

Copy-editing of research papers: who and why and why not

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Poorly written research papers are a perennial problem, often written upon in these columns. Pandit¹ found that ‘many of us are unable to feature in top-tier journals not because of our inability to pursue good science, but because of the failure to write in a coherent and lucid manner’. In exhorting editors ‘to accept such [poorly written in terms of language] papers and suitably edit them, instead of outright rejection’ Marcin Kozak² sidesteps a crucial issue: Who should do the job of ‘suitably editing’ such papers? Kozak’s colleague took the view that ‘it is not the editors’ job to take care of language of the papers published in their journals’. Who, then? In the publishing world, this is – or used to be – the job of the copy-editor (also known as the subeditor), either in the publisher’s employ or working as a freelancer but paid by the publisher. Increasingly, however, publishers expect authors to pay for copy-editing or simply dispense with copy-editing altogether. Some journal publishers, including Springer, Elsevier, and Wiley-Blackwell, even list on their web pages for authors the names of a few agencies that undertake copy-editing of research papers for a fee.

Does copy-editing matter? As an interested party, I will not attempt to answer the question, but direct readers to a web page titled ‘Adding value through subediting’ from the website of Nature³. The web page offers ten reasons why ‘Nature and the Nature research journals copyedit (subedit) scientific research papers’. The following are the first four reasons in the list.

- To make the paper more comprehensible to those not in the immediate field.
- To ensure that scientific terms and concepts are accurate.
- To make the paper read well, and in correct English.
- To improve the clarity of papers whose authors are not native English writers or who are not able with language.

Indeed, copy-editing fixes the kind of errors and infelicities listed in a *Current Science* editorial⁴: ‘undefined abbreviations, multiple systems of units ... references cited with a cavalier disregard for accepted style’. It is important to keep in mind that copy-editing research papers well therefore requires not only good command of the language

but some familiarity with, and understanding of, the subject. *Current Science* is probably among the few Indian journals to maintain a stable of copy-editors, in-house or otherwise. Most Indian journals do not, for a variety of reasons, probably the most common being that majority of the journals are in-house operations and not run on professional lines – mostly by people for whom running the journal is a chore, a responsibility that has been foisted upon them, a job that will win them no plaudits if done well, but is sure to attract censure if not.

It is tempting to believe that good copy-editing contributes to raising the impact factor of a journal, but I am afraid I have not been able to find any research to support this contention. It is also a moot point whether good copy-editing improves the chances of acceptance, although Moharir⁵ is generous in giving credit to the help he received from copyediting. However, of any two comparable manuscripts accepted for publication, the one that has been copy-edited will make it to print ahead of the other because among the chores that copy-editors attend to is ensuring that the manuscript is prepared according to the journal’s instructions, a particularly important contribution considering that ‘Not reading a journal’s instructions for authors’ topped the list of ten editorial problems editors at the American Medical Association (AMA) see in the manuscripts submitted to or accepted for publication by the AMA⁶.

If correspondence in *Current Science* is anything to go by, research papers from India, whether destined for foreign journals or Indian, need to be edited for language and style. This is a task additional to other tasks such as acknowledging and keeping track of submitted manuscripts, assigning reviewers and chasing them, informing authors of the reviewers’ comments and decisions. Perhaps it is a question of mindset: researchers know that if they engage a graphic artist to prepare illustrations or a typist to key in text, or even a field assistant to help in lugging instruments around or in recording observations, these services have to be paid for – and auditors and funding agencies accept these items as legitimate expenses. However, I am not so sure whether copyediting has made it to the list of ‘approved heads of expenses’ or whether funding agencies, which may be

willing to pay page charges if some journals demand them, would be equally willing to pay for copy-editing of manuscripts. Perhaps the reluctance is even more deeprooted: after teaching a course on communication skills for more than 20 years, Modak⁷ confessed in these columns that ‘while students tend to acquire good communication skills, the course met with considerable resistance from postgraduate science faculty’.

Chinese researchers, on the other hand, are only too willing to pay for such services, either because they find it much more difficult to handle English than Indians do, or because they are offered cash incentives for getting published in journals with very high impact factors.

Until the research community in India accepts copy-editing as a legitimate expense, readers will continue to bemoan poorly written and presented research papers.

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