



The return of the native: An American perspective

By Kathryn Nelson Emily

Not-so-standard English

Like Joy, I am a native speaker of English who returned home after spending 30 years in a non-anglophone country. I had spent most of my career in Vienna, Austria, writing, editing, and translating for German-speaking scientists, and returned to take a job at Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida (one of two offshoots of the famed original Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota). For me, 'returning home' was a relative concept. I was indeed returning to my home country, but after growing up amidst the Scandinavian-American traditions of the American Midwest and then spending 30 years in Central Europe, moving to the American Southeast was like going to a third, quite different country. Jacksonville, which calls itself the city 'where Florida begins,' is a city in transition. Linguistically and otherwise, it's a hodgepodge of cultures transposed onto a deeply traditional southern city. The growth of its economy, the presence of a large Navy port, and the influx of escapees from the harsh winters of the northern and mid-western states have made Jacksonville a fascinating mix of American subcultures and accents. Not only does it represent a microcosm of America, but it also has become an international melting pot. According to the 2000 United States Census, 72 different languages are spoken in metropolitan Jacksonville, and more recent data show that children representing 125 countries of origin and 88 languages are enrolled in the public school system's English for Speakers of Other Languages program [1]. Working at Mayo Clinic Jacksonville with doctors from all over the world, I was right in the middle of the language mix.

At first I was so happy to hear English spoken at all that I didn't pay attention to the differences in accents and dialects that surrounded me. But then I began to appreciate the many varieties of English I heard. Most prominent in everyday life, of course, was the colorful and creative language of the American South. At home, I asked one of my new neighbors how he was. He answered, "Ahm jes' fine—fine as frog's hair split four ways. If things get any bettah, Ah may have to har [hire] someone to help me enjoy it." That summer there was a drought and everyone was hoping for rain. "It's so dry, the trees are bribin' the dogs," they said. Coming home from my first day of work, I told another

neighbor how relieved I was that things had gone well. "That's good," she replied. "This mornin' you looked as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a roomfull of rockin' chairs."

'Native' and 'non-native' editing

At work, my services as a manuscript editor were available to the staff of approximately 300 physicians at Mayo Clinic Jacksonville. This service was part of Mayo's Section of Scientific Publications, probably the world's oldest academic editorial department [2]. The Mayo brothers, whose ground-breaking development of the concept of a private group practice resulted in the well-known Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, realized early on the importance of well-written scientific communications. In 1907, they hired Maud Mellish-Wilson to organize and develop a library, and to do editorial work in connection with the preparation of scientific publications [3]. Today, a number of large medical research facilities in the United States maintain editorial departments to ensure the high quality of publications that are the source of their reputations [2].

Since returning to the United States, I have worked with both native- and non-native English speaking authors, first at Mayo and now as a freelance editor. Initially, I assumed it would be much easier and faster to edit manuscripts by native-English authors. I was wrong. Both native and non-native English authors can have trouble choosing the appropriate words and organizing their thoughts. Both often leap from one idea to another without providing an adequate transition. Both often leave out important details because they assume readers will be versed in the field and will know what is meant. Native-English authors may be more knowledgeable about the language, but they can also be more careless; sometimes non-native English authors pay more attention to the mechanics of writing, simply because they are aware of their own inadequacies.

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Internet and SMS influences

I know that many of the native-English authors' mistakes result from the fact that they are busy clinicians who don't have the time or the peace and quiet necessary for good writing. But I do find myself worrying about what seems to

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be a growing lack of concern for traditional standards of written English. The need for speed and efficiency in communication caused by the rise of the Internet (chat rooms, email, and instant messaging) and Short Message Service [SMS] technologies (text messaging via cell phone) are causing dramatic changes in language [4].

Text messaging has produced a new form of English adapted to the need for immediacy and terseness. Text messages rarely use punctuation and vowels are often eliminated (as in 'JstClIME' for 'Just call me!'). Words or parts of words are replaced with symbols, numbers, or letters that create the same sound (See you later = CUL8R). Abbreviations are also used (for example, 'IMNSHO' for 'in my not so humble opinion'). Teenagers seem to learn the rules easily, but they are complex enough that many parents were grateful when one cell phone service provider posted a tutorial for parents on its website [5]. So far, the only incursion of this type of cryptic language into a scientific manuscript that I have noticed was @ for 'at,' but I am wondering if it will be only a matter of time before I see more.

A world of many 'Englishes'

As Joy points out, changes in English are driven not only by native speakers, but perhaps even more by non-native speakers. David Crystal estimates that there may be as many as two billion English speakers today [6]. It is fascinating to contemplate the concept that there are now many 'Englishes' [7] with varying degrees of evolution of their own standards. The idea that 'proper' English is the sole provenance of native speakers (the so-called 'inner circle') and that everyone else must strive to emulate them seems no longer to be valid. We appear to be headed toward a 'a tri-English world, one in which you could speak a local English-based dialect at home, a national variety at work or school, and [a simplified] international Standard English to talk to foreigners...' [8].

Respecting and teaching

On the one hand, I agree that editors need to be sympathetic to the changes brought about by this trend when they lead toward a simpler, less idiomatic English. Indeed, global communication would profit if we could help native-English authors become more understandable to non-native English readers, for example by avoiding esoteric vocabulary, idiosyncratic forms and structures, and cultural references that are not universal [9]. Quicker acceptance of new word forms, phrases, and structures entering the

body of global English may help rather than hinder our efforts to increase comprehension.

On the other hand, we should remember that we are also teachers. Even if other forms of English are perfectly valid, English conforming to American and British standards still brings prestige, and learning to conform to those standards can open career doors for our authors [10]. How will they learn if we accept non-standard forms without instructing them? Thus, we must maintain a delicate balance between respecting the author's voice and imposing our own ideas of readability and style. I agree with Joy that the key to success lies in our ability to explain the differences and thus empower the author to make the final decision.

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EMWA member receives Serbia's highest award

Congratulations to Sofija Micic, an EMWA EPDC member and *TWS* author¹ from Belgrade, Serbia, who received The City of Belgrade Award on 18 April 2008. The award is made for the highest achievements in 7 areas including art, science, medicine and education. Sofija, who has a doctorate in linguistics, received the award in the area of education for a medical dictionary (English-Serbian/Serbian-English) that she compiled. Serbia's new democratic regime introduced the award—the most prestigious in the country—6 years ago.

¹ Micic S. Teaching medical writing in an integrated skills approach in Belgrade. *TWS* 2007;16(1):10-11
Micic S. Titles of research articles: Serbian experience. *TWS* 2007;16(4):153-155.