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McKinley, J & Rose, H. (2019). Standards of English in academic writing: The authors respond. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Volume 44:

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### **Standards of English in academic writing: The authors respond**

The response to our recent article on journal submission guidelines (McKinley & Rose, 2018) facilitates an opportunity to engage in further discussion on English language standards in published academic writing. We are grateful to Paul Stapleton for his response, and to the editors of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* for this further occasion to clarify our position. The main concerns raised by Stapleton (2019) are as follows:

1. That we fail to fully consider the importance of a standard for conveying scientific findings;
2. Disagreement with our suggestion that terms such 'good' and 'error-free' should be avoided in author guidelines, as it risks eroding academic standards that have been painstakingly established over time;
3. A belief that the introduction of non-standard, but globally-used, forms of language are a 'slippery slope' to the degradation of academic writing.

Stapleton (2019), whose work we have great respect for, uses a combination of anecdotal and historical evidence to support his arguments, and focuses on the findings of Martinez's (2018) study, which we cited in our paper. We believe that Stapleton's (2019) reading of our article is understandable, and even defensible regarding a language's orthography, but nevertheless seems somewhat misconstrued. In this rebuttal, we address and hope to

alleviate some of his concerns. To compare like with like in our arguments, we draw upon anecdotal evidence of our work as editors, as well as historical arguments associated with the erosion of standards in English. We further underpin our arguments with recent research.

### **The importance of standards in academic publishing**

In response to our article, Stapleton (2019) purports the importance of standards for conveying academic findings, and this is one point where we are in full agreement. In our original article, we conclude that decisions surrounding academic publishing are mediated by two forces: “a need for linguistic clarity in journal publications so that research can be understood with unambiguity; and a need to be inclusive of a global academic community, many of whom are L2 writers” (McKinley & Rose, 2018, p. 9). Through well-worded author guidelines, a journal is able to communicate these dual aims to *all* contributors in an *inclusive* manner.

Drawing from the examples in our study, the author guidelines for *Molecular Systems Biology* highlight the importance that manuscripts “be written in clear and concise English and be intelligible to a broad readership”. Such wording highlights the importance for *all* writers, L1 and L2 users alike, to communicate in an unambiguous language to effectively convey their scientific findings. This is starkly different from other author guidelines in our sample which suggest L2 speakers need to “sound like a native speaker” (*Neuropsychopharmacology*) or enlist “the help of an English-speaking colleague when preparing the manuscript” (*Reviews of Modern Physics*). Such guidelines suggest that an author’s linguistic abilities or native status, rather than their scientific expertise, is a desired characteristic of a contributor to the journal. Author guidelines that refer explicitly to a *broad* or *international* readership position all contributors on equal footing regarding who judges what language is acceptable within their academic community. It also places the onus on L1 writers to ensure their work can be widely understood and in an accessible language for a heterogenous audience.

Further to this, our paper was critical of guidelines that indicated *poor* language, and not the contribution to knowledge, would be a primary reason to reject a manuscript. One of our conclusions was for author guidelines to not foreground ‘good’ language or ‘error-free’ writing as a criterion of academic excellence. We found guidelines particularly egregious when they implicitly positioned L2 writers as deficient in their linguistic abilities. We argue that guidelines need to emphasise the fact that manuscripts are evaluated according to their scientific contribution, and that ‘good’ research rather than ‘good’ language is essential to the integrity and advancement of knowledge. Unfortunately, some studies have indicated that language continues to be a criterion for evaluation. As an example, Mungra and Webber’s (2010) study into the peer review processes of medical journals found “44% of criticisms by peer reviewers to Italian researchers’ submissions were language-based (that is in the spheres of semantics, syntax or discourse), whereas 56% criticised scientific content or method” (p. 51). In another example, Adamson and Muller’s (2008) study investigating attitudes of reviewers of three English language education journals based in Asia found that “respondents saw language as either the ‘most important’ or a ‘primary factor’ in evaluating papers” (p. 48).

To clarify, in the conclusions of our own study, we do not propose that journals should discard their language standards for publication. What we are advocating for is a reconceptualization of how error is viewed and dealt with in the process from receiving submissions to publishing them. We understand that language standards and house styles in the publishing industry are necessary to ensure consistency within a publishing house. However, there is no reason why these standards cannot be applied once an article has been conditionally accepted, based on its scientific merit. At the AAAL conference held in Atlanta in March 2019, the main topic for discussion in the closed editors' meeting was how much our journals should support L2 scholars regarding language use (i.e. more fully utilize copyeditors to help prepare final versions of papers for publication). Ideally, we would like to see appropriate structures put in place where editors and reviewers are encouraged to put aside their judgements of a manuscript's adherence to 'correct' or 'error-free' English when assessing the merit of a paper. This would ensure that papers are evaluated on their scientific contribution. It is our view that an article's *language* can always be improved through proper editing processes; however, an article's *scientific merit* is far more unchangeable.

### **The erosion of standards: a rebuttal**

The second argument raised in the response is that written academic standards should be preserved. This stance is underpinned by a historical perspective of the development of language spelling standards. To start, we believe there is a problem with transposing examples surrounding the orthography of language to examples of patterned differences in the use of the language itself. Stapleton (2019) argues that if published writing fails to meet the established norms within the academic community, it will lead to the overall erosion of standards in written academic English. However, this argument does not acknowledge that standards are always changing according to acceptable usage within a linguistic community. As many L2 writing experts specialise in standard forms of English, they are susceptible to take up strong positions in judging what is acceptable English language use in the wider English-using community. This stance comes through in Stapleton's (2019) positioning of non-standard forms of language as "faux pas", which are the products of "poor proofreading" or "naïve interpretations" written by "periphery scholars". However, the academic community is much larger than those who share this centrist perspective, as "researchers all over the globe are being urged to disseminate their findings to wider and more diverse audiences" (Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2014, p. 1). It is this wider academic community that dictates what is acceptable in our academic community.

