Small languages – small geography?
The production of knowledge and contemporary challenges for publishing in geography

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Abstract: The article emerges from the debate concerning publishing in geography, especially regarding internationalism, the language of publishing, and the scope of geographical journals. English is the most common language of science – though only about 6% of the inhabitants of the earth speak it as a mother tongue. Increasingly, the evaluation of scientific activities is based on refereed publications in English at electronic databases (ISI, SSCI, etc.). In this article I consider the role of Geografiski Raksti/Folia Geographica (GRFG), a geographical journal published by the Latvian Geographical Society.

In the GRFG a total of 53 articles by 51 different authors was published in 1999-2003. Human geographical themes dominate over physical geographical ones. The articles have been predominantly in Latvian (33) but all articles include at least a summary in English and there are also articles fully in English. English and Latvian make up a total of 84% of all references. Russian references are few and references in other languages are scarce. Language is significant in the production of particular geographical knowledge and geographical concepts are often best expressed in the mother tongue. GRFG is a unique arena for publishing geographical research in Latvian. Small languages contribute significantly in making great geography.

Keywords: geographical journals, publishing, language, English, Latvia

In the early 21st century there are more journals than ever available for publishing geographers’ research findings. The internet has made easier the on-line access to different journals of geography – at least for people at universities with institutional agreements. Publishing has also become a big business and many journals with international range have been launched in geography from the 1990s onwards. In the competitive academic world evaluation of geographers’ activities has increased and one has to become rigorous to publish and not perish in geography [Jauhiainen 2003].

“Small languages – small geography?” is a deliberately provocative title. This title is prompted to the vivid academic debate that emerged in the early 21st century concerning publishing in geography. The debate has evolved in three basic directions: (1) evaluation of scientific activities and the role of journals in them; (2) questions about internationalism in geographical journals and practices related to it; and (3) the language of publishing and the scope of the journals [Hancock 1999; Gutiérrez & López-Nieva 2001; Harris 2001; Samer & Sidaway 2001; Short et al. 2001; Garcia-Ramón 2003; Gregson et al. 2003; Minca 2003].

In this article I touch on the current debate about geographical publishing from two viewpoints. First, I present how the institutionalization of geography is intertwined with the production of particular geographical knowledge. Second, a more specific issue is to consider the role of Geografiski Raksti / Folia Geographica that is a geographical journal published by the Latvian Geographical Society.

I discuss here what arguments could favor publishing scientific outcomes of geographical research in “small languages” such as Latvian. However, despite the “smallness” of the number of Latvian-speakers compared to many languages (English, Spanish, French, etc., not to mention Chinese…) it should be remembered that almost 99% of languages spoken today in the World have less that five million speakers.

Institutionalisation of geography and the production of knowledge

Most geographers as well as many scholars outside the discipline agree that geography is a particularly challenging field of inquiry. Its scale reaches from the intimate thoughts, body and
surroundings of a researcher to the issues that cover the entire Globe. Nowadays, no aspect is considered taboo as a research topic in geography. In research the community of geographers moves flexibly back and forth in time and space from the solid inside of rocks to changing perceptions of people.

Communication has always been a significant element in geographers’ activities, from yesterday’s discourses about the discoveries of continents, to today’s real time on-line Internet discussions about the effect of globalization at a local level. Geographers communicate in various fields and through various means: teaching in and outside the academy, commenting publicly in the media, writing in different academic and non-academic journals and textbooks, producing applied reports for governments and private enterprises, and so forth.

Many distinguished scholars of the long history of geography have indicated that the emergence of geography was related to the discovery of the world, the colonization of territories, and bridging nation and territory together by providing geographical instruction in schools and necessary information for authorities to organize territories within national borders [Capel 1981; Livingstone 1992]. Over the centuries the production of geographical knowledge has become more complex, so that geography has positioned itself somewhere between natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. The scope and activities within geography have significantly broadened during the long history of the discipline – especially during the last decades. Figure 1 makes a brief synthesis of the development of geography from a purely scientific endeavor to a more applied practice and consulting activity.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Institutionalisation of geography and production of geographical knowledge. Modified from Granö 1997.

