

Perspective

“It’s Not the Way We Use English”—Can We Resist the Native Speaker Stranglehold on Academic Publications?

Pat Strauss

School of Language and Culture, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, New Zealand; pat.strauss@aut.ac.nz

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Abstract: English dominates the academic publishing world, and this dominance can, and often does, lead to the marginalisation of researchers who are not first-language speakers of English. There are different schools of thought regarding this linguistic domination; one approach is pragmatic. Proponents believe that the best way to empower these researchers in their bid to publish is to assist them to gain mastery of the variety of English most acceptable to prestigious journals. Another perspective, however, is that traditional academic English is not necessarily the best medium for the dissemination of research, and that linguistic compromises need to be made. They contend that the stranglehold that English holds in the publishing world should be resisted. This article explores these different perspectives, and suggests ways in which those of us who do not wield a great deal of influence may yet make a small contribution to the levelling of the linguistic playing field, and pave the way for an English lingua franca that better serves the needs of twenty-first century academics.

Keywords: academic publishing; dominance of English: native/nonnative speakers of English; resistance; academic lingua franca

There is widespread acceptance of the importance of English in academia [1–4]. Hyland ([2], p. 83) notes that it is “now unquestionably the language of international scholarship”. Academic writing for publication takes place all around the world and involves over 5 million scholars and over 17,000 higher education institutions; more than 95% of indexed natural science journals and 90% of social science journals use all or some English in their publications [3]. The impact of English in the academic world is self-perpetuating. Academics who wish to be most visible in their fields need to publish in English [2]. This dominance is illustrated by the fact that many European and Japanese journals are now publishing in English, and there has been a dramatic increase in the number of second-language speakers of English publishing in English journals [2]. The editors of the journal *Brazilian Administration Review* decided at the journal’s inception in 2004 that articles would only be published in English. They noted that this decision had been taken because “there is a growing need to bring our scientific work to a wider audience, which inevitably means taking it to countries where Portuguese is not the dominant language” ([5], p. 1).

On the face of it there appears to be little point in struggling against the tide, and a pragmatic acceptance of the importance of English for publication seems the most sensible way to go. Moreno illustrates this pragmatic approach in her discussion of the problems facing Spanish scholars who wish to publish in international journals. She notes that “protesting against and criticising mainstream practices would be a disservice to the scholars” ([6], p. 58). Although she agrees that current publication practices discriminating against second-language (L2) writers should be critiqued, it is clear that her main focus is on helping these writers publish in English-medium journals. She argues that publication in prestigious journals will help academics qualify for tenured positions and gain promotion. Unfortunately, such pragmatism comes at a price.

The ideology of pragmatism works “to reduce all human problems to the level of technical difficulties and solutions” ([7], p. 255). This means that the importance of critiquing current academic

publication practices will become very much a side issue, and the focus will remain on practical solutions to getting published. Academics who are second-language speakers of English (L2) are also driven by the publish-or-perish mentality of higher education, and will be forced to “perpetuate and legitimise the infrastructures of power” of the worldwide publishing industry ([8], p. 215).

There are, of course, a number of L2 scholars who do speak out against the status quo. Hanauer and Englander note the dissatisfaction of Mexican academics who feel that conforming to English language requirements means that the articles they publish do not do justice to their work [9], a feeling that is echoed by academics in a Spanish study [10]. Canagarajah argues [11] that L2 scholars are increasingly questioning the way in which English native-speaker norms are taken for granted in academic communities, noting that “they are not prepared to treat writing . . . for academic purposes as devoid of values or voice” (p. 108). The Finnish academic Anna Mauranen, editor of a book entitled *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and Findings* [12] makes it clear out that all of the chapter authors, whether L1 (first-language speakers of English) or L2 speakers, were regarded as “expert users of English” (p. 123). She points out that the book is aimed at an international audience and that the language employed by the authors is “effective English as an international lingua franca” (p. 124).

The case put forward by L2 academics such as Canagarajah and Mauranen is a strong one. I believe as they do, that it is essential that academic English becomes more responsive to the needs of the international academic community. In the following pages I will attempt to justify this perspective, and highlight what I believe I can do in my own limited capacity.

