INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: FROM ANGLICISATION TO MULTILINGUALISM

A.K.A.: LANGUAGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A FEW CONSIDERATIONS TO MOVE BEYOND CLICHÉS

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Paper presented at the

Norwegian Language Council
Oslo, Friday 5 May 2017
An area in which clichés abound

- These clichés concern student quality, student motivation, research quality, the very meaning of ‘internationalisation’ – and language itself

- What to do?
  - Review some of these clichés
  - Try to understand why they're so popular
  - Try to break free from them
A necessary clarification

▶ In this talk, the question of "English" is often brought up…
▶ … but *obviously* the issue isn't English *per se*
▶ The problem is linguistic hegemony, no matter which language benefits from it
▶ Similar remarks could be made if Navajo, Norwegian, Italian or Gujarati were in that dominant position
Cliché No. 1

"International university education necessarily takes place in an international language"

This claim mixes up the positive and the normative levels

- it's incorrect at the positive level, since it ignores the reality that the world is linguistically diverse, and that if you really mean "internationalisation", then a truly international university education should reflect that and be multilingual.

- it's disturbing in normative terms, because it implies a consent to linguistic hegemony.
Cliché No. 2

"The academic world operates in English anyway"

A misleading claim on two counts (but with a pernicious effect as a self-fulfilling prophecy when people start believing it).

- A widespread use of English doesn't mean the exclusive use of English: 2012: only 4% of the 15,134 diplomas awarded (at all levels) by German universities are in English (in other words: 96% are wholly or partly in German; some of these use some English, but English-only diplomas make up 4% of the total)

- The academic world does different things in different languages (e.g. internal operations of a research team v. presenting a paper abroad)
Cliché No. 3

"Everybody speaks English anyway"

Low-level skills may be quite widespread, but high-level skills are not, and they are not significantly more common among the younger than the older generation. This is borne out by various data sets, notably Eurobarometer and the Adult Education Survey:

- English is the L1 of 14% of the (pre-Brexit) EU population
- It's an L2 at a very good or good level for 21% of the EU's residents
- It's the L1 of 7%-8% of the world population
- As a L1 or L2, including modest skills levels, it's spoken by the at most 25% of the world population
- In other words: 70% of the world population has little English or no English at all
Cliché No. 4

"We must teach in English to attract the 'best' students"

This might be plausible at PhD level, where the catchment area can be truly global, but there is not a shred of empirical proof to back up this claim for BA and MA level studies (not to mention that it presupposes that the locals are a bit dim)

- people who really want an English-medium education, *if they really are the best*, are likely to have already registered at Harvard, Yale, or Oxford… and those who register for English-medium degrees in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, etc., might precisely not be the best

- this creates pedagogically absurd situations

- those who are truly the "best" are likely to be those who, among other skills, will also have acquired receptive skills in Dutch, German, French, etc.
Cliché No. 5

"Offering English-medium education maximizes the intake of foreign students"

This deserves to be qualified. A rough index of relative over-representation of foreign students in OECD countries (ratio of share of international student intake to share of resident population) indicates that a country's rank as a destination favoured by international students doesn't correlate with the extent of anglicisation of their universities:

- Unsurprisingly, there is strong over-representation of predominantly English-speaking countries (NZ [1st], AUS [2nd], GB [5th], CDN [6th]), largely because students want to learn English.
- ... but among non-anglophone countries, the strongest overrepresentation is among countries that have resisted all-out anglicisation in higher education (A [3rd], CH [4th], B [7th], F [9th]).
- "over-anglicised" countries rank lower (S [8th], NL [11th]).
- of course, this index needs to be refined and combined with others, but international students may not be attracted by "English" – perhaps the local language(s) are no less important in attracting them.
Cliché No. 6

"Scientific research is in English"

This claim ignores the fact that research encompasses different steps:

- reading of others' research
- interaction within a research team
- presentation of results in international conferences
- publication for an academic readership
- publication for the educated general public

Not all these steps are in English, let alone in English only
Cliché No 7

"The spread of English is a natural phenomenon

This claims mixes up (incomplete) observations and their interpretation

- qualitative observation of actual language practices in multilingual contexts (incl. academic ones) reveal a high variability of patterns and constant use of code switching

- the macro-dynamics of language aren't "natural": they are the outcome of the interaction of various economic and geopolitical forces, which serve some interests more than others

- these dynamics are something that societies may legitimately aspire to steer through policy, for reasons of both efficiency and fairness
Cliché No 8

"Languages are neutral and having only one for research constitutes a net communication gain"

This is, of course, a particularly naïve but surprisingly widespread expression of "folk linguistics", which...

