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National languages matter in academic career trajectories

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the value held by national languages, here Swedish, in the scholarly career trajectories in non-Anglophone countries. To this end, we analyze the language policies of Swedish higher education institutions and the narrated perceptions of two international recruits. Adopting Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between scientific and academic capital, we argue that Swedish language skills constitute a vital asset in processes of accruing power in Sweden's scientific world. Hence, as we maintain, English is not all that matters, despite internationalization being high on the agenda.

Introduction and objectives

The internationalization of academia has a number of language-related effects. Simultaneously, it renders higher education institutions (HEIs) into multilingual spaces (Gimenez & Morgan, 2017; Kuteeva, Kaufhold, & Hynninen, 2020; Liddicoat, 2018), while it bolsters the position of English in core practices such as teaching and publishing (Airey, et al., 2017; Carli & Ammon, 2007; Englander & Corcoran, 2019; Salö, 2017). In the latter research strand, it has recurrently been implied, although not unanimously, that English has become 'all that counts', often at the expense of national languages. For instance, as Altbach (2007, p. 3610) posits concernedly, 'In many countries, academic rewards of all kinds accrue to those using English and participating in global scientific networks.'

Engaging with the language policies and with international recruits of Swedish HEIs, in this paper we draw attention to an under-studied dimension of these discussions; namely, the value that national languages necessarily hold in internationalizing academia. Our objective is to interrogate the efficacy of Swedish language assets in career trajectories, so as to shed light on how national linguistic capital interrelates with scientific and academic capital. Grounded within a discussion of internationalization and international recruitment in Swedish HE, we explore how the value of Swedish linguistic capital is articulated, (1) in the language policies of Swedish HEIs, and (2) through the perception of two internationally recruited Anglophone faculty members.

As will be shown, while it is only occasionally recognized as such in HEI policies, the linguistic capital of Swedish-language skills has a considerable value in processes of accruing academic power in Swedish HE. In the age of internationalization, this insight raises a number of questions relevant to language policy in theory as well as in practice.

Sweden: Internationalization and international mobility

The notion of internationalization in HE policy comprises a broad set of measures taken to increase international mobility, co-operation and knowledge exchange. In Sweden, internationalization has long been a desirable policy direction, which was amplified and rendered more pronounced in the HE context from the 1990s onwards. Its implementation was greatly facilitated by virtue of Sweden's adoption of internationalism as a societal ideology across the post-war era, and the widespread knowledge and use of English that followed in its wake (Dahlstedt, 1976). Indeed, after the implementation of the Bologna Declaration in 2007, English-medium instruction programs were swiftly implemented (Airey, et al., 2017).

While Sweden's early-day internationalizing pursuit was modest and non-conflictual, it gradually came to re-actualize the age-old tension between universities as international or national institutions (Crawford, Sinn & Sörlin, 1993). Accordingly, in certain respects internationalization has proven hard to implement in the Swedish HEI structure. Language provides a case in point. Although principles of autonomy apply, Swedish HEIs are government bodies, largely funded and 'softly' governed by the Swedish state. The administrative language of the Swedish state is Swedish in accordance with a long-standing praxis and, later, legal regulations (Ministry of Justice, 1986; Ministry of Culture, 2009). Thus, Swedish HEIs are administratively run largely through Swedish. Researchers are free to use whatever language they like in practices such as publishing but are required to use Swedish in others. Some duties conducted by HEI staff count as an exercise of public authority and here Swedish is used, as it were, on behalf of the state. Consequently, so-called parallel language strategies are commonly implemented by Swedish HEIs (Salö, 2018).

Recruitment provides another case in point. Due to the salience of internationalization discourse in Swedish HE, one might expect to see a great proportion of international staff recruitment at all levels. However, such a state of affairs is scarcely reflected in the steady trickle of reports (see below) on the staff composition of Swedish HEIs, produced by the Swedish Research Council (SRC) and Swedish Higher Education Authority (SHEA). Irrespective of measures used (e.g. degree-awarding country, citizenship, or background), these reports show that while Swedish HE has indeed seen an increase in the number of internationally recruited staff, Swedish nationals are more successful in securing permanent positions and are more prominently engaged in leadership tasks.

