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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Language and symbolic boundaries among transnational elites: A qualitative case study of European Commission officials

Daniel Drewski

Department of Sociology,
Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg,
Bamberg, Germany

Correspondence
Daniel Drewski, Department of Sociology,
Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg,
Bamberg, Germany.
Email: daniel.drewski@uni-bamberg.de

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Abstract

Previous research has asked whether European integration leads to the formation of a new kind of 'transnational class' or 'elite' in and around the European institutions in Brussels. This paper focuses instead on intra-group distinctions and symbolic boundaries between EU professionals from different countries. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of language as a marker of distinction, it argues that language continues to be a resource for symbolic boundary making. Empirically, this paper builds on in-depth interviews with officials of the European Commission, who are at the heart of an emerging transnational elite of EU professionals. It shows that while Commission officials are multilingual and use multilingualism to construct themselves as a transnational group, intra-group symbolic boundaries continue to be drawn based on competence in the Commission's two main working languages, English and French. Overall, this paper points out the overlooked importance of language differences for transnational professionals' symbolic boundary making.

KEYWORDS
Europe, highly skilled migrants, migration and mobility, transnationalism, world region

INTRODUCTION

Due to European integration, the national borders between the member states of the European Union (EU) have become more porous. This has increasingly enabled Europeans[1] to engage in transnational practices and become internationally mobile, that is, to study, work and live abroad. Sociologists have inquired whether this leads to the emergence of new kinds of *transnational* social groups beyond the nation state (e.g. Fligstein, 2008; Medrano, 2011). Most attention has been given to those social groups at the 'top', which occupy new positions of power and privilege. The transfer of political competences from the national level to the European level has attracted an increasing number of professionals and experts to work in around the European institutions in Brussels and elsewhere, which offer the opportunity to engage in EU policy making. Scholars have asked to what extent they form an emerging 'transnational power elite' (Kauppi & Madsen, 2013), a political class of 'Eurocrats' (Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013) or a new group of 'EU professionals' (Büttner et al., 2015). In particular, they have identified the emergence of common cosmopolitan dispositions and self-understandings as 'Europeans'.

Less explicit attention has been given to the issue of language differences. A shared language is arguably an important requirement for the formation of a transnational professional elite. Given its current global dominance, it can be assumed that this language is mostly English (Harrington & Seabrooke, 2020, p. 406). However, transnational professionals typically have different linguistic backgrounds, as they are recruited from different countries and regions. This may trigger contestations over language use and generate differentiations and inequalities among them. This paper seeks to address this issue based on an in-depth case study of officials of the European Commission, an important subgroup of EU professionals. It shows that, despite their cosmopolitan disposition and good knowledge of foreign languages, Commission officials do engage in 'symbolic struggles' over which languages function as legitimate forms of communication and that symbolic boundaries can be drawn between the speakers of different languages. These findings contribute to the literature on the emergence of transnational elites in the EU by highlighting intra-group symbolic struggles and boundaries drawn in this process.

The European Commission is the supranational organ of the EU and lies at the heart of EU policy making. The officials of the European Commission were chosen as a case study for the following reasons. First, Commission officials are recruited from all 27 member states of the EU (including the United Kingdom, before 'Brexit'), which has 24 official languages. The Commission is therefore a uniquely multinational context in which processes of transnational group making that involve individuals of heterogeneous national, cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds can be observed. Second, the Commission is the supranational organ of the EU and represents the 'European interest'. Its officials have established themselves as a unique 'European administrative elite' within the field of EU policy making, independent from national influence (Georgakakis, 2013, 2017; Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013). This makes the Commission something like a 'least-likely case' for the observation of symbolic struggles related to national and linguistic differences. If they are experienced as relevant here, they can be expected to play a role in the context of other processes of transnational group making as well.

The following section will outline the analytical framework of this paper. Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu (1991), this paper explores the symbolic struggles over language use among the members of the emerging transnational elite of EU professionals and the symbolic boundaries these entail. The third section introduces the language regime of the EU and of the European Commission. Even though the EU has 24 official languages, only English, French and German are the Commission's 'working languages', to be used in internal oral and written communications. The methodological approach of data collection and interpretation is described in the fourth section. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with Commission officials from different EU member states to analyse their language preferences, the meaning and value they ascribe to different languages, and the perceived inequalities resulting from the Commission's language use. The fifth section outlines the main results of this study. First, it shows that while Commission officials define themselves as cosmopolitan and multilingual, they are nevertheless divided over whether English should become the sole working language of the Commission, or whether French should enjoy an equal status as English. Second, the

results section describes the symbolic struggles over the legitimate language of the Commission. Commission officials who support the use of English as the sole working language tend to emphasize the attributed 'instrumental value' of English as a simple and effective means of communication with as many people as possible. In turn, Commission officials who support the use of French emphasize the 'symbolic value' of languages as an expression of cultural diversity. Finally, the empirical results suggest that the preference for one or the other option entails symbolic boundaries between officials of different backgrounds, which seem to be related to the linguistic distance between one's native language and French or English, as well as the structural opportunities to learn either French or English in one's country of origin. The final section will summarize the results and draw some conclusions on the question of transnational elite-making.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is a burgeoning literature on the emergence of transnational social classes and elites. For example, scholars such as Leslie Sklair (2001) and Sighard Neckel et al. (2018) argue that globalization has led to the formation of a new transnational economic class, whose members are educated in international schools, work in multinational corporations and live in expatriate enclaves of global cities. Similar arguments have been made for the group under study in this paper, namely, that the transnational professionals and bureaucrats working in international organizations such as the European institutions begin to resemble a transnational 'social class' or 'elite' (Büttner et al., 2015; Georgakakis, 2013, 2017; Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013; Kauppi & Madsen, 2013; Nowicka, 2006; see, however, Andreotti et al., 2015; Hartmann, 2016). This paper builds on this line of research but will use the term transnational 'elite' rather than 'social class' because it refers to a specific group that occupies the new positions of privilege and influence that have emerged in the EU, that is, the professionals and managers working in the European institutions.[2]

