Whither non-English European public health journals?

Problems faced by non-English European public health journals

In today’s globalizing market of scientific publications, the size of the readership and the purchasing power of the readers determine much of a journal’s language policy. Unlike China, a single nation-state with its 1.3 billion people, Europe, a continent with its many nation-states and 730 million people, is home to a few dozen languages. The need to communicate across political and cultural boundaries had always facilitated certain languages to emerge as a *lingua franca* in Europe’s history, be they Greek and Latin in the classical and medieval periods, or English and French in the modern era. In the recent decades, English emerged as the *lingua franca* to meet this need in scientific communications, both intra-European and extra-European. The further integration of the European Union will further facilitate this trend. The publication in English of *Eurosurveillance* by the European Centre for Disease Control and growing outputs of intra-European collaboration in public health research that are published in English are just two examples. Such is the emerging trend in journal publishing: ‘international’ journals ‘go English’; local/national journals remain ‘vernacular’.

Another reason for this trend is the rise of bibliometrics and its tie with academic promotion and funding allocation. From university ranking by newspapers and funding allocation by funding bodies to the evaluation of individuals’ academic performance by universities, the academic world is increasingly relying on (if not obsessed with) bibliometrics. No doubt, bibliometrics, with its quantitative approach and easy-to-use figures, appeals to both researchers and administrators alike, as it provides the decision-makers with an aura of objectivity and measurability that is much revered in our scientific communities. Nevertheless, the ‘obsession’ with bibliometrics, and its associated misuse, makes the survival of non-English language journals increasingly difficult. Major databases are alleged to be biased toward publications in English and those published in developed countries. Such a possibility would have made Chinese and Latin American journals, as well as non-English European journals, less accessible to potential readers. Given their smaller potential readership, journals published in many European languages (other than English, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Russian) are less likely to be read and cited, and therefore have a lower ‘impact’. The vicious cycle of having a lower ‘impact’ and therefore receiving less high-quality submissions from authors and henceforth achieving an even lower ‘impact’, will make the survival of these journals endangered.

At the heart of the present dilemma is the tension between reaching out to an international audience and communicating research outputs to one’s local readership. There is evidence of a growing trend of European journals diversifying into either ‘international’ journals published in English or ‘local’ ones published in the ‘vernacular’.

This highlights both the demand in the scientific community to communicate across linguistic boundaries and within linguistic communities, and the difficulty to achieve both aims by one single journal.

The choice of language

In my opinion, there are three tiers of journals, stratified by languages and by the number of potential readers. The first tier belongs to the international journals that are currently almost all in English. The second tier belongs to journals that serve sizeable linguistic communities of the world’s population. It is fair to say that there exist a few linguistic regions that can sustain the continual publication of scientific journals in non-English languages, with a sizeable supply (authors) and demand (readers). In my view, they are Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and French. The third tier is, what I call, local. Whether it is the Italian *Igiene e Sanita’ Pubblica* (‘Hygiene and Public health’) or the *Vietnam Journal of Public Health*, they serve as a platform for publishing locally relevant research outcomes and for disseminating public health information to local practitioners. These journals may or may not continue to survive, but even if they do, they may have a limited international influence. Even European countries, like Germany, that have a long-standing tradition of scientific research find themselves in a disadvantage by publishing in their national languages and some of their journals are switching to English. In my opinion, most European journals that are published in languages other than English, French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish, belong to the third tier, not because of their quality, but because of the possibility of their ‘extinction’, at least as a means of communication of any high-end research. Unlike China or Japan, many countries in Europe do not have a big national market for scientific journals published in their national languages. Their journals face enormous pressure to switch to English or restrict to publishing papers that are only locally relevant.

