

ENGLISH IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The role of English in constituting and dominating the geopolitics of knowledge is explored in three fields: scholarly writing in the USA, trends in the generation and marketing of encyclopedias, reference works and electronic databases of “global” reach and the selection processes that influence knowledge production and serve to maintain hierarchies of language; ongoing analysis of whether Nordic languages are being eclipsed by English, as well as the nature of western academic discourse dominance for the vitality of other cultures and languages. These instances show how global scholarship is being constrained through an English filter that amounts to epistemic symbolic violence. These examples are linked to current pressures to quantify the utility of university “productivity,” and the need for more proactive strategies to ensure the diversity of knowledge communities, which is necessary for the continuation of humanity.

KEY WORDS: Linguistic dominance, encyclopedia, monolingualism, symbolic violence, academic discourse.

RESUMEN

Se explora el papel del inglés en la constitución y dominio de la geopolítica del conocimiento en tres campos: la escritura académica en los EE.UU., los patrones y modas en la producción y mercadeo de enciclopedias, libros de referencia y bancos de datos electrónicos con alcance “global” y los procesos de selección que influyen la producción de conocimiento y mantienen las jerarquías de lenguajes. Se analiza también el eclipsamiento de las lenguas nórdicas por parte del inglés. Por otro lado, se estudia el carácter y consecuencias del dominio occidental en la academia para la vitalidad de otras culturas y lenguas. Estos ejemplos demuestran como la producción académica global está constreñida por un filtro inglés, una forma de violencia epistémica y simbólica. Además, están ligados a las demandas de cuantificar la utilidad de la productividad de las universidades y a la necesidad de estrategias proactivas para asegurar la diversidad de las comunidades de conocimiento indispensables para la preservación y futuro de la humanidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: dominación lingüística, enciclopedia, violencia simbólica, discurso académico, geopolítica del conocimiento.



INTRODUCTION

The article explores some aspects of the way the dominance of scientific English is being consolidated at the expense of (speakers of) other languages. Our examples to shed light on this phenomenon are drawn from three fields:

1. The limitations of the parochial monolingualism of US academia, exemplified by scholarly writing on bilingual education, as compared with multilingual Europe;
2. Encyclopedias, and the normative and gate-keeping functions of this expanding genre in the “global” language in the electronic age;
3. Ongoing debates in the Nordic countries about whether Nordic languages are being eclipsed by English, and the implications of an increased use of English worldwide.

Each of these instances of contemporary linguistic dominance shows how global scholarship is being constrained through an English filter. They demonstrate that in the formation and distribution of academic knowledge, *lingua franca* English is in no sense a neutral *lingua academica* but rather a *lingua tyrannosaurica* (Swales). It is arguable that such pressures lead to academics being censored or internalising subtle forms of self-censorship and self-colonisation. In the space of a short article we can merely provide a few glimpses of the forces that are shaping the geopolitics of knowledge.

FILTERING “OTHERS” OUT OR IN

We begin with an example of how research written in languages other than English and/or by researchers outside the “core English” countries is invisibilised (Skutnabb-Kangas, “Reviewer’s”). Eugene García’s 92-page focus article on “Bilingualism and Schooling in the United States” aimed at addressing “educationally related “conceptual/theoretical contributions” that attempt to explain and, therefore, lay the foundation for educational action that responds to the culturally and linguistically diverse context in our schools” (García 1) (emphasis added). Such theoretical issues have been addressed by literally thousands of researchers in countries outside North America and in languages other than English, but there is not one single reference in languages other than English. Only 14 of around 200 references, around 7 percent, are to non-North Americans, and almost half of these are British. All but a couple of these non-North-American works are published in either the UK or the USA. Two references only are to continental Europeans but only to articles we just happen to have published in the UK or USA. There is not one reference from Latin America (even if García understands Spanish), Africa, Asia, or the Pacific, regions with massive experience and solid theoretical USA-relevant writings about education in “culturally and linguistically diverse contexts,” and even if many researchers from these areas write in English too. García’s scholarly behaviour epitomises anglophonic North American academia.



