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English is already the  
unofficial language of the EU



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## English is already the unofficial language of the EU

English would not act as a barrier to other European languages, but instead be the path for a stronger and more adept EU.

While there are 24 officially recognized languages in the European Union, it is estimated that there are approximately 225 minority or indigenous languages in Europe, accounting for roughly 3% of the world's total. Moreover, there are approximately 40 main languages in Europe – meaning majority languages. This can be viewed in comparison to the USA, where despite Spanish being spoken by over 38 million people (making it the second most spoken language in the nation), it has still not reached an official status. However, the EU has made it a point to recognize the diversity within member states, not just through cultures and national identities, but also through languages. Europeans find themselves coming across more and more languages every day, mainly due to the internal



diversity in the EU, but also from factors such as globalisation, increased international migration, and increased opportunities of traveling, employment and education. This article will summarize the key reasons why the European Union needs English as its collective, shared or unofficial language, with a special focus on understanding why English would not act as a barrier to other European languages, but instead be the path for a stronger and more adept EU.



## The truth about English

English is a European language. It is not a British or American influence on Europe in any sense, considering English has Germanic, Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Norman French roots. As a language, English has countless “borrowed”

European words but also resembles various European languages’ grammars, syntaxes and morphologies. The English language is comprised of several “borrowed” terms from various European languages – making it the perfect melting pot of European tongues. English perhaps is also the one language that has collected cultural elements from different European languages, acting as the EU’s motto of unity through diversity. The list of borrowed words or phrases in English is endless, however, they span from technical vocabulary that is used in medicine, law or in other science related fields to arts, architecture, colours and basic day to day diction. A great

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example is the English word “diplomacy” because its etymology has two origins – the most recent being from the French term “diplomatique” which ultimately came from the Latin, “diploma” (another commonly used English term). There is an endless list of words that English has adopted which originate from Franco-German words, once again highlighting that it is the ultimate shared language of Europe.

English highlights the diversity and unity within European nations, much like the founding principles of the EU.



These examples show that English is, in many ways, a combination of European cultures – it has intertwined European languages and become the global tongue for communication. English highlights the diversity and unity within European nations, much like the founding principles of the EU. The EU nations could be united by a language that is symbolic of their history and past experiences, and English is, for a variety of reasons, the most appropriately constructed language for this purpose. The use of English as an unofficial language would allow Europeans to celebrate each others’ diversity, while at the same time, maintain that English is not the only language of Europe, and sustain the assortment of cultures and languages that Europe has to offer.

## English usage within the EU

Within the European Parliament (EP), English is the one language that is spoken the most, and has consistently stayed as the language of choice amongst MEPs, despite their freedom to choose any of the 24 official EU languages.

The data showed that English was spoken for 130 hours during the 2012 European parliamentary debates (Codrea-Rado, 2014). Harry Cooper, the parliamentary adviser to MEP Syed Kamall, has commented on this English usage, saying: “Although MEPs can speak in their native language, many will opt to speak in English. But the data speaks for itself; English is Europe’s common language in much the same way Latin once was.” It is also interesting to note that all EU commissioners speak English. One of the major issues people may have with claiming English as

