

Professional development for practitioners and researchers in specialized communication in English

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At the first Mediterranean Editors' and Translators' Meeting (METM 05), held in Barcelona in November 2005, language and communication experts welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and examine some of the practices that help authors whose first language is not English to communicate effectively. This article touches on a few of the topics that were covered at the event; more information is available on the Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) website¹ and in other publications for science communication and publishing professionals.^{2,3}

The interface between translation and editing

Increasingly, scientific-technical-medical translation requires translators to undertake editing tasks previously handled by publisher's editors, peer reviewers, documentalists, mentors, thesis advisors, and in-house or institutional reviewers. Journal publishers are cutting corners on copyediting to preserve sustainability or increase profits, and some journal editors admit that a manuscript that requires little editing is more likely to be published than a paper with equally important scientific content but that will cost more to edit.⁴ However, on a more positive note with regard to the dissemination of science information from non-English-speaking countries, participants at METM 05 learned that at least one publisher is thinking of expanding bilingual publication in Spanish and English to more of its journals.

Translators need to understand these trends and be prepared to advise their clients—both authors and publishers—on changes that may be needed to ensure that the authors' message gets through as clearly as possible to target readers. By way of example, Mary Ellen Kerans, a freelance author's editor and translator in Barcelona, Spain (and organizer of METM 05) explained how editing faults discovered by translators can be integrated into the bilingual publication process.⁵

Translators, authors' editors and journal editors at METM 05 agreed that dialoging with authors was often needed to discover the meaning behind unclear writing or confusing translations. Translators and editors at the workshop run by Karen Shashok on editing tasks implicit in translation were encouraged to be proactive in consulting with authors to dispel ambiguities and other problems, because readers were likely to interpret these rough spots in the text as careless science or inadequate writing, editing or translation. This advice was repeated in the workshop run by manuscript editor Aleksandra Misak of the *Croatian Medical*

Journal. She advised translators to contact authors without hesitation whenever they detected readability problems in the text, noting that science authors were not always highly skilled writers. She also warned that *not* asking any questions during the translation process might be a sign that the translator was assuming too much knowledge about the actual meaning, or was simply assuming that expert readers would understand what the translator had not been able to understand. Translation problems are common in the manuscripts Aleksandra edits, and she noted that many translators do not appear to be familiar with the terminology and style conventions used in medical journals to produce a text that the author's peers find acceptable.⁶

Unclear writing on the rise in all languages?

Participants seemed to agree that missing antecedents, dangling participles and unclear writing in general are widespread faults in many languages. Another common feature of researchers' writing seemed to be a reluctance to repeat words or phrases, even in scientific or technical contexts where the confusion caused by the use of synonyms to «liven up» the «style» might cause confusion. Readers of the target text should not be left wondering what the authors are referring to, and repetition—a comparatively minor stylistic irritant—may be more acceptable to readers than the extra effort needed to understand a confusing text. It was felt that for technical terms, translators were justified in choosing one unambiguous term and using it consistently in place of the synonyms authors often used.

Because researchers do not often revise their texts thoroughly, translators are likely to encounter confusing or unclear passages, and they should work with authors to edit the text accordingly before it is submitted. This is especially so if the text is intended for publication (in peer-reviewed journals, for example) or for other forms of critical review (such as grant proposals). Training in qualitative and quantitative research methods can enhance the translator's ability to detect careless descriptions of variables and potential faults in the reporting of results, and thus to help authors present their results clearly and convincingly.

Is English adapting or accumulating deleterious mutations?

Joy Burrough-Boenisch, a freelance editor who—like most participants at METM 05—works with scientists whose first language is not English, noted the globalization of English

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and of publishing, and the continuing evolution of the language as it absorbs inputs from ever-growing and increasingly varied populations of users. In many science journals and books (as in other media) texts are no longer being revised or edited to high standards. Large commercial publishers have been moving editorial and production work to areas where labor is cheaper, and where standards of English may be different from what has been acceptable until recently. Several speakers at METM 05 observed that the standards for appropriate language can be hard to define. This problem is compounded by the many users of English (both native and non-native) who are developing their own discipline-specific criteria in the absence of a «gold standard.»

Ian Williams, a specialist in English for Specific Purposes at the University of Cantabria (Santander, Spain), showed how writers whose first language is Spanish differ from native users of English in their discourse style. He noted that placement by non-native writers of English (or their translators) of background information in the wrong place within the Discussion section of research manuscripts—the «regressive» structure—was likely to be rejected by native-English readers, who prefer a «progressive» structure.

As authors' editors know, the reasons for readers' rejection are not always clear, since many criticisms blame «the English» with no further explanation and often without flagging the parts of the text that caused problems. Reviewers and editors (even those whose own knowledge of English appears to be less than perfect) are quick to request that a native English speaker revise the text, even when a native English speaker has already done so—and even when this information is stated in the Acknowledgments section.

Peer reviewers rarely receive training in critical reading and constructive reviewing techniques, and cannot always be relied on to provide advice about the writing that helps authors to improve their texts for their target readers.⁷ When over-confident reviewers attempt to «correct» the English they can introduce errors in a text that was correct as submitted, or make changes that reflect their personal preference but do not make the text easier to read or understand.

Where can language professionals find usable models for high-quality English in specialized fields?

Are these negative reactions by readers a sign of unacceptable writing or thinking by the authors? Are reviewers and editors intolerant of cultural differences in writing patterns? Are translators and editors who work with authors missing something of key importance by not understanding enough about target readers' expectations—not only for correct English grammar and terminology, but for broader and less readily standardized structural features of the text such as argumentation and coherence? Most participants in the workshop on editing tasks implicit in translation concurred regarding the lack of consensus on «good scientific English» by indicating that they had seen the «Please have a native English speaker revise this manuscript» admonishment in at least one editor's or reviewer's report during their career. Under the circumstances, however, finding out what the

author's target audience will find acceptable and unacceptable remains a major challenge.

Determining an appropriate level of quality for «readability» or «colloquial usage» is not always a straightforward task for language professionals. How do we know when «the English» is good enough to satisfy the readers' expectations? How do we judge in advance whether the resources available for translation and editing (time, money and skills) will be adequate to make the target text good enough? Where do we turn for models of what the target readership will find acceptable? Science journals vary in the quality of the English and the editing, and this makes it even harder for language advisers to find reliable models. Participants at METM 05 were urged to seek the author's advice about which publications are considered trustworthy sources of information in their discipline, and to use these publications as models for acceptable writing and editing.

Ensuing discussions between participants suggested that to best serve our clients, translators and other language professionals need to educate ourselves not only in subject-specific knowledge but also in text features that will ensure a respectful reading from the author's target audience. In some cases, what the target audience finds appropriate writing or usage may sound unusual to the language professional unfamiliar with the discipline. We have all encountered examples of writing that the target readership may well find acceptable even though it contravenes grammar and syntax rules the language professional feels ought not to be bent. On the other hand, the uneven quality of the writing and editing in many science publications means that models for good writing need to be chosen with care, and what authors point to as acceptable in their specialized field (and use as a model for their own writing) may in fact be less than perfectly edited and therefore be unacceptable to the professional science communications consultant (and to some target readers).

Participants at METM 05 judged the event to be highly successful, and in our second conference in Barcelona on 27-28 October, 2006, MET hopes once again to provide a forum where language and communications practitioners can interact with researchers in linguistics to each other's mutual benefit—and ultimately to the benefit of those who rely on our support to communicate successfully in English.

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