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A LINGUISTICALLY LEVEL PLAYING FIELD: ENGLISH-MEDIUM SPORT OFFICIATING BETWEEN LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits four problem areas of the use of English as a lingua franca by sports officials (including coaches, referees, etc.) at international sporting events which were recently identified in an editorial by McNamee in the journal *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*. These propositions are revisited by drawing on, inter alia, the theoretical models of ‘linguistic imperialism’ and ‘cultural appropriation’. The argument is made, in particular, that the ability of so-called ‘non-native’ users of English must not be underrated.

Keywords: international sports competitions; language; English; inequality; linguistic imperialism; cultural appropriation

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INTRODUCTION

A recent editorial published in the journal *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* (McNamee, 2013), focussed on the use of English as a lingua franca by sports officials (including coaches, referees, etc.) at international sporting events (including training sessions, competitions, meetings and negotiations, etc.), identifying such linguistic practice as a potential source of ethical and philosophical problems in sport. The editorialist argued that the use of English carries a risk of bias, which can be broken down into different categories, and called for an assessment of the relative risk incurred in various sports on account of their specific nature of interaction, in particular with referees, umpires, etc. The aim of this paper is critically to revisit the contribution made by that editorial.

PURPOSE

This paper will discuss McNamee’s four propositions and provide reflections on their likely implications in practice. Drawing on knowledge from linguistics and second

language pedagogy, as well as cultural theory studies, as summarised in an earlier paper (Kornbeck, 2015), a framework will then be provided permitting these reflections to be taken further. I hope to have opened an important discussion which, nevertheless, seems to remain largely open-ended, depending upon the theoretical assumptions from which various contributions might start, as well as on the empirical knowledge which it has not been possible to map at this stage. To further frame a discussion which might otherwise emerge as rather detached from the reality of interaction on football pitches, cricket grounds, stadia, etc., two vignettes will be provided, on the understanding that their heuristic value is illustrative (without covering the entire thematic field of this paper). Alert readers will further notice that, whereas Vignette 1 does include officials, Vignette 2 does not. However the lessons to be drawn regarding the use of English as a so-called first or second language remain valid.

Vignette 1 – “How do Croatians, Brazilians and Japanese communicate on the field?”

The following is an excerpt from a report published by a TV network in connection with its footage of a major football (soccer) event:

The World Cup kicked off this with a match between Brazil and Croatia officiated by a Japanese referee. How do Croatians, Brazilians and Japanese communicate on the field?

After the Croatian team lost the opening match, the Croatian player, Vedran Corluka complained that he couldn't understand the referee.

“He was speaking Japanese,” said Corluka, “so it was real difficult to communicate with him.”

This isn't the first incident of miscommunication on the soccer field. In fact, miscommunication is what gave birth to one of the most infamous symbols of soccer. For this week's edition of Sideways Glance, I take a look at the origins of the red card.

Ever wonder what players are saying to the referee on the field?

Peter Walton has heard it all. He is a former Premier League referee. But when Walton, or any FIFA referee for that matter, talks back to players it should be in English and not Japanese or any other language.

FIFA referees take English courses to learn the basics of what they need to know to communicate on the field.

“‘Off’ for example is universal and everyone knows what ‘off’ means when you red card a player,” said Walton.

(Porzucki, 2014)

The report goes on to state that, apparently, today's red card were born out of such situations, specifically at the 1966 World Cup.

The referee for the match was German.

Around 35 minutes into the game, the referee called a foul against Argentina.

Argentina's captain, Antonio Rattin, questioned the foul. The problem was, as he said in an interview later, he was speaking Spanish, which the referee didn't understand.

Things got increasingly heated. There were wild gesticulations and raised voices in various languages. And then the German referee sends Rattin “off”.

“Because of miscommunication, because of some language barrier and also because of body language issues, the ref didn’t communicate to Rattin or Rattin didn’t pick it up, and [he] stayed on the field.”

The Argentine captain refused to walk, stopping the game for eight minutes – an eternity in soccer. He finally did leave the field and the game resumed but most importantly, that moment of complete breakdown in communication forced FIFA to innovate.

“FIFA said look we’ve got to have a way of communicating to the players and the public at large when there’s been some disciplinary sanction,” said Walton.

