

# Thinking in a foreign tongue: The problem of English language dominance in social research

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Drugs and alcohol are consumed by people from different countries and language groups around the world. Yet, this diversity fails to be reflected in the research that aims to expound the pleasures, problems, and consequences of this consumption. A recent study documents the degree to which the Anglophone world dominates the addiction publishing field (Hellman et al., 2020). The English-speaking world of four countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia – represented 75% of the editorial workforce and 70% of all authors that published in the 41 journals. Representation of low-income countries was close to zero; there was a negligible number of author and editor affiliations in middle-income countries, and the editors-in-chief were mostly male (80%). All journals nevertheless

claimed to advance research of universal value,

applicability, and closeness to contexts of usage. The question becomes: are we achieving a closeness to the diverse realities around the world when our modus operandi entails a homogeneous isomorphic wheel, where almost everybody comes from the same background and views matters through similar cognitive and cultural setups?

The dominance of the English language in drug and alcohol research creates two types of problems. First, it favours researchers from the Anglophone world and builds practical hurdles for non-native English readers, who have to read and write in a foreign language. This structural barrier works against the desired diversity in addiction journals. Second, a more deep-seated but less acknowledged problem is that

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researchers from non-English-speaking countries become accustomed to *thinking* in a language that is foreign to their own societies. Many isomorphic trends in the addiction research field are entangled with the English language and with sociocultural understandings often borrowed directly from the Anglophone world. The social sciences copy hard sciences as sites of English concepts that quickly spread across the world, leaving the grassroots level with the predicament of figuring out what the concepts mean in new contexts. The meaning of concepts will change when they cross borders (Bengtsson & Ravn, 2015), and researchers must therefore be careful to reflect on how they adapt concepts.

The first type of problem – the practical hurdles of reading and writing in a foreign language – is easy to describe and comprehend. The second problem – the sociocultural drawback of thinking in a foreign language – may appear more abstract. To make the problem concrete, we will provide some examples in the following.

### Example 1: Addiction

The large-scale European Union EU project Addictions and Lifestyles in Contemporary Europe – Reframing Addiction Project (ALICE-RAP 2011–2016) was launched in 2011. At the first gathering of the project, researchers from several non-English-speaking countries conveyed the same problem: they could not translate the concept of addiction directly to their own languages. The problem had been described before by scholars noting the lack of a term corresponding to the concept of addiction in the Nordic languages (Room et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it was a surprise for the English speakers of the project: a circumstance that they had never even considered. The example illustrates that English concepts are *not* universal descriptors that uncomplicatedly cross borders. On the contrary, concepts such as “addiction” that describe human practices and experiences are deeply embedded in

sociocultural contexts. However, the example also illustrates the blind angles of research towards this fact. Even the news value of the sociocultural translation problem was dictated from the Anglophone viewpoint. While the problem was well-known by non-English-speaking researchers, it became a new finding when discovered from the Anglophone perspective.

### Example 2: Timely care

A Danish study on social welfare provision tailored to young people with complex problems developed the concept of “timely care” in a work written in English (Andersen & Bengtsson, 2019a). When the researchers then wanted to translate the work into Danish to disseminate their research to professionals, the translation proved difficult. The process made the sociocultural drawback of thinking in a foreign tongue quite tangible, as the concept of “timely care” could not be straightforwardly translated into Danish. The researchers decided to go with *rettidig hjælp* (“help at the right time” in English), but acknowledged that some meanings were lost in the translation of the concept and the work as a whole (Andersen & Bengtsson, 2019b). While “care” was eventually translated as *hjælp* (help), care is something more and other (Tronto, 2013). Alternative translations were considered, such as *omsorg* (nurture) or *støtte* (support), but in the context of this particular study these concepts did not capture the characteristics of the social welfare in question. The researchers conceived and developed the concept in English, and all translations compromised depth, nuances, subtexts, and overtones to some extent.

### Example 3: Community

The English concept of “community” is an example of a worldwide travelling term that may appear universal but is actually a conceptual chameleon that changes meaning depending on institutional structures and sociocultural

backdrop. Hence, when the New Zealand-based gambling policy researcher Peter Adams (2008, 2016) presented a theoretical model for understanding the moral jeopardy involved in gambling-revenue-based support to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), “community” and “community organizations” featured as universal notions. However, when a Finnish study (Egerer et al., 2018) wanted to apply the theoretical framework, the predicament of ignoring the different meanings was revealed.

Community organisation is not a term that would be typically used for the civil society organisations (CSOs) and third-sector actors in a Nordic context. Adams’s framework is one of New Zealand. In the English-speaking world – especially Australia, the US, and the UK – where most gambling research has been conducted so far, civil society plays another role in the overall system of responsibilities. In the Nordic welfare countries the municipality and the state hold the main responsibility for service provision, and it is this common good that is channelled in Adams’s concept of “communities”.

