



**E**NTER ANY ROOM IN BRUSSELS, and you are likely to hear conversations in a wide variety of languages. Although spoken with every accent imaginable, English dominates. It's the most commonly spoken second language among the vast majority in the EU, and tends to be the natural go-to language for Europeans.

But listen closely and you will soon realize that people in the “Brussels bubble” – those working for and around the European institutions – have developed their very own English dialect. To an English or American ear, conversations in Brussels have a somewhat European flavor, with people naturally accommodating each other's turns of speech and vocabulary.

They include words that do not exist or are relatively unknown to native English speakers outside the EU institutions – often defying standard spelling and grammar checkers. Many are used with a meaning derived from other languages and not usually found in English dictionaries.

## Speaking **in Tongues**

The EU has become a laboratory for a new *lingua franca*, a branch of English shaped by non-English speakers, says Brunswick's **CLAIRE THOMAS-DAOULAS**

“Which actor is in charge of this dossier in the Cabinet?” is a typical sentence in Brussels. The “actor” here can be anyone (person or organization) involved in doing something – not necessarily some stage or screen star. A “dossier” means a policy issue or subject, while the “Cabinet” is the private office of a European Commissioner.

“Eventual” is often used to mean “possible,” and “actual” to refer to something happening now – twisted usages that are inspired by the way similar-sounding words are used in other European languages. In the institutions, many “fonctionnaires” will go on “mission” – translation: Many civil servants will go on business travel. An intern or someone doing a work placement is known as a “stagiaire.” You may also be asked to “SMS” your friend on his “handy,” rather than asked to text them on their mobile phone.

This “Euro-English” no doubt grates on the ears of native speakers. In data protection, a field in which the European Union plays a leading role in establishing standards globally, EU texts use the phrase “adequate level of protection,” in the sense of “equivalent level of protection.” To our American partners, “adequate” sounds like “barely acceptable,” a difference of definition that has led to disputes between the two sides.

Many also argue that the jargon developed in Brussels is another cause for the distance and mistrust of European citizens toward European institutions. The use of idiomatic vocabulary, particularly if it creates misunderstandings, fosters a sense that the EU cannot relate to its citizens.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that the EU is an unprecedented political project that brings together people from 28 different countries, who speak 24 different languages and come from different cultural and historical backgrounds. To agree on a common vision for this project that is the EU, we, as Europeans, must be able to rely on a shared language.

A language is obviously much more than a strict set of rules. It is first and foremost a tool to communicate, one that needs to be adaptable to social contexts. Rather than being formal or static, the English language lives and evolves through its use by people from different backgrounds.

In EU official meetings, everyone is free to speak his or her own language, with official simultaneous interpretation provided. But in a day-to-day setting, in informal conversations between colleagues and friends or even in high-stakes political negotiations, English is the easiest common language, and so is developing into a *lingua franca* with a life of its own.

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Until the enlargement of the EU to Eastern European countries in 2004, French and English were spoken to an equal extent by the Brussels bubble. With the addition of eight countries from the East of Europe, with no ties to Roman languages and a cultural proximity to the US, English became much more predominant.

### **Impact of BREXIT**

There are over 70 million native English speakers in the EU, or about 13 percent of the EU population. With Brexit looming, the EU will lose 65 million native speakers. Yet it is unlikely that Brexit will make English any less important in the EU – in spite of French and German efforts to the contrary.

Too many people use it to communicate for it to be replaced by any other language, at least not any time soon. Thirty-eight percent of Europeans speak English more or less fluently as a second language. Inside the Brussels bubble that figure is much higher. A full 94 percent of secondary students in Europe learn some English as a foreign language. French is a distant second, with 12 percent of European citizens speaking it as a second language; German is third at 11 percent. English as the language of business and diplomacy is too well-established in Europe and worldwide for Brexit to change that dominance.

What Brexit will change is that the British will lose their say in how English is used in Brussels. A near-absence of native English speakers will create more space for Euro-English to flourish. In many situations, English will be spoken without a single native speaker, and any hope that the British could nudge Europeans toward the UK standard will be lost. Europeans will be free to take the language in a new direction.

When using English, EU citizens will be on the same footing: They will be communicating in a second language; no one will hold the absolute truth in how the language is used. As it evolves, the language will be shaped as a true, egalitarian *lingua franca* – sans authority – for a unique political entity.

There are prior examples of this. In each of the UK’s former colonies – India, Nigeria, even the US – a distinct form of English has emerged.

The development of a “Continental English” would take time, and require intense interaction between people who regularly switch between their own languages and English. In the meantime, Brussels and its Euro-English may serve as the laboratory in which this new form of English is created.