

“Our Data Can Serve as a Basis for ...”: Adspeak in Russian Scientific English

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Nonnative scientists writing in English for international publication should try their best to write the “English way.” This means that rather than following the writing conventions of their mother tongues, they should learn and adhere to the conventions accepted in English.

The modern English style of communicating science favors a straightforward, clear, and logical line of presentation. It is concerned with readability, clarity, conciseness, and coherence.¹ By contrast, writing styles from non-Anglophone cultures such as Russia can be more elaborate and more tolerant of vagueness and wordiness.²

As noted by Yakhontova,³ Slavic texts put greater emphasis on presenting scientific knowledge (“telling”) than on advertising and promoting research (“selling”). This, however, does not mean that Slavic authors are not interested in self-promotion and self-advertisement.³ Indeed, all authors want to “sell” their work, irrespective of the writing culture to which they belong, and that is unobjectionable. What makes a difference is the rhetorical means by which the goal of “selling” is hoped to be achieved. Whereas native English speakers generally seek to promote their work by being as concise and specific as possible, Russians prefer generalized statements that often sound verbose, exaggerated, and low on substance—the kind of statements I call “adspeak.” Despite being used for “selling” purposes, adspeak makes a paper less forceful and may even raise suspicions about the true quality of the authors’ material. This article focuses on adspeak in Russian scientific English but may also be applicable to writers from other languages, especially those languages that have similar writing conventions to Russian.

The introduction sections in Russian original research papers frequently open with clichés like “In recent years, much attention has been paid to ...,” “There has recently been increasing interest in ...,” or “During recent years, [such and such an object] has been actively used as a model

for studies on” Such clichés may be perceived by the Anglophone reader as being overblown and subjective—more so if they are unsupported by references. They may be taken to mean only that 1) the work submitted is based on an important topic and therefore deserves to be published and that 2) the authors are not alone in their field. They may even bring to mind Graham’s humorous “A Glossary for Research Reports,”⁴ which translates “of great theoretical and practical importance” as “interesting to me” and “it has long been known that” as “I haven’t bothered to look up the original reference.” In English, a better introduction would be based on facts, rather than on mere words. For comparison, here is the first paragraph of the introduction to a U.S. cancer research article:

Colon cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death in men and the third leading cause in women in the United States, with an estimated 108,070 new cases per year, resulting in an estimated 49,960 deaths per year [ref.]. Since the 1980s, there has been a persistent trend in the increasing percentage of right-sided colon cancers with an associated decreasing percentage of left-sided and sigmoid colon cancers [refs.]. Obrand and Gordon [ref.], who studied information from their institution’s database, reported an increase from 22% of colorectal cancers diagnosed in the right colon between 1979 and 1982 to 31% between 1991 and 1994.⁵

This paragraph promotes the authors’ study well, because it is clear and factual. It tells a concrete story with concrete figures and gives appropriate references. Think of the difference it would have made if the paragraph had begun, for instance, “Recently, colon cancer has been the subject of active research by oncologists throughout the world”!

Russians writing in English also tend to overuse intensifiers such as “extremely,” “very,” or “quite.” Examples abound: “Design of novel heat-resistant alloys ... is an extremely important issue ...,” “This knowledge [the authors’ data] is extremely valuable in understanding recent population declines ...,” “... a helminthological study of the Siberian roe [deer] is quite important,” “Reliable determination of residual drugs in livestock production seems to be a very important task. It is very topical in” That sounds like a radio being on at full volume, with the sole message that the authors did not waste their efforts on a tiny issue. A

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better writing strategy would be to tone down emotion and carefully distinguish situations that do warrant an intensifier from those that do not.

Still another source of promotional clichés is “problem,” a highly overused word in Russian science: “Anthropogenic contamination of the environment ... *is one of the most urgent ecological problems*. ... Despite the ban on industrial production and application of PCB [polychlorinated biphenyls] since the 1970s, *the problem* of PCB utilization ... *remains a pressing one*.” “Pressing problem,” “topical problem,” “urgent problem,” and “important problem” are all subjective opinions; without facts and figures, they have little meaning.

Of little meaning too is “for the first time,” a cliché with a strong self-advertising flavor (e.g., “The experiments described in this paper *prove for the first time* ...” Wheatley⁶ explains, “While this may be true, it conjures up a moment of real drama, the authors hailing themselves as true pioneers by making prior claim, when the whole purpose of a primary research paper is to communicate *new* [italics his] findings.”

In the conclusion section, Russian authors often suggest that their present achievements are an important prelude to later applications: “The proposed test system *may be a useful tool for* ...,” “This method ... *can serve as a basis for* the development of ...,” “... using these objects ... *appears to be promising*.” Although the hedges “may,” “can,” and “appears” reduce the certainty of the authors’ claims, the use of “useful” and especially “basis” and “promising” is self-promoting (compare, e.g., “This method may aid in developing ...”). Nonetheless, simply saying that one thing may form a basis for another or that something may have a promising application is too vague to count as a conclusion. The conclusion of the U.S. cancer research

article quoted above is plain and factual, if slightly marred by a misprint:

In recent years, the distribution of right- versus left-sided colon cancers has changed, with an increasing incident of right-sided colon cancer. The cause behind this is currently poorly understood and likely multifactorial. Our findings [sic] of worse survival for right-sided colon cancer bears further study to understand the cause. Moreover, understanding differences in tumor biology may ultimately affect the treatment modalities, specifically chemotherapy regimens, which are used for right- versus left-sided colon cancer.⁵

My conclusion—and recommendation—is plain, too: When writing in English, do not try to promote your research with verbosity, exaggeration, and imprecision. Instead, do just the opposite—be concise, honest, and specific. Your chances of publication will be greatly enhanced if you make facts and findings speak louder than your loudest words.

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Selections from “A Glossary for Research Reports”

By C.D. Graham, Jr From *Metal Progress* 1957;71:75-76.

It has long been known that...	I haven’t bothered to look up the original reference
... of great theoretical and practical importance	...interesting to me
While it has not been possible to provide definite answers to these questions...	The experiments didn’t work out, but I figured I could at least get a publication out of it.
Three of the samples were chosen for detailed study...	The results on the others didn’t make sense and were ignored.
Typical results are shown	The best results are shown
It is suggested that... It is believed that... It may be that...	I think...
Thanks are due to Joe Glotz for assistance with the experiments and to John Doe for valuable discussions	Glotz did the work and Doe explained what it meant