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Listen to Eva Forslund and Magnus Henrekson, Please!

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

In 1729, the Royal Swedish Society of Sciences at Uppsala elected as one of its members the man who introduced the steam engine into Sweden. His name was Mårten Triewald. One of Triewald's reactions to his election was to propose that the Society should change from publishing in the *lingua franca* at the time, Latin, to Swedish (Ellegren 2019, 176–181). The Society at Uppsala did not listen to this proposal, but ten years later Triewald's vision came true in the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, founded in 1739. A corresponding reform, inspired by Eva Forslund and Magnus Henrekson (2022), is not likely today. Those who read Forslund and Henrekson will probably instead dismiss their arguments as backward-looking and point to the international character of modern academia. However, these skeptical readers also have reasons to take onboard their pleading for “a rebalancing against English and toward the native language” (2022, 258). Their arguments are important for all three tasks of universities: research, education, and collaboration with society.

Research

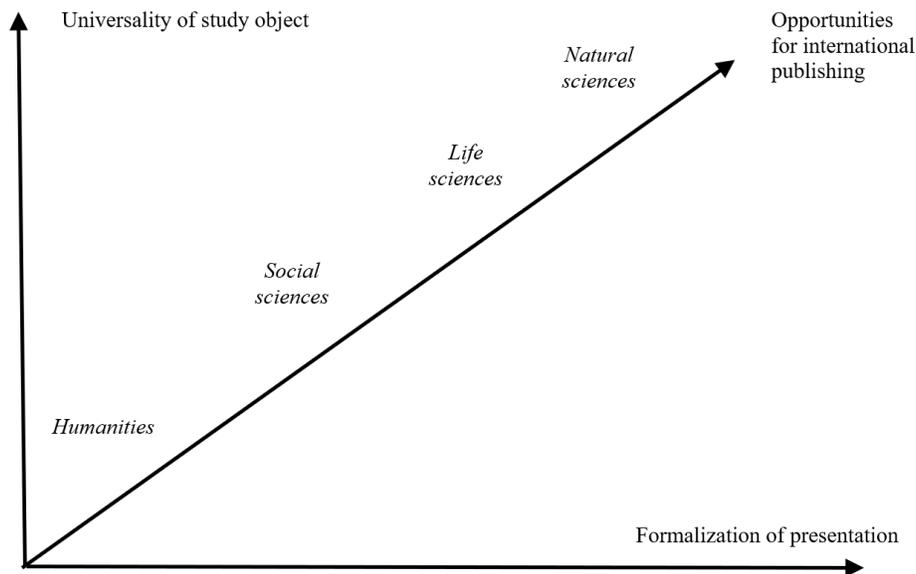
First, in terms of research, it is of course a great advantage that scholars all over the world who read English can get access to the research results of their international colleges. However, as pointed out by Forslund and Henrekson, the strong focus on publishing in international top journals has unfortunate effects for our understanding of real-world economics. Since most of the top journals are Anglo-American, non-English speakers are already, in writing their papers, at

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a disadvantage in relation to native speakers. Although language editing before submission is almost mandatory nowadays, language editors cannot perform miracles. The original text is the input to the editing, and if the input has deficiencies in terms of precision and formulations, there is a considerable risk they will remain in the edited text.

The problems are, of course, as pointed out by the two authors, less severe in disciplines where the natural language is less important. Thus, as suggested in Figure 1, the opportunities for international publication are greater the higher the degree of formalization in the presentation. Another significant factor is the generality of the study object. The more general the research objects and consequently the research results, the greater opportunities for international publishing. According to this reasoning, mathematics and theoretical physics end up in the upper right-hand corner of the diagram, followed by other natural sciences and life sciences, while the humanities are located in the lower left-hand corner. The social sciences are to be found somewhere above the humanities but below the natural sciences and life sciences.

Figure 1. Opportunities for international publishing for different disciplinary areas



In the race for publishing in top journals, economists have shown ambitions to move up on the third axis. Economics has become more and more formalized, using more and more mathematics. Economists have also increasingly turned to research that is less context-dependent, such as game theory, experiments, and studies of large databases, notably from financial markets.

