Does internationalization change research content?

![Table 5: SSCI journals by country in 2007.](image)

Source: Kang 2009, p. 201

Every linguistics undergraduate student is by now familiar with the fact of linguistic imperialism in academic publishing where the pressure to publish in international journals translates into the pressure to publish in English, leaving researchers from non-English-speaking backgrounds at a competitive disadvantage. I have often joked in my introductory sociolinguistics lectures that discovering a cure for cancer and not being able to publish it in English would probably be little different from not discovering a cure for cancer at all. The academic pressure to publish in English is thus old news but I’d never before thought about the fact that there might be more to the story: does the dominance of US- and UK-based journals among the most highly-ranked journals not only constitute pressure to publish in English but also pressure to conduct particular types of research? i.e. is there not only a form effect but also a content effect?

Myungkoo Kang’s article about university reform in South Korea demonstrates exactly that. In the name of globalization and international competitiveness, South Korean academics, just as their colleagues elsewhere, are under pressure to publish in SCI- and SSCI-indexed journals. In South Korean academia, publications in SCI- and SSCI-indexed journals bring financial rewards for faculty, have become indispensable for being awarded tenure and constitute a positive hiring consideration.

In 2007, for example, there were 1,865 journals indexed in the SSCI. 1,585 (79.62%) of these originated in the USA and UK (see table for details). SSCI-indexed “international” journals are thus clearly hugely skewed towards those originating in Anglophone “center” countries. Among Asian countries, 7 SSCI-indexed journals (0.38%) originate in Japan, 5 (0.27%) in China, 4 (0.21%) in India, 3 (0.16%) in South Korea, and one each (0.05%) in Singapore and Taiwan. Even those SSCI-indexed journals published outside the Anglophone “center” countries are overwhelmingly English-language publications. So, the fact that pressure to publish in SSCI-indexed journals translates into pressure to publish in English is obvious.

In order to find out whether it is not only the language of publication that changes with the pressure to publish in SSCI-indexed journals but also the actual research, Kang analyzed articles published by Asian scholars in the top SSCI-indexed journals in the area of Communication. He found that most such articles “framed local
phenomena with American mainstream theories” or “appropriated mainstream theories by redefining mainstream theoretical concepts.” By contrast, only a very small number of these articles attempted to formulate research problems from the local context.

The author concludes that South Korea’s policy for improving research competitiveness (as expressed in pressure to publish in SSCI-indexed journals) actually jeopardizes local/national knowledge production and the formulation of local/national research agendas with relevance to the actual needs of local/national societies. The attempt to foster globally top-ranked social sciences researchers in South Korea constitutes simultaneous encouragement of social sciences researchers to neglect issues within their immediate social contexts.

Kang’s paper is part of a special issue of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies devoted to “Neo-liberal Conditions of Knowledge.” All the contributions in that volume demonstrate how academic “internationalization” in effect means the imposition of English-mediated centralized regimes of knowledge. It is not only local/national languages that are being pushed aside and undermined in the process but, more worryingly, locally informed, locally engaged, and critical forms of knowledge production and dissemination.

Kang, M. (2009). ‘State-guided’ university reform and colonial conditions of knowledge production Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 10 (2), 191-205 DOI: 10.1080/14649370902823355