



Das eJournal der Europäischen Rechtslinguistik (ERL)
Universität zu Köln

Review of “The Language(s) of Politics. Multilingual policy-making in the European Union“

**by Nils Ringe.
Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press 2022.**

Philippe Van Parijs

14. April 2022
doi: 10.18716/ojs/zerl.2022/1422
www.zerl.uni-koeln.de

Contents

- 1 "Multilingualism depoliticizes"
- 2 A pacifying compromise
- 3 More *lingua franca* ?
- 4 More linguistic intermediation ?
- 5 Politics defanged
- 6 So much the better !
- 7 References

1 “Multilingualism depoliticizes”

<1>

Nils RINGE’s *The Language(s) of Politics* (2022) is an instructive and insightful book in several ways, surprising, yet persuasive. It is also important for the European Union and beyond, as the global nature of many of the most urgent problems we face today requires us to interact and take collective decisions in a multilingual environment. What it presents as its central claim is that multilingualism depoliticizes EU politics. By way of constructive criticism, I shall argue here that this formulation is misleading. The book does not have one central claim, but two very different ones, logically independent of each other. Each of them is well supported, but only one of them is about the effects of multilingualism as such and neither of them is about depoliticization of EU politics.

<2>

The fundamental fact that forms the background of both claims can be phrased as follows. In the presence of significant linguistic diversity among its members, an organization needs to function in a multilingual way, in the sense of relying on one of the following two formulas to facilitate interaction between its members, often, not always the same one for all types of interaction within the organization.¹

- (1) The use by all of one shared language, which can be, but need not be, the native language of some members of the organization (here called *lingua franca*).
- (2) The systematic provision of translation and interpretation services from and into all the native languages recognized by the organization (here called *linguistic intermediation*).

<3>

Against this background, RINGE asks whether the adoption of a multilingual functioning affects politics and policy-making in the European Union. His intriguing answer is yes: it depoliticizes EU politics and policy-making (pp. 9-11, 200), and it does so in part intentionally, through the language regime it adopted from the start and adjusted later on to accommodate the recognition of a growing number of languages (chapter 3), and in part unintentionally, as the by-product of the use of a shared language by nonnatives (chapters 4-5) and of the use of translation and interpretation services (chapter 6). In other words, the EU’s reliance on formulas (1) and/or (2) above has a “depoliticizing” effect, defined as “the reduction of the political nature of and the potential for contestation in policy-making” (pp. 20, 188).

1 This definition matches RINGE’s own. “I use the term multilingualism in reference to two realities of EU politics: that most interactions are between native speakers of different languages who either (1) use a shared nonnative language to communicate or (2) rely on translation or interpretation” (p. 20). Note, however, that there is a third mixed formula: (3) The systematic provision of translation and interpretation services from and into a subset of the recognized languages (multiple *linguae francae* or partial linguistic intermediation). It is exemplified by the language regimes of the college of the European Commission and by the United Nations, with three and six privileged languages, respectively.

2 A pacifying compromise

< 4 >

Let us first consider the effects of the EU's current language regime, as discussed by RINGE in chapter 3. This regime combines a formal equality between all recognized languages and the pragmatic use of (predominantly) English as a *lingua franca*. It originates in the *modus vivendi* adopted by the European Coal and Steel Community (1952), later enshrined in Regulation N° 1 of the European Economic Community (1958). This regulation asserts the formal equality between the (then) four official languages in their legal, representative and symbolic functions.² But its Article 6, by allowing European institutions "to stipulate in their rules of procedure which of the languages are to be used in specific cases", made room for pragmatic considerations in the service of fluid communication and cost containment, with French and later English serving as a *de facto linguae francae* (pp. 85-87).

RINGE persuasively argues that this regime provides a sensible compromise between, on the one hand, legal, representational and symbolic fairness – equality before the law, equal access to political participation for citizens and equal dignity – and on the other efficiency. The former justifies an extensive and expensive use of translation and interpretation services (in legislation, public communication, Council meetings, Parliamentary sessions, etc.), while the latter justifies the ubiquitous use of one or more privileged languages in more or less informal contexts. This compromise is acceptable both to those who would be incensed if a formal hierarchy between languages were established and to those who would be scandalized if expensive interpretation and translation services were used in too many situations in which they serve no practical purpose. It is therefore regarded by most as sufficiently sensible, which prevents the EU language issue from being a hot political topic.

