

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Neonationalism and Finnish higher education. Language indexing higher education policy

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: In Finnish higher education, neo-nationalist (Lee 2017) developments have been exemplified by complaints made to the Chancellor of Justice's office or parliamentary questions on uses of English in tuition. Recent language debates in Finnish higher education have been largely motivated by the ideological protection of Finnish rather than of the constitutional bilingualism. This paper presents an analysis of recent post-nationalist (Heller 2011) and neo-nationalist developments in order to understand the changing role of the nation state in globalization (see Buckner 2017), both in higher education and societally. The empirical data consists of interviews and parliamentary debates on the role of languages in Finnish higher education.

Buckner, E. S. (2017) The changing discourse on higher education and the nation-state, 1960–2010. *Higher Education* 74, 473-489.

Heller, M. (2011) Paths to Post-Nationalism. *A Critical Ethnography of Language and Identity*. OUP.

Lee, J. (2017) Neo-nationalism in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education* 42(5), 869-886.

Paper: This paper presents an analysis of recent post-nationalist (Heller 2011) and neo-nationalist (Lee 2017) language policies in Finnish higher education in order to understand the changing role of the nation state in globalization (see Buckner 2017), in higher education as well as societally.

Neo-nationalism refers to a “new nationalism based national order in the new global economy” (Lee 2017, 870), thus contrasting with the post-national hegemonic order where nation states were destabilized in the global economic system (see for instance Heller 2011). The rise of neo-nationalist policies means that the role of language has become societally visible in a new way (Kelly 2018). In Finnish higher education, neo-nationalist developments have been exemplified by complaints made

to the Chancellor of Justice's office or parliamentary questions about the uses of English in university tuition (Saarinen 2014). The increase in support of populist parties and movements in Finland has also created growing tensions particularly on the position of Swedish, formally an equal national language but a de facto minority language, with approximately 5.5 % population share. The recent backlash against English, in turn, appears largely motivated by the ideological protection of Finnish rather than of the constitutional bilingualism as such (Saarinen 2014).

Neo-nationalism in higher education has not been widely studied yet (but see for instance Lee 2017 on South Africa), although populism and populist movements within higher education and language policy are beginning to receive some attention (see Mathies & Weimer 2018; Kelly 2018). In Finland, the earlier language debates that dealt with nationalist ideologies have revolved around the delicate balance between the national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Now, attention has turned towards English, first as a lingua franca of the post-nationalist internationalizing higher education, and then as a catalyst that makes visible the dynamics between different languages, domestic and international, as their positions are negotiated and contested (Torres-Olave 2012). The overall positive attitude towards English in Finland has made Swedish in practice the third rather than second national language in higher education since the 1990s. (Lindström & Sylvén 2014). These developments have challenged celebratory views of Finnish constitutional bilingualism and linked Finland, somewhat belatedly, to the neo-nationalist developments that have emerged in Western countries.

It is clear that the concern for Finnish and Swedish in higher education does not only have neo-nationalist implications but also, for instance, links to learning and knowledge construction (Kuteeva & Airey 2014). These, in turn, are linked to the basic tasks of universities as providers of knowledge and professionals for the nation state (Buckner 2017). However, the phenomenon of "protecting" national languages also opens doors for more populist and neo-nationalist discourses (Lee 2017; Kelly 2018). This neo-nationalist turn now calls for further analysis both inside universities and societally.

The data consists of interviews (N=19) from two Finnish universities, as well as parliamentary debates on the role of languages in higher education since the 1990s. The main questions are:

1. How are national languages (Finnish and Swedish) discussed particularly in relation to English?
2. What kind of a trajectory of language policy emerges from the analysis of position of languages in higher education?

The data have been analysed by employing Critical discourse analytical approaches to track language policy trajectories and discursive cycles of language policy. To provide the historical higher education policy and language policy trajectories, the author's recent work is first reviewed to discuss the position of particularly Finnish, Swedish and English in Finnish higher education and the potential implications that this has to Finnish constitutional bilingualism. Methodologically, the presentation thus expands on existing views on how discourses of language are operationalized in the social dynamics of higher education.

Preliminary results suggest that a combination of societal, higher education, and language policy developments has now challenged the constitutional bilingualism in Finland, both in higher education but also societally.

Firstly, analysing language ideologies since the 1990s in the context of higher education policy developments such as internationalisation and quality assurance policies, makes language a proxy for post-nationalism as the use of English as an unquestioned lingua franca in society increases, breaking the link between “language” and “national”.

Secondly, since around 2010, concerns about the position of national languages, Finnish in particular, emerge, as the dynamic between English and the national languages develops with the changes in the political climate and the rise of populist and neo-nationalist politics.

Thirdly, the neo-nationalist discourses that are becoming more apparent in the Finnish society tend to tilt the discussion towards a concern for the position of Finnish rather than Swedish, thus making Swedish invisible in language political debates where it had previously been a contested entity. Thus, the increasing use of English in Finnish higher education paradoxically plays into the hands of neo-nationalist arguments, bringing attention to Finnish and making Swedish at least in some contexts invisible rather than contested.

The recent post-nationalist and neo-nationalist language policy developments in higher education are relevant to the larger understanding of the (language) ideological debate of the changing role of the nation state in globalization (see Buckner 2017) of higher education in particular and societies in general.

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