Native English speakers: Have you ever thought about the privilege that comes with your ability to speak English?

On my recent trip to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, I was struck by the predominance of the English language. It was certainly a great benefit for me, considering my lack of knowledge of Arabic, but it also made me uncomfortable with the imperialistic overtones it carried. English has become the global academic language. Recent studies from Hamel indicate that 75-90% of global-level academic papers were written in English. Many nations, most notably China, require or test their students for English language competency before they are admitted to higher education. Once in higher education, some institutions even teach their courses in English, despite it not being the native language of the country. The reasons behind English’s dominance are rooted in history and it is perpetuated by systems of dominance and oppression that started
long before the present. I want to provide a brief overview of the reasons for this as well as the implications of it.

**Why English Dominates**

English’s dominance has one of its roots in the United States’ status as the first higher education system to achieve what Martin Trow characterized as massification, or a level of participation in higher education reaching over 50%. As a result, the United States is able to exert an outsize influence on academia globally. As other nations reach towards massification to be competitive in the global environment, they often look towards the American model of organization. The United States’ diversified system of higher education ranges from the large research university to the small liberal arts college and the 2-year community and technical and trade schools. These institutions produce a broad range of both pure and applied research at all levels of quality, almost exclusively in English. Further expanding the size and scope of this literature is the participation of the sizeable systems of the British Commonwealth countries, particularly Great Britain itself, and Australia. Acting as regional global higher education centers, these countries spread the use of English globally.

![Figure 1](image)

**From Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise**

In reaching a level of mass higher education first, the United States was able to create academic literature and research of an unprecedented size, scope, and quality. Possessing the most developed system of higher education achieved over decades, and funded federally and
commercially, the United States produces high quality research in sufficient volume to overwhelm the entire system. The publishing industry, and established and respected journals, developed alongside higher education only further cementing the range and quality of research. These publishing houses, predominantly in the English speaking Western world, also produce the rankings of journal quality. Utilizing scholarly article impact and citation studies, which are often a source used in faculty promotion and tenure decisions, these companies (ex. ISI, Corbis) create a closed loop within publishing circles. The companies determine which journals are of the highest quality, which in turn increases competition for these journals (some with acceptance rates below 5%), which results in a further perception of quality and thus cementing these journals at the top of the hierarchy. If developing systems are to achieve a level of quality, they are presented with a choice of participating within these already established systems, or developing their own. The development of these systems takes decades to achieve, and developing systems of higher education across the globe are left with a chicken-egg problem. Developing systems need quality faculty possessing doctoral degrees and advanced publishing systems to produce quality work, but quality work and dissemination methods are needed to produce and sustain high quality faculty and systems in the first place.

General forces of graduate student migration also work to cement English as the academic language of choice. As a result of massification, the United States has a head start in the academic knowledge arms race. Developing systems of higher education, not possessing the resources or infrastructure to produce high quality doctoral students, must often send their citizens to other countries to achieve the education necessary in order to populate their systems. The United States remains one of the top destinations for international graduate study. This forces newly minted academics from other countries to learn English and become socialized in the means of US-centric scholarly production. Those that do return to their native countries (and statistics reveal that this is very few, although the trend is changing and is regionally dependent), often find lower paid positions and infrastructures that are unable to support the level of research
to which they have grown accustomed. This further tilts the table toward the United States, and thus English as a predominate language.

**Negative Implications of English Dominance:**

- It privileges English and Western ideas over those of the local. Sometimes referred to as neo-colonialism, or cultural imperialism, this position recreates and reinforces the old colonial forces of subjugation and power imbalances through the use of language and culture instead of the industrial and economic forces of old.
- It affects the educational systems of the peripheral countries by pushing educational systems to be reformed to include English language literacy as a necessary competency. This diverts educational resources that could be used elsewhere.
- It places higher level learning out of reach for many. Without knowledge of English, high-level academic knowledge is largely inaccessible to vast portions of the world. This results in fewer resources from which to teach and from which to create local knowledge and research.
- It makes it difficult for non-English speaking academics to produce writing of the quality required to participate in some of the top journals across the globe. It also often requires those researchers to adopt the predominant paradigms and methodologies of the Western world.
- It perpetuates English-speaking countries domination of the world higher education rankings, often equating English language use with the quality of an institution. This dynamic further cements English language-speaking nations as the largest hosts to international students. Once studying abroad, many students may face additional adversity and even discrimination due to their status and their language ability. This reinforces the power dynamic keeping native-English speakers in the power position.

**Positive implications of a common academic language:**

- It allows for the freer sharing of ideas and a common academic space from which researchers may work.
- It internationalizes research and the academic profession. If institutions share more freely, a truly global system of higher education may emerge and theoretically academic mobility and quality will increase.
The English language dominates the higher education globally and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The evolution of the United States system of higher education, and the added impact of the vast a diverse British Commonwealth, have created a great source of power from which English has cemented its position as the global language of the University. The publishing industries and systems that grew up alongside them created closed loops of power that maintain the hegemony of the English language. As systems of higher education develop around the globe, they are forced to play within this dynamic. Although a common academic language is not necessarily a bad development, the fact that it is one language currently in use is particularly problematic. The challenge is to create a system that values local knowledge but allows for robust international discourse.