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The Virtues of Native Discourse: Striking a Balance Between English and the Native Language

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The Virtues of Native Discourse: Striking a Balance Between English and the Native Language

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Abstract: An increasing number of researchers, whether in Sweden, Slovakia, Italy, Japan, Brazil, or many other places, are using English in their discourse, written or oral, despite working in a place where the native language is not English. To convey insights and research results to the general public or to domestic policymakers, one must write in the native language. Language affects the way students learn and the content of teaching. Working in a second language can adversely affect learning unless teachers compensate for certain effects. When English is the working language, there is a risk that the study of relevant national, regional, and local institutions and conditions will be downplayed, which may impair students' understanding of the workings of the country where most of them will pursue their future careers. Also, there is a risk that important domestic aspects will be overlooked as researchers seek to treat topics sufficiently general to appeal to 'international journals,' which use English. The authors are Swedes and economists, and here often use illustrations from economics in Sweden, but the issue arises widely and increasingly, in many areas of learning and throughout the world.

Keywords: Economic policy; Economics teaching, Economics writing; Institutions; Language of instruction.

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When should a native language be used in economics? 'Almost never,' seems to be the answer in an increasing number of countries where the native language is not English. The choice between the native language—be it Swedish, Spanish, Japanese, or any other native language—and English as the working language at universities in non-English-speaking countries entails many tradeoffs. The issues are treated by linguistics and other scholars, in such works as *English as a Global Language* (Crystal 2003), *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and Findings* (Mauranen and Ranta 2009), and *English as a Lingua Franca: Perspectives and Prospects* (Pitzl and Osimk-Teasdale 2016).

Our essay is homespun and offered as a point of departure. We are economists and we are Swedes; we illustrate using economics in Sweden, but the issue is confined neither to economics nor to Sweden. It pervades the academic disciplines in all countries whose language is not English. Our general posture on the issue is that the use of native language is being given up either too readily or without proper regard for the consequences. In the countries at the forefront of the anglicization process, at most of the relevant margins, a rebalancing against English and toward the native language should be considered.

Economists are keen to identify and clarify tradeoffs. There are many advantages to using English. When research and teaching is in English, a larger market opens up. Researchers can publish in international journals, communicate with other researchers, build on research conducted in other countries, and reach a greater number of people in the world.

Furthermore, using English, faculty and students can be recruited from other parts of the world. International student exchange becomes possible, which brings with it significant cultural upsides. When English is the language of instruction domestic students become better prepared for an increasingly globalized labor market. In many countries, academia is still dominated by old, petrified structures that hold back scientific progress (on South Korea, see Schwekendiek 2016). In those contexts, a larger role for English can break structures, pave the way for scientific progress, and contribute in a valuable way to public affairs.

However, using the native language has plenty of advantages as well. Using the native language makes it easier to teach domestic institutions, history, and conditions of high relevance. It makes it easier to apply economic analysis to specific domestic conditions that native students are likely to be familiar with, rather than, say, examples from the U.S. economy. There is less risk of superficial learning. Students become better prepared for a professional life in their native country. The distance between academia and society is reduced if universities and societies share a common language, so universities need to develop terminology suitable to native discourse.

Around the world, researchers aim to publish in international journals. We certainly acknowledge that it is neither possible nor desirable to use native language to publish original research of the kind sought by international journals. Language barriers in many senses are also barriers to research, and the shift to a common language for economists worldwide has undoubtedly impacted economics research positively. Nevertheless, it is crucial that the shift towards English not be carried too far, at the expense of concreteness, relevance, and participation in public affairs.

There are tradeoffs, and one must strike the right balance between the native language and English. For countries that are rapidly increasing the use of English as the language of instruction already at the beginner's levels of university studies, it is important to avoid overshooting. New generations of economists need to be encouraged and equipped to engage in their own country's development. This means communicating their findings in the native language in various ways, contributing in their home country, e.g., in government commissions and reports. Even general insights need, when valuable, to be popularized at home, in the native language.

The present article grows out of the experience one of us had when she wrote an article on this topic in the daily newspaper *Upsala Nya Tidning* (Forslund 2021). The article sparked an unprecedented amount of reader feedback. It touched on Swedish conditions specifically and higher education at the university generally, and it argued that the use of English was too often at the expense of students learning efficiently. The many emails we received from people who believed the shift from Swedish to English was happening without conscious contemplation showed clearly that there is a need to formulate the issue, and consider the tradeoffs, and consider ways to reduce the tradeoffs. Our goal is to raise questions as much as it is to answer them. Even if our perspective is European, or even Swedish in particular, and economics-oriented, the dilemmas we are highlighting are becoming increasingly apparent in the rest of the world, and in more and more fields of research and learning.

The European context—higher education in English

An increasing share of courses and programs are given exclusively in English. Economics departments are switching into a more Anglo-American approach in the recruitment of students and junior faculty, introducing career ladders and evaluation criteria for promotion that closely resemble those that evolved over a long period of time in the U.S. university system.[1]

In the European Union and the additional four countries comprising the European single market there are no fewer than 26 different native languages.[2] In many of these countries the anglicization process has gone very far, particularly in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, France, and Denmark, while it has barely started in some of the other countries (Wächter and Maiworm 2014, 16).