- assumes that language equals communication, and that communication equals mere information transfer
- omits the psychological, sociological, political and economic non-neutrality of languages
- assumes a cognitive neutrality which is belied by recent research (and you don't need a crude Sapir-Whorf approach for this)
Anna Wierzbicka, (psycho-linguist, National Australian University, Canberra), 2014:

rarity of semantic "primes"
Pilot studies of the relationship between multilingualism and creativity, holding under numerous constraints, including exposure to intercultural experience, reveal the existence of a positive correlation between them.

- The correlation stands at about 0.15 – modest, but statistically significant and holding across different psychometric measurements of creativity.
- These effects hold under numerous controls (gender, age, personality variables) and, importantly, "intercultural experience" (e.g. "travel abroad")
- An aggregate model combining individual multilingualism & intercultural experience on one side, and various creativity measurements on the other side, reveals a "general" correlation of about 0.25
- This strongly suggests that monolingualism in research would be dangerous
Cliché No. 9

"The generalized used of English by all fosters equity"

It could… if there were no native speakers. But linguistic hegemony gives rise to major uncompensated transfers in their favour:

- privileged markets
- savings in communication effort
- savings in foreign/second language instruction
- knock-on effects of the above savings
- symbolic "legitimation" effects (even the Financial Times owns up to this fact)
Cliché No. 10

"International English isn't really English, it's "ELF" or "globish", and therefore no problem of inequality arises"

This claim reveals a deep, utter confusion:
- **NOWHERE** is there a clear, logical definition of "English as a lingua franca" (actual *language*? way of communicating? "frame of mind"?)
- No clear definition of empirical object (with or without NSs ?)
- Irrediemably anecdotal character of alleged manifestations of ELF

Ultimately, ELF is nothing but a crude syllogism in three terms (T1, T2, T3):
- T1 "ok, English might be imperialistic and exclusionary"
- T2: "ELF ≠ English"
- T2: *therefore*, English used as a lingua franca isn't imperialistic or exclusionary"

- The concept of "English as a lingua franca" essentially has a whitewashing function
Why are these clichés so common?

- Three *possible* explanations:
  - Naïveté (and fascination for a language associated with power)
  - Subservience (and the desire to pay obeisance to power)
  - Market failure (when rationality leads to sub-optimal decisions)

- Only case-by-case studies can tell us which of these explanations is relevant in a particular case (and they may sometimes combine)
1. Naïveté
(10 June 2014, Lake Geneva)
2. Subservience

*Discours de la servitude volontaire*
Étienne de La Boétie, 1548/1549 (then aged 18)

Translated into various languages, e.g.:

*Discurso de la servidumbre voluntaria*

*Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*  
([http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm](http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm))
3. Market failure

- Non-coincidence of optimal solutions:
  - at the MICRO level, what is in the interest of individual actors is multilingualism [sometimes called "plurilingualism" when referring to individuals' language skills]
  - at the MACRO level, what is in the interest of society as a whole is: [societal] multilingualism
    - resource allocation: creativity, innovation, resilience, intrinsic value, political and cultural aspects
    - resource distribution: "linguistic justice"
  - at the MESO level, what is in the perceived interest (if viewed in a short-time perspective) of institutions, firms, universities often is uniformisation (leading to choices that reinforce self-fulfilling prophecies)
  - The problem at hand bears strong resemblance with that of the evaluation of natural resources (e.g. fisheries)
The political challenge

So, what should be done? I submit that we should:

1. constantly repeat facts and staying alert to expressions of naïveté and subservience
2. keep a watchful eye on university presidents, ministers of education, etc.
3. better understand the role and value of diversity as a common good (referring to the "commons", studied in particular by Elinor Ostrom, 2009 Economics Nobel Prize winner)
4. think in terms of a global governance of linguistic diversity, just as we try to put in place forms of global governance for climate or for the environment
The organizational challenge

Explore pragmatic solutions:

- Bear in mind the various types of communication (teaching, research, admin; internal v. external; etc.) occurring at a university

- In order to ease foreign students' arrival, offer English-medium instruction for foreign students in *initial years*, but *not* for subsequent years (the space made for English may then increase again for PhD courses, giving the presence of English a "U-shaped profile" in the 3-5-8 Bologna system)

- Differentiate between receptive and productive skills (courses and readings in the local language, student essays in English allowed)

- In order to offer a *genuinely* international and intercultural education, *exclude* English-only degrees

*Keep multilingualism as a compass!*
Merci – Danke – Grazie – Grazia