

Sue Wright

English in the European Parliament: MEPs and their Language Repertoires

1. Introduction

The advance of democracy in the European nation states was one of several factors which contributed to the spread of national languages. Citizens' knowledge of their national language allowed flows of information and political debate. As the European Union has developed from a trading association to assume features of a supranational polity, reproducing the democratic practices established in national arenas has proved problematic at the supranational level. How can political institutions that recognise 23+ official languages ensure free flow of information among voters and elected delegates, the participation of all parties in political debates, and intergroup cooperation? The difficulties of political debate and exchange in a multilingual setting may be one of the reasons for the widespread accusation of democratic deficit levelled at the European Union.

In order to research one aspect of language and the perceived democratic deficit, I had investigated networks among MEPs in the European Parliament in the parliamentary session of 1996. My findings had been that relationships were dictated by language competences, that informal information flows were truncated by language barriers, and that negotiation in unofficial settings was constrained for MEPs with no or little knowledge of English and/or French (Wright 2000). In 2006 I was awarded a British Academy grant to repeat this work and see how the situation had developed.

In the intervening decades since the first project, a set of accessions has changed the linguistic balance. The entry of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia¹ has brought large numbers of MEPs into the parliament who will have learnt Russian, English and German as a foreign language. This is likely to have encouraged the swing to English as the most common lingua franca, a development already discernible at the time of the first research project.²

¹ And, of course, Bulgaria and Romania since the time of the first part of this study.

² The swing is confirmed by quantitative data collected by the Translating and Interpreting services of the institutions. See, for example, the most recent report available at http://www.eca.eu.int/audit_reports/special_reports/docs/2006/rs09_06fr.pdf

2. The Project

The 2006 research project was not complete at the time of publication of this issue of *Sociolinguistica*, so what follows is a report of work in progress. The methodologies used to gather data were interviews, observation and questionnaire. At the time of writing face to face and telephone interviews with MEPs, assistants and interns have been carried out with 141 native speakers³ of 10 of the 20 official languages of the parliament. Respondents had a choice of being interviewed in their first language, in English or in French. Interview questions were open-ended and concentrated on how the individual managed their role in a multilingual democratic environment. Further interviews are planned.⁴ The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity; this trades transparency for openness. In a political environment where informants have to protect relationships and/or abide by state policy, the pledge of confidentiality allowed a more candid discussion. Observation took place during Committee and Group meeting weeks in Brussels and Parliamentary sessions in Strasbourg throughout September and October 2006. A questionnaire to a larger sample asking for their reactions to possible policy initiatives has, at the time of writing, been circulated but not all replies have been returned and there has, as yet, been no analysis.

3. How MEPs and their teams experience multilingual democracy

Both interviews and observation revealed that there are discernible patterns of behaviour and attitude among MEPs and their assistants. I have described behaviour as *widespread* where several informants have reported that they act in this way or that others do. I have portrayed attitudes as *common*, where this is supported by similar personal accounts or by parallel assessments of others. Observation was used to confirm or challenge the data. Patterns of similarities permitted some categorisation and the most apparent division was into linguistic, national and regional groups.

4. Native English speakers

The Irish and UK MEPs split into two clear camps. In one group, some respondents were very aware of the need to respond very carefully and tactfully to the tendency within the Parliament for increased use of English as the language of the political process. They saw

³ For the purposes of this research I have defined native speaker in a very broad way. Here native speaker includes all those who have been educated in the language and who habitually use it in public settings. Thus someone who first spoke Frisian but was educated through Dutch and who represents the Netherlands in the European parliament has been counted as a Dutch speaker. I recognise that this convenient shorthand is framed by the nation state view of congruence of language, territory and person.

⁴ Where there is little or no evidence from a group this is because the interviews have yet to take place.

the existence of a lingua franca to be of benefit to all and to be encouraged. At the same time they realised that this did not exempt them from the need to contribute to mutual comprehension. They felt that their contribution should be to 'confine (themselves) to a standard format in order to be understood', 'to boil down their style', to observe the parliamentary rule of KISS (keep it short and sweet). They saw no place for rhetorical flourishes and extravagant style since this could hamper comprehension in a multilingual setting. In the plenary sessions, parliamentary procedure discourages this practice anyway, as speakers are allocated a precise and short time to make their point and are cut off if they run over their allotted slot. In the preparatory work of the committees and planning meetings of the groups, they felt that where English was used it should be plain and clear. Most respondents in this group actually had some competence in another language and were not confined to using English, although they recognised that they mostly did so, particularly where groups were from a variety of member states. Their linguistic behaviour in the public sessions did tend to confirm that they attempted to articulate carefully and to use a clear, plain style.

