

THE DYNAMICS OF MULTILINGUALISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: EVIDENCE FROM EUROBAROMETER SURVEYS

Edina VÁRNAGY

*¹Department of World Economy and International Business, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of World Economy and International Relations, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary
varnagy.edina@econ.unideb.hu*

Abstract: *This study examines the evolution of multilingualism in the European Union using data from the three waves of the European Commission's Europeans and their Languages survey conducted in 2005, 2012 and 2024. The surveys provide representative, self-reported data and use a largely comparable set of questions across waves, making it possible to analyse changes in multilingualism over time. The study adopts a repeated cross-sectional design and combines descriptive and regression-based analysis to examine the overall trends in multilingualism and its distribution across socio-demographic groups. In addition to documenting changes in the proportion of respondents who report speaking at least one, two or three foreign languages, the paper investigates the persistence of language inequalities across age, education, and occupational groups, with particular attention to younger cohorts. The results show that multilingualism increased in the European Union over the period under review, although the pace of growth slowed in the later period. At the same time, substantial inequalities in language skills persist and have changed only modestly over time. Higher levels of education and more advantaged occupational positions are consistently associated with better language outcomes, while generational differences appear to have narrowed modestly. Overall, the findings largely confirm the main patterns identified in the existing literature, while also providing updated evidence based on recent EU-wide survey data. The findings suggest that the progress in multilingualism has been uneven and that improvements in overall language proficiency have not eliminated persistent social disparities. By drawing on high-quality EU survey data, this study contributes to the literature by offering an updated comparative perspective on the development of multilingualism and its social stratification within the European Union.*

Keywords: *economics of languages; multilingualism; foreign language proficiency*

JEL Classification: *Z13; O52*

1. Introduction

Multilingualism has long been regarded as one of the European Union's core values and a major policy priority, dating back to the beginnings of European integration. One of its central aims has been to enable citizens to participate fully in European public life in their mother tongue while also developing proficiency in foreign languages and safeguarding linguistic diversity (European Commission, 2026a). The European Union represents a unique linguistic space, characterised by an exceptional concentration of languages within a single political and economic

framework (Romaine, 2013). In addition to its current 24 official languages, more than 60 regional or minority languages are also present (European Commission, 2026b).

At the same time, EU multilingualism policy has long embodied a dual logic, in which multilingualism appears both as a normative value and as an economic resource (Dendrinos, 2018). The literature has pointed out that this duality creates ambiguity in EU language policy, generating tensions in both the design and implementation of relevant strategies (Leech, 2017; Dendrinos, 2018). Despite the formal equality of languages, the literature has extensively documented the presence of linguistic hierarchies within the European Union (Els, 2005). Although there are 24 official languages with equal formal status, English, French, and German enjoy a clear predominance (Dendrinos, 2018). The distinction between working languages and official languages has tried to make it easier to manage linguistic issues within the Union (Marác–Adamo, 2017). Sayers and Láncoş (2017) describe this as a multilevel language hierarchy, in which certain languages have acquired a privileged status. Within this system, the dominance of English is especially evident, pointing in a direction that runs counter to the EU's declared objective of multilingualism. Romaine (2013) interprets this phenomenon as hegemonic multilingualism, referring to the persistence of hierarchical relations alongside linguistic diversity.

At the same time, the extent to which multilingualism has expanded across the EU population remains an empirical question, particularly when differences between social groups are also taken into account. This study examines the development of multilingualism in the European Union using data from the 2005, 2012 and 2024 waves of the Eurobarometer survey Europeans and their languages (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025). It investigates not only broad trends in multilingualism, but also how language proficiency has evolved across different social groups. In doing so, the study contributes to the literature by providing updated comparative evidence and by confirming and refining the main findings of earlier research based on representative Eurobarometer data.

2. Literature review

Although multilingualism has long been promoted as a core European value, the literature points to a persistent tension between its normative framing and its economic function (Dendrinos, 2018; Leech, 2017). This tension became particularly visible after the period often described as the “golden age” of multilingualism between 2007 and 2010 (Gazzola, 2016a), followed by a partial loss of momentum after 2014 (Leech, 2017). More recent policy documents, including the 2019 Council Recommendation, reaffirm the “mother tongue plus two languages” objective (Council of the European Union, 2019; European Commission, 2016c), yet several authors argue that such goals remain broad and tend in practice to favour languages with greater economic weight (Sayers–Láncoş, 2017). This raises the question of the extent to which multilingualism has actually spread across European societies, and whether the distribution of language competences can be regarded as equal across different social groups.

