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## Viewpoints

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### English – whose responsibility?

In the November 2008 issue of *European Science Editing*, Marcin Kozak wrote about the disappointment he felt about the review of an article submitted to a science journal with a view to publication. Kozak raises the question: “Is my writing so bad indeed?” Kozak does not say whether the article was checked for grammar, punctuation, and style.

I have been translating articles, papers, dissertations, and so forth for 30 years or so. Gradually, a demand arose for something which here (in Norway) is referred to as “language washing”. Basically, this comprises correction of grammar, punctuation and syntax. In reality – and if a proper job is to be done – this is pre-editing. Pre-editing is the process whereby an article is prepared for submission to a journal, or for presentation at a congress, for example.

#### Hurdles

It is clear that “language washing” is just the first hurdle; the whole course has to be run. If the content is hazy, terminology is aimed to impress the professorial peers, and the profusion of references appears to be a listing of “see what I have on my bookshelf”, then the author must expect a “revise and resubmit” – at best! The pre-editor would be failing in his duty if he or she did not point out these failings and, for the ordinary reader, the irritations. My approach is to consider myself not so much as a (pre-) editor, but rather as an ordinary reader who is hoping to gain new knowledge from my endeavours as well as those of the author.

My corrections include a wide range of comments. Some suggest alternative formulations or sentence structures; others enquire whether the chosen word was the first choice. But one important function of my comments is to explain why a certain change or correction was made. Occasionally these are quite elementary, for example relating the subject and the verb. “The regulations and the law was quite clear”, I read in one article. The verb was duly changed. But imagine my surprise when the article was returned for a “revise and resubmit” exercise, and the verb changed back again. When I pointed this out to the author, I was informed that the *editor* had changed this “so it will have to be retained as *originally*”! I forget which comedian it was who had as his punch line “Well, there’s no answer to that!”

#### Hard done by?

But what I did not grasp from the contributions to the debate on non-native English (*ESE* 34:4, pp. 100–104) was why there were grounds to feel “hard done by” when an article was rejected on the basis of poor English “unjustifiably so in the author’s opinion” (to quote from one part of the text). Very often, when I read these articles I seriously wonder why the author did not write in his or her native language and have the text translated. I do not agree entirely with Marge Berer when she says “translated papers are notoriously *not-quite-English*” (my italics). Surely, this

applies only if the translator is not translating into his or her mother tongue.

But the point I want to come to is why the non-native author insists on writing in English if his or her English really is so poor? Why not write in the native tongue and have it translated? The qualified translator will ensure that the style and all the nuances are preserved. Of course, not all authors do have a “good” style, and the translator may even be able to ensure that the finished product is better than the original.

I agree that some of the contributions may be rejected on account of language – or that this is the reason given. The result is the same: six months’ research down the drain, so to speak, and at what cost. Here (in Norway), the Research Council has estimated that a researcher-year amounts to about £150,000. This includes salary, office expenses, secretarial assistance, equipment, travel, heating, lighting, journal subscriptions, and so forth. Whatever, six months wasted is six months wasted.

#### Another theory

I have a second theory. There is a need to write, publish, and be damned – all in English. It is a requirement in Norway that a researcher is competent in English, but “I am, therefore I can” seems to be the order of the day. The standard is generally appalling, frightful, and shocking. Each year I have about 40 clients from more than a dozen research institutions and university institutes. I am sorely tempted to bite the hand that feeds me, but valour is the better part of dissension, I find. The diplomatic way to provide instruction in the art of writing is, of course, to write a book. Sales of my publication *Writing Academic English. A Guide for Norwegians in the Preparation of Articles and Theses* swept into double figures, but struggled to make 100, despite intense advertising! Why? Because researchers are arrogant to a degree that makes Bush look like a piece of undergrowth. “I can, therefore I am.”