Internationalization is related to other incentive structures. Lars Engwall and Linda Wedlin (2022) argue that the combined forces of how business schools are ranked and accredited, for example, contribute to a skewed type of internationalization. When universities adapt to global rankings, they tend to treat the university market as a global

[1] This process is accelerated by the introduction of the European Job Market for Economists (link) in 2018. The setup of this market is almost a carbon copy of its U.S. counterpart (see European Economic Association 2018).
[2] The 24 official EU languages plus Norwegian and Icelandic.

one. Yet today and in the foreseeable future, the vast majority of university students will be recruited domestically and will remain in their native country during all or most of their professional career, and in order to improve, universities still need to compete on a market that remains largely domestic.

In Sweden, 91 percent of all full-time university students are Swedish natives. A large majority of them can be expected to remain in Sweden during their professional careers (Statistics Sweden 2021). In effect, universities in non-English-speaking countries are by and large domestic institutions that prepare national students for careers in the national labor market; it is misguided to treat them as actors primarily catering to a global student and labor market.

The university systems in Europe are typically highly centralized. Central or regional governments grant charters to universities and decide on the size and admission rules of a university (through budgetary allocations). The centralization leaves less leeway for universities to adjust remuneration to track an individual professor's research and teaching performances, to vary the level of remuneration according to the economic value of the professor's field of specialization, and to adjust the allocation of its research budget across fields in response to changing social demand.

Nevertheless, in all areas of the academic world in Europe, there has been movement in recent years toward English as the language of instruction. The trend toward anglicization of academia has gained additional momentum in Europe through the Bologna Process, the overarching aim of which is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff, as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world. The process involves cooperation between ministries, higher education institutions, students, and staff from 48 countries (Bonjean 2018). Link.

The stated aim of the Bologna Process is to facilitate mobility of students, graduates, and higher education staff. That aim would have EHEA countries embark on a standardization of their degree structure and quality assessments as well as to the removal to greatest extent possible of obstacles stemming from the fact that countries have different native languages. These efforts lead to an increased use of English as the language of instruction. In Sweden in 2020, two thirds of all teaching at the masters' or higher level was in English, up from roughly half in 2010 (Malmström 2022).

The dual roles of universities both as promoters of the Bologna Process and internationalization, on the one hand, and as domestic institutions, on the other, are not always easy to combine. In most European countries, the university sector is part of the government sector. In their capacity as higher educational institutions, their administrative working language is therefore the official native language.

In Sweden, for instance, there is a Language Act stating that colleges and universities have "a special responsibility for Swedish terminology to be available, used, and developed within their various disciplines."[3] At the same time, the Bologna Declaration requires universities to take part in the internationalization of research and higher education.

Combining these two responsibilities has resulted in an ambition to achieve what is called "parallel language use" (Salö and Josephson 2014). The aim has been formulated by Uppsala University (2018) as follows: "Swedish and English are the main working languages [and] are used side by side." In practice, parallel language use has proven to be difficult. It is easy to point to situations where the goal fails. Undergraduate programs are to a large extent given exclusively in the native language, while graduate courses are often taught only in English. Thus, graduate students may never combine their specialization with the qualifications to development of terms, concepts, and arguments in their native tongue, while undergraduate students will lack the means to do so. Thus, this structure of how and when we use the respective languages may create a gap, not only between the general public and each field, but between those who studied on lower and higher levels within each field.

In addition, many administrative jobs cannot be handled in English. Combined with the fact that large parts of advanced level education are unavailable in Swedish (Salö and Josephson 2014, 310), the use of different languages in undergraduate studies, graduate studies, and administration are examples of when the ambition of parallel language use in reality is not parallel, but segmented and to some extent disjointed.

Nowadays, national universities in Europe are typically assigned an objective, in addition to teaching and research, to communicate to society insights and results and apply them to social affairs. This objective, customarily denoted "the third mission" (Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020) has come to be interpreted more broadly as collaboration between universities, on the one hand, and private industry and the public sector, on the other.

In Sweden, this third objective was added back in 1975 and was explicitly codified in 1998 (SOU 1998, 128, 153–154). The universities are obliged to be open to influences from the outside world, to disseminate information about their teaching and research activities outside academia, and to facilitate access to relevant information about research results. Nevertheless, the task is often not prioritized. In a 2019 survey of 3,699 researchers at 31 Swedish universities, 32 percent of social science respondents said they would engage more in communication if it were valued more highly in promotions and 27 percent said they would do so if it were given more weight in funding applications (Vetenskap & Allmänhet 2019). Perhaps researchers should be given more incentives and encouragement to develop their public-discourse skills in their native language. Such encouragement can be given even if English remains the language for writing research.

[3] Språklag (2009:600), § 12 (link).

The teaching of economics at Swedish universities

To get an idea of how economics departments in Sweden are thinking about these issues, we contacted them.[4] We found that, in accordance with the trend for higher education in Sweden in general, English dominates as the language of instruction in master's programs. Linköping University is the only institution that offers a master's degree taught in Swedish.

The pattern at the undergraduate level is that the earlier the program, the more the teaching is in Swedish. Several departments offer a first-semester course in economics in Swedish, but transition to English gradually throughout the program. At Uppsala University, the working language at the undergraduate level is to some extent dependent on the availability of teachers. At Stockholm University, first-semester economics is taught in Swedish and thereafter practically all courses are in English. Several departments allow undergraduate students to choose which language to use for their thesis. However, the general tendency is clear: English is gradually becoming predominant as the language of instruction in higher education.

