



## Report 2020



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# **Post-Brexit attitudes to English and multilingualism in the British press**

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## 1 Introduction

In this paper, we aim to explore how articles from an assortment of newspaper outlets encapsulate attitudes towards English in the European Union and multilingualism in Britain post-Brexit. Our choice of topic was grounded on the assumption that Brexit, a controversial current political affairs, would inevitably receive considerable news coverage, hence guaranteeing access to a rich supply of articles. Moreover, literature from Jacobsen (2017), Vitores (2016) and Modiano (2017) further enriched our knowledge on Brexit's impact on English and multilingualism. These scholars contemplate the potential impact of Brexit on the status of English, deducing that it should remain intact following Britain's departure from the European Union. Jacobsen (2017) suggests that it is problematic to deem English as inherently British. Although used by imperialist Britain as a symbolic device for exploiting former colonies, the pragmatic role of English as a lingua franca for facilitating simple communication between non-native speakers must not be disregarded. Vitores (2016) postulates that aversion to English as an official EU language post-Brexit will spark some language policy reform, but will not erode the status of English as it is too deeply inculcated in international business, politics and culture. Similarly, Modiano (2017) suggests that Britain's withdrawal from the EU will not weaken the prestige of English, regardless of any resistance towards its current status as a working language of European parliament.

Our research questions have been altered and reduced so that they are concise and relate more explicitly to the articles. Furthermore, we have shifted our focus from how attitudes to the status of English has 'changed' due to Brexit, and are now only concerned with attitudes to the status of English post referendum. Moreover, we have also chosen to relate one of our research questions to post-Brexit attitudes towards multilingualism in the UK as this topic lends itself to an interesting discussion and has been widely reviewed by British news journalists.

Our fieldwork plan has also been modified. To provide a fair, representative sample of newspaper outlets, we intended to select articles from *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph* and *Metro* to illustrate how centrist, right and left leaning columnists present current affairs to reach different target demographics. However, to prevent our preconceived ideas about the underlying political ideologies of these news outlets from interfering with the content of the articles, we decided not to place too much weight on political orientation of the newspaper outlets. Thus, we chose three articles from *The Guardian*, one article from the *Daily Mail*, two articles from *The Telegraph*, one article from *BBC News* and one article from *Express*, as content of the articles from these outlets was pertinent to our research questions.

To achieve a more coherent analysis, we decided to use a thematic analysis as opposed to a discourse analysis. A thematic analysis is used to identify emergent patterns and themes in qualitative data (Daly et al., 1997). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme "*captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning*". Once we read and were familiar with the articles, we organised our data via coding, reducing large portions of text to the underlying meanings that they represented. From here, general themes across each research question were established by combining similar codes, and subsequently reviewed to ensure that they accurately represented what was prevalent across the data set as a whole. (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017.)

To answer our main research question; “How does the British press present post-Brexit attitudes to English in the EU and foreign languages in the UK?”, we addressed two further sub-questions. An appropriate way to structure our thematic analysis was to separate the articles and allocate to each sub-question, allowing us to identify recurrent themes for the separate topics. These groupings are shown in the Appendix to support the thematic analysis.

## **2 Findings**

From separating the data into our sub-questions, we found that each set of articles presented a pattern of overarching themes. In our thematic analysis, we identified three themes for each sub-question; *‘losing status, losing influence’*, *‘uncertainty of the future’* and *‘valued and admired as a language’* for question 1, and *‘Resistance to foreign languages’*, *‘Languages are paramount to future success’* and *‘Multilingualism reduces risk of isolation’* for question 2. In the course of the findings section we will discuss how these themes are applicable to examples extracted from our data.

### **Losing status, losing influence**

This theme demonstrates the repercussions of the EU referendum result on the English language, as well as how the authors view this forthcoming effect. It also represents how, following Brexit, English could ultimately lose its prestigious status in the EU.

