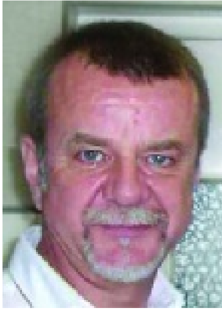

More myths about English

by Alistair Reeves

In the last issue, I discussed 4 myths about the English language [1]. I promised to explode more myths in this issue, so without further ado, I do just that below. If you disagree with me, please let me know!

Myth 5: '...ize' is American and '...ise' is British; '...ize' is better (some people) and '...ise' is better (other people)

'…ize' is indeed American, and this is what American readers expect to see. Both can be used in British English, although British writers more often use '...ise'. Neither is better than the other. What is important—and this will be no surprise to you by now—is to be consistent. The following does not look good: 'To standard***ise*** our reports, we harmon***ized*** procedures for report preparation'. (This applies to mixed US and British spelling in general, but only within self-contained texts or documents, not across dossiers[1].) The Oxford Dictionary lists '…ize' and '…ise' as 'variant spellings' in its introduction, and settled on '..ize' for all its entries, to be consistent. Many other British dictionaries list both, some with '..ize' first and some with '…ise' first.

By the way: not etymologically but phonetically related to '…ize' or '…ise': 'analyze' and 'catalyze' are correct in American English. The British English equivalents are 'analyse' and 'catalyse'. 'Analysis' and 'catalysis' are correct in both.

Myth 6: The number of the verb after 'none of' is always singular

Oh, for a rule as in German (and presumably many other well-regulated languages) that the number of a verb is always determined by its subject, at least when writing!

I have seen this one almost lead to fisticuffs. The subject of many pointless discussions is the claim that there is an incontrovertible 'rule' in English and that you must ***always*** follow 'none of' with the singular. Who says?

What's the story on 'none of'? Here we go: it's all to do with 'countable' (concrete) and 'uncountable' (abstract nouns) and whether you mean 'not part of a whole' or 'not one of a group'. It is complicated by 2 things: we unfortunately have a lot of 'mixed' nouns that are used both countably and uncountably, e.g. 'medication'; and you often cannot distinguish between the number of a verb in the simple past in English, e.g. 'None of the subjects developed rash'—the verb could be singular or plural here as the verb form in the simple past is the same. In many other languages, the number of the verb can always be recognised by different endings—a linguistic luxury unknown to native English speakers unfamiliar with other languages, except when using the verb 'to be'.

What follows are not rules, they are just my pragmatic suggestion to give some guidance on this.

Countable noun used in the singular. Assume that a bolus injection was to be given over several minutes. You are talking about only 1 injection, even though the word 'injection' is countable (i.e. it can be used in the plural). In the report you are writing, it is important to document whether all or only part of the injection was given, or if it was not given at all. The injection was not given and you decide to use 'none of'. You write: 'None of the injection was given'. Fine. The singular is the only possibility here because you are talking about part of a whole, i.e. only 1 injection. Of course, you could have said: 'The injection was not given', but this is not always what you want to say.

Countable noun used in the plural. A patient was due to receive a series of injections over 1 week. The patient decided to withdraw from the study before treatment started. To document that the patient received no injections, you decide to use 'none of'. You have the choice between 'None of the injections was given' and 'None of the injections were given'. Both are correct. There is a ***well-established convention*** amongst British writers to opt for the second possibility, using the plural—and this now 'sounds right' to most. My impression is that American writers more often opt for the singular, but plenty of them do use the plural. If your house style, your boss or your client requires the singular, use it. If I have my choice, I prefer to use the plural. Don't let anyone tell you that the singular ***must*** be used.

I have to add here that, as in the first example, you could write: 'The injections were not given' and avoid the problem entirely!

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1 Clinical reports and summary documentation often have the text in British spelling and the 'end-of-text' tables or appendices in US spelling, or vice versa. Don't worry about this. Just make sure that all of the text and all of the tables are consistent within themselves, even if they differ.

>>> More myths about English

If the discussion on 'none of' gets too heated, suggest a rewrite or avoidance of the verb 'to be'.[2]

Uncountable nouns. These have no plural, e.g. 'information' and 'advice', so it follows that if they can only be used in the singular, the verb following 'none of' must always be in the singular: 'None of the advice was heeded', 'None of the information was collected'.

Speakers of German, and I suspect other North-West European languages and Slav languages, please note: 'informations' and 'advices' do not exist. To render both in the plural, you have to say 'pieces of'. That's just how it is.

