

“Awkward wording. Rephrase”: linguistic injustice in ecological journals

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International scientific communication is monolithically dominated by English, particularly within natural sciences [1,2]. The professional career of individual scientists relies on their ability to publish in internationally relevant journals, and writing in English is the only way to achieve this. Non-native English speakers (NoNES) seem to be clearly disadvantaged with respect to native English speakers (NES) when trying to get their work published [3]. In fact, English language proficiency has been shown to be a strong predictor of scientific output, both at the level of individual scientists [4] and nationally [5].

Journal editors select acceptable manuscripts based on whether the paper is of interest, the analysis is sound, the interpretation is consistent, and the presentation is adequate [6]. Thus, for an equal quality and interest of science, there is an intrinsic difference in the probability of having the paper accepted between NES and NoNES due to ‘presentation’ adequacy. This is because achieving the linguistic precision required by high-ranking publications is extremely difficult for NoNES, even when they are able to express themselves in grammatically correct English. It is commonplace for NoNES ecologists to receive editorial decisions stating that the submitted science might be publishable, but that a NES should review the text prior to acceptance. Then, to have your publishable science published you should ask a NES scientist friend to help you (bearing the risk of losing all your NES scientist friends) or pay to have your work revised and corrected. In fact, many journals even recommend specific scientific editing services to be used at the author’s own expense and risk.

The present situation is a clear, unequivocal example of linguistic injustice [7]. All the costs of having a common international language in science are borne by NoNES scientists, implying unfair cooperation in obtaining a common good (i.e. a common language). Moreover, NES, who freely benefit from having a common language, tend to dominate all possible arguments with NoNES, since NoNES’s language skills never reach those of NES [8]. NoNES ecologists need to feel that their science is judged on equal grounds to that of Anglophone colleagues. It is not the dominance of English that is being discussed here; English itself it is not the problem, since we all benefit from having a common language. However, the privilege of being a NES should come with a responsibility to help NoNES colleagues with linguistic issues [9], and this responsibility affects individuals (e.g. editors and reviewers) as well as publishers.

I believe that publishers should provide adequate linguistic editing advice and eventually correct those works that are considered to contain science of sufficiently high quality during a peer-review process. Performing or supervising language editing can be extremely time-consuming and thus journals employing full-time editors (such as the *Trends* journals) are probably in a better position to offer a fairer publication process, although all journals should work in this direction. For example, journals could charge authors a small, flat fee to establish a grant-like system (based only on scientific merit) to pay for language editing of selected manuscripts. In fact, open-access journals already charge flat-fees that could be employed to defray text editing, thus implying that both NES and NoNES could pay for something that would only benefit NoNES. The chances for publication of NoNES would also increase through the promotion of international partnerships [10], so that NES would be involved in production of manuscripts. However, this would benefit NES just because they are speakers of the dominant language.

Whatever the measures adopted, this should be a matter of debate. But, first of all, NES scientists, and particularly those involved at any level in the peer-review processes, should become aware of the linguistic injustice problem. They would then probably be more tolerant with the English language inaccuracies of NoNES; a simple change in attitude that could alone give rise to a fairer scenario in scientific publications.

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