



Brexit, Englishit? Disintegration and How Taking Back Control Means Giving Up Control

¿Brexit, Englishit? Desintegración y cómo recuperar el control significa renunciar a él

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Abstract

This contribution seeks to explore what disintegration can mean for a language, with a focus on Brexit and the English language. Linguistic differences are often instrumentalized as drivers of disintegration. However, in the case of Brexit, disintegration will also affect the status of the English language. Due to the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, English will no longer be a first official language of any European member state; it is only the second official language in Ireland and Malta. This has important political and legal repercussions, that affect the future of the English language in the EU after Brexit. Based on desk research, we see two avenues for the future of the English language within the EU: it could be replaced by another major European language (German/ French), or could become a real European *lingua franca*. The latter option seems most reasonable as the English language has taken a firm foothold among young (and older) Europeans but entails that by taking back control of its decision-making processes by leaving the EU, the UK will lose the little control over the English language it currently still has. This tendency was already taking place both internationally as within the EU but will greatly accelerate after Brexit.

Keywords: Brexit, disintegration, English language, EU, UK, lingua franca, Euro English

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Resumen

Esta contribución busca explorar lo que la desintegración puede significar para un idioma, enfocado específicamente en el Brexit. Las diferencias lingüísticas suelen ser una de las principales razones por las cuales la desintegración sucede; sin embargo, en el caso del Brexit, el idioma inglés se verá afectado debido a la decisión del Reino Unido de dejar la Unión Europea. El inglés no será el idioma oficial de ninguno de los Estados miembro europeos (es el segundo idioma oficial de Malta e Irlanda, más no el primero). Esto tiene repercusiones políticas y legales importantes, que afectarán el futuro del idioma en la UE después del Brexit. Basados en investigación documental, vemos dos avenidas para el futuro del idioma inglés en la UE: podría ser reemplazado por otro de los idiomas más utilizados, como el alemán o el francés, o podría convertirse en la auténtica *lingua franca* europea. La segunda opción parece muy viable, ya que es un idioma muy hablado por la juventud europea. No obstante, al dejar la UE y recuperar el control sobre sus decisiones, los británicos perderán el control sobre el idioma inglés. Esta tendencia ya había sido observada en varios países fuera de la UE, pero se acelerará dentro de ella, después del Brexit.

Palabras clave: Brexit, desintegración, idioma inglés, Reino Unido, Unión Europea, lingua franca, euroinglés

Introduction

The phenomenon of disintegration is not novel, but it is a phenomenon that has only received an increasing amount of attention in recent years. The rise of nationalist and populist feelings and parties has called the tendency towards greater integration that has been observed in recent decades into question. This integration resulted from the realization that there exists a variety of imminent threats that one nation alone cannot tackle, as they are not confined to one nation's boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point for the necessity for a concerted effort that crosses borders as a pandemic affects people irrespective of their national origins. However, the idea that integration specifically serves to achieve workable cross-border solutions has been questioned by nationalist and populist interests. Greater expansion and collaboration have been followed recently by calls for national governments to reprioritise the 'folk'. In the context of Brexit, exiting the EU was framed in the context of regaining control of matters of critical importance to the British public, such as increased funding for the National Health Service instead of devoting resources to the EU.

The voiced concerns with greater integration (whether it be social, political, or economic in form) stem from the sentiment that integration has become superimposed onto a previously static, homogenous entity. Integration then comes to be viewed as an adaptation to a previously un-adapted holistic

entity, thereby raising concerns about both dilution and diminution. This is clear in the nationalist and populist responses to questions of greater or increased integration and can cause a fetishization for the preservation of local, regional, and national cultures, which are also thought to have been unaffected over time. Brexit saw Vote Leave focus on immigration for example.¹

Deep integration, such as within the EU, only works when the policy preferences of the entities that collaborate are not too heterogeneous.² Peoples' preferences are created in a social setting and as such are also something that can be modified and manufactured. One such preference base is that of language, which additionally can play an important role in the process of manufacturing and framing preferences.

