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A Reflection on Some of My Recent Research

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Introduction

The study of academic writing has grown enormously in the past 40 years (e.g. Hyland, & Jiang, 2021) and in large part this has been to better understand and address the needs of students and academics who are increasingly required to write (and publish) in English. Whether you see this expansion of English a helpful lingua franca or a rampaging Tyrannosaurus Rex (Swales, 1997), the dominance of English has transformed the educational experiences and professional lives of countless students and academics across the planet. Fluency in the conventions of English academic discourses is now virtually essential as a means of gaining access to the knowledge of our disciplines and navigating our careers. It has also reshaped the ways that teaching and

research are conducted in higher education, not only creating the multi-million dollar enterprise of EAP, but leading to the recognition that native English speakers also benefit from an explicit understanding of the arcane and alien discourses of their fields.

But the field of academic writing has also expanded (and perhaps fragmented) because it offers such rich pickings for analysts interested in a diverse array of the twenty-first century's most fascinating and contentious concepts. Here, in the apparently frozen surface of scholarly texts, we find evidence of interaction, interpersonal engagement, community, identity, power and cultural variation. At the same time, these texts reveal the workings of theoretical constructs such as legitimate peripheral participation, genre, agency and the social construction of knowledge.

These are the issues that have absorbed and frustrated me for my entire academic life and continue to do so in my semi-retirement. Without the burden of administration, the demands of teaching and the relentless petty appraisals of everyday university life, I find myself with the free time to both publish more and more of what I like. In this brief essay I will sketch one of the directions my recent work has followed: looking at some of the diachronic changes which have taken place in research writing.

Diachronic change in research articles

Perhaps at no time since the invention of the printing press have there been such major changes in research and publishing. We have seen, for example, an explosion of journals, papers, doctoral dissertations and books with the globalisation of research and the encroaching demands of publishing metrics on scholars across the planet. The latest UNESCO

statistics report 7.8 million full-time equivalent researchers in 2013, accounting for 0.1% of the global population! This represents an increase of 21% since 2007, or around 4–5% per year (UNESCO, 2017). Combined with career imperatives to publish, this creates a highly competitive environment for academics

Recent times have also witnessed the growth of collaboration and multiple authorship; the expansion of access to a massive online literature and the fragmentation and specialisation of research. Equally importantly, there has been a growing imperative in recent years to reach new audiences and sponsors. Universities themselves recognise that they cannot be ivory towers of learning and have to engage with non-academic audiences. The mantra of ‘knowledge exchange’ now means that many academics are also evaluated on community outreach as well as the academic impact of their work. These historical changes have consequences for rhetorical practices and the way academics write. With my colleague Kevin Jiang, I have, through a series of papers and a book (Hyland, & Jiang, 2019), tried to trace some of these consequences.

Rather than focus on the subject matter of science, we explored the form arguments take, that is, the kinds of claims authors make, how they support these, and how they relate to their readers. This involved exploring articles from the same five top-ranked SCI journals in four disciplines spaced evenly at 25-year intervals over 50 years: 1965, 1990 and 2015. Taking six papers from each journal in each period, this gave us 360 papers of 2.2 million words. The results show that academic writing is not static, fixed and uniform but dynamic, diverse and responsive to changes to the worlds which create it.

Many of the changes we observed in the language of research articles, however, are glacial. The research article is what Hundt and Mair (1999) have called an “uptight” genre: relatively resistant to rapid change. Not only do academics have a vested interest in sticking to

what seems to work for them, but also the majority of those submitting manuscripts to journals are now writing in a second language. Having invested considerable time, effort and frustration in developing the rhetorical skills needed to successfully write for publication, it is perhaps surprising that we have detected any willingness to change rhetorical practices at all. There does, however, seem to have been a shift in argument styles in academic texts over these years.

We have noted, for example, that research articles are now more informationally focused, increasingly contain present tense, provide more explicit in-text reference, and use less abstract language. Writers are giving greater attention to cohesion with both more cases of demonstrative this and with more of these structures containing an attending noun to help readers follow the thread. They are also citing massively more often and giving less prominence to those they cite, even if they are citing themselves, with more references to co-authors. We also found that academic writing is becoming more uniform and less formulaic in its use of lexical bundles as while both the range and frequency of bundles have risen, variation in their use and the proportion they comprise of total words have declined. In terms of interaction, explicit markers of stance and authorial attitude has declined although authorial self-mention has massively increased, particularly the use of exclusive we. Explicit engagement with readers has also dropped significantly, especially in the soft fields, and we could find no evidence of a significant rise in 'informality' beyond an increase in the use of authorial self-mention.