< 5 >

The pacification of this particular EU issue is not the same as the depoliticization of EU politics. Moreover, the cause of pacification is not the multilingual functioning of the EU, but a particular way of organizing it. Linguistic intermediation for all types of interaction or the use of a single language in all communication would equally qualify as forms of multilingual functioning as defined, but would no doubt give rise to fierce contestation. Duly rephrased in this way, RINGE's claim seems to me very plausible, and so do the reflections he adds about how the current consensual compromise may shift in the future, due to a number of exogenous factors. He mentions three of them. I shall briefly discuss them and one more. The trends pushing towards more *lingua franca* I shall call "Erasmus" and "Brexit". Those pushing towards more intermediation I shall call "DeepL" and "Netflix".

2 Interestingly, RINGE (p. 84) mentions that it was lobbying by Belgium that led to the equality regime, because using only French and German would have left out Belgium's third (and main) national language, Dutch. This suggests that it was a concern for the symbolic dimension of parity of esteem, rather than for the representative dimension of equal access to participation or for the legal dimension of equality before the law that was the main driver for the initial adoption of the equality principle: at the time, the ability to participate in politics or read legislation in French was certainly more common among the Flemish (who protested) than among the Dutch and the Italians (who did not).

3 More *lingua franca* ?

<6>

By “Erasmus”, I mean the fast rise in competence in English from generation to generation (noted by RINGE on pp. 106-107) as a result of increased cross-border contact and media exposure.³ Once European citizens with a language other than English as their native language start being able to express their views and read legal texts in English hardly more laboriously (and even sometimes less laboriously) than in their native language, the legal and representational aspects of fairness will not be much better served by general intermediation than by the *lingua franca* regime. Only the symbolic aspect of equal dignity will subsist, and the cost of pursuing it through general intermediation may sensibly be regarded as absurdly high.⁴ When that stage is reached, there would not be anything unacceptable about the exclusive use of English as the language of EU legislation — just as French is accepted as playing that role on its own in today’s Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, for example — despite it being the native language of only a small minority of the population. As RINGE points out (pp. 109-110), it would then have the advantage of legal certainty relative to the current equal authenticity of all linguistic versions. Long before that stage is reached, however, the requirement of translation and interpretation into all official languages could be gradually weakened.

<7>

“Brexit” obviously refers to the dramatic fall in the proportion of native English-speaking European citizens as a result of the UK leaving the European Union. As RINGE (p. 158) insightfully points out, this is likely to lead to some gradual divergence between British English and EU English, partly because of less intense interaction with British citizens within and around the European institutions, and partly because there will henceforth be hardly any native English speaker involved in the drafting of EU legislation and other EU documents. However, as RINGE persuasively argues (pp. 105, 157), Brexit does not weaken, but strengthens the position of English as the EU’s *lingua franca* — for the fairness-based considerations against it are seriously weakened as a result of the UK’s departure, not only because English is no longer the native language of the bulk of the population of one of the EU’s biggest member states, but because it is the language of collective identification of none

3 See the graphs in the 2013 paperback edition of VAN PARIJS (2013: chapter 1) and the interactive website VAN PARIJS (2012) (languageknowledge.eu), both based on self-assessment data collected for the most recent EU’s Special Eurobarometer 386 on Languages (2012). The OECD’s next PISA surveys will incorporate data based on the results of English proficiency tests taken by 15-year-old pupils.

4 In VAN PARIJS (2011: chapter 4), I invite readers to imagine that this degree of proficiency in English is reached throughout Europe, so that the symbolic function of equality between all languages can no longer piggy-back on the legal and representational functions, and I then ask how else linguistic justice as parity of esteem could be served. (My answer is: through the linguistic territoriality principle, which I discuss in the following chapter.) However, I do not believe that this stage has been reached, nor therefore — contrary to what RINGE suggests (pp. 65-66) — that getting rid of intermediation altogether in favour of an exclusive *lingua franca* regime would be more sensible than the present compromise.

of the 27 member states. English featuring as the co-official language of the Republic of Ireland and Malta provides a handy formal ground for keeping it among the EU's official languages. But for the Irish and the Maltese it is the remnant of a colonized past, and for them, like for all other European citizens, it can be considered as a mixture of continental languages imposed through two invasions on the inhabitants of Great Britain, and legitimately reclaimed as Europe's common second language (see VAN PARIJS 2019). No attempt to topple English in favour of French (the European institutions' former dominant language), German (the EU's top native language) or Spanish (more widespread than either worldwide) has the slightest chance of success, as each of them now fares far more poorly than English in terms of fairness no less than in terms of efficiency.

