

## Linguistic Neoliberalism in the European Union : Politics and Policies of the EU's Approach to Multilingualism

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## LINGUISTIC NEOLIBERALISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION. POLITICS AND POLICIES OF THE EU'S APPROACH TO MULTILINGUALISM

Vicent Climent-Ferrando\*

### Abstract

The European Union has always placed linguistic diversity at the core of Europe's DNA. The EU's motto "United in Diversity" is recurrently mentioned when referring to the multiplicity of languages in the continent, which are discursively portrayed as one of Europe's greatest assets. This EU political rhetoric on multilingualism, however, does not match the policy actions undertaken by the European Union, which point at a decreasing interest in multilingualism. This article seeks to analyze the evolution of the EU's multilingualism policy over the period 2005-2016 from a Discourse Analysis perspective, which shows an increasing *commodification* of languages and a utilitarian approach on the EU's language policy. It argues that while the idea of promotion, protection and respect of linguistic diversity remains in the current EU *political rhetoric* on languages, the *actual policies* adopt a market-oriented approach, which considers languages as mere *commodities* for economic growth, mobility and jobs. The article ultimately argues that the EU has fully embraced *linguistic neoliberalism* as its policy on multilingualism –defined as the exclusive focus on language skills for market-oriented purposes.

Keywords: European Union; language policy; linguistic neoliberalism; commodification; language ideology.

## EL NEOLIBERALISME LINGÜÍSTIC A LA UNIÓ EUROPEA. L'ENFOCAMENT DE LA POLÍTICA LINGÜÍSTICA I LES ACCIONS POLÍTiques DE LA UE EN MATÈRIA DE MULTILINGÜISME

### Resum

La Unió Europea sempre ha posat la diversitat lingüística com a element principal del seu ADN. El lema de la UE "Units en la diversitat" es fa servir recurrentment per parlar de la multiplicitat de llengües del continent, que sovint es tracten discursivament com un dels valors més importants d'Europa. No obstant això, aquesta retòrica política de la UE sobre multilingüisme no va lligada a les accions polítiques dutes a terme per la Unió Europea, que mostren un interès decreixent en multilingüisme. L'objectiu d'aquest article és analitzar l'evolució de la política de multilingüisme de la UE durant el període 2005-2016 des de l'òptica de l'anàlisi del discurs. L'anàlisi mostra la mercantilització creixent de les llengües i l'enfocament utilitarista de la política lingüística de la UE. L'article argumenta, a més, que mentre que la idea de promoció, protecció i respecte a la diversitat lingüística continua sent la retòrica dominant en la política actual sobre llengües de la UE, les accions polítiques reals adopten un enfocament mercantilista, en què les llengües són considerades béns comercials per al creixement econòmic, la mobilitat i l'ocupació. L'article demostra, en definitiva, com la UE ha adoptat de manera plena el neoliberalisme lingüístic en la seva política de multilingüisme –definit com l'enfocament exclusiu de les competències lingüístiques amb finalitats purament mercantilistes.

Paraules clau: Unió Europea; política lingüística; neoliberalisme lingüístic; mercantilització; ideologia lingüística.

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## 1 Introduction

The motto *United in Diversity* was first adopted by the European Union in 2000 to express the common goal of the European project, which is to “achieve unity of purpose through peace and prosperity in Europe while acknowledging and fostering the wealth of its different cultures, traditions and languages” (European Union, 2000). To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in 2007, this idea was reinforced with the motto *Together* to express the notion of different peoples working for common objectives and goals (European Union, 2007).

Languages occupy a central element in Europe's diversity. As proclaimed by the European Commission to refer to Europe's linguistic diversity, “the harmonious co-existence of many languages in Europe is a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity, one of the cornerstones of the European project.”<sup>1</sup>.

Despite its limited competences on language and culture –as education, culture and language policies remain the responsibility of EU Member States– the European Commission claims to be “committed to safeguarding this linguistic diversity and promoting the languages spoken in Europe”<sup>2</sup>. It broadly categorizes linguistic diversity into three main layers: the 24 official languages of the EU, some 60 to 80 regional or minority languages, five of which with a “semi-official status” (Catalan, Basque, Galician, Welsh and Scots Gaelic<sup>3</sup>), and non-autochthonous languages spoken by migrant communities in Europe. As indicated by the European Commission itself, this commitment is based “for reasons of cultural identity and social integration and cohesion, and because multilingual citizens are better placed to take advantage of the economic, educational and professional opportunities created by an integrated Europe. A mobile workforce is key to the competitiveness of the EU economy” and claims that “a successful multilingualism policy can strengthen the life chances of citizens: it may increase their employability, facilitate access to services and rights, and contribute to solidarity through enhanced intercultural dialogue and social cohesion”<sup>4</sup>.

