

Editing for International Authors

From the CBE Interviews editor—Our guest interviewers for this issue are Gil Croome and Susan Stockwell, who have worked extensively with authors whose 1st language is not English. They agreed to carry the ball over to you on the Philippines assignment. Remember, dear reader, you also can be a guest interviewer—just let us know.

Guest Interviewers:
Gil Croome
Susan Stockwell

From the guest interviewers—“When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less” (*Through the Looking Glass*, by Lewis Carroll).

To convey ideas clearly, we must use words that have common meanings, even if we have to define them ourselves. But if we must define the words we use, our letters, speeches, or research papers will be long-winded, hard to read, and probably confusing. So we should use a version of the language that others understand without the definitions. However, if we use a local version of the language, our meaning might be clear to the population using that local version but not to those who use other versions.

Most editors believe that standard English should be used in scientific reporting. Is there room for nonstandard English? We asked 3 editors who work with authors whose 1st language is not English and who regularly have to deal with nonstandard English. They responded to our questions through one of the marvels of modern technology: e-mail.

Helen van Houten has lived and worked in Africa for many years, editing scientific materials, teaching researchers to write, and teaching editors the tricks of the trade. Ian Montagnes is a consultant concerned with international publishing development. His work in Asia and Africa included 3 years in the Philippines, where he led a training program for editors from 21 developing countries. He edited *Scholarly Publishing* for 24

years and was editor-in-chief of the University of Toronto Press for most of that time. Seth Beckerman, who responded to the last question, has had wide experience in editing in North America, Asia, and Africa as an in-house editor and as a freelance author's editor.

Q: Is there a “standard English” in international science writing? Can you define it?

Van Houten: Yes, I think that there is a standard English—scientific or otherwise. No, I'm not at all certain that I can define it. But it follows the generally laid down rules of grammar and syntax that one finds in any grammar book. It is the English defined as “acceptable” by those who use the English language as a basic tool in their work—writers, politicians, historians, and, yes, editors. With minor variations, it is the same for British, Americans, Canadians, Australians, and others who grow up with English as their 1st language. More and more people are growing up here in East Africa with English as their 1st language or the 1st of their 2 languages.

Montagnes: The only English that belongs in international science writing is the English of science. This is a specific variant, characterized by a strict adherence to various conventions. There are conventions for the use of symbols, units, mathematical expressions, and abbreviations; less agreement, except on consistency, in conventions of spelling (an ocean divides haematologists and hematologists); diverse conventions for citations. One convention is to follow the syntax commonly accepted for English. Another is to use words that brook no misunderstanding. All the conventions, whether universal or not, have the goal of effecting clarity in communication. Anything that reduces clarity breaches the conventions.

Q: Should nonstandard English ever be used in scientific writing?

Van Houten: Nonstandard English should not be used in scientific writing. That does

not mean that nonnative speakers should not write in English. I know many scientists here in Africa whose 1st language is not English but who write beautifully clear papers. I also come upon papers written by native speakers that are not written well at all and papers written by nonnative speakers that are not well written.

In conducting science-writing courses for African researchers, I always bring out what an editor friend and colleague told me: fuzzy writing reflects fuzzy thinking. If authors have clearly in mind what they want to say, an editor can tidy up the English. But if the organization is poor, if the thoughts haven't coalesced, no editor can do much with the paper. An editor can't follow the thought, can't follow a thread through the paper, can't fix it up.

Writing in nonstandard English would definitely limit the audience. Any journal published in English should maintain the normal standards of the language. The whole idea of writing up one's results in English is to make it available to a wide audience. Standard English is the only vehicle that can convey that message. Anything else cuts down on the readership. Or worse, the form detracts from the content, and an impatient reader might even deem the results not credible.

