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# The (in)justice of EMI: a critical discourse analysis of two key stakeholders' views on the Polytechnic University of Milan court case

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**Abstract:** While English-medium Instruction (EMI) continues to be appealing for various stakeholders, it also raises some epistemological and ethical concerns, which have in the past found expression in polarized debates. A well-known example is the 2012 Milan court case, in which the academic staff sued the Polytechnic University of Milan over its attempt to promote an EMI-only policy. Now almost ten years after the case, the motivations of the key proponents and opponents of the policy are yet to be explored in depth. In order to explain how different interpretations of EMI could result in such unreconcilable positions, in this paper we adopt a new analytical angle, focusing on two *elite participants*: the rector who promoted the policy and the lawyer (also a faculty member) who represented the lecturers in court. Via a critical discourse analysis of interviews to these participants, we aim to unveil how different stakeholders from the same context frame EMI in relation to ideas of justice/injustice. Results indicate that, despite comparable personal commitment to education and similar understandings of language/power interactions, the participants evaluate English against different frames of reference (i.e. a horizon of globalized education, versus the traditional national understanding of the goals of education). This leads to diametrically opposite evaluations of the growing presence of English in higher education.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis; EMI; higher education; language policy; linguistic injustice

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**Abstract:** Sebbene l'English-medium Instruction (EMI) continui ad essere attrattiva per vari attori, essa solleva anche questioni etiche ed epistemologiche, che in passato hanno trovato espressione in aspri dibattiti. Un noto esempio è rappresentato dalla caso di Milano del 2012, in cui lo staff accademico fece causa al Politecnico di Milano per il suo tentativo di promuovere una politica di esclusivo EMI. Ormai a quasi dieci anni dal caso, le motivazioni dei principali sostenitori e oppositori dell'iniziativa rimangono ancora parzialmente inesplorate. Al fine di spiegare come differenti interpretazioni dell'EMI abbiano potuto sfociare in posizioni talmente inconciliabili, in questo studio si adotta una nuova prospettiva analitica, concentrata su due *partecipanti élite*: il rettore che promosse la politica e l'avvocata (lei stessa appartenente al corpo accademico) che rappresentò gli accademici in corte. Lo scopo è quello di rivelare, tramite un'analisi critica del discorso delle interviste di questi partecipanti, come attori provenienti dallo stesso contesto posizionino l'inglese in relazione a idee di giustizia/ingiustizia. I risultati indicano che, nonostante un comparabile impegno personale verso istruzione e una simile comprensione delle interazioni lingua/potere, i partecipanti giudicano l'inglese sulla base di diversi quadri di riferimento (ossia un orizzonte di istruzione globalizzata, contro i valori nazionali tradizionalmente attribuiti all'istruzione). Questo a sua volta risulta in valutazioni antitetiche della crescente presenza dell'inglese nell'istruzione superiore.

**Parole chiave:** analisi critica del discorso; EMI; ingiustizia linguistica; istruzione universitaria; politica linguistica

## 1 Introduction

By decreeing illegitimate the exclusive adoption of English-medium Instruction (EMI) at universities in 2018, Italy became one of the few countries to formally rule against the spread of English in national higher education. The casus belli was the approval, in 2012, of a Polytechnic University of Milan policy which aimed for exclusive EMI at the master and doctoral level. The policy generated great resistance among the academic staff and a polarized debate joined by academics, politicians, students, and the Accademia della Crusca language society, which reached international news outlets (e.g. University World News, BBC, Universitetsläraren). After 100 professors petitioned at the local administrative court against the policy, the case came to involve the Council of State<sup>1</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> National body with advisory and jurisdictional functions, which can be called on to express a second-degree judgement on verdicts returned by the administrative regional courts (TAR). See also

Constitutional Court.<sup>2</sup> The rector who had promoted the policy maintained that such an initiative was anchored in the most recent Italian reform of the education system (the 240/2010 law), which, among other things, aimed to promote internationalization. Conversely, the Council of State and Constitutional Court deliberated that, while the use of foreign languages in education represents a useful tool, the complete exclusion of Italian could not be considered in line with the Italian Constitution.

The Polytechnic of Milan case resolved now over five years ago, but language remains a current topic in Italy. In 2022, now Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni advocated for a constitutional reform that explicitly recognized Italian as the national language and for a motion for the exclusive use of Italian in official national documents.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, looking specifically at EMI, while positive attitudes are reported in the literature by various stakeholders, these are also accompanied by remarks on the pedagogical and professional complexities that EMI entails (e.g. Zuaro 2022a). Overall, despite having one of the highest numbers of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe, as of 2024 Italy scores below average in the percentage of HEIs that actually offer EMI.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while in the last decades EMI has certainly made inroads in Italy, it remains a somewhat limited phenomenon.

