

FORUM

Discussing international education



THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

GLOBAL TRENDS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: WHO'S LEARNING WHAT?

LOSING OUR IDENTITY: THE RISE OF ENGLISH AS A *LINGUA FRANCA*

EAIE ISTANBUL 2013 CONFERENCE REPORT

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LANGUAGE: EVERYBODY'S TALKING (ABOUT) IT

The 'mouthful of air' that Yeats breathed into poems is also the stuff education is made of. Language is the message and the medium, the vehicle, the cargo, the ballast. It is no wonder that when linguistic issues arise, emotions tend to be quick to ignite.

VIRVE-ANNELI VIHMAN
University of Tartu, Estonia

When we speak with people from similar backgrounds, language is usually invisible, unnoticed. When we wish to reach people beyond those we grew up with, we encounter unfamiliar accents, confusing slang, and different languages. Suddenly, language becomes visible, problematic, sometimes opaque.

We need not look deep into the past to find examples of heated arguments around issues of language: in 2012, a Latvian referendum on making Russian an official language brought out over 70% of the electorate, and the proposal was rejected. In Ukraine in the same



Photo: Pavel L Photo and Video (shutterstock)

in English at French universities sparked a controversy in the French Parliament in May 2013. This may serve to remind us that language policies for universities today are enmeshed in national identity politics. Many people in France saw the

role of moral gatekeeper and the romantic notion of the progressive intellectual must be taken seriously. Universities have the mandate to break barriers in innovation, interdisciplinary and transnational cooperation, but also often bear the weighty task of upholding national languages as vital, flexible means of communication. This is sometimes seen as a conservative aim, but should just as readily be seen as the task to modernise the linguistic repertoire and bring national languages up to par with academic and industrial developments.

Language policies, then, should reflect this double mission that many universities must juggle, and they must include a means of enforcing their implementation. Institutional language policies may encompass a wide variety of communicational situations, from foreign language teaching to preparing students for the international labour market, or providing support for international members of the community who do not speak the local language. In addition, however, mechanisms to support the development

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, FRENCH WAS THE LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE THROUGHOUT EUROPE

year, a brawl broke out in Parliament over a proposed language law which would have given Russian official second state language status.¹

WHICH LANGUAGE?

Debates have fanned across European countries regarding the language of teaching in the context of today's internationalisation. For smaller language communities (from Iceland to Bulgaria, Finland to Malta), the argument may feel like a question of linguistic life and death, about sustaining a viable national language across domains. But even for French and German, with much larger speaker populations, and a history of serving as scientific languages across disciplines, the question is an emotional one. Two hundred years ago, French was the language of education and culture throughout Europe, and one hundred years ago, the majority of pioneering research in Engineering or Physics was published in German; today it is only certain Humanities disciplines which still require a reading knowledge of these languages.

A law that would allow a restricted number of university courses to be taught

law as the beginning of the end, a threat not only to the French language, but to French identity. The daily newspaper *Libération*, on the other hand, published its front page entirely in English, with the headline "Let's do it" provocatively printed without a translation.²

UNIVERSITIES AND NATIONAL LANGUAGES

It is when language becomes a contested issue that policies and strategies are called for. This is when language unquestionably becomes an emotional issue. But is it only an emotional issue? The question of which languages are used in research and higher education cannot be called merely symbolic: language is

inextricably linked to a nation's psyche, as well as to creativity, innovation and powers of communication – nuanced, direct or implied, denotation and connotation. Universities cannot fulfil their (social, cultural, academic) aims by playing the role of weathervanes, following trends and repeating earlier models. The

LANGUAGE POLICIES FOR UNIVERSITIES TODAY ARE ENMESHED IN NATIONAL IDENTITY POLITICS

of academic terminology are important. In Estonia, for instance, the national government has implemented various schemes to ensure that the Estonian language maintains a vital vocabulary across disciplines, including support for publication of textbooks and the requirement that PhD dissertations written in other



languages also contain a lengthy summary in Estonian.⁴

A BALANCING ACT

Universities are primarily equipped to teach and conduct research, but the creativity and potential of students and faculty is harnessed for various ends. Can universities do what they do best (nurturing young minds, the pursuit of truth) without selling their cultural souls? The answer appears to be, and has to be, yes. The multifaceted activities of universities need to be examined closely and individually for every national and

to be conceived as a basic skill required for functioning in certain spheres. Despite the perceived equality and levelling effects of the internet, the dominance of English is greatly supported by the globalised information space, thereby increasing inequality among languages.⁶

Pragmatism does not rule out support for domestic languages and plurilingualism. However, despite the pluricentric character of English, native English speakers have been shown to be more competitive in the job market; academic papers written in English contribute more to raising a university's rank-

CAN UNIVERSITIES DO WHAT THEY DO BEST WITHOUT SELLING THEIR CULTURAL SOULS?

institutional context. Language policies, when written, need to be based on this specific case analysis and lead to real opportunities for supporting linguistic skills of students and scholars, and mechanisms for ensuring a balance of powers rather than a reckless race to convert to the hegemony of English.⁵

ENGLISH BIAS

Language is sometimes seen as a 'Humanities' issue – the language of publication may be more problematic in Humanities and Social Sciences than in Exact Sciences – but in every discipline, each communicative act reinforces linguistic habits and routines. Knowledge of English, on top of being counted as a set of foreign language skills, has begun

ing in international league tables than non-English language publications.⁷ If the EU's goals include equalising this imbalance, then at least two opposing interests are involved: the preservation of cultural (hence, linguistic) diversity and the economic interest in standardisation and international commerce. Without policies and carefully monitored implementation, this could indeed lead to an English-dominant academic sphere.

The smaller the linguistic community, the more acutely linguistic choices are felt. Language policies in universities must take into account languages in teaching, publishing and internal communication, as well as the availability of support services in target languages. In publishing research, the necessity for

the wide dissemination of research results paired with the bias toward English in bibliometrical research evaluations has led to an accelerated drive towards English not only in STEM subjects, but more and more across all scientific domains.

The languages used in universities are critical both practically and symbolically, as higher education is a key context where cultural attitudes and practices are formed and carried from one generation to the next; university graduates enter the workforce in various professions and become fully-fledged contributors to the linguistic landscape. Before students graduate, the best that universities can do is to provide a healthy balance of light, water and nutrients, to encourage each sapling to grow to its own potential and be prepared for the multidimensional world we live in today.

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