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Norway's misunderstanding of the Bologna Process: When internationalisation becomes Anglicisation

Paper presented at the conference Bi- and Multilingual Universities: Challenges and Future Prospects. Helsinki University 1-3 September 2005.

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Abstract:

Making the higher education sector English speaking is not a stated goal of the Bologna Process. In the Bologna Declaration and its succeeding communiqués, no mention is made of language issues or measures to overcome language barriers. However, in Norway there seems to be a tacit understanding that English medium higher education is necessary in order to meet the goals of the Bologna Process. In Norway's 2003 report "Norway – Implementation of the elements of the Bologna Process" it is stated that "Norwegian higher education institutions are encouraged to increase the number of academic courses offered in English at their institutions in order to attract more foreign students to Norway" (page 2). This was backed up by a law amendment in 2002, which repealed the clause "the language of instruction is normally Norwegian" (Universities and Colleges Act, §2.7). The Ministry of Education and Research has on numerous occasions emphasised the importance of English, both in research publications and as a language of instruction. Norway's interpretation of the Bologna Process seems to contribute to a language shift from Norwegian to English in higher education, despite the absence of such a goal in the Bologna Declaration itself.

Introduction

I have chosen to give my talk here today the title: "Norway's misunderstanding of the Bologna Process: When internationalisation becomes Anglicisation". This is a rather provocative title, and you might say that I'm exaggerating. However, my reason for choosing it was that I want to draw attention to a phenomenon which I have encountered in various documents regarding higher education and research politics in Norway in the recent years, namely a tendency to consider the words "international" and "English speaking" as synonymous. This idea is manifested in several political documents, which concern both teaching on university level, and research. The claim which I am going to make in this talk, is that there is a trend towards the increased use of English in the higher education sector in Norway, and that we might, in a possible future scenario, see a language shift from Norwegian to English in the sector, or in parts of the sector. This budding language shift is driven by a desire for *internationalisation*, which again is part of the emergence of an educational *market* where universities compete internationally for the best students and the best lecturers. The Bologna Process is meant as an aid to creating such an open market. But because of the tendency to regard "international" and "English speaking" as synonyms, the Bologna Process also, unintentionally, contributes to an emerging language shift.

Bologna goals and non goals

The Bologna Declaration is, as you know, an agreement between 45 European countries, where the aim is to establish a common European Higher Education Area by 2010. Within this area, there should be a free flow of students and lecturers. The declaration, however, does

not suggest any measures on how to cope with the linguistic challenges this aim presents. In fact, it doesn't mention language at all! I find this absence remarkable. Does "free flow" mean that students should be offered language courses to enable them to study in the country of their choice? Or does it imply the use of a linguistic "common currency", analogous to the Euro – most likely English? Such questions should be discussed at international Bologna Process summits, but so far I have found no indication that they have been.

This means that in practice, the decision is left either to the individual country, or to the individual university or college. So I went to see if the issue is addressed in any of Norway's follow-up documents for the Bologna Process. In Norway's 2003 report on the implementation of the elements of the Bologna Process, I found that language matters are mentioned twice:

First, it says:

Norwegian higher education institutions are encouraged to increase the number of academic courses offered in English at their institutions in order to attract more foreign students to Norway (page 2).

And on the next page, it says:

For Norwegian students and teachers going abroad, language is sometimes considered an obstacle, especially in relation to non-English speaking countries. In order to encourage stays in non-English speaking countries, The National Educational Loan Fund awards grants for language courses (page 3).

What this report is saying, is that exchange students going *out* of Norway are encouraged to travel to non-English speaking countries and learn the language of their host country. While exchange students coming *into* Norway are *not* expected to learn any Norwegian. So this is not a two way street.

I think part of the explanation for this asymmetry can be found in the Norwegians' view of themselves. Being a country of only 4 and a half million people, it is constantly emphasised that our country is a small one, and that our language is a small language. Thus, we do not expect foreigners to learn our language, unless they are planning to settle permanently in Norway, or, in the case of students, complete a full degree at a Norwegian university, in which case a language course is required.

