

Shall I Publish This auf Deutsch or in English?

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Abstract

This essay responds to an invitation by the editors of *Sociologica* to write about publication strategy.

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English is the lingua franca of academia. This essay is published in an Italian journal, the authors of the symposium are French, German, Dutch, Danish, Chinese, Canadian and American. Despite this international reach and the location of the journal in Italy, none of the contributions are written in Italian, French, Dutch or Chinese. Of course, the editors would have been surprised if a contributor had submitted a manuscript in any other language but English.

What is to be taken for granted in an international collaboration like this symposium, the convention that the conversation takes place in English, is in many other instances a much more tricky issue for those whose linguistic competencies go beyond their mother tongue. And in many ways the idea that English would indeed be the lingua franca of sociology is an illusion at best.

I set off from my own experience, but the issues I raise go way beyond personal idiosyncrasies. I am German, studied mainly in Germany and have always held academic positions at German universities or research institutes. At the same time, I hold a master degree from an American university and spent altogether four years — first as a student and later as a researcher — at American universities. More recently I have spent several years at academic institutions in France. From the beginning of my academic journey, I published in German as well as in English. Many of my publications have been translated either from English into German or vice versa, other articles are only available in one of the two languages.

1 Academic Careers

To publish in both languages was a publication strategy recommended to me very early on by my advisers. What is at stake here are the odds of having a successful academic career. But the choices are far from obvious. German is a language spoken in a community of roughly one hundred million people, Germany has one of the most significant traditions in sociology, it has several very reputable sociology journals, a professional association that holds regular meetings, and an academic labor market that has filled the overwhelming majority of positions with Germans. All this speaks for the need of publications in German to succeed in an academic career in Germany. It is by publishing in German that one makes a name for oneself and finds recognition in search committees that consist of German academics who, for the most part, are primarily oriented towards the German academic system with its publications, institutions and networks. In an evaluation of publication practices in German sociology conducted ten years ago, it was found that only 15.6% of publications by sociologists working at German universities or research institutions were published in a non-German speaking country (Wissenschaftsrat 2008, p. 36). This may have changed somewhat over the last ten years, but certainly not dramatically. In German economic sociology, for which I have more recent data, 63% of publications over the last ten years (2008–2017) have been published in German (270 out of a total of 428 publications).¹ For books the number is 81.1%, for journal articles it is 41%, and for book chapters in edited volumes it is 74.2%. German sociology takes place not only in Germany but also in German. A career in German sociology makes it necessary to publish in the language of Goethe.

The need to publish in German finds counterfactual proof — though I can give this only in anecdotal form — in German sociologists who published only (or mostly) in English and experienced great difficulties in gaining positions in Germany, but were able to have successful careers outside of Germany. The need to publish in the countries' language holds in similar ways for all large European countries; countries large enough to have developed self-sustaining professional structures in the discipline. France, Italy, and Spain certainly resemble the situation described for Germany. The situation is different in the European countries with smaller language communities, which experience much stronger push factors to publish in English.

At the same time, publishing “only” in German is clearly not enough. Certainly there are many German sociologists who have never published in any other language but German (and for all practical purposes that means that they have not published in English). But the rhetoric of the internationalization of science offers rewards for showcasing one's ability to also publish in English, especially if such

1. This data is assembled from the website of the economic sociology section of the German Sociological Association (DGS) where authors can have their recent publications listed. See: <http://wirtsoz-dgs.mpifg.de/neuerscheinungen.asp> It is not a complete set of publications in economic sociology in Germany, but covers a large part of it and there is no reason to believe that the language ratio would shift with a more complete set of publications.

publications appear in highly-ranked journals. Publishing in English demonstrates a symbolic capital that increases the author's legitimacy, even if the publications remain largely unnoticed by the "international" sociological community and the community intended to be reached by the author is primarily German sociologists. German sociological institutions buy into a symbolic hierarchy which rewards linguistic reach into the English language and positions American academia at the top.²

Just as significantly, "only" publishing in German is not enough if one aims at recognition of one's work beyond German sociology. If you look at citation rankings based on the *Social Science Citation Index* (SCCI) — which has a global reach but also a bias towards English language journals — you see that there are only a very small number of Germans among the most cited sociologists. In fact, only a relatively small number of non-Americans make it onto this list. Among the 195 sociologists most cited between 1956 and today, there are 12 Germans (6.1%) (Korom, 2018, forthcoming). Many of them are "classical" authors like Max Weber and Georg Simmel whose work has been diffused without much active participation on the part of the authors. That Max Weber became known in the US is due to the work of Frank Knight and Talcott Parsons, not to Weber himself. The other authors — examples would be Claus Offe and Hans-Peter Blossfeld — have written large parts of their oeuvre in English and kept very close ties to American sociology, be it through extended stays at American research universities, presence at conferences or through research cooperations. Such international reach thus demands a dedicated strategy of participating in conversations that are in many cases detached from the national sociological discourse in Germany; a participation that takes place through publications in English but also through physical presence in the institutions and meeting places of the other country. For any publication — be it in German, French or any other language — that is not translated into English, the author knows in advance that it will not be recognized outside of the respective language community. When writing in any other language but English, reach is locally restricted. At the same time, as a German sociologist one cannot take for granted that one's non-German publications are noticed in German sociology. The stronger the institutional integration and the stronger the publication record in the target country, the stronger the recognition of the author's work. The strongest effect is achieved by emigration: Many of the sociologists at American universities are not American by birth but are nevertheless fully part of the professional system of American sociology. Some of them were able to also maintain a reputation in their country of origin, mostly by publishing in their mother tongue as well.