The preservation of a country's language, and its parenthetical history and legacy, is a common focal point and a common preference that is both personal and cultural. However, language is not impartial nor unchanging and it is not free of value-based encoded sentiments. Much of Bourdieu's work focussed on the choice of words, the selection of syntax and a person's ability to express themselves in their 'linguistic habitus' as similar in many ways to material consumption choices that are clearly class-informed and classifying.³ Collapsing the complexity of language has been a necessity in guaranteeing forward momentum for integrated/federal structures. This is often reflected in the daily operation of nation states, in which sub-entities have received certain competences based on a country's particular language setup. Many recent conflicts that have led to the break-up of nation states⁴ as well as to the rise of "regions' competences" in decision-making (for example see Catalunya⁵ and Belgium⁶ are often informed by differing linguistic backgrounds). To

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1. Nicholas Watt, "EU Referendum: Vote Leave Focuses on Immigration", *BBC News*, May 25th, 2016, <https://bbc.in/3J7DJvJ>.
 2. Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore, *The Size of Nations* (Cambridge, US: MIT Press, 2003).
 3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1993).
 4. Such as the collapse of Yugoslavia. See Ranko Bugarski, "Language, Nationalism and War in Yugoslavia", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 151 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2001.048>; William Safran, "Introduction: The Political Aspects of Language", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 10, n.º 1 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110490450746>.
 5. Elisa Roller, "When Does Language Become Exclusivist?: Linguistic Politics in Catalonia", *National Identities* 4, n.º 3 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1460894022000026132>.
 6. Jan Wouters, Sven Van Kerckhoven and Maarten Vidal, "Traditional and New Federalism in Europe: Belgium and Switzerland Compared", in *Weak States, Strong Societies?*, ed. Amin Saikal (London: IB Tauris, 2016).

that end, while a streamlined language is necessary for frictionless integration, the maladaptation or assimilation of too many discrepant groups can result in a fracturing of integration efforts. As such, linguistic differences have often been employed, instrumentalized or used for political purposes in connection with disintegration processes.

In light of the decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016, language was not considered one of the main points of contention, but the English language will nonetheless be affected by this decision. The extant literature on the topic of Brexit has studied several issues concerning the expected impact on both the UK and on the EU. For example, post-Brexit, the UK is expected to be affected in fields as diverse as fisheries⁷ and its role as the hub for financial services.⁸ While many other preserves of everyday life will become restricted with the removal of frictionless trade and freedom to reside in other Member States, one intangible good that has received sparse theoretical attention concerns the future of the English language within the EU.

This paper focuses on the idiosyncratic position of a language that is commonly employed in the service of integration and global expansion, but which is commonly conceived of as being the preserve of one nation in particular. The aim of this paper is to determine what the impact of disintegration will be on a language upon which many have come to depend on, English, in the context of Brexit.

The following section provides a brief background on how the English language came to dominate in the European Union. This commentary then assesses the impact of Brexit and the future of the English language within the European Union. We close by providing a small conclusion. What seems apparent is that while it seems that the proponents of Brexit prioritised the desire to take back autonomy and control, we argue that the genie is very much out of the bottle with respect to the English language. By taking back control of the decision-making from the EU, the UK might have unwittingly given up control over the English language within Europe.

7. Jeremy Philipson and David Symes, "A Sea of Troubles': Brexit and the Fisheries Question", *Marine Policy* 90 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.12.016>.

8. Sven Kerckhoven and Jed Odermatt, "Euro Clearing after Brexit: Shifting Locations and Oversight", *Journal of Financial Regulation and Compliance* 29, n.º 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFRC-02-2020-0021>.

