

Book Review: *A Practical Guide to Scientific and Technical Translation: Publishing, Style and Terminology*

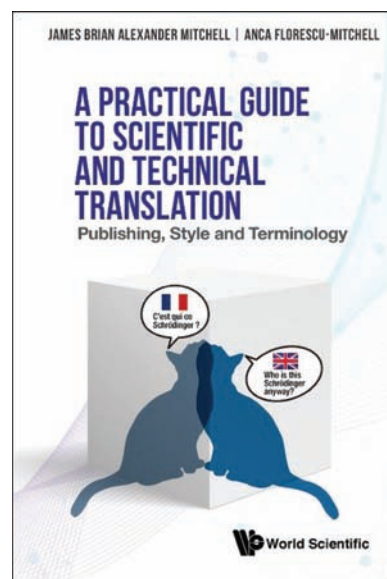
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A Practical Guide to Scientific and Technical Translation: Publishing, Style and Terminology. James Brian Alexander Mitchell and Anca Irina Florescu-Mitchell. London: World Scientific; 2022. 200 pages. ISBN 981124314X

In a conversational tone and sometimes being repetitive, which shows a fear that the readers do not grasp the real goal of *A Practical Guide to Scientific and Technical Translation: Publishing, Style and Terminology* or do not understand clearly their advice, James Brian Alexander Mitchell and Anca Irina Florescu-Mitchell use their experiences as researchers, reviewers, proofreaders, and translators to give detailed instructions for writing in English and producing technical and professional translations. Mitchell is a native English speaker who translates from French to English, and Florescu-Mitchell is a non-native English speaker who translates from French to English, English to French, and English/French to Romanian. I write this book review from the point of view of a non-native English speaker who writes my own articles in English and does professional translations from English to Portuguese.

The book is divided into 2 parts. The first part, Direct Authoring, is devoted to helping scientists who are non-native speakers of English to write scientific papers. The second part, Technical Translation for Translators, provides guidance for professional translators of technical writing.

According to the authors, “direct authoring” is when a non-native speaker, after deciding what to write in their



paper, starts to write it directly in English. In this first part of the book, Mitchell and Florescu-Mitchell clarified that their goal is to help scientists to avoid making mistakes common to those who use English as a second language, and not to write a grammar book. They use examples in French from their experience working with authors to explain to scientists what to do and not to do in terms of style, grammar, and convention, when preparing a scientific paper for publication. Examples are observing the differences between UK English and U.S. English, the use of contractions, vague words and colloquial language, passive and active voice, present tense, past tense, future tense, gender neutral text, and numbers and units, among other rules. It is very interesting to note how the use of certain words reveals the identity of the author. In the excerpt below, we can see a mistake in a paper written by a French author using a false friend, or words that appear the same way but that have different meanings.

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In English, "realise" means coming to the understanding of something:

"I realise that I have to go to the dentist today so I cannot go for coffee"

In French, this word has a much wider meaning and it is common to see a French person write something like:

"The experiment was realized"

These sentences are completely wrong in English and should read like: "The experiment was performed"

The false friends here are *réaliser* (French) and *realize* (English). It is also intriguing to see that the origin of some grammar mistakes committed by non-native speakers when writing in English are the rules they learn to speak and write in their native language. As an example, let's look at the mistakes in writing in English related to the plurals and adjectives pointed out in the book:

Plurals

This is something that often shows up in articles written by a non-native English speaker. In fact, there are two problems, not using plurals when you should and using them when you should not. In French for example, the "s" at the end of a plural noun is generally not pronounced. It is often found in articles where the French author has thought about what they want to say but when they write it, they forget about the "s" in English because they don't hear it

Adjectives

One of the difficulties that arises when writing in or translating into English is the placement of adjectives where these are placed before the noun in English, while, in French for example, they are more often placed AFTER the noun (there are actually rules, even in French, believe it or not!)

This type of error may cause misunderstandings in a scientific paper and easily reveal to the editor and to the reviewer that the author is not a native English speaker. In the world of scientific publishing, papers written by non-native speakers open the door for publication bias during the peer-review process, showing the connection between both language and identity and language and power.

In this first part of the book, the authors also cover scientific writing style. They provide a good characterization of the scientific style, bringing up its main characteristics such as accuracy, clarity, and readability, and highlighting the importance of the concepts discussed in a scientific article. However, Mitchell and Florescu-Mitchell say:

This does not mean that it has to be written so that everyone can understand it. That is the role of the "popular press". A scientific article has a certain targeted audience who should understand the concepts presented so that they can take in this knowledge and access its authenticity.

Although this is certainly true for some scientific journals, it should be noted that there is a recent push in many scientific journals to make scientific articles more understandable for a wider audience. Examples are the initiatives of the biomedical journals *The BMJ* and *Research Involvement and Engagement* in involving patients in their peer-review process. One of the roles of these patients is to check "the clarity of the reported research and its interpretation to a lay audience."¹ *Research Involvement and Engagement* still asks authors to submit a plain language summary,² along with the manuscript and the abstract, to make the paper accessible to patients, reviewers, and to the public.³ Thus, these bold initiatives are broadening the role of scientific journals, blurring the lines between scientific journals and science magazines, and making the authors write their articles in an understandable way in order to reach a wider audience. This wider audience may be scientists from different fields of knowledge or even non-scientists.