Italy is not the only case of mixed reactions, as EMI often triggers discussions around the defence of the local languages and cultures (e.g. Gabriëls and Wilkinson 2020). On the one end, in its role of lingua franca English facilitates international communication (e.g. Van Parijs 2011); however, English has also been described through a plethora of negative metaphors (see Hultgren [2020] for a summary) to emphasize its potentially threatening role towards non-Anglophone academics and learners, non-Anglo-American epistemologies, and other languages. These discussions often tackle questions of cultural hegemony and social and linguistic injustice seemingly for two main reasons: firstly, that the use of English as the communication tool is frequently not optional, but mandated through overt or covert policies; secondly, that, due to its specific connection to the Anglo-American society and culture, English cannot be considered a ‘neutral’ communication tool (e.g. Kuchah 2018; Zuaro 2022b, forthcoming). Overall, if linguistic justice is

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[https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_14\\_3\\_1.page?contentId=GLO52998&previousPage=mg\\_14\\_3#](https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_14_3_1.page?contentId=GLO52998&previousPage=mg_14_3#) (last accessed 3 July 2024).

2 National body of constitutional guarantee which, among its duties, operates a constitutionality review of national and regional laws. See also [https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/jsp/consulta/istituzioni/introduzione\\_EN.do](https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/jsp/consulta/istituzioni/introduzione_EN.do) (last accessed 3 July 2024).

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIAeISle2sQ> (last accessed 3 July 2024).

4 For example, below France, Germany, Spain, and Greece. Data obtained and analysed as reported in Wingrove et al. (under review).

understood as the right to express oneself in the language(s) that allow such expression to the fullest (Moreno Cabrera 2006), it may be clear how the dominant use of English in academia, as well as other areas of society, can affect the “parity of participation” (Fraser 2007) and trigger discourses of injustice.

Research on linguistic injustice often maintains a focus on grassroots forms of resistance. In EMI literature, this seems to have led to prioritizing students and lecturers, overlooking other categories of stakeholders. Policy makers, however, can play a crucial role in both resisting and reinforcing mechanisms of injustice. Their perspectives hold potentially unique insight into why and how certain decisions are made in higher education. Therefore, in the present article we target specifically stakeholders who can be considered elite actors (Beach and Pedersen 2019), or individuals with a unique positioning in terms of agency or knowledge in a particular process.

We, thus, return to the case of the 2012 Milan litigation, focusing on one elite participant from each side of the controversy: the rector of the Polytechnic who promoted the EMI-only policy and the lawyer (also a member of the academic staff) who mainly represented the petitioners in court. Via the novel involvement of elite participants, whose voices have not been represented in previous analyses, we aim to shed some light, rather than on the court case’s outcome, on the deeper causes for the ideological clash behind it (cf. Molino and Campagna 2014; Murphy and Zuaro 2021; Pulcini and Campagna 2015; Santulli 2015; Zuaro et al. 2022). To that end, in this paper we investigate which discourses are made relevant by elite participants in the discussion of English in higher education and how these relate to perceptions of social (in)justice. In this way, we aim to clarify how the adoption of EMI can be framed in very different, sometimes seemingly unreconcilable, ways.

## 2 Literature review

While it is hardly controversial to claim an inter-dependent relationship between language and society, the nature of such dependency is still the object of debate. For example, on the one hand, there is significant evidence of connections between language and various types of social injustices: minorities can face oppression on the basis of their use of language (e.g. Dovchin 2020; May 2012) and, in education, language can represent an instrument of social division and inequality in learning (e.g. Kamwendo et al. 2014; Kuchah 2018). On the other hand, it has been argued that language is often not the cause of social inequality, but rather a symbol or catalyst of other social anxieties (Hultgren 2019, 2020; drawing on Cameron 2012), thus representing “an epiphenomenon of a problem that is fundamentally non-linguistic” (Mufwene 2014: 921).

Nevertheless, whether by triggering specific discriminations, or by becoming a function of other social injustices, in academia “language is a key resource that rests at the centre of social inequalities” (Soler 2021: 165). English, for example, can unjustly be framed as a proxy for competence, belittling the knowledge and skills of the non-Anglophones. Thus, individuals who are less proficient in English may see their professionalism, competence or education questioned (e.g. Haidar 2019; Zuaro Forthcoming) and even proficient professionals may internalize nativist ideologies and struggle to recognize themselves as experts (e.g. Nygaard 2019). Similarly, education offered in English may inherently be regarded as qualitatively better (e.g. Lanvers 2021) and Anglophone research communities as more worth addressing (e.g. Harbord 2017). As one result of this mechanism, English can be framed discursively as overpowering other languages by virtue of its prestige, generating much academic reflection around language endangerment and its causes (e.g. Hultgren 2020, 2021; Lanvers 2021). Furthermore, because not all communities have equal access to English learning and, through it, to prosperous education or employment (Ricento 2015), English can also be associated to discourses of gate-keeping. In academia, career progression is often tied to publication in high-ranking journals that only accept manuscripts in English (Harbord 2017; Soler 2020). As a result, “many scholars that come from [non-Anglo-American] sociolinguistic, cultural, and geographical positions will continue to face bigger challenges in order to join their discourse communities of reference and to be seen as legitimate participants in them” (Soler 2021: 166).

