

The English language in academia: Identifying power structures, denaturalizing daily choices. ECREA 2018 special panel report

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Note

Invited report for the Thematic Section on ECREA 2018 devoted to the 7th European Communication Conference of the European Communication and Research Association (ECREA), held in Lugano from October 31st to November 3rd, 2018.

Media and communication research has been dominated by the Anglo-American paradigm and English has become the *lingua franca* of academic life. The 2018 ECREA conference focused on centres and peripheries, inclusions and exclusions, cores and margins in the field. In line with the programme, this special session on Language in Academia tried to respond to contemporary critical asymmetries, analysing a specific dimension often taken for granted: the English language hegemony. The centrality of the English language is often assumed without questioning or critical reasoning.

The use of English has certainly brought scholars together, it has created the possibility of world-wide and regional networks and research projects. The pragmatic function of the English language allowed us to prepare and to operationalize this panel and it has created the indispensable conditions for the very existence of the Lugano ECREA 2018 conference. The benefits of understanding each other are obvious and scholars around the world value this.

However, the naturalization of the power structures underlying this concrete reality must be examined and the consequences of the present-day reality must be addressed. The English language-centrality needs questioning in a multilingual setting such as the Swiss context and by the communication and media research community at large.

In fact, media and communication scholars have the responsibility to reflect about social, economic and cultural asymmetries and the field reflects these concerns. Gender, ethnicity, age, geography and others are sources of inequality are under close and well deserved scrutiny. However, language-induced inequalities have been neglected as research object. The ‘new normal’ of marginalizing national languages and the noticeable exclusion of minority languages deserves attention as this is specially pertinent in social sciences and humanities given the contextual nature of the knowledge production.

1 Participants and topics

In this panel, we started with Paolo Mancini’s (University of Perugia) written presentation. Paolo Mancini’s manuscript “*Not only an English language issue*” was delivered by Helena Sousa as the author couldn’t participate due to a last-minute impediment. The paper was nevertheless delivered and debated. Paolo Mancini argued that the problem we were discussing was not just a question of language. “Indeed, the English language issue has to be inserted within a larger (and for many aspects, more dramatic) problem of ‘cultural and scientific hegemony’ of the Anglo-American academy that depends on several reasons, and that seems visible in the field of social and political sciences”. According to Mancini, this “cultural he-



gemony” applies to the organization of scientific work, the quality of writing and very often to methodology, too. In order to clarify his argument, Mancini says there is no doubt that many journals accept articles only if they adopt the Anglo-American Q/A schema and other organizational structures. “Very often the application of these schemata trivializes and simplifies the quality of the scientific work and limits the possibility of more original approaches. The issue of English language goes together with the diffusion of scientific paradigms that not always foster innovation in social and political sciences”. Mancini believes that we face not only a problem of language and translation but also a sort of scientific dominance that has different roots and not rarely produces negative consequences.

The second speaker of the panel was Karin Raeymaeckers from Ghent University with the paper “*Lost in translation in Academia?*” As a constant reminder of the dividing power of language if used within a framework of power rhetoric, influence and identity, Karin Raeymaeckers referred to her own experiences in the Belgian context: “Belgium indeed is a multilingual country but this focus on power and identity has driven the country in a flux of misinterpretation, antagonism and political instability”. In a plea for pragmatism and mutual respect, Karin Raeymaeckers argued that the power of language is indeed very important, but it shall not “drive us apart”. The concern is based on the very existence of “language borders” inside the country which establishes in practice different research communities. In her presentation, Karin Raeymaeckers outlined three main lines of thought concerning the hegemony of English: first, the responsibility of the scientific journals to offer equal access to academics from distinct linguistic backgrounds; second, the importance to develop human resources policies for academic careers that take into account the characteristics of the different academic cultures and, finally, a reflection on Erasmus programs which balances between shifting the university curricula into

English courses and the preservation of national languages.

The third panel participant, Tarlach McGonagle (University of Amsterdam) delivered a paper about “*The dominance of English in academia: a concern for academic freedom?*” This paper refracted the panel’s focuses – English as the *lingua franca* of academic life; the power dynamics that explain this linguistic dominance and its practical implications – through the prism of academic freedom. In doing so, Tarlach McGonagle stimulated critical and creative thinking about how language policies can shape the reflective and subjunctive space that universities should foster. Tarlach McGonagle started the discussion with the conceptual analysis of academic freedom even if its precise delineation was unclear and sometimes contested: “Its many facets include freedom of expression and access to information; educational rights; linguistic rights; participatory rights, cultural rights and the right to non-discrimination”. Academic freedom has not (yet) achieved firm recognition as an autonomous right in international or European human rights law, but it is, according to Tarlach McGonagle, receiving a growing focus of scholarly discourse and political attention. In its current state of development, academic freedom is best regarded as comprising elements of the above-mentioned (and other) human rights. The author explored the relevance of those rights-related issues from the perspectives of key actors/stakeholders, in particular, academics, students, academic institutions, State bodies and society (including civil society and industry). This exploration demonstrated that the rights and interests of the different actors/stakeholders sometimes align neatly with each other and at other times prove to be at odds with one another. If academics are expected – or required – to teach and publish in English, does that curtail or enhance their academic freedom? Does it drive them away from national scholarly audiences or does it accelerate their penetration into a global scholarly community? Are university students entitled to follow educational programmes, with adequate

materials and resources, in national or minority languages? Is it legitimate for third-level educational institutions to prioritise English-language programmes and research as a lucrative business model that attracts overseas, non-EU students who typically pay higher tuition fees? How does that impact on academic standards and student satisfaction levels? To what extent should academic institutions be expected or obliged to function in the languages of the society and communities around them? These and other pertinent questions were on the table.

