“Native here and to the manner born”
Academic publishing and ‘proper’ English

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In the context of academic publication, there is a need to recognise the validity and acceptability of texts written by non-native authors that, whilst eschewing formal error, may nevertheless still fail to correspond to the pragmatic expectations imposed by criteria of nativeness.

In this article I describe what I take to be a form of linguistic imperialism at work in the processes of academic publication, most specifically as these refer to the manner in which the English of research reported in written format by non-native speakers of English is treated by reviewers and editors.

The article challenges the assumption that native standards of English should be the basic criteria of linguistic quality in international academic publication. Since a fundamental aim of such publication is effective diffusion of content, this paper proposes that journals be more open to variants of English that may not fully comply with the expectations of the ‘standard’ language, and it calls for language consciousness-raising on the part of all those involved in the writing/revising/publishing process with a view to ensuring a fairer and less linguistically exclusive publishing scenario.

1. Introduction

HAMLET: The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;
And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.
HORATIO: Is it a custom?
HAMLET: Ay, marry, is’t:
But to my mind, though I am native here
And to the manner born, it is a custom
More honour’d in the breach than the observance.

(Hamlet, Act I, Scene iv)
The academic world is an exacting place. It regularly requires its members — whatever their field — to carry out original, relevant and even paradigm-shifting research, work that will be subjected to the rigorous criticism of peer review and made to stand or fall in the harsh light of very public exposure. And, to consolidate an academic career, this process must be gone through with again and again. This is a tall order.

Imagine, then, if we add to all this the need to produce such research in a language that is not your own, if you wish your work to be widely disseminated. And imagine, further still, that the reviewers and editors of the journals in which you need to publish often insist that the language of your research be practically identical, often in the most minor of details, to that of natively produced variants. Failure to comply with this insistence will probably result in your submission being rejected, as the form of English in which your research has been written will be considered inadequate and unsuitable for this objective. You are therefore faced with a double task: mastering your own area of academic specialization and mastering, too, the language needed to communicate your work to a broader public.¹

In essence, this is what faces researchers whose native language is not English. No-one is surprised at this anymore. And, we might ask, why should they be? Academic, scientific and cultural advancement depend fundamentally on the rapid and effective transmission of ideas within the academy, which are then transferred to society. Clear communication is the key to this, communication that calls for comprehension across all frontiers. In this respect — referring now only to language and not to the specific content of the research (which I am of course in no position to evaluate) — it would seem obvious that academic publication should insist on a precise and sophisticated control of English, now the global lingua franca.² To put this into perspective, some estimates suggest that “approximately half of the published articles in the world are written in English, and in some fields an even greater number”.³ Furthermore, within this position, it also seems coherent to say that an insistence on ‘quality’ English merely aims at ensuring standards of excellence; any compromising of these standards must surely be to the direct detriment of academic rigor and quality.

Looked at in this light, the idea of working with the norms and expectations of standard written English (typically, but not exclusively, UK/US) in academic publication is both a reasonable and effective approach, fully in keeping with the general objectives of the activity, primarily the broadest dissemination of innovative research, whose content and form should be of the highest standards. And who would not agree with such an admirable enterprise? Except, of course, that — when it comes to language, and the imposition of its norms — very, very many other matters are actually being brought in to the equation, explicitly or not. Let me reiterate that I do not, and obviously cannot, concern myself here with issues
of research content and quality, and that my interest therefore lies exclusively with use of English. And it is in this ambit that I would like to suggest that the apparently reasonable insistence on what we might colloquially term ‘proper’ English, that which conforms to the normative expectations of natively produced language (and is specifically recognized as such), is often actually concerned with forwarding a rather distinct agenda, namely, safeguarding a mechanism that — overtly or not, consciously or otherwise — ensures the primacy of a privileged minority and a more direct access to the publication of this minority’s views. This is, in contrast, to the marked disadvantage of the much larger linguistic majority, whose own research is therefore at the very least put onto a slower track, until such a time as its linguistic presentation is deemed to conform to the language requirements and standards of the privileged “inner circle.”

The question of non-native authoring of academic texts in English, and of the procedures prior to the publication of such texts, has been approached in the literature from a considerable number of perspectives. Broadly, these include assessments of native-speaker proofreading or editing of texts authored by non-native speakers of English (NNS) and of the interactions between these two ‘sectors’ (Ventola & Mauranen 1991; Mauranen 1997; Shashok 2001; Burrough-Boenisch 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Kaplan & Baldauf 2005; Mišak et al. 2005; Lillis & Curry 2006a, 2006b, and Li & Flowerdew 2007); critical appraisal of journal editors’ attitudes towards their NNS contributors and the experiences of NNS attempting to publish their work (Flowerdew 2001); the consequences of NNS authors’ failure to engage adequately with the need for language proficiency (Turner 2004) and, related to this, discussion of whether intelligibility or language-standard conformity ought to predominate in NNS writing (Flowerdew 2008).

Though these concerns are varied, they nevertheless revolve in one sense or another around the issue of whether NNS authors’ writing can be deemed fully acceptable, who makes such judgements and what this implies both for the language itself and for all parties involved. Following this, in this article I describe what I take to be a form of linguistic imperialism at work in the processes of academic publication, most specifically as these refer to the manner in which the English of research reported in written format by NNS is treated by reviewers and editors, who we can with no exaggeration term the true facilitators of publication, perhaps even the gatekeepers of the language itself, at least in this linguistic arena.

