

## Words, Grammar & Co

### Too much plural

*The event had no sequelaes.* This is not surprising because events may have only ‘sequelae’ (Latin plural of ‘sequela’). This is one Latin term in common use in our field where I make an exception to my (still personal and disputed) ‘rule’ that well-established Latin and Greek terms may just take an ‘s’ or ‘es’ in the plural (viz. ‘memorandums’ or ‘maximums’).

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### Un... or in... ?

#### That is often the question

Languages teem with inconsistencies, and you only have to look as far as the negative prefix in English for a good example. We have a panoply of possibilities: *un...* (untouched), *in...* (inept), *im...* (impervious), *ir...* (irreplaceable), *non...* (nonserious), and *a...* (asexual)—and I have probably missed a couple of other possibilities (such as *de...* and *dis...* in their wider senses). Even considering just *un...* and *in...*, often only one is possible, sometimes both, and sometimes language shows a distinct preference for one or the other—even when using the same root word in a noun or an adjective. And sometimes the different prefix results in a (very) different meaning.

I was reminded of this recently when I edited a text which referred to *instable compounds*, which doesn’t sound right (to me, anyway!), and automatically changed it to *unstable compounds*. Then vacillated a little. If we say *unstable* rather than *instable*, why do we say *instability* and not *unstability*? There is no answer to that. It is just a matter of usage. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* lists *instable*, first recorded in 1483, as ‘now rare’, so it has almost become a dictionary word<sup>1</sup>, but nobody can tell you why. *Instable* predated *unstable* (1549) by 66 years, but *unstable* has a much larger entry. So despite being a later arrival, in the subsequent 5 centuries, *unstable* won over *instable*. So much for adjectives.

For the nouns *instability* and *unstability*, we have the reverse situation. *Unstability* is in the dictionary but is definitely more of a dictionary word than *instable*, and does not sound right. Here, *instability* won the day and is definitely here to stay.

Nowadays, we can use computer searches, albeit unvalidated<sup>2</sup>, to point us in the right direction in cases of doubt. And sure enough, Google broadly confirmed what *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* says: 5.8 million hits for *unstable* and 0.5 million for *instable* (plus the question: Do you mean unstable?) and 4.8 million hits for *instability* and only 85,000 for *unstability* (plus the question: Do you mean instability?). *Unstability* therefore still has some users, but, in proportion, far fewer than those who use *instable*.

This is further complicated because the dictionary also gives *unstableness* and *instableness* as possibilities, but as

far as I am concerned (and, I hope, all users of English) these are definitely dictionary words and have had their day (if they ever had one).

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### New words and old feelings

So now we know. And all we medical writers have been waiting on tender hooks haven’t we? The word of the year 2009 is ‘unfriend’! This at least is according to those who took part in the vote held under the guise of the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. With this word and some others social networking websites made their impact on last year’s words of the year list commissioned by Oxford University Press. ‘Unfriend’ means to remove someone as a friend from Facebook or a similar site. But for the meaning of ‘tweetups’, ‘Zombie Bank’, ‘snollygoster’, ‘staycations’ and more please look elsewhere [1]. I will just tell you about bossnapping because this might be useful to you. This is the action taken by employees to protest against redundancies and cutbacks by which they prevent senior managers from leaving company premises.

While we all excitedly await the announcement of word of the year lists—so that we can impress colleagues, bosses, pals at the pub, clients or whoever with our grip of the here-and-now—David Mitchell finds these new words dispiriting [2]. They remind him of his school days when teachers frowned on words like ‘nice’ and ‘good’ saying they were boring. Rather rich says Mitchell when he considers how boring school was. And he adds that “Slagging people off for saying “nice” and “good” is what leads to their resorting to “awesome”.” (He seems a bit out-of-date here because I have not not heard ‘awesome’ once from my kids once recently. It seems to have been usurped by ‘random.’) Mitchell’s problem is that although we are usually told to use language correctly to avoid ambiguity there is little substance to this argument. For instance, he says

“No one ever accidentally bought more potatoes than planned because they were told to buy less rather than fewer. Of all the times I’ve typed: “Hopefully see you then” in an e-mail, no one has ever subsequently complained that, when they saw me, I didn’t seem hopeful.”

He concludes that the rules do matter—it’s just obeying them that doesn’t. And the truth of the matter is when slang becomes correct, misspelling is overlooked and American spelling is adopted, he feels a mug for having learnt the rules. He could have been doing more exciting things at school.

