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On the Road to Linguistic Equality? Irish and Maltese as Official EU Languages

Abstract

Although the Republic of Ireland and Malta have English as an official language, both countries have ensured that their co-official languages, Irish and Maltese, are also recognised at European Union (EU) level. Yet, lacking a tradition as international conference languages, the road to linguistic equality in the EU institutions has not been straightforward. This article examines the motivation underpinning EU recognition of Irish and Maltese, before analysing how this change of status has been implemented.

Key words: Irish, Maltese, European Union, multilingualism, language policy

Introduction

Following the Brexit referendum of June 2016, the expected departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union has meant that of the twenty-seven remaining member states, the only countries with English as an official language will be the Republic of Ireland and Malta. However, both countries

are bilingual polities, an issue which was the source of scurrilous, quickly scotched rumours that English would no longer be an official EU language after the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the organisation (Boyle, 2016; Guarascio, 2016). Yet, despite their long histories in Malta and the Republic of Ireland, both Maltese and Irish are relatively recent additions to the family of official EU languages, having gained this status only in 2004 and 2007 respectively. With the ever-increasing dominance of English on the global stage, it is timely and important to examine not only how less commonly spoken languages such as Irish and Maltese have managed to gain prestige and recognition on the European stage, but also how these languages have managed, through official EU status, to gain equality with major international conference languages such as English and French.

As part of a wider project examining the translation and conference interpreting professions in the Republic of Ireland (Hoyte-West, 2019; Hoyte-West, under consideration), this article seeks – in a preliminary manner – to analyse the factors underpinning the motivation behind the recognition of Irish and Maltese as official languages of the European Union, and their ensuing implementation in its institutions. This will be done initially by providing a brief overview of the common features between the Republic of Ireland and Malta, before outlining the importance of multilingualism in the EU context. Subsequently, the historical and sociocultural reasons for Irish and Maltese becoming EU official languages will be analysed in greater detail, before examining the ways and means that both languages have become integrated into the EU institutions.

The Republic of Ireland and Malta – an overview

At first glance, the Republic of Ireland and Malta may appear to have little in common. Yet, a deeper analysis reveals a number of shared characteristics. Both countries are islands – in the case of the Republic of Ireland, the island

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of Ireland is shared with Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom. In European terms, both the Republic of Ireland and Malta are relatively small in terms of population, with around 4.5 million and 450,000 people respectively. Indeed, in the case of Malta, it is the EU's smallest member state, both with reference to population and to land area (European Union, 2019a). Both countries, too, are situated geographically at the periphery of the European continent, with the Republic of Ireland situated on the Atlantic fringe, and Malta located in the southern Mediterranean.

In addition, both countries possess distinctive linguistic and cultural identities. The Republic of Ireland has Irish, a member of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European languages that is related to Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton. It is an ancient language with a strong literary and cultural pedigree, yet was subsequently marginalised by English (Anderson, 1991, p. 78). However, as the first official language of the Republic, in legal terms Irish currently enjoys precedence over English. In the case of Maltese, it is the only Semitic language represented among the EU's official languages, and together with Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian, also represents the non-Indo-European official languages. Although written in Latin letters like the majority of other EU official languages, Maltese is closely related to Arabic, especially from the Maghreb; however, the country's location at the crossroads of the Mediterranean means that its language has been subject to many other outside influences, most notably from Italian and English (Badia i Capdevila, 2004).

Both languages can be considered as less widely spoken languages given that there are fewer than half a million native speakers of Maltese (The Economist 2015), and, in addition, despite the uncertainty regarding the exact number of native speakers of Irish, UNESCO (2011) classes the language as 'definitely endangered'. The presence of English as one of the official languages of both countries attests to past colonisation by the United Kingdom, which, in the case of Ireland lasted for several centuries, and for Malta, lasted just over a century and a half. As one of the most enduring legacies of British rule, the coexistence of English with the local languages has led to prolonged

language contact which has affected all levels of society. Thus, in the Republic of Ireland – and especially so in Malta (Camilleri, 1996) – there is a long tradition of multilingualism and code-switching, which influences all of the languages concerned.

