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The Elephant in the Room: Embodied Effects of Anglo-American Hegemony and Linguistic Injustice in Academia

Maria Rodó-Zárate

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
maria.rodo@upf.edu

Abstract

Anglo-American hegemony and linguistic injustice in academia have gained increasing attention in recent years. Following the work of feminist geographers and the call for embodied knowledge production, I aim to contribute to these debates through a reflection grounded in my own experience. Through ten examples, I show how linguistic hierarchies materialise in everyday academic practices and argue that linguistic injustice is not only an abstract phenomenon but also an embodied one that shapes lived experience in academia. As such, it should not be understood as an individual problem of "competence", but as a structural form of epistemic inequality that conditions who can speak, be heard, and produce legitimate knowledge. Recognising Anglo-American hegemony as an axis of intersecting systems of power in a Eurocentric, neoliberal, gendered, racialised and classed academia opens the possibility to redistribute linguistic labour and to foster a more situated, richer and less unjust academy.

Keywords

Anglo-American hegemony, geography, language, intersectionality, lived experience

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Introduction

Professor*: Your English is not good enough to present your paper in our seminar.*

This was the answer I received after asking a Professor if I could present my doctoral research in the seminar she was leading at a university in the US while I was in a visiting stay. The topic of my research perfectly fit the seminar, as she told me, and my study was advanced enough to be discussed. But my English was not good enough even though I had studied English at school since I was six years old. Even though I could read and write papers in English, have an informal conversation, attend courses, give a lecture and be in a meeting with her. It happened fifteen years ago and I still remember her eyes looking at me, her voice and her tone. I can still hear my silence after it, realizing that she would not let me present my work because of *my* English. And, to this day, I still remember that sentence whenever I present a paper at an 'international' conference, thinking that my English has not improved that much since then, that maybe my English is still not good enough to give this presentation.

Many scholars have focused on linguistic injustice in academic publishing and research (see Lillis and Curry 2010; Hanauer et al. 2019; Duszak and Lewkowicz 2008; Lunny 2019; Catala 2022), which relate the linguistic issue to discussions on broader processes of exclusion. Specifically, it has been shown that linguistic prejudice exists in academia as a way of valuing some forms of language and communication more positively than others (see Morales-Gálvez and Soler 2025). Within Geography, the Anglo-American hegemony in the discipline has received attention too (see Garcia Ramon 2003; Aalbers 2004; Helms et al. 2005; Imhof and Müller 2020). Yet, the extent to which Anglo-American and linguistic hierarchies structure academic knowledge production contrasts with the relatively marginal place they still occupy in disciplinary debates nowadays, making them the elephant in the room of the discipline.

The size of this elephant becomes particularly clear when looking at the quantitative data presented by Martin Müller (2021) in relation to the current situation in publishing in Geography. The author shows that 95 per cent of handbook editors, 93 per cent of handbook and progress report authors and 90 per cent of editors are from Anglophone countries. And 82 per cent of editorial board members and 70 per cent of journal authors are from Anglophone countries too. Most of the non-Anglophone scholarship is from Western European countries, while Global Souths and Easts are almost completely absent. As the author argues, linguistic privilege (the advantage of commanding a specific hegemonic language) reduces the diversity of thought and is a central element of epistemic struggle in the production of geographical knowledge (Müller 2021). Gutiérrez and López-Nieva (2001) also argue that, based on their research on the affiliation of authors and editors, there is not a truly global forum or internationalization in human geography. These numbers cannot be explained merely by linguistic abilities but rather reveal a structural configuration of epistemic power within the discipline. These concerns have also been addressed in emerging discussions on translation in geography, which show that translation is a key site where epistemic hierarchies are produced, shaping which knowledges can travel, under what conditions, and which remain untranslated or marginal (Husseini de Araújo and Germes 2016; Davies 2024; Ferretti 2025).

