

The languages of politics: How multilingualism affects policymaking in the European Union

Multilingualism is an inherent part of the European integration process, with the EU currently recognising 24 official languages. But how does the use of multiple languages affect policymaking? Drawing on a new study, [Nils Ringe](#) shows that multilingualism has an important depoliticising effect on the EU policy process that reduces the potential for conflict between actors.

Multilingualism is an ever-present feature in numerous political contexts around the world, including both multilingual states like India, Canada, and Belgium and international organisations like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the African Union.

It is also an increasingly important reality in a globalised world that consequential political decisions are negotiated between politicians who do not share a common native language. But political scientists know surprisingly little about how multilingualism affects politics and policymaking, even though language provides the basis for all interaction, collaboration, contestation, deliberation, persuasion, negotiation, and transaction between political actors.

In a [new book](#), I use the case of the European Union to investigate how politicians' use of shared foreign languages and their reliance on the simultaneous interpretation of oral proceedings and the translation of written texts affects political dynamics and decision-making processes. In-depth interviews with almost 100 policymakers and language service providers in the EU's main institutions, paired with quantitative and linguistic data, show multilingualism to be an inherent and ubiquitous feature of EU politics that influences political interactions, deliberations, and negotiations. It shapes the very nature and flavour of EU politics and policymaking in ways both subtle and profound.

Most importantly, I find that multilingualism *depoliticises* policymaking, meaning that it reduces its political nature and potential for conflict. This is notable, in part, because one might expect multilingualism to make EU politics more conflictual. After all, language is deeply emotive and linguistic heterogeneity is generally seen as a contributor to political division and social strife. Moreover, language barriers may lead to misunderstandings, confusion, and tension between political actors. Yet, both foreign language use and reliance on translation tend to simplify, standardise, and neutralise – and thus to depoliticise – the EU's "language(s) of politics."

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Communication in foreign languages tends to be simple, utilitarian, and standardised, for three reasons. First, EU actors are unable to express themselves with the same ease and proficiency as in their mother tongues. Their vocabulary, grammar, and syntax are simpler; their ability to use idiomatic, rhetorically rich language is circumscribed; and they rely on commonly used words, phrases, and other linguistic constructs.

Second, EU actors know that they have to make themselves understood by those with lower language proficiency; language is, therefore, kept comparatively straightforward even by linguistically gifted EU actors. Third, EU actors anticipate the need for translation into other languages, which they facilitate by falling back on simple language and commonly accepted phrases. They "speak for interpretation" and "write for translation."

Overall, the need for effective communication between non-native speakers becomes pivotal and elevates the practical, communicative aspect of language over the political or ideological. As a result, language is not wielded as a tool to advance political goals in the same way as would be the case in monolingual contexts.

These effects are heightened by the prevalence of "EU English" as the main shared language, which is more neutral, utilitarian, standardised, "decultured," and de-ideologised than 'standard' English. Hence, what EU actors say or write becomes less indicative of their national and political backgrounds, preferences, and priorities. They also tend to discount ideologically charged language – terms like "austerity" or "illegal immigrant" – because it may not be used with purpose by non-native speakers. Politicised, ideological, or partisan language thus becomes neutralised.

The EU's language services also simplify, standardise, and neutralise language. Translators of written texts rely extensively on existing documents, shared terminology databases, and commonly accepted and widely used phrases, rather than being "creative" in their translations. This is for good reason: all language versions of EU law are equally authentic, or equally "legally valid," which requires that EU legislation is drafted and translated so that it is interpreted and applied consistently across the member states.

The safest way to ensure this equivalence is for translators to rely on terminology, phrases, and formulations that are anchored in existing documents, all of which results in a standardisation of the target language in the translation process. Another depoliticising effect of the equal authenticity principle is that it allows little room for ambiguity in the source text, which constrains the ability of political actors to use purposely vague language when negotiating and drafting legislation, thus blunting a popular tool for forging political agreement.

Simultaneous interpreters of spoken language also face terminological challenges, but the main difficulty they face is having to convey – accurately and on the spot – not only the substance of what is said, but also the speaker's intention, meaning, culture, and personality. This already exceedingly difficult task is further complicated by often rapid speech and the wide range of highly technical issues covered. As a result, the output of simultaneous interpretation inevitably tends to be more functional, simple, and standardised than the input language.

While a more deliberate and rationalised policymaking process may be a beneficial outcome of EU multilingualism, other consequences are less benign.

In sum, multilingualism entails that the language(s) of EU politics tend to be utilitarian, simple, standardised, neutral, decultured, and de-ideologised. This affects social and political hierarchies inside the EU institutions as well as the EU's political culture, by shaping issue salience, perceptions of political differences, polarisation of opinion, intensity of debate, and the resonance of arguments.

Overall, it makes the process and quality of policymaking more deliberate and rationalised – which does not, however, mean that all political differences and contestation are muted or moot. EU actors have diverging ideological, partisan, and national preferences, and those differences do not disappear in a multilingual environment. Political dynamics are different, however, when language serves primarily as a means of communication instead of a political tool; when decision makers are less distinguishable based on what they say or write; and when their language is not as indicative of particular national and political backgrounds, preferences, and priorities.

While a more deliberate and rationalised policymaking process may be a beneficial outcome of EU multilingualism, other consequences are less benign. To start, genuinely divisive political problems may become unduly depoliticised, which is undesirable from a representational perspective. Moreover, a depoliticised language of politics is problematic for the EU as a polity and as a political project. Its functional and overly rationalised nature will likely be perceived by the general public as bland, abstract, and distant, which undermines the quality of representation and weakens the link between the EU and its citizens.

For more information, see the author's new book, [The Language\(s\) of Politics: Multilingual Policy-Making in the European Union](#) (University of Michigan Press, 2022). The eBook version is available for free on the [publisher's website](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
