses (Gerhards 2010/2012, 2014) have revealed considerable differences between the social classes. The higher educated are for instance significantly more often able to converse in English than people from lower educational backgrounds. While the higher social classes can participate in the European integration process, this access is mostly denied to the lower ones due to lower levels of foreign language competences. When focusing solely on the elites one might conclude that the prevalence of English as foreign language is already sufficiently high. From a democratic perspective as regards the inclusion of the whole population, this however is not true. And thus the improvement of English competences is also an issue of reducing social inequality as regards peoples' chances to participate in the processes of Europeanisation and globalisation.

2. In the cited Eurobarometer survey people were asked whether they are able to have a conversation in English. Obviously, the quality of spoken English cannot be assessed by this question and unfortunately there are no comparative studies available to assess the language quality. The findings from a survey of German high-school graduates ("Abiturienten") from Hamburg and Baden-Württemberg are very insightful regarding the quality assessment of English competences. Only about 25 per cent of said graduates in both federal states have the required TOEFL score in order to be eligible to enter American universities. And only about five per cent have the score needed in English to pass the entrance examinations of one of the top US universities (Jonkmann et al. 2007: 130). This is a quite sobering result given that high-school graduates have usually been learning English for at least ten years. Here, it serves as proof for the thesis that neither the number of citizens in Europe speaking some English nor the quality and level of spoken English is satisfactory enough to conclude that there would be no need for catching up or for more actions to be taken to improve such skills.



#### **4. Learning English and another foreign language: Couldn't both be encouraged?**

It's surely desirable that European citizens do not only speak one foreign language but, beside English, learn one or several other foreign languages. This is what Jürgen Trabant (2014: 32ff.) hopes for, expressed in the formula "M+E+1" (mother tongue, English, and another language). The realisation of this legitimate wish might fail considering the real conditions of foreign language acquisition. In contrast to first language acquisition, which is automatically learned during the socialisation process, second or foreign language acquisition is dependent on instruction and tuition. The individual pace of learning a new language is indeed very different and varies according to previous knowledge and the degree of complexity of the language to be learned, but all in all it's very time-consuming to learn a foreign language. The poor results from the study on English competences among high-school graduates from Hamburg and Baden-Württemberg substantiate this: After all the pupils usually have had English classes for ten years and several hours each week. While a new language is quickly and effortlessly learned during childhood and adolescence for various reasons, the efforts needed to be invested into language acquisition exponentially increases with age of the language student. Scientists call this particular disposition of language acquisition at an early age the "critical period of second language acquisition". There is a considerable decrease in the efficiency of learning a second language at the age of ten already (Bleakley & Chin 2010; Esser 2006). Especially due to the complex nature of foreign language acquisition, it is in strong competition with other learning activities so that one has to weigh which goal to prefer and pursue. When making English language competence the first priority and when bringing into account the abovementioned findings of an insufficient prevalence as well as level of English language competence in Europe, then there is little reason to focus on the acquisition of a second foreign language. Regarding school curricula there is also the question which classes' hours to reduce in order to have more time for teaching a second foreign language given that the overall amount of hours stays the same.

#### **5. What are the benefits of adopting English as a common foreign language?**

Communication is the dominant function of language. It includes the interaction with others and the coordination of actions between them. This nearly trivial definition of language's function contains various implications as the terms of interaction and coordination serve as placeholders for quite different forms of exchange between people. A common native language as well as a common foreign language enable us to communicate in everyday life and when travelling, help us building friendships and relationships, and facilitate coordination and communication at work, the trade of goods and services, the provision of information, etc. Several scientific findings have revealed a tight link between a common language and the density of social exchange in different dimensions.

More prevalence of a common foreign language in Europe would clearly facilitate the mobility of the citizens, which continues to remain quite low despite the EU right to freedom of movement. Changing countries can thus be used to personally socialise with people abroad, for educational purposes, but especially for people's professional lives. The improvement of foreign language competences in one language would not only lead to individual benefits but also to positive collective consequences. In a meta-analysis of 81 different studies in which the relationship between a common language and bilateral trade was analysed, Peter Egger and Andrea Lassmann (2012) conclude that when two countries use the same language, trade flows are facilitated by 44 per cent (while controlling all other factors influencing trade). Geographic mobility facilitated by speaking English would further lead to more balanced labour supply and demand within the EU. In the course of the ongoing Euro and economic crisis the number of unemployed people increased dramatically. This is especially true for the youth unemployment rate in the crisis-stricken southern EU countries while the more affluent member states increasingly witness a shortage of skilled labour. There is a multitude of factors influencing people's mobility. Language however is one of the central obstacles.

A common foreign language would not only considerably facilitate economic trade in Europe but would also substantially improve the chances for political participation of the European citizens and subsequently support the emergence of a European public sphere. Since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 EU citizens have Union citizenship status in addition to their national citizenship; the rights attached to this however can only be fully claimed by the citizens who are able to communicate in a European-wide context. Improved opportunities for European communication would support the emergence of a European public sphere and thus a bottom-up democratisation of the EU. The public debates on the banking crisis, Euro crisis and economic crisis during the last years have again confirmed one particular finding from research on the emergence of a European public sphere. A European public sphere is not much developed; public debates mostly happen in separate national public spheres (Gerhards 1993). Hence, the debates on the Euro crisis, its causes and solutions were different in Greece from that in Spain, in Germany or in Finland, which can be mainly attributed to the fact that discussions in national public spheres are held in the respective national languages and are isolated from each other. Under these circumstances an exchange of arguments that transcends borders and leads to European-wide deliberation processes is not possible. This in turn stabilises people's reasoning and thinking in terms of national interests. A common language is needed to establish a European public sphere. Otherwise it will not develop (Gerhards & Hans 2014).