The idea came from the head referee of those 1966 World Cup games, a man called Ken Aston. Aston was stopped at a traffic light one day and it suddenly occurred to him.

“Yellow, take it easy; red: stop, you’re off.

And so the red and yellow cards were born.”

(Porzucki, 2014)

The veracity of this explanation is not central to the use made of Vignette 1. Rather, it has been chosen because it includes most of the elements addressed by McNamee (2013): incomprehension, confusion, embarrassment in the wake of submission to authority – all bound up with the role of English as a sporting lingua franca. Vignette 1 certainly seems to sustain the claims made by McNamee (2013).

Vignette 2 – Selections from the history of ‘sledging’ in cricket

‘Sledging’ consists in hurling more or less good-humoured abuse at sporting opponents in order to unsettle, distract and/or demoralise them. While there is good reason to challenge this practice (for example, because sledging could be construed as contrary to the ‘spirit of sport’ in perfect analogy with doping: earning a dishonest advantage using non-sporting means) the focus in this context will not be on these further ethical implications) but rather on the linguistic interaction itself.

The following is an excerpt from a newspaper report providing a collation of the purported ‘best’ (i.e. most witty, provoking, creative or memorable) examples of sledging in cricket.

Merv Hughes vs Javed Miandad:

During a test match between Australia and Pakistan in 1991 Javed Miandad tried to sledge Merv Hughes.

He said to him: “Merv you are a big, fat bus conductor.”

Just a few balls later Hughes dismissed Miandad. On doing so he ran past him and shouted: “Tickets please.”

Ian Healy vs Arjuna Ranatunga:

Australia were getting very frustrated at not being able to get Arjuna Ranatunga of Sri Lanka out. Ranatunga, the then captain of his country, was a ‘larger’ than your average man.

The Australians tried a number of different ways to get him out tactically before Ian Healy, the wicketkeeper, said: "Put a Mars Bar on a good length and that should do it."

Merv Hughes vs Robin Smith:

Hughes was bowling some beautiful, almost unplayable deliveries to England batter Robin Smith.

A frustrated Hughes got bored and ended up saying: "If you turn the bat over you'll get the instructions mate."

Daryll Cullinan vs Shane Warne:

South African Daryll Cullinan was well known as someone who Shane Warne got out on umpteen occasions.

The pair hadn't come against each other in some time. So when they did and Cullinan walked out to bat, Shane Warne couldn't resist.

He said to Cullinan: "I've been waiting two years for another chance at you." Cullinan's reply was: "Looks like you spent it eating [...]."

(Ostick, 2015)

The four examples of verbal exchange provided in Vignette 2 all have one thing in common: they require a very good command of English, not only for the insults to be delivered, but also for the victim actually to feel them. The ability to react quickly by returning the insult creatively and wittily depends upon instant comprehension (Hughes vs. Miandad). Some individuals might even have missed the point in their so-called mother tongue, while many of those who had understood might still have lacked the creativity and/or aplomb to return the insult quickly and in style. Some sledging practices involve metaphorical language or imagery (Cullinan vs. Warne, Healy vs. Ranatunga), while others rely on a style of absurd narrative referring to entirely fictitious situations of no relevance to the concrete sporting action (Hughes vs. Smith, Cullinan vs. Warne). All four sledging cases could only work between people with a very high level of language proficiency, either native or near-to-native.

METHODS

While the paper presents a straightforward approach to revisiting the statements made by McNamee (2013), the use of vignettes may warrant a few remarks from the perspective of research methodology. Vignettes may be used "to allow actions in context to be explored; to clarify people's judgements; and to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics". They allow for "interpretation of actions and occurrences that allows situational context to be explored and influential variables to be elucidated", "clarification of individual judgements, often in relation to moral dilemmas" and finally for "discussion of sensitive experiences in comparison with the 'normality' of the vignette" (Barter & Renold, 1999).

"Stories must appear plausible and real to participants." They therefore "need to avoid depicting eccentric characters and disastrous events, and should instead reflect 'mundane' occurrences (Finch, 1987) [...], although [...] in some circumstances it can be advantageous to incorporate some 'unusual occurrences' into the story line. Indeed, Hazel (1995)

argues, writing specifically about engaging with children and young people, that the more inappropriate or controversial the behaviour featured in the vignette, the more confident participants will feel about offering a response” (Barter & Renold, 1999).

