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## Impact of Brexit on the status of the English language in the European Union

**Abstract:** The United Kingdom joined the EEC/EU in 1973. Its membership has been one of the thorniest issues in British politics over the last forty-five years. The United Kingdom was one of the most Euroskeptic member states in the EU. The ‘added value’ brought by London to the EU was the English language, which successively supplanted French from the function of working language of the EU. English is not only the official language of the EU (it is one of 24 official languages), but primarily has a dominant position in the EU. It is used for communication between the EU and the world, between European institutions and during informal meetings. The purpose of this article is to analyze the position of English in the EU, to show its strengths, and finally to answer the question of whether the present status of English in the EU will remain after the UK leaves.

**Key words:** Brexit, multilingualism, official languages, working languages, the European Union

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### Introduction

The European Union is currently comprised of 28 countries. The slogan ‘united in diversity,’ adopted in 2000, reflects the two overarching objectives of the EU – firstly, maintaining and respecting the member states’ linguistic, cultural and historic differences; secondly, highlighting the importance not only of their history and culture, but also of national languages. Currently, the EU has 24 official languages. Their number is based on the principle of multilingualism, adopted by the EU and still considered valid. Working languages are used for communications within EU institutions, mainly English, French and German. The United Kingdom’s (UK’s) departure from the European Union will open up the question of the status of the English language, both as an official language and as a working language within EU institutions. The aim of this article is to explore the role of English in the EU now, as well as after the UK leaves

the Union. The research thesis is that English has a dominant position in the EU nowadays, whereas after the UK leaves the EU, its role as a *lingua franca* will gradually diminish in everyday communications within EU institutions, and that eventually it will be replaced by other languages, e.g. French or German.

This article is in three parts. The first part discusses the principle of multilingualism in the EU and the importance of national languages. The second part contains the analysis of the legal status and the practical dimension of EU working languages, whereas the third part sketches out potential scenarios for the use of English in EU institutions resulting from the UK leaving the EU. To develop these scenarios, a dogmatic method, using legal and historical analysis, will be deployed. Legal analysis of Union documents and treaties will enable the status of EU official and working languages to be defined. In turn, the historical method will enable tracing the evolution and gradual domination of English in the EU. The hypothesis will be validated using prognostic and political discourse methods.

### **The principle of multilingualism in the EU**

Multilingualism is the fundamental principle of language policy in EU institutions (Oakes, 2002, p. 373). The legal basis for language policy is defined in Article 248 of the Treaty of Rome, which states: “this Treaty, [is] drawn up in a single original in the Dutch, French, German and Italian languages, all four texts being equally authentic” (Treaty establishing the EEC). Thus established, the principle of multilingualism signals the equality of citizens of the countries listed in the treaty and the fundamental right of non-discrimination. In 1958, the Council passed Regulation 1 (Council Regulation 1/58) concerning EU (then EEC) language policy. According to the regulation, each member state has the right to demand that its official language receives the status of an official language of the EU. In practice, this means that all EU regulations and other legal documents are translated into official languages of the EU. Moreover, any EU official language may be used during a debate in the European Parliament. Language policy, as determined in Regulation 1/58, requires each institution to employ translators, but also to guarantee the identical understanding of translated legal documents, following the principle that all language versions are to have equal legal status. The version of a do-

document in each language must keep the same structure, have the same number of pages, the same numbering system and the same paragraph split, even the same length sentences (Robertson, 2013, p. 21). It should be highlighted that not all EU documents have the status of official documents and therefore not all documents are translated into all official languages (Szul, 2007, p. 68).

At the moment, the EU has 24 official languages (which, at the same time, are its working languages): Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. The affirmation of the equal status of languages of the member states is contained in the Treaty of the European Union (TEU: Art. 53), the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU: Art. 342) and in the EU Fundamental Rights Charter (CFR: Art. 22). It is worth bearing in mind that neither Luxembourgish nor Turkish (Cyprus) are official languages of the EU. This is because, after a country becomes a member of the EU, its government decides which language should be declared as the official language (Károly, 2008, p. 130), and with the abovementioned countries, neither Luxembourgish nor Turkish were declared as official languages. Importantly, this concerns only official languages, covering the whole of the territory of a member state. Other languages used in parts of the member state's territories e.g. regional languages or those used by ethnic minorities lack official status (Paluszek, 2015, p. 122), e.g. Catalan or Basque (*Euskera*). Catalan authorities had petitioned hard to have its language recognized as one of the official languages; Brussels responded by introducing the semi-official EU language. In practice, this means that EU documents are translated into such a language (with the member state bearing the costs) but these lack the status of legal documents (Szul, 2007, p. 70). Currently EU semi-official languages include Catalan, Basque, Galician, and Welsh.

