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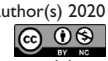

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English as *lingua franca*. Or the sterilisation of scientific work

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Abstract

This essay discusses the impact of defining English as the *lingua franca* in academia, taking it as an additional barrier to achieving more equitable participation and a diversity of perspectives in scientific publications in the field of communication studies. Two aspects are particularly problematised. The first is the characterisation of a so-called research that travels, contrasting the ideal model of a strategic definition on what materials should be published on which platform with a scoring and evaluation system that prevents or limits intelligence in these choices. The second aspect is the definition of an acceptable level of eloquence for international circulation, in which the domestication of language leads to an epistemological domination. The debate is illustrated with a series of data regarding the (in)visibility of Latin American scientific production in international academic publications. Such barriers are, finally, presented as mechanisms of power that feed the so-called status of #CommunicationSoWhiteAndRich. The reflection suggests that the search for scientific rigour should not be confused with the rigidity of forms, valuing the construction of solidarity networks that contribute to the decolonisation of scientific thought.

Keywords

#CommunicationSoWhiteAndRich, decolonising, dewesternising, English, Latin America, *lingua franca*, publishing, translation

This essay focuses on the issue of English as *lingua franca* within academia, problematising it as a filter that strongly limits the encounters between Western theory and scientific cultures rooted in other languages. It is based in the experience of being a Latin American

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scholar initially trying to circulate in international fora from Brazil and lately taking a Masters and a Doctoral degree in Europe – an experience that moved from a personal challenge to a collective reflection with other colleagues facing similar barriers.

The first half of the essay concentrates on two topics debated during a panel of the 7th European Communication Conference of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), that is, 'the research that travels' and the issue of eloquence. It moves then to a section in which I place my personal experience within the general challenge of the inclusion of Latin America in the cartography of recognised knowledge. The essay ends with some final considerations, engaging with ideas such as 'mindful inclusiveness' (Rao, 2019) and 'resistant translation' (Bennett, 2013) to overcome the sterilisation of scientific work.

The research that travels

In 2018, I attended the 7th European Communication Conference of ECREA and went to the panel 'The English language in academia: Identifying power structures, denaturalising daily choices'. A highly important but sad panel, considering that it was placed in the last spot on a Saturday evening, when most of the attendees were already making their way back home. No more than 12 people, speakers included, populated that room for what I consider as the richest debate I took part in that whole conference.

Even though this is a critical piece of work, I also recognise ECREA's important initiative of raising the issue in one general conference, which must be rather acknowledged and celebrated. The note describing the conference theme clearly stated that 'as the subtitle of the conference emphasising "translation" suggests, this also requires re-examination in the continual dominance of the English language in academic affairs' (ECREA, 2018). Additionally, these conferences have frequently given the floor to a number of presentations in which European and Latin American authors collaborate (Ganter and Ortega, 2019).

One of the most heated debates on that panel referred to the choice of publishing in English, after Andreas Hepp's communication entitled 'Research that travels: On theorising contextual research and transcultural academic discourse'. According to this perspective, the most important thing a researcher can do is to strategically decide what to publish, on what platform and for which audience.

The logic is clear and coherent: there are reflections, analyses, data that are more interesting in a local context of a country or region. This material does not necessarily have international appeal and could circulate, in its original language, to audiences potentially interested in the subject. A skilled researcher is able to classify, amid his/her work, what interests these audiences and the more transversal reflections, interesting broader audiences. This is the material that should be translated; this is the 'research that travels'.

The notion resonates with the idea of travelling theories, well known from the work of Edward Said (1983). This author asks whether an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength after having moved from one place and time to another. Together with fidelity and textual meaning, translation is one of the most relevant issues in this process, considering 'the existence, or otherwise, of terminological equivalents, the presence of elements in a theory that resist translation, and the transformations effected by any translational encounter' (Lloyd, 2015).

Hepp presented a highly desirable perspective, pointing to a strategy where the evaluation of academic efforts is decentralised, and highlighting the agency of scholars who would be better placed to decide where to publish according to research and public interests. The idea of cosmopolitanism also accommodates such a perspective, as it estimates that 'cosmopolitan scholarly work should be guided by empirical and theoretical questions that are relevant across borders' (Ganter and Ortega, 2019: 84). Although it can be taken as a horizon to pursue, this is not the current rule. From one side, the imposition of rankings impels scholars into a market competition that jeopardises the very sense of scientific work. From the other side, such an approach concentrates the power over the definition of what knowledge is legitimate deepening cognitive injustices.

Publish or perish, still and again

There is a great risk in defending that publishing in English is a matter of choice for the researcher. This idea questions researchers' competences – as if they were unable to identify strategic audiences - and ignores the pressures imposed by the academic system – as if researchers were free to make these choices.

