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Miscellaneous

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University autonomy and the increasing shift to English in academic programmes at European universities: In dialogue with Liviu Matei

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Abstract: This paper centres on a dialogue with Liviu Matei, Professor of Higher Education and Public Policy at Kings College London, which aims to transcend sociolinguistic disciplinary boundaries by exploring the increasing use of English for higher education academic programmes at European universities within the context of university autonomy. Once Provost of the Central European University, forced to move from Hungary to Austria when its institutional autonomy was increasingly infringed by the state, Liviu Matei's academic work combines intellectual acuteness with experience, further deepened in the practice of consultation and applied policy research for influential international bodies and organisations, including the Council of Europe and the European Commission. With him, we consider in novel ways the role that legal reform granting a regulated autonomy to universities accompanied by a more corporate style of higher education governance may have played in the rampant growth in recent decades of English language academic programmes in the now European Higher Education Area (EHEA). We reflect on the historical and public policy contexts out of which English as a medium of instruction (EMI) arose, the regulated autonomy of universities by ministerial practices of steering at a distance, and widely obtaining political epistemologies and policy narratives.

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1 Introduction

Our dialogue with Liviu Matei, Professor of Higher Education and Public Policy at Kings College London, takes place at the intersection of sociolinguistics and public policy studies, from which it explores the rise of English language academic programmes at universities in European countries where it is not predominantly used as a societal language. Its stimulus for discussion derives from a transdisciplinary research project, ELEMENTAL,¹ currently undertaken by the authors, which seeks to identify the drivers of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) within the context of widespread European higher education reform towards a greater institutional autonomy and a more corporate style of governance (de Boer and File 2009). In considering how EMI may have been impacted by such practices of governance also in the absence of a formulated language policy, our approach aims to offer new insights into its rampant growth within a sector that is pervaded, to varying degrees, by a neoliberalist ethos of performance and competition (Bleiklie 2018), yet shaped by reforms that have been spearheaded by modernisers rather than marketisers (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

While the marketisation of higher education has come under scrutiny in relation to the proliferation of EMI programmes in an internationalised academe, linked to the currency and use of English as a lingua franca (e.g., Jenkins 2013), the public policy context within which the sector has come to be quasi-corporately governed and its impact on the rise and thrive of EMI may be less understood. This could be due to the largely monodisciplinary nature of most research into EMI, which is still dominated by those with an applied (or socio-)linguistics background and has yet to reap the potential benefits of greater interdisciplinary collaboration (Macaro and Aizawa 2022). Certainly, this is the case with our project's focus on the particular governance practice of 'steering at a distance' – the indirect regulation by a country's government of universities via accountability instruments and mechanisms, such as performance indicators, funding formulae, and strategic plans (e.g., Bleiklie 2018; Chatelain-Ponroy et al. 2018; Kickert 1995). In sociolinguistics, little attention has been paid to the governance of higher education institutions through such practices of steering at a distance by the state, which may also work

¹ English as the Language-of-Education Mechanisms in Europe: New Transdisciplinary Approaches in Linguistics. <https://www.emieurope.org>

independently of any specified language policy to fuel the trend of EMI (or at the very least in tandem with it).

We can thus turn to other disciplinary areas, such as public policy and administration to look for work with potential relevance to ‘language management’ even if indirectly linked to language itself, incorporating also Spolsky’s (2009: 30) sense of a “wider sociolinguistic ecology” to traverse between the meso level of the institution and the macro level of societal governance of higher education. From a public policy disciplinary background, Gazzola’s (2023) work intended for an audience of applied and sociolinguists, among others, undoubtedly serves to deepen our understanding of language policy and planning itself (see also Gazzola et al. 2024). However, it is his critical assessment of the impact of performance indicators that are not directly linked to language management on English language programmes in higher education in Italy (Gazzola 2012) that is of particular relevance to our current interests, a focus recently also taken up by Hultgren and Wilkinson (2022) in the context of EMI in the Netherlands.