There is a model which I think captures this world view very well, and that is Abraam de Swaan's (2001)¹ analogy about the linguistic galaxy, or "the global language system", as he calls it: In the linguistic galaxy, some languages are moons, or peripheral languages, which circle around planet- or central languages, which in turn circle around star- or supercentral languages, which all circle around the centre of the galaxy, the single, hypercentral language: English.

¹ I am using De Swaan's ideas as a tool to explaining the mindset of the authors of the political document. I do not intend to use De Swaan's model as a source of unquestionable fact about individual languages' placement in the hierarchy. The model must be seen here as a broad generalisation.

What makes a language a moon, planet, star or the centre of the galaxy? It depends partly on the total number of speakers, but also, it depends on how many people have learnt it *as a second or foreign language*. The moon languages are minority languages that are not commonly spoken outside their ethnic group. Native speakers of the moon languages typically also learn to speak a planet language of their region, in order to communicate with other people in the vicinity, for example in a market town. Native speakers of the planet language, however, do typically not learn any of the moon languages of their region. Instead, they choose to learn a star language, which is used for international communication among neighbouring countries. Native speakers of the star languages of the world are best served to learn English, which maximises their chances to communicate with people globally.

So what we see here, is that language learning typically goes in an upward direction in this model: Native speakers of the moon languages learn their corresponding planet language, while native speakers of the planet language only very rarely learn the moon language. The speakers of the planet language rather prefer to learn “upwards” to a star language, while the speakers of the star language might not be so interested in learning a planet language. In this model, Norwegian would be a planet language. Therefore, what we see in the Bologna follow-up report is only what can be predicted from De Swaan’s model: We do not expect speakers of other languages to learn Norwegian, because in most cases, that would mean learning “downwards”, or “sideways”, not “upwards”. While at the same time, we are eager to learn “upwards” ourselves, and send students out to study star languages such as Spanish, Russian or French.

So rather than expecting anyone else to have any desire to learn Norwegian, Norwegian politicians and university leaders on various levels, as well as lecturers, presume that if we want to attract foreign exchange students, which after all is one of the main goals of the Bologna Declaration, we must offer them the opportunity to follow their lectures in English, rather than in Norwegian. This is thought to be the most viable solution for two reasons: Firstly, English is the language that already has the highest number of foreign speakers in the world, so by using English as a “common currency” we hope to attract those students who do not wish to use their stay abroad as an opportunity to learn a new language. And secondly, by choosing English we also wish to attract those students who wish to learn more *English*, thus placing ourselves, admittedly as foreign speakers, at the top of the language hierarchy.

This means that Norwegian students will have to follow lectures held in English as well, because one does not want to run parallel courses, one for Norwegian students, and one for exchange students. This was specifically stated in a hearing carried out by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2001, where it was said that both the ministry and the Parliament wish for the institutions to offer at least *some* English medium courses for both foreign and Norwegian students.

(Address the audience :)

I was hoping that you could help me with some input here on what is going on in other countries. Especially if there is any speakers of smaller languages here – Does what I’ve said sound familiar, or are there other approaches? I would appreciate if you could keep this in mind for our feedback/discussion session afterwards.

The law amendment

So in Norway, at least, there is a political wish for a higher proportion of courses offered in English. This wish has been backed up by a law change. In the Universities and Colleges Act, there was previously a clause stating that “the language of instruction is normally Norwegian” (§2.7). But this clause was repealed in 2002 when the law was amended. The Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs explained its reason for repealing the clause by stating:

In the Ministry’s view it is important that the Norwegian universities and colleges continue to develop their provision of courses held in English. Educational institutions should decide for themselves what provisions they will make in relation to other languages. (Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs 2001).

The Minister later explained that she still thought the language of instruction would be Norwegian in most cases, and that the universities and colleges should still have a responsibility to develop Norwegian as an academic language. Her intention was for English medium courses to be a supplement to, and not a replacement for, Norwegian medium courses. On the other hand, the minister explained that she felt that keeping such a clause would be too strong a signal against offering English medium courses, so the clause had to be repealed.