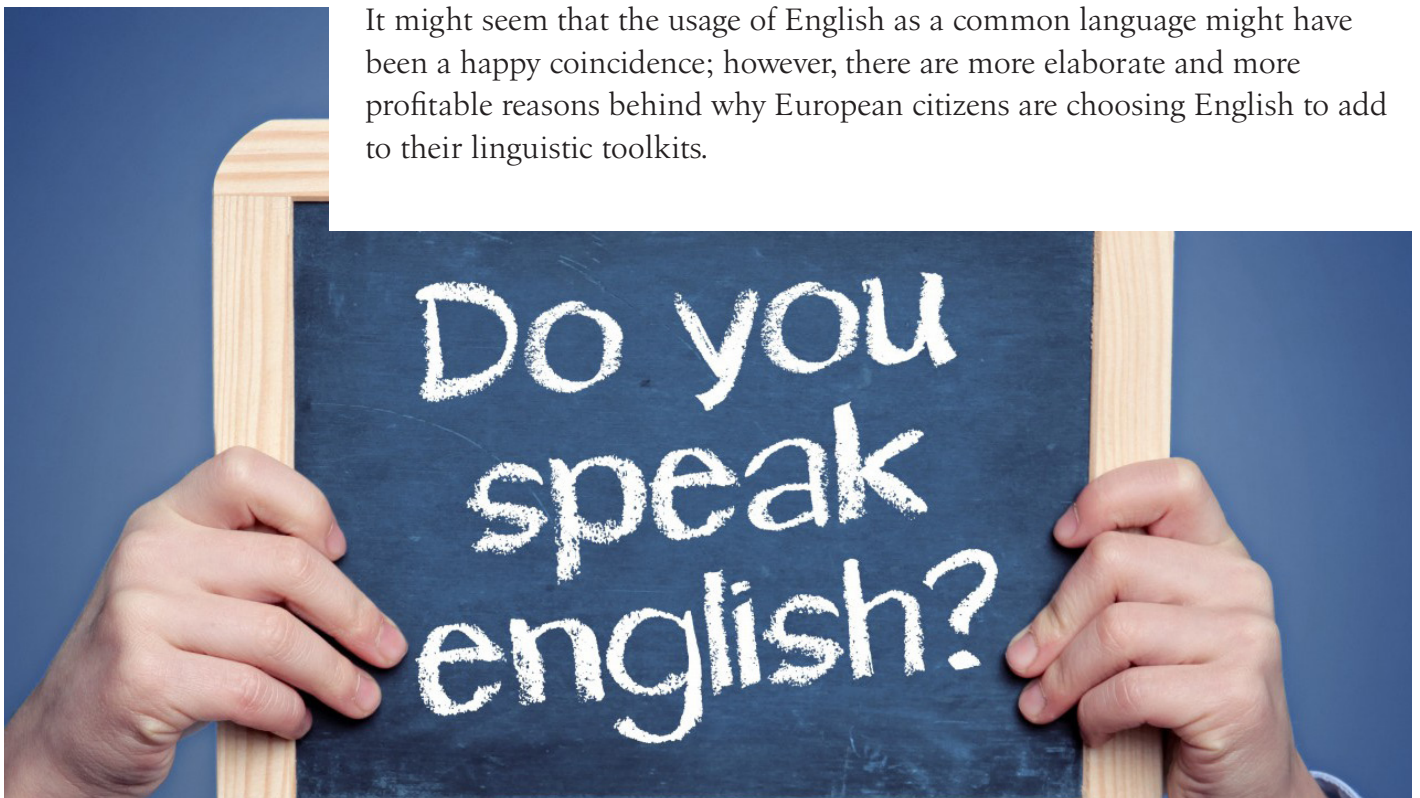


the common language of Europe is that non-English speakers are going to be disadvantaged, which is a natural concern. However, making English the language of Europe does not mean that there will be no attention given to the diverse range of languages that already exist. The EU was formed on the beliefs and principles of unity through diversity and the liberty to foster national identities alongside the shared European identity. Thus, any language that could be EU's common language would not be there to replace the member states' linguistic diversity, but rather to supplement it and assist in forming common connections.

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Moreover, English is already Europe's second language. Research from Eurobarometer, the European Commission and several media channels including the Guardian, all reveal that English is Europe's second language already. A Eurobarometer study found that English is already spoken as a mother-tongue language by 13% of Europeans, and that the five most widely spoken second languages, after mother tongues are: English (38%), French (12%), German (11%), Spanish (7%) and Russian (5%) (European Commission, 2012). It is important to notice the huge majority of second language English speakers in Europe, which needs to be recognized since English is the most widely spoken second or foreign language in 19 of the 25 member states, where it is not an official language (excluding the UK & Ireland) (European Commission, 2012).

