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Commentary

Making the Case for Multilingual Scholarly Communication

Lynne Bowker [1], Mikael Laakso [2], and Janne Pölönen [3]
[1]Département de langues, linguistique et traduction, Université Laval, Canada
[2]Information Studies, Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, Tampere University, Finland
[3]Federation of Finnish Learned Societies, Finland

A scholarly communication ecosystem with one dominant language presents numerous inequities. Implementing multilingualism is complex and there is no single strategy to achieve it. Rather, multilingualism can take different forms, and small steps taken by different actors can add up to increase linguistic diversity. This commentary unpacks some of the complexities involved in multilingual scholarly communication and offers some concrete recommendations for moving forward.

Keywords: scholarly communication, multilingualism, language bias, language diversity, equity, inclusion, plain language

The current situation

In the past several decades, English has emerged as the central language used for scholarly communication, despite the fact that only a small percentage[1] of scholars and researchers are Anglophones (Gordin, 2015). While other languages are sometimes used – particularly in national or regional contexts (e.g. Larivière, 2019; Kulczycki et al., 2020) – English has become the lingua franca for international scholarly communication. This is problematic in a country such as Canada, which has two official languages (English and French), as well as numerous Indigenous and heritage languages. Likewise, it raises a similar problem in many other parts of the world, where English may not be an official or common working language.

The use of one key language for international scholarly communication has contributed to a complex situation in which a number of inequities have emerged, but for which solutions are tricky to implement. In the following commentary, we first consider the complexity of the issue and identify some of the costs associated with privileging one language as the central language for international scholarly communication. Next, we note some of the challenges associated with implementing multilingualism and consider some of the different forms that multilingualism can take. Finally, we end with some concrete recommendations for introducing more linguistic diversity into the scholarly communication ecosystem.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lynne Bowker: lynne.bowker.1@ulaval.ca

Unpacking the problem

The use of one language as the main language for international scholarly communication has created a complex web of issues, which have implications for individual scholars, for research, and for society. Some of these issues arise simply from the fact that one language is used as the lingua franca, but the specific use of English introduces some additional issues (e.g. owing to its use as a colonial language) (Phillipson, 2010). Several international groups, such as the Helsinki Initiative (2019) and UNESCO (2021), have begun to advocate for more linguistic diversity in scholarly communication. Similarly, Acfas (Association francophone pour le savoir) (Larivière & Riddles, 2021; St. Onge et al., 2021), which is the principal French-language learned society in Canada, as well as the Commissioner for the French language in Quebec (Commissaire, 2023), have also argued for more actively recognizing French as a language of science. While there is a growing consensus about the benefits of multilingualism in scholarly communication (e.g. improved equity for scholars, increased epistemological diversity, broader access to knowledge across society), it can be challenging to unpack the complexities and to know where and how to begin changing the situation. However, it seems clear that one key issue is the way that research is assessed (Pölönen et al., 2021a; CoARA, 2022).

As pointed out by Szadkowski (2023), the notion of prestige is an important one in the scholarly communication ecosystem, and it manifests itself in several ways. For in-

[1]It is challenging to calculate the precise number of Anglophone scholars; however, Zeidan (2023a) reports that only 4.7% of the world's population speak English as a native language, while just 18.2% of the world's population can use English proficiently (Zeidan 2023b).

stance, many scholars aim to publish in prestigious journals (i.e., journals with a high impact factor), which are typically international journals that are indexed by major academic databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science (Śpiewanowski & Talavera, 2021; Johann et al., 2024). Work published in these prestigious journals is likely to be viewed more favourably by institutions and their evaluation systems, and it is also more likely to be cited (Nygaard, 2019). But one of the problems that has emerged is that the notion of prestige has become artificially entwined with English. Most international journals publish in English (the international lingua franca), and the major academic databases (e.g. Scopus, Web of Science) index mainly English-language documents (Vera-Baceta et al., 2019). These databases are then used to search for relevant literature, which then gets cited. Publications in other languages are less likely to be indexed and cited (Larivière, 2019), although publication and citation databases that are more open and inclusive to multilingualism are emerging, such as OpenAlex (Céspedes et al., 2025). Without a high number of citations, journals and researchers do not advance in the metrics such as the journal impact factor or the H-index respectively. Setting aside for the moment the bigger question of whether these rankings are the most appropriate measures for research assessment, English is currently a factor that contributes to the overall problem. To break the association between English and prestige, it will be necessary to devise a research assessment system that values and incentivizes publications in other languages. The CoARA Working Group on Multilingualism and Language Biases in Research Assessment is a recently established group that is working toward this goal (CoARA, n.d.). In the meantime, the current research assessment environment has some repercussions, some of which are outlined in the next section.