Another group of English native speakers was much less linguistically aware. From observation of their performance in the parliament and in other public forums, it was clear that they were not making a conscious effort to meet the linguistic needs of those using English as a second language. Their oral performance suffered from one or more of the following problems: too many metaphors, archaic idiom, colloquialisms, rambling syntactic structures, a failure to articulate clearly and a tendency to speak very fast.⁵ Very telling evidence of how difficult non-native speakers of English find such practice came in a meeting where a German MEP spoke first, using English. His delivery was slow, with heavy emphasis, his sentences were short and mostly SVO and his lexis plain. Only a dozen of the one hundred and twenty or so members of the audience (with a mixture of first languages) put on head phones. An Irish MEP then gave an address, in English. After a few sentences, 55 more people had put on their headphones. In the café during the lunch break I asked members of the audience whether this had occurred because the second intervention had been more interesting, more important than the first. The small group polled said variously that they had had difficulty following the second speaker because of sibilance, accent, muffled delivery, soft tone of voice and lack of clear articulation. In my own evaluation, the speaker certainly seemed to be unaware of the linguistic needs of his audience.

Some members of this group that could be termed less linguistically aware were judged as 'arrogant' by those native English speakers who do take pains to facilitate communication. They reported various anecdotes where the stereotypical Brit abroad shouts louder and louder in English in order to get a point across. I witnessed one such example of this behaviour directed at French-speaking bar staff in the Altiero Spinelli building in Brussels. Both customer and waitress in this very multilingual setting were absolutely determined that they would speak only their own language.

One wonders how the resolutely monolingual English speakers function in the European political process. Another incident that I witnessed showed how little they can

⁵ This is a general problem caused by the short, timed slots for presentations and responses.

contribute to negotiation of meaning. A British MEP was signing in a guest at reception. The guest offered his driving licence instead of passport as proof of identity. The receptionist asked them both 'lieu de naissance?' This was met with incomprehension. She tried 'ville de naissance?' When this was not understood she tried 'birth town' (*see note with phonetics*), still with no success. The exchange was degrading into irritation on both sides. My feeling was that quite apart from the telling lack of knowledge of a simple item of vocabulary, common in international travel, someone who manifested a total lack of ability to hear a word in his own language in another accent or to guess meaning from context was ill equipped to work in cross national teams. A view from a Portuguese respondent was that, in her experience, such monolingual Anglophones were highly likely to misunderstand the English used in the institutions. They had not noticed the connotative development of certain lexis within the parliament and its peculiar usage, and were unlikely to check sense.

Analysed more closely it seems clear that in the parliament not all English mother tongue speakers are at an 'advantage'. Those who rely entirely on English and believe that there is no need for them to make an effort to learn the communication rules of Brussels may well be marginalised and out of the loop of much of the trans-national information flows. This may be compounded by their choice of assistant and intern (see below).

5. Native French speakers

The French native speaker group bore some resemblance to the English native speaker community, in that its members also divide clearly into two sets, one militantly monolingual and the other pragmatic and ready to do what is necessary to further its political projects.

The militant French monolinguals are similar to British monolinguals in their inability to tailor their speech to the needs of a multilingual parliament. One of the key features of a certain kind of monolingual indulgence is the overuse of quotes from French classics. This fails to have the desired effect. The approximations offered by the interpreters for the adjective 'Tartuffesque' in one of the parliamentary sessions in October 2006 showed how, when there is no shared high culture, the force of such expressions is lost (and often misunderstood). A degree of confusion started in the English version and was compounded in the relay system. The highly centralised French education system gives all those who have passed through it a fund of shared quotations and aphorisms but, whereas these messages are an effective shorthand within the French elites, MEPs from other groups report that they can obfuscate and irritate when used outside the group.

