

## **The Use of Foreign Languages in the Metropolitan District of Porto, Portugal**

In May 2001 it was decided to conduct a survey into attitudes to foreign languages, language learning and language usefulness in the metropolitan district of Porto. This survey formed part of a programme of activities put together by the Faculty of Letters modern languages' departments to celebrate The European Year of Languages.

The initial inspiration for this local survey was The Eurobarometer Special Survey N.<sup>o</sup> 54 managed and organized by The Education and Culture Directorate-General of the European Commission which described similar issues at a European level and resulted in the publication of the report *Europeans and Languages* in February 2001. Using data from both surveys, it is possible to describe the issues from local, national and pan-European perspectives taking into account a variety of sociological variables.

The respondents in this local survey were asked to consider various aspects of their foreign language ability, learning experience and language preferences. The role of foreign languages in the European dimension was considered in terms of ideas of citizenship, the linguistic image of The European Union, the question as to whether the EU should have a single working language and, if so, which. Also the impact of Porto being the joint European Capital of Culture on foreign language contact was considered in one question.

The initial findings of the local Porto survey presented in this paper show a number of distinct, different patterns when compared with the Eurobarometer conclusions, with the main focus falling on the relevance of educational background, professional status and age of the respondents.

The interviews which form the basis of this survey were carried out by undergraduates attending The Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto. These findings result from the work of the authors who also received the support of fellow foreign language teachers as well as members of staff from the Sociology Department.

The preliminary nature of the statistics presented in this paper must be emphasized. It is hoped that a fuller, more detailed presentation will be made available at the Faculty of Letters website in the near future. This final representation of statistical information will make more

extensive use of the SPSS version 10 software package which can provide filtered cross-referenced data demonstrating variations within categories of response according to each independent variable.

### 1. Sociological Profile:

#### *1.1. Sex:*

Male: 355 = 44.8% Female: 432 = 54.5% No Response: 6 = 0.8%  
793 Respondents

The total number of local respondents was almost 800 in comparison with the 16,078 interviewed for the Eurobarometer survey of whom approximately one thousand were from Portugal.

#### *1.2. Age:*

0-17 years: 54 = 6.8% 18-25 years: 339 = 42.8% 26-35 years: 130 = 16.4%  
36-50 years: 195 = 24.6% 1-65 years: 60 = 7.6% 65 + years: 11 = 1.4%  
No response: 3 = 0.4%

The age bias apparent here towards the 18-25 group probably results from the questionnaire being conducted by students of the Faculty of Letters who would be more likely to be in contact respondents of a similar age to themselves.

#### *1.3. Formal Education: Indicate the highest level attended:*

Primary: 108 = 13.6% Secondary: 333 = 42% Baccalaureate: 58 = 7.3%  
Graduate Degree: 259 = 32.7% Post-graduate: 9 = 1.1% Masters: 7 = 0.9%  
Doctorate: 5 = 0.6% No response: 14 = 1.8%.

There is an approximately equal division between respondents who have been formally educated beyond secondary level and those who have not.

#### *1.4. What is your principal occupation?*

Homemaker: 22 = 2.8% Student: 271 = 34.2% Unemployed: 3 = 0.4%  
Retired: 12 = 1.5% Professional (self-employed): 29 = 3.7% Business

Owner: 47 = 5.9% Secretary: 12 = 1.2% Professional (salaried): 136 = 17.2% Director: 11 = 1.4% Shop Assistant/Tradesperson: 20 = 2.5% Service provider: 91 = 11.5% Supervisor: 7 = 0.9% Manual worker (skilled): 27 = 3.4% Manual worker (unskilled): 52 = 6.6% Others: 29 = 3.7% No Response: 24 = 3.0%

The typology employed here corresponds to the interpretations by the respondents themselves. The high percentage of student respondents (34.2%) reinforces the existence of a bias towards younger people (42.8% between the ages of 18 and 25) and is of key importance. The European average figure reported by Eurobarometer is that 78% of students are likely to know a foreign language compared to a figure of 99.6% among student respondents of this survey; this figure is rivaled only by that of "self-employed professionals" at 93.1% as well as the "salaried professionals" at 97.1%.

