



**Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici
Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes**

**Stefania M. Maci
& Michele Sala (eds.)**

**REPRESENTING AND
REDEFINING SPECIALISED
KNOWLEDGE: VARIETY IN LSP**

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CERLIS Series
Volume 8

Stefania M. Maci & Michele Sala (eds.)

Representing and Redefining Specialised
Knowledge: Variety in LSP

2019
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

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CERLIS SERIES Vol. 8

CERLIS

Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici

Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes

University of Bergamo

www.unibg.it/cerlis

REPRESENTING AND REDEFINING SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE:

VARIETY IN LSP

Editors: Stefania M. Maci, Michele Sala

ISBN 978-88-97253-03-7

ISSN 2532-2559 – CERLIS series [Online]

Url: <http://hdl.handle.net/10446/155776>

Doi: 10.6092/10446_978-88-97253-03-7

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DAVIDE SIMONE GIANNONI

Reaching Out to Students at Home and Abroad: Multilingual Practices at UCAS

1. Introduction

As the world's leading economies become increasingly reliant upon each other, driven by the converging forces of deregulation and globalisation, a similar process is changing the face of higher education institutions across the planet. Normally referred to as *internationalisation*, it seeks to attract increasing numbers of overseas students and academic staff through initiatives such as “credit and degree mobility for students, academic exchange and the search for global talent, curriculum development and learning outcomes, franchise operations and branch campuses” (de Wit/Hunter 2015: 45).

Internationalisation has become a strategic factor in academic decision-making because it offers greater visibility and recognition, generates much-needed income to fund research and facilities, and increases cultural diversity among students and staff. The process also implies new challenges for academic administrators, who need to ensure equal recruitment practices and cohesion within their organisation. For example, there may be a mismatch between institutional claims and actual practices; according to Robson (2011: 625), “The rhetoric in most universities suggests a desire for transformative internationalization, though actual institutional engagement varies across the continuum”.

Language policies are a key element of how new stakeholders are addressed and engaged, bearing in mind – as argued by Lomer (2014, 2018) – that institutional discourse can objectify and commodify international students, rather than present them as an

active part of the academic community. At the same time, internationalisation challenges well-established cultural practices within host institutions, drawing attention to “extremely important issues about who shapes the culture of learning and intellectual HE spaces and who determines the norms of discourse within academic communities” (Turner/Robson 2008: 11).

One of the countries at the forefront of these developments is the UK, whose share of the global mobile student market is second only to the US, with the former attracting 11% and the latter 18% of the total in 2012 (UUK 2014). While the proportion of non-UK students – defined by country of domicile – studying in British universities has remained relatively stable over the last decade or so, rising from 14.2% in 2006 to 19.2% in 2015 (UUK 2017: 16), their geographical distribution has changed significantly.

The strongest relative growth (see UUK 2017) has come from outside the EU, namely the Middle East (+102%), China (+99%), other European countries (+56%) and South America (+42%). India, on the other hand, bucked the trend with a 23% contraction over the period considered. The picture that emerges from these figures is one of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among the international student population.

Internationalisation also means that British universities are more likely to recruit staff from other parts of the world, with overseas academics accounting for around 30% of full-time staff in 2015 (Minocha *et al.* 2018). Their experience is described in a number of qualitative studies focusing on the cultural differences that complicate workplace communication and socialisation. University administrators are urged to acknowledge that the “pedagogical approaches and cultural values acquired by academics outside of the UK HE [higher education] context may not fully align with British values, both in academia and outside, and, indeed, with the expectations of both international and British students” (Minocha *et al.* 2018: 13).

A recent study warns that “in many British higher institutions the general attitude towards skilled migration has been one of assimilation by which international staff are expected to assimilate to the values and norms of the host country” (Gimenez/Morgan 2017: 88). What is needed instead is an environment where local and international staff gradually acquire skills that allow them to

collaborate more effectively for the benefit of students and scholarship.