The Stockholm School of Economics is unique in that all courses, including at the undergraduate level, are taught exclusively in English, although there are plans to introduce a course with the aim of being relevant to economic policy issues in a Swedish context, using Swedish as the language of instruction. At the University of Gothenburg, the School of Business, Economics and Law plans to offer an English-only language track for the economics program at the undergraduate level from the fall of 2023. Until now, the first three semesters have been given in Swedish only, but the change means that the entire program will be offered in English.

Why give courses in English? The departments argue that they want to be able to attract foreign students and honor exchange agreements. Teachers are recruited from abroad and textbooks are in English. Many take it as given that the language of instruction is English since the workplace is international, and the university has an international profile. Also, it is often mentioned that Swedish-speaking students request instruction in English. An additional reason adduced for choosing to teach in English is that the subject is research-heavy, and researchers use English as their working language. Course content closely coordinated to research thus justifies that teaching taking place in the same language.

If very few courses are taught in the native language, there will not be much demand for textbooks in the native language. Thus, the trend comes to ensure its own justification. We see here an element of self-fulfilling prophesy.

Choices of the language for individual undergraduate courses are to some extent made on a case-by-case basis, while decisions about international master's programs were typically made in connection with the implementation of the Bologna Process in Swedish higher education in 2007. In cases where courses are given in Swedish, the reasoning is that

[4] We are grateful to directors of studies, professors, and program managers at Jönköping University, Linköping University, Södertörn University, University of Gothenburg, Linnaeus University, Uppsala University, Lund University, Stockholm University, Karlstad University, and the Stockholm School of Economics for input and information. Other information about language of instruction comes from various higher education syllabi.

Swedish students should be proficient at communicating economics in Swedish, and that Swedish lecturers teaching Swedish students in English should be avoided. Some institutions also raise a concern that it may be more difficult for students to discuss economics in Swedish if they do not master the terminology in Swedish, and more difficult for students and graduates to talk about economics with people lacking economics training, i.e., the overwhelming majority of the population.

Accounting and law departments sometimes include as requirements undergraduate courses in economics. While economics courses are typically taught in English, the major subjects are taught almost exclusively in Swedish. The reason cited for this state of affairs is that law and accounting are topics that deal specifically with Swedish conditions.

The development of economics is similar to that of Sweden’s university sector in general (Malmström 2022), but it is clear that the transition to English instruction at the graduate level has gone much further than in many other disciplines.

Different subjects, different language choices

Although the trend generally looks the same, the picture turns out to be a little more variegated when you break it down into different subject areas, where the extent of anglicization varies. This is no coincidence—as the structure of different subjects differs, so does the language of their research and teaching (Bolton and Kuteeva 2012).

Crudely speaking, there are three main subject groups: natural sciences, social science, and the humanities.[5] When it comes to natural science, say, physics, national, regional, or local conditions and institutions do not affect how physics works, and domestic physicists do not need a nationally adapted language in order to function. Language can thus be said to be less important in the natural sciences, since knowledge is conveyed to a large extent through equations, formulas, figures and diagrams, and the most important means of communication is thus the language of mathematics itself. Moreover, the body of knowledge that students need to master can almost always be found written in English. In this context, John Airey and coauthors (2017) note:

> In the sciences, language is often viewed as a passive bearer of meaning—an unproblematic means for reporting quantitative results. Clearly, this is not the case in the humanities and social sciences where language is conceived as integral to the thoughts and meanings being expressed.

The humanities—the study of languages, literature, the arts, history, philosophy, archaeology, anthropology, law, and religion—are at the other end of the spectrum. It might be said that they are devoted to the unique value of the particular within its cultural and human contexts and do not seek general laws (Rickert 1986/1913). And when the humanities are pursuing things of a universal or general nature, they often do so by appreciating instantiations and exemplars best kept in the native context.

[5] The boundary between the humanities and social science is somewhat fuzzy.

Studies in the humanities tend to be deeply embedded in a specific cultural and temporal context, which often make them inappropriate for publication in a 9,000-word format in an international English-language journal. In law, each individual word carries special meanings, significations, and connotations, and high demands are placed on the reader to master the language in which laws are written. Also, domestic conditions are crucial. Academic articles in law are written so that practitioners, i.e., judges, lawyers, and professionals, can read them. The bond between the profession and academia is therefore particularly strong. Law as a subject is thus tied closely to specific national conditions, which justifies a higher degree of native language usage, both in research and teaching.

Social science is devoted to the study of societies and the relationships among individuals within those societies. The main disciplines are sociology, economics, management, political science, and psychology. Without going deeply into the matter, we may just note that the aptness of native language, as opposed to English, varies.

The tradeoffs themselves, therefore, vary by field, by country, and by many other categories. It is less problematic to switch to English in disciplines where the subject itself is universal and where mathematics is central. The transition to English in these subjects therefore tends to be faster (Kuteeva 2014). English now totally dominates scientific publications in the natural sciences in Sweden; the share of articles in English exceeds 98 percent and all Ph.D. theses in recent years were written in English. In the humanities and social sciences, the share of Ph.D. theses in English was below 30 percent until the mid-1980s and is now almost 70 percent in the humanities and approaching 80 percent in social science (Malmström 2022).

