

THE LINGUISTIC ASPECT OF MEDICAL RESEARCH PAPERS- NEED TO DEVELOP INSIGHT

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All indexed biomedical journals are required to conform to the international standards and to follow the pattern as suggested by the guidelines for indexed medical journals¹. The main language of communication for medical literature is 'English' though there are a number of indexed journals published in different languages. Our national language 'Urdu' has not progressed so far in terms of its medical literature value that we can adopt this for research communications. Moreover, the medium of medical teaching in the country is 'English' language. Hence, it is expected internationally that we can communicate as efficiently in this language as any other English speaking country in order to make our research findings more understandable and transmissible.

The writer had an opportunity to review a number of articles and received feedback from English-speaking medical reviewers about a number of manuscripts. The common problem found by these reviewers in rating the manuscripts from Pakistan is the non-conformity with the language style. The general observations were: inconsistency in narration, inappropriate choice of words which fits into the common observation of thinking in Urdu while writing in English, the phraseology and language employed are at times quite awkward with great liberty taken with the meaning of some words, use of superfluous language and adoption of dramatic style, switching of tenses, some subject/verb disagreements and sentences lacking appropriate nouns. There are observed grammatical and syntax errors/omissions which are odd for a scientific paper. In some of the papers, the authors lose grip on the flow and organization of narration in terms of language. At times, the reviewers find it difficult to comprehend the exact meaning of what the authors are trying to say with respect to their findings in a given research paper. In a number of recent empirical studies, interfaces between syntax, such as morphology and discourse have been shown to be unstable in different types of language development².

A number of faults were detected by reviewers where problems with jargon and indifferent English in medical writings, complexities in sentence structure³, and vernacularization⁴ were evident. A study⁵ of medical journals showed a constant preoccupation with style with jargon, vogue words and weak impersonal constructions.

It was emphasized that eternal vigilance to clear, orderly reasoning and language is crucial during preparation of a manuscript⁶.

Ludbrook⁷ has made suggestions to reverse the trend of deteriorating language quality in biomedical journals which are: greater emphasis on good writing by students in schools and by university students, consulting books on science-writing, one-on-one mentoring, using 'scientific' measures to reveal lexical poverty, making use of freelance science editors and encouraging editors to pay more attention to the problem. Kisson⁸ suggests 'clear-ability' and clarity in medical writing which should be clear, simple and unambiguous and coining of new words not seen in contemporary English should be avoided. Shortcuts of words can be avoided by performing a literature search that will lead to an appropriate word or phrase that already exists. The use of long words may be considered 'more scientific' may lead to vagueness. Arturo⁹ suggests the potential authors to understand their readership, watch for choice of words, keep the write-up simple and organized, look for acronyms, stay away from slang and remember to punctuate. Lanza¹⁰ in a scholarly paper attempts to help the authors by offering some tips, for example exclamation points (!) are rarely used in English and almost never in medical writing as they are known for expressing strong emotion. Most minor variations in spelling are acceptable as in US and Britain style of language like center vs. centre, grey vs. gray etc. Fractions like 2/3 and 4/5 should be written like "two-thirds" and "four-fifth". Lanza¹⁰ goes on to advise about one way to achieve clarity in a manuscript is to respect Standard English word order. First: subject, then: verb, direct object, indirect object which is illustrated by an example "recent studies have found no significant difference in the various approaches".

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There are a number of ways by which the linguistic improvement in a manuscript is possible. Authors may benefit from an education program called English for specific purpose (ESP)¹¹ which consists of countless components and combinations that have evolved over time to fulfill communication needs situated within a wide range of social, academic, and work-related contexts. There is a computer conversational system¹² that can potentially help a foreign-language author to improve language fluency through practice dialogues. The Modern Language Association (MLA)¹³ has developed a guideline under the caption “MLA style” for formatting manuscripts and using English language in writing. It assists in preparing scholarly manuscripts and student research papers with respect to mechanics of writing, such as punctuation, quotation, and documentation of resources. It also provides writers with a system for referencing their sources through parenthetical citation in their essays and Work Cited pages and also protects writers from accusations of plagiarism.

An important paper by Tychinin¹⁴ makes some suggestions for writing better scientific English. It urges copy editors working for major scientific publishers to contribute articles on usage and style topics, with real-world examples, and possibly even to introduce a journal section that might be headed ‘Copy Editor’s Corner’ that can become a source of great help to the writers rather than recommending a guide book.

In the local scenario, it is much advisable for the authors to follow a simple language pattern that would make a manuscript understandable from an international perspective, to read a number of published manuscript before writing the paper, to ask a colleague more well versed with English to review it before submission, to get help from on-line tuition or seek service from a copy editor. The editors can also assist the authors by setting some language guidelines and making the service of a copy editor available and devoting a section as mentioned above. Reviewers should also give a liberal feedback on linguistic aspects that can help the authors in making necessary corrections in order to produce a revised manuscript sound in both scientific content and language. It is high time when we have to address the linguistic aspect of the research manuscripts in order to gain more acceptances in the international academic arena.



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