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Academic writing: Conformity and beyond A brief note

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Let me start on an anecdotal note. I have drafted part of my doctoral dissertation and am expecting my supervisors' verdict. I'm literally floundering in a sea of doubts: Is my writing reader-friendly? Will it come up to the academic reader's expectations and standards? Have I followed the proper line of arguments and built my thesis plausibly? Is my review of the literature exhaustive? Have I convinced the reader of the novelty of my contribution? Is there a contribution in the first place? The verdict is merciless: "Interesting work, Christina, but ..." and a barrage of flaws ensues. Dominant among them: "Some points are cryptic. And, most importantly, your writing doesn't seem to conform to the conventions of the academic writing community. It is a bit of a hybrid, a cross between linguistics and literature, which is rather confusing, for this is not literature, it's linguistics, so clarity and lucidity of expression are a major concern". So, I tell myself "If you are to convince your reader-judges, you cannot possibly give free rein to your literary self. Try to make your style more *staccato* and matter-of-fact. Shorten your sentences, use more mainstream, linguistics-oriented vocabulary, avoid metaphor". But then my other self bounces back and refuses to be hushed: "Oh come on, what's so terribly wrong with long sentences? Henry James – and please do not hasten to call this arrogance, for how dare I associate my writing with the great novelist's ... – wrote paragraph long sentences. And, anyway, I have always believed writing was my strong point. I was after all praised for my compositions at school and my undergraduate study writing proceeded smoothly. So, why submit?"

Again on an anecdotal note, a student of mine once decided to opt out of the course, because she felt uncomfortable in the academic rigor straitjacket. She was more of a literary type, she said, so she found applied linguistics and methodology were too dry and deprived her of her freedom of expression.

Harsh and unattractive as this may sound, academic writing is a process of submission and conformity. It is an exercise in discipline and an effort, easier to some but quite a challenge to others, to belong, to become a member of academia and gain recognition in the community. To achieve this, you need to develop a good command of the conventions employed in writing of the kind. Academic writing is a genre in itself and, like all genres, it possesses specific attributes. Quoting from [https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic writing](https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic%20writing), "Academic writing is clear, concise, focused, structured and backed up by evidence. Its purpose is to aid the reader's

understanding. It has a formal tone and style, but it is not complex and does not require the use of long sentences and complicated vocabulary". Or, alternatively: "Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective (usually), a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice" (<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting>).

The actual wording may vary slightly but the common denominator is the importance of clarity, focus, conciseness and precision, formality. Opacity is strongly discouraged – "It's not unheard of for scholars to utilize needlessly complex syntax or overly expansive vocabulary that is impenetrable or not well-defined (<https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/academicwriting>) – and minimizing excessive or inappropriate use of specialized vocabulary may be referred to as a way to achieve clarity (*ibid.*). Focus involves demonstrating an understanding of a specific subject area, which requires systematic planning as well as selectivity in dealing with the often innumerable sources available. Conciseness and precision relate to the rule of economy – keeping what you really need to support your point and leaving out redundancies – as well as to the appropriate use of the relevant terminology, which will, of course, vary for each discipline. What helps keep you focused is the evidence basis of your writing, the need to support what you say with the help of the literature in a step-by-step fashion. Your choice of diction testifies to your awareness of the specific discipline boundaries – the use of words generally acknowledged as expressing concepts relevant to the discipline – and is therefore crucial to achieving what Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) refer to as "lexical cohesion", words bonding together in harmony in search of a common goal, that of delimiting the field. Finally, formality suggests giving up all personal tone of expression, a true ego defeat. The contribution to science is yours, built, of course, on the basis of prior knowledge, but the voice cannot be too gruff or too soft, as yours might be. It has to conform.

This is further complicated by the tentativeness expected of academic writing. Watling (2017) argues in favor of "we speculate" rather than "we have established", "our work suggests" rather than "our work proves", "we propose" rather than "we demand". This deals another blow on one's ego. You can never be certain, so conviction is left out of the picture and everything is potentially overturned in a rival piece of academic writing. This may literally reduce you to silence.

The academic writing straitjacket may often involve setting very concrete rules of expression. Here's an example: "Only include one main idea per sentence. Keep your sentences to a reasonable length (generally not more than 25 words). Long sentences can be difficult to follow and this may distract from your point. Avoid repetition." (https://library.leeds.ac.uk/info/14011/writing/106/academic_writing/5).

Most of us would wince at the idea. This is far too prescriptive! It counteracts the notion of free thinking and a scientist, an academic writer, is a free thinker *par excellence*. So, are we sacrificing content to form, targeting homogeneity where heterogeneity might be cherished most? Do we really need all this prescriptiveness? If academic writing is a genre in its own right, academic writing in each area being a genre within the genre, are genre boundaries so clear-cut? What about interdisciplinarity? Couldn't we say academic writing is interdisciplinary, a fusion of styles and concepts? Would this lead to a new Babel, opening a huge rift in academia? Should a poet doff his/her poetic attire when writing science and a scientist don the poet's dress in writing poetry, especially in the digital world, where genre boundaries seem to be systematically trespassed? In other words, isn't there room in applied linguistics and methodology for my ex-student, who bitterly quit the course?