In 1929 Karin Kock wrote the first ever Swedish Ph.D. thesis in economics written in English.[6] It was not until the 1980s that a majority of economics Ph.D. theses in Sweden were written in English. By 1990, the English language had almost totally taken over (Sandelin and Rankki 1997). From 2000 to 2021, among a total of 1,100 Ph.D. theses in economics at Swedish universities, only one (Ljungberg 2007) was written in Swedish and one in Norwegian (Davidsen 2000), while all others were written in English.

Learning and language

It might be thought that unique domestic conditions can be treated just as well in English. But there is considerable risk that student learning will suffer, much could be lost in translation, and then students would be “dumber in English” (Hadenius 2003, 3). The study environment is inevitably affected by a change in language. Both students and educators are affected. In a review of Scandinavian research on how language choice affects the learning environment, Camilla Falk Rønne Nissen and Lars Ulriksen (2016) conclude that when lecturers with non-English mother tongue teach in English, they make both conscious and unconscious changes to their pedagogy. They use a formal language more reminiscent of

[6] Up through the early 1930s, most Swedish Ph.D. theses in economics that were not written in Swedish were in German (roughly 20 percent). Kock was the second woman in Sweden to get a Ph.D. in economics, and in 1947 she became the first female cabinet minister in Swedish history.

course literature than plain language and natural idiom. The same content is thus formulated more narrowly, and the teaching is less rich. Hanne Tange (2010, 143) believes that when you switch to English as the language of instruction, it happens at the expense of jokes, anecdotes, examples from everyday life, and relevant references to current events. The lectures become more boring. Lectures often become reminiscent of monologues rather than dialogues, as teaching becomes less interactive when it is conducted in a language other than the students' first language (Nissen and Ulriksen 2016, 19).

Mastering a certain corpus of knowledge is a gradual process. Lectures provide one key means in this process, ideally an overview and introduction of the subject matter, making the student well prepared for in-depth absorption of the course content through reading, repetition, solving of problem sets, and so on. Arguably, the lectures should not be a substitute but a complement to reading the literature. Lectures should provide insightful, intuition, and motivation to the student's ensuing study of the reading materials. They should entice the students into applying themselves. Insight, intuition, and motivation are much easier in your own language. If knowledge is formulated only in an anglicized way, it can be difficult for those students who do not understand that particular phrasing, if no alternatives are offered to absorb the material. Having set the language to English, assignments and exams are returned in English, and it can be more difficult to determine whether a student has gained a deeper understanding.

A more generalized way of teaching, where a handful of highly similar and thus largely substitutable English-language textbooks are used from introductory economics courses and onwards across the globe, indeed makes the market for the successful textbook larger, but it does not necessarily help students. A more generalized way of teaching means that there are fewer hooks for students to hang onto mentally. If one cannot relate material to other parts of one's life, the material becomes not only harder to process and remember but also appears less relevant and useful. Despite these problems, using English might be redeemed by countervailing benefits, but we must mind the downside effects if we are to make ourselves responsible to what Ronald Coase (1960, 43–44) calls "the total effect" of our decisions.

In his 2009 dissertation, Airey described learning patterns among Swedish students of physics. The students themselves said it did not matter whether the language of instruction was English or Swedish; they asserted that they could absorb the knowledge just as easily either way. But when Airey analyzed video recordings of students in lectures, a different picture emerged. Students generally asked fewer questions when the language of instruction was English. They also focused more on their own notes than on following the lecturer's reasoning. It was more common for students, when teaching was conducted in a second language, not to fully absorb the knowledge. Instead, they memorized what they heard or read and reproduced it verbatim in discussions or during exams. Teaching in a second language can lead to students hiding their own ignorance or misunderstandings, from the teacher and from themselves.

Learning is more than just knowledge. Learning can also be about identification. In order to spark the interest of students, one has to make sure that they identify with the material. Cultural references and idiomatic expressions are important pedagogical tools in this respect. Introducing a student to economics, or any subject, means inviting the student into a new world—a world which they must envisage they could be a part of.

Economics lost in translation

A South African study looked at what happens when students of economics do not know how to translate a certain word or term (Paxton 2009). A common learning strategy identified by the study is that students instead only try to *remember* the word. Again, it becomes difficult for examiners to determine whether a student has only learned to repeat the terminology or whether they understand it. It also happens that students have difficulty finding a proper translation for different concepts. Sometimes there simply is no very apt translation. The alternative is then to find the concept that is closest. This increases the risk of so-called *false friends*, that is, translating a concept into something that sounds similar in the other language, but whose significations or connotations do not line up well with those of the English term. The understanding of the concept then becomes at best incomplete; in the worst case, a misunderstanding arises.

To give an example, the English noun *sanction* can be negative or positive, punishment or reward, disapproval or approval. The seemingly identical Swedish noun *sanktion* has the negative meaning only, and when "sanction" is used in the positive sense, it is likely to cause confusion.

There are many examples of concepts and expressions in economics that were originally established in English but lack a recognized translation into the domestic language. The problem is especially acute at the advanced level. Since teaching and examination at that level increasingly takes place in English, there is no reason for the individual domestic student or educator to formulate a proper translation of the concepts. But when the young economist is then called to talk about economics in the domestic language, she faces a problem. One option is to pepper her Swedish discourse with borrowed English terms. Another alternative is homemade translations. But these may be poorly anchored in the student's native language or difficult to understand if he or she has not already mastered the English concept.

