Letters

Watching Our Language

As a biologist who is the son of an English teacher, I appreciate Bernard Dixon’s desire to see we scientists use language precisely, and personally I even like the fact that English conserves a lot of Latin that even Romance languages like Spanish do not.

However, as a native speaker of English who is also fluent in Spanish and who works primarily with Spanish-dominant students for whom English is a second language, I have to point out that whenever most speakers of a language decide to speak a certain “new” way, the newer way becomes the “right” way because what is most important about language is that we understand each other, not that we speak a certain way. Languages are, after all, constantly evolving and can even become extinct as Dixon knows (in Spanish we say “1 bacteria,” “2 bacterias” because this actually makes sense according to the rules of the Spanish language by which all plural forms regardless of the origin of the word end in “-s”).

Instead I would like to see Dixon take on a much more important misuse of vocabulary but rather deals with an important because it is not merely an issue of language that we understand each other, not that we speak a certain way. Languages are, after all, constantly evolving and can even become extinct as Dixon knows (in Spanish we say “1 bacteria,” “2 bacterias” because this actually makes sense according to the rules of the Spanish language by which all plural forms regardless of the origin of the word end in “-s”).

The problem is that even in fantastic science programs like Nova and Nature, the word “theory” is constantly used to mean a tentative explanation that must be tested (“theory” = “hypothesis”) rather than what a scientific theory actually is, the best or most accepted current explanation based on the best current available information. Thus, it is no surprise that most nonbiologists, even after watching a science program, might say something like, “Evolution is just a theory.”

Jonathan E. “Jack” Davis
Dona Ana Community College-NMSU
Las Cruces, N.M.

Writing about Blogging

The article by Melanie Kaplan entitled “Microbiology Goes Digital” in the November 2010 issue of this magazine (p. 471) presented a description of ways in which our field becomes part of the world of social media. We are particularly pleased by the generous terms used to characterize our own blog, Small Things Considered. December 1, 2010, marked the completion of its fourth year. We would like to add a few themes that may give readers a greater insight into the process involved.

Producing our blog is a community effort. It started out as a community of two, when Merry joined Elio soon after its inception. Gradually we fell into a comfortable rhythm, each authoring some posts, and all posts bouncing back and forth between us for editing. Gradually the community behind the blog grew. About half the lengthy articles we now post are from guest writers. Some of this material is solicited, some appears spontaneously at our electronic door. Contributors include distinguished and experienced microbiologists as well as undergrad and grad students. We are happy that our blog has become a forum.

We are also glad to have two active Associate Bloggers, Welkin Johnson and Mark Martin. The blog has greatly benefited from the support given by the ASM Communications Committee, by Chris Condayan, the Manager for Public Outreach, in particular. And we are always happy to see an excerpt from the blog on the penultimate page of Microbe.

What about the community of readers? A mixed group they are, ranging from leading microbiologists to bright kids in grade school, and including more casual visitors from the public at large. Some are introduced to the blog through its use in the classroom. (We have a pedagogical bent, as seen by our columns “Of Terms in Biology” and “Talmudic Questions.”) Based on anecdotes, we learn that articles from the blog are used for academic enrichment in various ways. One is as a destination for students in search of topics for term papers or other reports. Another is as a source of material for teachers preparing exam questions. We ourselves have offered graduate level students the option to write an article for the blog as part of their final exam.

We believe that blogs can encourage good writing. Because of the informal style used, writers are released from the shackles of conventional technical writing and can express their thoughts in a personal way. We suspect that being able to say what one really thinks makes for clearer writing.

There’s almost no downside to blogs, other than the time required to construct them and the time required to read them. We have heard, oh so often, “I wish I had the time to read your blog.” We hope that readers will increasingly find that time.

Elio Schaechter and Merry Youle
Co-bloggers