Costs of privileging one language for international scholarly communication

Here we overview several implications of privileging one language for international scholarly communication as observed in the literature. Amano et al. (2023) convincingly quantified a number of the disparities that have been created. For instance, they report that it takes non-Anglophone scholars longer to read the literature, to write up research findings, and to edit and proofread papers. Once submitted, papers written by non-Anglophones are more likely to be rejected or to need major linguistic revisions. Similarly, Ramírez-Castañeda (2020) points out that non-Anglophones may need to pay for linguistic support (editing, translation) and they may need to spend longer preparing presentations and may even opt out of participating in conferences because of the added pressure of speaking in English. Overall, these factors may lead to a lower research output for many non-Anglophone scholars, which in turn could impact hiring, tenure, promotion, appointments as peer reviewers, or editorial board members.

In turn, this creates a ripple effect elsewhere in the scholarly communication ecosystem. For instance, with disproportionately fewer non-Anglophone voices in peer reviewer pools, on editorial boards or in senior positions, there is less diversity in other respects too. For instance, it is well known that language is associated with culture and world views, and if we privilege English, then we may also privilege Western viewpoints and knowledge systems, which could ultimately lead us towards an epistemological monoculture (Bennett, 2015). Similarly, if scholars search mainly in academic databases that primarily index English-language publications, they may overlook relevant knowledge published in other languages and exclude it from systematic reviews, meta-analyses or other types of literature reviews (Hannah et al., 2024). As noted by Konno et al. (2020), language restrictions in review papers can influence the findings, and given that reviews often contribute to forming a knowledge base, exclusion of relevant information from a review might also eclipse that knowledge from the scholarly record and even bias the foundation of knowledge altogether.

Finally, the ripple effect can even spread beyond the scholarly community. Research findings can be pertinent to society more broadly, but local stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, funding bodies, citizens) may not be fluent in English and may not be able to access and make use of this research if it is not available in local languages (Pölönen et al., 2021b). Moreover, when research is not published in local languages, it could lead to domain loss for those languages (e.g. specialized terms are not created in other languages, making it difficult to discuss these topics in languages other than English) (Sibeko and Setaka-Bapela, 2024).

Some challenges of implementing multilingualism

The inequities associated with the use of English as the central language of international scholarly communication have become clear, but the path towards a more multilingual scholarly communication ecosystem also presents challenges (Adema et al., 2024). Language is a factor at multiple stages in the process. The previous sections discuss language-related hurdles mainly from the viewpoint of the author, but additional perspectives must be taken into account. If we want to encourage authors to write in other languages, then we also need mechanisms to enable peer review, discovery, and reading and engaging with works in other languages. There may even be some technical hurdles to overcome, such as ensuring that the publishing platforms can handle the scripts and fonts needed to publish in other languages (Dombrowski et al., 2024). This means that we are unlikely to find a single one-size-fits-all solution to achieving multilingualism in the scholarly communication ecosystem. Nevertheless, this should not prevent us from seeking ways to introduce more linguistic diversity; even small steps can help to bring us

closer to the goal.

