

## *Editorial*

# English language editing at A&A

J. Adams<sup>1</sup>, C. Halliday<sup>1</sup>, A. Mednick<sup>1\*</sup>, M. Usdin<sup>1</sup>, C. Bertout<sup>2</sup>, and M. Walmsley<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Language Editor, Astronomy & Astrophysics

<sup>2</sup> Editor-in-Chief, Astronomy & Astrophysics

<sup>3</sup> Letters Editor-in-Chief, Astronomy & Astrophysics

### ABSTRACT

Language editing was introduced into the A&A editorial process in 2001. Here, we report on how this is done in practice and on the criteria that are applied.

**Key words.** Editorials, notices

A&A introduced language editing as a service to its authors in 2001. Since that time, the scope and coverage of articles has increased steadily with the goal of making all the articles published in the Journal as clear and concise as possible. The Journal now employs three full-time language editors, all professionals with university degrees and with extensive training or experience in editing, language teaching, writing, science, and publishing. This Editorial discusses how and why articles are selected for language correction, the behind-the-scenes process in the editorial office, and why certain phrases and terms are corrected and others not. We hope that this explanation will help clarify both the purpose and the process of language editing and also describe how the authors can help make the submission of articles smoother and more rapid.

## 1. Why edit articles?

The Journal introduced language editing to improve the overall clarity of its published articles and to make certain a good level of English is maintained. It is one part of the recent developments at the Journal, and indeed language is edited in most professional publications. A&A is not just a forum for publishing scientific articles, but is also the reflection of a growing community of astronomers and astrophysicists from over 60 countries. While English is the chosen medium of communication, it is often not the first language of most of the Journal authors, who might feel hampered by the need to publish in a language that is not their own. With this in mind, the language editors placed some guidelines for authors to use on the [A&A web site](#) in 2006 and have been sending authors to the site since then for explanations of specific points as they came up.

All too often, unclear language is interpreted as a sign of unclear thinking, so the job of the language editors is to allow the science to appear as it is intended. The language should be correct, unambiguous, and formal, and it should also carry the content, such that the article reads smoothly and clearly. The process of review by a trained, but non-specialist reader allows areas of text to be detected that are not very clear or that may be confusing to some readers.

It is not the role or the intention of the language editors to evaluate or adjust the scientific content, since that has been done in the refereeing process. Rather, the text is read to assess its grammar, syntax, and clarity. They intervene first to remove grammatical errors, second to resolve any ambiguities of expression, and third to smooth out or simplify the style, leading to a style for the journal that is clear, concise, and easy for scientists to read. To this end, we feel that the language should be transparent, meaning it should go unnoticed, thereby allowing the reader to pay full attention to the scientific content.

## 2. The editing process

Language editing is an integral part of the editorial process at A&A. At each point, the language editing is an attempt to avoid language being a barrier to publishing high-quality science.

When a paper is first submitted, the scientific editor may choose to send the paper back to the author requesting that the level of language be improved before sending the paper to an external referee. This is usually because the editor has determined that the

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\* Former language editor

paper contains enough scientific content to warrant review, but that the level of English hinders appropriate evaluation or that the paper will require undue language revision to reach the level sought at A&A. This step acknowledges the difficulty of having to express oneself clearly in written English, whatever one's first language, and the disadvantage relative to native English speakers of being required to publish in English. Having a manuscript clarified by English-language colleagues before submission can, therefore, speed up the refereeing process and get it to the publisher sooner. At the other end of the process, any paper requiring more than 3-4 hours of time from a single language editor leads to delay for all the other papers waiting for language editing.

The Journal accepts up to 40 articles a week. All of them are now being briefly scanned by a single language editor, who also looks closely at all abstracts for correctness, clarity, and conformity to the goal and style of an abstract. Based on this review, articles may be (i) accepted in that version and sent on, (ii) modified slightly for minor typographical errors and sent to the printer (in most cases with a quick pass with the author for verification), or (iii) sent to one of the language editors for more thorough correcting. While they do strive to keep the time spent in language editing to a minimum, the number of papers seen and the variations in how much time is needed to thoroughly revise each one in the order received will postpone the publication of your work. The median time for language editing, for instance, was 16 days in 2007.

### 3. What to do if you disagree with a correction

In the appendix to this editorial, the language editors present the changes they are likely to suggest, which also gives a closer idea about what criteria are used in the decision to edit for language or not. First, however, we want to let you know how to react to suggestions if you are puzzled by them or if you disagree with one or more. It is an important step in the process, which explains why these corrected versions are returned to the authors for confirmation and corroboration: the authors must confirm the changes by entering them in the final submitted version in  $\text{\LaTeX}$  after checking that our suggestions have not altered the scientific meaning in any way.

If an author does not agree with a proposed change, she or he is requested to send an email to the language editor via the A&A office explaining the queried change and giving both the original correction and the author's preferred change. If there are many such issues, it is helpful to have the preferred changes marked in bold face in a referee format version of the text uploaded on the [A&A MMS website](#). The preferred corrections are almost always accepted provided no additional language errors are introduced. In matters of scientific content, the author's preference is always respected.

