

## UNDERSTANDING MULTILINGUALISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. CASE STUDIES FROM ROMANIA

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### **Abstract**

*Drawing on the data provided by the Eurobarometer on Europeans and their languages, on the Relevance theory, and ethnographic observations of contemporary Romanian society and its linguistic habits, this article develops the taxonomy of different subdivisions of multilingualism in the social continuum “pre-university studies - university studies - labor market”. Qualitative research based on ethnographic interviews and testimonies from real-life experiences provides us with a contextual understanding of the term in pre-university education and on the labor market, while quantitative research based on responses to a thematic questionnaire sent to university students of economics provides key clues about their language skills with a view to improving their linguistic performance. The case studies examined in this study will allow us to refine certain preconceived ideas about multilingualism, and to perceive accurate social and cultural patterns of this contemporary dynamic topic.*

**Keywords:** multilingualism; Eurobarometer; education; university education; labor market.

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### **1. Premises and research questions**

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From a sociological perspective, the contemporary age is the most deictic period ever. The “I” must constantly be present “here”, acting in the “now”, asked to react and respond – simultaneously, if possible - to messages, urgent phone calls, running emails, products to buy, etc. Regardless of the language used, the message must be transmitted immediately and the response must be given “ASAP!” For instance, during a short 3-minute walk in an underground station in Bucharest, Romania, advertisement visuals call for action now in English, Romanian, or French. Using and understanding a language other than one’s mother tongue is a fashionable reality. The examination of deixis within the framework of multilingualism - in 2024 Bucharest - reveals how contextual and reference markers in advertisements cater to a diverse linguistic landscape. By employing deictic expressions tailored to various cultural contexts, public messages effectively engage different segments of the population, thereby enhancing their impact in a multilingual society. This interplay not only reflects the city’s linguistic diversity but also illustrates the strategic use of language in marketing to foster consumer connections across multiple cultures.

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Multilingualism is a living phenomenon that has existed ever since the divine sentence of the Tower of Babel, as the biblical parable mentions. It was when God punished people who spoke the same language, for wanting to reach by themselves the knowledge of Heaven, by building together a tower that would rise to the skies. Therefore, God confused their language and, thus, scattered the people: “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. (...) Therefore, its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.” (Genesis 11:6-9). Speaking two or more languages is a life reality and a phenomenon that has always existed, but which is becoming more and more widespread in Europe (Braun, 2014:14).

Today, multilingualism has become commonplace in our multicultural society. However, it raises many pragmatic and specific questions, such as:

- (1) What are the common features of this global phenomenon?
- (2) What is the state of multilingualism among Romanians?
- (3) How does it manifest in Romania, in the “secondary education - university education” continuum, and on the labor market?
- (4) What do these specific contexts in Romania have in common with European trends?
- (5) Is there a gap between the acquired and the required language skills?
- (6) What are the conditions that should be fulfilled and the main reasons for wanting to learn a language, and what barriers are there?

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## ***2. Theoretical framework***

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### ***2.1 Key aspects related to the terminology, definition and taxonomies***

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People with different levels of proficiency in a foreign language are defined by terms such as bilingual, multilingual, plurilingual, or polyglot. These terms are partial synonyms for the same linguistic ability or experience. The difference lies in the actual degree of proficiency and the number of languages active in a person's cognitive system. The term “multilingualism” was chosen for this research because the case studies indicated that it is the most frequent occurrence in Romania. When it comes to defining the term, the literature and the surveys on contemporary reality indicate that multilingualism is the state of being able to communicate linguistically and interact culturally using complex and composite personal competencies (Cenoz, 2013, King, 2017). In fact, different domains share the same definition:

*Multilingual and multicultural competence will be defined as the competence to communicate linguistically and to interact culturally with a social actor who possesses, to varying degrees, the command of several languages and the experience of several cultures, while being able to make use of this linguistic and cultural asset,*

together. We shall consider that there is no superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competencies, but a complex or even one compound personal competence. (E.C., 2012: 27).

Essentially defined as an individual's ability to switch between languages according to their daily needs, multilingualism can be native or acquired, individual or collective, oral or written, intellectual, or the result of migration, or mixed marriages, active (speaking or writing) or passive (understanding and reading). The term is used with reference to anyone who speaks two languages or to what is written in two languages. Whether we are talking about children born in a family whose parents speak different languages, or about people living in a bilingual society, or moving to another country, or about a requirement for certain professions, there are certainly strong reasons for considering multilingualism to be valuable.