Such discussions are generated by the particular position of English as a global communication tool. Despite the paradigmatic shifts in linguistics away from monolithic views of English and towards English as a lingua franca (ELF) or World Englishes (WE), an understanding of ‘English’ as the Anglophone native standard survives, even in diverse and international academic settings (e.g. Jenkins and Mauranen 2019). This is perhaps because, while conceptualizations like ELF move the focus to the actual communicative needs and dynamics among speakers (Smit 2010), potentially positioning all speakers on more level ground, they have been argued to not completely erase the privileges enjoyed by those perceived as speakers of the ‘native standard variety’ (De Schutter 2018; Jenkins 2007; Van Parijs 2011). It is then possible that the empirical experience of linguistic challenges and injustices, combined with limited access to the specialized sociolinguistic discussion, may continue to reinforce polarized and stereotypical views of language and its role in international communication.

Overall, English, in its most monolithic view, is likely conflated with quality and authority as a result of the global influence of the Anglo-American economy

and culture (see e.g. the connection between the global spread of English and the global spread of capital identified by O'Regan [2021]). Thus, English is often associated with discourses of progress, prosperity and utility, that can even assume a “relationship between English proficiency and economic development of a country” (Kuchah 2018: 41). With education being significantly affected by the economic neoliberal turn (Tavares 2022), the use of certain languages can itself be legitimized by criteria established in the global economic sphere (Holborow 2015), rather than in the education one. This process, too, reinforces the position of English as the perceived language of science, to a point where policies at universities can invoke the adoption of English without necessarily having to explain why (e.g. Zuaro et al. 2022). Furthermore, even when the promotion of English is declaredly motivated by language learning aims, or justified by the communicational function of English as lingua franca, in reality it can still subtend economic and political goals (Hultgren 2021).

The connections between the spread of English and social injustice complicate the contemporary phenomenon of the English-mediated internationalization. Recent research suggests that, at least in certain contexts, local discussions around internationalization may rely on the discursive superstructures of globalization and national security (Eder 2020). Both globalization and national security are concerned with national development, but the first mobilizes (and legitimizes) neoliberal ideologies of inevitable reality, whilst the second is based on the idea of nation as a “regime of truth” (Eder 2020, drawing on Ball 2015). Regimes of truth “offer the terms that make self-recognition possible” (Butler 2008: 22, in Ball 2015). Nations (here intended as the governmental, legal, and traditional context of a community), thus, fulfil this role by defining which discourses are accepted as legitimate within their society. When it comes to legitimizing higher education policies, globalization and national security can become dichotomous: the first will motivate certain choices by noting that globalization is the reality of the world, whereas the latter will establish the rightness or wrongness of such choices against the specific context of the national identity. Thus, when it comes to assessing the legitimacy of EMI in local higher education, the national regime of truth has a clear potential to clash with the inevitable reality of globalization.

The Polytechnic of Milan controversy seems an expression of such a clash. In the rest of this paper, we analyse this case in terms of the dominant discourses on either side of the debate, as represented by the elite participants of the rector and the lawyer. Our aim is to clarify why the proposed switch to EMI was considered by some the best way to fulfil the mission of the university and safeguard access to quality education, and by others an unnecessary instrument of injustice and exclusion.

### 3 Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is characterized by a view of language and society as inextricably intertwined, by a focus on power relations, and by a critical approach to methodology, whereby different methods can be adopted to offer a critique of social phenomena (Fairclough et al. 2011). Thus, while CDA encompasses a variety of theoretical and methodological models, “what unites them is a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, and political-economic, social or cultural change in society” (Wodak 2012: 627). In CDA, discourses are seen as representing knowledge about a particular topic at a particular point in time, thus providing access to the meaning of certain social practices. Typical Foucauldian approaches frame this relationship as mutually constitutive: discourse constructs the object itself, thus allowing or limiting the possibilities to understand it (Foucault 1972). Such approaches, however, can imply a rejection of realism and a discursive determinism that may be difficult to reconcile with CDA’s aspiration to challenge dominant discourses. Other positions, while still considering discourses a key embodiment of transitive knowledge, attribute less autonomous powers to them. Critical realism (Bhaskar 1998), for example, develops a transcendental argument whereby it is necessary to not only unravel the discursive fabric, but also investigate how it interacts with social structures and causal mechanisms (Joseph and Roberts 2004). This type of approach offers an alternative to discourse-reductionism, while still viewing discourse as an access point to the subjectivities of particular social contexts. The critical component remains an important focus, in that “these constructive subjectivities [can] entail an epistemological distortion about the intransitive ordering of society which works in the interests of a specific social group” (Joseph and Roberts 2004: 4). In the present paper, our use of CDA is theoretically informed by the critical realist position.

