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# Language variety, language hierarchy and language choice in the international university

HARTMUT HABERLAND and JANUS MORTENSEN\*

The articles in this issue of IJSL, “Language and the international university”, are concerned with the impact of transnational student mobility and university internationalization on the sociolinguistic makeup of present day universities in Europe. The collection has emerged in the wake of a conference on Transnational Student Mobility held in Roskilde, Denmark, in December 2008.<sup>1</sup>

As the title of this introduction suggests, the articles contained in the present issue deal with various aspects of language variety, language hierarchy and language choice in the international university. The term “international university” requires — perhaps — a discussion. What we refer to as “international university” is the university as we experience it today with increased — and in some cases drastically increased — transnational student and staff mobility. Some people talk about globalization of universities, a term that we try to avoid due to its lack of analytic acumen. The term “internationalization” is at least widely understood, although Ulf Hannerz has pointed out that often when we use the term “international” or “global”, we should use the humbler term “transnational” instead. “International”, strictly speaking, involves nations as corporate actors, while in “the transnational arena”, actors may be individuals, groups, movements, business enterprises and others (Hannerz 1996: 6). And what is called “global” is often not truly global, rather characterized by a high degree of globality in Beck’s (2000) terminology.

A discussion of the sociolinguistic implications of university internationalization will invariably have to take English into account. However, we believe that it is important not to overestimate the role of English and to acknowledge that there is more to university internationalization than mere Anglicization. Globalizing processes have indeed led to a situation where English has attained an unprecedented degree of globality. But an unprecedented degree of globality does not mean total globality. English is *not* spoken in *every* corner of the world, just in more places than any other language ever before. Estimates about the *total* number of speakers of English worldwide vary, but even the least conservative estimate of 1.5 billion English speakers falls short of the

total figure for the world population. Since there are only about 330 million first language speakers of English, most communication in English happens in what may be called a *lingua franca scenario* (Mortensen 2010). English plays a central role in the present global processes of language ecology (including those caused by and affecting university internationalization) although it is important to stress that it does not play a central role in *all* of them, and *never* in splendid isolation.

Where English plays a role, it can do so in two ways. If it is considered the language of globalism (Beck 2000; Haberland 2009), the choice of English as academic lingua franca is determined by market forces, the commodification of teaching and learning in the “international educational marketplace” (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005), or what are perceived as requirements (“*Sachzwänge*”) of the knowledge economy. This is what Bull (this issue) calls “global English” and it leads to uniformity rather than diversity (cf. Saarinen this issue).

On the other hand, English can be used as a means of facilitating transnational communication and cooperation; historically it has been not only the language of imperialism, but also of anti-imperialist resistance (Brutt-Griffler 2002). This is what Bull calls “international English” (this issue).

A significant difference between these roles of English (not different kinds of Englishes) is that in the first case, “there is no alternative”. Even if common-sense thinking dictates the rule of English, English is ironically the only factor in the world market that has no competitor at present. It is, so to say, transcendental to it because it is exactly what makes the neoliberal world market — which to a large degree is an ideological construct — possible. As a means to communicate across nations (also between third and fourth world nations), on the other hand, there are alternatives to English. Given the large number of Spanish-speaking students from Latin America at Spanish universities, English has a competitor here (Llurda et al. 2009). Esperanto has been tried in at least one international academic institution, the *Akademio Internacia de la Sciencoj* in San Marino (Gobbo and Föbmeier 2012). The use of the (partially) mutually intelligible languages of Scandinavia in a scenario of receptive multilingualism (Zeevaert 2007) has played and still plays a role in universities in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Lindström this issue). And for many transnationally mobile students, the alternative is the language of the host country that they are being “internationalized” in.

With these considerations as background, the contributions to this issue explore the interplay of English and other languages in a number of universities in Europe.

The first two articles of the issue are case studies of multilingual universities and their language policies. Cots, Lasagabaster and Garrett (“Multilingual policies and practices of universities in bilingual regions in Europe”) investi-

gate the tensions involved in managing multilingualism as part of university internationalization policies through a comparative study of three universities in bilingual regions of Europe: the University of Lleida in Catalonia (Catalan, Spanish), the University of the Basque Country (Basque, Spanish) and the University of Cardiff in Wales (English, Welsh).

Lindström (“Different languages, one mission? Outcomes of language policies in a multilingual university context”) reports on the language situation in an officially bilingual university (Finnish, Swedish) that is trilingual in practice (Finnish, Swedish, English). Through a qualitative investigation of the experiences of students and staff at “the grass-roots level”, Lindström shows that there is a tension at the university between overt and covert language policies, and discusses how this tension may be related to the fact that different language groups have different needs and priorities.

In the third article of the issue, Bull makes the important point that “If we want to understand the sociolinguistics of globalization, we cannot be satisfied with analyzing general tendencies alone. We also have to look at exceptions, contradictions and oppositions to what is considered normal, mainstream and unmarked.” Thus, her article (“Against the mainstream: universities with an alternative language policy”) focuses on two universities in areas with “small” languages: *Sámi allaskuvla* in Kautokeino, Norway and *Fróðskaparsetur Føroya* in Tórshavn on the Faroe Islands. Interestingly, these universities have resisted the trend to introduce English as a medium of instruction and instead maintain the local languages, Sámi (primarily North Sámi) and Faroese, respectively, as their primary languages. Bull argues that the reason for this choice may be related to the fact that the institutions see the local, rather than the global, as a central part of their *raison d’être*.