The fourth presenter, Andreas Hepp (University of Bremen) discussed “*Research that travels: On theorising, contextual research and transcultural academic discourse*”. The author problematized the dominance of language in transcultural academic discourse: “How far does English as a language dominate the academic discourse across national borders?” In his presentation, an alternative point of view was put forward, namely the reflection about which kind of research travels well transnationally and transculturally. Taking this point of view, Andreas Hepp considered that language is only one aspect in the sense that a common language – which is nowadays English – is needed to make communication possible. However, in addition to language, the author notices that there is a remarkable pattern: what travels well in the sense that it is published, read and discussed more widely are rather general theories and approaches. “Typically, they are more or less detached from specific contexts and because of this can be re-applied to various cultural and social contexts. On the one hand, this pattern is not necessarily negative, because the scholars of the field of media and communications have the chance to develop a language of common theories and approaches”. At present, said Andreas Hepp, concepts like “platform society”, “datafication” or “mediatization” represent this (critical) transcultural discourse of theorizing but there is nevertheless the problem that research which is highly context sensitive or addresses more specific phenomena is far less published internation-

ally and if far less recognized. The result of both is therefore a kind of paradox: “While there is a strong tendency in recent theories on media, communication and data to put an emphasis on the need of context specific knowledge, the space this knowledge has within transcultural academic discourse is far more limited”. The main argument of this presentation is that this paradox cannot be overcome but academics should be more aware of it in order to handle this paradox in a productive way.

In the last presentation, Helena Sousa (University of Minho) delivered a paper called “*An exercise in continuous juggling: living with the hegemonic power of a language other than yours*”. This paper was based in the assumption that it is through language that a shared discursive patrimony (both divergent and convergent) is developed and therefore a common language allows for the development of comprehensible texts that permanently (re)construct scientific communities. In some European countries this hegemonic power is widely accepted as English is effectively the *lingua franca* of science. In other countries, the defense of maternal languages as science of knowledge and culture is still a relevant aspect in both the political and scientific agenda. In her presentation, Helena Sousa stated that the defense of the Portuguese language and culture has been one of the few cross-cutting consensual aspects of governmental policies, both from right-wing and left-wing governments, since the 1974 revolution. However, puzzlingly, despite this systematic programmatic governmental consensus, the national science foundation (*Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia* – FCT) has been in line with the Anglo-Saxon scientific paradigm that dominates European science policies and, in practice, ignores the Portuguese language. In this paper, it was demonstrated how a particular communication research centre (Communication and Society Research Centre) has been dealing with this ambiguous policy and how has it tried to articulate globalization processes with local and regional needs. The research centre put in place a multi-lingual strategy that created the conditions for the conviv-

uality of English and Portuguese, even if the pendulum moves frequently from one to the other. Two main aspects of this linguistic strategy were highlighted. The first one is the bilingual option. The centre publishes two scientific journals simultaneously in Portuguese and in English. All texts be submitted in Portuguese or in English are translated if accepted for publication. The second aspect is the option of open access publication. In the last five years the research centre made available almost all its scientific productivity on online repositories (the RepositoriUM of the University of Minho). The combination of open access and multilingualism (there are also publications in French, Spanish, German, Italian, etc.) has created new research possibilities and it has stimulated unpredictable multi-linguistic dialogues.

2 Outcomes and reflections

After the delivery of the five papers, there was an open debate about the contradictions, paradoxes, divides and possibilities driven by linguistic practices and policies in the academia. Despite the lack of consensus on how to address asymmetries induced by linguistic choices and the use of English as *lingua franca*, it became clear the need to reflect on a range of measures to mitigate the perceived threats to academic freedom and recognition engendered by the dominance of English in science. In particular, the academic community should rethink its editorial mechanisms and policies, its evaluation systems and mobility tools. Linguistic differences have the potential to enrich the academia if free and open debates are cultivated and if new insights come to the fore.

3 Panel overview

Panel title

The English language in academia: Identifying power structures, denaturalizing daily choices

Panel organizer

Helena Sousa (University of Minho)

Date and location

Saturday, 3rd November 2019, 15:30–17:00, Ex-Asilo Ciani, Room 4

Not only an English language issue.

Mancini, P. (University of Perugia, Department of Political Sciences, Perugia, Italy)

Lost in translation in Academia?

Raeymaeckers, K. (Ghent University, Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent, Belgium)

The dominance of English in academia: A concern for academic freedom?

McGonagle, T. (University of Amsterdam, Institute for Information Law, Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Research that travels: On theorising contextual research and transcultural academic discourse.

Hepp, A. (University of Bremen, ZeMKI Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, Bremen, Germany)

An exercise in continuous juggling: Living with the hegemonic power of a language other than yours.

Sousa, H. (University of Minho, Institute of Social Sciences, Braga, Portugal)