Thanks to the evolution of language, many nouns that were once only uncountable are now used countably, e.g. 'medication'. If you considered the series of injections in the second example above as the 'study medication' (using this as an uncountable noun), then you would write: 'None of the study medication ***was*** given' as opposed to 'None of the injections ***were*** given'. If the series of injections consisted of 2 injections of ***different*** drugs at each time point, you might choose to say: 'None of the study medications ***were*** given', but you could just as well say: 'None of the study medication ***was*** given'. I am not keen on using medication as a countable noun, but many writers like to use it this way.

Myth 7: The number of the verb after 'a number of' is always singular

Another instance where I wish for an 'Académie Anglaise' to settle this sort of question. Like the number of the verb after 'none of', this one also leads to endless (and equally pointless) heated discussions. This is governed by the use of the definite (the) or indefinite article (a) before the word 'number'.

Consider the sentence: 'A number of variables **were** studied'. The word 'number' is clearly not plural, but the message conveyed by the phrase 'a number of variables' when it is used as the subject of a sentence clearly means 'more than 1', and 'a number of' has come to mean an indeterminate small number, 'some' or 'several' that you do not need to count. The accent here is therefore on the plural word 'variables' as the determinant of whether the verb is in the plural or singular. This is the reason why there is a ***well-established convention*** that 'A number of' is constructed with the verb in the plural. Again, there is no rule here, it 'sounds right'. But if you wish to persevere with the singular, nobody can tell you that you are wrong. Decide what you want to do, or do what your company or client wants you to do, and you never have to think about it again! Just be consistent.

'The number of' is different. 'The number of variables in this study **was** too high' is correct, and to use 'were' would be incorrect. 'The number' in this sense does not indicate an indeterminate number, but a definite number you have probably counted. The accent here is therefore on the singular word 'number' as the determinant of whether the verb is used in the singular or plural.

By the way: 'The majority of …' constructed with the singular now sounds wrong. Not 'The majority of patients was enrolled before Amendment 1', but 'were'. Government is a difficult one: official 'BBC language' is still to say 'The government are …', so this is heard every day in the UK and plenty of people use this. I have always preferred 'The government is …', and plenty of people use this too.

Myth 8: 'Prior to' is better than 'before'

Writers—particularly those from American English-speaking areas—seem to have forgotten that the word 'before' exists, and that 'prior to' can ***always*** be replaced by 'before'. As is often the case, good (and bad) American English usage often eventually creeps into British English usage, and this is definitely happening with 'prior to'. I have heard claims from both native speakers from the US and the UK and non-native speakers that they have been told that 'prior to' is 'more correct' because it means 'really before' or that it is 'more scientific'. One wonders where these misconceptions come from. 'Before' really does mean 'really before' and 'prior to' does not improve upon it. As a minimalist as far as language is concerned, I prefer 'before', simply because it is a single word and has only 2 syllables. Please don't ever write 'prior to' again—but use it to your heart's content when you speak![3]

A recent unfortunate development amongst non-native speakers of English and, I hate to say, some native-speakers when writing, is to use prior as a preposition: 'Prior the study…' or 'Prior the investigation…' instead of 'before'. 'Prior' without the 'to' here is definitely wrong, because 'prior' is an adjective ('In a prior study, we investigated …'). To use it prepositionally (see above) or adverbially, it needs the 'to': 'He did it prior to me' ('before' is better anyway!).

Myth 9: 'Following' is better than 'after'

'Following', when used to mean 'after' at the beginning of an adverbial phrase, should always be replaced by 'after'. Following is not better and does not add any extra meaning. Except perhaps ambiguity: 'Following the guidelines, they published a report on their findings'. Does this mean that 'They followed the guidelines to produce a report on their findings' or 'After they published the guidelines, they published a report on their findings.'? Because 'following' is a participle formed from a verb, your readers will very quickly want to see a subject they can relate to 'following'. In this case, it can only be 'they' and can only mean 'They followed the guidelines to produce a report on their findings'. If you want to express the idea of the second option

2 Speakers of Romance languages please note: English speakers will almost always write 'No injections were given' and not use a singular subject or verb when referring to a situation where it was intended to have given more than 1 injection to a group of patients or a series of injections to 1 patient. If you are describing a situation where a patient was due to receive 1 injection at a particular time and the patient did not receive it, you could write: 'The injection was due at 18:00. No injection was given and the patient was therefore withdrawn from the study'. Otherwise, the plural 'sounds right'. I have been looking for an explanation for this for years. If anyone has one, please let me know! Similarly, if no adverse events occurred in a group or study, the plural is used: 'No adverse eventS occurred in Group 3', and not 'No adverse event occurred …'.