Several analyses have pointed to the growing consolidation of ranking systems under the mantra of 'publish-or-perish'. The culture of rewarding publication productivity is well established in the United States and was introduced in Western European countries in the 1980s, reproducing market competition practices (van Dalen and Henkens, 2012). Researchers are compared to each other individually, between peers, and collectively, between universities.

More precisely, there is enormous pressure on young researchers. With a recently obtained doctoral degree (Suzina, 2018), my experience was that most – if not all – selection procedures evaluate the number of publications, confirming an increasing global trend that associates hiring, promotion and tenure as well as grants and other subsidies with publication records (McGrail et al., 2006; van Dalen and Henkens, 2012; Zivney and Bertin, 1992). Some application forms ask scholars to specify the number of articles in publications with peer-review; others even ask for an indication of the number of citations for each article, which incentivises work on 'sexy', controversial, and 'visible' topics to the detriment of intellectual relevance. This supposed 'neutral' criterion for evaluating and rewarding performance has brought with it a series of issues such as publication bias and unethical behaviour (Marí-Sáez and Ceballos-Castro, 2019; van Dalen and Henkens, 2012).

It is not, therefore, a matter of choice. As much as a researcher is clear about the relevance of his/her reflections in relation to the audiences that can best benefit from them, career progression depends on competing for space in international journals and, therefore, writing in or translating into English. For instance, among the twelve highest ranked journals in Western Europe in 2018, eight only publish articles in English and the other four do not state this clearly but present guidelines only in English (ScimagoLab, 2018).

Who choses what is important?

The approach of the 'research that travels' suggests a strategic classification of audiences, but it also increases the power in the hands of those deciding the value of the

strategy. Ganter and Ortega (2019) analysed the invisibility of Latin America in the seven best ranked Western European journals. They identified that, among 462 members of editorial boards, only two were Latin Americans; the same proportion of 0.43% of representation was found for African scholars and 4.98% for Asians (Ganter and Ortega, 2019: 80–81). If this does not signify an automatic bias, it clearly reveals concentration of power and lack of diversity which might influence editorial flows.

During the debate at ECREA's panel, there was a discussion about the relevance of sharing local case studies in international journals. I could dwell on the general boredom aspect of only having access to case studies from English-speaking countries: we will know everything about the use of Twitter in the UK or the USA but will ignore even more how these processes occur in Poland, Bolivia or Senegal. The prospect of poverty from this perspective is terrifying and it envisages impacts on an already very uneven framework, in which white and rich scholars have advantage over any other group (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Rao, 2019).

Waisbord and Mellado (2014) propose four dimensions to flesh out the idea of 'de-westernisation' of research: the subject of study, the body of evidence, analytical frameworks, and academic cultures. Reflecting on the subjects of study, they talk about an already important set of issues understudied or absent. Beyond providing visibility to issues coming from different contexts, the authors argue that 'foregrounding objects of study located outside the West is helpful to expand the research agenda and probe the conventional analytical parameters of Western-based scholarship' (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 364).

Talking about the body of evidence, they question if existing arguments, based on 'narrow slice of context-specific cases', travel well across the world (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 365). It has been the case for Western theories. The globally spread notion of public sphere is originally based in observations made by Jürgen Habermas in Britain and even if substantial criticism was made continuously – as well as developments by the author – I myself have had reviewers requesting to include Habermas in my papers while I was trying to propose other perspectives in debates about other realities. Meanwhile, I have written six entries for the SAGE International Encyclopaedia of Mass Media and Society (Merskin, 2020), all of them reporting about media in countries of Latin America.[1] Despite my arguments, only English texts were allowed to be indicated as further readings, which resulted in the invisibility of several relevant sources exclusively because of a language threshold. As a sign of hope, this rule has been changed in late 2019. After accepting to write an entry for another Encyclopaedia with SAGE, I was informed that, considering the range of readership, I could also suggest readings in other languages.

Diverse subjects of study and bodies of evidence need space in international journals in order to promote the transnational dialogue that Waisbord and Mellado (2014) point out as necessary to produce more complex and stronger reflections. The more English works as a sterilisation filter, the more other cases and knowledge will be sitting there, waiting for an English-speaker to find them strategic enough for reaching an international forum. More than providing statistics for rankings, this should be the role of journals, becoming an arena where we can access knowledge from different sources.

The issue of eloquence

During that same ECREA panel, another aspect, brought by Karin Raeymaeckers, raised an intense debate: the issue of 'eloquence'. The required standard of English was pointed out as an additional level of difficulty, including by researchers coming from rich Western countries, even those where English is taught as a second language, such as the Scandinavians. For non-White and non-Western scholars, it constitutes another strong barrier considering that many of them come from environments where English is rarely spoken.