Specifically, within feminist geographies and geographies of sexualities, which are my main areas of research, authors such as Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon (2003; 2012) have shown how the Anglo-American hegemony not only situates English as the hegemonic language, but it also establishes guidelines for intellectual debate, valuing certain academic traditions and not others. Garcia Ramon, Simonsen and Vaiou (2006, 1) also argued that there is "an almost undisputed dominance of Angloamerican geography, in terms of theoretical approaches, topics and ways of "doing geography"' and show how it is specifically applied in feminist geography. The authors showed how in the journal *Gender, Place and Culture*, in 2006, 7,3% of the authors of articles were not based in Anglo-American universities, 2,19% of book reviews were in languages other than English and English sources in the bibliography reached 95%. More recent contributions suggest that, despite the global expansion of feminist geographies, these dynamics have not been overcome. Instead, the field continues to be shaped by uneven geographies of knowledge production and circulation, in which Anglo-American academic spaces retain a privileged position (Blidon and Zaragocín 2019).

Likewise, other authors have shown how Eurocentrism permeates social sciences (Kulpa and Silva 2016) and how inequitable power geometries and locational privileges develop in specific scholarly traditions (Browne 2015). Silva and Ornat (2016) explain how Anglo-American epistemic privilege silences academic discourses that come from the peripheries and show how economic interests of the publishing industry also affect the everyday experiences of scholars. Moreover, as Garcia Ramon and Estévez Vilariño (2015) argue, these dynamics are also shaped by the neoliberalisation of universities, where evaluation systems based on citations and impact are closely tied to English-language publication circuits, mutually reinforcing Anglo-American hegemony.

Following the works of feminist geographers and the call for embodied knowledge production, I contribute to these debates through a reflection based on my own experience as a way of embodying the implications of Anglo-American hegemonies and linguistic injustice in academia. They are mundane experiences that often go unnoticed but that reproduce and are a manifestation of geopolitical power relations in knowledge production. These experiences are a source of knowledge and show the internalization of those dynamics and the normalization of specific forms of power. This follows Eaves, Gökariksel, Hawkins, Neubert and Smith's (2023, 2) call to explore "comfort/discomfort as political emotions that reveal and help unsettle power asymmetries". Following this line, examining the uneven and embodied geographies of discomforts can also be a point of departure for rendering visible power geometries and the everyday and material consequences of inequality.

Many of the reflections I will share came out in conversations with Southern and Eastern European and South and Central American colleagues at the peripheral spaces of academic meetings. As a researcher who works on the emotional and spatial dimensions of intersectional inequalities, I regularly participate in discussions where power relations in academia are the focus of the debate. I have had the chance to create relations of mentorship and friendship with both non-native and native English-speaking colleagues, who have been central for navigating academia and of great help, joy and pleasure. However, the effects of the Anglo-American hegemony are rarely at the center of the formal, official, and visible discussions on decentering knowledge production. On the contrary, the Anglo-American hegemony is usually one of the top topics among those who do not have English as a principal

language in any corridor at a conference or event. We identify ourselves through our accents, surnames, faces, affiliations or the 'being lost' expression in a talk. We chat about the (small) percentage of the keynote conference that we understood, about the difficulties of following a whole session or about how tired we are of listening to and speaking another language for a whole day. These kinds of informal exchanges become key sites for collectively reflecting on our positionalities and navigating unequal academic structures, pointing to the importance of relational and everyday forms of reflexivity in knowledge production (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015).

Here I don't intend to speak for "*we*, the Non-Native English Speakers". Our experiences are diverse. It is not the same being a non-native English speaker from Southern Europe, as I am, than from Colombia, Japan, Senegal or Sweden. Anglo-American hegemony does not operate in the same way across different geographical and epistemic contexts. As decolonial approaches have long shown, contemporary hierarchies in knowledge production are embedded in broader colonial relations that continue to shape global inequalities between epistemic traditions (see Mignolo 2000; Quijano 1997; Grosfóguel 2006; Lugones 2007; Espinosa et al. 2014). Therefore, in the Global South, Anglo-American hegemony intersects with longer histories of coloniality, while in Europe it is shaped by historically privileged Eurocentric traditions. In this sense, while some academic traditions are peripheralized within Anglo-American circuits, this peripheralization cannot be understood in isolation from the historical and ongoing privileges associated with European knowledge production (Houssay-Holzschuch 2020). At the same time, Europe is not a homogeneous space. Multiple hierarchies shape knowledge production across the continent, including enduring East–West asymmetries within European academia (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2016). Moreover, relations of power and domination also operate within states, particularly through linguistic hierarchies that marginalize certain languages and the knowledges articulated through them (Garcia Ramon and Estévez Vilariño 2015).

