Inclusion through writing

On 5 December 2022, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) will be hosting a session entitled 'Promoting social justice through accessibility of language in science' at the World Science Forum. Our journal is proud to be chairing this event, which coincides with the launch of our revamped language and style guide – what we term our Inclusive Language Policy.

This policy, which represents a more explicit codification of previous policies for our authors, is not a substantial shift in direction for the journal, but underlies and emphasises our commitment to the journal as a site for academic excellence and as much participation as possible by a range of scientists and scholars, mostly from our continent. There are two main features to the policy. First, we reiterate the importance of accessible, clear language across the board. For example, in keeping with many other scholarly journals worldwide, we encourage authors to avoid unnecessary jargon, and write in the active voice, in order to make their work easier to read. Second, we address particular issues in writing in an inclusive way, focusing on preferred terminology. Here, for example, we give some guidelines on reporting on race and ethnicity, sex and gender, and on disability, illness and impairment. We recognise in our policy that some terms and usages may be contested, and we leave space for two important contributors to what we hope will be a living and, where appropriate, changing document. First, we allow authors who have good reason to use language in different ways from those we suggest to contact us and provide reasons for this usage for us to consider. An example of this could be the preference in writing about neurodiversity for what is termed 'identity first' language rather than the 'people first' language we suggest in general for writing about disability, as the 'identity first' language is central to some approaches in the neurodiversity field. Second, we welcome discussion at a general level about the policy and its components.

Our wish to make language practices at our journal as inclusive as possible is not unique internationally, and is in line with many debates and positions put forward at the recent World Conference on Research Integrity held in Cape Town in 2022. It is also in keeping with the evolving Cape Town Statement which was discussed at the meeting, and to the Global Code of Conduct for research partnerships. Questions of fairness of access are key to all these endeavours. Language can be used to exclude and to divide; it is our responsibility as researchers to use language as far as we are able to include and to communicate respect.

As uncontroversial as these views may appear on the surface, there are in fact a number of anxieties about accessible language which we would like to address. Possibly the most fundamental of these is the worry that using simple language will cause us to lower the standard of scientific communication. This is a worry which some express in a context where many dangerous and baseless claims are made and propagated through the Internet, and where the integrity and competence of good science and scientists are under attack. As a journal, we believe as strongly as ever in the importance of rigorous peer review, and we agree that there is a crucial difference between well-informed, evidence-based opinion and opinion based on untested or unfounded ideas. It is crucial that the standards of science are maintained, and all researchers have a role to play in emphasising the differences between rigorous work and populist declarations. Requiring scientific rigour, though, is not the same as requiring unnecessarily confusing writing and jargon. At times, scientists must use jargon in order to communicate with specialist peers, and at times we also use terms which may differ in specificity from how they are used in everyday talk – for example, there may be world of difference between somebody describing themselves as 'depressed' when they are writing a memoir, and the number of people a psychiatric epidemiologist would want to classify as 'depressed' when trying to assess the gap between the number of those requiring psychiatric treatments for depression and those actually receiving such treatments. As the science communication specialist Marina Joubert puts it, there is a big difference between 'dumbing down' (which is the last thing we want in good scientific communication) and 'clearing up' (which is something for which we strive) (https://www.scidev.net/asia-pacific/practical-guides/how-to-write-about-your-science-1/). Globally, for most people writing up their research in English, and most people reading such research, English is not their first language. The reasons for this go way beyond the global communication of science, and speak to the complex politics of the dominance of English internationally, which links to colonial and exclusionary histories. It is our responsibility to be as inclusive as we can to all who can contribute to research. One issue for us to explore, for example, is publishing abstracts in different languages. The issue of exclusionary language, though, extends beyond questions of whether people are writing and reading within their native languages. Even within the English-speaking world, there have been traditions of writing which make text unnecessarily obscure and imprecise. For example, some of us have been taught to use agentless passive constructions in our work (for example, 'It is well established'; 'It is believed'). These constructions obscure the basis on which claims are made. As researchers, we need to know who believes what, for example.

A second concern about our language policy may revolve around worries about the emotional and political sensitivities around terms used for race, gender, disability, and so on. It is indeed true that many people feel uncomfortable about issues of difference, and hence some may wish to resist what they view as attempts to police usage about difference. Some of the people we have consulted about our policy have expressed concerns about what they have termed 'political correctness'. The term 'political correctness' is in itself imprecise, but often links to anxieties that people and organisations (and in this case, our journal) may be pandering to a particular political constituency in a way that is performative rather than helpful for social cohesion or scientific rigour. Although we recognise that language is always linked to politics (this cannot be avoided), we believe that our policy helps clarify usage and works towards our (admittedly political but also broader) goals of inclusion, rather than to exclude and divide.

We envision that our policy will be helpful to authors and readers. As with all other aspects of the work of our journal, we welcome feedback and debate. It is in the nature of science that all in the science community must be open to new evidence and better arguments. We believe our policy is a clear marker of where we stand as a journal.