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Academic publishing and the myth of linguistic injustice

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ABSTRACT

Academic publication now dominates the lives of academics across the globe who must increasingly submit their research for publication in high profile English language journals to move up the career ladder. The dominance of English in academic publishing, however, has raised questions of communicative inequality and the possible 'linguistic injustice' against an author's mother tongue. Native English speakers are thought to have an advantage as they acquire the language naturalistically while second language users must invest more time, effort and money into formally learning it and may experience greater difficulties when writing in English. Attitude surveys reveal that English as an Additional Language authors often believe that editors and referees are prejudiced against them for any non-standard language. In this paper, I critically review the evidence for linguistic injustice through a survey of the literature and interviews with scholars working in Hong Kong. I argue that framing publication problems as a crude Native vs non-Native polarization not only draws on an outmoded respect for 'Native speaker' competence but serves to demoralizes EAL writers and marginalize the difficulties experienced by novice L1 English academics. The paper, then, is a call for a more inclusive and balanced view of academic publishing.

Academic publication is now an enormous industry that dominates the professional lives of academics across the globe, with perhaps six million scholars in 17,000 universities producing over 1.5 million peer reviewed articles each year (Björk, Roos, & Lauri, 2009). The reach and significance of this industry has never been greater because it is through publication that knowledge is constructed, academics are evaluated, universities are funded, and careers are built, and each year its influence becomes ever more intrusive and demanding. Publication is where individual reputations and institutional funding coincide; the result of managerialism and an accountability culture that seeks to measure "productivity" in terms of papers, and citations to those papers. In this context "knowledge" is regarded as a thing that can be parcelled up and measured, and those that produce it are seen as deserving of rewards. The more knowledge produced, the greater the reward.

Scholars around the world have therefore found their promotion and career opportunities increasingly tied to an ability to gain acceptance for their work in high profile journals indexed in the *Web of Knowledge* SCI databases and usually published in English. This counting of output, for example, helps explain the four-fold increase in submissions to the 4200 journals using the *ScholarOne* manuscript processing system between 2005 and 2010 and why this increase is led by academics from countries that have not traditionally been strong in research. So while submissions from traditional publishing powerhouses such as the United States and Japan increased by 177% and 127%, respectively, during these 5 years, those from China and India increased by 484% and 443%, and Iran and Malaysia saw more than 800% increases in submissions (Thomson Reuters, 2012).

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Overall, the U.S. share of world submissions dropped by 3.3% over this period while China's increased by 5.5%, moving it from 14th to 5th in world output in just 10 years (Royal Society, 2011). More recent figures from SCImago (2014) show China just behind the United States in submissions.

Submissions, however, are not accepted articles and the dominance of English in academic publishing has raised questions of communicative inequality and the possible "linguistic injustice" against an author's mother tongue (Clavero, 2010). Native English speakers are thought to have an advantage as they acquire the language naturalistically while second language users must invest more time, effort, and money into formally learning it and may experience greater difficulties when writing in English. Attitude surveys reveal that English as an Additional Language (EAL) authors often believe that editors and referees are prejudiced against them for any non-standard language uses while Flowerdew (2008) even claims that EAL writers are "stigmatized" by journal editors and reviewers—the "normals." (p. 79). In this paper, I critically examine the evidence for linguistic injustice – or editorial prejudice – through a survey of the literature and a small study of EAL contributions to leading journals. To support my argument I draw on interviews conducted with 25 EAL scholars of various first language backgrounds, disciplines, and publishing experience together with a handful of Native English speaking scholars[1]. I argue that framing publication problems as a crude Native vs non-Native polarization functions to demoralize EAL writers and ignores the very real writing problems experienced by many L1 English scholars.

1. Global publishing and disadvantage

On the face of it, the expansion of international publishing to all corners of the planet is a positive development, both for academics and for developing nations seeking to become part of the "knowledge economy." Globalization offers greater opportunities for increased scholarly dialogue by broadening the corpus of academic literature, providing new avenues for research and collaboration, and opening more channels for reporting location-specific research. The greater participation of multilingual researchers in this web also offers massive benefits to global knowledge itself. As Liu (2004, p. 2) observes, EAL researchers "help reform, expand, and enrich the knowledge base of core disciplinary communities," and Canagarajah (1996) concurs that these scholars are able to bring outside perspectives to offer fresh insights on old problems. Pérez-Llantada (2014, p. 192) also sees discoursal changes as "Anglophone norms merge with culture-specific linguistic features." Thus the participation of this broader base of researchers in academic publication enriches knowledge, raises previously unexplored issues in the mainstream, enhances rhetorical practices, and draws attention to untapped resources (also Flowerdew, 2001).

Despite the surge in submissions from BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China—the "emerging economies") and other non-established nations, however, the "Western" nations (and Japan) continue to dominate the world output of scientific papers. The United States remains the biggest spender on research and produces the most research papers, accounting for 29% of the total number of published papers, followed by Japan with 8% and the United Kingdom, Germany, and China with 6% each (World Bank, 2012). This means that these five countries are responsible for 55% of the world's journal articles, while 23 countries accounted for 90% (Ware & Mabe, 2009). Thus, while acceptances in Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) ranked journals[2] for the major players remained fairly stable at around 50% of submissions between 2005 and 2010, the massive increases in submissions by China and Iran yielded no appreciable increase in accepted papers while India, Taiwan, Korea, and Brazil all saw acceptances fall by at least 4% (Thomson Reuters, 2012). So although increased financial investment has stimulated the participation of EAL researchers in global publishing, this has not had an equal impact on published output or on the influence of their papers as measured by citations to them.

The fact that publication rates have lagged behind increases in submissions does not necessarily mean that the quality of these submissions has not increased, merely the intensity of competition. Numerous obstacles prevent submitted manuscripts becoming published papers and participation in academic publishing clearly makes sophisticated demands on writers. But while all newcomers feel challenged and intimidated by writing for publication, attention has largely focused on the difficulties of non-Anglophone authors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Native speakers of English are unfairly advantaged in scientific publication by virtue of their Native–non-Native speaker status (e.g., Clavero, 2010; Guardiano, Favilla, & Calaresu, 2007) as it is easier for them to access the literature in English and to craft texts linguistically acceptable to the gatekeepers of international journals.

This view receives some support from several quantitative studies which have found that submissions to medical journals from countries with low English proficiency scores, low Gross Domestic Product, or little research funding are less likely to be accepted for publication irrespective of their scientific quality (e.g., Man, Weinkauf, Tsang, & Sin, 2004). Saposnik, Ovbiagele, Raptis, Fisher, and Johnston (2014), for example, analysed all 15,000 contributions submitted to the journal *Stroke* between 2004 and 2011 and found that acceptance rates were higher for submissions from countries where English was the Native language. Similarly Okike, Kocher, Mehlman, Heckman, and Bhandari (2008) and Ross et al. (2006) found a preference for articles from authors in the United States and Canada, a preference which was reduced by 34% with a blinded review process

[1] All participants work in a leading research-intensive university in Hong Kong and were interviewed using an open-ended schedule of questions that focused on their educational background, writing challenges, publishing experiences and collaborative writing.

[2] The ISI is a unified citation index to the academic literature representing the most prestigious journals. Part of the Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge, the ISI includes databases for the sciences, social sciences, and humanities and includes Annual Journal Citation Reports (JCR) which give an Impact Factor (IF) for each journal in its indexes.