Multilingualism is the leading principle in the EU and, given the varying level of language skills of citizens of the member states, there are a number of guarantees and aids. First of all, all EU members can communicate with EU institutions and access EU legislation in their own language. Secondly, multilingualism stresses and promotes the language cultures of all member states (Kuźelewska, 2014, p. 153). The Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR: Art. 41) contains the declaration of respect for linguistic diversity and the right to good administration. One of the elements of this right is the ability to apply to the European Union in one of

its treaty languages and to receive a response in the same language. The UK and Poland have not signed the CFR.

Linguistic diversity is a fundamental European value, reflected in the fact that there are over a hundred regional and minority languages used in Europe. Therefore, protecting the rights to a language and multilingualism form solid foundations for the concept of European democracy (Kjoer, Adamo, 2016, pp. 4–5). Decisions of the European Parliament in 2000, and of the Council in 2001 (Decision No 1934/2000/EC), stress the equal status of all European languages; written as well as spoken.

Danuta Hübner – the head of the EU Parliamentary Commission for Constitutional Affairs – has declared that after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, English will cease to be an EU official language (Goulard, 2016), because only the UK has notified it as an official language (Malta notified Maltese and Ireland – Irish). Hübner said: “If we don’t have the UK [in the EU], we don’t have English” (Goulard, 2016). It would be difficult to maintain English as an official language if the country that had notified this language has left. French MEP Jean-Luc Mélenchon declared that “English can no longer be ‘the third working language’ of the European Parliament” (Clavel, 2016). Another French politician Robert Ménard added: “The English language has no more legitimacy in Brussels,” and that “Irish was now more relevant than English: ‘Irish Gaelic, the first national language. English is second language of the constitutional point of view [sic]’ ” (Campbell, Rossignon, 2017, p. 4). The President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, during a diplomatic meeting in Florence, declared that English was gradually losing its importance (Rankin, 2017).

Regulation 1/58 does not state directly whether a country could specify more than one official language. If the interpretation of this document produces a positive outcome and Malta and/or Ireland notify English as their second official language, English could remain as an official language in the EU. The case of Ireland is particularly interesting. At the point of Ireland joining the EEC (in 1973) until 2007, Irish did not have the status of an official and working EU language, since Dublin notified English, not Irish, as the official language of Ireland. Irish was, at that point, a treaty language (a language in which primary legislation was made), but not the language of secondary legislation of the EEC (Doczekalska, 2013, p. 237). The official request to regard Irish as an official language was only made in 2004. After Irish had acquired the status of an official and working language of the EU, the Council suspended that status for

the period of several years, arguing that there was a lack of competent translators. The status of the Irish language is revised every five years (Paluszek, 2016, p. 123). It is therefore feasible for Ireland to declare English as its official language in order to keep it as an official and working language of the EU, despite the UK leaving the EU. This scenario is highly desirable, as the EU is not capable of translating all public documents into Irish. However, the first debates appearing in the Irish press indicate that Irish would remain as the official language, with English as the working language used by the Irish (Carey, 2016). Replacing Irish, or Maltese, with English would be difficult for political reasons (Ginsburgh et al., 2016, p. 15), as this could be regarded by the citizens of those countries as severing the links with their national roots and losing their national and ethnic identity.

### **Working languages in the EU**

Following its language policy and the principle of multilingualism in the EU, official languages of the member states are, at the same time, official and working languages of the EU. The first languages to acquire this status were: French, Dutch, German and Italian. It should be stressed that Regulation 1/58 does not distinguish between official and working languages. Nevertheless, these differences are subject to detailed analysis in specialist literature (Gazzola, 2006, p. 397; Ammon, 2006, pp. 320–321). Official languages are those that are used for communication between citizens and their member state. It is accepted that working languages, also known as procedural languages (Fidrmuc et al., 2007, p. 9) – are used in communications between EU institutions and the outside world, between institutions, within institutions and during internal meetings of members of EU institutions. Procedural languages are also used in draft documents of European institutions.