To analyse the formation of transnational social classes and elite groups, scholars often draw on the conceptual toolbox of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986). A *transnational* social class or elite is typically defined as a group of people of different nationalities but who, despite their diverse origins, share a similar capital endowment and have developed a similar habitus and lifestyle that forges them together and distinguishes them from other groups (for an overview, see Carlson & Barglowski, forthcoming). Adapting Bourdieu's terminology, it is argued that they have acquired new kinds of 'cosmopolitan' or 'transnational' cultural capital, like international educational credentials or knowledge of foreign languages, particularly English, the global lingua franca (Gerhards et al., 2017; Igarashi & Saito, 2014; Weenink, 2008). In particular, it has been remarked that the ability of transnational elites to speak dominant and/or prestigious languages (termed 'elite multilingualism' by Barakos & Selleck, 2019) functions as a sign of elite distinction in a globalizing world. Furthermore, they are said to have a 'cosmopolitan habitus' and practice a globalized lifestyle that sets them apart from more sedentary social classes. Finally, they are assumed to have developed social identities that transcend particularistic conceptions of national identity.

The literature has paid less attention to the issue of how language differences are negotiated in the making of a transnational elite. In his work, Bourdieu has analysed how the emergence of a French state elite in the context of the political centralization of France went along with a symbolic struggle over the adoption of French as its standard language and the devaluation of various regional dialects (Bourdieu, 1991). Taking inspiration from Bourdieu, this paper argues that among the transnational elites employed in the European institutions in Brussels, similar symbolic struggles over the value of different languages as the legitimate means of communication occur (see also Loos, 2000). Transnational elites are recruited from different countries and typically have different native languages.[3] Despite—or because of—the increasing predominance of English as a vehicular language, the question of which language to speak with each other may become a matter of contention and generate distinctions and inequalities between speakers of different languages.

By focusing on disputes among transnational elites over the use of different languages, this paper also deals with what sociolinguistics have termed 'language ideologies' (for an overview, see Blommaert, 2006; Woolard, 2021). This

term refers to socially embedded, metalinguistic beliefs about the nature of language and its forms of use. It involves judgements about the quality and status of different languages and language varieties, for example, the prestige of French as 'refined' language or of English as 'efficient'. Thus, language is not a neutral medium of communication, but also (re-)produces relations of power and status between different speakers and is thus a site of contestation. This paper investigates transnational elites' beliefs about the value of different European languages and their struggles to impose them as legitimate means of communication.[4]

As the empirical analysis will show in more detail, this paper argues that respondents judge languages along two dimensions (terms by Gerhards, 2012). The first is the 'instrumental value' of different languages, meaning the extent to which they enable efficient communication with others. The instrumental value of a language hinges on its perceived simplicity to learn and the number of speakers who speak that language. The second is the 'symbolic value' of different languages, which refers to the extent to which they claim to represent the identity or culture of a particular social group, such as a national identity. As we will see in this paper, both principles can clash in the case of transnational elites: Adopting a single language for its instrumental value may ease communication with each other but raise concerns over cultural hegemony.

Following Bourdieu, language differences may ultimately be mobilized in 'practices of distinction' or to draw 'symbolic boundaries' among transnational elites from different linguistic backgrounds. By drawing symbolic boundaries, people use certain criteria (e.g. culture, language, morals) to define themselves as members of a social group and distinguish themselves from others (Lamont et al., 2015, p. 850). Symbolic boundaries are associated with perceptions of closeness and distance, likes and dislikes or feelings of superiority and inferiority between the members of different social groups. They can lead to social closure and the unequal distribution of resources and social positions between members of in-groups and out-groups. Given its close connection with the formation of group identities, particularly along national and ethnic lines (Kamusella, 2018), language can serve as an important marker of symbolic boundaries (Barth, 1998; Wimmer, 2008).

Evidently, it must be noted that the relations of power in the symbolic struggles about language use among transnational elites are shaped (though not determined) by the international hierarchy of languages. According to de Swaan (2001), the different languages of the world are ordered hierarchically in terms of their centrality within the world language system. English has come to occupy a central position and is predominantly used in international exchange, while other languages are more peripheral and count only few speakers. The extent to which a language becomes a central language results from the inequalities and relations of power between different linguistic communities. For example, the increasing importance of English as a global lingua franca is the result of the worldwide expansion of the British Empire in the 19th century, as well as the political, economic and cultural hegemony of the United States in the second half of the 20th century. English has replaced French as the most important language of international diplomacy, trade, literature and science (Casanova, 2004; Gordin, 2015; Heilbron, 1999; Sapiro, 2010).