Language is also part of the problem for academics who come to the UK. Śliwa/Johansson complain that “little is known about the use of English by native speakers of other languages in workplaces based in English-speaking countries and where the majority of the employees are native English speakers” (2015: 78). The respondents interviewed by Jiang *et al.* (2010: 163) “felt that the English language could be an obstacle that possibly hindered their academic acculturation, including daily communication with colleagues and students, and the delivery of teaching to home or international students”. Similarly, those interviewed by Gimenez/Morgan (2017: 83) suggest that “proficiency in English, or the lack of it, can act as a barrier to the allocation of resources and positions, even more strongly than the appropriate professional skills and qualifications”.

A thematic survey of the literature on internationalisation in higher education (Yemini/Sagie 2016) shows a sharp rise in the number of studies over the last decade, with ‘English as a lingua franca’ topping the list of most frequent themes in 2007-2013, followed by ‘Multicultural issues’ and ‘Student mobility’.

1.1. Diversity and multilingualism

There is a growing body of research that deals with the languages of higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world, especially in settings where English is the chosen medium of instruction (see, among others, Doiz *et al.* 2012a; Bolton/Botha 2015; Lau/Lin 2017). Specific policies regulate “institutional languages in use/language diversity (formally adopted and informal); languages employed in teaching programmes; language teaching volume and organization; English language programming/‘local-language-as-a-foreign-language’ provision” (Turner/Robson 2008: 13).

Running courses in EAL (English as an Additional Language) with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds offers clear advantages in terms of cognitive engagement and graduate career prospects, although it can be a hurdle for students, lecturers and administrators alike. At the same time, there is a fair amount of educational research

on the international student experience in British universities (see Miller 2014).

What seems to be lacking is information on the use of languages other than English in Inner Circle HEIs, where English is not only a medium of instruction but also the host country's L1. A recent investigation of UK university websites (Giannoni 2015) suggests that only a third include any foreign language content – with Chinese offered as the main choice. The present study extends such research to the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) portal, used by the vast majority of undergraduates applying for a university place in the UK. The aim is to assess the presence/range of foreign language (FL) content and how it has varied in time.

The choice is not merely between a selection of languages (based on their utility and/or access to proficient drafters) but also between different degrees of *localisation*, i.e. of “linguistic and cultural adaptation of digital content to the requirements and the locale of a foreign market” (Schäler 2010: 209). Nantel and Glaser's comparison of how users perceive websites in the original-language version as opposed to a translation (English/French and vice versa), indicates that “the perceived usability of multilingual websites depends not only on the quality of the translation but to a clearly measurable extent on whether the linguistic background of the Web designers matches that of the site users or not” (2008: 120-121). The user experience tends to be more engaging and enjoyable when a website is designed in a way that demonstrates compliance with “culturally determined metaphors, attitudes and preferences” (2008: 114). The localisation of content is particularly relevant in the case of promotional or argumentative texts, whose evaluation rests on non-objective criteria such as trust, familiarity and reliability.

Multilingual websites have become a standard feature in all domains of online communication. Den Os/Blavette (2001: 16) list five basic options: “1. Completely independent sites for each locale; 2. Parallel structure to the sites, but the information present on each page is completely different; 3. Parallel structure to the sites, but the information present on each page is slightly different; 4. Parallel sites, but where some pages have not been localised (e.g. due to cost); 5. Completely parallel sites with identical structure and information”.

Diachronic developments in multilingual websites are a promising area of research, as they can shed light on alternative approaches implemented by the same organisation at different stages of its operations. The availability of digital repositories of online content is a major resource for retrospective investigations that may reach back to the mid-1990s. A recent example is Berezkina's (2018b) analysis of alternative language content in three Norwegian state websites between 1997 and 2014, complemented by interviews with institutional members of staff. The trend seems to favour English as the default lingua franca for international readers, while other foreign languages peaked around 2010 and have since decreased in number because, as highlighted in the paper's title, "language is a costly and complicating factor" (Berezkina 2018b: 55).