Greenall (“Attracting international students by means of the web: transadaptation, domestication and cultural suppression”) takes up an under-researched phenomenon, namely how the pressures of commodification affect the branding of a university as “international” rather than “local”. On the basis of a case study of a Norwegian university’s website, she argues that non-Anglophone universities competing for transnational students should be careful not to eradicate their cultural distinctiveness when communicating online through the medium of English. Neglecting to emphasize the relevance of the local setting and the way it influences the university is not only misleading, but potentially also bad for business as transnational students might not be interested in applying to yet another generic “international university”.

Söderlundh’s article (“Global policies and local norms: sociolinguistic awareness and language choice at an international university”) is an ethnographic study of language choice in the day-to-day interaction of university courses at a Swedish university. Interestingly, Söderlundh finds that although the courses are nominally in English, they in fact exhibit substantial linguistic

variation. In particular, she shows that the local language, Swedish, has an important role to play in the classroom in addition to English. This is a good example of the point that English rarely exists all by itself at the international university, but rather tends to play a role in system in which the local language (or languages) will often also have an important place.

Risager's article ("Language hierarchies at the international university") is a case study from a Danish university. Risager draws attention to the fact that although Danish universities tend to have only one or two languages of instruction (Danish, or Danish and English in combination), there will typically be a plethora of languages present at the university due to the varied individual linguistic repertoires of students and staff. The article discusses how practices of hierarchization, inclusion and exclusion of languages can be approached in theory as well as practice in such multilingual settings.

Gazzola ("The linguistic implications of academic performance indicators: general trends and case study") investigates the use of bibliometric indicators as a tool for research evaluation in Italy and argues that this instrument encourages researchers to publish in English, and therefore functions as an implicit language policy tool. Gazzola also discusses the introduction of English medium programs at Italian universities and argues that such programs do not, as one might expect, seem to serve a particular student demand or a particular demand for English language skills on the Italian labor market. In fact, he argues, such programs are introduced because the ability to attract non-Italian students is an important performance indicator for Italian universities.

In Finland, English medium university programs have also become very common, and this development provides the impetus for Saarinen's contribution ("Internationalization of Finnish higher education — is language an issue?"). In particular, Saarinen discusses the implication of university internationalization for university language policy in a university system that has traditionally (in the 19th century and the early 20th century) been oriented towards two national languages (Finnish, Swedish) and now gives one international language, English, a special role.

The final contribution to the issue by Mortensen and Haberland ("English — the new Latin of the elites? Danish universities as a case") adopts an even broader historical perspective on language choice in academia. The authors draw up the history of competing university languages within the Danish academic system since 1479, as a contribution to the discussion of whether the present dominance of English is just a repetition of the historical dominance of Latin at European universities since the Middle Ages.

The issue is rounded off with a review by Li a recent publication that discusses the parallel use of Danish and English in Danish universities at the beginning 21st century. Li draws interesting lines between the perceived threat

against Danish in universities in Denmark (often couched in a discourse of “domain loss” in spite of the theoretical weakness of the term) and the lack of such a perception of a threat against Cantonese in Hong Kong.

There is an all too obvious — but possibly just apparent — paradox that shines through several if not all contributions. Hardly any of the authors show open enthusiasm for the role of English vis-à-vis other languages that emerges in the picture of university education under the spell of globalism, the knowledge society and education commodification. Rather, there seems to be a recurring critical stance towards an unquestioning acceptance of English as the “natural” choice of language in a world with increased transnational contacts, although none of the authors directly and explicitly ascribe the present situation to the mere machinations of the linguistic imperialism of one or two nation states.<sup>2</sup> Still, as is common, even this critical stance does not prevent the authors from expressing their cautiously critical attitude in the very language they refuse to accept as a “natural” choice. This paradox has been noticed and discussed before (e.g. in Haberland 1989: 937; Daryai-Hansen 2008). We consider it merely an apparent paradox. Under the present circumstances, English *has* attained a possibly unprecedented level of global spread (*globality* in Beck’s terminology) both in general and in higher education and academic research in particular. International journals like the present reach most people by choosing English as their publication language; publications in French, Spanish, German, Japanese and even Chinese clearly reach fewer readers than publications in English. The critical stance expressed by the authors of this issue goes against the impression that this dooms the other languages to *irrelevance*. On the contrary, the processes that we are experiencing also affect the other languages in use in academia, and not necessarily towards marginalization. The term “glocalization” that was fashionable for a while, is a poor description of this since it only acknowledges the “global” and the “local”, i.e. in terms of languages the supposed “lingua franca of the world”, English, against the local language which is under constant threat of becoming a “kitchen language”. This is as if there were no other languages either in transnational contacts (where regional languages often play a significant role) or locally in research environments and labor markets (where the local languages often prevail — exactly *not* as kitchen languages). We hope that the contributions in this issue show that not even in academia is the present linguistic situation best described as English swamping all the other languages, marginalizing them or making them redundant.

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## Notes

- \* Both editors have been affiliated with the CALPIU Research Center at Roskilde University while editing this issue. In 2009, Hartmut Haberland also spent part of his time with the Faculty of Foreign Language Studies of Kansai University in Osaka. The generous support of both institutions (logistic and otherwise) is greatly appreciated.
1. The outcome of the conference includes two more publications: a thematic issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* edited by Beyza Björkman (Björkman 2011), and an edited volume (Preisler et al. 2011).
  2. For a different model that assumes “hegemonic projects” built on persuasion and consent rather than force (brute or symbolic) see Haberland 2009.

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