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Rethinking English as a lingua franca in scientific-academic contexts: A position statement

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Abstract

We aim to challenge assumptions made about the use of English as a “lingua franca” in scientific-academic contexts, identify the impact of such assumptions on trajectories of knowledge production and uptake, and legitimize the use of multiple languages for transnational scholarly exchange. We set out ten principles: Using English as a scientific-academic “lingua franca” does not always promote inclusion; a language positioned as a scientific-academic “lingua franca” can act as a language of domination; positioning English as the “lingua franca” policy may discourage translations and exclude participation; policies which position English as being the contemporary scientific-academic “lingua franca” may convey the idea that knowledge produced in English is the only knowledge that exists; the imposition of English as a presumed scientific-academic “lingua franca” is a manifestation of the unequal distribution of knowledge production and uptake; languages/varieties function as powerful resources for knowledge making; choosing a language for publishing or presenting is a sociolinguistic right; choosing a language to publish or present in is a political act; convention organizers should have

the right to promote the language(s) of their choice; convention organizers and scholars should be as creative and sensitive to including as diverse an audience as possible.

Keywords: English for academic purposes; academic conferences; global knowledge making; sociolinguistic rights; language policies/politics; decoloniality

In July 2019, an international linguistics conference included two keynote speeches in Spanish—the main language used in the country holding the event—with no simultaneous interpreting into other languages. This led to a public debate about the extent to which the use of languages other than English in keynotes was an exclusionary practice. Whilst it may be surprising that the legitimacy of the use of languages other than English was questioned, assumptions underpinning the debate are widespread and, we think, need to be challenged.

The main underlying assumption seems to be that English is a “lingua franca,” whose use promotes inclusion and communication “efficiency,” while other languages are believed to exclude large numbers of participants. This assumption is ideological, although it has been naturalized as common sense, and it has concrete consequences for the social practices in which we engage in academia. For instance, this assumption is used to warrant the argument that English should be institutionalized as the language of international conferences.

This assumption is problematic for many reasons, not least:

- a) It ignores the fact that most scholars globally use multiple languages and engage in translanguaging practices on a day-to-day basis to carry out research, and are therefore quite used to navigating knowledge through multiple languages;
- b) It fails to engage with the politics of language and knowledge production, in particular the privileged position of English within evaluation regimes and the challenges such positioning poses to sustaining knowledges and equitable exchanges in other languages;
- c) It fails to engage with fundamental concerns raised about directionalities of knowledge exchange and the importance of linguistic/semiotic diversity to building more equal exchanges between, for example, the Global North and South, centre(s) and peripher(ies), West and East.

As a group of scholars located in different regions committed to advancing knowledge—and participation in knowledge making—in different languages, traditions, and directions, we believe that the language of scientific-academic exchange is not simply a matter of communicative skills and technological solutions, but also—and especially—a matter of the equality of knowledge making dynamics and opportunities. Furthermore, the languages that are selected and legitimised for scientific-academic exchange have a direct impact on individual and

collective histories and trajectories of knowledge production and uptake, and are central to linguistic and social identities, policies/politics, and rights.

Thus here we set out ten principles to foster discussion about how and why we, as research communities in different fields and regions, should use multiple languages and varieties to promote transnational dialogue in scientific-academic contexts. These principles are to be read together as they convey different dimensions, scopes, and actions in relation to the same issue.

1) Using English as a scientific-academic “lingua franca” does not always promote inclusion.

The very use of the phrase “lingua franca” to refer to English is problematic as it misrepresents in many ways what an academic lingua franca might be (i.e., constituted by many—rather than one—languages). It also gives the impression that English is in fact a shared language which is equally easy and accessible for everybody to use. This is not true. Many scholars do not use English as a part—or a central part—of their scientific-academic work and therefore writing and presenting in English requires them to spend additional time, labour, and often financial cost. It is also the case that levels of familiarity and confidence with academic English vary enormously. The fact that some scholars communicate highly effectively in English as an additional language does not mean that all scholars from the same communities can do so. Of course, to desire a “lingua franca” for scholarly communication may be experienced as apolitical, yet the use (and subsequent imposition) of English as the one and only “lingua franca” deprives other languages, cultures, and knowledge making infrastructures of an equal chance to participate in global scholarly conversations. It is thus inaccurate to consider that the compulsory use of English as a “lingua franca” is automatically an inclusive and agreed-upon option for communication. Furthermore, a monolithic notion of a “lingua franca” is a myth since any language is not uniform, entailing a wide range of regional, social, and disciplinary variations among speakers with heterogeneous linguistic repertoires who are familiar with different academic literacy practices.

