

Comments on Stig Hjarvard's presentation

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It is a pleasure to make comments on a presentation that has enabled us to get a better insight into what such a concept as globalization means on the everyday level. I do agree with most of the issues Stig Hjarvard took up. That is why I will not go into details, but rather try to develop further some of the themes he discussed.

As such, there were not that many totally new elements in Hjarvard's presentation, but it definitely gives us all a challenge. It is in fact surprising that we as communication scholars so rarely deal with the language. Nowadays, every other piece of research in Nordic media and communication studies has something to do with discourse analysis, but the language as such has only rarely caught our attention as a theme for research, although if anyone should know how crucial language is to communication it is we.

It would not be difficult for me to present as dramatic details as Hjarvard has about the influence of the English language on my mother tongue, Finnish – perhaps even more alarming, because the Finnish language is old-fashioned and grammar bound. The English language is able to break up deeper structures in Finnish than perhaps in Danish. In Finland we have gradually started to talk more and more through substantives and adjectives, although one in fact should put most emphasis on verbs in the Finnish language. Our verbs have become pale and our way of expressing ourselves more and more clumsy.

Also in Finland dialects have changed into kitsch – and into kitsch that sells well. During the past 5-10 years, the Bible as well as Donald Duck has been translated into several Finnish dialects. One could, of course, interpret this to mean that people have become interested in local dialects, but unfortunately this is not the case. Dialects have turned exotic and distant, and that is why those texts sell so well. Reading them is like visiting the tropical animals at Korkeasaari Zoo in Helsinki. For the news media, dialects definitely mean something vulgar and stupid. If a source uses a dialect, it is excluded from the reporter's text in the name of credibility – and it is left there if the reporter wants to destroy the legitimacy of the source. The worst case is if the source speaks one of the eastern dialects! During the EU membership campaign in the early 1990s, the media quite frequently used a technique whereby they selected Savolax-speaking sources when they were covering matters related to the No-to-EU campaign, thus indicating that the whole „No“ movement was old-fashioned and out-of-touch with reality.

But the situation is not exactly the same in the Danish and Finnish mediascapes. In Finland, we have a dozen Swedish-language newspapers, and we have Swedish-language radio and television channels. We do have, every now and then, stupid debates about the role and status of the Swedish minority language in the country and in the media, but simultaneously these debates sensitize us all to the significance of languages in general. There is a slight built-in tension concerning language questions in Finland, but the very same tension keeps alive our discussions on languages and their significance in society.

Stig Hjarvard seems to think that there is only one English-language culture, or perhaps two, a British and an American. However, the English that sneaks into the Danish language does not represent any genuine English-language culture. There is quite a large range of cultures operating in the English language, and they differ from each other considerably, depending for example on the role English has had in different parts of the world in colonialism and industrialism. The English that Hjarvard talks about is in fact the communication means of globalization, with only weak contacts with the British, American or any other culture operating in English. The language of globalization has no links with either space or time. Many English-language researchers and authors are as concerned about what is happening to the English language as Hjarvard is about what is happening to the Danish. These critics feel that their language is increasingly becoming an industrial product that anybody has the right to mistreat. The creative component belonging to genuine languages has disappeared.

As I stated earlier, I agree with almost everything Hjarvard said. However, I consider him somewhat ahistorical. I expected to hear more about power, language and the media. Changes in languages and language use have always reflected changes in power structures. Languages have reflected the views and values set by the strong, operating either in politics, the economy, religion or the culture. I am not even convinced that the pressures being exerted by the globalized English on the Nordic languages are at their strongest now. History has driven nations against each other, and languages have functioned as a means for conflict as well as for reconciliation. The scary side of globalization is the speed of changes in languages. The other languages have no time to adapt to the new situation and the new language regime.

The fact that languages are important for identity construction is a distinctly European phenomenon. For example in Africa, it is quite natural that an ordinary person uses, without difficulty, 2-3 languages on a daily basis. People change language according to the person they talk with, because the main thing is to understand and to be understood. Identity is constructed on another basis, mainly via music, dance and inherited traditions. Changing language is not a big issue. Contacts with history and the tribe are so strong that the means of communication is secondary. However, the relation of language to power is known and sensitized. Kiswahili was not raised to an East African *lingua franca* because it was the language of the slave trade. And in South Africa and Namibia, English was chosen as the official language after a change in the political sphere, because, unlike in many other parts of Africa, English was not the language of colonialism in the southern region.

The theme for today also allows us to talk about a linguistic domination far closer to us. Year after year, Finnish-speaking Finns attending Nordic conferences have talked about the difficulties they encounter, especially with the Danish language. We do want to participate in the Nordic conferences, but we simply do not understand the other Nordic languages, and for many, expressing oneself in Swedish also causes problems.

Personally, I feel that is a pity that there are so few Finnish-speaking Finns participating in this conference as well. We „old-timers“ do come, because we know that these conferences are thrilling, but younger researchers tend to select other venues. One of my doctoral students said a few months ago, when I asked why she had not registered for this conference: „Only very few have such good self-esteem that they are willing to pay to be labelled stupid or at least withdrawn and quiet, because they cannot express themselves adequately“. Do we need to be orthodox with the Nordic languages, if the main function of the language is then partly or totally lost? Nordic togetherness and a community of understanding cannot be created if people do not understand each other. Languages exist to enable communication.

This is one side of the issue, but there is another side as well. It is exactly the one Stig Hjarvard talked about. We as communication researchers have a special responsibility to promote and cherish our own languages. In today's Nordic countries, some courage is needed in this respect. At least in Finland, universities indicate that they want to promote internationalization. In practice, this means that all research reported in English is automatically assessed higher than research reported in the domestic languages. We should have the courage to state that it is the quality of the research, not the language that matters. Perhaps language does not matter as much in the natural sciences, but in the humanities and social sciences it does. It is not only the choice of language we are talking about here. If we talk to a foreign audience in a foreign language, we also pose the questions in another way than when we focus on a domestic audience. Who will study our local media circumstances from a local perspective, if not we? Moreover, we also bear the responsibility for keeping our mother tongue alive, rich and creative. This is possible only if the language is used in full scale: at home, at school, in literature and at our universities.

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