The available empirical evidence suggests that high levels of foreign-language proficiency are still not particularly widespread in Europe (Gazzola, 2016b). The range of foreign languages acquired within education systems is highly concentrated (Salinas, 2021) and, much like the EU's working-language structure, is dominated

by English, German, and French, while other languages are less widespread (Dendrinos, 2018). According to Costa and Albergaria-Almeida (2015), proficiency outcomes are substantially weaker in second foreign languages than in first foreign languages: while 42% of students reached the B1–B2 level in their first foreign language, only 25% did so in their second. These findings call into question the practical feasibility of the EU’s “mother tongue plus two languages” objective.

The literature also emphasises that multilingualism is closely intertwined with social and economic inequality. Linguistic hierarchies not only shape the status of languages but also contribute to unequal access to economic and social opportunities (Romaine, 2013). Barakos and Selleck (2018) argue that language proficiency can be interpreted as a form of linguistic investment that contributes to the acquisition or reinforcement of social position, while “elite multilingualism” functions as a gatekeeping mechanism for access to higher-status groups (Barakos–Selleck, 2018). At the same time, language skills operate as an economic resource (Araújo et al., 2015), yet access to the benefits associated with them remains uneven. Foreign-language proficiency is linked to improved income and employability, especially at higher levels (Araújo et al., 2015), but socially disadvantaged groups are less likely to possess such competences (Gazzola, 2016a).

Overall, the literature is not uniform in its assessment of the extent to which EU multilingualism policies have contributed to the spread of language proficiency. One reason for this is that the EU primarily formulates recommendations, while implementation remains the responsibility of the member states, resulting in substantial variation (Dendrinos, 2018). Earlier waves of the Eurobarometer indicate that younger generations are more likely to possess knowledge of multiple foreign languages (Araújo et al., 2015), but this does not necessarily imply a reduction in inequalities (Gazzola, 2016a). It is also important to note that previous research has already highlighted the tension between the EU’s multilingualism narratives and actual language practices (Els, 2005). Against this background, it is particularly important to examine the extent to which multilingualism has spread over the past two decades and whether this expansion has affected different social groups equally. The present study addresses this question through a comparative analysis of the 2005, 2012, and 2024 Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025).

3. Materials and methods

This analysis uses three waves of the European Commission’s Europeans and Their Languages survey, conducted in 2005, 2012, and 2024. This repeated cross-sectional survey provides a suitable basis for examining the longer-term development of multilingualism in the European Union, particularly in the post-enlargement period. The selected waves are broadly comparable in methodological terms, as they contain closely aligned questions on foreign-language proficiency.

The data were obtained from the archive of the GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025). The present study relies on individual-level microdata rather than aggregated Eurobarometer results in order to analyse both the prevalence of foreign-language proficiency and its distribution across socio-demographic groups. The three datasets include 29,328 respondents in 2005, 26,751 in 2012, and 26,478 in 2024. EU-level descriptive estimates were calculated

using the aggregate weights provided for each survey wave. Accordingly, the 2005 figures refer to the EU25 context of that period, while later waves reflect the corresponding aggregate populations of their own survey years.

The main dependent variables are derived from respondents' first, second, and third foreign languages spoken well enough to hold a conversation. These individual-level responses were used to construct harmonised measures of multilingualism across survey waves, including the number of foreign languages spoken and indicators for speaking at least one, two, or three foreign languages. Invalid and non-substantive codes were excluded based on the original survey documentation. Socio-economic variables were harmonised across waves in order to ensure comparability. Occupation was recoded into broader categories based on a consistent mapping of the original classifications: self-employed, managers, other white-collar workers, manual workers, house persons, unemployed, retired, and students (Eurobarometer, 2024). Age was included as a continuous variable and, for descriptive purposes, was also grouped into four categories (15–24, 25–39, 40–54, and 55+). Education required separate harmonisation. The original Eurobarometer records the age at which respondents completed full-time education and distinguishes special categories such as “still studying” and “no full-time education”. Rather than treating this measure as purely continuous, education was recoded into five categories: low, medium, high, no full-time education, and still studying. Educational attainment was classified according to the age at completion of formal education, with low defined as 15 years or below, medium as 16–19 years, and high as 20 years or above. This specification preserves important institutional and life-course differences.