### 4. Conclusion

We hope that you have found this explanation of the A&A language-editing policy helpful. We are always striving to improve this service, so we welcome comments and suggestions for improvements. In working together with the editorial board and with the authors, we aim to provide the best service possible to the authors, thereby helping to make the Journal and the authors who publish in it leaders, even trendsetters, in the international astrophysics community.

### Appendix. What language editors are likely to suggest be changed

Accepted papers that are written clearly, correctly, and simply, with very few or no spelling or grammar errors, and that are presented in the correct A&A format are sent directly for publication. They will have been checked in a specific order of criteria: correct English expression, consistency within the article (spelling, conventions, Journal style requirements), clarity (including ambiguity or a lack of precision), and more stylistic concerns like conciseness and effective presentation of an idea.

Once we receive a paper for editing, we look at all of these aspects. This appendix attempts to outline what we have all agreed to work toward in our editing in our attempt to be consistent; however, it must be remembered that differences are inevitable, because language is not a static, rule-bound exercise, so inevitably, different editors change certain phrases in different ways. The list of criteria that follows includes all but the first category of our priorities and in that order. Each entry also explains what that criterion entails. The list is then followed by a chart that gives more specific details of each criterion and gives some examples of how changes tend to be made.

**Criterion A: Correctness.** Since correct English is fairly standard between the English dialects, we will not be discussing these errors after this paragraph, even those that we correct often. Examples of these familiar corrections include such problems as incorrect article use, verb tenses (e.g., present or present perfect for the past), agreement with the subject, incorrect prepositions (e.g., *depend on* not *of*, *in a figure* not *on* it), incorrect or awkward word order (e.g., placement of the adverb, awkward subordination), word choice for the context of a sentence (e.g., changing *discriminate* to *distinguish*, not using *evidence* as a verb or *large* or *small* with *value* or *temperature*), lack of an important part of a sentence (e.g., use a direct object with *allow*, *permit*, *enable*), punctuation, and capitalization. The most common errors have already been covered in the file "[Frequent corrections](#)" and in the [English guide](#) on the A&A web site, or they can be found in any standard English dictionary or grammar book. Correct English is the main thing we look for when deciding whether an article should be language-edited or not. If there are a few errors outside the abstract then it may not go to a language editor; but for these articles, the editor treating all the articles may instead point these corrections out to the author to be changed along with the abstract, a process that goes very quickly.

**Criterion B: Consistency.** Consistency is one element in coherence and is a second measure of professionalism. Spelling is the primary way authors are inconsistent in the articles we see. It can happen that a single article contains different spellings of a single word because there are sections written by different authors; however, it does happen that a word is spelled in two ways in the same paragraph. The most frequent problem we must deal with, however, is the movement between the two main dialects in English in the same article, the British (and Commonwealth) and the American. As stated in the English guide, both forms are correct and accepted at A&A, but it is not good form to mix them, so the largest part of Sect. 2 of the [English guide to language editing](#) on the A&A website lists expressions that are different in the two dialects so that the authors can use it to make their spelling more consistent before submitting the article. Beyond this, we look at the consistency of the article with the publishing conventions at A&A and most other scientific publications, as outlined in the *Instructions to authors*.

**Criterion C: Clarity.** Otherwise, we look for problems in clarity, which covers ideas expressed in a confusing or ambiguous way and, in a wider sense, the overall logic or shape of a discussion in its parts or as a whole. The overall logic is more the realm of the referee, but there are times we make suggestions for changes to a full section, such as reducing a long conclusion that repeats too much of the discussion or rearranging the abstract. These cannot be codified here, but are integral to all discussions of how to write an essay or a scientific article (e.g., [Elements of Style chapter<sup>1</sup>](#) or [the ACS style guide<sup>2</sup>](#)). The chart that follows will have several examples of more detailed concerns in this category, such as incorrect word choice or unclear reference. The second of these examples is a familiar problem that is not always possible for an editor to deal with even when we can define at least two things the phrase may refer to. We often suggest ways to clarify the phrase, but as we are not able to enter into dialogue with each author about each ambiguous text, we tend to suggest one or two options for the author to choose from or try to rephrase the sentence so that it is less ambiguous. Again, if the proposal does not fit the author's original meaning, then he or she needs to realize that the original phrasing still needs to be worked on either by rewriting or by contacting the editor with an explanation that may lead to the best version.

**Criterion D: Conciseness.** Very close to clarity in method, conciseness is an ideal in English style. It has been shown over and over that using more words than needed leads to confusion so that the point in a sentence, paragraph, or article is lost. The most famous statement of this comes from [The Elements of Style](#): *A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.*

**Criterion E: Miscellaneous.** The last category is the miscellany of editing: the details of a house style that helps with all the categories above and also adds to the professional feel of both the Journal and each article within it. We list them here, and the logic behind many of them is given in the [English handbook](#) on the A&A web site.

