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THE CONVERSATION

L'expertise universitaire, l'exigence journalistique

Catalan, Basque and Galician are unlikely to become official EU languages, but alternatives to connect with regional language speakers are out there

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Langues

English

Español

Français



Pedro Sánchez stands by the Catalan, Spanish and European flags, at a meeting in Barcelona in 2021. Lluís Gene/AFP

The Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, is in a pickle. In August, he sent out a formal request to the rotating presidency of the Council of Europe for Catalan, Basque and Galician to become official EU languages. The request was part of a coalition agreement with the Catalan Independence Party, whose support he depends on to remain in power. The subject is also due to be discussed at the General Affairs Council on 19 September.

As could be expected, Brussels coolly greeted the prime minister's newfound appetite for polyglotism. EU diplomats fear that agreeing to the request could trigger a domino effect across the bloc, with other regional language communities demanding similar recognition. As it stands, the Council is taking a cautious approach, out of phase with the timeline of Sánchez's domestic pressures.

The EU is a multilingual organisation

From a historical perspective, this certainly makes sense. The addition of official languages to the EU legal order is neither automatic nor trivial. The union's language regime has been built up gradually since the Treaty of Rome came into force in 1958. First, the four community languages (French, German, Italian and Dutch) were chosen. It was a revolutionary choice at the time that is still difficult to explain today, although it is assumed that it avoided the emergence of conflicts in Belgium, which shared its three official languages with four other member states.

A tradition then took root: each time the organisation was enlarged, the member states' representatives on the EU Council would include the official language of the newcomer. With a few exceptions, the number of official languages of the union gradually increased as it enlarged.

Nowadays, applicable legislation on the subject is clear: the EU is a multilingual organisation with 24 official and working languages. However, a hasty Internet search soon muddles the picture, due to the strong tendency to confuse the "working languages of the institutions" with "the official languages of the EU".

The latter category may also be used in the institutions (the European Parliament being the most striking example), all while remaining the authoritative languages in the drafting of legislative texts and the case law of the EU Court of Justice. For example, a European directive or regulation will only be deemed legally enforceable if it has been translated and published in all 24 official languages of the Union.

Despite Brexit, English remains the lingua franca

As for the bloc's *lingua franca*, the European Commission has developed the habit of using English for its internal work, as well as for its dealings with other institutions and external partners. It is estimated that 85.5% of documents drafted by the commission use English as source language, compared with 3.7% for French and the rest for other official EU languages. Since the Brexit deal was struck in January 2020 – more than three years ago – English continues to dominate everyday life of most European institutions, and its status as one of the official languages cannot be modified without the unanimous will of the member states.

Notwithstanding this, all 24 official languages can be used in writing or orally, making them “working languages”. If an institution such as the European Commission receives a request in Latvian, for instance, it will use the same language for its reply. Latvian will thus be a language in which the Commission has indeed worked. The EU’s Court of Justice also ensures that competitions for the recruitment of European civil servants never give preference to English unless the institution provides reasons for doing so.

Multilingualism and the Council

Sánchez’s plight is made more acute by the fact that any change of the EU language regime is contingent on the unanimous approval of the member states. It can be obtained at the Council of the European Union, in this instance, the meeting of the foreign affairs ministers of each of the 27 member states. This unanimity makes the scenario in which all the other European states accept a proposal by one state to add three new official languages highly implausible.

Until now, there has been a relative consensus on adding a new official language when a new state joins the union.

For various reasons, the case of member states with several national languages or official languages wasn’t a problem at the time of their accession. The main explanation is that a language that is regional in one state is often the national language of another, such as German in northern Italy. Spain is unique in this respect because, unlike Belgium, which has three national languages, it is a state with a national language and regional languages that are, essentially, only spoken in Spain. The regional languages enjoy a very high level of protection, with most of them sitting alongside Spanish as co-official languages in the concerned regions.

It is also clear that when Spain joined the EU in 1986, the protection and recognition of Spanish regional languages were not as advanced as they are today.

All in all, nothing suggests that the Spanish proposal will be taken up. On top of a historical mistrust of certain countries toward their minority languages, many member states would rather stick to one national language for diplomatic purposes. Others may not wish to deviate from the tradition of “one new accession, one new language,” which until now has allowed the EU to save on translation and administrative expenses.

Alternative solutions

With this in mind, it is worth remembering that over the past 20 years Spain has found administrative solutions to connect its citizens to EU law and institutions.

One of the main mechanisms consists in allowing users of Spanish regional languages to write to European institutions in their own language (say, Catalan). The recipient institution then sends the text to Madrid, which translates it into Spanish, an official EU language. The institution can then reply to the citizen in Spanish and transfer the reply to Madrid, which will translate it back into the regional language.

The system is far from perfect. To date, the European Parliament lacks a translation service for the continent's regional languages. This contradicts the idea that MEPs ought to be able to represent their fellow Europeans without being hampered by language barriers. Despite the goodwill of interpreters in the institutions, the democratic issue persists, especially given the large number of Catalan speakers, estimated at around 9 million.

Unanimity tends to "freeze" any movement toward linguistic reform. One compromise could consist in translating any legally binding EU legislation in Spain's regional languages, without granting them official EU language status. Such a solution would carry clear economic and organisational advantages. It has also been tried and tested in the cases of the Irish and Maltese national languages and could be a win-win situation for all concerned.

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