1.2. UCAS

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, whose origin dates from the early 1960s, is a non-profit organisation that manages the application process for admission to UK tertiary education. Its website (www.ucas.com) explains that in 2014 it handled applications from 700,000 students seeking places at 380 different universities and colleges, with a substantial proportion of applicants from the EU and other parts of the world.

A UCAS progress report entitled *International Admissions Review: Findings and Recommendations* notes that "during the last decade, the number of international and EU undergraduate students coming to the UK for HE has increased substantially, and numbers applying through UCAS have risen by 57%" (Westlake 2014: 6). We are also informed that in 2013 there were around 45,000 EU and 70,000 non-EU applications.

Although a breakdown of applicants by domicile and/or language is not apparently available, it is significant that EU and international students feature prominently in the organisation's website, with specific information on, and links to third-party UCAS-registered centres, i.e. "schools, colleges, education advisers and agents who help students into UK higher education" (UCAS 2015: 6).

It should finally be added that virtually all British universities reach out to prospective applicants through an international network of local representatives, recruitment officers, advisors and education fairs. These country-specific contacts also provide their services in the candidates' home languages.

2. Material and methods

To assess the use of FLs, the UCAS portal's homepage and all of its sections (including videos) were inspected – as available online in early May 2018 – for the presence of content in languages other than English, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish. All of the 51 'tiles' linking the homepage to the sections were worded in English, with the exception of one in Welsh (“Astudio yn y Gymraeg” = Studying in Welsh). Special attention was given to the ‘International and EU students’ section and, though not directly relevant to the present investigation, the social media links at the bottom of the homepage were followed up to identify their language(s).

The only type of FL content found in the website was a series of international guides, whose list could be accessed by navigating four levels into the website: Homepage > International and EU students > UCAS Undergraduate: International and EU students > International guides. A link to the ‘International guides’ page also appeared in the Google+ page of UCAS. Finally, there was a link to an automatic translation resource (“Listen/translate with BrowseAloud”) at the bottom of the homepage.

To gain further insights into UCAS's multilingual policy over the years, different versions of its website were explored using WaybackMachine (www.archive.org/web), which is a valuable source of information for retrospective investigations (cf. Hine 2015; Berezkina 2018b). Its database was found to contain Web captures of the UCAS domain covering a 20-year period, from December 1998 to June 2018.

Though not fully reliable, due to incomplete captures and inconsistencies in the dating of individual webpages, this digital archive is a unique source of longitudinal data comprising 345 billion webpages. The first capture for each year was inspected to see whether it contained any FL guides; if the relevant section was not available, a later date was chosen (meaning that the data collected refer to the earliest available capture for each year rather than to the entire year).

3. Results

A total of 13 pdf files named ‘Apply to study in the UK’ were listed in the ‘International guides’ page, followed by the name of the language used: Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Spanish. While the files’ names were in English, the titles within the guides were in their respective languages: e.g. “申请在英国学习” (Chinese), “Postuler pour étudier au Royaume-Uni” (French), “Bewerbung für ein Studium in Großbritannien” (German), “ Studiu w Wielkiej Brytanii” (Polish), “Подайте заявку на обучение в Великобритании” (Russian). There was also some evidence of localisation, as these titles differed in many ways from the longer, more detailed English guide (‘Applying to study an undergraduate qualification in the UK’) appearing at the top of the page.

The international guides are 4-page factsheets that outline the role of UCAS and various steps in the undergraduate application process. They are primarily addressed to applicants but incorporate a short end section for parents (whose backing is often crucial for international students paying full tuition fees). Unlike their children planning to study in an English-speaking country, parents may not be proficient in the language and will welcome information about UCAS in their L1 or in another L2 they happen to know.

There was also a smaller set of multilingual guides for musicians wanting to apply for post-secondary study, titled

'Introduction to UCAS conservatoires'. These were located three levels into the website (Homepage > International and EU students > UCAS Conservatoires: International students) and consisted of nine-page factsheets detailing the role of conservatoires and the application process in English, Chinese, Italian, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Japanese.

