# EASE-Forum Digest: December 2016 to March 2017

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### "Improve the English"

Aleksandra Golebiowska's journal often received manuscripts from India which were written in poor English. When asked to improve their English, even when the use of reputable editing services was suggested, the authors instead consulted professors of English. The manuscripts sent back to the journal were little improved. How did other journals tackle this problem? Diana Epstein's journals encountered the same problem and they recommended authors from Lower Middle Income Countries contact Author Aid who offers a free language editing service to these authors.

Tom Lang thought the problem arose because in general, professors of English are unaware of the conventions of medical-technical writing. He supposed Aleksandra's journal could adopt the same approach as many other journals and place a list of editing services on their website. However, the cost and quality of such services varied and most journals refused to include names of individual copyeditors, who provided the best but most expensive service. The problem as Yateen Joshi, a copyeditor from India, saw it was that copyeditors everywhere tended to have a degree in English rather than one in science added to which authors were unaware of editing services or found them too expensive.

Andrew Davis took issue with Yateen's implication that a science degree was a prerequisite for good editing skills and rather considered there were several layers to the problem

- authors credited professors of English with a higher status than copyeditors, which he had also encountered in Germany.
- "the English should be improved" was conceived as it should be made more literary whereas it should be made more scientific and clearer
- manuscripts were improved, even in the US/UK, towards the local standard of English as opposed to the international scientific form.

Therefore journals should ask authors to seek assistance from someone trained to edit scientific English. Authors who did not heed this request should expect to have their manuscript rejected.

Mary Ellen Kerans made a distinction between asking authors to "improve English" and asking them to "improve writing." By "writing" she meant "the adequacy and logic of the argument, the completeness of the information, the clear differentiation between fact and stance." She implored editors to "stop just using "get help with the English" as code for "I don't understand your ms (manuscript) and since I also see some grammar errors I guess that's what's wrong"."

Instead they should:
1. "give brief examples of a couple of spots where a reader is confused and why, so the author sees it's not ready for peer review,
2. suggest the author get feedback on how to revise the writing (in all appropriate senses including "the English,"), and then
3. allow resubmission for possible peer review if the revision is substantive and the ms no longer confusing."

As a novel approach, John Cathey suggested "uberizing" the global scientific manuscript editing business. In this way the copyeditor, middleman, could be eliminated altogether and the clients placed in direct contact with journal editors. A form of collaborative editing using a system such as Google docs would be needed. A small team could work on a paper, communicating as done for a Wikipedia page. An administrator could police the English to ensure it met the required international scientific standard. He conceded that issues of payment, levels of editing and certification of the qualification to edit would have to be resolved, but the scheme could be initiated by a start-up or through crowd-sourced funding.

Mary Ellen agreed this was a possibility, except it would still leave the fact that working with an author's editor is far from simple. Those helping could not judge what was needed until they were thoroughly engaged with the manuscript, which if the golden standard of the editing collaboration undertaken by the *Croatian Medical Journal* were to be adopted, although ideal, would be exhausting.

I mused that Indians and other regional (for which I would include continental Europeans) English-speaking authors could understand their own native English, so was it right to impose US/UK English on authors? And did it have to be 'scientific' English, which is often difficult to understand anyway? (Aleksandra did explain at this point her problems with the Indian manuscripts were basic such as a lack of subject–verb agreement, spelling mistakes and typos.)

Mary Ellen reiterated her contention that editors should worry less about the English and rather tell authors that they found a specific sentence difficult to understand so as to impress upon them how difficult a reader found their muddled explanations to understand. Here though, we were talking about two different aspects, as Françoise Salager-Meyer stressed, it was not an either/or problem but usually both an English and a writing problem. I agreed with all Mary Ellen had said about the writing side but if, as Andrew implied, text was unacceptable because it was not appropriate scientific English, who was to decide the appropriate form of international scientific English? Andrew said scientists should write so that their audience understood but this audience increasingly encompasses scientists from outside the authors' field and a general public searching the Internet for information.