Our second example draws on officially multilingual Finland. The Finnish Literature Information Centre <<http://www.finlit.fi/fili/>> states that in 2005 163 books (fiction and non-fiction) written in Finnish, Finland Swedish, or Saami were translated into 31 languages. The most common target languages were German (29), Estonian and Swedish (15 each), English (14), Dutch (10), Spanish, Lithuanian, French, Finnish, and Russian (6 each), plus 21 other languages. Of 12-13,000 books published per annum in Finland (population 5.2 million), some 16-18 percent are usually translations from other languages (see <<http://statfin.stat.fi/StatWeb/start.asp?PA=Akir4010&CD1=a&D2=a&LA=fi&DM=SLFI&tt=2>>). Finnish texts are thus translated into many languages, Finns keep informed about what is being written in other languages, also through translation, and some Finns also publish in other languages.

But some speakers of demographically major languages, often English, do not seem to feel much need to be informed about “others.” Mark Fettes refers to this mindset as “a kind of monolingual escape clause” that only consults texts that have been translated into a so-called “world language” (quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic* 245). Hence if something has not been written in English or translated into it, “it does not exist; it cannot be good or important since it has not been translated” (Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic* 45, in a subsection about the myth “Monolingualism Is Sufficient”).

Translation into and from English is asymmetrical, reflecting the unbalanced flows of information and the increasing dominance of English in the geopolitics of knowledge. In Sweden a century ago an approximately equal number of titles were translated into Swedish from French, German, and English. Now most translation is from English (Melander). UNESCO’s *index translationum* shows that the Finnish story is comparable for German, Spanish, French, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, and Danish. While these statistics have been contested and in turn complemented and cross-referenced with other works, it is estimated that around 1980 more than 40% of all translated books world-wide were from English. In continental Europe the figure increases to between 60 and 70% (Heilbron 434). The obverse of this centrality of symbolic capital is that ever fewer titles are translated into English from other languages.

These filtering processes are not random. Speakers of demographically small languages often read and even write in several languages, and keep informed about what researchers in other parts of the world produce. Speakers of demographically major languages often do not. They are actively “othering” us and what we produce, even when we write in their languages, while claiming universalism for their knowledge. A new species of scholarly orientalism?

ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND GLOBAL ASYMMETRY

We now draw on our own experience of contributing to encyclopedias and handbooks, genres which are increasing in number and which established scholars contribute to. These works function to definitively establish or fix knowledge. They

are thus vastly wider in scope than dictionaries, which are only norm-setting for words. The Pergamon/Elsevier *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (1993, 10 volumes) spawned single-volume “concise encyclopedias” of *Pragmatics* (1998), *Educational Sociolinguistics* (1999), and *Sociolinguistics* (2001). A new 14-volume multi-media version of the parent encyclopedia was published in 2005, a mere 11,000 pages, 7.5 million words, price £3,500. These works also exclude or “other” Spanish-language references. Thus for instance, the recent spate of bibliographical resources in English has almost obliterated philosophical scholarship in Spanish (Mendieta). In addition, even when an entry in a dictionary or encyclopedia is about a Latin American or Spanish philosopher, these same reference resources do not allow for reference to non-English sources. The list of sources can only include extant translations or secondary works in English, even when these are twice and thrice removed from the original language.

The “study of the deeds of our ancestors is thus more than an antiquarian pastime, it is an immunological precaution” (Eco 316), so we shall briefly position our experience in a historical perspective.