The adoption of CDA is not devoid of complexities. For example, through an extensive analysis of Education literature, Rogers et al. (2005) identified some weaknesses in CDA research, such as: lack of a clearly described linguistic framework; limited focus to how power is reproduced rather than resisted; lack of development from reflection to reflexivity. CDA has naturally continued to develop since then; nonetheless, Rogers et al.’s recommendations remain valuable for current research and (in combination with Mullet [2018] and Machin and Mayr [2023]) have informed our analytical procedures. Our case study is indeed one of resistance, originating from a bottom-up initiative; however, we deliberately focus on both sides of the debate, to encompass reproduction of power as well. Additionally, the co-authorship between researchers from different personal and professional backgrounds is meant to achieve meaningful reflexivity, through the

strengthening of rigour and authenticity (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). Regarding the lack of theoretical coherence between the identification of linguistic resources and their connection to social practices, which Rogers et al. judge the “weakest link” (Rogers et al. 2005: 386) in the studies examined, our analysis proceeded to connect methodologically and conceptually the participants’ linguistic features to broadly circulating discourses that connect English and (in)justice. This was achieved through the deployment of Van Leeuwen’s (2007) legitimation framework, as described next.

### 3.1 Dataset and analysis

Data for this study were collected in the context of fieldwork for the ELEMENTAL<sup>5</sup> research project. The rector and the lawyer were involved as a result of purposeful sampling (Creswell and Plano-Clark 2011). Both took part in audio-recorded semi-structured interviews in their native language (i.e. Italian): they were initially asked to offer a recount of the events of the court case, asked some pertinent questions, and offered the opportunity to discuss and expand on any aspect that they deemed relevant. The resulting interviews spanned around 30 min for the rector and 60 for the lawyer. Both interviewees signed a participation consent and, acknowledging that their role in the debate inevitably made them recognizable, waived their right to anonymity. Nonetheless, personal information not key to the study is withheld.

After transcription, the interviews were analysed with the assistance of NVivo. First, the material was analysed according to Van Leeuwen’s (2007) legitimation framework, in which he draws on Weber’s (1964) idea that every system of authority seeks to further its own legitimacy, as well as on Berger and Luckmann’s notion that legitimation “‘explains’ the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 111). In the present study, instances of (de)legitimation in the participants’ interviews are considered access points to discourses of legitimacy, fairness, justice (or lack thereof). Legitimation speech in the interviews was, thus, identified and classified; however, in line with the aims of CDA, the analysis did not seek to offer a quantification or description of the various kinds of legitimation featured in the data, as much as to identify how particular events or practices were indeed (de)legitimized according to the participants’ perspectives. Therefore, as a second analytical step, all identified

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<sup>5</sup> English as the Language-of-Education Mechanisms in Europe: New Transdisciplinary Approaches in Linguistics.



excerpts were reviewed through multiple rounds of close reading to identify connections with circulating discourses connecting English and (in)justice.<sup>6</sup>

This research design features some key methodological advantages: the adoption of an established linguistic framework makes the analysis more rigorous, potentially facilitating replicability. Additionally, the focus on elite participants, original to this study vis-à-vis previous recounts of the case in the literature (e.g. Molino and Campagna 2014; Murphy and Zuaro 2021; Pulcini and Campagna 2015; Santulli 2015; Zuaro et al. 2022), provides unique insight into the motivations behind the controversy and into the two sides of the debate. Results from the analysis are presented in the Section 4.

## 4 Results

The analysis revealed that both participants framed their conduct primarily as a means to further the interests of the students, the institution, and the nation. They also highlighted how this had come at a personal cost (e.g. “the government, the newspapers, and partially many colleagues too, they attacked us in such a manner [...]. They told us we were reactionaries, that we were – essentially – fascists” #1, lawyer; “[I was] accused of insulting the Constitution, genocide of the Italian language...” #2, rector).<sup>7</sup> Despite these commonalities, these actors’ attitudes often appeared to be diametrically opposed: the same practice was evaluated in opposite ways, against the same purpose. In the next sections, we offer an overview of the dominant discourses identified in the interviews, showcasing how they are used to (de)legitimize the drastic adoption of English in Italian HE, presenting it as an act of (in)justice.

