

English or Dutch? The instrumentalisation of language of instruction and the resistance to nationalistic discourse in Higher Education in the Netherlands

Aurelie Joubert, Janet Fuller

University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper focuses on recent debates about the language of instruction in the Dutch Higher Education context. After a period of intense internationalisation of universities which occurred in the 2000s by implementing English-language programmes and recruiting international staff, a political backlash now sees the intention to limit the use of English in Dutch universities as a way to control temporary migration, seen as a societal issue.

Through a critical discourse analysis of the content of manifestos of political parties during the recent election campaign, and of articles in online university newspapers, the instrumentalisation of both English and Dutch reveals the portrayal of English as a threat and of Dutch as a tool for exclusion. Resistance can be found in the emphasis made by the academic community which highlights the presence of a mixed linguistic practices and a hybrid academic identity which goes against the nationalistic political discourse.

Full paper

The language of instruction in universities in the Netherlands has shifted quickly to English in the last two decades (Teichler 2004) with 25.1% of all students at research universities in 2022-2023 being international (NUF 2023). In this process, English was framed as a way of participating in the global and neoliberal academic market (Edwards 2020). However, there has been little reflective discussion on the role or value of multilingualism, and the place and importance of Dutch was lacking.

Since 2018, a backlash made of different waves against the anglicisation process has been noticed, first through campaigning by organisations (Van Engelsoven 2018; Beter Onderwijs Nederland, Maastricht University/University of Twente, 2018) and a petition sent by academic representatives to the government to defend the right to teach in Dutch (De Groot, Jurgens, & Verbrugge, 2019). More recently, a particularly strong political push to limit internationalisation

with a proposed 'law internationalization in balance' which is aimed to help alleviate the extra pressure caused by temporary migration particularly in the saturated housing market. This law has not yet been passed, but universities are already trying to address what they see as an inevitable change in the policy for language in higher education.

This paper deals with the way discourse has been articulated around the role of languages, mainly Dutch and English, in Dutch Higher Education in recent political debates and online university newspapers. In particular, the analysis will outline the language ideologies present in the manifestos of the major Dutch political parties during the election period of Sept-Nov 2023 and in the reaction and interpretation of the proposed law by the media most directly concerned: independent university online newspapers. It aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What language ideologies are present in the platforms of the major political parties regarding 'Internationalisation in Balance'? 2) What language ideologies are present in discussion of 'Internationalization in Balance' in university newspapers throughout the Netherlands? 3) How do the discourses about English and Dutch in higher education shift over time (2023-2024) and how do they portray or resist a nationalistic stance?

The selection of the data for the political discourse was made based on the declared aimed intentions as regards limiting the internationalisation process in the manifesto of the main political parties (the centrist *New Sociaal Contract*, the far-right *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, the leftist and Green party alliance *GroenlinksPartijvoordeAardbeid* and the liberal right wing party *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*). The online media data was selected based on a timeline: 1) after the first announcement of the intention to tackle what is seen as a situation of internationalisation that is out of control by the Minister of Education, Robert Dijkgraaf (23 April 2023); 2) during the election campaign that was to decide the constitution of the Chamber of Deputies (the *Tweede Kamer*) and eventually the prime minister and 3) after the election results that saw the unexpected victory of the far-right party *Partij voor de Vrijheid*. University online newspapers from the top 9 universities were selected because they are the ones that contain quotes from university members and the ones that would represent the view close to the higher education sector. They are also the ones that would represent the majority views from different regions of the Netherlands, each with their own characteristics and different migration rates.

Through a Critical Discourse Analysis that focuses on text as well as macro-structures of power (Fairclough 2010), the latest anti-internationalisation political discourse reveals how English is framed as a threat to Dutch identity, and how other languages are absent from the discussion. The use of Dutch in higher education is utilised as a repellent and a way to fight undesired migration and to bring Dutch students back to the forefront. With the analysis of both political discourse and media discourse, a layered intertextuality (Wodak & Fairclough 2010) highlights the existence of a discourse of resistance found in university newspapers which highlights, more and more strongly over time, concerns over the future of Dutch academia, for internationally-embedded research expertise and collaborative funding as well as for international staff wellbeing and opportunities. It also shows the realities of academic communities which point out mixed linguistic practices that favour a view of diversity and inclusion, rather than the planned instrument of exclusion that Dutch is set to become according to the planned law.

References

De Groot, A., Jurgens, E., & Verbrugge, A. (2019) Oproep aan de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal [Appeal to the House of Representatives of the Netherlands]. Retrieved on 1 April 2019 from www.beteronderwijsnederland.nl/nieuws/2019/03/oproep-tk-nederlands-volledig/

Edwards, A. (2020). Language policy and the law: How Dutch universities legally justify English-medium instruction. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(1-2), 38-59.

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis : the critical study of language* (Second ed). Longman.

Teichler, U. (2004). The Changing Debate on Internationalisation of Higher Education. *Higher Education*, 48(1), 5–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4151528>

Van Engelsoven, I. (2018). *Wetvoorstel: Wet taal en toegankelijkheid* (Bill on Language and accessibility Act). The Hague: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Wodak, R. & N. Fairclough. (2010). Recontextualising European Higher Education policies: the cases of Austria and Romania. *Critical Discourse Studies* 7(1), 19-40.