To begin, merely 14% of Sweden's HEI teachers and researchers hold a PhD degree from another country (SRC, 2019). This pattern is particularly striking in the humanities and the social sciences, where only 7% of the teachers and researchers hold doctoral degrees from countries outside Sweden (SRC, 2016). Overall, internal and national recruitment prevail. For example, while nearly 70% of the professors in medicine are employed at the same HEI where they gained their doctoral degree, a mere 7% hold a foreign doctoral degree (*ibid.*). Utilizing different definitions, a recent statistical analysis shows that the average share of permanently employed faculty members with citizenships other than Swedish is below 10%, which is substantially lower than that of most internationalized HEIs worldwide (SHEA, 2020). Moreover, the same analysis shows that the share of faculty members who hold all their academic degrees from other countries is as low as 7%.

Similar patterns are evident in the distribution across work categories. Overall, about a third of all staff with research and/or teaching duties were born abroad. The share, however, is significantly higher among holders of short-term career-development positions, i.e. postdocs (78%), research fellows (65%),

and associate senior lecturers (53%). Among the two permanent positions, senior lecturers and professors, the share is considerably lower (26% and 28%, respectively) (SHEA, 2019). This image is given further definition in a diversity report produced by Uppsala University (2016), surveying the backgrounds of personnel across different work-categories. It shows that the share of staff with a ‘foreign background’, that is, those with both parents born abroad, decreases the further up the career ladder one looks. In ‘administration’ and ‘qualified administration’ 85% have Swedish background, and for leadership positions the share is 94%.

Among other things, questions may be posed about the extent to which the practical mastery of Swedish features in these dynamics. Ethnic background, citizenship, etc. obviously do not correlate straightforwardly with language skills; to be sure, many employees with ‘foreign backgrounds’ speak Swedish as a second language. However, in recent years it has been suggested that language skills may be a structuring feature in their own right, affecting administrative participation, employability, and social inclusion. For example, the governmental Inquiry of Internationalization (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018) addressed the lock-in effects that might arise when Swedish is the language of university administration. Similarly, The Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers, SULF, has drawn attention to issues of language with regard to incoming doctorates leaving Sweden once their degrees are completed, as well as to problems of linguistic exclusion throughout their endeavors of obtaining such degrees (Universitetsläraren, 2019, 2020). Such accounts notwithstanding, the language-related experiences of international recruits seeking to advance their careers abroad are seldom considered in language policy research, hence our desire to explore such experiences here.

Framework and procedure

In principle, at least, academia is and has long been a meritocracy: a reward-system in which admission and success is to be granted on the basis of abilities, deeds, and recorded virtues (Rothblatt & Wittrock, 1993). In Sweden like elsewhere, this situation has another legal layer in that most universities are state-governed and their staff, in effect, state employees. According to Swedish constitutional law, appointments to state positions must be based only on objective criteria, such as merit and skill (Ministry of Justice, 1974, 2010).

In this paper, concurring with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1988, 2004), we conceptualize academia as a social space where advancement in career trajectories hinges upon competition over recognition. Academics more or less willfully engage in capital accumulation and conversion, and gradually increase their possession of capital with which academic positions, research grants and the like can be obtained (see Salö, 2017). Accordingly, the logic we subscribe to is attentive to cumulative chains of transactions, whereby forms of capital are changed into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Following Bourdieu, we here make a broad distinction between two forms of assets effective in career trajectories: scientific capital and academic capital. Whereas the former is a capital of ‘strictly scientific authority’, the latter is a ‘capital of power over the scientific world which can be accumulated through channels that are not purely scientific’ (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 57). More precisely, while indicators of scientific capital include distinguished publications, presentations at first-tier conferences, scientific awards and other signs of scientific prestige, the indicators of academic capital rather concern signifiers of academic power: managerial positions and directorships (acting faculty or department head), councilor commitments, membership of committees or national academies, and the like (see Bourdieu, 1988).