It might seem that the usage of English as a common language might have been a happy coincidence; however, there are more elaborate and more profitable reasons behind why European citizens are choosing English to add to their linguistic toolkits.





## English as the Lingua Franca

A lingua franca is a language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different. Lingua francas have come and gone from existence for as long as languages have been documented and they

are certainly not born overnight. Historically, there is no single reason for a lingua franca to emerge, but rather a shared collective belief that unites communities of different vernaculars together without compromising their native tongues. Latin and Greek were the lingua francas of the Roman Empire. Linguists across the globe agree that English is the lingua franca of the 21st century. 58 countries around the world have made English one of their official languages, making it the

number one official international language (Etnologue, 2013). Currently, the 5 most spoken first languages in the world are: Chinese, Spanish, English, Hindi and Arabic, in that order (CIA World Factbook, 2013) & (Etnologue, 2013). While the total number of speakers for Chinese and Spanish are higher than English, it is important to realise that Chinese and Spanish are spoken in only 33 and 31 countries respectively, whereas English is spoken in a total of 99 countries (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2014). This is because countries such as China and India have put great emphasis on teaching their national languages alongside English to younger generations, which is a similar approach to many EU member states. English is already the most common language in various sectors of our lives, such as public services, the web/internet, academia and research, higher education and global business.

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Countless cities have adopted the use of English for public services – on road signs, maps, and announcements and more, which makes English a useful language that increases mobility across borders (e.g.: Wales, Paris, Brussels, Finland) (BBC, 2013). Learning English would encourage European citizens to not only explore other member states, but also the world, giving them a broader cultural understanding and enabling the movement of people, which has been known to increase awareness and promote the acceptance of diversity.

The Internet is certainly one of the most pervasive mediums for communication used in modern life; its importance cannot be denied. The English language is especially abundant online; a study by W3Techs conducted in 2014 found that around 55% of the internet's most visited websites used English as their primary content language, compared to that in second place: 6% in Russian (W3Techs, 2014).

Parts of the internet's most popular websites, which range from social media, blogs, news articles and software applications to simple menu bars are in English originally, with translations that follow. Most major websites use

English as their main language, and many do not have translation services enabled. Around the world, the majority of internet users will have had to deal with an English website at some point in time, thus adding another reason as to why it is the contemporary lingua franca.

Additionally, 80% of academic papers and research papers are in English (Tardy, 2004), making information and education far less accessible to non-English speakers. This also holds back talented individuals from joining the ranks of the world's renowned researchers, because while their methods may be innovative, their language abilities would be holding them back from effective communication. European citizens would be able to be a part of the large sector of research and academia, breaking yet another barrier between themselves and the globalised world. Moreover, the top universities have consistently been in the UK or the USA, where English language requirements are the top of the criteria list for any prospective applicant

(Parr, 2014). Europeans who have a good command of English have the added opportunity to go to one of the world's best higher education institutes, which would only further their chances and choices for employment. It is

Thus, for European citizens, no better language comes with the number of benefits and opportunities than English. Learning and mastering any language will be difficult and require help, but considering the similarities between English and European languages, it will cut down on the level of difficulty, while still giving Europeans the benefits of speaking a language that can open countless doors for them.



now increasingly important for the youth to have a good grasp of English as more companies, institutions and organizations attach English language requirements to their admission criteria. Related to this are international organizations, multinational corporations and other global companies, where the everyday working language is consistently English. It is the language of globalisation and of global business as more and more multinationals have realised that strength behind operating in English (BBC, 2010) – faster, more efficient and a more obvious global recognition. Any organization or corporation looking to expand globally will have to put English at the forefront of its operations to gain international legitimacy, and to be able to communicate with global citizens who speak a global language – English.

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## Advantages of multilingualism

There are not just practical, economic and social benefits to being fluent in languages. Being fluent in two or more languages has physical or biological benefits.