Therefore, whether a language is regarded as a working language or not is a matter of whether it is used as one in practice. No EU document indicates a difference between official and working languages. However, at the moment, English dominates as a working language. The use of French as the *lingua franca* is slowly being abandoned, although it is commonly used in four countries: France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland (outside of the EU). Within the European Commission, three working languages are commonly used: English, French and sometimes

German. The status of these three languages as working languages is mainly due to historical reasons and the former and present position of these countries, regarded as great powers. This duopoly of French and English has a rational justification. The latter is used mainly by northern member states, with southern member states mainly resorting to French (van Els, 2005, p. 268). However, already in 2001 (just before the EU was enlarged by the accession of ten new states) the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi petitioned for a decrease in the number of working languages of the European Commission to three: English, French and German (Oakes, 2002, p. 379).

Table 1

### Working languages in EU institutions and bodies

Institution/body	Working languages
European Parliament	All 24 official languages
The Council	All 24 official languages
European Commission	English, French, German
European Court of Justice	French
European Court of Auditors	English, French, German
European Economic and Social Committee	All 24 official languages
European Committee of the Regions	All 24 official languages
European Central Bank	English

**Source:** After Gazzola, 2006, p. 397.

Like the European Court of Auditors, the European Commission has three working languages: English, French and German, the European Court of Justice – French, and the European Central Bank – English (Scheller, 2004, p. 134). The European Parliament, a body representing the citizens of the European Union, is clearly disregarding linguistic pluralism, especially with works in progress and in informal meetings, where a limited number of working languages are utilized, with the clear dominance of English. The dominance of French in the European Court of Justice stems from historical reasons and from the strong influence of French law (Kuźelewska, 2014, p. 158). For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to clarify that court proceedings in the European Court of Justice are conducted in the language of the complainant, or of the court asking a pre-judicial question. The judges deliberate in the working language (French) without the services of an interpreter (Konieczna, 2013, p. 48).

### ***Brexit and the future of English in the EU***

The possible withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union is a consequence of the 2016 Referendum. The main reason for the vote on remaining a member of the European Union was the power struggle between political parties in Britain and systematic entrenchment of Euroskepticism as the dominant trend in the policies of British right-wing parties. The disadvantages resulting from EU membership were merely a backdrop to the campaign of the supporters of a referendum (*Has the general...*, 2017). The Prime Minister David Cameron's aim was to convince Conservative voters not to vote for the UK Independence Party (UKIP). David Cameron offered as an alternative a moderate, or rather a less radical, political program by borrowing its main manifesto proposals from UKIP (e.g. solving the problem of uncontrolled immigration from the EU and confronting EU bureaucracy head-on). He envisaged a change in voting preferences by getting UKIP supporters to vote Conservative – and as a consequence the eventual fall of UKIP (Kuźelewska, Puchalska, 2017, p. 82). The second important factor in the decision to hold the referendum was the growth of Euroskepticism within the Conservative Party. The issue of Europe has, for over 40 years, been creating tensions among the Conservatives. Cameron said: “I believed and still believe that the fact that we hadn't had a referendum on this issue for 40 years, despite the fact that the European Union was changing ... was actually beginning to poison British politics – it was certainly poisoning politics in my own party” (*Cameron defends decision*, 2016).

The outcome of the referendum of June 23, 2016 on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union (Duff, 2016) led to the UK initiating the procedure of leaving the EU by triggering Article 50 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The consequences of the UK leaving the EU will be felt by both sides in multiple areas (Witkowska, Kuźelewska et al., 2017, pp. 46–48) – that of the economy, politics, social, cultural but also linguistic. The English language is one of the 24 official languages of the EU and, despite all languages officially having equal status, English is certainly ‘more important’ in everyday European affairs than, say, Finnish, Maltese or Slovak. English has become the *lingua franca* (Borowiak, 2008, p. 8), as nowadays it is the language of science, medicine, technology, globalization, international finance, popular culture and communications. Moreover, English is the

main and the dominant working language in the EU, despite occasional accusations of linguistic imperialism (Dabašinskiėnė, Čubajevaitė, 2013, pp. 20–21).