I use the expression “linguistic imperialism” with a certain reticence. First, because of the not inconsiderable objections to the term that have been expressed most especially since the publication of Robert Phillipson’s (1992) study. Second, whilst imperialism of a political and military sort can hardly be conceived of as existing without being the direct consequence of a deliberate, planned strategy, what we call linguistic imperialism — as this refers to language used and taught,
examined and required — can only really be thought of as having a correspond-
ing and explicit master plan if we buy into the notion of conspiracy theories. In
that respect, the possible implications deriving from the term will strike many as
exaggerated, unreasonable and unfair. Alan Davies’s now rather famous satirical
take on this thesis imagines Phillipson hounding Davies’s colleagues at Edinburgh
University and “outing those who have pretended all these years merely to teach
applied linguistics, but who have really been plotting with the British Council to
take over the world” (1996: 485).8

Yet if we were to ask NNS researchers how they feel about Davies’s comment,
even accepting that he was basically referring to the teaching of Applied Linguis-
tics rather than to editing manuscripts, we might find that it hits rather too close to
home for comfort. Not that many of these researchers actually suspect the British,
for example, of trying to revive or substitute their long-lost empire through the
power of language; but they might certainly feel that their own world of academic
dissemination has indeed been taken over by the gatekeepers of a form of English
that is, in most circumstances, simply beyond their ability to attain.

Before continuing, however, let me post my basic caveat emptor for this article.
The ideas set out here stem directly from my experience of working with the Eng-
lish-language manuscripts of NNS researchers sometimes before, sometimes after
submission to academic journals. The insight that this has given me, such as it is, is
therefore practical in nature and does not pertain to any form of research project,
experiment or hypothesis. My sample groups, if that is what I can call them, are
absurdly small and can be given no statistical significance. And the researcher-
authors themselves are from a fairly limited range of disciplines, are usually native
speakers of Spanish or Catalan (but no other language) and work for the same
university. This clearly restricts any “generalisability” that my comments may have.
And yet, whenever and wherever I have had the opportunity to speak of this issue
— and I have outlined the ideas presented here in talks from Croatia to Finland
— my argument appears to correspond precisely to the often viscerally held views
of NNS researchers from a very wide diversity of backgrounds and circumstances
(and, I might add, is enthusiastically received by this group). But, to repeat that
caveat, what follows is not a conventional academic paper: I accept that, on the
whole, this is an openly subjective account; I do not attempt to analyse non-native
language in much formal detail, nor will I consider — except marginally — the
characteristics of ‘global’ English, however we may choose to refer to this. Instead,
I present a discussion of what I see as a highly questionable professional practice
that often undermines the integrity of the academic community and which, one
way or another, degrades all of those involved in its processes.

Finally, since this article focuses on the issue of academic texts written by
NNS, and which have been rejected for publication, there are two further points

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that need raising. The first of these is to make clear the evident fact that many manuscripts are quite rightly declined by journals for their systematically poor level of English, though it also needs saying that native-speaking authors (NS) are no automatic guarantee of flawless language. This dismissal is entirely understandable if, for instance, it affects the essential comprehensibility of the text or else where texts fail to respect purely ‘mechanical’ conventions such as orthographic norms.9 No-one involved in text correction, editing or academic publishing would want to deny that such texts are fairly common. But they are emphatically not my concern here. What I am talking about are texts written in what is now referred to, variously, as ELF, EIL or WE,10 and that, notwithstanding their formal correctness, are not characteristic of native-speaker language. Basically in consequence of this fact, they are deemed by a small but powerful sector to be linguistically inadequate. The second point is that my approach might be said to tar all academic journals with the same brush, in the sense that the argument put forward here appears to suggest that all publications of this kind act in a uniformly detrimental way to NNS authors. This is certainly not the case: a good number of journals already present combinations of articles written by NS and by NNS (and papers written by NNS do not necessarily have to be revised by NS before they can get accepted). In addition, the distinction between native English and international English might not always be clear-cut. I would therefore like to make clear at this point my awareness of the fact that many journals and their editors are now increasingly sensitive to this question and to the need for solutions that obviously defend their journals’ quality and reputation but that also provide NNS authors with opportunities to publish their work. The position that I argue here, however, and notwithstanding this, is that the language prejudices frequently faced or perceived by many NNS authors are still a common experience.11

2. Where’s the problem?

In the Language Advisory & Translation Unit of the Language Service at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, my colleagues and I attempt to ensure that articles written (mostly) in English by the university’s research staff are accepted for publication in the journals to which they will be, or have already been, submitted. Where these texts are plainly unacceptable for this purpose (by which I mean that they are poorly structured, poorly expressed and are characterized by a high number of basic orthographical or grammatical errors), we arrange for translation by requesting a Catalan or Spanish ‘base’ text. Generally, however, having spent their entire academic careers reading and writing research in English, researchers’ competence in this language is strikingly solid. When they choose to send
their manuscripts to us for revision prior to journal submission, our work is often limited to what I would informally call ‘tweaking’: minor modifications of aspects such as the occasional prepositional collocation, certain uses of the definite article, active-passive voice and a policing of some phrasal-verb overuse: all the usual suspects that we habitually round up and lock away when giving a text its ‘native’ feel. Other researchers opt to submit their manuscripts directly to the journal and then contact us with the resulting editorial and reviewer feedback if publication has been denied.

With respect to use of language in the rejected manuscripts, this editorial feedback is not infrequently negative, though it practically never indicates the exact source of its dissatisfaction. Yet often, the very same texts that are deemed to be linguistically poor are, most confusingly for their authors, formally impeccable. And, in that sense at least, they communicate their results and observations with precision and clarity; in other words, they carry out their task of effectively disseminating results and debating consequences in a perfectly adequate manner. On the other hand — hardly surprisingly — these texts rarely match the complex linguistic control of work written by native users of a similar professional and academic standing, particularly in the somewhat nebulous area of style. And since this is the case, the indications received from the journal are usually that the language of the manuscript must be brought into line with expectations of native usage (however indeterminate this notion may be) in order for a re-submission to be given further attention.

