



Worlds of English

English in the European Union

VARIETY OF SPEAKERS

[Ambient dialogue]

NARRATOR

At the European parliament in Brussels there are twenty three official languages.

AMBASSADOR

[Ambient dialogue]

NARRATOR

When the European Union was first established the dominant languages were French and German but that has now changed.

ALISON

All languages are equal but to coin a phrase some are probably more equal than others. Our official line is very definitely that all languages are equal but there's no point denying the fact that English is becoming more used and therefore more valued. I would, I would say. But officially not at all.

AMBASSADOR

I would like to reiterate in this regard that the European Parliament supports...

GYÖRGY

English has become dominant. Pretty much everybody who wants to have some kind of a role and function and above all influence will know English.

NARRATOR

The demise of French is particularly marked. It used to be the language of all documents presented to the parliament.

GYÖRGY

The amount of material originating in French has really dropped to below ten per cent, it's now very low. Really the reality is that you can't live without English, you can now live without French.

JEAN

La question fondamentale c'est.. est-ce qu'on peut gouverner cinq cents millions de personnes qui parlent vingt-deux langues avec une seule langue? Ma réponse est définitivement 'non'. C'est impossible

NARRATOR

A key catalyst for the rise of English as a lingua franca in the European Union has been the accession of new states from northern and eastern Europe.

GYÖRGY

My own experience, I remember going to Prague in '90 – '91 and saying to waiters is it to be German, is it to be English and they'd all say German. By '96 – '96 it was English so somewhere or other a switch occurred. Obviously there are some few exceptions and I don't really know exactly how but English won out. Clearly again the prestige of the United States is an enormous significance here and in a sense this is the sort of normality, well you know if you're normal you speak English.

ALISON

In practice there certainly has been a very big change. It began I think in 1995 when Sweden and Finland joined the European Union because they really brought with them a tradition of learning English and speaking English and that was something which was confirmed then in 2004 with a very big enlargement to Eastern Europe.

ALISON

The staff that came with those countries tended to be English speaking as a second language rather than French speaking and that really just tipped the balance.

FOREIGN CONVERSERS

[Ambient dialogue]

BARBARA

The role of English is mainly that of a lingua franca which means that it is a means of communication for people who for whom this is the best language of communication, it doesn't mean that everybody is at the same level of English, it doesn't even mean that everybody's happy to choose English but if it is the only means of communication that everybody shares then that is what you call English as a lingua franca.

NARRATOR

Whilst many have accepted the growing use of English on pragmatic grounds as a tool for communication, others do not see this as politically neutral.

JEAN

Je ne vois pas comment on pourra arrêter à court terme cette domination, cette hégémonie de la langue anglaise. A vingt- sept pays il faut une lingua franca, cette lingua franca pour l'instant est l'anglais, qu'on se réjouisse, ou qu'on le regrette.

C'est que l'union européenne c'est une fédération sur la langue de domaine. Or on ne peut pas diriger cette fédération dans une autre langue que les différentes langues parlées par les citoyens. Sinon ça porte un nom, c'est du colonialisme, c'est un empire. Et l'union européenne ne peut pas fonctionner de cette façon- la.

Donc, je considère que l'anglais n'est pas une menace pour le français mais c'est une menace pour la légitimité de l'union européenne.

MIGUEL

The question is that we do not want to have one language which will somehow dominate and will become the only language because that would be against all principles and politics, you have to realise that the parliament is a place where citizens elect their representatives and therefore we endeavour here to make it absolutely compulsory that everyone of the languages has the same respect and dignity.

TRANSLATORS

[Ambient dialogue]

NARRATOR

The European Union spends large sums of money on ensuring that interpreters are always available for all twenty three official languages and suggestions that work takes place in the three dominant languages of French, German and English have been resisted.

MIGUEL

Very few people speak any foreign language as precisely as they speak their mother tongue and so that's why when people say well we could develop here, we could work only in two or three languages that would be cheaper indeed because we spend quite some money in interpretation and translation. My idea is always I would say well I would agree that we work only in three languages provided that nobody can speak his own language. And then my British colleagues say no no no no let us keep on to the twenty three.

GYÖRGY

There's no question if one is speaking one's mother tongue one can really have an advantage over those who are speaking a second language. In that sense I think having all the twenty three languages regardless of what it costs but also issues of prestige and a sense of equality. Ok not very many people are going to speak Maltese or Estonian but having them I think is a part of being European, the multiplicity of language is really in a sense at the heart of what being European is.

