Correspondence

Levelling the lingo playing field

Andrea Ballabeni

With an ever-declining number of papers written in languages other than English, the idiom of Shakespeare is, today more than ever before, the international language of science [1,2]. In 2014, according to PubMed’s language filter, 95.4% of life science publications retrieved by the search engine were written in English, in line with the trend of the last several decades [1,2]. Today, among the 20 countries with the highest number of publications per year on PubMed, only France and China apparently publish less than 95% of their papers in English [1].

However, English is only natively spoken by around 5% of the world population and only about 20 countries use it as their primary language (http://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/size). Not surprisingly, in 2014, only 4 out of the 20 countries with highest number of life science publications have English as their primary language [3], and in the 5-year period 2008-2012, nearly 54% of papers on PubMed were written in countries where English is not the primary idiom [1].

So, is it wise to keep English as the language of science? According to Howy Jacobs’s 2012 editorial [4], the answer is yes. Jacobs argues that, because English is the language used to publish the vast majority of scientific articles today, it must be considered and protected as the language of science. His stance, he says, is not imperialistic—his native language is English—because he would willingly replace English should “a majority of the world’s scientists” vote for it. This aside, Jacobs’s support of a single language for international scientific communication makes sense. That English is the language our community has settled on is a product of history; had one been writing a 100 years ago, one might have predicted German would dominate [5]. Nevertheless, the use of English is now accepted and supported as standard by most researchers.

But are the standards set for “good English” fair to non-native speakers, who are in the majority? While there is no doubt that using a single language benefits everybody, as it avoids the need for translation, at least in academic circles, it is also unfair, as Jacobs acknowledges, for those scientists whose native language is not the chosen one. In the case of English, in many countries the language is not well spoken or taught, which means that scientists in these countries do not seriously encounter it until they reach university and begin to undertake research. In Jacobs’s own words, learning and perfecting a language at graduate student level “is already too late: time “wasted” on perfecting linguistic competence inevitably decreases productivity at the bench”.

So, what could be done to help scientists compete on a level playing field? Jacobs rightly argues that scientific papers should not be corrected by non-scientists and that seeking help from native speakers who are also scientists is usually not practicable in the long run, even if you are friends with them. Jacobs therefore proposes two solutions: “prospective scientists should […] be fast-tracked into an English-language immersion programme from an early age” and “science funders in non-English-speaking countries should consider providing additional resources to equip laboratories with support personnel combining advanced scientific training with fluency in English.”

The former proposal is sensible, but probably not easily implementable, especially in the short term; it would be almost impossible to select prospective scientists when they are in school, and perfectly mastering a foreign language at college is probably too late. The latter proposal might be more easily implemented, but it is unlikely that funders would provide extra cash to hire those support personnel; therefore, the appointment of this staff would most likely subtract cash from other research purposes, thus maintaining the uneven playing field.

So, how can we help the scientists whose English is not perfect? I offer a possibly controversial idea. While Jacobs takes for granted that the level of English needs to be nothing but perfect, I instead propose that the expectations should be subtly adjusted to the English level of the writers. I am aware that this proposal might sound somewhat blasphemous to language purists. However, I am not proposing to lower English quality to a point where reading and understanding would be challenging. Instead, I am proposing that journals and readers should make small mental adjustments to offer a “pass” to non-native speakers of English who cannot write perfectly, no matter how much effort they expend. As a matter of fact, when it comes to spoken English, native speakers are already very accommodating and generous with colleagues who did not have the luck of mastering English earlier in life. Indeed, when scientists meet at international venues, they do not judge their colleagues for their English mistakes or their funny accents; instead, they generally focus on science. Why could not the same be done for written English? If the scientific community speaks out about this problem and advocates for this mindset change, scientists will soon be willing to use the generosity used for spoken English and will forgive imperfections in otherwise compelling scientific publications.

In order to efficiently put this idea into practice, it would be important to let readers know the English level of the writers for any given paper. I suggest that upon submitting papers or funding proposals, all authors should be asked to submit information about whether or not they are native speakers—and optionally, to self-evaluate their language skills by rating themselves on a scale.
from 1–to-n. This information should be attached to the author affiliation information, and editors and readers can then make allowances for those self-identifying as non-native speakers. This system would nudge many readers to slightly adapt their expectations based on the self-declared English competency of the writers, and would be based on the honesty of that disclosure, to which there should be no stigma attached.

The value of a paper has everything to do with the quality of the science therein and little to do with the quality of the prose—which in any case is highly stylized in scientific writing. Scientists choosing not to disclose that they are not native speakers would have no recourse to complain about criticism of their grasp of the language, while those who do declare can rest assured that the community will judge the language of their publications with more magnanimity. Of course, the system should not deter both native and non-native speakers from improving their English skills, as well-written prose will of course remain more satisfying to both write and read. Indeed, the greatest badge of honour might be to declare non-native status and nevertheless write beautifully. At the very least, declaring this information will raise awareness in countries where English is the native language of the problems faced by non-native speakers.

This proposal might look idealistic or naïve, but it would not be so in a mutated cultural framework. Establishing and adopting that framework is the hard part of this shift, but those of us in the majority ought to push the minority of native speakers to give us a break—and indeed stop chastising ourselves for our linguistic disadvantages.

In a few decades, we will perhaps put more value on non-English publications [6] or be able to use computers to instantaneously translate any language into any other, and many scientists will perhaps choose to use their own native idioms, even in science. Or perhaps everybody will be able to write perfectly in English—or in whatever the future dominant language is. In the meantime, this different mindset and these simple policies would provide more equal opportunities and more focus on the real value of a publication: its science. Moreover, this system would have a positive influence even outside the scientific community, in a world that does not abound in solidarity.

References