Despite this positive *political rhetoric* on linguistic diversity and the importance of languages to strengthen the EU's unity, the EU's *policy actions* on multilingualism seem to go in the opposite direction. There has been a decreasing political interest in multilingualism over the past few years, as the Commission has gone from having one entire portfolio on Multilingualism over the period 2007-2010 (Commissioner Leonard Orban), to a Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth (Androulla Vassiliou, 2010-2014), to the final elimination of the portfolio of Multilingualism with the current Commission (Commissioner Tibor Navracsics 2014-present). To the progressive elimination of the Multilingualism portfolio we must add the downsizing of the Commission's Multilingualism Unit and the removal of the former unit dealing with Multilingualism Policy; Skills and Qualification Strategy from the Directorate-General on Education and Culture to the Directorate-General on Employment<sup>5</sup>, expressing the new political intentions to instrumentalize languages for market-oriented purposes.

This article seeks to trace the evolution of the EU policy on multilingualism over the period 2005-2016 and to analyze the current EU political ideology behind the rhetoric on languages. It argues that while the official EU political rhetoric continues to portray linguistic diversity as one of Europe's greatest assets, the

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1 European Commission's website on languages. Available here [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/multilingualism/linguistic-diversity\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/multilingualism/linguistic-diversity_en) [Last consulted 03 December 2016]

2 Europeans and their Languages. Eurobarometer 306 Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Directorate-General for Translation and Directorate-General for Interpretation and coordinated by Directorate-General for Communication, 2012

3 The Council of the EU has agreed that certain languages, recognized by the Constitution of a Member State, even if they are not the country's official EU language(s), can be used in formal EU meetings and EU documents. An agreement on the use of Basque, Catalan and Galician in documents has been concluded between the EU institutions and the Spanish government. The United Kingdom government has a similar agreement concerning the use of Welsh and Scottish Gaelic. In these cases, translations are provided by the government of the Member State concerned when needed at its own expense. Interpretation from (but not into) Basque, Catalan (also known as Valencian) and Galician is provided upon request for certain Council formations with regional representatives, as well as in the plenary meetings of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee. The cost of this interpretation is covered by the Member State in question. The Welsh and Scottish authorities have a similar arrangement. These languages are often referred to in EU jargon as semi-official languages.

4 Op.cit. 2

5 See Press Release of 10 September 2014, The Juncker Commission: A strong and experienced team standing for change, available here [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-14-984\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-984_en.htm) [last consulted 03 October 2016]

actual policies on multilingualism point at an increasing *commodification* of languages, conceptualized and represented as a set of bounded, marketable communicative skills that can be advertised, bought and sold. The analysis aims to show how the current EU policy on multilingualism – and consequently (language) policy action – is based on a standard language ideology that focuses on a functional, market-oriented importance of language skills for growth, jobs, labour, mobility and competitiveness. In so doing, it recontextualises discursive elements from a neoliberal skills rhetoric, devoid of the *tie-securing* function of language (Kraus & Kazlauskaite-Gürbüz 2014), that is, the symbolic and social cohesion functions of language.

This *commodification* of languages has been singled out as one of the semiotic components of globalization in what has been referred to as the new *political economy of multilingualism* (see Heller 2003, 2010; Krzyzanowski & Wodak 2011). This article argues that while it is true that this *commodification* of languages in the EU policy on multilingualism was initiated at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010), which based its priorities on a European Knowledge-Based Economy (see Krzyzanowski & Wodak 2011), it has been further consolidated in the current EU programmes (2010-2020) –the so-called Europe 2020 strategy– which primarily focus on employability, mobility and the (language) skills and tools necessary to achieve these economic targets.

The article builds on an analysis of 43 different policy documents, EU recommendations, communications, resolutions, EU Council conclusions, reports, and press releases from the main EU institutions –mainly the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. To gain inside knowledge, contacts have been maintained with the Commission's officials in the former Multilingualism Unit, with the Chair of the European Parliament's Intergroup for Languages, Jordi Sebastià<sup>6</sup>, as well as with various relevant stakeholders at EU level such as government representatives of regional and minority languages such as the European Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD).

The corpus has been analyzed using Thompson's Depth Hermeneutics Approach (1984), developed in Discourse Analysis, which allows us to provide a three-layer analysis: the *socio-historical analysis*, which looks at the political, economic and social context in which discourses and practices on multilingualism are produced; the *formal and discursive aspects* of the analysis –which looks at the rhetorical devices and chains of reasoning used as legitimating strategies– and the *interpretative analysis*, closely intertwined with the previous two, as it connects the second phase with the first one and allows us to unveil how certain forms of discourse are implicated in the sustenance and maintenance of particular ideologies. This framework will allow me to capture the modulation, reproduction, opposition and contestation of EU political discourses on multilingualism in the EU and how these are related to real policy developments, strategies, ideologies and practices used to adopt a market-oriented approach to Europe's linguistic diversity.

