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Journal Item

How to cite:

Seargeant, Philip (2017). [Comment] The symbolism of English on the Brexit battleground. *World Englishes*, 36(3) pp. 356–359.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/weng.12273>

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The symbolism of English on the Brexit battleground

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The implications of what the UK's planned withdrawal from the Europe Union will have on the English language are, for the moment at least, a matter of speculation. English's current status in Europe is closely tied up with its status in the world more widely, and is the product of a myriad of historical and political factors, most notably colonialism, decolonization, the influence of US cultural power, and processes of globalization. It has, to date, been possible to discern patterns in the way the language has spread and developed in various parts of the world based on similarities between historical events in different contexts – and influential models that underpin the study of world Englishes, such as Braj Kachru's 'three circles model' and Edgar Schneider's 'dynamic model', are based on precisely this approach. But a scenario similar to Brexit does not fit with any of these precedents. It is *sui generis* as far as political upheavals go. Which leads to the speculation.

Of course, Brexit itself is founded upon, and continues to be marked by, speculation. The referendum was a choice between a known quantity (sticking with the status quo) and a complex of ideologies and aspirations which were not tied to any specific collection of policies. There was (and, at time of writing remains) no clear idea of what a UK outside the EU would/will look like in practical terms – nor what the impact of the UK's withdrawal will have on the EU. And because of this logistical vacuum, the Brexit discourse has been a site for the creation and contesting of various imagined scenarios, with the English language often used as a symbolic touchstone by different sides of the debate.

Despite the uncertainty over how this will all play out, there are one or two key issues we do know however, which are likely to shape the way the situation evolves. The first is that, although the UK is set on a path to leave the EU, this does not mean that the UK is 'leaving' Europe. Relations between countries – and

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indeed the wider concept of a European community – will persist in some form or other, both culturally and politically. Secondly, it is important to distinguish clearly between the EU institutions and the EU as a complete political entity. Whatever the fate of English within the institutions (whether, for example, it continues to be used as an official working language), this will not necessarily have a particular bearing on citizens in the member states. It will be of symbolic importance of course, but the immediate implications will be localised within the institutions themselves. And thirdly, the position of the United States within the broader equation needs to be taken into account. In the latter half of the twentieth century it was the US which was the predominant driver behind the spread of English, and it still remains as the dominant centre of power in this regard. Attitudes towards English in the EU are likely to be shaped as much by international relations between the EU and the US as with the UK.

Given the speculative nature of the cultural implications of Brexit, the most engaging questions around English in this particular context at the present moment involve the politics of the language rather than the forms (in terms of possible emergent varieties) or communicative strategies (the details of certain *lingua franca* accommodation features). As Modiano suggests in his paper, it is almost certain that English will remain an official language for the union, due to Ireland and Malta's continued membership. And although once the UK has left, native English speakers within the EU will fall from approximately 14% to just 1% (Linn, 2016), it is nevertheless very likely that English will continue as a powerful *lingua franca* across the continent due to its wider status as the pre-eminent global language of modern times. It also seems likely, as Modiano notes, that it will continued to be used as an unofficial *lingua franca* in the corridors and bars of the EU institutions. Yet it is already the case that for many MEPs it is often less pragmatic to use English in official settings (in parliamentary debates, for example), either because they feel they would be surrendering some of their negotiating power if they did so, or because it sends the wrong message to their constituents back home (Open University, 2011). And it is related to this type of context where speculation over the future of English is most marked at present: i.e. the way that English is currently being conceptualised within European (and

trans-Atlantic) politics, and the extent to which it is being used or cited symbolically as part of the lobbying for position between opposing negotiating factions.

In the week that the British prime minister Theresa May was triggering Article 50 for the official start of the UK's withdrawal, an April Fool's joke published in *The Connexion* (an aggregation site for French news in English) suggested that the Académie française was advocating for a French replacement for the English word 'Brexit'. One suggestion, they reported, was that it would be replaced with a home-grown equivalent such as 'RUquit', a blend of 'Royaume-Uni' and 'quitter' (*The Connexion*, 2017).