### 4.1 English as a necessity

The seemingly self-evident necessity of English features prominently in the rector’s interview, as something that cannot be helped.

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<sup>6</sup> We acknowledge the complexities of the interview as a data generation method, therefore data transcripts from this study will be made available at <https://www.emieurope.org/> (the rector and the lawyer identified as P2 and P3, respectively), to facilitate contextualization where necessary.

<sup>7</sup> All excerpts are translated into English by the corresponding author. Originals are omitted due to space constraints.

We believe that in order to keep the good students at the Polytechnic, it is necessary to have international classes. In this historical phase, this unfortunately entails knowledge of the English language. I speak Italian and English, so I would have preferred that Italian was enough, but English is preferable. (#3, rector)

In my professional life, that is the situation; so I do not try to change it, I have to accept it. (#4, rector)

According to the rector, the EMI-only policy represented a response to a “potential competitive threat”, a “strategic decision”, not only to attract good students, but also to hire international faculty, given that “having only courses in Italian would have strongly limited [the university’s] ability to attract lecturers” (#5). The strict need for English is instead delegitimized by the lawyer, who rejects this discourse on multiple levels, stating that “universities have always been international, they were born international” (#6), and that “if I teach medicine or engineering at an Italian university, I need to entertain a relationship with the territory as well” (#7).

Small detail here, one says: [English] is the lingua franca of research, of teaching, of conferences, and so on. Well, look at what Nature is doing though, which is one of the most prestigious scientific journals. A while back, Nature decided to make Nature Italy, which is indeed the version in Italian. Nature does it, but we want to move in an obstinate and contrary direction [...].? These are the things that I really don’t understand. It could be – I repeat, English is a good thing and who can deny that. If we had five languages that everybody learns since elementary school, that would be even better. (#8, lawyer)

It should be noted that, if the rector to an extent disregards the possible impacts of prioritizing international faculty and good students, the lawyer, in turn, somewhat overlooks that *Nature Italy* is not a peer-reviewed journal of primary research.

Overall, in the case of the rector, the discourse seeing English as a necessity is reinforced; the frame is mainly one of instrumentality. The lawyer resists this by seemingly attributing higher importance to the interests of the local context and to linguistic diversity, than to the advantages that English can provide.

## 4.2 English signifying quality/internationalization

Discourses conflating English with internationalization or with quality and competence are notoriously present in HE. Traces of them can be found in the rector’s talk in statements such as “in Scandinavian countries English was already widespread, so the international opening was almost natural” (#9) or “the better students, who had higher marks in the BA, enrolled in the international class. The Italian[-medium] class tended to become a class of students somehow less culturally open” (#10).

The lawyer, conversely, distinguishes between English proficiency and other professional abilities, seemingly also separating language from the knowledge it communicates.

I believe it has made way in the minds of many, whether they are willing to accept it, or to confess it, that quality is necessary in research and in teaching, and that language is a medium, not the thing itself. (#11, lawyer)

If I am a constitutionalist, well I need to be evaluated for my knowledge and maybe for the novelty of the ideas I produce on constitutional law, not for the fact that I have someone translate my article and then publish it on an international journal. (#12, lawyer)

Stemming from her rejection of the conflation between English and quality, the lawyer also questions the uncritical attribution of prestige to English (e.g. “One simply says *Jobs act*<sup>8</sup> and thinks: mmm there must be something good about this, it is even said in English. *Smart* is cool, isn’t it? No, it’s not bloody cool; go and read what it actually says” #13) and connects it to recursive reproductions of epistemic and social injustice.

The [evaluation] criteria are pointless, including: how many EMI courses do you have? How many international students do you have? But what does this have to do with you offering good teaching or good research? (#14, lawyer)

If you’re attending a conference, or if you want to write for a scientific journal that you like, because you want to be global [...], then of course you write in English. But that’s a different thing. However, colleagues rightfully tell you: sorry, but if I write [in Italian] it’s worth a 2 [for our evaluation committees], [in English] a 4. Then of course I’m led to make that choice. But, again, it’s not a fact of nature, we chose this. (#15, lawyer)

English is not enough, because you have to ensure the quality of your research and of your teaching; that your lecturers and researchers are adequately compensated; that your students can live in a friendly atmosphere, not oppressed by high living costs, by rents, distance, etc. These are, in my opinion, the things that make a university a university where it is nice to study, to work, where one goes to try and express oneself to best of their possibilities, both as a researcher and as a student. (#16, lawyer)