To capture this discursive evolution, I have used Blommaert's *language ideological debates* (1999) as a conceptual framework. In the field of politics, discursive struggle and contestation are generically captured under the label of *debate*. The political process develops through a series of exchanges involving a variety of actors: politicians and policy-makers, academic and non-academic experts, non-governmental organizations and media. Debates are, political-ideologically, the points of entrance of all these stakeholders into policy making: they are (seen as) the historical moments during which the polity gets involved in shaping policy (Blommaert 1999: 8). For our purpose, it is crucial to note that this process is mainly a process of shaping textual tools captured under the term of *public opinion*: interpretation of policies, analysis of policy statements in the field of language and their close link to the political, social and economic context in which these practices are embedded.

Following Thompson's Framework, the analysis will be carried out in two main parts. After this introduction, the second part –the sociopolitical analysis– will be aimed at highlighting both the EU's (limited) policy competences on education, culture and language policies, and the rapidly-changing political and economic scenario in the EU, a necessary analysis to help explain the increasing market-oriented approach in the EU's language policy. The third part will focus on an analysis of the narrative, the rhetorical devices and the chain of reasoning used to shape an increasingly utilitarian cognitive framework of the EU's language policy,

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<sup>6</sup> Interview held on January 21st 2015. European Parliament

which is becoming the *dominant habitus*, using Bordieu's classical notion (1991), that is, the way the EU frames, conceives and conceptualizes languages.

## 2 Analyzing the EU legal framework: the limited competences on languages

In the field of languages, education and culture, the EU Treaties give the European Union the task of supporting actions of Member States aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States (Treaty of the European Union, article 165.2), while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Treaty of the European Union, article 165.1).

Linguistic diversity is, therefore, embedded in the legal framework of the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, adopted in 2000, which the Treaty of Lisbon makes legally binding, also places an obligation on the Union to respect linguistic diversity (article 22) and prohibits discrimination on grounds of language (article 21). Respect for linguistic diversity is therefore a fundamental value of the EU. Despite being included as one of the key values of the European project, it should be noted that the EU holds limited competences in this field. The principal responsibility on education and languages still remains within the power of Member States.

The legal foundations for the language regime of the current EU were laid down in the Council's Regulation 1 of 15 April 1958, which states that "the official languages and the working languages of the institutions of the Community shall be Dutch, French, German and Italian" (article 1) and that "regulations and other documents of general application shall be drafted in the four languages" (article 4, Council of the European Economic Community, 1958: 385). It also provided for persons or Member States to choose their preferred language, out of the four official and working languages, in communication with the Community institutions (article 2, Council of the European Economic Community, 1958: 385). The 1/1958 Council's Regulation has been modified to include the official languages of the new Member States, with the exception of Irish, which acquired the status of official language only in 2007 with a temporary derogation<sup>7</sup>.

We also find another level of officialdom only applied to five languages. The European institutions reached an agreement at the request of Spain (2005-2006) and the UK (2008-2009) on granting specific language provisions to Catalan, Basque, Galician, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic<sup>8</sup>. In July 2005, the EU Council created a new category of languages, next to the existing category of "official languages" and called these "co-official" languages. This was done at the request of the Spanish Government, which wished to include Catalan, Basque and Galician in EU affairs due to the intensive lobbying of these communities. Co-official languages can receive certain services in the EU, such as interpretation during meetings, translation of final legislation or the possibility for citizens to correspond with EU institutions in the language.

Since 2005, the Welsh Assembly Government worked intensively on an initiative to include Welsh in EU affairs as a co-official language. Through the close collaboration between the UK Government and the Welsh Government, this was achieved at the EU Council in July 2008. Following this, a similar agreement was signed with the EU's Committee of the Regions in 2008 and a more limited agreement was also signed with the European Commission on 9 July 2009.

In both cases, translations are provided by the government of the Member State concerned when needed and at its own expense. In practical terms, these language communities have often complained about the non-compliance with these norms as well as the fact that it is the language communities themselves that must cover the translation costs, and not the State.

To this layer in terms of official status of language we must add the rest of the so-called *regional or minority languages of Europe*. Defined by the Council of Europe as "languages traditionally used by part of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Council Regulation (EC) No 920/2005 of 13 June 2005 (OJ L 156, 18.6.2005, p. 3) stating that 'the institutions of the European Union shall not be bound by the obligation to draft all acts in Irish and to publish them in that language in the Official Journal of the European Union', except for regulations adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. This derogation has been extended for a period of five years (until 31 December 2016) by Council Regulation (EU) No 1257/2010 (OJ L 343, 29.12.2010, p. 5).