Context matters, and so do our intersectional positions and our trajectories. Who can afford the amount of time, resources, and effort required to learn English to a certain degree? The mobility required to study or work in an English-speaking country is conditioned by many factors such as migratory policies, dependency bonds, economic conditions, care responsibilities, political commitment or interpersonal relations which impact people in many different ways depending on their positions. Everyone's experiences are also configured by classed, racialized, gendered, sexualized, aged and other power dynamics in academia. My experience is shaped by intersecting positions of privilege and oppression, and unfolds in an in-between space within the hierarchies of knowledge production through which Anglo-American hegemony operates. From this position, I reflect on how these hierarchies materialise in my (partial and situated) experience of navigating academia.

Can non-native English speakers speak?

Me*: What if I am asking something the presenter just explained and I didn't understand?*

Not being able to clearly understand and confidently express yourself in English is a limitation to participation in academic events. It also has to do with missing relevant information (or the fear of it), the intellectual and physical fatigue it produces and the insecurity of not being able to elaborate and express your ideas in their full complexity.

English as the 'common language' is something generally taken for granted in the academy, which excludes many (and specific social groups) from entering the discussion and voicing their own ideas. Moreover, besides being a discriminatory practice, this exclusion is precisely what prevents the ideas that may challenge Anglo-American hegemonies in knowledge production from being expressed, heard and, ultimately, taken into account.

Cultural and linguistic hierarchies

Colleague*: What language do you speak to your children?*

Me*: Catalan.*

Colleague*: And your partner?*

Me*: Catalan too.*

Colleague*: Why don't you speak Spanish or English to them?*

Writing, talking, and reading in English is what is generally considered relevant and what has (and brings) recognition and impact in academia. Not only in the Anglo world or in an 'international' context. Also in non-Anglo contexts, an article in English, a collaboration within Anglo-American academic circuits or an invited presentation to an Anglo university is usually what is considered as the most prestigious and what counts for promotion. Beyond publishing dynamics, it has an effect on the consideration of other languages, and specific meanings for minoritized ones. Writing, singing, or teaching in my language was forbidden in my country until less than fifty years ago. And the struggle against the minoritization of Catalan is still an ongoing one. Language is related to political and historical processes of domination as well as to cultural identity, collective memory, and community bonds. Erasing this diversity in academia also implies unrooting the research we are doing. Therefore, linguistic hierarchies are not only related to the differences that might exist in the proficiency people may have in English. It also has to do with hierarchies about who we are and with whether our history, culture and language matter at all. It has to do with cultural and political imperialism and with what ideas, theoretical frameworks, epistemologies, ways of writing and of explaining our research count as relevant (and valid) and which ones don't.

The unmarked Anglo-American context and my situated claims

Reviewer*: How is gender constructed in Barcelona?*

The imperialistic dynamics of travelling concepts are unidirectional. The center is the only place where theory can be developed, and the peripheries are seen as those places where it is applied, tested or where particular contributions based on specific case studies are produced. Would a reviewer ask the author to develop "how gender is constructed in NYC"? Epistemic hierarchies make a regional tradition become universal compared to other knowledges considered to be local. Situatedness is generally only applied to the difference, and is only asked to be reflected on by the marked ones, such as women and racialized people. But the Anglo-American privilege is also a position, and scientific production developed in this context should also be considered as partial, situated and specific, not as universal or context-less. I have read dozens of articles and books where North-American authors do not make explicit that they are writing on issues that are only based in the US or

on academic discussions that are mainly taking place there. Books and articles written by authors that just forget that writing from the US and being native-English speakers is profoundly conditioning their perspective, so it should also be an issue to reflect on regarding situated knowledge.

Defining the canon and importing debates

Colleague*: Papers that I publish in top journals just fall down like a stone. I have assumed that if I don't move to the US or UK, I will never be part of 'the conversation'*.