The most recent data on languages in the EU stem from a Eurobarometer survey from 2012 (European Commission, 2012). The most widely spoken language as a mother tongue in the EU was German (16%), followed by Italian and English (13% each) and French (12%).[5] More than half of Europeans speak at least one foreign language, the most widely spoken being English (38%), followed by 12% French and 11% German. As will be discussed later, there are large differences between countries and regions in terms of which foreign language is learned: for example, respondents from the Eastern Enlargement countries are much less likely to speak French than respondents from the EU-15 (6% vs. 14%).

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND ITS LANGUAGE REGIME

The focus of this paper is on the disputes over language use among the officials of the European Commission, that is, the around 13,000 higher officials from all EU member states who are permanently employed in the supranational 'executive' organ of the EU (excluding the Commissioners appointed by the national governments). Previous research

has shown that within the transnational professional field emerging around the European institutions in Brussels, Commission officials have fashioned themselves into a unique 'administrative elite' as representatives of the 'interests of the Union' (Büttner et al., 2015; Georgakakis, 2013, 2017; Georgakakis & Rowell, 2013).[6] They are a highly qualified group of professionals, mostly recruited through a selective entrance competition (the '*Concours*') in numbers roughly proportional to the population size of their countries of origin. Commission officials also have extensive international experiences, speak various languages and cultivate a cosmopolitan habitus (Kassim et al., 2013; Suvarierol, 2011).

However, the staff of the European Commission does not form a homogenous group. Several studies have remarked on important internal structural divisions and symbolic boundaries between officials. For instance, building on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, Georgakakis (2013, 2017) argues that the Commission is internally divided between officials with professional experience accumulated in the EU institutions (i.e. 'European capital') and those with professional experience in and backing by their respective nation states (or 'national capital'), as well as between more specialized 'technical' posts and more 'political' posts. Several ethnographic studies have also remarked on symbolic boundaries along the officials' different national and regional backgrounds (Abélès et al., 1993; Shore, 2000). For instance, Abélès et al. describe a symbolic boundary between 'Northern' and 'Southern Europeans', which is based on cultural attributions. Lewicki (2017) describes a symbolic boundary between officials from the so-called 'old' and the 'new member states', that is, the mostly Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, which is based on an attributed degree of 'Europeanness' and 'modernity'. Building on this literature, this paper focuses on the issue of languages, which has been identified as a contentious issue.

Following its motto 'united in diversity' and the acknowledgement of the cultural autonomy of its member states, the EU has officially adopted a policy of multilingualism. As initially enshrined in the European Council's Regulation No. 1 from 1958, all official languages of the member states of the EU enjoy equal status, which means that now there are 24 'official and working languages' of the EU (Ammon, 2012). All of them can be used, for example, to communicate with and between EU institutions, for formal proceedings in the Council or in debates in the European Parliament. However, while the EU is officially multilingual, the European Commission uses the most widely spoken European languages English, French and German as internal working or 'procedural' languages (e.g. in meetings or to draft internal document) because settling on a limited number of languages raises work efficiency and diminishes transaction costs that would result from permanent translation.

The dominant working languages of the Commission changed over time, reflecting exogenous developments and the changing composition of the staff. Initially, the most important language of the Commission was French (Stevens & Stevens, 2001, pp. 128–130). It was a recognized foreign language in the founding member states of the European Communities, the organization was established in a mostly French-speaking city (Brussels), and French civil servants exerted a strong influence on the Commission. With the first Northern Enlargement in 1973, English was introduced as a working language and became more prominent over time. In the 1990s, research suggests that English was used on par with French (Abélès et al., 1993, pp. 32–38; Quell, 1997). In recent decades, English became dominant, as it consolidated as a global lingua franca, and the second Northern and the Eastern Enlargements led to an inflow of colleagues from countries in which English is the first foreign language. Ban (2013) has noted a paradoxical effect of the Eastern Enlargements: despite increasing the number of official languages in the EU, it has led to an increasing use of English in the Commission. Throughout the Commission's history, German only played a minor role as a working language, despite efforts by the German government to promote its use (Haselhuber, 2019).

Some previous studies have opened up the 'black box' to study the internal language use inside the Commission. In an ethnographic study from the early 1990s, Abélès et al. (1993, pp. 32–38) describe how Commission officials deal with multilingualism in practice. Meetings, casual conversations or even written documents could switch from French to English and back, and both languages would sometimes fuse into a distinctive Commission 'Franglais' or 'Frenglish'. More recently, Wodak et al. (2012) describe how language choice inside the Commission is characterized by frequent code-switching and dependent on contextual factors, such as the interaction- and power-dynamics of a meeting. Finally, Ban (2013) has examined conflicts over language use following the Eastern Enlargements of 2004 and 2007. She describes a tension between many established officials who preferred the use of French as a working language,

and newly recruited officials form the new member states, which mainly preferred English (see also Kassim et al., 2013, pp. 254–255). The present paper contributes to this literature by focusing more specifically on Commission officials' beliefs about different languages and how they use them to draw symbolic boundaries.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The data presented in this paper stem from 44 semi-structured interviews with Commission officials working in Brussels, completed in two phases of fieldwork, from February to April 2016 and in March 2017. The interviews were conducted as part of a study on symbolic boundaries related to the different national and regional backgrounds of Commission officials (Drewski 2022). Of the 44 interviews, issues relating to languages in the Commission were mentioned in 32 interviews, which form the backbone of this paper.[7]