Research is providing more and more evidence that a multilingual brain is quicker and better at dealing with ambiguous and complex problems, problem solving and in some cases, even delaying or resisting serious brain illnesses including Alzheimer's disease and dementia (Bialystok, Craik & Freedman, 2010 & 2012).

Moreover, learning a second language increases the density of grey matter in the inferior parietal cortex, which is the brain's language dominant area



in the left hemisphere. This translates to great benefits in terms of wiring the brain's neural paths in a specific way which increases levels of engagement, and stronger executive control of actions. This means, first of all, children who are fluent in two languages will be more successful in staying focused, engaged and in control of their thoughts and decisions (Kluger, 2013) & (Schlessinger, 2012), which will translate to professional success later in life (Wills, 2012). This also means that adults who are bilingual have the added practicality of being able to switch attention on and off when multi-tasking, and be less likely to get distracted from one task to the next.

Another significant reason to be multilingual is that learning languages has been known to result in improvements in parts of the brain that are seemingly unrelated to language. This means that language learning does not just improve skills directly related to language or communication, also provides other skills such as using less brain power during complex problem solving, resulting in prolonged time spent solving the issue before a person gets exhausted (Bock, 2012).

Aside from cognitive advantages, research has also found that multilingual individuals are more culturally aware, in the sense that they are able to appreciate different cultures and diversity more, as they have already been exposed to a different culture through the language. It is a common belief in any country or city that the way to understand a culture is through its language. Multilingual individuals often possess this cultural awareness, making them the ideal person for any opportunity that would require open mindedness – a trait that is very sought after in the global world. Employers often seek individuals who are able to immerse themselves in different cultures without any problems, especially as more and more corporations now operate outside of their native land. Moreover, multilingual individuals would also be more empathic, and be able to see the culturally rooted reasons behind any given global event and understand it at a deeper level by applying cultural rules and norms to the situation.



Using English across Europe will first of all, make information sharing more efficient, and it will allow citizens to communicate with their neighbouring countries freely, and it will exist complementary to national languages which, as always will hold onto the cultural diversity of Europe.

## Preparing for the future

Globalisation is already well established within our lives, and it will only get increasingly apparent as more people continue to migrate, cross borders and create new lives for themselves, away from what we might call their native countries. This means that preparing for the future holds a brand new meaning, one that is attached to perfecting skills that would be useful in any context: languages. Investing in expanding one's language abilities will lead to a brighter and more flexible future. Bilingual or multilingual individuals will have developed a whole skillset that will help them succeed in different contexts by being more mobile through language, more adept at

shifting through cultural norms and values and better prepared at accepting an entirely different culture. The majority of Europeans already speak two languages (CEDEFOP, 2010), so there is little reason to skip over one of the

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**BY POPULAR DEMAND, ENGLISH IS ALREADY THE UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. EUROPE ALREADY HAS A COMMON LANGUAGE. NO NEED TO GET LOST IN TRANSLATION. ONE LESS BARRIER FOR US ALL.**

English is the most widely spoken foreign language in 19 of the 25 Member States where it is not an official language (i.e. excluding the UK and Ireland). Around 4 in 5 Europeans (79%) consider English as one of the most useful languages for the future of the children. "Europeans and their Languages" - Eurobarometer Report 2012

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**TOGETHER, THE IMPOSSIBLE IS NOW POSSIBLE**  
**WE ARE BRAND EU**

**EUROPEAN TONGUE**

**ENGLISH IS ALREADY EUROPE'S DE FACTO LANGUAGE. IT IS THE MOST WIDELY SPOKEN FOREIGN TONGUE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION. ONE LESS BARRIER FOR US ALL. NO NEED TO GET TONGUE TIED.**

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most desired skills in the globalised world of speaking English. Eurobarometer Study 386 found that 88% of European respondents felt that knowing additional languages (other than their mother tongue) is very useful (European Commission, 2012). Another 67% of the respondents felt that English was one of the most important languages for them, out of 17% for German, 16% for French, 14% for Spanish and 6% for Chinese (European Commission, 2012). English is clearly the overwhelmingly desired second language.

