

## EUROPE 2020: WHICH LANGUAGES FOR BUSINESSES IN EUROPE?

Roxana-Maria GĂZ

Department of Specialized Foreign Languages, Babe -Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

**Abstract:** *In an increasingly international business environment, where the European strategy for 2020 aims at 'smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth', as well as at turning Europe into an economic force, where the job market is characterised by the continuous circulation of people and knowledge, can one still speak of multilingualism? Is multilingualism still preserved, or is a single 'corporate language' preferred to several 'working languages'? This paper tries to analyse the current status of languages in European businesses, if one may speak of a 'corporate lingua franca', and if multilingualism can still be seen as a true advantage for companies.*

**Keywords:** *businesses, corporate language, corporate lingua franca, Europe 2020 strategy, education*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2010, at a 'moment of transformation' (EC, 2010:3), the European Commission issued a communication to reinforce its three main priorities: smart growth, sustainable growth, and inclusive growth of the economy of Europe, which had much suffered because of the financial and economic crisis. That is why, the 10-year European strategy targeted the development of the economies of all its 28 member states, in order to 'take charge of their future' (EC, 2010:3).

How can Europe take its future into its own hands and make the best out of what it has? Its leaders actually try to rely on seven initiatives that support the three above-mentioned priorities, namely: innovative union (which refers to the access to finance), youth on the move (its purpose being the improvement of education and the increase of young people's employability), a digital agenda for Europe (which refers to a digital market), resource efficient Europe (the aim is to make a shift to renewable energy sources), an industrial policy for the globalization era (targets mainly the small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs), an agenda for new skills and jobs (modernization of the labour market and empowerment of people with new skills for better jobs), and, last but not least, European platform against poverty (EC, 2010:4-5).

All these seven initiatives cover five main domains of action, i.e. employment, research and development, climate change and energy sustainability, education, as well as fighting poverty and social exclusion. What do all these

initiatives and actions have in common? The answer is language. We need language to communicate in order to access finance, to go in an exchange programme, to find better jobs. But which language? The European Union has 28 member states and 24 official languages. Can all 24 languages contribute equally to the development of the European Union and to the businesses of Europe?

### 2. LANGUAGES AND BUSINESSES

**2.1 Overview of the European economic market.** After World War II and until the 1980s, the European Union economy grew steadily. Up to the 1980s, the GDP per capita in Europe was bigger than in the US. However, after 1980, a decline started in Europe, which led - among other things - to a rising unemployment rate (Balcerowicz, 2013:9). By 2007, the GDP per capita was bigger in the USA than in Europe. Some of the reasons for this difference are low productivity, low employment, etc.

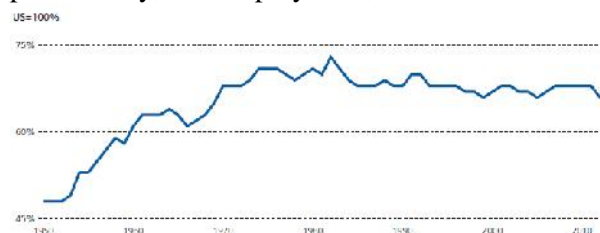


Fig.1 GDP per capita in EU-15 (1950-2012) *apud* Balcerowicz (2013:9)

Employment is one of the actions the European strategy is aiming to improve by 2020. The

European Commission’s agenda set as target to increase the employment rate to 75%, to have more and better jobs. In the executive summary of the Europe 2020 strategy are presented some figures regarding the employment rates in Europe: 63% of women are employed compared to 73% of men; there are only 46% of older employees (aged 55 to 64) compared to more than 62% in the US and in Japan (EC., 2010:7).

In today’s globalised world, young people are not encouraged to start their own business due to both the absence of business knowledge and the lack of start-up capital necessary for the setting up of a business. Young people lack motivation, which is often the ‘engine’ of a successful business. They also lack the necessary start-up capital, and most of the times the access to funding is expensive and bureaucratic. Furthermore, young people feel (and most of the times, they are right!) they are not trained to form an entrepreneurial mentality. Most young people complain about the fact that the current educational system does not offer support in understanding and knowing the reality of the current economy.