An example is the concept of *asset specificity* in English. It means the asset has only one or a few areas of usage and can therefore rarely or with great difficulty be repurposed or sold off to third parties. Translation into Swedish has given rise to the term *tillgångsspecificitet*, where *tillgång* means asset and *specificitet* is *supposed to* mean specificity. However, the Swedish word *specificitet* is a statistical term that currently bears no other meaning than the probability that a binary diagnostic test indicates a negative result when the true result is negative. That meaning differs from the meaning in the composite *tillgångsspecificitet*. The Swedish concept of *specificitet* lacks the everyday meaning of the English *specificity*. Students who learn the concept in Swedish are likely only to memorize it, without necessarily understanding its meaning, and the composition of the term itself does not help one to remember its meaning. The translation *tillgångsspecificitet* has, in effect, turned *specificitet* into a polyseme, that is, a word with multiple meanings, and to use a polyseme competently, one should comprehend the multiple meanings and their connotations.

Of course, language is a changing tool that is continuously created and recreated in interactions between people. If enough individuals use a word or concept long enough and with a certain meaning, it will eventually acquire that meaning. Will this be the case with a concept such as *tillgångsspecificitet* in economics? Probably not. Terms such as *asset specificity* are not likely at any point in the near future to become a term that ordinary citizens use habitually; the term will continue to be used almost only by economists. At the same time, the meaning and concept of *asset specificity* could be useful for a larger public as well, for example, to explain some of the seemingly irrational phenomena when goods with high acquisition cost are difficult to find a market for or are sold very cheaply. But if no effort is made to make sure the terminology resonates in the natural domestic discourse, the concept's usefulness—the insight—is forsaken. The only thing that is then created and recreated in the interactions between economics are the group's own treatments, while the distance between economists and laypeople increases. As a result, knowledge of economics becomes more difficult to disseminate to the public.

Another example is the word *policy*, a word that exist both in Swedish and English, but with different meanings. In English, it is defined as "the art, study, or practice of government or administration; the conduct of public affairs; political science," while in Swedish, the word *policy* is described as "basic principles for the actions of a company or organization in general or in a certain respect," such as a company's or organizations attitude towards e.g., anti-discrimination, alcohol, or work environment (*Oxford English Dictionary; Nationalencyklopedin*). A *policy* in a Swedish sense thus refers to a specific code of conduct. Within economics in Sweden, however, the meaning of *policy* has been recreated to bear the same meaning as in English. Some may argue that meanings of *policy* are continuing to change—the term has a complicated past (Heidenheimer 1986). At any rate, there is a risk that an internal lingo among students and researchers, differing from how people in the society at large communicate, alienates the two groups from one another.

Is Sweden to abandon Swedish?

While the need for education in the native language is important in teaching, small countries like Sweden have long turned to German, French, and English to engage international research, but German and French have long since been pushed off that stage, leaving English. However, research and education are naturally intertwined. Here, we aim to shed light on how the transition to English in higher education also has consequences for how research in economics is conducted, and how—and whether—it is communicated to a larger public.

There are subjects that rely on a universal language, notably mathematics, and where the findings and insights gained are universal in the sense that they are quite independent of the national or linguistic context within which the discourse takes place. By contrast, there are topics and disciplines that require an understanding of local institutional conditions including the cultural and temporal circumstances—topics and disciplines where the meaning of each word is particularly important. Like psychology, economics ends up somewhere in the middle.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* "economics" has two definitions. First, it is described by its subject matter: "a social science concerned chiefly with description and analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services." The second definition corresponds to what constitutes the bulk of contemporary university courses in economics, namely "economic theory, principles, or practices." Economic knowledge is conveyed to a large extent with the help of diagrams, mathematical equations, and econometric estimates. Consistent with this state of affairs, David Colander and Arjo Klamer (1987) reported that, already in the 1980s, a mere 3.4 percent of the U.S. Ph.D. students at the leading departments believed that a thorough knowledge of the economy was very important, while 68 percent believed that this was unimportant. By contrast, 57 percent said that excellence in mathematics was very important and 41 percent that it was moderately important.

Hence, many parts of economics as it is taught are universal; knowledge is often thought to be hierarchical and to build on previous research in a fairly straightforward manner. Against this background, it is easy to argue that English should be the primary working language in economics.

On the other hand, economics is a social science, where it is important both to understand local conditions and to have a deeper understanding of theories and concepts. A mathematical formula always means the same thing, regardless of language and country. But how human purposiveness is manifested differs based on existing incentive structures and cultures, and these differ from society to society, from era to era and from context to context.

Economists such as Samuel Bowles (2016) have highlighted the problems of placing too much emphasis on abstract formulations and of exaggerated claims that findings are universal in scope. Findings may in fact be the result of a highly idiosyncratic blend of culturally evolved motivations or preferences. Therefore, one necessarily needs to look beyond one's own culture in order to do comparative analysis. Comparative analysis teaches us about one thing by contrasting it with another. If people exclusively studied their own cultures in their own languages, that would preclude *comparative* cultural analysis and the kind of unexpected conclusions laid out by Bowles. But 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.