Language assets, that is, linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), have an indirect yet conspicuous mode of operation within this logic of capital conversion, because it is the medium through which such rewarding actions are taken. English, for instance, is increasingly a prerequisite for being published in the journals that count the most within the evaluation regimes of most disciplinary fields. However, career advancements hinge not merely on the accrual of scientific capital but on academic capital, too. Consequently, we postulate that Swedish linguistic capital holds seemingly underestimated currency in processes of accumulating academic capital – that is to say, in relation to the linguistic market conditions imbued therein (Bourdieu, 1991; Salö, in press). Language skills may function as a form of ‘seed capital’ that allows for further investments, which, in turn, grant access to spaces where other forms of power-laden investments are possible and where language-dependent forms of academic capital can be obtained. Yet, as we shall stress, it is vital to refrain from thinking about these processes in binary terms. It is not as if English straightforwardly grants scientific capital whereas Swedish grants academic capital. Processes of amassing scientific prestige are not, and should not be, detached from processes of academic power accumulation: the two forms are intertwined in ways that obscure how linguistic capital is converted and thus realized in exchanges of career trajectories.

Through this lens, we examine policy requirements of Swedish HEIs as well as the ‘on-the-ground’ experiences of internationally recruited researchers and teachers. The former unfolds as a discourse analysis of language policy documents (e.g., Karlsson & Karlsson, 2020) and the latter as a ‘narrative interweaving of experience born of practical, perceptual activity’ (Ingold, 2000, p. 286). The procedure has been to obtain all Swedish HEI language policies and select those that include phrasings about the language skills of staff. Next, following Gimenez and Morgan (2017) we located two academics working at different departments at a Swedish HEI, and recorded an hour-long interview with each. The two selected interviewees, below alias Robert Morgan and Darren Corbett, are, like the interviewer (second author Holmes), first language speakers of English who moved to Sweden as adults for a professional position in Swedish academia. In exploring ‘experiences’, taking Ingold’s lead (2000, p. 167), we take particular interest in the informants’ ‘perceptual involvement’ in Swedish HE, with a view to grasping their sociolinguistic experiences of the value of Swedish.

HEI language policies and their aspirations

Swedish HEIs can choose to formulate a language policy of their own. According to a recent account, 21 out of Sweden’s 49 HEIs, and 2 separate faculties, have adopted a language policy (Salö, 2018). The existing policies make up a heterogeneous set of documents of different length, scope and foci. While phrasings about the ‘merit value’ of language skills appear as a theme in many policies, some HEIs, aligned with their internationalizing pursuit, center only on English as a meritorious language skill (Karlsson, 2017). For the present study, the main concern has been to locate and discuss statements about the expected Swedish language skills of international recruitments; that is, researchers and teachers recruited from countries other than Sweden. We have located 11 HEI language policies that connect with this question. Based on how they address the value of national linguistic capital in processes of capital conversion, these were categorized into three kinds; namely, those that are vague, idealistic or explicit.

The vague language policies address the question of language skills with regard to Swedish and English equally and in very general terms. For example, Borås University, Malmö University, University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Södertörn University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

state that skills in both languages are meritorious in recruitment. The common trait here is that the policies neither go beyond statements about the general importance of linguistic skills, nor do they draw any connections between language and scientific or academic capital accumulation.

Other HEIs' policies place imperative language-learning demands on their internationally recruited staff. However, the goals they set up seem unfeasible to reach unless deliberate and potentially unrealistic efforts are made by both the incoming staff and their host department. For instance, it assumes that the incoming staff member will be given the requisite amount of (free) time for learning Swedish, as well as access to adequate teaching provisions. At Dalarna University, 'inmoving personnel' are expected to acquire 'functional competence in Swedish within a year or so' [inom något år]. Linköping University states that teachers who lack Swedish linguistic competence upon starting a permanent position must within two years attain the Swedish linguistic skills sufficient for teaching, supervising and participating in academic and administrative work. Such policies seem rather optimistic and would be dependent upon departmental leaders facilitating international recruits in their Swedish language learning. Belonging to this category are also HEIs that draw on interpretable phrasings, rather than specific learning objectives and time frames. For example, University West states that permanently hired staff are expected to communicate and access information in Swedish 'within a reasonable time'. Lund Faculty of Engineering (LTH) states similarly, that 'Reasonable demands in Swedish and English are expected to be fulfilled within a two-year period' and adds that 'Employees who have not mastered Swedish shall be provided individually adapted teaching.' Thus, while several policies in this category indeed stress that language courses are to be arranged, they nevertheless express an overly idealistic ambition concerning the possibilities of acquiring Swedish sufficient for advanced professional use.

