

ENGLISH AS INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE IN GEOGRAPHY: DEVELOPMENT AND LIMITATIONS

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ABSTRACT. The rise and spread of English as a language of international communication is discussed through an analysis of two bodies of data: languages used in twenty-nine International Geographical Congresses (1871–2000); and utilization of supplementary abstracts or text in international languages in geographical periodicals and serials, from initial use of English in 1882 to widespread use of it in 2002. Five stages in the use of English are recognized: 1) no use of English; 2) provision of abstracts in English; 3) occasional inclusion of articles in English; 4) publication of special issues in English, particularly for international meetings; and 5) a shift to English as the basic language of the text. English provides a window into the geographical literature; but it is only a window, not the full panorama of the richly diverse geographical literature in the six main languages that have been used in International Geographical Congresses and in the fifty-five languages that have been used in geographical serials. *Keywords:* *English language, geographical publications, global languages, International Geographical Congresses, international languages.*

Geographers wish to know about the world. Geographical knowledge is place specific, and most of it is possessed by persons who live in a rich fabric of cultures, in numerous linguistic communities. They write geographical studies for the most part in their own languages. A comprehensive survey in 1980 found that, over the years 1723–1979, 3,445 geographical periodicals and serials had been published in 107 countries in 55 languages (Harris and Fellmann 1980). Rare indeed is the geographer who can read or utilize more than a few of these languages. Languages of wider communication are needed to promote intercommunication among our communities. As a consequence, papers delivered at the quadrennial International Geographical Congresses sponsored by the International Geographical Union (IGU) have been limited to six principal languages. Since 1960 this number has been reduced to two. In recent decades English has increasingly become the medium of communication, both in international congresses and in geographical periodicals and serials published in many countries and distributed over all continents.

The use of English is first assessed in the twenty-nine International Geographical Congresses held since 1871, excepting interruptions during the two world wars. The supplementary use of English in abstracts or texts of geographical periodicals or serials is then examined.

INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL CONGRESSES

The number of languages used for communication at International Geographical Congresses has varied over time from six to two. Four principal languages—French, English, German, and Italian—were used in the first fifteen congresses (1871–1938).

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