During the first, the “classic geography period” from the late 18th century onwards, geography started to emerge as a separate academic field with its own identity [Granö 1997]. On the one hand, the geographer emerged as a scholar of the scientific academy and founded
learned societies. A scholar was a devoted scientist whose aim was to find the truth and to promote geographical discoveries. Academies were the main scientific institutions. On the other hand, along with the establishment of new universities in the early 19th century, teaching and research were integrated together and first chairs of geography were established (Figure 1).

The emergence of geography as university discipline was linked to the early 19th century Humboldtian ideals of civilization in which the aim of university was to search for truth through the interaction between teachers and students. The autonomy of the university would guarantee the means, methods, and scope of research. This is close to the Habermasian notion of science with practical humanistic interest, where the aim is to expand knowledge through communication [Habermas 1971]. However, in the latter part of the 19th century the seemingly innocent “what is where” geographical research was used to build up and strengthen the then emerging nation-states [Capel 1981].

The second, the “applied geography period” period, started from the late 19th century onwards. During that period the scope of geography expanded and the discipline emerged as a normative tool. Besides the academy and the university, the figure of the geographer was connected to specialized institutes devoted fully to research; and to applied colleges devoted to teaching, and to a lesser extent, also research [Granö 1997] (Figure 1).

The idea of this new geography as an applied technical field of study can be interpreted as a certain interaction and merging of interest between government and science. Following the early 20th century Weberian notions about the role of the university, science is an important field through which one can find clear technical solutions for problems of society. The idea of a university is not to be involved in political life or to decide what is right or wrong in society. The aim of the researcher – a geographer, for instance – is to find the truth or the applied solutions for specific problems. Later on politicians decide to implement those solutions that are deemed to be good for the nation [Habermas 1971]. This is linked also to the notion of science as having a technical and rational activity whose aim is to reproduce society [Habermas 1971]. Geography, as many other disciplines during the 20th century, became a useful normative tool to help the governments of established nation-states to organize and use their national resources most efficiently [Capel 1981].

During the third, the “contemporary geography period”, from the latter part of the 20th century onwards, the activities in the discipline expanded further. Geography emerged as a contracting and consulting activity in national and international research projects and programs in and outside the university [Granö 1997]. Geographers became appointed to the positions of project researcher, planner of research councils and manager of broad (inter)disciplinary research framework programs (Figure 1). This is linked to the idea of the university as an enterprise that is able to market and sell knowledge. It was found that often it was enough to reflexively modify existing knowledge for particular social and economic contexts, so that basic, fundamental research declined in many fields. Universities became socially and economically fully responsible for their activities and research output was continuously evaluated for its pragmatic relevance. The aim of inter-, trans- and post-disciplinary research programs at the university was to produce new applied knowledge. In short term this can direct the attention away from seminal scientific research.

One such trend is the Research Framework Programs of the European Union (EU) that is a cornerstone of EU science policy. Collaborative networks of scientists within the EU have proliferated rapidly and joint projects, research infrastructure, and institutes have become common. According to Frenken (2002, 568), smaller and more peripheral countries of the EU are increasingly integrating into large research framework programs by reducing their national orientation in research over time. Larger and more central countries in the EU are today better integrated in the inter-EU research programs and research collaboration. Scale advantages obviously render larger countries more attractive partners than smaller countries.

Geographical publishing and the production of knowledge
Geographical knowledge is “textual”, divided between written texts, visual elements such as pictures, photos, and maps, and unwritten everyday experience. There is need for
geographical knowledge everywhere, so around the Globe one finds different communities of geographers. Often geographers communicate directly within the community they live in, because a lot of geographical knowledge is place-specific [Harris 2001]. This means that geographical knowledge is produced in very many languages and often in the local language of the place. The question of language is important because language represents also the way of thinking, and it provides a framework for expressing our experiences and ideas [see Minca 2003, 164–166]. Despite its global reach geography is very much a local and place-bound scientific activity.