Importantly, however, some decades ago, before the United Kingdom became a member of the European Union, France had had some success in its efforts to establish French as the main official and working language (Ammon, 2006, p. 330). It is not without reason that the only authentic version of the Paris Treaty of 1951 establishing the European Community for Coal and Steel (ECCS) was in French, as French was most commonly used by the ECCS founding member states (Łachacz, Mańko, 2013, p. 79). Other language versions of the Treaty were merely translations of the original document (Robertson, 2013, p. 17). The dominance of French stemmed from three main reasons. Firstly, European institutions were located in three cities where a significant majority of residents spoke French – Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. Secondly, French was the official language, or one of the official languages, of three out of six founding member states – France, Belgium and Luxembourg (Oakes, 2002, p. 374). Thirdly, France was the largest member state of the EEC/EU (Kuźelewska, 2011, p. 72). When in the 1960s, Britain was applying for EEC membership, it twice encountered decisive opposition from France (in 1963 and 1967) (Lequesne, 2015, p. 20). The French raised a number of objections to the United Kingdom being accepted as a member of the EEC. They saw a threat to French agricultural interests and to France's leadership in the Community (Furby, 2017, p. 15); they attributed to the UK the role of a Trojan horse of the United States and pointed to the island and overseas nature of the connection between London and Europe (Kuźelewska, 2006, p. 52). They were also rightly concerned over the competition that English would create for French as the main EEC working language. After the death of General Charles de Gaulle, the French President Georges Pompidou, before agreeing to Britain becoming a member of the EEC, secured from the British Prime Minister Edward Heath a promise that British officials working in EEC structures would be fluent French speakers (Ager, 1996, p. 168).

After 2000, the situation gradually evolved, with English replacing French as the dominant working language in the EU. The French did not concede the field easily. Between 1994 and 1998, they ran French language courses for civil servants of the member states and candidate states, and civil servants of the member states working in Brussels were



offered a placement at the prestigious French *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) in Paris (Oakes, 2002, p. 380). Nevertheless, negotiations with the ten candidate states over accession were conducted exclusively in English, disregarding French. The sensitivities over the diminishing role of French as an EU working language were illustrated by the French President Jacques Chirac leaving a session of the European Council when his compatriot, the leader of European employers, announced that he would make his speech in English (Branchadell, 2007). In 1973, it was not only the UK, but also the English language, that officially entered the EEC/EU (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 9), and gradually but relentlessly started to strip French of its role as the dominant working procedural language. After the expansion of the EU in 2004, as a result of cultural, ideological and generational changes, the role of the French language in the EU had weakened (Kuźelewska, 2011, pp. 72–73).

With the UK leaving the EU, the function of English as the main working language will be limited. It is doubtful that the strong member states (France and Germany) would concede that the current policy on the working language should continue, especially as in the past (in 2001) they did not agree with the proposal of the Vice-President of the European Commission Neil Kinnock that working documents for the European Commission be drafted in English only (Hoheisel, 2004, p. 77). It is much more likely that French will become the dominant working language once again, closely followed by German. A similar scenario happened in the not too distant past. The position of Germany (and of German) grew significantly in 1990 after the reunification of the two German states (Buchmüller-Codoni, 2012, p. 3), and in 1995, after the EU was joined by Austria, with German also as an official language. In the mid-1990s, Germany succeeded in making German a working language (after French and English) of the European Commission, due to the efforts of the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (Ammon, 2006, p. 330). But in 1999, when the presidency was held by Finland, the Finns did not agree to use German as a working language in informal meetings of the European Council. The stance of the Finnish presidency resulted in meetings being boycotted by Germany and Austria. The Helsinki stance was upheld by Stockholm, which excluded German as a working language in informal expert meetings during its presidency. This time Germany (with an objection from France) agreed to the number of working languages being limited to one (English) (Ammon, 2006, p. 331). In 2010, with the structures of the EU

diplomatic service (European External Action Service – EEAS) being established, Guido Westerwelle, then German Foreign Secretary, appealed to Catherine Ashton for German, next to English and French, to be treated as an equal language of European diplomacy, and that knowledge of German should be one of the criteria when selecting officers to serve on diplomatic staff. In her response, delivered in German, Ashton gave assurances that German would play a major role in the EEAS. The proposal that knowledge of German should be one of the criteria for staff selection in the diplomatic service was greeted with less enthusiasm by the head of the EU diplomatic service, who admitted that she herself was not fluent in German (Wagińska-Marzec, 2010, p. 2, p. 4).

