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Embracing multilingualism to enhance complexity sensitive research

Academics who engage with local stakeholders to develop their research processes often find themselves spanning between the local language in which the research process takes place and English, the undisputed lingua franca in academia. In this post, **Patricia Canto, Susana Franco** *and* **Miren Larrea** *argue that embracing the coexistence of different languages in all the stages of the research cycle fosters inclusion and pluralism, helping to develop complexity sensitive research.*

This post can also be read in translation on the Orkestra website in [Basque](#) and [Spanish](#).

English is the [undisputed lingua franca of scholarly exchange](#), the language used in the most prestigious international conferences and journals and, most often, the language used by multinational research teams. However, it [has been argued](#) that the use of English as the standard language in academia, while important for promoting research excellence, often constitutes a barrier for engaging local partners in non-English speaking countries. This can be due to the high costs associated to translation, in terms of time and money. Universities and research institutes actively engaged in producing socially relevant knowledge are therefore constantly negotiating a balance between achieving local and global impact.

As our research takes place in the Basque Country, we find ourselves in one such situation, spanning from English to Basque and Spanish to link theory with practice and then back again to English to bring knowledge cogenerated with practitioners to academia. This does not make our academic lives easy, but we argue that it makes us more aware of complexity and compels us to generate mechanisms better suited for inclusion and pluralism. That is why, instead of considering the differences in language as a nuisance, we are experimenting with them to develop complexity sensitive research.

The context in which we are doing this is [Orkestra](#), established in 2006 within the University of Deusto, to engage with societal actors in research projects that improve the competitiveness of the Basque Country with the ultimate aim of increasing the wellbeing of its citizens. To this end we develop transformative research processes working with public administrations, firms and other territorial actors to address the different competitiveness-related challenges faced by our territory. These processes involve different degrees of interaction with our territorial stakeholders, determined by the various methodological approaches that coexist in our Institute, which range from co-generating knowledge with policymakers to more linear analyses with specific policy recommendations. As such they therefore need to navigate between two official languages (Spanish and Basque). This has made us acutely aware of the need for the two languages to have their space, the difficulties this creates, and the challenges posed by the need to guarantee that the minority language is not displaced by the majority language. We therefore argue that learning to coexist with various languages helps us to embrace diversity, which is something that we also need to do when we develop research processes with other territorial actors.

And then there is English. As academics, we are expected to publish in highly ranked journals and accumulate citations to prove the quality and impact of our research. Unless initiatives like the PLOTE index gain acceptance as a measure for career progression, this means mainly targeting journals published in English. So, while we communicate in Basque and Spanish with the local stakeholders with whom we engage in research processes to address territorial challenges, we draw from academic literature written in English to nurture those processes. Likewise, we publish the findings and lessons from those research processes mainly in English. Research becomes a continuous translation from theory to practice and from English to Basque and Spanish to later go back into concepts and theory in English.
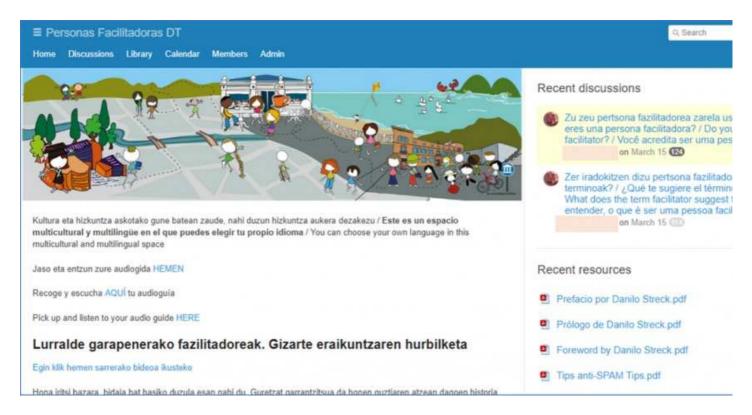
This has a number of consequences, we mention three of them. First, in order to share our work with local stakeholders and/or colleagues who are not fluent in English, we need to translate it. Translations are expensive and time-consuming, so a large part of our work stays in English unavailable to the local stakeholders, who may have participated in the research process. This is an issue not only because it reduces their possibilities to learn from the systematized outcomes of the processes in which they participate, but because it reduces their perception of the value of research. When stakeholders feel that researchers write exclusively for other foreign researchers, their readiness to support and fund research may decrease.

Second, academics who don't read English may find it difficult to continue building on knowledge published only in that language.

Third, and by no means least, naming complex issues or ideas only in English impoverishes other languages. When we forsake finding a word for a particular concept or idea in a given language, we impoverish that language. This is a highly relevant concern for Basque, which is a minority language.

We are therefore exploring different ways to address this issue. One is a dialogical virtual space we created to disseminate a book entitled "Facilitative Actors of Territorial Development". The home page (see Figure 1) invites participants to a multicultural site where contents in Spanish, English, Basque and Portuguese coexist in the same space. Participants can post their reflections in multilingual threads that currently have contributions from people based in several European and Latin American countries.

Figure 1 A multicultural multilingual virtual space

Another example is a book where chapter authors have been invited to choose the language they want to write in and to provide extended abstracts in two additional languages, so that different communities can have at least some access to their content. The two languages chosen for the chapters are English and Spanish, but extended abstracts are already confirmed in Basque, Norwegian, Portuguese and German. This is a recognition to the language in which the research process with stakeholders is developing.

What we have learned from working with different languages and acknowledging them during the full research cycle, including the dissemination stage, is that they are time-consuming, costly and even a bit messy and uncomfortable. For example, in the case of the virtual space above, some participants complained that having to find their own language among texts written in other languages begs an extra effort from them and slows them down. However, the alternative is renouncing inclusion and plurality, which is at odds with the challenge faced by academia to address complex societal problems.

Indeed, humanity is facing global challenges characterized by complexity, understood as diversity in the ways problems and their potential solutions are interpreted. Languages, ingrained in stronger cultural differences, are part of such diversity. When we learn to integrate language diversity in our research, we generate insight on how deeper differences can be managed regarding complex societal challenges. The technical knowledge to solve some of these problems exists, but there are difficulties to integrate this knowledge in the day to day decisions of the myriad policy makers that should be acting on it around the world. This connection between knowledge and action is, of course, not exclusively a matter of translation from English, but language is central to the connection between academics and policymakers.

If we want our research to be socially relevant, we need to learn to navigate complexity. One way of learning to do so is figuring out how to create spaces that include the different languages in which our research processes develop.

About the authors

Patricia Canto *is Publications Manager and Researcher at Orkestra – Basque Institute of Competitiveness. Her research interests include the link between research communication and societal impact, and the role of universities as agents of change in territorial development* @patricanto

Susana Franco *is a Researcher at Orkestra – Basque Institute of Competitiveness. Her research interests span different areas related to territorial competitiveness, with a particular emphasis on the socio-economic implications and the role of universities in such processes* @SForkestra

Miren Larrea *is Senior Researcher at Orkestra – Basque Institute of Competitiveness and lecturer at the University of Deusto. Her research focuses on action research for territorial development and she coordinates the Territorial Development Laboratory, a space for action research oriented to policy making.* @miren_larrea

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