
Viewpoint

How to omit articles like a native speaker

Dmitry Tychinin

Institute of Biochemistry and Physiology of Plants and Microorganisms, Russian Academy of Sciences, Saratov, Russia
tychinin_d@ibbpm.ru

The English article system is notoriously difficult for non-native speakers to master, but what about native speakers? Are they always justified in their choice of articles – or their omission of them? Anyone familiar with the bioresearch literature, for example, must have noticed that in papers by native English speakers, notably in the methods and results sections, countable nouns often take no article, as if they were uncountable. One may come across sentences such as: “Cells were grown in medium with glucose”, “The culture entered stationary phase”, “Strain K12 was used as recipient”, and “The tests were conducted at 5% significance level”. Omissions of this kind, which are obviously wrong and unidiomatic, seem not to worry journal copy editors, who are by definition the guardians of proper English.

There is no doubt that articles may be dropped when not absolutely necessary.¹ One such exception is the omission of repeated articles in co-ordinate structures (eg “a bacterium or virus”, “the heart, liver, bladder, and vertebral column”). Articles may also be omitted in various “abbreviated styles” (titles, instructions, lists, figure and table captions and footnotes, etc).¹ Articles also need not be used when nouns have both countable and uncountable uses; thus, either “a solution was added” or “0.5 ml of solution was added” is correct English. One caveat applies, though: such omissions should not distort the meaning or impair the style. In the examples above, while the meaning of the sentences is retained, the style noticeably suffers.

Scientific language may demand that normal usage be violated for specific purposes (eg accuracy or conciseness). In particular, some nouns in English are “in the process of shifting from uncountable to countable”.² *Steel* and *permeability*, for instance, are uncountable nouns in general English. Nonetheless, we would speak of “a variety of steels” and “different permeabilities” in academic contexts. But how can we possibly account for shifts in the opposite direction – from countable to uncountable? Suppose we might convince ourselves (and others) that “bacteria grown in medium with glucose” is okay on the grounds that the medium in question is actually a *solution*, which is uncountable as well as countable. Then how should we treat “bacteria grown on solid medium”? Or “bacteria in logarithmic phase”?

Why are native speaking scientists allowed to take the liberties with their language that would normally be regarded as evidence that the manuscript was authored by a non-native speaker? One probable explanation is the influence of colloquial English, in which there are fairly frequent omissions of all sorts, including oddities like “wife’s on holiday”.¹ Even glaring article mistakes, such as those given above, may sound so natural to the native speaker’s ear that authors and native speaking editors leave them uncorrected if no misinterpretation arises. Nonetheless, these mistakes should not be ignored. Think of the legion of non-native authors, especially those from languages that have no articles, who may be tempted to adopt the faulty style of their native colleagues. Think also of the danger to the linguistic quality of academic prose. The magisterial *ASM Style Manual for Journals and Books* is quite explicit on the issue: “If omitting an article makes bad idiomatic English, it also makes bad scientific writing, however common it is in professional jargon”.³

Language abuse tends to be gaining acceptance with time, and what is inappropriate today may be legitimate tomorrow. “Data is/was” occurrences are now ubiquitous in science reporting, and the use of *bacteria* as a singular noun (eg “*Enterobacter sakazakii*, a deadly bacteria”) is creeping into radio broadcasts. In a similar trend, “Results are presented in table” or “Analysis was conducted with mutant strain of *E. coli*” might one day become standard technical English. I can do no better here than to reiterate the desperate words of Professor Raymond Coleman, former editor-in-chief of *Acta Histochemica*: “Can we meet the challenge and preserve some of the elegance of well-written English?”⁴

References

- 1 Swan M. *Practical English Usage*, 3rd edition. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 2 Swales J, Feak C. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*, 3rd edition. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2012.
- 3 *ASM Style Manual for Journals and Books*. Washington, D.C.; American Society for Microbiology, 1991.
- 4 Coleman R. Pardon my proper English. *The Scientist* 2003;17(23):68.