

Globalisation vs diversity in national languages in HE context: case of Estonia

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Abstract

Given the rapid globalisation since the 1990s and the rising support of a culture of internationalisation in higher education across Europe, the position of national languages in academia deserves more attention. The “Strategy for the Internationalization of Estonian Higher Education 2006–2015” has diminished the role of Estonian by removing the requirement of the existence of Estonian-medium education from doctoral education.

In 2011–2012 we surveyed Estonian doctoral students’ opinions and stances about their usage of academic languages. Only a minority of doctoral students claimed to be always unrestricted in their language choice, and many veered towards using primarily English.

Recent strategies in education, research and language aim to advance Estonian-medium HE, and in 2022 we conducted a re-survey to see how the situation has changed. This paper presents some results and implications of our two studies, discussing the current academic language situation and policies.

Keywords: *Globalisation; intercultural strategies; linguistic diversity; academic Estonian; internationalisation of HE.*

1. Introduction

Rapid globalisation since the 1990s has significantly impacted national languages used by scholars, and the language situation in academia has been somewhat contradictory. In the realm of education, the institutional strive towards internationalisation of higher education has been supported across the EU, either with specific mobility supporting schemes at the European level, with national strategies that aim to increase competitiveness in the global market of education, and with institutional policies that set the goal to benefit from exporting education by increasing international students has resulted in a culture of internationalisation within higher education (see discussion in Abdulai et al. 2021). This has increased the demand for instruction in the English language in higher education institutions across European countries. Meanwhile, the parallel trends of measuring academic excellence in citations have privileged publishing in English-language academic journals and rendered academic writing in any national language with lesser potential readership somewhat less relevant for aspiring academics.

Those trends are visible in all national contexts, especially the smaller countries. At the same time, language diversity is a well-grounded principle in the EU: “Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) emphasises that ‘Union action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States’, while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1) TFEU).” (EU Language policy)

This paper explores the case of higher education in Estonia, a country with a population of 1.3 million. The Development Plan of the Estonian Language 2011–2017 stated:

““The Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015” aims to ensure the existence of Estonian-medium education on all educational levels in all fields of study, thus creating a possibility of using foreign languages for the teaching of most specialities within the same field of study. The “Strategy for the Internationalization of Estonian Higher Education 2006–2015” diminishes the role of Estonian-medium education further by removing the requirement of the existence of Estonian-medium education from doctoral education.”

Choosing a language is not so straightforward as academics, and students indeed feel increasing pressure to use English instead of Estonian, given the culture of internationalisation of higher education. In 2011–2012 our team of linguists and sociologists from Tallinn University accomplished the study “Estonian as a language of higher education and academic research” supported by the EU. As a part of this, in 2012, the team surveyed Estonian doctoral students’ opinions and stances about the usage of academic languages (Roosmaa et al. 2014).

Given that recent education, research and language strategies for 2021–2035 again aim to advance Estonian-medium higher education, we conducted a re-survey in 2022. This paper presents two studies' key results and implications, discussing the current academic language situation and policies.

2. Research design and material of the study

2.1. Research methods

In designing the research project, our primary research questions were:

- How do doctoral students in Estonia experience the issue of language choice?
- What kind of difficulties have they experienced in academic work – incl. reading and writing – both in Estonian and English?
- How much is the Estonian language used for doctoral dissertations in Estonia?

We applied the concept of *intercultural strategies* introduced by Berry (1997) as an extension of his earlier concept of acculturation modes.

Doctoral students, like any academicians, live in an intercultural environment, being at the same time part of their domestic research culture, tradition, and language, as well as of the international academic arena – the latter most often colonised by English-language research, some of which published by speakers (or, rather – writers) of English as a second language. From two fundamental issues – Cultural Maintenance and Contact-Participation – the four strategies have been derived, facing all peoples living interculturally: integration, assimilation, separation/segregation and marginalisation. Cultural Maintenance: is it considered valuable to maintain one's identity and characteristics? Contact-Participation: is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with larger society?

These issues are based on the distinction between orientations towards one's group and those towards others (Berry 1997). This distinction is rendered as (i) a relative preference for maintaining one's heritage culture and identity, and (ii) a relative preference for having contact with and participating in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups. It has now been well demonstrated that these two dimensions are independent (see overview in Kruusvall *et al.* 2009). In this model, the English-language (and ESL) academic culture can be viewed as the larger society, and national academic languages as ethnocultural groups, while different ethnocultural groups develop their strategies. However, in terms of intercultural studies, it is maintained that the best-working strategy relies on both preferences being strong – that means we assume that the most fruitful integration to the academic world occurs only when academic thinking is possible, and happening, in the Estonian language just as well as in the dominant language.

