MULTILINGUISM WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Nicoleta MEDREA[1]

Abstract

Multilinguism refers both to a situation where several languages are spoken within a specific geographical area and to the ability of a person to master several languages. The benefits of knowing foreign languages are undeniable. Language opens up the space for intercultural tolerance, facilitates working, studying and traveling and allows genuine intercultural communication. This paper attempts to present the attitude of the Europeans regarding the learning of foreign languages and special reference is made to the case of Romania and its mindset of linguistic diversity among the other European Member States.

Keywords: multilinguism, foreign language, linguistic diversity, EU policy, language learning

The EU is truly multilingual: at present it has 27 Member States and 23 official languages. Multilinguism is one of the European Commission's policies and it has become part of Education and Culture Department[1], whose present commissioner is Androulla Vasilliou. The question arising within the multinational context of the EU is whether one can speak about a future for linguistic diversity in Europe. The answer of the European Commission is Multilinguism which has three core aims: to encourage language learning, to promote a healthy multilingual economy and to give all EU citizens access to legislation, procedures and information of the Union in their own language.

This respect for linguistic diversity was early mentioned in the first regulation of the Treaty of Rome (1957): "each of the four languages in which the Treaty is drafted is recognized as an official language."[2] At that time there were 6 founding Member States, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, France and Germany, and 4 languages, French, Italian, German, Dutch. However, after 50 years, the principle stays the same even though now there are 23 official languages in the EU.

Furthermore, Art.22 of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000) requires EU to respect linguistic diversity, Art. 21 prohibits the discrimination based on language and finally, according to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the EU shall respect its cultural and linguistic diversity.

Apart from these rules meant to secure respect for linguistic diversity, the EC has developed programs and organized events to support its multilinguism policy such as: Lingua Program (1990- 1994); 2001 was the European Year of Languages and the 26th of September was established as the European Day of Languages; in 2002 in Barcelona, heads of states launched an appeal for learning at least 2 languages; from 2004 to 2006 the "Language Action Plan" was developed in order to promote languages; in November

[1] Lector univ. dr., Universitatea „Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureș

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)

2005 the EC adopted a new strategic framework for multilinguism. Currently (2007-2013) the Lifelong Learning Program is developed and this includes LLP Erasmus for Teaching Mobility whose mainly aim is to promote transnational partnerships and encourage participants to learn languages.

Some think that in order to reach a better communication it would be easier to have a single language such as English (*lingua franca*), and that national languages of a minor importance have no future. However, each language is valuable in itself as an essential element of one nation's identity. Language means not only words, but a whole culture that is behind those words, words that go together only with the stories of their country of origin when traveling to other language areas. Respect for these national languages involves the very act of trying to preserve the peculiarities of the cultures they represent.

English then seems no longer to be sufficient in this process of translating one culture into another.

And here intervenes the Multilinguism policy of the EC, which encourages direct transfers from one language into another, more specifically the learning of languages, especially of those not so commonly used. The argument is that the transfer would be more accurate. Yet the reality proves that for most cases English stills stays as an intermediary, as the only available tool when doing business for example, when trying to find a job in another country or when traveling abroad. Nonetheless, this does not mean that English is no longer an asset, on the contrary it has become a kind of 'by default' language that must be mastered by those wishing to have access to better jobs, to acquire information and to communicate worldwide. To this asset, the CV of a young European must add at least another foreign language, apart from the mother tongue and awareness of the necessity of learning other languages apart from English should become a priority.

In trying to get a better picture of how the Europeans envisage their future Europe from the perspective of its multilinguism, I considered as being relevant to quote figures from a survey entitled "Europeans and their languages"[3], which was carried out in 2005 on 28,649 citizens. Special reference will be made to the case of Romania and the figures are self-speaking for its mindset regarding linguistic diversity among the other European Member States.

According to this survey, the most spoken languages in Europe are:

- English (38%- increased by 6 points, compared to another survey from 2001)
- French (14%- increased by 3)
- German (14%- increased by 6; took over French after the enlargement of the EU)
- Spanish (6%- increased by 1)
- Russian (6%)

As regards the number of languages, 56% of the citizens of the EU are able to hold a conversation in one language apart from their mother tongue and 44% admit not knowing other language than their own. 28% of the respondents state that they can speak 2 foreign languages well enough to have a conversation (the share increased by 9 points

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)

from 2001). 11% of the EU citizens speak at least 3 languages. Within this context 2/3 of the Europeans believe that language teaching should be a political priority, concluding that "Education is the key."