Interest in Academic English writing has its roots in *student* writing, and initially the writing of L2 students. The focus was on how best to assist these students’ writing endeavours in higher education. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is based on the experience of writing tutors, and research into specific discipline practices. It is viewed as a practical response to the needs of students, and focuses largely on the text [13]. The strength of this approach lies in its contributions to the teaching of academic writing, but it has been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the broader context in which the writing plays out. Ruecker argues that students have busy lives and that what is important to them is it that they learn “a privileged standardised variety of English” ([14], p. 116). However, there are a number of EAP academics who support a more nuanced approach to the teaching of academic writing. This has led to the rise of Critical EAP [15]. The 1990s also saw the rise of the Academic Literacies model developed by Lea and Street [16]. This approach focuses on practices rather than texts, and the way in which these practices are embedded in different disciplines [17]. It takes into account factors such as notions of identity, power relations, and differing institutional practices. Critical EAP scholars acknowledge the importance of context and exploration of social identities and the impact of power relations. Although there are still differences between the two approaches they now share much common ground.

While both the academic literacies movement and EAP have traditionally focused largely on students, growing attention is being paid to the writing of L2 academics. Much of what is said about students applies equally to these L2 academics writing for publication. For example, Lillis and Scott’s exhortation [18] that the academy values what L2 student writers bring to higher education is mirrored by Flowerdew with regard to L2 academics. Flowerdew points out marginalising these academics can be “impoverishing in terms of creation of knowledge” ([19], p. 122).

However, wider acceptance of *what* these L2 academics bring to the academy does not appear to extend to *how* this contribution is expressed. Hyland rejects the idea of writers having an original voice, arguing that the wish to develop such a voice points to a failure “to grasp the essentially social nature of writing for publication” ([2], p. 89). In what sounds very much like a warning, he says that authors will only be published if they use language with which readers are familiar. In an environment where editors are often inundated with articles, they might well be looking for reasons to reject manuscripts and “non-standard language may serve as good a reason as any to justify this” ([2], p. 89). Jenkins maintains that “the attachment to native English . . . still pervades global academic life” ([4], p. 927). However, the views of those opposed to a radical rethink of current academic writing norms are not

consistent. Even Hyland, in what appears to be an about-face, argues that we need to challenge the privileged status of academic writing, instead evaluating its appropriacy and effectiveness in a given context [20]. This point is taken up by Lillis et al., who argue that current conventions are not valued because they “offer meaningful, valid and creative resources for knowledge production, evaluation and participation in the contemporary world” ([21], p. 9), but simply because they ensure that articles are written in a way that is familiar to those who control what is published in journals.

Canagarajah gives an example of a second-language speaker of English who employed a non-standard grammatical feature in a piece of writing. When she was asked about this, she replied that she could not find a grammatical structure in English that conveyed accurately what she wanted to say. As Canagarajah points out “to treat each use of deviation from academic discourse as a sign of unproficiency or failure is to underestimate the agency of the students” ([22], p. 33). Interestingly, in Canagarajah’s own words we have an example of non-standard use of English. Most English speakers would use “lack of proficiency” rather than “unproficiency”, but there is no confusion as to what is meant, and Canagarajah’s standing in the academic world would mean that few would challenge his use of English.

However, the average journal editor is not dealing with academics of Canagarajah’s standing, and what is acceptable from Canagarajah may not be tolerated from another writer who does not enjoy the same reputation. We native English speakers are often courted by journals to act as reviewers, and we hold a great deal of power in our anonymous hands. Belcher points out that journal editors rely on their reviewers to maintain the standards of their journals [1]. Earlier, I noted Hyland’s warning that editors spoiled for choice in the articles submitted might well turn down an article if it does not adhere to familiar conventions. Reviewers, therefore, who raise concerns about non-standard use of language might well sound the death knell for an aspiring author. All too often, these academics seem to regard themselves as “owners” and “custodians” of English ([4], p. 933). The problem with this gatekeeping is that it appears to be based on linguistic criteria whose relevance for intelligibility has not been proved [23]. However, it seems difficult for English native-speaking academics to accept English that is not like their own. It is possible, too, that they might be concerned that editors would think they lacked the linguistic competence required to ensure that journal standards are maintained.

A colleague who was reviewing an article for a journal asked my opinion of the phrase “strongly wanted” employed by the author. She was uncomfortable with the word “strongly”. She felt that the word “clearly” would have been more acceptable. I pointed out to her that the two words are not synonymous, and “clearly” would not have conveyed accurately what the author wanted to say. I added that the more common phrase “really wanted” would probably have been viewed as too informal for an academic text, and that in addition “strongly wanted” seemed to me to be more powerful than “really wanted”. She conceded the point but argued that the sentence, although grammatically acceptable, should be rewritten, and that a comment along the lines of “this is not incorrect but it’s not the way we use English”, would be appropriate.