Publication — that hard currency of academic advancement — therefore often requires our researchers to modify their text to ‘native standard’ (many journals include a note to the effect that NNS authors should have their work revised by an NS, along the following lines: “If not written by a native speaker, it is advisable to have the paper checked by a native speaker”). This is probably a rather costly task; it is certainly time-consuming. At this point, in their understandable anxiety to ensure publication, some researchers come up with a Spanish or Catalan version of their text and request a translation from us (though, since their work is very often written from the outset in English, this may even mean that these authors will first have had to translate their English text back into their own language!). Alternatively, the indications we receive from those who decide to revise the English in their manuscripts are that we should make as many language modifications as possible, so that a comparison between the rejected and resubmitted versions of the text would reveal considerable correction activity, even where considerable correction is not at all required, as my comments on tweaking have already suggested. It hardly needs saying that this is something of a pantomime.
2.1. Sample texts and comment

As a means of contextualising this problem, I present a series of very short academic texts from a variety of ambits, paired into original and corrected excerpts. The texts cited are fragments, although they are basically representative of the language level and characteristics found throughout the larger texts from which they have been taken. Though varied, they all share the fact of having been initially rejected for publication on the grounds of insufficient level of language; subsequent revision of this language led, in every case, to successful resubmission. A comparison between the original versions and their revised counterparts will obviously show that the texts have been adapted to native requirements; my concern here, however, is not really to engage with the details of the modifications made — a process that is anyway never definitive or final — though in the following section I give a brief review of certain differences between the two versions. But, with all respect to the position of Turner (2004), I would like to draw attention to what I see as the mostly entirely acceptable language of each one of the original versions. For what I assume are obvious reasons, I do not identify the authors.

Examples of NNS texts and their NS-revised versions (modifications indicated in bold in the revised versions).

(Text 1, original) However, intellectuals such as the well-known writer and journalist Eugeni d’Ors (1881–1954) defended the promotion of high level basic research as the only way for the scientific take-off of the country, and looked at Flammarion in a more critical way. In fact, in 1910 — the foundational year of the SAB—, Alfred Lorenz a bookseller from Leipzig offered to the Barcelona City Council the possibility of purchasing a large number of research books belonging to the personal libraries of a group of German University professors.

(Text 1, revised) However, intellectuals such as the writer and journalist Eugeni d’Ors (1881–1954) defended the promotion of high-level basic research as the only way for the country to develop scientifically, and regarded Flammarion in a more critical way. In fact, in 1910 — the year the SAB was founded — Alfred Lorenz, a Leipzig bookseller, offered Barcelona City Council the chance to purchase a large number of research works from the personal libraries of a group of German university lecturers.

Comment: the revised version modifies forms in the original text such as “the scientific take-off of the country” and “the foundational year of the SAB”, reflecting perhaps a certain tendency in formal, written native English to avoid overly truncated forms, as well as the corrector’s attempt to counter the higher frequency of genitive forms in Romance languages, an issue that is also present in Text 3 (see
below). The revised version also modifies the original “professors” to “lecturers”, in accordance with UK English university nomenclature.

(Text 2, original) With the supervision of the Rector of the University, some political and military authorities, a great number of amateurs in physics, mathematics, geography, astronomy, as well as a crowded audience, professor Jardí lectured on the scientific bases of the pendulum, providing some experiments on its oscillation movements. Other members of the SAB answered all sorts of questions posed by the numerous public.

(Text 2, revised) In the presence of the University’s Vice-Chancellor, political and military authorities, many amateur physicists, mathematicians, geographers, and astronomers, as well as a crowded audience, Professor Jardí lectured on the scientific bases of the pendulum, reproducing a number of experiments on its oscillatory movements. Other members of the SAB answered a range of questions from the public.

Comment: The revised version, also adapting the lexis of the original text to its intended UK readers, opts for the more traditional “Vice-Chancellor” (which, for this context, was the author’s intended meaning, though I recognise that — for some UK institutions — Rector and Vice-Chancellor are separate positions); the quantifier “some [political and military authorities]” has been entirely removed, the reviser possibly feeling that it was pragmatically inadequate or insufficiently precise for a formal written context, and “a great number of amateurs in physics...” and “all sorts of questions” have been modulated to the tonally less colloquial “many amateur physicists” and “a range of questions”, thus bringing the text into line with the perceived requirements of a more formal level of style.

(Text 3, original) The existing evidence supports the idea that academic entrepreneurs have fewer managerial skills and industry experience than their counterparts, which reduces their firms’ performance. On the other hand, the organizational-learning literature suggests that the “Scientific Method” as an exemplary way of learning. Since academic entrepreneurs are more familiar with this method, they will learn faster than non-academic ones. From a longitudinal dataset, we compare the Total Factor Productivity (TFP) growth of 104 university spin-offs and 73 new technological firms created by non-academic entrepreneurs. The results confirm that, at the starting level, the TFP is lower for university spin-offs than for the other start-ups. Consistent with the premise that the academic entrepreneurs learn faster than other entrepreneurs, the estimated annual growth rate in TFP of university spin-offs is higher than in the other start-ups.
Existing evidence supports the idea that academic entrepreneurs have less-extensive managerial skills and industrial experience than do their non-academic counterparts; this inhibits the performance of firms managed by academic entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the literature on organizational learning suggests that scientific methodology is an exemplary learning approach. Since academic entrepreneurs are more familiar with this, they should learn faster than their non-academic counterparts. From a longitudinal dataset, we compare the Total Factor Productivity (TFP) growth of 104 university spin-offs and 73 new technology firms created by non-academic entrepreneurs. The results confirm that, at the outset, TFP is lower for university spin-offs than for the other start-ups. Consistent with the premise that academic entrepreneurs learn faster than other entrepreneurs, the estimated annual TFP growth rate for university spin-offs is higher than that for other start-ups.

Comment: The original version opts for the so-called Saxon genitive in “firms’ performance”, which — with minor syntactic changes — is modified in the revised version to “the performance of firms…”, perhaps reflecting a certain tendency in formal written English to limit the use of such possessives in written contexts when pertaining to inanimate substantives. The revised version also opts to modify the original’s “[s]ince academic entrepreneurs are more familiar with this method, they will learn faster than non-academic ones” by replacing the indicative “will” with a modal “should” (interestingly thereby establishing a slightly different causal connection between the expressed notion of familiarity and the consequent likelihood of learning), possibly feeling that the context requires a degree of tentativeness. The pro-form “(non-academic) ones” is changed to “(non-academic) counterparts”, again presumably reflecting the need for a higher degree of formality.