In these excerpts, again, the lawyer seems to evaluate the legitimacy and justice of certain practices against the context of national higher education and society, beyond the single horizon of the Polytechnic. This difference in the two interviewees is reflected in how the Anglo-American influence in global HE is framed as either participatory or exclusionary. The rector considers Italian an obstacle to

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<sup>8</sup> Informal name of a controversial reform of the Italian labour law, inspired by the homonymous reform promoted by Obama in America, despite significant differences between the two.

international participation in the local system, implicitly framing English as a participatory resource. The lawyer, on the contrary, mentions that the positioning of English and of American quality indicators as criteria of merit generates exclusion, resulting in disadvantage for non-Anglophone institutions.

[For the purpose of having an international class] this language requirement – to have an in-depth knowledge of Italian – became somehow limiting. (#17, rector)

It's like when we say that universities are ranked according to criteria established at Yale. Well, no; if we're playing, the rules must be the same for everybody. We don't start from criteria established at Yale; we all agree on the criteria on equal ground. Otherwise, I'm sorry, but there's always someone starting from 100 m ahead. (#18, lawyer)

Both of these perspectives arguably hinge on the need to safeguard the institution's interests; however, they end up with opposite conclusions.

### 4.3 English as a threat

The lawyer's attention for the broader national context appears to result in discourses that dichotomize English and Italian. This seems not exclusive to HE (e.g. "Why do you have to call *made in Italy* '*made in Italy*'? Why do you have to change the meaning of words? [...] Why do we have to say *babysitting*, why do we have to say *lockdown*, do we not have words in Italian?" #19), but it is framed as especially significant in that context.

If you renounce speaking your language at a high level, and so renounce speaking your language in the places in which ideas are by definition produced – because that is what universities should be [...]. If you only speak another language there, no longer your own language, your language will regress, maybe not in the very short term, but in the medium term, certainly it regresses to dialect. Not to mention the long term. In my opinion, one of the notions that truly emerged in this battle is that of linguistic biodiversity. I mean that we protect [...] the [Fossa] maggot cheese but are not capable of safeguarding Italian. We should ask ourselves a couple of questions, because clearly our priority scale is off. (#20, lawyer)

English is considered threatening not only to the vitality of Italian as such, but also to its promotion to students in EMI programmes.

They put a couple of modules in Italian in all programmes. Obviously, which modules in Italian? The optional ones, that no one takes. Matter of fact, at some point I told the rector: well, we could also add a cut and sew module at Nuclear Engineering, since... What the heck are those optional Italian modules that no one will ever take, since they are not interesting, even doing there? (#21, lawyer)

The rector did not reference such discourses in his interview, but for one brief mention in which he seems to dismiss as an exaggeration the idea that his policy might represent a threat: “As if [the Academic Senate and I] were in favour of English against Italian, or wanted in any way to violate the historical tradition” (#22). This statement showcases how matters of language are indeed perceived as not relevant only to language as a code, but to the general cultural heritage of the community.

#### 4.4 Strength in numbers

Legitimation can occur by setting certain individuals or entities as examples of correct conduct. This is sometimes role-model-oriented in the lawyer’s interview, who (de)legitimizes certain stances through the opinions of Italian intellectuals or politicians (e.g. “This was indeed what Tullio De Mauro believed in...” #23). Nonetheless, most of the time, both interviewees legitimize a given conduct based on more conformity-based mechanisms featuring other universities or European countries.

Since, if you go and see what happened, not here, but at other universities in the following years, as a matter of fact a lot of universities chose a solution similar to our own. (#24, rector)

I have to say, the language used at [international technical universities associations] has always been English, and all universities, including the French and German ones – which are a bit slower than others – had started [EMI] courses. So, the general landscape was rather clear, it did not require a particular analysis. (#25, rector)

Nobody would ever dream of allowing a student to enrol without knowledge of the language of that country. That’s what they do in England, in America, in Germany, in France. They do it everywhere. (#26, lawyer)

Here, again, the same type of logic is adopted, but to support two opposite arguments. This is possible because the arguments are not strictly built upon the legitimacy of the conduct, as much as on the legitimacy of those who adopted it (i.e., other respected universities or nations). If the conduct is perceived as intrinsically legitimate, its appropriacy in a different context may be taken for granted.

This partially explains the choices we made, doesn’t it? I mean, if it were a romance philology university, maybe I would have reasoned in a very different way. With engineering, architecture and design, this international opening is especially relevant. The majority of the international texts are in English, so, in a way, the way to go was evident in terms of what choice to make; no need for an especially deep analysis. (#27, rector)

Overall, discourses of emulating ‘what others in Europe are doing’ reproduce power not only by making certain choices appear self-evident, but also by reinforcing the authority of those who stand as examples.