In the world there are over 6,000 languages of which about 70 have at least five million speakers. By the late 1970s, Harris & Fellmann (1981) counted that there had been published 3,445 geographical periodicals and serials in 107 countries in 55 languages. Many new geographical periodicals have been launched since that research was done. However, currently there is a trend towards linguistic homogenization, i.e. the use of English in the language practices of geographical journals [Short et al. 2001]. English-speaking geographical journals have been launched in non-English speaking countries and some traditional journals have even changed their language into English. Very often there are at least abstracts in English in periodicals [Harris 2001].

Today there are two major reasons for geographical publishing in English. First, it is said that English is the global language of science and it provides the only possibility to reach the international audience. This might be true, but despite English as the “lingua franca” of many contemporary geographers, only about 6% of the inhabitants of the earth speak it as a mother tongue [Harris 2001]. Garcia-Ramón (2003, 2) indicates that English as a global language privileges the geographical discourse of Anglophones and excludes those not feeling so comfortable in English.

Second, today in Geography (as well as in many other disciplines) the evaluation of scientific activities and universities is regularly conducted by funding authorities. Following the dictates of today’s globalization discourse scholars should be visible at the international and global level as often as possible. Unfortunately, it is difficult to have a good measure that articles and periodicals have on the development of science. The easiest and increasingly used way to measure international impact is to use electronic bibliographic databases of scientific journals. Citation Indexes are becoming the reference point in national boards for measuring the quality of publications [Garcia-Ramón 2003, 3]. One example is the Institute of Scientific Information Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index database (ISI database) that contains 18.7 million articles, reviews or book reviews published in certain academic journals from 1986 onwards (ISI 2003). Nevertheless, these databases contain only selected and limited numbers of journals that are published in English.

Language matters, particularly in human geography, as the field is dealing with people in different cultural contexts. For this same reason physical geography has generally less direct challenges posed by language. However, conceptualization and expression of particular geographical phenomena are influenced by language in physical geography as well. The rise of globalisation in geographical publishing means that English has not only become the language of expression but also a framework that influences the mindset of geographers. Garcia-Ramón (2003, 1–3) argues that Anglo-American geography has gained undisputed hegemony in geography – at least in such human geography journals that are counted in the ISI database. For many geographers in these journals “there is no place for the ‘Other’ [geographical] traditions” outside the Anglo-American one (see also Gregson et al. 2003). This issue is accentuated by the exclusionary and masculinist Anglo-American refereeing systems in these journals [Berg 2001]; and by requirement of having current references from Anglo-American geographical literature [Minca 2003, 166]. This is the trend, not with standing the fact that much of the best geographical literature is not in English [Harris 2001].

The journals of human geography included in scientific databases such as the Social Science Citation Index are not as international as it first seems to be. Gutiérrez & López-Nieva (2001, 67) studied 19 of the most known human geography journals that are included in the ISI database and their publications in 1991–1997. The outcome was that most journals did not have a high international profile if the nationality of article authors or of editorial boards members is
counted. Almost three out of four (73.4%) articles in these journals of human geography came from the USA and the UK, and the great majority of editorial board members was either British or American.

Geografiski Raksti / Folia Geographica

The institutionalization of geography and recent debates on geographical publishing have an impact also on Latvia. To contextualize the current challenges I take a brief overview of the development of geographical research in Latvia. Geografiski Raksti / Folia Geographica (GRFG) was founded in 1929 by the Latvian Geographical Society. The aim of the journal was to publish scientific geographical articles from both physical and human geographical viewpoints [Krauklis 1999].

Geographical research in Latvia dates back to the 19th century. Thus it did not emerge with GRFG or with the establishment of the Institute of Geography in the early 20th century. It was nevertheless important that the GRFG contained scientific geographical articles in the Latvian language. During the first period (1929–1938) six volumes were published. The launching of the journal was connected to the emergence of Latvia as an independent state. As in many other countries, due to national pride of the people, educational and practical needs of the state, full academic structures in geography were established, regardless of the quite small size of Latvia and the number of its scholars. Besides the university, geographical research was conducted also at the Academy of Sciences.

