



Europe on the move

Speaking for Europe

Languages in the European Union



European Union



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Languages in the European Union

'The ability to communicate in several languages is a great benefit for individuals, organisations and companies alike. It enhances creativity, breaks cultural stereotypes, encourages thinking "outside the box", and can help develop innovative products and services.'

Leonard Orban,
Member of the European Commission



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The importance of language



The language we speak helps define who we are. The many languages spoken by the 500 million citizens of the European Union spread across the continent in a vast mosaic pattern. The EU recognises this right to identity and actively promotes our freedom to speak and write our own language, while it continues to pursue its goal of closer integration among its member countries. These aims are complementary, embodying as they do the EU's motto of 'United in diversity'.

In fact the EU goes further, encouraging its citizens to learn languages. To know another language, or maybe several, makes it possible to move and find a job in another country. This mobility on the labour market helps create new jobs and stimulate growth. Knowing other languages also promotes cross-cultural contacts, mutual

understanding and direct communications between individual citizens in an ever-expanding and more diverse Union.

No discrimination

There are 23 official EU languages. When a new country becomes a member of the EU, the national language of that country normally becomes an official EU language. The decision on this is taken by the EU Council of Ministers. This ensures that individual EU citizens are able to use the same language in any contacts with the EU and its institutions as they do when dealing with their national authorities at home.

By the same token, all new legislation adopted by the EU is translated into all official languages so that any interested citizens across the Union know immediately what the

new law is about and how it affects them. All language versions of an EU law have the same legal value.

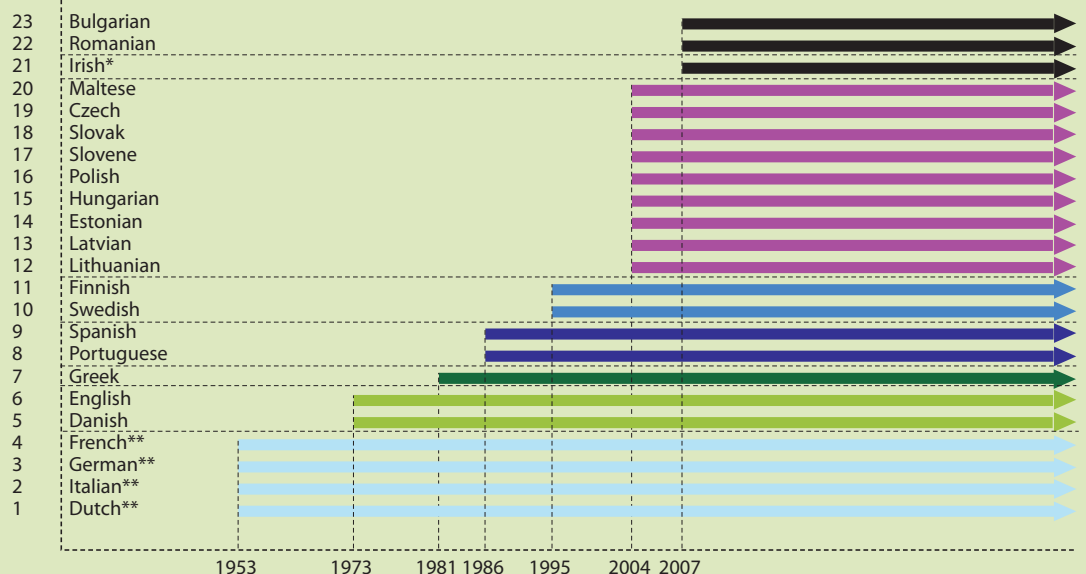
In this way, the EU ensures that there is no discrimination between citizens whose languages are spoken by a large number of people and others using less widely spoken ones. In the European Parliament, for example, members are free to address the assembly in the language of the people they represent. Slovenian members are just as entitled as German ones to speak the language of those who voted for them.

Major responsibilities

Translation and interpretation are therefore major EU responsibilities. The entry of 12 new members between 2004 and 2007 more than doubled the number of official



EU official languages



*Irish: Treaty language since 1973. Catalan, Basque, Galician: Special status since 2006.

