

Opinion  
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# English Writing of Non-Anglophone Researchers

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At the end of the 20th century, English firmly established its widely recognized role of a dominant language of research communication. Not surprisingly, it was metaphorically compared to “a powerful carnivore gobbling up the other denizens of the academic linguistic grazing grounds.”<sup>1</sup> The preponderance of English has essentially changed the linguistic landscape of research reporting, which has been increasingly becoming more and more Anglophone: for example, journals in many countries switch to all-English policies, like medical journals in Sweden, where the only remaining Swedish-language one is *Läkartidningen* or *Newsletter*.<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, scientists experience unprecedented pressure to publish in indexed journals, the majority of which come out in English. These new communication realities cause “linguistic injustice”<sup>3</sup> by imposing an additional burden on nonnative authors who face essential multilevel difficulties in English research writing. Some of these difficulties, identified, in particular, in Asian research context, have already been analyzed in the literature.<sup>3-5</sup>

The present article considers the concerns of nonnative English researchers coming from a different part of a globe, namely Ukraine, an East European country with speakers of several Slavic languages. Like their peers worldwide, Ukrainian researchers are obliged to publish in the journals indexed in WoS or Scopus to advance in their career. Currently (as of April 2020), Ukraine publishes 123 quality journals in hard and soft sciences (<https://openscience.in.ua/ua-journals>). The majority of them (including those 15 which specialize in medicine) accept articles in three languages—English, Ukrainian, and Russian, with some considering only English-language articles. In view of this and with regard for international publishing demands, presenting research results in English is therefore becoming a standard for Ukrainian researchers, as well as for their counterparts from Central and Eastern Europe. However, they face not only pleasant career prospects related to this situation but also writing problems and challenges, often rather serious. These difficulties will be addressed below based on the professional experience of the author of this article as a researcher of scientific communication,<sup>6</sup> developer of the training sessions and teaching materials in English for Research Purposes,<sup>7</sup> and an ad hoc editor of English research papers produced by Ukrainian scientists in the fields of biology, veterinary medicine, and mathematics (the texts of the papers served as sources of mistakes exemplified below).

The difficulties which non-Anglophone research writers experience can be grouped under such categories as linguistic (grammar, punctuation, and stylistic), organizational (textual), citational, and rhetorical ones. Linguistic problems are most obvious as they usually follow from an insufficient level of English proficiency. However, even those authors who are competent in English often exhibit mistakes in their writing, related to such important

grammar themes as articles, word order and use of passive constructions. Articles traditionally “mystify” the speakers of those languages where they do not exist. Not surprisingly, nonnative English scientists either underuse articles or overuse the definite one (*the*). As to the indefinite *a/an*, they usually do not well understand when to use it. For example, the author of this article witnessed an anecdotal case when a Ukrainian mathematician tried to convince his interlocutors that *a* is absolutely unnecessary in sentences like *This is a book*, because, in his opinion, it is quite clear to everyone (including native speakers) what the sentence is about!

Native tongues also influence the word order issues in research writing. While word order in English sentences is quite strict, with a subject coming before a predicate, it is vice versa flexible in many Slavic ones. Therefore, such mistakes as in the sentence “*In a 25.0 mL standard flask were placed solutions,*” are quite common as they are based on the native grammar pattern transfer. Also, nonnative research writers tend to excessively choose passive verb forms (e.g., *is correlated* instead of *correlates*) and to avoid active constructions with the so-called dummy subjects used instead of *I* or *we* (*This paper describes*), which are quite common in English research writing, but are, regrettably, scarce in the English texts written by East European researchers.

Regarding punctuation, Ukrainians noticeably tend to misuse commas: they either excessively put them, often before the identifying relative clauses beginning with *that*, *which*, *who*, etc. (e.g., *side effects, that are characteristic of stimulating agents*) or ignore these punctuation marks, frequently after various types of phrases at the beginning of a sentence (*Specifically for our task the solution method was developed*).

Another area of writing difficulties is related to stylistic choices which authors make. Ukrainian researchers often show insufficient mastery of academic vocabulary; their lexical preferences are not rich enough and favor everyday words instead of their more formal counterparts (e.g., *get* instead of *obtain* or *a lot of* instead of *considerable* or *numerous*). Also, they are persistent in using *so* as an informal substitute of *therefore* or *thus* (e.g., *So, they can be used to mask certain metals to improve selectivity*).

Furthermore, the speakers of Slavic languages tend to produce not enough coherent texts due to the insufficient use of logical connectors—words and linking phrases like *although*, *however* or *due to*, the importance of which for ensuring a smooth flow of information in a scientific text has particularly been emphasized.<sup>8</sup> Ukrainian researchers noticeably use fewer connectors than their English counterparts, often overuse *but* and *because* which are less frequent in English research writing, obviously underuse the connectors denoting summation, such as *in effect* or *overall*, and often confuse *although* and *nevertheless* (interestingly, such mistakes are also characteristic of Korean authors of academic texts in English<sup>9</sup>). The misuse of connectors results in the production of the texts with logical discrepancies to which Anglophone audience is quite sensitive.

As to citations, Ukrainian researchers often choose the easiest option, adhering to a pattern with no reference to the activity of a researcher/researchers (e.g., *In stressful situations, butaphosphan activates energy metabolism* [3]) and ignore more sophisticated citing models. Such a pattern often makes reference to the state of knowledge rather than to single studies and thus bears a risk of producing “irrational and multiple references, which artificially inflate the journals' and individuals' impact profiles.”<sup>10</sup>

Overall, Slavic scientists seem to be preoccupied more with content of writing rather than with the ways of presenting their findings. Putting it differently, they rarely focus on how to frame

their research in an engaging and interestingly problematic way, make few attempts to appeal to wider audiences,<sup>8</sup> and use rather limited rhetorical options. This can be traced, for instance, in research paper introductions: while Anglophone researchers often justify the undertaken research as a response to knowledge gaps in the discipline, Ukrainians prefer less confronting strategies and often present their studies as those which continue research traditions or as confirmatory ones,<sup>6</sup> thus underplaying their novelty and contribution to the field. The following example illustrates such rhetorics: *The seeds, collected from elite trees, should be stored in optimal conditions for preserve their viability. The present paper focuses on cryopreservation of such seeds.*

Summing up, it should be noted that problems experienced by Ukrainian and other East European scientists are not unique and are, in many respects, similar to those of their peers in Asian countries. For example, it has been reported that Korean researchers possess problems in the organization and development of the content of their papers,<sup>4</sup> while Japanese scientists lack vocabulary resources and are so preoccupied with grammar accuracy that become unable to think about their readers and make strategic rhetorical and linguistic choices.<sup>5</sup> Such difficulties and challenges arise from authors' insufficient awareness of norms and standards of English research writing and the influence of national writing styles. These problems can be alleviated by the following measures: 1) participation in appropriate training sessions, seminars or webinars, 2) obtaining assistance from the university-based editing systems, the development of which has recently been advocated,<sup>11</sup> and 3) deeper involvement into professional life and activities of international research communities.

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