



# Publication of Ethnobotanical Research in Local Languages

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## Editorial

An issue that many of us struggle with is the language of publication. As native English speakers who also speak other languages, we frequently see problems with translation of ideas, plant names, and cultural philosophies into English. The same is no doubt true of translation from local languages into other major global languages. [However, this very conversation is in English and is drawn from many other conversations that were mostly held in English. Therefore, English is the local language of this particular discussion.]

When we began to produce *Ethnobotany Research and Applications*, one of the issues that was discussed was the language of publication. English is clearly the most widespread language of science (although Mandarin Chinese is more commonly spoken as a native first language) but there is reason to believe that this could easily change in the future. Other global languages that are important to science include Spanish, French, Arabic, German, Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Russian. Other scholarly languages such as Latin, Farsi, Hindi, Urdu, Greek, Italian, Thai and Indonesian are notable for their large literatures. Although there is much ethnobotanical and cultural information held by speakers of the above mentioned languages, much modern ethnobotanical research is being conducted in communities where these languages are either not spoken or where they are secondary to the content of the research. The vast majority of human cultures (not individuals) use languages that are not globalized and are for the most part only important in small localized areas. These local languages/cultures are the context for ethnobotanical studies and therefore deserve more attention.

English was selected as this journal's language because it is spoken by those of us who first formed the journal as well as our largest group of readers and producers of manuscripts. However, we announced our intention to

publish in other languages as well. Since then only a few manuscripts have been received in languages other than English even though many of the manuscripts have dealt with knowledge learned in a local language other than English. We are hopeful that this will change in the future with the promotion of regional or language specific articles and issues intended to highlight the work of scholars from places where English is not the first language or even a language of science. We feel that this is a particularly important matter for those researchers who desire to give back to communities more than research notes or articles in a foreign language, but final print articles in a language that is meaningful in the community.

There are many reasons advanced for and against the publication of ethnobotanical research in global versus local languages. Anthropologists in particular have waged war over this issue. We do not wish to repeat their battles but merely to point out some of the details that are important to ethnobotanists. The arguments that we have heard most often are discussed below.

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### Reasons for not using local languages

There are many good reasons for not using local languages in the writing of scientific papers. These appear to cluster into issues affecting the quality of the science and issues affecting scientists. Both are important.

Issues affecting quality of science:

1. Universal understanding of research is achieved when all scholars can read the same language.
2. Opportunity for comparative metadata studies occurs when results are published in a common global language.
3. Vocabulary of scientific discussion is absent or limited in many languages so publication in a global language allows the author to use the vocabulary of science within its (science's) cultural context.
4. Future researchers (and members of local cultures) benefit from archives of global language literature. They might not be able to read a local language or understand it if fluent speakers/thinkers no longer exist at the time of their research in the future.
5. Using global languages allows for more open exchange of ideas.
6. Using global languages promotes international understanding of cultural differences and understandings.

Issues affecting scientists:

1. Publications in peer-reviewed journals in a global language are more prestigious.
2. Publications that are in a global language are easier for readers to access and therefore be read and referenced, thus encouraging circulation of the author's results and theories.
3. Researchers needing funding from major international sources in order to conduct their work are often encouraged to publish in a global language and to submit grant proposals written in a global language. Funding therefore is linked to selection of language.
4. By using global languages, an author's research will receive increased recognition resulting in invitations to give presentations and to submit further publications in books and journals.
5. Publication of research results in a global language that is familiar to the researcher may be easier.

### Reasons for using local languages

There are likewise many good reasons for using local languages. These also may be considered as issues affecting the quality of the science and issues affecting the scientist.

Issues affecting quality of science:

1. Consistent presentation of information as it is originally encapsulated in a local language is more factual and reflective of the cultural context.
2. Presentation of research in a local language results in less loss or confusion of information in translation.
3. Within local languages scientists are able to discuss some concepts that are not possible in the limited languages of science.
4. Usage of local languages now will benefit future members of local cultures (and researchers) who need to read and consider local patterns of thinking within local languages.
5. Using local languages for research across related cultures allows for comparative studies without the filter effect of a third language. (For instance, a comparative research publication on Hawaiian and Tahitian ethnobotany using the local languages as the context of the analysis is more insightful than the same research using English or French contexts for the analysis.)

Issues affecting researchers:

1. Using local languages restricts access to information to those who are most likely to be able to understand and use it. In some cases this is a responsible action on the part of the researcher in response to local concerns.
2. Researchers who are members of local cultures may be expected to publish in local languages and be criticized for publishing in other languages. In cases where a community has suffered from colonization, publication in the global (colonial) language would be a betrayal of the trust the community has placed in the researcher.
3. Researchers who come from within a colonized culture, and who do research within their own culture, sometimes are motivated to do the research for the benefit of their culture, not for the scientific community. Publishing in a global language may satisfy another scientist's motivation but not their own. Ultimately, they will not publish in a global language because it does not follow their ideals.
4. Researchers may lack the experience using a global language and are therefore faced with the choice of publishing in a local language or not publishing at all.
5. Researchers may be able to express pride in culture by publishing in the local language.
6. Researchers in related cultures using related languages may be able to read and understand each others work easier than if a global language were used.

