

EAFTELETO Symposium

“National Languages and Terminology in Higher Education, Science & Technology”

Athens, Greece, 7 November 2013

A Swedish perspective

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The problem

Almost nine out of ten dissertations written in Sweden today are written in English. This has been the case since the mid-1990's (however, the dominance of English in dissertations has been a fact since the 1940's). The highest number of dissertations written in English (94 %) can be found within the natural sciences, the corresponding number for the social sciences being 65 %, and 37 % for the humanities. Most of the dissertations being written can be found within the field of medicine, science and technology. Three out of ten have an abstract written in Swedish¹.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the visibility of English in higher education has increased substantially, due in part to courses being taught exclusively in English, but also because the use of course literature written in English has increased.

Most people in Sweden agree on the fact that the use of English in higher education is beneficial and necessary for Sweden to be able to participate in and contribute to an international scientific co-operation. But there are also those who see the growing dominance of English as a threat, especially if it is happening at the expense of the Swedish language. Two major factors are being particularly highlighted; the potential domain loss and the risk of a loss of ability.

Domain loss refers here to the situation where the native language loses its position and becomes less useable, thus less used within a particular field. Loss of ability has to do partly with the learning ability of students which diminishes when courses are being taught in English, since many students struggle when reading academic and otherwise specialised texts in that language. It refers also to the fact that not all teachers are so good at teaching in English. Studies show that younger teachers are generally more positive towards teaching entirely in English, whereas older teachers tend to see potential problems with it, e.g. having

¹ Figures are from 2010.

to abandon a familiar teaching method in which, for example jokes can play a part.

Some argue that a division could be made between research, research information and education; research and education could be conducted in English, whereas research information could be given in Swedish. Others have argued against this, pointing to the fact that such a division cannot be made because the fields overlap and influence one another. Amongst other things, it has been pointed out that it is not possible to successfully inform about one's research in Swedish if proper Swedish terminology is lacking. Therefore, there are compelling democratic reasons to adopt a multi-lingual approach and strengthen the positions of both Swedish and English as main academic languages.

The solutions

- Language Act → language policies, guidelines etc.
- Methodology for creating national language terminology through networking
- National termbank and other tools for finding established – and launching newly-created – terminology
- Applying tools for automatic term extraction, ontology construction etc. on course literature
- Co-operation with publishing houses to simplify the creation multilingual term lists for monolingual course literature

As a result of many previous debates concerning language, some higher education institutions have developed different strategies for dealing with their choice of language, and use of language. A study conducted in 2009 showed that, of the 37 academic institutions that had been studied, 11 had some kind of official documents on language (policies, guidelines or plans).

Conclusion

I will conclude by telling in more detail about two higher education institutions which have developed a language document, have appointed staff to deal with the goals and aims of the document – and which are also addressing their terminological responsibility in a way that is in line with TNC's view.

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