The militant wing of the Francophone group is extremely critical of the move to English. In interviews, the indignation of informants was palpable⁶: 'Est-ce normal qu'on nous inflige l'anglais à tout moment?' 'Parler du multilinguisme dans ces conditions-ci, c'est de l'hypocrisie.' 'Il est dangereux d'avoir les documents dans une langue.' Respondents saw widespread use of English as a danger because 'si vous nivelez, vous allez vers

⁶ I interviewed all French speakers in French which I speak well.

une pensée unique', and because 'la langue (international English) est si appauvrie qu'on n'arrive pas à exprimer sa pensée et on perd les nuances.'

They were unanimous that language rights must be respected and stressed that the 'unity in diversity' policy must be maintained in the linguistic domain. 'Ça ne peut pas continuer comme ça!' 'On ne veut pas perdre nos langues.' They regretted that the situation had changed since the 1990s. They claimed that documents used to be available in all the official languages in good time but that now much of the preparatory paper work was only available in English and that drafting and negotiation were increasingly in English. When this was the case, several respondents who do not speak English well reported that they simply did not go to preparatory meetings for their committees: 'Je ne vais pas perdre mon temps!'

The nostalgia of these respondents is perhaps more for the eclipse of French as a privileged language of interaction, rather than for any Golden Age of multilingualism in the second half of the 20th century. There is little convincing evidence that the situation was radically different then. The main distinction was that it was French rather than English that was the dominant language in the institutions in the early decades of the Community. MEPs from other groups were swift to point out that the French did not take steps to prevent their language from ousting others, when it was the default medium for the political process. Nor do they take action now where it continues to dominate. German respondents were particularly acerbic about the French conversion to the defence of multilingualism and point to the current campaign to get French adopted as the legal language of the EU (Druon 2005) as an illustration of the lack of true commitment to multilingualism within official French circles.

In discussions of language management, the concept of *géométrie variable* was frequently mentioned. This appears to mean that not all the official languages should be used all the time. Four or five should be chosen. The contradictions in the adoption of four or five lingua francas need further discussion, and this will take place below. Here it will suffice to note that many dismiss it, believing it is principally a way of cloaking promotion of French. These widely held suspicions are supported by various snippets of evidence from the present project: one French MEP who supported *géométrie variable* enthusiastically in interview was not able to say immediately which languages apart from French she thought should be used more extensively.

Another group of mother tongue French interviewees held quite divergent views. They took the line that 'on est ici pour faire de la politique, pas pour faire des leçons de langue'. They admitted that they did not always abide by the French government *vade mecum* (http://www.rpfrance.eu/article.php3?id_article=493) which requires the French to use French in the European institutions. They preferred to do 'what is necessary to get the job done.'⁷

These respondents believed that they were well served by their translators and interpreters, particularly in contrast to some other language groups; the quality of the interpreting reduced fatigue and the waits for translations were relatively short. There was

⁷ In English in the interview which was mainly in French.

a high level of agreement that in the formal political process the interpreting and translation were working comparatively well for the Francophones.

However, there was also unanimity that politics was not simply the formal process where interpreting and translation are available, but also 'spontanée', 'en dernière minute', 'créatrice' et 'pas planifiée ou planifiable'. All the important consultation, negotiation and dealing that happens 'dans les coulisses, dans les couloirs, dans les bars' take place in the languages that people have in common, and this, it was recognised, is often, although not exclusively, English. Respondents reported that there were those who were excluded from these informal networks by their lack of appropriate linguistic skills. In particular, they cited the isolation of the English monolingual group described above. 'Oui – il y a des gens exclus. Je comprends tout le monde sauf les Anglais.' 'Il y a une baragouine des institutions qui ressemble à l'anglais. Entre gens nuls en langue on se comprend.'

6. MEPs from the new accession countries in central Europe

The language repertoires among this group are very diverse with three main profiles discernible.

One group can be seen to be in the tradition of cosmopolitan Mitteleuropa. A number of Hungarian MEPs, for example, claimed competence in four or five languages and their fluency was certainly indisputable in those foreign languages used in the interviews. The level of English of all these interviewees was almost native speaker standard.⁸ Their repertoire was also likely to include German. However, few spoke French at the level where it could be an effective tool for political work. They exhibited a very positive attitude to language learning and some were actually in the process of acquiring new languages (e.g. Greek and Romanian).