A basic reason for the efforts of researchers, economists included, to move up along the third axis in Figure 1 is the increasing pressure to publish in journals with high impact factors and to achieve high citation figures. Behind these efforts lie not only the availability of metrics but also the emergence of rankings (Wedlin 2007; Espeland and Sauder 2016) and accreditations (Hedmo 2004). These are important for leaders of academic institutions, who increasingly tend to use the metrics for evaluations of and resource allocations between departments. Metrics are even used for the evaluations of individuals, and individuals tend to choose metrics in promoting themselves.

An effect of the pressures to publish in high-impact journals is a homogenization of research. In the field of economics, the *American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, and the *Review of Economic Studies* are often considered as the top five journals (Heckman and Moktan 2020). Since publications in these journals count much more than publications in other journals, economists tend to adapt their research to the earlier contents of these journals. However, rejection is the fate of most of the manuscripts submitted to the top five journals, leading to subsequent submissions to other journals. In this way, the papers in regional and even national journals will also have the same kind of orientation as the top five journals. In terms of the national journals, this is possible since they have been inclined to change their language to English. The Swedish *Ekonomisk Tidskrift*, founded in 1899, became the *Swedish Journal of Economics* in 1965, and eventually in 1976 in collaboration with Danish and Norwegian colleagues, the *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*. Likewise, the German *Zeitschrift für Volkswirtschaft, Sozialpolitik und Verwaltung*, founded in 1892, became the *Journal of Economics* in 1986.

The efforts to move up on the third axis entail that the research presented tends to become more formalized and less grounded in empirical studies of specific problems in a particular country. The exception to the latter appears to be studies from the United States. While authors from other countries often get the question “Why country X?”, this does not seem to be the case for U.S. authors. As a result, many research results are based on data from one particular country, which is not representative of all countries in the world. At the same time, the understanding of economic systems aside from that of the United States has become meagre.

The efforts to raise the reputation of institutions have also had the effect that institutions in non-English speaking countries are starting to recruit on the international labor market, in economics through interviews at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association. In this way, these institutions add faculty members who are not native speakers. The logic behind these recruitments is that the new faculty members have experience from international publishing and have valuable academic networks, both being factors that can facilitate publishing in

international journals. This may be a successful strategy in terms of publications but tends to have disadvantages related to their ability to address nationally grounded research problems as well as to take part in collegial decision-making. The latter may be particularly problematic in times when there is a pressure on university presidents, deans and heads of departments to behave as strong and strategic leaders.

Thus, the tendency to move from native languages to English in research is a result of ambitions to raise the reputation of institutions and individuals through publishing in journals published in the United States. This is less problematic in disciplines where research objects are not dependent on context and where formalization is high. For the social sciences, to which economics belong, it is more problematic. Non-English-speaking authors in social sciences have disadvantages in international publishing at the same time as national research problems are neglected.

Education

A native English speaker as a faculty member at, for example, a Swedish university, may have the above-mentioned shortcomings in terms of nationally grounded research and collegial decision-making, but he or she should have an advantage from teaching in English. However, there is some evidence that students have another opinion. They appear to have difficulty in understanding native English speakers, finding they speak too fast and with accents that are difficult to understand. Therefore, they prefer the English spoken by their compatriots. Still, there is a problem of communication. According to the Swedish author Kjell Espmark (2012, 156), who is one of the eighteen members of the Swedish Academy, information is lost at both ends. He reports that non-English-speaking faculty members feel that they can express 70 percent of their mother tongue capacity when speaking English. Similarly, students estimate that they apprehend 70 percent when taught in English instead in their own language. Since 70 percent times 70 percent is 49 percent, half of the message from the teacher to the student is lost in translation! Obviously, lack of a broad sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical deficiencies lie behind the difficulties for the students and teachers. In contrast to research papers that go through language editing before submission, teaching means broadcasting directly. As for the students, they often have limitations in their command of English. Experiences in Swedish universities indicate that these in many cases are even more severe for incoming international students.

In view of the above-mentioned problems, it is relevant to ask why universities chose to teach in English. The answer is that they face strong pressures to

internationalize. Both rankings and accreditations use this variable for their assessments. In addition, national governments push for increasing internationalization (see, e.g., SOU 2018). Together these pressures provide strong incentives for academic leaders to jump on the internationalization bandwagon. However, there are of course also both hopes of brain gains and commercial benefits. For some academic institutions, internationalization has provided considerable financial contributions (Birrell and Betts 2018). In order to be part of this market for international students, it is common for universities to join educational fairs to recruit students.

