

The problem of anglophone squint

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The limited attention given by anglophones to the literature in other languages is a notable long-term condition, and Aalbers (2004) has quite volubly brought to the attention of readers of *Area* some of its manifestations and consequences.

‘Anglophone squint’, as it has been dubbed, is very evident in geography journals emanating from the English-speaking world (Whitehand 2003), as Aalbers made clear in different terms. The increasing dominance of the English language in several types of geographical communication over the past 100 years has been spelled out with characteristic thoroughness by Harris (2001). Fortunately, the distorted vision that has accompanied this trend is at last being recognized as a serious impediment by a sizeable number of researchers (Garcia-Ramon 2003), though the grounds for concern that have been expressed have tended to be more political than intellectual (Gregson *et al.* 2003). My purpose here is to rehearse briefly a few facts and speculations that bear on the problem and then identify some pointers in the search for remedies: for though we may differ in our grounds for concern there is surely common ground in the pursuit of solutions.

Short *et al.* (2001) and Gutiérrez and López (2001) have demonstrated the limited sense in which the large majority of the most visible human geography and general geography journals might be regarded as international. While many of them purport to be international, the reality is that they are at best international only within the English-speaking world. In most cases the majority of authors emanate from the country in which the journal is published (the USA or the UK). Similarly anglophone authors have been heavily over-represented in citations at least since the 1960s: there was a marked increase in the citing of articles by American geographers, relative to those by French and German geographers, in the first 3 post-war decades (Whitehand and Edmondson 1977). More recently the lopsided pattern of international communication that developed has been compounded by the increasing emphasis that indexing organizations have given to English-language journals. From its

inception the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) concentrated largely on journals in the English language and now only two of the 35 'geography' journals covered in its Social Sciences database are not primarily or exclusively in English.

Of course the use of the English language in the most visible journals is not in itself the main part of the problem. Much more serious is the weak representation within these journals of work by researchers from the non-anglophone world. The large majority of geographical research emanating from outside the English-speaking world is not published in English, and since most anglophone geographers today are practically monolingual, this work is virtually unknown to them. And this is at a time of increased awareness of the international dimensions of research among non-anglophones. As Aalbers (2004) suggests, it is easy to believe that the meagre representation of work by non-anglophones in the English-language journals reflects in part a less-than-welcoming attitude by the gatekeepers of these journals. The unintelligibility of some of the kinds of English to which Aalbers has apparently been subjected also rings true: it would not be surprising if the use of gobbledegook English by native English speakers were bewildering to, and ultimately perhaps repellent to, potential non-anglophone contributors to English-language journals.

Doubtless a few British colleagues of my generation who have seen the problems referred to developing during the course of their careers will hark back to the days when foreign languages were a higher priority in British education. However, while calls for a return to a more liberal education are certainly in order as part of a longer-term remedy, the problem raised by Aalbers also calls for a review of more specific shorter-term ways forward that might be efficacious before his retirement, if not mine.

A major part of the solution is unlikely to be provided by nationally-based organizations and their journals, controlled as they are by members and interest groups from their respective countries. Nor are multinational commercial publishers likely to be the saviours, heavily concerned as they are to ensure sales in by far their largest single market: America. At first sight a more promising way forward might seem to be to seek solutions through international disciplinary organizations, but in most cases, and the International Geographical Union is no exception, these operate to a major extent through constituent national associations, and their primary

function in practice is periodically to bring together members of constituent countries for conferences that, in most of the humanities and social sciences at least, suffer from problems of communication not unlike those affecting publications.

One of the most promising contributions to a solution is to be found largely independently of existing associations and frameworks, namely by the more or less spontaneous development of international groups of researchers and practitioners drawn together by recognition of the advantages of sharing ideas and findings on problems of mutual interest. A good example is the International Seminar on Urban Form (ISUF), which began with the coming together of 20-30 scholars, researchers and practitioners from several disciplines and countries in a series of annual meetings in Lausanne in the mid-1990s. Communication was almost entirely in English, although the native language of well over one-half of those present was either French or Italian. Critical to the momentum that the group rapidly achieved was the fact that ideas previously confined largely to one or two language areas now permeated much more widely. Within 3 years of the first meeting a journal, *Urban Morphology* had been born that now has a circulation of about 500, spread over nearly 50 countries. Though it is published exclusively in English, and has been included in the ISI's coverage since 2001, 65 per cent of the authors of articles during the first 8 years of publication, 1997-2004, were affiliated to institutions in non-anglophone countries. Practically all articles are submitted in English, but in comparison with *Area*, at least as it was when I edited it, the editorial effort required for an average article is much higher. The amount of effort by authors for whom English is not their first language is also high, as it also tends to be for referees, some of whom are advising on papers that are for them in a second language. ISUF is not problem free but it does illustrate how a significant step forward in international communication can be made outside the frameworks of existing organizations.

Attempts to rectify anglophone squint require efforts by both anglophones and non-anglophones. The traffic in ideas needs to be multi-directional: there are benefits for all, as members of ISUF are discovering. What is critical is that work of wide significance, emanating from any part of the world, reaches the international market place. But the functioning of that market place needs to consist of more than each national participating group setting out its stall. The really rewarding part is

when participants sample the goods from one another's stalls and actually make use of them in their work.

Aalbers has provided a service to British geographers by taking the bit between his teeth in a British journal. However, there has been a tendency for commentators to focus on certain aspects of the problem: notably the detrimental effect that excessive influence on the academic media by America and Britain is having on the rest of the world. As discussion broadens and deepens, it is to be hoped that increased attention will be given to the intellectual benefits for anglophones that would stem from the greater integration of ideas from other language areas into anglophone thinking. Internationally, anglophones would be likely to earn greater respect for their own ideas as a consequence.

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