In the Anglophone literature, the English concept of “community” often refers to the non-governmental or the third sector. This sector comprises NGOs, civil society and what we often refer to as the third sector in the Nordic countries. A problem arises especially when we use literature that conceptualises this sector in an Anglophone sense, as the third sector is not arranged in the same way in the Nordic countries. The Nordic third sector is not in the same sense made up of civil society grassroots movements that come together and raise funds through recruitment of popular support and/or philanthropy. In the social and health field, public support is often its lifeline. In Finland, this entails a grant system that is based on gambling revenues. Perhaps the most unsuitable and unfortunate translation of the concept was a Swedish translation of community as the Swedish term *kommun* (“municipality” in English).

#### Example 4: Public health

The framework of policy interventions which are intended to cover a whole population and are connected to an epistemic machinery that produces associations between habits and consequences was something of a given in the Nordic welfare states from the outset. Ambitions were set to monitor and address social and health problems in line with a social contract that saw the public sector as representing the interest of all citizens. Today we would refer to these ambitions under the umbrella concept of public health, which will be our fourth and last example.

Societal systems that did not in the same way provide room for the institutionalisation of questions of social inclusion and marginalisation had a greater need to frame all sorts of policies under the flag of the populations’ health. Nordic researchers and academic bodies – who often had pioneered the grasp of public health but not necessarily under that label – borrowed the concept from the Anglophone academic world as if they were borrowing new pencils from the cool kid in class. And yet their own pencil case was full of better and more proper tools to see and grasp the societal and cultural phenomena that they studied. As Nordic research became increasingly internationally seated, the concept of “public health” gained increased territory as a justification and an epistemic dogma in the Nordic countries just as in the rest of the world (for a discussion, see Bergenheim, 2018; Hellman, 2018; Room, 2018; Stenius, 2018).

#### *Lost in translation*

As researchers, we have to participate in international research communities where the English language reigns supreme. When we publish articles – and publish we must or perish – English is not a choice but a prerequisite. However, we lose diversity when we accept the dominance of the English language, and we lose meaning in the transplantations.

Should we accept this loss with no questions asked? Or should the question be raised on the agenda of democratic citizenship? The societies we work in often fund our work one way or another, which legitimises the expectation that we as social scientists aim to understand our countries and contribute to envisioning futures of thriving Nordic welfare societies. Yet, researchers are structurally encouraged (by, for example, merit structures and demands from those who finance our work) to think and work in English. Even if we later translate the research into Nordic languages, we must realise that translations are always second-bests. We will lose (some) meaning.

How much do we lose by using English? Can we assess the price of not thinking about our societies in our own languages? This is a very hard question to address. Perhaps we can learn something from African writers who reflect on the consequences of being under the influence of colonial languages. The Senegalese author Bou-bacar Boris Diop has clarified some of the consequences and some ways forward:

In their search for literary legitimacy, African authors, writing in French or English, often focus on themes that are likely to appeal to Western readers, and this also makes them write in a certain way. At the heart of it, this translates to a fabricated repetition of the West's clichés on terrorism or immigration, to name two "timely" themes of the moment. Such works then end up being part of the African school curricula, despite the fact that they are intended for the Western public in terms of their content and form. Sadly, what might give an impression of political advancement becomes a source of confusion. [...] I was the very first instructor to offer Wolof language and literature courses there [Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, Senegal], which means I'm in the position to declare that the emancipatory rupture will require a reappropriation of the world in African languages. I could clearly see the relief in my student's eyes and see how seamlessly reality had become intelligible to them. I'm not saying that this will be easy: the complexities of our painful history and the radical

nature of colonial destruction manages to make every task thankless to the point of seeming insurmountable. The decolonization of the mind can only become the order of the day if it can engage African languages as the conduits of knowledge. In my humble opinion, it is the only measure with true historical import. (Diop, 2020)

In large parts of the world, the problem of English language dominance is entangled with the terrors of colonialisation. The "decolonization of mind", as Diop explicates, requires that people can think about their lives and societies in their own languages. Decolonisation is not a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and as Nordic scholars we are aware that the requirement we experience to think in foreign tongues is not part of a painful history of colonial destruction. We can listen and learn, though, from the researchers and writers who explicate the problems of dominating colonial languages as well as the emancipatory potential of reappropriating the world through their mother tongue.

In this editorial, we have addressed the question of English as a lingua franca of addiction research. Language use and concepts are not a new theme in the *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. In the past, this journal has discussed how language use mainstreams repertoires for understanding the complex realities of substance use and addiction. We still accept manuscripts in Scandinavian languages and are involved in the committees of the European Association of Science Editors (EASE) and the International Society for Addiction Journal Editors (ISAJE) that work towards diversity in the field of scientific publishing.

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