In article 1.2 the author suggests that “slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe”, which conveys how Britain’s decision to leave the EU has caused the status of English to erode. As well as with the use of “downgrade” in the form of a verb; “downgrade to the use of English”, illustrates the physical hierarchy of influential languages within the EU, and how English will be lower down on this post-Brexit. Article 1.3 implies that the English language; “no longer has any legitimacy”. This is highlighted by “no longer” to illustrate the end of an action or state. This directly references how English is only negatively losing influence within the EU. This is parallel amidst article 1.4 with the use of modal auxiliary verb “might” to prevail the possibility expressed by neighboring EU countries that “English might be dropped when Britain leaves the bloc”. Although not completely certain, it reflects a likely possibility that the English language could be demoted in use and influence within the EU. Lastly in article 1.1, the authors enforce the losing influence with alliteration “Brussels mocks Britain”, suggesting that the English language is becoming merely a joke and is set to “lose authority”. These bold headlines give the audience a flavour for the article, as well as providing some light humour to juxtapose the seriousness of negotiations with English post-Brexit.

### **Uncertainty of future**

This theme suggests that the future status of English as a lingua franca is indefinite following Brexit. Furthermore, authors sculpt their conflicting opinions according to their perception of what might happen to English as regards its prevalence in the EU.

Article 1.1 states that “officially” English could be dropped post-Brexit. This suggests that English may not retain its lingua franca ‘par excellence’ status in the future. Moreover, “Brussels saying English

language should be banned post brexit” reinforces this hostile mood in EU countries. However, the statement is subsequently followed by the modal auxiliary verb “could”, which illustrates how the future remains uncertain. By contrast, article 1.2 argues that English is “highly unlikely to disappear”, reflecting an ambitious outlook on the future of English, which holds a very much fixed position in the EU and thus a decline in its status is doubtful . In article 1.3, “English language is the most popular foreign language but only across small nations” idolises English, suggesting that it is the language of choice in many countries. However, the conjunction “but” discloses such uncertainty over the language’s future, revealing whether it is favourable enough to remain as a primary working language of the EU parliament post-Brexit. Lastly article 1.4 employs the auxiliary “could” and subordinating conjunctions “although” to contrast opinions of the future of the English language post Brexit, emphasising the uncertainty.

### **Valued and admired as a language**

This theme reflects how English is valued highly in the EU. As English is vital for facilitating communication within the EU parliament, it holds prestige as the preferred lingua franca. This highlights how EU countries view English as important for the discussion of foreign affairs.

Article 1.1 deems English as a highly influential language, labelling it as the “lingua franca in decades,” suggesting “it would be hard to refrain from using English”. This conveys the value of English as a bridging language for facilitating communication between non native English speaking countries. This infers that the English language is primarily preferred for discussing diplomatic affairs. Similarly, this is reflected in article 1.2 in the statement; “many diplomats prefer to use English”, establishing how those involved in Brexit negotiations and matters relating to EU politics favour the use of English. In addition, the statistics in article 1.3 “94% secondary school pupils, 83% primary age, learning English as a 1st language” illustrates how, even from a young age, learning English is valued as an academic priority. Also, high percentages reveal how English language is prominent in first language acquisition. In article 1.4, the author illustrates how unity is found through acknowledging that “English is the world language we accept” labelling it as “the primary language for communication”. This conveys how we all share a common ground when it comes to English, establishing communication links between countries.

### **Resistance to foreign languages**

This theme explores Britain’s deeply entrenched resistance to multilingualism, whereby native English speakers deem language learning as futile as they rely on non natives, who already speak English. The articles discuss a post-Brexit surge in monolingual attitudes, which has affected the education sector in particular.

Article 2.1 coins the term ‘linguaphobia’ to illustrate Britain’s resistance to multilingualism as problematic. The standfirst ‘New research shows teachers reporting that the vote to leave the EU has hardened monolingual attitudes’ and the quote “that English is somehow the norm is a complete misapprehension of the facts...” infer that Brexit has deepened this inherent misconception of the status of English, increasing ignorance towards languages. Article 2.2 explores the nation’s underestimation of the importance of foreign languages. The writer argues that ‘progress in the

uptake of languages has lagged', reflecting a resistance to study languages in favour of other academic subjects. Article 2.3 comments on the assumption that foreigners will cater to the communicative needs of English speakers, stating that 'much of Britain seems belligerently convinced that if the world doesn't understand us then we should just shout louder at them.' It also discusses the failure of the British education system to encourage language uptake, suggesting that 'Languages have become seen as subjects in which it's too hard to excel'. This is further discussed in article 2.4: 'GCSEs and A-level languages in England are seen as being hard subjects in which to get a good grade'. Article 2.4 also reports that 'Parents in disadvantaged areas are telling teachers languages will be less useful after Brexit', suggesting Brexit discourages language uptake in schools in deprived areas, potentially due to an increased sense of nationalism.

