EASE-Forum Digest: September to December 2014

You can join the forum by sending the one-line message "subscribe ease-forum" (without the quotation marks) to majordomo@helsinki.fi. Send in plain text, not HTML. Details at www.ease.org.uk/node/589.

Establishing the value, if any, of language editing

Karen Shashok asked if any research had compared usage metrics between better-edited and less-well-edited scientific articles. She thought such research might now be possible because many journals provide links to editing services in their instructions for authors or require authors to state if their article has been edited by a "native English speaker" or prepared by a medical writer. Her main interest was whether a difference could be established between readability of articles edited before submission by someone unaffiliated with the journal and those edited between completion of peer review and publication. Tom Lang challenged Karen to define "good" editing. He thought there were too many variables at play to allow a robust study, for example it would not be known if the author had accepted all the editor's changes. Andrew Davis agreed that such research would be extremely difficult, although he had heard of some research that showed articles with higher readability metrics were more likely to be downloaded. And from his experience, he was convinced efficiently increasing readability scores and reducing the number of mistakes in grammar, syntax and vocabulary increased the probability of getting the manuscript accepted (see also support[1]).

What Tom believed could be studied was the effect of the presence or absence of certain elements. For instance, it is known that CONSORT elements, including a clear problem statement, a complete statistical methods section and informative graphs, improve the quality of papers reporting randomized clinical trials[2]. Unlike "good editing", the presence or absence of such elements could be identified objectively.

Sylwia did not entirely agree, especially with Tom's "nonsense" dismissal of suggestions that a well written proposal was more likely to be funded than a poorly written one. She thought an easily understandable, well organized and logical proposal helps to persuade funders that the idea is worthwhile and indicates likelihood that the authors will publish their results, which is usually also important for the funders. Tom countered "Prove it!" He was not aware of any scientific evidence to support such a claim and reiterated there are too many variables to allow evaluation of the contribution writing quality makes to a decision.

Karen still thought the quest of discovering associations between post publication usage and whether a paper was edited by someone not directly affiliated with the publisher was worth pursuing. An evaluation instrument for editing quality could be developed. Naturally it would need to be pretested and evaluated to ensure it provided reproducible results. The hypothesis could be simple: "that differences would appear in the frequencies of usage (views, downloads, citations, tweets, whatever) between articles that were and were not edited before publication. Whether an article was or was not edited (by, for example, an authors' editor, translator/editor, medical writer, language editor, technical editor or editorial services firm) before submission or before acceptance might be recorded in the manuscript record, or it could be determined by checking the Acknowledgments section. The sample of articles could be divided into edited vs not edited and then the associations analyzed for each group separately. Or "edited vs nonedited" could be just another variable in the analysis, and whether it is found to be associated with other variables (frequency of usage, country, discipline, language, funding, impact factor, compliance with the appropriate EQUATOR checklist, publisher...whatever) would be discovered after the analysis was finished. If the manuscript management records or databases of enough journals and publishers contained the appropriate fields, it might be easy to extract the data and search for associations." Karen admitted her suggested approach was limited but felt that with the amount of carelessly edited material currently being published in reputable journals, knowing whether editing results in greater usage rather than assuming that it does would be a better option. "A super idea" was Norman Grossblatt's verdict. Karen's proposed study design that concentrated on editing itself would avoid defining "good" editing. He thought such a study could be easily undertaken if journals could be persuaded to indicate in their data whether an article had been "edited" or "not edited".

Francoise Salager-Meyer pointed to a linguistic study loosely connected to the topic[3]. Tom judged the study not to be so enlightening because rather than researching professional medical editors' work it compared the work of native-English-speaking English teachers and healthcare professionals who edited texts written by non native English speakers in Japan. The concept was to bring texts not to high-quality medical writing but only to an acceptable level of English, primarily by adding definite articles. I was unsurprised that English teachers made more revisions affecting definite articles because articles generally seem to be an endangered species in scientific articles—notwithstanding that they are one aspect of good quality writing.

Skeptically, Ed Hull asked what the value of the study Karen was suggesting could be and what it could possibly achieve. Karen thought it would shed light on whether standards are declining as commonly protested and whether readers anyway care about or pay attention to writing quality. She listed a number of stakeholds she thought would have an interest in knowing if good editing is or is not related to post publication usage: people who buy or sell editing services, research institutions in need of funding, editors interested in how to attract more readers, and publishers concerned about whether income is influenced or not by the quality of editing. And she added a question: "If "standards" have "declined" yet profits on journals remain so high, does this mean readers don't care enough about "editorial quality" to stop paying for less-well-edited material? Does it have something to do with

big deals and journal bundling, which make it impossible for libraries to cancel specific titles and therefore make it impossible for publishers to receive negative feedback on the quality of specific titles?"