As was widely commented upon of this year's crop of April Fools, in the Trumpian era of post-truth it was increasingly difficult to discern the satirically fabricated from the surreally genuine. For example, back in the world of real news, a few weeks after the referendum vote itself a petition was submitted to the UK Parliament's website arguing that 'all French words' should be removed from the cover of the new British Passport given the fact that French is an EU language. The vote to leave the union was a clear sign that people wanted to 'Take Back Control... of their borders, their culture and their language', the petition argued (UK Government and Parliament, 2016). As a number of people were quick to point out, however, the word 'passport' itself comes from the French, which made the idea logistically rather difficult. Then there was the intervention from Nigel Farage, ex-leader of the UK Independence Party. When the status of English was being impugned in an exchange between European politicians, he stood up in the European parliament to argue that any suggestion of the language's decline was clearly false because 90% of the songs at the Eurovision Song Contest were sung in the language (Ruptly, 2017). Quod erat demonstrandum.

While these examples may range from the purposely satirical to the misguided or bizarre, the same strategy has been employed consistently at all levels of debate over the meaning of Brexit. As Modiano writes, within days of the referendum vote in June 2016, the head of the Constitutional Affairs Committee, Danuta Hübner, was suggesting that it would probably be necessary to drop English as one of the EU's official languages (Goulard, 2016). Although,

as noted, this is very unlikely to happen, it was an early sign of the way that the symbolism of language and linguistic heritage was likely to play a significant role in proceedings. Since then there have been reports that the EU's lead negotiator was demanding that Brexit talks be conducted in French rather than English (Guarascio, 2016), and earlier this year in a pointedly emblematic use of codeswitching, the president of the European commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, stated, in English, that 'Slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe', before switching to French for the rest of his address (Rankin, 2017). Indeed, Juncker conducted his first Brexit press conference in French, and his officials at the time suggested he would no longer be using English in public, although this has not transpired to be the case (Rankin, 2016). In cases such as this, Brexit appears to be revitalising or reinforcing ideologies associating English with British heritage – which is perhaps unsurprising given the rise of nationalist agendas in many of the populist movements which are reshaping global politics.

At the same time, however, use of English has also been used to symbolise a different agenda within the debate. For example, the headline in Germany's *Die Welt* newspaper on the day after Theresa May had triggered Article 50 read 'Dear Brits, ze door is schtill open' (*Die Welt*, 2017). By using 'Denglish' (a mixture of English and German) here the paper struck an inclusive note (with a hint of self-parody), suggesting that relationships in the union could flourish despite linguistic and cultural boundaries. A similar use of the language came from Emmanuel Macron when he delivered a speech entirely in English following Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Paris Accord on climate change (Wilts, 2017). In both cases, code choice is a symbolic act of addressivity using English as a means of identifying with an international rather than exclusively national community.

Returning to the anti-English sentiments of the sort voiced by Hübner and Juncker, Modiano suggests that these are antagonistic 'because they illustrate the kind of attitude which provokes support for the British departure from the Union in the first place'. This is possibly true, but given the fact that the departure has already been decided upon, their symbolism is now more to do with lobbying for position before the upcoming negotiations (of which there has been much on

either side). An open question related to Modiano's point, however, is whether Brexit is a discrete event, or merely the beginning of a larger process. To an extent, arguments about the possible emergence of a 'Euro' variety of English are based on the idea that further major political disruption within the union will not take place. Yet at present, world politics is seeing stark polarisation of beliefs, particularly with the rise of and resistance to populist movements. And given the relations these movements can have to nationalist agendas, it seems likely that the jousting over the political symbolism of languages will continue to be foregrounded, both in terms of English but also the relative importance of other languages. How exactly this will play out, it seems far too early to tell at present. What the debate does currently indicate however is that the associations that English has as the national language of Britain (and all the 'ownership' implications that follow) is still very much a part of its identity in mainstream discourse - and from a political point of view, the process of Brexit is reinforcing this discourse. It remains to be seen what will happen once the process itself is concluded.

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