

Book Review: *The Language(s) of Politics: Multilingual Policy-Making in the European Union* by Nils Ringe, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2022, 264 pages. ISBN: 978-0-472-07513-3. DOI: 10.3998/1.3110.0000.0000.0000.0000



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

BOOK REVIEW

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HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

Multilingualism is a defining feature of the EU's political system. While undoubtedly admirable, it presents a puzzle of how a supranational political system can function without conflicts arising from linguistic miscommunication, misunderstandings, and exclusion. Nils Ringe's book, 'The Language(s) of Politics,' provides a plausible answer, asserting that multilingualism depoliticizes EU policy-making. According to the author, the EU maintains an equilibrium in its language regime through a 'veil of formal language equality.' This equilibrium is achieved by employing a common working language and offering extensive language services that are accessible to policymakers as needed. In this sense, the book serves as further confirmation of the efficiency of the EU's political system: the EU is capable of producing legislation just like national political systems, while simultaneously avoiding obstacles that arise from 24 official languages. To some, the effectiveness of this multilingual regime may not be surprising. Ultimately, the EU is an example of a coming-together federal political system: member states join voluntarily by accepting the EU's primary and secondary legislation, which includes the rules surrounding the use of languages. The EU's language regime is neither under the control of a single entity nor is it coercive. But the book's argument extends beyond this viewpoint and contends that there are unintended consequences arising from the linguistic limitations of policymakers as well as the effects of translation and interpretation.

The book presents three possible mechanisms for the depoliticization hypothesis. First, multilingualism results in the use of simpler and more pragmatic language. Second, the widespread use of technocratic language reduces linguistic differences during the policy-making stage between EU actors. Lastly, the language used in EU documents and bargaining is more neutral and de-ideologized as a result of translation and interpretation. The author derives his empirical insights using a research design based on the method of 'soaking and poking.' The book is thus not a theory-testing exercise in the strict sense, but rather an (undoubtedly impressive) empirical study that checks the plausibility of the proposed mechanisms using first-hand accounts of relevant actors in the policy-making process.

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KEYWORDS:

EU policy-making;  
legislative politics;  
language and politics

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Proksch, Sven-Oliver.  
2023. "Book Review: *The Language(s) of Politics: Multilingual Policy-Making in the European Union* by Nils Ringe, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2022, 264 pages. ISBN: 978-0-472-07513-3. DOI: [10.3998/1.3110.0000.0000.0000.0000](https://doi.org/10.3998/1.3110.0000.0000.0000.0000) Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory 26(2): 176-179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.417>

The backbone of the empirical analysis consists of a notable set of in-depth elite interviews with nearly 100 respondents, including interpreters, translators, lawyer-linguists, and policymakers. These interviews provide fresh insights and captivating anecdotes into how EU multilingualism works in practice. Naturally, interviewing elites can only offer a glimpse of the larger phenomenon, but in the absence of extensive records from closed-door meetings, it constitutes a convincing approach. The book's description of the empirical strategy would nonetheless have benefited from additional information regarding the selection criteria for the experts, possible biases arising from the expert pool, the structure of the interviews, the coding scheme and intercoder reliability, and the issue of replicability due to the unavailability of publicly accessible transcripts. These considerations aside, by drawing on the accounts of an unprecedented number of experts, the book provides a compelling account of the role of multilingualism in EU policy-making.

'Language(s) of Politics' offers a welcoming fresh perspective on EU policy-making by putting language use front and center in the analysis of various aspects of the EU's policy-making process. In doing so, it makes significant contributions to the literature on EU legislative politics, European integration, and text analysis of political speeches. The book provides novel insights into what the author calls "de facto uneven multilingualism," which allows for the pragmatic use of some languages more than others despite a formal language equality reinforced by Brussels-specific EU English. While the empirical literature on political speech-making primarily focuses on the question of language use by elected representatives during campaigns and in parliaments, the book emphasizes instead the relevance of a broader set of actors and also those relegating the information between politicians (translators and interpreters). The depoliticizing aspect of multilingualism means that what possibly makes a politician successful in a national context, being a persuasive and passionate speaker in public debates, appears less important in the EU policy-making context. Finally, the book's argument regarding depoliticization underscores its significance in the ongoing debate about the EU's democratic deficit, as the increased politicization of the EU in domestic debates continues to confront a system that operates within a strongly technocratic and depoliticizing linguistic framework.

