

# The future of British English in the European Union

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What standard will the EU adopt in the post-Brexit era?

## Introduction

In the three years and seven months between the referendum on 23 June 2016 and 31 January 2020, when the UK officially left the European Union, there was much speculation over what status English would have in the EU after the withdrawal of the UK. It is now apparent that English has continued to flourish. This is supported by statistics for Member States which chart the extent to which English is a school subject. Well over 95% of the children in the EU are taught English as a mandatory subject. Official EU figures also show that 38% of the population is proficient in English as a second language, three times more than both French and German (*Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and their Languages*, 2012). Moreover, although some, such as Danuta Hübner, EMP, wanted to question whether or not English could maintain its status as an official language in the EU, it is now apparent that it will not be possible to remove English in this respect (with changes requiring a unanimous vote in the Council, which Ireland has said it will not support [European Commission, 2016]), (*The Guardian* 27 December 2019). English has also retained its position as one of the three ‘procedural’ or ‘working languages’ alongside French and German. This has taken place despite the fact that without the UK, no Member State has English as its official EU language, and only approximately one percent of EU citizens have English as a mother tongue.

## EU language policy

During the 47-year period of membership in the bloc, the UK secured for English its role as an

official organizational language for European cooperation. Over time, French, once the predominant language for cross-cultural communication in such capacities, declined in importance while, with support from the increased popularity of American English, as well as the advent of English operating as the language of globalization, English became the undisputed mainland European lingua franca among the peoples of the EU as well as within the EU apparatus. Now, in the post-Brexit era, it is apparent that the UK leaving European unification has triggered the questioning of EU language policy, which encompasses not only the understanding that every Member State has the right to one official language, but also that every citizen has the right to communicate with the EU in one of the official languages. Other aspects of the EU language policy are the protection of lesser used, minority, and endangered languages, the



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promotion of plurilingualism, the establishment of three procedural languages, and the recognition of languages deemed ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ for the drafting of treaties and other legal documentation (Van der Jeught, 2015; Somssich, 2016). English has a role to play in all of these respects, despite the fact that the EU went from English having a strong position, with over 70 million native speakers and circa 175 million second-language speakers, to one in which native speakers are a tiny minority of the population represented not so much in mainland Europe but rather for the most part located on the island of Ireland. The French claim that because of these demographic shifts, there is good reason to question what status English can and should maintain as an official EU language, its future as one of the three procedural languages, its position as the common language for written and spoken communication within the EU apparatus, as well as its standing as a language for the drafting of treaties. See, for example, ‘Is France really trying to ban speaking English in the EU?’ in *The Local*, where EU MP Julien Aubert argues that French must now replace English as the common European lingua franca (*The Local*, 7 October 2021).

### **The dominance of English in the EU**

In Modiano (2017), I argued that Brexit could potentially result in a strengthening of the role English maintains in European affairs. In hindsight, this has turned out to be the case. English has retained its role as the given choice at all levels of operation in the EU, which has support across the majority of Member States. For this reason, it is no longer possible to entertain the idea that French will replace English as the predominant lingua franca of the EU apparatus. Quite simply, the French language does not have the second-language speaker base required to operate efficiently as an EU lingua franca. Moreover, Germany and Austria have indicated with their behavior that they are not interested in challenging English in such respects, despite the fact that with 90 million native speakers in the EU German is by far the largest language in the Union spoken as a mother tongue.

Consequently, the question of what role English will play in the EU is no longer about the survival of English without UK membership. Instead, the debate concerning the role of English is more about the forms and functions English will have going forward. What variety of the English language is to be utilized within the EU apparatus? How can an official EU decree on the English language norm

impact the manner in which English is taught and learned in formal educational settings? Has the moment now come for the peoples of Europe to claim English as a mainland European language, and in so doing begin establishing a basis for a second-language variety of European English or European Englishes to emerge? If the EU were to establish an English norm based on the manner in which English is used in mainland Europe by non-native speakers, this would have a profound impact not only on how identity can be formed and expressed in an acquired language which operates as a lingua franca across the EU, but moreover on the very embodiment of European identity and thus on European integration.