## Underlying issues

There are a number of issues and assumptions that form the basis of different perspectives about the use of local versus global languages in research publications. There is clearly a need for ethnobotanists and related scientists to consider these in order to have fair discussions.

The mostly common issue that we have encountered when discussing this matter with our friends and colleagues has been a philosophical consideration of: "who is to be the primary beneficiary of research?" Cultural insiders often see their work as primarily benefiting their own culture while cultural outsiders express a desire for some kind of balance of benefits for insiders and external science. Both insiders and outsiders may see benefits for publication in local languages, but the insiders with fluency in the language are more likely to follow through with actual manuscripts.

The researcher's status as a member of the local community or an outsider is clearly important. Both may feel responsibilities to produce work in either a local language or a global language.

The nature of the research as being documentary, hypothesis driven inquiry, addressing a practical local need, addressing a broader international need, or a combination of these is clearly important in determining how the research results should best be disseminated. Research that is intended for local consumption and benefit logically should be reported in a language context that will benefit the local community. This may not need to be a peer-reviewed publication unless the researcher is being measured by this standard. Research that is not intended for local consumption is a bit more complex and could benefit from publication in a local language or be hindered by publication in a local language.

A researcher's desire to expose or shield local knowledge from either the global or local readers is also a consideration. Questions of intellectual property rights and free distribution of knowledge are linked to the question of the language that is used because publication in local or global languages provides easy access for one group and difficult, limited, or no access for the other.

## Possible compromises

Three kinds of compromises have been regularly advanced: Translation of materials into multiple languages, use of enriched vocabularies of local languages within global language texts, and provision of local language abstracts with articles in global languages. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses.

*Translations:* In some cases side by side translations may be good, however, in reading side by side translations it is not unusual to spot instances where deep thoughts are trivialized in the process of translation due to lack of appropriate terminology or disjunctions in philosophies between languages. Even simple changes in sentence structure can change the implications of a thought. Readers are most likely to read the translation into a global language and ignore the local language as a mere novelty. If the global language is not clear or does not carry the same depth of meaning as the local language (or conversely implies something deeper) then the actual content of the work is not really available and could easily lead to misunderstandings. Scholars of sacred texts are sure to point out that reading the original documents in Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, etc. carries the full meaning while translations are always a bit off and sometimes not able to transmit ancient truths. The same is true of ethnobotanical information. Translations hopefully carry substantial meaning, but in order to understand the full truth, we need to work within the local language.

*Enriched vocabulary:* Heavy usage and emphasis upon local terminology with definitions within globalized language texts is a common strategy for recognizing the importance of local languages without excessive loss of global language readers. However, there is more than a little concern that these kinds of colonial-style documents trivialize the complexity of local cultural contexts. Within these publications there is the motivation to reduce meaning to simple translations. This is most easily seen in the translation of local plant names into Latin binomials even though there is probably not a one-to-one relationship in the understanding of species concepts, range of variation within taxa, and underlying meanings and symbolisms of taxa within the local cultural contexts. Using enriched vocabularies in research publications surely increases the importance of local vocabularies and for the insightful researcher, points the way to greater levels of inquiry. But, scholars who lack the time or insight are likely to be misled into seeing simplified views of the culture being discussed.

*Local language abstracts:* Many journals encourage or require the publication of abstracts in multiple languages. It is rare for these abstracts to be published in local languages, although the authors and editors of Economic Botany have made noble efforts in this regard. A possible solution to the perceived problems of publishing in a local language is to produce the report in the local language and to tack on a translation of the abstract in a global language. This allows those not familiar with the local language to have an idea of the content of the article if not the details of the arguments. In many ways this could actually be worse than having no translation whatsoever, because the abstract serves as the most condensed and homogenized version of the information that is related in greater detail in the document. Readers are led to believe

that they know the content of the article when in fact they only know the content of an abstract. If all science were reduced to the content of abstracts, there would be little substance to science and we would all be left hungry for the facts and reasoning that would be missing.

## Conclusions

Our conclusion follows the lists of reasons. It is not based upon a reproducible scientific study, but is rather a set of decisions based upon desires to see clarity in research even at the risk of restricting access to knowledge.

Some kinds of research work should be produced in English or other global languages and not in local languages. Examples include: work conducted by researchers who do not have a high level of understanding of the local language (therefore can be clearer in the global language), and work produced with the intent of developing general theories about human interactions with plants. When possible, local scholars should be authors or co-authors of work that includes translations and enriched vocabularies. Great care should be taken to avoid misleading simplifications of research results and interpretations.

Some kinds of research work should be produced in local languages rather than global languages. This is probably particularly true of documentary works produced by local scholars who are not fluent in a global language or feel that significant information will be lost in translation. As a general rule, local language publications should be encouraged rather than avoided.

This issue of the *Ethnobotany Research and Applications* includes a number of articles published in the primary language of the central highlands of Madagascar which is the dominant language of Madagascar. The papers will be incomprehensible for some readers but will be of great interest to others who want deeper insights into the ethnobotany of Madagascar. We fully expect that at some point in the future, these same authors will publish other work in their local language as well as in global languages such as French and English.