

Engaging a Plurilingual Scientific Community



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Most anthropologists in the Anglophone realm probably do not spend too much time reflecting on the role of English as their only linguistic tool of scientific endeavour. They read the abundant academic literature in their field, discuss their research and ideas, and teach and write their papers in English only. They may never question whether there should be any relevant research or even theory outside the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, this

even more so, the production and diffusion of research generated outside of English. Those of us who publish occasionally in English but primarily in other languages have to struggle with barriers far beyond sheer linguistic competence in order to have an article accepted in an “English only” journal. We are forced to formulate or rewrite our work according to Anglo-Saxon discourse structures and cultural models of doing research, a process that may severely hamper our own message in terms of the cultural context and research traditions within which we work.

Others proposed evaluating non-English papers in their original languages and translating accepted papers into English. Although logistical concerns remain, such a procedure could offer more publication opportunities for non-English scholars and ensure that original discourse styles and research paradigms rooted in different cultural models be preserved.

No doubt more proposals and ideas will emerge through this ongoing discussion if international academic bodies—including primarily English-language bodies from the US, UK and Canada—prioritize the creation of a plurilingual and intercultural field of research and academic communication.

COMMISSION ON WORLD ANTHROPOLOGIES

attitude ignores to a large extent the existence of a wide academic world “outside.” But why should that be a problem worth discussing?

Over the twentieth century, international scientific communication has shifted from a plurilingual model that included at least English, French and German on fairly equal terms, to a clear pre-eminence of English. In international periodical publications, more than 75% of the articles in the social sciences and humanities and well over 90% in the natural sciences are written in English. A central question from a perspective of cultural and linguistic world diversity is whether the actual hegemony of English will lead to a total monopoly, at least on the international level, or whether changing global conditions and language policies might move academia toward pluralism.

A number of good reasons indicate that world academia would be well advised if it did not allow scientific monolingualism to take over and determine the future of research. A first argument is that reducing the production of models, topics and strategies of research to one language might lead to a dangerous impoverishment of scientific creativity itself, as it obliterates its constitutive, historical base of diversity in ways parallel to other ecological systems and fields. This becomes more evident when we move beyond language structure to the realm of discourse, language ideologies and cultural models. What might have been the fate of such seminal work as developed by Foucault, Bourdieu or Habermas—three theorists who are eminently universal, because their work is so deeply rooted in their national traditions—had they been forced to discuss, write and, ultimately, think in English right from the beginning of their academic life span? What about the knowledge and theory represented in Aztec, Mayan, Quechua, Hindi or Tamil languages and cultures?

Second, the imposition of English monolingualism in science would further deepen existing inequalities, both in terms of access to international scientific publication and,

A third argument relates to the danger of the growing monolingualism of Anglo-Saxon academia and the professional class itself. In the US, 65% of foreign language knowledge stems from heritage languages and only the rest from new acquisition. The US is the only Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country with no foreign language requirement in public education, except for a few states. David Graddol, one of Great Britain’s leading futurologists on the language question, argues forcefully that “English will not be enough” in the UK, the US or elsewhere to survive in a future multilingual world society.

How can we reverse this shift toward scientific monolingualism if we feel it moves in the wrong direction? Such an endeavour would certainly have to challenge existing power relations in academia. At the recent AAA Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, the Commission on World Anthropologies convened a meeting for editors of leading anthropology journals to discuss the possibilities of opening up monolingual journals to contributions from multiple languages. One suggestion was to publish some articles in other languages, possibly with a link to a translation on the journal’s website.

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Over the next few months, AAA will seek your input. AAA’s Committee for the Future of Print and Electronic Publishing (CFPEP) needs to develop a recommendation to the AAA Executive Board later this year about our publishing partnership with Wiley-Blackwell. To make the most informed recommendation possible, CFPEP will be asking members to complete an electronic survey this month about our journals and AnthroSource. It will also solicit written memoranda from section leadership, editors and other stakeholders before September, and it will draw on the results of a survey of current editors conducted in February of this year. Please help us all out by participating.