Multilingualism in the European Union

Having gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1922 (the Republic of Ireland, as the 'Irish Free State') and 1964 (Malta) respectively, both countries joined the European Union in 1973 (the Republic of Ireland) and 2004 (Malta) respectively. In accordance with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the EU has had the concepts of multilingualism and linguistic equality at its core since its foundation. Since those early days, however, the number of languages has increased from four (Dutch, French, German, and Italian) to 24 (Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish), with Croatian being the newest addition in 2013 (European Union, 2019b). At present, three different alphabets (Cyrillic, Greek, and Latin) are represented, as are languages from the Celtic, Finno-Ugric, Germanic, Hellenic, Romance, Slavonic, and Semitic linguistic families.

Under the principles of linguistic equality, citizens of the EU have the right to use any of the abovementioned official languages in correspondence with the EU institutions (European Commission, 2019). For ease, given the wide range of languages covered, certain EU institutions have designated certain languages as working languages – for example, the European Commission has recognised English, French, and German in this regard (Quell, 1997). EU regulations and legislation, however, are required to be made available in all 24 official languages. In the European Parliament, MEPs can speak in any of the 24 official languages during plenary sessions, leading to over 500 possible language combinations for the interpreting services to manage.

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Consequently, the volume and combination of languages requires a large cadre of trained linguists, and the responsibility falls to staff and freelance translators and conference interpreters (European Parliament, 2019). Whereas several EU member states have a long tradition of providing translation and interpreting provision at the domestic level, this was not necessarily the case for some of the others. This was especially so with regard to some of the smaller EU member states, such as Latvia (EU Interpreters, 2013), whose languages had historically not previously been used as international conference languages. The same too, was true of Irish and Maltese, as English, being a major global language, had been traditionally used by the Republic of Ireland and Malta on the international stage.

Research questions and methodology

Building on the abovementioned overview, it was decided to investigate the impetus and rationale for the Republic of Ireland and Malta's decision to have Irish and Maltese accorded full EU official status. Hence, the following research questions were advanced:

i. What were the historical and sociocultural reasons for the governments of the Republic of Ireland and Malta to seek recognition for Irish and Maltese at the EU level?

and

ii. How has this recognition of Irish and Maltese as official EU languages been implemented in the EU institutions?

Given the preliminary nature of the study, it was decided to conduct a literature-based analysis, focusing on English-language resources. The sources consisted primarily of the online archives of newspapers and journals, supplemented with relevant official EU resources. However, the limitations of this approach were clearly apparent; in ideal circumstances, there would have the opportunity to conduct interviews with relevant national and European officials and policymakers in Dublin, Valletta, and Brussels. In addition,

in order to gain access to potentially useful materials written in languages other than English, there would also have been the necessary investment of time to gain sufficient reading knowledge of Irish and Maltese for research purposes. Nonetheless, given the dearth of previous research in the area and the pioneering nature of the topic, it was felt that a literature-based approach would still provide a good preliminary overview of the issue, and thus provide a solid basis for further work.

Results of the analysis

The sources were analysed in line with the different research questions. As such, with regard to the historical and cultural reasons for the governmental impetus to recognise Irish and Maltese, it is important to note that language is a key marker of national identity (Anderson, 1991, pp. 67–68). Having gained independence in the 20th century, both the Republic of Ireland and Malta are comparatively young nation states. Hence, language plays a role both in advancing national consciousness and in differentiation from the colonial overlords. By opting for the elevation of Irish and Maltese to EU level, the governments have sent a clear signal that, although they may share some aspects of their heritage and language with the United Kingdom, both countries, nonetheless, have their own language, heritage, and history that is independent of the former colonial power.

This aspect is closely interlinked with the implementation of Irish and Maltese as official languages. Initially, both countries had requested English as their sole official language for interactions with and recognition by the EU, an approach which had been espoused by the Republic of Ireland since joining the EU in 1973, where Irish was used only on formal occasions such as signing a major treaty (Truchot, 2003, p. 103). On beginning its negotiations to join the European Union, Malta too seemed to follow a similar approach; however, during the accession negotiations, the Maltese government requested official EU status for Maltese. Correspondingly, this led to discussions in the Republic of Ireland regarding potential official EU status for Irish (Murphy, 2008).