Germany, anyway, beyond the strength of the German language, is intrinsically attractive, so it didn’t need English as much to support internationalization. (#28, rector).

The idea that economically and socially solid societies may be more attractive is not difficult to understand. However, in this case, it (potentially unintentionally) goes to reinforce discourses whereby powerful nations have more cause to establish under which terms the process of internationalization occurs and are more justified in pushing forward on the global scene their language and culture.

## 4.5 Civil duty

The idea that educators have a civil duty towards the nation is a common backdrop for both interviewees, resulting in discourses of fairness and equality being legitimized theoretically and instrumentally.

We are a public university and we believed it fundamental, in this perspective, to open the heads and minds of all our students and offer the same opportunities to everybody. Then, because of this, we needed to avoid ending up with... not a ghettoization, but a somewhat different learning ability. Students from wealthier classes already in their BA had a good knowledge of English; in other cases, this knowledge was more modest. Thus, our decision was: let’s use the BA as a basis to grant equal starting competencies for our students; let’s give an indication, three years in advance, that at the MA we’ll switch to English, so that in these three years all our students have a chance to acquire the English skills and avoid, in some way, learning deficits. (#29, rector)

Despite the EMI-only policy being here framed as an equal opportunity strategy, some complexities remain. It seems hard for students who have already received at least eight years of English language education with modest results, in a country with generally moderate English proficiency,<sup>9</sup> to bring their proficiency to university level in just three years. The lawyer voices some concerns on this matter.

Because, if your students – the Italian ones too – do not know English, you’re forcing it, you’re pushing them to make an unnecessary effort, considering that they are already putting in plenty of effort, if they are studying Nuclear Engineering. And the same goes for the lecturers. (#30, lawyer)

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<sup>9</sup> English language education is compulsory for all of elementary and middle school in Italy; it is then studied for a different number of years at different high schools. Nevertheless, according to the 2023 English Proficiency Index, Italy remains firmly in the Moderate category, scoring #35.

An important difference in the interviewees' perspective is the focus on opportunity versus choice. While the lawyer focuses on the latter (e.g. "there are more and more [EMI] courses; but at least there is a possibility to choose; which, for me, from a constitutional perspective, is one of the things I would not renounce" #31), the rector focuses on cultivation of potential. In doing so, he appears to operate a shift from representing the interests of 'all students', to those of the 'good students'.

We say that, if good students enter [our university], we won't ruin them. Meaning good graduates come out. Then, a key element is being attractive for students with good potential. Rankings are the tools used by national and international students to choose where to go. So, in this view, being higher in the rankings means attracting students of better quality and, thus, remaining a good university. I'd say that is fundamentally the goal. (#32, rector)

In theory, there is no reason why the purpose of cultivating the students' potential should clash with the students' ability to choose between L1-medium or EMI education. However, next to the role played by the aforementioned discourses conflating English with quality, the neoliberal turn in higher education too conditions universities' priorities, typically pushing the focus to competition. To survive this competition and appease the rankings, universities often turn to EMI. The moral soundness of rewarding high-performance institutions or departments in general is questioned by the lawyer.

Where did this [criterion of excellence] come from? [...] Well, I can be happy about it, I'm excellent, it means my department gets a lot of millions. And the others? Especially departments that maybe are in the south, that don't have professors, don't have classrooms... [...] How can you tell a department that they get an extra 15 million because their project was considered excellent, and the others get nothing! [...] You should do the opposite. You're excellent, you're great – very nice, well done. I have to support the others, not continue to give funding to you. (#33, lawyer)

In this picture, the Polytechnic's manoeuvre to introduce an EMI-only policy is looked at with suspicion.

In my opinion, it wasn't as much the need to internationalize, because, again, there was no need to do this. Actually, I am convinced that a university is the more international the more it can welcome differences and compare itself to them, compare them to the national culture. So, the point, then, is that at some point the rankings started saying that the criteria are the use of English, if you go and see [...] So it's easy to answer. It's simply just one way to climb the international rankings, and surreptitiously so, because you don't state it clearly, that this is the reason. (#34, lawyer)

Overall, the two positions of the interviewees appear unreconcilable because they envision and pursue progress in different ways. The lawyer speaks of a "cultural battle", a resistance against an "obtuse decision"; the rector, on the other hand,

describes such decision as a “push”, a “stimulus” that brought other, “maybe slightly slower” universities to reflect on their own policies. In the next session we discuss such difference and draw out conclusions.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

In the present paper we analysed two elite actors’ perspectives around the 2012 Polytechnic of Milan litigation, to shed some light on their framing of EMI in Italian higher education. In particular, our goal was to unveil how each participant framed English in relation to discourses of (in)justice, (de)legitimizing specific linguistic and cultural power relations. Results from the analysis suggest, despite a similar commitment to the public good, a diametrically opposed attitude towards the strong adoption of English, with little overlap. The lawyer references discourses of language loss and cultural hegemony, that negatively impact parity of participation and freedom of choice, as well as the community’s ability to understand the importance of such issues. The rector, on the other hand, draws from discourses of opportunity, progress and inevitable reality, which primarily position English as a necessary tool to develop potential and achieve strategic goals.

