The global spread of English is leading to unforeseen — and, for many mother-tongue speakers, unpalatable — outcomes. For example, two years ago, Korean Airlines reportedly chose a French partner to supply its flight simulators, in part because its English was more comprehensible, in the words of a UK rival. The final Incredibly, it seems that non-mother-tongue speakers of English are realizing that conversation in the language tends to flow more easily and intelligibly when we or not native speakers are present.

In other words, where English is seen as a lingua franca, native speakers are often the problem and non-native speakers the solution. This opposite scenario is still widely assumed to be true. The “deficiency by default” perspective on non-native use of English is common even among linguists and experts. For instance, eminent British academic Roy Harris wrote in The Times that non-native speakers of English were “a hotch-potch in which there does not matter how the words are spelt, whether or not singulars are distinguished from plurals, and which syllables are stressed in speech and which are not”. The equally eminent German scholar Manfred Görlach similarly described “broken, deficient forms” of English that reflect “incomplete acquisition”. Harris, Görlach and the countless others who share their mind-set, in effect, that any feature of English that differs from a particular native standard will vary in this way. This is an error. According to this view, they would argue, the plural “accommodations” can now be accepted because it has been adopted in the UK, and the US, whereas the plural “informations” remains an error because it has not. The possibility that the English spoken by non-mother-tongue speakers may be both proficient and different from that of native speakers is dismissed out of hand.

Thus, despite the fact that the vast majority of the world’s English speakers speak a lingua franca it is seen as the pre-rogative of the minority who speak it as a native language to decide its international forms. This is patently absurd. It becomes all the more untenable in light of research findings demonstrating that the use of native English idioms and some pronunciation features more often hinder than facilitate successful communication in lingua franca contexts. The entrenched attitudes of those who dismiss such work as an exercise in political correctness prevent them from embracing change and cause them to cling to the believe that only mother-tongue speakers can speak English. This ignores the many changes that mother-tongue speakers have wrought on the language through linguistic contact and influence down the centuries, which for some reason are not seen as appropriate to modern English.

In our universities, there are those who agree with Harris that the English of non-mother-tongue students is “appalling”. Hence, they would argue, the correction “starting grant” scheme must have been in evidence. There is no indication that the 250-odd winners of the present competition will not see fair play because the 800 evaluators have already rebuffed too many promising applicants. Furthermore, the evaluators lack the means for fair play for several reasons. By the very nature of being young, the applicants’ potential cannot be determined rationally. Usually, PhD theses are written in the author’s native language: most panellists might not even be able to understand the applicant’s title. The main criterion is the scientific value of the proposed research. It is always hard to evaluate plans, hence most evaluators turn to background information to make sense of a particular proposal. Obviously, young researchers cannot accumulate much reputation of their own. For this reason, the evaluators had to look for other signs of excellence. One could be sure that they evaluated a proposal from an affiliate of a highly esteemed colleague much more favourably than one sent in from a no-name place by a disciple of an unfamiliar mentor. The notorious Matthew effect, by which eminent scientists get more credit than comparably unknown researchers for similar work, must have been in evidence. This mechanism might be acceptable in rivalry between senior scholars, but it produces great injustice in the case of young researchers, especially in a highly fragmented Europe.

It is highly dubious that the ERC panelists can discern the most promising researchers. Scholars might know which institutions are the best in their field, but there is no assurance that the younger people there are also the best. I bear no malice towards the ERC’s scientific board members and its 800 assistants by predicting that the 250odd winners of the present competition will not be selected because of their individual creativity and willingness to break new ground but will be affiliates of well-known senior researchers or connected to the most prominent universities. It might be that the highest-ranking universities assemble many of the brightest minds, but there is no indication that the distribution of promising young women and men correlates with any of the established rankings. Starting scientists of high potential may be scattered much more generally. A tremendous amount of work-time has been wasted by those participating in the first stage of the process alone. I calculate that at least 9,000-person months on the side of the proposal-writing young scientists and about 100 weeks’ work-time of Europe’s best and most creative senior researchers have been expended. No doubt the well-meaning members of the ERC’s scientific board will argue that they could not have foreseen the high number of proposals. But they should have at least considered the possibility.

One cannot but blame the ERC for not thinking ahead. A Green Paper published in April by the European Commission on the perspectives of the European Research Area complained about the fragmentation of the European scientific and research landscape, the lack of a common labour market for academics, their immobility, and so on. The Commission had much bumpy foundation has no existence. The solution is invariably said to be amplifying the number of non-native speakers of English, why learn Spanish? This same ethnocentric attitude is responsible for the position that many hold in respect of English use. They would argue, the plural “accommodations” can now be accepted because it has been adopted in the UK, and the US, whereas the plural “informations” remains an error because it has not. The possibility that the English spoken by non-mother-tongue speakers may be both proficient and different from that of native speakers is dismissed out of hand.

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