The understanding seems to be that the “we” refers to those fortunate enough to use the English of the Inner Circle countries. These countries are defined as “the traditional bases of English, dominated by the ‘mother tongue’ varieties of the language” ([24], p. 3). We both agreed that the grammar was correct, and the meaning was not obscured in any way. It was simply that the phrase is not used commonly by first-language speakers.

My colleague and I are from New Zealand, one of the Inner Circle countries. Both of us are first-language speakers of English who came to New Zealand as adults, she from another Inner Circle country and I from South Africa, which is not. I have suffered the indignity of having my English-language ability challenged. An editor of an Australian journal queried my use of the word “timeously”, saying that it was “a made-up word”. I pointed out that the word was in the Oxford dictionary. The response was a veiled threat about publication—I capitulated and replaced one perfectly good word with four “in a timely manner”.

These incidents illustrate the claim that the function of grammar is not primarily to ensure that comprehension is easy but rather a way of expressing social identity. It operates, Widdowson claims, as a gatekeeping system, “a shibboleth” ([25], p. 381). The reactions of English-speaking academics often seem to be out of proportion to the minor linguistic errors they criticise. The possibility for different varieties of English “appals or even terrifies some who think there is a ‘purity’ to be defended” ([26], p. 60). Advocates for the use of English as a lingua franca give as an important motivator the fact that the native speakers of the language would no longer feel that “their language” is being “abused and distorted” ([27], p. 152).

There are success stories, though, where L2 authors have successfully defended a non-standard choice of grammar. Bhatia tells of an incident where, as an author who had “no academic standing” ([28], p. 47), he resisted the request of an editor of a prestigious journal to change an expression he had used in an article submitted to the journal. The expression had clearly “jarred on the ears of a well-established native speaker” ([28], p. 47) of English. While aware that his actions might imperil his chances of publication, Bhatia chose to resist, and wrote what he described as the most important letter of his life, justifying his employment of those particular words. The editor withdrew his objection.

Perhaps that editor shared these sentiments: “The very idea of a standard implies stability, and this can only be fixed in reference to the past. But language is of its nature unstable. It is essentially protean in nature, adapting its shape to suit changing circumstances. It would otherwise lose its vitality and its communicative and communal value” ([25], p. 384).

It is not merely that language use is changing. The context of higher education is in a state of flux. New discipline areas are being introduced to the academy and these new fields require new genres. [29]. However, simply focusing on textual practices will not be sufficient. If these new genres are to serve the new disciplines well, practices both inside and outside the academy need to be examined [29]. Lillis expresses much the same sentiment, advocating for dialogue around text so that all stakeholders can explore ways “in which alternative meaning making practices can be institutionally validated” ([30], p. 44).

While this would appear to be a sensible solution, the matter is far more complicated. Many of these new disciplines battle for recognition at universities. In order to gain the esteem of colleagues in other fields, academics in these new disciplines are determined to be “more traditional than the classics” ([31], p. 937), and are hesitant to challenge current academic writing expectations, fearing that this will simply confirm their status as inferior disciplines.

In many ways, academics in new discipline areas share the same challenges as L2 academic authors. Both groups struggle to use traditional academic language in a way that serves their purpose; both are constrained by current writing conventions from exploring new ways to disseminate their research. Proponents of a more open approach to academic language maintain that an academic approach that was genuinely international would listen to the views of the diverse populations that make up higher education. What should count is “clarity, effectiveness and contextual appropriateness of communication. While high academic standards are vital, native like English is not” ([4], p. 932).

It appears that many of the issues raised in this article could be addressed by the development of a written English academic lingua franca. This would enable academics around the world to communicate with each other, and offer greater visibility to their research. However, in order to achieve such a lingua franca, native speakers of English would need to abandon demands that L2 academics accommodate “a narrow assimilationist model of English” ([4], p. 927). We need to consider these words: “it is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it” ([25], p. 384).

Canagarajah maintains that all acts of communication and literacy involve “shuttling between languages and a negotiation of diverse linguistic resources for situated construction of meaning” ([32], p. 1). He notes too that while geographical locations are used to contextualise languages

“the social negotiations and rhetorical encounters that create alternative *spaces* (original italics) for creativity and understanding” is of far greater importance ([32], p. 6). It would appear logical that academic journals should be at the forefront of these alternative spaces. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and Inner Circle English remains dominant despite the fact that the sociolinguistic reality of modern universities is not reflected in current language policies and practices [4]. English-speaking academics, it appears, are loathe to quit a comfort zone that offers them both familiarity and a measure of control.

