Post-Brexit English: A post-national perspective
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In his article, Modiano raises a number of important issues regarding the role of English in post-Brexit Europe. In many ways, this discussion is very much about nationalism and its resurgence. Europe can be regarded as the birth-place of nationalism. Historically, particularly considering the 18th and 19th centuries, the codification of national languages has been instrumental in the construction of modern nation states. The cultural and ideological connection between languages and nations is still so strong that, even now, it pervades most discourse on language. The EU language policy, for example, is entirely based on the idea that languages represent national identities. Strictly within the frame of that policy, English is just one of the 24 official languages of the Union. However, despite the equal standing accorded to English with respect to other languages in official EU documentation, any cursory glance at actual language practice immediately suggests a very different picture. The readers of this journal need no reminder of the fact that English is far more than the language of one specific nation state. Just to reiterate a piece of information that can be found in every textbook in the field, English is not only the most widespread language in the world, but is also one that is more widely used as an international lingua franca and/or additional language than as the primary national language of any one country.

So, the fate of English is unlikely to change in any significant way in a post-Brexit scenario. As Modiano remarks, 'It is probable that UK membership in the Union does not have any bearing on the decision among continental Europeans to use English'. This is because when they speak English Europeans do not use a national language, but an international lingua franca, whether or not the UK is part of the EU. And this leads me to the aspect of Modiano's article that I find difficult to agree with, namely the attempt to impose a world Englishes (WE) analytical framework onto a context that is very different from those about which the framework was developed. In a nutshell, Modiano suggests that, free from the imposing presence of Britain and of British English, Euro English will finally thrive as an independent variety, similarly to what happened to Indian English or
Singaporean English after the end of the British empire.

I see three problems in Modiano's argument.

First of all, the relationship between Britain and the rest of Europe bears no similarity with that which Britain had with its colonies. The status and the roles of English in former British colonies were very different from what they are in contemporary Europe. Even as a full member of the EU, Britain is by no means a dominant presence in Europe. Germany, France and, to some extent, Italy, yield equal or more influence within an EU context. The presence of English in Europe has nothing to do with Britain's membership in the EU but has everything to do with the role that the language has as international lingua franca. Business people, tourists or students from different EU countries are much more likely to use English than any other language to talk to one another, in exactly the same way as people from ASEAN countries do, for example. The fact that the current role of English as the preferred international lingua franca can be traced back historically to the expansion of the British Empire is a separate issue. I do not think the British are in any position where they can be engaged in a 'crusade to defend the integrity of British English'. And even if they were, such a crusade would be rather fruitless – English-using Europeans are on the whole unconcerned by the fact that there happen to be 60 million people in another European country who speak this language as their primary (and often only) language.

The linguistic consequences of Brexit within the EU apparatus are of course an entirely different matter. I agree with Modiano when he says it is likely there will be changes in the role of English here. But what I find problematic is that he seems to conflate the very specific context of the EU apparatus with the much more general one outside of it. It is true that decisions will have to be made as to the status of English, for example, in official EU documentation after Brexit, but these are very different issues from those that regard ordinary people's language practices.

The third, related, point is about the development of Euro English. Specifically, my contention is: how important is it for us in sociolinguistics to persist in wanting to identify (supra-)nationally defined varieties of English? Labels such as 'Euro English' or 'British English' conceptualize varieties as sealed packages characterized by internal uniformity and external distinction, and whose linguistic features are neatly distributed within national borders. But this misrepresents sociolinguistic reality. For example, the degree of linguistic variation within Britain is greater than anywhere else in the world. And, just like in other parts of the world, language practices in Britain are subject to the influence of transnational cultural flows emanating from the US, Australia and elsewhere (and of course the direction of such flows isn't one way!). As regards 'Euro English', who really needs this label? The avoidance of idiomaticity, for example, which Modiano mentions as a feature, is presumably related to the cross-cultural nature of international communication and is not confined within a European context. Semantic shifts such as the one related to the word eventual(ly) are interesting but are part of the continuous flux that typifies English in its being in contact with other languages, in Europe and elsewhere.

Thus, Europeans do not need linguistic independence from Britain in the same way as, say, Americans did in the 18th century and Australians in the 20th. There are no British clutches that language practices in Europe need to be liberated from. The motivations that inspired Chinua Achebe to advocate the forging of a new, Nigerian English in the 1960s are out of place in 21st-century Europe.

The result of the EU referendum that has led us to the brink of Brexit was, after all, the first real proof of significant shifts in public opinion that have been taking place especially in the industrialized West as a result of a combination of factors: the lack of a real recovery after the international financial crisis in 2008, rising unemployment, increased inequalities in income between those at the very top of the wealth scale and everybody else, and the growing threat posed by international terrorism. As governments seemed to be protecting financial institutions while imposing austerity measures, people lost confidence in politicians' ability to ensure more equitable societies. However, driven by relentless toxic media campaigns, the anger and the frustration of those who feel betrayed by politics have been channelled towards the poorest, not the richest,1 towards how governments are supposedly too open to 'uncontrolled' migration, rather than how they continue to favour large corporations (for example through a laissez-faire attitude to taxation). A narrative has emerged according to which open-border policies and migration are seen as the root causes of unemployment, cultural disorientation and even terrorism.

In the eyes of a growing number of people, the walled medieval citadel represents a more reassuring representation of society than the 21st century global village. New fences and walls are being erected all over Europe at an unprecedented rate to keep migrants out. In the face of such insularity, the presence of a common language that we can all use to

exchange ideas and points of view should be celebrated. There is no need to nationalize it in order to make it more acceptable. There is no need to continue to postulate the existence of nationally-defined Englishes by emphasizing differences among them when so much of the usefulness of English resides in what makes it our common language.

NOTE
1. The latter, paradoxically, are greatly admired and even entrusted with the task of changing the system, as the recent election of Donald Trump as US president testifies.