** These four languages were used by the European Coal and Steel Community, which was founded in 1950 and was the first step in the formation of what is now the EU. In 1958 the official languages were decided in Council Regulation No 1, which has been amended each time new countries joined the EU.

The current EU languages became 'official languages' of the EU in these years



languages from 11 to 23, focusing attention on the role of languages in the EU as never before. This prompted the EU to create multilingualism as a new policy area in 2007. The aims here are to promote language learning in the EU, to ensure citizens have access to the EU in their own language, and to exploit fully the contribution of multilingualism to the economic, social, cultural and political development of the European Union.

The EU's commitment to safeguard linguistic diversity shows that it is not seeking to erase national or regional characteristics and replace them with a 'European' uniformity, as some critics claim.

Thanks to interpretation, Members of the European Parliament can debate issues in their mother tongue



Know your linguistic roots

The languages of the EU come from a variety of roots. Most belong to the vast Indo-European group whose main branches are Germanic, Romance, Slav and Celtic. Greek and the Baltic languages, Lithuanian and Latvian, are also Indo-European although not part of the principal branches. Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian come from the Finno-Ugrian group of languages. Maltese is close to Arabic, with Italian elements.

Most of the EU's 'regional' and 'minority' languages also belong to one or other of the above groups. The main exception is Basque, spoken on both sides of the Franco-Spanish border, whose roots are still being researched.

The notion of minority language covers not only lesser-used languages like Sami in Lapland or Breton in western France, but also the use of official EU languages when spoken by a minority in another member country (such as German in northern Italy or Hungarian in Romania and Slovakia). The entry of the Baltic countries with Russian-speaking minorities has added a new category of 'minority' language — one which is the national language of a non-EU country.

The 23 official languages of the European Union are Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. Catalan, Basque and Galician have official language status within Spain which means that certain EU texts are translated from and into these languages at the cost of the Spanish government.

The EU has fewer official languages than member countries. This is because Germany and Austria use the same language, Greece and Cyprus share Greek, and Belgium and Luxembourg have common languages with their French, German and Dutch neighbours. The result is 23 languages for 27 countries.





The tongues of Europe

German is the most widely spoken mother tongue in the European Union with about 90 million native speakers, or 18% of the EU population. English, Italian and French are each the mother tongue of between 60 and 65 million EU citizens (12–13% of the total).

However, English is spoken by an estimated 38% of EU citizens as their first foreign language, putting it well ahead of German and the others as the most widely used language of the European Union. About 14% of EU citizens have either French or German as their first foreign language.

The arrival of 12 new member states since 2004 has confirmed the pre-eminence of English as the emerging lingua franca of the European

Union. But it has also strengthened the position of German, which is now on a par with French. This is because German is more widely spoken as a foreign language than French in the countries of central and eastern Europe. As a result of historic and geopolitical factors, Russian is the first or second foreign language spoken in most of these countries. In fact, the most recent survey by the European Commission, published in 2006, shows that five languages dominate as the foreign languages most widely spoken by EU citizens (see box).

Not surprisingly, the best language skills are found in countries that are relatively small or whose language is not well known elsewhere. More than 90% of people in eight EU countries — Latvia,

Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden — claim to speak a second language in addition to their mother tongue. At the other end of the range, only 34% of Irish people and 38% of Britons claim to know a second language well enough to hold a conversation.

'Mother-tongue-plus-two'

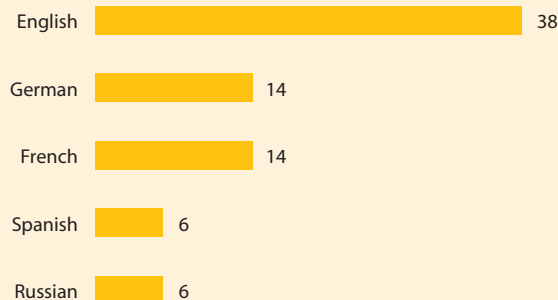
Although most Europeans who learn a second language pick English, followed by German and French, other language options may be more appropriate in certain circumstances. This is particularly the case where EU citizens want to move from one country to another to seek out better job opportunities. In such instances, learning the



Most common foreign languages in the EU

Question: 'Which languages, other than your mother tongue, do you know well enough to hold a conversation?'

