
Reports of meetings

METM12: Eighth Annual Mediterranean Editors and Translators' Meeting

Venice (Italy), 8–10 November 2012

As translation has been growing as a proportion of my regular work, and I thought it time to go and see what there was to be learned from others whose work combines these two activities. Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) is the only body I know of that caters for this, and thanks to a reciprocal arrangement with EASE their annual meeting was open to me. With many non-Mediterranean members (the Dutch contingent is strong), it looked a good place to start, and so it proved.

The annual meeting of the Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) in 2012 started with a day of workshops on practical topics, such as editing medical texts, understanding and reporting statistics (descriptive and bivariate analyses, regression analyses and multivariate models), anatomy of the nervous system for English-language specialists, and editing non-native English.

My main interests were translation and the author–editor/translator relationship. Arriving late, I unfortunately missed the talk by Joy Burrough-Boenisch of the Society for Native English-Speaking Editors, entitled ‘Didactic editing: a practice beneficial to both author and editor’. There is little scope for serious language coaching in routine cost-conscious copy editing, but given the modular (‘Lego-brick’) nature of internationally readable scientific writing, a few specific tips could go a long way.

‘Overcoming rhetorical incompatibilities in academic writing’ is a regular task for most science copy editors. My favourite example relates to East Asian authors, who write papers with sound data, impeccably argued, then backtrack in their conclusion with ‘might be’ and ‘could be’, instead of ‘is’. I attribute this to a cultural style of politeness and modesty, but in English the difference between ‘might be’ and ‘is’ is material. This talk by Karen Bennett (Lisbon, Portugal) was full of matter that will help the work of turning serpentine, foreign-sounding sentences into neat English. An interesting nugget was how the oft-cited clarity of English academic writing is not neutral: it is conditioned by the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition of logical positivism and empiricism and shares its weakness – an inherent tendency to reductionism. As Einstein said, we should make things as simple as possible, but not simpler.

A session entitled ‘News with practical implications from the world of biomedical editors’ gave an update on guidelines, ethical standards, plagiarism issues, and various learned associations, also mentioning online resources such as Retraction Watch and Scholarly Kitchen.

The presentation by Jason Willis-Lee (Madrid, Spain) of current models of open-access publishing provoked a telling question from Dado Čakalo, who edits an open access journal in Croatia that is university-funded and is free (or was that nearly free?) to both authors and readers. Why is this model not even mentioned in most current discussions

of the options for open access, he wanted to know. Since the answer would open up a whole can of worms about free market ideology and the funding cuts to universities, it is not surprising that the question was not taken up at any length, but for me that was one of the memorable moments of the meeting.

Two further presentations stood out. One was ‘Why authors’ editors and translators are needed more than ever in the evolving research publication environment’ by Karen Shashok (Granada, Spain). Her main point was that with the disappearance of free editorial support from publishers, non-native English speakers are increasingly dependent on finding language support for themselves. Many new centres of research excellence are growing all over the world; ever more non-Anglophone authors are having to make themselves understood in English. And the natural result of limited editorial support within scholarly journals (with honourable exceptions) is that ‘a certain element of gatekeeper function is devolving onto freelance editors and translators’ – an alarming state of affairs.



Tom Jefferson commanding his audience

The other notable presentation was the lecture by Tom Jefferson (Rome, Italy) on ‘The Cochrane Collaboration and problems with research synthesis.’ The story of the Cochrane Collaboration’s revision of its conclusions on the effectiveness of neuroaminidase inhibitors to prevent and treat influenza (the Tamiflu story) is not new in the scientific community, but Tom is a commanding communicator, and his account of the uncovering of the extent of withheld data in clinical trials held his audience rapt.

The MET meeting was remarkable as a meeting place and knowledge exchange for editors and translators increasingly drawn into the globalisation of research publishing by the relentless rise in the need for non-native speakers to publish in English.

Kersti Wagstaff

*Freelance editor, proofreader and translator
Alton, Hampshire, UK*

*Advanced member, Society for Editors and Proofreaders
Member, European Association of Science Editors*

kersti-w@dircon.co.uk