

English in the EU

Lingua franca

Britain is leaving. Its language is staying

"SLOWLY but surely, English is losing importance," quipped Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, before switching to French for a speech on May 5th. Is this true? Not really, and it seems not to have been intended as seriously as easily offended British headline-writers took it. After all, Mr Juncker, who is known for going off-script in speeches, delivered his barb in English, and the audience laughed.

In any case, speakers of *la langue de Shakespeare* have little to worry about. The European Union has 24 official languages, three of them considered "working languages": French, German and English. Eurocrats are polyglots, often able to speak all three tongues, plus another of their own. Mr Juncker may be right that in the halls of the EU's institutions, English will be heard somewhat less after Brexit, simply because of the exodus of a big group of Anglophones. But English is not just British: it is also an official language in Ireland and Malta. More important, the three enlargements

of the EU since 2004 have decisively shifted the balance in Brussels from French towards English. There is no consensus for going back, still less for switching to German.

Besides, English is putting down deep roots among ordinary people on the continent. For all of France's notorious linguistic nationalism, it is telling that François Hollande, the outgoing president, was mocked on *Le Petit Journal*, a news and entertainment show, for his ropey English. Emmanuel Macron, a generation younger, is fluent. Fully 66% of EU citizens speak another language, a number that is growing steadily. Eurostat, the EU's statistics agency, does not break those figures down by language spoken, but it is easy to extrapolate from what is studied in schools. Among students at lower secondary level outside Britain, 97% are learning English. Only 34% are studying French and 23% German. In primary school 79% of students are already learning English, against just 4% for French. Some countries, such as Denmark, begin English in the very first year.

A language increases in value with the number of people able to speak it, so tongues that are valuable tend to become more so over time. And language knowledge takes a long time to acquire; societies do not quickly change the languages they speak. The trend of English in Europe began well before the vote for Brexit and is unlikely to dissipate, even "slowly but surely". Mr Juncker might better have said that although Britain, unfortunately, is exiting the EU, its former partners will always remember the linguistic gift it is leaving behind.

Does not decline

European Union*, foreign languages studied
At lower-secondary level, % of pupils, 2015



Source: Eurostat *Excludes Britain (insufficient data)

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