

Does Brexit spell the end for English as the lingua franca of the EU?

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The UK is not the only English speaking EU state, but when Ireland and Malta both joined the EU they opted to put forward Irish and Maltese as their official languages. This has led some politicians to suggest that following Brexit, English should no longer be classified as an official EU language.

David Fernández Vítóres writes that in practice the suggestion of removing English from the list of official languages is likely to prove impossible to implement, but the debate nevertheless indicates the willingness of countries like France and Germany to revisit the EU's language policy once the UK leaves.



After the triumph of the Leave vote in the UK's referendum, numerous politicians, mainly French, have been quick to say that with the United Kingdom leaving the EU, English should no longer be an official EU language. This reaction should come as no surprise to anyone. The French have always considered their national language as the standard bearer of France's cultural exports across the world and as proof of the country's international influence. Although it is certain that the role of French as a language of diplomacy par excellence had gradually been losing ground since the end of the First World War, until it was finally replaced by English, this recently lost glory still rankles among a large section of the French political and intellectual class.

And from a formal point of view, the French politicians are not wrong. Their argument is supported by the fact that the other two English-speaking member states (Ireland and Malta) did not register English as their language when they joined the EU. Given that the status of English as an official EU language was guaranteed through the accession of the UK, both Ireland and Malta opted to have Irish and Maltese included among the official languages and thus promote greater visibility of the cultural and linguistic identity of these two countries within the EU.



But leaving the wishes of French politicians aside, the removal of a language from the list of official EU languages could be extremely difficult, if not impossible. First of all, it would require an amendment of Council Regulation No. 1/1958, which regulates the language regime of the Union and which has been modified with each new EU enlargement. Amending this language regime to accommodate a new official language, as occurred with Croatian in the latest enlargement, is relatively simple, as it is done through the Act of Accession of each new member state.

However, the opposite process would be extremely complicated since it would require the unanimous vote of all

member states. And therein lies the main problem: it is highly unlikely that two English-speaking countries like Ireland and Malta would vote in favour of reforming the language regime to exclude English from the list of official EU languages. And even less likely still if we consider that the Council has approved a series of temporary derogation measures for Maltese and Irish, which limit to a large extent the drafting and publishing of European institution documents in these two languages.

Thus, a mechanism designed in principle to ensure multilingualism in the EU, as well as equal treatment for the less widely spoken official languages (such as Danish, Swedish, Maltese, etc.), would now serve as a safeguard clause to protect the majority official language both inside and outside the European institutions: English.

Brexit and the EU's lingua franca

The dispute over language primacy within the EU does not end with the “failed” reform of its language regime. What can be expected in the future following Brexit? The fact that it was almost exclusively French politicians who proposed the idea of removing the official status of English sheds some light on the future strategies of the different member states as regards language.

Even if the status of English as an official language remains unchanged, it is a fact that the percentage of speakers with English as their mother tongue would be drastically reduced, dropping from the current 13% to just 1%. This could be used as an argument for member states with a higher percentage of native speakers of their languages, such as German (16%), Italian (13%), French (12%), Spanish and Polish (both 8%), for claiming greater institutional representation for their respective languages. In this respect, it is not unreasonable to think that France would claim a status for French similar to that which it had before the accession of the UK in 1973, when it was by far the most widely used language within the institutions.

Although it is almost impossible to think that English will disappear from the EU's institutional framework, it is very likely that France will design and lead some kind of strategy to remove the institutional presence of English in favour of French. In this respect, it is expected that the linguistic cooperation agreement reached in 2000 between France and Germany's foreign ministers, Védrine and Fischer, will be strengthened. This agreement stated that both countries would mutually support each other should the status or function of their respective languages be threatened by the institutional and organisational dynamics of the EU. Moreover, this agreement could receive the support of the rest of the member states, since it would mean greater institutional representation for the other official European languages.

However, it is also very likely that doubts about the whole EU project generated by Brexit itself will discourage many Europeans from learning languages whose material utility is largely determined by the fact that they are official EU languages. This will certainly undermine the position of German and French and favour that of English.

In any case, a lesser representation of English would only be defensible within the institutions. Outside of them, the number of European citizens that have English as a foreign language has been growing steadily since the UK's entry into the EU and, given its position as a world lingua franca in an increasingly globalised environment, this trend is expected to continue in the future. According to Eurostat, 38% of Europeans claim to have sufficient skills to be able to maintain a conversation in English, compared to 12% in French, 11% in German and 7% in Spanish. Furthermore, the percentages of these latter three languages have been dropping in recent years. Ironically, English, a “minority” official language, could yet become the lingua franca of the EU despite the UK's exit.

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About the author

David Fernández Vítóres – *Universidad de Alcalá, Madrid*

David Fernández Vítóres is a Researcher and a Lecturer at the University of Alcalá. He has published in the *Journal of Language and Politics* and other academic journals and is the author of several books (in Spanish) including: [Spanish Language in International Relations](#) (2012), [The Europe of Babel](#) (2011), and [The Multilingual Europe](#) (2010). His work focuses on the role of language as a political instrument in international relations.



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