Esther Duflo (2017, 23) asserts that, in addition to understanding and creating universal frameworks for how people behave, and how the economic system works, economists must be able to apply these insights in the "complicated, messy policy environment" where reform takes place. In her review of Bowles's book *The Moral Economy* (2016), Rachel Kranton (2019, 158–159) points to the same thing: to understand the consequences that follow from a new reform proposal, and thus a changed incentive structure, detailed knowledge of social and political conditions is required. This general point is made forcefully by the world-leading human evolutionary biologist (and former professor of psychology and economics) Joseph Henrich:[7]

> [E]conomics remains saddled with a way of thinking that has little place for culturally evolved differences in motivations or preferences, let alone differences in perception, attention, emotion, morality, judgment, and reasoning. People's preferences and motivations are taken as fixed. Even when thinking about something as straightforward as beliefs, the standard approach in economics is to assume that these beliefs reflect their empirical reality. Cultural evolution, however, need not create a correspondence between reality and people's beliefs. (Henrich 2020, 487–488)

Unique domestic conditions affect the national, regional, or local economy, and the activity or phenomenon being studied, and, in turn, economic actions affect institutional conditions. An understanding of economic theories and models is important. But it is also essential to understand how these play out in the context at hand and how they are affected by local conditions and culture (Markey-Towler 2019).[8] Using one's own native language when treating one's own native culture surely conduces to contextual understanding.

Students still need knowledge of local institutions and structures at all levels of their education. If all teaching and reading assignments are in English, a great deal of local institutional detail and context has to be left out for an obvious reason: the relevant texts will not be available in English. Instead of learning how the central bank pursues monetary policy in the students' native country and the law governing its operations, students learn about the Federal Reserve system and how it operates. If these students then go into research, their research ideas and contributions to the field will naturally be less oriented towards issues of domestic importance. Furthermore, many of the most essential economic policy institutions in the country, such as those engaged in the operation of monetary

[7] The reader is also referred to Mayer (1992), who argues that economists tend to prioritize precision over truth because the profession acts as if the strength of an argument depends on the strength of its strongest link.

[8] A further adverse effect is caused by the increased emphasis on publishing in the most highly ranked journals, the 'top five.' Papers using U.S. data have a much greater chance of being published in the top five instead of in other journals, conditioning on author affiliation and field of study (Das et al. 2013). The focus on the top five may therefore incentivize non-U.S.-based researchers to use U.S. data, leading not only to less knowledge about other economies, but to even more research based on data generated by an economy about which the researcher is likely to have little detailed knowledge.

policy, conduct their communications in the native language, for which these students will be less well-prepared.

The research frontier itself is affected. Most research can—ideally—claim to be internally valid. However, little social science research can pretend to achieve external validity, which is not a problem in and of itself. External validity is not about being able to extrapolate every research result to any other country or context in the world, but about understanding what conditions are key for some results to hold. Therefore, the same question needs to be asked in many different contexts. At the same time, there is a tendency that once a certain research question has been asked in one specific context, using one set of data, this result does not need to be replicated (or debunked) in other contexts. These issues are intertwined with issues that emerge from the quest for getting into the most highly ranked journals, which results in an ever more intense hunt for new previously unresearched questions that could warrant publication in one of the top journals. Once the seminal article is published, interest subsides despite the fact that findings of the first study are unlikely to carry over fully to other contexts. The reason is obvious: subsequent studies, however aptly performed, are unlikely to be accepted in one of the most highly ranked journals, unless the first subsequent study happens to be the first study for the United States.

When writing in English for international journals, there is a greater risk that the conceptualization becomes abstract, and that the voice of non-native English speakers becomes unnatural. If there is an overemphasis of academic prestige, researchers may be diverted from true learning, true participation in public affairs, and naturalness in finding their own voice. The point is nicely made by Agnar Sandmo, one of Norway's most prominent academic economists in the postwar period. In his memoir, Sandmo (2019, 88; quoted in Sandelin 2020) says that "writing in your mother tongue is special; one is released, becomes freer and in a way manages to get a better expression of one's true self." Sandmo goes on to say that ”an ideal Norwegian economist publishes both in English and Norwegian, in English when she or he has original results to present to the research community, in Norwegian when communicating research to a wider circle of domestic readers or when analyzing topical economic policy problems."

It might be useful to think of a *discourse span* connecting research and public instruction and persuasion in domestic life. The flow should be bi-directional, from research to public dissemination, and from public life to research. Public life tests and challenges the reality and validity of research claims. By devoting themselves to the full discourse span in Swedish, the Swedish economists improve their Swedish prowess both in research and in public discourse. They integrate their language across the discourse span, strengthening their Swedish and arguably their science.

How we research, teach, and communicate economics has clear consequences for how economics develops as a field. If economics gradually ceases to focus on domestic conditions, economists—even within their own countries—will cease to have specialized knowledge about the domestic economy. Once again, academics is in danger of losing touch with non-academic sources of validation.

Where should the demand for native language use come from?

It is not by chance that English has become increasingly common in business and teaching in recent years—there are good reasons for it. Language barriers are a type of transaction cost to interactions, and the use of a common language reduces this cost. It makes it easier for foreign students to come to the country in question and for domestic students to study or work abroad, and it reduces transaction costs in the global academic market. As for why the *lingua franca* should be English as opposed to say German, French, Spanish, Russian, or Chinese, the question is taken up by David Crystal (2003).

But turning to a common language also gives rise to new difficulties. When students are not taught in their first language, it becomes more difficult to communicate insights and knowledge to their immediate environment. One reason why law is still mostly taught in the native language is that law is tied to specific national conditions, and that the subject's academic articles are written so that judges, lawyers, and other professionals can also read them.

