Western-Centricity in Academia: How International Journals Endorse Inner Circle Englishes and a European-American Worldview

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Abstract

Most international academic journals are produced in Europe and the United States, and whether or not they are considered objective and inclusive forums for worldwide academic research, they are subtly imbued with elements of their own culture. First of all, the language, is, in most cases, English, but not Outer Circle Englishes or English as a Lingua Franca, but specifically British and/or American English. And this obviously creates a big barrier for authors who are not fluent in these varieties, which partly explains the dearth of authors coming from areas outside Europe and, more specifically, the United Kingdom and North America. After the language itself, the problem lies in all the western cultural elements that are found in the journals. The dates, for example, are always expressed in western terms such as the Christian era. Or the names of the authors in the references, which follow the western convention of the surname followed by the first name/s (or initials), which is at odds with the patronymic systems normally used in Muslim countries where no family names exist, for example. This paper discusses these issues and tries to offer some possible solutions.

Keywords: academic journals, English as a lingua franca, Esperanto, eurocentrism, western-centricity

Introduction

Western-centricity, often simply called Eurocentrism even though it normally includes North America as well, is a form of ethnocentricity and a by-product of colonialism.

Ethnocentricity, of which western-centricity is a form, refers to "the tendency to view one's own ethnic group and its social standards as the basis for evaluative judgements concerning the practices of others – with the implication that one views one's own standards as superior" (Reber, 1985).

Quoting Gheverghese, Reddy and Searle-Chatterjee (1990), western-centricity

grew out of the historical processes of Western colonial and economic dominance and has, in turn, provided an ideological justification for that dominance. The categories and approaches used in European academia help to maintain the political and intellectual superiority of Europe. (p. 1)

Far from criticizing all things that come from the west, the problem is that the flow of knowledge is normally unidirectional: from Europe, and more precisely from Northern Europe and North America, to the rest of the world, and rarely the other way round, even though many countries have precious and unique knowledge that would greatly contribute to both academic studies and the general wellbeing of the West. As far as social science is concerned, it was reported in the *World Social Science Report 2010 of UNESCO* that research in this area of knowledge outside Europe is very limited and hardly ever cited. According to this report, for example, North America cited no research whatsoever from either Asia and Africa (Alvares, 2011, p. 72).

A lot has been written about this kind of cultural colonialism and I will not repeat what other researchers have explained better than me. In fact, in this article, I would like to focus on one specific type of western-centricity, i.e., academic journals in my own area of research, sociolinguistics. I will consider four main points of contention that in my view show the western-centricity of most academic journals quite clearly. I will start with the composition of editorial boards and the language normally used, English, and those that could be used, English as a lingua franca[1] and Esperanto. After these, I will briefly look at the dating system, always expressed as Christian era, and at the way references reflect the western notion of a name followed by a family name.

Editorial Boards

Most international academic journals are produced in Europe and the United States, and whether or not they portray themselves as objective and inclusive forums for sharing academic research worldwide, they are subtly imbued with elements of their own culture. Their editorial boards include mostly westerners working at western universities, in addition to a few other countries such as Israel, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan in Asia, and South Africa in Africa. Interestingly, very few Southern and Eastern European academics or universities are included either. Even those few non-Europeans and non-Americans that are included in the editorial boards normally work in western universities. I had a look at the editorial boards of eight of the highest ranking journals in my own area of research (*Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, Language Problems and Language Planning, Current Issues in Language Planning, Language Policy, Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal, International Journal of Multilingualism, Multilingua, International Journal of the Sociology of Language*). The number of affiliations outside Europe, North America, or Australia and New Zealand is on average 62 out of a total of 223 (28%); nearly a third of these (24 out 62), however, are from the "outposts," mentioned above, of western academic culture, that is, Israel, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Africa. The journal doing the best in this sense is the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (16 out of 30), the one doing "worst" is *Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal* (5 out of 27).[2]

The Language

Apart from these considerations, another problematic issue is the language used in the great majority of journals: English. Not Outer Circle Englishes or English as a Lingua

Franca, but specifically British and/or American English. This creates a barrier for authors who are not fluent in either of these varieties, which may partly explain the dearth of published authors coming from areas outside North America, the United Kingdom or, to a lesser extent, Europe. As Flowerdew (2013) has nicely summarized:

> The fact that this lingua franca, English, is also the native language of one group of scholars (a minority) and is an additional language for the rest of the world (the majority) brings with it particular advantages for the former group and disadvantages for the latter. Anglophone scholars enjoy what van Parijs (2007) has referred to as a "free ride." English is their mother tongue and the language in which they have received their education, so they do not need to make any special effort to learn an additional language …. Non-Anglophones, on the other hand, and their governments, have to invest in learning English. Governments need to use taxes to fund English teaching in schools and universities, and individuals, if they do not receive adequate support in the public sector, need to pay tutors and editors. (p. 3)