From a motivational point of view, young people are rather drawn to finding a job within a company than to starting their own business. The fear of failure, their lack of experience, as well as the absence of viable role models are the factors that replace the motivation of starting their own business with that of finding a stable and well-paid job. But who are the employers on the EU labour market? Apart from the state institutions of each country, which offer jobs, there are also the large multinational companies. However, according to research, the largest number of companies on the EU market (99%) are the small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) (ec.europa.eu). They are the companies that spin the wheel of or fuel the European economy.



Fig. 2 Small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU in figures, Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

According to the Annual Report on the European SMEs 2013-2014, small and medium-sized enterprises employ two out of three

employees. The five key sectors of the European economy (manufacturing, construction, accommodation and food, business services, wholesale and retail trade) account for 78% of SMEs (ec.europa.eu).

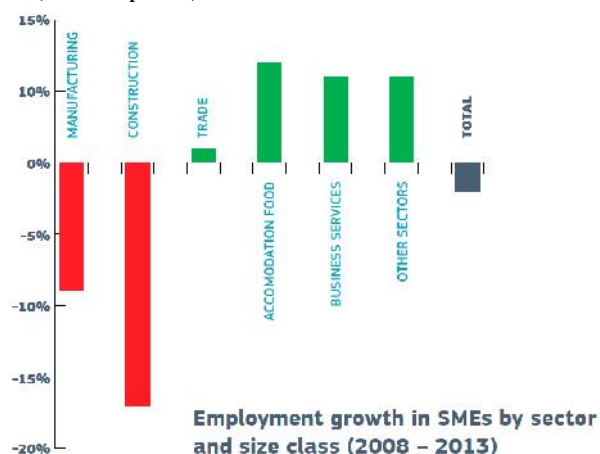


Figure 3. Employment growth in SMEs by sector and size class (2008-2013), Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

As the graph above shows, there was an increase, until 2013, in accommodation and food, business services, and trading companies in Europe. According to the same statistics of the European Commission, one of the main problems that the SMEs have to struggle with is to find customers, to access finance, as well as to find skilled workers and managers.

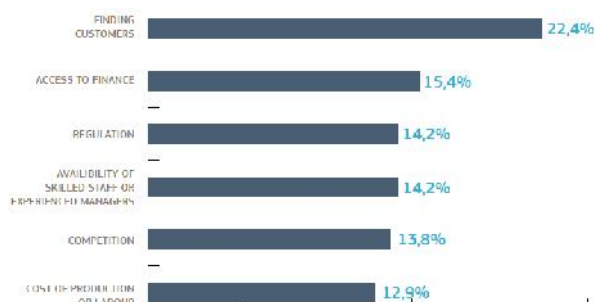


Fig.4 Pressing issues for SMEs (2013-2014), Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

Given the fact that the societies worldwide become more multicultural and globalisation embraces both societies and economies, companies, in their turn, feel the effects of multiculturalism and globalisation.

It is much easier now to find a job abroad, legislation is more permissive for immigrant workers. Therefore, companies have to deal with several cultures and languages. Is there one

language of business in Europe? How can companies make sure their message is understood by all its employees? Certainly, one of the answers is - as in the case of the European Union institutions - to make sure all employees and collaborators, consumers and suppliers receive the information and instructions in their mother tongue. Another answer is to find a common corporate language that all employees speak.

The first solution would probably be better for the recipients and would be a sign of respect for each partner's language. This means translating documents into their native language. However, some companies might consider this solution to be counter-productive and time-wasting. One of the main purposes of companies is to obtain profit and reduce unnecessary costs. Therefore, the second solution is often considered more practical for the companies and its employees.

