



Educational Digital Divides: Addressing English monolingualism within academic research

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Executive Summary

The English language dominates academic content worldwide and is an exacerbating influence on the global educational digital divide. In response, academics are calling for more bibliodiversity ([Hawthorne, 2014](#)), arguing that content should be translated into multiple languages in order to increase its accessibility and encourage contributions from lesser developed or developing countries. One existing approach towards bibliodiversity is open access publishing, which promotes the free and open access to scientific literature. Free access to such research has the potential not only to increase the knowledge of the global community but also to encourage cross-cultural academic inclusivity. In this brief we will outline the key approaches to reducing the

dominance of English monolingualism in academic publishing.

English as a Lingua Franca and the limitations of monolingualism in academic literature

The prevalence of English monolingualism in academic literature is well documented ([Alayande 2015](#); [Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue, 2011](#); [Brock-Utne, 2001](#); [Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008](#)). While some researchers argue that English is a neutral Lingua Franca ([Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010](#)), many more suggest that its use as an International Language of Science (EILS; [Tardy, 2004](#)) constitutes a colonial approach to academia that suppresses non-native English speakers. In other words, English monolingualism in

academic publications perpetuates the divide between the Global North and South, restricting participation to those who can read and write English to a certain level.

The monolingual model of academic publishing is comparable to a bordered garden; it denies its attendant (the Global North) a view of the external environment (developing countries) and vice versa. Academic monolingualism reduces representation within academic publications to those based in the Global North and promotes English-speaking researchers based in Europe and North America. This contradicts a key 'special recommendation' made by UNESCO in 1974, which argued that [universal access to scientific information](#) would help build peace, sustain social and economic development, and improve intercultural dialogue. The publication of research in multiple languages would be a necessary first step towards universal access to scientific information, and would lead to an increase in representational diversity within these literatures.

This critique of monolingualism in academic publishing resonates with the [World Summit of Information Society](#) (WSIS) action lines C3 (Access to information and knowledge) and C7 (Applications: E-Science). In a [UNESCO Action Line discussion](#) at the 2019 Summit, multiple NGOs, Not-for-Profits, and private sector organisations joined together to call for an end to the linguistic singularity of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP; [Corcoran, 2016](#)). Assisting in the resolution of the aforementioned action lines, academics ([Mounier, 2018](#) for example) argued for an increase of bibliodiversity within literature. This concept, elaborated by feminist writer [Susan Hawthorne](#), refers to the need for a culturally diverse and balanced range of published materials for generating knowledge. It is said to be threatened when there is an undue focus (or 'overproduction') on a limited number of publications, which are often commercial interests. In addition to bibliodiversity, it was also proposed that open access publishing be rolled out across several continents, which would have the effect of advancing a more linguistically diverse, and thus culturally

horizontal, model of academic communication.

The educational and academic Digital Divide in the Global South

During the UNESCO discussion, a representative of the NGO [African Journals Online](#) (AJOL) asserted that the divide between rich and poor is exacerbated by a lack of access to information and knowledge. Countries from the Global South (GS) often have educational sectors that are underfunded and lack governmental support or systematic structure, particularly within its education sectors.

Although some countries continue to have low levels of internet access, the digital divide in many GS countries has narrowed in recent years due to the growth in use of internet-enabled phones. Nevertheless, academics based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within GS countries still face at least two barriers: First they are often unable to access academic research due to paucity of Higher Education

Resources (HER) available to them. This means they are often unable to access academic publications stored on commercial sites or hidden behind paywalls. Second, they are often excluded from contributing to this body of research courtesy of their reduced English language proficiency compared to native speakers. This has the effect of limiting the number of academic contributions from researchers based in the GS.

However, while it is easy to attribute this educational divide to the lack of government funding and the monolingualism of academic publishing, academics in both the GN and GS could practise bibliodiversity to address this issue. Most notably, they could decide to publish their research in multiple languages in order to increase the number of non-native English speakers who could contribute to and access it. Furthermore, it could be argued that giving researchers in GS greater access to research published in their own languages might increase the quality of their outputs, increasing the use of (and thus funding for) future research.

Open Access Publishing and Bibliodiversity: Resolving the Academic Digital Divide

Though governmental support could make a substantial difference to HER and educational infrastructure in the GS, a large-scale open access publishing movement, akin to Open Science, could also have a significant impact on this educational digital divide. It could not only make texts more accessible, but also potentially lead to greater collaboration between researchers based in the GN and GS, who would no longer be divided by their English language proficiency (or lack thereof). For example, Open Access is a [direct foreword](#) made by UNESCO, hailing from a recommendation on science and scientific researchers from a [UNESCO General Conference in November of 2017](#). The foreword recommends that member states establish a norm for any scientific publishing, [“to be published in open access journals,”](#) and that they should, [“promote and support open scholarship”](#).

Research funders and assessment exercises, such as [REF 2021](#), have gone as

far as to stipulate that researchers must deposit their work in open access repositories in order to maximise its reach and impact. Furthermore, the [Open Scholarly Initiative](#) goes so far as to outline its end goal as, [“increasing the amount of research information available to the world and the number of people who can access this information”](#). Although the universal rollout of such initiatives may be desirable, there remain questions as to its feasibility. There is no guarantee that journals which are currently open source will remain so, nor clarity on how these platforms will be funded in the long term, particularly in the humanities or social sciences. Hence, greater attention must turn to the promotion of multilingual - and indeed multicultural - publishing platforms and journals, with the aim of increasing bibliodiversity as a whole. This must originate from technologically developed and advanced societies, including those which are primarily English speaking. If policymakers within the GN were to more explicitly endorse cultural and linguistic diversity within academic research, initiatives such as open access publishing would be greatly strengthened and would

inevitably expand across all disciplines. Diversifying the literature used by researchers based in HEIs within the GN would also increase bibliodiversity and decrease the prevalence of English monolingualism. Furthermore, it might result in greater recognition of research produced in GS countries, which would in turn increase the number of citations for this work, and improve the diversity and quality of the research produced overall.

Conclusion

The use of English as a Lingua Franca within research constitutes a colonial approach to academia, reducing representation within academic publications to those based in the GN and promoting English-speaking researchers based in Europe and North America above those in the DS. In contrast, bibliodiversity - the referencing and publication of literature in multiple languages ([Hawthorne, 2014](#)) - aims to diversify academic literature and publishing, increasing representation from across the globe. Together with open access publishing, it has the potential to increase the visibility of research produced by

academics based in HEIs within developing countries. However, this alone will not address the inequalities between researchers based in the GN and GS. While we work to enable more people from the GS access to free, high quality academic research through the open access movement, we must also endeavour to improve bibliodiversity within research literature and academic publications.

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