

In all languages? How minority languages are excluded from scholarly publishing

English may have become the lingua franca of academia, but there are good grounds for preserving linguistic diversity in scholarly communication, including public engagement and impact generation at a local level. Several initiatives have emerged in recent years that seek to promote multilingualism in scholarly communication as an expression of bibliodiversity, among them the 'In all languages' campaign. But to what extent are minority languages excluded from scholarly publishing infrastructure and initiatives that seek to challenge Anglophonic hegemony? This is the provocative question we ask in this opinion piece, drawing on our experience of publishing the world's only academic journal in our minority language. We draw attention to three challenges faced by publishers of minority-language academic content: additional steps in the editorial workflow, exclusion from scholarly publishing infrastructure and ineligibility to apply for funding. We end with a plea for a conception of 'balanced multilingualism' that extends beyond 'national' languages other than English.

Keywords

scholarly publishing; minority languages; balanced multilingualism; bibliodiversity

The rise of English as the lingua franca of scholarly communication has undoubtedly brought benefits, not least the facilitation of global knowledge exchange.¹ But there are good grounds for publishing research in languages other than English, too, at least in some fields (notably the social sciences and humanities), some of the time. Academia's Anglophonic hegemony puts non-native users of English at a significant professional disadvantage.² Other reasons for preserving linguistic diversity in scholarly communication relate to public engagement and generation of impact: to paraphrase the Helsinki Initiative on Multilingualism in Scholarly Communication, if we want to keep locally relevant research alive, create greater impact beyond academia, and protect scholarly communication infrastructure in local languages, we need to promote research 'in all languages'.³

Some publishing business models seem to be more conducive to a linguistically diverse scholarly publication ecosystem than others. We lack precise data. But of the over 120,000 active scholarly journals that are not registered as open access in the Ulrichsweb Global Serials Directory, only 30% are listed as publishing text in at least one language other than English.⁴ Among the journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) that charge an article processing charge (APC), the figure, at 28%, is broadly similar.⁵

Just as it is for subscription-based and APC-based journals, English is the most common publication language for so-called diamond open access journals (that is, journals that make articles available without restrictions and do not charge an APC). Diamond open access, however, is a veritable Tower of Babel compared to these other models: of diamond journals listed in DOAJ, 67% accept publications in at least one language other than English.⁶ In recent years, moreover, diamond open access communities



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"if we want to keep locally relevant research alive ... we need to promote research "in all languages""

2 have made a point of embracing multilingualism as an expression of cultural diversity in publishing, or ‘bibliodiversity’.⁷ Multilingualism features prominently in recent attempts to outline the values and principles that diamond journals and platforms share. Take, for example, the Action Plan for Diamond Open Access drawn up by Science Europe, cOAlition S, OPERAS, and the French National Research Agency.⁸

Discussion of multilingualism in scholarly communication has, understandably enough, centred on official ‘national’ languages other than English, especially languages such as German and French whose status as languages of scholarship once far exceeded that of English. But what about minority languages, those languages without official status at state level that are traditionally used by a minority of a country’s population in a particular territory (to use the definition – not universally accepted – given by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages)?⁹ Many of the reasons provided for promoting official national languages in scholarly communication – preserving locally relevant research and generating greater impact outside of academia, for example – are just as valid for minority languages. Indeed, an even stronger case could be made for publishing relevant research in minority languages than for other languages because of the role such efforts can play in language revitalization and reclamation. Support for minority-language publishing, for example, is among the pledges that signatories to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages can sign up to.¹⁰

‘Diamond open access, however, is a veritable Tower of Babel compared to these other models’

Let us imagine that a small, but nonetheless highly engaged, group of academics who are also users of a minority language wish to publish research in the language of their community, with the enthusiastic support of that community. The diamond open access model would quickly emerge as the only option for a small-scale, community-driven, academic-led initiative such as this. But how far would these academics get? Does promotion of multilingualism in scholarly communication extend to minority languages? Or are minority languages excluded even from the diamond model of scholarly publishing?

For us at Septentrio Academic Publishing – the diamond open access publishing service operated by UiT The Arctic University of Norway – this is more than just a thought-experiment. In March 2023, we took over as the publisher of *Sámi dieđalaš áigečála* (in English: *The Sámi Scientific Journal*), the world’s only academic journal that publishes exclusively in Sámi languages.¹¹ Founded in 1994 and jointly owned by the Sámi University of Applied Sciences and UiT The Arctic University of Norway, *Sámi dieđalaš áigečála* is an interdisciplinary peer-reviewed academic journal that publishes content chiefly about language and culture but also topics within the social and natural sciences. It is registered as a level 1 journal in the Finnish Publication Forum and as a level 2 journal (the highest rank) in the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers. The primary language of the journal is Northern Sámi, which has an estimated 25,700 speakers according to Ethnologue, but it also publishes in two other Sámi languages: Southern Sámi (600 speakers) and Lule Sámi (2,000 speakers).¹² Prior to its transfer to our platform, articles were published on a custom WordPress site.

‘Or are minority languages excluded even from the diamond model of scholarly publishing?’

In what follows, we reflect on some of the barriers to scholarly publishing in minority languages, taking our experience of onboarding a minority-language journal as our starting point. Quite apart from the fact that we are dealing with small numbers of speakers – and, in the case of two of the languages the journal publishes in, very small numbers – we maintain that there are particular socio-cultural, technological and financial challenges to publishing academic content in these lesser used tongues that raise important questions of equity.