**2.2 The power of English.** The dominance of a certain language over the communication in businesses across Europe is strongly influenced by the economic power of a country. A language usually becomes a global language not only due to the historical traditions it comprises or due to the culture it brings with it; these are usually the reasons why one may choose to study a foreign language or another. The main reason for the global spreading of a language is strongly connected to the power of the people speaking that language, to the economic power it brings. It is the case of English. In its case, it is well known the fact that, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain was one of the most important countries in the industrial and trading sector. However, by the end of the same century, the leading role was taken by the U.S.A.. This new economic power managed to, in only one century, to develop quickly and to become the most productive economy in the world at that time.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century immigration waves to the American continent led to the adoption of English as a means of integration into the new community, and it is in fact the language that managed to maintain the unity of the new continent. There were two major factors responsible for the spread of English all around the world. The first one was, as we have already seen above, the colonial power of the British that expanded in different continents all around the globe. The second factor was the emergence of the U.S.A. as the greatest economic power of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in fact, it is this latter factor that actually explains the current position and power that the English language enjoys

nowadays (Crystal 2003: 59). Consequently, a notion well-known in the field of sociolinguistics was brought into discussion: the *linguistic imperialism*. This notion appeared at the beginning of the '90s, more specifically, with the publishing of Robert Phillipson's book with the same title. One may argue that the supremacy of this language is still of current interest, even though its power is not as great as it used to be during the last century.

We have textbooks in English for almost all educational programmes, we have TV programmes or movies broadcast with the original soundtrack, we have music and newspapers coming from the English-speaking countries, we have brands and products entering the national markets. We are surrounded by English almost everywhere, not to mention the fact that English words have been borrowed in our vocabularies, especially for the technical and IT domains.

Westernization, modernization, the spread of international youth culture, popular technology and consumerism are all ideologically encumbered and have ideological as well as behavioural and economic consequences

- Joshua Fishman stated in 1987 (*apud* Phillipson, 1992:10). The European Union is based on the belief that people should be united in diversity. But lately English has become an international lingua franca and more and more people have started learning and speaking it, considering it a real competitive advantage for their personal and professional development.

**2.3 English-only businesses?** It is well known that we are living in a globalized world, in which "states and societies are becoming «increasingly enmeshed in worldwide systems and networks of interactions»" (Rassool 2007:100). Therefore, the flow of people, trade and capital placed language and communication at the centre of the interactive global cultural economy. As such, Colin Baker underlined the importance of speaking at least two languages, mentioning that

as swift communication by phone and computer across great distances has become possible in recent decades, and as air travel has brought countries closer together, so the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism has been highlighted (Baker 2001: 417).

He also pointed out that bilinguals had become more important in the employment market due to the increase in the amount of information and to the ease of delivering it around the world.

In tourism, marketing, retailing, airlines, public relations, banking, information and communications technology, accountancy, business consultancy, secretarial work, hotels, law and teaching, for example, bilingual and multilingual employees often have the competitive edge when applying for a post or for promotion (Baker 2001:417-418).

The strong connection between bilingualism / multilingualism and the employment market has also been proved by the fact that those who master several languages may use this for the prosperity of the businesses in order to act on the market trying to satisfy their customers' needs (Baker 2001:419-420). Even multinational corporations have become aware of the necessity to exploit the linguistic resources of their employees as "language in the new service economy is viewed as a commodity" (Cameron 2005:15). Deborah Cameron stated that

companies increasingly see it as necessary to add value to the linguistic raw material embodied in their employees, by designing a way of interacting which is believed to appeal to customers, training workers to reproduce the prescribed design in their behaviour, and keeping them under surveillance to make sure they stick to the specifications (Cameron 2005: 15).