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Initially, both languages were subject to derogations on their use in the EU institutions. The derogation for Maltese lasted for three years following Malta's entry to the EU, and ended in 2007, the same year that Irish became an official EU language and its derogation entered into force (Morgan, 2015). The primary reason for both derogations was the challenge of recruiting suitably qualified translators and interpreters, thus guaranteeing quality of linguistic provision. Consequently, there was increased cooperation with relevant training programmes at universities in both countries. In addition, due to the lack of conference interpreting provision in the Republic of Ireland and Malta, the first Irish and Maltese interpreters were actually trained in London at the University of Westminster (European Commission, 2007a; 2007b). Following this initial step, however, suitable training programmes in conference interpreting were founded at the universities of Malta and the National University of Ireland, Galway (University of Malta, 2019; de Rioja 2012). Given that all speakers of Irish are native speakers of English, and also bearing in mind the high level of English language proficiency in Malta, the demands on translators and interpreters working with Irish and Maltese are considerable. Building on the sociocultural factors outlined above, it can be argued that the high degree of contact between both languages and English means that, when translating and interpreting, a premium is placed on avoiding code-switching and other common lexical and grammatical interferences that may arise due to bilingualism and language contact.

Although Maltese has, in theory, been fully implemented in the EU institutions since the derogation was lifted in 2007, in practice things have not always run smoothly. In 2013, a notable example was the case of the MEP Joseph Muscat beginning a speech in Maltese only to find that no interpretation had been provided. As shown in video footage (Sammut, 2013), his angry response to the situation and subsequent refusal to give his speech in another language thus illustrates the importance of language equality within the European Union institutions.

For Irish, however, the situation remains incomplete, given that it is still subject to derogation. In 2015 the MEP Liadh Ní Riada highlighted the lack

of full provision by speaking solely in Irish for a whole week in the European Parliament, even though the necessary interpretation services were not available (Ryan, 2015). However, it is important to note that attempts have been made towards meeting these requirements. Indeed, the first EU staff interpreter with active Irish has been recruited (EU Interpreters, 2018), and according to the European Commission, the derogation on the use of Irish in the European Institutions will be lifted on 1 January 2022, and it will subsequently enjoy the same status as any other official language of the European Union (European Parliament, 2018).

Conclusions and suggestions for further research

Building on the findings outlined above, analysis of relevant resources has highlighted the numerous similarities between the Irish and Maltese experiences with regard to their historical and sociocultural contexts. In addition, it has been noted that the recognition of both languages as official languages of the European Union has been important in highlighting the unique linguistic and cultural heritage of both countries. However, both Irish and Maltese have had problems in gaining linguistic equality due to derogations on their use in the EU institutions. Furthermore, both languages have suffered similar challenges regarding the provision of relevant translation and interpreting services, due primarily to the lack of relevant personnel and training opportunities. However, the development of suitable training courses at the domestic level has managed to largely remedy the shortfall of translators and interpreters. As such, with the lifting of its derogation in 2007, Maltese currently enjoys parity with the official EU languages. In the case of Irish, the wait is still not over but the future remains very optimistic.

As suggested in the methodology section, the limitations inherent in a purely literature-based approach could be removed by gaining additional empirical data through interviews and surveys. In addition, as the linguistic

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diversity of the European Union continues to gain greater prominence, the preliminary findings outlined here regarding Irish and Maltese may be transferable to other case studies. A potential example is Luxembourgish, which, although one of Luxembourg's three official languages, is nonetheless not an official language of the European Union. However, building on its domestic success, there are growing initiatives to have it recognised as an official EU language (Euractiv, 2018). Should this happen, it is hoped that the information gathered here regarding the Irish and Maltese experiences will potentially be of relevance when conducting comparative analyses.

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