

# Combatting Exclusionary Language Practices in Science Publishing: A DEI Concern

Sarah Frances Gordon and Emiliano Gutiérrez Fierros

Over the last few decades, English has become the dominant language of science. It offers a platform for communication across countries and knowledge-building processes.<sup>1</sup> The mantra of “publish or perish” in the academic community is well known, and many are under increasing pressure to publish in high-profile journals, which are mostly English-language journals.<sup>2,3</sup> Academics are expected to publish in English regardless of whether this is their mother tongue, or even what region their research was conducted in. As a result, non-native English speakers invest considerably more time and effort in honing their academic writing skills in a language that is not their own. While many non-native English speakers can meet or exceed the writing skills of their native English speaking counterparts, the extra effort required to reach that level places them at a significant disadvantage.

In this context, your success as an academic appears to be contingent on your ability to write in English. However, navigating the Anglophone scientific publishing world can be stressful and can cause anxiety for many non-native English speakers. Academics that choose an alternative route and publish in non-English language journals are at a disadvantage as their work is often cited less and overlooked in the international community,<sup>4</sup> but ignoring non-English literature and scientific advancements in other countries creates biases in research. Furthermore, ignoring research published in other languages also contributes to incomplete scientific understanding and hinders international collaborations on global challenges such as climate change and pandemics.<sup>1,4</sup>

SARAH FRANCES GORDON (ORCID: 0000-0001-5131-8519) and EMILIANO GUTIÉRREZ FIERROS (ORCID: 0000-0001-7132-422X) are with Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, Mexico.

*Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the Council of Science Editors or the Editorial Board of Science Editor.*

## English-Only Compounds Inequities

The crude construction of the native vs. non-native English speaker dichotomy in this discussion conceals inequalities present in the scientific community,<sup>2</sup> and there are also important challenges other than language bias to consider. For example, academics conducting research in less-developed countries experience financial and scholarly isolation, and many academics in these regions struggle to access literature, as much academic knowledge is locked away behind paywalls.<sup>2</sup> These academics may also experience difficulties publishing their research as their institutions may not have the funds to pay the high article processing charges (APCs) involved. Although many journals offer fee waivers and discounts, often these are poorly communicated, or the discounts are not significant enough. In recent years, the trend of open access publishing and the Open Science movement has led to the formation of many open access journals that do not charge any APCs. Despite all this, there is still significant pressure for academics to publish in high-impact journals, which are almost always English-medium and follow a traditional, subscription-based model and charge APCs. In this sense, academics from resource-rich universities in high-income countries who speak English as a first language are at a distinct advantage.

The native vs. non-native English speaker dichotomy also provokes problematic questions such as “who is allowed to claim English as their own?” and “whose language is it?”<sup>5</sup> These questions imply that English is constrained by British and American linguistic norms and is the property of a few.<sup>5</sup> However, English is an international language and is spoken by approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide. It belongs to all those who speak it and is not constrained by a geographical area. If we want to understand and combat exclusionary language practices, it is important that we also challenge our own underlying beliefs about the English language.

Making English the gatekeeper of the scientific community has contributed to inequalities in under-represented communities.<sup>4</sup> We must also acknowledge that there are underlying structural barriers that have contributed to the privileged status of Anglophone journals,<sup>1,3</sup> and this privilege

## CONTINUED

is rooted in colonialism and racial injustice. Therefore, it is our responsibility in the scientific publishing community to question these exclusionary language practices and try to eradicate them. This is especially important now as we are seeing a push to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

### Combating Exclusionary Language Practices

There are ways that academics and journals can combat exclusionary language practices in science. Journals should make their policies around sharing non-English versions of published articles clear to authors and remove any unnecessary barriers regarding copyright so that academics are able to disseminate non-English versions of their work online.<sup>4</sup> This will help broaden the audience of the work of many academics. It is also important that academics review literature in other languages as well and acknowledge the work being done on their topic in other countries. Collaborations between academics from the Global North and the Global South should also be encouraged.

English-language journals also need to implement steps to avoid language bias and editorial prejudice. Firstly, journals should include an explicit position on DEI on their websites<sup>6</sup> and explain how they are working to combat linguistic bias as part of their DEI strategies. Journals should be committed to ensuring their editorial board members and reviewers are linguistically, racially, and geographically diverse. Peer reviewers represent important “gatekeepers” in scientific publishing, and journals should instruct reviewers that their decisions during the peer-review process should be based on the quality of the science and content, not the linguistic fluency of the manuscript.<sup>4</sup> This will help reduce the language bias against non-native English authors, which is often seen in the peer-review process.<sup>7</sup> In scholarly publishing, promoting transparency and openness during the peer review process is also key to creating a unified community.

Peer reviewers should be instructed not to leave comments such as “manuscript should be checked by a native English speaker” as these can be perceived as offensive. Reviewers

can simply leave comments such as “The manuscript must be edited again” if they are concerned about the grammar and syntax of the manuscript. Diversifying the peer-reviewer pool to include second-language English speakers and persons from developing countries will also help combat linguistic bias and support DEI in working with authors and reviewers.

Implementing these steps does not mean the quality of scientific publications needs to suffer, but there is a need to eradicate the exclusionary language practices in science publishing and include individuals in the process that understand the challenges involved in publishing in Anglophone journals. Diversifying the gatekeepers of the scientific publishing community will hopefully lead to more equitable outcomes. If we are truly committed to building a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive culture in science publishing then we need to take language bias seriously and attempt to address the inequalities it is perpetuating.

### References and Links

1. Lynch AJ, Fernández-Llamazares Á, Palomo I, Jaureguiberry P, Amano T, Basher Z, Lim M, Mwampamba TH, Samakov A, Selomane O. Culturally diverse expert teams have yet to bring comprehensive linguistic diversity to intergovernmental ecosystem assessments. *One Earth*, 2021;4:269-278. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.01.002>
2. Hyland K. Academic publishing and the myth of linguistic injustice. *J Sec Lang Writing*. 2016;31:58-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.01.005>
3. Lillis T, Magyar A, Robinson-Pant A. An international journal's attempts to address inequalities in academic publishing: developing a writing for publication program. *Compare*. 2010;40:781-800. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2010.523250>
4. Amano T, Rios Rojas C, Boum II Y, Calvo M, Misra BB. Ten tips for overcoming language barriers in science. *Nat Hum Behav*. 2021;5:1119-1122. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01137-1>
5. Phan NLH. The place of English as an international language in English language teaching: teachers' reflections. Routledge; 2020.
6. Bancroft SF, Ryoo K, & Miles M. Promoting equity in the peer review process of a journal publication. *Sci Educ*. 2022;106:1232-1248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21733>
7. Politzer-Ahles S, Girolamo T, Ghali S. (2020). Preliminary evidence of linguistic bias in academic reviewing. *J Eng Acad Purp*. 2020;47:100895. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100895>