Multinational corporations face challenges as they deal with employees coming from different countries, with different cultures and languages. Specialists agree that

when operating in a multicultural environment, you want to be sensitive to different levels of language fluency and comprehension (Solomon, Schell 2009:156),

as barriers may come up in global teams. It is highly recognized that "global teams are a complex mixture of individual personalities and skills, cultural values and diverse work style" (Solomon, Schell 2009:245), where creativity, flexibility, high tolerance level, multiple perspectives, inspiration and bridge building are seen as advantages of multicultural teams, while they encounter challenges as: different expectations, communication and coordination problems (Solomon, Schell 2009: 244). It has been said that "language skills equal business skills" and that multilingualism is becoming more and more relevant not only for multinational companies but also for small and medium enterprises. As such, in 2006, the National Centre for Languages (CiLT) and the International Communication Specialists initiated a study entitled: *ELAN: Effects on the*

*European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, because, as stated in the European Commission's document, drafted in 2005, "language skills will be important in achieving European policy goals, particularly against a background of increasing global competition" (European Commission, 2005). The purpose of this study was to analyse the importance of languages and of language skills in the European economic environment, especially in what small and medium enterprises are concerned.

The study shows that there is a direct connection between languages and successful exporting: "four elements of language management were found to be associated with successful export performance: having a language strategy, appointing native speakers, recruiting staff with language skills and using translators and interpreters" (ELAN, 2006:7). This investment in languages has proven to be very efficient as, the study further mentions, companies, and especially SMEs, investing in the language management have registered an increase of almost 45% in export sales, as compared to companies that did not consider these elements as being important (ELAN, 2006:7). English (more specifically *global English*) seems to be the language that has a visible economic power. In a research carried out in 2011 by Bloomberg magazine, they tried to see which languages – except English – are more useful in businesses around the world.

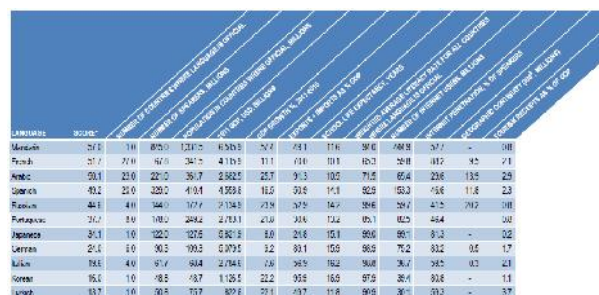


Fig.5 Bloomberg rankings. The languages of business, Source: [http://www.aatfri.com/pdf%20files/Bloomberg%20Rankings\\_Business%20languages.pdf](http://www.aatfri.com/pdf%20files/Bloomberg%20Rankings_Business%20languages.pdf)

As the graph above shows, there are other worldwide important languages that make a difference in the business environment. According to the number of speakers, the number of countries where the language is official, the GDP, the GDP growth, number of Internet users, etc., the research showed that Mandarin, French and Arabic rank in top three most influential languages in business. Similarly, in a more recent interview (6<sup>th</sup> February 2015), published in the online version of *Deutsche*

*Welle* magazine, the famous German linguist Ulrich Ammon talked about the languages most used in businesses, stating that – in an international ranking of languages – an important factor taken into account is the gross national product of a country. According to him, English ranks first, followed by Chinese, Spanish and German.

As to the languages spoken within a company, this is a matter of practicality. There are companies that, for mere practical reasons, choose English as the language of communication within them (for example BMW in Germany), or both English and the official language of that country (e.g. VW in Germany) (Ammon, 2006:32).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Businesses need language, whether for communication among the co-workers or for communication with business partners, consumers, suppliers, etc. In some authors' opinions, English is the language that has visible economic value. To support this statement, Colin Baker is mentioning in one of his studies what Florian Coulmas (professor for Sprache und Kultur des modernen Japan at the University in Duisburg) said in 1992:

no Japanese businessman ever tries to operate on the American market without a sufficient command of English, whereas the reverse case, of American business people who expect to be able to do business in Japan without being proficient in Japanese, is not at all rare (Baker 2001: 428).

In the conference delivered in Tallinn, *Multilingualism – challenges and opportunities of the world economy*, Leonard Orban, the former European Commissioner for Multilingualism, emphasized the development of today knowledge society and the change in the nature of work, “the movement from a *job-for-life* perspective to one where people will change job, and even career, several times”, and the need to invest in language skills. The remark that is used to highlight the value of languages in today's business world is: “with English you can buy anything in the world. But if you want to sell, you had better learn your client's language”.

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