

Cookie policy: This site uses cookies to simplify and improve your usage and experience of this website. Cookies are small text files stored on the device you are using to access this website. For more information on how we use and manage cookies please take a look at our [privacy \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/privacy-policy/\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/privacy-policy/) and [cookie \(URL=/cookie-policy/\)](#) policies. Your privacy is important to us and our policy is to neither share or sell your personal information to any external organisation or party; nor to use behavioural analysis for advertising to you.

Agree

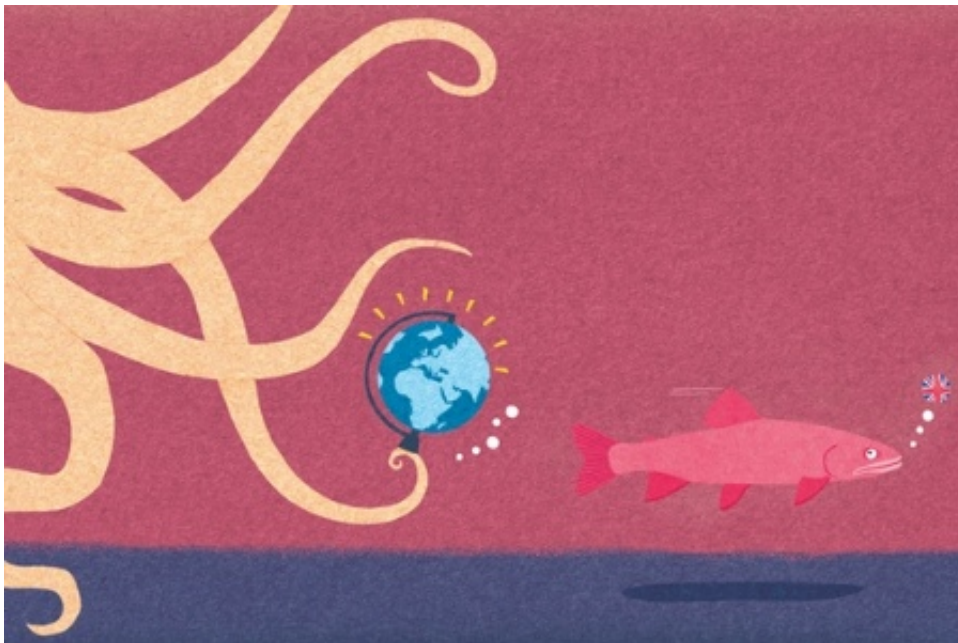


AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Polyglots required if we want a place in the global academy

7 March 2013

English cannot be the only acceptable language of scholarship, says Toby Miller. It's arrogant, impractical and anti-intellectual



Source: [Marcus Butt \(URL=#\)](#)

We might engage in partnerships with Korean or Chinese universities, but our discourse, our theories and our points of departure will continue

The signs are all there: the future domination of English as the major language of international diplomacy, business and education seems assured. Safely positioned in the top three internet languages and the top two Twitter languages, it is the preferred mode of communication for international airline pilots, corporate engineers, university physicists and medical researchers, inter alia.

In academia, English has long been the *sine qua non* for publishing in the sciences and medicine. The social sciences and humanities remain partial holdouts, perhaps because of the spread of the two other principal imperial languages, French and Spanish, the wealth of their sponsoring nations and the localism of their discourse. But even these areas are changing - for example, Latin American universities clearly favour work published in English over the languages of their own countries.

All this looks just fine and dandy for Anglos, doesn't it? We can remain in our English shell, confident that anything worth translating will duly be brought before us. And confident, too, that we understand, for example, globalisation, because we are agents of it. We remain respectful, of course, of other cultures, but are clear that their knowledge must be communicated in English for it to affect how we think.

As an academic, I often see this tendency in, say, lists of journals drawn up by professional associations, libraries and governments as legitimate publishing venues.

And I see it when reviewing manuscripts for publishers. Even scholars undertaking fieldwork outside their comfort zone, and presumably learning the relevant languages, rarely cite scholarship other than in English. So while primary sources, such as newspapers or interviews, perhaps even school history textbooks, are mentioned, theoretical and analytical work done by "the other" is not. This sends a clear message: "You are worth studying; you are an object of knowledge; but you are not a subject of knowledge, creating scholarship that I need to understand alongside work signed by a vast array of *angloparlantes*".

