

European universities torn between internationalization and the protection of the own language

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Dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

On May 4th of this year my university, the KU Leuven, celebrated the 50th anniversary of its autonomy as a Dutch speaking university by organizing a conference on the tension experienced by most European universities between internationalisation and the protection of the own national language and culture. I am very happy to be able to present to you today here in Aruba some reflections that I could also present at that conference. Yet I have to make some previous remarks before sharing with you these reflections.

First of all, it is good to recall that my reflections are coloured by the national and European surroundings I daily experience. Therefore some of my reflections may not be transferable as such to other regions of the world.

Secondly, I was struck by the fact that the roles of languages may vary from place to place. Whereas we in Flanders emancipated ourselves from the dominance of the French language, we are now confronted with an unprecedented Anglicisation and try to protect our language Dutch against a take-over by English. Sometimes it seems to me that on these islands of the Dutch Antilles, Dutch takes the role of French, whereas Papiamentu is in the role of Dutch. Of course, *omnis comparatio claudicate*, but it confronts us anyway with the fact that there are no good languages, nor bad languages. How evident this may seem, it is important to recall this while a language very much related to Dutch, Afrikaans, is under severe pressure.

In the third place, and in line with the above, I want to apologize for speaking English and not Papiamentu; but who knows, perhaps one day this will be different!

Today, I sometimes hear the echo of the opposition between social and national in the discussions concerning the relation between internationalisation and the protection of the own language. Internationalisation, then, is the progressive, forward looking approach; while protection of the own language is the backward looking conservative reaction. I would like to strongly oppose such a presentation of facts. First of all because I do not believe that it is either one or the other. We should combine our care for the own language and culture with internationalisation. If we are successful in doing so, both will even strengthen each other. Moreover, internationalisation is not per se progressive or social; protection of the own language and culture is not per se conservative. When internationalisation, and let us call it by its name, the wide spread use of English, be it bad English, leads to better communication between academics and students of various countries, it certainly is positive, but if this leads to the negation of diversity, if it imposes a uniform way of speaking and thus of thinking, we should not be happy with it. This very limited form of internationalisation is paired with a certain (economic) worldview that might even be a threat to universities in their 3 core tasks: education, research, and service to the communities. Allow me to elaborate on this.

Universities are threatened, as they are confronted with certain demands to emphasise the direct utility of what students are to be taught, prioritising such over their general development as persons and citizens. Direct utility to the world sounds nice, but it is seldom meant to be service to the poor and to the less developed countries; direct utility to the world most often means service to the 'established' powers, the big international firms, the world of money. Bad English is of perfect use here!

Universities are also threatened as research is made more and more dependent upon external financing by international actors, some of them non-profit, many pro-profit. The fact that research supports economic development is not wrong at all, but research should not be restricted to doing so. Other values should also play a role in determining research priorities, some of them indeed not linked to the international markets, but to the needs of defined groups of people and

communities living in a concrete, national context. If we look at certain important non-profit funding institutions, such as the Commission of the European Union, we see that they very much focus on economic return of the research. The European Union may have as its motto, 'unity in diversity', the reality is that outside any international agreement, it de facto imposes that all research applications and in fact all research are to be carried out in English; this fits perfectly in their nearly exclusive free market orientation.

Of course science is not linked to a nation or a language. Science by its essence is international. There is no French mathematics; there is mathematics. There is no German engineering science, there is engineering science. So it is only normal that there is a constant exchange of knowledge and ideas between scientists of all parts of the world. English being the lingua franca of the day, this exchange takes place in English. What we should avoid, however, is that the scientific reflection itself is confined to English, that we cannot but use English when we deal with a given academic subject, as that would narrow too much our creativity, our freedom of thinking on the subject. What we cannot accept is that English would kill the development of the national language in a whole area of science, at the end making the national language only suited for home, garden and kitchen. Internationalisation is essential to the development of any science, to research and academic education. The benefits of internationalisation are well-described, and the process is seen as evident, being beneficial for both research and education, for both students and professors. Internationalisation should however not necessarily and always mean Anglicisation. It should also leave room for a diversity of important and less important other languages, as this will contribute to a genuine internationalisation rather than oppose it.

