

# Speaking up for a single working EU language

**E**NGLISH has become the recognised language of Europe, even though linguists are warning that it threatens to wipe out other languages, especially those of smaller countries.

But one place where English isn't yet omnipotent is the European Union.

A single dominant language might appear to be a sensible alternative to the growing Tower of Babel in Brussels, where translation costs are rapidly climbing towards €1 billion a year.

But European Commission president, José Manuel Barroso declared current policy, declaring that translation is, in fact, the language of the EU.

That is despite the fact that the vast majority of bureaucrats, politicians, business people and lobbyists use English, according to recent surveys. Needless to say, not everyone is in agreement with Mr Barroso's view that translation is the way forward.

There is a strong argument that the single European entity should have a single working language.

But, according to a growing band of enthusiasts, the answer to a new

## An Irish diplomat

### believes the EU should consider using Esperanto, writes Europe Correspondent Ann Cahill

celebrated its 119th birthday this week.

He has many supporters including in the European Parliament, where Esperanto was recently put forward as a sensible alternative to the current system of translating to and from more than 20 languages.

The Tipperary man believes the time is right for the EU to consider this option and he has many supporters among the 2,500 delegates, from more than 70 countries, attending a European Esperanto conference in Florence this weekend.

Among them are his two daughters, Aisling, 13, and Ciara, 10, who have it as their fifth language. His wife, Suzanne was initially opposed to them learning Esperanto.

However, when the girls were easily able to translate into Irish every word of a conversation their parents were having with visiting friends, she gave in.

Dr Ó Ráin is used to opposition to Esperanto.

"People react emotionally against it, saying it's an artificial language."

A study suggested this was a typical reaction because Esperanto was not

seen as a mother tongue.

"Its fertilisation was artificial but it has been around for more than 100 years. At least 1,000 families speak it as their mother tongue and I know families where it's in its third generation," he said.

There are several million speakers worldwide — a tiny percentage overall — but it is a living language with its own slang, swear words and even euphemisms, he says.

It is taught in several universities, including 11 in China where it is growing faster than in any other country. Recently, 500,000 copies of a book about learning Esperanto were sold there.

Ireland has very close links to the language devised by a Polish doctor in Warsaw. The first translation into English was done by J.C. Geoghegan, whose parents came from Rathmines in Dublin. Fluent in a raft of European and Asian languages including Irish, he also proposed green as the emblem colour.

It also appears that Joseph M Plunkett and James Connolly, two of the seven signatories to the 1916 Proclamation, could speak Esperanto.

## Basic Esperanto

Hello — Saluton  
Welcome — Bonvenon  
Good morning — Bonan matenon  
Good afternoon — Bonan tagon  
Good evening — Bonan vesperon  
Goodbye — Gis la rando  
Excuse me — Pardonu min  
I'm sorry — Mi bedaŭras  
How are you? — Kiel vi fartas?  
Fine/Okay — Bone  
Thank you — Dankon

And there is a list of Irish literature translated into the language, from Brian Merriman's *The Midway Court* to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. It is also a resilient language, having survived both Stalin and Hitler who sent its speakers to the death camps, including the three children of its founder.

But Dr Ó Ráin's trump card for the language is the dozens of studies that show Esperanto is the best introduction to the learning of foreign languages.

With just 16 rules of grammar and no exceptions, five hours' study gives

the student a general idea of the entire language, while five hours learning German, by comparison, give practically no results.

Studies in Germany and Budapest showed that providing pupils in primary schools with two years of Esperanto led to them acquiring Russian 25% quicker, German 30%, English 40% and French a full 50%.

"It gives students more faith in themselves and their ability to learn languages and they understand about learning to communicate in another language more quickly," said Dr Ó Ráin.

Convincing countries to adopt another language will be difficult, especially Britain where having English as the main EU language is worth €10bn a year to them, according to one study.

But Dr Ó Ráin believes it can be done.

"After all when the EU agreed to have a common currency they did not just adopt the German mark, they devised a new currency, the euro. Esperanto offers the same kind of opportunity — and one that will be very far to everyone," he said.