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New understandings of the rise of English as a medium of instruction in higher education: the role of key performance indicators and institutional profiling

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Abstract: The rise of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has prompted concerns over linguistic injustice, educational disadvantage, societal inequality and epistemic homogenization. As EMI tends to generate heated debates, its drivers need to be better understood. Borrowing conceptual frameworks from political science, this article proposes a new understanding of the drivers of EMI, pointing to the introduction of new steering tools in the 1980s to govern Europe’s higher education institutions. Conducting Process Tracing in a Dutch university, and drawing on document analysis and interviews with nine “elite participants” – Ministers of Education, University Rectors, Members of the University Executive Board, Faculty Deans and Programme Leaders – we argue that the very first EMI programme at our case university may be traced back to a set of governance reforms in the Dutch higher education sector that introduced key performance indicators and institutional profiling. Responding to calls for linguists to engage with the political economy, we identify previously under-illuminated links between political processes and EMI. We conclude that close attention to the political economy is key to understanding the rise of EMI, and more generally language shift, and ultimately to tackling linguistic injustice that may follow in its wake.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction; higher education governance reforms; institutional profiling; key performance indicators; linguistic injustice; steering tools

1 Introduction

The main drivers? Well, that’s a very interesting question because there is actually not much gusto for English as a Medium of Instruction. It’s precisely the other way around; there is only

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opposition against it and so who are the fools who have still managed to get it introduced against all odds?

Interview with Jo Ritzen, Dutch Minister of Education (1989–1998); President of Maastricht University (2003–2011).

Across the world's higher education institutions, lecturers, students and support staff are increasingly faced with having to teach, learn and interact in English – a language that for the vast majority is not their first. In Europe, where longitudinal data are most readily available, the number of English-taught programmes more than trebled in the seven years from 2007 (2,389 programmes) to 2014 (8,089 programmes) (Wächter and Maiworm 2014), with the number likely to be even higher today. Beyond Europe, a recent study identified 27,874 full masters and bachelor degree programmes taught in English at universities in the world's non-English dominant nation states (Mitchell 2021). This ongoing drive to English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has generated heated debates across the world, prompting concerns about inequity, injustice and disadvantage at a societal, educational, professional and individual level (De Costa et al. 2021; Dimova et al. 2015; Shohamy 2012).

In this paper, we suggest that a deeper understanding of the drivers of EMI is important in order to comprehend and, if deemed necessary, to tackle any linguistic injustice that may follow in its suit. In search of such deeper understandings, we are particularly interested in a previously under-illuminated link between EMI and higher education governance reforms centred on the introduction of key performance indicators and institutional profiling. Using as a case study the ascendance of EMI at a Dutch university in the mid-1980s, the paper borrows conceptual tools from political science to unpick and disentangle the governance reform processes that may have contributed to this university starting to offer EMI. Although many higher education systems in Europe have undergone similar reforms (de Boer and File 2009), the Netherlands was among the first to implement them, and also among the first to offer EMI, making it a particularly apt case to illustrate our argument. Drawing on a corpus of longitudinal national and institutional documentary data (1977–1999) and interviews with nine policy and decision makers, our analysis suggests that EMI may have been rendered possible, or been spurred on, by the introduction of new steering tools from the late 1970s and onwards to govern the Dutch higher education sector.

In analysing EMI within a context of political reform processes, we respond to calls for socio- and applied linguists to engage with the political economy in order to understand the rise of Global English, of which one aspect is EMI, and its consequences for linguistic justice (Block 2022, 2017; Duchêne 2020; Gal 1989; McElhinny 2015; O'Regan 2021). Duchêne (2020) argues that recent sociolinguistic

celebrations of multilingualism should “not divert attention away from broader inequalities, especially socioeconomic ones, that multilingualism is unable to address” (2020: 91). To many critical sociolinguists, a linguistics attuned to the political economy is one that puts neoliberalism at centre stage (Block 2017). Neoliberalism, the doctrine that has dominated the world in the past 40 years (Block 2018; Duchêne and Heller 2013; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner 2010; McElhinny 2015; Park and Wee 2012), is defined as follows by the human geographer David Harvey:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practises that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (2007: 2).