At the same time, English-language countries are now engaged in an unseemly rush for East Asian money in the social sciences and humanities. (We have great universities! You have great finance! We welcome you!)

And the curriculum? It will largely remain as it was, of course. (We built it that way, it's about us, you want it.)

We might engage in partnerships with Korean or Chinese universities to add Asia and stir, but our discourse, our theories and our points of departure will continue. This means we can go on teaching our own country's students as before, with the costs to them kept somewhat under control by income from "the other". It all sounds very neat. But it's flawed and stupid.

First, the Asian wave may be changing direction towards local education with the rapid rise of its own universities. Second, many forecasters think that the rise of the Bric countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) as economic powerhouses may be coming to an end, as a result of factors from rising wage expectations and class struggle, to state corruption, inefficiency and shifts in patterns of consumption.

The Financial Times recently ran a "Beyond the Brics" series highlighting the potential of countries such as Indonesia and Mexico, while *The Economist* has just published a 10-page special on Mexico pointing to, among other achievements, the country's return to its status as the world's leading television-set manufacturer because its skills, wages and transport costs are undermining China's brief hegemony.

There have been false dawns for these countries before. But betting against them now would be ill-advised, given their strategic position in the international political economy and their blend of natural resources and human capital.

Second, the current hegemony of Chinese money in particular is far more than a financial gift. It presents a unique opportunity to change how we do what we do, for the better. The same would apply for Mexico or Indonesia. But the opportunity is not being taken.

The research excellence framework necessarily influences how we undertake, categorise and value scholarship. But one day we shall look back on four- stars and "impacts" as arbitrary and whimsical classifications. We must remake ourselves in ways that transcend the limits of managerial and bureaucratic imaginations.

This would mean an immediate revolution in how we hire faculty, train graduate students and undertake research. We should conceive of our teaching and research on a collaborative basis. That means, depending on the topic, working in teams. Those teams should involve people who are fluent in all the major world languages (Putonghua, English, French and Spanish); who mix academic backgrounds across the human sciences; and who are prepared to rewrite the rules of what counts as knowledge and where they should publish it.

The effortless extrapolation from literary criticism or social theorisation undertaken from stained and worn armchairs and breathlessly reinvigorated over youthful laptops will no longer do. To remain as we are, in our methodological nationalism and monolingualism, is impractical, given the new needs and orientations of our political economy, and anti-intellectual, given the new opportunities for knowledge that such a revision promises.

The future is not English.

Postscript:

Toby Miller is professor of cultural industries at City University London.

Readers' comments (2)

- [Michael Hughes \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/michael-hughes/2000080.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/michael-hughes/2000080.publicprofile) | 07 Mar 2013 9:47am

Collaborations already do take place across disciplines and cultures, particularly in the natural sciences and engineering. The fact that English is so widely used is what makes this kind of internationalism possible.

I'm not sure about the idea of hiring people based on their language skills though. Most Research Groups will naturally have a range of languages covered, but the idea of deliberately hiring an otherwise inferior candidate just so he or she can publish in an obscure foreign-language journal is quite a strange one. If we accept the premise that almost all academics can read English, what exactly is the benefit of assembling some kind of in-house translation unit so as to be able to publish in a non-English journal with a tiny readership?

- [Eduard Du Courseau \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/eduard-du-courseau/2000274.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/eduard-du-courseau/2000274.publicprofile) | 07 Mar 2013 3:42pm

The sad reality is that a) most UK university staff can't communicate to a high level in any foreign language and when language audits take place, it is found that the types of languages that are spoken are not necessarily those that are in need for particular projects or collaborations.

Mr Hughes- your tone is patronising and dare I say typically British- terms such as "obscure" foreign languages, "inferior" candidates and "tiny readership" along with generalisations that almost all academics can read English nowadays betray a deep sense of ignorance of how the world works and how foreign language acquisition takes place not to mention the levels of proficiency that are required to think in a foreign language. The original article made a sensible suggestion to hire faculty teams from the world's major languages; this would give the UK a sharp competitive advantage. The alternative- rapid monolingual decline