Indeed, this is why Vignette 1 and Vignette 2 have been chosen for this paper. To readers with a knowledge of sport, sport science and sport philosophy they represent something familiar and plausible, yet they also contain elements of the absurd or grotesque, allowing us to use them in an ideal-typical way to characterise two opposing scenarios: submission through *incomprehension* (Vignette 1) as opposed to submission through perfect *comprehension* (Vignette 2). On account of their illustrative value (and not on the basis of a claim that they are representative of all social reality covered by this paper), they have been used as ice-breakers or scene-setters for the subsequent, more theoretical, discussion.

For the purpose of revisiting McNamee’s four initial propositions, these have been numbered IP1 to IP4. They will be compared with four counter-propositions numbered CP1 to CP4.

RESULTS

Risk of moral bias

IP1 – McNamee’s first proposition consists in identifying a risk of moral bias and preferential treatment, contending that sports officials “might give preference in their judgements (wittingly or otherwise) to an individual or team that plays in a certain style, or to penalize more frequently or harshly players who are known to commit fouls injurious to other athletes” (McNamee, 2013, p. 365). IP1 seems corroborated by some everyday layman’s knowledge as well by certain strands in socio-linguistic research, including in particular Robert Phillipson’s (1992) ‘linguistic imperialism’ paradigm. In the key publication – a book from the early 1990s which has been recently re-edited (Phillipson, 1992, 2010) and translated into some other languages – this theoretical model is embedded essentially in an English-Language Teaching (ELT) (as a second language) discourse, in which Phillipson attacks the spread of global English as the purported process of a means of furthering British political, commercial and other interests and/or those of the Anglo-sphere more generally, assuming that “there is a very strong case for claiming that ELT and the intellectual tradition behind it are neo-colonialist” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 72).

While the causalities underpinning Phillipson’s anti-imperialism may be questioned as such (do the UK and US really promote ELT merely to dominate the world, or could it be that ELT is useful in itself?), Phillipson’s research into the work of the British Council overseas is still worthy of attention. Yet the model or theory carries with it a paternalistic bias: that of assuming that ELT recipients are essentially passive and vulnerable. An alternative view might be that they are actively engaged in building their own destinies and that, far from being an instrument of oppression, ELT and the resulting English language skills become a means of empowerment. Phillipson identifies a ‘monolingual fallacy’, according to which competence in other languages is underrated, and a ‘native-speaker fallacy’, understood as bias against using ELT teachers who are not native Anglophones.

Both of these fallacies are however symptomatic of a view according to which ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ are absolute rather than relative concepts.

Phillipson’s main fallacy could be called ‘nativism’: an unquestioned belief that all humans necessarily have one ‘native’ language which is so dominant that they cannot possibly reach comparable proficiency levels in other languages, while they also possibly cannot hope to match ‘native’ speakers in using those languages. While it is true that many people exhibit a pattern of language skills and language use where the same language is dominant in almost all linguistic domains (family, work, study, public spaces, etc.), it is equally true that many humans do not follow this pattern. That the familiar ‘native/non-native’ pattern may be statistically most significant cannot obscure the fact that the other pattern does exist, especially in some regions outside of the industrialised world (e.g. West Africa).

Depending on biographical patterns, different linguistic domains show stronger proficiency, reflecting which language was or is dominant in a person’s early years, school years, studies, work life, residential life, relationships, experiences of parenthood, etc. There is no reason why a person must resort by default to the same language, even within the same linguistic domain. In bilingual families it is not uncommon for parents to speak one language together, for each parent to speak another language to the children and for children to respond in another language than the one they are being addressed in. Persons who are exposed to such patterns of language use early on seem to develop a code-switching ability which others are normally deprived of (Kornbeck, 2015, p. 202).

If this statement seems biased by the fact that it matches the author’s personal experience, it is in fact supported by a report commissioned by UNESCO in the 1990s: “bi- or multilingualism is the ‘normal’ human condition” (Batley et al., 1993, p. 1).

