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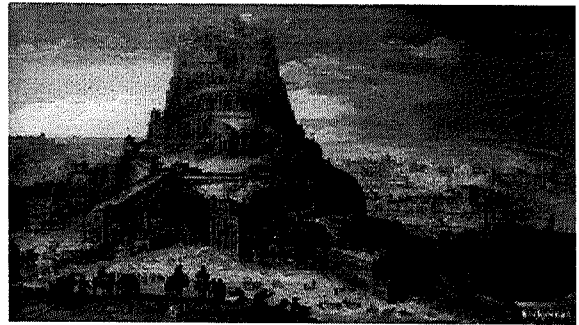
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## Multilingualism and the EU

# Babelicious

Apr 30th 2015, 21:11 by R.L.G. | RIGA

THE European Union is unique: 28 countries that have chosen to share their sovereignty in pursuit of bigger goals. The main goal was originally peace, but today it is prosperity, in the form of greater economic co-operation and trade. At the core of the EU is the single market, the idea that goods, services, people and capital should flow freely across borders.



But the single market is more of an organising principle than a reality. Goods flow freely, and EU citizens can move and work freely across EU borders, but services are different. A doctor or architect qualified in one country has a far harder time working in another.

As for virtual and digital services, which would naturally cross EU borders, a Frenchman who wants to buy a pay-tv package available across the Channel, in Britain, cannot easily do so. Besides the legal obstacles is another traditional one: language. This week your columnist attended a conference in Riga on putting multilingualism at the heart of the digital single market. Attendees want to develop policies and technologies that make it possible for an online shopper looking for a lawnmower to be able to search and find not just the best and cheapest lawnmowers, but the best and cheapest *Rasenmäher* and *cortadores de grama*.

The EU has 24 official languages. Regional minority languages add many more to the total. The EU's policy is lavishly generous: any of the national official languages may be an official EU language. This is tough to deal with. One of the European Commission's biggest budget items is translation. At the European Parliament, any member may speak in an official language, and

receive translation from any official language into his or her own.

“Europe” was founded by just a small set of countries: West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Leaders could sit at a small dinner table, and everyone spoke decent French, the working language of the community. It was an act of generosity to make all languages official: Dutch, at that time, was the minnow.

Today the picture has changed radically. Leaders from 28 countries need a banquet table, not a kitchen table, if they are to sit together. Among the 24 languages, Dutch is now one of the bigger ones. The official languages reach all the way to Maltese—an Arabic dialect written in the Roman alphabet, in a country where English is widely spoken—and even Irish, a language whose last monolingual speaker died in the 1960s.

Would the six founding members have made the same decision—to recognise all national languages as official and equal—if they had known they would one day be translating every piece of legislation into Maltese and Irish, Latvian and Lithuanian? The founders of the United Nations, after all, pragmatically chose six official languages—English, French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic—for their 51 member states (who today number 193).

Who knows if the Six would choose to make the same choice today, but they would certainly be wise to do so. The core of the EU may be the single market—a technocratic project. But the heart of the average European lies with a national identity, or even a regional one. Issuing laws and regulations in a subgroup of languages would be unacceptable to a huge group of voters, who do not want to be subject to laws they cannot easily read. At the level of political theatre, debates in the European Parliament may be boring and stilted, thanks to the need for simultaneous interpretation. But imagine if members were required to use those few languages, and forbidden to speak in the language their voters understand.

The result would be a populist-nationalist backlash even bigger than the one Europe already faces. European citizens joined the union for its economic benefits, not because they wanted to dissolve their identities into a larger European one. The Commission’s translation and the Parliament’s simultaneous interpretation may be expensive and confusing. So be it; the union’s multilingualism is a part of its own official motto. If “United in diversity” is to be more than a slogan, multilingualism must be more than a hazy goal.

**Responda às questões de acordo com o texto *Multilingualism and the E.U.: Babelicious*.**

1. Em que aspectos os objetivos atuais dos membros da U.E. diferem dos objetivos iniciais?
2. Quais são as dificuldades enfrentadas pelos profissionais que desejam atuar em países da U.E, dos quais não são cidadãos?
3. Qual evento o autor do texto participou recentemente e qual foi à pauta deste?
4. Por que é difícil lidar com a política atual da U.E. em relação à aceitação de línguas oficiais?
5. O que diferencia a questão linguística da época em que a U.E. foi criada em relação ao momento atual?
6. Segundo o colunista, qual é o problema em aceitar a língua irlandesa no parlamento europeu?

**TRADUZA OS SEGUINTE EXCERTOS**

7. Attendees want to develop policies and technologies that make it possible for an online shopper looking for a lawnmower to be able to search and find not just the best and cheapest lawnmowers, but the best and cheapest *Rasenmaher* and *cortadores de grama*.
8. Would the six founding members have made the same decision – to recognize all national languages as official and equal – if they had known they would one day be translating every piece of legislation into Maltese and Irish, Latvian and Lithuanian?
9. At the level of political theatre, debates in the European Parliament may be boring and stilted, thanks to the need for simultaneous interpretation. But imagine if members were required to use those few languages, and forbidden to speak in the language their voters understand.
10. So be it; the union's multilingualism is a part of its own official motto. If "United in diversity" is to be more than a slogan, multilingualism must be more than a hazy goal.