Multiple forms of multilingualism

One important point to recognize is that individual scholars, institutions, publishers, journals and other actors in the scholarly communication ecosystem are operating in their own regional or national context, and this may come with different needs, expectations, regulations and resources. It is not realistic to think that every research output will be published in each one of the world's 7000 languages, but achieving greater linguistic diversity is attainable. In some contexts, multilingualism may mean that some journals publish in a local language and other journals publish in English – a situation that already exists in some countries (Kulczycki et al., 2020). In other contexts, multilingualism may mean that a single journal allows researchers the choice of publishing in one of multiple languages. For instance, the Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science accepts submissions in either English or French – the two official languages of Canada – and publishes the metadata (title, abstract, keywords) for each accepted manuscript in both languages, while the full paper appears only in the language of submission (CJILS, 2025). In other contexts, a more comprehensive translation policy may mean that a journal translates and publishes full papers in multiple languages. This is the case for the journal BiD: Textos Universitaris de Biblioteconomia i Documentació, which regularly publishes articles in Catalan, Spanish and English simultaneously (BiD, 2020).

At conferences or for other types of research presentations, multilingualism could include issuing a call for papers in multiple languages, ensuring that the conference website is in multiple languages, allowing speakers to present slides in one language and speak in another, implementing automatic translation of captions (in an online platform), or providing professional interpreting services. There is no single right or wrong solution; the overall goal is to increase linguistic diversity, and along with this, to increase equity and epistemological diversity. However, achieving this goal largely hinges on changing the research assessment culture so that research outputs that are produced in other languages are appropriately incentivized and valued (CoARA, 2022). This is the long-term goal, but we can start by taking some smaller steps to bring us closer to reaching it.

Some recommendations for moving forward

In this section, we outline some recommendations for ways to increase multilingualism in scholarly communication, while recognizing that not all suggestions will be relevant for all contexts, and that different actions may have different degrees of impact and may require different levels of effort or investment. A number of these suggestions stem from our recent work on the DIAMAS project (2024a), where we helped to develop a range of resources for supporting open scholarly publishers, including with efforts to increase multilingualism (DIAMAS, 2024b). These resources were developed based on an extensive literature review, the results of a large-scale survey of publishers, and various community consultations. As noted above, multilingualism has multiple facets and can be addressed from different angles. Below, we organize the recommendations according to actions that can be taken by different actors in the scholarly communication ecosystem.

Recommendations for authors

- Prepare a plain language summary of your research to facilitate access for non-experts or for expert readers who may be reading your work through their less dominant language.
- Write as clearly as possible to improve the translatability of your work for readers who may use automatic translation tools (e.g. Google Translate, ChatGPT).
- Search for, consult and cite relevant works in other languages that you know.

Recommendations for journal editors

- Set targets and monitor progress towards diversifying the pool of peer reviewers and editorial board members to ensure a broader representation of speakers of languages beyond English.
- Provide concrete guidance on the journal's website to help authors write in a way that optimizes their text for translation (e.g. guidelines for clear writing and plain language).
- Develop a policy that encourages or requires authors to submit a linguistic citation diversity statement with their manuscript.

Recommendations for publishers

- Implement policies to host plain language summaries, translated abstracts, or translations of full texts alongside published articles.
- Integrate functionalities into journal platforms that enable the addition and management of multilingual metadata.

Recommendations for research institutions

- Value and reward publications in other languages appropriately (e.g. equal recognition for tenure or promotion, prizes).
- Support databases and metrics that allow non-English articles or journals to be recognized and cited more easily and equitably.

Recommendations for funding agencies

- Offer funding or incentives for translation of articles and of conference materials.
- Offer funding to support interpretation at conferences.
- Invest in the development of improved automatic machine translation tools to facilitate reading and writing of research proposals, reviewer reports, and scholarly publications in language of choice.

Concluding remarks

In this commentary, we have sought to make a case for why linguistic diversity matters in scholarly communication, as well as outlining how we can take meaningful steps towards this goal. Multilingualism is complex and can be challenging to implement and manage within the scholarly communication ecosystem. Nonetheless, the benefits of linguistic diversity, such as improved equity for scholars, epistemological diversity, and better access to research output for the wider society, are worth pursuing. Although there is no easy solution or single strategy that can be followed to suit all contexts, a variety of smaller actions, as proposed in this commentary, are emerging as viable steps to help us improve the situation. All actors in the ecosystem have a role to play, and cumulatively these actions will contribute to increasing multilingualism in scholarly communication.

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