Likewise the chances to emerge a world public and world civil society are crucially dependent on the possibility to communicate in a language which is understood by many. Protesters at Gezi Park in Istanbul with their banners saying "Help defend democracy", citizens in Tunisia chanting "Game over" in the context of the Arab

Spring, or protesters in Brazil calling “We don’t need the World Cup, we need money for hospitals and education” during the World Football Championship 2014, do not primarily communicate in their national public spheres but with people outside their country by using a language that is spoken by many. In this respect, English also provides an opportunity for the constitution and emergence of a worldwide public sphere. Banners with similar contents in Turkish, Arabic or Portuguese would not have been understood as much in the world.

Lastly, psychological studies show (Kinzler et al. 2009) that communication in a common language creates trust between people and fosters a feeling of attachment. While linguistic diversity is nearly exclusively judged and interpreted positively in the hegemonic discourse of linguists and cultural scientists, they do underestimate the downsides to linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity hampers communication, separates interacting people from each other, increases the probability of the development of group identities along language boundaries, and often leads to tensions and conflicts between speakers of different languages. Having a commonly shared language at their disposal by contrast can help to overcome existing differences.

## **6. Is the European linguistic and cultural diversity threatened by a lingua franca?**

A solid objection against the promotion of English as Europe’s lingua franca is the threat of other languages and thus also cultures through the hegemony of one single language. English hegemony is associated with the dominance of the Anglo-American world view and values because language and world views are interpreted to be interwoven (Phillipson 2003; Trabant 2014).

However, encouraging the use of English as Europe’s lingua franca does certainly not mean that the linguistic sovereignty of the nation states within the countries and thus the linguistic diversity are under threat. The mother tongues of the countries will naturally continue to exist and also serve as reference points for identification; they are only complemented by adopting a single *foreign* language.

Furthermore the thesis of language’s impact on thinking and thus on the appropriation of the world and culture is very controversial. A discussion of the pros and cons is beyond the scope of this paper (de Swaan 2007; Gerhards 2011). Some cognitive psychologists assume that thinking happens in a specific mental language. And because it occurs in this inner language, the impact natural languages have on thinking is low. Everything that people express in a particular natural language can be principally translated into another language. If language and culture are however not as closely interdependent as often assumed, this has consequences for language policy. One of the core arguments against a single common foreign language has thus been softened. Philippe Van Parijs (2004: 138) precisely gets to the heart of the thesis of the independence of language and culture:

*There is nothing intrinsically „pro-capitalist“, or „anti-poor“, or „market-imperialist“ about the English language, just as it is not because Marx wrote in German that there is something intrinsically „anti-capitalist“ or „pro-proletarian“ or „state-fetishist“ about the German language. Like all other languages in the world, English and German have the means of expressing negation, so that whatever Marx wrote in German you can also deny in German and whatever Bush said in English you can also deny in English.<sup>4</sup>*

## **7. How can language competences be improved?**

Languages are mostly learned at school, during longer stays abroad, and by consuming foreign-language media products. A precondition for learning foreign languages via media products is that they are broadcasted in the original language. In many countries including Germany, however, this is not the case (Van Parijs 2004). Nearly all TV programmes from abroad are dubbed although there is a considerable high share of foreign productions in most countries: 87.5 per cent of the 83,049 hours of TV broadcasting in 2009 were foreign programmes. More than half of TV broadcasting hours (i.e. 47,721) are productions from America and thus in English (Media Consulting Group 2009).

It would equal a free, no-cost foreign language class if these productions were broadcasted in the original language. And quite many people would obviously take advantage of this free “class”. TV is still the most commonly used medium consumed by the people. People in Germany e.g. watch four hours TV each day (Van Eimeren & Frees 2013). Additionally, screening of media imports in the original language is associated only with very low costs compared to other measures taken to improve foreign language competences as for example increasing the hours (per week) for teaching foreign languages at (language) schools, because the programmes are already available in the original language.

However, one could object that television is not an educational institution and that people have a right for comfort and for their native language. There is a simple solution for this problem. Since the transition from analogous to digital television there is the technical possibility to offer both dubbed and original non-dubbed versions, so that citizens can make a choice. And since foreign language acquisition happens relatively quickly especially during childhood and adolescence, one should start to change the respective TV programmes. The preconditions are particularly fa-

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<sup>4</sup> The adoption of English as lingua franca as well as to make a case for political support of this process creates injustices between the different languages. Adopting English as lingua franca advantages native speakers insofar as they would not have to learn a new language, while all others would have to invest time and effort to acquire the English language. Various measures to compensate for this unfairness are discussed in the literature, which I will not be able to discuss in more detail here (cf. Van Parijs 2011, 2004: 138).

vourable. In Germany for example, children aged 3 to 13 years on average watch more than 90 minutes TV per day; this equals two hours of class a day for seven days a week. The 14 to 29 year olds even spend on average 134 minutes in front of the TV (Van Eimeren & Frees 2013). Additionally, especially the 3 to 7 year olds are particularly fond of KIKA (“Kinderkanal” meaning child’s channel). KIKA is a collaboration of the German public-service television broadcasters ZDF and ARD. Via the broadcasting council, policy-makers can exert influence on the programme of the station, which is particularly favourable. Citizens’ multilingualism could be improved by simple means in the long run if the foreign-language television programmes for children and teenagers would not be shown in the dubbed but in the original language version.

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