

Will the European Union oblige train drivers to speak English?

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1 Chronology

On 20 May 2023, ‘The Telegraph’ publishes an article [‘The European Union will force its train drivers to speak English’](#)

The introduction reads:

“Brussels will force EU train drivers to speak English under rules designed to foster closer ties between Member States.

The rules to be announced this autumn as part of the European Train Drivers Directive will require the application of a single common language.

Sources say English should be selected, despite reluctance from some EU Member States following Brexit.

...

Brussels sources have confirmed that an update of the Train Drivers Directive is planned for autumn this year. However, they warned that the decision could still be delayed. »

This article follows the publication in the Official [Journal of the European Union on 17 May 2023](#)¹ of a resolution of the European Parliament of 13 December 2022 (Strasbourg plenary) “Action plan to develop long-distance and cross-border passenger transport”.

38. [The European Parliament] further stresses the need to promote a single working language at EU level, namely English, for train drivers who carry passengers on long-distance cross-border routes and who do not speak the languages of the Member States crossed over during the journey

References to the beginning of this resolution include [the Commission’s October 2021 study](#) (478 pages in English) entitled ‘Long distance cross-border passenger rail services’. Many people (“Stakeholders”) concerned with international transport were interviewed to give their opinion.

It seems that the problem of languages for train drivers is addressed twice:

— p. 73: *Stakeholders also stressed that European railways use a wide range of technical and operational systems and languages. In aviation, on the other hand, common standards and a single language mean that trained aircrew can take off, fly between and land at almost all airports in Europe or the world without further training.*

— p. 413: *Railways operate in different languages. Train drivers may need to speak a relevant local language to comply with safety requirements. Other train staff may need to speak one or more local languages to advertise and take care of passengers.*

The language problem does not appear to be addressed in the potential measures to remove barriers to long-distance rail transport (page xiii = p. 25).

2 Differences between air and rail transport

One plane goes from one airport to another without touching land, so without making contact with the overflying country, and therefore without interaction with the population of the country overflown. If everything goes well, the aircrew only has contact with professionals (air traffic

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2023:177:FULL#page=57>; available in all the official languages of the European Union, replacing the two letters indicating the language with that of another language, for example replacing ‘FR’ with ‘ES’ to have Spanish.

controllers). Even in case of difficulties, there is no contact with the population of the country, because the aircraft can only land at an airport (if not, in general, the accident is very serious, with many deaths).

On the contrary, a train runs on a railway at ground level. If everything goes well, between two stations, the train drivers (and the controllers, and the rest of the crew) have no more contact with the population than for air transport. In the event of incidents, caution commands to stop the train, and there are frequent exchanges with the population of the country.

For example, in the event of a catenary rupture, a fall of a tree on the track, or the movement of livestock on the road, local professionals must be involved, and there is a need to exchange information with them. In case of suicide or personal accident, emergency personnel, police and judicial authorities in the country must intervene on the spot, and therefore exchange information with the flight attendants.

Therefore, for rail transport, ‘a single working language at EU level’ is not enough, it is necessary to be able to speak with the inhabitants of the country, who do not necessarily know the ‘single working language’. It can be recalled that in a report to the European Parliament of September 2022 “ [The European Union’s approach to multilingualism in its own communication policy](#)” the majority of the inhabitants of the European Union do not understand English.

3 Problem of democratic functioning in decision-making

Formally, the rule seems respected. The European Parliament, the (partial) legislative body of the European Union, issued a (non-binding) resolution following preparatory work by the Commission (the October 2021 study). Secondly, the Commission, which is the executive body of the European Union, is working on the implementation of this resolution and is preparing a (binding) directive which will then have to be transposed into national laws.

3.1 Those most affected by languages in rail transport do not appear to have been consulted.

The European Commission’s study was informed by the replies of many stakeholders in rail transport (Table R.2): infrastructure managers, old or new railways companies, passenger representatives, travel agencies, etc. But it does not seem that the staff themselves have been consulted through their trade unions. The list of persons or organisations interviewed is between pages 87 (113) and 94 (120).