Answers (in %):



Source: European Commission, Special Eurobarometer survey 243, 2006.





language of a neighbouring country could be more directly useful. Partly for this reason, the European Union encourages people to learn two foreign languages if possible.

According to the 2006 Eurobarometer survey, 28% of those polled said they knew two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. However, the survey also shows that in seven EU countries (Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom) between one half and two thirds of the population do not know any foreign languages.

Other findings of the survey include the following.

- A total of 84% of those polled think that everyone in the EU

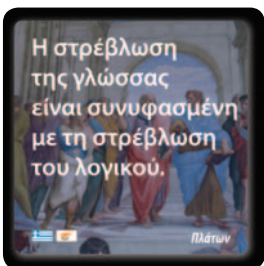
should speak one language in addition to their mother tongue. About half support the idea of mother-tongue-plus-two languages.

- English is seen as the most important foreign language to learn by 68% of those surveyed, followed by French (25%) and German (22%).

- The majority of Europeans believe that children should start learning foreign languages at primary school between the ages of 6 and 12.

- The main reasons for learning a foreign language are for going on holiday or are work-related. Of those polled, 35% want to use their language skills on holiday abroad. A total of 32% learn languages in order to use them at work, while 27% do so to be able to work in another country.

- About 63% of Europeans believe regional and minority languages should receive greater support.



© Helen King/Van Parrys Media

Many people practise their language skills while on holiday



Regional and minority languages



Respect for linguistic and cultural diversity is a hallmark of the European Union. It is enshrined in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights adopted by EU leaders in 2000. Regional and minority languages are more specifically protected by a charter agreed within the framework of the Council of Europe.

Linguistic diversity covers not only the 23 official languages of the EU but its regional and minority languages as well. There are more than 60 of these, although the actual number depends on how you define

This Sami woman in Lapland speaks a minority language

a language (as opposed to a dialect, for example). These languages are spoken by up to 50 million people across the European Union.

Three definitions

There are three generally accepted categories of regional or minority languages:

- languages that are specific to a region which may be within a member state or a cross-border region and which are not a dominant language in any EU country. This includes languages such as Basque, Breton, Catalan, Frisian, Sardinian and Welsh;
- languages spoken by a minority of the population in one EU country but which are official languages in another: for example, German in southern Denmark, French in the Vallée d'Aoste in northern Italy, and Hungarian in Slovakia;
- non-territorial languages such as those of the Roma or Jewish communities in the EU (Romani and Yiddish).

The notion of regional and minority languages does not include dialects of any of the official languages or any of the languages spoken by immigrant communities in the European Union.

Non-indigenous languages

A wide range of languages from other parts of the world are spoken by immigrant communities in EU countries. Prominent among these is Turkish with sizeable immigrant

communities in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Others include Maghreb Arabic (mainly in France, Spain and Belgium), as well as Urdu, Bengali and Hindi spoken by immigrants from the Indian sub-continent in the United Kingdom.

In general, these non-indigenous languages are not given formal status or recognition in EU countries. But immigrant communities receive EU funding to help them integrate into their new countries of residence through its social and regional development programmes. In some countries, they are also given support for developing skills in the languages of their countries of origin and their children are taught these languages at school. This is a way for the people concerned to keep in touch with their cultural roots while assimilating the language and culture of their new host country. Such bilingual skills can also be a personal asset and open up career possibilities in several fields.



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The languages of integration

Many local authorities and national governments provide immigrants with language training, familiarisation courses on local society and culture, and help in finding jobs. The latter elements are often provided in the immigrants' own language.