Anglo-American hegemony is a crucial element for understanding how the canon is established in a discipline; what the accepted, pertinent and innovative theoretical frameworks are, and who is allowed to participate in its definition. Non-Anglo scholars are usually left out of it, only complementing the topic with (and from) their situated perspectives, with a peripheral role that cannot shape the core elements of the ongoing conceptual or theoretical debate. These dynamics also imply the growing insignificance of non-Anglo traditions and a tendency of importing Anglocentric debates to other regions, thereby imposing political, theoretical, and epistemological discussions that may have no connection with local politics. So, it is not only about adding non-Anglos and their perspectives to the discussion. It is about changing the center too. It should not be only about adding non-Anglo reviewers so that non-Anglo authors can have their article reviewed by non-Anglo peers and their papers can be 'added' to the journal. It is also about asking non-Anglo scholars to review the work of Anglo scholars so they can point out the Anglo-American biases that might be present in their research. And it is also about translating articles and books written in other languages into English, reading them, engaging with them, citing them, and adding them to our syllabi.

The Anglo standard and the epistemic filter

Reviewer: *A significant difficulty hindering acceptance of this paper at present is the poor use of English*.

Many non-native scholars send their manuscripts for proofreading before submission. In this case, we used the proofreading service, which cost around one thousand dollars, offered by the same Anglo-American journal to which we were submitting the paper. And yet, there was still a *poor use of English*. It shows the existence of an Anglo standard, a very specific, narrow, and culturally situated form of English that defines what counts as "good academic writing." It is not inaccurate; it just does not conform to a particular linguistic style that has been normalised as universal. But the problem is bigger: Writing with traces of another linguistic world instantly signals non-Anglo and activates a set of biases and prejudices. *Poor English* functions as a proxy for lack of legitimacy and authority as a scholar. After all, how many of the most cited contemporary authors who have shaped the ways we think today wrote in "poor English"? This not only penalises non-native speakers but also privileges native ones, whose texts are more likely to be read favourably simply because of their linguistic fluency, not because of their intellectual contribution. The very style of English thus becomes an epistemic filter that conditions not only who is heard, but whose ideas are considered worth listening to.

A stranger within

Reviewer: *The author doesn't engage with the wide and various audiences that it could and shows unfamiliarity with relevant literature.*

As a hypothetical exercise, imagine that in order to complete your PhD it is required that you publish in, let's say, a Brazilian top journal. You are based in a US university and your knowledge of Portuguese is just what you learned at school. Now think about looking for and reading Brazilian scholars, familiarizing yourself with their academic culture, theoretical traditions, identifying key authors and their context. Then think about writing a paper in Portuguese on a case study based in Minnesota and having to enter into dialogue with Brazilian authors. You can cite research in English from US scholars that have worked on the same topic and context as you, but it will be considered *irrelevant*. Imagine that you get to do it. Not once but dozens of times. You have learned Portuguese, spent some months Brazil, you have attended conferences there and met Brazilian scholars. You have also been teaching in Portuguese at your US institution, to native English-speaking students and about US geography. But it is not enough. You still feel like a stranger in a place where you are asked to act as if you were an insider, as if you were part of the same community of scholars. But you are not. In the end, you are not sitting around the table where the discussion is taking place. You might be quoted as a particular case study, but you are not taking part in the main conversation.

The unjust distribution of labour and benefits

Colleague*: I was accused of self-plagiarism because I translated parts of my own article, for dissemination reasons, into my own language.*

Learning English can be very expensive and time-consuming, as it is translating, proofreading, accessing journals and books or attending 'international' conferences. Consequently, linguistic injustice has to do with the uneven access to information, resources, networks and jobs, which is itself a form of inequality too. The labour and resources involved in becoming fluent in English should also be considered economic and structural barriers to academic participation, not simply matters of individual linguistic abilities. Moreover, beyond the efforts of learning a language, there is the labour of learning the geography, history, culture, way of expressing, writing and working in the Anglo-American context. It's not just learning English; it is about learning an entire different (academic) culture. And once all this work has been done, there is another layer of labour, because you have been producing knowledge in a language that is not that of the place where you live, teach, disseminate your work, and seek to have an impact. And this work is rarely funded, recognised or even understood within Anglo frameworks.