As Mustar et al., (2006 p. 304) points out, previous studies that focus on University spin-offs have not used longitudinal data. They stress that this kind of analysis will produce a better understanding about how they evolve. For filling this gap and testing whether there is an initial disadvantage from academic entrepreneurs which is reduced over time, we construct a secondary unbalanced panel data composed of 104 Spanish university spin-offs and a control sample of 73 Spanish independent start-ups with the financial data available from 1994 to 2005.

As Mustar et al. (2006, p. 304) point out, previous studies that focused on university spin-offs did not use longitudinal data; these authors stress that longitudinal data analysis will provide a better understanding about how university spin-offs evolve. With a view to bridging this gap and to testing
whether academic entrepreneurs have an initial disadvantage that decreases over time, we compiled a secondary unbalanced data panel of 104 Spanish university spin-offs and a control sample of 73 Spanish independent start-ups, using available financial data from 1994 to 2005.

Comment: The revised version changes the original’s “[f]or filling this gap and testing…” to “[w]ith a view to bridging this gap and to testing…”, preferring the standard collocation “bridge” + “gap” and clearly feeling a need — in this context — for an introductory phrase of purpose (with a view to/in order to, etc.). It also changes "previous studies that focus… have not used longitudinal data" to “studies that focused… did not use”, a tense modification thought necessary, I suppose, to align the meaning more fully to the adjective “previous”.

(Text 5, original) Typhoid fever is a systematic infection caused by Salmonella enterica serotype typhi (S.typhi). In Spain during 2006 the incidence was 82 cases, 17 in Catalonia (a rate of 0.21 per 100000 inhabitants). The prognostic depends on the speed of diagnosis and the treatment. Factors such as the age, the nutritional state, the serotype of Salmonella, and the presence of complications can affect it as well. These are diverse and more frequent in endemic areas, gastrointestinal hemorrhage (1–10%), gastrointestinal perforation (0.5–3%), neurologic affection (2–40%), disseminated intravascular coagulation, pneumonia, hepatic or splenic abscess, hemophagocytic syndrome, pericarditis, endocarditis, haemolytic uraemic syndrome or pancreatitis among others with a very diverse incidence.

(Text 5, revised) Typhoid fever is a systemic infection caused by Salmonella enterica serotype Typhi (S. Typhi). In 2006, the incidence in Spain was 82 cases, of which 17 were in Catalonia (0.21 cases per 100,000 inhabitants). Prognosis depends on speed of diagnosis and treatment. Factors such as age, nutritional status, Salmonella serotype and the presence of complications can also affect the prognosis. Complications are diverse and more frequent in endemic areas; these include gastrointestinal hemorrhage (1%–10%), gastrointestinal perforation (0.5%–3%), neurological effects (2%–40%), disseminated intravascular coagulation, pneumonia, hepatic or splenic abscess, hemophagocytic syndrome, pericarditis, endocarditis, hemolytic uraemic syndrome and pancreatitis with very diverse incidence.

Comment: the revised version, as with that of text 3, systematically irons out a nonstandard overuse of the definite article (“the age, the state…”), in application of conventional native rules of article usage. It also opts, throughout, for the use of the <-e-> spelling in forms such as “hemolytic” and “hemorrhage” in order to give coherency to the text.
To many, the tone and form of the modified versions may appear more suitable, more academic, more correct. The English, some might say, is proper. But if we ask ourselves whether the original versions are comprehensible, broadly representative of the lexical expectations of their particular field and sufficiently adequate in tone to comply with the requirements of formal written language, the answer — I would say — must surely be ‘yes’. Which brings me to suggest (though, as I mentioned in my caveat at the outset, I recognize that this particular sample of texts is extremely small) that insistence on full linguistic compliance with standard — native — English may not always be primarily concerned with assuring comprehensibility, or suitability, or adequacy of tone, since clearly these aspects can usually be managed successfully by non-native authors. Instead, what I posit is taking place, both in the case of the (non-)publication of these particular texts and also at a more general level, assuming these cases to be a microcosm of a far broader phenomenon, is a power game that makes use of the criteria of language nativeness as a form of filtering. This facilitates swifter access to publication for those texts that directly conform to this criterion, yet restricts this access for other texts that — whilst correct, understandable, precise and effective — do not, and indeed cannot, meet these requirements. Why this should be the case, that is, what the objectives of this ‘game’ might be — setting aside empire-related conspiracy theories — comes down to what I see as the almost instinctive belief that natively produced English is the only ‘correct’ form of the language and therefore the only form that should be circulated as ‘valid’. This belief is held by many native speakers themselves, though it is also shared by other stakeholders in any enterprise or activity that may benefit from promoting such a perspective; it is typical, I suggest, of people who are — or perceive themselves to be — gatekeepers of a very determined form of the English language. It corresponds to an unwillingness to accept that English is no longer the exclusive property of native English speakers, and that its use, modification and even its evolution now lie in large measure in the hands, or minds, mouths and keyboards of millions of users for whom English is not a first language. Native speakers cannot at one and the same time benefit from the globalisation of their language (which, if we are to be fair, ought also to allow for an equally global ownership) yet refuse to validate as acceptable those forms of this globalized language that may contradict their distinctly insular criteria.