I was invited to lecture on writing academic English at a renowned research institution in Oslo. Based on the experience I had had with material from this institution, I felt the need was for a review of basic punctuation – the dash, the semicolon, the colon, the comma splice. But who would turn up to that? After all, hadn’t they studied English for eight years at upper secondary school? Admittedly that was up to 30 years ago, but how many had been on a brush-up course? Hadn’t the rules and regulations on commas changed? What were the major differences between UK and US English as had emerged in recent years?

Returning to the main theme, yes, I agree that some editors seem to choose “poor language” as the basis for rejecting an article that might have much merit in its academic content. But the language is the first line of offence. The reputations of the journal, the editor, and the referees are all at stake here.

If you really are poor in English, then a qualified translator is the obvious answer – alternatively, submit the article to a national journal.

On the other hand, you may have a point. Few editors are language experts, and even fewer referees. As Marcin Kozak quotes: “The English at present is not at a standard, which allows publish the manuscript in an international journal

... Actually nearly each sentence needs corrections.” If this really is the English punctuation and syntax applied in the letter of rejection, he has a good point.

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## The author thanks the anonymous referees for their valuable comments

Science authors love acknowledging anonymous referees of their articles. I have anonymously refereed papers more than once, and not once did I receive acknowledgments from authors whose papers I reviewed.

Can the referee who receives such appreciation, however, be sure the authors indeed thought of his or her work as so valuable? Maybe the authors thought it might help them have their paper accepted by the referee? Or maybe there were some other reasons underlying this decision?

Let's try and consider why authors are keen to acknowledge referees of their papers. First of all, the authors indeed think the comments they receive are of such a high value that they decide to appreciate the referee's contribution to the article by acknowledging this. Second, they think it might help them to have the paper accepted. Third, this is their standard procedure, without too much consideration whether they should do it or not. Fourth, they are asked to do this by the journal editor.

Unfortunately, all of these reasons can be true. Of course, the first one should be a hundred-percent situation, but I am sure I am not the only person who does not believe that it is. Some authors may want to appreciate a referee's work, at the same time hope that it might be also helpful. I am not going to claim here that there are no authors who acknowledge their referees only because the latter deserve it. Of course, there are many such authors. But ...

The second group of authors may be the biggest one. Such authors believe—and who knows, maybe sometimes correctly—that to acknowledge a referee's work will make the referee happy, and account for his or her at least slightly more favourable review. It may indeed, but we should always remember that referees are (most of the time) anonymous, which is why such thank-you notes will remain only in their, and maybe the editors', memories (for how long, if at all?). What's more, the majority of the referees are aware that they may be acknowledged with this aim only, thus they may be quite “resistant” to this kind of acknowledgment. Some may even find this tasteless.

The third group consists of those who don't think of such things; instead, they simply add a thank-you note to all revisions. There are even authors who are so eager to thank their referees that they do so in a first submission! (Don't think this is just a joke; I myself know at least one such person.)

The fourth group, finally, consists of authors who receive suggestions to thank the referee from a journal editor. Believe me, I would not have figured this out had it not been suggested

that I do this myself. The editor of a journal I submitted my article to asked me (suggested? recommended? you never know) to thank the referee for his/her comments. After brief consideration I thought I should (for obvious reasons), and I did so, even though I did not think the referee's comments deserved acknowledgment. This was some time ago; now I wouldn't do that. Just to make it clear, I do thank referees if their comments are useful. But as a referee it does not make me feel good to see acknowledgments for my comments if they do not deserve it (for example, when the paper was very good and I suggested only minor changes in presentation).

In summary, I think it is a nice thing for a referee to be acknowledged by authors when he or she merits this. Nevertheless, in today's science publishing the value of such acknowledgments is limited for the reasons given above. Maybe we could apply a blind-acknowledgment system, in which any acknowledgments for referees should be revealed to them after the final acceptance of a paper, and authors should be informed about (and kept aware of) this? This might, at least to a reasonable extent, limit unethical acknowledgments. (Yes, I wrote unethical, though I am aware that not all of them are really unethical.) And maybe referees might finally feel that their work was acknowledged because the authors thought it was worth acknowledging?

Please, do treat this proposition as a joke.

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