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News & Tips
from

English support

NB: If you received this newsletter by e-mail, it is (hopefully) because you have expressed a wish to do so. If this is not the case, and/or you do not wish to receive it in future – *please let us know!*

No. 36 – October 2007

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Dear friends

At the last minute, I was regrettably unable to attend the *Copenhagen Language Festival* (see last issue) held on 15th September due to pressure of work, though I understand it was a success. I did manage to get to the *Communication and Language Forum 2007* on 26th September, where the *English support* stand was well attended. Just over 250 people, including exhibitors, came to the Forum, and we probably got to speak to at least half of them.

The importance of communication

The Communication and Language Forum 2007, organised by the Union of Communication and Language Professionals, had as its main theme this year, *the importance of communication for the competitiveness of companies in a globalised world*. Last year the theme was *globalisation and inter-cultural communication*.

But communication has *always* been important – and not just in the context of globalisation. In fact, *forget the wheel*, by far the most important invention human beings have ever made is *speech*. Before speech, all communication was limited essentially to what can be conveyed through body language. Naturally, the noises that we could make with our mouths and throats contributed to this communication (as they do with other mammals), but nothing complex, nothing requiring extensive collaboration, and no abstract ideas could be uttered, formulated, or even thought.

The DNA record shows that around 50,000 years ago the descendants of a group of *homo sapiens sapiens* in one part of eastern Africa began to spread out over the whole world. The fossil record shows no physical change, no change in what some people like to call the “hardware” of our bodies and brains, but something dramatic must have happened in our “software” – our culture.

The development of language as we know it, the prerequisite for everything we now think of as human, is the most likely enabling event for the expansion, which fairly quickly led to the presence of *homo sapiens sapiens* almost everywhere and the extinction of the only other form of *homo* left, the very successful *homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, which had dominated much of western Eurasia for at least 100,000 years with what the archaeological record shows was an almost static culture.

So it seems a little odd that we have to spend so much time convincing our fellow human beings that communication and language are important, also in business; that it can affect your bottom line, stimulate innovation, and help meet marketing targets; that poor language can eliminate all the costly gains of flashy graphics and fancy layout on your website; or that clear communication is the very bedrock upon which the objectivity of science is built.

But people take language for granted. *We, communicators, must become better at communicating the importance of communication!* ☺

You will find a brief report on the Forum at <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/komsprog2007.htm>. And I owe a special *Thank you!* to Eileen and Claire, who helped man the stand on the day.

Please turn over!

Adapt and adopt

These two verbs have quite separate meanings, but are very often confused by even well-educated non-native speakers of English. Here is an example from a paper I read recently:

*“In April 2005, EC maximum levels for benzo[a]pyrene were **adapted** for e.g. bivalve molluscs intended for human consumption (10 $\mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$ wet weight)”.*

The fundamental meaning of the verb *to adapt* is to *change, modify* or *adjust* something to fit new circumstances or purposes. This meaning is clearly not present in the above sentence.

The verb *to adopt* means to *accept* or *take over* (a child, an idea, a plan, a proposal, etc.) *as one's own*. This is what the author of the above sentence meant to say:

*“In April 2005, EC maximum levels for benzo[a]pyrene were **adopted** for e.g. bivalve molluscs intended for human consumption (10 $\mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$ wet weight)”.*

There had been a proposal to set maximum levels for the presence of this mutagenic and highly carcinogenic hydrocarbon in bivalve molluscs intended for human consumption. The European Commission agreed with this proposal and set the maximum levels – i.e. *adopted* them.

On the other hand bivalve molluscs might be described as *adapted* for living in certain conditions – i.e. their evolutionary history is one of *change to fit* the conditions they now live in.

Insulate and isolate

Confusion between these two verbs is mostly due to their overlap in meaning and the fact that many languages (including Danish) use the same word for both. Both words come from the same Latin root (*insulatus*, meaning *made into an island*), one directly, the other via Italian.

But there is a clear conceptual difference between an *isolated* house and an *insulated* house. The first is far from other houses, while the second does not lose heat in winter. So an *isolated* house might also be *insulated*. ☺

The fundamental idea in the verb *to isolate* is that of *placing apart*. A person with a contagious disease may be *isolated* – separated from others who might catch the disease. The cause of the disease might also be *isolated* – separated from other possible causes.

The fundamental idea in the verb *insulate* is that of *preventing the transmission* of electricity, heat or sound to or from something by surrounding it with a non-conducting material. So I might wear *insulating* clothing in Arctic conditions to keep the warmth in, or a recording studio might be well *insulated* to keep the surrounding noises out.

In the field of electricity, we might speak of *isolated* circuits (*kept apart*) and describe the plastic or rubber on wires keeping them apart as *insulation*.

Four hundred and fifty topics have been tackled so far in the pages of

News & Tips

You can look them up on the website at: <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/backindex.htm>, and back issues can also be downloaded at: <http://www.englishsupport.dk/EN/backissues.htm>, where you can also download a whole year at a time (if you wish) by clicking on the year heading.

From the classroom...

Light rail

I am currently teaching a class of university lecturers in the field of transport. Last month, we had some discussion about the generic concept *light rail* and how it is used in English.

