Language Hegemony of Lingua Franca in Research and Higher Education

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Is Language Hegemony an Ethical Issue?

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I intend to frame the *de facto* dominance of English, as having not only practical, but also economic and ethical consequences in terms of threats to innovation, and the negative impact of an emphasis on the written word that excludes alternatives such as images, embodiment, diagramming, etc. as potential sources of the next generation of understandings and worldviews.

So, is the dominance of English in academia, an ETHICAL question? Well, one indicator of ethical questions is the presence of the word "ought". We say that non-English-language speakers "ought" not to be disadvantaged, etc. For this ethical imperative, indicated by the word "ought", to have legitimacy, we would need to establish that this is indeed a requirement. Such requirements are often tested by a negation: that is to say, why "ought" we not disadvantage a specific language user-group? One can imagine the defence: that in a world where we all have our native languages, someone will always be advantaged or disadvantaged according to the dominant language in any particular context. The only way to avoid this would be to ensure that scholarly communication is only undertaken in a language that is nobody's native language, for example Esperanto or, as was the case in the Enlightenment, in Latin.

But even if we decide there is a moral imperative, a legitimate "ought", such imperatives always have more force if there is also an interest in delivering them. Academics from the free-market school of thinking might argue that we operate in a capitalistic situation in which the dominant language has already been used to produce the dominant body of scholarly work, and therefore the pressure is on speakers of other languages to write in English. They might point out that there are technical solutions to this situation, such as the use of Google translate. Although AI translation is not currently as good as a well-trained human translator, or someone with good idiomatic English as a second language, it is easy to see that it won't be long before AI translators are as good as most people's non-native use of English. When that happens, our annoying free-market thinkers may argue, it will be possible for researchers

to write in any language and make their works available to the scholarly community, at least within the 200 languages promised by Mark Zuckerberg (1).

Nevertheless, the ease with which native English-language speakers can access English-language publications will give them an advantage. Perhaps we can compare this to other advantages, gained by researchers at prestigious, often English-language speaking universities such as Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, etc. On this basis, it will never be a level playing field for all researchers. Especially in the current global political context, it seems likely that ethical arguments are going to be regarded as optional at best, and at worst, an encumbrance to freedom of trade, freedom of speech, and other free-market ideologies. It is a battle to establish that it "ought" to be different, when the facts on the ground are being used as pragmatic evidence for how it happens to be, and the economics and politics on the ground are being used as evidence of how that isn't going to change. Therefore, to establish an ethical case for change in the face of opposition from a globally non-ethical politics, we must consider why it ought to be different, and not just that it ought to be different.

One approach to this comes from sociolinguistics. Languages have different capacities to communicate content, that is, some languages are better at expressing certain relationships than others. It is clear, even within the European group of languages that, for example, German facilitates creative compound formation that is difficult to translate into English. Going further afield, more "exotic" languages like Hopi or Kuuk Thaayorre may bring with them the ability to discuss fundamental concepts such as time, place and direction in ways that are different from that facilitated by English. Here, I have in mind the arguments around linguistic relativity, and whether radically different languages facilitate or even cause, or are consequences of, different conceptual structures (2). This idea of linguistic limitation doesn't end at spoken language, but applies to all forms of expression, writing and notation.

Whilst writing is often regarded as the notation of language, language is itself the notation of thoughts and ideas, so we must also develop annotations for music and other socio-cultural phenomena. We could even expand our scope and consider image-based communication under our umbrella-concept of language and notation. However, any form of language and notation is incomplete, because it arises in a limited social context in which there is a need to express culturally situated content.

[INSERT FIGURE 5_1 HERE]

For example, Western musical notation has evolved in parallel with the development of a system of harmony around specific notes and their intervals, that can be annotated in stave notation. In this system there are no permitted tones between one semitone and another. But twentieth century composers such as Messiaen wanted to use quartertones, and so new notation had to be added so that the idea of a quartertone could be communicated. Graphic scores take this evolution of a conceptual language paired with its notation even further and break away from the temporal linearity of the score and of prescribed, legitimate "notes" in a system.

Not all spoken languages have a written form. Even in those that do, writing only captures part of what is happening, so conversation analysts have needed to develop additional

notation for intonation, body-language, etc. Nahuatl is an indigenous language from pre-Columbian Mexico that does not have a written script. It uses pictorial images and abstract signs simultaneously to document history, and origin stories across time and space. The resulting artefacts annotate concepts of time, place and movement in ways that are radically different from European cartography or linguistic description.

[INSERT FIGURE 5_2 HERE]

My point is, that thought, language and writing or notation, are interlinked, and the logical form of the notation (as Wittgenstein might say) determines the boundaries of what can be thought and said (3). So one response to my question why it "ought" to be different - why "ought" we be bothered by monolingualism - is the pragmatic observation that different languages have different communicative capacities and the more strange the linguistic or notational structure is, so the more there is an opportunity for novel conceptualisations such as quartertones in music or spatio-temporal mapping in Nahuatl. This pragmatic observation has economic consequences when framed in terms of creativity, innovation and competitive advantage.