In the broad and representative surveys of doctoral students in Estonian universities, we were interested about what are their experiences and motives concerning language choice.

2.2. Material of the study

The amount of doctoral students has diminished. In 2012 we had 2,926 doctoral curricula in Estonian, while this year, there are 1,775 Estonian and Estonian-English curricula in total.

The sample description in table 1 accounts for self-selection – respondents are those who care about the issue. A vast majority have Estonian as their first language.

Table 1. The sample of 2012 & 2022 surveys.

Sample description	2012	2022
No. of universities participated	7	6
Respondents N	240	101
Gender, % of females	70%	70%
Average age (min/max)	33 (23/64)	37 (24/57)
Estonian as the first language	92%	92%
Main activity: doctoral student	40%	36%
Main activity: employed	54%	49%
Studies are related to work, yes %	80%	75%
Studying social sciences, culture, humanities	49%	61%
1 st –2 nd year of studies	33%	32%
3 rd –4 th year of studies	51%	43%

Source: own analysis

We categorised the respondents into two subgroups: doctoral students of social sciences and culture, incl. humanities (SCH), and those of natural sciences and technical disciplines (NT). We asked if they have participated in five types of academic activities and in which language:

- (1) writing academic research texts to publish,
- (2) writing popular science texts,
- (3) reading academic research publications,
- (4) reading popular science publications,
- (5) participating in academic conferences.

SCH doctoral students appear to participate in research or scholarly communication **in the Estonian language** in more academic activities than NT doctoral students do. Among both research classes, the variety in types of scholarly work communication in the Estonian language has increased from 2012 to 2022, especially among the NT students and particularly regarding publication writing. In 2022, we observed a significantly higher rate of SCH doctoral students, 92%, participating in academic conferences held in the Estonian language, compared to 82% in 2012. Among NT students, there appear to be more writers of academic (65%) and popular science publications (70%) in 2022, compared to 52% and 50%, respectively, in 2012.

Comparison over time shows relatively stable results for engaging in academic communication **in English**. Overall, differences between the two research classes are minor, yet interestingly, among NT students, we observe a substantial rise in writing popular science publications, from 23% in 2012 to 62% in 2022. However, in both research classes, students write popular science publications in English to a lesser degree compared to other types of participating in scholarly communication. More SCH doctoral students have mentioned writing academic publications in 2022 (93%), compared to 78% in 2012.

3. Doctoral students' opinions on language use

We were interested in what aspects of language have bothered doctoral students when using one or another language for their academic activities. Results are presented in Figure 1.

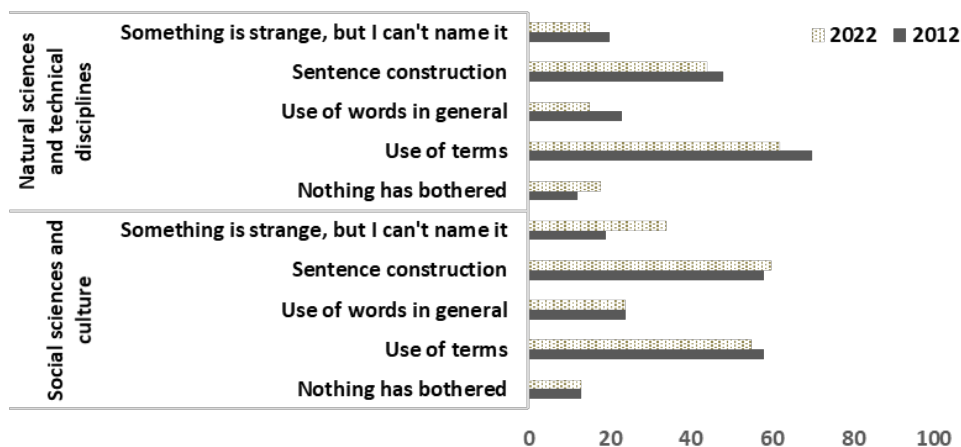


Figure 1. Aspects of language use which have bothered doctoral students when reading a text in one's study field in Estonian. Source: own analysis

It appeared that when **reading** a scientific or study text in one's field in **Estonian**, doctoral students of all domains are mainly bothered by terms used and sentence constructions. There are no notable changes between the two surveys. However, among SCH doctoral students, a rise in feeling that something is strange occurs, but they cannot name what exactly is strange. When **writing in Estonian**, NT doctoral students encounter more difficulties, particularly in the usage of terms: 58% in 2012 and even more of them, 73% in 2022. The percentage of those who have no difficulties has further diminished in 10 years, from 17% to 12%, while more SCH students in 2022 (38%) experience no problems in Estonian writing, compared to 32% in 2012.