The policies of two universities, KTH and Lund University, include explicit phrasings about the value of Swedish for purposes of career advancement and integration. They are explicit in the sense that they include phrasing on why Swedish linguistic capital is needed in relation to other forms of capital accumulation. KTH's policy mentions the integrational value of Swedish and adds that 'teachers who do not master Swedish have a hard time fulfilling the requirement necessary for promotion and are normally not qualified for leadership duties.' Here, then, the link between linguistic assets and academic capital is clearly highlighted. Lund, similarly, states that skills in Swedish 'increase the career opportunities within the university' and mentions additionally the value of Swedish in relation to employability and integration into Swedish society. While such a reference to 'career opportunities' is not straightforward or specific, it nonetheless signals an attempt to move beyond what increasingly looks to us to be both hollow and/or surreptitious policy discourse.

Questions may be raised about how such policy aspirations relate to real-life encounters with Swedish, to which we now turn.

On-the-ground experiences of international recruits

Robert Morgan, the first informant, moved to Sweden some 20 years ago to start a postdoc in a natural science department. Entering into an internationalized work environment, he made no formal effort to learn Swedish. Neither was he requested to. As he puts it:

Morgan: No. There's no prerequisite for any of the staff that come here to learn Swedish.

Holmes: Informally, do you remember being asked or was there any pressure from anyone?

Morgan: Zero pressure. Because, actually it's not needed for the workforce. Everything that happens in the department, the primary language is English. Essentially, you're doing research and a little bit of teaching. And all of that is done in English here.

Without acquiring much Swedish, Morgan managed to eventually secure a permanent position as assistant professor. Up until this stage of his career, he had done without Swedish and his lack of Swedish language skills had not been an obstacle for his professional advancement – English sufficed for the accumulation of scientific capital, with which he secured a job.

Darren Corbett, the second informant, moved to Sweden some 5 years ago, at a later stage of his career. Upon taking up a position as full professor in an education department, he was already a senior scholar recruited from a prestigious European HEI. In his interpretation, his recruitment was part of an internationalization agenda:

Corbett: When I arrived in this department, there were no international members of staff, they were all Swedes.

Holmes: From your own perspective, is your international status an asset?

Corbett: Yes. The bottom line is that this is why I was employed by the university – to create or to help grow an outward looking university department. To shift an insular, inward looking department into something more fitting to a research led university.

This agenda, however, would prove complicated for Corbett. He came to sense that linguistic skills are attached to symbolic values in that some staff members actively seek to defend the value of Swedish by insisting on its use, whereas others call for a more distinct international profile:

Corbett: Embedded within this institution there is a sense that some think we should do everything in Swedish because this is a Swedish department. Others say that you cannot become an international department, you can't engage with the international world, if you only work in Swedish.

Upon taking up his position, Corbett recalls having heard about a policy saying that international employees should be 'functionally competent' in Swedish after three years. Yet, he saw no signs of this rule being applied and, for his own part, did not put any considerable effort into learning Swedish, partly because he was told not to.

Corbett: When I came here, our prefekt [head of department] said, look, don't bother with Swedish, just do your job. It's more important that you do your job than waste your time learning Swedish. Which has proved to be really interesting, because he was only in the post temporarily.

Holmes: So have things changed? Have you been asked or put under pressure to learn Swedish?

Corbett: Not overtly. No one has said anything. But whereas [the former prefekt] would conduct meetings in English, more and more they're conducted in Swedish and the expectation is that I will follow. If I make any contributions, I will do it in English.

Holmes: So, in the meetings you are following but you respond in English?

Corbett: I don't follow everything. I guess I probably follow 25, 30%. With confidence. It's interesting. If we've got written notes to read before the meeting, I am much more confident. But if someone is extemporizing, I find it very hard to keep track of what's being said.

Notably, both informants link the value of English to research and scientific activities, which they envision to be the primary task (Corbett: 'Science operates in English.'). For Morgan, however, the value of Swedish became evident a while later, when his duties as a faculty member came to include a new mode of engagement with administrative steering. Here, in a context of academic power, Swedish was perceived to circulate increasingly prominently, and the prevalent linguistic market conditions contrasted sharply with those at play in his previous scientific undertakings.

Morgan: It's only as you drift a little bit higher up that, you know, that it comes into play. I think for a lot of people there's a glass ceiling with the language, because you're not encouraged, you're never told that if you want to stay in Sweden and work in Sweden that you're going to have to learn Swedish, right?