Informants reported that foreign language skills had been a factor in the choice of Hungarian representatives to the parliament. The formal position in the EU is that there should be no such stipulation, since this would prevent some citizens from putting themselves forward for election. Despite this, foreign language competence had been considered in the selection of the 24 Hungarian MEPs. The Hungarian point of view was that without competence in a foreign language, a Hungarian speaker would be ineffectual: 'Once you want to be an MEP you must realise that all the work in committees, all the preparation, none of that is going to be in Hungarian.' 'Probably a minimum of two foreign languages is best to be able to do the work. A meeting might be interpreted into eight languages – and you have got to know one.' 'If you don't have the basic competence you don't socialise and then you don't find things out.'

The Hungarians seem to side with the pragmatists in the EU language debate and appear eminently flexible. One interviewee said 'We take it normal that we make an effort. We always have.' Perhaps because they do make this effort, and with some success, they are critical of any translation or interpretation offered in Hungarian which is not first class. 'Sometimes the translation is quite unspeakable! Were they in a tearing hurry?'

⁸ 12 out of a total group of 24.

Perhaps this combination, a preparedness to use one or more *lingua francas* and a requirement of high levels of literacy in their native language, may provide some reassurance to those who fear that constant use of a *lingua franca* constitutes a threat to a national language. Informants did not see any threat to Hungarian from their multilingualism. They believe that they are most unlikely to shift to English. The language will simply be a tool and part of their language repertoire, playing the role that German and Russian did for their predecessors.

The respondents from the Baltic/Slavic speaking group report two tendencies. A number of MEPs from Central Europe had spent the decades before the end of Communism outside their countries of origin. In the US, the UK, Belgium, France and elsewhere, they had become ambilinguals, equally competent at a high level in both their family language and the language of the public sphere of the country where they had residence. This fluency was very clear not only in my sessions with them, but also in parliamentary sessions and media interviews where this category of MEPs regularly displayed a very sophisticated and faultless command of English. A smaller group had near native proficiency in French. Very often these individuals had been central to the accession negotiations, which had been in English.

In contrast, another sector within the Baltic/Slavic group reports having Russian as a first foreign language, learnt in school in the period when their countries were part of the Communist bloc. These MEPs are now in the process of acquiring English, but in a busy parliamentary schedule find that formal classes are difficult to fit in. They report that for them political life is difficult in a multilingual setting where English and French dominate. Those who are only able to read European documents confidently and comfortably once they have been translated into their national language are often disadvantaged because the translation of essential documents and amendments may take longer to appear in the 'small' languages than in the 'big', and may sometimes arrive too late to be studied properly before the meeting. Those who can read other languages but only draft in their first language are also handicapped and must rely on assistants with linguistic skills. Understandably this group prefers to socialise together, in order to relax. On social occasions they report that a minority will use Russian but that often conversation results from participants' passive comprehension of languages from the same linguistic family group.

Outsiders to this group reported the difficulties in interacting with some of its members. A Hungarian reporting on working with a Lithuanian in committee said 'I go away from all our meetings thinking she hasn't understood.' A Dutch respondent said 'The Poles I work with are on the outside of the group. We often don't know what they want or think.'

7. Mediterranean and southern MEPs

Portuguese is one of the languages that is interpreted into the majority of languages through the relay system, i.e. it is rendered first into English or French and then into Estonian, Czech etc. The Portuguese respondents were extremely critical of the relay system which they felt generated inaccuracies and lost information. Because of this, some

reported that they often give their speeches in English or French, reasoning that at least the message was 'their' message at the point of interpretation into the majority of languages. Those who do not do this, asked colleagues to check the accuracy of the French and English interpretations or gave interpreters summaries of their speech beforehand.

The high number of Brazilian interpreters was an issue for the Portuguese. Respondents stated that they were irritated by interpretation into a language that they saw as allied to their own, but not their own. Parliament's commitment to full translation and interpretation has a symbolic function, underlining the equality of the member states, as well as a communicative function, permitting contact across language boundaries. The symbolic value appears to be devalued here, where the language variety is not exactly that of the state concerned. The irritation felt may be encouraging increased use of English and French among some Portuguese MEPs.