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#### Reference:

1. Savill R. ‘Tweetups’ and ‘unfriend’ among Oxford English Dictionary’s ‘words of the year’. *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2009. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/howaboutthat/6905776/Tweetups-and-unfriend-among-Oxford-English-Dictionaries-words-of-the-year.html>
2. Mitchell D. Only a poltroon despises pedantry. *The Observer*; 3 January 2010. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/03/david-mitchell-english-language-grammar>

1 Dictionary word: in all languages, a word found in the dictionary which is obsolete, but which is retained in the dictionary so that its meaning can still be described.

2 This is a good example of the difference *in...* and *un...* can make. Something *unvalidated* has simply not been validated, but something *invalidated* has been validated and declared invalid (*invalid* does not exist)

## Do you really know the meaning of English's foreign words?

English has borrowed a vast number of foreign words but how well do you know them? Here are just a few common examples:

**‘Déjà vu’** (French) was first used in a French translation of Sigmund Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* published in 1901 to describe a feeling that Freud suggested corresponded to the memory of a subconscious daydream. Now the term is also used to mean when an event feels similar to something that happened in the past.

**‘Via’** is one Latin word for three English words (by way of). It implies more strongly than ‘through’ that a solution or destination has been arrived at by dint of a little detour.

**‘Lingua franca’** (Italian) literally means Frankish language. Arabic speakers in the Middle East in medieval times referred to Europeans as Franks. The Frankish language was predominantly Italian with some Persian, French, Greek and Arabic words by which people of different native tongues could communicate with one another. The term lingua franca is now used for any common language spoken by speakers of different languages.

**‘Kudos’** (Greek) means glory or renown. It's a singular noun in Greek and was first used in British English at the end of the eighteenth century. The Americans, however, assumed the ‘s’ at the end meant it was a plural noun so they use the word ‘kudo’ unless someone has received more than one accolade in which case it's kudos.

A **‘a priori’** (Latin) idea or argument is one based on inherent knowledge rather than fact. ‘A posterior’ is the opposite, knowledge gleaned through experiment or experience.

Finally be careful when you ask for an **‘alfresco’** (Italian) meal in Italy. It might mean ‘in the fresh air’ in English but in Italian it is slang for ‘in prison’.

**Source:** Rhodes C. A Certain Je Ne Sais Quoi. London, Michael O'Mara Books Limited, 2009; ISBN: 978-1-84317-364-9

## An excellent article on manuscript writing— For what it's worth

‘Right your writing. How to sharpen your writing and make your manuscripts more engaging’ has to be read (fortunately it is Open Access)<sup>1</sup>. The reason it has to be read is because it gives some excellent examples of paragraphs as originally written and edits them to show how to introduce

concepts gently, ensure each sentence is a consequence of the preceding one, avoid long strings of modifiers, avoid lazy verbs and ensure each idea has its own sentence. The improvement wrought by the editing epitomises the difference between good and poor science writing.

The article also sets out some writing rituals suggested by Margaret Cargill (see book review in *TWS's* volume 18 (4) page 245) and Tara Gray: build your paper around the results, rather than setting aside chunks of time write daily for 15 to 30 minutes, log your time to motivate you to keep up your writing, post your thesis on a wall to keep it in your face and make it easier to change and edit your thesis, use topic sentences to concentrate the mind, send early drafts to non-experts and read out loud to improve the tone, flow and logic of an argument.

However, on a disheartening note, William Penrose wrote an online comment on the article: “it's always seemed to me that the standards they [language experts] deplore are actively enforced by the science community. By the time co-authors, associates, internal editors, department managers, institutional editors, and journal reviewers were done with my writing, the same old polysyllabic words, passive voice, overly cautious conditionals, and dead words were all put back in. I think the notion that turgid prose is somehow more intellectual and intimidating is woven right into our scientific culture.”

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## Hoping for a hyphen

The following sentence was spotted in the *BMJ* [2009;339:b5448 (19 Dec, p 1385)] by **Neville Goodman** (nevvgoodman@mac.com) who had to stop at ‘dependent’ and re-read the sentence. It needed a hyphen.

“We have developed a list of 25 technique dependent physical diagnostic manoeuvres that we teach to our trainees.”

## Alzheimer's disease or Alzheimer disease?

An eponym is a name of a disease derived from the person who discovered the disease. Alois Alzheimer, a German physician, is credited with the discovery of this debilitating disease in 1904 when he presented the case of a 51-year-old woman who had shown severe memory loss and whose brain was found on autopsy to be shrunken and to have abnormalities.