The term *light rail* was devised in 1972 by the Urban Mass Transit Association in the USA. It corresponded broadly to the German *Stadtbahn* concept; the word *light* was used to indicate light loads. In British English, the term *light railway* had long been used in a similar way.

But there is a grammatical difference which those who make use of these terms should note. A *light railway* is clearly a noun concept, while *light rail* (in the sense intended) is always used as an adjective. As Wikipedia expresses it: “*The Docklands Light Railway (DLR) is a **light rail** system serving the redeveloped Docklands area of East London*”.

So while you can go to any town in the UK and ask if they have a *light railway*, you will only get puzzled looks if you ask if they have a *light rail*. And the same is true in the US. A light rail is a rail that is light, and a rail can be a horizontal bar of wood, a curtain rail, a fence – or, of course, one of those things used in parallel pairs to make railway track. But it is definitely *not* a railway or railroad system. So you have to use *light rail* as an adjective with a noun: a *light rail system*, a *light rail network*, *light rail transportation*, *light rail technology*, and so on.

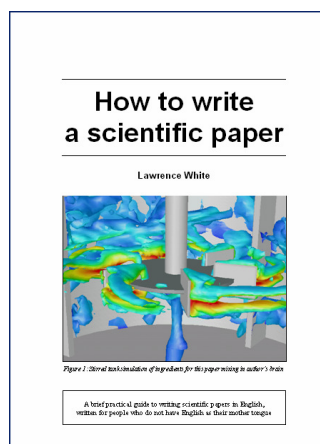
The only exception I have seen to this rule (in texts written by native speakers) is the use of *light rail* as an uncountable noun in the clear context of talking about light rail systems. Here is an example from Wikipedia: “*Britain began replacing its run-down local railways with **light rail** in the 1980s, starting with Tyneside and followed by the Docklands Light Railway in London*”.

Plurals of abbreviations

Abbreviated nouns (e.g. *vol.* for *volume*, *dept.* for *department*, *tbsp.* for *tablespoonful*, etc.) have a full stop to mark the abbreviation. These do not have plural forms (though note that the plural of *p.* for *page* is *pp.*), and neither do units of measurement: *km*, *cc*, *rpm*, etc.

But a lot of modern abbreviations and acronyms are made with capital letters or numbers. The usual way of making the plural form of these is to simply add a small “s”. So *non-governmental organisations* are *NGOs*, *chief executive officers* are *CEOs*, *compact discs* are *CDs*, the *Twenties* were the *1920s*, and if a *carbon nanotube* is a *CNT*, then *carbon nanotubes* are *CNTs*.

Fifty years ago, it was usual to use an apostrophe here, but today the apostrophe is normally only used with abbreviations to indicate possession, e.g. *NATO's combined strength*, *1920s' music*, the *CEO's salary*, a *CNT's properties*, and so on. [See also *News & Tips* no. 29].



Booklet for science researchers!

“How to write a scientific paper”, is an excellent guide – even for the experienced author of scientific articles and reports. It is easy to read and gives good advice about the structure of such papers, the writing process, and a number of the many linguistic traps that authors who do not have English as their mother tongue tend to fall into.

Kurt Lauridsen, MSc, PhD
Danish Decommissioning, Risø

Published by *English support*. Order it now from your local bookshop or direct from www.englishsupport.dk

Please turn over!

Switching from passive to active voice in scientific papers

In my booklet, *How to write a scientific paper*, I argue that passive forms should not be used just to exclude the author(s) from the picture. Real scientific objectivity is based on the *repeatability* of the work, observations or experiments – not on what I call “*first-person phobia*”.

Far too many scientific papers are difficult to read and understand because of the style and language they are written in. This affects the repeatability of the work described *and its scientific value*. Using the active voice more often increases the likelihood that your reader will be able to follow the text and see who did what when and where. See also *News & Tips* no. 31.

Here is a customer who understands that, but is still not quite sure how to use the first person:

Dear Lawrence

You proofread a scientific paper for us some months ago. You suggested using the active voice with “we” instead of the passive voice to make clear the difference between “what we did” and “what others do or what has been described in the literature”. For example, writing “we propose the following reaction mechanism”, instead of “the following reaction mechanism is proposed”.

I found this very useful and think that it is also very helpful for the reader.

At present, I am writing my PhD thesis and realize that it would also be convenient to use the active voice there to make that difference between our work and the literature.

I have talked to my professor about it and he said that it should not be a problem with regard to the regulations for a PhD thesis. But, being only one author – how would that be with regard to semantics? I really would not want to say “I”, because what I am describing is the result of our work together.

It would be very helpful to hear your opinion about that. Many thanks in advance.

AK

I think the answer is that you use “I”, when referring to yourself, and “we”, when referring to the group – whose existence you obviously acknowledge in *Acknowledgements* and introduce in your *Introduction*.

This allows you both to avoid taking sole credit for the work of the group, and yet to state your own conclusions without making everybody else in the group take joint responsibility for them. In other words, you make the natural distinction between *I* and *we* that you made in your e-mail:

We did this and we got these results.

I think their significance is the following.

I hope that helps!

Dear Lawrence

Many thanks – I think that is a good solution.

AK

More next month!

Best wishes

Lawrence White

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