Portuguese and Greek MEPs were vigorous in their rejection of the attempts in some quarters to simplify the language regime to four or five official languages. They hoped that commitment to the full multilingual policy would continue as a means of ensuring cohesion and equality, but if there was to be a *lingua franca* for any purpose, then there should be one single language chosen. It made no sense to them that the parliament should plan for several. This combined both unfairness and inefficiency.

8. MEPs from the Nordic, Dutch and German groups

Respondents from these language groups proved to be among the least interested in my research project. One very frank German interviewee told me that my work was probably counter productive in that it drew attention to a problem which is in the process of resolving itself. According to him, commitment to the use of all the official languages ensures that a *lingua franca* develops. It could not be otherwise in a democratic process where all must be negotiated; no decisions are imposed top down. Negotiation needs a common language; imposition can work through translation. His belief is that the political process within the institutions is increasingly enacted in English, and that it is best to leave this to evolve. Others agree there is a move to English, and do not necessarily see it as a bad thing. They believe, however, that it would be honest to acknowledge this and take the steps necessary to see that no member state group or individual is excluded or disadvantaged by the development. Those who welcomed the move to a single *lingua franca* for the political process stressed that it must be limited to internal process. The political product – the set speeches in the parliament and the published laws – must continue to be in the various official languages of the state in order to ensure that the citizen can access the debates and decisions.

In some interviews with members of this group there was the recognition that the high level of English language proficiency among members of this group had consequences for competence in their native language. At times they could not recall some terms that they habitually use in English. This is, of course, one of the main concerns of sociolinguists working in this area (see Ammon this volume) However, when asked, interviewees played down the problem: 'If we need a word in Dutch, well we will find it.'

Juhani Lönnroth, Director General for Translation at the European Commission, flagged the problem, when he admitted that it became increasingly difficult to find young people who can draft in their native language. This, he saw, as a consequence of the tendency to pursue higher education in English (Lönnroth 2006).

Members of the Nordic, Dutch and German groups agreed in the majority that they were less interested in insisting on the national language as a symbol than in ensuring that their message was being listened to by the greatest number. A number said that they often made presentations in English in order to overcome the reluctance of plenary session attendees to wear their headphones, and to be in control of their text as far as possible. As interpretations will often be from English into other languages in the relay system, speaking in English ensures that a speech or an intervention will only be interpreted once.

9. The assistants⁹

The work of the MEPs is supported by assistants. For the most part members of this group are young(ish), highly educated, multilingual and ambitious. This profile gives them a particularly important place in the communication networks and information flows of the parliament. Firstly and most importantly, the assistant can bridge language divides. Whereas there is no formal requirement for an MEP to be competent in a range of languages, this is a prerequisite for assistants. They are often appointed to provide the language skills that their bosses do not have. As they are young and highly educated, they are mostly competent to a high level in English through their reading within their specialisms, and some may have actually used English as a medium of study at this level. However, as O'Driscoll (2005) has noted, English is not seen as mark of distinction in the colleges which prepare students for roles within the EU institutions (College of Europe etc). It is a necessary but not a sufficient skill. He reports that those with ambition realise that they must acquire more complex linguistic capital. Assistants are commonly multilingual and/or in the process of learning more foreign languages.

Secondly, the assistant can build relationships. Although some may travel with their MEP between Brussels and Strasbourg, and to the constituency, most do not. Thus they are rooted in Brussels or Strasbourg and have the stability to develop networks with their peers. As most of them are young and single and away from home, they tend to socialise with each other in the evenings, which strengthens links. In addition many of them know each other from the institutions where they have studied. They are a much more homogenous group than the members.

Thus the assistants are largely able to communicate among themselves and have the opportunities to do so regularly both inside and outside work. MEPs and assistants agree that assistants play a central role in the circulation of information:

'Les assistants se connaissent et se parlent.'

⁹ What is said here about the assistants applies to a degree to the interns. They are in the parliament for a shorter period of time, and so have less time to form longstanding associations. On the other hand, they tend to be even younger and, as one MEP put it, have 'urgent purposes' that send them out socialising.

'Ils nous amènent des informations; il nous influencent.'

'The assistants all go out with each other and gossip. We keep tabs on a lot of developments that way.'