### *1.5. What is your current professional status?*

Company Owner/Employer: 40 = 8.1% Self-employed Worker: 54 = 10.9% Salaried worker: 369 = 74.2% Family firm – unpaid work: 21 = 4.2% Member of a cooperative: 2 = 0.4% No Response: 11 = 2.2% (Other situation: 297 = 37.5%).

The categories employed here correspond to those determined in the recent Census 2001 conducted by the government in Portugal. The great majority of workers were not self-employed regardless of their type of occupation.

## 2. Language Learning

### *2.1. At what age should learning a foreign language begin at school?*

3-6 years: 228 = 28.8%  
7-9 years: 425 = 53.6%  
10-13 years: 133 = 16.8%  
14-18 years: 6 = 0.8%  
No response: 1 = 0.1%

Business and professional people dominated the selection of 3-6 years as the ideal age to start learning a foreign language whereas all job

types and ages were represented in the choice for 7-9 years. Almost all respondents chose a pre-puberty option indicating an awareness, conscious or not, of a "critical age" factor strongly associated with language learning success by many theorists. The figure of 53.6% opting for 7-9 years old reflects the local compulsory schooling policy although recognition of the value of an early start to foreign language learning is strong (28.8%).

### *2.2. Do you speak a foreign language?*

No: 108 = 13.6% Yes: 685 = 86.4%

The positive response figure of 86.4% can be qualified by consideration of the factors of age and educational qualifications. The figure decreases with an increase in age, from over 90% to 70.3% at age 36 and then falls below 50% for the over 65 age group. The more educationally qualified a respondent was, the more likely an affirmative answer was, thus all respondents, except two (99.4%), who had progressed beyond secondary school replied positively. Foreign language knowledge at Primary level remains low by comparison at 38.9%. A similar pattern is present in the Eurobarometer survey. However, the total affirmative response percentage for Europe was much lower at 53% with 54% expressing no desire to learn a foreign language because it would be too time consuming (64%) or too difficult (65%).

### *2.3. If No, which of the following languages would it be useful to learn?<sup>1</sup>*

German: 9 = 8.3% Danish: 0 = 0% Spanish: 8 = 7.4% Finnish: 0 = 0% French: 34 = 31.5% Greek: 1 = 0.9% English: 94 = 87% Italian: 1 = 0.9% Dutch: 0 = 0% Swedish: 0 = 0% Other(s): 0 = 0%

Regardless of age or profession the choice of English as being useful to learn dominates, the exception being among respondents with an educational background limited to "primary school" who did not choose English. Also noteworthy is the zero response level for the Scandinavian languages, perhaps a reflection of their geographic, com-

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<sup>1</sup> The language options are presented here according to Portuguese alphabetical order just as they appeared in the original questionnaire.

mercial and cultural distance from Portugal. The local figures correspond largely to the Eurobarometer figures for English (75%), French (40%), German (23%) and Spanish (18%). One difference was in the figures for German and Spanish which were much lower locally than those for Europe indicating a more polarized attitude.

*2.4. If Yes, which of the languages do you consider to be your first foreign language (and then 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>)?*

German	Danish	Spanish	Finnish	French	Greek	English
Italian	Dutch	Swedish	Other(s)			
1 <sup>st</sup> Foreign Language:						
English: 469 = 68.7% French: 120 = 17.6% Spanish: 21 = 3.1%						
German: 9 = 1.3%						
2 <sup>nd</sup> Foreign Language:						
French: 280 = 49.7%	English: 88 = 15.6%	Spanish: 65 = 11.5%				
German: 57 = 10.1%						
3 <sup>rd</sup> Foreign Language:						
Spanish: 113 = 31.4%	German: 89 = 24.7%	French: 81 = 22.5%				
Italian: 16 = 4.4%						

Among the respondents choosing English there was a strong bias within the 18/25 age group, of whom the vast majority were students, with a subsequent decline in relation to the respondents' ages. This perhaps explains the very different Eurobarometer results which were 41% for English, 19% for French, 10% for German and 7% for Spanish. This difference is accentuated further when the figure of 36% for Portuguese only respondents within the Eurobarometer population is considered. A contrasting pattern exists with the choice of French, where there was a slight drop in positive responses in the 26/35 age group (down to 19 from 43 respondents) followed by an increase in the 36/50 age group (up to 38). Here the local historical background is important as it is only comparatively recently that English has superceded French in educational contexts and in public awareness.

