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Research Paper

Linguistic Comments on Iranian Medical Researchers' Manuscripts: Exploring the Reasons for Linguistic Errors

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Abstract

The articles submitted to ISI-Indexed journals receive various comments from peer reviewers. This study analyzes the text histories as well as peer reviewers' comments on 20 articles written by Iranian medical researchers published in ISI-indexed journals. Using Mungra and Webber's (2010) categorization of linguistic comments, this study aimed to investigate the amount and types of linguistic comments made by peer reviewers on these manuscripts. There was also an attempt to understand the reasons behind their linguistic problems through semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that fewer linguistic comments as compared to content comments are made on these manuscripts. Moreover, Mungra and Webber's (2010) categorization of linguistic comments was not found to cover all linguistic comments in our corpus and an additional category was used to make better categorization of linguistic issues. Personal attempts to improve the

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knowledge of English, attendance in various English classes, participation in academic research networks and, above all, extended use of English in researchers' university curricula are among the basic reasons for the researchers to develop their knowledge of English. Implications for holding English for Academic Purposes courses for medical researchers are also discussed.

Keywords: Peer Reviewer, Linguistic Comments, Medical, English for Academic Purposes, ISI-Indexed Journals

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1. Introduction

Scholars feel a sort of pressure to publish the result of their research and contribute to science production in their field. To achieve material incentives, promotion and professional advancement, and knowledge construction at international levels, periphery scholars need to publish their articles in English-medium refereed journals since local journals do not enjoy the prestige attributed to Western journals.

1.1 Literature Review

Literature has discussed article publication and the processes in which they are involved (Flowerdew, 1999; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Li, 2006). It is revealing that in their attempt to publish articles in refereed journals and to meet the requirements of English-medium publication, researchers encounter various discursive and non-discursive problems. Canagarajah (1996) indicated that non-discursive problems of periphery scholars, such as delays in receiving mails, limited access to recently published articles, and lack of telecommunication facilities could hinder the process of article publication.

Discursive and linguistic difficulties encountered by periphery scholars were found to be related to their inadequate proficiency in English (Belcher, 2007; Salager-Meyer, 2008) and researchers' style of writing (Li, 2006). Misak et al. (2005) also described periphery scholars' problems in the four

layers of manuscripts: the study quality, narrative, scientific reporting style, and language. They also provided some guidelines for periphery scholars to overcome these difficulties. Moreover, Salager-Meyer (2008) introduced some steps to be taken such as appointing periphery scientists to the editorial board of international journals, broadening their practice of publishing special issues on scholarship in non-Western contexts, and diminishing the cost of scientific publication.

Although periphery scholars might encounter a lot of problems in the process of article publication, they compose their manuscripts and submit them to refereed journals. After submission, the scholars are sometimes provided with peer reviewers' comments on their texts. Swales (1996) believed that peer reviews of articles are examples of genres which are typically "out of sight or occluded from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (p.46).

Reviewer comments, as viewed by Glass (2020), are the most essential part of the peer-review process of scientific articles; it is also anxiety-laden, sometimes enjoyable, constructive, but often disheartening, painful, and sometimes cruel and soul-crushing element. She provides some good and bad examples of review comments.

There are various factors which could affect the rejection of an article. However, Coates et al. (2002) found "clear indications that carelessly written articles could often have either a direct or subliminal influence on whether a paper was accepted or rejected" (p. 279). Moreover, they suggested that standardized guidelines should be introduced in scientific writing. They categorized the types of errors into 1) grammatical errors, including passive voice, verb tense, and general grammar problems, 2) structural errors, including long sentences and word order, and 3) lexical errors, including jargons and noun misuse.

Journal editors and reviewers approve articles based on such factors as the topic and area of research, the soundness of the analyses, the consistency of the interpretations, and the adequacy of the presentations, the last of which may cause a difference “in the probability of having the paper accepted between native English speakers and non-native English speakers” (Clavero, 2010, p. 552). He believes this is due to the fact that “achieving the linguistic precision required by high-rank publications is extremely difficult for non-native English speakers, even when they are able to express themselves in grammatically correct English (p. 552). Of course, it is very common for a paper written by a non-native English speaker to be tentatively accepted for publication, but that a native English speaker should review the text prior to final acceptance. In fact, many journals even recommend some specific scientific editing services to be used by the author at his/her own expense and risk. This is what Clavero (2010) calls ‘linguistic injustice’. In fact, native speakers of English are believed to have an advantage since they acquire the language in a natural way while second language users must invest more time, effort, and money into formally learning it and may experience greater difficulties when writing in English. Hyland (2016) argues that there is little convincing evidence that a linguistic disadvantage exists, and that focusing on a disadvantage has harmful consequences for both native and non-native English-speaking scholars. He believes that we need to see L2 writing as a part of wider social, institutional and political contexts and not as something which exists in isolation from them. He claims that the difficulties experienced by writers of any first language “are not due to deficit or negligence, but wider discourse practices which are often invisible to writers, reviewers and editors” (p. 22). Furthermore, it is evident that issues of linguistic disadvantage, or even injustice, become essentially irrelevant at these advanced levels of academic writing where authors are trying to have