Holmes: When did this become apparent to you?

Morgan: It occurred to me when I started going to meetings. And at some point, I would bend the conversation back to English because you can do that as an English-speaking person, right? You know, you can just say 'I don't understand', or 'can we swap over to English?' and it will just happen immediately. At some point I thought, 'I shouldn't be doing this', right? Because people don't really want to do that.

As can be seen here, Morgan's perception of linguistic valorization in the workplace had an impact on his own linguistic practices (cf. Salö, in press). He refers to the notion of a 'glass ceiling' with respect to Swedish linguistic capital. He thus subscribes to the idea that an international scholar's career trajectory contains unacknowledged barriers that only some ostensibly overcome. That glass ceiling, Morgan holds, is Swedish linguistic assets, a fact that he became aware of as he started attending administrative, Swedish-held meetings (cf. Karlsson & Karlsson, 2020, p. 82). According to Morgan, in such settings Swedish is as dominant as English in his scientific work:

Morgan: Swedish is never a problem up until a certain level, right? What I've found actually in the last three years is that once you move into the administrative layer, everything below administration is in English, all the science. Once you move into the administration, it's all in Swedish. The emails, the meetings, the conversations, the paperwork.

Worthy of note is the fact that Morgan has been able to pursue a career in Swedish HE, despite not possessing any significant Swedish linguistic capital in the years leading up to his appointment as assistant professor. While mastering Swedish now, however, he nonetheless senses that in more recent years he has missed certain opportunities because of his lack of such assets, again with reference to Swedish linguistic capital as an invisible obstacle in processes of acquiring the capital of academic power:

Morgan: There are things that have passed me by because of language. At some point, there was a funding agency here and they were looking for future leaders for a program. They were going to give 20 positions away and they interviewed 30 people. In the interview they said,

can you do it in Swedish? I said I can't. I knew it was gone then. And there are other things which happen through The Royal Swedish Academy [of Sciences], which only my Swedish colleagues get called in for.

Holmes: So, it seems that Swedish language learning has hindered you from getting access to certain spaces.

Morgan: Yeah. And it's very frustrating when it happens. At some levels it hasn't, but at others it has. So, you know, for the foreign people here there is a bit of a glass ceiling. Which is language.

Holmes: Is that ever addressed or discussed in this department? Has it been acknowledged at any point?

Morgan: No. It's a difficult one, right? It's very hard to complain. You could be frustrated by it, but it's very hard to complain. I mean, who are you going to complain to? And what are you going to complain about? I mean, you're living in Sweden.

Notably, Morgan is at pains not to come across as a complainer, and states that he regards any demands placed on him to develop competence in Swedish as reasonable. Much like Morgan, Corbett is careful not to complain, but his account is permeated with more outright frustration linked to the fact that his lack of Swedish linguistic capital is so much of an issue. As a recruited professor, he cannot really say that he has been held back because of his lack of Swedish. Yet, he feels marginalized and under-used:

Corbett: I think this is a really complicated issue. For me, my job is about encouraging the research in the group. And to help colleagues write their proposals and get grants. And to help colleagues and PhD students write for publications and to become more outward and international. And I think that's why I was employed. So this is very much an English task, or a task best done in English. But in terms of let's say departmental management groups, of which I am a member of some, you know, professors have to be, I get really frustrated, because I know I can't make the contribution I'd like. I know that I am always marginalized slightly in the debate. I just know that I can't contribute to the growth of the department as a whole, as I'd like.

As we have seen, the two informants have had quite different experiences with the value of Swedish-language assets, as reflected in their perceptions of what Swedish skills afford (cf. Ingold, 2000, 166). Morgan entered the career system as a postdoc and was immersed into an English-speaking work environment, to progressively grasp the value of Swedish through his professional movement. For him, the further up the career ladder one moves, the more the efficacy of Swedish increases. Corbett was employed as a professor at a Swedish-leaning department. In his experience, the value of Swedish is less stable and hierarchical; rather, it fluctuates at the departmental level and depends chiefly on the whims of whoever happens to be in charge:

Corbett: I don't think there is a single ethos. I think this reflects the tensions within the department. The ethos is determined by whoever is the prefekt [head] and that's a three-year post. And three years isn't long to change a culture. So while this colleague over here is currently part of the flavor of the month, we have a new colleague taking over as prefekt in August and I think he will be much more aligned to this colleague. So, there is this continuous tension. For me the biggest issue is the tension between colleagues who view this as a Swedish

university, and so it should be Swedish, and those who understand that to make it function in an international discourse, that we have to go beyond Swedish. That's the tension for me.