Sociolinguists sensitive to neoliberalism will look not only at the linguistic inequalities and injustices experienced by minoritized, racialized and otherized language users, but also at how those inequalities and injustices got there in the first place. Or, as McElhinny (2015), advocating for “a historical eye”, encourages us to ask: “Why this, why now?”. Borrowing conceptual frameworks from Political Science, as in this paper, allows us to explore “the relationship ... between the market and the state” and “understand how social institutions, their activities and capitalism interrelate” (Block 2017: 35).

In what follows, we will show that although the Dutch higher education institutions remain predominantly publicly funded and situated within the public governance domain, the reforms they have undergone since the late 1970s and 1980s have been underpinned by neoliberalist ideologies centred on loosening the regulatory grip of the nation state while putting into place steering tools and accountability mechanisms centred on incentivizing higher education institutions to be proactive and entrepreneurial and to compete for students and government funding.

2 Theoretical and methodological approach

Our approach is informed by theoretical and methodological frameworks from political science, based on two distinctive features: One is the use of “process tracing” and the other the reliance on “elite participants”. We discuss each in turn below.

Theoretically framed within critical realism (Bhaskar 2016), “process tracing” is a qualitative, case-based research method that traces the mechanisms between a cause (in this case: political reforms) and an outcome (in this case: EMI), identifying and disentangling the mechanisms that link them (Beach and Brun Pedersen 2019). Used in political science, psychology, business studies and other fields, this paper adopts an adapted version of process tracing used in political science to shed light on some (perhaps unintended) outcomes of political decisions (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Whilst process tracers vary in their approaches, most start out with hypothesizing a processual chain and then proceeding, in a way that can be likened to detective work, to collect data (“observables”) to empirically assess the validity of the hypothesized cause (Beach and Pedersen 2019).

To pre-empt objections from sceptics, we should make clear that tracing processes is not meant to imply linearity, nor does it rely on any simplistic conceptualization of social processes. We take as given that unlike the natural and physical world, the human and social world is notoriously complex with multiple factors at various levels coalescing to yield certain, often unpredictable, outcomes. Although we argue that EMI may be linked to higher education governance reforms and point to the encoding of these reforms in legal and political documents, it is important to note that the reforms did not take place at a single moment in time, nor was their implementation inevitable. Reforms are subject to interpretation, resistance and embracement by social actors and thus it is not a given that any reform or policy will have the outcomes that were intended. Nor is it the case that a reform will have a single outcome or that an outcome will have a single cause. We would, however, suggest, that the reforms we identify may have established a set of favourable conditions conducive to EMI.

Another distinctive feature of our political science approach is that our nine interviewees can be described as “elite participants”, here understood as powerful individuals who are involved in key decision making and policy processes that have consequences for others (Dexter 2006). Elite participants are often hard to access; however, they can hold the key to enriched understandings of the often-subtle ways in which power is wielded, the social world is shaped and inequities are formed and reproduced. In this article, our elite participants include a former Minister of Education, University Rectors, Faculty Deans, Programme Leaders and others involved in powerful positions of academic governance and higher education policy at the time when EMI came about in our case university. As most of the EMI literature to date has focused on lecturers and students, the perspective of “elite participants” has the potential to offer new understandings (see also Wilkinson 2014, 2016). Because of their high-profile and recognizable identity, some participants have opted to waive their right to

anonymity. In those cases, their real name is stated underneath their interview excerpt.

3 Governance reforms in Dutch higher education

In this section, we describe two political milestones in Dutch higher education that may have contributed to the rise of EMI in our case university. The first is the publication of the white paper “Higher Education; Autonomy and Quality”, HOAK for short, in 1985 (de Boer and van Vught 2016; Meertens 2011). This policy spearheaded the concept of “steering at a distance”, an approach to governance that increases the autonomy of higher education institutions while putting into place accountability mechanisms (de Boer and van Vught 2016). As de Boer and van Vught explain, the governmental micro-management that had prevailed until that point entailed “stringent regulations and extensive control mechanisms” (2016: 25). With the HOAK policy, however, this form of steering was abandoned in favour of the government stepping back and allowing the higher education institutions more room to make their own decisions (de Boer and van Vught 2016). The transition to “steering at a distance”, which took place in the Netherlands and other European nation states from the 1980s, was both ideologically and economically motivated. Ideologically, there was growing disillusion with and distrust in etatism – the authority of the state over the individual citizen – possibly influenced by the Reagan/Thatcher era in the US and the UK, and a resultant emergence of an economically motivated philosophy that the perceived inefficiency of public sector institutions should be remedied (Krüger et al. 2018). The reforms are premised on a neoliberal logic of creating entrepreneurial, proactive, efficient and dynamic universities (Clark 1998, 2004). Economically, there was increasing financial pressure on the system as a result of “massification”, i. e. increased demand for higher education (Trow 2006).