<sup>8</sup> For more information please visit [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-13-825\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-825_en.htm) [last consulted 03 December 2016]



population of a state, but which are not official state language dialects, migrant languages or artificially created languages<sup>9</sup>”, these languages have no legal recognition at EU level. As acknowledged by the European Commission itself, “nearly all regional and minority language communities face difficulties in ensuring the survival and development of their languages<sup>10</sup>” and while always reminding that the Commission has no competences on language issues, including minority languages, it claims to “work with national governments and interest groups to promote their teaching and learning, thereby helping them survive”.

One of the first elements derived from an initial analysis of the EU legal framework on language policy is that the imperative of maintaining linguistic equality and protecting linguistic diversity in the EU is, first and foremost, designed to uphold the diverse linguistic identities of the Member States rather than those of its citizens (Kraus & Kazlauskaitė-Gürbüz, 2014). This approach reproduces what Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) have called *the dogma of homogeneity*, that is, the idea of linguistic diversity as the sum of one nation-one language, which is reproduced at EU level.

### 3 Analyzing the evolution of the market-oriented approach on the EU policy on multilingualism

The different degrees of official support to the languages of the EU, along with the peculiar policy and discursive frame sustained over the past decade or so have had direct repercussions in the way the EU has shaped its policy on multilingualism. As we shall see in the lines that follow, the dominant ideology sustained during the period analyzed has been increasingly based on the functional importance of language skills to increase competitiveness, reinvigorate the economy and to boost people's employability and mobility through (majority) language learning.

This ideologized representation of language policy from a *language skills* perspective has progressively allowed for the recontextualization within the language policy domain of a hegemonic neo-liberal economic discourse of language skills for the economy. In so doing, the dominant policy discourse on languages in the EU has served to induce changes in social and pedagogical practices within the languages domain as part of a neo-liberal restructuring of all European policies.

As pointed out by Kraus and Kazlauskaitė-Gürbüz, “the EU's approach to language policy has oscillated between two normative poles. On the one hand, linguistic diversity is seen as a pillar of Europe's cultural inheritance, as an asset that is of paramount importance when it comes to achieving the intercultural understanding on which a trans-European civil society has to rely. On the other hand, multilingualism is primarily regarded as an economic asset and thereby becomes a potential competitive advantage in a global context characterized by cognitive mobility” (2014: 517).

While it is true that this approach began to surface in the Lisbon Strategy and its Knowledge-based Economy in 2000 (see Krzyzanowski & Wodak 2011), the clear dominance of the economic approach to languages explicit in the Communication outlining the Commission's policy objectives on multilingualism: *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism* (2005).<sup>11</sup> This *Framework Strategy* –the first-ever adopted by the Commission on multilingualism– emphasized three elements needed in the EU's multilingualism policy: 1) the encouragement of language learning and linguistic diversity in society; 2) the promotion of a healthy multilingual economy and; 3) equality of access for EU citizens to EU legislation, procedures and information in all official EU languages. Despite the rhetorical insistence on the value of linguistic diversity as the EU's founding principle, the analysis shows the almost-exclusive focus on the market-oriented approach to languages, with special emphasis on the acquisition of language skills for mobility and employability purposes, as we shall see below.

When referring to the first objective, *the encouragement of language learning and linguistic diversity in society*, the Framework Strategy systematically refers to the formula *Mother Tongue + 2*, an approach to multilingualism approved in March 2002 by the Heads of State or Government of the European Union whose

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<sup>9</sup> Definition provided by the Council of Europe and shared internationally as the standard definition for minority languages

<sup>10</sup> The Regional Languages of the EU, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/linguistic-diversity/regional-minority-languages\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/linguistic-diversity/regional-minority-languages_en.htm)

<sup>11</sup> COM (2005) 596 final

“long-term objective is to increase individual multilingualism until every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue<sup>12</sup>”. The discursive insistence of the 1+2 formula—recurrently observed in the EU rhetoric on language learning—discursively replicates the abovementioned *dogma of homogeneity*, in which the discourse on one state-one language is reproduced at personal level, considering monolingualism as the norm in all European citizens (all European citizens are intrinsically monolingual) and learning two foreign languages for mobility, employment and competitiveness as the goal to be achieved. This dominant ideology, systematically reproduced in all policy initiatives on multilingualism during the timespan analyzed, has also been the approach taken in the current policies on language, the so-called Europe 2020 Strategy.

