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What Languages Count in International Education?



The increasing mobility of university students and teachers has led to the emergence of new scenarios of language contact, while English has become the lingua franca for international activities in higher education. Researchers from the UAB have participated in a European project aiming to identify scenarios and situations in which European linguistic diversity may be considered an advantage, focusing on different Catalan university spaces. The results suggest that all languages may be considered strategic assets for the internationalisation of universities.

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Student and staff mobility is both a key objective and one of the most visible results of the internationalisation processes in which higher education institutions are immersed. Although universities in Catalonia and elsewhere have long been multilingual, increased mobility, in part thanks to the Bologna process, means that new scenarios of language contact are emerging. In turn, languages referred to in different discourses as 'large', 'small', 'medium', 'local', 'global', 'national', 'international', 'minority', 'majority', 'lingua franca', etc. have to be managed, both at the policy level and at the level of everyday interaction, in order to guarantee both efficient and fair communication.

At the university language policy level, the solution often found is to promote the use of a global,

international, majority lingua franca for dealing with situations that involve people from abroad and who supposedly don't speak any of the local, official languages (i.e. Catalan or Spanish). In this regard, the concentration in recent history of economic power in English-speaking nations and English-dominated multinational corporations has seen that language become central to globalised international relations, international media and business. English has also become a core part of international teaching, administration and research in higher education institutions.

Against this backdrop, investigators from the Research Group on Plurilingual Teaching and Interaction (GREIP) were part of the European 6th Framework project entitled 'Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity' (DYLAN). The project ran from 2006–2011, was interdisciplinary and involved researchers from 18 European universities. Broadly speaking, the aim of DYLAN was to identify ways in which Europe's linguistic diversity may be considered an advantage (for example, as compared to everyone just speaking English). The research was conducted across three terrains: European companies, political institutions and universities. The GREIP team worked on the latter field, undertaking qualitative investigations in different settings at two universities in Catalonia.

One of the sites studied at the universities were the reception services for international students and staff. Although these are officially places for supporting bureaucratic procedures, and also ones where one would expect only large, international lingua francas to be used, the authors hypothesised that, given the multilingual and multicultural contexts of universities, the communicative situation was in fact more complex. More specifically, the authors asked what exactly was understood in these places to constitute the business of 'welcoming' newcomers into universities, in particular in terms of language. That is, they focused on studying how the participants of the service interactions mutually understood the aim of their communicative encounters, how the employees understood they should receive the newcomers and how the service users interpreted norms of membership at the institution. The way speakers use language allows insight into how they define the communicative situation, by pointing to their linguistic preferences and the value attributed to their own and others' plurilingual repertoires.

In order to do this, a language socialisation perspective was taken. Language socialisation assumes that in the process of interacting with others, we develop not only the command of the languages around us and knowledge of how to use them appropriately, but we also learn to adopt appropriate identities, ideologies, and other language-related behaviours. When receiving students and staff from abroad, it is understood that although the official aim is to welcome newcomers into the educational community, the types of interactions that take place allow participants to mutually socialise ways of using and valuing languages. The researchers carried out fine-grained analysis of interactions that took place at the reception offices between staff and newcomers – including misunderstandings, jokes, and playful uses of language – and sought to link what they observed with dynamics operating more generally at universities and in the sociolinguistic surroundings.

The researchers conclude that the business of 'welcoming' international students and staff is both a macro practice carried out generally using lingua francas (English, Spanish), guided in part by institutional policies and by an interactional ritual that workers follow for attending to newcoming students and staff. However, this business also involves certain micro goals; for example, making a newcomer feel comfortable, showing one's interlocutor friendliness, introducing newcomers to institutional terminology in the local language, or sharing and learning

about one's linguistic and cultural resources. The authors show how these micro practices, which are possibly just as important to 'welcoming' newcomers as part of internationalisation strategies as the macro policies and rituals, involve complex plurilingual uses that extend beyond simply adopting the international lingua franca.

Such results call into question simplified understandings of what languages count as linguistic and cultural capital for these new, globalised scenarios and suggest that all languages may be considered strategic assets for the internationalisation of universities.

Adriana Patiño-Santos

University of Southampton

Research Group in Plurilingual Interaction and Teaching (GREIP)

A.Patino@soton.ac.uk

Emilee Moore

Research Group in Plurilingual Interaction and Teaching (GREIP)

Department of Language and Literature Education and Social Science Education (UAB)

Emilee.Moore@uab.cat

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