In terms of second foreign language, French accounted for almost 50% of the respondents' choices. In addition, it should be noted that the number of respondents choosing English as their second foreign language (88) represented more than half of the respondents who did not choose English as their first foreign language (150). These factors reinforce the notion of polarization mentioned above.

### *2.5. How would you rate your ability in your first foreign language?*

Read/understand:

Very good: 191 = 27.9% Good: 237 = 34.6% Adequate: 155 = 22.6%

Intermediate: 45 = 6.6% Basic: 47 = 6.9% No response: 10 = 1.5%

Listen/understand:

Very good: 179 = 26.1% Good: 221 = 32.3% Adequate: 166 = 24.2%

Intermediate: 59 = 8.6% Basic: 38 = 5.5% No response: 22 = 3.2%

Oral production:

Very good: 97 = 14.2% Good: 192 = 28% Adequate: 222 = 32.4%

Intermediate: 75 = 10.9% Basic: 72 = 10.5% No response: 27 = 3.9%

Written production:

Very good: 78 = 11.4% Good: 189 = 27.6% Adequate: 220 = 32.1%

Intermediate: 91 = 13.3% Basic: 80 = 11.7% No response: 27 = 3.9%

The Eurobarometer survey reports results in this category in terms of three levels of language proficiency: "very good", "good" or "elementary". With respect to English the results were 14% for "very good", 33% for "good" and 29% for "elementary". Locally in Porto five levels of proficiency were employed with scores for "very good" being approximately double for the receptive skills of reading (27.9%) and listening (26.1%) and at almost the same level for speaking (14.2%) and writing (11.4%). This distinction between receptive and productive skills is very important in pedagogical terms and in terms of giving an indication of the respondents' levels of self-confidence and language learning awareness. For example, the number of "very good" and "good" replies decreases with an increase in the age of the respondent. Also, among second language users of French and Spanish there was a more positive bias towards the skill of speaking compared to users of English.

### *2.6 Indicate by order of importance (maximum of three) the main sources of learning in your first foreign language:*

*First Source:*

Primary School: 191 = 28% Secondary School: 209 = 30.6% Language

Institutes: 39 = 5.7% Higher Education: 18 = 2.6% Short courses abroad:

2 = 0.3% Stays in foreign countries: 56 = 8.2% Others: 8 = 1.1%

No Response: 160 = 23.4%

*Second Source:*

Primary School: 56 = 11.1% Secondary School: 178 = 35.3% Language

Institutes: 43 = 8.5% Higher Education: 37 = 7.3% Short courses abroad:

6 = 1.2% Stays in foreign countries: 20 = 4% Others: 3 = 0.8%

No Response: 160 = 31.7 %

*Third Source:*

Primary School: 21 = 8.3% Secondary School: 25 = 9.9% Language Institutes: 34 = 13.4% Higher Education: 55 = 21.7% Short courses abroad: 8 = 3.2% Stays in foreign countries: 29 = 11.5% Others: 20 = 5.6%

No Response: 67 = 26.5%

Formal schooling accounted for almost 60% of the options available, a clear indication of the dominant role of classroom instruction in the field of foreign language learning. Considering the primary source of the respondents' foreign language there was a clear distinction between the cases of English and French. In terms of degree of importance, the pattern for French was: "primary school", then "secondary school" and then "stays in foreign countries" whereas for English it was: "secondary school", then "primary school" and then "language institutes". There was also an inversion of priority choice in the 0-17 age group who chose "primary school" before "secondary school". In the Eurobarometer survey there is a much clearer dominance of secondary education as the main source with a figure of 59.1% reported, a figure almost identical to that achieved locally for primary and secondary education combined.