Authors peer reviewing their own papers scam

Helle Goldman referred editors to an article in *Nature* about peer review scams: http://www.nature.com/news/publishing-the-peer-review-scam-1.16400
It reports incidents of authors providing email addresses of recommended reviewers that filter back to themselves or their associates. The article mentions the Editorial Manager online manuscript management system as particularly vulnerable to manipulation because passwords are emailed in plain text rather than under layers of encryption to users claiming to have forgotten them, but other systems are also susceptible. Editors should look out for red flags for these scams including if: "The author provides Gmail, Yahoo or other free email addresses to contact suggested reviewers, rather than email addresses from an academic institution."

Andrew Davis opined that editors' failures to check the authenticity of peer reviewers recommended by authors was a scandal. Editors should know if a reviewer provides good reviews and therefore would not send a manuscript to unknown people at such email addresses. Helle said that his journal uses the Web of Science and institutional websites to check that potential reviewers don't share an institutional affiliation with the authors or have coauthored papers with them. Scientists who have a good publishing record would not be ruled out if a non academic email address had been provided. Marcin Kozak also thought nothing was intrinsically wrong with reviewers using such addresses and referred to an article in JASIST that he coauthored "Do researchers provide public or institutional E-mail accounts as correspondence E-mails in scientific articles?" (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.23401/abstract). Alan Hopkins, himself retired and using a non academic address, saw their potential for unscrupulous authors but considered them acceptable if there was evidence of the addressee's academic reputation.

Marcin commented that he never used the reviewers recommended by authors. Although Helle would not have a paper reviewed exclusively by reviewers recommended by the authors he did point out that in a narrow field they may be the only people with the requisite expertise. Marge Berer concurred. Another solution proposed by Marcin might be for editors to ask authors to suggest reviewers only when finding experts to review the manuscript becomes difficult.

Norman Grossman added that the story had also been covered by Retraction Watch (retractionwatch.com), which reports on publication transgression generally.

Discussion initiators

Karen Shashok: kshashok@kshashok
Helle Goldman: helle.goldman@npolar.no

References

1 Coates *et al*. Language and publication in "*Cardiovascular Research*" articles. *Cardiovascular Research* 2002;53(2):279-85).
2 O'Leary JD and Crawford MW. Review article: reporting guidelines in the biomedical literature. *Canadian Journal of Anaesthesia*. 2013;60(8):813-21.
3 Willy I, Tanimoto K. Convenience editing" in action: comparing English teachers' and medical professionals' revisions of a medical abstract. *English for Specific Purposes* 2012;31(4):221-92.

Perform and its fiends

When did you last perform something? Most people would probably answer by referring back to a school play or musical event, or to their participation in the local dramatics society, understanding the question as "enact before an audience". Even a scientist would be unlikely to answer, "I performed some documentation yesterday" or "Last week I performed some measurements". So, why do we read sentences like "Analysis of the data was performed" instead of "The data were analysed" or, more daringly, the active "We analysed the data" in academic journals?

Perform(ed) also has the nuance of bringing a task to completion; but would readers doubt that the analyses had been completed? It is appropriate when formally taking action in accordance with requirements, as in "perform one's contractual obligations". It is appropriate for judgments on physical function: "The athlete performed well". Some dictionaries note its use in a sexual context, "He performed well in bed". However, Gowers states, "If you mean no more than *do*, then that is a less misleading word to use".[1] Authors generally heed this advice—except when they write academic papers. Recent searches found five *performed* for every *done* in PubMed. By contrast, *done* was three times as common as *performed* in a corpus of books searched with Google Ngram Viewer. What's more, *performed's* occurrence increased 2.4-fold in PubMed between 1975 and 2010.[2]

Apart from the overstretch of its meaning, *perform* attracts an entourage of unnecessary words: compare "Staining of cells was performed" with "Cells were stained". It promotes the use of abstract nouns such as *administration*: "Administration of H(2) receptor antagonists was performed in patients", where the concrete noun *patients* is a better subject for the sentence: "Patients were treated with H(2) receptor antagonists". It encourages use of the passive voice when the active voice is an option: "We treated patients with H(2) receptor antagonists". Thus, *perform* encapsulates the fiends of academic writing: imprecision, wordiness, overuse of abstract/nominalized nouns, and the passive voice. The thinking author will avoid writing *perform* superfluously and slay four fiends at the stroke of a key.

References

1 E. Gowers. *The complete plain words* 3rd ed, revised by Greenbaum S, Whitcut J. London, Penguin, 1987
2 Goodman NW, Edwards MB. *Medical Writing A Prescription for Clarity* 4th ed. Cambridge, CUP, 2014. ISBN 978-1-107-62815-1

Elise Langdon-Neuner
a.a.neuner@gmail.com