The second objective—*the promotion of a healthy multilingual economy*—focuses entirely on the language-economy binomial, entrenching the utilitarian logic to the EU's language policy, which is embedded in the broader policy of the above-mentioned 2010 Lisbon Strategy and the Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs (2005-2008)<sup>13</sup> which sought to make the EU “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world”<sup>14</sup> by 2010 and identified the improvement of *language skills* a priority towards achieving these objectives.

As for objective three—*equality of access for EU citizens to EU legislation, procedures and information in all official EU languages*—the Framework strategy adopts a restrictive definition of multilingualism when considering it, once again, as the sum of one language-one nation by stating that “the Regulation adopted by the Council<sup>15</sup> stipulates that legislation must be published in the official languages and requires its institutions to deal with citizens in the official languages of their choice. In this respect, multilingualism, despite being used in the EU's relations vis-à-vis its citizens, is conceived as the sum of State languages, neglecting the multilingual nature of the vast majority of EU States.

The analysis indicates a systematic reference in policy actions to the notions of *language skills*, *language competences* and *benchmarking* within the discourse on multilingualism, which appear systematically linked to the concepts related to the economy such as *competitiveness*, *growth* and *jobs*, adopting a mere functional approach which places languages at the service of the economy. The benchmark framework is easily equated with a skills-based approach to domains of language use, for example, in terms of the skills requirements for accomplishing job-specific tasks. The notion of functional communication applied to languages is further reflected in the task-based character of the performance descriptors associated with benchmarks: each ‘benchmark’ describes ‘a person's ability to use foreign languages to accomplish a set of tasks (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000). In sum, the systematic reference to the notions of *communicative proficiency* and *language skills* linked directly to economic competitiveness and the rhetoric around economic issues reveals its ideological basis in normative representations of hegemonic patterns of language use.

This ideological approach on the EU's language policy developed a powerful momentum in 2007 with the creation of an entire Commission's portfolio devoted to Multilingualism (2007-2010), which gave higher visibility and political importance to multilingualism in the EU. The almost-exclusive focus on the economic aspect of the EU's language policy intentions became explicit during the presentation by Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban, of the Commission's programme on languages: “Politically, I will steer the Commission's work on bringing an active multilingualism policy into a variety of policies which are the key to the functioning of the EU and the internal market: culture, education and competitiveness<sup>16</sup>”. While insisting in a narrative of positive self-representation of Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity as a source of richness, the focus of the programme revolved mainly around the strategic importance of languages as an asset for the European economy: “multilingualism can give any industry a competitive advantage if it helps them to tap local markets and create new products which also cater for multilingualism”, and paid

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12 Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002, Presidency Conclusions, part I, 43.1.

13 COM (2005) 24 of 02 02 2005

14 Lisbon Council, 23-24 March 2000. Presidency Conclusions

15 Regulation 1 of 1958 European Economic Community (EEC), determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community

16 Hearing of Commissioner L. Orban before the European Parliament's Committee on Education and Culture, 27 November 2006 available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=IM-PRESS&reference=20061127IPR00312&language=CS>



particular attention to the learning of big hegemonic languages for trade and business “our efforts to support multilingualism are not limited to EU languages; we are also encouraging training in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Turkish and Russian<sup>17</sup>”.

These political intentions translated into concrete, tangible policy outcomes over the following years: the elaboration of the ELAN report *Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise* (2007), the goal of which was “to provide the Commission and decision-takers in Member States with practical information and analysis of the use of language skills by SMEs and the impact on business performance<sup>18</sup>”; the creation of the *Business Forum on Multilingualism* (2007) aimed at “exploring how language skills can have an impact on trade and jobs in the European Union, which issued, in turn, a series of Recommendations<sup>19</sup>” (2009) and a subsequent report *Languages Help Businesses* (2009-2011)<sup>20</sup>, encouraging the Commission to embed the business approach on language in its Europe 2020 strategy.

The Business Forum also resulted in a series of concrete policy initiatives focused exclusively on the economic performance of Europe as a result of language competence, namely, the CELAN Project on *Language Strategies for Competitiveness and Employability* (2010), the report on *Language Management Strategies and Best Practices at European SMEs* (PIMLICO report, 2011), or the *Language Guide for European Business* (2011), to name only a few. To this we must add the setting up by the European Commission of the Languages for Jobs Expert Group (2010), the purpose of which was to “produce policy recommendations which can bring about a better match between demand and supply of language and communication skills on the European labor market”.<sup>21</sup>

The rhetorical insistence on the market-oriented approach, systematically replicated in all the EU policy developments on language, is also perceived in the initiatives put forward by Council of the European Union, the EU body representing the Member States. The *EU Council Conclusions of May 2006* defined the *specific indicators for language competences* whereas in the EU Council Conclusions of November 2006, it was reaffirmed that “foreign language skills are a prerequisite for a mobile workforce and contribute to the competitiveness of the European Union economy”<sup>22</sup>. These ideas were further supported in the subsequent May 2008 *EU Council Conclusions on Multilingualism*, the *EU Council Resolution of 21 November 2008 on a European Strategy for Multilingualism* and the *May 2014 Council Conclusions on Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences*, to name some the most relevant decisions taken by the Council in the field of multilingualism.