This was the *current* Minister of Education and Research’s official statement. I also asked the *former* minister his thoughts on the law amendment, in an interview with him, since he was responsible for a reform which was partly designed to implement the Bologna Declaration. The former minister agreed with the current minister, and explained to me:

Trond Giske: It is too much to ask from foreign students that they learn a lot of Norwegian, only to study in Norway for one or two years. Partly because Norwegian is not any kind of world language: there is a limited need to know Norwegian, if you are German, and you are going out in the big world. In contrast to the value that learning German has to us. Or French, or Spanish, or English. So if we were to succeed in inviting many foreign students to Norway, also a greater part of the tuition would necessarily have to be conducted in other languages than Norwegian. (Personal interview 17. June 2005).

Again, we see how Abraam de Swaan’s model applies: The former minister says that a German speaker has no use for Norwegian, while a Norwegian speaker has much use for German, because that would be learning “upwards” for us, while for the German speaker, it would be learning “downwards”. Being near the bottom of the language hierarchy, we do not expect anyone but the speakers of our moon languages, for example the Sámi languages, to learn our language, while we ourselves are eager to learn the “star” language German.

Is it bound to be English?

So, to get back to the Bologna Declaration: Nowhere in the Bologna Declaration, nor in its succeeding communiqués, does it say that in order to achieve the goal of a free flow of students and lecturers within the European Education Area we must all offer higher education in *English*. One could ask: What alternative solutions are there to the problem of overcoming the language barriers within the European Education Area? What are our options? These are questions that should be asked, but I can’t find any evidence that they have been, to any extent. I would very much like to know if anyone here knows if such questions were discussed in the process of writing the Bologna Declaration.

Norwegian politicians do not seem to have asked themselves these questions, however. Instead, there seems to be a tacit understanding that English is the only way. During an information meeting on the Bologna Process last September, I asked State Secretary Bjørn Haugstad from the Ministry of Education and Research what Norway should do to meet the linguistic challenge facing us with Europe becoming a single educational area. His answer was that tertiary education institutions should offer a higher number of study programmes in English, that employees should be encouraged to publish even more of their research in English, and that students also should be encouraged to write essays and term-papers in English (Bjørn Haugstad, personal communication 27.09.2004). Alternative routes were not mentioned or discussed in any way by the state secretary.

I also asked the former Minister for Education, Research and Church Affairs this question in my interview with him:

Ragnhild Ljosland: But nowhere in the Bologna Declaration does it say that it should necessarily be in *English*, even if there is to be internationalisation?

Trond Giske: No, no. But internationalisation is a goal of the Bologna Process. And English ... I don't think you can deny that English has won the battle to become the global, communal language (Personal interview 17. June 2005).

We see that in both politicians' minds, "internationalisation" and "English speaking" have become synonymous.

On the grass root level

I am now going to say a few words about how the political intentions of internationalisation and increasing the number of English medium courses are being implemented at the universities, on the departmental level.

If we look at particular courses, or particular study programmes, a shift to English can be done formally or informally. Students that I have interviewed report that it is quite common for the language shift to happen informally: the presence of exchange students in a class often causes the whole class to shift to English, even though the course has not been advertised as being English medium in the prospectus.

The change can also be done formally, although this is, for the time being, less common than informal, pragmatically induced language shift. In one of the other parallel sessions, 6A, professors Babill Stray-Pedersen and Borghild Roald and Mr Sverre Bjerkeset from the University of Oslo are going to talk about their [Experiences with an English Taught Semester in Medicine at the University of Oslo](#). Since 2002, all fifth year medical students at the University of Oslo have had to take one term in English. At the time of the decision, Professor Borghild Roald explained that part of the intent was indeed to facilitate exchange:

Medicine is an expensive study, but with bilateral exchange agreements, which mean that we swap students, the study itself is free. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to get non-Nordic students to come here, because few wish to learn Norwegian only to study for one term. By introducing one term taught in English we increase our chances of receiving foreign students. Thereby increase the chances for our students to go abroad (Jakobsen 2002).

It will be interesting to hear whether the department experienced an increase in the number of exchange students after this change was introduced.

I am currently in the process of doing fieldwork in a different university department, which has also formally introduced English as their language of instruction very recently. In this case, it is the Industrial Ecology programme at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. They decided two years ago that from autumn 2005 on, they should become an international MSc programme, where English should be the sole medium of instruction. So this term is their first term as an English only programme.