4 More linguistic intermediation?

<8>

There are, however, two other trends that may push the optimal compromise towards more intermediation and less *lingua franca*. The first one is "DeepL", understood as a shortcut for the facilitation of intermediation thanks to technological advances. One aspect is the recent dramatic improvement in the quality of machine translation. Even if professional translators and lawyer-linguists still need to play a role, this technological advance reduces massively the cost of securing a reliable version of legislation and other documents in all official EU languages. It also greatly facilitates access to the press and other documents available online in languages other than one's own — a dimension of EU politics broadly conceived no less important than what is happening within the EU's institutions. A second aspect is the more modest but still impressive progress in machine interpretation (speech to text and speech to speech). Because of the less standardized character of the input, one cannot expect the same level of reliability as in the case of machine translation, but the relevant comparison is with the actual average achievements of human beings who may not all be well-trained interpreters, can often get exhausted, do not always work under optimal conditions and have limited working hours. Again, the impact is not only on formal meetings, but also on casual encounters and on the possibility for citizens to access speeches and broadcasts in languages other than those they know. Finally, there is the possibility of using human interpreters without booths and other equipment thanks to the interpretation option offered by Zoom and other online meeting platforms. RINGE (pp. 107-109) rightly argues that such technological developments will tend to push the optimal compromise towards less use of the *lingua franca*. This will not only be because of a fast decreasing cost-quality ratio of intermediation, but also because of the associated reduction in the need, motivation and opportunity to learn foreign languages, including the *lingua franca*.

<9>

Finally, I would like to also mention "Netflix", used as a shortcut for the fast expansion of easy access to a fast expanding supply of films, documentaries and other visual productions in many languages, often with dubbing and subtitling options. At first sight, this should

boost the potential for learning languages. Abstractly, it does. But the law of least effort affects how this potential is being used. As a result, one can no longer take for granted that millions of European children will effortlessly learn English, as they do now in several Member States, by watching undubbed English films from an early age. If this perverse effect of expanded supply is more than marginal, the “Erasmus” trend may be halted, or at least slowed down.

< 10 >

To sum up: In the light of the evidence he adduces, RINGE’s first claim is plausible enough, but it needs to be rephrased. It is not the fact that the EU needs to function in a multilingual mode, but the particular way in which it does, that produces the effects he describes. And these effects cannot be characterized as the depoliticization of EU politics but rather as the pacification — or, in this special sense, the “depoliticization” — of the particular issue of the EU language regime, thanks to a sensible compromise between fairness and efficiency considerations. The contours of this sensible compromise may shift towards more *lingua franca* as a result of “Erasmus” and “Brexit” or towards more linguistic intermediation as a result of “DeepL” and “Netflix”, and such a shift might temporarily “re-politicize” the EU language issue. But it is likely to happen so gradually that it will hardly be noticed, and it will certainly not consist in dethroning English by another language nor in getting rid of intermediation altogether.

5 Politics defanged

< 11 >

Unlike the first one, RINGE’s second claim is really about the effect of the EU’s multilingual functioning, whether in the form of interaction in a *lingua franca* or in the form of reliance on interpretation and translation. To start with, communication in a *lingua franca*, RINGE points out, is systematically “decultured”, less exciting, less eloquent and less sophisticated than communication in one’s native language, and also less emotional, more deliberative, more abstract, more consequentialist, and it thereby leads to a more empathetic, less passionate, less mobilizing, less ideological, “defanged” form of politics that values content and work more than rhetoric and charisma (see esp. pp. 11, 13, 16, 126-127, 132-133). In support of this claim, RINGE mobilizes experimental literature that suggests that interacting in a nonnative language uses a different part of the brain and tends to be more sensitive to outcomes and less to intentions, more driven by reason and less by emotion than interacting in one’s native language (pp. 115-118). He also backs his claim with quantitative comparison of conversations held about similar topics by nonnative and native speakers of English. For example, in the corpus provided by the samples he analyzed, the former use sentences that are on average about 25% shorter, and their vocabulary is significantly poorer: the same words recur 5.3 times in the nonnative conversations, compared to 4.5 times in the native conversations (pp. 153-154).

< 12 >

However, the bulk of the evidence RINGE invokes in support of his claim is of a qualitative nature: a large number of interviews with people operating in various capacities in the European institutions. According to converging testimonies, people who have to interact in a language that is not their native language are not only more limited in their capacity to express themselves. They also anticipate the limitations of their audiences and speech partners, which further contributes to the adoption of a simpler, more neutral language that avoids idiomatic expressions and puns or formulations that might unintentionally irritate or offend. The overall effect is a blander, more content-focused, more rational, less emotional conversation style, but also a general attitude of greater tolerance and even empathy: Speakers understand that they can easily misunderstand or be misunderstood and appreciate each other's effort to express themselves in a language that is not their best language in order to facilitate communication (see esp. pp. 134-135).

