

## ■ Words, Grammar & Co

### Watch their words

More than what is immediately apparent might lurk behind an author's choice of words. The preliminary results of two research projects on 'spin' in the reporting of research results were presented recently at the Sixth International Congress of Peer Review and Biomedical Publication. One team found that 40% of the 72 reports of randomised controlled trials they examined used linguistic 'spin', e.g. "[The treatment] is expected to be a very important modality in the treatment strategy" and, "[The treatment effect] approached but did not achieve conventional statistical significance. [1]" The second presentation was of a quantitative study of the language used in reports of 35 randomised controlled drug studies [2]. 49% of the statements in the reports claiming an effect did not mention statistical significance. The word 'significant' was only rarely used in statements that claim the drug's safety.

The concept of a hidden agenda working on the reader's subconscious through word choice is exemplified in the BBC News report titled 'Lesson one: no Orwellian language' [3]. The report was about how education has been taken over by a language directed at controlling the way we think and act. It arose from Professor Richard Pring's speech at an education conference in the UK at the beginning of last year. Pring was protesting about the language of management, which has permeated discussions about education. He pleaded for people to talk again about 'teaching' rather than 'delivery', 'schools' instead of 'new providers'. Expressions such as 'efficiency gains' 'funding systems that respond to customer demand' clearly indicate that education is no longer seen as personal enrichment but merely as preparing fodder for the workforce.

Sensibilities are another influence behind word choice. Hence the word 'gender' rose to prominence on the back of prudish dislike for the word 'sex'. Even level-headed scientists have adopted the (wrong) word [4]. I have a suspicion that authors reporting animal studies jump through the hoops of avoiding the word 'kill' by using such inappropriate words as 'sacrifice' or 'euthanise' to give the impression that the animals were not really killed in these experiments.

How about this change that was required to be made to a presentation about communications agencies? One of the services that communication agencies provide was written as 'Key opinion leader development' but changed to 'Thought leader education' so as not to infer a desire to influence a medical professional to endorse a product.

And what is the difference between a 'code' and a 'set of recommendations'? The American delegation at an annual

forum of the World Health Organisation objected to a resolution calling for the development of a code that would promote responsible marketing to children of foods and beverages that are high in undesirable fats and sugars [4]. Codes and recommendations are both voluntary but the Americans thought 'code' could possibly be construed as binding.

**Elise Langdon-Neuner**

*langdoe@baxter.com*

#### References:

1. Boutron I, Dutton S, Ravaud P, Altman DG. "Spin" in Reports of Controlled Randomized Trials with Nonstatistically Significant Primary Outcomes Rhetoric. Poster abstract sessions. Sixth International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication. September 10–12, 2009, Vancouver. Available at [www.jama-peer.org](http://www.jama-peer.org).
2. Bero L and Cheng Y. Rhetoric Used in Reporting Research Results. Poster abstract sessions. Sixth International Congress on Peer Review and Biomedical Publication. September 10–12, 2009, Vancouver. Available at [www.jama-peer.org](http://www.jama-peer.org).
3. Baker M. Lesson one: no Orwellian language. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/7247160.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/7247160.stm)
4. De Looze S. All Gendered Up. *TWS* 2004;13(3):73-75
5. Glusker A. Assembly gets into wrangle over junk food warning. *BMJ* 2007;334:1130

### Academic writing: Do you ever read your prose aloud?

Gail Hornstein likes gardens and vegetables—and writing. She agrees in her article 'Prune That Prose'<sup>1</sup> that you can get away with prose that is lifeless, "cumbersome to read, filled with unnecessary complication, often disdainful and strictly obscure in style and tone"—yes, she's talking about academic writing—if your audience is other academics who will read your work even if it is impenetrable. But she questions whether the abstruseness makes academics seem irrelevant at a time when they are increasingly being called upon to justify their work.

