◆ Copy Editing: Pet Peeves and Bêtes Noires

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Copyediting entails high standards and, for many copyeditors, a pet peeve or two along the way. Occasionally, copyeditors even claim that their pet peeves or bêtes noires actually followed them home. The 3 presenters in this session provided vivid descriptions of peeves and even a prescription for dealing with problematic peeves.

Lorraine Loviglio, retired manager of manuscript editing for the New England Journal of Medicine and author of The Word Watcher column in CBE Views, welcomed her fellow "wordies"—not "weirdies"—to the session. She gave what she called a brief history of the pet peeve, noting that peeves were first domesticated more than 50 000 years ago—"about 20 minutes after the invention of speech". Unlike cats and dogs, pet peeves are friendly to strangers but snappish with their owners.

Taking issue with language permissivists, Loviglio argued for the enforcement of standards in written English. Diehards like her, she said, are dedicated to defending the language against "the barbarian hordes, most of them with advanced degrees", who would otherwise overwhelm it with their "inane gabble". Change in language is inevitable, she added, but that shouldn't be made an excuse for carelessness and ignorance.

Loviglio deplored the prevalence of what she calls "word bloat" in scientific writing—the use, in one example, of 13 words where 5 would do and the almost universal use of words like "methodology" for "methods" and "symptomatology" for "symptoms". In one of her columns, Loviglio compared authors guilty of word bloat to the frog in Aesop's fable that tried to puff itself up to the size of an ox. The frog swelled itself up until it burst. There's a moral in there somewhere, she said.

Some mistakes can be amusing. Loviglio collects examples that are sure to cheer up any editor. One author wrote a note of thanks to the Journal for accepting his letter to the editor. The author wrote, "It will really be a nightmare for us to find this letter published in the most prestigious and number one Medical Journal."

Margaret Mahan, retired managing editor for the University of Chicago Press, began her talk by holding up Strunk and White's The Elements of Style. "Please read this", she said. Mahan categorized her pet peeves into personal pet peeves, pet peeves of managing editors, and pet peeves of revisers of manuals. Mahan is working on the 15th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style.

Quoting a dictionary is never a good way to start, she said with a smile as she read the definition of a bête noire. Of course, any editor is entitled to a few pet peeves, she said.

Missing deadlines topped Mahan's list of pet peeves for managing editors. She added that freelance writers are often good at meeting deadlines because, understandably, they want to get paid.

Some rules can be a pet peeve for revisers of manuals, Mahan said. There are a few rules in the CBE manual, Scientific Style and Format, an excellent style guide frequently cited in the Chicago Manual, that she finds hard to live with—for example, the insistence on always using numerals, even for numbers under 10. Mahan's closing pet peeve was the kind of index in which, even though it is correctly formatted, you don't know whether you are in a main entry or a subentry.

Barbara Wallraff, a senior editor at The Atlantic Monthly and the author of both that magazine's Word Court column and a forthcoming book by the same name, argued that people who care about language can sometimes be too peevish. "My pet peeve is peeves themselves", she said.

She brought humorous samples from her mailbag, which showed how worked up people can get about fine points. It isn't unusual for people to object to usages that don't bother language experts at all, Wallraff said. Editors in particular should try not to do this; their job isn't to inflict their pet peeves on writers, but rather to share the "consensus of informed opinion" with writers to help them communicate as clearly as possible.

Pet peeves, or bêtes noires, whichever you prefer, seem to be a part of the word-lover's world. In fact, Loviglio said, "peevishness is fun if you know what you are talking about." Maybe if editors give their peeves plenty of reference books to chew on, they won't have as much time to annoy their owners. ◼