3.1. Difficulties in finding appropriate terms

As a part of the study, we focused on two aspects of the usage of terms by doctoral students:

- How do they assess their possibilities to find appropriate terms in the current academic environment?
- How do they perceive the appropriateness of terms they use in their research?

Firstly, there are two main tendencies in doctoral students' opinions on terms usage:

1. The share of SCH doctoral students who often cannot find a suitable term in Estonian has diminished in 10 years from 57% to 48%, while the percentage of NT postgraduate students who often cannot find a proper term in Estonian has increased from 71% to 77%. The share of those who never have difficulties finding an appropriate Estonian term has increased among SCH students. Still, the low (3%) in natural and technical sciences is unchanged.
2. The share of SCH doctoral students often experiencing difficulties with English terms has increased; however, the percentage of such NT students has diminished. Furthermore, the share of those who never have difficulties finding an appropriate English term has been smaller among SCH students in 2022 (11%) but larger among NT students (28%).

Secondly, how do doctoral students perceive the appropriateness of terms they use in their research? Some felt it was best to adopt English terms into Estonian. Twenty-five respondents argued that a uniform and univocal specialised vocabulary existed in English: *"I know English terms best because I mostly read texts in the same language, and my working language is English."* Among others, 36 students considered Estonian terminology deficient, hard to find, and lacking uniformity. On the other hand, such term adoption was criticised as well, explicitly by seven students: *"There are many anglicisms instead of correct terms in Estonian."* Doctoral dissertation was suggested to be the means to introduce new Estonian terms.

4. Conclusions and discussion

The analysis of the data from this survey led to the conclusion that it is easy for newcomers to academic writing to assimilate into the mainstream host culture of English and give up "boring" Estonian writing, especially since

- the norms and behaviour patterns of others support this,
- the regulatory practices or research evaluation and standards support this,
- the organisational space where professors and graduate students meet – guidelines – support this by overlooking the potential incentives to use Estonian.

Estonian doctoral students of every field have difficulties finding appropriate terms and sentence constructions in 2022, unchanged from 2012. It may indicate that more systematic courses in academic Estonian and terminology are needed at all higher education levels to advance clarity of the codification of knowledge and specialised communication. Improved skills in expressing academic ideas in Estonian may positively impact the educational system. Hence, the motivation to publish in Estonian should be improved. For now, these possibilities are few, almost lacking in natural and technical sciences.

The Estonian Language Strategy 2021–2035 does have the general objective to ensure the vitality and function of the Estonian language as a primary language in every sphere of life in Estonia, to guarantee everyone the right and opportunity to use the Estonian language, to preserve and strengthen the status and reputation of the Estonian language and Estonian cultural and information space, and to value knowledge of other languages. One of the strategic objectives of this plan includes coordinated terminology planning as a part of research on the Estonian language to achieve up-to-date specialised vocabulary in every field of scientific research and every area of life. Another strategic objective for education aims, among the rest, in collaboration with universities to apply language use and internationalisation principles in higher education which will grant the functioning of the Estonian language for higher education and academic research. These objectives are in harmony with the goals of Education Strategy 2021–2035 to promote the development of Estonian as a language of higher education and research, including developing and introducing Estonian terminology; support the maintenance and development of Estonian-language higher education curricula; reinforce the learning of Estonian by international students and academic staff. It is also a prerequisite for increasing the knowledge transfer capacity of research institutions and higher education institutions, set as an objective by the Research and Development, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Strategy 2021–2035 (RDIE Strategy).

While perceived as not in line with the culture of internationalisation in higher education, we claim that implementing these plans will advance language diversity in the globalised world. Parallel use of national and international academic languages is inevitably needed, advancing

diversity of thinking. Sharing knowledge internationally is also possible in other broadly spoken languages than English, e.g. Spanish, French, German, and Portuguese – not to forget regional languages like Swedish in the Nordic countries.

Likewise, a clear academic national language positively impacts general education through HE, especially with the help of teacher training. Any advanced language promotes the proper functioning of the society where this language is mainly used.

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