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The impact of language policies at European, national and regional levels in Northern European universities

Introduction

In the context of small countries where the dominant language(s) are spoken by relatively small populations, multilingualism is not only an asset but a prerequisite for the community to interact with the rest of the world. Consequently, for the individual, mastering of more than one language is an asset, affecting career possibilities and cultural exchange. In the Nordic context, this asset is apparently today partly developing and partly under pressure. We argue that a domain that should be particularly supportive of multilingualism is higher education. University graduates are a vital resource for society and increasingly important in a knowledge based economy with its intense need for research results for both commercial products as well as knowledge production. Embedded in national and local settings they represent a wide linguistic variety. The main focus in this study is on the bilingual (Finnish/Swedish) University of Helsinki, its policies and their outcomes.

Questions addressed

The main questions addressed in the study evolved around language policies in higher education, their input, output and outcome, with an ambition to assess language use in practice in a university context.

Methods used

The research builds on a combination of methods. Our policy analysis distinguished between overtly stated policies and covert policies, brought up in interviews with leading administrators and university staff. Further methodological tools were brought in from social sciences, including sociologically attuned discourse analytical methods. Policy outcomes were analyzed through interviews and focus groups and by using

pragmatically enhanced discourse and conversation analysis.

Main results

In Northern Europe a new bilingualism based on national languages and English is emerging. The universities all have policies in regard to internationalization. However, there are also other policies that aim at maintaining a broader multilingualism, for example responding to traditional language repertoires present in the communities. EU-based policies focus on internationalization, whereas national policies are often responding to legal requirements to maintain linguistic rights. University policies tend to encompass these different dimensions, however not necessarily in a coherent way. At the surface, policy documents give an impression that the University of Helsinki presents an ideal case in terms of multilingualism and the adaption of EU's Barcelona objective of a one plus two languages competence. On the one hand, the university strives to foster internationalization. On the other hand, national policies require a support to the two national languages in Finland (Swedish and Finnish). This is also the reason for the bilingual status of University of Helsinki. However, whilst internationalization, predominantly through English, is increasing without strong policy guidance, the use of Swedish language in education is fighting an uphill battle in spite of rather strict policy guidance and new initiatives to strengthen the position of the language.

Also in other universities in Northern Europe we find an almost total predominance of English language in the measures aimed at internationalisation and mobility. English language dominates the supply of education developed for foreign students and other types of international exchange such as teacher mobility and research.

Orientation to policymakers

For the national policy makers, there is a problem in that a clear definition of how multilingualism should be defined does not exist. Although this lack can be viewed as enabling a more diverse interpretation of multilingualism is still presents a challenge for policymaking where definitions are vital. In the Nordic context we see the consequences of this in the fact that language policies at national level have usually not encompassed the 1+2 formula set by the EU.

In regard to education, the Bologna Process and related mobility schemes initiated at a European level have had considerable impact. This impact goes beyond the overt policy measures that have been established at national levels. However, other languages than English have not benefitted from such a development.

In regard to education in English language, the absence of requirements concerning the level of English that is used is counterproductive. A policy measure to counter this would be to introduce language teaching and language tests for teachers in higher education.

A misuse of resources was found as courses given in for example Swedish in Finland are not identified and used by students from other Nordic countries who could

benefit from them. Finnish students who could use these courses as part of a CLIL learning experience were not encouraged. However, there is an interest within the universities studied to take on to the CLIL idea. This could be further developed. The University of Helsinki Language Policy (2007) includes a perspective of higher education in the form of bi- or multilingual courses. This would give an incentive to speakers of different languages to improve their understanding of other languages used in the milieu. Existing skills among students should not be wasted but taken better care of by supporting more broadly the development of language skills in higher education.

In regard to language skills in society, we found several milieus in which language skills in (minority) languages are required in order to serve functions in these languages within all different sectors of society. Such is the situation for Swedish in Finland, for Sámi in Norway, Sweden and Finland, and (de facto) for Russian in Estonia. This is a central argument for maintaining education in and of these languages in higher education.

In regard to research and researcher mobility, English has become the dominant international language. Universities and national policy making bodies in all Nordic countries, and also the Nordic Council, have reacted to this by establishing programmes for the promotion of their languages in scientific publishing, alongside the publishing in English.

Speakers see their languages as important in their own right. However, there is a consciousness of that the future of these languages is not self-evident. Therefore their maintenance is something that has to be safeguarded. Today, internationalization based on the command of English is a serious competitor to national languages.

It goes without saying that the opportunity and capacity to use a given language is influencing the desire to use it – and vice versa. Whilst the language policies studied are often formulated in a commendable way, it is not clear what obligations they impose and how these shall be applied in practice.

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