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After Brexit, is 'EurEnglish' still a lingua franca? The challenge of multilingualism

Position Paper by
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"Sharing and debating ideas about the possible future strategies to bolster the European integration process is an honour for both of us. We are very fortunate to be able to represent the University of Luxembourg, and the country of Luxembourg as a whole, at this event in Florence. Last but not least, we are extremely thankful for all the organizers of this conference to have invited us for this special occasion and that have made it possible."

Jazmin & Adrien

Introduction: Brexit "Leave" Vote and its Potential Consequences

On 23rd of June 2016, The UK citizens voted in a referendum to decide whether or not the UK should remain in the European Union. As the "Leave" vote prevailed, and following the UK Prime Minister Theresa May's triggering of Article 50 on the 29th of March 2017, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is now in the process of withdrawing its membership from the European Union.

The process of Brexit, which entails the first incident of a member state withdrawing from the EU in its history, will last approximately two years from the triggering of this Article. Along with numerous other consequences, the Brexit process has evoked/revived the debate over the status of the English language in the EU now that it will not be the EU working language of any member state. As Jacobsen (2017) mentions, "the Brexit referendum result on 24th of June 2016 did not only raise concerns about the implications of Britain's exit from the EU within wide spanning domains of trade and commerce, environment, social justice, or migration and security, but also about which language(s) these issues were to be discussed, and contested in." Now is therefore a great time to discuss the implication of the Brexit vote on the future role of the English language in European integration.

Consequently, this paper aims to discuss this very current topic, starting by briefly contextualising the current status of English before discussing its future within the EU. Afterwards, we will put forward certain arguments brought about for the possible downgrading of English as compared to other EU languages such as the two other procedural languages of the Union, French and German. Finally, we will present our position on the matter of language policy, which argues in favour of maintaining the status of the English language as the lingua franca of the Union.

Context of Multilingualism in the EU

Multilingualism in the European Union has always been a challenge due to the fact that the Union includes people from many different backgrounds and that the number of different languages in the community is enormous. Indeed, this very challenge has been highlighted by the European institutions themselves: "Language diversity entails constraints; it weighs on the running of the European Institutions and has its cost in terms of money and time" (European Commission, 2008).

Furthermore, with the multiple enlargements that the European Union has witnessed over the years, the multiplicity of the languages spoken intra-community has never stopped growing. After Croatia entered the Union in 2013, there were no less than 24 official languages represented at the institutional level (European Commission).

This complex multilingual framework of the European Union is often seen as a challenge/threat to policy coordination, although it is also seen as an asset/opportunity in a globalized world, in which diversity can be a competitive advantage (Kraus and Kazlauskaite-Gurbus, 2014). It is also important to say that the 24 official languages of the European Union obviously do not have the same weight and more often than not, the English language is perceived as the number one working language and 'lingua franca' of the Union.

The Cases of Ireland and Malta

For background information, it is important to point out that the UK is not the only English-speaking country in the European Union. However, the other English-speaking countries, in this particular case Ireland and Malta, both decided to put forward Irish and Maltese as their respective official language at the EU institutional level when they entered the Union, in 1973 for the former and 2004 for the latter (Fernandez Vitores, 2016). Therefore, this has brought about the question of the future English language legitimacy, or lack of, in the Union. Indeed, one can argue that with Brexit, English will no longer be an official language for any of the 27 remaining member states, and that consequently, it should not remain one of the three procedural languages of the Union, or even one of the 24 official languages overall.

Brexit: Reactions from officials

Following the referendum's rather unexpected "Leave" result, a number of politicians, most notably members of the European Parliament, have been very quick to react and have raised the question of the English language legitimacy in the EU. Here are a few examples of these reactions:

- Danuta Hübner: "If we don't have the UK, we don't have English" (Politico, 2016). The head of the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) warned that English would no longer be an official language of the European Union after Brexit. In fact, she argued further: "We have a regulation where every country has the right to notify one official language. The Irish have notified Gaelic, and the Maltese have notified Maltese, so you have only the UK notifying English" (Politico, 2016).

- Jean-Luc Mélenchon: "English cannot be the third working language of the European Union anymore" (Huffington Post, 2016). The French, Eurosceptic, and left-wing presidential candidate, who wants to review the European Treaties, argued after the Brexit referendum that English should no longer be one of the three working languages of the Union.

- Robert Ménard: "The English language has no more legitimacy in Brussels" (Huffington Post, 2016). The right-wing mayor of the southern French town of Béziers, who is closely tied with the National Front of Marine Le Pen, "called for Brussels to ditch English after the UK voted to leave to European Union" (The Sun, 2016). He even said that Irish was now more relevant than English: "Irish Gaelic, the first national language. English is second language of the constitutional point of view" (The Sun, 2016).

