

Analytic Philosophy's Language Problem

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Some time ago, the philosopher Luciano Floridi suggested that Western philosophy, and the mainstream contemporary approach to it traditionally called 'analytic philosophy', [is in dire need of a reboot](#). The concern was that the discipline might be in a period of decadence. Floridi locates the roots of the problem in what he sees as the increasingly self-referential navel-gazing of philosophers. His solution was to reorient our attention towards our contemporary society and its reliance on information technologies, in particular.

Others before and since have pointed to different causes for analytic philosophy's contemporary malaise. Some complain that [it often relies on armchair speculation](#) over [the use of experimental data](#). Others identify its problems with its excessive attempts to [align to the mathematical method](#). In this essay we would like to suggest another cause of (and corresponding solution to) the decadence of contemporary analytic philosophy.

Due in part to the general role of English as the world's current common vehicular language, contemporary analytic philosophers are often pressured to publish their ideas in English, so as to increase the chances of their being taken seriously by the global philosophical community. In [a recent study](#), 97% of material cited in a sample of articles published in prestigious Anglophone philosophy journals were found to be citations of work originally written in English. By contrast, prestigious non-Anglophone philosophy publications cited a much wider variety of sources: one sample was made up of 44% same-language sources, 30% Anglophone sources, and 26% all other languages combined. A similar predominance was also found in the composition of the editorial boards of prestigious Anglophone philosophy journals, where 96% of board members were academically based in majority Anglophone countries. Likewise, only one of the 100 most-cited recent authors in the standard-setting [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) spent most of their career in a non-Anglophone country, writing primarily in a language other than English.

These data illustrate the extent of the predominance of English as the language of contemporary analytic philosophy and of academic institutions based in Anglophone countries as the origins of the most influential analytic philosophy today. Those philosophers who manage to learn to speak and write the English language non-natively continue to have significant difficulties in [passing academic peer review in English](#) and in being [hired as faculty](#). Yet majority Anglophone countries house only about 6% of the global population. Philosophical discussion is consequently deprived of a huge pool of philosophical talent. Given the tendency of native Anglophone analytic philosophers to remain monolingual, the discipline is additionally losing out on those philosophical perspectives that are afforded by competence in languages other than English.

We believe this language problem is one of the roots of analytic philosophy's contemporary state of decadence. There are two possible solutions to it. The first would be a kind of balkanization of philosophy done in different languages or different traditions. One such example is the creation of societies and

[journals devoted to country-specific ‘philosophies’](#). Another example is Anglophone encyclopaedia entries devoted exclusively to [philosophy done in certain countries](#) or [groups of countries](#). The latter is also frequently accompanied by the absence of correlative entries devoted to philosophy done in majority Anglophone countries.

To us, this direction seems the wrong way to go. For one, it means losing out on the opportunities that a globalized and interconnected world can offer us. For another, philosophy is, at its roots, a cosmopolitan enterprise. We see no good reasons overall to depart from that spirit. In other words, we should continue heeding Socrates’ plea to the Athenians in the first paragraph of his defence in Plato’s *Apology*: that he be heard “as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country.”

The alternative direction is to maintain a common mainstream research language and tradition whilst increasing access and integration for those from different linguistic and educational backgrounds. Some routes to travel in this direction were identified in [a set of principles recently supported by more than 700 philosophers](#) from across 35 countries. These involve relaxing those current cultural norms that are irrelevant to producing good philosophy (recall Socrates’ reference to speaking “after the fashion of [one’s own] country”). Such norms often determine what counts as a good philosophical contribution: a non-fiction essay written in prose, articulated in self-contained paragraphs, and published in a prestigious journal, etc. Think of how few, if any, of the writings of philosophical greats would be recognized by the current mainstream. From Socrates and Plato to Hume and Kant, and from Arendt to Wittgenstein, none would fit those current mainstream stereotypes.

Other routes in the same direction recommend taking even more active steps towards increasing the participation of philosophers from different linguistic and educational backgrounds to philosophy conferences, journals, and departments, etc. This is both necessary and now much easier than it may have been at the start of analytic philosophy, given current information technology and globalization trends. It is also much more appropriate to a historical context of a much wider and more democratized access to education. Indeed, this [is the route](#) that [STEM](#) disciplines have already taken. It is also the route that industry seems to be taking, too, with several of the current, best performing multi-national corporations having non-native Anglophone CEOs (e.g., Shell, Pfizer, Google, Microsoft, Twitter, etc.).

Journal editorial boards are no longer constrained by physical restrictions, [and hence can be opened up to people based in a wider variety of places](#) and, as already happens regularly in STEM disciplines like physics, journal editorship searches can be made public. Similarly, conferences and other research meetings should now be conducted online or be online-accessible as a rule. Moreover, [the uncommonly low acceptance ratio of philosophy articles](#) in analytic philosophy is difficult to justify in a world of web publications. Analytic philosophy [should embrace the post-publication peer review model employed in physics](#), both to increase fast and open accessibility to research results and [to allow wider and more transparent mechanisms in its peer review](#).

For the most part, unfortunately, these are not routes that analytic philosophy has been going along. Moreover, given its basis on standards of quality that are difficult to define and operationalize, all philosophy constantly runs the risk of cronyism – [of philosophers giving greater opportunities to those who, in the way they are or work, resemble them most](#). Analytic philosophy would be benefited by greater internationalization, wider and more transparent decision-making, and the reduction (as much as possible) of conflicts of interest as well as of its current habit of hiring and providing publication opportunities on the basis of contacts, networking, [and academic pedigree](#). If we are right, then we need a reconditioning of the institutional framework of analytic philosophy that adjusts it to the current global and interconnected world.