Books are indispensable for maintaining many languages. However, sometimes they lead to certain languages being consigned to the dustbin of history. Books provide a record but are also the vehicle of the confrontations that are signaled by the word “geopolitics.” Books are weapons in the competition between imperial nations. Darnton’s 1979 study of the French Enlightenment’s *Encyclopédie* is an extremely instructive analysis of the complicity of books in the hierarchisation of languages. His *The Business of Enlightenment* attempts a “total history” of Diderot’s Encyclopedia, which became a major vehicle for the diffusion throughout Europe of French Enlightenment ideals. Darnton scrupulously tracks down the different editions, how and where they were sold and transported, who contributed to which editions, what kinds of paper were used, and who benefited from which editions. By detailing the forces and factors that went into the production, dissemination, and consumption of the different editions of the *Encyclopédie*, Darnton offers us a glimpse into the ways in which books are implicated in a political economy of knowledges (Wallerstein). Books are one product in a complex circuit of commodities and power.

Darnton did not discuss (nor should he have, given his very circumscribed aims) the ways in which the *Encyclopédie* became a vehicle for the propagation of French. It is telling that the original project of the *Encyclopédie* began as an attempt to translate, from English, Ephraim Chamber’s *Cyclopaedia, or Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*. *Encyclopedism* shifted from Greek origins to other languages via French. The prestige of French during the 18th century was directly linked to the dissemination of the *Encyclopédie*. Prestige, “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu), is one dimension of how a language is imposed, accepted, and appropriated. The *Encyclopédie* became a bestseller in France (including a hostile reception), but more copies of the book sold outside France. Encyclopedias also fix one particular variant or dialect of a national language. This may then serve as a language of empire (Phillipson, *Linguistic*), within global linguistic diversity (Ostler). The language of an encyclopedia thus becomes an important tool in the geopolitics of knowledge nationally, and may have a similar function internationally.



Darnton's approach would need to be complemented by a geopolitical approach to the interlocking of publishing, languages, and new means of communication. What the *Encyclopédie* did for the Enlightenment and French in the 19th century, the internet and books in general are doing for English at the dawn of the 21st century (Crystal, *Language*). Today the internet has become the "total" encyclopedia and the total library (for those who have access to the net), just as the *Encyclopédie* sought to be in the 18th and 19th centuries (for those who could read and knew French). Today, the internet is to the book what digitization is to printing, namely vehicles that both megaphone and channel the symbolic capital of one language and the knowledge production hegemony of a highly central and hegemonic knowledge community. While it is true that there already are more websites being produced in languages other than English, English remains the primary beneficiary and arbitrator of the traffic in the internet (Crystal, *Language Revolution*). The geopolitics of languages refers in essence to a hierarchical structure with central, semi-central, peripheral and endangered languages. The internet de-centralizes, and provides a vehicle for the protection and preservation of some endangered languages <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.phpURL_ID=8270&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>; see also <www.terralingua.org>, but it also exacerbates the power and centrality of already central languages, such as the European languages of the age of colonization (Heilbron; Mignolo).

Thus the major general encyclopedias produced in English are already available on-line for a relatively small annual fee: see the respective websites for *Encyclopedia Americana*, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (for several decades a US product), and *Collier's Encyclopedia* (sometimes referred to as the ABCs). Since 1998, Microsoft makes available with its windows package a version of the *Collier's Encyclopedia*, as *Encarta*, in tandem with the *Encarta World English Dictionary*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is similarly available on an internet subscriber basis. More specialised encyclopedias, such as those for philosophy, for instance, are also available either on CD or through an internet access fee (see the Routledge *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the Stanford *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the latter being available for free).

Most journals are now sold in subscription clusters that offer print and virtual copies of the journals, for a hefty fee. Most of these subscription services have been brought under the corporate control of large publishing conglomerates. Taylor & Francis, for instance, publishes about 1,800 books and 1000 journals a year, while Blackwell publishes 862 journals and 650 text and reference works annually. In 2006 Blackwell announced that it would make available in digital form all of its journals, from year one to the last issue, by 2008. By contrast, one independent British publisher, Multilingual Matters <www.multilingual-matters.com>, has a policy of making online versions of their journals available free to university libraries of the poorest third of the world's countries, and with a substantial reduction for the next third.