English is discussed by both participants as a *lingua franca*; however, the recognition of such role doesn’t necessarily translate into an increased sense of participation and ownership of the tool. Talk of the central role occupied by English can be almost apologetic (#3, #4), when not outright critical (#8) and wary (#20). In many ways, English continues here to represent an extension of the Anglo-American influence (#18), with the main difference between the perspectives of the two participants being to what extent this is perceived as unjust or, conversely, potentially advantageous (#32). The relevance and power of English is discussed not primarily in relation to its widespread use as a *lingua franca*, but rather in relation to the economic power and influence of the countries that use (or rather ‘own’) it. Beyond English, the same logic seems to be applied to other languages associated with nations that are influential enough not to need English as much (#28), that are therefore discussed as more justified in sticking to the use of their own language. Importantly, these dominant actors (be them nations, or the universities therein located) are perceived to possess a certain degree of intrinsic legitimacy and credibility. Their coming together in the adoption of particular behaviours legitimizes the behaviours themselves, setting them as examples that need undergo less scrutiny (#24, #25, #26). The deployment of what have here been labelled “strength-in-numbers” discourses may suggest uncertainty around how to navigate particular challenges of contemporary HE. On the basis of such



discourses, a scenario of isomorphic tendencies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) could be hypothesized, whereby in times of uncertainty, universities may model their decisions after those of other institutions. This could be fruitfully investigated further in future research.

It seems important to note that, despite their at times very different opinions, both participants motivate their stances on the basis of the wellbeing of the institution and the students. While this could be argued to be something of a posture, it does fall in line not only with the extent of their personal commitment to the cause, but also with the cultural backdrop of the country (see Zuaro 2022b), in which matters of education are viewed as of high relevance for all citizens. Considering their comparable commitment to education, and even, to a point, similar understanding of the interactions between language and power (as discussed above), how can these actors have come to such unreconcilable evaluations of the proposed EMI policy at their institution? The answer may be found in the different frame of reference adopted by these individuals.

With only a few exceptions, the rector mainly operates within the horizon of the institution and the talented students that gravitate around it. To a problem of access to quality education vis-à-vis class inequality, the rector identifies a neoliberal solution of opportunity, merit, and competition. English is presented as the gateway to such solution, by virtue of its discursive framing as an inherently beneficial tool of progress. Conversely, the lawyer mainly contextualizes her positions in the broader frame of the identity and social complexities and inequalities of the nation. The drastic promotion of English in education is seen, in this key, as a mismatched, unnecessary, and even misleading measure. Arguably, then, the primary reason why these actors cannot agree on whether EMI is a legitimate and just solution to the challenges faced by their institution (and by national higher education in general) is because they do not share a similar understanding of what such challenges consist of.

This conflict may represent a particular fracture in Italian education and society, similar to what is described elsewhere by Eder (2020): the pull for an increasingly English-medium globalized education could be clashing rather drastically with the Italian traditional understanding of what education is and should accomplish. In the particular case of the Polytechnic, on the one hand, the unmitigated promotion of English points to more globalized and utilitarian views of education; on the other hand, the critical involvement of the national authorities suggests a rejection of such discourses by the national regime of truth. This could perhaps suggest a need for Italian higher education as an institution to re-examine and re-establish its principles and objectives. More broadly, in regards to the implementation of

EMI in HE, one way forward may be through a more pervasive and widespread redefinition of the nature and purposes of English as a lingua franca in education, as well as through the redefinition of more equitable incentives and evaluations of its use. This may help universities navigate the complexities of international research and education with more refined tools against injustice.

Overall, our results confirm that debates around language and its role in HE can hardly be limited to strictly linguistic matters. The present study on the court case of the Polytechnic of Milan suggests that focusing on policy makers' compliance or subversion of the national regime of truth can help isolate specific nodes of social conflict. We conclude that future research on opposition to EMI may benefit from including, next to examples of grassroots resistance, also a focus on why and how discourses that reproduce power are adopted by elite actors, such as policy and decision makers. This could help identify broader preoccupations tied to social inequality in higher education, beyond the more well-known concerns of language protectionism.

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