### 3. Work

#### *3.1. How important is a knowledge of foreign languages in the labour market nowadays?*

Extremely important: 419 = 52.8% Very important: 261 = 32.9% Important:

98 = 12.4% Not very important: 11 = 1.4% Not at all important: 0 = 0%

No response: 4 = 0.5%

Recognition of the importance of foreign languages in the labour market was almost universal (over 98%) with special emphasis for the category of "extremely important" which received 52.8% of all opinions expressed. An educational background of a university or post-graduate level provided an "extremely important" rating of over 65% with less than 10% or less being allocated to "important" and below. This pattern was also true for all age groups, showing a slight decline with increase in age (from 60% at 26/35 down to 48.2% at 36/50 falling to 40.8% above 51 years of age), and strongest among students, professional people and company owners.

### *3.2. Do you need to use a foreign language in your field of work?*

No: 488 = 61.6% Yes: 303 = 38.3% No Response: 1 = 0.1%

Among the respondents who answered negatively students dominate which contrasts with their recognition of the importance of foreign languages stated above. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the student respondents were non- Faculty of Letters friends or acquaintances of the students who conducted the questionnaire. Zero positive responses were also provided by the "retired" and the "unemployed" categories. Also responding negatively were many unskilled workers, where only 19 (36.5%) responded positively and 33 (63.5%) responded negatively. A contrast exists here with "skilled workers" among whom 63.5% responded "yes". A positive response was more likely the more "professional" a respondent was; for example, among the category of "professionals" 125 out of 165 responded positively. The factor of age also provides some contrasting information: 67.7% say "yes" at age 26/35 (the peak) and this falls to 51.3% at 36/50 and 33.8% above the age of 51. However, perhaps the most startling contrast arises from the gender variable: 51.4% of men said "yes" whereas only 27.8% of women said the same. Language use at work among women is low. This compares to a figure of over 75% for the female population of the Modern Languages and Literature degree course at the Faculty of Letters in Porto.

### *3.3. If Yes, which of the foreign languages below do you need to use?*

German: 29 = 9.5% Danish: 5 = 1.6% Spanish: 69 = 22.7% Finnish: 2 = 0.7%  
French: 115 = 38.9% Greek: 0 = 0% English: 242 = 79.9% Italian: 16 = 5.3%  
Dutch: 1 = 0.3% Swedish: 0 = 0% Other(s): 2 = 0.7% specify: Chinese

An almost constant numerical relationship of results exists here: English in first place, with approximately double that of French in second place, which in turn is approximately double that of Spanish in third place, which is also approximately double that of German in fourth place. These results could be seen as a reflection of the relative importance of commercial relationships, hence the greater significance of Spanish over German in this instance compared to the inversion of this situation at other points of the questionnaire. This is the only category in which Italian marks any presence again perhaps a result of eco-

nomic factors. The dominance of English here may also reflect the use of English as a "lingua franca" or contact language with countries other than the United Kingdom or Eire.

### *3.4. What use do you make of your first foreign language in your work?*

For correspondence: 71 = 23.7% For consulting the Internet: 116 = 38.7%  
For talking/telephoning: 166 = 55.3% For consulting publications: 101 = 33.7% For producing documents/texts: 86 = 28.7% Others: Which? Information Technology: 7 = 2.3%

The results here assume significance in relation to the question of language skills which were considered in question 2.5 of this questionnaire. Namely that degrees of confidence were much higher when the skills required were receptive rather than productive. However, here, the highest frequency of use was for speaking and telephoning, precisely the second weakest skill area reported in question 2.5 (written production was the weakest). Also interesting is the fact that the Internet was more frequently used as an information resource than traditional publications, the Internet being very much a foreign language environment for native speakers of Portuguese.