Respondents for this study were sampled according to different criteria. First, they were sampled according to country and region of origin. Four respondents each come from France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; five from Spain and seven from Germany. Of course, these are not all the member states of the EU. However, they vary along important parameters such as the number of speakers of their official languages, they belong to different European language families (e.g. Romance, Germanic and Slavic), and they have different traditions of foreign language learning (e.g. while French is a widespread foreign language in Western Europe, it is taught much less in Eastern European countries, where English is often followed by German). Second, only policy making officials employed on a permanent contract were interviewed. The sample was diversified according to seniority, including nine administrators (responsible for policy making and policy management), 19 heads of unit (or middle managers in charge of around 7 to 10 officials) and 16 senior managers (typically in charge of 50 to 300 officials). Third, the sample includes officials from across different Directorates General (DGs) of the Commission, focusing, in particular, on policy DGs, but including a few cases from administrative DGs, external relations DGs and the Cabinets as well. Finally, the sample includes 20 female and 24 male respondents.

The officials in the sample are mostly highly educated: A third of them hold a doctorate degree, while only two hold less than a master's degree or equivalent. Most of them also have a middle- to upper-middle class background. Around half of the respondents have a parent who has completed tertiary education, while only a fifth has not completed upper secondary school. This warrants the assumption that by looking at symbolic boundaries among EU Commission officials, we can 'control for' other socio-economic variables.

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview guideline. Semi-structured interviews combine the advantages of the openness of narrative interviews and the focus of more standardized questionnaires. They allow interviewees to elaborate on their answers, by providing thick descriptions and personal accounts, while staying thematically focused. The interview guideline was initially designed in order to tap the respondents' experiences in the Commission related to their different national and regional backgrounds, and the similarities and/or differences they observe between officials from different countries. The interview guideline was specified along the course of the study. As language emerged as an important topic, more specific questions on language use were included. The section dedicated to the language issue covers the officials' experiences with the Commission's multilingualism, as well as their language preferences. In particular, the guideline sought to elicit justifications for using a language as the Commission's vehicular language. These core blocs were framed by more open questions on the officials' personal experiences in the Commission, and a socio-demographic questionnaire.

On average, the interviews lasted around 68 min, the shortest being 30 min and the longest being 104 min. The interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The interview segments are redacted for better readability and anonymized.

The transcripts were subject to qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), with the aim of systematizing the respondents' experiences with multilingualism, their language preferences and justifications for the use of different languages. To achieve this, the material was coded along emergent themes. These themes were identified in an

inductive approach. Furthermore, case summaries were written for each case, focusing on the categories of analysis. From the analysis, four groups of respondents emerged, which also seem to be related to the respondents' geographic and linguistic backgrounds. As will be analysed in more detail in the next section, the respondents differed in the extent to which they preferred English as the sole working language in the Commission or favoured a balance between English and French. Furthermore, they differ in terms of their experiences with the language regime of the Commission.

RESULTS

To begin with, the interviews with Commission officials confirm previous research about the distinctively cosmopolitan habitus of the new transnational professional elite emerging at the 'heart of Europe'. The group of respondents interviewed for this study has extensive transnational cultural capital (almost 80% have studied or lived at least in one other country than Belgium or their country of origin) and they are exceptionally multilingual. Half of the respondents of the interview sample reported knowing three to four foreign languages, and almost a third even said knowing five. Many respondents remarked that they appreciate the multilingual character of the Commission and the opportunity to speak different languages with their colleagues, such as this mid-career Polish administrator:

> Well, what is great is that we are in a multilingual environment. I think it's absolutely great, but that is my personal opinion. This Directorate General was traditionally French speaking, more than English speaking. This has changed twenty years ago, or ten years ago. But this has a positive consequence, that people are working in both languages here. It requests that the people are working in English; it requests that the people are working in French. And this is actually the way of doing… German is the third language, third official language in the Commission, and on some occasions, we are also working in German. So I think that's a kind of a European asset, that we have here in the Commission. [A colleague] is Italian, so there are colleagues who talk to him in Italian. He's speaking to someone else in French. Someone else addresses him in English, and it's perfectly ok, as long as you can understand each other and produce valuable results. The language is a secondary thing. Same talking to stakeholders, going outside the Commission. It's great if we can, in front of a French public, we can speak French, and in front of a German public, we can speak German. (Interview #38, par. 70)

Furthermore, some respondents draw on international experiences, openness to other cultures and knowledge of foreign languages as markers to define Commission officials as a transnational social group and to draw symbolic boundaries against people who remain rooted in their respective nation states—much in line with what Barakos and Selleck (2014) have termed 'elite multilingualism'. For example, the following mid-career manager from Italy describes this in the clearest manner:

> That's why I told you we are not representative of the society, of the European society. It's because we are all/it's much easier to have in common/I have more in common with a Greek PhD colleague than with a citizen from my own town in [an Italian province], who is unemployed and finishes study at the Bac. It's much easier for us to communicate, because we are selected indeed, sociologically, we are all speaking more than three languages, we have all studied at least a Master or maybe more, we have all been travelling, we're almost all from kind of mid-class families, if not more. […] We are all Europ-/I mean almost all, at least 90% of the people working in the Commission believe in Europe. (Interview #27, par. 14)