The book's claim of depoliticization presents an intriguing opportunity for future studies that could supplement 'The Language(s) of Politics.' First, while the book highlights the neutrality of language in EU policy-making, it does not explore further the incentives that some actors may have to disrupt this equilibrium. Future empirical work could look at how politicians adjust their speaking style when moving from the national to the European arena. Specific attention should be given to the growing number of Eurosceptic and far-right politicians, either in the European Parliament or in the Council. Studies could shed light on whether the multilingual regime can depoliticize Eurosceptic or far-right views when such politicians speak and bargain in non-native languages, or whether it poses even a danger because Eurosceptic and far-right views are communicated under the veil of simple rhetoric. The findings of the book furthermore underscore the need to factor in the linguistic proficiency of EU policymakers in future research. Language ability is a valence attribute for politicians, but one that is also possibly correlated with political ideology (reflecting a more cosmopolitan and less nationalist attitude). Future research, which may involve gathering more detailed biographical data of politicians, could thoroughly investigate these considerations.

A second related extension could examine the effect of linguistic depoliticization on domestic politics and its relation to the perceived complexity of EU rhetoric. Future work could extend the book's findings and speak to research on the high linguistic complexity of public statements made by heads of government and European Commissioners (Rauh, Bes & Schoonevelde 2020) or contained in press releases of the European Commission (Rauh 2023), along with the negotiating rhetoric of member state representatives in the Council (Wratil, Wäckerle & Proksch 2023). The evidence of these studies suggests that while speeches of national governments and Commissioners are sensitive to domestic public opinion in various ways, official communication remains highly complex, requiring a university-level understanding. While the book argues that multilingualism works in EU policy-making, an open question remains regarding how the supposed advantages can be translated into effective communication in national contexts, especially in the context of election campaigns and parliamentary scrutiny. For instance, although European parties are keen on promoting lead candidates for the role of Commission president (Spitzenkandidaten) in European Parliament elections, no significant attention has been given to the capacity of these candidates to communicate with national audiences in campaigns by virtue of being multilingual. If lead candidates from European parties cannot fill the gap, it may be up to national parliaments and national parties to increase their scrutiny of EU affairs (Kinski 2021). So far, national parliaments have only partially succeeded in keeping the EU accountable through domestic parliamentary debate (Auel & Neuhold 2017; Rauh & De Wilde 2018). More systematic comparison of the rhetoric used in parliamentary scrutiny in the EP compared to the one in national parliaments seems a worthwhile extension of the book's ideas. Existing research shows that national scrutiny in parliament can enhance the visibility of such debates in national news (Auel, Eisele & Kinski 2018). This topic could thus be part of the broader conversation regarding the EU's future institutional framework and the role that national parliaments may play.

In conclusion, 'The Language(s) of Politics' stands as a pioneering work that is bound to leave an important mark on the landscape of academic scholarship on European policy-making. This book provides scholars in the fields of comparative legislative studies, the European Union, and text analysis with the opportunity to engage in fresh debates and to seek innovative approaches for incorporating multilingualism into empirical research on policy-making and political representation. The main thesis, asserting that multilingualism depoliticizes policy-making, will undoubtedly remain a thought-provoking claim, and its potential implications ought to be thoroughly examined.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Proksch  
*Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*  
DOI: 10.33134/rds.417

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Proksch, Sven-Oliver. 2023. "Book Review: *The Language(s) of Politics: Multilingual Policy-Making in the European Union* by Nils Ringe, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2022, 264 pages. ISBN: 978-0-472-07513-3. DOI: [10.33134/rds.417](https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.417)" *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 26(2): 176–179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.417>

**Submitted:** 02 November 2023

**Accepted:** 03 November 2023

**Published:** 06 December 2023

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