

Dominance of English in Social Science: The Case of Economic Geography

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A big part of social scientific research is the art of persuasion. In social science, the role of rhetoric cannot be neglected in the name of facts and science. This tendency provides an uneven ground in communication across linguistic boundaries. Those who speak the lingua franca, English at least for now, as their native language have a clear advantage in that art of persuasion, which in turn gives them an advantage in advancing their theories and approaches. Researchers who were not brought up with other languages are likely to be left with the task of undertaking empirical and applied research.

At the level of individual researchers, such situation is a matter of equal opportunity. For the community of social scientists, the privileged position of one group over others can have negative impacts on advancing our knowledge. The insights behind social scientific theories and approaches do not materialize out of thin air but are deeply rooted in researchers' personal and collective experiences. If researchers with other native languages are not given equal opportunities to convert their experiences into academically useful insights and theories, then the global community of social scientists is not fully utilising the useful resource that the community owns. This much, most of us would agree. However, after the agreement on the fundamental, there are various views. Some may argue for more active action for plurality, such as more translation. Some others may claim Anglophone researchers should try harder to listen to researchers from other linguistic communities. Still others will say, what we have is the best that we can get for now and spending our efforts for pluralism is not going to yield much valuable. Some may claim having English as lingua franca is good because, although it privileges Anglophone works, it offers equal ground for academic communication among all the other linguistic groups.

This themed section was designed to discuss this thorny issue. Among various branches of social science within the coverage of this journal, we chose to focus our discussion on economic geography rather than other disciplines or subdisciplines for two reasons. Firstly, economic geography is methodologically plural, which is not the case in many other branches of urban sciences. For example, regional science, urban economics, and transportation policy, among many others, are mainly studied based on quantitative methods. On the other hand, planning theory, urban political economy, and urban sociology predominantly use qualitative methods. Economic geography has both quantitative and qualitative wings, so discussion in the context of economic geography can appeal to both quantitative and qualitative groups of the urban sciences. Secondly, in economic geography, there have been debates on precisely this issue in the past, so the discussion does not have to start from scratch. Earlier works such as Barnes and Sheppard (2010), Hassink (2007), Paasi, (2005), Rodríguez-Pose (2004), Yeung (2003) as well as more recent works such as Derudder and Liu (2016) and Jöns (2018) offer a good foundation that the current discussion can build on.

The section comprises one regular article-length paper by Hassink, Gong, and Marques (2019, this issue) as well as four short commentaries, followed by Hassink and Gong's response to these commentaries. While the participating researchers did not arrive at anything near a consensus, all writers and I hope that this themed section offers readers an opportunity to contemplate this critical issue that influences all students in the urban sciences.

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