How to get heard above the noise

David R. Rosseinsky

The Chemist's English. By Robert Schoenfeld. VCH, Weinheim, FRG:1985. Pp.173. DM 42, \$16.95.

ENGLISH is nowadays *the* lingua franca — anybody not perceiving all the lovely nuances of this cliché should read no further. Dr Schoenfeld's little book on the use of the language has come to the right reviewer, for how many people have had a research paper sent to four referees because of disagreements on the prose alone? (Comments ranged from "highly elegant exposition" to "turgid".) I regret having discarded substantial piles of such anonymous invective, which, as a collection, would have made for entertaining reading; after grudging concession of a major scientific point in a recent, treasured tirade, it was stated that "The gratuitous French phase on p.6 [*faute de mieux*] should be removed — its present presence in a paper with such a poor standard of English is sheer exhibitionism" (*sic*). Failing to find a Latin equivalent, and being ever compliant, I substituted *pis aller* (not, I fear, exactly the same thing). Dr Schoenfeld does warn against flaunting foreign phrases, which — *vide supra* — can become cheap avenging targets for referees whose fox one has unwittingly shot.

The author is editor of the *Australian Journal of Chemistry*, and has collected articles of guidance aimed principally at contributors and potential contributors. The book might well serve as a prescribed text for PhD students. Dr Schoenfeld admits that he cannot say what is "good" writing, and that he only edits to achieve an "acceptable" paper free of mistakes, but he proposes that a good paper is one written to yield its information to the reader in the shortest possible time. This dodges the question of the level of the reader's expertise, and clearly the writer must judge. In my opinion a paper on dihalobenzenes and potassium amide in ammonia, written in verse by Bunnett and Kearley (*J. Org. Chem.* 36, 184; 1971), serves as a model of clarity and readability simply because of the necessarily careful choice of words and phrasing. The failure of chemical verse to catch on is doubtless in part a result of the difficulty of such composition.

Early on, Dr Schoenfeld distinguishes Chemist's English (CE) from Standard Written English (SWE) which is nice and helpful but introduces just the unnecessary sort of neo-acronym specifically warned against later in the book. As cited, Chemist's English is a degraded tongue

whenever its usage departs substantially from Standard English; in my view the only allowable difference is a more impersonal style, and even then, only within limits. American usage is noted as allowing "we" and sometimes "I", rare in British scientific literature, but obviating the clumsy passive. Special or specific meanings are a part of scientific writing, but (to digress) did the once-proposed barbarism of "specific" = "divided by mass" ever survive? It was meant to complement "density" meaning "divided by volume", but this latter usage, having merit, has indeed happily coexisted with its English progenitor.

The book presents views from Gowers, Fowler, R.S. Cahn, eminent antipodean scientists and one T.M. Bernstein (of whom it is said, perhaps wistfully, "His writing is brisk, lucid and completely free of headmasterly condescension"). Unrelated "it"s, unrelated participles, and clumsy constructions, punctuations and styles, are all pinned down and analysed. Degraded English is opposed but not always vigorously: to give up with mere handwringing on the idiot use of "facile", usually together with "synthesis", seems to me to lack moral fibre. What is wrong with "convenient", which does not call for the instant rejection Dr Schoenfeld confers on the other alternatives?

A sometimes contrived jokiness detracts from the book's message, as does the use of colloquialisms such as "glitch", from computerbabble, whereas the best teacher would have been strict example. Further weakening of didactic authority follows from persistent use of "anthropomorphism" to which almost any circumlocution would have been preferable. And I absolutely chickened out (why should I abjure colloquialism?) of reading the chapter entitled "A Chemical Analysis of the English Sentence" — the author believes that the average reader's knowledge of chemistry exceeds that of their English, especially if the reader is under 30 and educated in an English-speaking country. Well, well! In another respect Dr Schoenfeld gets gamma-minus for an ignorant onslaught on the presentation of units in the quantity calculus. Most of these criticisms, of course, are statements of personal preference.

In my favourite article on aspects of the scientific literature, published in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* on 8 February, 1980, Graham Hills wrote that "The signal-to-noise ratio declines yearly not because the signal is becoming weaker but because the noise is becoming deafening". The concerns expressed by Dr Schoenfeld should help moderate the din. □

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