However, although government control in the Netherlands and elsewhere loosened in some areas, it tightened in others. Because “steering at a distance” is predicated on a neoliberal philosophy of “self-interested individuals and organizations and the role of material incentives in motivating them” (Dougherty and Natow 2020: 458), one of its key features is the introduction of accountability mechanisms or “performance indicators” (Minassians 2015), as reflected in concepts such as the “audit culture” (Shore and Wright 1999), the “evaluative state” (Neave 2012), and “governance by numbers” (Supiot 2015). This new performance culture was reflected also in how public universities were funded. Up until the 1960s, Dutch universities had simply been allocated funding on the basis of their declared spending (Jongbloed and Salerno 2003). Over time, however, as

neoliberalism tightened its grip over the sector, various other funding models were introduced and sharpened that made funding contingent upon the attainment of targets in both research and teaching (Jongbloed and Salerno 2003). In 1978, for example, the Dutch government began to distribute the higher education budget on the basis of a set of criteria, which included to some extent the number of students studying at the institution (Jongbloed and Salerno 2003). In 1983 the situation changed again with the introduction of the “Plaatsen Geld Model” (Place Money Model), which rewarded institutions with “active students”; thus drop-outs or students who take too long to complete their studies would have a negative effect on a university’s income. More students and more graduates would generate more income for an institution, whereas more dropouts would decrease it. This put pressure on universities to recruit more students, to ensure that they graduated within the set time, and that as few as possible dropped out.

The second political milestone was the Dutch government’s decision that all higher education institutions must draw up an institutional plan in response to the periodic governmental strategy for higher education, called *Hoger Onderwijsplan* (‘Plan for Higher Education’), later extended to *Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoeksplan* (‘Plan for Higher Education and Research’), better known as HOOP. This policy initiative aligns with the “steering at a distance” approach instigated by HOAK in that it requests higher education institutions to define their own institutional identity in Mission Statements and Annual Reports, within the parameters set out by the government’s HOOP. The underlying motivation was the government’s neoliberally predicated wish to enhance the “horizontal differentiation” (Clark 1983) in the system and strengthen the competition between higher education institutions (de Boer and van Vught 2016). The first HOOP was published in 1987, and in the early stages, HOOPs were published every two years, later every four years, with the institution’s development plans expected in the year following the government’s strategy.

Sijbolt Noorda, a key figure in Dutch higher education, whose roles have included President of the University of Amsterdam, President of the Association of Dutch Research Universities, Chair of Academic Cooperation Association, Board Member of the European University Association and President of the Magna Charta Observatory, remarks on institutional profiling as a key governance strategy of the time:

So instead of having a national system, where all study programmes and most research programmes were, in a way similar, and everywhere, and they were discussed in the National Rector’s conference, you now got a system where universities develop their own profile in a way, both in teaching and learning and in research.

In the next section, we will show how the new climate of “steering at a distance” using key performance indicators and institutional profiling as steering tools may have contributed to our case university starting to offer EMI.

4 Linguistic consequences of political reforms: EMI at a Dutch university

Within the new performance culture, a parliament-imposed target was set in December 1978 for our case university to recruit 6,000 students by 1990. This target is frequently referenced in the university’s annual reports in the late 1970s and 1980s. Although there is no evidence of the target being directly linked with the government funding model at the time, it may have come about in parallel with the introduction of the new performance-related funding models described above (while the annual reports do not make an explicit link between the 6,000 target and the funding model, they do mention financial challenges). The target may also have partly arisen as a result of pressure from other Dutch universities who feared the impact of an additional university on their own student recruitment. Some would have hoped that the university would fail to meet the target, thus imperilling its existence.