A recent debate about whether eponyms should be abandoned is outlined by Narayan and colleagues in their paper reporting their research on the frequency of use of the words ‘Down's syndrome’ and ‘Down syndrome’ [1]. Those in favour of abandoning eponyms argued that they >

<sup>1</sup> Grant B. Right your writing. How to sharpen your writing and make your manuscripts more engaging. *The Scientist* 2009;23(11):65-69. Available at: <http://www.the-scientist.com/article/display/56104/>

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> “lack accuracy, lead to confusion, and hamper discussion in a globalised world”. The motion’s opponents argued that eponyms are “often practical and form a medical shorthand” and “they bring colour to medicine and they embed medical traditions and culture in our history”. The researchers’ concern was not however the dropping of eponyms but whether they should be written in the possessive or nonpossessive form. They conducted their study of medical books and journals in 1998 and again in 2008. A gradual shift from ‘Down’s syndrome’ to ‘Down syndrome’ was seen over this period with the frequency of the possessive form more predominant in publications in European countries and that of the nonpossessive form more common in American publications. The researchers recommended the nonpossessive form should be used as the standard to avoid problems in literature searches created by inconsistency.

**Reference:**

1. Narayan J, Sukumar B, Nalini A. Current use of medical eponyms –a need for global uniformity in scientific publications. *BCM Medical Research Methodology* 2009;9:18. Available at: <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2288/9/18>

## Which is the world’s hardest language? (or: How many ‘we’s’ are there?)

Before coming to an answer to this question, an article in the *Economist* traces the elements that make a language difficult [1]. English is quickly dismissed as a relatively simple language which is just absurdly spelt.

On difficulty can be the diversity of sounds in a language. For example the sound ‘ma’ in English has four distinct sounds and meanings in Mandarin, which is relatively simple compared with other Chinese languages. Click languages such as Xhosa, a South African language, and the unusual sounds of !Xóǀ spoken by around 1000 people in Botswana are probably the most difficult to speak. When it comes to grammar, Estonian has 14 cases including incessive, inclusive, elative, adessive, abessive. Then there are noun classes in some languages which go beyond male, female and neuter. The Peruvian language Bora has 350 classes of noun. Sometimes the logic that gathers nouns together in a particular class is not clear. For example the linguist George Lakoff described one class of the Dyirbal language (spoken in Australia) to include women, fire and dangerous things. Agglutination is another complication. The English ‘antidisestablishmentarian’ is nothing against the possibilities in Turkish. But there is more. In Kwaio, spoken in the Solomon Islands, ‘we’ is different depending on whether it is ‘we two’, ‘we few’ or ‘we many’ and each of these forms has further forms that are inclusive ‘we including you’ or exclusive. Verbs in some languages have endings that indicate the time something happened, the size of the object or position of the speaker.

The article concludes that Tuyuca of eastern Amazon is the world’s hardest language, perhaps because in addition to a long list of the sort of complications already mentioned, verb-endings give information on how the speaker knows something, e.g. *diga ape-wi* means ‘the boy played soccer (I know because I saw him)’ whereas *diga apehiyi* means ‘the boy played soccer (I assume)’ and this, as the author points out, could be a journalist’s nightmare.

As for the ‘we’s’, John Page took the article to task in his letter to the editor [2] for suggesting that ‘we’ only has one form in English. He pointed out that ‘we’ has three meanings in English: we meaning you and I, as in ‘we had dinner together’; the royal we meaning I, as in ‘we are not amused’; and the marital we, as in ‘we need to take the garbage out.’

**Reference:**

1. Tongue Twisters. *The Economist*, 19 December 2009 page 128-129.
2. Page J. Tongue bashing (letter to the editor). *The Economist*, 9 January 2010 page 13.

## Appropriate hanging hyphen?

I think most of us now agree that the following use of the hanging hyphen has become acceptable in our types of text, in this case avoiding the repetition of *-based*: [1] *Drug X is available in an oil- or water-based cream vehicle.*

But what about the following: [2] *Up- and down-stream changes in processing have been made ...* . My usual advice is that the hanging hyphen should be used only if the term is a hyphenated term, as with *oil-based* in example [1]. Because *upstream* and *downstream* are not hyphenated, I would prefer *Upstream and downstream changes ...* in example [2]. But what about [3] *Up- and down-regulation were both observed?* I do not hyphenate upregulation or downregulation because the hyphen does not help the reader to understand the term or phrase (my major criterion for using hyphens; wherever possible I avoid them). But many authors prefer to hyphenate these two terms. Does this mean that example [3] would be acceptable in a text where both were hyphenated?