Challenge 1: extra steps in the publishing workflow

Many minority languages – historically considered ‘backwards’ and a hindrance to national unity – have faced centuries of marginalization in favour of dominant, national and colonial

3 languages. The result has been the exclusion of minority languages from public life, stigmatization, and a major decline in use.¹³

Of course, journals publishing content in minority languages have a smaller pool from which to recruit editors, authors, reviewers and readers. But they may also have to work harder to reach them. As a result of historical marginalization, minority-language users themselves may need convincing of the suitability of their language for scholarly communication. A minority language, moreover, may lack a fully developed academic discourse. And even where such a discourse does exist, users may need support to be able to read and write it fluently because of a perceived or real lack of competence.

The editorial team of the minority-language journal we publish works closely with authors, language consultants and language authorities to provide contributors with training in academic writing in these languages and to develop scientific terminology where required. These are not inconsiderable additional steps in the publishing process, which largely go unrecognized.

'A minority language ... may lack a fully developed academic discourse'

Challenge 2: exclusion from scholarly publishing infrastructure

Scholarly communication is dependent on a wide range of systems and tools, such as publishing platforms and discovery services, to meet the needs of researchers and their audiences. In many cases, this infrastructure has been developed with major national languages in mind. In some cases, this means that minority-language content is effectively excluded from scholarly publishing infrastructure.

A particular sticking point is the requirement to use two-letter language codes (the so-called ISO 639-1 standard).¹⁴ The two-letter standard was developed for the world's major languages and initially approved in 1967, but a three-letter standard (ISO 639-2, superseded by ISO 639-3) representing all known languages has been in use since 1998.¹⁵ Best current practice when identifying languages on the internet is to use two-letter codes where available, and three-letter codes if not.¹⁶ Unfortunately, scholarly publishing infrastructure does not always permit three-letter codes.

The main language in which our minority-language journal publishes is fortunate enough to have a two-letter language code. This means that we are able to correctly identify the language of articles on our publishing platform (we use Open Journal Systems). When we export article metadata to Crossref, we can tag the language appropriately.¹⁷ And we also have the possibility to increase the visibility of content in this language by registering the journal as a title that publishes in this language in, for example, DOAJ.

'we are unable to identify the language of articles that use these languages appropriately on our publishing platform or when we export metadata to Crossref'

The two other languages the journal publishes in, however, are among the several thousand languages globally that are not so fortunate: they lack a two-letter language code. As a result, we are unable to identify the language of articles that use these languages appropriately on our publishing platform or when we export metadata to Crossref. Nor can we state that the journal publishes content in these languages in DOAJ or other registers and abstracting and indexing services. These articles may have a small potential audience, but it hardly helps that they are all but invisible to that audience.

Challenge 3: omission from funding mechanisms

Operational costs for diamond open access journals publishing in minority languages are unlikely to be any lower than for journals publishing in English or other major languages. And yet, journals that publish in minority languages are not always eligible to apply for sources of funding from research institutions or government agencies designed to boost multilingualism in scholarly publishing by promoting languages other than English as scientific languages.

4 The Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, for example, recently invited open access journals in the humanities and social sciences that publish content in Norwegian to apply for financial support for the period 2024–2026.¹⁸ While journals that publish in the national languages of neighbouring Sweden and Denmark were eligible to apply, no mention was made of minority languages in the criteria. It has only become clear after the application process that our minority-language journal is eligible to receive funding, and it is, at the time of writing, on the waiting list for support.

We lack an overview of how local-language journals are funded, but it is clear that Norway is not alone in omitting minority languages in calls to apply for financial support. Sweden, for example, funds Swedish-language journals in the areas of health, working life and welfare.¹⁹ Quebec funds French-language journals publishing on topics within society and culture.²⁰ And Spain funds journals in the cultural sphere that publish in Spanish and Spain's other official languages (but not in other minority languages it has signed up to protect under the European Charter).²¹

'Publishers of minority-language content need equal opportunity to access funding streams'

Publishers of minority-language content need equal opportunity to access funding streams, both those that already exist and – should initiatives such as the 'In all languages' campaign pay off – any future ones that open up.

'In all languages'

Nobody is suggesting that setting up dozens of academic journals that exclusively publish in a language only used by a few hundred people would ever be sustainable. But we should acknowledge the additional barriers faced by editors of journals that publish content in minority languages, such as the need to provide extra language support to authors or develop scientific terminology in a language. We need to work towards making it technically possible to publish articles in all languages in a way that means they are discoverable for the relevant language community. And we should ensure that journals that publish in minority languages have access to the same or comparable funding sources as periodicals that publish in national languages other than English.

In recent years, several initiatives have emerged that aim to foster multilingualism as an expression of bibliodiversity in scholarly communication. These are surely to be welcomed by all of us who care about linguistic diversity in scholarly communication. It is not entirely clear, however, how minority languages fit into the Helsinki Initiative, with its focus on 'national' languages and 'national' infrastructure. Nor is it clear how minority languages that lack fully developed translation tools might benefit from, for example, the technology-based scientific translation service for scholarly communication proposed by OPERAS.²²

'Multilingualism in scholarly publication will not be "balanced" as long as minority languages are excluded'

What is clear to us, having welcomed the world's only academic journal in our minority language to our publishing platform, is that there is a long way to go before there is equitable access for all languages in scholarly publishing. With his concept of 'balanced multilingualism', Sivertsen proposes considering all communication purposes in different areas of research, and all the languages required to fulfil these purposes, 'in a holistic manner without exclusions or priorities'.²³ Multilingualism in scholarly publication will not be 'balanced' as long as minority languages are excluded.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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To cite this article:

Grange H, "In all languages? How minority languages are excluded from scholarly publishing," *Insights*, 2024, 37: 2, 1–6; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.640>

Submitted on 18 August 2023

Accepted on 15 September 2023

Published on 23 January 2024

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press.