Finally, Phillipson and many others seem to overlook the biographical aspect: a person’s ‘best’ language may well change over time, with proficiency being driven by the environments of school, work, leisure and, in adult life, the family one may found with another adult person. To accommodate Flemish irritation with their francophone royalty, the present Belgian royal couple decided to break with tradition by sending their daughter Princess Elisabeth (the future queen) to a Flemish school. Unsurprisingly, Belgian media have later reported that the heir was being tutored in French to make up for purported shortcomings (Het Nieuwsblad, 2013). One day Princess Elisabeth might well consider herself more Dutch- than French-speaking.

CP1 – The first counter-proposition is that, within the field of sport, Phillipson’s ‘monolingual fallacy’ and ‘native-speaker fallacy’ both need to be addressed in addition to the more obvious power/subordination patterns. Scholars need to identify the applicability of alternative ELT paradigms such as that of ‘cultural appropriation’. Discourses that frame allophones as potentially vulnerable therefore risk overlooking their resourcefulness and agency. If bi- or multi-lingualism is the ‘normal human condition’, then the ‘native-speaker’ concept is necessarily socially and culturally constructed (Kornbeck, 2015, p. 203). Whereas Phillipson’s model (1992) enjoys a certain standing, alternatives exist, such as the ‘cultural appropriation’ paradigm (e.g. Scafidi, 2005; Young & Brunk, 2012). But what are the implications in the context of sport?

Risk of cognitive bias

IP2 – McNamee’s second proposition is concerned with a risk of judgmental bias akin to a bias observed by editorialists in English-medium international academic publications (McNamee, 2013, p. 365). IP2 too seems supported by Philippon, yet just like IP1 it can be challenged on the ground that it reduces ‘non-natives’ to a reductionist status of ‘vulnerable allophones’ (Kornbeck, 2015). But are allophones automatically disadvantaged? As Vignette 2 illustrates, some situations where language is used in sport as a means of structural violence might even put more proficient speakers at a disadvantage than less proficient ones. Yet even the assumption that non-native speakers are necessarily less effective (active or passive) users of English (or others languages) needs to be questioned critically. The example of Belgian Crown Princess Elisabeth may match those of many other individuals (including this author) in that the relative strength of various languages used by a person may change over time. Also, even when native speakers do demonstrate a stronger command of the language used, they may not be more efficient communicators, especially if speaking to non-native users. This can often be observed in international meetings when (especially English) native speakers speak too fast, using ambiguous vocabulary, jokes, jargon, etc., thereby hampering listeners as well as professional interpreters (Kornbeck, 2015): eloquence does not *per se* equate with effectiveness.

Anglophone views of monolingual and multilingual persons reflect the current limited knowledge of other languages in the Anglosphere. Yet the fact that today’s Anglophone elites largely make do without foreign languages is not the result of a consistent tradition but rather of a more recent decline (cf. Woodhead, 2009, pp. 24–25). While 19th-century British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone spoke a number of modern languages, translated a multi-volume scholarly text from Italian into English (Jenkins, 2005, p. 121) and made a speech to a Greek audience using Italian (*ibid.*, 196), most top-level colonial servants in British Hong Kong were trained sinologists (Kwarteng, 2011, p. 386). Only the very last Governor, Chris (now Lord) Patten, had no knowledge of Chinese (whether Cantonese or Mandarin), nor apparently of further modern languages (*ibid.*, p. 387). That he launched a wide range of democratic reforms which have been subsequently undone by his Chinese successors could be seen as linked to his status as an English monoglot. The fact is, however, that the situation where monoglots are considered “normal” may affect assumptions about the human capacity, in general, to learn and use a second language. When T. B. (later Lord) Macaulay defended the introduction of English-medium teaching in 19th-century British India, he did so against the opposition of so-called ‘orientalists’ who favoured teaching in local languages:

It is taken for granted by the advocates of oriental learning that no native of this country can possibly attain more than a mere smattering of English. They do not attempt to prove this. But they perpetually insinuate it. They designate the education which their opponents recommend as a mere spelling-book education (Macaulay, 1835, sec. 32).

