

English Grammar and Style

Revising medical writing Backtracking, pronoun-induced Part 1 – Semantic revision

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Introduction

Pronouns are useful referents (i.e. the thing doing the referring) to avoid repetition of words (usually nouns). Although personal pronouns (he, she, and I, in particular) are infrequent in medical writing, the neutral 'it' and the demonstrative pronouns (singular, 'this and that'; plural, 'these and those') are common. However, the personal pronoun 'it' and the demonstrative pronouns invariably cause us to backtrack: to refer back to previous textual information (an antecedent) to find out what the pronoun is replacing. Backtracking impedes immediate comprehension of the text, especially when the antecedent is an entire sentence.

There are techniques for eliminating the personal pronoun 'it' and the demonstrative pronouns. These techniques may be semantic, syntactic, or both. Eliminating the neutral and demonstrative pronouns will help the reader by improving clarity, thereby eliminating a distraction to immediate comprehension.

There are four main techniques for eliminating personal and demonstrative pronouns: semantic revision, single syntactic unit revision, double syntactic unit revision, and syntactic position revision. In the first of three articles on backtracking pronouns, we examine semantic revision, i.e. replacement of pronouns by words with explicit reference to an antecedent. The examples are from graduate student writing in the course 'Systematic research writing'.

Example 1: 'It' in the subject position of a contiguous sentence

The example is taken from an Introduction section, research problem context:

The Dynamic Marble Size (DMS) algorithm is a market-inspired distributed algorithm for solving difficult combinatorial resource allocation problems. It represents both tasks and resources as agents.

The personal pronoun 'it' could refer back to 'Dynamic Marble Size algorithm' but 'it' could equally refer to 'a market-inspired distributed algorithm' without changing the meaning. We can assume that 'it' cannot refer to 'difficult combinatorial resource allocation problems' because the plurality of the statement excludes the singular 'it' as the referent. The suggested revision is an already stated abbreviation of the antecedent. The suggested revision is:

The Dynamic Marble Size (DMS) algorithm is a market-inspired distributed algorithm for solving difficult combinatorial resource allocation problems. The DMS algorithm represents both tasks and resources as agents.

Note also that by using an abbreviation, we avoid monotonous repetition of 'Dynamic Marble Size'.

Example 2: 'It' in the subject position of an independent clause of a complex sentence

This example is from a Discussion section, limitation-counterargument:

Although this sample survey of current physical therapy outpatients may not translate to the general population, it does support development of such a service.

The backtracking introduced by 'it' can be avoided by repeating the antecedent as an attenuated form:

Although this sample survey of current physical therapy outpatients may not translate to the general population, the survey does support development of such a service.

Example 3: 'This' in the subject position of a contiguous sentence

This example is from the Introduction section, justification for hypothesis and hypothesis:

*These infants are less likely to engage in object manipulation, body exploration, midline activities, and upper extremity weight-bearing postures. **This** may affect neural connectivity.*

It is not clear what **this** refers to. The intention of the author was to refer to the lower likelihood of infants engaging in all four of the activities in the list. Therefore, replacing 'This' with 'These decreased engagements' eliminates any doubt about the antecedent of 'this':

*These infants are less likely to engage in object manipulation, body exploration, midline activities, and upper extremity weight-bearing postures. **These decreased engagements** may affect neural connectivity.*

Notes

- (a) We need to use the word 'these' rather than 'this' because there are several antecedents.

- (b) The expression of 'these' in the present is dictated by the context of the present tense of the predicate ('are less likely') in the first sentence.

Summary

Three semantic revision options are useful for revising sentences containing the backtracking personal pronoun 'it', and the demonstrative pronoun 'this': (1) an abbreviation, (2) an attenuated antecedent, and (3) a term that renames the antecedent(s).

The next article will examine four options for revising 'Backtracking, pronoun-induced' sentences by a single syntactic unit revision.

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