

A Trilingual University as the Model Case for the Future

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Having been managing multilingual educational and research units for more than ten years, I would like to build on my experience. I am strongly promoting the idea that the future of higher education belongs to the trilingual university. English has practically become the *lingua academia* for the whole planet. Every nation is trying to keep higher education alive in its native language. In addition, in most parts of the world there is a regional 'international' language that cannot be ignored. It is easier to handle the case in smaller countries. In bigger ones, we shall often be ending up with bilingual or even unilingual cases. The absolute top of the university business (Harvard, Cambridge, etc.) cannot be blamed for the latter case. The medium level can. Diversity is the basic necessary condition for successful self-organization of multilingual and multicultural communities.

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1. Introduction

The main trends of globalization concern the academic institutions as strongly as any other international organization. Being international almost by definition, universities should be paid special attention. We are not going to touch all the aspects of internationalization of the universities here. Rather, we are going to focus on the linguistic aspect of the story. This aspect inevitably concerns identity. Therefore, we get into direct touch with the problem of the changing identities in the contemporary world. Some reorganization definitely does take place. Making sense of it will be an important question for our survey.

In Mediæval times the universities in Europe worked in Latin. This was the real functioning *lingua academia* of the age. Without being fluent in Latin no one could even enter the academic world, not to speak of making any kind of academic career. The situation was quite different for the last couple of centuries. One of the main claims of the current analysis, however, is that we are witnessing a turning back to a single international *lingua academia* just these days. This time the common language works for the whole planet, not just on one continent. That's English, of course. Perhaps American, rather than British, but this is probably not too important a question for us here.

Is this going to mean that someday all higher education all over the world will be given in English? Well, we cannot rule out this option. Should we be consciously striving for such situation? Probably not. Having said this, we face the task of explaining why. The answer is by no means evident. On the one hand, it would be much more cost effective and simply easier to arrange all the academic matters in one single academically established language. On the other hand, as far as humanities are concerned, the academia should continue paying attention to teaching and doing research on different national languages. It

would look bizarre to do so applying another language as a metalanguage, although not impossible as well. A similar situation has been lived through in some totalitarian societies not without setbacks. It would not be reasonable to repeat these mistakes.

Therefore, we should probably keep the diversity of academic languages. However, so far we have brought forward just some common sense type arguments for the support of our claim. Let us now try to reach for the theoretical hard core of the matter.

2. The Diversity of 'Academic' Languages. The Theoretical Side of the Story

It can be tempting to go for simplicity here. It would be simple to apply just one language for any academic matter anywhere in the world. To some extent we need such simplicity. Or rather we just need a common language in order to understand each other. English works quite well for the latter task. Still, the main purpose of the *academia* cannot be just efficient communication. It is the pursuit of knowledge of most diverse nature, including scientific knowledge but not only that, we should be striving for. This is really the heart of the matter. In order to be successful in our knowledge pursuit, we need to preserve diversity in the choice of the instruments at our disposal. One of the most important ones of these instruments is language. Therefore, we need to preserve the diversity of academic languages. English is sometimes quite inadequate for expressing knowledge produced by social sciences or humanities. Nicholas Maxwell would probably call the latter rather wisdom than knowledge (Maxwell 2010) but this will rather support our claim than work against it. Concerning knowledge the English language still copes with its tasks. However, then we try to explain the difference at the level of verbs, English leaves us in trouble here. We need to know for having knowledge, but just to be wise for having wisdom.

It is possible to add even a more solid theoretical background to the example given just above. That would stem from the theory that has been presented by Ilya Prigogine as his methodology of self-organization (see for instance Prigogine, Stengers 1984; Prigogine 1997). Let us take a closer look into this quite novel approach. The theory states that self-organization can occur only in open systems. Universities of today are definitely open systems. They exchange not just knowledge they have produced but students and faculty as well. At the same time, universities are nothing chaotic in the bad sense of the word. Normally, they are structured in quite definite way. In addition, however, in a progressive university, there is always room for something new not just as far as knowledge is concerned but concerning their structural build up too. We can claim that a university is not stable but a structurally stable system. It is flexible but tends to retain its basic structure under not too strong fluctuations. About the concept of structural stability one can learn, for instance, from Thom (1975) or Mürsepp (2010).

Therefore, normally all the main Prigoginian conditions for efficient self-organization have been fulfilled in the case of the universities. We should probably even say that universities today are the most perfect systems from efficient self-organization point of view. This is mostly due to their structural stability. Therefore, movement towards unification in

language usage, which is definitely going on, does not contribute to our main task here. We need to preserve diversity as the basis for effective self-organization and apply some efforts for the support of this task.

3. The Core of the Solution. Why Three?

What are the other 'academic' languages beside English we need to go for? How many do we need? Let us agree at once that no-one knows the correct answer to this question for sure. We can just give some considerations that might prevent us from going totally wrong.

There is a suggestion that the organizing centre of the stability of the *academia* requires active presence of three languages. This does not mean that we are adding two definite languages to English and that's it. It is certainly not such a clear cut case we are facing.

So what are these languages and why three? Well, there is an astonishingly simple explanation. Three seems to be exactly the number to reach in the context of our analysis. It is still the case in the world today that almost any nation, at least the ones having statehood, wants to have university education in its own national language, at least at the most basic (Bachelor) level. This goal has been achieved to quite different extent on different continents. However, the idea is progressing rather than regressing at least as far as Bachelor level education is concerned. Often, it is the national language that helps to consolidate the identity of an ethnical group. There are exceptions, of course, but they rather confirm the rule.

This is all clear, but what about the third language. Is it a unique one or does it depend on the region? Well, the latter is true. In most geographical regions of the world there is a regional *lingua franca*, which the academic world should not ignore.

