

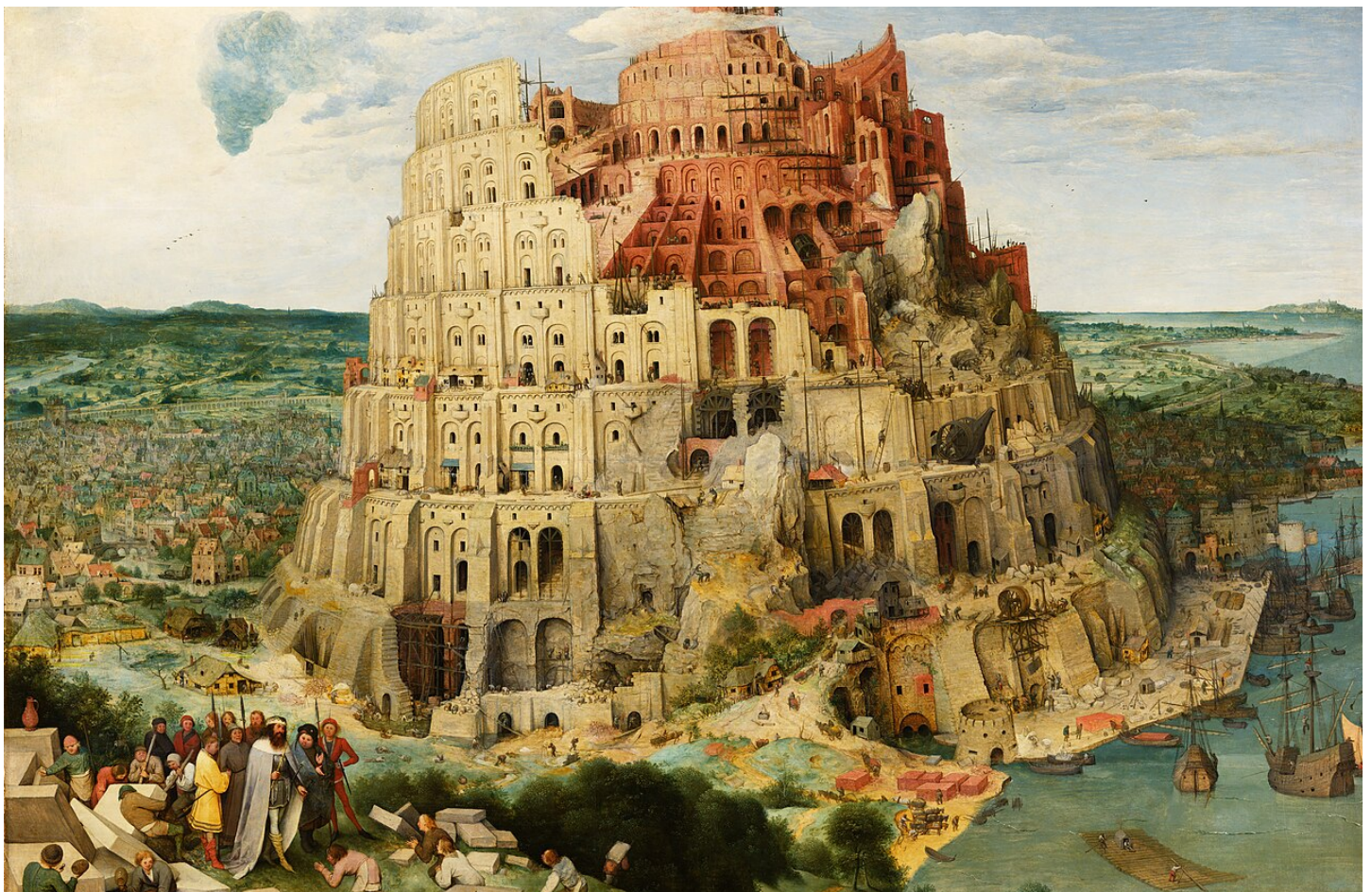
# Will AI topple the European Tower of Babel?

By Enrique Dans

September 6, 2023



**Artificial Intelligence is revolutionizing translation. The European Union and its institutions could benefit.**



The EU has 27 members and 24 official languages. Multilingualism is enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights: EU citizens enjoy the right to use any official language to communicate with the EU institutions, and the institutions must reply in the

same language. It truly is a modern Tower of Babel, costing the EU institutions a billion euros per year, which is less than 1% of the EU budget.

But help is on the way — AI.

ChatGPT translates texts almost instantaneously, with results much improved over previous software. It can be tailored to the way one writes: feed the algorithm with four or five of your texts and the automatic translator will mimic your style. The first draft of this English-language article was written in Spanish.

Technology is fast improving. When Google launched Translate in April 2006, it used statistical machine technology. Huge amounts of translated EU and UN documents were fed into computers and matched with queries. The system was limited, particularly for not-so-used languages. In November 2016, Google transitioned to neural machine translation, which uses deep learning techniques to translate whole sentences.

Today, ChatGPT marks a new step forward. Generative AI brings us the spectacle of Lex Fridman interviewing Mark Zuckerberg in faultless Hindi, which neither of them speaks of (as far as I know). If this wasn't enough, Fridman and Zuckerberg speak in their own voices, their lips synchronized.

It's hard to overestimate the potential: We have now overcome the ancient curse to prevent humans from reaching their level. Forget about subtitles. Thanks to a few algorithms (one to generate the language, another for the voice with its inflections, and another for the movement of the lips), we can watch any video in any language, at any time. Software called Aloud allows YouTube content creators to produce high-quality videos in any language.

## Get the Latest

Sign up to receive regular emails and stay informed about CEPA's work.

Email



Submit

This is politically powerful. By potentially reducing the cost of translation, the EU can live up to its ambition to allow citizens to keep their mother tongues — and perhaps reduce

regional tensions. Spain recently proposed Catalan, Basque, and Galician as official EU languages. It's "symbolic" considering Catalans, Basques, and Galicians speak fluent Spanish, and many young people speak English.

European institutions started integrating machine translation a decade ago. An AI neural network system was introduced in 2017. Even as the amount of material requiring translation increased from two million pages in 2013 to 2.5 million in 2022, the European Commission cut its number of permanent translators from 2,450 to around 2,000.

Will human translators become dinosaurs, destined for extinction? Probably not. The EU still depends on humans to review translations. Its actual translation budget has increased over the past decade due to outsourcing.

According to the original Tower of Babel, a united human race speaking a single language agrees to build a city and a tower, only to have God confound them so they can no longer understand each other. Each language enjoys enormous rich cultural richness, which is what a speaker moves beyond the phase of "simply being able to understand me" and dives into the nuances.

It is one thing to be able to arrive and order food in French in a restaurant in Paris. It's quite another to be able to think about reading and enjoying Baudelaire's "*Les Fleurs du mal*." Or knowing that, for some reason, French cats have nine lives and Spanish cats only seven. Why does "out of sight, out of mind" become "*ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente*" in Spanish or "*loin des yeux, loin du coeur*" in French? Similar? Yes, but with its delicate differences.

Chat GPT soon may be able to decipher these nuances, adapt to a theme, or a context, or at a certain level, offer results that a native speaker could pronounce in real-time. Train the algorithm with a person's speech or text, and the tool becomes an AI-powered personal translator.

And yet, people still want to talk to others directly, not through a machine. Despite Brexit, English remains the working language of choice for conducting EU business. According to a Eurostat survey, 96% of EU students opt for English as their first foreign language. During the French Presidency of the European Council, France insisted on using French — only to run into resistance, particularly from English-speaking Northern Europeans. When European Commission president Ursula Von der Leyen gave her State of the Union address, the word count was 81% in English, 12% in her native German, and just 7% in French.

This isn't to say that the EU practices Shakespearean English. EU English is full of jargon and hard-to-decipher terms. Know what comitology means? Maybe it's best to ask Chat GPT.

*Enrique Dans is a Professor of Innovation at IE University (Madrid)*

*Bandwidth is CEPA's online journal dedicated to advancing transatlantic cooperation on tech policy. All opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the position or views of the institutions they represent or the Center for European Policy Analysis.*



## Tech Policy Tracker

Tracking major developments in transatlantic tech policy

[Learn More](#)

## Read More From Bandwidth

CEPA's online journal dedicated to advancing transatlantic cooperation on tech policy.

[Read More](#)

## Related Articles

---



### Congress Talks AI With Tech Titans

September 12, 2023

BANDWIDTH

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY



### Techbros: Musk's Reality Check

September 10, 2023

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

EUROPE'S EDGE

REGIONAL SECURITY



## Germany's Chips Offensive: Winners and Losers

September 7, 2023

BANDWIDTH

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

### Related Issue Tags

BANDWIDTH

EMERGING TECHNOLOGY



---

#### Quick Links

[Issues](#)

[Events](#)

Insights & Analysis

About CEPA

---

### Contact

1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite  
400, Washington, DC 20004

---

### Follow



© 2023 Center for European Policy Analysis. All rights reserved. Website designed by nclud.

[Privacy Policy](#)