Let us look at this example:

> 3. Contributions must be in English. Spelling should be either American English or British English and should be consistent throughout the paper. *If not written by a native speaker, it is advisable to have the paper checked by a native speaker prior to submission.* [emphasis mine]

This is the third point in the guidelines for authors in the journal *Linguistic Landscape: An International Journal.* This means that British and American English are norms, which implies that other English spellings, such as South African English spelling, for example, would be rejected. This point would be enough to drive away a large number of Asian, African, and South American academics who do not master English and, above all, are not in contact with first language speakers who may edit their work. Professional editing services are offered on the web, but their fees are completely out of range for most academics in "developing" countries. One website I checked charges $250 for one research article! As English is not my first language, whenever I finalize an article, I also have to ask my English-speaking friends to look through it as I would not like to spend $250, which is equivalent to more than 1000 Malaysian ringgit, the amount of a minimum wage in Malaysia. Sometimes I have to wait for a while as not all of my English friends may be readily available.

Is there any solution to this problem? One would be allowing academics to use their own language, which is what the journal *Language Planning and Language Problems*, for instance, normally does. The problem, obviously, is that people who cannot speak or understand that language will probably skip the article. Another solution would be to allow all authors to use English as a lingua franca, whereby non-English-speaking academics would be allowed to express themselves in their own variety of English. The problems of comprehensibility that may arise could perhaps be obviated using explanatory footnotes provided by the editors.

The problem with this approach is that probably few authors would allow themselves to do this, feeling that their own English is incorrect or substandard. A lot has already been written on the high prestige that inner circle Englishes enjoy and nothing more needs to be added here (for one example relating to Malaysia, see Kaur, 2014).

Another solution could be the use of Esperanto or possibly some other international auxiliary language. Esperanto, however, may be the best candidate for its development and popularity.[3] It was invented by L. L. Zamenhof in 1887. Although it is not completely neutral as its vocabulary is based on European languages, it is very simple and completely regular, and most importantly, it is not the first language of anyone and has no culture behind it; and if it has, it is an international and pacifist culture. The whole grammar of Esperanto can be included in a few pages. It is a language that does not have any exceptions, where a large number of prefixes and suffixes are used to expand the meanings of root words. For example, the root *parol-*, coming from the Italian noun "parola" (word), can become *parolo* (word), *paroloj* (words), *parola* (spoken), *paroli* (to speak), *parolas* (I speak, you speak, etc.), *parolis* (I spoke/I have spoken, etc.), *parolos* (I will speak, etc.), *parolus* (I would speak), *parolu* (speak!), and so on (for a brief outline, see https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Esperanto/Grammar_Rules). However, in this case, too, the problem of prestige would probably emerge, as Esperanto does not seem to enjoy a particular high prestige outside its small circle of enthusiasts. It is a well-known fact that prestige is normally associated with whatever can bring cultural and, particularly, economic advantages. However, if anyone outside Europe and America had any doubts about the appropriateness of adopting a language created in Europe and whose vocabulary is based solely on European languages, I may perhaps recall that at one time, before the rapid spread of English, most countries in the world had Esperanto associations and many still do. As a matter of fact, China has been one of the biggest promoters of Esperanto, in spite of the great difference between its languages, including Mandarin, on one hand, and Esperanto on the other (Chan, 1986). One of the reasons for this popularity has been that Esperanto:

> is relatively easy to learn and use. It is systematic, logical, phonetic, and has few grammatical variations. Its practical (though limited) use for almost a century has demonstrated that it is easier to learn than national languages. (Chan, 1986, p. 11)

If Esperanto were accepted as the main language of academia, all academics, including American and British, would need to learn it like everybody else in the academic world. The above mentioned journal, *Language Problems and Language Planning*, requests two abstracts for every article: one in English and one in any other language, normally the first language of the author. In addition, a translation in Esperanto is always added. It is not certain whether adopting this idea would make a real difference, but it would be at least a symbolic statement against the "unicity" of English.

This is an example of the abstracts that were published for one of my articles on *Language Problems and Language Planning* (Coluzzi, 2015):

> *Economic phenomena and ideologies behind language shift: From nationalism and*

globalization to modernization and the ideology of "new"

This article examines the phenomenon of language shift from a macroeconomic and ideological perspective. More specifically it looks at how phenomena such as nationalism and globalization, which are closely related to the capitalist mode of production, have affected the spread of some languages and the demise of others, usually minority and regional languages. A special emphasis is placed on the ideology of modernity as a major cause for language shift in the world. Each section in the article includes examples from the areas in the world where the author has carried out his own research and possible solutions to the problems set forth.

