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Pluralizing English? Variation in high-stakes academic texts and challenges of copyediting

Joel Heng Hartse *, Ryuko Kubota

University of British Columbia, Department of Language and Literacy Education, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

Abstract

Paralleling the pluralistic conceptualizations of language as found in world Englishes and English as a lingua franca (ELF), pluralizing language use – that is, accepting deviations from standard Anglo-American written English – has been advocated in the field of second language (L2) writing. However, the question of how this pluralization is or can be achieved remains underexplored, particularly at the level of lexis and grammar, which has traditionally been an important focus for readers of L2 writers' texts. This question becomes contentious in high-stakes academic writing, which entails negotiation between L2 writers and gatekeepers (editors, copyeditors) who are expected to ensure academic sophistication and rigor of published texts. This article addresses theoretical issues related to differences in language use by critically analyzing the authors' own process of copyediting nonnative English writers' manuscripts prepared for a book publication. It examines the role of literacy brokering (textual mediation by editors, proofreaders, and others) at the lexicogrammatical level in academic text production. We found that despite sympathy for an approach that would pluralize English usage, the textual mediation of lexical and grammatical items was often driven by native-speaker intuition and was idiosyncratic. This idiosyncrasy further poses skepticism about the applicability of both error-oriented approaches to and pluralistic theories about L2 writing to copyediting in high-stakes academic publishing. We conclude that pervasive ideologies and accepted practices in academic publishing make it difficult to pluralize academic writing at the level of lexis and grammar. We conclude with suggestions for advocacy, research, and practice for L2 writing scholars and literacy brokers.

Keywords: Second language writing; Linguistic variation; Copyediting; Literacy brokering; Academic publishing

Introduction

As a growing number of nonnative English-speaking (NNES) writers publish their scholarly work in English-language journals, there have been calls for broader perspectives on language use, influenced by recent pluralistic conceptualizations of language such as world Englishes (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010), English as a lingua franca (Carey, 2013; Jenkins, 2014), and translingualism or plurilingualism (Canagarajah, 2006; Horner, Lu, & Matsuda, 2010; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011). These scholars call into question the imposition of ''Standard Written English'' norms in academic writing and advocate broadening acceptable forms of expression. Such perspectives are being considered by theorists and writing teachers, but the use of nonstandard language in academic publishing is usually proscribed; gatekeepers (editors and copyeditors) are expected to ensure academic sophistication and rigor of

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: joelhartse@gmail.com (J. Heng Hartse), ryuko.kubota@ubc.ca (R. Kubota).

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published texts. While Lillis and Curry (Curry & Lillis, 2004; Lillis & Curry, 2006, 2010) have conducted extensive research on the role of literacy brokering (e.g., textual mediation by editors, proofreaders, and others) in academic text production, there remains the question of whether and how pluralization of high-stakes academic writing at the ''deep structure of grammar'' (Canagarajah, 2006) is possible.

This paper explores contentious issues in allowing lexicogrammatical variations of English in high-stakes academic texts. We define high-stakes academic texts as scholarly artifacts that lead to publications (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, books) or are vetted for professional activities or achievements (e.g., grant or conference proposals). Drawing on our own experience of editing and copyediting a book, we will examine how the process of changing putatively non-standard lexis and grammar was negotiated and call for further research and debate in this area.

We first briefly discuss the edited book project and our struggle to implement what we believe to be positive or progressive ideals about NNES writers' voices while copyediting the text. We then review historical and recent approaches to nonstandard English usage and related areas of theory and research in academic writing, drawing a distinction between error-based approaches and variation-based approaches. We then discuss the demand for copyedited text in academic publishing and the sometimes contradictory assumptions and practices of editors, publishers, and writers, culminating with our own reflection and discussion of our editing process. We conclude that while there are growing calls for scholars and teachers to be more sensitive and nuanced in their treatment of variation from standard written English in L2 writing, the demands for standard English that exist in academic publishing make it difficult for editors, publishers, and writers to connect theory with practice. To contexualize our discussion, we begin with a concrete example which inspired us to explore this issue.

Linguistic pluralism and editing: Joel's experience

When Ryuko asked me to copyedit the edited book she was working on, a compilation of articles written by well-known scholars in our field (many of whom are second language speakers of English), I was glad to have the chance to gain the experience of learning about the publishing process as a doctoral student in TESOL. Although I have edited papers, articles, and dissertations for colleagues and classmates before, I had never done so for a major publication written by well-known authors. I knew some of the contributions would be written by senior scholars whose work has direct political implications regarding the editing of L2 English users' prose for publication. As a copyeditor who was hired in part because of my status as a native speaker of English, I sometimes found myself making changes to sentences by scholars who were directly calling for an end to the practice of native English-speaking (NES) copyeditors ''polishing'' NNES writers' text for publication.

Current practices accepted in academic writing and publishing deem it necessary for prose, written by native or nonnative English speakers, to be ''cleaned up'' or ''polished'' before it is sent to the publisher, but every editor has different standards, and the criteria that each individual operates with for determining what is or is not acceptable in academic writing is often based on intuition and personal preference. For example, early in the editing process, I found myself eliminating some uses of the word *would*. I changed a sentence in the introduction reading ''We hope that the readers *would* be able to visualize what institutional systems and expectations they are wading through. . .'' to ''We hope that the readers *will* be able. . .'' but found myself unable to explain to Ryuko why I had done so. To me, this *would* sounded unusual, even though I know people who use the word this way both formally and informally. Eventually, she agreed to the change, but ultimately, I am not sure whether my change actually improved the text in terms of readability, legitimacy, or acceptability for publication, or if it merely reflected my own individual preference as an editor and a reader.

In fact, it seems to me that I changed this use of *would* specifically because I knew I was being called on as a native English speaker, and that this set off my nonnative usage radar; I was aware of *would* being possibly marked as an Asian usage (see Bautista, 2004). After our discussion about this change, Ryuko asked me several times to ''retain authors' voices'' as much as possible. Still, I am unsure to what extent my changes—especially small changes like particular words or forms of words that felt awkward to me—were honoring the author's voice and intention. Of course, any published text is a process of negotiation (see, for example, Burrough-Boenisch, 2003, 2006), but at the beginning of the copyediting process, we both strongly felt that the content, authors, and audience for this text would require a more nuanced approach to editing that eschewed the polishing of seemingly (or as-yet) unconventional usage. This was not easy, and we learned that some of the newer and more attractive approaches to variation from standard written English which have been proposed in recent years (discussed below) are difficult to apply in practice, given the expectations and constraints involved in academic publishing.