Macaulay was not merely the colonial administrator of a British Raj which it would be difficult to condone today: he deserved credit for having defended the ability of all people to learn decent English, against the paternalism of the orientalists (see Kornbeck, 2015,

pp. 205–206), and he should be seen as a liberal thinker and policy-maker, not merely an oppressor (Masani, 2013). The same applies to US debates over how best to further the careers of so-called ‘minority’ students, where a conservative, Anglophone, male classicist emphasised classics over “Hispanic Studies” (Hanson, 2003), while a Chinese-born Yale legal scholar similarly rejected current liberal thinking and argued in favour of studying ‘difficult’ subjects (Chua, 2011; Rubinfeld & Chua, 2014) (see Kornbeck, 2015, p. 207). Quoting Macaulay, Hanson and Chua should not be understood as sharing all of their views: rather, their belief that non-Anglophones can build proficiency (in EFL just like in other subjects) deserves recognition as an alternative and a corrective to a benevolent paternalism which too easily ascribes to them a role of victimhood.

CP2 – The first counter-proposition is that, within the field of sport, the risk that non-Anglophone people’s ability to acquire proficiency in English needs to be identified and addressed.

Risk to fairness in general

IP3 – McNamee’s third proposition raises a fundamental question related to the level playing field: as “many international sports tournaments are officiated in the English language”, McNamee asks: “Can this be fair?” (McNamee, 2013, p. 365). Here again, the question must be whether or not the use of English provides for, allows or hampers a linguistically level playing field. If theoretical models such as Phillipson’s ‘linguistic imperialism’ are to be handled with care, as suggested above, both to avoid a ‘moral bias’ (CP1), as well as a ‘cognitive bias’ (CP2), there may be reason to lean more towards models such as that of ‘cultural appropriation’, which stress the agency of non-native people in taking command of languages which were not their ‘native’ ones at birth. Whether or not a linguistically level playing field can be ensured when English is used at competitions depends on their ability to take command and use English to their own advantage. Apart from this, the obvious question remains: what would the alternative be? As long as no one can imagine interpretation services being offered as part of competitions (though that might change depending on the available technologies, such as micro headsets), the only alternative (apart from sign language) would be the use of another, sufficiently widespread transnational language which would, however, be less widely used and understood than English in most contexts.

CP3 – The discussion of the potential for fairness, as identified by McNamee, might profit from drawing on the ‘reverse mission’ perspective developed in misiology (the academic discourse on missionary work), just as this perspective can be useful within social work (cf. Kornbeck, 2008).

Therefore, measures taken to counteract possible negative effects of English-medium sport officiating should avoid embracing the concepts of ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native speaker’ without appropriate caveats. In particular, the idea of dominant native speakers and the vulnerable allophones warrants further critical investigation (Kornbeck, 2015, p. 208).

Finally, the recurrent claims for the recognition of the ‘specificity’ of sport, which are regularly being made by its governing bodies in order to avoid regulators’ interference

with their (mainly profit-making) activities, could also be reassessed in the light of the problems identified by McNamee, since:

It seems a reasonable working hypothesis that issues of linguistic dominance, subordination, etc. otherwise felt as being insupportable in other walks of life might possibly be less outspoken in sport. If communication is limited to a very restricted code pertaining only to a very exclusive subject matter, the hazards of second-language use otherwise encountered, in situations where a language may potentially be used in its entire diversity (with different levels of formality, potential confusion due to polysemy and variegating connotations), the margin for embarrassment should be more limited. Many second-language users may feel comfortable using a second language vis-à-vis an expert audience but not in dealing with the general public. One thing is to walk in and out of conferences and meetings, always using specialised English in a code where notations and connotations are generally agreed upon; another is to engage into a dialogue with a high street shop assistant who may be half or one-third of one's own age. While athletes and players interacting with other athletes and players may feel the confusion of being exposed to a second language in its full breadth, officiating involves a more narrow and focussed type of communication. In addition to this, the terminology and jargon of sport is harmonised to a much higher degree than everyday language is. For these reasons, it is not excluded that allophones may actually be less vulnerable English users when engaged in sport officiating activities as compared to the situations where the same persons may have to communicate on other, less technical subjects. One "ref" may feel comfortable using English talking to another 'ref' but might be quite lost while attempting to buy a pair of shoes in a high street shop. However, this is a hypothesis and not a statement (Kornbeck, 2015, p. 208).