< 13 >

The effect of relying on interpretation is surprisingly similar to the effect of using a *lingua franca*. First of all, there is some neutralization going on, as regards both the choice of expressions and the tone adopted, as a result of interpreters "taking the edge off" the speakers' messages (pp. 167-168). More importantly, people used to being interpreted tend to adjust the way they speak so as to make the interpreters' job less difficult. As a result, "non-native language and interpretations are closer to each other than each is to native language" (p. 170). Whether in the case of nonnative or interpreted speech, however, it is misleading to describe the effect in the way RINGE does, as "depoliticization", or as refraining from "advancing political agendas" (pp. 113, 159). Politics is still conducted and political agendas are being advanced but, as RINGE convincingly suggests, in a different, "defanged", less emotional, but not necessarily less effective way.

< 14 >

The effect of the systematic use of translation and of its anticipation, as insightfully analyzed by RINGE, is quite different. Texts intended for translation are usually the product of lengthy interaction, and one can therefore not expect translation itself to have the same taming effect as nonnative speaking and interpretation. But the fact that EU legislation and other official documents need to be translated into all official languages (other than the one in which they were drafted) affects significantly the drafting itself. Because of the principles of supremacy and direct effect of EU law, all linguistic versions of EU legislation must be considered equally authentic. It is therefore important that intentional and unintentional ambiguities should be detected and, as far as possible, removed from the original version (p. 181). After Brexit even more than before, only a minority of the negotiators of the original versions — now nearly always in English — are native speakers of the language in which they are drafted. Therefore, lawyer-linguists are increasingly involved from the start in the drafting of the texts so as to anticipate translation difficulties and reduce the probability of needing to correct the original version so as to align it with the translations (pp. 144, 178-179).

< 15 >

This, too, can have a significant impact on the law-making dimension of politics in the EU, but again not one that could be readily described as “depoliticization”. It forces drafters to clarify the meaning of their texts more than they would have needed to do — and could get away with doing — in a monolingual national context, and it is therefore likely to occasionally raise political issues that would otherwise remain hidden. It also forces them to care, with the expert assistance of translators, about the way in which legal texts will be interpreted in national environments quite different from their own. No depoliticization, but a political practice that needs to constantly anticipate that what is being decided must translate into a large number of languages and the corresponding political contexts, and therefore requires from negotiators not only a symmetric effort to reach the best possible compromise, but also a joint effort to secure the multilateral translatability of the way this compromise is phrased.

6 So much the better !

< 16 >

In the light of this discussion, *The Language(s) of Politics* can best be understood as making two claims. Firstly, the EU has succeeded in settling on a combination of intermediation and *lingua franca* that manages its linguistic diversity in a way that provides such a reasonable compromise between fairness and efficiency that it is, for the time being, stable and consensual. Secondly, whether it uses a *lingua franca* or linguistic intermediation, a politics that needs to take linguistic diversity into account is structurally driven to significantly differ from monolingual national politics, owing mainly to the “defanging” effect of having to use a *lingua franca* or interpretation, but also owing to a shared concern for adopting legislation that means the same in all the languages into which it needs to be translated. Both claims are interesting and important, and they are persuasively argued for in this well-informed, neatly composed book. But neither amounts to establishing that a multilingual functioning depoliticizes politics. It is rather shown to lead to a somewhat less rhetorical, less emotional, more boring, but also perhaps somewhat gentler politics. So much the better!

7 References

- EUROPEAN UNION (2012). *Europeans and their languages*. Special Eurobarometer 386. Luxembourg, Publications Office. NC-03-13-176-EN-N.
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f551bd64-8615-4781-9be1-c592217dad83>.
- VAN PARIJS, Philippe (2011, 2013). *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- [VAN PARIJS, Philippe (2013). *Sprachengerechtigkeit für Europa und die Welt*. Berlin, Suhrkamp.]
- VAN PARIJS, Philippe (2019). "Give us back our language!". *Die Zeit*, 11 May 2019.
www.zeit.de/politik/2019-05/englische-sprache-europa-demokratie-philippe-van-parijs-english.
- VAN PARYS, Jonathan (2012). *The most spoken languages in Europe*. Brussels & London.
<https://languageknowledge.eu/>.

Nils Ringe

The Language(s) of Politics. Multilingual policy-making in the European Union.

Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2022.

ISBN 978-0-472-07513-3 (hardcover), 978-0-472-05513-5 (paper), 978-0-472-90273-6 (open access). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12080141>.
