

The Foreign Language Barrier in the field of Classics; A comparative study of four scholarly journals, published in the USA, UK, Germany and France / Ida Isaac

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the foreign language barrier in scholarship.

Among information scientists there is general agreement on the major importance of English in the international exchange of scientific information. Data show that a very high percentage of professional communication in the natural sciences is transmitted in this language. Since the German language receded in importance, English gradually became the lingua franca of the world of science. Nevertheless, great quantities of primary scientific material, especially in the fields of technology and applied science, up to this day are being published in many other languages, mainly Russian, German, French, and Japanese.

Almost all studies by information scientists, including those on sociology, have limited their range to publications in English, that is to say, to behaviour-patterns of English speaking researchers. Very little attention has been paid to linguistic preferences among researchers with a non-English background, as compared with their English-speaking colleagues.

The present study approaches the problem of the foreign language barrier on two rather novel fronts. It focuses on the discipline of classics, as an example of the field of humanities, and it deals with authors who publish their research in English as well as in French and German. Even so, it is obvious that the problem extends far beyond the boundaries of the subject matter covered here.

The first question posed is to what extent scholars in their research make use of foreign language material. In other words: what are the linguistic preferences of classical scholars from different countries, as far as this can be observed through the references they attach to their articles.

A second question concerns possible changes over time in this respect.

To pursue these problems, study is made of four renowned scholarly journals in the field of classics. All of them were established to be of a high academic standard. Articles from three periods, with intervals of 15 years between them, are scrutinized in one German, one French, one British, and one American journal. The periods start in 1960, 1975 and 1990 respectively.

The discipline of bibliometrics, specifically citation analysis, is applied and data were collected according to the accepted practice of citation analysis. For each article the frequencies of its references are divided into categories according to languages: German, French, English, and other languages.

Thus a picture emerges of the language-use by classical scholars, including changes over time.

Results show interesting patterns. As hypothesized, the own language, i.e. the language in which the journal is published as well as of the country of affiliation of the article's author, dominates in all four groups of scholars. It is always cited more often than any other language. That is to say, classical scholars do not differ from researchers in other fields in that they prefer to cite sources which were written in their own language.

Other notable findings are increasingly greater use of German citations in USA articles than in UK ones, and a growing use of French for the UK. Finally, the findings show that German scholars are prone to a relatively greater linguistic isolation than their French colleagues: French classical scholars appear to use more German and other non-English foreign languages than German scholars use French and other non-English foreign languages.

It is possible to conclude that the findings show the existence of a foreign language barrier among classicists, as observed through the varying citation patterns in the four periodicals chosen. It appears that each linguistic group of scholars cites own language sources in excess of their hypothetical weight to be expected relative to world production in this field, if one assumes the free flow of information in this context. In other words, even among classicists a preference for their own language-use is striking. After all, their command of languages in general and linguistic aptness in particular may be assumed to be more outspoken than this is the case among researchers in the exact sciences.

It is suggested that practical changes in library management-decisions may eventually result from findings like these. It certainly is advisable to study more periodicals and include other specializations in order to confirm the above findings.

System No.

404785