Besides having the ability to communicate with different people from different cultures, literature states that multilinguals think more creatively, flexibly, and openly, and multilingualism has proven cognitive advantages (Abdelilah-Bauer, 2008, Braun, 2014, King, 2017). This is referred to as divergent thinking that generates original and less conventional solutions. The studies that have researched this are based on the hypothesis that having two or more mental representation systems increases flexibility and originality of thought. The phrase “mental representation system” implies that a bilingual person has two words for a single object or thought, which means a wider semantic repertoire. Compared with monolinguals, bilinguals find it easier to concentrate and avoid distractions (Abdelilah-Bauer, 2008:207). According to sociological, linguistic, academic and economic perspectives, the different types of multilingualism can be classified according to : (1) the age of acquisition - thus, there is early or late multilingualism; (2) life circumstances, according to which a distinction is made between academic and circumstantial bilinguals; (3) the degrees of education and language proficiency, formulated by J.A. van Ek and John L.M. Trim in 1990, regarding the threshold level of basic and survival proficiency in a target language and community, and which are the core of the European Framework of Reference for Languages. This research approach focuses on situations that are favorable to becoming bilingual and on people's ability to assume this quality fully.

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## *2.2 Eurobarometer and multilingualism in Romania*

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Multilingualism, which has long been assessed from a sociolinguistic perspective, is far from having achieved its full potential, especially in the dynamic context of the contemporary intermingling of populations throughout the world. More specifically, the phenomenon of multilingualism has been shaped in recent years by the serious events that have taken place in Europe and elsewhere: immigration to EU countries, the problem of educating children in the Romanian diaspora, business travel, required skills for online communication, and the pressing need to improve oral

language competences in the professional or private sphere, as well as the real pleasure of discovering other cultures.

This research is based on the data already collected by the European Commission in the “Europeans and their languages” survey. The study reveals very positive attitudes in Europe towards multilingualism. More specifically, it states that 98% of Europeans consider that mastering a foreign language will benefit their children; 88% think it is very useful to know a language other than one’s mother tongue; 72% agree with the EU objective of at least two foreign languages for everyone; 77% would support language policies. It is worth remembering that one of the provisions of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is that knowledge of two modern languages in addition to the mother tongue by the end of secondary education is an objective of the education system.

	English	French	German	Spanish	Russian	None
Speaking	26%	8%	2%	5%	2%	52%
Writing	20%	7%	1%	2%	1%	58%
Online communication	24%	5%	1%	2%	1%	59%

**Figure 2. Data on Romanians’ knowledge of a foreign language**

*Source: E.C., 2012 Eurobarometer survey*

On the one hand, the 2012 Eurobarometer data on Romanians and their views on multilingualism do not paint a very optimistic picture. In particular, Romania is one of the 5 Member States where more than half of the population declare that they are unable to speak another foreign language. These countries are Spain, 54%, Romania, 52%, Bulgaria, 52%, Czech Republic, 51% and Poland, 50%. A percentage of 22% of the Romanian population state to have knowledge to maintain a conversation in at least 2 languages, and only 8% in at least 3 languages. Intercultural understanding is a priority for only 19% of the population. English and French are the most widely spoken languages, with a significant gap between the two. 2012 Eurobarometer statistics show that more than 50% of Romanians do not have foreign language literacy, while the most commonly learned and used foreign languages are English, French, German, Spanish and Russian.

On the other hand, the 2024 New Eurobarometer shows a slightly more positive attitude towards language learning, as compared to the 2012 survey. The European Commission's press release underlines that Romanians have a positive attitude toward learning foreign languages, seeing it as valuable for personal and professional

growth. It also emphasizes that language education is considered a priority in Romania, reflecting the broader EU commitment to multilingualism. The data show a statistical involution compared to the European average in terms of another foreign language that Romanians actually speak at conversational level. More specifically, Romanian respondents' ability to hold a conversation in foreign languages has declined since 2012: 25% can converse in English (a 6% drop), 7% in French (a 10% decrease), 3% in Spanish (down by 2%), and 3% in German (a 4% decrease). However, Romanian respondents report increased foreign language use in several areas since 2012: a 14% rise in using foreign languages on the internet (now 49%), a 19% increase when traveling abroad (now 37%), and an 11% increase for reading work documentation (now 16%). Even more, Romanians see English as the most valuable language, with 62% prioritizing it for personal growth and 74% for their children's future. Interest in French has declined by 12% for both adults and children, while German's importance has decreased by 3% for adults and 5% for children's future needs. Moreover, forty-five percent of the Romanian respondents consider that formal education is the most effective way of learning a foreign language. Additionally, they would make significant progress in learning a foreign language if lessons were free (27%), if they were paid to learn (23%), if there were opportunities to work abroad (21%), if it led to a better career (19%) or for more travel opportunities (18%).