The global appeal of the English language

Language, and the ability to express oneself, is one of the most powerful drivers of human interaction. It is woven into issues as diverse as affect, emotions (and the ability to express those emotions), national belonging, culture, and interdependence. It serves as a primacy construct for both debate and argumentation. However, while language can be employed in the service of narratives and shared narratives for continuity, language can also serve as the dividing line between people groups as a language can sustain us and them distinctions.

Many societies were initially founded on the notion of the necessity of monistic essentialism: one currency, one language and one sovereign. With the rise of the nation state, followed by increased regional integration (in particular European integration), these have been hollowed out and language, for example, is no longer as useful as it once was in the definition of borders. The necessity to adapt to the requirements of multiple languages has evolved in tandem with the advancement of global supply chains, globalisation, and tourism as nations attempt to attract investment and to remain competitive. This adaptability, in some senses, has been woven into the national constitutions of the fifty-five nation states that have at least two official languages.

The English language has become a globally recognised means of communication due to colonization, Anglophilia and its everyday use in North America. English has remained an important language in several areas in the world even after the decolonization period, by dint of its new-found use in commerce, education, and tourism. Given the seeming stalemate and indecision about whether French or German could be propagated as the national language of the EU in its earlier years, English rose to prominence as a kind of stopgap, surpassing the other official languages and the other working languages of the EU as the ‘primary’ go-to language in which to communicate, after the accession of the Scandinavian and Eastern European countries. English is the most commonly spoken foreign language in 19 out of 25 European Union countries (excluding the UK and Ireland). In the EU25, a working knowledge of English as a foreign language clearly leads at 38%, followed at a distance by German and French (at 14% each).

Moreover, the share of the population with knowledge of English in other EU member states ranges from 55% (in France) to 71% (in Sweden).⁹ What

9. Statista, “English proficiency in European countries in 2019”, *Statista*, February 28th, 2023, <https://bit.ly/426T2Oa>.

stands in opposition to the overseas uptake and adoption of English, however, is the growing monolingualism that is prevalent within schools in the UK at present. A report from the beginning of 2020 highlighted that only 32% of children in the UK can write in a language other than English. This trend has been the direct result of a 2004 directive within the UK that removed the requirement to learn an additional language at school.¹⁰ This emphasis on sticking to one language has led to the creation of a disparity between the UK and the other member states as elsewhere in Europe, English was being folded into national curricula, alongside other languages and not instead of them.¹¹ English has become the preeminent second language of Europe, on a voluntary or national government level push, in the absence of any direct colonial history or diaspora¹² with the important exceptions of Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Gibraltar. There has been a concerted effort to increase fluency in English by Europeans since the Second World War. The European appetite for adopting English stems from historical events such as the World Wars and the Cold War when a strong affinity towards the US and UK was created and from a desire to fold English into a multilingual project.

This has put the English language in a unique position. It has become the most useful language to connect different language groups throughout Europe and is often the second language that is taught in schools. Moreover, in some cases, such as Belgium, the English language plays an important role in terms of trifurcating the country's three national languages (Dutch, French, and German). In some other countries, speaking English within mixed language groups allows speakers to adopt a subject position that allows them to shy away or conceal elements of speech that might otherwise become heavily weighted with historical predispositions and power implications. In Hong Kong, English remains the preferred language, its return to the People's Republic of Chi-

10. Richard Adams, "Learning Foreign Languages Should Be Compulsory, Says Report", *The Guardian*, January 9th, 2020, <https://bit.ly/400BbGL>.

11. Sean O'Dubhghaill, "It's Fake—I mean It Sounds the Same, but It's Fake': Plasticity, Simulation and Passing through the Irish Language in Belgium", *Irish Journal of Anthropology* 17, n.° 1 (2014), <https://bit.ly/3yua3Ed>.

12. Marko Modiano, "English in a Post-Brexit European Union", *World Englishes* 36, n.° 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12264>.

na notwithstanding.^{13, 14} In India, English was initially deemed to be phased out in favour of Hindi post-independence.¹⁵ However, given that the usage of Hindi was expected to create cultural and political tensions, English eventually became an official language of India. In the United States, English is the national language, which has further increased its global appeal. English thus became the language of choice for global interactions.

