

M3 U6

THE LANGUAGES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION



INTRODUCTION

Did you know that the European Union has 24 official languages and more than 60 regional or minority languages?

How do these languages, which belong to different families, coexist? What are their similarities and differences?

We will explore the major language families, their connections, and what makes each language unique.

I. THE MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

1. Romance (Latin) languages

Origin: Derived from Latin, the language of the Roman Empire.

Examples: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian.

Similarities:

Shared vocabulary (e.g. **liberté** in French, **libertad** in Spanish, **libertà** in Italian)

Comparable grammatical systems (**masculine** and **feminine genders, verb conjugations**)

Distinctive features:

Romanian has retained a case system (influenced by Slavic languages).

French uses nasal vowels (*bon, vin*) and liaisons.

I. THE MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

2. Germanic languages

Origin: Derived from dialects originally spoken by Germanic peoples in Northern Europe.

Examples: German, Dutch, English, Swedish, Danish.

Similarities:

Verb-second word order in many contexts

Use of compound words (e.g. '**Vollmilchschokolade**' in German = milk chocolate)

Distinctive features:

English has largely simplified its inflectional system but retains a very rich vocabulary.

Icelandic, which is close to Old Norse, has changed relatively little.

I. THE MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

3. Slavic languages

Origin: Derived from Old Slavic, historically spoken in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Examples: Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, Slovenian, Croatian.

Similarities:

Use of the Latin alphabet (**Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Croatian**) or the Cyrillic alphabet (**Bulgarian**)

Complex case systems (for example, seven cases in Czech)

Distinctive features:

Czech and Slovak are closely related and are largely mutually intelligible.

Czech and Slovak use diacritics to indicate vowel length (e.g. **á**) or consonant softening (e.g. **č**).

Polish features complex consonant clusters (e.g. **szcz**).

I. THE MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

4. *Baltic languages*

Origin: An ancient Indo-European branch, closely related to Slavic languages.

Examples: Lithuanian, Latvian.

Distinctive features:

Lithuanian preserves many archaic Indo-European features and is often considered to be one of the closest living languages to **Sanskrit**.

Latvian uses pitch accent to distinguish meaning.

I. THE MAJOR LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

5. Other families

Celtic languages: Irish, Scottish Gaelic (spoken by minorities but protected).

Finno-Ugric languages: Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian (structurally very different from Indo-European languages).

Isolates: Greek (its own branch of Indo-European), Basque (a pre-Indo-European language).

II. LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

1. Alphabets and sounds

Latin alphabet: Used by most languages, with variations (e.g. **ñ** in Spanish, **ø** in Danish).

Greek alphabet: Used in Greece and Cyprus.

Cyrillic alphabet: Used in Bulgaria.

Notable sounds:

The English **th** (as in **think**)

The rolled **r** in Spanish and Italian

The Czech **ř**

The Slovak long **í**

II. LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS

2. Grammar and syntax

Inflected languages: German, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Croatian, Lithuanian (the grammatical function of a word is indicated by changes in its form).

Analytic languages: English (few inflections, stricter word order).

Agglutinative languages: Finnish, Hungarian (words formed by combining basic elements called morphemes).

III. THE EU'S LANGUAGE POLICY

The European Union is an area of cultural and linguistic diversity, where languages are a central part of the common heritage.

Each enlargement has introduced new official languages. For example, Greek became an official language in 1981, and Croatian in 2013.

The EU currently has 24 official languages: Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish.

III. THE EU'S LANGUAGE POLICY

Dates of accession of official languages

1958: German, French, Italian, Dutch

1973: Danish, English

1981: Greek

1986: Spanish, Portuguese

1995: Finnish, Swedish

2004: Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Slovak, Slovenian, Czech

2007: Bulgarian, Irish, Romanian

2013: Croatian

III. THE EU'S LANGUAGE POLICY

Official languages: All legislation and key documents are translated into them.

Regional languages: Protected (e.g. **Breton, Catalan, Basque**).

Working languages: English predominates, but French and German remain important.

Multilingualism is at the heart of EU policy. Its **main objectives** are:

to communicate with citizens in their mother tongue;

to protect Europe's linguistic diversity;

to promote language learning across the EU.

This approach is unique: no other international organisation provides such a high level of linguistic protection and promotion.

III. THE EU'S LANGUAGE POLICY

Language Rights in the EU

Every citizen has the right to address EU institutions in any of the 24 official languages and to receive a reply in the same language (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union).

Legal texts and their summaries **are translated into all official languages.**

In the European Parliament, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) may speak in any official language, and debates are interpreted in real time.

To ensure multilingual communication, the EU employs hundreds of translators and interpreters. Their role is to enable mutual understanding regardless of the languages used.

CONCLUSION



The EU does not view languages as barriers but as bridges between cultures. However, this diversity also raises important questions: how can minority languages be preserved, and how can young people be encouraged to learn several languages?





Erasmus+
Enrichit les vies, ouvre les esprits.



Co-funded by
the European Union

יִשְׂרָאֵל национален שפה 文化 شرقية
inalco
Institut national
des langues
et civilisations orientales