It may be interesting to see who leads the top and who tails it. The top with those who master at least one foreign language is headed by the Luxembourg citizens 99%, followed by the Slovaks 97% and the Latvians 95%. Two foreign languages are mainly used by the Luxembourg citizens 92%, Netherlands 75%, Slovenia 71% (German and English). Due to the spread of English as a language of wider communication, at the other end of the ranking, Ireland and the United Kingdom are found to have 34% and 38% of citizens respectively knowing a language other than their mother tongue. Within this context of multilinguism the British have to give up their monolinguism as the globalization of their mother tongue would have an adverse effect on their competitiveness and consequently they have to start learning foreign languages from an early stage. Also, fewer Italians (41%), Portuguese (42%) and Hungarians (42%) master languages apart from their native language.

In the case of Romanians, to the question '*What are the main foreign languages that you study in your country?'* the answers qualified English as the first with 29%, then French with 24% and finally German with 26%. As regards the *number of foreign languages spoken*, 47% Romanians speak a language apart from the mother tongue, 27% two, 6% three and 53% none.[4]

According to the 2005 survey, to the questions '*Have you started learning a new language, improved your command of another language in the last 2 years?' and 'Do you intend to learn another language in the future?',* 12% report they have improved and intend to do so and 69% neither improved, nor intend to do so. Therefore only 1 in 5 Europeans can be described as an *active language learner*. Of the Romanian respondents 22% state that they have improved and 23 % intend to do so. I believe the main reason is the accessibility of information by means of technology development, the free movement of persons that the European Union facilitates and consequently the mobility of the world of work. The most active language learners during the last two years are to be found in Sweden (32%), Latvia (28%) and Finland (28%), whereas those with strongest intentions to improve their language skills reside in Latvia (39%), Slovakia (36%) and the Czech Republic (33%). The most active language learners tend to be young, with higher education, students or already possessing language skills in several foreign languages. The reasons invoked for not learning other languages are usually lack of time and motivation and the costs of language lessons. To overcome these obstacles the EC has to continuously prioritize the learning of foreign languages. In 2002, Barcelona European Council laid down the principle of teaching 2 languages in addition to the mother tongue, thus signaling the importance of learning languages for the future Europe.

In 2007, in Brussels, as part of its policy of developing multilinguism, the EC set up the so-called 'Group of Intellectuals'[5] who advanced the concept of the *adoptive personal language,* a kind of second mother tongue, which involves familiarity with the country

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)

where that language is used along with literature, culture, society and history. The reasons presented for adopting another language are: individual and family background; emotional ties, professional interest, cultural preferences, and intellectual curiosity; "a rare language", which would bring about a rare specialization in a leading edge field. The results would be that apart from learning the language of the host country, native speakers of that "rare" language would no longer feel excluded from the society where they immigrated. This could also bring about cultural development by facilitating direct and accurate transfer from one culture into another. Economic benefits can also be considered as the learning of a new language, especially of a rare one opens new business opportunities and may bring about professional satisfaction by facilitating access to niches.

The intent of the EC is to encourage a two-way relationship, a twinning network also on the institutional level. That adoptive language is going to be taught to a large group of people, then placements and jobs are to be offered. This network covering entire Europe is meant to strengthen the sense on community, while leaving each one's sense of identity intact.

This engagement with another language, other people, another country, another culture meets the aim of the EC, namely respect for diversity.

Why is it good to learn more languages? According to the 2005 survey, the vast majority of Europeans (83%) believe that knowing foreign languages is or could be useful for them personally. English is perceived by Europeans to be by far the most useful language to know (68%). French (25%) and German (22%) follow next almost side by side, and Spanish ranks fourth with a 16% share. The importance of learning foreign languages was also underlined by the report entitled *'Languages mean business'* a report submitted in July 2008 by another group called "The Business Forum", made up of entrepreneurs and language experts who stated that "For buyers is enough to speak English, for sellers, however it is better to speak the buyer's language."[6] One example that supports the importance of learning languages is that companies may lose contracts if they don't have sufficient linguistic expertise. One's employability also increases according to the number of languages mastered. Finally, the migration phenomenon, the development of new technologies, the need for accurate translations for different areas, not only business, all these claim the necessity of learning several languages.

