



Rule Britannia, McDonald's and Other Things

by Norbert de Clercq

If Peter Stuyvesant and his fellow Dutchmen had not been thrown out of Manhattan all those years ago, I might have been writing in Dutch and not about what follows.

I have been a scientific writer for the best part of three years now and I have a confession to make. To my annoyance, sometimes I get comments from referees on publications I have written: "Please correct the Belgian English and have the text reviewed by a native English-speaking person". Thus my English is NOT perfect, far from it, and the texts I write are full of clues to the reason for this. Indeed, English is not my mother tongue. Though the business I am in requires me not only to speak but also to write in English, be it British or American English. You could say, stop doing what you do and go do something else but - bad luck - I actually enjoy what I am doing, and that is to write. Thus, I have to do my best and continuously improve it, together with numerous fellow non-native English-speaking medical writers. My attendance at the last EMWA conference in Dublin prompted me to write this and continue the dialogue on being a non-native English-speaking medical writer. I hope this will help those out there who may encounter difficulties with acceptance of their English texts.

I must admit that I am fortunate, being born in Belgium, where language is a continuous reason for quarrel among fellow citizens, and people are very aware about language usage. Not only do we have three official languages (Dutch or Flemish; French and German) but also, English is all over the place. It is part of the core curriculum of every kid from 12 years onwards (oops, I should not use "core curriculum"). When you switch on the radio in Belgium (and in many other European countries), more than half the songs you hear are in English, films or series on the television are shown in their original version, at least in the Flemish-speaking region, and more and more advertising is done in English. The latter is probably done for convenience in this multi-lingual society. However, it upsets some people, although so far it has not become anywhere near as bad as in France, where the drive to ban English is much stronger. The continuous immersion in English of course is very useful when your profession is to write in English. But I must admit that this is not the only advantage I have.

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Rule Britannia?

I have been on the post-doc trail in an English-speaking country, actually in the core of it, London. Such an experience forces you to speak English as your main language but also living there gives you great opportunity to read newspapers, watch television and listen to the radio on a continuous basis. It is when you are actually there, that you finally start to pick up and use the finesses of a language. For instance, little did I know what "I feel knackered" meant when I arrived. Again, immersion in English is the key for improvement and there are plenty of opportunities to do it - so do it.

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It is also a question of attitude. We do not write novels, nor do we try to match ourselves with James Joyce. We report on facts and data, interpret and give our views. As long as your English is as correct as possible, you should not worry. But this does not mean you should be complacent. On the contrary, you have to work on improving your English every day. And because you are a non-native speaker, you will probably do this better than many a native speaker. Let's face it, who among us has not read text written by a native speaker that was far from perfect?

Finally, I would like to suggest something for those of you who occasionally have to give presentations in English. People are often reluctant to do so because they fear comments on their language use. Again, this can be overcome with an offensive rather than defensive attitude. If the people in the audience would speak in your language to the same standard you try to do in theirs, then they have every right to comment. My message for those who do not dare, is to simply go out there and do it, and more importantly, learn from your mistakes and be open for constructive comments.

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