

The Imperial Tongue: English as the Dominating Academic Language

Academic superpowers like the US and the UK have ensured that English is the predominant academic and scientific language and that the curricula are dictated by trends there. While this has created a global academic environment with a common medium of communication, it has been at the cost of other national languages and research topics of local importance.

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English dominates the fields of science, scholarship, and instruction as never before. While it is unlikely that it will achieve the status that Latin enjoyed as the sole language of teaching and scholarship at the 13th century universities in Europe, the Latin analogy has some relevance today. Back then, Latin not only permitted the internationalisation of the universities but also allowed the Roman Catholic church to dominate intellectual and academic life. It was only the Protestant reformation led by Martin Luther, combined with a growing sense of national identity, that challenged and then displaced Latin with national languages. As late as the 1930s, German was a widely used international scientific language and until the mid-20th century, most countries used their national languages for university teaching

and for science and scholarship. French, German, Russian, and to some extent Spanish were, and still are, used for academic and scientific publication and have some regional and international sway. Scholarly communities in Japanese, Swedish and many other languages were active and continue to exist as well. English was the closest thing to an international language, with several major academic systems using it – the US, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and most of Canada. In addition, the emerging academic systems of the former British empire – especially India, Pakistan and Nigeria – use English as the main teaching and publishing language. But English did not go unchallenged, and national academic communities seemed in general committed to national languages.

Now, English serves unchallenged as the main international academic language – indeed, national academic systems

enthusiastically welcome English as a key means of internationalising, competing, and becoming “world class”. But the domination by English pushes world science toward hegemony by the main English-speaking academic systems and creates challenges for scholars, and universities, that do not use English.

Causes of English Hegemony

It is not hard to see why English is the dominant academic and scientific language. Nations using English, particularly the US, have become the academic superpowers. Size and wealth matter a great deal in determining the academic pecking order. The US alone spends almost half the world’s research and development (R&D) funds and is home to a large proportion of the top universities on the world’s increasingly influential league tables. The English-speaking academic systems host more than half the world’s international students – many of these graduates return to their home countries with a zeal for English and for the foreign universities at which they obtained their degrees. The main scientific and scholarly journals are published in English because their editors and most of their contributors are in the English-speaking universities. Similarly, the large majority of the world’s academic web sites and scientific networks function in English.

English is the world’s most widely studied second language. This gives it a significant advantage in many non-English-speaking countries simply because of the number of speakers and the fact that it is by far the most widely distributed language. There are, for example, more students studying English in China than are studying English in the US, and more speakers of English in India than in Britain. Further, English has an official status in more than 70 countries. Colonialism provided stimulus for the spread of English (as well as other European languages) as early as the 18th century – to North America, south Asia, and the Caribbean – and later to Africa, other parts of Asia, Australasia, and the south Pacific. Today, no African university offers instruction in any indigenous African language – academic and intellectual life takes place in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, and Afrikaans, and it can be argued that English has pride of place. British and later American economic and political power spread English as well.

The international role of English and its growing domination of academic life worldwide have many implications. The power of English language scientific and scholarly journals, edited in almost all cases by academics in the main English-speaking countries, means that the research paradigms and scholarly interests of the journal editors, editorial board members, and indeed the majority of readers dominate journals and to a large extent research agendas and methodologies in most disciplines. Scholars in other parts of the world must conform to the interests of the prestigious journals if they wish their work to be published in them. While the internet is more open, the interests of the major contributors and users tend to dominate, and the English language is most widely used. International scientific meetings increasingly use English as the only official language.

The curriculum is increasingly dominated by trends prevalent in the major English-speaking countries, and in a globalised world this means that curricular trends are expressed in English and increasingly come from the US and a few other countries. The international spread of the master of business administration (MBA) degree is a good example of contemporary trends. The MBA degree was developed in the US to serve the needs of American business. Over time, it became the standard qualification required by senior executives in the US. In the past two decades, English has been recognised as a key qualification for management in other countries, compelled both by the growing influence of multinational corporations and by the power of American universities. US universities now offer MBA degrees in many parts of the world, and non-US universities have established their own MBA programmes, often using English and a largely US curriculum. This development shows the power both of the English language and of American higher education practices and ideas.

The academic journals and books published in English and edited from the US and the UK increasingly dominate world scholarship. These publications are almost the only ones internationally circulated. They are the most prestigious journals and academics worldwide compete to publish in them. They are listed in the science citation index (SCI) and its sister indexes. While SCI was not developed to rank journals or to measure the scholarly

productivity of individual academics or institutions, it has become a de facto ranking. Universities worldwide want their professors to publish in these listed journals and reward those who do. For example, Norwegian academics who publish in English and in recognised journals are paid fees for their accomplishments – their colleagues who publish in Norwegian are paid less or not at all. In Korea, the pressure is great to publish in recognised international journals in English. These are examples of a widespread trend.