3 A note for users of 'prior to': 'before starting X' is a good substitute for 'prior to the commencement of treatment with X' and sometimes even just 'before X' is enough!

and want to start with the adverbial phrase, 'after' is necessary, even if you think it is clear from the context.

It is interesting that in our area of writing 'subsequent to' (which also just means 'after' and can also always be replaced by 'after'—it does not mean 'as a consequence of')—does not seem to have gained such wide currency as 'following' used incorrectly or 'prior to'. Maybe that it still to come!

Myth 10: 'In vitro', 'in vivo' and 'ex vivo' should always be italicised

I give workshops on punctuation. One of the questions I ask participants is whether 'in vitro', 'in vivo' and 'ex vivo' should be hyphenated (see below) and I put up a few questions about this on the screen. I can guarantee that one participant per session will say: 'Yes, but isn't there a rule that "in vivo" must be italicised?' Not that I have heard of. This invariably causes more discussion than whether it should be hyphenated. I can't express my feelings on this better than Edith Schwager in 'Medical English Usage and Abusage' [2]:

"In vitro and in vivo are not italicised in American English usage, although they used to be. Their italicization in current American medical journals is a sign that the person in charge is not au courant or is intransigent".

As far as I am concerned, this also applies to British English. Not italicising these terms means that you never have to check that you have always italicised them—and why bother, when scores of other Latin and Greek terms are not italicised?

There are, however, 2 principles to follow:

- If a journal, your boss, your client or your conscience wants them in italics, just do it! Don't even think about it. But make sure you are consistent. This will give you hours of fun checking with 'Search and replace', especially if you are also required to italicise 'et al', 'i.e.' and 'e.g.' (which is actually equally inappropriate). If you are a freelancer, make sure you add the time to your invoice; if you have an employer, make your employer aware that this is wasting your valuable time, but don't argue too much!
- If you have a choice, decide what you want to do and also be consistent.

A note here on hyphenation of 'in vivo', 'in vitro' and ex vivo': it should never be necessary and ***there is no rule***, whether you use them as modifiers ('in vivo investigations') or adverbially ('This was demonstrated in vivo.'). If you have the formulation 'We demonstrated in in vivo investigations that…' you might feel the need to hyphenate it thus: '…in in-vivo investigations…' because of the successive 'ins'. Expend some energy on avoiding this rather than using the hyphen. Possibilities here are: 'We demonstrated in vivo that …'; or 'In vivo investigations showed that …'.

Streptococcus faecalis and all similar names (genus plus species) are italicised. This is one of the best accepted conventions throughout the world. I have yet to hear anyone object to it! This does not apply, however, to the general use of a genus in the plural (streptococci) or adjectives derived from a genus (streptococcal). Another 'by the way': '*Haemophilus*' retains the 'a' in American English because this is its official name.

More myths in the next issue!

Alistair Reeves
Ascribe Medical Writing and Translation, Wiesbaden, Germany
a.reeves@ascribe.de
http://www.ascribe.de

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Addressing Japanese

Although family names are given first in Japan, the Japanese are comfortable switching the order in a non-Japanese context. So, for example on the English side of a Japanese/English business card, the name is given in the Western order of family name last. They graciously extend this courtesy of changing their names to suit Western understanding when addressing non-Japanese, so if you receive a letter from "Kyoko Higuchi," then "Higuchi" will most likely be the family name. There is no clear rule that would help one differentiate a family name from a first name. One possible clue is that many women's first names end with "-ko" as with Kyoko, Yoko, Kumiko. So if the author is Kumiko Tanaka, you have a reasonable chance of being correct that the author is a woman and her first name is "Kumiko." But the "-ko" only helps sometimes. If the author is Kumiko Kaneko, you're in trouble. One way to solve the problem would be to employ the Japanese "san," which is not gender-specific. If you write "Dear Kaneko-san" you can't go wrong.

Greetings should use the formal Mr/Ms/Mrs-for example "Dear Ms Higuchi." Never assume a first-name relationship since in Japan even good friends and co-workers use the last name, "Higuchi-san" or "Ms Higuchi," when speaking to each other. And don't forget the title. Calling someone just by their family name, i.e. "Higuchi" is rude rather than chummy.

A typical way of beginning a personal letter in Japanese is to open with a remark about the seasons–the beauty of the cherry blossoms or fall color. For business letters in English, however, the Japanese follow Western form. There are loads of books in Japan on how to write business correspondence in English. Even so, adopting the Japanese sensibility of beginning a letter with a polite inquiry or remark is never a bad idea.

Katherine Pilgrim-Langer
KPilgrim-Langer@egginc.com