1.2: Editing texts by non-native speakers of English

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Making the message clear
The editing of NNS (NNS here stands for non-native speaker of English, NS for native speaker of English) texts can be particularly problematic. NSs may find such English quaint, clumsy, or wrong; NNS readers not sharing the author’s mother tongue may find the English difficult or impossible to understand. We can expect NNS authors to use English less subtly and skillfully than NS authors, and to find it difficult to know what and how to rectify, if asked to “improve the English”. So, if an NNS text is to communicate what the writer intends and contain no distracting linguistic shortcomings, it needs to undergo careful language editing. This chapter discusses generic features of NNS texts, some problems the language editing could and should resolve, and suggests editorial strategies. It also discusses who should do this editing.

Mistakes versus errors
Pre-publication science texts are never perfect for purpose, whatever their author’s mother tongue: they may contain incorrect spelling, punctuation and grammar, or have stylistic shortcomings such as redundancy, omissions, poor coherence, verbosity (or its converse: extreme terseness). A useful distinction is between “mistakes” and “errors”\textsuperscript{1}: we all make mistakes when tired, careless, or rushed, but when alerted to them we are able to correct them ourselves. Errors are ingrained and made consistently and systematically, so they have to be corrected for us, or we must learn not to make them. Through sensitive editing, editors can teach NNS authors to avoid making certain errors.\textsuperscript{2}

Generic NNS errors: learner English
Language-learner errors are an obvious feature of NNS English. They often arise from misapplying rules; for example, to form the past tense of an irregular verb. Grammar- and spell-checking software flags many such errors (such as “sinked” instead of “sank”), but will leave examples such as “leaded”, instead of “led” and “lied” instead of “lay” because these forms exist in English (as does “grounded” instead of “ground”). Editors of NNS texts must therefore look out for such cases but should also be prepared to find NNS authors of technical texts distorting the spellchecker because it queries acceptable terminology. When an Austrian author found “detrended” and “outlayer” being queried, she assumed that both were correct and that the spelling checker could not cope with statistics jargon. But “detrended” is correct, and “outlayer” should be “outlier”.

Another language-learner shortcoming of NNS scientists is a narrow and skewed vocabulary. Fewer synonyms are known, so words and stock phrases tend to be overused. Sometimes an imprecise or infelicitous word is used because the apt word is not known. In such cases, editors can help NNS authors expand their vocabulary and enhance their scholarly credibility by inserting or suggesting appropriate replacements (for example, “coextensive” instead of “limited to”, when describing the extent of cap rock in a simulation model of an oil reservoir). On the other hand, the NNS scientist’s vocabulary contains many specialist scientific terms. The combination of narrow general vocabulary and disproportionately wide specialist vocabulary yields writing in which “difficult” scientific terms are incongruously embedded in simplistic English. Sometimes, NNS scientists try to write very formally by nominalizing (using many words ending in -tion), writing exclusively in the passive voice and favouring multisyllabic words (“utilize” instead of “use”, for example). As well as being difficult to read, this style is difficult to sustain in a foreign language, so here too, incongruity creeps in, this time because over-simple or informal words and expressions (such as “a lot of”, “don’t”) appear in a matrix of complex, formal prose. In both cases, the editing should aim to achieve an even tone that is appropriate for the scientific content, is reader-friendly and does the writer justice.

Learners also make lexical errors (errors of word choice). The examples in Example 1, a Chinese-authored sentence, include “strong” (instead of “great”) and “abundant nutrition” (“high nutritive value”). “Culture ways” and “long-time planting” are literal translations that preserve Chinese word order, so can be classed as transfers (see below).

Example 1
The tomato is one of important vegetables and has many advantages, such as high yield, strong adaptability, abundant nutrition, many culture ways and long-time planting.

Generic NNS errors: transfers
Many of the errors and much of the strangeness of NNS writing result from transfer (“what works in my language will work in English”). The transfer can also be of an omission: the commonest (a classic marker of NNS English) concerns definite and indefinite articles (“the” and “a/an”), which many Oriental and Slavic languages lack. Authors speaking these languages tend to use English articles arbitrarily, but errors such as “a research” or “an advice” also arise from transfer of usage from languages with articles. Editors vary in how they amend article usage in NNS texts, for two reasons: the difference between American and British usage (in terms of frequency and collocation) and the expectations of specialist readers (for
example, in abstracts and biomedical articles, definite and indefinite articles are used sparingly).  

**Transfers of symbols**

Transfers of symbols can also cause problems. Example 2 illustrates a transfer of the symbol which in many European languages means “approximately.”

