

Opinion  
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# Conventions of English Research Discourse and the Writing of Non-Anglophone Authors

Tatyana Yakhontova

Department of Foreign Languages for Natural Sciences, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Lviv, Ukraine



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**Address for Correspondence:**

**Tatyana Yakhontova, Dr. Habil., Prof**

Department of Foreign Languages for Natural Sciences, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, 41 Doroshenka St., Lviv 79000, Ukraine.  
E-mail: tyakh@yahoo.com

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**ORCID iD**

Tatyana Yakhontova   
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9327-6887>

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Nowadays, researchers all over the world strive to publish in high quality journals to widely disseminate their findings, increase personal impact, advance in professional career, and contribute to the rankings of their institutions. Since the majority of such journals are published in English, many multilingual scientists, even those with an appropriate level of English language knowledge, experience problems, most often arising from their insufficient awareness of the norms and conventions of English research discourse and, on a more global scale, of Anglophone academic culture.<sup>1-3</sup> Therefore, it is important for nonnative authors to become cognizant of main features of English research writing.

In what follows, I will attempt to discuss these features and writing difficulties related to them, based on my teaching and editing experience as well as on the relevant findings of other scholars, and to suggest possible remedies to diminish or alleviate the problems. The examples which will be provided are extracted from paper drafts and published articles produced by Slavic-speaking researchers in the fields of biology, medicine, and ecology.

As known, English research discourse is based upon a number of consistent principles and main linguistic features, driven by them. These principles stem from a scientific paradigm and involve striving for maximal clarity, economy of linguistic expression, use of rational arguments, supported by facts and evidence, cautious manner of writing, and establishing links to research contexts and theories through citing and referencing.<sup>4</sup> Its style is generally considered to be formal, technical, and rather plain, reflecting a historically developed writing tradition, which dates back to Francis Bacon's philosophy of science. However, prominent stylistic features of English research texts are not always strictly observed by nonnative authors. For instance, they tend to use contracted forms, which are inappropriate in formal writing (*They don't lose their germination ability after cryopreservation*), periodically choose informal vocabulary (*This study has provided an appropriate stuff for future research*), or place adverbs at the end of the sentence, whereas a middle position (before or inside the verbal form) is much more preferable (*After this time, the analytical signal is increasing slightly*).

More serious difficulties, which nonnative academics often experience, are related to such a conspicuous feature of English research discourse as the use of collocations. Collocations are relatively stable word-combinations which regularly occur and are characteristic of scientific English in general (e.g., *to elaborate research problems* or *a key finding*) or of its disciplines (*severe disease* or *make a recovery* in medicine). In the majority of cases, non-Anglophone authors,

especially novice ones, use fewer and less sophisticated collocations and face problems with those of them which do not possess full equivalents in their mother tongues.<sup>5</sup> For example, I have often witnessed one persistent mistake, made by Ukrainian scientists (both mature researchers and doctoral students), who literally translated the Ukrainian equivalent of *conference abstract* and received *a thesis of a report* collocation, which has a different meaning in English! Such translation also leads to the use of the phrases which may seem quite strange for readers of international journals, e.g., *a premium is placed* (the author, probably, meant *emphasis is placed* or *laid*). Overall, developing knowledge of word-combinations “is notoriously difficult” for many research writers and, at the same time, is extremely important since the choice of particular phrases signals a membership in a disciplinary community.<sup>6</sup>

It should also be noted that insufficiently developed research writing skills may periodically cause illegitimate textual borrowings,<sup>7</sup> when inexperienced authors use long strings of words or even whole sentences from the papers of other scientists. To prevent this academic misconduct, nonnative writers should explicitly be taught the ways of avoiding unintentional plagiarism; in particular, they need to be explained how to differentiate between collocations and longer phrases, which, in case of borrowing, can be treated as instances of plagiarism.