Networking and informality in academia

Colleague*: No, I am not going to the conference dinner because it will be in English.*

Informal conversations require the use of vocabulary that is not generally related to the semantic field of your research, in which you might feel more confident. Moreover, slang and cultural references used for informal talk are not universal. Social events, conference dinners or chatting in a corridor are crucial moments for creating networks, affinities and sharing

information that may translate into work opportunities, recognition, better labour conditions and, also, citations (just think about how many authors in your bibliography you know personally). But who feels confident to go to a restaurant with native English-speaking colleagues when, too many times, you have been the only one that was not laughing because you didn't understand a joke? Or when you know you will feel lost in too many conversations? Informal encounters tend to be exclusionary spaces for non-native English speakers, those spaces where you explicitly feel that you don't belong.

The bartenders of the knowledge production industry

Colleague 1*: I am working at the University of Sheffield.*

Colleague 2*: Oh! I was in Sheffield last year for a seminar. Say hello to Prof. Smith! And you?*

Me*: I am a lecturer at the University of Barcelona.*

Colleague 2*: Oh! Bar-ce-lou-na! I was there ten years ago with my friends. I loved the beach and the wine. And it was always sunny!*

Some peripheries are also those places where knowledge is not supposed to be produced but where those who produce knowledge go on holidays or even retire. This process of 'holidayfying' some places reduces the scholars of those places to the bartenders of the industry of knowledge production. Who would ever produce cutting-edge research in a building by the sea where it's sunny almost every day of the year? Have you ever thought that there are great universities and researchers in places like Tenerife? Peripheries are considered as consumers of the knowledge that is produced in Anglo-American contexts, exotic or fun places to visit before or after an international meeting, and maybe places where to collect "exotic" data, but not places where to meet renowned scholars or where to listen to new perspectives and theories that can change the way you do *your own* research. In these geographies of knowledge production, those of us who live and work in such places become the party organizers of the academic world: we host those who arrive to enlighten us, applaud, apply their theories in our projects and recommend restaurants to them when they ask us for a *typical* place to have dinner.

English and stupidity

Me*: So, you are going to collaborate with him, congratulations!*

Colleague*: What? I said yes and smiled but I didn't understand anything of what he said!*

Me*: But why didn't you ask him to repeat it?*

Colleague*: I did it! But the second time I felt stupid asking him again…*

In academia, where you are supposed to be smart and eloquent, and defend your ideas with authority and convincingly, when you speak English, you just feel stupid. A shameful experience that makes you feel responsible for your inability to do what seems to be a natural task. The difficulties associated with expressing complex ideas and arguments in English in monolingual contexts might make you feel that you are unable to speak at all. The richness and nuance with which you can express in your native language, the body language attached to it, the ability to construct a convincing argument, the speed with which you relate

ideas and find the specific word might be lost even if you are fluent in English. So, it's not just about learning vocabulary and grammar, it's about learning where you can use certain expressions, tones, and registers. And it's also about the words in which you think, your cultural references and the complexity, agility, humor, beauty and connection with others you lose when expressing in a foreign language. It could happen to anyone speaking another language, but the Anglo-American hegemony also implies that it always happens to the same ones. We can never speak or write confidently at any 'international' forum. It's always the same ones feeling stupid.

From reflection to action

These are structural dynamics, reinforced in the current neoliberal context of academia, and not easily transformed. Yet there remains room for interventions in everyday practices. A first step might be to become aware of the existence of Anglo-American hegemony and of the ways in which we may contribute to reproducing it. One of its most evident and measurable dimensions is that of citation politics, understood as a reproductive practice through which disciplines are formed around certain bodies and knowledges, making them appear as central while others are systematically rendered absent (Ahmed 2013). As an exercise to reflect on how we reproduce these dynamics, I propose to do what I call the *Anglo-Hegemony Test*. It is simple: just take the list of references from a recent article or book you have published and go through each reference, one by one, asking a set of questions.

First, language: is the (original) work that I cite written in English? Second, publication context: is it published in a journal or by a press based in an Anglophone country? Third, authorship: is the author a native English speaker, based in an Anglophone institution, or trained primarily within Anglo-American academic circuits? Mapping references along these lines allows for a rough differentiation between works that are fully embedded within Anglo-American academic circuits, those that are only partially connected to them, and those produced outside these linguistic and institutional circuits. A further step would then be to consider how you engage with these latter works (if any): whether they are mobilized as central to the argument, shaping concepts and theoretical frameworks, or whether they remain at the margins of the text, cited as examples without substantially informing the analysis.