'I get some interesting information through X. She has her ear to the ground.'

Checking in interviews whether this view was prevalent largely confirmed it to be so. Interestingly, the few dissenting voices came from people who appeared to be quite formal in style and/or had older assistants. They suggested that it was inappropriate for MEPs to encourage gossip outside their offices and that they would be suspicious of an assistant who brought in information because they would imagine that intelligence was being traded.

A number of informants drew attention to some exceptions to the tendency of assistants to mix across national and language boundaries. Some MEPs (both British and non-British) regretted that some of the UK assistants, and particularly UK interns, stuck together. They speculated that this might be because they, unlike the others, were less likely to be multilingual and suggested that the users of English as a second language found them 'hard work'. Other cultural factors might be involved too; non-native speakers of English reported that they appear a particularly hard set to break into. That this group of assistants is out of the information loop is particularly unfortunate, given that there is a chance that their MEPs are isolated too.

10. Opening up the debate

These interim findings indicate that there are issues to be aired and debated in both political and academic circles. A key finding is the confirmation that the official commitment to multilingualism only works for some of the people some of the time. Many informants have been quite clear that, in their opinion, some MEPs are excluded from certain aspects of the process of the parliament and are disadvantaged by present language practices. Some MEPs are marginalised in their committees. Some MEPs are disadvantaged as they wait for documents to be translated into their language. Where they cannot read the early versions in English and French, they have less time to formulate responses. Some MEPs are never contacted informally by those outside their language group because there is no easy way to do this. This prohibits all quiet negotiation and deal making. Bringing people on side is done in public and through interpretation, and committee rapporteurs report that this is difficult and makes compromise less likely.

This situation may have enormous consequences. For example, many informants from a number of different backgrounds mentioned that 'the Italians punch below their weight.' 'The Italians are just not here; many of them just don't come.' 'The Italians are not major players.' There may be a number of factors here including the pressures of domestic politics, but some also believe that a sense of linguistic exclusion may play a part. 'When

we are in committee, X has to have *chuchotage*¹⁰ and he misses lots. He's not looking the right way.'

So how could MEPs be helped to function effectively in a multilingual system? How could participation be made possible for all political actors? A French MEP suggested that, if the parliament were given the financial means, this exclusion could be righted, but I wonder if throwing money at the problem is enough to make it go away. Take just two points in the parliamentary process where we have established that there are problems which are at least partially linguistic: drafting texts and achieving agreement. In the first case, drafting cannot take place in 23 languages.¹¹ Writing is a zero sum game; a text is composed in one language, which is then in a hierarchical relationship with the languages into which it is translated. There will always be a time lag for those who have to wait for a translation to get access to information. No amount of extra funding can change this. In the second case, persuading is often best done discreetly. Achieving a shift in position to get consensus may be more difficult through an interpreter, than where two people in disagreement can have a private discussion. Again extra money does not change this.

A way to move forward might be to recognise that the problem of language in the parliament is actually three different issues: first, the need to safeguard the symbolic equality of member states within the Union; second, the need for members of the parliament to be effective; third, the need for all citizens to be able to understand what is being debated and decided in their name. If we acknowledge that these are different matters and that the commitment to multilingualism does not have to be the same in all, we could make policy to encourage the community of communication that the democratic process appears to require.

If we separated the process of politics (the need to be effective within the institutions) from the product (the speeches in plenary and the laws passed which the citizens need to be able to access), we could maintain the commitment to full multilingualism where it must be guaranteed and abandon where that would be more productive. Thus, on the one hand, the public sessions in Strasbourg and the decisions of the parliament would continue to be translated and interpreted in order to remain transparent to the citizens. Laws applicable in each member state must be translated somewhere and it is probably most efficiently and effectively done at the centre. And on the other hand, we would be able to admit that the work before the public sessions and the decisions is not being carried out in all languages all the time and concede that MEPs who do not have appropriate foreign language competence are disadvantaged.

It would be a major leap from acceptance that foreign language competence is a *de facto* necessity within the parliament to a *de jure* requirement that all MEPs have a foreign language qualification. There is, however, some support for this. One Hungarian MEP pointed out that we already require that MEPs be literate, and it could be argued that knowledge of a foreign language is merely an extension of this. He remarked that anyone exiting from his education system without some foreign language competence would not

¹⁰ Interpreting by an assistant/interpreter who sits beside the politician/official and whispers a summary of proceedings.