Despite the reiterative rhetorical insistence on linguistic diversity as part and parcel of the European identity, as a shared heritage and an asset for Europe –a narrative systematically observed in all policy actions– the dominant frame that has been actively transformed into policy actions has been the economic-oriented, competitive-based approach on language skills and competence. As pointed out by Kraus & Kazlauskaitė-Gürbüz (2014: 518) “whereas these recurrent statements continue to stress the importance of linguistic diversity as a European value, they do not translate into tangible policy actions or a programmatic frame that would provide a set of consistent guidelines on political criteria for promotion of linguistic diversity in the realms of society which are most openly exposed to the standardizing pressures connected with European integration”.

Despite the rhetorical insistence on the values of languages for the EU project, multilingualism is therefore discursively conceptualized and, most importantly, politically developed in terms of its utility and *gate-opening* qualities in the realm of competitiveness, growth and jobs. This market-oriented approach has been graphically conceptualized by Krzyzanowski & Wodak (2011), who offer a bird’s-eye view of the semantic field of the EU policy on multilingualism in 2008:

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17 Op.cit.

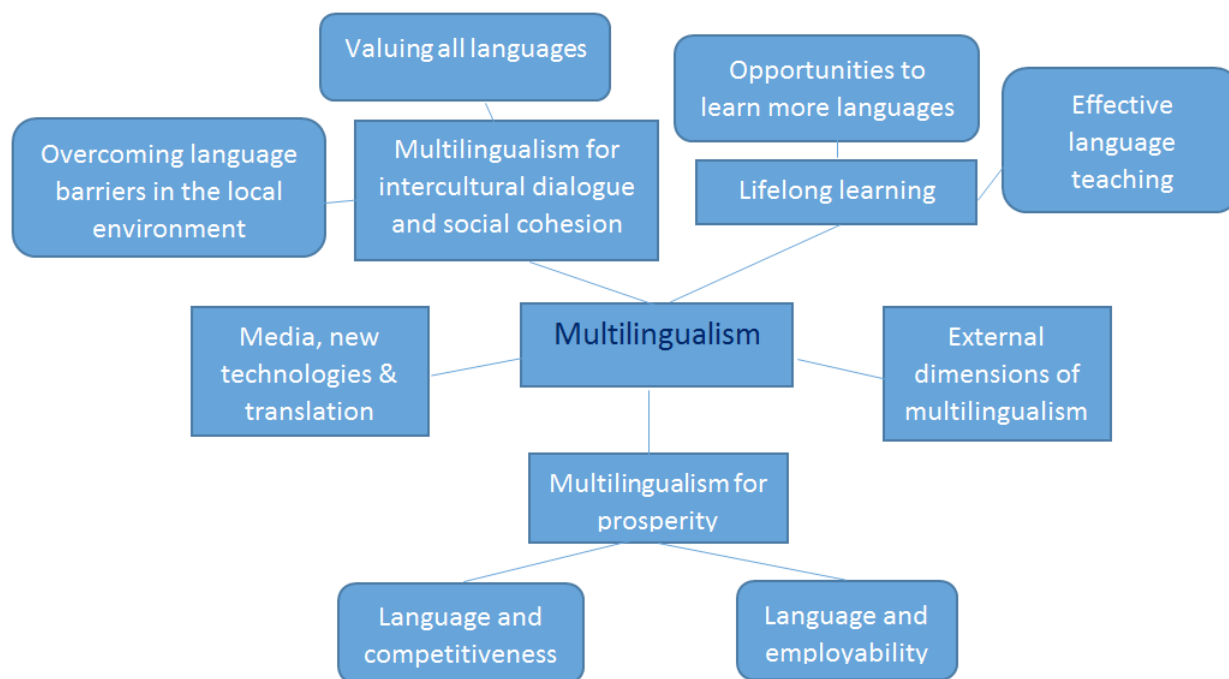
18 European Commission’s Press Release MEMO/07/79 Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise. 23/02/2007

19 Languages Mean Business. Recommendations from the Business Forum on Multilingualism

20 Report How Languages Help Businesses. Business Forum on Multilingualism

21 Languages for Jobs. Providing multilingual communication skills for the labor market. Report from the thematic working group “Languages for Jobs” European Strategic Framework for Education and Training. European Commission, 2010