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### 3. Case studies

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#### 3.1 Methodology

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To examine the research questions, methods of pragmatic-analytic analysis were used. Drawing on the principles of relevance theory, this research was contextualized to study the content and life situations behind the semiotic data collected from the respondents, in order to filter out the most relevant information (Grice: 1975:41-58). The design of questionnaires and the data collection followed discourse analysis principles which examine content in context. More specifically, the two relevance principles of an utterance are:

- the cognitive principle of relevance, which implies the maximization of relevance in / of all utterances;
- the communicative principle of relevance, which implies that “every utterance conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson, 1996:150).

These linguistic pragmatic methods are based on the idea that all acts of human communication are intentional and not exclusively explicit. The relevance theory principles highlight the pragmatic rules of economy and maximization of any utterance.

This research included a qualitative survey, in the form of ethnographic interviews, and a quantitative questionnaire. The data were studied, compared and analyzed in Excel, in order to gain an insight into the current trends of Romanians and with an eye to the social context of the respondents (pupils - students - employees). The survey focused on the following questions: (1) How do they functionally define the concept of multilingualism? ; (2) Which languages do they know/use and for which situations/purposes?; (3) What do they see as the advantages and the language barriers they most often encounter?; (4) How could they improve their language skills?; (5) What are the CERCL skills they master or wish to improve? Other questions concerned the environment in which respondents had best acquired their language skills in the long term, which skills they mastered best (active or passive), the environment and methods that provided the best motivation for improving language skills, the learning facilitators, or incentives, and the met obstacles, difficulties, or language barriers.

The qualitative questionnaire, an ethnographic interview, was addressed to 9 respondents, pupils in secondary education in Bucharest, and to 36 adults, employees in international companies in Bucharest. The quantitative research was based on the responses of 146 students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics.

Succinctly, the selected combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods from this article examines multilingualism among various groups. Ethnographic studies allow for in-depth insights into personal experiences and attitudes toward language learning, particularly among migrants and employees in multinational companies. The quantitative survey complements this by providing statistical data on language preferences and skills among college and university students, enabling a broader understanding of trends and behaviors in language acquisition. Together, these methods show the complexities and dynamics of multilingualism in contemporary Romanian society.

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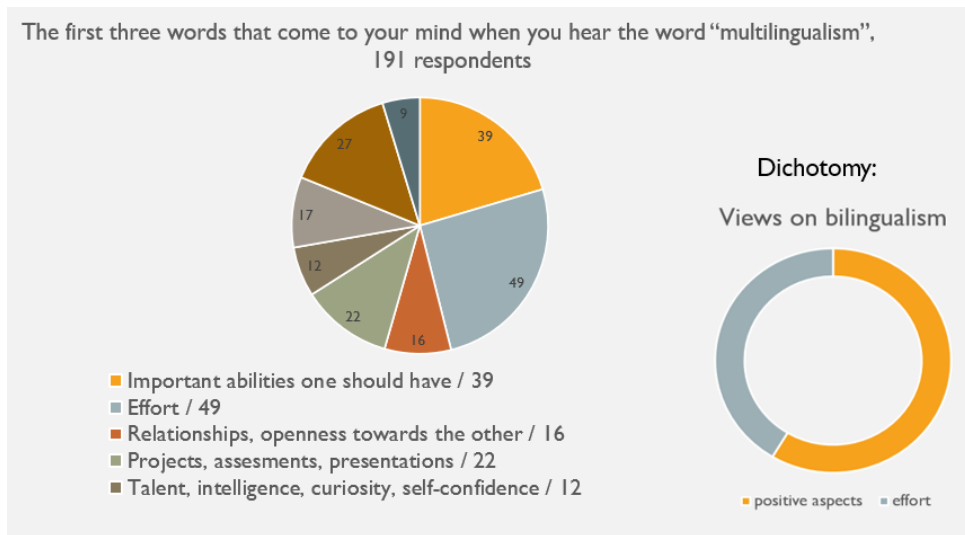
### *3.2 Results*

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The globalization of recent decades has resulted in an upsurge in the number of bilingual and even multilingual people, as international communication has grown on a massive scale. A huge transhumance of people has been attracted to the economic wealth of western Europe. The surveys reveal a dichotomous perspective on the concept of multilingualism.

