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Parallel Language Use

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4.6.1 The policy of parallel language use

Parallel language use, or parallellingualism, is a concept now firmly established in Nordic language policy discourse (though not so much outside of the Nordic community). It refers to the idea that no language should encroach upon another. The “encroaching” language that is implied here is English and the “encroached-upon” language is the official national language or languages of the Nordic nation states, i.e. Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish/Swedish. Parallel language use can be seen as a proposed solution to the threat of the “domain loss” discussed in the last section, and has in recent years become increasingly widely used, to an extent replacing the latter (see Hultgren 2014 for a history of the term).

Parallel language use is listed in the 2007 *Declaration on Nordic Language Policy* as one of four areas of priority, the other three being “language comprehension and language skills”, “multilingualism” and “the Nordic countries as a linguistic pioneering region” (Nordic Council 2007: 93-95):

The parallel use of language refers to the concurrent use of several languages within one or more areas. None of the languages abolishes or replaces the other; they are used in parallel (Nordic Council 2007: 93).

The notion of parallel language use was the culmination of language policy activities which had taken place in the five Nordic nation states (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland) since the turn of the millennium (Hultgren 2014; Davidsen-Nielsen 2008; Höglin 2002; see also section 6.3. for more discussion) and which were drawn up in a policy document, devised by the Nordic Council, a forum for co-operation between the Nordic countries. While the policy is not legally binding, Nordic ministers have committed to achieving its long-term goals (Nordic Council 2007). By now several

Nordic universities have policy documents in place which seek to manage the relationship between English and the local language(s), whether or not this is explicitly referred to as a parallingual language strategy (Hultgren 2014; Linn 2014; Björkman 2014; Saarinen 2014; Kristinsson 2014; Bolton & Kuteeva 2012).

Despite a near universal acceptance of the term parallel language use, it is not always clear what it actually means. A Danish government document makes clear that it would be unrealistic to expect that parallel language use entails a reduplication of all activities undertaken in a university, e.g. that all subjects and programmes taught in English should also be offered in Danish (Danish Ministry of Culture 2008). One of the propagators of the concept in Denmark, Peter Harder, Professor of English Language at the University of Copenhagen, acknowledges this lack of clarity, writing: "To a certain extent we shall all be involved in 'constructing' in the years to come what parallel language use is going to be in the end" (Harder 2008: n/a). Closer inspections of policies at Danish and Swedish universities have observed that despite an overt commitment to maintaining both the national language as well as using English, there is a striking lack of specificity as to what the role of each of these two languages should be and how this should be obtained (Hultgren 2014; Björkman 2014). Anne Holmen, furthermore, the first ever Professor of Parallel Language Use, has argued passionately for the concept alluding not only to the international language, English, and whatever official language(s) is used in each Nordic nation state, but to a much wider range of languages, including, importantly, the all too often invisibilized first languages of ethnic minority students (Holmen 2012). Others have noted that it is not clear if parallel language use is meant to refer to practice or competence, to policy or practice or to the individual or the language system (Salö 2014; Linn 2010; Thøgersen 2010).

Arguably, the imprecise nature of the concept opens it up to a range of interpretations, which, at one level may be problematic, but at another may facilitate implementation. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is the way in which the concept is used, respectively, by the Danish Ministry of Culture and the University of Copenhagen. While the Danish Ministry of Culture uses it to argue that Danish must be strengthened to secure its continued use, functionality, status and existence, the mission statement of the University of Copenhagen declares that the use of English is going to be expanded in order to attract international staff and students. What we are seeing here is in effect the same concept being invoked to promote two opposing ideologies: (national) protectionism on the one hand and, on the other, internationalization (see further Hultgren 2014).

In view of this apparent elusiveness and ambiguity of parallel language use, we now turn to an examination of how the concept relates to the sociolinguistic practices at the internationalized Nordic universities. More specifically, might the situation be described as parallel language use in action? Our discussion is organized around each of the three domains that are most commonly associated with universities: research, teaching and administration.

4.6.2 Parallel language use in practice

While research is often construed as if it were a monolithic domain or type of activity, it consists of several sub-activities, including networking, collaboration, managing research, doing research, publishing research, and evaluation of research (Kyvik 2013). Most research on language choice has been conducted on research outputs. Here it has been unequivocally shown that at Nordic universities, English is by far the most preferred language, and increasingly so (see 6.6. for more discussion). The proportion of academic articles published in English at Nordic universities is 70 to 95%; for doctoral dissertations, it is 80–90% (Gregersen 2014).

However, the picture changes when publications written for a non-academic audience are taken into account. McGrath (2014) found that, at a major Swedish university, Swedish is the preferred language in outreach genres (text written for non-academic audiences). McGrath also found disciplinary differences with Swedish being more often preferred by historians than by anthropologists and linguists, in that order. Evidence is emerging of the type of parallel language use that occurs in practice: language use correlates with different types of contextual factors, including publication outlet and discipline, thereby nuancing claims about the dominance of English in Europe. In practice, then, language choice appears to be pragmatic and to be dictated by intended audience and disciplinary conventions.