### *3.5. How often do you make use of your first foreign language in your work (approximately)?*

Always: 32 = 10.6% Frequently: 147 = 48.8% Rarely: 110 = 36.5% Never: 4 = 1.3% No response: 8 = 2.7%

While few respondents (10.6%) could claim to make constant use of their first foreign language at work it was also true that almost none (1.3%) were able to claim that their first foreign language was never of any use. Indeed, almost 50% stated that they used their first foreign language frequently at work. Therefore, while a clear majority of respondents did not require a foreign language in their work (61.6% in question 3.2) those that made use of this ability did so frequently and most usually for speaking and telephoning.

#### 4. Socio-Cultural Context

##### *4.1. To what extent does a knowledge of foreign languages improve your socio-cultural status?*

A lot: 300 = 37.8% Quite a lot: 396 = 49.9% A little: 71 = 9.0% Not at all:  
13 = 1.6% No response: 13 = 1.6%

In terms of improving one's socio-cultural level, the respondents were convinced of the importance of the role of foreign languages with just under 90% replying positively. Age seems not to be a factor here; the response figures for the "quite a lot" category are very similar across all age groups. When considering educational background, there is an approximately 10% jump in "very important" responses moving up each educational category, starting at 25% at primary level and finishing up at 52.4% among post-graduates. In terms of job/occupation, the combined figure of 93.1% for "very important" and "quite important" is a strong recognition of the socio-cultural factor in foreign language learning/knowledge. However in no single category did "very important" outweigh "quite important". Perhaps this was a question to which the respondents felt they should reply positively. It is also possible to imply the significance of two general factors: the increasingly global nature of the socio-cultural environment and the relative isolation of native speakers of Portuguese in terms of this process given the restricted geographical spread of the Portuguese speech community (compared to the high total number of speakers).

##### *4.2. Do you use a foreign language in the context of your social life?*

No: 308 = 38.9% Yes: 478 = 60.3% No Response: 6 = 0.8%

The balance of answers here needs to be seen in the light of the age factor. The fulcral point is the age of 35, below which the tendency is towards a positive answer and above which the tendency is towards a negative answer. Perhaps a question of definition also arises here as to what the respondents considered to be their social life, whether the concept was exclusive in the sense of implying direct contact with non-Portuguese speaking people or it had a wider interpretation.

*4.3. If Yes, which of the languages below do you use?*

German: 38 = 7.9% Danish: 3 = 0.6% Spanish: 89 = 18.4% Finnish: 2 = 0.4% French: 171 = 36% Greek: 1 = 0.2% English: 382 = 79.3% Italian: 19 = 3.9% Dutch: 3 = 0.6% Swedish: 0 = 0% Other(s): 1 = 0.2% specify: Serbo-Croat

The figures here correspond largely to those presented in question 3.3, related to the workplace, both in terms of ranking and in terms of percentages. The implication is that resident communities of foreign language speakers in Porto have comparable contact with the local population, but again, we should take into account the fact that English dominates through its dual role as the means of communication of both native speakers and second language users.

*4.4. In what kind of situations?*

Watching films: 345 = 71.3% Reading books/magazines: 282 = 58.3% Travelling: 245 = 50.6% Meeting tourists: 147 = 30.4% Surfing the Internet: 276 = 57% Socialising with foreigners: 222 = 45.9% Other: 8 = 1.7% What? Socialising with relatives

The most frequent use of a foreign language was the watching of films: this is a reflection of the local situation in which foreign language films are rarely dubbed into Portuguese (the exceptions being most often films produced for the juvenile market by Disney and Dreamworks) both in the context of television and the cinema itself. The lowest figure of 30.4% for contact with tourists may be surprising given that Portugal is considered a prime tourist location. However, the importance of tourism in the north of Portugal, and specifically in Porto, is much less than is the case for Lisbon and the Algarve. In any case, tourism in Porto focuses almost exclusively on the historic centre and the Port wine cellars on the opposite side of the River Douro which severely limits the local population's interaction with foreign visitors.