Such a feature of English research discourse as striving for maximal clarity of expression is also not always visible in the texts of multilingual writers, even though they are often advised to write in short and simple sentences to enhance readability of their articles.<sup>8</sup> Rather frequently, nonnative authors produce long, cumbersome, and difficult for understanding sentences, as in the following example: *The results obtained can be explained by the fact that OPG is a key element in inhibiting the activation and differentiation of osteoclasts and is of great importance in bone resorption processes, and therefore its level is increased...* Such constructions seem to be influenced by native grammar, on the one hand, and by insufficiently developed skills of concise linguistic expression, on the other. Also, they may often contain the repetitions of words which create the impression of a lexically redundant text, e.g.: *This data confirms the published data according to which some species of conifer trees among which are Abies species are characterized by reduced metabolic characteristics of seeds...*

As known, English research writing values logical development of ideas and convincing argumentation. Experienced authors of scientific texts usually pay serious attention to verb choices, as the words belonging to this part of speech essentially contribute to building reasoning and add dynamism to writing. However, nonnative writers tend to noticeably use nominalizations, that is, nouns formed from verbs or adjectives, as in the following example: *Involvement in the processes of vascular calcification occurs with the progression of the atherosclerotic process.* Wide employment of nominalizations leads to presenting information as asserted and abstract,<sup>9</sup> thus downplaying the argumentative and interactive aspect of research texts. In many cases, nominalizations could have been effectively substituted by verbal forms (*Statistical data processing was carried out* → *Statistical data were processed*), infinitives of purpose, in particular (*For the assessment of the degree of BMD loss* → *To assess the degree of BMD loss*), which are highly typical of current English scientific writing.

An important feature of English research discourse is its reader-friendliness which implies writing in a comprehensible for readers way and with due regard for their expectations. This feature is most explicitly implemented through the use of metadiscourse defined as “the range of devices writers use to explicitly organize their texts, engage readers, and signal their

attitudes to both their material and their audience.”<sup>10</sup> Regretfully, nonnative writers often underestimate the importance of such phrases and tend to underuse them, as can be seen from the following excerpts: *The demographic population of children ... and the causes of their mortality will be analyzed* → *The purpose of this paper is to analyze the demographic population of children ... and to identify the causes of their mortality*; *The aim was to investigate the interrelationship between bone and cardiovascular remodeling biomarkers* → *The aim of the study/research was to investigate the interrelationship between bone and cardiovascular remodeling biomarkers*.

Also, nonnative researchers frequently appear to be insufficiently skillful in modulating the strength of their claims. This particularly refers to such a global strategy of English research discourse as a cautious manner of writing, which protects the author from being criticized for possible errors or invalid claims and opens space for other opinions or points of view. The devices of expressing possibility and tentative opinions, called hedges, are considered to be crucial for medical writing, as they allow writers to present their hypotheses and findings “with appropriate accuracy, ... expressing possibility rather than certainty and prudence rather than overconfidence” and thus help them to gain approval from their peers.<sup>11</sup> However, European and Asian authors tend to use fewer hedges<sup>11</sup> and employ a limited number of such devices (mostly modal verbs *can* or *may*), even though English offers a wide repertoire of them. Often, they prefer not to hedge the statements of general truth or shared knowledge (*Gold has been among the most precious metals in the world for centuries* → *As known, gold has been...*), thus reinforcing the assertiveness of their writing style.

The described above problems are not unique and are usually attributed to the influence of cultural contexts.<sup>12</sup> To a certain extent, they can be alleviated by editing assistance, although support on the language level does not always ensure success.<sup>13</sup> Language editors and translators may underestimate the socially constructed and contextualized nature of research writing and are inclined to give such global pieces of advice as, for example, to delete the introductory phrases modulating the strength of knowledge claims,<sup>14</sup> although such phrases can be rhetorically important in certain textual situations.

Short-term (1-3 days) training sessions for researchers have proved to be another, and rather efficient, form of writing support.<sup>15</sup> Such sessions usually embrace four blocks of themes, focusing on major linguistic features of English research texts (formal style, vocabulary, cautious writing, use of metadiscourse, typical grammar patterns), overall structure and organization of prominent research genres (e.g., journal articles, conference abstracts, research projects, reviews), their important elements (titles, abstracts, citations, acknowledgments), and main communication processes (e.g., dealing with reviewers' comments). During the sessions, participants are involved into intensive task-based rhetorical and linguistic activities and get acquainted with useful writing techniques, for instance, with the so called “jigsaw” one which consists in “lifting” expressions from authentic papers, combining them and adding some of the writer's own.<sup>16</sup> This technique, quite different from copy-paste writing as a form of plagiarism,<sup>17</sup> is extremely helpful for nonnative authors who always feel lack of linguistic resources. However, this and other learning methods and forms of support need to be accompanied by deeper involvement of multilingual researchers into global disciplinary communities, as active participation in their activities essentially helps to develop the insider's knowledge of the norms and conventions of English research discourse. Enhancing curricula of medical students with research writing workshops and courses, similar to the described above training sessions, could also be beneficial.

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