Technically, these claims by a certain number of politicians across Europe are not wrong; however, in practice, we can say that it is more complicated. These examples summarize that there is a sense of scepticism for some officials when it comes to keeping the status quo regarding the 'EurEnglish' paradigm, which was not so much contested before the "Leave" vote of last June. However, we can argue that these reactions might only represent a minor perception compared to an overall favourable opinion of the use of the English language in Strasbourg. Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Robert Ménard, for example, respectively belong to the far-left and far-right parties in France, which means that they do not represent the mainstream opinion with regards to the status of the English language in the Union. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge this idea of 'EurEnglish' scepticism, although perhaps minor in the debate.

This paper will now address the question of the English language status of privilege in the European Union more in details by looking at the different levels of implementation.

The English language and its position of privilege

Institutional level

It is fair to say that the English language has occupied a position of privilege compared to the other two procedural languages (German and French), as well as anyone of the other EU official languages, since the accession of the United Kingdom to the Community in 1973. Between 1951 (Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community) and 1973, 3 of the 6 founder-member states were French-speaking countries (France, Belgium, Luxembourg). Furthermore, as the other 3 founder-member states' official languages were Dutch, German, and Italian, we can clearly point out that that English did not have any status in the early days of the European project. The French language was seen as the lingua franca even though its international influence and diplomatic use in global affairs was already decreasing since the end of the First World War (Fernandez Vitores, 2016). Therefore, when the UK finally accessed the European Community project in 1973, the English language gradually replaced the French as the main official language in the institutions.

Working level

Besides having proved to be the language of privilege at the institutional level, English has increasingly become the language of influence outside the framework of the European institutions and procedures.
In fact, since 1973 and the UK accession to the Community, English has also become the working language "par excellence", especially when it comes to international relations and communication purposes for politicians and practitioners. In addition, English has certainly in recent years not only dominated as the main working language amongst EU civil servants but also as the main foreign language taught in schools across Europe. The English language has become predominant because it is the first foreign language taught in the schools of many countries across the European Union, notably in Central and Eastern European countries, which entered the Union with the most recent enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013.
For all these obvious reasons, notwithstanding the Brexit referendum, English is currently, as it should be, perceived as the lingua franca in the European Union in terms of working language.

After Brexit: Keeping the 'EurEnglish' paradigm

The previous two paragraphs have helped us emphasize the fact that the English language has become significantly embedded in the framework of the European Union, both at the more formal, institutional level and the less formal working level. The separation of the last two paragraphs between the institutional level and working level is important for the rest of our position paper.

Indeed, in this remaining part of our paper, we will argue that the English language will and should remain the lingua franca of the European Union at both the institutional level and informal level even after the Brexit referendum results of 2016. In addition, we will argue that the English language in the European Union is a necessary market-driven outcome and that it will most likely remain that way in a globalized environment. Finally, we will put forward the idea that using the English language post-Brexit can be fairer for the 27 remaining member states.

Lingua franca in EU institutions after Brexit: formal level

To argue that the English language should be maintained as the lingua franca at the institutional level, we can put forward the theory of path dependence, which basically argues that when a system has become locked into a particular path for a certain amount of time, it becomes more and more costly to try and deviate from this particular path and change the way the system works.

In our particular case, the 'EurEnglish' paradigm has been increasingly embedded in the EU system for more than 40 years now; therefore, according to this theory of path dependence, we can argue that trying to downgrade the importance of the English language now will be particularly costly and difficult. Furthermore, if we were to gradually replace the 'EurEnglish' as the lingua franca of the EU, there would be the question of which language to promote instead (French? German?) and how realistic this shift can be. As a result, the Union is perhaps better off if it keeps the status quo if we were to use this theory. As Jacobsen (2017) mentions, "Clocks cannot be rewound. English is far too entrenched into the global communicative pipelines of politics, finance and culture."

When we put this theory in practice, we can clearly say that it will indeed be very hard to remove the English language as one of the EU official languages. The process of adding an official language when a new country accessed the Union is quite

straightforward; for example, the Croatian language was recently added as the 24th language of the Union. However, the reverse process of withdrawing an official language of the EU would require the amendment of Council Regulation 1/1958.

Therefore, all member states would have to agree on removing English as an official language. This process could involve costly rearrangements that would need to be undertaken if the English language were to be dismissed.

In addition, the required unanimity on this specific matter is very unlikely to happen because countries like Ireland and Malta are English-speaking countries that arguably put forward Irish and Maltese as their language of reference primarily to increase the visibility of the Irish and Maltese cultures. Nevertheless, English remains the main language through which officials of these two countries communicate, as well as officials from all member states. To illustrate, the Irish Times argues that "although Gaelic would remain the official language, English would remain the working language of Ireland" (The Irish Times, 2016).

Pragmatism and 'EurEnglish' after Brexit: informal level

This analysis brings us to our next point, upon which we argue that the European Union needs to be pragmatic about the 'EurEnglish' question. In fact, whilst English may well be the lingua franca in the EU institutions, it is also undisputable that it represents the lingua franca in the more informal settings. What that means is that beyond the institutions, English also remains the ultimate language. According to Jacobsen (2017), "In practice, professionals use the language that is required to get the work done and to achieve results. The EU cannot be an exception."