Discussion

Recurrent official reports from Sweden's research-related agencies suggest that the faculty of Sweden's academic labor market has a distinct national core, while internationally recruited free movers linger at its margins. This established pattern has beckoned us to gauge matters of linguistic capital – the efficacy of Swedish language assets in career trajectories. Adopting Bourdieu's bifocal vision to distinguish between scientific prestige and academic power, we argue that the importance of national linguistic capital can be misjudged in processes of accruing academic capital. Beyond the anglophone world, national languages thus matter in career trajectories; here, knowing English is not enough. For the informants of this study, knowing Swedish is perceived to function as a 'tacit requirement'; that is, as a principle 'of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 102).

Admittedly, our empirical data do not allow us to make strong causal claims. For example, although official statistics show that Swedish citizenship, background and PhD constitute factors for success in the career ladder of Swedish academia, we cannot be sure that language skills hold explanatory value. For instance, Sweden-born teachers and researchers with an immigrant background (two parents born abroad) are also underrepresented in Swedish HEIs despite knowing Swedish (Uppsala University, 2016, see Behtoui & Høyer Leivestad, 2019). By the same token, being English-speaking males, our informants' accounts represent only one side of the internationalization story, which may contrast with many others (Holmes, 2020; Salö, in press).

Nonetheless, the overall pattern is there: in spite of internationalization being high on the agenda, the less mobile, national agents secure the permanent positions, and lead Swedish HEIs. A number of tentative explanations may be put forth. Firstly, it may be that internationally recruited researchers do not strive at securing permanent positions to the same extent as Swedish nationals. Secondly, it could be thought that Swedish nationals outdo their international competitors based on objective criteria such as merit and skill, irrespective of their linguistic assets. Thirdly, the opinion might lurk that Swedish universities should be controlled by Swedes who are seen as having the practical knowledge needed for maintaining a collective, national heirloom, and that the lack of Swedish language skills might serve as a pretext for excluding international recruits.

Alternative explanations notwithstanding, our analysis shows that language does matter in researchers' experiences of their own 'paths of movement, of action and perception' (Ingold, 2000, p. 242), which is to say that the paths across which career trajectories unfold are themselves imbued with the constraints of linguistic market conditions. Yet, we would not go as far as suggesting that international recruits are systematically denied access to power on the grounds of language. Firstly, the careers of both interviewees would contradict such an understanding as they both secured permanent positions despite not knowing Swedish. Secondly, such a drastic understanding would obscure much of the complexity surrounding the issue at hand. It would downplay the soft logic according to which language skills intermingle with other forms of capital and overlook the practical considerations of HEIs. Suffice to say, Swedish HE comprises activities in relation to which Swedish linguistic capital is valued, such as undergraduate teaching and administration. Here, knowing Swedish broadens one's usability – real or perceived – in the academic workplace of Swedish HEIs. Language competence is but one efficacious

asset. By the same token, we do not subscribe to the binary assertion that English usurps scientific capital whereas Swedish usurps academic capital. Apart from being too narrow and simplistic, such a reading of our argument would overemphasize the efficacy of linguistic capital in career trajectories. Academics are not published in top journals only because they have a practical mastery of English; neither do they obtain top leadership positions only because they have skills in Swedish. Linguistic capital facilitates rather than automatically generates the accumulation of scientific and academic capital.

Is it, then, unreasonable to demand that those in positions of academic power in national HEI systems master the national language? We do not think so and, in fact, neither do the informants whose accounts we have drawn upon (Morgan: ‘I mean, you’re living in Sweden’). Yet, if this is the position that policy makers and those recruiting want to take, it should be made explicit in the language policies and local appointments procedures of Swedish HEIs. Also, resources and support measures would need to be put in place to make the learning of Swedish possible. Regardless of policy – vague, idealistic, or explicit, with a lack of any suitable support for acquiring Swedish language skills, foreign academics are always likely to find it difficult to acquire academic capital.