Nevertheless, among the languages spoken by Commission officials, a hierarchy seems to exist, which is based on what above has been termed their 'language ideologies', namely the officials' beliefs about which languages serve as

legitimate forms of communication between speakers of different linguistic backgrounds. As expected, at the top of the hierarchy stands English. However, it must be noted that, as some interviewees remark, the English used in the Commission is not the same as 'British' or 'American English'. Instead, it is a type of 'Euro-English' (Interview #9, par. 45), 'Globish' (Interview #7, par. 38) or 'Pidgin' (Interview #31, par. 74), which is simpler and contains expressions that would never be used by native speakers, often taken from French (such as speaking of an 'infraction' instead of an 'infringement' of Community law; Interview #30, par. 70).

English is followed by French, which, according to the interviewees, used to be an important language but is now less used—even though, as we will see, this is a cause of concern for some. The third working language of the Commission, German, is already of minor importance. This is illustrated by the following quote: 'German is not so often used. That's more of a language of some administrative notices. It's a third language that has lost its status. Because the Germans didn't support it, basically' (Interview #24, par. 26). Reflecting the hierarchy of the European language regime, the other official languages of the EU do not seem to play a role and are not considered legitimate working languages. Several interviewees remarked that they would not care to promote the use of 'their language', for example, 'Swedish' or 'Polish' in the Commission.

The question of whether to communicate in English or French seems to evoke a symbolic struggle among Commission officials. I distinguish between four groups based on their respective language ideologies and experiences with the language regime of the Commission, which will be described in turn. First, there are those who occupy a dominant position within the Commission's current language regime and who support English as the sole working language by emphasizing its 'instrumental value'. A second group of respondents sees the increasing predominance of English in the Commission critically and defends the use of French. They do so by contesting the instrumental view of languages and highlighting their 'symbolic value'. A third (small) group of respondents experiences manifest disadvantages from the increasing predominance of English as a working language in the Commission. A final group of respondents—often from Central and Eastern Europe—experiences symbolic boundaries with the use of French as a working language. This shows that language use is not simply a matter of communication, but also elicits questions of status and symbolic power.

'It's a question of pragmatism'

The first and symbolically dominant group of respondents supports the use of English as sole working language inside the Commission—even though most of them know several foreign languages and enjoy switching from one to the other from time to time. They frame the use of English as a 'question of pragmatism' (Interview #17, par. 52). Given that English is the most spoken foreign language among officials, and the most widely spoken foreign language across the world, in their view it makes sense to use it as a vehicular language of the Commission. In other words, these respondents hold a language belief that emphasizes the 'instrumental value' of English compared to other languages: It best enables an easy and effective communication with as many people as possible and should therefore function as the main medium of communication in the Commission.

Some of the respondents who highlight the instrumental value of English attribute characteristics like simplicity and efficiency to it that make it an ideal choice as a vehicular language. For instance, despite having studied in France and initially even preferring to work in French, this mid-career Hungarian manager argues that:

> I think it's absolutely logical that English dominates our work life, because it's easy, it's precise enough – not always – but it's precise enough to express ideas, concepts, including legal concepts, strategic ideas, in a common language. Without the sophistication of the original British English. But somehow this distortion which we have, the Euro-English, is necessary, because we are not into niceties here, our objective is to work together, to understand each other, if possible to a 100%, so there is no misunderstanding. In meetings, you have to come – all of us – with a common and shared understanding of what

> was decided. And for that, English is the easiest. Because it's easy to write, it's easier than French, and it's easier to think in English as well, because the concepts are not as sophisticated as perhaps in French. (Interview #9, par. 45)

For this respondent, the instrumental characteristics of a language as a means of communication—precision, simplicity—(which he attributes to English) are much more important than its symbolic qualities, such as 'sophistication' (which he attributes to French). He claims that Commission officials should not be concerned with such qualities, but with finding an effective way to work together that includes everyone. For him, English is the language that best enables them to do so.

This emphasis on the instrumental value of languages tends to correspond with neglecting the symbolic value of languages as a representation of culture and identity. For instance, a mid-career Swedish manager argues that for her 'it doesn't matter' which language is the working language of the Commission, given that she too has 'never had any pretension that they ever use Swedish' (Interview #10, par. 56).

As a result, some respondents draw symbolic boundaries against those colleagues that continue to defend the use of French. For example, a German official finds this 'French fuss about the Francophonie and protecting the French language' simply 'ridiculous' (Interview #7, par. 121). It seems that for him, languages do not require special protection and linguistic diversity is not intrinsically valuable. This attitude is also reflected in the following quote from an interview with a young Polish administrator:

> They [French officials] don't like that [laughs], they try to promote their language, yes. Very often I see they change the language at the meeting on purpose. Or they try to do 50-50 of a meeting in French and in English. But very rarely, I mean very rarely. But they have this ambition. Because I would never think about promoting, you know Polish, or whatever. I mean, you know, let's agree on one language, and let's have it. But I see they have this ambition of let's divide the meeting 50-50 [laughs], or let's call the one point in French, or whatever. And then people are "ok, let's do it for them." But it's more out of courtesy than out of real need. (Interview #16, par. 95)

With his observation, this respondent downplays the importance of recognizing the potential symbolic value of languages as expressions of culture when thinking about a working language for the Commission. It suffices to settle on one as a means of communication.

