



Viewpoint

One Health and a Common Medical Language in the new Europe: Esperanto versus English

Frank Houghton

Technological University of the Shannon, Social Sciences ConneXions, Limerick, Ireland.

Corresponding author:

Dr. Frank Houghton

Director- Social Sciences ConneXions

Technological University of the Shannon,
Limerick, Ireland.

Email: Frank.Houghton@TUS.ie

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7599-5255>



Abstract

English currently functions as a global terra lingua. Its dominance in scientific and medical research and publications remains strong. However, the Brexit vote and subsequent exit of the UK from the EU has dramatically altered linguistic dominance within this powerful economic bloc. One Health requires ongoing dialogue and communication across disciplines, countries, and regions. English, like the languages of other former colonial powers such as France and Spain, have complicated histories involving slavery, warfare, and imperialism. Esperanto, as an international auxiliary language, offers the potential to act as a non-partisan ‘bridge of words’ to unite diverse communities and support more united health research into the future.

Keywords: Esperanto; Medical language; One Health; Brexit; English language.

Source of funding

None declared

Conflict of interest

None declared



The WHO define One Health as:

‘an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems. It recognizes that the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent.’ [1]

In their description of One Health the WHO go on to specifically mention *‘collaboration across sectors and disciplines... The approach can be applied at the community, subnational, national, regional and global levels, and relies on shared and effective... communication, collaboration and coordination’* [1]. This heavy emphasis on communication and collaboration brings the issue of a common language to facilitate such actions to the fore.

There can be little dispute that English is currently the leading scientific and medical language globally. Its dominance though is not without challenges. However, until recently its privileged status has not been seriously threatened [2,3]. Interestingly, the threat to the dominance of English has not emerged as one might have anticipated from other languages such as Hindi, Mandarin or Spanish, but as a result of internal division.

In June 2016 the U.K. held a referendum on its continued membership of the European Union (EU). In this “Brexit” vote almost 52% of UK voters opted to leave the EU [4]. The UK subsequently left the EU on the 31st January 2020. The implications of this have largely been examined in terms of economic and social factors such as customs borders, the rights of European workers in the UK, and the UK’s ambivalent attitude towards inclusion or exclusion from research funding initiatives such as Horizon Europe [5]. However, the wider and longer-term implications of this development should not be ignored.

Brexit has dramatically altered the official linguistic pattern of the EU. Formerly, within the EU, English was the official language of three countries: the UK, Ireland and Malta. Thus, English was an official language therefore of approximately 15 percent of the European Union, at roughly 70 million people. However, the exit of the UK has seen this figure plummet to approximately 5.5 million, a mere 1.2 percent of the EU population [6].

Ireland is now one of only two countries in the European Union with English as an official language of the State. It is noteworthy that both States also have their own official native languages as well. It should also be noted that Malta has a population of approximately just 535,000 [6]. The situation in Ireland is interesting as although English is used by almost all Irish



people on a daily basis, the official first language of Ireland is Irish, with English officially relegated to second position [7].

However, even the reduced numerical status of English within the EU is not necessarily secure in the longer term. Ireland has witnessed significant growth in Irish language pre-schools, national (primary) schools, and secondary schools in recent years [8-10]. The revival of interest in Irish is not just reflected in a broad range of Irish Government documents [11,12], but may be seen specifically in relation to State health services in Ireland. A prime example of this being the Health Service Executives Irish Language Strategy [13]. Upon joining the EC Irish only held the status of a Treaty language [14]. In 2005 Ireland changed tack and formally requested that Irish be recognized as an official language of the European Union. This was subsequently accepted and after a series of derogations the European Union finally recognized Irish as an official working language of the EU in 2022 [14].

The status of English in the European Union is therefore under significant threat. The Brexit vote and departure of the UK from the EU has jeopardized the continuing dominance of this language in a bloc with a current population of approximately 450 million [6]. Even putting aside such quantitative metrics, at an emotional level the dominance of English is also under threat. The withdrawal of the U.K. from the EU has been a painful and bruising experience for all concerned. There has been a growing backlash against the continuing dominance of English within the bloc. Jean-Claude Juncker, former President of the European Commission, conspicuously opted to speak French rather than English at a public event and explicitly drew attention to this, remarking that “English is losing importance in Europe” [15].

At present English will undoubtedly continue to perform its role as an international lingua franca. However, its status longer term has been irrevocably damaged. The implications for publishing in the sciences, and in particular in the medical sciences may be significant. In response to the declining position of English, and in order to put aside nationalist rivalries, prejudice and favouritism, it may be opportune to explore the future potential of a language such as Esperanto to fulfil the role of lingua franca in the health and medical sciences.