On this very topic, Milroy (2007) observes that "there is usually a tradition of popular complaint about language, bewailing the low quality of general usage and claiming that the language is degenerating" (p. 138). A historical example of this is Jonathon Swift's now infamous letter to the Earl of Oxford entitled "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue" (Swift, 1712). In this paper, Swift advocates for the reform of the English language due to impurities derived from heavy and 'uncontrolled foreign influences' which allowed 'foreign' and 'fabricated words' to 'contaminate' the language. Such views are not too dissimilar from those of people today who believe that current standards need to be preserved and protected from further contamination of L2 marked English. No doubt, Swift's horror at reading the word 'amusement' which he refers to as a "monstrous production" (Swift, 1712, p. 24), is not dissimilar to Stapleton's (2019)

positioning of ‘evidences’, which is referred to as “another common error often seen in L2 writing”.

Further to this, Stapleton (2019) opines that standardization of written academic English is a cumulative process, which is comparable to the standardization of spelling, and that this standardization process will result in an ultimate global written norm which “we do not question”. Widdowson (2003) highlights the illogicality of such a view because “[t]he very idea of a standard implies stability, but language is of nature unstable” (p. 41). The fact is that language (unlike spelling) is constantly under a state of change, with exogenous and endogenous forces pushing and pulling it in various directions (Galloway & Rose, 2015). While some people try to curb change by conforming to the standards that are recorded in grammar and lexical reference materials, these standards only describe a language as it exists at a certain point in time. As the language changes, these reference materials also change to reflect the new realities of language use. A current example of this in published academic writing is the increased acceptance and use of ‘data is’ rather than ‘data are’, which is currently listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as a ‘mass noun’, which takes a ‘singular verb’. Milroy and Milroy (1999) explain that standardization “is never complete because, ultimately, a language is the property of the communities that use it ... It is not the exclusive property of governments, educators or prescriptive grammarians, and it is arrogant to believe that it is” (p. 45).

### **There is no ‘slippery’ slope to language degradation**

Much of Stapleton’s (2019) critique seemed concentrated on the findings of Martinez’s (2018) study of L2 language forms, rather than on the findings of our own study. Stapleton (2019) criticises our paper for a lack of examples of L2 marked academic writing, in stating: “Interestingly, despite their review of guidelines in 210 journals, McKinley and Rose offer none of their own specific examples of the type of language that particularly marks L2 usage in academic writing contexts”. We would like to emphasise that an analysis of ELF lexis was not part of our study and not part of our research question, nor were L2 writers’ texts part of our sample.

We will, however, take this opportunity to rebuke claims that the introduction of what is deemed as ‘error’ in academic papers will create a slippery slope, as this is an issue that researchers of linguistic hybridity and fluidity have discussed at length for decades. Jenkins (2007) notes that ELF research has long been criticised for adopting an ‘anything goes’ policy on the assumption that it embraces any deviations from established standards. In relation to pronunciation, Sobkowiak (2005), for example, stated the acceptance of non-standard forms would “bring the ideal down into the gutter with no checkpoint along the way” (p. 141). This is somewhat similar to the writer’s metaphor of the slippery slope. The writer also observes a ‘paucity’ of further examples in their own review of literature “from the L2 world of English that should be deemed acceptable by the academy”. If so few potential lexical items are available to threaten the integrity of academic writing, one must question what is waiting at the top of this slippery slope.

Stapleton’s (2019) critique also embodies a conflation of a ‘mistake’ and an ‘error’ using an anecdote of substituting a rising tone for a falling one in spoken Chinese as “considered an error in the ears of a listener”. This example is most clearly a language *mistake*, rather than the *patterned errors* we refer to in our paper, which have established

legitimacy through consistent and accepted use by a community of L2 writers. As Mauranen (2012) notes, “we cannot dismiss repeated [empirical] findings of non-standard forms as arbitrary mistakes” (p. 123). The examples provided in Martinez’s (2018) study are underpinned by evidence from research which shows statistically significant repeated use within a linguistic community (i.e. L2 academic writers). Baker and Jenkins (2015) observe that criticism towards ELF as a research paradigm often stems from “a very limited (if any) understanding of ELF on the part of the author” (p. 191).

### Looking forward

Overall, we feel that Stapleton’s (2019) interpretation of our article—that we are suggesting standards of English be relaxed when it comes to publishing research—is not entirely reflective of our actual stance. Thus, we are grateful to have had this opportunity to engage in further discussion with Paul, whose work inspired much of our own research as early-career academics in Japan. In this response, we hope to have clarified our position that our call for re-conceptualisation of error was targeted towards the actions of editors and reviewers, who are often seen as the “custodians” and gatekeepers of research publishing (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019, p. 253). We are not, in fact, suggesting a relaxation of standards for published work, which is still underpinned by important editorial decisions including justifiable commercial reasons to adhere to journal house styles. We do, however, adopt a global view of English language, which is reflective and inclusive of its current global use, but this should not be interpreted as an ‘anything goes’ ideology.

For global use of the language within a global academic community, communication of meaning is key. As higher education and the global publishing industry have Englishized, researchers now write for a global heterogenous academic audience, where L2 English academics are now in the majority, and not in the ‘periphery’. Author guidelines, therefore, must strive to be inclusive and reflective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reality of English used for global research and publication purposes.

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