their work published. Finally, it is important to consider the fact that “the current orthodoxy which attributes publishing success to mother tongue perpetuates an idealized monolingualism that still underlies a lot of thinking in applied linguistics” (p. 23). Languages are, in fact, linguistic practices which have developed to get things done in particular spheres and “not cognitive structures existing inside the head of idealized monolingual native speakers” (p. 23).

Many studies have discussed various debates and viewpoints about the peer review process of submissions to various journals (Thomas, 2011; Lipworth et al., 2011; Harrison, 2004). Some research expressed a positive viewpoint toward peer reviews of articles. Jefferson et al. (2007) and Weller (1996) acknowledged that peer reviews of articles help the authors to improve the quality of their manuscripts. Moreover, Snell et al. (2005) and Kearney et al. (2008) believe that reviewers spend considerable time to provide valuable comments.

In a recent study (Tan, 2021), the authors investigated the linguistic functions comments provided by reviewers in academic journal peer review reports, with a pragmatic approach. From the two main types of speech acts, (directive and expressive), the majority of the reviewers used directive speech act, and the expressive speech act was more prominently used in the case of negative comments. Tan highlighted the need for a collegial peer review with more positive and constructive suggestions by reviewers.

On the other hand, Bedeian (2003) criticized the peer review process of the articles and the participant scholars in his study mentioned that they were being treated as inferiors by reviewers, and editors consider the reviewers' knowledge as more important than the authors. Strabuck (2003) focused on the bias of peer reviewers and unreliability of reviewers was discussed in an article by Peter and Ceci (1982).

Gosden (1995) applied Halliday's systematic functional framework of textual revision to a corpus of novice non-native speakers' articles. He mentioned that addition and deletion of technical details were related to ideational meaning, rhetorical machining of the writers' claims and expression of purpose reflecting interpersonal meaning, and reshuffling of technical details and rhetorical machining of discourse structure reflecting the textual metafunction. He concluded that each of these metafunctions contributed to one-third of textual revisions.

In contrast, in another study Gosden (2003) categorized peer reviewers' comments according to their reference to Technical Details (TD), Claims (C), Discussion (D), References (R), and Format (F). The study concluded that 66% of the comments reflected interactional and interpersonal orientation (C, D and R). In fact, 27% of the comments reflected ideational metafunction (TD) and 7% expressed textual orientation (F).

Mungra et al. (2010) analyzed peer reviews of medical articles written in English by Italian researchers to answer two main questions: 1) What kinds of comments are made? and 2) Which comments are more common, linguistic or scientific-methodological criticism? The authors concluded that reviewers provided two basic categories of comments: content comments and language use comments.

Content comments constituted over one-half of all comments. The most frequent errors in this category were lack of procedural rigor, incomplete literature and errors of claims, scientific reasoning errors of the authors' own data, and lack of explanation about why data were unusual.

Category of language-use comments comprised 44% of the comments, being divided into two distinct sub-categories: lexical, grammatical, and syntactic comments (33%), and discourse and rhetorical comments (11%). Authors expressed that the most frequent comments in the first sub-category

were concerned with not being well written, lack of clarity and typos or suggestions for reformulation by the text editor. In addition, the most frequent comments on discourse and rhetorical features included improved information flow, up tone or giving more salience to novelty features, and down tone claim or hedge.

As to the clarity of the comments provided by reviewers, Whang (2020) believes that peer reviewers in academic publishing account for improving the quality of the articles through provision of clear, constructive comments that are neither unpleasant nor disparaging, while it is not easy for reviewers to write proper and inter-culturally sensitive reviews. As he claims, development of skills in writing peer review comments more clearly and politely leads to an increase in communication between reviewers and authors, thus further improving the overall quality of the journal.

The study by Mungra et al. (2010) revealed that Italian medical researchers received fewer linguistic comments on their submitted manuscripts to refereed journals. In this study, we analyzed peer reviewer comments on Iranian medical manuscripts submitted to ISI-indexed journals to investigate the linguistic comments on their manuscripts. All authors were medical researchers and had graduated from the same university in Iran. We tried to find out whether Iranian medical researchers like Italian researchers in the study of Mungra et al. (2010) received fewer linguistic comments than content comments or not. We adopted the categorization of language use comments in this study to identify linguistic comments manifested in peer reviews. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the leading-authors of the articles in order to find out the basic reasons behind receiving more or fewer linguistic comments than content ones. To the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted to evaluate the most frequent

linguistic problems of Iranian medical researchers in article composition. In general, this study tries to answer the following questions:

1. How many and what kinds of linguistic comments are made on Iranian medical researchers' manuscripts submitted to ISI-indexed journals?
2. Why do these researchers receive many or a few comments on linguistic issues rather than content issues?

