

# Study: Vast majority of EU citizens are marginalized by dominance of English language

January 31 2012

---

The European Union has 27 member countries and 23 official languages, but its official business is carried out primarily in one language — English. Yet the striking findings of a new study show that barely a third of the EU's 500 million citizens speak English.

What about the other two-thirds? They are linguistically disenfranchised, say the study's authors.

For the EU's non-English speakers, their native languages are of limited use in the EU's political, legal, communal and business spheres, conclude economists Shlomo Weber, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and Victor Ginsburgh, Free University of Brussels (ULB), the authors who conducted the study. As a result, people who are disenfranchised have limited access to EU laws, rules, regulations and debates in the governing body — all of which may violate the basic principles of EU society, the researchers say.

"[Language](#) is the proxy for engagement. People identify strongly with their language, which is integral to culture and traditions," Weber says. "Language is so explosive; language is so close to how you feel."

Weber and Ginsburgh base their findings on a methodology they developed to quantitatively evaluate both costs and benefits of government policies to either expand or reduce diversity. The

methodology builds on a body of earlier published research by Weber, Ginsburgh and other economists.

"Measuring language diversity's impact is an area of growing interest to scholars of economics and other social sciences," Weber says. "With globalization, people feel like they've been left on the side of the road. If your culture, your rights, your past haven't been respected, how can you feel like a full member of society? It is a delicate balance. People must decide if they want to trade their languages to increase by a few percentage points the rate of economic growth."

Weber and Ginsburgh report their findings and the methodology in their new book, "How Many Languages Do We Need?" (Princeton University Press).

"History provides many examples of political regimes that have mandated single languages for efficiency or social control reasons, many of which have proved unsustainable in the face of backlash from those disenfranchised linguistically," Weber says.

At the other end of the spectrum, other countries have permitted, by default or design, linguistic anarchy in which dozens or even hundreds of languages exist — to the detriment of even basic efficiency, he says.

"We knew there was a need for a quantitative methodology to evaluate both criteria for languages: efficiency and enfranchisement, which are indispensable for sustainable globalization in our fractionalized world," Weber says.

## **Quantitative analysis finds English is the language spoken by largest percentage of EU citizens**

Previous researchers found that 90 percent of the EU's official

documents are drafted in English and later translated to other languages, often French and sometimes German. Previous research also has documented frustration among EU officials with the political entity's multitude of languages, as members wonder whether they are being understood.

Against that backdrop, the Weber-Ginsburgh analysis of the EU used official data from a routinely conducted EU survey of member states carried out in 2005 and later. The data came from answers to questions that included: What is your mother tongue? Which languages are you conversant in? How do you rate your fluency on a scale of very good, good or basic?

Weber and Ginsburgh found that of all the languages, English embraces the most EU citizens, followed by German second and French third.

## **English, German and French fall short**

Yet those languages fall far short of including all people. The economists found that many EU residents are excluded.

Nearly two-thirds of EU citizens — 63 percent — don't speak or understand English, while 75 percent don't readily speak or understand German, and 80 percent don't speak or understand French.

"English is spoken almost everywhere around the world," the authors write, "but it is still far from being spoken by almost everyone." At the same time, many non-native speakers of English feel the onslaught of that language's global domination, a phenomenon that wasn't generally foreseen and that evolved only within the last 60 years.

Weber and Ginsburgh discovered one EU age group — youth ages 15 to 29 — that is less marginalized by English than other groups. Fewer than

half those young people — 43 percent — are disenfranchised, the researchers found.

The economists also introduce the concept of "proximity" — the degree to which languages are similar to one another. People who speak similar languages are less disenfranchised from one another, they say. Similarity is a factor of pronunciation, phonetics, syntax, grammar and vocabulary, although the authors caution that even words that seem alike aren't always related, but instead are merely similar by chance or because languages borrow words.

## **Language represents identity and culture**

Among the world's 271 nations, more than 6,900 languages are spoken, Weber and Ginsburgh say.

The economists say there is no optimal degree of language diversity for a society, but many examples throughout history demonstrate that too much linguistic diversity is expensive, detrimental and often divisive, they say.

The story of post-colonial Africa, widely referred to as Africa's growth tragedy, offers a painful example of the heavy costs incurred by a multitude of linguistic and ethnic divisions.

Language and cultural differences frequently have played a role in war, underdevelopment, brutal changes of power, poor administration, corruption and slacking economic growth, say the authors. Linguistic divides also impose friction on trade between countries, as well as influence migratory flows, literary translations or votes cast in various contests.

For example, in Sri Lanka two linguistic groups fought a bloody civil

war for 25 years, killing tens of thousands of people, note Weber and Ginsburgh.

## **Designating an official language must weigh costs, benefits**

Can the EU ever mandate an official language that embraces its 500 million citizens? How can Nigeria manage 527 languages spoken by citizens of that country? Or Cameroon, with its 279? How does democracy function in India, where 30 languages thrive among more than 1 billion native speakers?

About one-third of the world's nations have met these challenges by legislating official language provisions in their constitutions, the authors say. The official language typically applies to official documents, communication between institutions and citizens and debates in official bodies.

But to scientifically determine an optimal set of core languages, the authors say, nations must weigh the costs of linguistic disenfranchisement against the benefits of standardization.

"Our analysis offers a formal framework by which to address the merits and costs of the vast number of languages spoken in various countries," said Weber. "We formally measure linguistic similarities and subsequently the linguistic distances between groups who speak various languages."

The methodology can also measure the impact of other kinds of diversity, whether animal and plant biodiversity or economic classes of people.

## France: An example of linguistic diversity handled well

Over the course of human history, has any country handled their linguistic diversity well?

"France," Weber says. "Two hundred years ago, France had a lot of dialects, and only 3 million of its 28 million people spoke French. That's only 10 percent of the people. In a bloodless transition the government imposed French as the official language but allowed dialects to flourish."

**More information:** This research is reported in the new book: "How Many Languages Do We Need?" Published by Princeton University Press.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

Citation: Study: Vast majority of EU citizens are marginalized by dominance of English language (2012, January 31) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-vast-majority-eu-citizens-marginalized.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.