Developments such as these have become unremarkable since Google announced in 2004 that it would digitize entirely the holdings of five major libraries (Stanford, Harvard, Oxford, the University of Michigan, and the New York public library). While the holdings of these libraries are in the millions, they certainly do





not constitute even a small slice of knowledge and languages available today. As Kevin Kelly noted in his May 14th, 2006, *New York Times* Sunday Magazine article “Scan this Book!,” of the 32 million books that purportedly have been produced over the centuries, only 15 million reside within the public domain, i.e. anyone can reprint them or copy them. The remaining 20 million constitute books that are either in legal limbo or have copyright claimed by a publisher or author. While the “32 million books” number refers to books “catalogued” in WorldCat, this is in fact less than 60% the total holdings of the collection. Nonetheless, even a look at the language distribution of the “Google 5” reveals that the English language accounts for less than half of the cumulative holdings, while German, French, and Spanish account for almost a quarter, while the remaining quarter is in other languages (Lavoie & Connaway & Dempsey 7-8).

Large-scale encyclopedias have existed in languages other than English for centuries. There have been recent major national encyclopedia projects in countries like Denmark and Sweden, the products also being accessible electronically. But these contribute exclusively to national scholarly identity, however much their content may draw on a wide spectrum of knowledge from elsewhere. They belong within the nation-state-building paradigm, unlike works in English, due to its “global” reach. The same is true of monolingual state-language dictionaries, unlike monolingual dictionaries for English, which target a much wider readership and market. A much smaller but still sizable market exists for bilingual dictionaries with English as one of the languages. In addition, there are many bi- and multilingual dictionaries for languages other than English.

The dominance of English is unquestionable; whether it is secure is not so certain. What does seem sure is that the current English dominance within the geopolitics of knowledge is enhancing the symbolic capital of English and contributing to the erosion of linguistic diversity.

NORDIC LANGUAGES AND ENGLISH

Many continental Europeans appreciate that if the shift to English and Anglo-American norms in many spheres of life continues unchecked, cultural vitality and diversity will suffer. Symptomatic of the narrowing of cultural horizons is that researchers in Sweden, for instance, now tend to read one foreign language only, rather than several, which was the case earlier.

But even in countries with a high level of L2 competence in English, the increase in the use of the language is not uncomplicated. For instance a study of Nordic medical doctors reading an article (from the *Journal of Trauma*) either in English or in a translation into Danish, Swedish or Norwegian revealed that doctors reading the text, whether in a paper version or on a screen, took in more when reading in their mother tongue. Open-ended questions testing comprehension revealed that 25% more information was grasped in L1 (Höglin 32). This confirms the continuing need for Scandinavian languages to function as scientific languages. In view of the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction in continental

universities, there is a clear need for states and universities to formulate language policies. This is particularly the case since the Bologna process (<www.bologna-bergen2005.no>), designed to establish a single European higher education and research area by 2010, which 45 states are committed to, seems to conflate “internationalisation” and “English-medium higher education” (Phillipson 2006).

Nordic surveys have unearthed considerable evidence of potential domain loss. For instance, statistics for scholarly publications by Danes over a 10-year period document that an increasing proportion of books and articles are published in English rather than Danish (Jarvad). At least in the natural sciences, medicine, and technology, the implications of this shift need analysis. An earlier study documented considerable variation among academics at a Danish university: scientific discipline was only one among several significant variables influencing choice of language of publication, with people in history and Danish publishing mostly in Danish only. Also the degree of people’s own everyday multilingualism, participation in international (as opposed to Danish or Nordic) conferences, and even gender, indirectly (there were more males in natural sciences where publications tended to be mostly in English) influenced the choice. Multilingual non-Danes tended to publish in both Danish and several other languages, not only English (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas).