For me the question is: what can I do to help create alternative spaces? Benfield and Feak [33] argue that L1 academics have a responsibility to help L2 colleagues in the same discipline area. In addition, they feel that educational institutions should make the services of language professionals available to these L2 researchers. The authors acknowledge the difficulties in this approach; finding L1 academics who are willing to assist is not easy. Clavero notes wryly that one runs the risk of losing all one’s L1 “science friends” ([34], p.552). In addition, the services of language professionals are costly, and institutions are often unwilling to provide ongoing support. All too often, L2 academics turn to L1 speakers who do not have expertise in the subject matter. They can, of course, pay to have their work edited—some journals recommend specific editing services but this is at the academic’s own expense and risk [34].

Clearly, if I wish to make a difference, I need to assist my L2 colleagues, and I do where I can; but, as Clavero points out, this assistance is not without difficulty. L2 colleagues are often unwilling to encroach on fellow academics’ time, realising that they too are under pressure to publish, and often contending with heavy teaching loads. In addition, as indicated above, while we may work in the same broad discipline area, it is unlikely that we will have the same nuanced understanding of the topic as the author does.

However, these concerns are unimportant when measured against the real issue, and that is that the proposed ‘solution’ simply reinforces the status quo. L2 writers are positioned as deficient, and in need of L1 colleagues to ‘guide’ them onto the correct linguistic pathway. A good example of this can be found in an article published in a journal about academic writing [35]. The authors were comparing British and Sudanese writers producing medical texts. They noted that the differences between the two groups were “subtle” (p. 87), but nonetheless concluded that while they “would not wish to suggest that Sudanese writers should mindlessly copy the linguistic and rhetorical features found in British writing, . . . such exploration might raise awareness of generic requirements and constraints, and promote communicatively effective self-expression” (p. 94). In other words, subtle though it might be, the L1 writers were doing it better.

It would, of course, be naïve to assume that there are not a large number of L2 researchers who do need help with academic English. I am not for a moment suggesting that it is not the responsibility of L1 colleagues to support and help where they can. What I am saying, though, is that such help does not exclude the possibility of examining current academic writing conventions, and challenging them where appropriate. I would put this more strongly. I believe it is the duty of L1 academics to explore current writing standards more openly to see whether texts they dismiss as inferior are not simply different.

The question I have not answered yet is: what do I do? I start with the students to whom I teach academic writing. I echo what others have said to their students [4], telling them that while their lecturers will welcome native-like English, the students can point out the inconsistency of a university that regards itself as international insisting on New Zealand English language norms. I do not really expect that there will be any real challenge to teaching staff; the power distance is too great, and the students simply want to pass. I hope, though, that these remarks might return to them at a later stage in their academic careers, perhaps when they are writing theses or dissertations.

I try, when I am marking their work, to resist the old chestnut ‘This is not how we say it in English’, and look past the strangeness, to see if that which is different is not perhaps better, clearer or more interesting. Even if it is none of those things, if it is intelligible, should I indicate that change

is desirable? I try to rekindle the indignation I felt when the Australian editor ridiculed my use of English.

As a reviewer, I can approach my work with the same thoughts, and if necessary defend the use of non-standard English in the articles I review. I can encourage L2 colleagues to follow the examples of resistance cited earlier in defending their choice of English to reviewers and editors.

In addition, I have started to publish some of my concerns, and to speak up at conferences when I get an opportunity. In my limited experience, I have found that my concerns resonate with many L2 academics, but are less well received by their L1 colleagues. A number of highly respected researchers believe that the English currently used in prestigious journals is the best vehicle in which to report research. They are concerned that changes to the language will impact on the clarity and succinctness of such writing. I, on the other hand, believe that their concerns might well stifle the development of an English best suited to contemporary academic society.

These are, admittedly, very small steps, but they are a way of resisting the current domination of Inner Circle English. The language that we use as academics needs to better reflect the sociolinguistic reality of modern higher education. We should acknowledge that there are many Englishes and that it is “both futile and inappropriate” to attempt to hold on to a single standardised English ([36], p. 572). What we need is a lingua franca for 21st-century higher education. If that lingua franca is to be English, it needs to be a “living English, one that rejuvenates the language by contesting standardized, dominant English terms, phrasings, and meanings in the light of ongoing, and differing, lives, contexts, values” ([36], p. 573).

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