More than half of the respondents (51%) stress the positive aspects and the importance of mastering multilingualism - from the point of view of human relations, personal development, and openness to the world, in terms of talent, self-confidence, and power. However, a sizeable percentage of respondents (49%) emphasize the challenges they face, and the effort and patience they have to show when learning a foreign language in a society where time is scarce.



**Figure 3. Towards a functional insight on multilingualism**

Source: Author's surveys – Romanian target groups

### 3.2.1 Ethnographic interviews

Three groups of adult respondents, active on the labor market abroad and in Romania, were considered in this research. Their understanding of foreign language learning is, on the whole, once again, dichotomous.

The first category includes migrants to other European countries, intellectual bilinguals, such as doctors, architects and computer scientists who moved abroad in search of a more refined lifestyle. Their testimonies attest to the fact that, for them, cross-linguistic comprehension is a positive intellectual challenge. This is the case of S.M. (47 y. o.), a Romanian mother living in Verona, where she works as a medical professional. S.M. is a good example of the concept of additive bilingualism. Having specialized studies in Italy, of Romanian parents, she emigrated to Italy where she gave birth to two children who learned Italian and Romanian at the same time. This simultaneous early bilingualism implies that the children's language development is bilingual. They are considered native bilinguals, because at home they speak Romanian, while at the nursery school and in society they communicate in Italian. Like their mother, the children speak Italian with a Romanian “accent”, and Romanian with an Italian resonance.

The second group includes migrants to other countries who are learning the language as they speak it, while integrating it into work and life activities in other language communities. Taking advantage of their linguistic intuition and of the bits of foreign language they learned at school, this group sometimes understands the host language without actually speaking it. Thus, the case of M.S. (38 y. o.) illustrates passive

bilingualism - having worked for several successive summers in the United States as a beekeeper's helper (through the "work and travel" program), he was able to understand English, without actually being able to speak it.

Thirdly, on the Romanian labor market, multilingualism is part of corporate governance. The issue of multilingualism is a daily concern for many companies and institutions in Romania. Testimonies from employees reveal that the most preferred methods of learning a foreign language are private, free classes. So, in response, international companies such as Auchan, Carrefour, Michelin, BRD Groupe Société Générale call on private foreign language teachers to increase staff satisfaction. For the purpose of this article, the data was collected through ethnographic studies conducted in companies that provide foreign language courses with trainers, in international companies. But the interviews illustrate that often the tasks of the respondents' jobs are so demanding that learning, or improving linguistic competence in a foreign language often fails. The majority of adult respondents (87%) said they had felt the need for help in overcoming language barriers, especially in terms of active language skills, i.e. speaking, and presenting. A percentage of 65 % state that getting to know the other culture is a way of adapting to it and accepting cultural differences with a functional sense of humor. 45% consider themselves capable of handling technical terminology of a particular economic field, and of analyzing and translating product data sheets in at least two languages.

The teenage group of respondents expressed a positive perspective on multilingualism. Two of the respondents from secondary school are of French and German nationality. They live with their parents in Romania. For them, knowing a foreign language means, in their own words: "welt offen", "wissensgierig" - openness to the world, thirst for knowledge. The other respondents are enrolled in bilingual classes in Romania. They prefer to learn a foreign language through playful activities with the specific aim of using it for their interests: reading comics, playing multimedia online games, visiting Disneyland, communicating with foreigners, understanding foreign music and films without subtitles or dubbing: "I'm not very communicative, but I want to have the means if that's the case", confessed one little girl, aged 12.

For this teenage group, multilingualism is no longer an objective but rather a tool through which they can experience, feel, invent, and act independently, an instrument through which children can acquire essential skills and abilities. This group makes a good distinction between the languages they learn. English is seen as a necessary and natural skill for any future activity, while other languages, such as Japanese, would be learned simply out of curiosity and an intrinsic desire for knowledge. The interview analysis shows that throughout the school years the Romanian teenager experiments, feels, invents, thinks and, acts completely independently of the (foreign) language.

