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Scientific Babel: How Science Was Done Before and After Global English

Michael D. Gordin

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English is the language of science today. No matter which languages you know, if you want your work seen, studied, and cited, you need to publish in English. But that hasn't always been the case. Though there was a time when Latin dominated the field, for centuries science has been a polyglot enterprise, conducted in a number of languages whose importance waxed and waned over time—until the rise of English in the twentieth century.

So how did we get from there to here? How did French, German, Latin, Russian, and even Esperanto give way to English? And what can we reconstruct of the experience of doing science in the polyglot past? With *Scientific Babel*, Michael D. Gordin resurrects that lost world, in part through an ingenious mechanism: the pages of his highly readable narrative account teem with footnotes—not offering background information, but presenting quoted material in its original language. The result is stunning: as we read about the rise and fall of languages, driven by politics, war, economics, and institutions, we actually *see* it happen in the ever-changing web of multilingual examples. The history of science, and of English as its dominant language, comes to life, and brings with it a new understanding not only of the frictions generated by a scientific community that spoke in many often mutually unintelligible voices, but also of the possibilities of the polyglot, and the losses that the dominance of English entails.

Few historians of science write as well as Gordin, and *Scientific Babel* reveals his incredible command of the literature, language, and intellectual essence of science past and present. No reader who takes this linguistic journey with him will be disappointed.

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