2.2 Researchers’ views

To draw this section to a close, and as a way of giving some sort of voice to a party very centrally involved in all this but who nevertheless is usually silent, I would like to include a number of remarks made to me by Catalan and Spanish researchers in my university on their experience of language-related editor and reviewer
feedback. These comments were the result of a fairly open question that I sent to a small group of users of the university’s text-correction service (15); the actual responding group was smaller still (5). The question was the following: “Do you have any experience of negative feedback on the language of a manuscript submitted for publication that you feel — or know — to have been unjust and/or motivated by the fact that you are a non-native speaker of English?” Any other comments were also welcomed. This was, it should be clear, decidedly not a scientific survey and I made it patent to the respondents from the outset that, in sharing what I knew to be their concerns in this area, I was in effect offering them an opportunity to give free rein to their feelings. They were all informed that their comments would be included in this account. I mention this to stave off methodological objections and to confess that the sole purpose of this exercise was — as I have just indicated — to give a voice to a sector from whom, on this question that is vital to their own professional development, we rarely have a chance to hear. These remarks are obviously open to the charge that they stem from frustrated expectations. If, so to speak, all the cards were on the table, perhaps we would see that the editorial reasons for rejection were, in fact, entirely justifiable. Clearly, I cannot deny that possibility and this may weaken the value of the opinions being expressed. On the other hand, the respondents cited here are well-established academics, highly respected in their fields and with an enviable publishing track-record in English. Although some residual rancour may linger in one or two of their comments, I feel that the general sense expressed here of being marginalised by factors over which they can never have adequate control (that is, by level of English) is well worth recording, however subjective the result.21 I should also say that I gave the respondents the chance to reply either in English or else in their own language, if they so wished. I also informed them that, whilst their comments would be anonymous, I would use their English verbatim, not least because it is, in my assessment, excellent. All of them opted to reply in Spanish or Catalan, presumably feeling — as their experience has taught them to — that their use of English in formal, written contexts could never be taken entirely seriously, at least not by all native-speaker readers. What follows is therefore my own translation.

Respondent 1: “I have the feeling that, above all from the USA but also from other Anglo-Saxon countries, there’s the idea that we in the Mediterranean have a very, very poor level of English. A level of English that simply doesn’t reach the minimum requirements for writing a decent article. In large part, this view stems from the simultaneously held view that northern Europeans have a better level [of English] than we do, which may well be true but which is also bound up with a whole series of other prejudices that act against us. Many US colleagues have expressed this very point of view to me. I also have the feeling that the fact of the author
coming from France, Spain or Italy means that the reviewer often starts reading the manuscript in question with a marked bias, finding defects and strange constructions where — objectively speaking — there aren’t any”.

Respondent 2: “Being non-native means that you can’t ever ‘master’ English, and — in consequence — that you can’t read research and certainly can’t write articles”.

“Beyond the slightest doubt, I would very much be in favour of publishers/editors providing their reviewers with linguistic guidelines that helped discern between language level and the true scientific validity of an article’s findings”.

Respondent 3: “It seems to me that both reviewers and editors are unable to accept the quality and validity of scientific results if these are not expressed in a highly particular (i.e., native) form of English. But where’s the real difficulty? If the results are genuinely interesting and solid, this should still be patent and valued even if such results are not presented through the best of linguistic media. And yet, in all my many years of research and publication, I have never found a single reviewer or editor capable of discerning between these two aspects”.

“As for my own articles, I am quite sure that the very same expressions written by a Big Name, or (alternatively) by a native user of English, would be accepted with far greater benevolence — or simply accepted without further ado. At the very least, I’m certain that they wouldn’t produce the sort of ‘reviewer hostility’ that we Mediterranean scientists almost always face when we submit the results of our research for publication”.

Respondent 4: “There are editors and reviewers who tend to think that their publication is exclusively for themselves (e.g., a US journal that only seeks articles from US scientists). My feeling is that, although an article may make interesting and valuable contributions, if the authors are non-native users of the language, then they get given very distinct treatment — starting with comments on their use of language”.

“The fact of being a non-native writer of English may not, eventually, prevent you from publishing, but it certainly slows you down!”

Respondent 5: “There is indeed a linguistic imperialism at work, and a scientific one, too!”

The underlying cause of concern in these comments, I think, is the sense of dis-enfranchisement felt by the authors. English is the means by which these scholars are connected — and connect their work — to the broader academic context; the linguistic obstacles placed in their way therefore complicate this connectivity and, in effect, marginalise these researchers from their communities of interest.
I have already suggested that this simultaneously privileges the voices of a minority who are exempt from such obstacles; beyond this, Canagarajah (1996) has argued — for scholars in the developing world — that the alienation of this sector through an unequal exchange of knowledge is ultimately to the detriment of the academic community as a whole, and his views are clearly also relevant to these respondents’ observations. Related to this and as a means of re-empowering such authors, Flowerdew (2008: 77) makes the interesting suggestion that “the judgements regarding the acceptability or otherwise of EAL [English as an Additional Language] authors’ English might be better accorded to individual communities. Thus intelligibility, rather than conformity to ‘standard English’, might be established as a primary criterion”.23

A final and separate consideration, not directly evident from these remarks but perhaps implicit to them, is the issue referred to by Flowerdew (2001: 122–123) of NNS authors’ wishes to express their ideas, findings and insight in their own terms, particularly where this may involve wishing to retain aspects of style that they feel to be in keeping with the rhetorical traditions of their first language, with a consequent sense of frustration at having different modes of expression imposed on them.

3. Suggestions

Given the situation that I have outlined throughout, we either accept the status quo (positively, as something natural and desirable; negatively, as something unfair and discriminatory) or else we begin to find ways that might bring about change. Obviously, I support the second option, but not simply for ideological reasons — though those to me are suitably compelling in themselves. Beyond this, there is the practical consideration that NNS authors vastly outnumber their native English-speaking counterparts, and therefore that publication, viewed as the activity of a sector that depends on attending to its clients’ requirements, may actually be failing rather significantly to attend sensitively to those requirements. And there is also the more abstract but no less important fact that — perhaps as the result in part of a growing awareness of the minority position of native speakers for a language that now has a consolidated global applicability — a shift is taking place in the perception of previously stable distinctions between native and non-native identities, and in the acceptability of these distinctions in the context of a truly international English. As Alan Firth (2009: 164–165) observes:

Concepts are being challenged and revised. For example, the “natural” ascendancy of the exulted native speaker is being openly questioned, and what were once
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taken as both established and useful binary oppositional concepts such as competence/parole, speaker/hearer, L1/L2, acquisition/use, native/non-native, and cognitive/social have of late been rejected by a growing number of applied linguists [here he cites Firth and Wagner, Lantolf and Thorne, and Leung]. Binary oppositions are giving way to hybridities (…) while distinctions that were once viewed unproblematically as clear-cut are increasingly seen as blurred, liminal, and fluid.