The new state needed systematic geographical knowledge about its territory published in Latvian. Krauklis (1999) indicates how GRFG helped to fulfill this task with articles such as “The geographic regions of the territory of Latvia” by Ģederts Ramans in 1935, “The geography of Latvia’s soils” by Jānis Vītiņš in 1929 and “Latvia’s bogs” by Pēteris Nomals in 1930. (Ramans 1935, Vītiņš 1929, Nomals 1930) These kinds of comprehensive territorial overviews were common to many national geographical journals of young independent states.

During the Soviet period geography emerged as a more applied structure. It was integrated into the centrally-planned system for the use of natural and social resources of the Soviet Union. Geography at the university paid more attention to teaching than research, as was the case before. Most scientific, geographic research was conducted at the Academy of Sciences. During the Soviet era GRFG was not published. However, the publication concerning geographical phenomena in Latvia did not cease to exist entirely. Some findings were published in Latvian in the publication series of the Academy of Science and others by the State University of Latvia. Some research was published also outside Latvia in the Soviet Union in the Russian language.

The regaining of independence of Latvia in 1991 placed geography once again on the agenda in the country. There was a need to ‘remap’ independent Latvia and its particularities during the transition period from autocratic to democratic rule. The annual publishing of GRFG was reinstated from 1999 onwards and the journal took the initiative to emphasize the contemporary changes in Latvian environment and society. Examples of such topical articles are: “Reproduction of population in Latvia during transition period” by Pārsla Eglīte in 1999; “Latvian population mobility in the transition period” by Andris Bauls and Zaiga Krišjāne in 2000; “Seasonal and long-term changes of river discharges in Latvia” in 2001 by Agrita Briede, Māris Kļavinš, Valerijs Rodinovs & Ilga Kokarīte; “Prospects for regional development in Latvia: trends and strategies” by Pēteris Šķiņķis in 2001; and “Changes in the city centre of Riga” by Harald Standl in 2002 [Eglīte 1999; Bauls, Krišjāne 2000; Šķiņķis 2001; Briede et.al. 2001; Standl 2002]. Also more general, broader and interdisciplinary approaches have appeared, such as “Living with diversity in Latvia: people, nature and cultural landscapes” by Ādolfs Krauklis in 2000. [Krauklis 2000]

A total of 53 articles by 51 different authors have been published in the GRFG between 1999–2003 (if all published texts are counted as articles – Table 1). There is a dominance of human geographical themes over physical geographical ones. With one author alone there have been published 30 articles and 23 with several authors – the latter most often in physical geography. The articles have been predominantly in Latvian (33) but there have been also
articles fully in English (19) – especially for the purpose of International Geographical Union (IGU) world congresses. All articles include at least a summary in English that makes the journal accessible also for those who have the command of English but not that of Latvian. The articles appearing only in Latvian were reviews of the activities of the Latvian Geographical Society.

Counting the relation between the articles in English and in Latvian, it should be mentioned that for the IGU world congresses of the International Geographical Union 2000, the entire journal was published exclusively in English. Nevertheless, there are in “ordinary volumes” increasingly articles in English with summaries in Latvian. English is also becoming dominant in the use of references, despite the Latvian orientation of the journal. References in English and Latvian make total of 84% of all references. Meanwhile the use of Russian references has diminished to a few and there are only scarce references in German or French or other languages (Table 2).

### Table 1

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### Conclusions and open suggestions

Today, postcolonial and postmodern world-views criticize the modernist search for final truth and order that have been an integral part of the development of geography. One result in geography is the search for plural approaches when dealing with cultural diversity. Nevertheless, globalization is bringing more homogenization and economic rationality into academic and non-academic geographical practices.

