

Challenges of emerging countries: barriers to get published

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In today's world of profound changes and new paradigms, journals from emerging countries face both new and old challenges. In a recent publication, Meneghini⁽¹⁾ points out the differences in the commercial rationale between developed and emerging countries and discusses the dominance of international journals and the difficulties scientists from non-English speaking countries have to get published in these periodicals. He says that in order to publish their work in international journals, authors need to overcome barriers that include poorly written English and the generally lower and more variable quality of scientific production.

Perhaps it is not by chance that English dominates the world of science; as Meneghini rightly points out, the first scientific journal was published by the Royal Society in London in 1665. Much money is required for 'good' research, a commodity that is harder to come by in developing countries. In 1665, the British had already started world domination with the British Empire, at that time, including the Caribbean, parts of Africa, Canada and the USA. The English ruled the seas and thus made tremendous profits with piracy, the slave trade and 'protecting' weaker countries such as Portugal; perhaps an early example of the mafia - pay and we will 'protect'. The British economy was thriving which was reflected in scientific production that included the studies of Sir Isaac Newton.

World domination and good scientific production have other aspects in common including discipline, systematization and objectivity. Unfortunately most scientific researchers (around the world) are not good at writing. Even in the English-speaking countries of Britain and the USA, language professionals are paid to check and edit manuscripts in order to make them concise and yet unambiguous, the main ingredients needed to communicate scientific research. So it is important to discuss what is the 'poorly written English' mentioned by Meneghini.⁽¹⁾

Obviously incorrect spelling and grammar are common mistakes found in articles; authors (and translators) seem to be too 'busy' to check their own work or (for many errors) do not really understand the combined power of Microsoft Word and internet. Moreover, many authors (and translators) depend excessively on electronic translators such as Google Translate and Tradukka believing that these tools are sufficient to produce an acceptable English version. As reviewer, when I received a review article on myelo-proliferative neoplasms with spellings such as 'myeolofibrosis', 'Essential thrombocytomia' and 'Polycytomia vera' I immediately question the content of the article (the first impression is always very important). If the author does not spell technical terms specific to the article correctly, it is unlikely that he/she read sufficient publications in English to write a review article. Luckily, however, many journals have English language editors who correct this type of mistake.

But there are other types of errors that are much more difficult to correct and much more important. Language is not just a set of words and grammatical rules; language is greatly influenced by the culture. A scientific article must be objective and precise and northern Europeans, unlike the romantics of southern Europe, tend to be objective and precise.

Perhaps the first difference we notice between English and Portuguese manuscripts is the size of sentences. I frequently experience one-sentence paragraphs in Brazilian articles of more than one hundred words. By the time I had reached the end of the sentence I had forgotten the message the author was trying to convey. Another common mistake of Brazilian authors is the use of redundancy and repetition. This play on words is intentional to explain two different situations: by redundancy I mean the replication of two words with exactly the same meaning (First, we initially...) and repetition means duplicating the same idea several times often in different paragraphs. This latter technique should be used to emphasize important points; many Brazilian authors tend to waffle, to fill pages with words (to translate a Brazilian expression - 'to fill the sausage'). Many believe that the longer the article, the more important it is and the more people will read - definitively not true. Today we have too much to read and must write articles that are concise but not ambiguous.

Conflict-of-interest disclosure:
The authors declare no competing
financial interest

Submitted: 3/26/2012
Accepted: 3/27/2012

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DOI: 10.5581/1516-8484.20120021

I do not say that these mistakes are exclusive to Brazilians, they are an international phenomenon, and some Brazilian researchers publish excellent articles in English. And so if we want to increase our international publications, we must improve.

English language editors in England and the USA have an advantage – they learn English from birth and then only need to study science and scientific language, two skills essential for good scientific writing. Here in Brazil, translators need to learn another language (English) that is specialized (scientific) and also have a very good understanding of science. Generally who is good at humanities (translators) is not so good at exact sciences and vice versa. Often the authors of manuscripts written in Portuguese using a Brazilian style (who as I said before are not so conversant in writing) resist changes and the publication remains wordy. Thus, it is generally insufficient to send a paper to a translator and expect him/her to translate the ideas contained in the paper in a manner that is acceptable for international publications. A dialogue is necessary between the researcher and the translator; unfortunately, due to lack of time and insufficient remuneration, this generally does not occur - the author sends the manuscript to the translator who translates it and then it is sent directly for refusal by international journals; on its return it is sent to 'second class' Brazilian journals.

And what is the consequence of this rejection? One of the many challenges that permeate this universe is to overcome national skepticism and disdain that often exist in respect to publishing in Brazilian journals. For many, to publish in a Brazilian journal means to publish second class work. Moreover, many authors due to the demands of the post-graduate programs are forced to submit their work to

international journals, the result of which is frequently frustrating. Perhaps because of this many authors suffer from a lack of self esteem which is reflected in our scientific writing. Hence, very frequently in Brazilian publications we come across the word 'can' and the structure 'and/or'. Authors seem unprepared to be decisive even when there is extensive proof that they are correct. For example, instead of writing 'for some hypertension patients, salt increases the blood pressure' they write 'for some hypertension patients, salt CAN increase the blood pressure'. International reviewers perceive and reject. If there is evidence we must state it and when there is insufficient proof or when it is just a hypothesis we must clearly explain the true situation.

But there is hope. As has been reported before, the numbers of Brazilian journals and publications are increasing and the quality is improving.^(2,3) More Brazilian journals are entering PubMed with the need to adapt to international requirements. As countries emerge from the 'third world', more money enters the economy and the use of this money improves. And as researchers and translators gain experience of the needs of the international market, automatically the scientific writing will improve. Perhaps more importantly the attitude to so-called developed countries is changing after all, the emerging countries are the future of the world.

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