Use of Spanish in scientific publications. Neurology in the context of clinical medicine and Spanish scientific journals

Utilización del español en las publicaciones científicas: la neurología en el contexto de la medicina clínica y las publicaciones científicas españolas

Dear Editor:

It is striking that from some areas such as neurological publications edited in Spain, there has been a defence of the interest and the need to publish in Spanish as opposed to in English1-3, which has become the hegemonic lingua franca in the scientific field, especially in the field of natural and biomedical sciences4.

To determine the weight and importance of the Spanish language in the scientific production of Spanish institutions in general, and in the area of clinical neurology in particular, as well as the potential impact of publication in Spanish in relation to the degree of citation, a study of the presence of this language in the Science Citation Index-Expanded (SCI-Expanded) has been conducted. The evolution of the impact factor of Spanish biomedical journals has also been studied; this is part of a broader line of research that attempts to characterise the role of non-Anglo-Saxon languages in different areas of knowledge, as well as the impact of certain publishing strategies related to language, including the translation into English of articles published in other languages.

The analysis of the diachronic evolution of publications (articles, letters, reviews and editorials) containing some SCI-Expanded-included Spanish institutional affiliation between 1979 and 2007 (fig. 1) shows that the language of Cervantes has dropped drastically. This is evidenced by the continued decline found, with values that have not exceeded 10% since the mid-nineties, and that represent only 6.29% of all the works produced by Spanish institutions in 2007. The dramatic reduction in Spanish is a fact, despite the increase in the number of source journals published in Spanish included in this database and, therefore, in the presence of this language in absolute terms. The same declining trend was noted in connection with articles published in journals of the different specialties which make up clinical medicine, even though the presence of Spanish is greater in the area, with values that have remained in any event below 20% since 2005 (fig. 1). However, a contrary trend is observed in clinical neurology, where the Spanish language is in relatively good health. Since the late nineties, the annual scientific production (which hovers around 30-40% of the total number of works produced by Spanish institutions) has remained stable (fig. 1). There are two clinical neurology journals published in this language (Revista de Neurología and Neurología) that were included in SCI-Expanded in 1997 and 2001, respectively; their editorial policy represents an important impulse in the use of Spanish as a language of scientific communication. Theirs is an edito-
rial policy that, on the other hand, has not been a hindrance in relation to another parameter that is usually the most coveted, the impact factor. This important parameter has experienced a slow but steady increase for these two publications since their inclusion in the Journal Citation Reports lists and their evolutions show no significant differences in relation to the impact factors of other Spanish biomedical journals that translate their content into English. In this regard, only one publication stands out far above the rest, and the others are behind the neurological journals, despite presenting their contents in English (fig. 2).

After satisfying the formal quality and content standards, increasing the degree of citation must, with priority over linguistic issues, pass through the adoption of measures such as ensuring simple, fast and open access, providing clear editor articulation of publication purpose and content and attractive presentation thereof, expanding the number of publications edited in Spanish and English.
authors and encouraging interaction among the networks of
authors publishing in the journal, promoting scientific ties
with researchers from Spanish-speaking countries, as well as
international Spanish researcher collaborations and
interdisciplinary connection of clinical research and basic
scientific and epidemiologic activity. Furthermore, the
policy of prioritising the English language in a publication can
lead to unintended and perhaps undesired effects, such as
reducing the importance of the publication as a dissemination
vehicle for the community which it serves. In this sense,
different aspects of great importance have been rightly
pointed out from the area. These should be taken into
account by all clinically-oriented publications, particularly
in a situation characterised by the increasing number of journals
indexed in the desired (and at the same time controversial)
SCI-Expanded: namely, that these publications are generally
a vehicle of expression for the interests of a scientific society
and serve a large community of readers beyond the scientists
who publish in them and the role they occupy in the qualifying
rankings of publications.

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