The Languages of Medicine

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Medicine uses one lingua franca but speaks with many tongues. Just as Latin emerged after the Renaissance beside the regional European languages as the unifying language of the healing arts, so has English now assumed a leading role as the international language of medicine. International communication among clinicians and scientists is now almost exclusively in English. Nonetheless, patient contact, communication among colleagues within individual countries, teaching, and some scientific activity are still conducted in the local mother tongues.

As late as the beginning of the 20th century, medical science still used three languages to a roughly equal extent: German, English, and French. The turn to English, which took place at different speeds in different areas since the middle of the last century, has put an end to linguistic confusion and is thus to be welcomed, from a worldwide perspective, as a positive instance of globalization. There are, nonetheless, some negative consequences for scientific culture outside the English-speaking world. This article will deal with the extent of the secular trend toward English and its consequences for scientific readers, writers, and journals.

The anglicization of medicine

The following three examples will concretely illustrate the degree to which international medical publishing has become anglicized:

- In the last 130 years, the percentage of English-language journals in the American journal catalog Index Medicus/Medline has risen from 35% to 89%; the percentage of German-language journals in Index Medicus/Medline, on the other hand, has decreased from almost 25% to 1.9% ([1], data obtained by the author). In 1879, 284 journals in the Index Medicus were published in English and 201 in German. Last year, Medline, an online journal database that grew out of the Index Medicus, listed only 98 journals in German, a number that pales in comparison to 4609 in English. Like the German language, French, too, has become far less important on an international level (figure 1). Roughly 9 of every 10 new journals included in Medline at present are in English.

- Navarro analyzed the lists of references for articles published in three major German-language medical weeklies (the Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift (DMW), the Schweizer Medizinische Wochenschrift, and the Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift) and found that the percentage of references in German declined from 80% to 90% in 1920 to 10% to 20% in 1995 (figure 2) (2–4). He obtained comparable results for journals in French, Dutch, and Spanish (5–7). In journals in all of these languages, English-language articles accounted for 80% to 90% of the references. This trend continues today: in 2007, 80% of the references of scientific articles in Deutsches Ärzteblatt were in English.

- The dominance of English among leading scientific journals is even more overwhelming. The Journal Citation Report lists the journals that are most frequently cited (those with the highest impact factor, IF), i.e., the journals that are most highly respected around the world. Among major medical journals in the category "Medicine, General & Internal," the highest-ranking publication in a language other than English is Medicina Clinica (Barcelona), in 44th place on the list. Of the 103 journals that are listed in this category, only 13 are not written (entirely or primarily) in English, and only three of this small group are in German: DMW, Medizinische Klinik, and Der Internist. The impact factors of these 13 journals added together yield 5.2 – less than the impact factor of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, which reaches 9th place with a score of 6.9. The most commonly cited journal is the New England Journal of Medicine, whose impact factor, 51.3, is almost 100 times as high as that of the DMW (0.58), the highest-ranking German-language journal in the category. These findings apply to other areas of medicine as well, as shown, e.g., for gynecology by Lenhard et al. (8). As the impact factor of a journal is derived from the number of times its articles are cited by other journals around the world, it follows that a journal can only have a high impact factor if it is well understood internationally. Therefore, English-language journals have a built-in advantage.

NEW HEADING: "FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK"

Items will appear from time to time under this new heading to address topics chosen by our scientific editorial department. They will be concerned either with concrete aspects of the scientific articles appearing in Deutsches Ärzteblatt (e.g., conflicts of interest or the evaluation of the CME units) or with general questions of medical publishing, as in the current article.

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