Overall, respondents associate the increasing prevalence of English as a Commission working language with the EU's Northern Enlargement of 1995 (to Sweden, Finland and Austria) and the Eastern Enlargement of 2004 and 2007 (to mostly Central Eastern European countries). These are mostly countries where English is the predominant foreign language, and French plays only a minor role. This is reflected in the interview sample as well: Support for the use English comes mostly from the Northern and Central Eastern European respondents.

'If you are not making the effort to understand other people's languages, how the hell are you going to be *solidaire* with Europe?'

In contrast to the previous respondents, a second group sees the predominance of English and the decreasing use of French as a working language of the Commission with regret, thus occupying a position that is symbolically in decline from a once dominant status. They are in favour of maintaining a balance between English and French, which they justify by mobilizing a language ideology that challenges the 'instrumental hierarchy' of languages based on their attributed effectiveness as a means of communication, and emphasizing the 'symbolic value' of languages as expressions of distinctive cultures, worldviews and meanings. For these respondents, using more than one working language in the Commission is not a drawback, but an advantage, because it encourages cultural diversity. In their

view, languages should not be hierarchized in terms of their instrumental value but should be equally valued as an expression of different cultures. Therefore, they value the traditional use of French as a working language on par with English in the Commission. This view is illustrated by the following interview with a late-career French manager:

> But the problem here in the Commission, to be honest, is that, when I started in the Commission, there was still a lot of diversity, and now there is this tendency that everybody speaks English. And that change happened very much after the most recent Enlargement in 2004, because at that time, I remember, after the Enlargement, we were told in meetings, 'oh, don't speak French, because some of your colleagues won't understand, and we don't have translation.' So that's really […] a big change. And for me it's a bit of a problem, not only because I'm French and that the use of French is lower and lower each time, but also because it hasn't supported this diversity, which I think is very attractive in the Commission. (Interview #8, par. 31)

For this respondent, speaking both French and English encourages the Commission's cultural diversity, which in her view is one of its main assets. Interestingly, the fact that only two languages should be able to represent this diversity does not seem to be questioned, which points to the unequal symbolic value of languages in the Commission. Furthermore, it illustrates that language is more than a neutral medium of communication: Even though some of her colleagues from the Eastern Enlargement countries do not understand French, she prefers to continue to use it in order to support the 'diversity' within the Commission.

A further justification stressing the symbolic value of languages is put forward by the following mid-career manager from Spain. For him, languages are an expression of culture, and speaking a foreign language is a way to show respect for that culture. Given that Commission officials represent all of Europe, they should be prepared to speak the Europeans' languages as well: 'You know, if you are not making the effort to also understand other people's languages, how the hell are you going to be *solidaire* with Europe? How are you going to understand the citizens of Europe, and their problems?' (Interview #40, par. 80). In particular, he demands that Commission officials should be 'open' to another culture than their own and learn its language: 'If you are from the North, you should be open to a Latin culture. If you are from the South, you should be open to a, sort of, Anglo-Saxon or Nordic, or certain European culture' (Interview #40, par. 86). It follows that the Commission should maintain a balance between English (as representing a 'Northern European culture') and French (as representing a 'Latin' culture). Interestingly, again, this respondent divides Europe only in two halves in terms of linguistic heritage. He leaves the Slavic language family as the third largest one in the EU unmentioned, creating a symbolic hierarchy among Europe's language families.

The following late-career Spanish manager justifies the balance between French and English with yet another argument stressing the symbolic value of languages. In his view, the Commission's multilingualism is an asset because it contributes different culturally specific understandings of an issue. He remembers that when he joined, English used to be the 'economists' language' and French the 'lawyers' language'. In contrast, today's monopoly of English is a mistake for him:

> Because it has nothing to do the European culture, the Brussels culture, the Commission culture, in terms of pure administrative/in terms of how you divide the Services, how you have the medical expenses, how do you do administrative forms, they are categorized in French. Because the European law is a continental law, it's not a common law. And for lawyers it's not the same to write a text in French than in English. It is not a linguistic question; it is a question of concepts. So it's clear that the good old times have passed away and we will never come back to this situation. But I regret; I regret it because it was richer before. (Interview #39, par. 63)

This respondent suggests that the Commission has mistakenly given up on its ability to tap the rich cultural tradition—in this case, the continental legal tradition—enshrined in the French language. Thus, as opposed to

arguments that favour English as a pragmatic and inclusive solution to the communication problem posed by linguistic diversity, this respondent points out the value that lies in the use of a variety of languages to express different things. According to him, languages transport specific worldviews and meanings that can become lost in translation. As a result, he regrets that there is no longer a balance between French and English as working languages of the Commission.

Overall, the respondents stressing the symbolic value of languages and arguing for a balance of English and French as working languages predominantly come from France, but also from Southern European countries. The reason may be that their languages belong to the same Romance language family (e.g. French, Italian, Spanish). On the one hand, their similarity in terms of grammar and vocabulary makes learning a language from the same language family easier (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). On the other hand, there might also be a feeling of cultural closeness at play. As the respondent quoted above puts it, French is considered an expression of Europe's 'Latin' heritage to which other Romance languages belong as well. The increasing hegemony of English may have led to a perceived marginalization of the Romance languages and the specific identities and meanings that are believed to be attached to them.

