

A Universal Tongue?



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Did you know that, as of 2023, there are more than 7,000 known spoken languages in the world (Eberhard et al., 2024)? Did you know that the population of the world is more than 7 billion, and increases every day? Did you know that out of that 7 billion, only about 1.5 billion speak English (Statistics and Data, 2024)? To most, those facts are common knowledge. To everyone, those facts are only a Google search away. However, here is a fact you may not know-English is widely considered to be the language of science. This means that nearly all journals with national or international impact accept submissions in English only (Malayil, 2024). This initially may make sense, but I would like to take some time to dig deeper and fully understand some of the history behind this, the implications of it, and how we as a community might work to create a more informed, inclusive environment.

The English language began in Europe with the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who ultimately settled in Britain. Over time, the language underwent modifications due to common differences in dialect and, ultimately, became what we know it to be today. However, beginning in the 16th century, English spread throughout the world through British colonialism (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). The British established occupation of North America and the Indies and brought with them their language and culture. Deeming their ways “superior” over the culture of the native inhabitants of these regions, the British imposed these ways upon the native people of their colonies. Soon, English became the common tongue in most of North America, the Indies, and in some places in every time zone of the world (Crystal & Potter, 2025). This process happened repeatedly, until the British Empire reached its

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end in the 1960s (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020).

The 1960s were not all that long ago, and our world today still sees the effects of the spread of the British Empire. In most schools across the world, English is taught in addition to the native language. I am from India, and I can say that anyone who went to school there even briefly had to learn English while they were in school. Many Indians who stayed in school for a while are fluent in English, while those who did not get the privilege to finish school either do not speak English at all or are nowhere near fluent. This is the case in many non-Western countries around the world.

It is in this light that I would like to challenge the thought that English should be the common language. It is true that it is convenient to have some kind of common spoken language in case of travel, but does it make sense? When people come to America or go to London, they are generally expected to be at least semi-fluent in English. Non-English speakers are constantly required to accommodate English speakers, so why do we not accommodate them? However, let's look even deeper into this, and examine it from within the light of our community of scientists.

If a scientist wanted to publish their research in an accredited journal, it would need to be submitted in English. The only exception to this would be a regional journal, where only regionally relevant research could be published. For example, a botanist in Kashmir could find something in the agricultural system there that affects the growth of Kashmiri chilies, they could publish their research in Hindi in a regional journal that would only reach farmers in Kashmir. This makes sense.

However, what happens if that same botanist found a chemical in Kashmiri chilies that could be a component in a cure for a worldwide illness? What if that research was so important that pharmacologists and doctors everywhere needed to know that information to effectively treat their patients? What if that botanist didn't

speak English? How would that research get published? Would we then expect them to learn English just to publish their paper? Why can only English-speaking scientists get their work out there?

Science and research are two fields in which diversity is vital to our mission. We cannot grow in knowledge and understand the world around us if we remain a uniform community. This is something we know and can understand well. In our constant fight for diversity and open access to information, language should not be a barrier we are unwilling to overcome. Restricting the language of information to one means that the amount of information out there is reduced and restricted.

In today's world, we have access to translators for almost every language. We certainly have access to translators for all the most common languages. If a paper is submitted in a different language, what's the harm in hiring translators for that paper? If journals are worried about mistranslation or misleading information being inserted, then a process similar to peer reviewing could be used, where multiple translators work on the translation and check each other's work.

In our beautifully diverse world, there is so much learning that can happen. As scientists, our mission and our purpose is to find as much information as possible about the world around us, and language should not be a barrier to sharing this information with each other. While a common tongue can be helpful and convenient in some situations, sticking exclusively to that convenience is not always the right way to do things, and is not at all conducive to our mission. A person does not need to speak English to have accurate information or to share their research. If research is accurate, tested, original, and includes all the aspects we look for in articles that are read or published, it shouldn't matter where the person is from or what language they speak.

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