

Europe in Translation: Multilingualism in Theory and Practice

On April 4, 2019, Jean Monnet Chair Nils Ringe and Professor of Slavic, Comparative Literature and Visual Culture Tomislav Longinović hosted a workshop titled “Europe in Translation: Multilingualism in Theory and Practice” on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. This multidisciplinary symposium brought together scholars and practitioners from the social sciences and humanities who research the impact of linguistic diversity on European politics, identity, and culture. Starting from diverse methodologies and disciplinary postulations, the participants examined the way in which European politics and cultures are affected by multilingualism, foreign language use, and translation, both inside and outside the institutional framework of the European Union (EU).

Liana Muntean from the University of Birmingham (UK) kicked off the event with a presentation on persuasiveness and power at the Court of Justice of the European Union. Her research examines the written opinions of the Court’s Advocates General (AG), which after the EU’s 2004 enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe are drafted in a limited number of languages – and not necessarily in the AG’s mother tongues. Muntean’s talk was part of a panel on “Multilingualism in the Institutions of the European Union,” which also involved a detailed account of Nils Ringe’s research on multilingual politics and policy-making in the EU’s core institutions: the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Court of Justice. His presentation drew extensively from his book manuscript on the topic, which argues that multilingualism *depoliticizes* EU politics and policy-making. Both the use of shared foreign languages for direct communication and the reliance of EU actors on translation services make the language(s) of politics in EU policy-making more simple, utilitarian, and pragmatic, such that language merely serves as an instrument for communication, as opposed to a political tool used in pursuit of particular political agendas. They also compel EU actors to depend on widely shared expressions, commonly used linguistic constructs, and a customized terminology, which entails a standardization of language: users are less distinguishable based on what they say or write. Finally, reliance on shared non-native languages and the EU’s language services make the language of politics in the EU neutral, decultured, and de-ideologized, such that it is less indicative of EU actors’ national and political backgrounds, preferences, and priorities. The very nature and flavor of politics and policy-making in the EU, Ringe argued, are thus affected by its multilingual character, in ways both subtle and profound.

The next panel, on “Foreignness in Translation,” featured presentations by Boaz Keysar (University of Chicago) and Natasa Kovacevic (Eastern Michigan University). In his presentation, titled “Living in a Foreign Tongue,” Keysar provided an overview of his extensive experimental research in the field of psychology, which demonstrates that people make systematically different decisions in a foreign language compared to their native tongue. In other words, the language in which information is delivered affects people’s choices independent of the content of the message. Keysar’s presentation illustrated that the use of a foreign language has notable implications for decision-making by affecting, for example, how people deal with risks, make inferences, and even their moral judgments. Following Keysar, Kovacevic offered insights into

one particular example of “living in a foreign tongue” in her presentation on “Transnationalism on the Margins: Translating Migrant Experiences in the New Europe.”

The first of two afternoon panels – “Multilingualism: The Theoreticians’ View” – provided detailed consideration of theoretical issues in the study of multilingualism in the humanities. Jacques Lezra (University of California-Riverside) investigated the topic of “untranslatability” and the challenges it entails, while the presentation by Dragan Kujundzic (University of Florida) on “Trace, Translation, Deconstruction” focused on French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his theory of “deconstruction,” which questions the idea of absolute truth.

The final panel of the day offered a “Practitioners’ View” of multilingualism. The first presentation was by Francis Jacobs, whose long and storied career as an official in the European Parliament offered intriguing insights into the “evolving practice” of language use in “the world’s most multilingual Parliament.” Ellen Elias-Bursac provided similarly fascinating accounts of how translation and interpretation shaped the work of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, where she herself worked as a translator.

To end the proceedings, Tomislav Longinović joined Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University) – the acclaimed translator from French into English of classics such as Alexis de Tocqueville’s “The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution” and “Democracy in America” and, more recently, of Thomas Picketty’s “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” – in summarizing and taking stock of the lessons of the day. Their discussion highlighted the value of bringing together an interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners around the topics of language, translation, politics, and culture, and brought a fruitful and engaging day of intellectual discourse to a close.

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