

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Problematizing English as Lingua Franca in Higher Education Internationalisation

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**Research Domain:** International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

**Abstract:**

In this work-in-progress, we use a spatial perspective to explore 'English' in higher education internationalisation. Being geographically mobile and 'international' has become important for students and academics in higher education wherein English as a *lingua franca* has gained importance. Outside the Anglo-Saxon countries, offering English Medium Instruction (EMI) is often seen as a crucial indicator of internationalisation from an institutional perspective. This is to the extent where 'international programmes' come to mean programmes taught in English. Denmark is a case in point. We use Danish higher education as a case to explore the multiple usages of English amongst so-called native and non-native speakers. Linguistic diversity is not just about speaking multiple languages, but about speaking the ostensibly same language in different ways, in different 'places', and with different societal outcomes. The paper shows that the notion of English as *lingua franca* in higher education creates hierarchies of people and disciplines.

**Paper:**

### Background

English has a peculiar geography within conceptions of internationalisation of higher education. Whilst many languages remain moored to particular countries of the world, English is by contrast 'everywhere' (Pennycook, 2017). It is commonly described as the *lingua franca* i.e. the common global language (Jenkins & Mauranen, 2019) and can be argued to have become unmoored and universalised through internationalisation of higher education with its focus on English Medium Instruction (EMI; see Hultgren et al., 2014 for EMI in the Nordic countries or Galloway et al., 2020 for Eastern Asia). In this paper, we explore these notions, and challenge the aspatial rendering of English within depictions of international student and academic mobility. We seek to exemplify the multiplicity of English and how, through this diversity, the language might be implicated in the creation of new (heterogeneous) spaces of social interaction and social inequalities. The ubiquity of English rests on a particular rendering of the language as aspatial, flat and undifferentiated. In the presentation, we will problematise these assumptions, illustrated through the increasingly rich literature on language use within international education and our own empirical data.

## The project and its key concepts

Internationalisation of higher education is often portrayed as a neutral process (Madge, Raghuram & Noxolo, 2009), and as an ideologically impartial policy intervention that will lead to an unconditional good (Morley et al., 2018). The empirical data of this paper derives from a project on internationalisation of Danish higher education, which examines how internationalisation is embedded in and reinforces global inequalities from a spatial perspective. It does so by examining its 'geographies' (Adriansen et al., 2019). The Danish case is interesting because it is at the periphery of the hegemonic Anglo-American academy and represents a non-English speaking country, while simultaneously being part of the affluent Global North (Spangler & Adriansen, 2021). The empirical material comprises qualitative interviews and participant observations from three different universities with programmes taught in English. We have interviewed 70 students, twelve faculty and six study leaders.

We use a spatial perspective inspired by Massey's notion of relational space (Massey, 2005). [When we see internationalisation of higher education as a space constructed out of the relations and connections we have with each other across the globe, then internationalisation becomes an intersection of multiple spatial relations, presenting us with the existence of the other and the spatial complexity of language](#)(Salö, 2020). We seek to position or 'emplace' English by making space relevant and bringing it alive through a focus on relations and *where* these interrelate. We explore what 'English' means and how it is experienced in its multiple forms within the international student and academic experience.

## Findings

In our analysis across the empirical material four themes emerged: Hierarchies of English, English as internationalisation, English as the language of 'science', and Negotiations of language in learning situations. One example:

*'If we could speak English more naturally, we maybe could do such a kind of group work correctly or very well. But for me, I am not good at English, so this is very difficult problem'* (Japanese student).

Here, a student reflects on own language skills against an expectation of "naturalness", and how this affects their participation (and validation) in the 'international' classroom. The international students form a highly differentiated group with various levels of English proficiency and diverse backgrounds, creating a learning space with an implicit and intense interplay of hegemony, agency and hierarchies. We found similar experiences among the faculty now working in Denmark:

German study leader about oral exam: *'It's the English who are most nervous. It's funny, they have all that language advantage. They just have to open their mouth, then they already have a 7 [an average grade]'*.

Students and academics have differential access to different 'types' of English instruction. Linguistic diversity is not just about speaking multiple languages, but about speaking the ostensibly same language in different ways, in different 'places', and with different societal outcomes.

## Conclusion

The broad range of empirical material from students, faculty and study leaders allows us to explore the diverse ways in which English can be experienced within the 'international' university. Our findings show how language creates spaces that are not neutral but negotiated and contested. We argue that the notion of English as *lingua franca* in higher education creates hierarchies of people and disciplines.

By problematizing English as *lingua franca* and unpacking the meanings of English within internationalisation practices through a spatial perspective, we provide a multidisciplinary analysis of an understudied aspect of higher education internationalisation.

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