Before I start to review the second part of the book, I would like to comment on the advice given about how to write peer-review reports. In the Reviewing section, the authors talk about the fear of non-native speakers of English of unintentionally insulting the authors of the manuscripts that they are reviewing in the context of the anonymous peer review, mainly when they have to reject a paper. Based on their experience reviewing peer-review reports, some examples were given to deal with this kind of situation:

In one sentence, the reviewers said: "there were too many "useless" details". While this may indeed have been correct, the word "useless" is very strong and perhaps a bit insulting. We recommended that this be changed to: "there were too many details that were not very useful". This softens the tone and allows the author to reflect on whether this statement is helpful. To say that something is "useless" is very final and can put the author into a combative mood for the response.

As we can see, the tone of the report can hurt the feelings of the authors and put them in a bad mood when responding to a review, which may be unhealthy for all people involved in the peer review. Another fear of the non-native speaker is judging the English of other non-native speakers when they themselves make grammar mistakes. As a non-native speaker,

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I would like to add the fear of having your competence as a researcher put in doubt or your report disregarded. That was a case reported to me by an editor of a scientific journal: a non-native speaker of English reviewed an article of a native speaker and this article was rejected. The author was offensive with the editor, questioning the credibility of the journal by arguing why they would select non-native speakers to evaluate their article. To avoid this type of problem, Mitchell and Florescu-Mitchell suggest that reviewers concerned about the quality of their writing ask a professional or colleague proficient in English to check out their English before sending reports. It is a good idea, but sometimes it may be hard to do or awkward in practice. These concerns should be considered when implementing or researching models of open peer review to ensure participation of any interested member of the scientific community or the public and to reflect about diversity, equity, and inclusion in scientific journals.

The second part of the book, *Technical Translation for Translators*, is divided into sections discussing the essential tools to work as a technical translator, features, advantages and limitations, and technical problems of computer aided translations (CAT) tools, machine translation, translation in specific technical fields, translation of patents, legal contracts with translation agencies, internet searching and terminology, and translation as a profession.

The authors provide a realistic and critical view of the translators' job market, presenting challenges ranging from where and how to find the right terminology for a document to common problems that translators face. However, the authors go beyond the idea that to do a translation is only necessary to find the right terminology. For them, professional translators must understand what they are translating. For this reason, if the translator does not know anything on the subject they were invited to translate, they must decline the invitation to avoid mistakes. Mitchell and Florescu-Mitchell summarize that "technical translation is not about words but about the meaning of words (Definition, Concepts and Content)" and more: "Technical Translation is all about context."

From the experience of the authors doing translations in the fields of Physics, Automotive Engineering, Aeronautical Translations, Railways and Trams, Mechanical Engineering, Construction, Nuclear Engineering, Renewable Energy, Hydroelectric Power and Hydraulic Engineering, and Patents, professional translators can learn about the advantages of using spelling and grammar checks and the CAT tools and also how to avoid falling into some traps when using them.

This second part of the book is richly illustrated with photographs of bilingual and specialized dictionaries used by the authors. The most interesting insight is how the authors bring to light the importance of the Internet and

visual dictionaries to help the professional translator to find the accurate context for its terminology.

Regarding translation as a profession, 3 examples of common problems faced by translators and approached by the authors are as follows: 1) The client says the translation is too literal, when sometimes it should be literal to be accurate. 2) The client accuses the translator of having used machine translation as an excuse to say they did not like the translation. 3) The client thinks the translation was not made by a native English speaker. I would like to highlight this last problem. Mitchell and Florescu-Mitchell criticize the notion of being a native speaker of a language. For the authors,

Just because you were born in a certain country does not mean that you necessarily have a good grasp of its language. Indeed, if you left the country early in life you may not speak that language at all. So what is your native language? Well, it is the language that you have learned to write in and master but legally this does not make you a Native XXX speaker. Of course, when you hand in a translation it should sound like what an English speaker would expect so in that sense it is a valid requirement. One of the points to consider though is to ask if the person making the comment is qualified to make it. Are they a native English speaker? In our experience, they are not.

In fact, in my experience as a non-native speaker author and professional translator, it has been curious to realize native speakers of the English language are more understanding with the mistakes of non-natives than the non-natives themselves. For a non-native speaker of English, writing a paper in this language can be challenging. Not only because of the grammar rules, which can be learned by taking English classes or consulting books, but because it involves the embarrassment of sharing with others our writing imperfections inside a scientific culture where errors are not seen in a very good light. This way, I recommend *A Practical Guide to Scientific and Technical Translation: Publishing, Style and Terminology* for native and non-native speakers of English and for professional translators from any technical field. This guide will help scientists improve their writing in English and professional translators to refine their working practices.

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