One example is from the Flemish city of Ghent in Belgium, where immigrants and recognised refugees are offered an introductory programme including 1 200 hours of lessons in Dutch (the language of the Flemish region), plus 75 hours of civic orientation courses. The latter are provided in Albanian, Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Somali and Turkish.

In the German city of Frankfurt-am-Main, a 600-hour language course is preceded by familiarisation with the city and an introduction to German institutions and the national legal system. The course is offered in eight languages and taught by local settled migrants.

The Finnish education system supports the maintenance and development of the mother tongues of immigrants to ensure what it calls functional bilingualism. Instruction has been offered in 52 languages. Russian, Somali and Albanian have been the most widely taught languages as immigrant mother tongues.

Hungary developed its national integration policy on the basis of a six-month pilot project called Matra which included 1 200 hours of language teaching for immigrants, 700 hours of cultural and legal orientation, and financial assistance with living expenses.



A language class for immigrants in Vienna

Language and mobility



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It makes sense to employ native speakers to work in export markets

EU citizens have the right to live and work in other member states besides their home country. The EU makes it possible for people to go where the jobs are. Knowing other languages is the key to real mobility in the EU, enabling you to take maximum advantage of job, study and travel opportunities across the continent.

Learning the local language is not only the key to getting a job in another country, it also puts you in touch with local people. This often

gives a whole new perspective on what it is to be European and on what we are creating together. Our national histories and cultural heritage may differ, but our aspirations and hopes for the future are closely in tune. Being able to speak to one another raises our awareness of what we have in common and at the same time increases mutual respect for cultural differences.

Languages mean business

A study undertaken for the European Commission shows that EU firms can lose business opportunities through a lack of language skills. This is particularly the case for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are failing to fully exploit export opportunities in other EU countries. According to the study, up to 11% of SMEs — nearly 1 million firms — have lost contracts with potential clients in other EU countries because of language barriers. The study also stresses the growing importance of multilingualism

for winning business in world markets. In this context, English is the key language, but the study stresses the growing importance of Chinese, Arabic and Russian.

To improve export performance, the study recommends that firms:

- take a strategic approach to multilingual communication;
- appoint native speakers to work in export markets;
- recruit staff with language skills, and develop these skills further;
- hire translators and interpreters.

Multilingualism itself is an economic growth sector, creating jobs for language teachers, translators and interpreters plus their support staff, as well as for those who design and produce electronic and IT support platforms and the programmers and specialists developing computer-assisted or automatic translation systems.

Kun kieli kuulee,
kieli säreineen,
kieli viivähdäksineen,
kuulee kansa.

Malin Talvio

Mind your language

Every year the European Day of Languages is marked on 26 September.

The idea behind the event is to raise public awareness of all the languages spoken in Europe and the importance of language learning in spreading tolerance and mutual understanding. The European Day of Languages celebrates linguistic diversity as one of Europe's strengths, and encourages lifelong language learning in and out of school. One of the posters used for this event shows the usual form of greeting in 37 languages.





Promoting language learning

The EU is committed to supporting the rights of its citizens to personal and professional mobility, and their ability to communicate with each other. It does so by funding a number of programmes to promote the teaching and learning of European languages. These programmes have at least one thing in common: they cover cross-border projects involving partners from at least two, and often three or more, EU countries.

The EU programmes are designed to complement the national education policies of member countries. Each government is responsible for its own national education policy, including language teaching. What the EU programmes do is to create links between countries and regions via joint projects which enhance the impact of language teaching and learning.

EU funds for learning

Since 2007 the main programmes have been put under the overall umbrella of the EU's lifelong learning programme. Promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity is therefore one of the objectives of the programme, and of its four specific subprogrammes. Each of these is named after a well-known European educator and each is responsible for one area of learning and teaching.