4. Results

4.1. Results of the descriptive statistics

Wave-specific EU-level descriptive estimates indicate a moderate increase in foreign-language proficiency over time between 2005 and 2024. As shown in Table 1, the average number of foreign languages spoken rose from 0.77 to 0.97, while the share of respondents speaking at least one foreign language increased from 49.1% to 59.2%. A similar pattern can be observed for higher levels of multilingualism. These estimates are consistent with the official wave-specific Eurobarometer aggregates (Eurobarometer, 2024).

The growth in the share of those speaking at least three foreign languages is particularly noteworthy, as it points to an increase in higher-level multilingualism from 6.7% to 10.8%. These findings suggest that the general level of foreign-language proficiency in Europe has improved, although the pace of change should be characterised as gradual rather than dramatic.

The age breakdown shows a clear and stable pattern. In each survey year, younger respondents speak more foreign languages on average than older age groups. Among those aged 15–24, the average number of foreign languages spoken increased from 1.12 in 2005, to 1.22 in 2012 and to 1.31 in 2024, while older cohorts also showed improvement over time. Although absolute differences narrowed somewhat, the generational advantage of younger respondents remained in place. Among those aged 55 and over, average foreign-language proficiency rose from 0.53, then 0.61 to 0.74. This suggests that younger cohorts continue to benefit from more favourable opportunities and institutional conditions for language learning.

Occupational status also emerges as an important structuring factor in foreign-language proficiency. Higher-status groups, especially managers and other white-collar workers, consistently speak substantially more foreign languages than lower-status groups in every survey year (Eurobarometer, 2024).

A descriptive breakdown by education reveals a strong and persistent gradient in foreign-language proficiency. In all three survey waves, respondents with higher educational attainment reported substantially more foreign languages than those in the lower-education groups (Table 1). The average number of foreign languages spoken in the high-education group was 1.24 in 2005, 1.34 in 2012, and 1.39 in 2024, compared with only 0.25, 0.30, and 0.32 in the low-education group. This gap did not narrow over time; if anything, it widened slightly. While foreign-language proficiency increased modestly among the highly educated, gains among the lower-education groups remained limited, suggesting that the expansion of multilingualism has been socially uneven.

Table 1: Foreign-language proficiency by education group, 2005–2024.

	2005	2012	2024
Low	0.25	0.30	0.33
Medium	0.66	0.75	0.73
High	1.24	1.34	1.39

Source: Own calculations based on Eurobarometer microdata (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025)

The education-based patterns shown in Figure 1. also show earlier findings on the difficulty of achieving the EU’s “mother tongue plus two languages” objective.

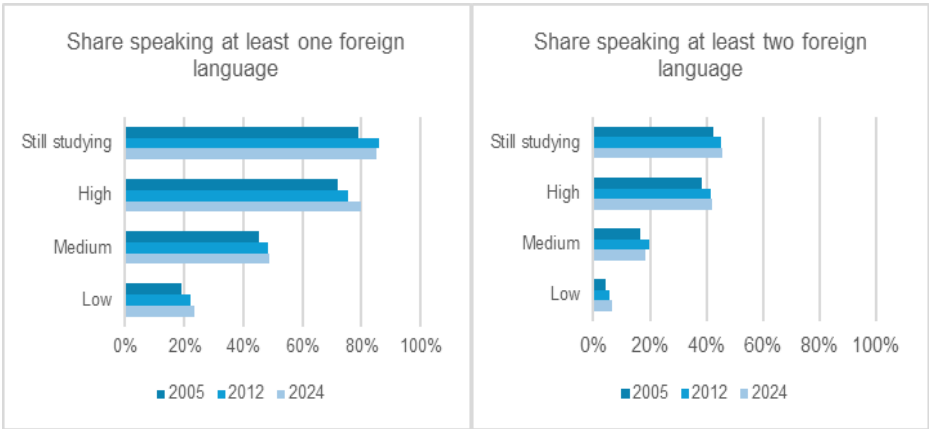


Figure 1: Educational differences in foreign language proficiency, 2005–2024
Source: Own calculations based on Eurobarometer microdata (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025)