Any thoughts, *TWS* readers?

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## Saying ‘No’

Jan Freeman of the Boston Globe [1] tells us that it is ‘nutty’ to claim that you cannot say *I ate no bananas*. Proponents of this say that you should always say *I did not eat any bananas* because you can’t eat *no bananas*. How complicated do prescriptivists want to make our lives? I agree with Jan Freeman. Of course you can eat *no bananas* because *no* is used here as an adjective meaning *not any*. Any

fool can tell you that! (Or can they?) But can any fool reading this answer this one: which is **better**, [1] *No adverse events associated with the nervous system were observed* or [2] *Adverse events associated with the nervous system were not observed* (recent question in a training session). I have played around with these two in all sorts of contexts, and there may be extreme situations where one is preferable to the other because you can always find exceptions. However, I spontaneously go for [1] because I think it is good for the reader to see the negation up front, and this is just how we usually express this idea. But as for which is **better**—I don't know. Any thoughts on this?

Whatever—if you opt for starting with *No*, your subject is always in the plural in English—*No adverse eventS WERE observed*, and not *No adverse event was observed*, as in many other languages.

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**Reference:**

1. Freeman J. Rule by Whim. *The Boston Globe*. 21 December 2008.

## How to sneer with inverted commas

When was the last time you saw *paperback* written with a hyphen? Our copy of *Norton's Star Atlas*, published in Edinburgh in 1966, tells us that “it was also intended to be used as a companion to Webb's invaluable ‘Celestial Objects for Common Telescopes’ (recently reprinted in America as a ‘paper-back’) ...”.

In the meantime, the hyphen has disappeared uncontroversially from the word *paperback* on this side of the Atlantic. But the inverted commas around the word *paper-back* tell a different story. They are from the author and not from me, and are great evidence of how to sneer with punctuation marks. The author either meant “Look at the way those silly Americans write *paperback*—with a hyphen indeed!”, or “This is a new-fangled American word which will never establish itself on our side of the Atlantic”, or even “The Americans may use this adjective as a noun, but I disapprove, and it should be ‘paper-backed’ anyway”.

Whatever, the author is suggesting that you should distance yourself from the expression. Fortunately, *Norton's Star Atlas* did not have a very wide circulation. We now all agree that *paperback* is a noun and an adjective without a second thought. This does, however, illustrate that you should be careful with inverted commas around terms, as they often—sometimes unjustifiedly—call the term they surround into question without the reason being clear to the reader.

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## Business: Preview of TWS's June issue and call for articles

It's been a long hard winter in Europe but spring is coming, a time to spring clean, grab new opportunities, and start initiatives. By popular demand, the theme of the upcoming June issue of *TWS* is ‘Business’. A wide spectrum of topics relevant to medical writers whether working in large pharmaceutical companies, small medical writing businesses, CROs, medical communications or as freelancers will be covered by this theme.

Articles are lined up on methods of managing and developing businesses and projects, including innovative ideas on how bring in expertise in related areas and how to manage projects outside the traditional medical writing area. There will also be articles on harnessing the business potential of social networking through Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn etc., important aspects of patents and technology transfer/business development, codes of compliance, and working in a CRO as well as coping with social isolation as a freelancer.

**Do medical writers add value?** One question of particular interest to every medical writer is whether our work in writing and processing documents actually adds value to the process. According to Art Gertel, intuitively we know that there are gains in quality, efficiency, and compliance with industry/journal standards when professional medical writers are deployed. But do we have evidence? You will be able to read Karen Woolley's article in the June issue to find out.

**You** are also welcome to submit an article on any other topic which you feel fits into the business concept. As always we are pleased to accept articles or short reports on subjects of interest to medical writers which are **outside** the theme of the issue. Remember not only is writing an opportunity for you to share your expertise with other medical writing professionals but an article published is a new addition to your CV. And *TWS* is happy to provide you with a pdf to post on your website.

Please submit articles (up to 2500 words) and short reports/boxes (up to 100 words) for the June issue to [editor@emwa.org](mailto:editor@emwa.org) by 15<sup>th</sup> April.