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Bridging language barriers in global oncology: toward more inclusive scientific communication

Some time ago, we came across a funny sketch on Instagram. It was taken from an episode of *Modern Family*, in which Sofía Vergara's character tries to explain how hard it is, as a native Spanish speaker, to mentally translate everything into English before speaking. At one point, she says, 'Do you even know how smart I am in Spanish?' That line made us laugh, and think. It is true. Although one may speak fluent English, most people find themselves more witty, articulate, and convincing when speaking their native language.

In recent years, a growing number of researchers from non-English-speaking countries have been selected to give oral presentations at major international congresses. Between 2021 and 2024, at the ASCO Annual Meeting, most speakers were from US institutions (66.7%), but 6.3% came from China and 4.0% from France. Far fewer presenters represented institutions in the Middle East (0.1%) or South America (0.3%), and none were affiliated with institutions in Africa.[1] The ESMO Congress 2025 demonstrates an even broader international representation, with 32.8% of speakers originating from English-speaking countries (USA, UK, Ireland, Australia, and Canada), followed by Germany (8.9%), France (8.6%), Italy (8.4%), Spain (6.4%), the Netherlands (5.7%), and China (5.6%). Notably, speakers from the Middle East and South America are slightly more represented at the ESMO Congress (2.4% and 0.9%, respectively), while only 0.1% come from Africa.[2] It is hoped that these figures will continue to increase in the coming years, fostering a broader and more equitable global representation of oncologists and their patients.

The Global Oncology Trends 2025 report by the IQVIA Institute noted a sharp increase in trial initiations in China. In 2024, China-based companies accounted for 39% of all oncology clinical trial starts, more than any other country.[3,4] This shift suggests that a growing number of researchers from non-English-speaking countries, and often using non-Latin alphabets, will be called upon to present their findings at major international forums.

While the widespread use of English serves as a valuable common ground for sharing scientific knowledge globally, these observations have prompted us to reflect on how we communicate science. Is it fair to expect these brilliant minds to express complex ideas in a language that is not their own? Can they truly convey their insights with the same precision and nuance as they could in their native tongue? Are public speaking tips enough to overcome the anxiety that comes with presenting in a second language, in particular at early stage of career? A list of best practices may not suffice for those facing the very real challenge of linguistic and cultural barriers.

In an era of artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced digital platforms, where we can attend congresses both in person and virtually, AI-powered language translation could aid speakers and revolutionize scientific communication. By enabling scientists to present their work with full confidence and clarity, AI could surpass traditional simultaneous translation in effectively conveying messages to a diverse, multilingual audience, without triggering a 'Babel effect'. Additionally, scientific societies could complement this innovation by providing tailored speaker training upon request, further enhancing the clarity and impact of scientific presentations.

Many possess strong English skills, but why exclude novel opportunities for them to truly and deeply show how smart they are in their own language?

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