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Reflections: On Publishing

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Conceiving academic publishing as a long-term process that often includes oral communication and knowledge exchange at academic conferences, this commentary offers a critical take on English as *lingua franca*. Contrarily to the historical use of lingua franca as a simplified system of transnational communication that facilitates the pragmatics of economic and cultural exchange, academic English is instead used vernacularly and becomes an excluding barrier. In the writing and peer review stages of publishing, the linguistic positionality of both authors and peer reviewers thus needs more reflection in order for academic English not to become once again part of a disenfranchising process.

Keywords: lingua franca, English, academic publishing, peer review

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In 2005, an intervention titled "Anglophones: If you want us to understand you, you will have to speak understandably!" (Belina 2005) appeared in the journal *Antipode*. It resulted from a debate on the question of the hegemonic use of English at academic conferences that took place at the International Conference of Critical Geography in Mexico City in January 2005. There, aside from the language debate, several delegates volunteered to translate or summarise paper presentations from English into other languages (and primarily Spanish), and speakers had the possibility to present in Spanish. Although the debate and the resulting *Antipode* intervention are mainly about the language used at conferences, it is also valid for publishing, and especially if we focus not on "the fact *that* English is used [...], but want to make some simple propositions concerning *how* it is used" (Belina 2005, 853).

I am a non-Anglophone geographer, trained and fluent in a number of languages, who has lived and worked in the UK long enough to acquire dual nationality. Yet, as a colleague recently put it to me, English native speakers "always have one draft less" to write. From my position, two points become worth of analysis when it comes to the politics of language in publishing in the Anglo-centred academia: the first regards the problematic nature of and the assumptions around the idea of English being a *lingua franca* of academic interaction; the second concerns the implications of these assumptions in the process of publication and peer-review.

Academic publishing is only the culmination of a much wider process of knowledge production and exchange that, very often, includes predominantly oral discussions, presentations, and debates that take place at international academic conferences. The notion of lingua franca in publishing ought to be deconstructed in the light of what happens in these early phases of the publishing process, where the exchange, feedback and validation of concepts and ideas and knowledge production happen orally. This oral phase is important, but while there has been debate in geography around English as

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a vehicle of academic cultural homogenization (Short *et al.* 2001), of uneven/exclusionary communication due to differential fluency/clarity (Belina 2005), and of linguistic cultural hegemony (Kitchin 2005), the very notion of lingua franca referred to and relied upon in these contributions, has specific geographical, pragmatic and political connotations that have not yet been critically dissected. This brief commentary suggests instead that it is by drawing on history and linguistics and by looking at how language (and language difference) *actually* works, that we can start to (dis)place the predominance of English in the Anglo-centred academia.

The popular usage of the term "lingua franca" is that of, simply, a common language. However, a historical look highlights a rather more nuanced meaning. The word derives from the Arabic *lisān al-faranj*, that is "language of the Europeans": geographically, *Faranj* distinguished the rest of Europe from Greece (Treccani 2017). For centuries, Lingua Franca was used for commerce between Arabs, Europeans and Turks in the Mediterranean, consisting of an in-between language with a simplified grammar and a predominance of Italian, Spanish and Arabic words. More generically, it has come to denote every language adopted in a simplified form for the pragmatic purpose of communication in a multicultural environment. But lingua franca, exactly because it was *franca* (i.e. free, exempt) belonged to no one, and to everyone at the same time. One of the most common assumptions, is that English is a lingua franca because it is by far the most widely spoken language at international academic conferences. However, the mere ability to speak English does not in itself equate to speaking lingua franca. Academic English spoken and heard at conferences is often not franca, but vernacular: it is the kind of English spoken by natives in that language, and assuming that they will be understood by others, just by speaking English. As Belina (2005) also showed, it is used with in heavy accents, fast pace, as well as extensive use of abbreviations, idiomatic expressions, and even tricky *double entendres* that – contrarily to what lingua franca aims to achieve – might make English less accessible to those who are not native speakers, even if they are very fluent. More than words get lost in the orality of conferences: bits of discussions go amiss, conversation are subject to misunderstanding, participation might be compromised or even intimidated. In other words, the power (and the energy) to hear correctly, listen and comprehend, and be able to participate and respond, becomes often a crucial – but underconsidered – driver of the politics of academic interaction. English is assumed to be a lingua franca, but is more often not used as such by those who speak it vernacularly. Thus, English becomes not a simplified and shared system of free-flow communication, but a system of potential linguistic disenfranchisement.

The impact of this assumption about English being a lingua franca even when it is, in fact, a vernacular, carries on into the politics of academic geographical publishing. Being bilingual but having almost always to write in English as a second language, is not simply about translation: it is about sourcing thoughts and terms from two, or often more, languages. This sourcing and sorting works as an integrated system, an interlanguage (Canagarajah 2007), an in-between linguistic realm in which one can very easily become stranded. Linguists very rarely talk of inter-linguistic processes only as "translation". They use complex terms, such as "cross-linguistic activation", "cross-language lexical interference", and "codemeshing". All of these describe a process of "translanguaging" , that is "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system" (Canagarajah 2011, 401). How does one deal with this as a non-anglophone academic author? It is beyond the scope of this short commentary to offer firm conclusions on this, but one question emerges: should authors disclose the bi- or multi-lingualism that shapes their writing, in the same way they disclose research funding that allowed the research or the positionality that shaped the data collection?

Recently, one academic reviewer described my written English as "hard to follow". Shortly after this remark, the reviewer required a justification for having conducted fieldwork in four languages (the three languages spoken in my area of research, plus my own native language for a number of interviews with Italian speakers) and of the process and pitfalls of translation. In other words, I had to justify both my shortcomings in English and my proficiency in four languages for research. What might seem very ordinary comments to a reviewer, can be perceived as undermining, unappreciative or simply contradictory for an author. As authors, we are required to reflect on our research positionality and explain rigorously our methodological choices. Should a similar level of reflexivity also happen for reviewers? The anonymity of the double-blind review process is meant to ensure fairness and avoid conflict of interest. However, authors are not on a level playing field when it comes to language (among many other things): should authors who write in English as second or even third language have a right to disclose their positionality? The opportunity to reflect on diversity aspects such as language and multilingualism as part of an author's positionality should be accompanied by an opportunity for referees to become more mindful of linguistic difference. This would constitute an opportunity to embrace language difference as an empowering realm of knowledge production, rather than a disenfranchising one.

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