Needless to say, there are places on the face of the Earth where there is no need for exactly three academic languages. The British greats or the American Ivey League can probably go on according their own deeply rooted historical tradition. American universities that do not belong to the 'Premier League' should probably adopt Spanish as their second language of instruction. Therefore, we should not stick to the 'trilingual' case. Sometimes one is more than enough. Two may be very good as well. By all evidence, sometimes there is a need to go further than three. Still, three seems to be the model case.

What are the typical third languages? The answer to this question obviously depends on the region we are dealing with. In Eastern Europe it is normally Russian. In the Nordic countries Swedish, excluding Sweden of course. In Central Europe the third language would obviously be German. Latin America would fluctuate between Spanish and Portuguese. We shall not be going into details concerning China or Africa. Still the trilingual case seems to hold. The idea of the regional *lingua franca* clearly holds on these continents.

4. Reshaping Identity

Language is a solid basis of identity for most human beings. It is the mother tongue we use, we are more fluent in than in any other language, we think in that shapes the foundation of our identity. Learning another language and using it at a regular basis clearly reshapes our identity. Those of us who are active in the *academia* are open to this reshaping probably more than other people. The sole exception being the 'lucky ones' who happen to be born British or American and manage to pursue their whole academic career in Oxbridge or the Ivey League. Everyone else is subsumed to the identity distortions.

Identity in the world today can be modelled by a mathematical concept, an open sphere. There is the core, which very often has been formed around the mother tongue. Those of us, who do not learn any other language at all, have obviously the clearest identity. However, this is not what we should be striving for. Does that mean that breaking the original identity has to be our goal? Well, our task is definitely much more complicated.

The task can be formulated as follows. Identity of the academic profession these days has to be flexible. But losing the core feature cannot be accepted. This brings us to a model case where the academic has to float somewhere in between of the core of her heritage and the surface of the open sphere, which does not exist. Therefore, we have the case of self-realization here. It is the language(s) that show the way in the darkness of this self-realization.

Needless to say, the situation is complicated. Our identity in the academic world, and obviously not only in the academic world, is becoming more blurred than ever before in history. Each challenge, however, proposes opportunities. An educated human being today is more free than ever before. If she manages to preserve her basic link to her original identity then she can develop freely in an organized, or rather self-organized, way. There may be an illusion that losing the original bound would make the situation even better. Losing the organizing centre, however, may leave the person 'hanging in the air' without any guidance. This is hardly a desirable situation.

Actually, the situation is even more complicated than has been described so far. We can easily acquire multiple identities that shape our lifestyle. This can lead to not having an identity at all except being human and probably belonging to the *academia*. Maybe we don't need anything more. In the case of some academic fields, mathematics and natural science, it is probably really so. However, this can hardly hold in the case of humanities.

5. Managing the Trilingual University

As the concluding synthesis of our analysis, we attempt to single out some basic principles of managing the trilingual university. We shall not be targeting the ideal case but rather something different. The ideal case would be the situation, where the faculty and students of a trilingual university are fluent in all three languages. However, this will not happen in reality and if it were to happen then we would probably end up in using just one language.

Here we may well have the most remarkable result of our analysis. We need the diversity of academic languages just in order to escape unifications like this. We need to learn. However, we cannot achieve fluency in everything we learn. This is the necessary diversity we need. In a way, it comes to us by itself. Still, we need to do something in order to achieve this diversity. Namely, we need to learn.

What can the manager do in this context? She can just facilitate the learning. The manager should definitely be able to speak all the three languages. In a good case, one of them would be her mother tongue. Obviously, the manager has to be an open tolerant and certainly person of good temper. The students studying in different languages tend to be quite distinct groups and may not start to interact easily. The situation may be pretty much the same concerning faculty. Actually, it may be even more complicated.

In principle, the manager has to be prepared for the situation where each 'language group' may be willing to oust the other two. One might ask now, why strive for the trilingual or even bilingual situation at all. In order to answer this question, we have to refer to the objective reality, to a kind of invisible hand arranging the development of human society, may be even of restructuring the public sphere to put the situation into the language of Jürgen Habermas (1962). Although multicultural society has been recently declared a failed project by several influential political leaders, the linguistic transformation is going on continuously. Here, the direction is opposite to the cultural trend in society. Society as a whole changes towards diversification. The linguistic turn works in the opposite direction of unification, towards quickly growing usage of (American) English. As each and every system, each and every field of human activity requires diversity as a necessary condition for its self-organization we need to worry about the situation with languages. Therefore, the manager of a trilingual university needs to care about preserving its trilingual character despite the pressure to take the easy way towards unification.

The real goal of the universities should not be just knowledge production but achieving wisdom. According to Nicholas Maxwell, we have to exchange knowledge-inquiry with wisdom-inquiry (Maxwell 2010). The focus of our current analysis does not enable us to pay Maxwell the attention he deserves. Let us just claim that wisdom cannot be reached, wisdom-inquiry cannot be implemented from a simplified-unified foundation. It requires diversity.

Success of the manager will strongly depend on the openness of her personnel. People have to be open-minded. Trilingual university cannot be built with narrow-minded conservative people. This is probably the most challenging task of the manager. She has to be ready for some unpleasant and inconvenient replacements.

Last but not least, the manager has rather to be the leader. The spirit of leadership is more important than conventional management skills. Reading Margaret Wheatley would be very helpful here (Wheatley 2006).

6. Conclusion

The conclusion of our analysis is very brief. The future of the university is trilingual. 'Unfortunately', this does not mean that we will be well off knowing just three languages. The number of 'academic' languages is not likely to decrease. The opposite may well be the case. We should be happy about this as linguistic diversity enhancing our pursuit of knowledge will be preserved.

7. References

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