### Desk rejection for failing to meet the required standard of English

Karen challenged the forum with a scenario. A manuscript was desk-rejected because "the English" was not up to the journal's standards. The manuscript was then thoroughly edited and resubmitted with a certificate from the pre-submittal copyeditor. It was again desk-rejected. The email from the editor explained that despite the language revision the standard of English in the resubmitted version was insufficient for reviewers to be able to evaluate the manuscript, adding, "On a personal level, the [publisher] service is recommended. We recommend that you have your paper professionally edited for English language by a service such as [publisher's] at [link] [reference]. [...].When re-submitting your copyedited manuscript, please advise, via the cover letter, who carried out the copyediting revisions." No examples of the English errors were provided.

This left the authors with two impressions. Firstly a suspicion it was rejected for other reasons about which the editor was not being transparent. Secondly a skepticism about the editor's integrity in suggesting the use of the publisher's editing service.

What seemed strange to Karen, apart from the editor's obvious preference for using the publisher's editing service, was the apparent assumption the authors would follow the advice, incur more expense and delay, and resubmit to the same journal. The journal was one owned by an international federation of professional societies published by one of the Big Five medical journal publishers. The authors opted not to take the matter any further with the editor but submit to a journal from another publishing house.

Michael Altus thought the authors were being overly suspicious. He doubted that there were concealed reasons for the rejection or that the editor was inappropriately pushing the publisher's editing service beyond what was human nature, but if so his eyeballs would roll up to look at the ceiling over such a lapse of decency and publication ethics. Michael agreed the authors should try and publish elsewhere but not necessarily with a journal published by a different group. Individual editors handled manuscripts differently.

Valerie Matarese wondered if the author's instructions said use of their own editing service was or was not required before submission. Karen later researched the journal's website and found "If you feel your paper could benefit from English language polishing, we recommend that you have your paper professionally edited for English language by a service such as [publisher's] at [URL]." This was followed by the usual statement about such use not being a guarantee of publication. The only other guidance was a reference to an outdated edition of a well-known style manual and to instructions to authors published in the journal—except that they had not been published. Open Access articles of the type that could indicate the journal's style were also not available.

Andrew saw two issues:
- should journals recommend their own editing services—this would be fine provided it was one amongst many?
- was the edited manuscript really below the journal's standard?

On the second point the editor should be called to account. The authors should ask the editor to provide examples of where the manuscript failed to meet the journal's standards. The authors could do this while pursuing a submission elsewhere, and the editor could even asked to indicate where the English had failed to meet the required standards so as to help with its preparation for another journal. He stressed the editor had a right, even when a manuscript had been edited before submission, to reject if it did not meet the specific journal's language standards.

Karen agreed that the editor should be asked for examples. It would clarify for instance if the authors had erroneously submitted the wrong version of the manuscript or MS Word had corrupted the work of the Track Changes tool when viewed on a different computer.

Although Valerie's first reaction had been of a pay-back relationship between editor and publisher's services, she thought there were other interpretations. The manuscript might have required heavy editing and while resolving the problems to a state where the manuscript was comprehensible enough for peer review the editor might have stopped short of rewriting into native English—such extensive editing that would touch on ethical issues of ghostwriting. In this regard she thought some way needed to be found to educate journal editors about the processes of presubmission editing. Alternatively the editing might not have followed the journal's house style, which 10 years ago would have been resolved by in-house copyeditors without charge to the authors.

Andrew and Mary Ellen both related occasions where an editor had identified the English at fault which had revealed to them the changes had been made after copyediting. These issues could be resolved with further editing, but this solution was denied if an editor refused to give more than a general condemnation of the English.

If the editor did not give details and the authors shied away from confronting the editor as with Karen's scenario, Andrew suggested the author's editor might approach the editor. Karen cautioned confidentiality would preclude such a course without the authors' permission. Authors were often uncomfortable about contacting a journal with whom they had had a bad experience, assuming it would lead to a further deterioration of their relationship with the journal. Instead, they would prefer to move on and try a different journal no longer trusting the editor to act in an unbiased manner.

Karen concluded that being suspicious of everything was not always beneficial; on the other hand researchers become mistrustful if they feel an editor's decision is unjustified or biased. With the scenario she outlined, she thought a more positive outcome could have been achieved if the authors had asked the editor to provide examples of the manuscript's faults, "The authors would not feel they've wasted their time with the journal, and the editor, if the manuscript had been re-edited to comply with his standards, would not feel he's wasted his time with this manuscript." The other lesson was journals should provide authors with clear, up-to-date guidance on their standards for "the English" and writing.

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