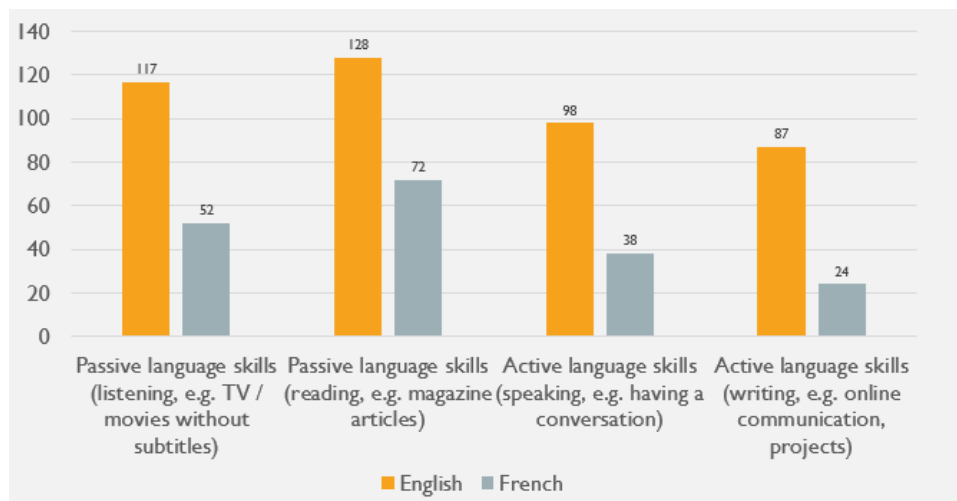


### 3.2.2 Quantitative survey

For university education, the statistical data of this research confirm the Eurobarometer results, with the majority of respondents preferring English. University students claim to have both active and passive skills to the same extent. The second most common language is French, but skills in this language are visibly weaker, and passive skills are given priority.

Students stated that the most favorable environments, in which they learned best, were at school, through multimedia tools, such as films or video games without subtitles, for English as a second language, and private classes. Only 15% of respondents said they would consider moving to another country. The majority would like to improve their interactive and conversational skills, to benefit from, on the job market, and for economic reasons.

As the chart shows, English is preferred and most widely used by students (87%). Possession of passive skills prevails for French (~ 50%). Regarding the past learning environment, English was learned at school (74%), through music and movies without subtitles (65%), using online gaming and communication (54%), and by training at home with private teachers (24%). Students' French competences were acquired at school, when they had oral presentations (71%), by training at home with teachers (24%), during travels abroad and other family-related events (17%), and in internships (7%). In terms of their preferred future learning environments, students emphasize the need of functionality, with a high focus on spoken interaction. Their predictions concerning the future frequency of foreign language use are related to travels, internships and labor market insertion.



**Figure 4. University students' attitude towards their knowledge of a second language self-assessment**

Source: Author's survey. Respondents: 146 university students

The analysis of the research data shows that Romanian students have the necessary openness to enhance their multilingual skills, being aware of the reality of this phenomenon, but that “competences still need to be improved. Whilst just over half of all Europeans are able to speak at least one other language, there are no clear signs that multilingualism is on the increase.” (E.C., 2012:142).

It is relevant to mention that this research faces a number of limitations, such as its reliance on Eurobarometer data, which may not fully represent the complexities of multilingualism. Moreover, findings are based on self-reported attitudes, which can introduce biases. Additionally, the diversity of respondents’ experiences and interpretations of multilingualism may also affect the results. Nevertheless, considering the multifaceted nature of multilingualism in Romania, this study serves as a reflective analysis of contemporary linguistic dynamics within the country.

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#### **4. Conclusions**

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This study uses Grice's principles of relevance to underscore the intentionality behind human communication, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of multilingualism in Romania. By examining the context and semiotic data from diverse respondents, the research underlines the complexities and challenges of foreign language use within a contemporary framework. To sum up, according to the carried-out surveys and to the studied testimonies, multilingualism in Romania is a very active phenomenon. Our research confirms the results of the 2012 and 2024 European surveys that, as in other Member States, the Romanian population is aware of multilingualism’s benefits, but language skills still need to be improved. The common view of multilingualism in the education-work continuum is that the Romanian population still hesitates between a pessimistic vision - too much effort to learn - and an optimistic one: multilingualism is a gateway to the world, to knowledge.

The dichotomy present in Romanian society can be conceptualized as both a significant challenge and a valuable asset for the dissemination of knowledge and the cultivation of trust. While linguistic confusion impedes effective communication and collaboration, the capacity to comprehend multiple languages enhances understanding and facilitates the spread of information. This duality of multilingualism serves as both an obstacle and an advantageous resource within the societal framework. Nevertheless, this existing dichotomy does not hinder the conclusion that multilingualism is a prerequisite for the emergence of European awareness and active European citizenship. Multilingualism is an essential component of European identity. It is the necessary support for cultural diversity and respect for people, an absolute condition for the individual and the professional development of each person. Multilingualism is therefore a source of sustainable development for societies that accept and enrich it through the will and actions of their individuals.

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