If, on the other hand, Swedish HEIs opt for another approach, explicitness would likewise be warranted in order not to make the question of departmental language policy dependent on individual agency, that is, on the ethos of whoever happens to be in charge. Distinctions could be made between types of meetings where Swedish must be used for particular ends (e.g., decision-making boards and drafting committees) and those where such restrictions are not needed. While there are no strict rules dictating that work-place meetings must be held in Swedish, many Swedish HEIs have implemented such policies locally (Karlsson & Karlsson, 2020). Where this has happened, it could be argued that as a result of the current linguistic situation, only highly proficient Swedish-speakers are likely gain access to spaces where academic capital, albeit little scientific capital, can be accrued (ibid., p. 82). If ‘knowing Swedish’ serves de facto as a form of capital in its own right, sometimes even gaining the upper hand, important meritocratic principles are set aside. Holders of Swedish linguistic capital would secure positions of power over the academic world due to reasons that deviate from scientific authority, merit and skill, and so ‘reinforce the forces of inertia in the scientific world’ (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 12). Swedish HE would lose the impetus of internationalizing processes and reinforce the contemporary recruitment patterns of the Swedish academic labor market.

Whichever way one looks at it, one thing is quite clear: the observation that internationalization in some respects augments the value of English should not deceive us into thinking that English is all that is valued in internationalizing HEIs. Hence, as remarked by Holmes (2020, p. 281), for transnational scholars working outside the anglophone world, ‘a repertoire consisting of only English is not as optimal as one might be led to believe.’ Consistently, the gist of our argument here should act as a corrective to assertions that hold skills in national languages to have become increasingly devalued and dispensable. Vis-à-vis career trajectories in Sweden, our account suggests the opposite. This insight might also be valid in relation to other academic systems beyond the anglophone world, as the share of foreign faculty members in Sweden is in fact higher than in countries such as Germany, Finland, Spain, Portugal, and Italy (SHEA, 2020). In-depth comparative accounts are needed. In our view, the beacon light for such inquiries ought to be the insight that the value of any capital is neither fixed nor predetermined – on the contrary, one of the central stakes in academia is to ‘determine which properties are pertinent, effective and liable to function as capital’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 11).

Conclusion

The national–international tension in academia lingers on, constantly renewing itself through new modes of expression. In and of itself, the internationalization of academia is a denationalizing force that nourishes several lines of conflict inherent in this world: transformation vs. durability; upheaval vs. inertia, and so on (Crawford et al., 1993). In this process, matters of language inevitably percolate. Accordingly, from the viewpoint of Swedish HE, this paper has sought to offer insight into the interrelations between language assets, scientific prestige, and academic power in career trajectories in times of heightened internationalization. We have postulated that grasping the efficacy of national languages in internationalizing academe entails realizing (1) that a scholarly career is built upon two main forms of capital: scientific capital and academic capital; and (2) that linguistic capital grants access to spaces where scientific and academic capital can be accrued.

Indeed, in internationally profiled disciplines it seems quite possible to get around on one’s scientific merit without much knowledge of Swedish: such assets are rarely needed for scientific publishing, grant applications, workplace interaction, or advanced-level teaching. However, we propose that national linguistic capital – in this case Swedish language skills – is paramount for the accumulation of academic capital as a power over the scientific world. While the language policies of Swedish HEIs seldom recognize the value of Swedish linguistic capital in this regard, KTH and Lund University constitute two lucid exceptions in that they explicitly state that skills in Swedish are valuable assets for career opportunities, and that lacking such skills effectively hinders promotion and leadership duties. In agreement with such statements and emboldened in our engagement with the data presented above, we argue that the perceived efficacy of Swedish increases the further up the career ladder of academic power one goes, and the deeper into the administrative state one ventures. According to the perceptual practical activity of internationally recruited agents, not knowing Swedish is sometimes experienced as effectively holding back career advancements because low possession of that form of linguistic capital denies access to spaces of engagement where academic capital can be accrued.

By way of concluding, academia is at heart a space where power struggles over legitimate membership unfold. In this paper, matters of language have been traced to reveal one such struggle, evident in the fact that linguistic market conditions with conflicting (internationalizing and nationalizing) effects converge and intermingle. We hope that the dynamics sketched in this paper work to open up new and fruitful avenues for further empirical research.

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