2. Material and Method

To answer these questions, we analyzed 'text histories' (Lillis & Curry, 2006) of 20 manuscripts written by 12 different Iranian medical researchers. All these manuscripts had been submitted for publication to ISI-indexed journals. Ten manuscripts had been finally accepted for publication and the remaining ten had been rejected at the end. Among this sample, 13 articles had undergone only one round of review, and seven articles were reviewed twice.

Analysis of the comments helped us understand the kinds and number of linguistic comments and semi-structured interviews provided the reasons for the high or low number of linguistic comments. Interviews were conducted with four authors whose papers had been accepted for publication and five authors who had failed to publish their manuscripts at the end. Furthermore, 'respondent validation' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 181) was used to ensure the accuracy of interpretations.

3. Results and Discussion

In the reviews of the articles, a total of 2213 comments were identified. Among them, 115 comments were found to refer to linguistic issues and the rest focused on the content. Adopting the language-use category in the study of Mungra et al. (2010), we classified the linguistic comments into 2 sub-categories: 1) lexis and syntax comments and 2) discourse and rhetorical comments. Among linguistic comments, 109 referred to the sub-category of lexis and syntax comments and 3 comments reflected discourse and rhetorical

comments and the remaining three comments could not be incorporated in Mungra et al.'s (2010) classification of linguistic comments.

Table 1*Lexis and Syntax Comments*

Lexis and syntax comments	Number of comments
Not well written/ use of English	75
Lack of clarity verbosity	22 7
Typos or suggestions for text editor	5

Table 2*Discourse and Rhetorical Comments*

Discourse and rhetorical comments	Number of comments
Up tone or give more salience to novelty features	3

Though more categories of comments were identified in the study of Mungra et al. (2010), in our corpus we only identified these 5 categories of comments. According to Mungra et al. (2010), the category of 'not well written/ use of English' is related to comments on inappropriate use of the language. Example 1 reflects an inappropriate use of the language and Example 2 represents a complaint about a part of a text that is not well-written.

EX 1. Line 13: 'because the incidence ...' this sentence needs grammatical revision.

EX 2. The manuscript should be revised regarding grammatical and spelling issues. You can have a linguistic professional review the manuscript before re-submission.

The second category of comments among lexis and syntax comments is related to 'lack of clarity'. In this part, the reviewers commented on the vagueness of a manuscript and recommended revisions for improvement of clarity. Example 3 illustrates the point:

EX 3. Conclusion section, line2: As mentioned in the result section, it should be clear if the [...] rate was higher or not.

'Verbosity' refers to overuse of words in cases that a text can be written through fewer words. Example 4 illustrates the point:

EX 4. Paragraphs 4 and 5 can be shortened. If the effect on [...] is studied after 6 months of use, there is no need to mention about [...].

'Typos' is related to the category of comments regarding mistakes in the way something is typed. Example 4 represents a reviewer's complaint on a typing mistake:

EX 5. Discussion section, line 2: a typing error in the word 'severe'.

The only category of comment which reflects discourse and rhetorical comments was up tone or give more salience to novelty features. In these kinds of comments, authors were encouraged to give more strength to the validity and findings of their research. Example 6 illustrates this fact:

EX 6. It is better to mention the superiority of this study over the other studies (reference no 16, 18, 22, 25 & 32).

Though some categories of comments in the study of Mungra et al. (2010) were not identified in this study, we found some linguistic issues which could not be covered by Mungra's classification. These comments were related to 'rhetorical moves' that shape different sections of a manuscript (e.g., introduction, discussion, etc.). Genre analysis in terms of rhetorical moves was developed by Swales (1990) to describe a part or section of research articles.

We identified 3 comments in our corpus that focused on inappropriate structuring of different sections. These comments can be categorized under the 'discourse and rhetorical comments'. The following examples illustrate this point:

EX 7. Because there are no recorded data about [...] in this study, we think this point can only be

discussed in the Discussion part rather than in the Conclusion part in the Abstract.

EX 8. At least 2 papers on economic burden of inappropriate [...] are necessary in Introduction section.

These two examples emphasized peer reviewers' comments on inappropriate structuring of different sections of an article (rhetorical moves). This category should be also considered in classification of linguistic comments on manuscripts.

So far, we have emphasized that Iranian medical manuscripts submitted to ISI-indexed journals receive very few linguistic comments compared to content comments. We also categorized the linguistic comments based on Mungra et al.'s (2010) categorization of language-use comments. To find out the basic reasons behind their few linguistic errors committed in manuscripts, semi-structured interviews were conducted as well.