Although the share speaking at least one foreign language is comparatively high among medium-and high-education groups (49% and 80% in 2024), the proportion speaking at least two foreign languages is substantially lower (18% and 42% in 2024), especially among respondents with lower educational attainment. According

to the reported figure, this gap did not narrow over the period under review and may even have widened slightly. Taken together, these results suggest that the expansion of foreign-language proficiency has been concentrated primarily among the more highly educated.

4.2. Results of the regression analysis

The OLS estimates broadly confirm the descriptive patterns. Relative to the reference category of respondents who are still studying, lower levels of education are associated with substantially weaker foreign-language outcomes. The coefficients for no full-time education, low education, and medium education are all negative and highly significant. Age also shows a consistently negative association with foreign-language proficiency. By contrast, managers, other white-collar workers, the self-employed, and students report significantly better outcomes than the reference occupational category of house persons, while manual workers do not differ significantly from the reference group.

Table 3: Determinants of the number of foreign languages spoken (OLS estimates)

	(1)
Managers	0.268***
	(0.015)
Manual workers	-0.008
	(0.014)
Other white collars	0.117***
	(0.014)
Self-employed	0.163***
	(0.017)
Age	-0.005***
	(0.000)
Education: No full-time	-0.755***
	(0.042)
Education: Low	-0.763***
	(0.010)
Education: Medium	-0.474***
	(0.008)
Year: 2012	0.119***
	(0.007)
Year: 2024	0.106***
	(0.007)
Observations	75377
R ²	0.292

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Notes: Weighted OLS estimates. Standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects and survey-year dummies included. Reference categories: occupation = house persons; education = still studying; survey year = 2005

Source: Own calculations based on Eurobarometer microdata (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; European Commission and European Parliament, 2025)

The logistic models reinforce the same core patterns. Relative to the reference category of respondents who are still studying, lower levels of education are associated with substantially lower odds of foreign-language proficiency. In particular, respondents in the low-education group have odds ratios of 0.139 for speaking at least one foreign language and 0.122 for speaking at least two, while the corresponding values for the medium-education group are 0.337 and 0.378. Age is negatively associated with language outcomes: odds ratios of 0.982 for speaking at least one foreign language and 0.989 for speaking at least two indicate that foreign-language proficiency declines with age. Managers and self-employed respondents show significantly more favourable outcomes than the reference occupational category of house persons, whereas manual workers do not differ significantly from the reference group. The positive year coefficients further suggest that the probability of speaking foreign languages was higher in both 2012 and 2024 than in 2005, even after controlling for socio-demographic composition and country fixed effects.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how foreign-language proficiency evolved in the European Union between 2005 and 2024 and whether the expansion of multilingualism was accompanied by a reduction in social inequalities. The results show that multilingualism increased over the period under review, but only moderately. Foreign-language proficiency improved across the EU population, yet the pace of change was slower between 2012 and 2024 than between 2005 and 2012. These results are consistent with the official wave-specific Eurobarometer aggregates (Eurobarometer, 2024). At the same time, language skills remained strongly socially stratified. Both the descriptive and regression results indicate that foreign-language proficiency is closely associated with age, educational attainment, and occupational status. In particular, higher levels of education and more advantaged social positions are consistently linked to better language outcomes. These findings suggest that the expansion of multilingualism has been gradual, but socially uneven.

The results point to a persistent tension between the EU's multilingual ambitions and the social distribution of actual language competences. Although multilingualism remains one of the most inclusive language regimes in the European context (Gazzola, 2016b), the relationship between linguistic diversity and social participation is not straightforward; rather, it is multidimensional and contradictory (Marác and Adamo, 2017). This implies that the promotion of multilingualism cannot be treated merely as a symbolic commitment to linguistic diversity, but must also address the social inequalities that shape access to language learning.

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