After the UK triggered Art. 50 TFEU, members of the European Commission started to use French and German for communications more often, a gesture that may be regarded as symbolic after the outcome of the British referendum (Guarascio, 2016). The President of the European Commission Juncker, at the meeting of European diplomats in Florence in spring 2017, began his address in English, announcing a slow but steady decline of the importance of the English language in Europe, and proceeded in French (Rankin, 2017). Angela Merkel stated that German should be the language of communication in the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council, especially as it is the native tongue of 16% of the population of 500 million European citizens, whereas English and Italian are used by 13% of the population and French by 12% (Vasagar, 2013; Eurobarometer, 2012, p. 5). The position of German is strengthened by the fact that it is used in six countries: Germany, Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium, as well as in Switzerland and Lichtenstein (outside the EU).

## Conclusions

Is the use of English as the *lingua franca* of the EU a closed chapter? Despite statements made by some European parliamentarians that English will cease to be an official language of the EU, this scenario is not totally credible as “language is like water, it flows where it wants” (Deniau, 1995, p. 93). Despite the principle of multiculturalism and linguistic diversity of the EU being cultivated, English is clearly the dominant language and is a European *lingua franca* (Fenyő, 2003, p. 60). The possibility that Malta and Ireland will notify English as their official

language should not be disregarded either; in this way, English would retain its status as a working and official language of the EU. However, both these countries are small and not all that prominent in EU structures, compared to France and Germany. Those two European powers, founders of the EU, and its engines, will doubtlessly use *Brexit* to strengthen their own languages within the EU.

In the immediate future, English will retain its dominant position among procedural languages of the EU. Considering the Eurobarometer special report on the knowledge of, and the ability to use foreign languages by citizens of EU member states (2012), the five most frequently used languages include: English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%). Looking at the number of member states where English is the most popular foreign language – this is the case in 19 member states. The difference in the number of people and states using English as a foreign language, in comparison to French and German, is significant, and impossible to overcome in the next few years, especially as English continues to be the primary foreign language taught in European schools – 79% of pupils are learning English, whereas those learning French – the proportion is only 4% (*Britain is leaving...*, 2017). In turn, almost 96% of secondary school and university students are learning English, 23% French, 22% Spanish and 19% German (*Foreign language*, 2017). Despite the fact that EU civil servants and diplomats in general can fluently use three foreign languages in parallel, and therefore, for them, switching away from English to French or German would not constitute a problem, the same cannot be said of ordinary EU citizens. It is difficult to imagine a situation where materials and documents (even just working drafts) are translated into French and German, whilst the society reads only in English. This would result in widening the gap between the Brussels elite and ordinary citizens. To sum up, English is too ‘popular’, that is, most frequently taught, understood and deployed, for it to stop being used. European leaders will undoubtedly decide to make a symbolic gesture of cocking a snook at the British and using French or German, but, in the long run, this situation will be uncomfortable and will be likely to result in a degree of paralysis in the works, and the process of translation being made more difficult. In the meantime, the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker said that English is losing its significance. Moreover, the negotiations over Britain leaving the EU are being conducted in French (Rankin, 2017).

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## Wpływ Brexitu na status języka angielskiego w Unii Europejskiej

### Streszczenie

Wielka Brytania przystąpiła do EWG/UE w 1973 r. Jej członkostwo było jednym z drażliwszych problemów w polityce brytyjskiej w ciągu ostatnich czterdziestu pięciu lat. Wielka Brytania jest najbardziej eurosceptycznym państwem członkowskim UE. Wartością dodaną wniesioną przez Londyn do UE był język angielski, który sukcesywnie wypierał język francuski z funkcji języka roboczego Unii. Język angielski jest nie tylko językiem oficjalnym UE (obok pozostałych 23 języków oficjalnych), ale przede wszystkim ma pozycję dominującą w komunikacji pomiędzy UE a światem zewnętrznym oraz pomiędzy instytucjami europejskimi i podczas nieformalnych spotkań. Celem artykułu jest analiza pozycji języka angielskiego w UE, umacniania się jego statusu oraz udzielenie odpowiedzi na pytanie o to czy zachowany zostanie obecny status języka angielskiego w UE po opuszczeniu jej przez Wielką Brytanię.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Brexit, wielojęzyczność, języki oficjalne, języki robocze, Unia Europejska