3.1. Variation in time

As shown in Table 1, the first FL undergraduate guides appeared online in 2008 (September) and the range of FLs changed four times: in 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2014. Only four languages (Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish) have been present throughout the period. In 2018 the range comprises both large international languages and small national ones (Lithuanian, Norwegian).

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Arabic	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bengali	x										
Bulgarian			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chinese	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
French		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
German		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Greek		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hindi	x										
Italian							x	x	x	x	x
Japanese	x	x	x	x	x	x					
Korean			x	x	x	x					
Latvian					x	x					
Lithuanian			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Norwegian							x	x	x	x	x
Polish					x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Romanian			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Russian	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Spanish	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Urdu	x										

Table 1. Variation in FL content since 2008.

Grouped geographically (Table 2), the same results suggest a marked shift over time to EU languages, which accounted for only 12.5% of the FLs in 2008 but have risen to 69.2% since 2014. Of course, this classification is only roughly indicative of recent trends, as it includes at least two languages (French and Spanish) that are official currency also in non-EU countries.

	EU FLs	Non-EU FLs	Total
2008	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	8
2009	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)	8
2010	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.7%)	12
2011	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.7%)	12
2012	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	14
2013	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	14
2014	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	13
2015	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	13
2016	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	13
2017	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	13
2018	9 (69.2%)	4 (30.8%)	13

Table 2. Variation in language groups since 2008.

The conservatoire guides are not included in these tables because they are a recent addition to the UCAS website (dating from 2015) and their range of languages has remained unchanged, apart from the addition of Japanese in 2016. They arguably serve a different, smaller audience to that of the undergraduate guides and interestingly include two FLs (Korean and Japanese) that have not been available for the latter since 2014.

4. Discussion

The current prevalence of EU languages in the UCAS website is consistent with the Union's role as a source of UK applicants. According to recent statistics (UUK 2017), the EU accounted in 2015/16 for 29.1% of UK students, followed by China at 20.8%, other

Asian countries (excluding India) at 19.1%, Africa at 7.7%, and the Middle East at 6.7%. However, the EU provided an even larger share (32.3%) back in 2006/07, which contrasts with the strengthening of EU languages over the period considered.

Furthermore, it is unclear why languages such as Hindi, Japanese and Korean were dropped and what motivated the preference for certain EU languages over others. Figures in UCAS (2017) show that Lithuania and Bulgaria are among the European countries with the highest percentage of young people entering UK universities – a reason that may explain the inclusion of their languages but does not apply in the case of Norwegian. Italy, on the other hand, is among the top European providers of first-year UK students, alongside Germany, France, Greece, Spain, Romania, Poland and Bulgaria (HESA 2018).

Beyond the EU (cf. HESA 2018, again), China is by far the leading country, with around 90,000 students in 2016/17 – which is consistent with the use of Chinese by UCAS; Saudi Arabia is also high in the list (in line with the use of Arabic). However, these statistics provide no obvious justification for the adoption of Russian or the omission of Hindi, Malay and Cantonese.

There are several points in these results that deserve consideration. First of all, it is obvious that international applicants to UK universities need to come equipped with EAL skills, given that their courses, reading material, classroom interactions and examinations will all be in English. It is also clear that UCAS is willing to make part of its information available in multilingual versions for the benefit of prospective students and their parents. Underscoring the importance of international applicants' parents, is a specific 20-page guide in English entitled *Parent Guide 2018: Everything You Need to Support Your Child with Their Higher Education Choices* that details the academic options and career paths available to students. The fact that the FL guides have been online for around a decade proves that they serve a real purpose.

Apart from these instances of FL content, the 'virtual linguistic landscape' (Ivkovic/Lotherington 2009) of the UCAS website is entirely monolingual. In some respects the finding is predictable, given that the UK is a major destination for internationally mobile students. Yet it contrasts with the increasing presence of English pages in the websites of non-Anglophone academic institutions across

Europe and beyond (cf. Jenkins 2014). Non-English text occurred only in the pdf files themselves and without FL cues leading readers to such content – making it hard for someone with no knowledge of English (or of Latin script) to access the material.