The impact of Brexit on the English language

Linguistic differences have often been a driver for disintegration. However, in the case of Brexit, language was not a primary driver. ‘Taking back control’ did not refer to language as much as it did to take back control of decision-making from the European institutions.

Since 1958, there has been an expectation that a Member State would ‘notify’ one of its national languages for primary consideration by the European Union. The ‘EEC Council: Regulation No.1 determining the languages to be used by the European Economic Community’¹⁶ was brought up in the immediate aftermath of Brexit in June 2016. The former head of the European Parliament’s Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) Danuta Hübner being the first to underscore that the English language would no longer be primarily notified by the United Kingdom.¹⁷ The primary conveyance employed at the legislative level has a lot more to do with convenience than legislative stricture; however, for instance, the Irish language, which appears before the English language in Ireland’s constitution, was recognized formally in 2007 as a ‘treaty language’ but took 14 additional years to graduate from ‘derogation’.

Both Malta and Ireland (where English is an official language) opted for a first official language other than English. For instance, the Republic of Ireland gives Irish Gaelic as its official language, and Malta gives Maltese. Out

13. Hong Kong, *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China*, May 2021, art. 9.

14. Kingsley Bolton, Werner Botha and Andy Kirkpatrick, eds., *The Handbook of Asian Englishes* (Hoboken, US: John Wiley and Sons, 2020).

15. India, *The Constitution of India*, May 2022, art. 343.

16. Council of the European Communities, *Regulation No 1: Determining the Languages to Be Used by the European Economic Community*, October 6th, 1958, 358/58.

17. Hortense Goulard, “English Will Not Be an Official EU Language after Brexit, Says Senior MEP”, *Politico*, June 27th, 2016, <https://politi.co/2BrTpqX>.

of a population of about 448 million, after Brexit, the English language as a first language stands at a mere 0,06 percent in the Union, while the German language would be at 18% for example.

This problematizes the role of the English language in the European Union moving forward. On the one hand, it is no longer the first official language of any member state, but on the other hand, it has become deeply embedded in the lives of Europeans.¹⁸ English's value moving forward will remain the same but will become increasingly unmoored from the country in which it first became established. Brexit thus speeds up the already ongoing process, as English became a global language living next to British English.

The disintegration of the UK from the European Union could continue to affect the language division within the Union and could become the first instance in which a national language will have become separated from its nation, its origin point, to re-establish itself as an orphaned language in the European Union.

The future of the English language in the EU

The role of the English language will become an important issue post-Brexit and there appear to be two very different manners in which this orphaned language might come to call Europe its home once more. Looking at the future, two possibilities are immediately possible: a refocusing of languages within the EU, or a 'taking control' of the English language by EU citizens. Will a kind of linguistic intensification take place, in which national languages re-assert themselves to displace the English language or will English continue as a kind of stopgap or as a kind of burdensome necessity?

In many other fields, there is a great deal of 'picking up the pieces' taking place at present, as is evident in terms of economic competition; one key example of which is the competition/scramble to appeal to businesses currently operating in the UK to relocate overseas (such as to France and Germany).¹⁹ This same level of competitive drive is not happening in the language field. Of course,

18. Ushma Jacobsen, "English in the European Union after Brexit: Inclusion Effects of a Language without an Owner", *Culture, Practice and European Policy* 2, n.º 1 (2017), <https://bit.ly/3yzkfuY>.