In addition to drawing on such instruments of steering themselves as data, our project makes use of research interviews with participants at both the university and ministerial levels of governance in different European countries to illuminate the drivers of EMI. In this way, we go beyond the level of the institution to accommodate within our remit of investigation ‘university external actors’, corresponding to the macro-level of the analytic framework proposed by Darquennes et al. (2020) in *Sociolinguistica 34* on language diversity management in higher education. Our present dialogue with Liviu Matei as an expert in public policy and higher education informally takes us yet another step beyond the ministerial macro-level, or system level, to gain insights also into the wider sphere of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Both meso and macro policy may, of course, implicate language policy without being formulated as such, while practices might be taken to constitute (components of) policies (Spolsky 2004), arguably even at the most micro level of interactional procedures (Bonacina-Pugh 2012). However, it would be remiss of us to assume without further elaboration that “no policy is a policy” – whether this implies that none has been formally implemented, or that people themselves informally make the practices that constitute the policy. This would leave unexamined the ‘default’ mechanism of its operation, as embedded within a sociocultural and politico-economic context favourable to the installation, sustenance and growth of the object of investigation, namely, EMI. Instead, our project examines the practices and processes of neoliberal incentivisations, within the legal framework of autonomy and public administration of steering at a distance, as part of a wider critical turn towards the political economy in sociolinguistics (e.g., Block 2018; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner 2010; McElhinny 2015; Park and Wee 2012).

The increasing autonomy that has been granted to public universities through legal reform in many European countries (Eurydice 2000; Krüger et al. 2018) is a key component of steering-at-a-distance practices, which have replaced more direct interventions by the state in the drive towards greater efficiency of the public sector (Capano and Pritoni 2020; Paradeise et al. 2009). Given that strings are attached to the public purse, the autonomy of universities is nevertheless partial and regulated. In practice, autonomy can further be subcategorised by dimensions and degrees of fit, as for example in the country calibrations of the European University Association (EUA) Autonomy Scorecard (Pruvot et al. 2023).

2 Dialogue with Liviu Matei

As we extend our reach from sociolinguistics into that of autonomy and higher education public policy, we turn to the expertise of Liviu Matei to address questions on how higher educational reform may have impacted on the rampant growth of English language academic programmes in many countries of the now European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Formerly Provost of the Central European University (CEU), which was forced out of Hungary due to state infringement on its autonomy (Matei 2019) and relocated to the more favourable environment of Austria, Liviu Matei is an authority on university autonomy and governance, among other areas. He also holds extensive experience of consultation and public policy research for influential international bodies and organisations, including the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

Unsurprisingly, Liviu Matei's work reflects this wealth of experience and expertise, dealing with an array of topics on higher education and public policy, including an ongoing focus, particularly within the EHEA, on academic freedom and institutional autonomy (e.g., Matei and Iwinska 2018), higher education governance and funding (e.g., Matei 2018), higher educational reform (e.g., Matei 2022), and internationalisation (e.g., Matei et al. 2015; Matei and Becker 2022). Our dialogue with him presents an edited version of an in-depth conversation held online in March 2023 between the first author and Liviu Matei, who has approved its finalisation. Here we minimize the questions and follow-ups of the former to foreground Liviu Matei's responses.

The discussion is focused around four main questions. First, we elicit general observations on the historical and current trend towards EMI in Europe in the context of higher education public policy (Section 2.1). Next, we garner some thoughts on our project hypothesis of a possible relationship between institutional autonomy and practices of steering at a distance and the increase in EMI at Euro-

pean universities (Section 2.2). We follow up by delving a little more deeply into the concept of institutional autonomy, considering whether any aspects other than those more explicitly related to choice of language in the curriculum may be of relevance (Section 2.3). Finally, we forge a link between the trend towards EMI in Europe and prevailing political epistemologies and policy narratives (Section 2.4). We conclude with some reflections on the interdisciplinary insights gained from higher education and public policy into the trend towards EMI in European higher education at the institutional and system level, and beyond to the wider sphere of the EU and EHEA.

2.1 Recent decades have seen a marked increase in English as the language of academic programmes at universities in many countries of Europe. Do you have any observations on this trend? Out of which historical and public policy contexts did it arise, in your view?

From my experience as a researcher on higher education policy, as a university administrator, and as someone who has been lucky enough to take part in major higher education policy projects at the national and supranational level in the last few decades, I can attest to the fact that there has been a major shift towards teaching in English in higher education in Europe. To give you an example, when CEU started in 1991 in Prague, later moving to Budapest, it was the only university offering master's programmes in English in that geographic area of central and eastern Europe (and also one of the very few on the European continent offering master's programmes as we know them today). It was very easy to recruit students from eastern European countries such as Romania, Russia, or Poland. But a few years later, CEU had to change its approach to student recruitment in part because more and more universities started to offer master's programmes, and in English. It had to go global due to intensifying competition in the region and in Europe.