### **Languages are paramount to future success**

This theme reiterates the importance of a multilingual future generation enabling communication and building relationships overseas post-Brexit, whilst monolingualism is perceived as a hindrance to opportunities and economic prosperity.

Article 2.1 states that Britain's "growing language deficit" will increase post-Brexit 'because the UK's £1bn "language industry" heavily relies on EU citizens', insinuating that monolingualism burdens the British economy. It argues that monolingualism jeopardises financial prospects, warning that 'economic opportunities and bridge-building with the rest of the world was at risk after Brexit if Britons did not become less "linguaphobic"'. Article 2.2 states that 'Ensuring the next generation is equipped to work in a multilingual international marketplace' 'is hugely important', suggesting multilingualism is key to establishing relationships with foreign traders. Emphasis on 'ensur(ing) that pupils choosing their GCSEs understand the importance of languages to their futures and the future of this country' reinforces the value of early language acquisition. Article 2.3 explores how prosperity relies on the nation's ability to communicate with the world, as 'languages open so many doors to understanding'. The Author argues that we should learn a language to 'take back control', equipping us with abilities to thrive and become a more powerful nation. Article 2.4 explores concerns that monolingualism limits potential career prospects. The quote "If they haven't got a language, that is a closing off of opportunities for work" expresses the value of multilingualism in an increasingly competitive working world.

### **Multilingualism reduces risk of isolation**

This theme addresses concerns of post-Brexit isolation aggravated by monolingualism. The articles discuss the necessity of national scale multilingualism for preserving communicative ties with the rest of the world, minimizing the risk of isolation.

Article 2.1 states that 'Britain faces further isolation after Brexit if it doesn't adjust its citizens' attitude towards learning foreign languages', warning that monolingualism will inhibit contact with the world post-Brexit and that language learning is fundamental to preventing isolation and enabling accessibility. Article 2.2 suggests 'the need for shared language has grown' because there are no longer 'physical, legal and fiscal barriers', which demonstrates the importance of learning foreign languages, questioning if Britain is to succeed independently. Article 2.3 argues 'brushing up on a European language' is the best solution, adding 'we still have a choice over how culturally isolated we

become'. This reiterates the important role that multilingualism has in reducing potential isolation, and although this is inevitable following Brexit, as a nation we can gain control by learning a language. Article 2.4 states that 'studying a foreign language from primary school onwards is a "liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures". This suggests that multilingualism opens the cultural barrier created by Brexit, indicating that multilingualism enhances communicative EU ties.

### 3 Discussion

The purpose of our research was to explore and encapsulate attitudes to multilingualism in Britain and English in the European Union post-Brexit. In tackling two sub-questions in order to answer our main question; "How does the British press present post-Brexit attitudes to English in the EU and foreign languages in the UK?", the findings appear to be controversial, mirroring the nature of the current political affairs. It is clear that there definitely is a strong consensus among scholars in their literature; including Jacobsen (2017), Modiano (2017) and Vitrores (2016), that the status attached to English as the lingua franca of the European Union will not simple become eroded post-Brexit.

Jacobsen (2017) states that English is deemed the lingua franca par excellence for the negotiations of foreign relations and diplomatic affairs, while also expressing the position of privilege that English occupies in the EU. Such ideas are further supported by Vitrores (2016) arguing that such resistance to English may result in some policy reform but will never strip the language of its status as the lingua franca of the EU. Our data confirms the beliefs in our chosen literature. Article 1.1, echoes the favouritism of English as the working language, suggesting 'it would be hard to refrain from using English,' labelling it the 'lingua franca of decades.' Similarly, in article 1.2. it proposes that 'many diplomats prefer to use English'. This idea that English is valued and admired as a language supports and adds to the findings of these scholars.