2) A language positioned as a scientific-academic “lingua franca” can act as a language of domination. Any language positioned as the scientific-academic “lingua franca” at a certain geo-historical moment is often, too, a language of domination, exploitation, and coloniality of knowledge; that is, having such a common language offers not only a potential means for transnational communication of scientific-academic knowledge, but also provides possible evidence of previous or contemporary relationships of domination among social groups, their culture, and their wealth. This linguistic imperialism reproduces an unequal division of power and symbolic and material resources, and explains why choosing alternative or “minoritized” languages is an often counter-hegemonic political stance and a type of active intervention.

Coloniality and domination are also re-instantiated in the periphery; for example, English might be an imperialist language to a Spanish speaker, but Spanish might be, in turn, an imperialist language to a speaker of Spain's other languages or Latin American indigenous languages.

3) Positioning English as the “lingua franca” policy may discourage translations and exclude participation. If we assume that every scholar in a field is familiar with English, there will be little interest in offering multilingual interpretations in conventions, promoting translations of works into other languages, or learning additional languages if you speak English. Furthermore, we lose the deep value of having to understand the worldviews and epistemologies lived through different languages. Thus, positioning English as a “lingua franca” may reinforce the production of knowledge originating in certain regions, at the same time as it may discourage knowledge produced elsewhere, that is, using English a “lingua franca” may foster a lack of reciprocity. In promoting the use of languages other than English for scholarly communication, we need to acknowledge the existing barriers. For example, scholars' prior investment in English language learning and use may discourage them from choosing different languages to publish or present in; journal editors and convention organizers may have concerns for their readership/audiences; local knowledge making infrastructure may need to be developed (e.g., local journals may be few in number). Even so, we are optimistic that such barriers can be overcome, through ideological shifts and through material resources (e.g., mature machine translation technology).

4) Policies which position English as being the contemporary scientific-academic “lingua franca” may convey the idea that knowledge produced in English is the only knowledge that exists. The scope, editorial boards, and language of publication of high-status journals—as well as the language and nationality of the most prestigious keynote speeches and editors of international handbooks—often seem to equate English-based knowledge with worldwide scholarship. This scientific-academic monopoly often does not acknowledge intellectual traditions developed in sites and languages beyond the Anglophone centre. The need for recognition is not only a matter of inclusion or affirmative action: Scholarly production in regions and languages other than English is thriving and on the rise, and need to be engaged with by the monolingual-Anglophone world. If a scholar coming from these minoritized traditions decided not to acknowledge work written in English, they would likely be criticized, or plainly not accepted or published: Leaving out Anglophone traditions is often seen to equal neglecting what are frequently considered to be fundamental works in many disciplines.

5) The imposition of English as a presumed scientific-academic “lingua franca” is a manifestation of the unequal distribution of knowledge production and uptake. Discussions of a

“lingua franca” do not typically reflect the issue of how opportunities to participate in transnational conversations are unequally distributed. A scholar located in a post-industrialized English-speaking country is able to do research on almost any topic, either general or particular, theoretical or applied, geographically situated or across borders, which will likely receive more attention than work from a scholar situated in the periphery. Moreover, scholarship produced in post-industrialized English-speaking countries has the power to validate—or not—transnational research topics of interest and to legitimate knowledge and “facts” produced elsewhere. In contrast, it is difficult for a scholar located in the periphery, writing in a local language, and drawing from non-English literature to have their research validated as a legitimate contribution to transnational conversations: Too often they are granted legitimacy only in terms of being a token of their culture. This colonial distribution of intellectual labour is not exclusively a unilateral centre-to-periphery enterprise, but it is often reinforced in and from the periphery. Finally, this coloniality of knowledge is not only a matter of symbolic power and validation, but also of the globally unequal socioeconomic and structural distribution of conditions for knowledge production and participation. We should therefore always examine our academic actions and claims to determine whether we are simply reproducing this coloniality of knowledge or rather contributing to changing it.

