

EAFTELETO Symposium

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

Athens, Greece, 7 November 2013

State-of-affairs Round Table

‘Europe and the Low Countries’

Background for the presentation of Jan Roukens

This ‘summary’ provides some background for the presentation. It comprises essentially three citations from recent publications (September 2013), and comments by the author, from:

- a report by the Institute of International Education (IIE)
- a paper of A. Kornai
- a letter to a Dutch language advisory body (English translation).

Citations from the report: English-taught Master's programmes in Europe, a 2013 update

“The paper, English-Taught Master’s Programs in Europe: A 2013 Update, is an update of a report published by IIE in June 2011, and provides a data-driven look at the continued growth of master’s programs in Europe taught entirely or partially in English.”

“In recent years, European countries in which English is not the primary language of instruction have developed an increasing number of programs taught either fully or partly in English in order to serve domestic demand for higher education in English and to attract students from around the world. The authors, Megan Brenn-White and Elias Faethe, examine statistics that they have obtained from MastersPortal.eu, an online directory and comprehensive source of information about postgraduate degree programs in Europe. The authors examine the growth of English-taught master’s programs in Europe, including the total number of programs offered by country and academic discipline, their duration, and data on prospective students.”

“According to the report, as of June 2013 the total number of English-taught programs in Europe was 6,609, a 42 percent increase since 2011. The top host countries for English-taught Master's programs are: Netherlands, Germany, Sweden,”

Comment

IIE is an organisation in the US promoting international education worldwide. The organisation compiles data about student mobility and English-taught university programmes worldwide. In Europe, in-depth studies of the kind have been conducted by the ACA – Academic Cooperation Association in 2002 and 2007. It was expected that a 3rd ACA study covering the situation in 2012 would be published in 2013, but it was not possible to fund that survey. Very recently the European Commission has been able to fund the follow-up survey. That is positive, because the ACA reports are of good quality and provide figures and motives.

The numbers of English-Taught Programmes (ETPs) in European universities vary from country to country and from university to university. Trendsetter and leader of the gang are the Netherlands since 2002. But the Scandinavian countries have surpassed the Netherlands in relative terms, i.e. in proportion to the size of their populations. In the Netherlands all the Dutch-taught masters have been abandoned, and many bachelor studies are also offered English-only. The Nordic countries are next in line. And the process is goes on. Large countries like Germany, France and Italy follow at a considerable distance, though steadily.

The consequences of these developments for society and for the quality of knowledge transfer and for education in general, have never been studied in some depth in these countries. Politicians were looking in the other direction. In an increasing number of countries, scientific literature in the national language is non-existent. Handbooks, even textbooks in the national languages are not produced any more in several countries. The university staffs potentially able to write such books are not available. If only because the development of scientific terminology is 10-20 years behind.

Citations of the article of A. Kornai: On Digital Language Deathⁱ

“A language may not be completely dead until the death of its last speaker, but there are three clear signs of imminent death observable well in advance. First, there is *loss of function*, seen whenever other languages take over entire functional areas such as commerce. Next, there is *loss of prestige*, especially clearly reflected in the attitudes of the younger generation. Finally, there is *loss of competence*, manifested by the emergence of ‘semi-speakers’ who still understand the older generation, but adopt a drastically simplified (reanalysed) version of the grammar.”

“In the digital age, these signs of incipient language death take on the following characteristics. Loss of function *performed digitally* increasingly touches every functional area from day to day communication (texting, email) to commerce, official business, and so on. Loss of prestige is clearly seen in the adage *if it’s not on the web, it does not exist*, and loss of competence boils down to the ability of raising digital natives in your own language. Digital ascent is the opposite process, whereby a language increasingly acquires digital functions and prestige as its speakers increasingly acquire digital skills.”

Comment

Kornai identifies three endogenous factors leading to the imminent death of a language. They resemble the symptoms of a disease. There are exogenous factors as well, but these are less interesting in this context. Although....Examples of exogenous factors, or forces: natural catastrophes, war and suppression, political pressure, economic pressure. Kornai describes the prolonged phase of decline of a language, not just the terminal phase. During the phase of decline, a language gradually loses functionality and quality. This goes hand in hand with reduced usage of the language; overall throughout society or in particular domains, such as the science and technology domains.

A section of his paper deals with the decline of a language due to insufficient usage in the digital environment. This is a very relevant perspective in modern society, because of the ever increasing impact of the digital environment on the human cognitive habitat. Many scholars share the view that if a language does not survive in the information society, it will not survive *tout court*. Although the relative volume of images on the internet has increased in comparison with text, text is still the most important medium for transferring knowledge in

science and education. In the last century the European Commission recognised this and counteracted the overwhelming use of English in IT and the internet by launching the concept of a *multilingual information society*.