The Bologna Process played a big part in this change. Before 1999, there were no master's programmes at all on the continent, or not as we know them today. The emergence of the concept of graduate or postgraduate education was part of a large package of transformations brought about by the Bologna Process. There was also the enlargement of the European Union. All of a sudden, it became a lot easier for students from central and eastern Europe to move across borders towards the west. At least one of the causes of the increasing use of English in higher education is this unique environment for mobility in what became the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This is a very peculiar, *sui generis* common space for dialogue and practice in higher education, with mobility as a core principle, and in which English became more and more a lingua franca, despite the pre-existing linguistic diversity and the declared objective to preserve it in the EHEA. Clear and ambitious mobility

targets were adopted in the EHEA, and then by particular countries, and these were a very strong political and policy factor facilitating the use of English.

There was also a lot of pressure from various quarters to move beyond the national model of higher education policy or even higher education institution. The European Commission had an important role in that. At some point they adopted not directives (legislation), but policy frameworks where it was explicitly stated that there is something wrong with European universities – they are not good enough, they are not competitive enough, because they are nationally as opposed to internationally oriented. It was further said that universities in Europe were “captive” in the hands of nation states. Universities should change, they should “liberate”. And there was an implicit message that they will only receive funding from the EU if they do so – if they become more international/European.

2.2 Our project explores the links between EMI in European higher education and the legal reform by which universities have gained a regulated autonomy, namely, one with strings attached to the public purse via the instruments and mechanisms of steering by state ministries. In your view, are there any such links?

I hadn't previously thought about the relationship between university autonomy and the increasing shift to English in academic programmes. I find this question intellectually intriguing. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and even more so with the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999 and the Lisbon Strategy of the EU in 2000, European governments in democratic countries agreed to ‘give’ universities more and more autonomy. That was not based on moral principles or considerations. It wasn't that much an issue of rights either; it was more of an instrumental reckoning, if you wish. The understanding was that the more autonomous universities are, the more efficient they could be. So, if as a government, I am generally interested in the production or transmission of knowledge, because I think that's good for the economy and society, let's give universities freedom as institutions to decide on certain things within certain limits, rather than the ministry deciding on everything, because in this way they will be more efficient.

What is also interesting is that within the EHEA, a European model of autonomy emerged during the first two decades of the new century that is different from the American model or other parts of the world. The dimensions of this new model are encapsulated in the European University Association (EUA) Autonomy Scorecard (Pruvot et al. 2023). By conferring academic autonomy to institutions (one dimension of autonomy), they were given the freedom (or more freedom, in certain countries) within certain limitations to choose the language of instruction. English became very rapidly the language of choice, in a few cases (programmes or institutions) not only second to national language or languages but even instead of them. We can say that the increasing use of English was part of this trend towards more

autonomy, justified primarily, in the eyes of national authorities by instrumental considerations: if we want our universities to be competitive, they should be able to attract international students; if we want them to attract international students, let them choose the language of instruction. What is that language of instruction? More and more, it is English.

There seems to be a strong link here with institutional autonomy, which comes with political and ideological positions, rather than just academic or pedagogical ones. And I think we have seen these taken to the extreme. There have been cases in the Netherlands, which was a frontrunner of this process, where the Government has had to step in to say, well hold on, you can have these programmes in English, but you must also have programmes in Dutch, because otherwise it is against the rights of our own citizens. Or we have the case of the Polytechnic University of Milan, which decided one day everything should be exclusively in English, that it didn't make sense to have things in Italian if you wanted to be a world-class, competitive university with students from just about everywhere, not just Italy. That case went all the way to the Constitutional Court. That is an extreme example, but I think we can follow this thread of a certain understanding of efficiency in the economy, in public policy, and in higher education to English becoming linked to more autonomy and then, in some cases, with teaching in English.

2.3 Are there other aspects of institutional autonomy beyond choice of language that you think may be relevant to the growth of EMI in European higher education?