What this exercise (in which I would score rather poorly) often reveals is not only the overwhelming weight of Anglo-American knowledge production, but also the ways in which even when other voices are present, they may occupy marginal or tokenistic positions. This exercise can be extended to the syllabi we teach too and can also be approached through an intersectional lens, attending to the gender, race, age, origin, or other social positions of those authors who meet none or only some of these criteria.

The point is not to individualize blame for these choices, since citation practices are also shaped by the expectations and requirements of journals, reviewers and disciplinary conventions that require us to engage with certain authors in order to be legible (and published). Yet this does not mean that citation practices are beyond our reach. Rather, it calls for greater awareness of how we reproduce or unsettle these hierarchies through our own practices. One of the first things we can do, within the realm of citation practices, is to engage

in what Mott and Cockayne (2017) describe as a *conscientious engagement* with the politics of citation, that is, a deliberate and reflexive approach to how we select, mobilize, and give visibility to certain voices over others. This implies not only diversifying who we cite, but also how we engage with those works, allowing them to shape our concepts, arguments, and analytical frameworks.

However, in order to engage with these other works, there are some more broader interventions that might be necessary. These include revising publishing practices (Müller 2021) and translation directions (Husseini de Araújo and Germes 2016); expanding networks, collaborations and co-authorships; and engaging more directly with academic contexts beyond Anglo-American institutions. At the same time, academic hierarchies are also reproduced through everyday practices of participation: conferences, seminars and other academic settings tend to operate through what has been described as "speech-as-presence", privileging certain voices while marginalizing others (Hanrahan and Billo 2023). Rethinking how participation is organized, creating spaces that take linguistic diversity into account, and transforming everyday academic interactions thus become equally important steps. It may also involve learning other languages and doing visiting stays in non-Anglo countries. Perhaps democratizing the experience of feeling stupid from time to time could also generate a little more awareness of the embodied effects of inhabiting academia through a language that is not your own. Ultimately, any transformation requires recognizing that the effort of mutual understanding across languages cannot fall solely on non-native English speakers, but must be more equally distributed.

Final thoughts

Researcher*: And yet another axis?!*

Eurocentrism has been, and remains, a fundamental axis in shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge, deeply rooted in colonial histories that continue to structure global inequalities. Decolonial approaches have foregrounded how knowledge production and circulation are structured by enduring colonial relations that position certain epistemic traditions as authoritative while others are systematically marginalised (Naylor et al. 2018; Naylor and Jazeel 2025; Zaragocín et al. 2022). Intertwined with that, the dynamics of knowledge production are also gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed. In geography specifically, there has been a historic marginalization of 'othered' people and epistemologies (Oswin 2020). Some authors have recently analyzed the gender of gatekeepers in the current Anglophone publication landscape (see Schurr et al. 2020) and have shown the failure of geography to make a significant progress towards racial justice (Faria et al. 2019).

Yet the answer is *yes*. It has long remained the elephant in the room, but language must be understood as an axis that shapes lived experience in academia, and as such, it produces exclusion and discrimination. Crenshaw (1991) defines structural intersectionality as the way in which social and institutional structures produce qualitatively different experiences across intersections. And linguistic hierarchies should be considered one of those structures. It is not only an abstract phenomenon, it is embodied, and it shapes who can access and participate in academic knowledge production. In this sense, attending to language is not about adding another axis, but about making visible a dimension that already structures the boundaries of knowledge production.

Letting Anglo-American hegemony enter our 'list of axes' does not make Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, colonialism or white supremacy less important. The incorporation of (not that) "new" axis shouldn't be seen as threatening the "old" ones, because it does not intend to minimize nor deny the others. Instead, it helps us understand them, and their interrelations, better. Actually, considering the complexity of intermeshed power relations could be an opportunity to establish a real dialogue with critical voices that could greatly enrich academic discussions, make the lives of some of us a little bit easier and contribute to a richer and less unjust academy.

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