The organisation’s language policy is not stated by UCAS in its online reports, but there is mention of its importance when respondents signal the need for “information in different languages as well as ‘country specific’ pages” within recommendations to “Improve the information & advice available through UCAS for international and EU applicants” (Westlake 2014: 10). After all, the ultimate goal is to encourage as many suitable candidates as possible to benefit from UCAS’s services.

Like large parts of the higher education industry (cf. Molesworth *et al.* 2011; Zhang/O’Halloran 2013; Giannoni 2018), the organisation appears to be run on managerial, customer-centred principles. Its current approach, as laid out recently in *UCAS’ Strategy to 2020*, gauges success in terms of “market share of admissions (UK, EU, and international)” and “performance and resilience of the core admissions systems” (Smith/Marchant 2018: 7). To pursue its vision, UCAS recognises the need to develop “an end-to-end service ethos which reflects the voice of all of our customer groups” (2018: 4). Language is not explicitly named here, but serving the needs of international stakeholders is clearly a linguistically-sensitive goal. Time will tell whether this translates into a wider provision of multilingual content and FL services.

5. Conclusion

Mastering online communication in a multilingual environment is a challenge for those involved in website design and management. It complicates the process of updating pages and links, requires additional resources for translation/editing and inevitably favours some languages over others. A common mistake made by Web designers is to underestimate the importance of textual quality and

there is evidence that “one dimension of service that influences the usability of a site considerably is the quality of its language” (Nantel/Glaser 2008: 114). This also applies to texts in the home language, whose wording can be easified to improve readability and reduce the need for translation (cf. Carroll 2010).

As noted in the case of UK universities (Giannoni 2015), understanding what choices drive an organisation to include FL pages in their websites is not easy for an outsider. Even when language policies are spelled out in official documents, their implementation may be complicated by “covert considerations inside the institutions [...], locally situated needs, beliefs, and experiences” (Berezkina 2018a: 113). It is frequently unclear to what extent decisions are taken in response to emerging demands and opportunities or as part of a coherent, well-thought out plan.

Given the limited amount of FL material identified in the present study, it is arguable that its presence largely serves a phatic rather than a strictly communicative purpose. It may be seen as a gesture, a considerate way to make international candidates (and/or their parents) feel more welcome within the UCAS application framework. It is also true, as pointed out by Lane (2016: 611), that reliance on online evidence alone is loosely indicative of the subject’s behaviour and may “tend towards autoethnography rather than the ethnography of other people”.

Albeit complex to reconstruct, the textual variations of online platforms over time deserve closer attention from language scholars because they flag underlying trends and help to contextualise synchronic data. The longitudinal evidence retrieved in this study points to a gradual stabilisation of FLs, which have remained unchanged since 2014. Viewed critically, the range of FLs offered is a reflection of their relative power in an unequal world: including specific languages in the virtual linguistic landscape contributes “to mark language status in expressed power relations among the coexisting linguistic choices” (Ivkovic/Lotherington 2009: 19).

It is important, however, not to overestimate the impact of financial considerations on the degree of institutional interest in certain nationalities and/or language groups. Similarly, “highlighting the monetisation of EMI [English-Medium Instruction] can lead us to an oversimplification of a very complex global trend” (Doiz *et al.*

2012b: 214). Finally, whatever the range of languages available, there is a risk of tokenism – a feature that Koskinen (2000, 2013) attributes to European Union institutional websites, where multiple versions pay lip service to equality by favouring the symbolic value of multilingualism over pragmatic considerations.

Further research – which would have to engage directly with insiders as respondents – may shed light on current language-related policies within UCAS. It could also show how likely readers are to access the FL guides and whether there is a need for further content of this type and, admittedly, might conclude that English alone is sufficient for the kind of audience targeted by UCAS. This would align with the general acceptance of English in academia noted by Lasagabaster (2015) and with that the observation that “if the rhetoric of maintaining linguistic diversity is to be a reality, solutions have to be found” (Phillipson 2015: 38) by higher education policy-makers.

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