Scientific writing like a native English-speaker: tips for Italian researchers

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Introduction

Definitely ourselves or some colleagues had, at least once, his/her manuscript returned with the comment "needs to be reviewed by a native English-speaker". Many researchers receive this response even after translation or revision by an official translator or a native English-speaking co-author. Indeed, not every native English-speaker or non-native English teacher / translator who writes well in English can write well for the scientific literature. Over the past years, I have been collaborating with Italian researchers, and I notice that their English status is, at least in general, relatively weak. The truth is, one thing to write Italian, which is plenty of different regional expression, and another to write well in Italian, the same applies to English. Scientific English writing has its own style, rhythm, and some particularities such as the use of passive voice, which is considered inappropriate in most forms of writing (news, novels, blogs, etc.) outside of science. However, the use of passive voice is acceptable and even most of the time, key in some scientific writing. Whereas Marlow (2) suggests that reviewing take twice longer than translating a manuscript, in my experience so far, there is a usually relationship between conceptual and grammar mistakes. I have spent several hours frustrated and lost within confusing spend hours being frustrated by confusing sentences resulting from simple mistakes, and fixing the same mistakes over and over again. For this reason, taking advantage of my Portuguese knowledge, I took inspiration from the contribution given by Dr. Marlow for Portuguese-speakers (1, 2), to assist to the Italian research community, based on the grammar similarities between the two idioms. Thus, I have assembled a compilation common "errors" made by native Italian-speakers, which according to my experience, are the same to that usually observed in Portuguese speakers (2) when writing scientific papers in English. I was fascinated from reading the tips provided by Marlow (2) as I could applied her suggestion, based on my Portuguese knowledge. Since then, and thank to that editorial as well, my scientific English skills have significantly improved.

I put "errors" in quotes because many of the following tips are just that: tips, or *dritte*, that do not always refer to incorrect English, but rather to weak scientific English. Most of these are common mistakes or poor writing habits that affect even native English speakers, so correcting them before submitting your manuscript can give you an advantage with the revision process, possibly avoiding to read "needs to be reviewed by a native English speaker".

Tips

Nine tips were suggested according to that described by Marlow (2) for Portuguese-speakers and adjusted for Italian-speakers. First, five fixing-type tips (use of the passive voice, when to use "the", only capitalize subjects if they refer to the formal names, when to use "that" and adjective placement) and then, three stylistic / contextual tips (avoid assuming, use singular titles in tables and figures, and when to use a comma) were described.

Use of passive voice

Simply, avoid beginning sentences with "it is":

- Italian: *È importante sottolineare la presenza… È stata trovata una correlazione…È stata data poca attenzione…*

- Weak English (directly translated): *It is important to underline the presence…It was found a correlation…It was given little attention …*
- Strong English: *The presence is important to underline … A correlation was found… Little attention was given…*

When to use "the"

This is related to the incorrect use of *del, della, degli, delle*.

- Italian: *…che ha chiamato l'attenzione dei riceratori…*
- Weak English (directly translated): *…that called the attention of the researchers…*
- Strong English: *…that called the attention of researchers…*

Only capitalize subjects if they refer to the formal names

For example "*La ricerca è stata condotta dal Dipartimento di Sport e Salute dell'Università degli studi di Salerno (formale) situato nella provincia (informale) di Salerno*". The same applies for English. Importantly, do not capitalize south or southern and related geographical terms. For example "*Lo studio è stato realizzato nella zona occidentale (informale) della Puglia (formale)*".

When to use "that"

Remove "that" from structured sentences as:

- Italian: *I nostri risultati mostrano che molte a persone piace correre*
- Weak English: *Our findings revealed that most people enjoy jogging*
- Strong English: *Our findings revealed most people enjoy jogging*

However, use "that" at the beginning of a dependent clause or such as: *Suggerisce che / suggerito che (Suggest that / suggested that); Riscontrato che (Found that); Mostrano che / mostrato che (Showed that / Shown that)*

Adjective placement

Place adjective before nouns:

- Italian: *Caratteristiche del programma … Punteggio dello studente*
- Weak English (directly translated): *Characteristics of the program … Score of the student*
- Strong English: *Program' characteristics … Student's score*

Place after using "of" for formal names or unit of measures. For example, *Numero di casi … Dipartimento di scienze* directly translate to *Number of cases … Department of Sciences*

Do not directly translate "of" from "*di, degli, delle*"

- Italian: *In 2018, ci sono stati 1000 nuovi casi di questa malattia nel mondo*
- Weak English (directly translated): *In 2018, there were 1000 new cases of this disease around the world*
- Strong English: *In 2018, there were 1000 new cases this disease around the world.*

Use "'s" when the adjective belong to the subjects:

- Italian: *Penna dello studente … Scarpe dell'atleta*
- Weak English (directly translated): *Pen of the student … Boots of the athlete*
- Strong English: *Student's pen; Athlete's boots*

In the plural, use "s'" when the adjective belong to the subjects:

- Italian: *Caratteristiche dei programmi … Punteggi degli studenti*
- Weak English (directly translated): *Characteristics of the programs …Scores of students*
- Strong English: *Programs' characteristics … Students' scores*

Avoid assuming

Simply continue explaining what you were referring to:

- Italian: *In questo studio, sono stati inclusi 50 pazienti. Di questi, 48 erano sani.*
- Weak English: *In this study, 50 patients were included. Of these, 48 were healthy.*
- Strong English: *In this study, 50 patients were included. Of these, 48 patients were healthy.*

Prioritize the passive voice

Try to use I / we as little as possible or exchange with the passive voice:

- Italian: *Abbiamo riscontrato risultati contradittori …*
- Weak English (directly translated): *We found controversial results…*
- Strong English: *Controversial results were found …*

Use singular titles in tables and figures

Do not use "variables" as heading. When naming categories use for example: sex (male, female) and not sexes (males, females); or Odd ratio (not odds ratios).

When to use a comma

Use a comma in prepositional phrases, transitions and adverbs in the beginning of sentences. For example: "*In questo studio abbiamo riscontrato questo risultato*" translate to "*In this study, we found this result*". If a sentences contains two or more comma, split in two, using after the dot: *of these, however, therefore, currently.*

Concise writing

Unfortunately, Italian is not direct, concise language. Then, we need to adjust our language to properly write in English. Here, I summarise five tips according to Marlow (1).

- Passive voice: whereas the use of passive voice is suggested *(ex. I dati sono stati raccolti…)*, the use of active voice *(ex. Abbiamo raccolto i dati…)* will reduce your number of words.
- Build your research problem on facts: why readers should read your work. How to reach the Point B (study' aim) from Point A (research problem)? The Point A would be the research problem.
- Remove unnecessary nouns and adjectives: identify phrases that could be expressed in a single word, examples:
  - *Fino al momento che = finché*
  - *Nel caso in cui = se*
  - *Metà uguali = metà*
  - *Esportare fuori / importare dentro = Esportare / importare*
  - *Ripetere di nuovo = Ripetere*

Final note

As my English-related research skills have improved following these tips, hopefully yours. To conclude, before writing your manuscript, remember the tips: it is, the, formal state, that, adjectives, avoid assuming, prioritize the passive voice, use singular titles in tables and figures, and when to use a comma.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that he has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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