Today, internationalisation puts a huge amount of pressure on universities and scientists to use English in academic research, for education and in administrative contacts with students and incoming staff from abroad. Knowledge-production typically takes place in international magazines that use English. The question becomes whether this equation between internationalisation and exclusive Anglicisation is appropriate.

I believe not. I am convinced that an open minded internationalisation requires also a variety of languages, one of them , probably for the moment the most

important one, being (bad) English. Genuine internationalisation does not exclude the use of national and other languages in academic education and research, but rather stimulates it. Genuine internationalisation of academic education and scientific research, is well aware of the third equally important task of the university: service to the community. And let us be clear: service to the community is not the same as providing the businesses of the country with innovative solutions and new market opportunities.

If a university is to realise its triple goal: excellent academic education, top research and service to the community, it has to internationalise while at the same time care for the language or languages of the communities it serves. Doing both will strengthen both. Take the KU Leuven, for example. Half a century ago, a student revolt claimed democratisation and the use of the own language. It did not lead to a weak, provincial university, but to an internationally oriented university, servicing the Flemish population and the world with excellent research and education.

A university that is internationally oriented, but starts from a strong connection to the own language and culture in order to be firmly rooted in the community and provide openness for all. How do we get there?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me now come to some suggestions I would like to make in order to bring forward the idea of a simultaneous effort of internationalisation and of further protection of the own language and of the linguistic diversity. These suggestions will be made in general terms, but are of course easily translatable to a specific reality. The suggestions will successively relate to academic education, scientific research and human relations management.

As far as academic education is concerned, I would like to stress the importance of keeping in mind what it is all about: providing young people not only with skills and knowledge, but with a genuine academic education, in order to enable them to take up in their later carrier the more important functions in a society, we want to be democratic and providing fair chances to all. In this perspective it is

imperative, -and this is my first suggestion-, that that all careers (except those that intrinsically imply a knowledge of a foreign language, such as language teaching) should be accessible on the basis of a domestic language study programme. Universities should be compelled to provide such an offer themselves, in the case of larger comprehensive universities, or to provide it through interuniversity arrangements in at least one of the partner universities. Highly specialised academic education or university education tracks directed to an international audience, could be provided without domestic equivalent if this appears to be necessary. However two provisos in this context: highly specialised does also mean a very limited number of students; and addressing an international audience is a question of contents, not of recruitment policy.

Secondly, internationalisation of academic education also means further stimulating students to have a part of their curriculum abroad or to have at least some international experience at home. In this perspective I would like to make two remarks. Far too often the experience abroad is not really an experience in another country, but rather the experience of an international students cocoon, following together classes in English, not seldom strictly separated from the domestic students. I don't see this as appropriate. An experience abroad should really immerge the student in the foreign country, its culture and language. A serious effort in this direction needs to be made; the ERASMUS programme had good intentions in this respect, but seems to have forgotten about them in practice.

My third suggestion here relates to linguistic diversity. Internationalisation requires more than one or two languages to be mastered. It simply is not enough that a university student masters his mother tongue and English or should I say again, bad English. Especially in a multilingual country like Belgium, but also in other countries, the student should be exposed to a variety of foreign languages. I therefor plead for at least including a third language in any academic curriculum.

Let us now turn to scientific research. A very first observation that needs to be made relates to the diversity between the various scientific research areas. The more 'exact' a science is, the bigger the influence of English becomes, natural sciences having the most, and humanities the least use of English. Therefore it is important to keep the policies at national and university level more general

and allow room for discipline-specific adjustments. English is the lingua franca in many areas of science and we may be happy with this or not, but it is a fact. In line with what I said previously, my suggestions take that fact as a starting point.

My first suggestion would be to keep all scientific areas at least open for the use of other languages than English. This entails that any scientific community has the responsibility to continue to develop the domestic scientific language, even if the main research is totally or partially carried out in English. This means that e.g. European or national funding programs would require not so much the research applications to be in national language, but that the results and the main findings of research would also be published in extensive domestic language publications. This is evident for dissemination of the findings, but should also be true for the research results as such. In case funding is directly made dependent on complementary publication in the domestic language, an important contribution to the development of the domestic language, and thus also to linguistic diversity may be expected. What is said for funding could also be repeated for taking into consideration peer reviewed publications.