However, only 53% agree that EU institutions should adopt a single language when communicating with citizens and for parliamentary procedures (European Commission, 2012). This might be because of the fact that learning English has often been made into a two sided debate with rigid borders, where each argument arrives at the one conclusion that English will ultimately overrule other European languages, which is simply incorrect. English as Europe's unofficial language must come with the key understanding that it must not be dominated or prioritized over other native European languages, and that all languages in the EU are treated equally. This achievement can only arise from a committed governance team dedicated to ensuring that English language learning is not prioritised over the other languages.

Moreover, correct policy implementation will ensure that other languages are treated equally. Using English across Europe will first of all, make information sharing more efficient, and it will allow citizens to communicate with their neighbouring countries freely, and it will exist complementary to national languages which, as always, will hold onto the cultural diversity of Europe.

Brand EU believes that the European identity needs to be created with the understanding of unity through diversity, which is also what the belief is for the languages present in Europe.



## Brand EU Vision: **make English the shared language of the EU**

Branding Europe is all about finding areas of common values amongst all member states. At the Brand EU Centre, there is a firm belief that Europe needs a shared or collective identity, and one of the greatest strengths behind any identity is language. Language is the representation of culture, beliefs and values that are shared amongst

its speakers. Therefore, to fully establish a European identity, we must also establish one, collective European language.

English as the collective language for Europe is not a random choice at all. It is based in the fact that the majority of Europeans find English to be one of the most important languages and agree that it would be the most useful language in the future. This understanding is also clearly shared by a total of 99 countries where English is spoken and within that, the 58 countries that have made English one of their official languages (CIA World Factbook, 2013). Moreover, European citizens are already extremely linguistically advanced,

considering that the majority speak at least two languages, and adding English to their portfolio of language achievements would not only open more doors for them, but also present better opportunities around and outside of Europe. On an international level, English is accepted at the lingua franca, making it the ultimate language of cultural understanding and mobility. As mentioned above, multinational corporations all operate in English and with more businesses becoming global, English will become the prime tool of communication.

Other fields of higher education, research, medicine

and technology also rely heavily on English, and not learning English would greatly hinder European citizens from being able to achieve success at an international level.



Finding a collective voice for Europe also means ensuring that all the other voices are not drowned out. This can only be done through national efforts that ensure each diverse language is recognized and practiced. For example, there is a law in France that states that if public signage is translated into one language, it must be translated into at least two other languages. This is a great example of making sure English does not dominate, and allows for other commonly spoken languages to be shared as well.

Making English the unofficial language of Europe is an idea that would bring great benefits that range from social, economic and even physical well-being. In many ways, as outlined by this piece, English already fills that role. There is no reason why English does not meet the requirements to create a stronger and more capable Europe that embraces multilingualism and steers clear of homogenising the diversity of Europe.

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“The EU urgently needs a shared understanding of how to realise its ambitious agenda. It needs to identify the measures required to adapt to the global era, and the costs and implications of standing still. In short, it needs to communicate a common vision of how Europe can secure its future. The choice we face is therefore clear: build on the strengths of the EU and use its collective weight to become an assertive and relevant player in the world, or cultivate fragmentation and contemplate the possibility of absolute decline in a world where the rules are defined by those who matter.

From the independent Reflection Group Report “Project Europe 2030” presented to the European Council on May 8th 2010.

#### **BRAND EU CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

The BRAND EU Centre for European Identity examines how the lack of a collective European identity and a strong EU BRAND are key impediments for citizens and other international actors to understand, support or be attracted to the EU project. Our programmes seek to inform and educate citizens, the media, decision and policy-makers by providing unique research and insights at both international, European, national and local level in order to build a strong BRAND EU.

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