Example 2

The plates were incubated for 3 weeks in a dark room at ± 23 °C and a relative humidity of ± 90%.

Transferred symbols can also cause problems. Example 2 illustrates a transfer of the symbol which in many European languages means “approximately.”

Example 2:

The data of the 2 groups diverge in almost all the

Transfers of convention from the NNS writing culture

Conventions of writing are not universal, so appropriate scientific writing varies among cultures. To an NS, science writing in the given cultural tradition, for example, appears “pretentious and badly organized” (see 3.188) whereas the four-unit pattern of writing traditional in certain Asian cultures (notably Chinese, Korean and Thai) may seem incoherent (cf. 3.189). And when French scientists transfer the French convention of reporting science in the present tense to their English writing, they seem to be stating general truths, rather than describing their own procedures and findings (see 3.190). NNS scientists are already exposed to the conventions of scientific English passively (through reading) and actively (through writing courses), but didactic editing can help them master these.

Features attributable to both learner English and transfers: writing that does not “flow”

NNS authors who write fluently in their own language often write English that does not flow, as do novice and unskilled NS writers. Since disjointed, clumsy text can distract the reader from the message, even when the individual words are correct, grammar, spelling and punctuation, it should be improved.

One or more of the following factors can contribute to awkward flow:

1. the NNS author does not know how to use cohesive devices (conjunctions and words or phrases that signal links with preceding sentences) effectively in English;

2. cohesive devices are not used as often, or as explicitly, in his or her mother tongue;

3. the author has been guided by the sentence length usual in the mother tongue, but this is much longer or shorter in scientific English;

4. the author has followed mother-tongue ordering of the information in the sentence.

Reason 1 is clearly a learner error, but the others are transfers. Reason 3 helps explain why NSs lose the thread of the long and complex sentences written by French, German, Slavonic and Spanish, but find that Dutch scientists write choppy (very short, simple sentences). Reason 4 results in “frontal overload,” a feature reported in the English writing of Dutch, Finnish and German scientists, but undoubtedly found in other NNS Englishes. It comes about because in English, the rhetorical impact comes at the end of the sentence. Compare Example 5a, a formally overloaded Dutch-authored sentence, with the corrected version 5b, which contains the same information, but has been “end-focused.”

Example 5a

The carbon balance of terrestrial ecosystems is strongly debated since the discovery that our understanding of the global carbon cycle could not track the pathways of all CO2 released by human activities.

Example 5b

Since the discovery that our present understanding of the global carbon cycle fails to track the pathways of all CO2 released by human activities, there has been heated debate about the carbon balance of terrestrial ecosystems.

Problems of assertiveness

When making claims and presenting conclusions, authors must use words that are neither too strong nor too weak for the given situation. An NNS author may not have mastered the modal verbs (“may,” “might,” “would,” “should,” for example) that signal degrees of confidence about an assertion. If that author uses forceful verbs (“is,” “shows,” “indicates,” “suggests”), many modals and no qualifying adjectives or adverbs like “possible” or “apparently,” he or she appears assertive. This is enhanced by overuse of the present tense (which, conventionally in scientific English, is used for stating general truths). Whether this English results from learner inexperience (not knowing subtle words, being unable to use tense properly) or is cultural (in Dutch, modal verbs are used less frequently; in French, science is reported in the present tense, it should be edited sensitively to modify the bluntness. Sometimes, the tone is over-cautious, over-polite, or vague because the author feels that the present tense (“sounds right; but OK”). Their corrections were superficial, at sentence level (spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax).

Commercial online editing services recommended by many science journals offer NS scientific graduate language editors who correct grammar and spelling errors. Whether they also correct other NNS errors is questionable. However, there are specialist language professionals who work with NNS authors to remediate NNS errors from texts. These authors’ editors operate at the interface between editing and translation, as mediators between the NS and NNS cultures, to filter out the linguistic and cultural transfers and cultural myopia from NNS writing.

Whether the language editing can preserve the author’s authentic voice depends on the standard of English and the field. It is crucial that it be done sensitively and subtly. Examples of this are seen in the hard sciences. Ideally, after editing, the English of an NNS author writing with a strong foreign accent should be international, rather than unnaturally American or British. And when inept NNS English is being amended,
care must be taken to ensure that the changes do not alter what the author is trying to say, but only how he or she says it. Ideally, the author (who, after all, is responsible for the paper) should know what has been changed, why, and to what effect. Burrough-Boenisch and Matarese discuss how authors' editors do so, and mention the importance of giving language editors due acknowledgement.

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References

Further reading