2 Substantive Issues

The question of which language to publish in reaches beyond the issues of career and recognition. It also points to substantive issues. One basic observation is that writing in a second language always comes at the cost of subtlety and linguistic precision. Authors are generally best when writing in their mother tongue. Even more importantly, the language of publication has profound implications for sociology as a discipline, if one understands sociology as standing in an enlightenment tradition, seeing its task as contributing to a better understanding of the social forces actors are entangled in. At the bare minimum, this demands that not only other sociologists in the profession, but also experts and lay people in the public sphere of the community being investigated can read what sociologists find out with their research. That these target publics would read any foreign language research is wishful thinking at best. Writing in Germany in English about aspects of German society insulates sociological scholarship, which then becomes a project driven by a disconnected elite. Cosmopolitanism easily leads to sociological Globish. Looking at my own publications, I can see that there is one of my research topics, the inheritance of wealth, where my publications are primarily in German. The monograph *Unverdientes Vermögen* has been translated into English, but many of the articles I wrote thereafter on the reform of inheritance law and estate taxation were addressed explicitly to a German audience — the audience I hoped could benefit practically from the insights I could provide. I felt very clearly that if I wrote these articles in

2. It would be interesting to investigate this more closely, for instance with reference to gender differences. Do German female sociologists pursuing an academic career in Germany need more legitimacy through publications in English than their male peers?

English and thus addressed them to a non-German audience, then I would write them differently and the texts would lose much of their significance for the political discourse in Germany.

The rewards coming with publications in English not only have the intended linguistic consequences of increasing the numbers of English-language publications but also unintended substantive consequences. Top English language journals in terms of status are not equally open to any topic, theory or method. This is fully understandable because these journals also operate within a cultural and social realm with its specific concerns and priorities. After all, sociology is not a universal science but investigates cultural and institutional particularities. Thus a German author, aiming at success with his or her submission to an American or British journal, will direct his research at topics salient not in Germany but in the US or the UK. The topic will rather be equal opportunities in the US, than equal opportunities in Germany or Romania. Or it will be at least a comparative research design including the US.

The same holds for theoretical traditions. To find acceptance among reviewers, the work needs to connect to the theoretical and conceptual instruments discussed in the sociological community in which the journal and its reviewers are embedded; contributions that don't meet this criterion run the risk of remaining impenetrable. Sociology is not a universal science. This holds despite the fact that there are authors who are seen to speak universal truths, and their theories are applied to foreign cultural contexts without much thought — Pierre Bourdieu, who is the most cited author in sociology, being the classic example. Some authors have been given this status of a “global ultra elite” (Korom, 2018, forthcoming) — e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, Weber and Parsons — who become divorced from the cultural context that informed their work. The aspiration to publish in English makes researchers especially prone to contribute to this cultural decontextualization of theories. It's a kind of sophisticated twist on the classic anthropological problem of going to meet the native in his context and applying one's own cultural frames.

During the last couple of years I spent much time in France, which allowed me the privilege of also learning the language. I wanted to understand French sociology beyond the French authors from the “global ultra elite” whose work has been translated into German and English. In my observation, French sociology, when compared to German sociology, is even more organized around its own research traditions that primarily take the French intellectual space as its reference point. Some (especially younger) French sociologists regret this and see it as French sociology lagging behind, which should be countered through stronger international openness, including increasing publication in English.³ To be sure, there is much to be said in favor of this. But it can also not escape one's attention that the reason for the originality of parts of French sociology lies precisely in its embeddedness in intellectual and cultural reference points that are different from American, British or Polish sociology and that this originality flourishes in a specific language community. Für die Soziologie ist die Sprache der Publikation alles andere als trivial.

3. Several French sociology journals (*Sociologie du travail* and *Revue Française de Sociologie*) made the move to publish a complete or partial English online editions with translations of the articles published in French. The success of this very costly project in terms of international recognition of the published research is, however, very limited. The reason for this could be that French articles are not only written in French but also use different ways of structuring arguments and order the presentation of information differently. The American standard has not been adopted everywhere. As a result, even the translated text remains difficult to penetrate.

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