I would like to highlight a number of ways in which we might start to dismantle this ‘imperialism’ and replace it with a more realistic, constructive and inclusive attitude towards the validity of English produced by NNS. But, before doing so, we need to engage with an objection that is in a certain sense quite understandable. This is the question of norm generation and the evaluation of usage. Put differently — and from the position of those who, in Firth’s terms, see the ascendency of the native speaker as ‘natural’ — if the very speech community that gives rise to the language hands over its prescriptive role, who can then take on this role in an effective and authoritative way? Who will decide on what is right and what is wrong?24 In this laissez-faire arrangement, surely the only outcomes we can expect are a drastic lowering of standards and a babel-like chaos in which practically anything could masquerade as English. This is a sort of inverse “quis custodiet custodes?”, which — rather fatalistically — assumes that unless the native speakers take care of English, we will then be left with a driverless train hurtling on towards a destiny unknown but surely disastrous. There are many things that we could challenge at this point regarding the perceived need for authorization, ‘correct’ forms or gatekeeping roles, but I would prefer to focus more positively on the idea that the global speech community should never be thought incapable of understanding the need for linguistic consensus in maintaining the usefulness of a lingua franca. It is in everybody’s interest to establish common ground, even accepting (as we must) that language changes, and, in different places, does so at different rates and in different ways. In this sense, it seems inevitable to me that practical initiatives will be developed to support this common ground for users of global English, and that these initiatives will be incorporated into formal and informal teaching and reference materials for the language. Some initiatives and proposals are already under way; the clearest examples are, I think, the development of a core pronunciation syllabus for EIL (Jenkins 2000, 2002) and suggestions concerning core elements in the ambit of ELF lexis and grammar (Seidlhofer 2005). These ideas will gain greater relevance as the NNS communities gradually become more confident in their ability to use English globally without having to unconditionally defer to native norms. In turn, the still-prevalent idea of the “error-prone” language of NNS users should fade, but — as the work of Jenkins and Seidlhofer (and others) suggests — this certainly need not result in anarchy. What it will result in, though, however internally regulated by agreement on the use of core features, is a form
or forms of the language that are at some variance with current standard English, and this can only increase over time. We are still quite some distance from a scenario in which native English, on the one hand, and ELF/EIL/WE, on the other, are members of the same family but no longer on direct speaking terms, as it were, like Dutch and Afrikaans, say; and if that situation ever should arise, it will hardly do so overnight. Whatever the case, if this is to occur, it will happen whether or not we insist on viewing native English as the only truly correct form.

And so, back to English in academic publication and some suggestions. The first of these is that, as a means of moving towards greater acceptance of NNS-produced language, a measure of ‘arbitration’ should be made available to NNS authors in their dealings with journals. In the Language Advisory & Translation Unit, we offer researchers a correction certificate that can be presented to the journal on manuscript submission. This does mean that, as things stand, we have to accept that an NNS manuscript that has not been adapted, at least in some measure, to native English expectations is very unlikely to ever be published; it also means that the certificate — the purpose of which, beyond being informative, is primarily pragmatic — plays to conservative expectations by indicating that the corrector is a native speaker of English. But the certificate has still another function, which we might call pedagogical: it emphasises that the text should not be judged linguistically alongside natively produced language (drawing attention to the unreasonableness of such a comparison) and introduces the idea not of native level but of native-like competence. This is also a concept that we might object to — when will we stop believing that the only worthy ‘versions’ of English are those that imitate its native speakers? — but which is at least a step towards getting those gatekeepers to open up their gate just a little wider. Here is the text of the certificate:

To whom it may concern:

The Language Advisory & Translation Unit of the Servei de Llengües at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona hereby confirms that the document entitled XXX, written in (UK/US) English by XXX has been revised by a native English-speaking professional translator/corrector, and is now deemed to be acceptable, from the point of view of its language. The correction of this document has specifically focused on the grammar, lexis, orthography and syntax of the language used, in accordance with the accepted rules and guidelines for Standard English.

It is evident, of course, that any text written by non-native users of the language is unlikely to achieve the same linguistic effect as a text of a similar nature written by native users, in terms not only of the complexity and variety of its grammar and lexis, but also with respect to the less identifiable component features of its overall style. However, whilst for a limited range of specific items the text may not conform to certain given publishing criteria (depending upon the journal in
question), we nevertheless recognise that the general use of language in the article indicated in this certificate, as defined by broadly applied language-assessment standards such as those of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, is in all other senses of native-like competence.

At a less directly practical but certainly more important level, I would agree with what appears to be a fairly broad consensus in the literature that there is a considerable need for consciousness-raising among journal editors and reviewers in the area of international English. In this regard, there is scope for researchers to develop and disseminate to journal publishers a range of information on ELF language in academic writing, outlining relevant general characteristics and proposing certain ‘non-standard’ features for acceptance. I admit that I have not thought through the precise logistics of this, but I am thinking along the lines of insight provided jointly by various prestigious research sources that has, for example, been consolidated into a single accessible and readily comprehensible report. For example, a common misconception of ELF is that it is a simplification of standard English, understanding this as a negative characteristic. But work by Mauranen (2003, 2006) has shown this to be far from true, with NNS users often — actually as a means of fostering comprehensibility — opting for language that is morphologically and syntactically more complex. Another misconception is that NNS English is detrimental to clarity of understanding. Firth (2009: 149), discussing the pragmatic characteristics of spoken NNS language, reports that it shows “a high degree of interactional robustness, cooperation, consensus-seeking behaviour and affiliation (...) explicit and overt miscommunications are rare, despite variance in language form and proficiency”. Obviously, some of these remarks are not relevant to written language, but, although this lies somewhat beyond my objectives in this discussion and I have not taken the idea any further here, I believe that a plausible case could be made — along similar lines to Firth — for the ways in which the pragmatics of NNS written texts focus carefully on constructing and validating aspects of meaning as a reflection of their authors’ broader, consensual approach to using English. In all events, my point remains the same: highlighting and providing practical examples of the positive features of ELF that counter negative assumptions of its linguistic ‘poverty’ relative to native English would be a very useful starting point in addressing the language attitudes and beliefs of journal editors and reviewers.