22 Council Conclusions available at OJ C 172, 25.7.2006, p. 1. [last consulted 29 September 2016]



**Figure 1.** Semantic field of multilingualism in the EU's language policy of 2008 (Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2011)

This dominant frame has been further entrenched in the current EU programmes, the so-called Europe 2020 programmes of the current European Commission (2014-present). Three political decisions confirm this trend: 1) the new Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, Tibor Navracsics, has not included a specific reference to multilingualism in his portfolio. 2) The former unit dealing with Multilingualism Policy, Skills and Qualification Strategy has been transferred from the Directorate-General on Education and Culture to the current Directorate-General on Employment. And 3) one of the latest EU flagship initiatives, the European Digital Single Market, has neglected Europe's multilingual reality, sparking heated reactions<sup>23</sup> across a wide range of stakeholders –from academia to lesser-used language representatives– as the Digital Single Market prioritizes the big hegemonic languages, namely English, with no mention whatsoever to Europe's multilingual reality.

#### 4 Opposing voices to the utilitarian approach on multilingualism

The dominant ideology being currently shaped around the marketable value of languages –especially the big economically-profitable ones– and the economic incentives of language promotion for economic growth, jobs and a competitive labour market and a mobile labour force, has been met with contestation from a variety of stakeholders at a European level but mainly by regional, minority and lesser-used language communities.

While it is true that the Committee of the Regions has repeatedly insisted on the need to promote linguistic diversity, which includes the historical linguistic minorities of the EU, “calling on the Commission and the Council to take more of an account of the need for a specific policy on linguistic minorities that is adequately funded and underpinned by a firmer legal basis”<sup>24</sup>, it has been the European Parliament (EP) which has attempted to provide a wider approach to languages, through numerous resolutions and reports over the past decades.

Especially relevant is the EP's report *Multilingualism: Between Policy Objectives and Implementation* (2008), which had as a primary goal to assess the language policy developed by member states and other stakeholders of the European Union over the period 2004 to 2008. The conclusions already noticed the

<sup>23</sup> Manifesto. Europe's Digital Single Market must be multilingual. See website created for this purpose <http://www.multilingualeurope.eu/> [last consulted 23 April 2016]

<sup>24</sup> Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘protecting and developing historical linguistic minorities under the Lisbon Treaty, September 2, 2011

increasing utilitarianism given the EU's language policy. While noting that "there is a lot of interest, support and demand for promoting linguistic diversity, preserving minority languages, it highlights that "multilingualism and linguistic diversity are sometimes conflicting policy agendas. Language learning policy has tended to be influenced by 'harder' priorities like economic competitiveness and labor market mobility, and linguistic diversity policies by 'softer' issues like inclusion and human rights. Multilingualism policy has been more highly prioritized than linguistic diversity policy in terms of concrete actions" (2008: iii).

In a subsequent resolution, the European Parliament overtly acknowledged the fact that "the importance of multilingualism is not confined to economic and social aspects and that attention must also be paid to cultural and scientific creation and transmission, as well as to the role of languages in shaping one's identity" (European Parliament, 2009: 61). This idea was further highlighted by the Parliament report "Endangered Languages and Linguistic Diversity"<sup>25</sup> (2013) and by the Members of the European Parliament belonging to the Parliament's Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages, created in December 2014 with the goal of supporting and giving greater visibility to Europe's lesser-used languages.

Much more recently (2016), the European Parliament has commissioned two reports related to languages: one entitled "European Strategy on Multilingualism: Benefits and Costs", which gives an overview of the almost-exclusive market approach to languages in the European Commission's language policy over the past years, and a "Report on Minority Languages and Education", which highlights the importance of valuing all languages for identity and social inclusion.