This European model of university autonomy that developed with the EUA Autonomy Scorecard (Pruvot et al. 2023) has been very clear about dimensions of autonomy and quite comprehensive. But one dimension that was completely ignored, and is ignored, is what I would call strategic autonomy, or autonomy to decide on the strategic direction. That is the freedom of the university to decide on the direction in which it is going. Universities can already decide within limits, quite broadly on occasion, on the curriculum, student recruitment and admissions, hiring, retention of staff, budgets and how to manage them, for example. But it is not the case that they can decide where they are going as an institution and what their mission is. That is often decided within broader or narrower frameworks by public authorities, by governments. And I think this reflection has been largely missing from the conceptualisations of autonomy.

There was a lot of pressure from the European Commission for each EU country to adopt their own internationalising strategy. This was meant to put internationalisation very high on the system agenda as well as the institutional agenda. And most countries in the EU have done that – they have formulated national internationalisation strategies, objectives, or criteria. Some did this on their own. There are countries, for example, where allocation of public funding includes as a criterion the

percentage of international students. To put it simply, the more students you have in your universities, the higher the likelihood that you get more funding. That is not about English as a language of instruction, per se. But again, if you are incentivised to have more international students, there is more of an incentive to have English language programmes.

2.4 You discuss political epistemologies or policy narratives in much of your work. Which of these do you think are relevant to the trend in use of English for academic programmes in the countries of the now EHEA?

There are always long-term trends at work. In Europe, such trends acquired a particular colour after the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the emergence of the EHEA/the Bologna project. And some new trends emerged. I would say that if we want to understand what happened in Europe between 1999, 2000 and at least 2015 if not now, we should look at very strong policy narratives. One of them was the knowledge society narrative, which came together with a neoliberal narrative or ideology. It was this idea that knowledge should be the most important source for the economic competitiveness of a company or a country, and also for social advancement in that country. Everything should be based on knowledge, but fundamentally a “neoliberal knowledge” which is primarily needed for competitiveness. You cannot be competitive with the rest of the world unless you have a larger labour market in Europe, to be supported by a larger knowledge economy (and society), be it the EU only or, even better, the European Higher Education Area. In the early 2000’s, when this narrative was at its height, the thinking was that if it’s only the Netherlands or Romania or Slovenia alone, or even the UK, that’s not large enough to be able to compete with the United States or with China or Brazil. (These were the countries mentioned at that time as the main competitors.)

This combination of the two narratives – the knowledge society and neoliberalist competitiveness – resulted in something that was very supportive for higher education for at least a period of time. If we want to be the most competitive economy in the world, which was an official objective of the European Union between 2000 and 2010, we need higher education; but we need higher education not organised on national principles but on European principles, because we need a larger labour market with easier recognition of degrees, a European ethos, European institutions, and so forth. So, these narratives of knowledge society, neoliberalism, European integration, even democratisation (at least for a while) combined to support the idea of moving across borders and increasing enrolment in higher education. Knowledge is important. And who is producing the knowledge? Universities. So, we should invest in universities and give them freedom to perform better, to help fulfil this dream of the early 2000’s in Europe of being economically competitive (“the most competitive in the world”), to achieve full employment, eventually,

to provide extended social protection (there was a lot of talk then about a proper “safety net”) and solidarity (including “with future generations”), etc.

Regarding the Europeanization discourse specifically, the idea was that more Europe is good, more Europe is better. Universities should work for Europe. Therefore, when they do that, they should be supported. Create big projects – Bologna itself, Erasmus, the Horizon project, which are immensely ambitious, even unprecedented, some of them also coming with an unprecedented level of funding. In this new context, we see universities competing for funding and for prestige at the European level. Even if the money gained from major grants is largely offset by the administrative costs and burden of managing them by the university, there is the prestige of being competitive and visible internationally. And this, in turn, translates into a better position to recruit international students or academic staff.

In a country like Austria, where my former university relocated because the environment for autonomy and academic freedom is one of the best in the world, there is still intense competition. Austria is also an example for how other ideological positions, not mentioned above, may help to moderate neoliberal market-based approaches, such as a genuine appreciation for science and advanced education in themselves, not as political or economic instruments. I would take the risk to say that Austria, for example, is not in the middle of a market-madness, like other countries where the need to finance universities through tuition fees leads you to feverishly seek international students. On the other hand, as Austrian universities do not have the autonomy to decide on the charging of tuition fees, they must negotiate with the state authorities for funds. So, even if a university has its own ambitions with respect to internationalisation, it must to some extent align with the state ministry through the process of steering at a distance. In this sense, it may lack some of the strategic autonomy previously mentioned. Any such drives towards internationalisation, whether by neoliberalist free market competition or incentivised by state ministries who adopt a neoliberalist model of regulation by steering at a distance, may have implications on the use of English for academic programmes.