The second suggestion related to research, would be to encourage in general scientists to deliver research results in the domestic language. This could be done by creating a fund for the translation of domestic publications into English or English language publications into the domestic language. Publications of scientific research in the domestic language could also be stimulated by creating awards or prizes to honour people or publications, which reflect the care for the development of domestic scientific language.

The third suggestion is related to what I said at the start of my discussion of scientific research: not all areas of science are anglicised to the same extent. What is more, it may even be less desirable to force a scientist to do research and publish for an international audience, as he or she should rather concentrate on domestic topics and make his/her results read by domestic policy makers. It is worrying to see that research focus, in certain scientific areas, has so much shifted o international topics, that whole areas most relevant inside one country, seem to be abandoned by scientific research . Let us give the example of public health economics, very relevant in all countries but very much connected to the domestic reality of hospitals, health care providers and national legislation. Examples could be multiplied: in nearly all sciences you have larger or smaller

pockets of topics with high domestic relevance, but less attractive for the modern scientist who is pressured to publish on the fashionable international topics of the moment. It is difficult to stop this creation of scientific outcast areas, but it might be useful to create funding reserved for research in the domestic language or to reserve part of European, national or university research funding for research in the domestic language on domestically highly relevant topics, which are not sufficiently present on the international scientific stage.

Let's look at two more general suggestions related to human resources, before turning to a final observation of what we can do.

Internationalisation means at many occasions that meetings will no longer be held in the domestic language as one or more participants are not mastering the language. The meeting is then held in English. This seems normal and natural, but probably restricts the ability of some others to fully engage in the discussions. This is often not enough taken into consideration. Meetings and documents with an official character, which create new rules, new rights and duties should however always be in the official, domestic language of the university. This is a requirement of democratic participation of all and in line with the public language policy of the state. Translations may possibly be provided, but then translation into the international, not into the domestic language!

The second remark is related to the first: internationalisation will indeed often mean that universities recruit their researchers and professors internationally. Arises then the question whether we should oblige the foreign recruited staff to know or learn the domestic official language of the university. I think we should indeed do so. This is self-evident when the recruited staff member is supposed to teach or do research in the domestic language, but also when he or she is only to teach in English and do research in this language, the basic knowledge of the domestic language will not only allow him/her to better interact with students and colleagues, but also to service the local community, which at the end of the day most often funds also his/her work. Moreover, can we really speak of an academic community, if some of its members cannot participate in the meetings, in the decision making or in the social life of the whole faculty and university? The pace in which and the degree to which a foreign colleague should master

the domestic language is of course open for discussion; that at a certain point in time this knowledge is to be proven, is not.

A final observation then, which also leads to an appeal to a different approach and more cooperation.

After all, now it seems that people taking up the defence of their own linguistic identity do so very often in their own narrow national context. Proud national associations for the defence of the national language will refuse to use any other language, as they consider this contrary to their own high mission. I think this is fundamentally wrong. The defence of the French language in France and indeed Belgium, is also of my concern, as is the promotion of the Danish in Denmark, or indeed the Dutch language in the Netherlands and Flanders. Making internationalisation and linguistic diversity go hand in hand, implies that those concerned with the defence of the own language and culture find each other, talk to each other, if need be in English, in order to promote the linguistic diversity. At a European level, partners will have to be sought to influence the EU's involvement in teaching and research. The aim will be to change the current *de facto* dominance of English, and to move towards an approach that better realises the 'unity in diversity' values that lie at the heart of the European Union. At an international level, partners will be sought to analyse – and as far as possible neutralise - the substantive impact of the dominance of English as a disciplinary language.

In our efforts for our own language, it should be only normal to bring together different people from a wide variety of countries to promote the national languages and identities, and in doing so we simultaneously demonstrate the power of international exchanges. This is yet another way of how internationalisation and the protection of the national language are inextricably bound together, and serve to make each other stronger.