NEW LANGUAGE POLICY AT THE BCDSS

By Imogen Herrad,
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You will not be surprised when I tell you that English is an international language, not only in business and culture, but also in academia. Almost three quarters of all scholarly journals are in English.*[1] (As is, of course, this magazine, which is designed to be read and understood by as many people as possible.) But *which* English? Linguists have known for a long time that there are many co-existing Englishes – Singlish, Nigerian, Cypriot, and Jamaican Englishes, to name only a few. But the standard languages in international publishing are still American (AE) and British English (BE), while all other Englishes are regarded as divergent or non-standard.

The reason behind this Euro-American-centredness is not linguistic: American English is not 'more correct' than Pakistani or Australian English. It is economic: a legacy of the last two centuries during which European and North American countries colonized and exploited large parts of the rest of the world. The vast majority of academic publishers and journals – and *all* of the most influential and prestigious ones – are based in the Global North.[2] Half the market is dominated by just five academic publishers: Elsevier (The Netherlands), Black & Wiley (US), Taylor & Francis (UK), Springer Nature (Germany) and SAGE (US).[3]

This puts an unequal burden on scholars whose first language is not American or British English. Studies have shown that for them, writing can be not only more difficult and stressful, but also more time-consuming.[4] Many scholars whose English is regarded as non-standard employ (and pay[5]) language editing services to 'standardize' their language. If they don't, they face an increased risk of rejection: academic writing in 'non-standard' English is more likely to be rated as poor by editors – regardless of the actual quality of the text.[6]

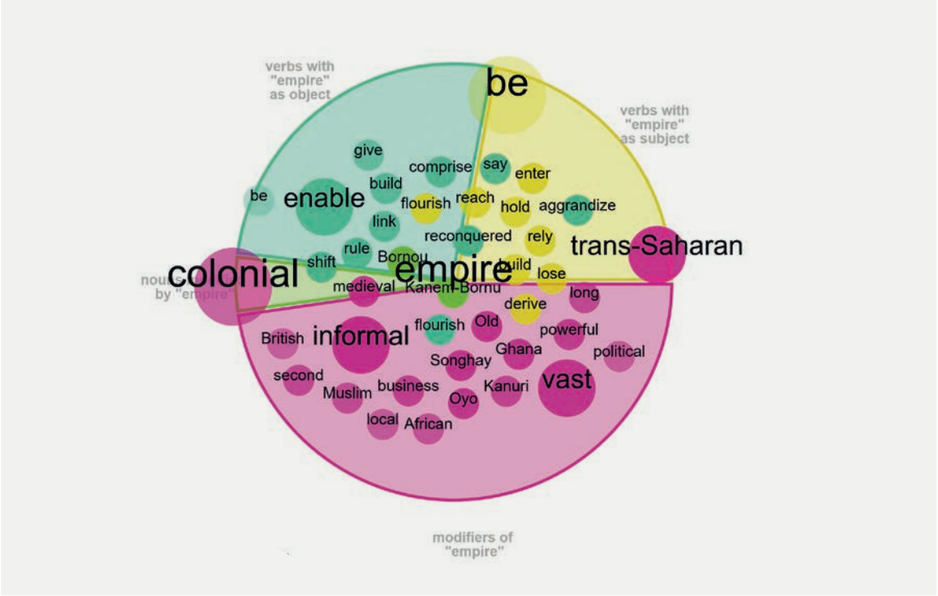
These facts motivated us to implement a new Language Policy. After much discussion between the Publications Team and BCDSS scholars in 2022, we composed the following text:

> With its mission to explore phenomena of asymmetrical dependency, the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) and its publications series work against forms of gatekeeping which may put obstacles in the way of scholarly work in English felt by some to be non-standard. The Center understands language to be intimately connected to power structures and strives to foster an awareness of epistemic dependencies resulting from linguistic dependencies. Given that language is multiply situated and constantly evolving, the editors of Dependency and Slavery Studies do not insist on conformity to the traditional binary standard Englishes (British and American). Our focus is on clarity and the communicative value of English as an international lingua franca. Authors are encouraged to write in their national or regional variety of English.

The policy initially only applied to our flagship publishing series, *Dependency and Slavery Studies*, but after further discussion we have now slightly updated and extended it to *all* BCDSS publications – including the *DEPENDENT Magazine*. That is why you might notice that in future issues, one article uses British spellings and grammar, the next is in Philippine English and the one after that in Canadian English.

You may wonder how we in the BCDSS Language Team – my colleague Kathryn Abaño and myself – now go about our work. We have been trained in the 'standard' Englishes (BE and AE), but what about the others? Have we suddenly become experts in World Englishes? Alas, we have not. But we can build on the work of linguists. The team behind the International Corpus of English (ICE)[7] has been collecting material for comparative studies of English worldwide, and assembled corpora (i.e. very large collections of language as it is actually written, or spoken) of many Englishes. The ICE project includes East African, Hong Kong, Indian, Jamaican, New Zealand, Nigerian, Philippine and Singapore (Singlish) corpora. These corpora can be downloaded as text files from the ICE website, and accessed with a digital text analysis tool.

Say we get a paper by a Nigerian scholar in which we find a passage about which we are unsure, such as the use of 'Kanem Empire' and 'Kanuri Empire' without a definitive article. In BE or AE, we would write, '*the* Roman Empire', '*the* Kanuri Empire'. It is a feature of Nigerian English that articles are sometimes dropped. We find out by going to our text analysis tool, where we activate the Nigerian corpus and type in 'empire'. The tool searches through the 300,000 words in the corpus and shows the contexts in which 'empire' is used. (If you want to get technical, this is a concordance search.) It gives us another two cases of 'empire' without definitive article, but many more where the article is used. So we add 'the' and move on.



A visualization of the results of our concordance search for the word "empire" in the corpus of Nigerian written English.

In addition, we keep an eye out for a new variant of English: ELFA, English as Academic Lingua Franca. Because in fact the largest community of speakers and writers of English are the internationals: non-native speakers who use it to communicate with each other. ELFA is ultimately the language most of us at the BCDSS use. It is a vehicle for communication. So when we in the BCDSS Language Team go through books and essays and articles, our top priorities are correctness – and clarity. We want readers to understand the texts. So sometimes we sacrifice a phrase that may be really nice and artistic, but that is also complicated. And occasionally we may amend a particular use of grammar that is perfectly correct in one variant of English – not to standardize or correct, but to make that sentence as clear as possible, for all readers.

It is still very much work in progress, and we learn as we go along. When we get it wrong (which sometimes we do), we hope that scholars understand.

Imogen Herrad
is translator and language editor at the BCDSS. She has lived in Berlin, London, Buenos Aires and Cardiff as a freelance writer and broadcaster, and currently works on a PhD thesis (in her spare time) about disobedience in ancient Sparta. Imogen has written an essay on decolonizing academic English, from which some of the passages in this article have been taken, for the volume "Invisibilized Agency," edited by Mònica Ginés-Blasi, which will be published in the BCDSS' *Dependency and Slavery Studies* series in 2024.