All these articles were written by at least four authors. The participants mentioned that they mostly wrote articles with their colleagues with different expertise. Therefore, they could receive help from others to overcome their various linguistic problems. This can lead to the formation of various academic research networks (Curry & Lillis, 2010) that ease the difficulties in the process of article composition and provide opportunities for publication.

Moreover, among the network members, the corresponding author (i.e., the one responsible for manuscript submission and revisions) is the one who is more proficient in English. Authors also mentioned that due to lack of time and skills, they ask their students or colleagues to deal with the linguistic issues of their studies. These people are proficient in English, familiar with different journals as well as their guidelines, and have enough experience in article compilation and revision.

The interviewees mentioned that they attended various English classes to improve their proficiency in English and personally attempted to increase their English knowledge in different ways. Among different reasons mentioned by the authors for their good knowledge of English, a very interesting point was revealed about their university curriculum which encouraged English skills improvement.

Before the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the medical university in which all these authors studied used English texts as references and the medium of instruction in classes was also English. The university professors came from other countries, and they were mostly native speakers of English. After the revolution, the university, in some cases, followed the previous approach. The professors asked the students to read English references and texts, but not the translated versions of their material. Moreover, they needed to search for a particular subject matter in English books, write a summary in English, and present the result of their research in Persian.

Interviewees revealed that they needed to write medical records of the patients in English and submit them to their professors. They provided patients' history (such as family or drug history), progress notes and then their assessment and plan for remedy in English. They read about various cases in English, wrote medical records in English, and presented the result of their study in Persian to their classmates.

Moreover, due to regular reading and writing in English, medical students constantly switched from Persian into English. They presented their medical records in Persian with a lot of switching from Persian to English. Their professors, also, used a lot of English equivalents of technical words and jargons in their speech. They expressed that laboratory reports were written and read in English and that accomplishing these tasks forced the students to improve their English.

Personal attempts to improve English skills, attending various English classes, academic research networks and, above all, the use of English in their university curriculum resulted in a good command of English for these medical researchers. As a medical student, they enroll in Academic Writing courses; as MAftoon and Rabii (2007) mentioned, they are provided with feedback—written/oral— by their teachers. The above-mentioned study concluded that such feedback had a significant effect on students' progress towards writing and using English language appropriately. Consequently, the authors' familiarity with English leads to fewer linguistic comments than content comments on their manuscripts submitted to ISI-indexed journals.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on the linguistic comments of reviewers on Iranian medical researchers ' manuscripts submitted to ISI-indexed journals. We found that very few linguistic comments were made on their manuscripts as compared to content comments. We also categorized their linguistic errors based on Mungra et al.'s (2010) classification of linguistic comments. The majority of comments focused on the category of not well written/ use of English. The second category focused on comments which sought clarity of the text.

The results of this study support those of Mungra et al. (2010) in that Iranian medical researchers like Italian medical researchers committed fewer linguistic errors than content ones. However, it differs from this study since Mungra et al. (2010) only focused on the categorization of the comments. Moreover, we identified another linguistic sub-category related to rhetorical moves, which was not found in the review of Italian articles. Research on academic manuscripts written by various authors aimed to investigate the

basic reasons for authors' fewer linguistic errors which represent their good knowledge of English. We found that personal attempts to improve English knowledge, attending various English classes, participation in academic research networks and, above all, researchers' university curriculum foster English skills improvement.

In contrast to the studies by Belcher (2007), Flowerdew and Li (2009), Li (2006), and Misak et al. (2005), which revealed that English acts as a barrier for publication, this study concluded that English seems not to act as a barrier for Iranian medical researchers. This can be due to their curriculum implementation and use of English in their field of study.

Analysis of peer reviewers' comments as an occluded genre which is available only to a small group of people (Swales, 1996) can provide a better understanding of this genre for all researchers in general as well as the novice ones. It can also help investigate various problems of researchers in manuscript composition. This study emphasizes that adaptation of a similar curriculum by other universities and frequent use of English in fields of studies and creation of academic research networks can improve the linguistic knowledge of students and academic staff and help them commit fewer linguistic errors in manuscript composition in English.

The results of this study can also contribute to formation of EAP classes on linguistic issues for article composition useful for novice medical researchers seeking acceptance of their research article in refereed journals. In this case, researchers will become more familiar with frequent linguistic issues in the manuscript composition and act more independently in the revision of their manuscripts. Awareness of these issues will lead to fewer linguistic errors and can accelerate the process of article revision. As a guide, the checklist provided by Ganji and Derakhshan (2020) can help the authors as well as

peer reviewers to understand the rating scales and criteria for peer review of the articles and their evaluations.

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