6) *Languages/varieties function as powerful resources for knowledge making.* Language is not simply a transparent medium of communication. Languages reflect the resources available in their contexts and carry histories of use and meaning, indexing particular concepts and intellectual traditions that may not translate well to or from a scientific-academic “lingua franca.” On the individual level, using a preferred language may enable greater creativity, conceptualization, and accuracy. Conversely, the use of English as a “lingua franca” may promote certain frameworks and resources—including discourse, syntax, and lexicon—for meaning making that are implicitly based on hegemonic cultures, traditions, and epistemologies. As academics we should work to sustain diverse intellectual sources for knowledge making—rather than restricting them—to avoid blank spots, account for local needs and opportunities, and promote theoretical innovations.

7) *Choosing a language for publishing or presenting is a sociolinguistic right.* Every researcher should have the right to present and exchange ideas in the language of their choice, in keynotes or other scientific-academic genres. The fact that an audience may not be familiar with a particular language or variety should not exclude the use of such a language or lead to a view that its use is exclusionary. However, the politics of language(s) and knowledge production and the institutionally and historically privileged position of English within evaluation regimes make it structurally challenging to safeguard the right to your/our own language in scientific-

academic communication. This right is more limited in terms of publication: The most influential international indexed journals only publish in English, thus most scholars using other languages in their writing do not have the chance to get published. This is particularly worrisome for scholars located in—usually developing—countries where evaluation regimes demand publication in such journals for academic review and promotion as well as for institutional accreditation. To address this imbalance, the production of multilingual journals and articles published in the original language along with English and other translations—common in not-for-profit journals and peripheral regions—and the inclusion of underrepresented topics and regions and non-canonical ways of writing is a crucial way forward.

8) *Choosing a language to publish or present in is a political act.* The language in which a scholar chooses to present, publish, and exchange ideas not only depends on fluency or communication, but also on political stance and identity, whether explicit or implicit, intentional or unintentional. Presenting in the language(s) of your community, childhood, country or region, when such a language is less frequently used in scientific-academic venues, legitimizes work being carried out in such language(s) and is a way of sustaining traditions of knowledge making. Additionally, choosing to present or write in a language other than English is also a productive act in challenging the normativity and hegemony of English. These actions contribute to generating transformations and have become more frequent in recent years, although unequal access to symbolic and material resources limits this emancipatory effort.

9) *Convention organizers should have the right to promote the language(s) of their choice.* Organizing committees should be able to promote certain languages which enact a certain political stance within their context. A keynote given in a local or minoritized language might exclude some attendees while including others. More importantly, such an event might make the point that more research and scholarly exchange in that language is needed or encourage members of the community to explore and learn diverse languages, epistemologies, histories, and cultures. We should be willing to work harder at learning to understand in languages we don't know. Similarly, translation resources may be invested as an affirmative action in certain languages of interest, such as local sign or indigenous languages, rather than in a scientific-academic "lingua franca." Conversely, a scholar might consider which languages are accepted and promoted when deciding which conferences to attend.

10) *Convention organizers and scholars should be as creative and sensitive to including as diverse an audience as possible.* Despite the complexities and implications of the languages used in scientific-academic conventions, organizers and scholars should take advantage of the

many means available to help diverse audiences participate in the conversation through formal and informal interpreting practices. Successful strategies used in international conferences include: the use of written slides in one language and oral presentations in another; free use of code-switching and translanguaging throughout presentations; simultaneous interpreting in additional languages—and in English-speaking countries, into other languages; translated extended handouts; and live captioning of the speaker or sign interpreting. There are technological and creative ways of promoting broad participation, not always limited by budget, to avoid exclusion and segregation when a scholar chooses to use a local or minoritized language.

Although these principles might not be new, they offer a common basis for discussion and planning of scholarly conferences and publication venues. We think it important to publicly and explicitly discuss these issues and welcome opportunities for further debate in order to modify, add nuance, and revise these principles in light of contributions from regions, traditions, and languages different from our own.

Translations of this position statement into multiple languages are available at <https://www.escriturayaprendizaje.cl/elf>

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The list included here is intended to signal work which we see as informing and underpinning the principles outlined

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