Academic programmes offered in English have become widespread in many non-English-speaking countries. Universities in Europe, Asia, and to some extent Latin America are offering degree programmes in English alongside instruction in national languages. A small number of new private universities operating solely in English have also been established, sometimes calling themselves the American University of... in order to take advantage of the prestige and popularity of English. In some cases, these universities seek accreditation in the US, which has been granted to a few such institutions.

The worldwide branch campus movement for the most part uses English as the medium of instruction. The US, Australia, and the UK have been most active in establishing branch campuses, and it is not surprising that English is the medium of instruction. Non-English-speaking countries often use English as well – Dutch and German branch overseas campuses often offer their programmes in English. There are at least 100 branch campuses, mainly sponsored by universities in the North and operating in the South. The branch campus movement exports both language and curriculum, introducing new ideas into host countries and perhaps displacing national models.

Most observers see the impact of English in higher education worldwide

as a positive trend – contributing to globalisation and enhancing an international academic culture. A global academic environment needs a common medium of communication, and English is the only possible language. In addition, English brings new ideas to sometimes moribund academic institutions worldwide. But there are significant downsides to the new hegemony of English.

Downsides

The impact of English in most cases increases the influence of the major English-speaking academic systems, particularly in the US and the UK. These countries have many of the world's leading universities, produce a high proportion of scientific discoveries and scholarship, and mainly are the centres of scientific communication. The norms, values, methodologies, and orientations of the academic communities of these centres tend to dominate the rest of the world – the peripheries. While English is not the only factor of this trend, it is central.

What happens to national scientific communities in an English-dominated global environment? There has always been tension between the local and the global in science and scholarship – since knowledge is by its nature international. The use of national languages and the existence of national journals and publishers are called into question. Knowledge is ranked according to whether it is recognised by the international academic community or not. If not, even though a domestic publication may be highly relevant to national needs, it is considered even within a country as being less prestigious, and this may have implications for a scholar's academic career or salary. Ambitious academics will naturally seek to publish in international publications to advance their careers and increase



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their reach. Topics such as local history, and research on local health problems may be ignored to gain recognition internationally.

Some time ago, the Dutch minister of education proposed that universities in the Netherlands shift the language of instruction from Dutch to English so that Holland could boost its attraction for international students and integrate more fully in global scholarship. The Dutch parliament debated the issue and decided not to shift the language – arguing that the Netherlands would lose its distinctive culture if the Dutch language was no longer used for intellectual and academic life. This argument is relevant elsewhere. If the knowledge that is most valued is aimed at the international academic world and is expressed in English, there will be negative implications for national scientific and intellectual systems.

In many countries, academic rewards of all kinds accrue to those using English and participating in global scientific networks. These scholars are typically invited to international conferences,

awarded research funds by both international and national funders, and are generally seen as leaders of their scientific communities. Universities and governments often use the SCI and related systems to judge the impact and value of their academics and universities. SCI becomes a kind of proxy for quality and productivity. Similarly, the international ranking systems use such measures. This is not surprising, since there are few other easy ways of measuring productivity. However, again, this privileges those who produce their work in English and intend to reach an international audience.

These factors will tend to orient researchers and scholars to themes, as well as the use of English, that they feel will appeal to an international audience, often at the expense of essential but more parochial themes that might be of interest only to local or national audiences. Further, the methodologies chosen for research will also tend to be those popular internationally, whether these methods are relevant to the specific topic being researched or not.

The current debate concerning the

General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) as part of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has direct implications for this discussion. GATS will force academic systems worldwide to be more open to foreign influences. Should GATS be widely implemented, this will inevitably mean that the English language institutions and programmes will further entrench themselves worldwide.

These factors lead to homogenising knowledge worldwide. Not only is English the dominant language, but its relationship with the controlling trends in international science and scholarship is a powerful combination of forces contributing to decreasing diversity of themes and methodologies.

What Can Be Done?

If globalisation implies broad trends determining the direction of the world economy, science, and other factors, then the use of English as the global language of science and scholarship is inevitable for the foreseeable future. Science indeed



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is increasingly international, and the global mobility of students and professors is a long-term reality. There is an international knowledge network that involves not only science and scholarship but increasingly people. This network operates mainly in English and is dominated by the main English-speaking academic systems.

The argument here is that the international network is both inevitable and largely positive, but that national and local scientific communities and higher education systems must be protected. Internationalisation may be positive but homogenisation is a bad thing. An entirely open market will weaken these communities, just as the major world languages today are snuffing out small and weak languages. Science and scholarship in

national languages deserve support. The evaluation of academic merit should not depend solely on the judgments or rankings of the SCI or other exogenous agencies – and thus left to foreigners. While the effort of local evaluation may not be easy, it is necessary. Research published in national languages needs support. An appropriate mix between local and international publication will help nurture an active research community.

The essential necessity is an understanding of the importance of national scientific and intellectual communities. Creating a balance between the local and the global may not be easy but intellectual independence depends on it. [17]

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