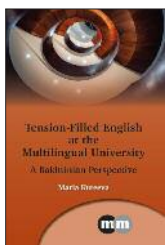


# Book Reviews

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## **Tension-filled English at the Multilingual University: A Bakhtinian perspective**

**Maria Kuteeva**

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Internationalisation in higher education offers valuable opportunities for collaboration and learning, but it also brings challenges. As part of the broader theme of linguistic and epistemic equity, the complexities of language use in internationalising academia have sparked widespread scholarly interest. In the book *Tension-filled English at the Multilingual University: A Bakhtinian perspective*, Maria Kuteeva provides a detailed examination of the tensions surrounding the use of English at multilingual universities. In synthesising the existing scholarship, she incorporates her own findings and research published in Kuteeva et al. (2020), which uncovered the dynamics of mono- and multilingualism in non-anglophone European universities. Here she looks more closely at language issues through a Bakhtinian lens to provide theoretical interpretations of the available evidence and offer deeper insights. Bakhtin's view of language as dialogic, multi-voiced, and permeated with social tension has influenced scholarship in many disciplines, but his ideas seem particularly relevant to the current context of internationalising universities. The analysis encompasses multiple levels of language use and includes language policies as well as disciplinary and individual practices ranging from being more constrained and norm-driven to more fluid. The arising tensions often drive individuals to deviate from established norms to convey identities, challenge dominant ideologies, or express themselves creatively.

The breadth and depth of the work are both impressive: the author reviews a substantial body of research and offers a theory-based analysis of highly complex topics, using original research material to illustrate abstract ideas, while also highlighting inconclusive evidence and divergent viewpoints. The

thoughtfully selected epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter enrich the reading experience, and key concepts are repeated throughout the book, allowing the reader to reengage with the ideas.

The book comprises eight chapters, starting with broader theoretical discussions and macro-level perspectives and gradually moving towards more specific aspects and viewpoints. Similarly, the research approach progresses from quantitative to qualitative. The six content chapters, divided into three main parts, focus on conceptualisations of English (Chapter 2), language policies and wider societal discourses on language use (Chapter 3), disciplinary perspectives towards English (Chapter 4), the role of English and other languages in research publications in different disciplines (Chapter 5), students' perceptions of the use of English, along with their language practices (Chapter 6), and their use of English in creative writing (Chapter 7).

In the Introduction the author presents the key concepts and provides an overview of Sweden's language landscape before explaining her methodological and terminological choices and the rationale for a Bakhtinian framework. We learn intriguing details about Bakhtin's life and his unconventional writing style, leading to subsequent translation challenges. For instance, the central concept of "dialogism" was never used by Bakhtin, and "heteroglossia" is an umbrella term only used by Bakhtin's translators to refer to three interrelated concepts: "diversity in speech", "diversity in language", and "diversity in voicedness".

Chapter 2 starts with an overview of the ongoing scholarly debate on the position of English in higher education and research, and the author highlights that the tensions stem from different conceptualisations of English. After examining three conceptualisations – English as a standard language, a lingua franca, and part of a translingual practice –, the author shows how centripetal and centrifugal forces pull in different directions, towards language unification or stratification, thereby creating tensions. While these conceptualisations focus on specific uses of English, a Bakhtinian analysis allows for an exploration of both L1 and LX users, written and spoken communication, and standard ("unitary") and non-standard ("heteroglossic") language uses.

Chapter 3 focuses on "parallel language use", a principle that emerged in response to the spread of English seen as a threat to the national language(s). Analysing two Nordic policy documents, published by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2007) and Gregersen et al. (2018), the author highlights

conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, language policies protect the national language(s) in education and research, while also recognising the significance of English in key areas of language use. On the other hand, policies also promote multilingualism and languages other than the national language(s) and English. The chapter also covers broader societal discussions on current trends, such as migration, digitalisation, the upsurge of nationalism, standard language ideologies, and neoliberal principles in university management, which have influenced language policies. The author utilises the findings of a large-scale survey (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012) that explored students' and staff members' patterns of language use, their linguistic resources, and their attitudes towards using English and other languages. The findings are interpreted through a Bakhtinian lens and drawing on the concepts of "heteroglossia" and "polyglossia", the analysis reveals three main discourses: epistemic monolingualism, (wishful) academic multilingualism, and deficient multilingualism. These discourses illustrate the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces and the conflict between the ideology of parallel language use as promoted in language policies and the everyday realities, characterised by a competition between Swedish and English.