The choice of language in journal publication, however, is never simply a matter of efficiency of communication. Apart from linguistic reasons, the historical, social and political backgrounds also matter. Medical journals from many former British colonies, e.g. Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Singapore, will no doubt continue to publish in English as the colonial legacy leaves them with English-speaking medical professionals who are themselves beneficiaries of the status quo of English being the international language. The Scandinavian use of English in their scientific communications more readily than the French, perhaps because the former is more aware of their small population size and their need to communicate internationally in English. The Japanese have done well scientifically without using much English, perhaps because their English-speaking elites manage to translate the latest scientific developments into their language in a very efficient way.

Nevertheless, public health as an applied scientific discipline is always contextualized. Unlike theoretical physics, the contextual nature of public health demands that its communication goes far beyond the community of researchers. Journals serve not only for
international research communications, but also for the dissemination of scientific developments from researchers to practitioners. Local journals published in the native tongue facilitate local public health communication and their very existence helps fostering the cohesion and growth of a native community of researchers and practitioners in public health. As local practitioners of medicine and public health read journals primarily in their native language, it is imperative for us to facilitate publication of these journals.

Lessons from other regions

The emergence of nationwide, multidisciplinary bibliographic databases in China is itself a worthy attempt to facilitate knowledge dissemination and minimize the associated transaction cost (in both money and time). Several Chinese databases exist and compete with each other, but they share one common feature—they attempt to cover all academic journals (across all disciplines) published in mainland China, and provide their users with a service that combines bibliography and subscription to one point-of-use. Instead of connecting from the database to the websites of different publishers, subscribers to the databases (mainly universities and their staff and students) have full-text access to all journals available in the databases that cover the vast majority of all mainland Chinese journals. These databases are exploring overseas market too, as academics and libraries in other countries begin to value the wealth of Chinese academic literature.

In Latin America, with its many Spanish and Portuguese journals, the trend is to couple continental-wide databases with Open Access. Databases like LILACS and SciELO have facilitated the use of these journals, of which many are freely accessible online and with English abstracts. Some even provide full articles translated into English. Many Latin American academics actively promote their journals and databases to the international scientific community and have attracted some attention in recent years. With the consolidation of Chinese and Latin American journals and databases, they are going to form the two major blocs in journal publishing independent of, and yet connected with, the ‘international’ English publication bloc. By harnessing a critical mass of potential readers, these journals can become self-sustainable, and with these databases, they are provided with platforms to outreach to the international academic community.

Future possibilities

In the future, automated translation provided by online facilities, e.g. Google Translate, will become more reliable and the language barrier will become less formidable as technology advances. Meanwhile, we can do our parts today to enhance the visibility and competitiveness of non-English language European public health journals.

Could the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) play a role? The EUPHA can consider facilitating non-English European public health journals to be indexed in PubMed, Web of Science and other databases. The EUPHA can also consider the possibility of creating a common portal to all public health journals published in Europe, with abstracts translated into English and other major European languages, and RSS function for quick dissemination of latest news and table of contents. Another possibility of EUPHA is to set-up some programs or networks to help European public health journals, especially those published in the less affluent part of Europe, to attain a higher editorial standard and thus attract more high-quality papers. One example is the Eastern Mediterranean Association of Medical Editors (http://www.emro.who.int/EMAME/) and its facilitation of the improvement of medical journal publication in the Middle East.

These suggestions may help stimulate further discussion, and I am sure that editors, authors and readers have suggestions to help non-English European public health journals to fare better in the years to come.

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There is room for different languages in public health journals

Sustaining and promoting a non-English international public health journal may be considered as an impossible task in our 21st century, mostly English-speaking scientific world. However, not only this is possible, but also to me it is a task, for different reasons.

The first of these reasons is ‘diversity’. The fast growing development of internet and World Wide Web communication bears a risk of standardization. Almost all international scientific communication takes place in English, whether it is oral or written. And this is not always (not very often . . .) perfect Oxford English. It is often quite a poor or simplified language (as the one used in this viewpoint), used mainly by people originating from non-English-speaking countries. There is no doubt that using this language impoverishes