19. Sven Van Kerckhoven, "Post-Brexit Leadership in European Finance", *Politics and Governance* 9, n.º 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i1.3705>.

linguistic dominance is much subtler, does not provide any direct payoffs, and is more path-driven than controlled. This would mean that advancing the causes of different languages is a long-term project, rather than a short-term opportunity. Nationalist and populist tendencies could provide some support for a reappraisal of the different languages with the EU. This would also coincide with the EU's generally robust desire to protect and facilitate minority languages, to advocate for 'unity within diversity';²⁰ the (continued) widespread adoption of the English language might strike a contradictory chord in this respect, at least when it is not viewed from the perspective of increasing the number of languages spoken by EU citizens to increase education and the competitiveness of the EU. In the latter view, languages are not competing, but enriching and complementing each other.²¹

Some EU officials have already called for the end of English as one of the dominant languages within the EU.²² These calls were made mostly with regards to the French language, and supported by the French Prime Minister, Emmanuel Macron, and former EU Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker. The French language would indeed be a reasonable option as it dominated the other languages in the European Union until the 1990s. When the EU was still the European Community, official languages were Dutch, French, German, and Italian, but as more countries joined, which often had English as unofficial second language, the tables were turned, and English came to dominate.²³

However, the question of how the English language will be portrayed by some member states is yet to be seen. Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander De Croo attracted media attention when he opted to sidestep the issue of consigning himself to speaking one of Belgium's three official languages, opting instead to speak to his addressees about COVID-19 in English. French President Emmanuel Macron also spoke in English to address American scientists in

20. Katarzyna Iskra, "Language Policy", *European Parliament*, April 2022, <https://bit.ly/3YxPGAA>.

21. Michał Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak, "Political Strategies and Language Policies: The European Union Lisbon Strategy and Its Implications for the EU's Language and Multilingualism Policy", *Language Policy* 10, n.° 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-011-9196-5>; Michele Gazzola, "Multilingual Communication for Whom?: Language Policy and Fairness in the European Union", *European Union Politics* 17, n.° 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516657672>.

22. Bill McLoughlin, "EU Humiliation: Brussels Forced to Keep English as Official Language Despite UK's Exit", *Express*, September 28th, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3Lh3tY>.

23. Kingsley Bolton and Daniel Davis, "Brexit and the Future of English in Europe", *World Englishes* 36, n.° 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12263>.

response to the US's withdrawal from the Paris Climate change agreement.²⁴ Moreover, in order to remove the English language as an official language of the EU, there would have to be a unanimous vote in the European parliament in favor of doing so.²⁵

As such, the UK's attempt to wrest control back from an interdependent union of European Member States could fire back in terms of the dominance of the English language. The UK's departure represents, in this view, a unique opportunity to finally reevaluate the legitimacy and everyday usage of the English language in a continent that no longer recognizes it in the same way as it has since the UK's accession in 1973.

The second option would mean a longer commitment of the EU member states to the usage of the English language. In that sense, control over the English language and the way the language develops within the EU, would no longer be under the prerogative of the crown. There is no central authority over the English language at present.²⁶ It is a living language driven by a set of rules that the language community agrees upon.²⁷ While it there might be some hand-wringing about the departure of the UK from the EU in terms of its linguistic legacy, what poses a more interesting avenue for research, to our minds, is the notion that new hybrid or pidgin permutations will emerge; these variations will encounter fewer issues around correct usage and, while putatively 'broken', will not be answerable to a member state that has withdrawn its cooperation in every other field.

The English language is at risk of becoming, due to the disintegration of the UK from the EU, the *lingua franca* for international and European interactions, but without oversight. It might well become a language or dialect that is systematically used to make communication possible between groups of people who do not share a native language or dialect, particularly when not one of the speakers' native languages. When the UK was a colonial power, English became the *lingua franca* throughout the British colonies, often by force. Due to its

24. Robert Mackey, "French President Emmanuel Macron Offers Refuge to American Climate Scientists", *The Intercept*, June 1st, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Js6aWB>.

25. See European Union, *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, March 1st, 2020, art. 342.

26. Several other languages do have a central authority. L'Académie Française, for example, is the pre-eminent French Council for matters pertaining to the French language.