The first, Comenius (named after Jan Amos Comenius or Komensky, a 17th century educationalist from what is now the Czech Republic), covers primary and secondary schooling. Erasmus (named after the 16th century humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam), is a special programme designed to enable university-level students and

teachers to spend time at a university in another EU country. Erasmus provides intensive language courses for participants in advance of their stay abroad. The Leonardo da Vinci programme (named after the great figure of the Italian Renaissance) focuses on vocational education and training. The fourth programme is Grundtvig, named after N. F. S. Grundtvig, a 19th century Danish pioneer of adult education. This programme specialises in teaching adults.

Within their areas of responsibility, each specific programme aims to:

- encourage people to learn languages at all educational levels and at all ages during their working life;
- improve access to language learning resources throughout Europe;
- develop and disseminate innovative teaching techniques and good practice;
- ensure that a sufficiently wide range of learning tools are available to language learners;
- raise awareness of the importance of multilingualism as a key economic and social asset of the EU.

All languages are eligible for support under these specific programmes: official languages, regional, minority and migrant languages, and the languages of the EU's major trading partners.



It is never too soon to start learning another language

There are national information centres in each country, which give details about how to apply to participate in these programmes (see ec.europa.eu/ploteus).

Cross-cultural bridges

The cultural programmes of the European Union also promote linguistic and cultural diversity in a number of ways. The MEDIA programme funds the dubbing and

subtitling of European films for showing in cinemas and on television in other EU countries. The 'Culture' programme builds cross-cultural bridges by supporting the translation of modern authors into other EU languages.



© Council of the European Union

EU peacekeepers in Africa need a common language to sort out operational problems

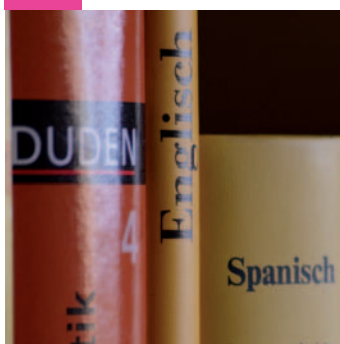
Leonardo helps keep the peace

The Leonardo da Vinci vocational training programme became involved in an unexpected area of activity when it funded a transnational training programme to improve the language skills of EU peacekeepers sent on military, police or humanitarian missions to hot spots around the world. The programme, called Linguapeace Europe, involved

partners from 11 countries of the European Union. They included Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom.

For multinational EU missions to be effective, participants need to be able to talk to each other, very often with a high degree of fluency and accuracy. Linguapeace Europe developed, tested and disseminated language training and reference materials at intermediate and advanced levels, reaching a standard of linguistic competence recognised by international and national qualification bodies.





The tools of multilingualism

Linguistic diversity is a part of everyday life in today's European Union. With 500 million citizens from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is more important than ever to provide them with the skills to understand and communicate with each other. At the same time, more can be done to develop multilingualism as a tool to help EU firms become more competitive and to secure new export markets in Europe and beyond.

Initiatives like the EU's lifelong learning programme are therefore important complements to what the governments of each country can offer to their citizens and firms. EU support for multilingualism has been strengthened in the current programme period of 2007–13. It identifies language learning and linguistic diversity as general goals and the budget for linguistic projects has been increased.

A second one is better

The EU's concept of multilingualism for individual citizens is very ambitious. While learning one foreign language in addition to your mother tongue is good, learning a second additional language is even better. Between the most recent Eurobarometer survey by the Commission in 2006 and the previous one five years earlier, the number of those interviewed claiming to know two languages in addition to their mother tongue had risen from 26 to 28%.

The EU is aware that language skills are unevenly spread across countries and social groups. The range of foreign languages spoken by EU citizens is narrow; relying on one lingua franca in the form of English, however important, is not enough. The EU believes that the goal of 'mother-tongue-plus-two' is ambitious, but not beyond reach. Language learning is a lifelong activity, starting at school (or even pre-school) and continuing through all levels of education and all life stages.

Learning for life in and out of school

While teaching should begin early, it only makes sense if teachers are specially trained to teach languages to young children. Moreover, class sizes should be relatively small, and enough time needs to be set aside in the school curriculum for language teaching.

Schools need to respond to the challenge by offering as wide a range of languages as possible.