In the phase of the European Union enlargement, it is estimated that evaluation and assessment in science will increase in the member states. It is becoming a norm in geography that most impact is given to publications that have been published in peer-reviewed international journals with a certain import factor. Sometimes in the evaluation system are also taken into account publications and books by recognized international publishers. However, many of these international journals in English are neither very international nor global. This
narrow evaluation based on “international” scientific databases can be conducted in some fields of science but it does not suit well for geography, especially for human geography that has significant cultural and linguistic connections to the places it researches.

A further challenge to geography is the European harmonization of university curricula that is taking place. In general, to be more integrated, it is expected that scholars from countries of “small languages” should use English more often in their teaching and publications as well as in references. In the Baltic States the departments of geography are quite small and the research units are smaller still when geography is split into sub-units. The further integration into EU research frameworks will raise the question in the three Baltic States, for example, whether there is a possibility or even a need for Ph.D. granting in the national language? If the language of science is English and geographers in the three Baltic States publish their research outcomes in English, what will be the future of geography and GRFG?

The history of the institutionalization of geography indicates the broadening of geographers’ activities. Today in Latvia these reach are over from classic fundamental research, to applied research, and further into contracting and consulting activities. The two very specialized extremes of geography – the specialized scientist in the academy and the manager of international research framework programs – are represented by those geographers whose language is most often English. However, there is geography outside these extremes and a need to continue teaching and publishing in “small languages” such as Latvian.

Integration of Latvia in the European Union will increase the number of geographers involved in contracting and consulting fields. There is need for particular geographical knowledge in the territorial organization and regional development policy in Latvia. In my brief encounters with Latvian policy makers I have noted that there exists misunderstanding concerning regional development, regional policy, and the EU Structural Funds. This is at least partly so because there is not enough conceptualization of the region and regional development theories – major concepts in Geography – in the Latvian language and in Latvian contexts. Furthermore, in Latvian as in many other languages, the geographical vocabulary is place and context sensitive. Many specific geographical words in Latvian do not translate very easily and directly into English. I observed this when discussing with Latvians nuances of different landscape types in a seminar (2002) in Estonia. Local linguistic usages and one’s mother tongue are very important in grasping sensitive geographic nuances. For scientific and applied research and their implementation it is important to know the concepts, terminology, and theories profoundly also in one’s mother tongue. Nevertheless, because in the world most geographical literature is written in languages than other Latvian, there is also a need to know other languages, and I would recommend at least English, Russian, German, and one Romanic language. This makes it possible for geographers of small countries to follow many fields and develop ideas in one’s mother tongue as well as in a foreign language.

Today in Latvia, besides GRFG, there are other geography-related publications in the Academy of Sciences and at the University of Latvia as well as at sub-branches of the University and in several research institutes and organizations of public authorities. Ministries and other authorities publish research papers by geographers, but they do not have a particular journal devoted to geographical issues. GRFG is globally the most significant journal for geography in Latvian.

My recommendation for GRFG is that it should remain a geographical journal about Latvia. It should contain viewpoints from both human and physical geography. My suggestion is that all articles should be in Latvian with tables and figure texts in Latvian and English and a full-page summary in English. I think that many aspects of geographical research are best expressed in the mother tongue. For Latvians there are plenty of opportunities to publish in English elsewhere. I also suggest writing also reviews in Latvian about different significant geographical concepts and theories – maybe a couple of articles in each journal issue. In a few years this would become an invaluable reference for students, scholars and policy makers in Latvia. A final recommendation is that the journal would be accessible on the Internet – even the journals from the 1920s and 1930s.

GRFG has an important mission. GRFG is globally a unique arena in which there is published geographical research in Latvian. The articles create a very significant patrimony in
the global, national, and local production of geographical knowledge. GRFG is a vital element in promoting global diversity in geography. Small languages contribute significantly in making great geography. Besides this, following the Habermasian concept of emancipated interest, GRFG could be one channel for fruitful critical interaction between geography, geographical development, and politics in Latvia.

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