I have discussed these questions with my African colleague, for whom English is definitely her 2nd or 3rd language—and definitely above “standard”. She and I always cross-check each other's work, and she picks up points that I overlook. She feels as I do—if anything, even more vehemently. English is English, Kiswahili is Kiswahili, and so on; and whatever language you choose to write in, you follow the rules for expressing yourself in that language as well as you can.

Montagnes: There is room for nonstandard English because the power of English comes in no small part from its diversity. There is no academy, as in French, trying to force the language into a straitjacket. English is flexible and absorbent, drawing into itself the patterns and words of all the areas in which

it is spoken. International scientific communication should not have to deprive itself of that strength.

Sometimes the English spoken as a 2nd language is more precise than "standard" English. A Tagalog-speaking person in the Philippines is likely to say, in English, "I am the one who will do x . . ." and "You will be the one who will do y . . .", not "I'll do x"; there is no question about the separation of responsibilities. (The precision of the English spoken as a 2nd language can also be confusing because it is different from the supposed precision of standard English.)

Misunderstandings will always arise when people who speak different varieties of English meet. If international communication is to be effective, such misunderstandings must be at a minimum. There must be a common language.

But what is standard English? Is it the English of England or of the United States, the 2 major powers of the language? Is a vertical conveyance a lift or an elevator? Is a motor car or automobile powered by petrol or gasoline? Does standard English include the English of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or Jamaica—all countries where English is a 1st language? Of India, where perhaps more people speak English than in all those 4 countries combined?

Fortunately for science, most of the rich but confusing variety in the various Englishes lies in everyday existence—in words related to occupations, to the household, to recreation, and of course to sex. The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* has more than 600 pages of words that belong distinctively to that small province. Many would be unintelligible to most people living elsewhere. Few, if any, belong in a journal of molecular biology or transfusion medicine.

Language is rich in units of measurement. Ounces, cavans, borongs, jins, ardebs, feddans, and rais all have meaning in a local context, but for international communication science has adopted an international system. The English language is even richer, but regional variants belong in the regions, where their use might improve communica-

tion in writing intended solely for a local readership, not in communications intended for a global readership.

Q: How do journal editors react to papers in nonstandard English?

Van Houten: I do not know how editors of big, internationally prominent journals react. At editorial conferences, I get the impression that there is a spirit of helpfulness and encouragement, more tolerance of an author whose 1st language is not English than of an author who was judged to be a native speaker. That might or might not be true; matters of staff time inevitably come into consideration. I have had experience only on small, regional journals, proceedings, and similar publications. We are certainly tolerant. If the content is judged worth publishing, we work to smooth out the kinks and make the paper more readable. A nonnative speaker should seek an author's editor to go through the paper before it is submitted. Some institutions in this region have such capability on staff.

Beckerman: Scientific publishing is so competitive that it might be difficult for authors

whose English is not "conventional" to have their papers even accepted for review, no matter how sound the science or how important the work.

The issue is communication versus snobbery. Authors whose 1st language is not English are often able to communicate their research adequately in what might be considered "substandard" English, but do editors automatically reject their papers because of the syntax? I think such rejection is more often the rule than the exception. While I worked at international research centers, when asked I always tried to make time to edit papers by nonnative speakers of English before they were submitted to journals. My assumption was that, if the editor was not immediately turned off by the English, the paper stood a better chance of being evaluated for the science rather than the syntax.

Lack of conventional syntax might be a convenient filter for journal editors who are overworked and overwhelmed by the ^{OM} volume of manuscripts they receive and might look for quick reasons to return them. They might classify such manuscripts in the same category as those by authors who do not double space their manuscripts or submit the required number of copies.

Grant Writer

The Greenville Hospital System is seeking a full-time grant writer. This position involves preparation of both federal and private foundation grant applications dealing with research related to obstetrics and gynecology and to reproductive endocrinology. Interested persons should forward a resume and list of three references to Thomas M. Price, MD, Division of Reproductive Endocrinology, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Greenville Hospital System, 701 Grove Rd., Greenville, SC 29605.