They should also recruit and train more teachers — and here border regions can usefully cooperate with each other.

Adults too should have more opportunities for acquiring and using their language skills. Care should be taken to promote all languages, including regional and minority ones, to provide more venues for language teaching, to make more use of the internet for learning languages, and to provide more subtitling on television and in the cinema.

The EU is convinced that the cost of promoting the use of a second and third language by EU citizens is modest compared with the professional and personal opportunities lost — and the negative effects on the EU economy of lost business — due to inadequate language skills.

Clear information on how good you are

Two important practical contributions to the promotion of language skills are the Europass Language Passport and the Europass CV. Both tools are meant to assist the user in presenting his or her qualifications, formal or informal, in a standardised way — by language only, or by a complete CV. They can either be filled in online or downloaded and completed on paper (europass.cedefop.europa.eu).

This common way of describing your knowledge of a language has reduced the confusion caused by the numerous levels of competence and different expressions used previously.

Kur auša
runā, tur
gudrais cieš
klusu.

Latvian proverb

Dictionaries and grammar rules: our basic tools for learning languages



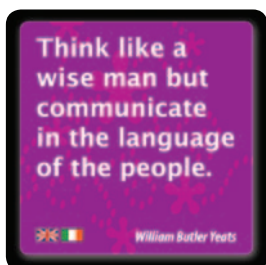


Running a multilingual European Union



The reasons why the European Union uses 23 official languages are not hard to find: they are democracy, transparency and the right to know.

EU legislation applies directly throughout the Union and therefore to all its citizens and businesses. New legislation must be published and made available to them in a language they can understand. As in any democracy, each citizen has a fundamental right to know why a particular item of legislation is being adopted and whether and how it impacts on his or her daily life. The use of all official languages also makes it easier for people to participate in public debates and consultations that the EU launches, often online.



The basic principle is that all citizens and their elected representatives have the same right of access to the EU and are able to communicate with its institutions and authorities in their language.

Elected representatives in the European Parliament have equal rights to speak on behalf of their voters in their own language. The same

holds good for government ministers at official EU meetings or citizens submitting complaints to the European Ombudsman.

Citizens are involved

Its law-making function and the direct involvement of its citizens explain why the EU uses more languages than multinational bodies like the United Nations or NATO, which operate only at the intergovernmental level with no legislative function. The United Nations, with more than 190 members, uses only six languages. The Council of Europe, with more members than the EU, publishes official documents only in English and French, as does NATO.

The EU institutions have fine-tuned their procedures over the years to handle the rising number of official languages. They have also striven to give citizens and governments quality translation and interpretation, efficiently and economically. The skills and competence of these services are upheld as examples worldwide.

word. But both must be able to work into their main language (usually their mother tongue) from at least two other EU languages.

The use of 23 official languages is the public face of the European Union. Internally, the institutions operate with slimmed-down procedures in the name of efficiency, speed and cost. The European Commission, for instance, works in three main languages, English, French and German. Most documents are drafted in one of these languages and circulate internally between the departments and services concerned until the final draft is ready for publication or for transmission to another institution such as the European Parliament or the Council of Ministers. At this point it is translated into the other 22 languages.

The European Parliament, which often needs to produce documents rapidly in all official languages, has developed a system centred on three 'pivotal' languages: English, French and German. A document presented, say, in Slovak or Swedish will not be translated directly into all 22 other languages. Instead it will first be translated into the three pivotal languages, leaving translators free to use one of these to retranslate the text into their main language.

This limits the need for translators who can work directly from, for example, Maltese to Danish or from Estonian to Portuguese.

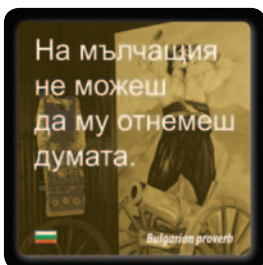
Mobilising resources

Running a multilingual EU comes at a price. But it is a modest price when set against the results. The annual cost of translation and interpretation is about 1% of the EU budget, or a little over € 2 for every citizen. The total cost has risen by a relatively small margin despite the arrival of 12 new countries since 2004.