27. Funnily enough, the whole plethora of new words originating from the Brexit process are an interesting case in point, see Christine Ro, "How Brexit Changed the English Language", *BBC*, March 14th, 2019, <https://bbc.in/424ULDC>.

international presence, the English language already plays the role of a lingua franca in the world. At present, it seems likely that it will continue to grow in usage as a lingua franca within the EU but will do so without the vernacular endorsement of a member state supporting and guiding its deployment.

In light of Brexit, the tendency to ‘operationalize’ the English language will accelerate. Researchers have previously argued that within the EU, ‘Euro English’, can be seen as developing as a lingua franca. ‘Euro English’ can be seen as a pidgin dialect of English based on the technical jargon of the European Union and the native languages of its non-native English-speaking population (terms include the usage of the noun and pluralized forms of the words training and guidance). For now, much of the reliance upon English has been led by people working within the EU bubble as well as by expatriates from EU countries, and by other European citizens.²⁸ This tendency could accelerate due to the high percentage of people with English as a second language. In this view, Brexit will not mean the end of English as a shared language within European borders and its institutions. However, it is very likely that this ‘English’ will no longer be British English, which appears to be destined to detach itself forever from the rest of the continent after Brexit, as it has already been detached from American English. It will serve as the language to speed up interactions, as a bedrock and ‘relay’ language for translators or might become increasingly Americanised in usage. Italy’s former Prime Minister has even called for a revitalisation or upgrading of the use of English after Brexit in 2017: “It would help us Europeans to become more competitive by using fewer languages”.²⁹ Here, the case is made for a candid recognition of the Pandora’s box-style predicament in which the English language now finds itself, as a crutch, as a relay and as a stopgap and, naturally enough, as a tool to communicate. The role played by English can be exemplified by dint of the fact that 80% of legislature in the EU is drafted in English first, as a ‘relay’ language, before being translated into the other languages.

That the continuous adoption of English as a European language will depend on the fortunes of the political and economic fortunes of the United Kingdom in the long run³⁰ is probably too strong a statement, as the English

28. Sandra Mollin, *Euro-English: Assessing Variety Status* (Tübingen, DE: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 2006).

29. Paul Dallison, “Mario Monti: EU Should Adopt English Post Brexit”, *Politico*, November 21st, 2017, par. 4, <https://politi.co/422mUel>.

30. Jane Setter, “Will Brexit Spell the End of English as an Official EU Language?”, *The Guardian*, December 27th, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3T5bltq>.

language is already globally accepted. However, the historical example of Latin, which was no longer anyone's first language after it had become everyone's second language, all before almost completely disappearing is telling to bear in mind moving forward.

Conclusion

Disintegration has a wide variety of consequences and often is a result of nationalist and populist pressures. Linguistic differences often play a role in disintegration processes.

This contribution has studied Brexit and the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union on the English language. Post Brexit only two member states will officially recognize English as an official language, albeit only as a second official language with the first one 'notified' serving as the commonly recognised choice. As such, the official 'power' of the English language will have waned considerably, as will any claims be concerning a delimited, 'correct' and endorsed schema for usage.

However, no other European language seems to be able to quickly step in and take over the English language's dominant position. Attempts to leapfrog English to pole position will be time- and resource-intensive given that, unlike most of the issues discussed in relation to Brexit, the acquisition of new language skills is not as easy as for example relocating one's business from the UK to the remaining EU member states. The English language will probably continue to be adopted and embraced as a *lingua franca*. The language can continue to serve as a way to easily communicate between different linguistic groups. Without guidance from the UK in the arena of language, there is a risk that the language will become further diluted in the view of the United Kingdom. This is a trend that has already been observed in recent years, with the rise of 'Euro English'. This trend can only be expected to accelerate. This would mean that Brexit and its attempt to "Take back control" of the UK's economy and decision-making would result in the unexpected abandonment of control over the English language. The study of disintegration would benefit greatly from assessing linguistic differences, not only as an input in the process but also as an output.

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