Just like research, the preference for different languages in teaching also depends on the context (see section 6.7 for a more general discussion). While Nordic universities offer the highest proportion of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Europe (Wächter & Maiworm 2014), its use varies according to level. At graduate level, some 10–25% of programmes are taught in English; at postgraduate level, the range is 20–40% (Gregersen 2014). This makes sense from the point of view that the more specialized the teaching, the greater the need for English to expand the target audience beyond the national language market. The same explanation may be offered for research: the more specialized a topic, the greater the use of English. In the context of Denmark, Preisler observes: “English is used when *not all* members of a transnational communicative network know Danish – and Danish is used when *all* members of a network can be expected to know Danish” (2009: 13).

As further evidence of how language choice is made in practice, Mortensen (2014), observing patterns of language choice in student groups on an international university programme in Denmark, found that although English is by far the dominant language, students also use Danish and sometimes a mixture of English and Danish. According to Mortensen, there is “no simple correlation between conversation topic and choice of medium” (2014: 436), but Danish, or a mix of Danish and English, is typically used in asides “that only some group members attend to” (2014: 436). Söderlundh (2012), who conducted fieldwork on an English-taught programme at a major Swedish university, found that Swedish was used in two recurring situations: one was where

students could not think of what a term is called in English, and the other is when the students comment on procedural issues, e.g. how to perform a certain task. This suggests that the national language, or whatever the first language of the student might be, may have a function in clarifying concepts and issues, a translanguaging strategy presumably facilitating learning (Garcia and Wei 2013.) Of course, it is worth pointing out here that the mixing of language consistently documented by researchers is entirely invisibilized in most language policy, including that of parallel language use. Mortensen (2014) complicates the picture further by suggesting that there may be individual preferences for one language over another, evidenced by one of his three student groups using English 93% and another using it 56% of the time. Languages other than English and the national language(s) are also used. Exchange and visiting students with the same first language formed groups together as did Swedish-speaking students who already know each other (Söderlundh 2012). As a result of these groupings, French, Spanish, English and Swedish can all be heard in the seminar room, resulting in the type of parallel language use that has been advocated by Holmen (see above).

The third and last of the three university activities, administration, is the one in which the national language is used to the greatest extent, especially for emailing, meetings and other types of administrative communication (Jürna 2014). The choice of language here, as elsewhere, is very much guided by each particular context. Hazel (2015) provides an interesting example of two students in an international office at a Danish university. One of the students, Anita, addresses the clerk behind the helpdesk in English (“we have a question”), without inquiring whether this is an appropriate language choice. The clerk continues the exchange in English until the students’ query becomes apparent: they want to study abroad. This leads the clerk to assume that they are Danish and asks if this is the case, presumably to establish whether it would be appropriate to switch to Danish. The students reply that they are German and the exchange continues in English. Apart from highlighting how linguistically complex contemporary internationalized universities are, this example illustrates how decisions about language use are made – *and can only be made* – locally and depending on the context.

4.6.3 The future for parallel language use

This section opened by discussing the concept of parallel language use and how it has solidified its status in Nordic language policy discourse. Turning to the level of practice, we saw some of the ways in which choices about language are made on the ground. Whether or not the existing sociolinguistic situation can be described as *parallel language use* seems at least to be open to discussion. Certainly, what we see is not a duplication of all activities in both languages, as has been hailed as unrealistic by policy makers from the outset. What we do see, however, is not only the two main but several languages used within the same domain, sometimes mixed, and each serving different communicative functions. Entirely as sociolinguistic theory would have predicted. The

notion of “complementary languages” has been proposed as a replacement for “parallel language use” to highlight the complementary ways in which different languages are used, rather than pretend or insist that they are used in parallel (Preisler 2009).

Whether or not the sociolinguistic situation at the internationalized Nordic universities might be considered one of parallel language use, probably depends on who you ask. Tying back to the example mentioned in 4.6.1, agencies such as the Nordic Council, the language boards and the Ministries of Culture in each nation state might well say that the national language(s) should be used more. Others, including universities and ministries in charge of research might say that the situation is just as it should be. And there will probably be those that fall between these two extremes. Inevitably this account raises questions about the purpose of language policies. If language policies are unable to meet their objective of steering the linguistic behaviour of individuals, whose preferences for different languages appear to be guided by an infinite range of local and contextual factors, then what is the point of having them? One answer might be that they serve an important symbolic function by providing the framework in which to make other decisions. For instance, if a university has an established parallellingual language policy, it might pave the way for implementing more concrete initiatives, such as increasing language support mechanisms, devising language tests and accreditation, and ensuring that all communication is written in both (or more) languages. However, it is worth noting that neither of the policies which were arguably among the main drivers for the rise of English at Nordic universities, were *language* policies. The Bologna Declaration, which sought to strengthen the EU’s position vis-à-vis the US by promoting intra-European mobility and standardization, did not devote a single paragraph to language (Phillipson 2006). Similarly, bibliometric policies which promote and reward publication in prestigious journals rarely address the issue of language (Hultgren 2014). In other words, if the current situation is to be reversed, the desirability of which is of course very much a matter debate, then the most effective way to do this is arguably not through *language* policies, but through *policies* that are much wider in scope and reach far beyond the realm of language and into the political and socio-economic domain. As Ferguson writes:

This is not to say that the dominance of English, in science and elsewhere, is unassailable, only that it will probably take a major shift in economic and political power to undo that dominance just as it will take, as Mufwene (2008: 243) argues, a change in the market ecology to make it advantageous to publish in languages other than English (2012: 493-494).

Once such policies have been devised, language use, given its contextually contingent nature, will follow suit.

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