

Unfortunately, linguistic injustice matters

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In a previous letter [1] I argued that the absolute dominance of the English language in scientific communication has led to linguistic injustice, arising for two main reasons: (i) non-native English-speaking scientists (NoNES) support all the costs of having a English as a common scientific language; and (ii) while native English-speaking scientists (NES) benefit for free from having a common language, they are in an advantaged position in any scientific discussion due to linguistic skills. Guariguata *et al.* [2] replied that there is no sharp difference between NoNES and NES, basically because the more one studies and practices English, the better his or her English will become. Of course, I agree with this, although I think there is no relationship between this statement and the linguistic injustice problem. The fact that some NoNES, with a lot of work and great merit, are able to overcome linguistic barriers does not imply that the injustice situation does not exist or is unimportant.

Guariguata *et al.* [1] do not see the associated costs to NoNES derived from linguistic injustice as a big problem nor do they believe that they can result in any important bias in the research output of scientists (although, surprisingly, they do propose solutions to overcome it). However, the available evidence highlights the role of linguistic difficulties of NoNES as a source of publication bias. Primack *et al.* [3] analyzed the results of the review process for manuscripts submitted to *Biological Conservation* and found that “there is substantial disadvantage of not having English as a first language; this disadvantage could result in a decrease of around 30% in the chance of acceptance”. Vasconcelos *et al.* [4] showed that the research output of Brazilian scientists was tightly related to their English-language skills and Man *et al.* [5] found that English proficiency was a good predictor of national research production, even better than the investment of each country in science. I found that the proportion of papers published exclusively by NoNES in ecological journals was negatively

related to the journals' prestige while, for any given Impact Factor, this proportion was clearly larger in journals published in non-Anglophone countries [6]. Thus, the beliefs of Guariguata *et al.* [1] do not seem to be supported by available evidence, and there is a notable disadvantage of NoNES when going through peer review processes [7]. Of course, having good English skills is not the only factor determining the quality and quantity of scientific production; this is so obvious that it does not deserve further discussion.

Guariguata *et al.* [1] suggest that NoNES scientist should: (i) train harder on their English scientific writing; (ii) become editors of scientific journals; and (iii) not get angry when receiving a send-to-a-NES paper revision. However, I think that the fair scenario needed to reduce linguistic inequalities among researchers would necessarily imply actions from NES scientists, the part of the scientific community for which English was a gift.

References

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