NARRATOR

MEPs are free to choose which language they speak in. For some this is easy, for others it's more complicated.

MIGUEL

It is not acceptable that I speak French or I speak German or I speak English which I can do whenever I am chairing the parliament, I can only speak Spanish and I should only speak Spanish. Among other things out of respect for my own people and for my colleagues and for the thousands of people who are in the guests' tribunes each one speaks his own language.

GYÖRGY

If I'm speaking on a purely Hungarian topic which does arise, I will speak Hungarian. If I'm speaking on a more general topic and let's say I did make a short speech on Israel, Palestine not all that long ago I spoke English. So that's generally the way I pitch it. There are some MEPs who will use English all the time simply because they think that more people will listen. I certainly have seen a situation where somebody's speaking, in what is called, a sort of primary language, they won't even put the headphones on. They will not listen to the simultaneous translation so basically people are lazy. MEPs are also lazy and they will listen in English, maybe they'll listen in French, possibly German and then if somebody starts speaking Latvian, forget it. And I discovered this very early on, that I spoke Hungarian in one of the committees and absolutely zero impact. I might as well not have spoken at all so that has guided me ever since so in committees I will on the whole speak English, it just depends.

AMBASSADOR 3

[Ambient dialogue]

DANIEL

I've heard members in the past talk about bad experiences with interpreting. I think that is perhaps the case in the minority of situations. I think a much stronger urge is just the sense that I think there's a very human urge to want to directly talk to another person in the language which they understand without using an intermediary because even if you're a very trusting person, I suppose at the back of your mind there's always a sense that if I'm using an intermediary I'm not in complete control of what it is I'm saying. I think that's human nature.

DANIEL

A language can be chosen for a number of reasons. A speaker may be wanting to show that he can be a bit of a virtuoso in several languages or maybe out of a sense of politeness be addressing somebody who's just asked him a question and answering them in the same language. They can be wanting to show that they identify with a particular group. A Belgian may want to show that he can speak both or even all three of the country's national languages and so there can be a number of pragmatic or political considerations.

GYÖRGY

I remember a Finnish colleague two or three years ago being absolutely furious and said the Finnish simultaneous translation is so bad that I am going to speak English from now on. So it may be that you know English is simply used because they don't trust the simultaneous translators. My experience with the simultaneous translators has actually been ok.

NARRATOR

But when MEPs do not use their mother tongue, misunderstandings can occur.

ALISON

What happens is people don't necessarily

say what they mean, they say what they're able to say and that can be two very different things and for interpreters that can hold all kinds of repercussions.

ALISON

If someone is speaking English let's say imperfectly, first of all the interpreters have to try to work out what that person actually is trying to say before they can then go on to the process of converting it into Spanish, into Portuguese, into Greek into whatever. So it adds an extra step, it adds an extra difficulty.

ALISON

Interpreters always prefer it when people speak their native language, it's much easier for us and for our work because then people are speaking naturally, they're saying what they want to say, they're much more expressive and if someone's English is limited then they can only say those things and sometimes they don't actually say what they mean to say. Just a little example - I was at a meeting where a woman said 'I'm glad you took your time to get here'. She meant 'I'm glad you took the time to get here'. It's a very small thing but it actually makes a difference and it means the interpreters have to do a lot more work on understanding the context and on trying to decipher what it is that person means to say rather than what it is they're actually saying.

NARRATOR

Some academics believe it's time to take a completely different approach to the dominance of English in Europe.

BARBARA

I think what we really need is some innovative thinking about the linguistic landscape in Europe if you like because this is an unprecedented situation that we have this growth and spread of one language and I think instead of adhering to this notion of one nation, one state, one language which is so deeply engrained in Europe because of our nineteenth century nationalism. So much, we've invested so much into creating nations that some are defined by their languages and languages are so intricately bound up with culture and the way forward for me would be to conceptualise English differently so that you take it out of this hierarchy of languages that we have. But if you take English out of this hierarchy and say ok English we take for granted anyway it's something like a driving license, you know it's something that everybody has, it's nothing special but without it you don't get very far if you like. Then if you take English out of this hierarchy then it will be interesting to decide which other languages you might want to learn but you would learn them for very different reasons, because you love Italian music or because you like French food and have French friends and things like that.