Sommario [Italian]

Fenomeni economici e ideologie alla base della deriva linguistica: Dal nazionalismo e la globalizzazione alla modernizzazione e l'ideologia del "nuovo"

Questo articolo esamina il fenomeno della deriva linguistica da una prospettiva macroeconomica e ideologica. Più specificatamente esamina come fenomeni come il nazionalismo e la globalizzazione, che sono intimamente legati al modo di produzione capitalista, abbiano influito sulla diffusione di alcune lingue e sulla scomparsa di altre, di solito lingue minoritarie o regionali. Enfasi particolare è stata posta sull'ideologia della modernità come causa principale della deriva linguistica nel mondo. Ogni sezione include esempi da aree diverse del mondo in cui l'autore ha svolto la sua ricerca, e possibili soluzioni ai problemi presentati.

Resumo [Esperanto]

Ekonomiaj fenomenoj kaj ideologioj malantaŭ lingva ŝoviĝo: De naciismo kaj tutmondiĝo al modernigo kaj la ideologio de "noveco"

Tiu ĉi artikolo ekzamenas la fenomenon de lingva ŝoviĝo el makroekonomia kaj ideologia vidpunkto. Pli specife, ĝi konsideras la manieron laŭ kiu fenomenoj kiel naciismo kaj tutmondiĝo, kiuj proksime rilatas al la kapitalista modalo de produktado, efikis al la disvastiĝo de iuj lingvoj kaj la malapero de aliaj, kutime minoritataj kaj regionaj lingvoj. Specialan emfazon oni donas al la ideologio de moderneco kiel forta kaŭzo de lingvoŝoviĝo en la mondo. Ĉiu sekcio de la artikolo enhavas ekzemplojn el mondaj regionoj kie la aŭtoro faris proprajn esplorojn kaj prezentas eblajn solvojn al la problemoj prezentitaj.

Other Problems

Although language may be considered the first and biggest problem about academic journals, western-centricity is clear in other aspects as well. These may seem "minor" with respect to the problem of language, but they retain a very strong symbolic significance.

If one looks at any journal cover, for example, what stands out instantly is the date, which is always expressed in western terms such as the Christian era. Calling it the Common Era has been an improvement, but it still makes reference to the date of Jesus's birth. It would be both fair and easy to add at least the most used calendars in the world, at the very least

the Islamic and Buddhist eras. For March 2009, for example, the Islamic era Rabi al-Awwal 1430 and the Buddhist era Mee-naa-kom 2552 could be added.

Another problematic area is the references. There, the names of the authors have to follow the convention of putting the surname before the first and/or middle names (or their initials). This is clearly based on the western use of first names and family names, which is at odds with many other naming systems in the world. Patronymic systems, for examples, are normally used in Muslim countries, but not exclusively. In Europe, for example, Icelandic people follow this system (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patronymic). In other cultures, for example, only a few first names or family names exist, which makes the APA system of using only family names and initials very confusing. In Bali, for example, only 10 first names are used (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balinese_name), whereas the Sikh have, in theory at least, only two surnames: Singh for men and Kaur for women (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikh_names). Many solutions have been offered to solve this problem, but ideally, journals should use the system followed in the original country of the contributor, even though that implies that the reference may begin with a first name, which should never be shortened.

Conclusion

In this short paper, I have just highlighted a few elements that are clearly western-centric and, I believe, should be changed. Trying to increase the number of non-western scholars in the editorial boards or changing the way dates and references are currently expressed should not prove particularly difficult, but, obviously, the use of English is and will continue to be a problem until either any language or English as a lingua franca could be used, or Esperanto, as I have suggested. Obviously opposition will always be strong, both from British and American academics who would not want to lose the power and centricity they currently enjoy, and from many Outer Circle academics whose first language is not English but can speak, read and write the latter with relative fluency.

Notes

1. Firth's definition of English as a lingua franca is: "ELF is a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth, 1996, p. 240, in Flowerdew, 2013, p. 4).

2. These are all good and respectable journals, and I am not commenting on the quality of the articles published, nor am I suggesting they should necessarily include African, Asian or South American academics in their boards who do not suit the requirements of the journals. Mine is just an observation about the western orientation of these journals.

3. Other auxiliary languages have been invented, but even though some have tried to be less Eurocentric in their grammar and especially lexicon, none has had the popularity nor has enjoyed the development and the abundance of material that Esperanto has. One example of a constructed auxiliary language whose vocabulary is based on roots from the major languages of the world is Lingwa de Planeta (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingwa_de_planeta).

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