The pressure to recruit students comes out clearly in interviews with those involved in the management of the university at the time. There is no indication, however, that recruitment should be international. However, because the university felt that the Dutch-speaking student market (which included those in the nearby region, other Dutch provinces and Dutch-speaking students from Flanders in Belgium) had been exhausted, it was decided to seek to attract students from neighbouring French-speaking Belgium and Germany. This could only be achieved by implementing programmes with English as the course language. Thus, the university’s first EMI programme was launched, and possibly among the first in the Netherlands and Europe. The programme in question was a first degree programme in International Management, offered by the Economics Faculty, which would lead to an MA in Economics (see Wilkinson 2013 for a fuller account). The programme was designed to benefit from cooperation with Aachen University in Germany and Liège University in Belgium, although neither university had much say in the design or form of this cooperation. The initiative was clearly taken by our case university. After an initial phase in Dutch, the programme would be taught mainly in English, with some courses offered in French in Liège and in German in Aachen (Wilkinson 2013).

Reflecting on the significance of the new climate of key performance indicators, a member of the University's Executive Board at the time remarks:

This [key performance indicators] was extremely important. At the time at the end of the 1980s/1990s the university had to satisfy to the Second Chamber a key performance indicator which was that there should at least be 6,000 students. [...] Very early it became clear that that would not be the case because one had insufficient numbers of Dutch-speaking students. And so I think the English part was really essential in getting to that target and 6,000 students was achieved in 1991, I think, or even before.

(Member of the University Executive Board at the time)

Jo Ritzen, preferring to use the more positive term “university autonomy” than the interviewer's term “new public management”, similarly recognizes that this created a climate in which universities could be entrepreneurial and innovative and offer new programmes taught in English:

That [enhanced university autonomy] made a huge difference. And indeed since the Netherlands has one of the most autonomous university systems that contributed to the Dutch taking a lead in the use of English in universities.

(Interview with Jo Ritzen, Dutch Minister of Education (1989–1998); President of Maastricht University (2003–2011).

Ritzen was an early and avid proponent of Dutch universities providing education in English but his ideas met with much opposition (Ritzen 2004).

Initially, these novel and more pro-active student recruitment strategies by our case university seem to have played only a minor role in meeting the 6,000 target. The Annual Reports show that only 1.7% of the students were non-Dutch in 1990. Nevertheless, the EMI programme was perceived at the time as a significant and successful initiative. A professor at the time referred to it as a “resounding success” (Klijn 2016: 187). According to the same source, the English-taught programme had strong support from the region and industry as well as students as it enabled the faculty to distinguish itself from other faculties in the Netherlands by turning “our attention beyond Dutch borders” (Klijn 2016).

What has been argued so far is that student recruitment targets set at the national level seem to have incentivised our case university to tap into new student markets, in this case beyond the Dutch-speaking communities, leading to the birth of the first EMI programme. Spurred on by HOOP's requirement for universities to develop an institutional profile, the university then capitalized on this successful initiative and decided to create an institutional profile around “internationalization”. The 1985 Annual Report features discussions around the expansion of Economics programmes with the two key words “international” and “European” (p. 38–39), and there were discussions also in the Faculty of Law about a

“European variant”. The subsequent Annual Report of 1986 (p. 20) reports on the Law Faculty making “internationalization” a key strategy for the first time, emphasizing links with the University of Lancaster in the UK. A *Commissie Buitenland* (‘foreign countries committee’) was set up and worked out an ambitious plan that all students should spend time at a foreign university and that foreign students should spend a year at our case university.

In further efforts to develop this “international” profile, the well-known scholar in intercultural communication, Geert Hofstede, was brought in along with other professorial candidates with strong international profiles. According to those involved in the senior management at the time, Hofstede played a key role in further developing the English-taught programme in International Management. Klijn reports Hein Schreuder, who was a senior decision maker at faculty level and instrumental in the recruitment of Geert Hofstede: “Geert was a big name in the field of comparative cultural studies. The fact that Hofstede was willing to come to [case university] represented an ‘incredible opportunity’” (2016: 187). By 1999/2000, the faculties began to expand international recruitment from Germany and Belgium in particular, attending educational fairs, etc. and by the mid-1990s this had been extended to other countries as well.