The same argument can be made regarding economics, a subject that permeates virtually every aspect of national policymaking in developed countries and their public sectors. In comparison with other social science subjects, the emphasis of economics on mathematics makes the subject less accessible to the general public (Calmfors 2021, 41). If one adds that domestic students and recent graduates are increasingly likely to lack knowledge of specific national conditions and to express themselves poorly in their mother tongue about economics, we might expect economics to recede in a national context.

The number of newly minted economics Ph.D.s per year is staggering. In Sweden there are 50 to 60 new Ph.D.s per year, the total number in Europe probably exceeds 2,000, and in the United States there are roughly 1,200 (Wessel 2021). One indication of the sea change may be had by noting that in Sweden the total number of Ph.D.s in economics in the fifty-year period 1920–1969 was 60 (Sandelin 1999), a number that has been attained in single years in the 2000s. At any rate, the present numbers far exceed the demand from academia, so the majority of these graduates will end up working in ministries, government agencies, regional and municipal authorities, and private industry. Those who work in government will mostly write, present, and talk in the native language. Deep knowledge of national institutions and conditions will therefore be a key determinant of the value of their work.

It is not necessarily wrong to switch to English as the language of instruction, but we need to consider what it means to do so. Consideration and awareness can be manifested, for example, by ensuring that students translate the material they have acquired and formulate their new knowledge in their first language as well, whatever that language may be. To ensure that learning does not become superficial, more focus on interactive teaching would probably contribute to students having the chance to rephrase in their own words, both orally and in writing, what they have learned. Discussions in small groups in both first and second languages give students more opportunities to process and internalize the content (Nissen and Ulriksen 2016, 22).

It would also be good to develop economics terminology in the native language, so students could more easily translate, and thus understand, what they have learned—and also be able to communicate it to people outside the field. Last but not least, we need greater understanding regarding what happens to learning outcomes when teaching takes place in a second language.

In some places there is cause to slow down the transition to English, and in others to adapt our teaching to the new linguistic conditions. But how should this be done? It seems unlikely that Swedish students—or students in other small European countries—will insist on instruction in the native language. In the documentation for a new English-language track in the Bachelor of Economics program at the University of Gothenburg, demand from Swedish students was singled out as a compelling justification. A survey of students on the bachelor's program showed that 72 percent would have applied for an English-language track if one had existed (University of Gothenburg 2021, 15).

Three decades ago, Bruno Frey and Reiner Eichenberger (1993) described how incentives differed between the European and North American academic markets for economists. They argued that, because American economists were expected to be more mobile, there were fewer reasons for them to study national institutions or the economic and political conditions specific to a particular region or locality. They painted a very different picture for Europe:

> In a typical European country, the smaller market size and the higher degree of government intervention give quite a different picture. … Economics professors are induced to invest their human capital in specific knowledge of local economic problems and institutions, which is helpful for a political career and getting various appointments. Graduate students know that they will almost certainly stay in the same country, quite likely in the same city, and hence have an incentive to learn about local institutions. (Frey and Eichenberger 1993, 189)

In the three decades that have elapsed since this was written, the situation has changed radically. English as a *lingua franca* has enabled greater exchange and mobility among European researchers; postdoc and tenure-track positions are customarily filled by recruiting on the institutionalized U.S. or European job market for economists. One reason for using English as the language of instruction is precisely the subject's ties to research, which is conducted in English. It does not seem likely at present that lecturers and researchers will demand a greater use of the native language in economics education in the European countries at the forefront of this development.

Even if individual students and researchers do not have sufficient reasons to demand more teaching in the local language in economics, there are many indications that it is desirable at a societal level. After all, most graduates from national universities in Europe will spend all or most of their professional career in their native country communicating in the local language, analyzing issues of great social importance in the local, regional or national context. For those people it is a major concern that their academic training also includes learning about pertinent institutional conditions and that they become proficient in economics writing in their native language.

An equally serious cause for concern is how research is done and on what. Arguably, the ultimate goal in economic analysis is social welfare, and as noted by Duflo: "many of us chose economics because ultimately, we thought science could be leveraged to make a positive change in the world" (2017, 23). Also, this is the main reason why government and private institutions grant large amounts of money to economic research. If in doubt, one only needs to visit the website of the Swedish Research Council and check out their assessment criteria, where one of them reads "strategic and national relevance" (link). The largest private funder in Sweden, the Wallenberg Foundations, state that they "grant funding to excellent researchers and research projects beneficial to Sweden" (link).[9]

Nevertheless, many career economists these days seem to believe that the main objective of the government and other financiers is something else, namely the financing of a very costly research tournament where most participants are set to lose, and where taxpayers foot the bill. Allegedly, this demanding tournament is necessary in order to select the most capable future professors, professors who will therefore be the most capable of teaching economics to future generations of students. This notion is probably behind stories of senior researchers who have dropped research projects at a fairly mature stage based on the motivation that it turned out not to have potential to garner publication in a top-five economics journal. Of course, there are projects that fail just because the research idea turned out not to be good enough and therefore should be dropped. But dropping a project because it lacks 'top-five potential' is an act of utter contempt towards the financier and one's ultimate employer at a national university, one's fellow citizens.