Hornstein maintains that the contempt academics have towards writing in a way that would be accessible for the broader public is in reality contempt for the ordinary reading public. She does not accept that the public are unable to understand science unless it's 'dumbed down', arguing instead that popular audiences are tougher than fellow academics because unless you say something important they lose interest and do something else, like play video games or watch TV.

The article describes her struggle to unlearn the academic writing skills she had been forced to acquire. One of the

1 <http://chronicle.com/article/Prune-That-Prose/48273/>

hardest lessons, which she likens to thinning a bed of carrots, was to make choices “something that academic writing allows you to avoid at all costs. Much of what makes that kind of prose so complicated is that nothing gets left out” whereas for a popular audience you have to “figure out what the hell you’re trying to say and come right out with it.”

With thanks to **Ursula Schoenberg** (u.schoenberg@t-online.de) for alerting *TWS* to this article.

## There’s more to metaphors than meets the eye

Drake Bennett of the *Boston Globe* has been hot on the trail of research that tests the links between metaphors and their physical roots [1]. Metaphors reveal the extent to which we think with our bodies. The argument is that we think with our brains, and our brains are part of our bodies. For instance, we associate power with elevation (‘friends in high places’), and so we unconsciously look up when we think about power.

Psychologists have been studying the relation between abstract thought and physical experience. For example, in one study in which participants were asked to estimate the value of several foreign currencies, the participants were given questionnaires on clipboards of two different weights. The participants who completed the questionnaires on the heavier clipboards not only judged the foreign currencies to be more valuable; they also gave more careful, considered answers to the questions they were asked.

The research has naturally turned to how physical manipulation might be used to influence our thoughts. Nils Jostmann, the lead author of the clipboard-weight study, suggests that pollsters might consider using heavier clipboards and heavier pens for issues where they want considered answers, and lighter ones for questions to which they want gut reactions.

It’s early days for this research, but next time someone hands you a hot drink before asking for your opinion on an important matter, it might be wise to put the drink down before you give your answer.

**Wendy Kingdom**

*Info@wendykingdom.com*

### Reference

1. Bennett D. Thinking Literally. *Boston Globe* September 2009. Available at: [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/09/27/thinking\\_literally/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/09/27/thinking_literally/?page=full)

## Would it be good/bad if English were the only language spoken in the world?

An article in *BBC Today* asks what is lost when a language dies. Currently 7,000 languages are spoken but 6% of the world’s languages are spoken by 94% of the world’s population. One prediction is that with the increasing extinction of languages 90% of the languages spoken today will disappear by 2100.

Claude Hagege, a French linguist, says that “If we are not cautious about the way English is progressing it may eventually kill most other languages.” The main loss when a language becomes extinct is that the culture which goes with it is also lost: a way of expressing relationships with the world around us and our kith and kin. There is also a close link between language and identity, so that when people perceive their language as useless they also see their own identity as having little value leading to social disruption in these communities. The article gives examples of languages that have been successfully revived; Welsh, Maori and Hebrew. Hebrew was a dead language at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, existing only as a scholarly written language without words for such mundane phrases as “I love you”. Now Hebrew is in everyday use, but one reader commented that this was at the expense of Yiddish and Ladino (Judaeo-Spanish), which used to be vibrant Jewish languages.

Many respondents to the article felt that languages that are dying out should just be catalogued for the interests of linguists. Some pointed out that a single language (English) had many economic advantages for the world and that, as one person wrote, “Most of the problems in the world stem from a lack of communications. If we all spoke English then these problems might disappear.” On the other hand as another correspondent who grew up in the US speaking German wrote “My father always asked us if we were richer having two dollars or one dollar. He said the same was true of language.”

Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8311000/8311069.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8311000/8311069.stm)

## It’s English and its apostrophes again

An extract from an email sent out by the Recruitment and Events Officer at Bristol University on 15 September 2009 could leave you wondering about the standard of English education you might expect to receive at the university:

“As we hope you are aware, the University will be holding it’s second university-wide Open Day on Friday 18 September 2009 from 10 am - 4.30 pm.”

With thanks to **Neville Goodman** (nevvgoodman@mac.com) for alerting *TWS* to this grammatical howler.

