

English language professionals on their mark in the Mediterranean

Mediterranean Editors' and Translators' Meeting
Barcelona, Spain; 4–5 November 2005

The time was right in late 2005 for the first Mediterranean Editors' and Translators' Meeting: a day and a half of workshops, plenary addresses and panel discussions that brought together practitioners and academics from Spain and other countries. Language and communications experts discovered their varied backgrounds and welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and examine together some of the practices that help authors whose first language is not English to communicate more effectively with their intended audience. Some of the themes that emerged, and some of the recommendations speakers offered for language professionals, are summarized here.

Translators, authors' editors and journal editors agreed that dialogue with authors was often needed to discover the meaning behind unclear writing or confusing translation. Aleksandra Misak, senior editor at the *Croatian Medical Journal* (Zagreb, Croatia), urged translators to familiarize themselves with what the authors' target audience might expect for terminology, style and appropriate language. She noted that knowing the author's first language enhanced the editor's ability to identify and amend problems in the text. Mary Ellen Kerans, freelance author's editor and translator (Barcelona, Spain) and organizer of the meeting, explained how editing faults discovered by translators can be integrated into the journal's bilingual publication process. Karen Shashok, freelance translator and editorial consultant (Granada, Spain), encouraged authors' editors and translators to be proactive in consulting with authors in order to dispel ambiguities that readers might interpret as careless science or inadequate writing, editing or translation. Freelance authors' editor Joy Burrough-Boenisch (Goring-on-Thames, UK) advised colleagues that knowing the difference between an error (an oversight that authors agree to amend when it is pointed out to them) and a mistake

(when the author is actually wrong about something but has not realized it) facilitates productive interaction with authors by defusing their defensiveness about mistakes. Freelance editor Malcolm Hayes (Leida, Spain) explained a successful system of providing coded feedback to authors about the different levels of editing needed. He noted that the method motivated authors to improve as writers, lessened their dependence on outside help, empowered them as communicators, and improved customer satisfaction.

In her plenary address Burrough-Boenisch noted an issue of concern to language professionals who work with scientists and other authors whose first language is not English: the globalization of English and of publishing, and the continuing evolution of the language as it absorbs inputs from ever-growing and increasingly varied populations of new users. Several speakers observed that the standards for appropriate language can be hard to define in these times. Ian Williams, a professor of English Philology at the University of Cantabria (Santander, Spain), showed how Spanish and English language writers differ in their preferences for organizing the Discussion section of IMRaD manuscripts, and noted that wrong placement by non-native writers of English of background information was likely to be rejected by native-English readers as a sign of unacceptable writing or thinking rather than accepted as a reflection of cultural differences in writing patterns.

Participants in the workshop on the editing tasks implicit in translation (mostly native users of English with many years' experience) concurred about the lack of consensus on "good scientific English" by indicating that all had seen the dreaded "Please have a native speaker of English revise this manuscript" admonishment in at least one editor's report during their career. Under the circumstances, determining what the author's target audience will find acceptable

and unacceptable remains a major challenge as the language evolves and standards shift (some would say downward).

In her keynote address Ana Marusic, editor of the *Croatian Medical Journal*, noted some of the challenges to producing and disseminating good science in good English from a small community. To meet these challenges she and her staff have developed "author-helpful" strategies to prepare authors — especially those from developing countries — for the rigours of international peer review and publication. Marusic emphasized that editorial feedback from her journal aims to motivate authors to become autonomous and develop confidence in their skills as scientists and communicators.

Also discussed at METM 05 [1] but not covered in this brief report were referencing skills, critical reading skills, translation studies, publishers' expectations for language service providers, the interactions between authors and their language consultants, university language services, skills needed by medical writers, and the history of

Mediterranean science communication. The full programme of the meeting and information about future activities can be checked on the METM web site at www.metmeetings.org. In 2006 METM hopes once again to provide a forum where language and communications practitioners can interface with academics to enhance the quality of each other's work.

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Reference

1. Kerans ME. 2006. Mediterranean editors and translators launch a regional association at METM 05. *Science Editing* 29(3): in press.