However, while CP1 and CP2 are more fully developed counter-proposals, at this stage already drawing upon a certain body of scholarly work, it will be noted that CP3 and CP4 are currently at an earlier stage of their development. They constitute the recognition of issues clearly warranting further academic assessment, preferably by drawing upon empirical knowledge, which in some cases might need to be generated first of all.

Risk assessment needed sport-by-sport

IP4 – McNamee's fourth proposition, finally, consists in emphasising a need to distinguish between

sports where the communication between official and player/coach either (a) is minimal; or (b) happens during times that do not immediately affect participation (such as conversations regarding rule interpretation before a game)

and those,

such as golf where players will frequently ask an official for a ruling regarding the lie of the ball, or in Rugby Union, where there are very complex constitutive rules

and one often hears the referee almost coaching the sides as to when it is and is not acceptable to challenge for the ball in a melee [...] The ruling is key in strategic terms since it will determine whether and how the attacking and defending teams respond to or nullify points scoring opportunities (McNamee, 2013, 366).

CP4 – IP4 does not warrant considerable counter-argument, except that it needs to be further refined in the light of the findings previously presented in this paper. Again, the lessons drawn from Vignette 1 (showing that non-native sportspeople may be disadvantaged) as well as by Vignette 2 (illustrating that a higher level of proficiency, whether or not reflecting ‘native speaker’ status in any narrow sense, may sometimes actually be a source of vulnerability rather than one of strength) could be infused into this discussion. We note that a risk assessment should be performed on a sport-by-sport basis, rather than according to a ‘one size fits all’ approach, such as that operated in anti-doping, where the results are far from convincing. Meanwhile the question remains, of course, of who should perform such a risk assessment: governing bodies, public authorities, civil society, athletes’ representatives (including through independent trade unions) or academics?

DISCUSSION

Between linguistic imperialism and cultural appropriation

McNamee concludes by inviting “a more robust analysis of the problem” (McNamee, 2013, p. 367) and this challenge is hereby taken up. The main contribution of this paper is to have made it plausible that ‘linguistic imperialism’ and ‘cultural appropriation’ are both paradigms worthy of use as conceptual tools in further discussing the ethical and other problems identified by McNamee in his editorial.

It will also be seen that these questions are eminently political, and that they have the potential to touch upon the autonomy of sports governing bodies, an autonomy which has already been badly damaged, in 2015, by scandals such as those affecting FIFA, IAAF and DFB (the national FA of Germany). The precise implications need to be identified: whose responsibility is it that a linguistically level playing field be provided?

CONCLUSION

This paper has nevertheless highlighted some reasons which make it plausible that English-medium sport officiating cannot *per se* be assumed to put allophones in a vulnerable position (cf. Kornbeck, 2015). It has challenged Phillipson’s (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism and demonstrated that a variety of competing concepts may be drawn upon, allowing the framing of allophones as resourceful agents. The paper has contributed to the discussion launched by McNamee (2013) by drawing together pre-existing research knowledge and proposing certain *prolegomena* for what could become a more extended discussion. It would seem natural to follow up with empirical research, in particular by researching the experiences, assumptions and beliefs of people concerned by the

challenges identified here: how do allophone sports officials actively experience the use of English as a *lingua franca* themselves? Finally, research could be undertaken looking into the training and practices of referees and coaches:

[U]nless sports regulatory institutions can find officials who can speak the mother tongue of both teams, some bias is likely to occur when referees are, as part of their officiating duties, required to communicate with players (and coaches) during the game (McNamee, 2013, p. 366).

It is submitted that empirical research could generate outcomes that might come as a surprise either to proponents or to opponents of the vulnerability hypothesis. At any rate, these outcomes could be stimulating and helpful, both academically and in terms of developing better practice (cf. Kornbeck, 2015).

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DISCLAIMER

After working in the European Commission (Sport Unit) (2001–14) the author recently joined the Secretariat of the European Data Protection Supervisor (Policy and Consultation Unit). The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of any official EU positions.

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