'Why do I have to speak in my third language and others in their second?'

As the previous group, a third group of respondents also struggles with the increasing predominance of English as a working language and favours a balance of English and French, but based on a language ideology that refers to the instrumental attributes of language. They highlight that the use of only one working language—namely English—results in the exclusion from everyday communication within the organization of those who have acquired French instead of English as their first foreign language. Given that the Commission formally does not require English proficiency as a criterion of eligibility, they ask, like this respondent from Spain: 'Why do I have to speak in my third language and others in their second?' (Interview #37, par. 111). In consequence, they report feeling more insecure in meetings and are often unable to get their points across.

Similarly, the following mid-career Spanish manager thinks that the predominance of English might give an unfair advantage to those who speak English as their native language:

> Actually, in the past, what happened/I'm talking about the seventies and eighties/in a meeting you never spoke your language. You always spoke another language. And you know, [the British] Secretary General of this administration for twenty years, I never heard him speak in English once. Never. He always spoke in French. Because it's an issue/I'd say an act of politeness to the others. If the others do not speak in their own language. That you don't abuse that privilege. Because now we are Anglo-Saxon, we don't care and we are, you know/that has gone. So actually, if you are Irish or English, you have a much better career, because you are very good at presenting and in meetings and everything. (Interview #34, par. 60)

In other words, these respondents deplore the fact that French has lost its instrumental value as a Commission language compared to English. This situation benefits primarily those officials who speak English as their native or first foreign language. This concern was voiced by only a few respondents who came from Southern European countries (Spain and Greece).

'But he chooses to speak in French, knowing that one third would be excluded'

Finally, one group stood out for struggling with the use of French as a working language, taking a symbolically dominated position in the organization. With the Eastern Enlargement of 2004 and 2007, thousands of officials from

Central and Eastern Europe[8] joined the Commission—an unprecedented expansion of the Commission staff. They come from countries in which French typically lags far behind other languages as a foreign language (see also Ban, 2013). For example, French does not figure among the three most learned foreign languages in any of the Enlargement countries from Central and Eastern Europe (except Romania), and it ranks only a distant third in Hungary (European Commission, 2012, p. 21). The interviews show that some Commission officials who come from these countries and do not speak French sometimes feel excluded (consciously or unconsciously) by colleagues who insist on using French as a working language. In consequence, they reject the use of French as a vehicular language in the Commission. An example for this position is the following late-career manager from Hungary:

> So in a way, Central East Europeans came in dominantly with English, into an organization that was on its way to move towards English, but had a very strong French component. […] [A] good example to give you is when [our superior] speaks […], [many] people sitting in a room, out of which one third do not speak French, and he knows it. And he addresses them in French, without interpretation, for half an hour. You can imagine the message of this, ok. The message of this is that it's more important that I speak French, even though he's fluent in English/he has a strong accent, but that doesn't matter, I mean everybody has an accent. But his English is perfectly good to communicate. But he chooses to speak in French, knowing that one third would be excluded. And if you think about the cultural message of this [….] Here, no one said anything, but you can imagine the impact on you, when you know that someone is purposefully talking to you in a language that you/and it's not your fault. You are accepted to enter this organization without speaking French. […] So, I'm not sure, but you can imagine the feelings of those. And those are predominantly Central East Europeans. (Interview #35, par. 19–21)

This quote describes how some officials from the 'new' member states, whose working language is often English, felt marginalized due to the use of French as a working language. On the one hand, this respondent and his Central Eastern European colleagues were excluded from the information their superior was transmitting in his speech. On the other hand, they also felt excluded in symbolic terms, as non-speakers of French, even though they were 'accepted to enter this organization without speaking French'. It is this symbolic aspect of his superior's language choice that irritated this respondent and his colleagues the most.

Over time, however, the Eastern Enlargement and the accession of mostly English-speaking officials has contributed to a declining use of French in the Commission, altering the balance of power. Some respondents from Central and Eastern Europe sense that this might have caused resentment among the predominantly Francophone officials, as reports a Hungarian mid-career manager:

> So this [language shift to English brought by the Eastern Enlargement], I think it was shocking for especially French and the Southern Europeans. Because they preferred French, especially the older generation, like Spanish, Italian people, their English was awful. Actually, I was shocked when I came and I thought everybody speaks such bad English. So then I was like, 'oh good, I can speak whatever language that badly, that's not a problem' [laughs]. (Interview #28, par. 108)

She then goes on to describe a situation when a colleague insisted on using French:

> And then once I went to a training/in the training offer, you always see whether it's in English or in French, the training, and I always chose the English ones. I speak French, but still, easier in English. And then in the training, when we started to do like a *tour de table*, who is who, where you come from. And then there was a guy, Italian guy, who gave a twenty minute speech, about 'this training should be in French. Because this is unfair, we cannot speak English'. And this was like [laughs]/everybody was like, 'oh come on, you can't do that'. So really, that created also a lot of resentment. (Interview #28, par. 108)

It appears that this respondent does not have much understanding for the language choice of the Italian colleague she describes in the preceding quote. It seems that for her, those who defend French as a working language appear like odd champions of by-gone times—amusing, perhaps to be tolerated, but no longer to be taken seriously.