Finally, returning now more directly to the consensus referred to above, a number of studies have suggested ways in which the NS/NNS dichotomy in academic publishing could be replaced by a more constructive negotiation between authors, author editors and journal editors, ideas with which I fully concur, not least because, as Ventola & Mauranen (1991) have argued, NS revisers often fail
to adequately comprehend the intention of NNS authors and consolidate this lack of comprehension in the version of the manuscript subsequently submitted to the journal.\textsuperscript{30} Mišak et al. (2005), for instance, propose hands-on training in manuscript editing as a means of improving NNS authors’ writing skills and of drawing attention — both for authors and author editors — to issues of organisation, style, appropriateness and language. Burrough-Boenisch (2003a) argues that editors and reviewers, as “shapers” of NNS texts, be provided with training in language. The same author (2006) forwards the idea that language professionals directly dialogue with journals as a means of clearly determining these journals’ views and criteria on language matters, and she also suggests that training be made appropriate to such professionals’ real needs. Along similar lines, Li & Flowerdew (2007: 100) observe that “it is in the interest of EAL authors to receive editorial assistance in their local scholarly community from systematized partnerships between language professionals and subject professionals, and that academic journals should join in the effort of assisting EAL authors to overcome the English-language barrier in international publication”. These types of ‘systematized partnerships’ are also proposed by Lillis & Curry (2006a), who argue for networking amongst the various agents that may be involved in producing a definitive text.

In short, this sets out a context of collaboration and acceptance rather than one in which NNS authors are perceived — and perceive themselves to be — second-tier contributors. That is, their work could on the one hand be constructively brought into the publication process in a way that aims at facilitating their own voices, and on the other hand, through greater editor and corrector awareness of the validity of NNS language, their contributions could be more broadly accepted as linguistically adequate in themselves.

4. Conclusions

Many currently existing editorial filters, as these concern English, impose an utterly unrealistic threshold onto NNS authors. This threshold often ignores the pragmatic adequacy of texts that it deems insufficient. Although it is obviously entirely justifiable to reject any text that is systematically unacceptable in objectively determinable aspects of its language, the consequence (some might say, the deeper purpose) of these filters is that they also negatively affect that research which, in spite of its broad linguistic correctness and clear communicative effectiveness, does not conform closely to the characteristics of natively produced language. The direct result of this is to slow down the diffusion of such research; the indirect result is to contribute towards a two-tier culture of academic research in which non-native authors form the lower level.\textsuperscript{31} Given the absolute minority of the native-speaker
group, this is — to say the very least — unreasonable. It is relevant to begin asking why, in this ambit, we continue to insist on conformity to native criteria when international English shows itself to be wholly capable of advanced and adequately nuanced communicative effectiveness.

Accepting the need to facilitate a greater publication of articles in international English is not at all to abandon ourselves to eventual linguistic chaos. As I have argued, a global speech community — profoundly interested in maintaining comprehensibility — is likely to show itself capable of adopting those approaches and ideas that contribute towards assuring this. In this respect, agreement on core global features that can be codified and taught as desirable is, effectively, a self-regulatory measure that will help guarantee an acceptable level of stability and similarity amongst forms of NNS English used for international communication.

On the other hand, without dedicated attempts to focus attention on this issue, it is unrealistic to expect changes of attitude from the editors and reviewers of journals that have to date, and often with enormous success, managed perfectly well without feeling the need to address the question of international English. In this regard, I have suggested that there are a number of “approximation strategies” that might be worth trying. These include a form of arbitration between the journals and NNS authors (in the case of this article, my example was the correction certificates that we provide to our clients) that, in addition to validating formal aspects of the submitted text, also attempt to raise awareness of notions such as native-like language and the unreasonableness of assessing NNS texts in the same light as natively produced language. Other approaches might include the attempt by well-respected researchers in the field of ELF to explain to publishers some of the advantageous characteristics of international English, as a means of dismantling prejudices and of encouraging their greater openness to accepting its use. Further still, I have outlined a series of suggestions from the literature that highlight the need for concerted efforts by all agents involved in the production and publication of academic texts, and point briefly to the specific undertakings that these suggestions envisage.

Finally, although I have already expressed some reservation about the use of this term, I would like to conclude with the thought that what might be called the linguistic imperialism prevalent in academic publication — even if evidently not a brutal or violent undertaking — nevertheless mirrors certain aspects of political imperialism in that it is pernicious and offensive. I would even go so far as to say that it degrades not only the authors who are subjected to it but also those who, consciously or not, actually carry it out. We all deserve something better, something more egalitarian and more genuinely accepting of the lingua-franca quality of International English in contexts such as academic publication. Many of us in positions of linguistic arbitration are indeed — as far as ‘proper’ English
is concerned — “native here and to the manner born”. But our often rather too-unquestioned assumption that this form of English must naturally predominate, and the attitudes and actions that then derive from this assumption are, I would suggest, “a custom more honour’d in the breech than the observance”.

Notes

1. In fact, what I call a double task was seen by Van Dijk (1994:276) as “the triple disadvantage of having to read, do research and write in another language”.

2. I am aware that the expression “global lingua franca” is by no means to everyone’s liking and that it generates some controversy, not least because serious challenges can be made to the plausibility of such an idea. I use it here, however, simply to mean that English currently occupies a central position in international communication, though not necessarily exclusively nor one that is always seen only as an advantage. For a fuller and very helpful contextualisation of related terms (“World Englishes”, “English as a(n) [International] [Global] [World] Language”, etc.), see Seidlhofer (2005).

3. Ventola & Mauranen (1991:457), citing research by Swales (1987), whose estimated figure has by now most probably increased.

4. The term is Braj Kachru’s (1985), of course, and describes the use of English around the world through reference to inner, outer and expanding circles. The inner circle represents those speech communities for which English is a first language; the outer circle refers to speech communities for which English is a second language (sometimes occupying a position as an ‘official’ language for those communities in addition to their own first languages); the expanding circle refers to those speech communities for which English is a foreign language or lingua franca.