¹¹ In January 2007 another three languages (Bulgarian, Irish and Romanian) will be added to the official languages list.

have the education level necessary to be effective as an MEP anyway. In other circles this stance would be discounted. Many believe that there can be no legal restriction on who may stand for parliament.

Moreover, if we accept that foreign language competence is a necessary prerequisite, this brings us to the question whether the language(s) to be learnt should be stipulated. And should it be one lingua franca or several? Both MEPs and academics are agreed that without intervention multilingualism will guarantee the spread of English. De Swaan puts it very clearly: 'the more languages the more English' (De Swaan 2001: 144). One sees this 'law' at work in the cafés, bars and meeting rooms of Brussels and Strasbourg. Where two or three people are in informal conversation, the languages used are various; when three, four and more people are talking the likelihood is overwhelmingly that the language is English.¹² Informants reported that in the political groups and the committees the default language is increasingly English. But would it be politically feasible to recognise this trend overtly? When the German MEP, Michael Gahler, called publicly (September 2006) for recognition that the internal business of the parliament is increasingly in English and that enshrining this as policy would be honest, he provoked a strong reaction.

Opposition was vociferous from the large constituency that suggests that a limited number of 'major' languages be used equally in the political process.¹³ However, this solution maintains many of the problems inherent in the present system and sacrifices the principle of equality without achieving efficiency. The problems would continue because there is no guarantee that those who need to communicate would have a language in common. The wait for translations would be shorter but would still exist and the hierarchical relationship of one text to another would still be an issue. Four or five lingua francas are less efficient than one. At the same time there would be little gained in terms of fairness. Apart from the speakers of the languages chosen, all speakers would be in a worse situation than they are in now. Those who were not native speakers of any of the chosen languages would have to make a greater commitment to foreign language learning, with all the opportunity and real costs that this would incur. Those who would find themselves in this position are adamant in their rejection of the idea. The 'small' language interviewees were clear: 'There should be a continued commitment to multilingualism, but if it goes, we don't want four or five official languages. We would fight this. A lingua franca would have to be English.'

If either the English-only or 4/5 lingua franca solution were to be recognised and enshrined in policy, how could such developments be made fairer for all? Van Parijs (2002) and Pool (1991) have both floated the idea that a common language is a common good and that those who benefit from its existence should pay for it. They argue that those who did not contribute through their effort (i.e. by learning it as a foreign language) should contribute to financial costs (e.g. by funding the learning of the first group). This is, of course, highly idealist, and as Phillipson (1992, 2003) has pointed out unlikely to be accepted as a general principle by states like the UK that make a large profit from foreign language teaching. The European Parliament might, however, be the one place where a

¹² Obviously this remark excludes visiting groups such as national delegations and lobbies.

¹³ For an exposition of the arguments for this position see Ammon (this volume).

simplified version of the idea would be acceptable and workable. MEPs with a number of official languages in their repertoire would find this reflected in their salary. Those who came with no foreign language qualifications could be paid less. The argument would be that this reflects the costs monolinguals cause and rewards the way multilinguals facilitate the European political process. The aim would be to prod *all* towards more complex language repertoires. As we have seen above, monolingual English speakers may be as hampered and hampering as any other monolingual, but not so aware of how they are failing to communicate. They need to improve their communicative competence and repertoires as much as any one. Such prodding might be more acceptable than requiring language competence in any legal form.

Any move away from full multilingualism in the institutions will, of course, immediately find what Coulmas (1991) has termed 'the unhelpful legacy of the nation state era' stacked against it. To put one or more languages above the others counters the concert of nations' philosophy in which the national language plays a symbolic role.¹⁴ The national language represents the essence of each group in traditional ethnic nationalism and the communion of the group in civic nationalism, and carries an intense emotional load in the nation state system. Thus the national language must be used or the status of each member state is under attack and its national pride under siege. It is clear that in diplomacy, where sovereign states come together as rivals to negotiate, there must be full interpretation and translation. But can we still hold to this principle when we are engaged in a post-national project to build a new kind of supranational polity? Here we are not out to win at the expense of the other but to succeed together. This needs cooperative not competitive language behaviour.

