

ENGLISH

without the

ENGLISH

With Brexit negotiations under way, English may be removed as an official EU language. Could this be just what it takes for a new form of English – Euro English – to evolve? Abi Millar chats to Dr Marko Modiano, author of a recent paper on the subject, about the link between politics and language change



On Friday 24 June, 2016, the British woke up to the news that their country would be leaving the European Union. With so many questions on their minds – not least what Brexit would mean for the economy, or their ability to work abroad – it was easy to miss the revelation that English might be removed as an official EU language.

Speaking at a press conference, MEP Danuta Hubner explained that each EU country had the right to select one official language. And while English is officially spoken in Ireland, Malta and Britain, only

Britain had picked English. “If we don’t have the UK, we don’t have English,” she said.

She added that, while English is one of the working languages of European institutions – and actually the one most used by civil servants – the only way to preserve its status would be through a unanimous vote by member states. Alternatively, the regulation could be changed to allow each country an extra language.

A number of EU politicians weighed in, which suggested, if nothing else, that language politics is a serious issue in Europe. The far-right French politician

Robert Menard claimed ‘the English language no longer has any legitimacy in Brussels’, while his left-wing counterpart Jean-Luc Melenchon stated ‘English can no longer be the third working language in the European Parliament’.

As we head towards the end of 2017, there is still no final word on the matter, although the prognosis may seem grim for Anglophones. If EU documentation stops being translated into English, might this lead to further decline – affecting whether English is taught in schools or used as a lingua franca of business?



Dr Marko Modiano, a Linguist at Gavle University in Sweden, thinks quite the opposite. His new paper, 'English in a post-Brexit European Union', suggests that, far from quashing English on the continent, Brexit might give it the push it needs to thrive.

"My analysis says that English is going to be stronger in Europe in the future, and that was going to happen regardless of whether or not Britain stayed in the EU," he says. "It's also the case that, now the British have left, the Europeans will all be on the same footing. They may become even more confident about using English because now

they have a language where nobody has an unfair advantage."

Modiano's paper, published in October in the journal *World Englishes*, makes a fascinating and provocative case for the continuation of European English.

He suggests that Euro English will evolve into its own distinct variety, similar to the way that postcolonial versions (e.g. Nigerian or Indian English) have sprung up around the world. And without the Brits' moderating influence, linguistic 'errors' that are already commonplace will become standard forms.

"What we're seeing is something called a transference, where non-native speakers take features from their native languages that they're literally translating into English," says Modiano. "Very often this turns into something that is not idiomatic and sounds strange to a native speaker. But when we study the way that English evolves, we see that this is indicative of a new variety of English in the process of coming into its own."

Modiano's confidence makes sense when you look at the statistics. Around 38% of European adults are proficient in English as a second language, a figure that continues to rise. In 2013, the proportion of European secondary school pupils studying English, apart from in a few countries, was close to 100%.

Aside from what young people learn in schools, they are immersed in English via the media. Factoring in TV programmes, films and online games, the average North European teenager spends more than two hours with the English language every day.

Then there's the widespread use of English as an international language of business. This is a matter of pragmatism, not politics and is unlikely to change because of Brexit.

"Because of globalisation, there's every reason to assume that continental Europeans are going to feel that English is a required language," says Modiano. "Many countries in the EU require knowledge of English if you're going to university, and this is even more so in the Master's and PhD programmes. So there are many reasons why the status, use, and functions of English will increase in future."

He feels that, to date, Euro English has been so in thrall to British and American English, its potential as a new variant has been kept in check. However, without any native speakers around to correct mistakes the crucial process of transference will accelerate.

"The fact there won't be any native speakers present opens the gate for an increase in creativity, because you don't have that nagging schoolteacher who's upset every time you make a mistake," he says.

So how might this work in practice? Modiano's paper mentions a number of changes already under way. For instance, many continental Europeans currently use 'Berlaymont' to mean bureaucracy, ●



'conditionality' to mean conditions and 'semester' to mean six months. There are new forms of pronunciation too (for example, co-operation pronounced as 'corporation') and a drift towards non-standard grammatical forms (for example 'I am coming from Spain' as opposed to 'I come from Spain', or 'we were five at the party' rather than 'there were five at the party').

Although those forms sound jarring to a native speaker, it may be helpful to think less in terms of correct and incorrect, and more in terms of what will be understood.

"People try to use language in a way that will give them the greatest success with the person they're talking to," says Modiano. "So Euro English is basically developing as a grass roots movement where a very large number of people are making small changes, and they're experiencing this as being useful in cross-cultural communication."

Of course, there is a top-down aspect to language change too, in that actual forms of usage are often stigmatised until they develop more prestige. Modiano suspects that the Europeans – like the Americans in the early 1800s and the Australians at the end of the 20th century – may decide to make their own dictionary, which would enable them to set conventions on their own terms.

"If the EU began to develop its own standards, and eventually began issuing some kind of guidance material, that would mark the beginning of a phase where people said, ok we can use this in schools," he says. "This is what happened with Indian English, where people started suggesting it could exist alongside standard English in education."

Here, Modiano is borrowing from the Indian Linguist Braj Kachru, who wrote a number of papers in the 1980s and 1990s about postcolonial language policies. Kachru, who coined the term 'World English', believed that local forms of English should be appreciated, encouraged and taught in schools – a radical view at the time.

While mainland Europe is hardly a postcolonial society, Modiano sees similarities from a linguistic point of view.

"We can use a postcolonial framework nevertheless, and we can also describe the influence of the Americans and the British as a form of cultural imperialism," he says. "I think for continental Europe, having their own variety of English is one way of dealing with this, because if everyone speaks British or American English they become subordinate members of our sphere of influence."

Evidently, if Euro English does emerge as a standardised form, it will raise all kinds of questions about identity, and may help to bolster people's sense of being European. Are we right to expect such an eventuality, given

the number of different communities (each with their own first languages) involved?

Modiano says this question was raised in some of the responses to his article.

"There's a perspective that says there's no consensus among the Europeans, that they want to have their own variety – there's too much regional variation and no one group that has enough power," he explains. "But it's always the case that people speak differently in different parts of a geographical region. We're now seeing people who speak this kind of general European English that's difficult to locate geographically, and I would argue that that's a very strong indicator that there is something called Euro English that's moving forward."

Not everybody in linguistics is convinced, and Modiano says his argument swims against the tide of mainstream opinion. However, he is pleased to see Euro English attracting so much attention, and credits Brexit with reviving interest in the topic.

"It was difficult to discuss making any kinds of changes to the way English is conceptualised within the EU, so long as the British were members," he says.

"Although a lot of non-native speakers in the EU were using features of Euro English, this had no support whatsoever from any people in positions of power. Then the British decided to leave the EU and that changed the sociolinguistic conditions radically for what we can expect to happen going forward."

In short, anyone concerned about the status of English on the continent needn't be too worried, even if it does end up being 'officially' removed.

“

NOW THE BRITISH ARE LEAVING, THE EUROPEANS WILL ALL BE ON THE SAME FOOTING. THEY MAY BECOME EVEN MORE CONFIDENT ABOUT USING ENGLISH BECAUSE NOW THEY HAVE A LANGUAGE WHERE NOBODY HAS AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE