

Helder De Schutter

The EU should erect a language academy for European English



Proposal

If English becomes the global lingua franca, it should also become the property of mankind: Cosmopolitan ownership for English is to be the norm. One good way to realise this is to set out non-native standards for English. Alongside accepted versions of English (from American to Indian English), we should also have lingua franca Englishes, such as German English or Spanish English. Language academies could work out such non-native standards. On top of these, the EU should erect its own EU language academy for European English.

Motivation

Such non-native tweaking of English fills English with cultural content from other languages, preserving non-native life-worlds. It also restores linguistic dignity, since it allows non-native speakers to claim ownership over English. English is then no longer the property of only a minority among its speakers: the native speakers.

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English is Europe's most widely spoken language. Although it trails German and French in terms of native speakers (before Brexit), it is by far Europe's most spoken second language. Today, 38 percent of the adult EU population can communicate in English (native and non-native speakers included), with French and German being distant runners-up, at 12 and 11 percent, respectively.

More tellingly still, a whopping 97.3 percent of European schoolchildren are taught English at school in all years of lower secondary education. The second-most-often-taught foreign language, French, is only studied by 33.7 percent of EU students. This 97.3 percent figure suggests that the entire EU is likely to follow the lead of countries like Austria, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands, which have become practically bilingual, with average levels of over 70 percent of the population being fluent in English. English is on its way to becoming the EU-wide lingua franca spoken by almost all EU citizens, either as a native language or as a second language. Europeans will use their native tongue with co-linguals, and English with most others.

This spread of English in Europe is a major asset. It allows us to travel anywhere within the EU and have meaningful conversations, get medical help, apply for jobs, rent apartments, pursue our businesses, attend conferences, or have our voices heard in the European public sphere. It even helps foster an EU-wide public sphere, making it possible to find supporters for one's political cause on the other side of the Continent. In short, English contributes to EU-wide mobility, efficiency and democracy.

Luckily, the EU can have these benefits without suppressing local languages. Most 18th- and 19th-century nation-builders set out to crush the vast diversity of languages, dialects and *patois*. They wanted to

assimilate all citizens into one national language in order to achieve state-wide mobility, efficiency, and democracy. The EU today could never do such a thing; it could never achieve EU-wide linguistic monolingualism. But the good thing is, it doesn't need to. The EU can and does benefit from its linguistic diversity while also benefiting from the fact that everyone also speaks or will soon speak English.

The welcome spread of English in Europe also creates injustices

Yet, despite its advantages, the spread of English also brings problems. The language used by non-native speakers of English in more and more parts of their lives is a foreign tongue. It is as if they were guests to a house really owned by the hosts, the native speakers. This set-up produces four distinct injustices:

1) Communicative injustice: Non-native speakers of English communicate less easily and less successfully in English than native speakers, which leads to communicative uncertainty. Native speakers are snappier, funnier, more authoritative and more persuasive, which has repercussions in many areas of life.

2) Resource injustice: In order to acquire the necessary skill of speaking English, non-native speakers must invest money, energy and time. The economist François Grin estimates the time investment alone as between 10,000 and 15,000 hours. In contrast, native speakers learn English "for free", just as non-native speakers acquire their native languages as they are growing up.

3) Life-world injustice: English is not a neutral code; it is filled with native references, symbols, and metaphors. Speaking any language makes it more likely to take in news sources, values, and ways of life expressed in that language. With English as lingua franca of Europe, the "life-worlds" associated with each European language do not compete on an equal footing. If English travels beyond native boundaries, the rest of the world should not thereby become mentally Anglo-Americanized.

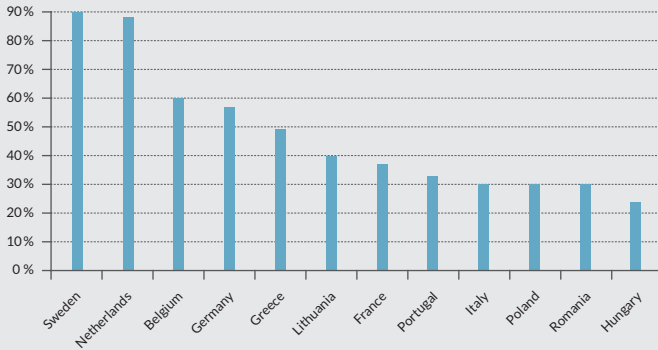
4) **Dignity injustice:** For understandable reasons, native speakers have come to expect that services in other countries are offered in English. However, the non-native speaker is thereby structurally expected to adapt and to address the native speaker in English. The sustained experience of this asymmetry bestows an aura of inferiority on the non-native speaker. Additionally, in such conversations, native English speakers hold greater linguistic and symbolic status, voice their thoughts more confidently, and are thus able to gain undeserved prestige from the simple fact that English has become the lingua franca. So, both the pressure to adapt and the lower prestige when adapting set non-native speakers back in terms of dignity.

All four of these injustices result from the fact that the language that is used as a lingua franca is itself spoken as a native language by a subset of its users. In a world with a lingua franca that is equally foreign to all and has no native speakers, everyone would face communicative issues and resource investment, but in equal measure. This is why a designer language, such as Esperanto, would in theory be the best possible solution for Europe. But Esperanto is currently no serious competitor to English. Indeed, it is an ideal not worth basing a political or normative project on given the utterly unrealistic chances of its being implemented. More realistic (but still misguided as an alternative to English) is the EU's official "1+ 2 model", which seeks to ensure that EU citizens know two languages in addition to their native language. The 1+2 model is a lofty ideal that I support, but today everyone is learning English, and the additional foreign language does not amount in practice to more than a band-aid to accepting the reality of the dominance of English. It is hard to see how this could change soon. In a conversation between, say, Portuguese and Hungarians, or between Swedes and Greeks, it is very unlikely that any language other than English will be used. And since all Europeans will be proficient in English anyway, what use is it that a Romanian might also know Italian, or that Germans may speak some French?

So, arguing for Esperanto, French, German, Italian or whatever other language is great, but reality is currently marching in a different direction, and attempting to fundamentally change that course is too utopian to

Proportion of English speakers varies between member states

Percentage of secondary English speakers in select EU member states (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:English_as_a_foreign_and_second_language_in_the_EU_and_Turkey,_2005.jpg)



make it the central course of action for achieving linguistic justice. English, with its benefits and burdens, is here to stay. Therefore, non-native speakers must find ways to deal with the injustices described above.

Europeans must seize the English language from the native speakers

One solution that I propose is this: Non-native speakers must seize English from the native speakers and set out non-native rules themselves without regard for what the native speakers think is proper English. If English travels beyond its native countries, Europeans should own it. To do so, Europeans should set out distinct standards for English based on their native languages.

English is a pluricentric language, with several accepted standard versions, such as American English, Australian English, British English, and many postcolonial varieties, such as Indian English, Nigerian English, or Singaporean English. It is no longer acceptable to tell an Australian or an Indian to speak “proper” English, as these are distinct *Englishes* in their own right. Now that the rest of the world is also increasingly

speaking English in a sort of ~~secondary~~ “linguistic colonization”, we should analogously set out to recognize *lingua franca Englishes*, such as German English, Spanish English, or Italian English.

Here is one example of what recognizing European *Englishes* could mean: On the European continent, the chief academic in universities is usually called *rector* (or *rektor*). The word used in Britain for this position is *vice-chancellor*. To use *vice-chancellor* in their English nomenclature would, in my view, be unnecessarily submissive for European academics. It would also be absurd, if only because the term for Britons correlates with a ceremonial real head, the chancellor, a function that exists in Britain but not in most European universities. The simple alternative is to stipulate that when using English, continental Europeans will call their academic head “rector”.

Norms for European English

Setting norms for non-native English vocabulary – but also for accents, grammar, and style – should be a task for existing language academies. But on top of these, the EU should erect its own EU language academy for European English. This EU language academy should have two purposes:

1. Standardise EU-internal terms and phrases, such as the “acquis”, the “Council” and its “General Secretariat”, “commissioners”, “heads of cabinet”, the “Committee of the Regions”, and all words which are expressed differently in standard British English (or have no equivalent) and for which, like with “rector”, the standard British words should not be prescriptive.
2. Harmonise the various European Englishes in order to ensure that English does not fragment up to the point where the very existence of a shared *lingua franca* would be in peril. The EU academy might be analogous in this respect to, for example, the *Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española*.

In 1780, the American founding father John Adams proposed a language academy for “federal English” in an attempt to consolidate a distinct form of American English. This academy was never erected, even though today linguists do recognise the existence of standard American English. The EU today could realise what Adams never managed to: to establish a language academy that will propose norms for English that are veritably “our own”.

British English is currently the norm for English usage within EU institutions. The European Commission’s *English Style Guide: Handbook for authors and translators in the European Commission* states: “the variety of English on which this Guide bases its instructions and advice is the standard usage of Britain and Ireland”.

This is understandable, but problematic. English simply is not just one of the EU’s 27 official native languages into which material is translated. Rather, English increasingly functions as the EU’s lingua franca. As a result, the linguistic conventions and the names for European institutions and functions should not be based on standard British or Irish English. They should constitute a variety in its own right, European English, that is spoken by Europeans when dealing with EU affairs in English on top of their local Englishes.

Making the use of English just

How will recognition of these regional varieties and European English solve the four injustices? The first two problems – communicative injustice and resource injustice – would be reduced somewhat by having regional varieties with proficiency targets that are easier to master for non-native speakers. Yet, these burdens would still exist. Only once all Europeans are as fluent in English as the Danes, Dutch, or Swedes are today will these problems dwindle in relevance and importance, as people would essentially grow up as bilinguals. The more important gains of my proposal are towards rectifying the life-world and dignity injustices.

Life-world: Non-native standards would allow us to fill English with cultural content, metaphors, and styles from other languages, preserving non-native life-worlds.

Dignity: Non-native standards would allow for non-native speakers to claim ownership over English. English would then no longer be the property of only a minority among its speakers: the native speakers. Within Europe, it would be effectively controlled by Europeans who don't need to linguistically bow to native speakers.

Such non-native tweaking is already happening, and I believe we should encourage this evolution. I recognise that the proposed network of academies for European English(es) would not entirely solve the four injustices, as European English and European Englishes are only part of the package of what full linguistic justice requires. But since English will not disappear anytime soon as Europe's lingua franca, we have no realistic choice but to live part of our lives in it. In short, if English is here to stay, we have to find a way to deal with it. By recognising and setting out a European standard and various native-language-based varieties of English, we would reduce the injustices that come with the dominance of English while retaining its major benefit: communication with our fellow Europeans.

For background information on how the proposal fits with the EU's political agenda and procedures, see www.twelvestars.eu/CMV/Helder-De-Schutter.

Further reading

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Objections

On 9 June 2018, Helder de Schutter defended his proposal in the Twelve Stars debate. The main objections are presented below. Rebuttals can be followed in the online debate.



www.twelvestars.eu/CMV/Helder-De-Schutter

➡ Would it be beneficial to erect a language academy stipulating rules for European English?

“[T]he injustice comes in because when a native English speaker reviews an article by a non-native speaker, on the level of perception it just reads a bit ‘funny’ or less than fully achieved by the standards of standard English. [But] I think the problem generalises to public speaking etc. I doubt that language academies can address this issue.” *marcomeyer24*

“I wonder what an academy working to preserve [...] idiomatic differences could do to diminish a key source of linguistic injustice, namely, that people who speak British or American English have a much better shot at being taken seriously (including getting their articles published when they are academics) than people speaking other kinds of English even when they are the majority, as is the case with Indian English speakers.” *marcomeyer24*

➡ What risks would be associated with erecting a language academy stipulating rules for European English?

“On the one extreme, you might end up sparking the development of different ‘Englishes’ that drift away from one another, potentially making understanding each other difficult (as, say, Arabic speakers from different countries or Chinese speakers from different regions have).” *marcomeyer24*

“Currently, the language is owned and set by no one. Codifying national Englishes would only serve to separate them and set the notion of a true English, which is currently an inconsistent and highly variable language. Institutionalising language only serves to ossify it and limit its evolution.” *thetasigma4*