Following this bottom-up perspective, we can also argue that throughout the European Union, the English language includes more competent speakers than any of the other languages. Therefore, English is the language that enables communication the most in the Union. To be precise, English is the most commonly spoken foreign language in 19 out of 25 European Union countries (excluding the UK and Ireland). In the EU25, working knowledge of English as a foreign language is clearly leading at 38%, followed by German and French (at 14% each), Russian and Spanish (at 6% each), and Italian (3%) (European Commission, 2012).

Also, according to the European Commission's Eurobarometer 386 (2012), on average, 38% of citizens of the European Union (excluding the United Kingdom and Ireland) stated that they have sufficient knowledge of English to have a conversation in this language.

This implies that "the drop in native speakers of English in the EU that follows Brexit may appear dramatic – but only if we retain a view of English as the property of Britain – which many would agree it ceased to be a long time ago" because the amount of non-native English speakers clearly outweigh the amount of native English speakers (Jacobsen, 2017). This is also a reason why we should keep the English language in the future.

The use of English as a market-driven outcome in a globalized world

Another reason why we think that the English language should remain the lingua franca of the European Union is the fact that the emergence of English in the EU in the first place does not necessarily come from the accession, or emergence, of the UK but more so from the post-World War II world and the start of the United States' hegemony, as well as the boom of global media outlets, global business, global finance, and global entertainment. "And it so happened that the US also spoke the same language that

Britain spoke" (Jacobsen, 2017). Furthermore, on June 28th 2016, the Forbes magazine published an article in which they characterized English as the language of business and argued that the use of English in the EU was a market-driven outcome (Forbes, 2016).

Therefore, the fact that the UK is leaving the European Union does not mean that English should disappear because as we said in the previous paragraph, the English language is so much more than just a property of Britain; it goes beyond the British national borders, and also goes beyond the European borders. Indeed, the English language is not only crucial for the intra-EU relations but also for global relations all over the world. The English language is widely used when it comes to diplomatic talks and commercial negotiations between the European Union and other main actors such as the United States, China, and many more. With or without the United Kingdom, if the European Union seeks to increase its role as a global actor, it has to maintain the English language as the lingua franca.

After Brexit: English as the fairest language in the Union?

This dimension of fairness with regards to the use of English after the UK decision to leave the European Union was notably brought to the table by a Swedish member of the European Parliament, who argued that "keeping English now could actually make communications in the EU a bit fairer, since most of those speaking it would be using a foreign language" (Wall Street Journal, 2016).

This is very interesting because before the Brexit referendum, some people could argue that certain languages had a special treatment, such as the English language. Now that we have the European Union without the UK, the English language can actually become the most neutral language and if we keep it as the lingua franca, no one could raise the issue of potential special treatment anymore, except for Ireland or Malta, the two English-speaking countries, which nonetheless only represent a tiny proportion of the total population in the Union.

According to Jacobsen (2017), the inclusive character of the English language "privileges the intrinsic values of any language that performs as a lingua franca to enable contact and communication; and it privileges the virtues of any language that

has the ability to include many speakers without creating language hierarchies between them." In fact, instead of getting rid of English because the UK is leaving the Union, we should perhaps think about promoting it to level the playing field of language policy for the remaining 27 member states.

Conclusion and Further Debate

At the beginning of the paper, we tried to put the Brexit vote in its context and tried to see the implications of this vote on the possible fall of the 'EurEngish' as the lingua franca of the Union. However, as we moved forward in our research, we discovered that the potential downgrading or replacement of the English language would be very difficult, perhaps even impossible to implement both formally (institutional level) and informally (working level). Whilst the formal elimination of English would imply very costly rearrangements in the institutions, the informal use of English is also so deep-rooted in the communication schemes between civil servants and EU citizens that it seems impossible to overturn.

As a result, in the remaining part of our paper, we intended to take position and argued that not only should the 'EurEnglish' paradigm remain as such, but that it should also be promoted further, across the 27 member states. In fact, the importance of the English language for the European Union goes far beyond European borders, as English represents the language of the global markets, global businesses, international relations, etc. It is important to go beyond the idea that the English language is solely a property of the United Kingdom and realize that the use of English is considerably and irrevocably embedded in the interdependent globalized world we now live in.

To conclude our paper, as it is its 30th anniversary, we would like to also highlight the role of the Erasmus program, which has provided great opportunities for students to move abroad and learn foreign languages while studying. This is very relevant for our topic because as many students would agree, the common relay language between students is often the English language, even though the outgoing students often seek to learn the language of the host country. The program has promoted a multicultural and multilingual European Union over the years, at the heart of which the English language will continue to play a big role in terms of communication between students.

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