I interviewed several members of staff regarding this decision, and it emerged that there were several reasons behind it. One was positioning within the university: As an international Master's programme, they were able to establish their own niche. Also, they have ambitions to serve more than just Norway. As the programme director explained, there is a limited job market for their candidates in Norway. Therefore, they seek to offer their educational services internationally, to cover a broader market.

Not just Bologna

And now we are back to what I mentioned in the introduction, about the market thinking in the higher educational sector. It is not just because of the Bologna Process that Industrial Ecology has chosen to become English speaking. The Bologna Process is only a tool, which formalises a trend which exists outside the Bologna area as well, namely the shift from the Humboldtian university ideal to a free market ideal. Within the new university ideal, universities compete against each other, for the best students, for the best lecturers and researchers, for the best placements in international ranking lists. My case department sees themselves as providers of a service with a world wide demand. They see that the service that they have to offer is not widely available in other countries. There is a niche for which they can compete in an international market. The Bologna Process facilitates such competition, but the trend would be there nonetheless.

Will it all be English?

Will the future bring a full language shift from Norwegian to English in the entire higher educational sector?

Professor Borghild Roald, from the medical department at the University of Oslo, does not think so:

Yes, I think there will be more instruction in English in the years to come. But it would be a blind alley if all instruction were to be in English, as some have claimed (Jakobsen 2002).

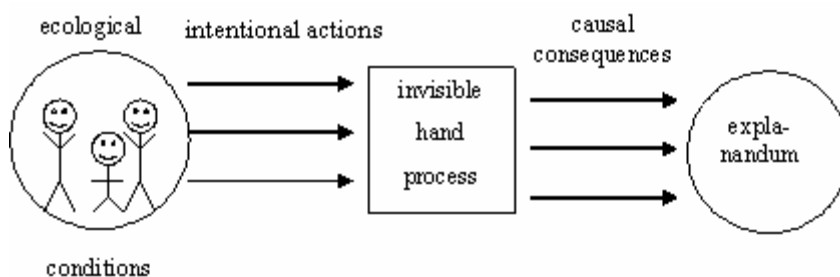
Neither does the director of my case department, the industrial ecology programme at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, think that *all* university level courses in Norway will be English medium in the future. Instead, he believes in a partial language shift in the sector:

I think – as it seems – that the Bachelor's [degrees] will be in Norwegian, while the Master's [degrees] will be in English. Because then you have mobility between the universities in Europe. And that is the intention of the Bologna Process. But at the same

time you maintain something which is local or national. And the cultural heritage, if you want. (Director of the international Master's programme in Industrial Ecology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, personal interview 21. April 2005).

But even though neither of them predicts a complete language shift in all higher education, both agree that there will be *more* English medium instruction than before - a partial language shift.

I think these kinds of predictions are important, because they may turn out to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Politicians and university employees agree that internationalisation is desirable. Internationalisation is interpreted to mean English medium instruction. Eager to fulfil the goals of internationalisation and increased exchange that are embedded in the Bologna Declaration, university departments gradually implement a language shift, without considering alternatives, or the possible sociolinguistic consequences of their choices. No-one stops to consider the end-product. Instead, the path is created step by step, where choices are made on a local level, for a variety of local reasons, whereas the final destination is unknown. This kind of choice making – or non-choice making - process is what the German linguist Rudi Keller calls an Invisible Hand process. This figure, from his book “On Language Change” (1994), shows how the Invisible Hand process works:



These (point to stickmen) are the individual decision-makers: Lecturers, directors of university departments, university management, politicians on various levels. Over here (point to “explanandum”) is the possible future end-product: A language shift to English in the entire higher education sector, or in parts of the sector. But these people (stickmen) aren’t looking over *there* (explanandum). They make their local choices for other reasons (“ecological conditions” in the model), such as those I mentioned earlier: They wish to attract foreign students, contribute to internationalisation, compete against other universities and so on. For them, English medium instruction is just a means, not the goal in itself. But the *combined result* of their actions will, if this trend continues, be a language shift in the sector – a loss of domain, as it is also called – nonetheless. Each actor is, as Adam Smith put it, “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (Smith 1991 [1776]: 400).

So in effect, though I do not believe it was originally intended to work this way, the Bologna Declaration, in the way it has been interpreted so far, has become a major force that pulls the higher education sector in the direction of Anglicisation, and not in the direction of multilingualism.

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