5. Less formally, this question has also been raised by Canagarajah (blog post of 19/10/2010: http://www.personal.psu.edu/asc16/blogs/TQeditor/), who refers to work by Murata & Jenkins (2009) and Mauranen & Ranta (2009).

6. Burrough-Boenisch (2003a) refers to those who modify the final form of an NNS text as “text shapers”; Lillis & Curry (2006b) use the term “literacy brokers”. These terms tend to refer to “author’s editors” (sic, Shashok 2001), that is, to agents directly manipulating the text itself, as opposed to reviewers, whose linguistic role may well be more purely observational than interventional.

7. For criticism, see particularly Bisong (1995).

8. In response to this, see Phillipson (1997).

9. This issue is further addressed from the standpoint of journal editors in Flowerdew (2001), and from that of NNS authors in Mišak et al. (2005).

10. ELF: English as a Lingua Franca. EIL: English as an International Language. WE: World Englishes. For further comment, see footnote 2.
11. For instance, Flowerdew (2001:121–122), reporting his informants’ opinions, speaks of “their particular difficulties in achieving publication” with a feeling by some that there is “the possibility of intentional or unintentional discrimination against NNSs on the part of [certain] journals”.

12. That might appear obvious, but it is worth recalling the evident fact that manuscripts are rejected for a host of reasons other than language use. Sadly, even native English-speaking authors have some experience of this…

13. See Lillis & Curry (2006b) for a description of how NNS-authored texts are “brokered” in preparation for publication; see Turner (2004) for the view that communicative effectiveness alone is an insufficient criterion on which to base academic publication.

14. Fairly recently, in addition to the fabled rejection slip, authors often also receive another piece of information from the journal. This is that, whilst the language of the manuscript in its current form is not suitable for publication, and with the objective of helping authors who are not native speakers of English, the journal in question now offers an English-Language Correction Service. This provides professional and externally validated assistance with texts that have yet to be accepted. However, all costs incurred in this correction process are at the authors’ own expense. The implicit message here is, I think, that publication is *almost* within grasp. For a small fee, of course. It might even be said that this fee is the cost of a temporary membership of the “Native Club”.

15. However, see Kaplan & Baldauf (2005) for a fuller analysis and problem categorisation of the language produced by NNS authors in manuscripts submitted to scholarly journals (based on a corpus of c. 50,000 words).

16. “There is a need for a much more robust conceptualisation of language work, particularly in the university context, and EAP [English for Academic Purposes] needs to reconsider its current emphasis on communicability at the expense of accuracy and precision. After all, these are precisely values that typify academic discourse” (Turner 2004:109).

17. In relation to this sort of intervention, see especially Mauranen (1997) on the notion of language-revisers’ “hedging”.

18. Annually, however, our service revises some 400 academic texts, and these fragments are entirely representative of the sort of NNS language we receive.

19. “This raises important questions about the precise nature of the activities [that brokers and scholars studying textual intervention by such brokers] are taking part in (and why)” (Lillis & Curry 2006b:29).

20. Since the 1984 British Council 50th Anniversary Conference, this has become known as the Quirk-Kachru debate. Quirk (1985), holding the view that the US/UK variant of English be the norm for communication and teaching, defended “a single monochrome standard” (1985:6); Kachru (1985), on the other hand and in emphatic opposition to this position, argued that “native speakers [of English] seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardisation” (1985:30).

21. For a far more detailed, validated assessment, see Flowerdew (2001:122). Referring to his own 1999 survey of NNS academics in Hong Kong with respect to their need to publish in Eng-
lish, he remarks that “nearly a third of the respondents felt that prejudice by referees, editors and publishers placed NNSs at a disadvantage when writing for publication”.

22. Naturally, such discrimination is only possible if a (double-)blind reviewing process is not applied.

23. See also footnotes 5 and 16.

24. A related issue here, but one that I do not develop further in this current discussion, is the question of exactly what constitutes an error in academic writing. This is broadly discussed in WE and ELF literature; for publication-related discussion, see for example McArthur (2001), “Error, editing, and World Standard English” and Garner (2001), “Calling for a truce in the descriptivist-prescriptivist wars”.

25. I recognise, of course, that the comparison between Dutch and Afrikaans and native/non-native English is somewhat unreasonable both as regards the historical period of separate evolution and the issues of language extension, speech communities, range of applicability and lingua-franca status.

26. This may seem a rather catch-all way of describing the elements covered in the correction process. However, I have seen rejection letters to NNS authors that dismiss their manuscripts for allegedly containing “serious errors in grammar, spelling, sentence structure and word choice” (editor’s feedback, journal not named), which makes you wonder if there was anything even remotely salvageable. On several occasions, these comments were followed by information on the publisher’s own correction services (see footnote 14). Whatever the case, the purpose of the certificate that we provide is to point out that the language of the text in question is error-free as regards its orthographical and lexico-grammatical properties. In this way, we attempt to ‘defend’ it from the automatic and a priori assumption that an NNS manuscript will, in all probability, inevitably be linguistically deficient. In this respect, the certificate articulates this ‘defence’ in the same terms often used by journals themselves to reject NNS texts, and this appears to me to be an obvious advantage to its wording.

27. See, for example, Ventola & Mauranen (1991); Flowerdew (2001, 2008); Burrough-Boenisch (2003a, 2006); Lillis & Curry (2006a, 2006b); Li & Flowerdew (2007).

28. This proposal is, of course, open to the objection that any report attempting to give a comprehensive insight into the core features of International English would be complicated to draw up, extremely lengthy and rather complex; in this sense, it might be a somewhat unappealing document to anyone other than a language specialist. That said, equally obviously, it could also be adapted to purpose.

29. Further and on-going confirmation of these characteristics was presented by Mauranen in the closing address of the 11th International CercleS Conference, Helsinki, September 2010.

30. A somewhat different view on text correctors is presented by Shashok (2001:113), who emphasises “the valuable part they play in the process of communicating scientific research”.

31. See Canagarajah (1996). See also my Section 2.2 for additional comment.
References


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