

France has almost entirely failed in its strategy to prevent English taking over as the lingua franca of the EU.

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Prior to the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Economic Community in 1973, the French language held a privileged position as a lingua franca of the Community. David Fernández Vitores assesses the demise of the French language's status and the failure of France to develop an effective strategy for preventing the advance of English. He notes that the country is now refocusing its efforts on consolidating the position of French in the legal sphere, one of the few areas where it still enjoys a privileged position in comparison to other official languages.



France is not only one of the founding members of the European Community, but also one of the main drivers of the integration process. However, this does not necessarily mean that France has systematically allowed the erosion of its political identity as a result of European integration. In fact, it has done the opposite. France's attitude regarding the position of the French language in the EU is a good example of its *savoir-faire*. Since the early years of the Community, France's strategy for safeguarding its language has focused solely on adopting measures aimed at promoting the language or strengthening the privileged position it previously enjoyed in the institutional arena.

The main challenge to this privileged position came in 1973 with the accession of the United Kingdom, as well as Ireland and Denmark. In addition to concerns about the French language losing its importance on the European stage as a result of English becoming an official Community language, this first enlargement brought with it a proposal to reform the EU language regime. Interestingly enough, the proposal for reform did not come from the states in which French and English were spoken, but from one with a minority language in the Community: Denmark.

On its entry into the Community, Denmark proposed not to use its national language, Danish, in an effort to help reduce the number of official Community languages to just two – English and French – thus streamlining institutional functioning. To avoid favouring native speakers of these languages, the only condition put forward by Denmark was that French members spoke English and English members spoke French. However, both the United Kingdom and France rejected this proposal, which is altogether surprising, especially in the French case, since the measure would have involved legally recognising the predominant role of the French language that France had been advocating up until that point. Opposition from the Italians and Dutch also influenced the stance of the French. However, from a rational standpoint, France's refusal can be understood because if it accepted the criterion of functionality as an excuse for reducing the number of languages to two, this same criterion could be used in the future to suppress French permanently, leaving English as the single working language.



Tower of Babel, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Public Domain)

Rejection of the Danish proposal also implied validation of the safeguarding strategy for the French language that France had adopted up to then. In fact, after the addition of English as an official language of the European Community, France continued to implement institutional measures to protect and promote French, by creating

organisations to defend the French language. An example of this approach was the establishment in 1979 of the *Comité pour la langue de l'Europe*. This committee had two, somewhat conflicting, objectives. On the one hand, it defended “the development of all European languages in all countries within the Community, without giving preference to English” and, on the other, it suggested that the European Community have a single official language: French.

Despite the progressive deterioration of the privileged position of French in the European Union, this was not a critical issue until 1992, which was the turning point after which French began to give way to English as the main lingua franca of the EU. This situation triggered the development of an urgent strategy to rescue French, based on the joint promotion of French and multilingualism. The aim of this policy was to curb the threat to French and the other languages, which had been clearly identified in various French institutional documents.

However, a mere change of mentality does not necessarily imply the adoption of policy measures to safeguard the language in the European context. It was also necessary to create a policy framework for action that would result in policy decision-making aimed at defending linguistic diversity and, by extension, the French language. Moreover, these decisions had to be supported by the other Member States; something extremely difficult to achieve if we consider that the strategy to defend diversity was driven almost exclusively by French interests. In Europe, this policy framework was defined by the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. The Treaty introduces two essential elements that facilitate the new French strategy: a reference to linguistic diversity and the principle of subsidiarity, which stipulates that “the Community shall take action... only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore... be better achieved by the Community”.

Thus, as the introduction of subsidiarity meant an extension of the competencies of Member States, it also ensured that the rest of the Member States supported the safeguarding of linguistic diversity advocated by France. This strategy has been unsuccessful, however, judging by the relentless advance of English as the supranational language of communication since the introduction of the principle of subsidiarity up to the present day. In fact, the current stance of French political leaders and academics suggests certain dissatisfaction with the results of the strategy initiated in 1992. Perhaps it is this dissatisfaction that, in recent years, has led to France adopting measures aimed at consolidating the position of the French language in an area in which it still enjoys a clear privilege in comparison to other official languages: the legal sphere.

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