Despite the agreeance of articles from our research and the literature we previously reviewed, it must be said that not all articles had similar opinions. Under the recurring themes of *losing status*, *losing influence* and *uncertainty of the future* controversial opinions surfaced. With statements from article 1.2. such as 'slowly but surely English is losing importance in Europe,' 'downgrade to the use of English' and 'English might be dropped when Britain leaves the bloc- further reducing the UK's influence,' from article 1.4, it is apparent that opinions have changed substantially within the 1-2 years since our chosen literature was published. The specific language used above implies a physical hierarchy of influential languages and with the alliteration used in the headline 'Brussels mocks Britain,' further imbeds this thought of the language being merely a joke, and set to lose it authority, completely disproving the ideas of Jacobsen (2017) and Vitrores (2016).

Regarding the attitudes of multilingualism in Britain, there is an intense resistance to foreign languages, as a new word 'Linguaphobia' has come to surface throughout the British press. Research suggests that this deep resilience from Britain when it comes to learning languages derives from the notion that it is futile for native English speakers to learn languages because foreigners already speak English and new research shows teachers reporting that the vote to leave the European Union has, 'hardened monolingual attitudes.' However, with further research, Britain's attitudes to multilingualism, appears to contradict the juxtaposing views presented amongst the press. The importance of a multilingual future generation is reiterated, in terms of facilitating communication

and building relationships overseas post-Brexit. The recurring theme of multilingualism reducing the risk of isolation in this post-Brexit period, disproves the ideas put forward by Schneider (2017), who believes globalization is nearing an end with the global hegemony of English accompanying the decline, as the main tool of the process. With our research rich in themes of *languages are paramount to future success* and *multilingualism reducing risk of isolation*, the decade of time which has passed has nurtured progressing thoughts. It is simply not enough to believe that Britain as a nation and the status it has held historically will be enough to withhold their dominance in language in the EU post-Brexit. Article 2.1 states, 'Britain faces further isolation after Brexit if it doesn't adjust its citizens attitudes towards learning foreign languages.' Article 2.3 cements this view as it explains, 'brushing up on a European language' is the best solution, adding, 'we still have a choice over how culturally isolated we become.'

Combining both the literature we have reviewed and the research that has stemmed from that, controversy is evident over the course of the Brexit period and that opinions have changed as well as widened over the affair. Our analysis establishes how the press perceives English as highly valued and although leaving the EU is imminent, the English language will still be highly influential to remain as a working language. As well as the how the importance and encouragement of multilingualism ultimately will sculpt the future for the English Language.

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## 5 Appendix

### Sub-questions and appropriate article groupings:

1. What are the attitudes towards English in the EU following Brexit?

Related articles:

- 1.1. Express; *“Brussels MOCKS Britain saying English language should be BANNED post-Brexit”* written by Carly Read, published 2019.
- 1.2. The Guardian; *“ Brexit: English is losing its importance in Europe, says Juncker”* written by Jennifer Rankin, published 2017.
- 1.3. Mail Online; *“Au revoir, English? Now French say the language has 'no legitimacy' and should be kicked out of Europe too after Brexit”* written by Julian Robinson, published in 2016.
- 1.4 The Telegraph; *“English language could be dropped from European Union after Brexit”* written by Danny Boyle, published 2016

2. What are the attitudes of native English speakers in Britain towards multilingualism post-Brexit?

Related articles:

- 2.1. The Guardian; *“British 'linguaphobia' has deepened since Brexit vote, say experts”* written by Sian Cain, published 2018
- 2.2. The Telegraph; *“Global Britain needs more linguists if we are to succeed after Brexit”* written by Nick Gibb, published 2017
- 2.3 The Guardian; *“Learn another European language – and give two fingers to Brexit Britain”* written by Gaby Hinsliff, published 2018
- 2.4. BBC News; *“Brexit 'hitting foreign languages in schools”* written by Branwen Jeffreys, published 2019