This is, of course, not new. The empowering and disempowering properties of discourse have been discussed extensively, as has the role of the individual enmeshed in this power game. Foucault (1969) refers to discourse exercising a power outside the bounds of which one cannot exist while Critical Discourse Analysts argue against the idea of “value-free” (van Dijk, 2001, p.352) language and scholarly discourse, underscoring its socially marked properties and its ability to engage users in complex power roles. “[...] some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream [...]”, says Fairclough (2005, p. 79; see also 2013), so they can get hegemonic, strangling less mainstream means of signification. If applied to the context of academic writing, especially for novice writers, whose experience of the specific discourse order is limited, such hegemony can become most tyrannical. Yet, there is hope for the dissident voice: “social agents draw upon social structures (including languages) and practices [...] in producing texts, but actively work these ‘resources’, create (potentially novel) texts, rather than simply instantiating them” (*ibid.*, p.80). This would mean that learners called upon to produce academic writing need not only reproduce existing wisdom but can also (or inevitably do) make their own contribution, which would make the power game a fairer one.

In Hyland’s (2009, p.25) terms, academic writing is the “fight” between “constraint” and “creativity”, “identity” and “disciplinarity”. It involves “achiev(ing) credibility as insiders and reputations as individuals”; in other words, conformity to the dominant discursual practices of the academic community but also “authorial identity” (*ibid.*). This requires “negotiating a representation of self from the standardizing conventions of disciplinary discourses” (*ibid.*), which is, however, as the scholar admits, “a skilled accomplishment”. If identity only makes sense within a social context, it appears that the only way to achieve it is by meddling with existing discourses (Bakhtin, 1986), adopting and transforming them (see Hyland, 2009, p.26). Faced with the conventions of academic writing, then, students need to strike a balance between what Hyland (*ibid.*, p.27) refers to as “shared norms” on the one hand and “personal traits” on the other.

If the semiotics of initiation into academic writing involves both imitation and appropriation and transformation of community practices, we could argue that the non-submissive voices referred to at the beginning of this note can worm their way into these practices less drably than originally expected. Yet, how exactly can this be done? How can student writers be brought to the point of “cherish(ing) their identity” (Thi Ly, 2003, p.20)? The online guidelines we gave examples of earlier show no resilience. Ivancic and Simpson (1992, p. 170) see this opportunity as “a matter of choosing one among a range of alternatives which seem consistent with one’s own identity” (Thi Ly, 2003, p.19). This is an interesting idea but needs a lot of elaboration to become more tangible. Thi Ly (2003) advocates free writing, among other things, for instance, but how feasible would this be within the space and time constraints of an academic course?

These spatiotemporal constraints are particularly relevant to Distance Education programmes. Academic assignments are submitted online and this involves a very different conception of space and time to what we have known so far. When physical presence is lacking and the time dimension is somehow reduced to the here-and-now, the author’s ‘text’ becomes immaterial in some way; yet, at the same time, by being deposited in an online repository, it also acquires permanence and visibility, alias materiality. It’s non-existent as a multi-dimensional object but also part of the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1989), potentially contributing to the specific discourse order. This could be said to heap quite a load on to authorial shoulders but would also give the student-writer text the agency it may yearn for.

So, how do we as tutors deal with all this? How do we help our students cope with the complexities of academic discourse, without the soothing effects of physical presence? We could make our students into a community of practice, enhance networking, collaborativeness, in the form of online forums, for example, and encourage somewhat unstructured expression in peer or student-tutor exchanges, semi-expressivist writing, which is more “to be learnt, not taught ...” (Hyland, 2016, pp.12-13), allowing space for individual meaning-making, without much interference. A fine balance between this rather “a-social” view of writing (*ibid.*) and its social semiosis features needs to be sought, however, if integration in the academic community is to be achieved, and the ways of striking this balance remain to be carefully and systematically explored. Democratisation of the public sphere born out of the common goals of all interactants would help fight the fear of exposure and might involve openness to the novelty and freshness brought in by novice writers. Tutor and peer feedback could be channelled in the direction of moulding both identity and sameness. Perhaps sameness is, to a certain extent, the stage preceding change, for, as in most other cases, you can only violate the rules once you master them. Most importantly, however, we could try to breathe a knowledge-transforming whiff into our courses, following Scardamalia and Bereiter’s (2014, p.400) advice. This would involve a ‘knowledge building pedagogy’ “based on the premise that authentic creative knowledge work can take place in (learning contexts) – knowledge work that does not merely emulate the work of mature scholars or designers but that substantively advances the state of knowledge in the (learning) community and situates it within the larger societal knowledge building effort”. A knowledge-building perspective might activate the agents of change and accommodate dissident voices, providing a pluralistic learning framework, so interdisciplinary learning and writing styles might be fitted in more easily.

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