



# A Coming Bounty of Academic Mutinies?

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

Eva Forslund and Magnus Henrekson (2022) have written a fascinating paper. On the more practical side, the problems and the trade-offs they mentioned are familiar to almost anyone involved in academic teaching in Europe. It is now common in Italy to have degree programs which are offered in English, albeit with Italian teachers. The quality of spoken English is not up to the most exacting standards, to say the least. Yet such courses come both from the drive towards internationalization which the authors mention in their paper, and from the demand side. While English is not *the* common European language, families in Italy associate proficiency in the English language with the possibility of accessing a wider labor market. Or at least so their wishes are interpreted by administrators and educational reformers.

On a more profound level, Forslund and Henrekson raise a subject which makes most of us uncomfortable. Science, social science included, is global; thanks to contemporary digital technology, scientific research is disseminated at unprecedented speed everywhere. A scientific discussion with more participants, ready to attempt to falsify their colleagues' theses and provisional results, is a healthier one and one apparently conducive to better and stronger research. Hence the globalization of science requires a common language, and that is English.

So far so good. But Forslund and Henrekson point out that the language in which we write is not alien to the way in which we argue what we want to argue. They list a few examples of “economics lost in translation:” words that are not perfectly matched by another in English, and vice versa. But they need not to be

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words. My favorite example is a story, possibly apocryphal, according to which once President George W. Bush grumbled that “the trouble with the French is that they don’t have a word for *entrepreneur*.” This was likely a *bon mot* to make fun of a Republican President and of course a learned economist may point out that the opposite is true, as the *e*-word was sadly missing in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. Yet, on a more fundamental level, President Bush, actual or fictional, was right: he meant that France has, at least now, a culture which is impermeable to the sort of active and happy endorsement of economic dynamism so profoundly rooted in American culture. President Bush, actual or fictional, may not have spotted the irony of using a word which so clearly smells of the French language, but was right in considering it a problem of *translation*.

Madame de Staël commented once that reading a book in translation, even in the case the reader knew well enough the language it was originally written in, brought with itself “a more intimate and domestic pleasure” (de Staël 1816). Translation is a complex exercise, in which what is brought from a language to another is not simply a word, a few printed letters on a piece of paper, but the universe of nuances and meanings that words bring with themselves. At best we may “say almost the same thing,” to quote the title of a book by Umberto Eco (2003) on the subject. And yet, saying almost the same thing, meaning almost the same thing, is the best we can hope also when we talk with friends that like us are born in Italy, in Italian—or in Sweden, in Swedish, etc. For me, it is a recurring doubt, when I teach to 20-year-olds: Do we mean the same thing, when we use the same words? Or is that life—our age, the books we read, the movies we watched, the games we played—are enough to take the Italian 20-year-old and me so far apart that what I consider obvious, when I talk, is actually far from obvious to her?

Translating is almost a universal exercise. Up to a certain extent, teaching in a social science—if done properly—is about translating concepts into a language accessible to younger and less informed people, while supplying them at the same time with a dictionary which will allow them to become conversant in the original language. In this regard, I am sure it is true that intuition comes more easily to students in their own language, as Forslund and Henrekson maintain, but I would not understate how much of learning per se is a matter of mediation and translation.

Forslund and Henrekson see problems in moving towards a global, English supply of economic teaching and researching. Among the problems they set out, there are two I consider most relevant:

1. By using English as their sole working language as economists, economists can indeed lose the sense of many local, institutional, historical and cultural nuances. This may backfire on them when they engage

in the “third mission,” that is, in the dissemination of the knowledge they produce at the broad level of public discourse in their respective countries. But it also impoverishes the quality of economic research.

2. Hence follows their fear that “the pretense of a theoretical universality, or the exclusive focus on Anglo-American institutions, discourages comparative analysis. Research by economists from so-called ‘peripheral’ economies is deemed less relevant, discouraging the kind of detailed comparative analyses that may be needed to understand complex motivations and preferences and the resulting behaviors. The high value placed by universities and colleagues on highly ranked journals means that the choice of research topics and methods becomes increasingly governed by the priorities of the editors of those journals” (Forslund and Henrekson 2022, 271). In short, homogenizing the language is the first step towards homogenizing the research. But if we all think and write the same, what’s the purpose of trading the information and knowledge we built? Globalization of scientific research may thus be self-defying.

I think both these concerns are legitimate, but the recourse to English as the standard language is part of a profound trend. The emphasis on publishing in top journals, the small regard for books in academic economics, and the attraction of top American universities as the place to be have forged a language of its own. The problem is not English, but the current version of ‘Economese,’ a cant within English.

I am not sure that English per se is nudging scholars towards “abstract formulations” (see Forslund and Henrekson 2022, 270). Indeed, considered as a language, English is rich in concreteness; its success has lain in part in the fact that the many versions of broken English spoken all over the world suit the needs of very practical people, the kind who would be quite uncertain on how to spell *abstract*.

It is more the attraction, than the abstraction—the attraction of institutions and journals whose prestige is founded on the obvious centrality of the United States in our world. Even in Europe we are likely to be better informed about what are the must-go places in the U.S., than in our neighboring countries. We European academics all speak English, but furthermore we all acknowledge the eminence of those institutions, those journals, those scholars, the commanding heights of our professions.

Something similar happens to political theory (my field) and other social sciences besides economics. I do not want to underestimate the problems Forslund and Henrekson point out. Those problems are very substantial, and they point

towards a conformism which, to firmly take root in scholarship, needs the framework of top institutions. In the game, too often played, of what should and what should not be researched, it is of paramount importance that the top places define the political boundaries of the permissible. The top places generate limits on what can be professionally discussed and considered.

The critics of globalization have long pointed out that it was bound to breed homogenization. In many fields, this has not been true. Think about food. Globalization added tastes and created markets for local cuisine, worldwide. Our diet has not been McDonaldized—unless for those who happen to enjoy McDonald’s no matter where they are.

But perhaps it is true that the English trend that Forslund and Henrekson so valuably explore is homogenizing thought. The problem is not easily addressed and will not be addressed by discouraging English learning. It has been shown that the American Economic Association—its personnel, authors, etc.—is essentially devoid of Republican voters (Langbert 2020). This suggests that the AEA—consciously or otherwise, simply reflecting the way its members think—may be effectively fostering homogenization both in terms of politics and in terms of fashionable academic Economese.

Some mutinies would help. What we would need is more contestation or more liberality among the officers of the AEA themselves—for example, actually living up to the title *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, by institutionalizing features and journal space that are open to people who believe, as Adam Smith did, that except in unusual instances we want social affairs to be less governmentalized, not more.

Furthermore, we need to encourage competition in the world of ideas. Reputation is the currency of academia and, in this case, we would certainly be better off if the dollar was not the world’s currency. We should prize creative outcasts. We need more academic entrepreneurship: more journals and more publishing houses, perhaps behaving differently than most academic publishers. We need creative ways to reach readers. We have so many tools to share information and yet there is so much room to improve the way in which we share it. There is more and more scope, in our global world, for translation, in the sense of a daily exercise to attempt to decipher, if not our fellow man, at least our fellow scholar.

Isn’t it wonderful?

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