The trick is to balance this sense of identity as a citizen of the EU in and through a lingua franca with our commitment to ‘unity in diversity’. The key to a sustainable solution here is the English language itself. Thus, my thesis is a simple one. I propose that European unification is unduly burdened by the ghost of British English. If it is our intention that English will continue to be the universal language of the EU, and if we want to promote the notion that there is a European identity in the making, then it is counterproductive to continue to endorse standard British English in the EU. We need to understand why this is the case and put forward proposals for ways in which we can find a better platform for the English language, one which allows second-language users of English in the EU to express their unique European identity.

### **Standard British English in the EU**

Let us begin with a review of the role that British English has maintained in the EU. It is evident that the choice of using standard British English (BrE) as the basis for documentation was both undisputed and uncontroversial. As Britain was one of the four largest countries in the EU, representing a native-speaker base second only to German, the British variety of English was the given standard for the EU. However, this was undermined by growing numbers of EU citizens opting for American English (AmE) when learning English at school, as well as by the increasing numbers of people in the EU apparatus utilizing AmE conventions in their writing. At the same time, most of the people who worked in Luxemburg with English-language services in the ante-Brexit era were British nationals. Nothing could be more natural than for them to deem BrE most suitable for the EU, just as one would expect the French to promote Parisian French and the Germans *Hoch Deutsch*.

With Brexit a reappraisal of the role that BrE plays in mainland European affairs is necessary for several reasons. One is the fact that this variety of English is now less popular among schoolgoers, despite the fact that many teachers, and often textbooks and exam protocols favor BrE. AmE is the most popular variety of English among Europe's youth and is the preferred variety in higher education. Among the majority of second-language users in the EU, this has resulted in English usage that contains elements of both AmE and BrE. Interference features from the mother tongue are also invariably present. This mixing of these three influences can be observed in grammar, in the use of lexical items, as well as in the use of idiomatic expressions. In speech it is clearly recognizable in pronunciation. The result is what I have labeled earlier as Mid-Atlantic English (Modiano, 2000). However, I now favor the idea of European English, European Englishes, or Euro-English, as a 'second-language variety or varieties in the making' (Modiano, 2009, 2020). Thus, because one can no longer describe the English which mainland European second-language users utilize in speech and writing as being collectively representative of the BrE norm, some other foundation for EU documentation, as well as teaching and learning, is required. Simply put, the conventional view that BrE is the best way forward no longer has support among L2 users of English across mainland Europe if we look at the actual manner in which they use the English language in speech and writing. That norm has become redundant.

## Language and identity

Another reason why we need to question the BrE standard for documentation in the EU apparatus and in education emerges from our investigations into the relationship between second-language use and identity. While the expression of identity is most evident in the use of the spoken language, the basis for usage in writing is nevertheless intimately related to spoken behavior, and in language education it is advantageous for both teacher and learner to promote the same standard for the spoken and written mediums. Through their structure, languages carry with them representations of beliefs and values associated with the cultures of those who have the language as a mother tongue. Ideologies and world views are embedded in language which are closely associated with the speech communities' unique understanding of the role maintained by the individual and social group in

the world at large (Byram, 2006). Linguistic relativism, which unfortunately has been more or less ignored by proponents of standard language ideologies, is highly relevant to the mainland European experience. When one proficiently uses an Inner Circle variety of English, as a non-native speaker, one inadvertently participates in the expression of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and ideologies of the speech community one is attempting to mimic. One becomes, in the process, an auxiliary member of that speech community. This is true when mainland European users of English have near-native or native proficiency in BrE. In doing so the mainland European assumes multi-identities in the sense that they may very well be perceived as being associated with a sphere of influence which is not their own. It does not matter if the speaker is aware of this sense of perceived identity or is oblivious to it. The problem is that an interlocutor can very well have a perception of the person addressing them which does not give a good indication of who that person is, what worldview they want to express, their beliefs and values, their loyalties, etc. It is also the case that the speaker may be influenced by the ideological load of the acquired language, something that makes an even stronger argument for critically examining the negative aspects of encouraging learners to acquire near-native or native proficiency in a language which the user will primarily use as a lingua franca in interactions with other non-native speakers. If and when non-native users of a language want to acquire near-native or native proficiency, they should be aware of this and choose it willingly, and not have it imposed upon them by educators.

