

## Research news

### Tracing the causes of the rise of English as an international language

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#### The rise of English as an international language

The number of people who speak English around the world is now estimated to have surpassed two billion (Crystal and Potter 2020), a fourth of the world's population. There is considerable debate about the consequences of the global spread of English for polities, societies, cultures and other languages around the world. Whilst many express concerns over fairness and equity and the potential loss of local languages, cultures and knowledge, others emphasise the benefits of having a shared language and view English not as replacing but as enabling multilingualism by bringing together, physically and virtually, people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Linguists have recently sought to move beyond such debates by re-theorizing 'language' and 'linguistic norms' to make such concepts fit for purpose in a world where multilingual speakers, who have English as their second or foreign language, constitute the majority (Makoni and Pennycook 2006; Jenkins 2015; Li Wei 2018; Kimura and Canagarajah 2020).

Apt quote from Saloe himself: – “linguistic theory must be extended with credible ways of understanding human action and interpreting social phenomena to better grasp the interrelationship between language and society.”

[https://www.academia.edu/39009174/Thinking\\_about\\_language\\_with\\_Bourdieu\\_Pointers\\_for\\_social\\_theory\\_in\\_the\\_language\\_sciences?email\\_work\\_card=view-paper](https://www.academia.edu/39009174/Thinking_about_language_with_Bourdieu_Pointers_for_social_theory_in_the_language_sciences?email_work_card=view-paper)

Where to date most linguists have focused on the *consequences* of the rise of English, there has been a lot less progress in tracking its *causes*, possibly because it is seen as beyond the remit of Applied Linguistics. What we do know is that the spread of any language is intimately linked with the political and economic power of its speakers (Phillipson 1992). The arrival of the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes took English, or rather some form of it, to the British Isles in 449 AD. From the 17th century, British imperial expansion took the language to settlements around the globe; the industrial revolution from the 18th century solidified English as a language of scientific progress whilst the more recent rise of the US as a global superpower has reinforced its power and appeal. However, unlike in previous generations where power could be more easily associated with particular nation states, in our contemporary globalized world, power is much more diffuse, distributed and not easy to pin down. In this project, therefore, we will ask: Who, if anyone, makes decisions that cause the English language to spread, and what exactly are those decisions? Is it even possible to identify them?

#### English as a Medium of Instruction in Higher Education

To begin to tackle this monumental question, we will study a domain in which English has risen considerably in recent decades: higher education. The project sets out to identify, with greater precision than hitherto, the underlying drivers of the expansion of English as a Medium of Instruction in higher education. To do this, we will take a novel approach, which centres on two features:

Firstly, we will focus on *decision makers*, those in power, in our case, higher education policy makers and university leaders, rather than what has previously been the case in the English as a Medium of Instruction literature: lecturers and students. We believe it is by uncovering the priorities in contemporary academic governance that we can truly begin to understand what drives the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction. Our driving hypothesis is that English as a Medium of Instruction is at least partially an unintended consequence of an approach to university governance that focuses on key performance indicators, metrics and governance by numbers.

Secondly, we will adopt an interdisciplinary approach, borrowing theoretical and methodological frameworks from political science and applying them to linguistics. Political scientists have well-established ways of examining systems of governance and the actions of decision makers. Specifically, we will be using a combination of methods called process tracing and qualitative comparative analysis to systematically trace in a detective-like manner the (sometimes hidden) links between a decision and its outcome. We will ask questions like: Is the introduction of English-Medium Instruction encoded in institutional documents or does it happen as an unintended consequence of other decisions? Which academic governance systems are particularly conducive to driving English as a Medium of Instruction?

## **Outcomes**

For some time now, there have been calls for Applied Linguists to engage with the political economy to better understand the linguistic and communicative consequences of globalization (Block 2018; Ricento 2015). This project is an attempt to take this call seriously. We hope that the outcome will offer a better understanding of the factors that cause English, or any language, to spread, and what, if anything, can and should be done about it. Beyond addressing such questions that intrigue linguists, however, we also hope that the project will offer insights of broader relevance into how current modes of governance in higher education may have (perhaps unintended) linguistic, educational, professional and societal consequences. Through focusing on language shift in the higher education sector, we believe that Applied Linguists can reveal previously hidden decision-making processes and thereby make a valuable contribution to debates about the purpose and role of universities in contemporary society and how they are best governed.

## **The project**

The project '[English as a Medium of Instruction in European Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Europe and the UK](#)' is an interdisciplinary project that brings together linguists, political scientists and key stakeholders. Led by [Dr. Anna Kristina Hultgren](#), the project is funded with £1.4 million by the [UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship](#) scheme. It runs for four years 2020-2024, with the prospect of another three years funding 2024-2027. The project combines in-depth case studies in six universities in Europe with cross-case comparisons of fifteen universities. We are currently a team of six European collaborators, four international stakeholder organisations, and we are in the

process of recruiting two PhD students. We will recruit three postdoctoral research associates in the near future. If you are interested in working with us, please look out for opportunities on the BAAL mailing list.

## References

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