The worry has been expressed that Nordic languages may be on a fast track to second class status. However, there is as yet no empirical evidence to show that researchers who publish in English are unable to communicate their findings in the local language, whether in scholarly or popularising form. The limitations of the existing studies do not permit firm conclusions, and the domain concept has yet to be rigorously defined. The sociolinguistic pioneers who popularised the term, alongside diglossia (Ferguson & Fishman), referred to the predictable language behaviour of interlocutors in broad social contexts. A distinction needs to be drawn between spoken language (e.g. the medium of instruction in higher education, the language(s) of conferences) and written language (e.g. textbooks, scientific articles, surveys for a government), and between reception and production. Research has gone some way towards clarifying the genres and activities that scholars are involved in (which could be seen as sub-domains), through studies of the implications of an increased use of English in Norwegian higher education (Schwach) and at one university in Finland (Wilson) and in Denmark (Petersen & Shaw). Reports commissioned by the governments of Denmark and Sweden articulate a goal of academics developing “parallel competence” (another undefined concept) in the national language and English. In fact what is happening in Scandinavia might as much entail domain sharing or domain extension as domain loss. The desirability of familiarity with other languages is ritually mentioned, but use and production of scholarly writing in French, German, Spanish and Russian is now marginal in the Nordic countries.

Swedish research suggests (Melander) that domain loss leads to

- 1- Less efficiency in thought, expression, and communication.
- 2- Dehumanisation, cold rationality, switch to Anglo-American discourse norms.



- 3- Loss of intertextuality, e.g. links between locally anchored fiction and medicine.
- 4- Loss of prestige of the Low language.

It is also possible that a switch to English marks a departure from local relevance. Economists in Denmark have reported (in professional newsletters) that choice of topic in economics reflects the preferences of the international scientific community rather than local needs. In Sweden the key national journal in economics, *Ekonomisk Tidskrift*, transmorphed in 1965 into the *Swedish Journal of Economics*, and in 1976 to the *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* (with Blackwell since 1986). During this period there has been a fundamental shift in authorship: 90% Swedish in the 1960s, down to under 20% since 1990 (when there is 30+% US authorship) (Sandelin & Ranki). Related studies show that the databases used for “international” comparisons are biased, since continental Europeans also publish in languages other than English (Sandelin & Sarafogkou). The expectation that continental academics publish in English influences topics, paradigms, L1 competence, and careers.

Quite apart from relevance, the issue of quality is significant if researchers are confined to literature in one language. Braj Kachru, an eminent linguist from India who has been based in the USA for decades, has this to say about a book on language policy in India, written by a Canadian geolinguist:

This is a typical specimen of Indian and Western collaboration: superficial and patronising [...] By ignoring scholarship in India’s regional languages on India’s language issues, we are missing vital insights. The English language provides us just one dimension, one perspective and one window. (Kachru 138, 140).

Hungarian social science journals have also bewailed the unequal relationship between North American researchers and their Hungarian “partners” (see the special issue of *Replica: Colonisation or Partnership? Eastern Europe and Western Social Sciences*, 1996; we are grateful to Miklós Kontra for drawing our attention to this). Throughout eastern and central Europe, linguistic imperialism interlocks with academic imperialism in ways that are cruder than in western Europe, due to unequal access to resources, asymmetrical relations in academic discourse that the status of English consolidates, and hierarchies of research paradigms. We think that the quotes below from Hountondji & Kontra capture this unequal relationship nicely, from two very different—and yet similar— contexts, North-South relations (academic imperialism) and western scholarly neo-colonialism in post-communist Europe:

What is needed today is a coherent strategy to put an end to extroversion in all forms, whether economic, scientific or technological. Thus far, we have been involved in the mass production of export crops for the consumption of people overseas, and /or exploiting mines for their industrial plants. We have been producing scholarly articles, conference papers and books for them first, and only secondarily for our own people. We have been collecting data in all fields primarily for *their* use, and only secondarily for the use of our own people. We have been



... serving as informants, though sometimes as learned informants, for a theory-building activity located overseas and entirely controlled by people there, giving as many details as we could about our history, our cultures, proverbs, myths, intellectual production, and so forth, to allow them to write impressive books on our societies. And when we happened to write such books ourselves, we did everything to have them read and appreciated by them first, and only secondarily by our own people. As a result, we could at best be co-opted in our individual capacity in a world-wide scientific discussion which remained centred in and managed by the North, while our people remained largely excluded from such a discussion. These trends should be reversed or at least corrected. (Hountondji 36-37).