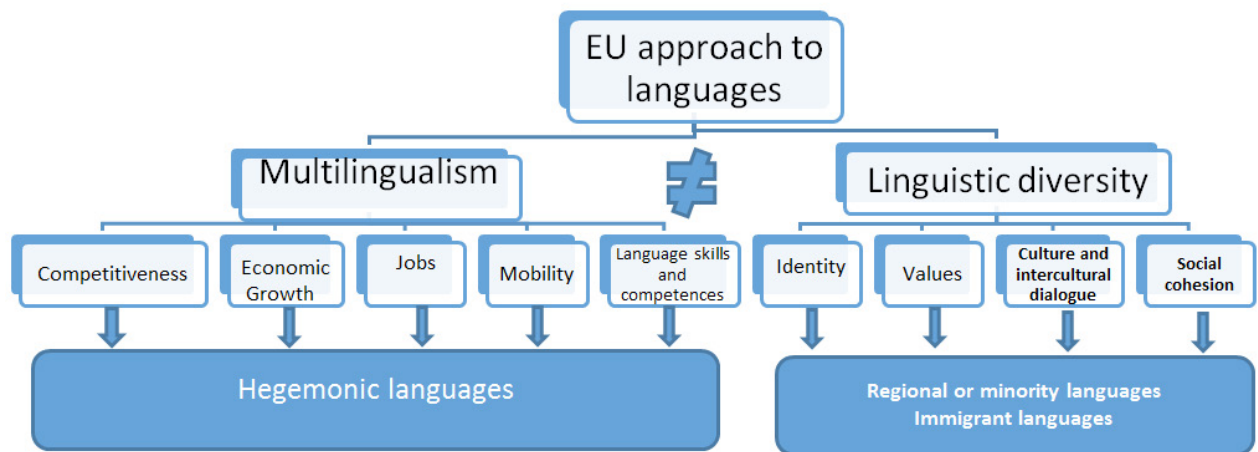
Of particular relevance is the critical voices raised by the *European Network for Linguistic Diversity* (NPLD), a pan-European network comprising regional governments, research centres and associations working to promote Constitutional, Regional and Small-state languages (CRSS) whose main goal is to raise awareness of the need to provide a stronger support to the lesser used languages. In an open, public letter addressed to the European Commission, the NPLD overtly expressed its "concern on the utilitarian, market-oriented approach to the languages of Europe, which prioritize big, hegemonic languages and will leave a remarkable number of lesser-used languages, small-state, regional or minority languages, aside"<sup>26</sup>. This concern has been replicated by a number of other relevant stakeholders at a European level, such as the Civil Society Platform on Multilingualism or the Poliglotti Multilingualism Expert Group, among many others.

The analysis of the interplay between the EU political rhetoric and the actual policies on multilingualism has served to surface the tensions between two dimensions of the EU policy on multilingualism: a *sentimental dimension*, which is often advocated in the EU narrative under the name of *linguistic diversity* and associated with the notions of *culture*, *identity*, *respect*, *intercultural dialogue* and *EU values*, but does not translate into concrete policy initiatives; and the *utilitarian dimension*, which has been clearly prioritized and focuses entirely on the functional importance of language skills and the economic value of languages for the economy, growth, and jobs. Whereas the first dimension –the sentimental one– would be applied to the EU's regional or minority languages (and much more recently to migrant languages, which are increasingly gaining ground in the EU's language, education and integration policies), the utilitarian dimension would be applied to the EU's hegemonic languages. Figure 2 below represents graphically the current EU's approach to languages:

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<sup>25</sup> European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies. Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies, 2013

<sup>26</sup> NPLD Press Release. New European Commission: no place for multilingualism. Available at <http://www.npld.eu/news-and-events/latest-news/103/new-european-commission-no-place-for-multilingualism> [last consulted 28 June 2016]



**Figure 2.** The current semantic field of the EU approach to languages

## 5 Concluding remarks

This article has traced the evolution of the European Union's language policy over the past decade and has examined the discursive process through which elements from a neo-liberal discourse have been progressively incorporated into the EU's discourse on language. This *linguistic neoliberalism* has become the dominant representation and the dominant cognitive frame within the language policy domain of the European Union and is playing a pivotal role in the structuring and development of policies on language in the EU.

It is this ideologized representation of language within such a cognitive framework that allows for the recontextualization within the language policy domain of a hegemonic neoliberal discourse based on the economy, which has been progressively transferred into the realms of the EU's policy on multilingualism from the field of economics. By transferring the economic rhetoric into the language policy sphere, the EU has followed a pattern of entextualization, that is, it has inserted a market-oriented narrative into the metadiscursive sphere of languages, indicating the preferred ways of "reading" these policies, a strategic practice often aimed at the acceptance of a certain metadiscourse by a community.

In so doing, languages, especially hegemonic languages, have gradually become *commodities*, which have now become an essential skill from a market perspective, equalized to other type of skills needed in the labour market such as numeracy, digital or ICT skills. As pointed out by Krzyzanowski & Wodak 2011 "the European Union Strategy on Multilingualism has not really become an EU policy field in its own right and the policies it produced mainly became measures supporting the implementation of key provisions from other policy areas" (2011: 132).

In sum, the EU narrative on the intrinsic value of linguistic diversity as the cornerstone of the European project has been subordinated to the economic goals of growth, competitiveness and jobs, and has evidenced the lack of a principled, real commitment and normative coherence of the EU towards its languages. The economic focus of the EU approach to language policies cannot be analysed in isolation as it has been determined by the overall strategic economic goals and political priorities of the Lisbon Strategy first, during the 2000-2010 period, and the current Europe 2020 Strategy.

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