Esperanto was created in 1887 by Polish physician Ludovic Zamenhof [16-19]. His aim was to create an international language that would facilitate communication across stark linguistic barriers that divide communities and countries. Being both Polish and Jewish Zamenhof witnessed the divisive nature of linguistic differences himself as can be seen in his own words:

In Bialystok the inhabitants were divided into four distinct elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each of these spoke their own language and looked on all the others as enemies. [20]



Zamenhof intended Esperanto to become an international auxiliary language or “common tongue” that would help unite people around the globe. It should be noted that although historically persecuted by Hitler, Stalin, Franco and Imperial Japan Esperanto has also enjoyed high level support [21,22]. In 1954 UNESCO passed the Montevideo Resolution (Resolution IV.4.422-4224) supporting its development [23], while in 1985 UNESCO passed another resolution supporting the teaching of Esperanto [24].

Esperanto remains the world's most widely spoken constructed international auxiliary language. However, it is naive to consider the future potential development of Esperanto without acknowledging that it faces significant to move into the mainstream [25,26]. However, it has significant potential to develop as a non-partisan lingua franca that may help overcome ethnic and cultural division and nationalist linguistic rivalries [27].

As a constructed language Esperanto is not the first language of any country. It is a non-colonial and non-nationalist language and lacks much of the historical and cultural baggage of many other languages. It has no association with colonialism, imperialism, slavery, ethnic cleansing, or genocide. It does however currently have over a million speakers and was recently included in Google Translate [28]. Esperanto even boasts its own medical journal which recently celebrated its 100th anniversary edition, *Medicina Internacia Revuo* [29].

Global geo-politics are constantly evolving. The dominance of the anglophone West is increasingly in doubt. In the field of science, countries such as India and Japan have both successfully completed moon landings [30-32], while China remains a global production powerhouse [33,34]. The US appears riven by internal divisions between conservatives and liberals that appear irreconcilable [35], while racism there continues to grow, fostered by populist politics [36].

The Brexit vote in the UK was undoubtedly driven to a significant degree by alienation, racism and xenophobia. As such, work permits there are now increasingly tightly controlled [37]. The UK, and London in particular, is no longer accessible to many who in the past would have welcomed the opportunity of moving there to work, at least for a few years. As such the UK is now effectively prohibited for many, and therefore the appeal of English as a skill to enable such a potential move is diminished. The UK's exit from the EU has harmed the role and status of English not just within Europe, but internationally as well.

One Health is an approach that acknowledges the inter-connectivity and inter-reliance of all aspects of life on our planet. Human health is of course inextricably linked to animal health,



plant health, and mycological health. For too long Western medical and scientific approaches, based on atomism, have blinded people to the interdependence of our fragile ecosystems. However, to succeed in the long term One Health requires open and transparent communication and collaboration from a vast array of disciplines from experts and practitioners across the globe. English is critically weakened after the UK decision to leave the EU. This may lead to a dramatic shift in the linguistic politics within the EU, a powerful global economic bloc. Other major global languages within the EU, such as Spanish and French, like English, all come with similar cultural baggage, notably colonialism, imperialism, oppression and war. Esperanto as an international auxiliary language comes with no such deficits. English may be the current international language of science, medicine and knowledge exchange. However, like French, Latin, and Greek before it, this dominance is by no means fixed and immovable. Brexit and its inherent isolationism may have helped weaken English globally, giving Esperanto an opportunity to develop as a truly global international auxiliary language.

References

1. WHO. One Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1
2. Tardy C. The role of English in scientific communication: lingua franca or Tyrannosaurus Rex? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. 2004;3(3):247-269.
3. Swales J M. English as Tyrannosaurus Rex. *World Englishes*. 1997;16(3):373-382.
4. The Guardian. EU Referendum: full results and analysis. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2016/jun/23/eu-referendum-live-results-and-analysis>
5. Budd C. The UK and Horizon Europe: Better late... but time and opportunities wasted. *Encompass* <https://encompass-europe.com/comment/the-uk-and-horizon-europe-better-late-but-time-and-opportunities-wasted>
6. European Union. Facts and figures on life in the European Union: Size and population. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/key-facts-and-figures/life-eu_en
7. Irish Statute Book. Constitution of Ireland. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html>
8. Ceallaigh TÓ, Dhonnabhain ÁN. Reawakening the Irish language through the Irish education system: Challenges and priorities. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*. 2017;8(2):179–198. <https://www.iejee.com/index.php/IEJEE/article/view/107>
9. Van Dongera R, Sterk R, Ó Murchú H. Irish: The Irish language in education in the Republic of Ireland. (Regional dossiers series). The Netherlands: Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning; 2016.
10. Gallagher A. Twenty-Five Years of Language Policies and Initiatives in Ireland: 1995-2020. *TEANGA, the Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics*. 2021;28:6-55. <https://doi.org/10.35903/teanga.v28i.1891>
11. Government of Ireland. 20 year strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030. Dublin: Government Publications Office. <https://assets.gov.ie/88781/087bbace-b392-4671-b51a-149720d3f6ff.pdf>



12. Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Action Plan 2018-2022. 20-Year Strategy For The Irish Language 2010-2030. Dublin: Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; 2018. <https://assets.gov.ie/88777/193c4c89-d711-4498-b3b1-42cdbaedb0cd.pdf>
13. Health Services Executive. Irish Language Strategy 2019 – 2023. Dublin: HSE; 2018. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/corporate/hse-irish-language-strategy-2019-2023.pdf>
14. Goodman S. A Brussels Gaeltacht? The Status of the Irish Language in the EU Institutions. *European Studies Review*; 2022.
15. The Irish Times. Jean-Claude Juncker says English language is ‘losing importance in Europe’. *The Irish Times*, 5th May 2017. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/jean-claude-juncker-says-english-language-is-losing-importance-in-europe-1.3072745>
16. Forster P G. *The Esperanto Movement*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers; 1982.
17. Janton P. *Esperanto: Language, Literature, and Community*. Tonkin H (ed). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; 1993.
18. Schor E. *Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language*. New York: Metropolitan Books; 2016.
19. Matthias U. *Esperanto - The New Latin for the Church and for Ecumenism* (Translated by Leon M, Mullarney M.) Antwerp, Belgium: Flandra Esperanto-Ligo; 2002.
20. Leisman G. *Clinical Esperanto*. *Funct Neurol Rehabil Ergon*. 2014;4(2-3).
21. Newnham D. A beginners guide to Esperanto. *The Guardian*, 12th July 2003; <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2003/jul/12/weekend.davidnewnham>
22. Chan G. China and the Esperanto Movement. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*. 1986;15:1-18.
23. Lieberman J. L. L. Zamenhof: Dr. Esperanto. *The New-England Medical Review and Journal*. 1959;261(19):963-5. DOI: 10.1056/NEJM195911052611909
24. Smokotina VM, Petrovaa GI. The Quest for a Universal Language throughout Human History. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 2015 ;200:107-113. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.08.026
25. Li DCS. Between English and Esperanto: what does it take to be a world language? *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 2003;164:33-63.
26. Patterson R, Huff S M. The Decline and Fall of Esperanto: Lessons for Standards Committees. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association : JAMIA*. 1999;6(6):444–446.
27. Christiansen PV. Language policy in the European Union: European/ English/ Elite/ Equal/ Esperanto Union? *Language Problems and Language Planning*. 2006;30(1):21-44.
28. The Verge. Google Translate adds support for Esperanto. <https://www.theverge.com/2012/2/23/2820379/google-translate-esperanto>
29. *Medicina Internacia Revuo: About The Journal*. <https://interrev.com/mir/index.php/mir/about>
30. Corum J. What It Looked Like When India Landed on the Moon. *New York Times*, 05/09/2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/science/india-moon-landing-photos.html>



31. The Guardian. Japan's moon lander survives two-week lunar night after wonky landing. The Guardian, 26/02/2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/26/japan-moon-lander-survive-lunar-slim-spacecraft>
32. Vaishnav M. Is India's Rise Inevitable?: The Roots of New Delhi's Dysfunction. *Foreign Affairs*. 2023;102:179
33. Chen J, Yin X, Fu X, McKern B, Beyond catch-up: could China become the global innovation powerhouse? China's innovation progress and challenges from a holistic innovation perspective. *Industrial and Corporate Change*. 2021;30(4):1037–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icc/dtab032>
34. Tollefson J. China declared world's largest producer of scientific articles. *Nature*. 2018; 553(7686)
35. Hawley G. *Conservatism in a Divided America: The Right and Identity Politics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; 2022.
36. Campani G, Fabelo Concepción S, Rodriguez Soler A, Sánchez Savín C. The Rise of Donald Trump Right-Wing Populism in the United States: Middle American Radicalism and Anti-Immigration Discourse. *Societies*. 2022;12(6):154. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12060154>
37. Dobson Sippy M. UK visa rules tore my family apart – and for others like us, it's about to get much worse. The Guardian, 09/04/2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/09/uk-visa-rules-families-income-threshold>