## 5. Europe

### 5.1. How important is a knowledge of a foreign language to your sense of being a European citizen?

Extremely important: 126 = 15.9% Very important: 221 = 27.9% Important: 248 = 31.3% Not very important: 120 = 15.1% Not at all important: 66 = 8.3% No response: 12 = 1.5%

In total 75.1% of respondents gave answers of "important" or above. This was a common pattern across all age groups. In addition, those respondents educated above degree level more often answered "extremely important". However, even though the distinctions between the categories "extremely important", "very important" and so on are consistent across all age groups (for example, the category of "very important": age 0/17:27.8%, age 18/25:28%, age 26/35: 27.7% and age 36/50: 26,7%) the exception is respondents over the age of 51 years; here the figure for "not at all important" is approximately double that of other age groups. The older generation did not "grow up with" the relatively recent notions of a European identity. This seems to function with age rather than gender as the figures for men and women are very even. The importance of educational background is much clearer where the combined figure for "extremely important" and "very important" only rises above 50 % for the university educated and postgraduate respondents. There seems to be a clear recognition that a "beyond local" perspective towards language is a contributory factor in a sense of being European. In the Eurobarometer survey 72% of all Europeans considered that learning a foreign language would be useful and 93% considered that it would be important for their children to learn a foreign language.

### 5.2 Which languages do you most associate with the European Union?

German: 349 = 44% Danish: 25 = 3.2% Spanish: 210 = 26.5% Finnish: 30 = 3.8% French: 574 = 72.5% Greek: 44 = 5.6% English: 719 = 90.7% Italian: 113 = 14.2% Dutch: 23 = 2.9% Portuguese: 217 = 27.4% Swedish: 19 = 2.4% No Response: 10

The very high levels of response for English and French were in some way predictable in the light of previous questions, but the appea-

rance of Portuguese in third position is perhaps indicative of the way in which local people accept the dominant role of English and French in European affairs but also assert the importance of their own native language in the same context. It also reinforces the idea of a two-tier definition within the foreign languages where English and French stand apart from Spanish and German.

### *5.3. Do the institutions of the European Union need a single working language?*

No: 452 = 57% Yes: 331 = 41.7% No Response: 9 = 1.3%

The answers represent a relatively even split between positive and negative. But the idea of a defensive attitude to one's native language also comes to light in this section, specifically among younger respondents. This resistance paradoxically increases with educational level (among postgraduates only 38.1% said "yes"). However, in terms of principal occupation, the influence of a large numbers of students may be considered decisive: 174 (64.2%) responded negatively and 93 (34.3%) responded positively. The same kind of imbalance is also discernible in the 18/25 age group where 208 (61.4%) responded negatively and 129 (38.1%) responded positively.

### *5.4. If Yes, which one of the languages below should be chosen?*

German: 3 = 0.9% Danish: 0 = 0% Spanish: 2 = 0.6% Finnish: 0 = 0% French: 23 = 6.8% Greek: 3 = 0.9% English: 257 = 75.6% Italian: 1 = 0.3% Dutch: 0 = 0% Portuguese: 20 = 5.9% Swedish: 0 = 0% No response: 31 = 9.1% Other: 2 specify: Esperanto

The lack of any significant figures for languages other than Portuguese, French and English may be seen as corroborative evidence for the points raised in relation to question 5.2. The degree of dominance of English was clear-cut despite the semi-official joint division usually assumed in parallel with French within European institutions.

*5.5. Has the fact of Porto being European Capital of Culture in 2001 led you to use foreign languages more frequently?*

No: 577 = 72.9% Yes: 206 = 26% No Response: 10 = 1.1%

There is little variation in responses according to age, sex or educational background. Only one group appears with a positive percentage, that of shop assistants/trades people with 55% saying "yes" with the next highest figure being 35.7% for "Self-employed professionals". Perhaps the fact that this survey was conducted in May, prior to the tourist "high season" in Porto, goes some way to explaining the low frequency of use/contact reported here. It may well be that the Capital of Culture status did little to attract non-Portuguese speaking tourists on a year round basis. It can also be noted that while Porto was joint European Capital of Culture alongside Rotterdam there are no instances of Dutch obtaining significant results anywhere in the survey, this despite the existence of several joint cultural projects including, for example, the conversion of a downtown shopping street into a Dutch language shopping environment.

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