English-speaking countries, particularly the United States, have become a role model for internationalization for non-English speaking countries. However, the two types of countries differ in one very significant way: the mother tongue. English-speaking countries do not need to adapt their language of teaching, while the non-English speaking countries have to adjust in order to attract foreign students. This means that the majority of students have to adapt to the minority, despite the fact that the majority are nationals and after graduation will work in their native country. It is therefore important for them to know central concepts in their mother tongue. The international students may fare no better if they go back to their home country. In fact, these students may have problems getting jobs when they return home, since labor markets tend to have barriers to entry for those with foreign education. Consequently, many metropolitan cities have a large number of well-educated taxi drivers (Engwall 2019).

The internationalization of higher education does not only mean a transition to teaching in English. In the same way as researchers try to move up on the third axis in Figure 1, curriculum designers tend to make the content more general and formalized. In this way, the contents of the education tend to lose the links to the particular problems of the domestic nation.

Thus, in the same way as English has infiltrated research, it has invaded education. This is an effect of ambitions to gain in reputation but also of hopes for brain gains and moneymaking. While pursuing those ambitions, institutions in non-English speaking countries have not taken language problems seriously. As a result, native students may face problems in learning and not have the right vocabulary when they try to enter the job market.

Contributions to society

In addition to research and teaching, universities have long had expectations to collaborate with society. That was the case even in Märten Triewald's day. In fact, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences manifested this mission with an

emblem showing an old man planting a tree and the quote “For posterity” (*För efterkommande*). In recent times, these expectations have increased, and evaluations are trying to assess the impact of academic institutions. There are also arguments (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001) that modern science is not an activity in isolation but in interaction with different stakeholders as well as in collaboration within a triple helix comprising academia, industry, and government (Etzkowitz 2008). For this to happen, command of the language in the specific country is obviously very important. It is also essential that researchers should be familiar with the particular conditions in the country. Such knowledge risks being neglected in academic programs resulting from efforts to move up on the third axis in Figure 1. Therefore, in order for universities to contribute to society, there is a need to adapt both research and teaching to national circumstances.

There are also expectations to make research results publicly available. Traditionally, popular articles in the native language have been the means to achieve this. However, with the increasing pressures to publish in international journals, many, particularly young scholars in their early career, abstain from such publishing, since these articles are not counted in evaluations. This is unfortunate, since it means that research results are kept away from a wider audience. In disciplines like economics, where the results have policy implications, this is particularly regrettable.

An argument against the above-mentioned tendency is that nowadays all publicly funded research should be available in the form of open access (Suber 2012). Everybody should be able to read research results. However, this is not an alternative to publications in the native languages, not only because the access has technical restrictions but above all because the published articles are written for specialists and are not easily understandable for those outside the discipline. This is particularly the case as academic authors have the ambition to move upwards on the third axis in Figure 1. In this way, research in for instance economics may miss an important opportunity for validating research results against reality.

Concluding remarks

The article by Forslund and Henrekson (2022) has a focus on the discipline of economics and on Sweden. However, it has much wider implications. Their reasoning is applicable for many of the social science disciplines as well as the humanities. In addition, it is valid not only for Sweden but for most non-English-speaking countries. A demonstration of the latter is a recent debate in the Netherlands, where about 40 percent of the freshmen are international students (CBS 2022). Similar to the reasoning by Forslund and Henrekson, and above, there are worries about the future preparedness of domestic students for the Dutch labor

market (Wiggers 2021).

The policy implications of the internationalization issue appear to be that politicians and university leaders should focus more on the home market and the preparation of domestic students for the national labor market. In so doing, it seems, particularly for the preparation of social science students for a global world, wise to increase the element of language training beyond English and the element of cultural studies. In relation to Figure 1, this means moving down on the third axis rather than moving upwards. For its success, it will be very important to integrate international faculty members in their new country by increasing their understanding of the particular institutional conditions and by encouraging them to acquire high proficiency in the domestic language. Overall, we should welcome the plea by Forslund and Henrekson for a balanced view. There is no need to go as far as Märten Triewald and recommend the mother tongue only, but there are strong reasons for using it to a much higher extent in universities where English is not the native language.

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