After the collapse of communism, it has become increasingly clear that western social scientists don't know enough about East-Central Europe and vice versa. In this age of globalization and Europeanization, those of us in the east who have taught and conducted research for many years in the western countries are subject to growing dissatisfaction with the lack of intercultural knowledge and understanding of the burning social and linguistic issues. All too often western "experts" offer their help to us and fail because they don't know the social issues in the east. They don't know the languages we speak, let alone the cultures we have. Oftentimes they are even ignorant of the distinction between the theory of cultural nation (defined on the basis of language and culture) and political nation (defined on the basis of citizenship). Some even believe that the latter is somehow more right or advanced than the former, as if nations constituted culturally were lesser developed. Few are the western scholars who have learned our languages and earned our respect by their research conducted in our countries. (Kontra 1).

In a review of David Crystal's *English as a Global Language*, Ranko Bugarski (90), a professor of English and linguistics at the Univerzitet u Beogradu, comments on the coverage of linguistic globalisation and writes that "many readers may feel that he has underestimated some of the dangers" as well as the implications of "the advantage mother tongue speakers of a global language automatically have over those who have to acquire it as an official or second language –in scientific research and publication, in trade negotiations or political debate, and so on." Equally distinguished European scholars, such as Bessie Dendrinou of Athens and Peter Harder of Copenhagen, have commented on the sensation of freedom they experienced after decades of professional functioning in English when they had occasion to write something in their first language. Ulrich Ammon of Duisburg, who is not an Anglicist, makes a plea for more tolerance of non-native English, and cites evidence of the evaluation of medical research in the Netherlands and Scandinavia to the effect that an identical text is ranked as being of better content when written in English rather than in the local language (see also Phillipson, "Dominance"). Gate-keeping in scholarly journals tends to be firmly in the hands of native speakers. The role of English in European integration raises key challenges for the maintenance of other languages in the geopolitics of knowledge creation (Phillipson, *English-only*).

There is also criticism in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands of the way universities are being ranked in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and the "Shanghai" list. In addition to the linguistic bias in favour of English, the criteria



themselves are fundamentally suspect, such as the very selective citation indices (see Swedish analysis of the way the system is rigged against them at <<http://www.sulf.se/templates/CopyrightPage.aspx?id=4642>>. Whatever their limited validity (they are “pure entertainment” according to *The Economist*), they are an instrument that affects recruitment and research policy. It is an insensitive blunt one that bureaucrats can use to control researchers. It also influences recruitment, choice of paradigm and membership of global and local communities of academic practice.

CONCLUSION

These cameos of how English is impacting on the geopolitics of language worldwide suggest that our languaging is subject to epistemic symbolic violence. If this is so, scholars from outside the “core English” countries, ideally in partnership with multilingual scholars in the USA, UK and Australia, need to develop proactive policies to ensure that the structural and ideological forces in place are undermined. There are major risks in the type of university accountability that we are being increasingly subjected to (quantitative measures of productivity in “approved” journals and languages, etc), as well as through self-regulating paradigmatic traditions and in response to invasive corporate pressures. The “publish or perish” principle is a filter into a monolingual, monocultural geopolitical mould. Like the story about the drunk and the lost keys, who searches close to a lamp post because that is where the light is, all scholarship that is relevant for advancement in the natural and social sciences and the humanities is surely not being produced only in English, or because it is translated from the English. For the sake of all forms of life, human and otherwise, linguistic diversity must be protected and enhanced. Monolingualism is not just a malady of one culture, but also of knowledge communities, and this in the end will not be in humanity’s interest.

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