

ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF MODERN SCIENCE

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Since the end of the Second World War, English has become the established language of scholarly communication, but not without controversy. The underlying reason for the rise of English as the language of science remains a topic of debate, but most frequently it is acknowledged as an accident of 20th century political and economic history. The British Empire, which spanned the globe from the late 16th to the early 20th century, was the largest empire in history and made English a truly international language. Today it is the first language of about 400 million people in 53 countries, and the second language of as many as 1.4 billion more. English was therefore well positioned to become the default language of science in the wake of the disruptive wars of the first half of the 20th century.

Whatever method we may use to measure the growth in science, whether it be number of journals, number of articles, number of patents, it is clear that the trend is still inexorably upwards. And increasingly the language of publication is English. The position of say, German, earlier this century in a discipline like chemistry is no longer what it was. The same trend is evident in French and since the demise of the Soviet Union also in Russian. The former Soviet-bloc countries in which Russian used to be the first foreign language now see its place taken by English. In Hungary, for example, where students now have a free choice of foreign language, English is now clearly in first place, followed by German, then French. A massive programme of retraining Russian teachers to teach English has meant that most of the younger generation are now learning English.

The position of English in some fields of science is even more stark. The vast majority of articles in computer science, for example, are published in English. For a scientist to publish in a language other than English therefore means to cut her- or himself off from the worldwide community of scientists who publish in English. The work may then be ignored simply because it is published in a language unknown to the rest of the world.

The same thing will happen to scientific English as has happened to general Englishes. We will see the rise of varieties of scientific English or “Scientific Englishes” which will deviate more or less from the standard. Clyne, German language expert, notes that the language of some of the social sciences in English has started to be influenced by German social scientific models in North America. In other words, the language will increasingly vary in terms of the requirements of the discipline itself, rather than the discourse styles of the general language.