## A good style site with some entertaining articles

*The Economist* has a style guide online to help you improve your writing. The site has some good advice, even for medical writers. The URL for the site is [www.economist.com/research/styleguide/](http://www.economist.com/research/styleguide/)

There is also an expanded hardback version of the guide that can be purchased through the site. Explanations in the online guide are short and arranged under headings including, Unnecessary words, Metaphors, Capitals, Plurals, Punctuation, Spelling and so forth. I particularly like the Dos and don'ts section and its treatment of 'case' and when '-ee' should not be added to the end of words, e.g. attendee. I am heartened by the recommendation to avoid 'relationship' and use the word 'relation' instead. 'Relation' is shorter than 'relationship', which as I understand it is something that happens between human beings, not things.

Writers are advised to use words with care: "A heart condition is usually a bad heart. A near miss is probably a near hit. "Positive thoughts" (held by long-suffering creditors, according to *The Economist*) presumably means optimism, just as a negative report is probably a critical report. Industrial action is usually industrial inaction, industrial disruption or a strike."

The capitals section is extensive, even covering e-expressions, most of which are lower case. The forward to the section states that the rules laid down leave some decisions to individual judgment. If in doubt, lower-case initial letters should be used unless it looks absurd. This point is emphasised by reference to a delightful quote from Emerson: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds".

A link takes you to a column called 'Johnson' written by Stephen Hugh-Jones, which *The Economist* ran between 1992 and 1999. His tongue-in-cheek style is a joy to read and he covers a miscellany of topics from terms for females to quaint rules. Thus, we learn from him that it's rough these days being a preposition. He points to *on* and *over* as having become prepositions-of-all-work, driving poor old *about* almost into retirement. He also refers to the elegant distinction between *Compare to* which emphasises similarity and *compare with* which emphasises dissimilarity (probably here 'neutrality', irrespective of dis-/similarity, would be more accurate). This must be one of the most common mistakes I see in medical writing. Another word where the preposition makes all the difference is *contrast*; *In contrast* is simply unlike; *by contrast* implies unlike by comparison.

An article on words with opposite meanings starts with the classic *quite*. *Sanction* is another of these words and *table*, unbeknown to me, has a different meaning on the other side of the Atlantic: Congress tables an item that it does not want to discuss; Parliament tables one that it does. Watch out for trapeziums, which look very different to Americans. I rather like the *dead chuffed* example. Hugh-Jones explains that Partridge's magisterial dictionary of slang states that it can also mean *displeased*; indeed Partridge cites *dead chuffed* as used specifically in the *displeased* sense.

The last article in 1999 was in *The Economist's* millennium issue and is about the world language. This is the final paragraph: "The web of course works both ways. An American has far better access today than ever before to texts in German or Polish or Gaelic. But the average American has no great incentive to profit from it. That is not true the other way round. The web may even save some mini-languages. But the big winner will be English." I wonder. There is some food for thought there.

Finally, there's a link where you can do a quiz based on *The Economist's* style guide. It's called 'The write stuff' and asks if you've got it.

**Elise Langdon-Neuner**  
[langdoe@baxter.com](mailto:langdoe@baxter.com)

## Pronoun virus cause of restaurant cleaners' distress

Oysters, which can be contaminated with human sewage, were found to be the cause of the vomiting and diarrhoea suffered by 529 patrons and staff of Heston Blumenthal's world-famous Fat Duck restaurant in the UK. It was one of the largest outbreaks of norovirus reported in medical literature. *The Guardian's* report of the incident on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2009, in which they referred to the 17 members of staff who had reported symptoms, included the following sentence:

"One even vomited in the restaurant toilet, though happily it was closed at the time."

Whether the restaurant cleaners were happy that the toilet lid was down at the time is perhaps questionable.

With thanks to **Tim Albert** ([tim@timalbert.co.uk](mailto:tim@timalbert.co.uk)) for alerting *TWS* to this interesting sentence.