In their analysis of articles published in the best ranked journals and ECREA conferences from 2010 to 2016, Ganter and Ortega (2019) concluded that European scholarly culture 'limits access to articles drawing from Latin American intellectual traditions' and that 'despite the many attempts to de-Westernise media and communication studies, it is still more common to talk about Latin American contexts than to integrate work from within this regional context into intellectual realities' (Ganter and Ortega, 2019: 69). The authors could not identify the reasons behind this trend, but we can speculate about the relevance of a required eloquence in English in the consolidation of what they call 'a dualisation of labour markets into 'insiders and outsiders' (quoting Alexandre Afonso) and 'logics of the global knowledge economy in which subaltern epistemic locations are systematically silenced' (referring to Boaventura de Sousa Santos; Ganter and Ortega, 2019: 70).

More than once, I received feedback from peer reviewers stating that 'the text is correct and understandable, but it has an accent' and recommending a review by a native English-speaker – even in cases where such a review had already been done. The most frequent advice I had for my dissertation was: 'write as a native English-speaker', although I was a Belgo-Brazilian, interviewing Brazilians for the research, doing my PhD in a francophone university within a research centre whose majority of members were Spanish-speaking Latin American scholars. In many circumstances, I felt I was reducing the sense of what I was analysing because I could not find – even with the support of a native English-speaker reviewer – an English proper formula that could be accepted. This was the case with the notion of popular communication, which I frequently changed to community or alternative communication despite epistemic differences and a consolidated scholarship tradition. Not to mention the inequalities imposed on those who neither have an international experience nor afford translations or language proofread.

Bennett (2013: 169) argues that 'market forces ensure that texts written by foreign academics need to be thoroughly domesticated to ensure acceptance by international journals, a process that sometimes involves the destruction of the entire epistemological infrastructure of the original'. She talks about languages as bearer of worldviews and about 'knowledge networks' associated with the development of academic languages. The way one approaches an issue is associated with the researchers' cultural background and the inputs they receive from the fieldwork. The way one constructs an argument carries along a structure of acknowledging and thinking, that is strongly deformed – if not completely erased – when the referential function of language prevails over interpersonal or aesthetic features, as highlighted by Bennet. It is a matter of lexicon rather than grammar.

The choice of terms is part of the analytical and interpretative result of the studied realities and processes. If, in astrophysics, there may be an element that can only be called by one name, in social processes, the cultural lexicon is part of the approach and expression of the phenomena. The exigency of a high level of eloquence does more than establish a language reference through which the whole of academia can exchange productions and findings. It becomes a power vector that rather sterilises this process, reducing the diversity of sources of knowledge and jeopardising any intention of cosmopolitanism.

Some argue that journals have international editorial committees that safeguard flexibility in their evaluations. In a claim for 'mindful inclusiveness', Rao (2019: 700) alerts us that this can be more difficult than one imagines, because 'we are trained to be rigorous in our outlook and taught to be unbiased in our review and selection process'. Denying the possibility of avoiding all personal biases, she also recalls their diversity, naming foreign-sounding names, geographical references and familiarity with approaches; a list in which eloquence should also be included. Referring to studies that observed the attitudes of editors of international journals, Bennett (2013: 174) affirms that it is rather 'English Academic Discourse (EAD) that determines what is considered knowledge and how it should be presented'.

Rao (2019) is also very critical of the idea of quotas, that encourages many publishers to incorporate diversity into their editorial boards, including women, people of colour, and scholars from different geographical and institutional backgrounds. It is necessary to check, however, to what extent this flexibility allows some diversity in the origin of the contributions but is still affected by the level of eloquence required. This does not question the exigency of quality in the texts or the clarity of the ideas. It rather highlights that the eloquence of native English speakers is typical *only* of native English speakers, and mainly calls attention to the point that the 'particular theory of knowledge (empiricism, positivism, linguistic realism) as well as certain values (a belief in the virtues of economy, simplicity and transparency)' that characterize English are also 'largely unproblematised by the international academic community' (Bennett, 2013: 180).

An interrupted dialogue

I worked for around 15 years as a journalist in the field of communication for social change, with a particular involvement in grassroots communication, which became gradually the core of my research in popular communication. There is a historic path of practice and research in this field in Latin America[2] and I was rather surprised by some comments while presenting my research projects in Europe.

The continued exposition of my research developments in different arenas led me to understand that the international recognition of popular communication studies was related to the 1970–1980s, mainly with reference to authors such as Paulo Freire or Jesús Martín-Barbero. Some peers warned me against concentrating my efforts on something 'of the past' or very locally constrained. I became an archaeologist for them, which resonates with Ganter and Ortega's (2019) findings that suggest that the dialogue between European and Latin American scholars has strongly diminished since the 1990s.