Disciplinary differences

These general trends, however, are more marked in some fields than in others and the most momentous changes are those which distinguish the individual disciplines. In feature after feature, we find our hard knowledge disciplines, biology and electrical engineering, going in very different directions to our soft knowledge fields, sociology and applied linguistics.

Scientists are now, most surprisingly, moving away from their traditional objective, faceless styles of writing where facts are supposed to do the talking, and towards more involved, stance-laden discourses which emphasize the role of the interpreting researcher. We have found both biology and electrical engineering, for example, now employing fewer bundles which focus on reporting research and adopting more forms which carry interpersonal and evaluative meanings. There are also more stance markers, most noticeably self-mention, which clearly indicate the author's role and foreground their control of the discourse. In addition to changes which emphasise authorial stance and features which strengthen claims and ensure readers are clear about the writer's contribution, we can see an authorial repositioning in the heavy fall in references to shared knowledge. There has also been a gradual rise in engagement markers, particularly directives, and a small decline in a 'formal' interactive style. We see these changes as related to the impact of the wider audience for science in recent years and the need to address audiences beyond an immediate group of informed insiders who are less likely to be familiar with arcane understandings and allusions and require more guidance in following the ideas in a paper.

In contrast, and equally surprisingly, we find writers in the humanities and social sciences heading in the opposite direction. Applied linguistics and sociology have strengthened their informational focus, shown by the use of nouns, prepositions, attributive adjectives

and longer words. A trend we attribute to the growing preference for experimental, data-informed investigations in these fields and the growth of applied linguistics as a more sophisticated, empirically oriented discipline. There have also been changes in how writers convey a stance, claim solidarity with readers and acknowledge alternative views. There is now less authorial intrusion and a less visible stance by authors in the top applied linguistics and sociology journals compared with 1965. Writers are using far fewer hedges, boosters and attitude markers (per 10,000 words) and those in applied linguistics are also using less self-mention. These changes, of course, minimize authorial presence in a text and direct readers away from individual interpretation of results and towards data or methodological practice as a source of persuasion.

Similarly, writers in these disciplines are also engaging far less with readers than in the past. The ways that writers take the processing needs and background knowledge of their readers into account is no less important but is now being done with less explicit authorial intervention, with more attended this structures for example. It may be that with increasing specialisation, topics have become more focused and the literature more concentrated, forcing writers into more specialised niches from which to speak to their audiences.

Language change and workplace trends

Academic publishing today is, unsurprisingly, very much part of its times, a representation of a neoliberal view of a world in which free competition sorts out those who deserve to succeed from the rest. This is a culture of constant appraisal where individual achievements are measured in terms

of publications (generally in English and in a limited number of prestigious journals) and citations to those publications (in a wider number of prestigious journals). It is the nature of competition to create winners and losers and for academics this means that, as in most other professions, the workplace is now a more stressful and exacting environment than it was in 1965. It has become a context which valorizes individualism and fetishizes publication.

The changes we have documented across our three corpora are, I believe, a rational response to the changing contexts in which we work. There are strong institutional pressures on academics these days to conduct interdisciplinary research and construct their papers to talk to external funders, commercial sponsors and other non-specialists. Furthermore, with metrics-driven assessments coming to dominate academic careers, the ability to not only ensure the comprehensibility of one's arguments but also their persuasiveness, is now a professional imperative. The use of interactive metadiscourse to both draw on common understandings and create shared associations where this is possible and to clearly signal connections, frame arguments and support interpretations when it is not, is a key aspect of this use. Similarly, with greater competition and topic specialisation it is now more vital for writers to carve out a distinctive niche and define a specific novel contribution as their own using self-citations, self-mention, evaluative that structures and by citational practices which increasingly report prior work more impersonally and with greater emphasis on its contribution to their own research.

Academic writing, then, is not the fixed and invariable form of discourse it is often thought to be. Within these texts there are real people trying to get their voices heard above the clamour of academic competition, seeking to carve out scholarly reputations and research careers. Academic discourses are no different from any other in

carrying traces of human purposes and interactions, and these change in response to contextual circumstances. It would be surprising if the momentous changes we have seen in academic practices did not influence the ways knowledge is constructed and disseminated in the pages of academic research articles.

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