Evolving English at the British Library

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On Saturday I went to see the exhibition Evolving English at the British Library in London. The exhibition explores the English language in all its diversity and was recommended to me by Matt Brown, expert on all things London (his review for the Londonist is here). **Evolving English** is interesting in many different ways, but here I want to focus on English as the language of science – used in two examples in the exhibition.

The book Micrographia from 1665 by Robert Hooke is the first major scientific work devoted to exploration using the microscope. It is also an important step in the development of scientific English. The book was praised for the clarity of the language at the time, but from today's science writing perspective contains sentences that are too long and convoluted, uses conversational English, and frequently the active voice. The National Library of Medicine provides a beautiful online version of the book, where observation XXV starts with:

> A nettle is a plant so well known to every one, as to what the appearance of it is to the naked eye, that it needs no description; and there are very few that have not felt as well as seen it; and therefore it will be no news to tell that a gentle and slight touch of the skin by a nettle, does oftentime, not onely create very sensible and acute pain, much like that of a burn or scald, but often also very angry and hard swellings and inflammations of the parts, such as will presently rise and continue swoln divers hours.

As an example of current scientific English, the exhibitors picked the paper describing the cloning of Dolly (Wilmut 1997). The text is described in the exhibition as:

> The language is punctual throughout and technical terms are mostly used without explanation. The main text is supported by illustrations (here called figures), tables of data and – over the page – bibliographic references to other scientific research. The purpose is to to maximize accuracy, remove any chance of ambiguity and provide writers with every opportunity to give detailed evidence.

The exhibition makes it very clear that the English language is constantly

evolving, and scientific English is no exception. Papers written in 10, 20 or 100 years might use a very different language. One important influence today is of course science writing in blogs and other social media. And with electronic publishing, open access, citizen science and other trends, scientific papers have become available to a much larger audience.

References

Wilmut I, Schnieke AE, McWhir J, Kind AJ, Campbell KH. Viable offspring derived from fetal and adult mammalian cells. Nature. 1997;385:810-813. DOI: http://doi.org/10.1038/385810a0.