

Editing English Content for Non-English Readers

Speakers:

Mauricio Rocha e Silva

Clinics

São Paulo University Medical College

São Paulo, Brazil

Britt Bromberg

Xenofile Editing

New Orleans, Louisiana

Reporter:

Rita Janssen

Allen Press

Lawrence, Kansas

Mauricio Rocha e Silva opened the session by leading a brief tour through the history of the use of Latin-derived words in English literature from the 14th century to the 21st, revealing a pattern of increasing cross-fertilization between the two languages. He pointed out that there are 896 million Romance-language speakers and 937 million English-language speakers in the world and offered practical advice on how English can become more understandable to Romance-language speakers, as well as how to edit scientific English papers written by Romance-language-speaking authors.

Although English contains words that are derived from Latin, an editor should look out for false cognates—words that exist in English and Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Italian that look and sound the same but do not have the same meaning. An editor can spot false cognates when a sentence simply does not make sense. The existence of Latin-derived words with no equivalent in English can also make translating between languages difficult.

Rocha e Silva recommended the *Comprehensive Bilingual Dictionary of Spanish False Cognates*, published by Bilingual Press. You can also add the following Web sites to your favorite Internet sites for fast online reference tools:

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_false_friends#L (all languages, general).
- www.sk.com.br/sk-fals.html (Portuguese).
- spanish.about.com/cs/vocabulary/a/obviouswrong.htm (Spanish).
- french.about.com/library/fauxamis/blfauxam_p.htm (French).

In addition to vocabulary, syntax needs the writer's and editor's attention. Romance-language speakers continue to conjugate many verbs and can live without pronouns, but English-language speakers use only three conjugations and use pronouns to distinguish the number applied to the verb. Choosing the correct pronoun can be a challenge for the editor when the Romance-language writer has left it out, especially if the passive voice is being used.

Britt Bromberg, a freelance editor, rounded out the discussion by sharing practical strategies for building and maintaining a freelance editing practice that caters to authors who are non-native English speakers. He reviewed basic business-building strategies and the unique aspects of working with authors who are not proficient in English.

He emphasized the importance of choosing words carefully when working with authors for whom English is a second language. When delivering your work to an author, you should send a cover letter, the raw editing changes, the cleaned-up edited document, and a file where the changes are highlighted in a colored font.

In the cover letter, be sure to acknowledge the possibility that you (the editor) have introduced errors. Encourage the author to read every word and every revision to make sure that the entire paper says what the author wants it to say. Explain the comments and queries and how to make them visible in the electronic file. Tell the author how many comments there are and ask that additional changes be made in a different-colored font.

Bromberg reminded us that authors who are not native English speakers may be struggling with both English and their computers and that they might misunderstand queries and comments and fail to address them. Always address the author formally in the first query. Don't make your queries simple questions; provide several possible answers for the author to choose from. Authors want you to tell them what to do, so give them actual samples of ways to correct their text. He also suggests avoiding "editor speak"; let your queries sit overnight to make sure that they are clear before you send them to the author, and avoid colloquial phrases.

After you send the manuscript back to the author, follow up with an offer to assist him or her with responses to reviewers once the manuscript is submitted. Send a seasonal card and ask how the manuscript is progressing.

Both speakers provided the audience with useful tools for addressing problems in text written by writers for whom English is a second language and strategies for communicating with the authors themselves. 