The success of our case university’s EMI programme did not go unnoticed as universities elsewhere in the Netherlands also began to introduce EMI programmes in business and economics, notably Groningen, Rotterdam (Erasmus), Nijmegen and Tilburg (Wilkinson 2013). This suggests that other universities may follow suit when EMI is introduced, and that it may have a “contagious” or “inspirational” effect. Indeed, internationalization is now a defining feature of many universities across the world but for our case university to have adopted an institutional profile around “international” in the mid-1980s was unusual and certainly earlier than other Dutch universities. As a former Head of Department and Member of the University Council remarks:

[the university] had to fight its place into the academic scenery in the Netherlands. And one way to do it is to create a competitive advantage by going international sooner.

(Interview with Former Head of Department).

Spurred on by HOOP’s biannual request for higher education institutions to strengthen their profile, our case university increasingly sharpened its profile around “internationalization” over the years. Mentions of the university as an “international” and “European” university occur with increasing frequency in Annual Reports from the early 1980s and, by the 1990s, “internationalization” has taken a priority positioning in Annual Reports. Although initial student numbers for the first English-taught programme were low, they quickly grew, almost

doubling year on year, so that by 1999, two thirds of the intake was from non-Dutch areas (Wilkinson 2013). To this date, our case university remains the most internationalized in the Netherlands, measured in terms of proportion of international students (10,910 [55%] in 2020) and on the Times Higher Education internationalization score (98 out of max 100) (Universiteiten van Nederland 2022a, 2022b).

5 Conclusion: interdisciplinary ways forward

In this article, we have sought to shed some new light on the drivers of EMI, and more broadly the rise of English as a global language. We have showed how borrowing conceptual tools from political science can extend and deepen the important work already undertaken by critical sociolinguists to understand how the rise of English is inextricably linked with developments in the political economy (Block 2022, 2018; Duchêne and Heller 2013; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner 2010; McElhinny 2015; O'Regan 2021; Park and Wee 2012). Specifically, we have shed new light on the drivers of EMI in higher education, pointing to the role of governance reforms and the introduction of new steering tools such as key performance indicators and institutional profiling. We have argued that these steering tools, premised on a neoliberal logic of market competition for funds and students and institutional branding, played an influential role for EMI to emerge and thrive in our case university. As our focus has been on one particular university, this inevitably restricts the generalizability of the findings because the process for other universities and nation states is likely to be different. It is possible, for instance, that the geographical position of our case university, and its nearby borders to two other European countries, may have played a role in the perceived need to offer English-taught programmes as way of attracting students speaking one of the languages of the neighbouring countries. That EMI found this place – it could have been something else – therefore has a lot to do with local contexts and local institutional support. Had the initial programmes not been successful, then an entirely different story might have unfolded. There is something of being in the right place at the right time, but also recognizing that the conditions are conducive. It is noteworthy, for example, that the Economics Faculty that launched the EMI programme was actually working on two separate plans for bringing in a Business Management track to Economics (the faculty recognized that more students in the Netherlands opted for Business studies than economics); however only Hofstede's plan involved internationalization and teaching in English, which is what was chosen. This underscores the necessity of undertaking case-by-case and in-depth research into EMI drivers and processes. Nevertheless, while the specific causes of EMI will necessarily vary across institutions and nations, the principles of many of

the political reforms apply across Europe with “steering at a distance” now being the dominant philosophy of national governments’ approach to their higher education systems (de Boer and File 2009). This study, therefore, might serve as an encouragement to conduct further interdisciplinary work into how national reform processes centred on granting higher education institutions greater autonomy may play a role in driving the rise of English as a Medium of Instruction, a hitherto under-illuminated perspective in the EMI literature. We would suggest that unearthing the processes between political reforms and linguistic outcomes serves an important function to critical sociolinguists like ourselves as it may help pinpoint with greater precision the workings of neoliberalism and serve as an important step towards understanding and ultimately redressing linguistic and other injustices.

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