It took a bit more time for me to realise that the problem had other connections, translation being one of them. Enghel and Becerra (2018) coordinated a special issue of *Communication Theory*, in which they address the difficulty of circulation of Latin American research in the field of communication. Their findings reveal that the increasing evolution of communication and media studies in the region since the 1980s was 'underrepresented' in the journal. But, drawning on previous analyses, they also demonstrated that, even up to the 1990s, in general, 'those academics who crossed the borders from South to North to pursue a PhD and/or got their work translated to English did better' (Enghel and Becerra, 2018: 114).

In this sense, my approach to English as the *lingua franca* engages with the debate about decolonising or de-westernising the field of communication studies. Ganter and Ortega (2019) affirm that '[t]he development of English into the de facto ruling language (. . .) is similarly accountable for the lack of critical discussion and inclusion of Latin American scholarship in European media and communication studies'. As they observe in their sample, few scholars refer to works published in Spanish or Portuguese, even among Latin American authors themselves. From one side, this highlights the weight of language, confirming Enghel and Becerra's findings, and from the other side, it demonstrates Bennett's perspective about the domestication of scientific work, with Latin American authors accepting the imposition of quoting global references already validated by editors and reviewers.

Final considerations

The levels of exigencies of English in academic works encapsulate a series of mechanisms for excluding 'alternative networks of knowledge' (Bennett, 2013) and sterilising the academic debate. As they do not serve to improve and enrich the reflections and theoretical constructions, limiting the subjects of study and bodies of evidence (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014), their implementation serves predominantly to create or reproduce structures of power that support the #CommunicationSoWhiteAndRich (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Rao, 2019).

The analysis of the (lack of) presence of Latin American authors in international journals, as the one conducted by Enghel and Becerra (2018) as well as those that they take as historic reference, illustrates this situation in which all parties lose. Conceptual developments do not get proper visibility and, consequently, lack the opportunity of being improved by external insights. Case studies rich in content, despite being limited in range, are not made available and, therefore, do not contribute to create transnational interpretations. Scholars circulate indefinitely within a spiral of citations between familiar peers (Chakravartty et al., 2018), whose discourse was domesticated into an epistemology that does not challenge anything else.

The rich debate during the ECREA panel finished with the reflection/provocation that 'we are the system' and, therefore, partly responsible for transforming it. This seems to be the call of this moment. English as a *lingua franca* can really work as an agglutinating route, which allows the exchange of knowledge and experiences. In order to do so, it needs to be open to the diversity of eloquence inherent in such a vast appropriation.

We can admit and recognise that problems related with eloquence might come from original structural weaknesses, but for the sake of the science and knowledge, there must be an alternative solution to cutting off production from non-native English-speakers from academic publications. If we cannot address the problems in the source, we can still do a good job in the outcome, providing these scholars with opportunities and support in order to have their work published. But support must not mean providing a copywriter who will 'translate' their texts into standard English versions. We need to embrace language as carriers of culture and take the flavours of different accents as part of the content, as signals of the perspective these authors are trying to express.

I remember a tutor, Professor Sergio Alcides do Amaral, during my bachelor's degree in journalism in Brazil. While counselling the students, he prescribed more rigour and less rigidity, meaning a balance between the strict application of scientific rules and the flexibility to fulfil challenging inputs. It goes in line with Rao's claims for 'mindful inclusiveness' (Rao, 2019) from editorial boards and peer reviewers. It is not an issue of lowing the quality of the contributions, but rather of assuming biases and recognising the power embedded in the demands of eloquence.

Bennett (2013: 179) talks about the idea of a 'resistant translation' that preserves the voice of the authors and, therefore, the cultural heritage that guides the epistemological approach. She recognises that just a few scholars feel entitled to practice it, and many end up by just adapting their language in order to get published. Both processes of imposing numerical measures for valuing research and demanding levels of eloquence that overlap with the cultural lexicon lead to the sterilisation of discourse – and to some extent – of scientific practice. The debate around de-westernising and de-colonising academia might be the opportunity to convert networks of knowledge into networks of solidarity.

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Notes

1. My entries referred to the media sector in Paraguay (co-authored with Maria José Centurión), Peru (co-authored with Maritza Asencios), Dominican Republic (co-authorerd with Ana Belgica Guichardo Breton), Guatemala, El Salvador and Panama.
2. See Pertierra and Salazar, 2020; Stephansen and Treré, 2019; and for a glimpse of the myriad of authors working in this field see several sections in the anthology coordinated by Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006.

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