This critique of near-native or native proficiency in Inner Circle varieties is only valid when the language in question is acquired in environments where the English language is used as a lingua franca and has an acknowledged second-language variety or is in the process of attaining second-language status for its particular culture-specific usage. Where English is utilized as a foreign language there is no alternative to using native-speaker norms. Consequently, if it were the case that English was operational in mainland Europe as a second language, as a language used among peoples belonging to the same nation state who, because they have different tongues, use English when interacting with those who have differing linguistic profiles, then it is possible, when distinctive usage can be observed, to define such usage in the mainland European context as a second-language variety or varieties in the making.

## Nativization

In this respect, it is possible to identify characteristics which act as identity markers for the second-language speech community and begin initiating codification processes to substantiate that they are systematic. In the act of defining the English which non-native mainland Europeans use in their communication with others within the EU, one can conclude that the EU is a multicultural, multilingual nation state, and that within that political entity English acts as the contact language people turn to when they do not share a mother tongue or have greater proficiency in some other shared language. Viewed in this light, the enforcement of BrE, AmE, or any other Inner Circle variety as the standard for EU documentation, or as the educational standard, is an imposition. Braj Kachru made this clear in his investigations of how English became nativized in South Asia and mapped out a logical argument for why local second-language varieties of English should be available to learners (Kachru, 1986). This was because the local variety has utility for the learner in that it is an established behavior in the community and as such is not only a viable form of communication, but is also an important site of identity. It was put forward that supporting the local variety was a way in which one could show respect for the identity of the learner and the community of which the learner is a member. In such contexts, the insistence that school-goers target Inner Circle varieties, is a blatant form of neocolonialism.

## Why standard British English?

Assuming that the BrE norm is appropriate for the EU and consequently for EU citizens in post-Brexit Europe is problematic for these reasons. What logical argument can be put forward to continue to promote BrE, and as such the British sphere of influence, in the European Union? The British have left the field and have made it clear that they do not want to participate in European unification. What are the valid arguments to retain their language standard? One line of reasoning often invoked is the supposition that BrE is superior when it comes to intelligibility across cultures. Unfortunately for those who want to support such beliefs, it is no longer the case that the use of BrE is the best choice for accommodation; this is true within mainland Europe as well as internationally. AmE has greater utility. One also hears the argument that BrE has more social prestige and is

more appropriate for formal situations, such as in education and in the workplace, while AmE is supposedly a variety most suited for informal interaction. Notions such as these may have had some credibility among Europeans in the past. Today, they seem out of sync with current thought and moreover smack of ethnocentricity.

There is no longer a sound basis for promoting BrE as the standard for the inner workings of the EU, nor can I see any reason to continue to exclusively promote BrE in the teaching and learning of English in schools. Far too many people, both within the EU apparatus as well as within the population in general, are speaking and writing something more akin to AmE, or else speak what could be defined as a form of European English, or European Englishes. While there will be those who will want to continue to have the BrE standard, this standpoint is now both a minority and rapidly waning contention. AmE now has overwhelming support, especially among young people, which is indicative of what we can expect to become even more apparent in the future, when children leave school and enter adult life. But AmE, like BrE, disrupts efforts to express a European identity and for this reason one should see with AmE the same problems we find in utilizing the BrE norm. Both are culture-specific varieties which do not accommodate the need to have a variety of the English language which facilitates the acquisition of a mainland European identity. Both have their centers elsewhere and as a result place second-language users of English in mainland Europe at the margins.

