Correspondence

Tortured Phrases are Not Automatically Unethical

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In his recent correspondence, Olivier Pourret[1] points out the occurrence of "tortured phrases" due to the application of paraphrasing software. Tortured phrases could also be the result of ethical use of machine translation (MT).[2] Current MT, large language models (LLMs), and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) provide low-cost tools for translation that change academic writing but also reading,[3] because they allow overcoming language barriers for non-native English authors. Unfortunately, these tools are sometimes the source of tortured phrases.

The way of writing in individual languages differs.[4] Many authors are able to formulate their ideas more precisely in their native language than in English. Therefore, some authors prefer to write manuscripts in their native language and subsequently translate them into English. They often use MT or GenAI for translation and subsequently make corrections to the prepared translation or cooperate with a professional translator. The subsequent control and editing of the MT are very important, because the authors are fully responsible for the correctness of the translation.

My field of research is the water footprint ("vodní stopa" in Czech); Google Translate translates this term as "water track" in approximately 1% of cases. Unfortunately, I have found this tortured phrase "water track" several times in the manuscripts that I peer reviewed. This shows inconsistent checking by the authors and possibly unawareness of the terminology in English. If such a tortured phrase is also found in the final published article, it serves as evidence of poor-quality peer review, as an expert on the topic should be able to detect these tortured phrases during the initial reading of the manuscript.

Olivier Pourret[1] points out that the use of tortured phrases "can be a red flag for broader issues within a paper." Assessing whether a tortured phrase in the manuscript is the result of imperfect checking after using a MT, lack of understanding of the subject matter, or the result of unethical behaviour of the author will always be a subjective decision. On the other hand, since it is a certain flag, the reviewer should point it out in the comments to the editor and at the same time ask the authors to explain why the tortured phrase (or in general "incorrect terminology") appears in the manuscript.

Considering the impact that using tools like MT, LLMs, or GenAI has on the publication process, it is necessary for all participants to behave responsibly and ethically in accordance with best practices and to minimize any unintended negative impacts.[5] Currently, many manuscript submission systems already include an author's statement about the use of GenAI. However, that is only one part of the publishing process. A parallel can be found, for example, with MDPI, where the reviewer answers the question in the review form as to whether he/she detected plagiarism or an inappropriate level of self-citation. Therefore, I believe that the instructions for reviewers or directly the review forms should contain a requirement to report suspicions of the use of paraphrasing tools or the occurrence of tortured phrases or using incorrect terminology.

References

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