The fact that multilinguism has become a problematic reality for Europe is beyond doubt. The EU has 490 million citizens with different language skills and different needs. There are 27 Member States and 23 official languages plus the "imported" languages from other continents (immigrants - e.g. Asian languages). The result of migration is a Europe with 175 nationalities. Against this background the idea of mastering 3 languages (one maternal, one international and one adoptive) is hoped to give cohesion to the EU. According to the 2005 survey, the response of the Europeans to the "mother tongue plus two" policy indicates that 50% of them agree with the view that every EU citizen should be able to speak two foreign languages, while 44% do not share this view.

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)

The reticence in acquiring languages can be overcome by offering more learning opportunities which should meet the expectations of those wishing to start or develop learning foreign languages. To the question 'What do you most like about learning English?' most respondents to the 2005 survey state that they welcome learning in school, in an institutionalized manner. The other means favored include the press, cinema and the internet. One highly debated issue involving the means of learning foreign languages is the use of subtitles in films and TV programs: 37% of Europeans prefer to hear the original language while watching foreign films or programs (the Scandinavian countries top the ranks), but the majority (56%) would like to have their films or TV programs dubbed (Hungarians (84%),citizens of the Czech Republic (78%) and Austrians as well as Germans (76%) are most often against the use of subtitles. Here the attitude of the Romanians with 62% preferring subtitles indicates their awareness regarding the efficiency of having a day-to-day contact with the language they want to learn.

According to the 2005 survey the foreign language is learnt mainly in school (59% of the respondents started learning in secondary school; 24% in primary school). In Romania 34% started learning in primary school and 45% in the secondary school. 57% of the European respondents who have learned languages at school consider that their language lessons have been the most effective way of learning. Practicing language skills in authentic environments, such as during visits (50%) or a language course (44%) in a country where the language is spoken or through "one-to-one" lessons with a native speaker (44%), also receives a notable share of mentions. In general, it can be said that learning with a teacher or in authentic situations with native speakers are assessed to be more effective ways than self-learning or passive learning by listening to the language spoken in films, television or the radio, thus once again the role of education systems, language teaching in particular in promoting multilinguism is evident. The same survey gives some controversial information related to the preferred means of learning languages according to geographical area. Thus, residents of northern and western Europe seem to be more inclined to prefer either studying in a group with a teacher or lessons at school, whereas southern Europeans and citizens of the new Member States are more likely to reject all the ways offered.

The figures showing the most frequent situations of using foreign languages can also generate ideas for developing means of learning. Thus the foreign language is used while traveling abroad(42%), by using the internet (23%, an increase by 7 points compared to 2002), when communicating with friends (25%, an increase by 6), in work related situations such as having a conversation (25%) and writing emails or letters at work (15%), with a 4-point increase for each. As a general rule, men use foreign languages more in work-related situations, whereas women tend to speak foreign languages in informal communication situations. Not surprisingly, young respondents use languages mainly while studying. This is also the case for active language learners who also put their language skills into practice at work.

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)

As a conclusion, the Europeans have reasonably good language skills because 56% of Europeans speak a language other than their mother tongue and 28% of the respondents master two foreign languages. However, 44% of EU citizens admit to not knowing any other languages than their native language. Good language skills are perceived in relatively small Member States with several state languages, lesser used native languages or "language exchange" with neighboring countries. Those who live in southern European countries or countries where one of the major European languages is a state language appear to have moderate language skills. Over half of the respondents consider that the level of their language skills is better than basic. This is the case for 69% speaking English, 59% knowing German, 56% speaking Russian, 54% knowing French and 52% mastering Spanish.

The portrait of the "multilingual" European is: young, well-educated or still studying, born in a country other than the country of residence, one who uses foreign languages for professional reasons and is motivated to learn. Consequently, it seems that a large part of European society is not enjoying the advantages of multilingualism.

Bibliography:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages
http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf
http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference
http://www.timesofmalta.com/business/view/20080821/news/languages-mean-business

Notes:

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages (downloaded on 5th February, 2011). The EC had one separate Department on Multilinguism whose Commissioner was Leonard Orban from January 2007 to October 2009.
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/emu_history/documents/treaties/rometreaty2.pdf (downloaded on 5th February, 2011)
[3] http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf (downloaded on 5th February, 2011)
[4] *Mother tongue*: In Romania 95% speak Romanian as a mother tongue; 6% other languages with EU official status; 0.7% other languages; the % is more than 100 because the respondents mentioned more than one mother tongue languages
[5] http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference (downloaded on 5th February 2011)
[6] http://www.timesofmalta.com/business/view/20080821/news/languages-mean-business (downloaded on 5th February, 2011)

BDD-A2825 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:55:18 UTC)