## Current documentation standards

Now the British have left the Union, presumably to engage with the challenges of globalization. As such they no longer have any say in the affairs of the European Union. Nevertheless, we can observe residuals from the ante-Brexit era, when it was taken for granted that the BrE norm was the standard in the EU apparatus. One example of evidence of continued coercion can be found in the *English Style Guide*, issued by the Commission and updated as late as July 2021. There it states, in the introduction, '[f]or reasons of stylistic consistency, the variety of English on which this Guide bases its instructions and advice is the standard usage of Britain and Ireland' (*English Style Guide*, 2021: 4). Here is what follows:

*Language usage.* The language used should be understandable to speakers of British English (defined in the introduction to this Guide as the

standard usage of Britain and Ireland). As a general rule, British English should be preferred, and Americanisms that are liable not to be understood by speakers of British English should be avoided. However, bearing in mind that a considerable proportion of the target readership may be made up of non-native speakers, very colloquial British usage should also be avoided. (*English Style Guide*, 2021: 8)

Well after the UK has left the EU, this style guide continues to promote the notion that it is appropriate to instruct the 60 000 employees of the EU to accommodate native speakers of BrE in the UK in their use of the English language. It also explicitly argues that one should avoid features of the American variety not commonly understood by speakers of BrE. Speakers of AmE in the US, together with Canadians who have an almost identical language variety, are well over 300 million strong. Their influence on the manner in which non-native users of English worldwide speak and write English is massive and has been dominant for more than 20 years, while BrE has been steadily in decline. Moreover, the truth of the matter is that far more features of BrE are esoteric and difficult to decipher by users of English in mainland Europe, while the lion's share of AmE features are more commonly understood both in mainland Europe and throughout the world.

Who authorized this insistence that those working for the EU should, in their writing, envision the reader as being a native speaker of BrE? The text cited above is an excellent example of the type of patronizing that has caused BrE to become ostracized in the first place. I suspect that when the leaders of the EU have knowledge of this imposition, measures will be taken to remove this maneuvering from such publications, and instead see that the introduction to this guide and others like it unambiguously proclaim that the purpose of official EU language guidelines is to promote a use of English which is deemed to be the best form of communication for the citizens of the EU. Here it must be noted that there is no good reason to prioritize the accommodation of native speakers, seeing as they are a tiny minority in the EU, and every reason to work toward establishing a viable basis for non-native speaker to non-native speaker communication.

## Standards for a European lingua franca

As European unification intensifies in the years to come, and as English continues to make advancements on the indigenous languages of mainland Europe, it will become increasingly apparent that

action needs to be taken not only to protect the autochthonous languages of Europe from linguistic Anglo-Americanization, but also to bring about a framework for the English language which allows the lingua franca to exist alongside mainland European languages in what can hopefully be a less obtrusive manner. Here, in recognizing processes of nativization, and in codifying European English or European Englishes as a legitimate second-language variety or varieties, advances can be made which are not possible if one insists that the only acceptable English in documentation is one based on native-speaker norms. Moreover, recognizing a second-language variety or varieties, for Europe, would make possible the enactment of an emerging European identity. In this way, the English language would be considered to be a mainland European language, one which is owned by the second-language speakers who collectively use English as a lingua franca within the EU. One would as such see linguistic nativization as a welcomed process which always occurs when a language becomes a lingua franca in a multicultural, multilingual nation state.

## Conclusion

Sharing a universal language not only facilitates communication among people with differing linguistic profiles, it perhaps more importantly establishes the foundation for a national identity to emerge in the use of the lingua franca. It is in this respect, with English defined as a mainland European enterprise, that we can begin to see English, not as a language which threatens the vitality of our indigenous languages, but more as a medium which facilitates participation in both European unification and globalization. This is of course highly challenging, and we must not forget the warnings which have been issued at regular intervals by language scholars such as Robert Phillipson (1992, 2003, 2012) and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2002). But because the historical weight behind English is now overwhelming, we have no other course of action than to engage this beast in the attempt to tame it, and mold it into a form which best suits our purposes. For these reasons, mainland Europeans, along with the leaders of the EU, must now claim ownership of the English medium and in so doing harness its energy for the good of the body politic.

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