So, we can be specific about WHY "ought" we do something about monolingualism. I suggest we already have at least 4 practical and 3 ethical reference points:

Practically, linguistic pluralism is a fact of life owing to the diversity of natural languages and geographic distribution. However well-educated a certain elite are, there will always be a need for translation. Machine translation already takes most of the burden away, but it needs to be trained on good examples provided by genuinely bilingual and bi-cultural people. As a result, that culturally nuanced, human expertise, may always be needed as a check on machine translation in fields such as international diplomacy, literature, poetry, etc. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that our best thinkers are necessarily also our best linguists, so there is a risk of strong, novel concepts being lost in weak, mechanistic translation. Finally, those Anglophones who do not currently experience the practical problem of linguistic hegemony, may feel less comfortable if the tide turns towards Chinese or Spanish.

Ethically, it clearly advantages some and disadvantages others if, in addition to discipline-specific knowledge, one must add an apparently unrelated skill in second-language fluency. This is a matter of EQUITY. Somewhere between the practical and the ethical, there is every reason to believe that content may be lost if one limits expression to only one language or notation. The dominance of one linguistically encoded set of concepts has consequences for the marginalisation of content requiring a different encoding. This is a matter of DIVERSITY. Ethically, since language is associated with culture, nationality and identity, it is clearly contrary to the interests of the many, to raise one language group above the others. This is a matter of INCLUSION.

I would like to mention three initiatives to show that action is already being taken, even if the facts on the ground seem overwhelming.

Firstly, the "Helsinki Initiative in Multilingualism in Scholarly Communication", has a commitment to, among other activities, "promote language diversity in research assessment, evaluation, and funding systems" (4). Individuals and organisations such as EAPE, can sign up to support this initiative. Helsinki advances 3 main recommendations to be adopted:

1. To support the dissemination of research results for the full benefit of society.

- by ensuring researchers are merited for disseminating research results beyond academia and for interacting with heritage, culture, and society.
- and by ensuring there is equal access to researched knowledge, provided in a variety of languages.

2. To protect national infrastructures for publishing locally relevant research.

- by ensuring not-for-profit journals and book publishers have both sufficient resources, and the support needed, to maintain high standards of quality control and research integrity.
- and by ensuring national journals and book publishers are safeguarded in their transition to open access.

3. To promote language diversity in research assessment, evaluation, and funding systems.

- by ensuring that in the process of expert-based evaluation, high quality research is valued regardless of the publishing language or publication channel.
- and by ensuring that when metrics-based systems are utilized, journal and book publications in all languages are adequately taken into account.

Secondly, UNESCO is bringing information together in a single open resource. The project is called "Developing Institutional Open Access Publishing Models to Advance Scholarly Communication" (DIAMAS). Within DIAMAS, it is developing an Extensible Quality Standard for Institutional Publishing (EQSIP); and multilingualism is a key element addressed in its equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging (EDIB) component (5).

UNESCO has a series of recommendations, for example:

- For authors: to practice citation diversity (e.g., citing research published in other languages) and consider including a citation diversity statement with your own articles, including any linguistic limits on literature searches (e.g., searches that have been conducted only in English). OBJ
- For peer reviewers: to identify to the editors the languages in which you are able to provide peer review feedback.
- For editors: to provide or recommend guidelines to help authors to prepare manuscripts in a reader- and (machine) translation-friendly way. Well-crafted input can lead to better quality translation output from automatic translation tools.
- For librarians: to add multilingual metadata to items to facilitate multilingual searches in library catalogues.

- For journal publishers: to translate abstracts, summaries, and tables of contents into multiple languages.

Thirdly, particularly with reference to the bias that English-language dominance may bring to research evaluation, the global "Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment" (CoARA) project is a coalition of over 700 research organisations, funders, assessment authorities, professional societies, and their associations, who have agreed on a common direction and guiding principles to implement reform in the assessment of research, researchers, and research organisations (6). It has set out a shared direction for changes in research assessment practices intended to maximize the quality and impact of research. To this end, CoARA has established a "Working Group on Multilingualism and Language Biases in Research Assessment", which has the dual objectives of raising awareness about the importance of multilingualism in scholarly publishing, and providing guidelines for recognizing, rewarding and incentivising research published in all languages.

I will conclude with a reminder that these attributes of "equity, diversity, and inclusion", should be the main reference points in any ethical arguments about the problems of monolingualism in academia, because they focus the argument away from intangible notions of what OUGHT to be different, and towards more tangible notions of WHY, and the benefits that will come from any actions.

ENDNOTES

(1)

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(4)

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