Could cooperation be achieved through a paradigmatic shift? What if we change perspective and recognise that national languages with their codified forms and standardised structures were the product of a particular political system? In nationalist ideology there was conflation between using a particular language and belonging to a certain group. Being monolingual in the national language was almost a badge of loyalty. At most, the loyal citizen might add one or more prestige foreign languages as a marker of high culture and as a means of contacting the *outside* world. This is not the situation today. European Union citizens have multiple political allegiances (even if not always recognised) and wider spheres of action (even if not always exploited) and thus need *repertoires* not a single national language. So perhaps we should conceive our problem in terms of speakers, their repertoires and their communication needs and not in terms of language as discrete system?

What if instead of viewing the relationship of language and power in the parliament as one where English dominates and where its spread must be stopped because it represents

¹⁴ The symbolic relationship of nation state-language-power seems at work in the current quarrels over signage outside and inside the European institutions. There was fierce criticism when the name plate of the Council of the Regions was put up in English and it has been replaced by a sign in Dutch and French, the languages of the national space in Belgium. There is a question tabled in the current session of parliament (Louis 2006) querying why the signage in the parliament is increasingly in English. The answer is perhaps that there is not always space for 23 signs. The issue is one of representation rather than communication.

an increase in influence of native speakers of the language, we consider that power in the parliament lies with those whose language repertoires allow them to function efficiently within the system and achieve their political projects? These well equipped individuals are not necessarily native speakers of English, far from it. Those who have the linguistic tools for political effectiveness are often non-native speakers of English, who have English as part of their repertoire. Moreover, the English native speakers to be found in this group are rarely monolinguals.¹⁵

And if we move away from conceiving English as primarily the national language of one of the member states, we can promote the idea that language 'belongs' inevitably to those who use it. A *habitus* in Bourdieu's sense will develop. The English spoken within the European institutions will develop in response to the needs of those who use it in this space, will become a variety which belongs to its constituency and will be the expression of a particular set of cultural practices.¹⁶ The important thing is that it may come to be seen as a language that belongs to those who use it as an additional language as much as to native speakers. A French interviewee dismissed this language which is coming into being as 'patois', but in this lies its advantage. Accessible and simple, the lexis of the variety of English which is developing in the European Union will acquire connotation in use and certain forms of syntax will develop as appropriate for the texts written in it. There will of course be a tension between such appropriation and the desire to retain mutual comprehension with the Englishes of globalisation, and thus it may not develop independently to any degree. However, it is likely to develop enough for users to feel that they are owners.

Van Els (2005) has argued convincingly that multilingualism in the institutions is a costly exercise which is not delivering. The problem is compounded with each enlargement. This research has confirmed that there are indeed problems. The way forward could be to move out from under the shadow of the nation state language system and, resisting the legacy of nationalist ideology, seek to encourage all those who are making personal efforts to ensure communication among Europeans. The commitment to unity in diversity should not be an alibi for old national egotisms or obstructive monolingualism, but a set of policies to encourage attitudes and behaviour that promote interaction while valuing *all* our differences.¹⁷ And the development of policies which will encourage equity and access for all may necessitate radical rethinking of the ideological dimension.

¹⁵ For example, Graham Watson, leader of the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, who is competent in four other languages apart from English.

¹⁶ This is not the place to describe the attributes of this developing language variety in detail here but in brief, it can be categorised as having distinct lexis (*troika, acquis, conditionality*), as being grammatically simple (SVO) and as lacking in metaphor and citation. Jenkins (2006) and Seidlhofer (2006) have been arguing for some time that a distinct European English variety is developing.

¹⁷ And in linguistic terms these differences are of course far more complex than the 23 official languages of the European Union. It is noteworthy that those who represented 'minority language' interests spoke to the Parliament in the debate on culture on Tuesday 24th October in English. They appear the least interested in keeping the language regime as it is.

In all of this English native speakers in both the political and academic spheres are in a particular position and need to consider carefully how they proceed. A laissez-faire approach to intergroup comprehension and communication which seeks to profit from the current linguistic situation without contributing either resources or effort can only do harm.

11. Bibliography

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