When the market for research becomes globalized and self-validating, the crucial institutional details unique to the particular environment that generates the data used by the career economist risk being overlooked. Indeed, data themselves can be suspect when researchers do not understand their institutional lineage—that is, how the data are generated. The academic focus risks being shifted from searching for knowledge that could improve the functioning of the national/regional/local economic system to writing streamlined papers using the preferred methods on issues deemed to be of interest to the editors and reviewers of the most prestigious journals (Ruhm 2019). High rewards for publishing in a small number of journals with very similar views on what constitutes high-quality research thus discourages the kind of pluralism that may be necessary to address non-U.S. societies' most pressing issues (Novarese and Pozzali 2010).

The journal editors cater to the representative reader—who is unlikely to be interested in the particularities needed to understand the specific phenomenon analyzed in a small country. George Akerlof (2019) speaks of "sins of omission;" issues of high social relevance

[9] The two Söderberg Foundations have a virtually identical formulation: https://ragnar.soderbergs.org/ and https://www.torstensoderbergsstiftelse.se/.

will not be researched, or unique idiosyncratic details will be left out of the analysis despite being substantively important.[10] Perhaps most importantly from a societal point of view, academic economists are disincentivized from taking to heart and acting in accordance with the insights from the work of Bowles and many others, which is aptly summarized by Kranton (2019, 147) as follows: "To understand the relation between incentives and behavior, economists must grapple with the full range of human motivations. … In the realm of policies to enhance the public good, there is no escape that the devil is in the details."

Imagine a student in a small non-English speaking country, say Sweden. The student has just graduated and faces a choice: what career trajectory to pursue? One possible path is a research career, trying to get published in a top journal, writing about a subject that is perceived to be of general concern or contributes to the broader research field; it could be an experiment, an equilibrium model, a sophisticated analysis of U.S. data, or a multivariate analysis using OECD data.

Another path is working with institutional analysis of some aspects of Swedish affairs, such as the pulp, paper, and timber industries and how their potential is dependent on the functioning and regulatory frameworks of the housing and energy market. To do so, one needs, inter alia, deep knowledge about the inner workings of Swedish society, the cultural importance of the timber industry in the northern parts of the country, and how geography affects the economic conditions.

It is not far-fetched to imagine that having predominantly or only been taught economics in English leads the student to believe she is fully qualified to write in English. The education's sharp focus on those parts of economics that are independent of context is likely to make the student feel more confident to embark on a project where specific institutional conditions seem to matter less (or where one gets away with assuming that they matter less). By contrast, the student is likely to be less confident to analyze specific economic conditions and relate economic insights to cultural and geographical conditions unique to Sweden. The likely choice is then to opt for the international project rather than the domestic one. Meanwhile, Swedish industry is beset by policy measures and reform proposals sorely lacking an appreciation of economic principles, knowingly applied to the actual domestic state of affairs.

Concluding remarks

When should a native language be used in economics? This is not a theoretical question, but a practical one with clear consequences. Individuals make language choices every day, but they rarely see the consequences on an aggregate level. That does not mean there are none.

The fact that human beings speak different languages no doubt gives rise to transaction costs that hinder many potentially important interactions from taking place. It is understandable that economics as a field is keen on reducing these transaction costs. But no

[10] *See* Heckman and Moktan (2019) for a discussion of the detrimental effects on economic research of an excessive emphasis on publishing in the five most highly ranked journals. Ek and Henrekson (2019) discuss the same problem from a European perspective.

cost can be eliminated merely by ignoring its existence. If the aim truly was to eliminate the transaction costs caused by the fact that people have different native languages, the solution would not be to switch to English without compensating for other consequences. There should be efforts to improve the understanding of English terms in the respective domestic languages, and a thorough reflection on what economics as a subject is and should be.

If or when we should use the official native language in economics teaching and writing depends on how we measure the value of international exchange against the value of understanding domestic institutional conditions, the importance of economists being able to communicate their insights, and their ability to understand insights from other subjects. One should also consider how learning is affected when teaching does not take place in students' native language, and how teaching should be suitably adapted.

If the tradeoffs involved in what Coase called "the total effect" are not given their due, the academic trend may have ill far-reaching consequences not only for students and teaching, but for research as well. If all economics students are immersed into highly similar academic settings, where the shift to English is made without heeding the tradeoffs, who will then—down the line—contribute to economic research and analysis of domestic conditions in countries other than the economically and politically most significant ones? We see a clear risk that an increasing number of issues of great domestic importance will remain unresearched or underresearched. The choice of language affects *how and what we learn*. It affects what we talk about. More specifically, domestic—be they local, regional, or national—conditions are easier to describe in one's native language and therefore have more room to breathe when discussed in the local language.

Language choice affects how we speak. Teachers who teach in a language other than their first language joke less and use fewer anecdotes and everyday examples to convey knowledge and insights, which may affect how students view the subject they are learning. Indeed, the choice of language affects how we view economics, and how we view economics affects which language we use. Translation requires bringing both the meaning and the intent into another language, which is rarely accomplished through literal translation.

Language choice affects what we research. Language is not a neutral bearer of meaning; it affects what we think about and what we value. The shift from native languages also means that local contexts and institutions become more difficult to describe and therefore to do research on.

The choice of language is thus more than deciding among a number of different tradeoffs. To change languages is, at least to some extent, to change worlds. English has opened up many valuable and useful doors for students, academics, and professionals throughout the world. It would be a shame if the zeal for academic validation shuts the door on a world of economics grounded in differing national and cultural contexts.

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