Chapter 4 starts with a review of influential theories of knowledge construction in different disciplines ("hierarchical" vs. "vertical knowledge structures"), after which the author draws on the Bakhtinian concepts of "monologic" and "dialogic" knowledge along with "voicedness" to account for disciplinary variation in language use. Utilising empirical evidence, she shows how different disciplinary practices and local academic traditions impact multilingual researchers' attitudes towards the use of English. She also highlights the difficulty of simply switching to a different language, and the conflict between external pressures to publish in English and the (often invisible) multilingual realities of the research process.

In Chapter 5 the author discusses the dominance of English in research publications, leading to "epistemic monoglossia". Utilising the notion of "unitary language", she theorises the disciplinary variation regarding the use of languages and incorporates empirical evidence to illustrate the experiences of multilingual researchers: their views of using English and their perceptions of the language norms and standards required when writing for publication. The author engages with ongoing scholarly debates on language standards, linguistic (in)justice, inclusiveness, and language change and discusses new "unitary" uses of English, when the standards are

collaboratively negotiated based on clarity and mutual understandability, along with translingual writing practices that challenge the dominant norms and ideologies.

In Chapter 6, after reviewing the existing research on English-medium education in the Nordic countries, the author draws on her earlier study (Kuteeva, 2020) to discuss how students' conceptualisations of English – as standard English, lingua franca, or translingual practice – are reflected in their practices. The analysis reveals tensions arising from different interpretations of language norms and the conflict between regulated and everyday language practices.

Finally, Chapter 7 zooms in on the experiences of students engaging in translingual creative writing and explores their perceptions of their own linguistic repertoires in relation to their bilingual selves and their use of various linguistic and semiotic resources. The analysis reveals tensions emerging from the students' present and desired linguistic repertoires and that their bilingual (“polyglossic”) self allows them to both maintain and challenge language boundaries, serving as a rich source of creativity.

In the Conclusion, the author emphasises that a Bakhtinian perspective illuminates not only the ideological nature of language use but also the interplay between observable practices and underlying ideologies. She highlights that a Bakhtinian perspective allows moving beyond written texts produced in standard English, which has been the traditional focus of research, and considering other languages, along with more situated, fluid, and non-standard language practices. However, as the author points out, a Bakhtinian analysis cannot explain the development of language hierarchies, nor the emergence of patterns of language practices, such as elite or grassroots multilingualism. Being shaped by various historical, social, cultural, economic, and geopolitical factors, they require a different analytical approach. The author calls for more dialogue among different fields within applied and sociolinguistics and across various disciplines concerned with language-related phenomena and argues that the tensions should not be seen merely as problems but also as opportunities for learning and enhancing individual agency. The author also advocates for increased language awareness and more institutional support and encourages reflection on personal language ideologies regarding language(s) and language uses, as well as existing structures, mechanisms, and norms.

The book focuses on two main functions of the university: as an educational

and research institution. However, a Bakhtinian analysis could provide valuable insights when considering the university also as a workplace, particularly when looking into the interplay between institutional and departmental-level language policies and individual practices at various meetings. Such an analysis could elucidate the tensions between English and the local language(s) and between policies and the lived intercultural experiences of “local” and “international” staff. These topics are important as unit-level language policies and support systems impact not only staff members’ belonging, professional identity, sense of agency, engagement, and commitment but also the quality of interpersonal relationships within the immediate work community. This dimension seems to be less explored in multilingual university settings (for a notable exception, see Komisarof & Zhu, 2016).

Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to the growing research on the role of language(s) in academia and serves as a meaningful resource for anyone interested in these issues: scholars and students who operate in a multilingual environment, along with other actors involved in education, research, and publishing.

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