Translators work with written texts, and interpreters with the spoken

Busy in the background: interpreters at a formal EU meeting





By word of mouth

EU interpreters use a similar system when providing interpretation to and from all 23 official languages. For instance, a Finnish speaker's words will be interpreted into a limited number of 'relay' languages. A Slovak interpreter will plug into one of these as the source language, removing the need for people who can interpret straight out of Finnish into Slovak.

Using linguistic shortcuts of this kind makes practical and economic sense — provided standards are maintained. Quality control of both interpretation and written translation is therefore a major challenge.

Interpreters also provide slimmed-down services for informal and working meetings. In some cases, only the most widely known EU languages are used. In others, participants may be able to speak a large number of languages but these are only interpreted into two or three of the widely used ones. The idea here is that speakers are free

to express themselves in their own language, or one they feel comfortable in, while it is assumed they have enough passive knowledge of a major EU language to follow the proceedings in that language.

On any one day, the interpretation service of the European Commission and the Council of Ministers has to cover about 60 separate meetings in Brussels or at other EU locations. These include formal meetings with full interpretation into and out of the EU's 23 official languages. Any such meeting requires a team of 69 interpreters.

New technologies

Given the unique size and nature of their linguistic services, the EU institutions rely heavily on the help offered by new technologies. Remote interpreting, management of multilingual websites and computer-assisted translation are the most obvious examples.

Exploiting the applications available on the market and developing their own solutions, the European linguistic services have become an ideal laboratory and a worldwide reference tool. The results of their efforts are offered to the public and often used by researchers and private companies.



Nothing is lost in translation:
read about Europe in your
own language





Future challenges

The EU has a formal responsibility to respect the linguistic and cultural diversity of its citizens. It does this in several ways:

- it respects our right to speak and write our own language and extends this right to our dealings with the EU institutions;
- it supports the use of regional and minority languages, irrespective of whether these languages are official EU languages or not;
- it actively promotes language learning and multilingualism as a means to individual self-improvement for EU citizens and as a vehicle



for creating jobs and growth across the EU economy.

The EU has stepped up these activities as EU membership has increased and as the number of official languages has doubled since 2004. It will continue to do so as the EU prepares to expand further.

While recognising the emergence of English as the most widely spoken language in Europe, the Union also wants to make sure this does not become, over time, a factor limiting linguistic diversity within its frontiers. This is why it stresses the

personal, social and economic benefits of multilingualism and why it has set the ambitious target of getting as many EU citizens as possible to learn two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

The challenge for the EU is to make best use of the available resources and to create the supporting policies and programmes needed, in order to achieve the kind of multilingualism it seeks in the shortest time possible.



Choose your language: the portal to the EU's website

i

FURTHER READING

Information about the use of languages in the European Union can be found at the EU's language portal:

europa.eu/languages/en/home

The Directorate-General for Translation at the European Commission has produced its own information booklets available at:

ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/index_en.htm

Information about interpretation and interpreters in the EU can be found at:

ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/index.htm

Information about the EU's lifelong learning programme and its subprogrammes is available at:

ec.europa.eu/ploteus

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There are European Commission and Parliament representations and offices in all the countries of the European Union. The European Commission also has delegations in other parts of the world.

The European Union





Europe on the move

Speaking for Europe

Languages in the European Union

The EU promotes the linguistic and cultural diversity of its peoples. It does so by supporting the teaching and learning of their languages. The EU's ambitious goal is to enable citizens to be fluent in two languages in addition to their mother tongue.

The EU institutions work with 23 official languages. This is to ensure that all EU citizens, whether they speak a major European language or a lesser-known one, have equal access to the policies and legislation of the European Union. This booklet looks in turn at the wide array of languages spoken in the EU, the many ways in which Europeans can benefit from learning languages and the EU's support programmes. Finally it examines what it takes to run a multilingual Union.