3 Reflections on the dialogue

Our brief dialogue with Liviu Matei presents but a snapshot of insights and understandings into the complex relationship between the increasing implementation of EMI programmes, institutional autonomy, the system level of steering by the state, and the wider context of the EU and EHEA. Nevertheless, it allows us to approach the question of language choice and decision-making in the university curriculum

in a novel way through interdisciplinary exploration with higher education and public policy in order to illuminate potential drivers of EMI. Further, we are able to do so in a way that makes some contribution to the multiscalar analytic framework proposed by Darquennes et al. (2020), in our case, differentiating between the meso level of the higher education institution, the system-macro level of the country state, and the European-macro level.

We can see that the locus of influence on EMI programme decision-making may be diffuse throughout this multiscalearity. Starting from our bottom-most meso level of the institution, its quasi-autonomy hinges, however loosely, on the systemic strategy of nations (or their devolved regions), which may in turn be informed by wider narratives of the EU and EHEA. The move towards EMI academic programmes within the institution may thus be incentivised at the system-macro level, perhaps indirectly, as in the case of counts of international students and other measurables of performance that are taken to encapsulate internationalisation or other strategies, e.g., mobility and training of early researcher development; and such incentivisations may further be influenced, to varying degrees, by the European-macro level, as in the case of mobility targets or funded initiatives, although as Liviu Matei points out, these represent policy frameworks rather than directives.

Our dialogue with Liviu Matei further highlights that the increasing level of EMI may form part of wider patterns of change in higher education in the EHEA that are underpinned by political epistemologies. That being the case, the multiscalar ways in which the different levels of meso-institutional, national system-macro, and European-macro influence each other might not be easily conceptualised in so far as they are ideational. In the context of European university alliances, Charret and Chankseliani (2023) adopt a rhizomatic metaphor to explain how they are formed from pre-existing networks. This could be used somewhat abstractly to capture the organic complexity of the way in which ideas might be said to intermingle and travel along with organisational bodies or more loosely defined networks of individuals, often coalescing under the umbrella of wider European initiatives. These are themselves underpinned by prior and ongoing efforts towards standardisation that support comparison, and hence also competition, such as that of study structures and quality assurance, as set in motion by the Bologna process in 1999, out of which the EHEA can be said to have arisen (Matei and Iwinska 2018). Such ideas that cohere as epistemologies become concretised as they find expression through strategic formulations at the system-macro level of the state, upon which public universities remain reliant for the bulk of their funding.

Liviu Matei clearly brings into focus the relevance of the political narrative of the knowledge society (and economy) to the shift towards greater institutional autonomy in the higher educational reforms of many countries of Europe, as adopted by the European Commission and EU in its Lisbon strategy (de Boer and

File 2009). And it is this which underpins steering at a distance practices. The system-level strategic formulations of the state which aim to incentivise universities to take steps in a desired direction are themselves, then, contingent on reforms towards autonomy. Yet, rather than representing moral principles based on rights or freedoms, the knowledge society narrative may primarily have served a neoliberal drive towards economic competitiveness that was itself rooted in the assumed benefits of an expanding labour market, from nation state to European conglomerate, and strengthening of the EU itself as a global competitor. At the level of a country's government it propelled widespread changes towards a governance of higher education intended to allow for greater efficiency of the sector and measurability of performance.

Ultimately, the autonomy of higher education institutions means a devolution of various facets of decision-making, to varying degrees of decision-making powers, from the system-macro level of the state to the meso level of the public institution and its governance. This also has implications on decisions to implement EMI programmes. The very relevance of institutional autonomy to EMI, and more broadly to language diversity management, might be substantiated by the inclusion of “Capacity to choose the language of instruction” as one of the core indicators of the dimension of “academic autonomy” in the European University Association (EUA) Autonomy Scorecard (Privot et al. 2023: 50). Liviu Matei's caution that “strategic autonomy” is yet to be incorporated into such measures of institutional autonomy, reminds us, however, that there may be other forces at play related to systemic level strategies at the macro level of the country state that potentially impact on choice of language in the institutional curriculum within the modernised model of European higher education governance.

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