A small incident may sometimes be indicative of big changes. In the spring term this year, I attended the demonstration lectures of four applicants to the position of Professor of Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Helsinki. Two of the candidates were foreigners and delivered their lectures in English, which was natural enough as not all members of the board of examiners understood Russian. But one of the two Finnish candidates used only English, too, though the whole audience consisted of speakers of Finnish, and the other Finnish candidate, delivering his lecture in Finnish, first explained in English why he had decided to do so. Obviously both Finnish candidates were afraid that the foreign candidates would have advantage because they used English, though the professorship they had applied for did not require any teaching in English, but only in Finnish and Russian.

A bigger event this year was that the Aalto University School of Business, the most prestigious in its field in Finland, announced that beginning from the autumn term, it would offer Master’s degree programmes only in English. Because most students at Finnish universities take the Master’s degree, and the Bachelor’s degree is not considered to be sufficient for the labour market of the country, the lawfulness of this decision was questioned. According to the Universities Act of Finland, the languages of instruction and examination at Finnish universities shall primarily be Finnish and Swedish, though other languages can also be used. But it seems that the Ministry of Education and Culture will not intervene; the Ministry is rather preparing to initiate an amendment of the Act if it is needed to permit such all-English instruction.

In general, increasing the use of English in teaching and administration is considered in Finland to be a central means of recruiting teachers and students from abroad, and this international recruitment is regarded as essential for the Finnish universities to be successful in international competition, as reflected in different kinds of university ranking lists, such as the Times Higher Education List or the Shanghai List. In addition, English-language programmes are used to draw Finnish students as well: most students of the Aalto University School of Business welcomed the new language decision of their university, seeing a Master’s degree taught in English as an asset in the international labour market.

In addition to this competition among the universities, the Finnish state also tries to confront competition among entire countries to attract highly qualified professionals: it is thought that without universities working at least partly in English, the best brains of the world will never find their way to Finnish companies. A recurrent theme in public discussion is that Finland is disadvantaged because of its climate and geographical location and the difficult Finnish language, and only the use of English can counterbalance these handicaps.

Most vacant professorships in Finnish universities are announced internationally, which is interpreted to mean that applicants knowing only English can be accepted. But this holds true for foreign applicants only: all Finnish-born applicants must prove that they know both Finnish and Swedish, and of course English, too. It is an interesting question what the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights would be if a Finnish applicant that had not been
elected filed a complaint against discriminating language requirements, but so far there has not been a concrete case of this.

At least in the University of Helsinki, it is possible to announce a vacancy internationally with the provision that a successful foreign applicant should acquire a working knowledge of Finnish or Swedish after having been elected. But many departments do not consider this to be a reasonable requirement and, at any rate, failing to learn Finnish would not qualify legally as a sufficient reason to terminate the employment.

Because Finnish professors publish their results in English, and often perform their everyday duties in international research groups in which English is the language of communication, the increasing use of English in teaching is not a problem for them. There is also a clear demand for English-language courses especially among exchange students coming to Finland for a term or two: I have myself experienced that announcing a course in English will immediately draw exchange students from many departments. From this point of view, having foreigners teaching in English at Finnish universities is seen mainly as a positive development.

The present situation is also shaped by factors having to do with language attitudes and language ideology. Speakers of Finnish usually think that their mother tongue is very difficult to learn; therefore they do not expect foreign teachers to use it. It is my experience that there is a marked difference between Finland and Sweden in this respect: it is quite normal for foreign-born teachers with permanent appointments at Swedish universities to use Swedish in everyday communication with their colleagues and even in their lectures, whereas in Finland, English is the unmarked choice. Swedish is obviously considered to be a “normal” language, but Finnish is not. Of course foreign teachers find Finnish a difficult language to learn if the Finns themselves reinforce this attitude. Moreover, investing in learning Finnish seems reasonable only if you think you will stay in Finland during your entire remaining career; in a third country it would not be an advantage. It is reasonable to use your time at a German university to learn German, but Finnish is too small a language to enrich your CV in the same fashion.

However, the crux of the language question may not be teaching, but administration. Although Finnish universities are not likely to adopt English as their administrative language in the near future, there have been a growing number of serious proposals to this effect (at the University of Tampere, for instance). Often these proposals come from Finnish teachers who feel disadvantaged because they must take care of all the administrative duties that their foreign-born colleagues cannot manage. The Finnish professors must defend the allowances of their departments in the university and in national politics and perform all kinds of bureaucratic chores, whereas the foreigners, it is said, can concentrate on research and on supervising the most talented students. On the other hand, foreign-born professors are often frustrated when they notice that what they see as a reasonable working knowledge of Finnish is not sufficient to understand the administrative jargon or to efficiently participate in meetings.

I would not say that English is immediately taking over Finnish universities. The great majority of Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes are still taught in Finnish or Swedish. In medicine, for instance, special emphasis is placed on teaching up-to-date Finnish terminology and manners of communicating with the patients in a comprehensible fashion. Some faculties have even decided that no Bachelor’s degree programmes will be taught in English, because the recruitment of international students is to be directed to the Master’s and doctoral programmes. But the tension between the traditional position of the two national languages and the need for more English, not only in teaching but also in administration, is
clearly growing, and the resulting compromises are not always satisfactory. A concrete problem is that a growing number of university graduates, knowing only English literature in their subjects, cannot write coherent texts about their areas of expertise in their mother tongue, but their active knowledge of English is not particularly strong, either. This is a problem not only in natural sciences and technology, but also in social sciences.

There is also a special question of language policy that concerns the University of Helsinki, which is officially the sole bilingual university in Finland, having both Finnish and (to a lesser degree) Swedish as its languages of instruction; all the other universities in the country are monolingual, using only Finnish or Swedish. In the official documents of the University of Helsinki, “bilinguality” still refers to the use of Finnish and Swedish, but in actual practice the university is bilingual in Finnish and English; the possibilities of using Swedish have diminished and do not meet the legal requirements. A foreign student coming to a consultation with a teacher can always expect being able to use English, whereas a Swedish-speaking citizen of Finland has to use Finnish, unless the teacher in question happens to be a speaker of Swedish themselves, or belongs to the shrinking number of Finnish-speaking teachers who are ready to speak Swedish – they are so few that the university has printed a special sticker Tala gärna svenska med mig (‘You are welcome to speak Swedish to me’), which they can place at their doors. And of course it would be impossible to require that foreign-born teachers should learn both Finnish and Swedish (although a few of them have actually done so).

I assume that in the long run, the pressure to promote international recruitment will increase the use of English at least in Master’s degree programmes, as it has already done in doctoral programmes, and we are going to see a growing number of Master’s theses written in English. This will, however, not raise the position of the Finnish universities in international ranking lists, because other comparable universities in Europe and Asia will resort to the same means. From a historical perspective, the use of Finnish as a full-fledged language of higher learning may turn out to be a relative short episode. One hundred year ago, Finnish had only begun to gain ground from Swedish at the University of Helsinki, at that time the only university in the Grand Duchy of Finland. Now it is Finnish that is losing ground to English, and it is difficult to see what could stop the development.

At any rate, language policy remains a topical issue at Finnish universities. The new rector of the University of Helsinki, elected in June this year, immediately named promoting international recruitment of teachers and students as his central goal. The language policy documents of the university are to be updated, and the new rector also confirmed his commitment to the status of Swedish in an interview published by the main Swedish-languages newspaper of Finland. But it is difficult to see what would change the general trend towards more English, less Finnish and much less Swedish at the university, a trend that most teachers and students find a practical necessity.