Overall, the respondents from Central and Eastern Europe often align with their Anglophone colleagues' language beliefs to support English as the dominant working language of the Commission. Coming from countries in which French is seldom taught as a foreign language, they favour English as the most pragmatic and inclusive choice that enables communication in a multilingual environment like the Commission. However, some of them have experienced the use of French as a linguistic practice of exclusion (an experience that is not prevalent among the respondents from Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom). This might mean that some respondents experience themselves as occupying a symbolically subordinate position as 'newcomers' in the Commission. However, overall, they altered the balance of power of the Commission's language constellation from French to English.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the issue of language difference in the context of the emergence of a transnational elite. It focused on the officials of the European Commission, who stand at the core of an emerging transnational professional elite of EU policy makers. While previous research has identified a European identity, cosmopolitan habitus and multilingualism as markers that constitute this group, this paper focused on intra-group distinctions to show that there is a struggle to define which languages should count as a legitimate means of communication and that symbolic boundaries are drawn accordingly. In particular, the paper elucidated the different language ideologies that officials mobilize in these symbolic struggles.

In the Commission, there is a dominant group of officials who support English as vehicular language. They hierarchize languages in terms of their instrumental value, that is, their ability to enable an effective communication with as many people as possible. The 'loser' of this kind of valuation is French, which has become a less spoken foreign language among Commission officials due to several developments, among them the Northern and Eastern Enlargements of the EU. Those who defend a balance between English and French as a working language contest the instrumental hierarchy of languages and stress their 'symbolic value' as carriers of specific cultures and worldviews, while another group feels disadvantaged because English is only their third language. Finally, some officials, particularly from Central and Eastern European countries, report experiences of exclusion due to the use of French by some of their colleagues.

The data suggest that the language issue may be related to symbolic boundaries between officials of different national and regional backgrounds. Tentatively, it seems that this has to do with the opportunity structures of language learning in their respective countries of origin, as well as the linguistic distance between their native language and French or English. For instance, the opportunity to learn English as a foreign language is highest in some Northern European countries, where average English language competence is most widespread compared to other EU countries, due to language learning opportunities at school and similarities between Germanic languages (Gerhards, 2014). Likewise, the opportunity to learn French differs between North Western and Southern European countries on the one hand, and Central Eastern European countries on the other. In this way, between-country differences in language learning opportunities may create unequal chances to participate in international exchange and succeed in transnational spaces.

This paper has presented only a snapshot of an ongoing process of valuation of different languages in the field of EU policy making. Evidently, it also responds to exogenous developments. An open question is how 'Brexit'—realized in January 2020 – has affected language use inside the European Commission. European civil servants of British nationality were not required to quit their job because of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU, but their number and their influence will certainly diminish over time. While English remains an official language of the EU (given that it is the official language of Ireland and Malta), two different outcomes for the language use inside the Commission are possible. On the one hand, French could regain dominance, because of the decreasing weight of British civil servants

in the Commission. On the other hand, English could remain the most important language or it could even be strengthened, given that it has become a more 'neutral' language, no more the native language of a large group of civil servants. Currently, the latter seems the likelier outcome (e.g. de la Baume, 2018). Future research is required to examine this question.

In theoretical terms, the paper draws attention to intra-group symbolic boundaries and practices of distinction in the process of transnational elite- or class-making. It suggests that the 'making' of a transnational elite does not only involve drawing symbolic boundaries against outside groups, but also *internal* struggles about defining the legitimate forms of cultural—including linguistic capital—of the group. The findings of this paper suggest that this may entail inequalities between group members of different national and regional backgrounds, depending on the perceived value of their respective capital endowment. Overall, this points towards the necessity of further examining the effect of international inequalities on the processes of transnational elite formation.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Interview data cannot be shared due to confidentiality.

ORCID

Daniel Drewski https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6530-8319

ENDNOTES

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the terms 'European' and 'EU' will be used interchangeably in this paper, even though I am aware that the EU does not cover all of Europe.

[2] Shamus Kahn defines elites as 'those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource' (Kahn 2012, p. 362). This is a broader definition of elites than given by those who limit the term elite to those 'who are capable of essentially influencing social developments' (Hartmann, 2015).

[3] Scholars have rightly pointed out that the association of language and nation is not straightforward. Speaking of a 'national language' is a political construct, which obscures the actual multilingualism of the population as well as varieties of language use (e.g. Blommaert, 2006). To be more specific, this paper focuses on what Blommaert calls 'linguistic communities', that is, groups which profess adherence to a standard language, and not 'speech communities', that is, groups which share a similar use of language in practice.

[4] It should be noted that the focus of this paper is on linguistic ideologies about the EU's different 'official' languages, and not on judgements about their forms of use, that is, whether someone speaks with an accent or in a specific dialect or sociolect.

[5] Note that these numbers still include the United Kingdom.

[6] Though Georgakakis (2017) argues that the Europeanist ethos of Commission officials has recently come into crisis through administrative reforms that have been perceived as undermining the unique status of Commission officials.

[7] Following an explorative logic, the interview guideline was adapted over the course of the study. After it became clear that language is an important issue, it was included explicitly in the questionnaire. Thus, some interviews do not provide data on this question.

[8] Plus Malta and Cyprus.

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