

Helder De Schutter: The EU should erect a language academy for European English

Background information on existing regulations/policy issues/initiatives

Keywords: *EU working language; European English; European English after Brexit; European Parliament working language; EU legislation on language; EU English language skills; EU25 English language skills*

Topic: The EU should erect a language academy stipulating rules for European English

Overview

In 19 out of 25 EU member states (excluding the United Kingdom and Ireland) English is the most commonly spoken foreign language¹. Around 38 percent of EU citizens claim to have sufficient English language skills². Moreover, English is the leading second language in European schools and classrooms.

With a definite Brexit approaching, it has been assumed that the English spoken on the European continent – in the absence of native British English speakers – might evolve into its own dialect (European English):

- “The exit of Britain from the Union will clear the sociolinguistic space for the emergence of an authentic European English, used by members of the EU as a ‘second language’ or (even) a quasi-Outer Circle English, serving the needs of the European Union as the common link language for administration and cooperation between member states.”³
- When the UK leaves the EU in 2019, only 1 percent of the EU population – in Ireland and Malta – will be living in countries where English is an official language

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf

² http://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_243_en.pdf

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/weng.12264>

In detail

- Even though in May 2017 EU commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker stated that “slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe”, he later confirmed that it was meant as a joke in reference to a looming Brexit⁴⁵⁶
- In fact, official EU communication of the recent past proves that the use of the English language in EU institutions will not be downgraded after Brexit
 - On the contrary, in the small print of the European commission’s proposed budget for 2021-27 it is stated that “the withdrawal of the United Kingdom will result in a limited reorientation of some functions within the administration, but the scope of activities will not change [...] Translation and interpretation services in the English language will also remain unaffected.”⁷
- There are a number of official EU documents highlighting the importance of English within the EU and as a working language of institutions, most notably:
 - Resolution on the use of the official languages in the institutions of the European Union
Content: Replaced the 11 official languages of the European Union with five working languages
Summary: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:51995IP0038>
 - Resolution on the multilingualism of the European Community, of 14 October 1982
Content: Affirms that the official languages and the working languages of the Community institutions are Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek and Italian;
Summary: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKewjbp-v25ZvbAhVIJVAKHchqCAoQFggvMAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.europadiversa.org%2Feng%2Fpdf%2Fstrubell_mari_eng.doc&usg=AOvVaw1s6f9qFat_leKrvBEPVdRZ
- Additionally, in official EU communications after the Brexit referendum it was confirmed that the status of English as working language will persist:
 - “The possibility that English will be abolished as an official language is virtually non-existent”⁸ – Press Service, European Parliament
- There is no official indication for an engagement in fostering the use of “European English” by the EU so far

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/05/brexit-english-is-losing-its-importance-in-europe-says-juncker>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/04/eu-has-no-plans-to-downgrade-use-of-english-after-brexit>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-juncker-language/english-language-exit-talk-was-only-banter-says-eus-juncker-idUSKBN1CI1DW?il=0>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/04/eu-has-no-plans-to-downgrade-use-of-english-after-brexit>

⁸ <https://slator.com/demand-drivers/eu-provides-clarity-on-post-brexit-future-for-english-language/>

Further reading

- <http://europarlamenti.info/en/European-parliament/working-languages/>
- <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/brexit-latest-news-language-euro-english-uk-leave-eu-european-union-a7957001.html>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2017/sep/25/without-uk-influence-eu-english-will-be-free-to-morph-into-a-distinct-variety>
- <https://qz.com/1270508/even-after-brexit-english-will-remain-the-language-that-holds-the-eu-together/>
- <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/05/13/britain-is-leaving-the-eu-but-its-language-will-stay>
- https://www.eca.europa.eu/Other%20publications/EN_TERMINOLOGY_PUBLICATION/EN_TERMINOLOGY_PUBLICATION.pdf
- http://tesi.cab.unipd.it/57181/1/Anthony_Dimitri_Avigliano_Policastro_2017.pdf