NARRATOR

This is not a view shared by the critics of the rise of English in Europe.

JEAN

Une autre question et c'est cela qui préoccupe à mon avis les Français, est de savoir quelle influence a le langage sur l'expression des idées. Or, on ne peut manquer de remarquer que depuis dix, quinze ans, vingt ans, le moment où l'anglais est imposé comme langue commune, l'Europe est devenue de plus en plus libérale.

Donc des valeurs qui ne sont pas des valeurs continentales parce qu'un langage, une langue, n'est pas neutre, une langue est un véhicule des valeurs et c'est cela qui est préoccupant.

NARRATOR

There's another aspect to the rise of English in Europe which has attracted attention. Is a new variety of English emerging? Something which can be called Euro English? There are a range of views on this subject.

BARBARA

I think in different contexts means different things for different people. So on the one hand its sometimes used to designate the English that's used within European institutions, a kind of

you know difficult to understand register that is used in the corridors of Brussels where people use certain terms that are very difficult to understand for the average European citizen such as subsidiarity and all these and I think they're actually glossaries of terms that the European Union uses in a way that you know most English native speakers would not normally understand., so that's one very special use of the term. It's also used more generally in a sense that people say ok Europe is, most of Europe is now a union and surely a union has a shared language and therefore there will be shared features and this is easy to understand why people would have this expectation but you must bear in mind that there are very many different European languages and depending on the combination of speakers that use English as a lingua franca, this English will vary quite a bit.

DANIEL

The question of whether one standard version of Euro English is arising or evolving I think is quite a complicated one and I don't know what the answer is. I'm tempted to think that there are certain words which are being adopted through being heard by the members, an example is foreseen. A member might say or anyone working in the European environment might say 'well, we're gonna have to work through this meeting all morning but unfortunately coffee is not foreseen', meaning coffee is not provided and then because in a number of languages like French or Dutch prévu, forseen that word is used. It's become part of this Euro English which is then adopted by more and more people and it just then...you almost find yourself saying it yourself. In fact I have heard native English speakers in this context saying that so gradually, inevitably that process is occurring.

ALISON

There is a truth in it to some extent. The English that people speak here, if they're not native English speakers is different from the English that we would use as native speakers but for me it's not coalescing into a Euro English. The Germans speak English in a German way, the French speak it in a French way but what you will see you'll see English used in what we would deem an incorrect fashion but it's accepted by everybody because everybody understands it.

DANIEL

Sometimes I think that certain tendencies are emerging, you know certain lexis but then that could just be the kind of lexis that you have in any job, any profession where a lot of people are together and they're initiated into it and they use their own vocabulary, their own jargon if you like. So I suppose you have to be careful to draw a distinction between normal jargon in any place of work and a new language.

GYÖRGY

In a sense I think Euro English has arrived. I think its contours are difficult to define, probably its grammar doesn't really correspond to English, I suspect that you know the subtleties of things like to take on, to take off, to take to, the infinite variations which you can get with just a tiny switch in English that escapes most of them. So in many ways it's a simple, sometimes even a very crude language but effective and it's very effective in the second language communication which I think in a sense is what we are talking about. It won't go away, I mean I think it's here to stay and I would be fascinated to see what it looks like let's say thirty years from now and it may be that native English speakers will have to learn it.

DANIEL

English speakers you know they only need to use a couple of expressions and they've completely lost their Euro English audience. You know if I turn round and say 'well, you know, I can't really use the booth today because it's on the blink' then, you know, any native English speaker would know immediately what I meant but most people speaking Euro English would already be lost. I would already have alienated them and for me that's just one example of this new thing which is emerging, maybe a slightly blander, simpler form of English being used to convey information in a much less layered idiomatic way.

JEAN

J'ajouterai que les Britanniques, les Américains ne doivent pas trop se réjouir de cette domination de la langue anglaise au sein du parlement européen et les institutions

communautaires parce que l'anglais qu'on parle ici est un anglais qui est à peine compréhensible pour un 'native English speaker'. Pourquoi? Parce que c'est du 'globish' qu'on parle ici.

Très souvent, moi j'adore, à Bruxelles lorsque l'on parle anglais, moi même je m'amuse à parler anglais, on voit les Britanniques souffrir horriblement car leur langue est en réalité violée tous les jours.