However, it would be useful to consult train drivers on their communication needs, even if it is the political authorities who have to make the decision.

3.2 The appearance of English in the December 2022 resolution seems to be an addition without much justification

The paragraph in favour of the imposition of English is among two other paragraphs dealing with the importance of the linguistic question:

37. [The European Parliament] acknowledges the importance of the language issue for train drivers travelling across borders and calls on the Commission to promote the development of digital language tools, which could be an affordable solution to help overcome language barriers and fill existing gaps;

38. [The European Parliament] further stresses the need to promote a single EU-wide working language, namely English, for train drivers who carry passengers on long-distance

cross-border routes and who do not speak the languages of the Member States crossed during the journey;

39. [European Parliament] supports the language training of railway staff so that they can adequately respond to the demands of all passengers

Paragraphs 37 and 39 deal with the importance of the question of language, in general. This is in line with the general policy of the European Union, which promotes multilingualism. On the other hand, paragraph 38 speaks of imposing English on drivers of passenger trains: one may wonder ‘why English’, but also ‘why passenger trains?’, since it is desirable to develop rail freight transport for an ecological transition of transport.

Promoting English as a single language does not seem to be a logical consequence of the previous paragraphs: if such a decision were to be taken, it would have to be justified by preliminary arguments, which does not appear to be the case here. ‘Further’ is usually an expression indicating that what is described is not part of the main discourse: does this mean that the wish to promote English was added without any direct link to the main speech?

3.3 The chronology of publications is not conducive to democratic debate

The democratic functioning of an institution is not measured solely by voting with a greater or lesser majority. Democratic functioning requires clear information and debate in order to be able to make informed decisions.

The European Commission study is dated October 2021, and Parliament’s resolution was voted at the December 2022 part-session. It is hoped that in this period parliamentarians have been able to discuss the content of this resolution.

But the publication in the Official Journal dates from May 2023: almost six months have passed. This is very long, and one cannot justify this interval by translation delays. Why such a delay?

The article in ‘The Telegraph’ appeared only three days later, with indications of a directive to be issued in the autumn (only four months later). It therefore seems that the drafting of the directive is well advanced, while the text of the resolution has just been published. As the article only says ‘Sources claim that...’, we cannot know where the preparation of the directive is. This therefore leaves little opportunity for the professionals or the various persons concerned to give their opinion.

It is therefore possible/probable that the directive to be published will have been drafted only by technocrats, without taking into account the opinions of the main persons concerned. It’s a shame.

We can dream better as the democratic functioning of the European Union.

4 Annex: the current situation

4.1 According to the French trade union CGT (www.cheminotcgt.fr)

In a May 2021 article², the union was already concerned about threats from all-English, which would endanger rail safety.

*Since 2007, point 8 of Annex VI to the European Directive 2007/59/EC lays down minimum standards for language requirements. To drive a train on the European network, a mechanic must have a **B1 level of language skills** in each country where he drives.*

² <https://www.cheminotcgt.fr/metiers/exploitation/anglais-la-langue-du-futur-dans-le-monde-ferroviaire/?categorie=32>

4.2 According to the Official Journal of the European Union

The text of the European Directive referred to³ above does not clearly indicate level B1, but gives direct indications of the competences expected.

8. LANGUAGE TESTS

The driver who has to communicate with the infrastructure manager on safety-determining issues shall have language skills in the language indicated by the infrastructure manager concerned. This knowledge must enable it to communicate actively and effectively in routine, problematic and emergency situations.

The driver shall be able to use the messages and communication method specified in the Operation TSIs. It shall be able to communicate in accordance with level 3 of the following table:

- 3 — may deal with practical situations involving an unforeseen element*
- can make a description*
- can participate in a simple conversation*

The minimum frequency of examinations is as follows: a) language skills (only where the language is not the person's mother tongue): every three years or after any absence of more than one year



3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32007L0059&from=ES#page=27>