The list that follows and the [pages on language editing](#) on the A&A web site will give specific examples of language that we have agreed to correct at these different levels. Not everything mentioned above can go into a list, by any means, but a short example can stand for many more complicated ones by illustrating the principle behind the correction.

## B. Consistency

Problem and advice	Examples
check a dictionary	for spelling or plural: data and spectra are plural, spectrum sing.
avoid mixing spellings	<b>UK or US:</b> centre or center, colour or color, analyse or analyze <b>Hyphenation:</b> star-forming/starforming as an adj., flat-fielding/flatfielding, on line/on-line/online
layout	follow <i>Instructions for authors</i> (e.g., captions)
use the same standard format for dates	Jan 24, 2006 or 24 January 2007 or IAU format for astronomical events (no numbers for months, standard abbreviations)
use lower case	for names of procedures or functions, elements, directions, and objects (point spread function, lithium, southwest, active galactic nucleus)
use upper case	for traditionally accepted proper names, copyright names, introductions of acronyms that use other than the initial letters: Large Magellanic Cloud, SOHO, special cases: the Sun, but solar; our Galaxy and Galactic, but Galactic center; other galaxies and galactic nuclei
equations	embed punctuation in the syntax: full stop if the sentence ends with the equation, no colon to introduce equation if it follows syntax, and commas as needed
first word of sentence	no abbreviation or symbol (Greek or a figure), except some star names with no other form

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oup.com/us/samplechapters/0841234620/?view=usa>

## C. Clarity and precise word choice

tenses	simple past	Actions completed in the past for present results: observations, calculations, testing method
	present perfect	Ongoing actions and those with an effect in the present; possibly for others' work or with some adverbs
	present	Results and actions in a repeated method
	future	For future work or predicted results, seldom for what is done later in the article
	continuous/ progressive	Seldom needed in a scientific article and difficult for non native English writers to use correctly
qualifiers	avoid vague choices, when there are correct, precise ones	Well-correlated → strongly or 85% correlated; lasted a very long time → lasted 1.2 Gyr
	avoid qualifying absolutes (with very, somewhat, etc.)	somewhat consistent? (it is or is not)
	avoid weak words for emphasis, e.g. <i>the fact that</i> often not a fact.	indeed, in fact, actually, best, etc. The fact that → That
	avoid hemisphere-specific terms	summer 2005 → 3rd quarter of 2005 or the northern summer
	phrases with <i>order</i> depend on context, such as <i>on/off/in the order of</i>	→ approximately (if not anything related to magnitude or math, as for the other phrases)
	avoid vague or confusing uses of <i>finally</i> (end of a sequence, only) and <i>recently</i> (give the date)	<i>recently</i> is a problem for future readers: <i>Einstein has recently outlined the theory of relativity</i>
	<i>quite</i> , <i>rather</i> mean different things in different contexts and dialects	Quite: very much or somewhat / Rather: very, somewhat, instead

## D. Concise, direct style

We are not talking of incorrect English here but rather what style is preferred.

active voice over the passive	Y was done by X → X did Y
the verbal form of an idea over the noun phrase	We performed an identification of ... → We identified ...
the version with less words	In order to detect the presence of X, we ... → To detect X, we ...
direct entry into a sentence, rather than:	It is worth commenting that ... (or) I believe/wish/feel ..., and similar introductions.
Redundancy (even hidden)	In the obtained results → In the results

## Other examples of criterion D:

- X is of particular importance → X is particularly important
- X is only of an approximate nature → X is only approximate
- Concerning/Regarding the explosion, its effect is ... → The effect of the explosion is ...
- The intersection of x and y occurs → x intersects y
- We aim at estimating → We estimate
- to make a comparison with → to compare ... (Likewise other noun versions of active verbs, when not needed for meaning)
- to show strong indications of something → to indicate something strongly
- is in contradiction with → contradicts
- is in agreement with → agrees with
- Before proceeding further, it is worth commenting at this point that we have studied the → We have studied the ...
- agreement is sufficient to verify → is close enough to verify (overuse of sufficient)
- coupled together → coupled
- determine the point of onset of ... → determine the onset of ...
- decreases down → decreases
- increases up to → increases to
- Vague phrasing: avoid wordy, imprecise, or overused jargon

### E. Miscellaneous

- **Use the formal register:** Avoid contractions (*can't* for *cannot* and *don't* for *do not*) and colloquial phrasing (*till*, *anyway*, *to detail*, *putting* for *placing*), too many dashes for more formal punctuation (tends to be ambiguous), fragments except in titles, headings, and the first part of a caption.
- **Sections of the article (some advice):** Keep the logical order in the abstract and write in full sentences as if the headings were not there. Avoid referring to other articles in the abstract or using work in progress or any article not refereed in your reference list. Avoid repeating explanations between sections (*As seen above...*) and between the captions and the running text (follow the *Instructions to Authors* on captions). Avoid a list format with no prose introduction, and lists are only useful when they are clearer than prose.
- **Avoid repeating words or structures:** Like wordiness, repetition of words and phrases indicates the need to shorten, combine, or restructure rather than leading to clarity or emphasis.