Citation, from a letter of the stichting Nederlandsⁱⁱ to the president of the Council for Dutch Language and Literature (original: Dutch)ⁱⁱⁱ

“With a sense of relief we learned of the intention of the Council for Dutch Language and Literature, to look into the use of teaching languages in higher education institutions and to report its findings. Since its foundation, 15 years ago, the *stichting Nederlands* has actively promoted Dutch as a cultural language, and therefore resisted the impoverishment of Dutch under the pressure of other languages, English in particular. We believe that your proposal to assess the use of the language in higher education is linked with of a similar desire to let Dutch fully play its important role and to safeguard the language against serious threats. A laureate of the LOF prize^{iv} of the *stichting Nederlands*, the comedian Herman Finkers, mentioned in his acceptance speech in 2012 that the ongoing mutilation of the language ‘takes the soul out of the language’. Despite the poetic overexposure a rake characterisation.”

“In the past decade, several LOF prizes were awarded to individuals and institutions in higher education who resisted the pressure. Particularly in the universities the teaching language changed drastically. For the worse, from the perspective of this foundation. One of the laureates of the LOF prize was the Dutch Academy of Sciences. In 2003 the Academy published the report “Dutch, unless “, i.e. the teaching language in the humanities should remain Dutch, unless on occasions the choice for another language was inevitable^v. Despite the wide acceptance of the recommendations by scholars in the humanities, the report was not acted upon. A sign on the wall.”

“In 2008, the *stichting Nederlands*, in collaboration with other organisations in the cultural and scientific sectors organised the congress: *Dutch in higher education and science*^{vi}. The report of this congress was issued by the Gent publisher Academia Press. The Netherlands, more than Flanders, is the leader in Europe with respect to Anglicisation of higher education. But that same trend is noticeable in other countries, especially in the Northern- or Germanic-speaking European countries.”

“Language policy in higher education has triggered an initiative to raise awareness of the appalling decline of the national language in higher education and science in an ever increasing number of European countries. In Slovenia (2010) and Estonia (2011) events such as the conference held in Brussels (2008) were organised. In November 2013, the prow is turned to Greece. These efforts are minuscule, compared with the forces and inexhaustible resources that are available to universities and other organisations supported by multinational business. They promote and drive the ongoing anglicisation of science and university education.

The *stichting Nederlands* together with equally motivated people and organisations throughout Europe keep the fire burning for the most valuable common heritage, the living language diversity of Europe.”

Comment

These are citations from a letter addressed to an official Dutch language advisory board on behalf of the *stichting Nederlands*. After almost two decades of total neglect by the authorities

of the declining use of Dutch as the teaching language in higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Flanders^{vii}, a glimpse of a change of attitude is emerging over the horizon. Pretty late, too late probably, as the language is not used any more in scientific writing and has not been enriched by new scientific terminology in the latest decades. Oral Dutch is still used in the first (bachelor) cycle in some university programmes, but declining. Dutch master programmes are virtually non-existent. With some exceptions, all textbooks and handbooks are in English, imported from America and the UK.

Is Dutch scientific language dead? It is stripped of its capability to support modern science and thus may be declared dead. The use of scientific Dutch is discouraged by the political and university authorities, and often forbidden by the universities in accordance with internal regulations. In spite of the fact that the law on Higher Education in the Netherlands states explicitly that the instruction language is Dutch.

But a language differs from a human being: a language may be reanimated if human beings can be found having the vision and the energy to do so. At this moment, the political weight of the good guys is too small. But never say never.

Jan Roukens

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- i** Kornai, A. (2013) Digital Language Death. PLoS ONE 8(10): e77056. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0077056
 - ii** Civil society foundation promoting the Dutch language
 - iii** Roukens, Jan (2013) Brief aan de Voorzitter van de Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren; Brussels, September 2013
 - iv** Prize awarded every year by the *stichting Nederlands* to an individual or a group for an extraordinary achievement promoting the Dutch language (LOF = PRAISE)
 - v** For example a temporary guest teacher not able to speak Dutch as teaching language
 - vi** Nederlands in hoger onderwijs en wetenschap? Conference proceedings: Academia Press, Gent, 2008
 - vii** The attitudes towards their common Dutch language differ considerably in the two countries, after their separation by force and politics in 1585. In a few words: the Flemish struggled for their language against foreign rulers for almost 400 years, whereas the Netherlands gained independence and flourished. In Flanders, the fire is still glowing