CURRENT TRENDS IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Monica Mihaela MARTA
"Iuliu Haţieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract : This article presents the roles and functions of written academic discourse within the current academic environment, at the same time highlighting its contribution to the construction of academic life. Thus, written academic discourse will be seen as closely linked with the process of writing for publication, especially in the English language, as well as with issues such as the creation of knowledge through discourse conventions and appropriate rhetorical strategies, professional and academic careers, hierarchy, competition and reward. A thorough understanding of the characteristic features of written academic discourse enables academics worldwide to take appropriate action in order to achieve or maintain high-ranking positions in their specialty fields.

Keywords: written academic discourse, writing for publication, knowledge claims, discourse conventions, rhetorical strategies.

Academic discourse refers to "the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the academy" (Ken Hyland, 2009a). According to this description, academic discourse is first of all closely connected with language, which is used to facilitate learning, teaching and the construction of knowledge, and especially with mastery of oral and spoken English, given its increasing role in the present-day academic and scientific environment. At the same time, this account reveals the social dimension of academic discourse, as it is through learning, teaching and constructing knowledge that social roles are shaped, identities created, funding obtained and hierarchies established. Language and the appropriate use of the conventions of various disciplinary discourses are the main tools for achieving these ends.

Written and spoken academic discourse were heavily researched as the subject has gained increasing importance in the last decades worldwide. Numerous authors carried out research on general academic discourse and writing, while others focused on specific aspects related to the particularities of medical, business, or technical discourse. Hyland (2009a, 2011) attributed this growing interest in academic discourse to three major developments in the international educational field. These factors have also greatly contributed to shaping the current academic environment in Romania, as suggested below.

The enormous expansion of higher education in numerous countries resulting in wider access to higher education following social inclusion policies and the more recent availability of international student mobilities constituted the first major development in the educational field. This resulted in a more heterogeneous student population with learners from different economic, social and cultural backgrounds studying together within national programs. It also allowed international students to complete their studies or benefit from scholarships in higher education institutions outside their countries of origin.

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The internationalization of universities was also mentioned in research carried out by Crystal (2003), Swales (2004), Hamel (2007), Mauranen *et al* (2010) and Flowerdew (2013), to name just a few. This process was regarded as closely connected with the spread of the English language as the main means of communication in academic and educational circles, which ultimately impacts on academic writing practices. Two of the consequences of the use of English as an Additional Language (EAL) were identified by Mauranen *et al* (2010) to be the increased focus on "Englishization", as Swales (2004: 52) put it, alongside a new emphasis on the rhetorical strategies employed by non-native academics and the possible influence of culture-specific practices.

Romania also adhered to the internationalization process, with higher education institutions such as "Iuliu Haţieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj-Napoca welcoming students from numerous countries including France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, the UK, Greece, Tunisia, Jordan, Israel, Canada, Australia or the US. This newly created multicultural learning environment impacts not only the students but also the university teaching staff, who is faced with the additional challenge of meeting the needs and expectations of mixed-language audiences who may have been accustomed to different learning styles, teacher roles, evaluation and assessment standards and overall system of values.

This expansion of higher education brought about the second development noticed by Hyland (2009a, 2011), namely the fierce competition between universities that now "fight" for tuition fee paying students as a source of income and financial support. Higher education institutions are also in constant competition with one another in the quest for high positions in international academic rankings, research funding, and worldwide recognition. In many European countries, Romania included, universities are subject to regular external audits by international and national agencies (such as The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ARACIS) aimed at evaluating teaching and research standards for accreditation and funding purposes. Again, additional pressure is placed on university teaching staff, who are compelled to produce excellent results in all fields of activity in order to endure the positive image and prestige of their university.

Finally, the third reason for the increasing interest in academic discourse is connected with the rise of English as the international *lingua franca* of teaching and research activities. The worldwide acceptance of English in the scientific and academic environment has shaped new academic contexts and goals, at the same time creating additional challenges especially for non-native speaking academics. The undeniable expansion of English in academic circles, which has practically turned it into a basic academic skill that scholars around the world must possess for adequate academic performance and desired results, has also been registered in the Romanian environment. The above-mentioned quality assurance audits, including those conducted by national agencies, place great importance on English-language output. Practically, the research activities that bear the most importance within such evaluations are those whose results are published in English in high impact international journals.

The importance of publishing in the national language or in national scientific journals without international impact has clearly diminished in recent years although such publications could be more accessible to specialists outside major university centers, who have limited

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access to international databases and journal subscriptions, or who may not be highly proficient users of the English language for various reasons outside their control. Within this current context of globalization, Hamel (2007) pointed out the increasing difficulty distinguishing between national and international communication for scientific and academic purposes, which could result in loss of national identities. Other possible consequences, such as decreased multilingualism, increased monolingualism, the loss of first language specialized registers, lexis, rhetorical norms and traditions or the gradual peripheralization of national languages were identified by Swales (1997), Crystal (2003), Mauranen *et al* (2010) or Ferguson (2013).

This heavy importance placed on publishing in English in prestigious international journals has slightly shifted the focus from teaching to conducting research activities and publishing. Although excellent results are expected in the teaching field, they rather seem to be taken for granted, while research activities based on national and international funding projects that result in extensive international publication are used to evaluate the members of the teaching staff of most Romanian universities in order to establish academic hierarchies.

In an attempt to analyze and classify discourse, John Swales mentioned James L. Kinneavy's *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse* (1971 in Swales 1990: 42), where discourse is classified into four major types according to which communicative component is given the most importance. Thus, discourse can be expressive, when the focus is on the sender, persuasive, when the focus is on the receiver, literary, when the focus is on the linguistic form or code, and referential, when the aim of discourse is to represent the realities of the world. If we were to consider the initial role of a scientific paper, i.e. to present states of fact, scientific developments, discoveries and their relevance for daily practice, then the discourse of research articles seems to be mainly referential. However, as Swales also pointed out as early as 1990 in his *Genre Analysis*, things do not seem to be as clear-cut as they may initially appear. The above-discussed importance of international scholarly publication shifts the focus away from the referential aspect towards the other dimensions of academic discourse, which thus appear to gain equal weight in a complex and multifaceted equation. The sender (writer) becomes a crucial element in the attempt to present valuable, strong knowledge claims which, if accepted by particular discourse communities, will bring the much desired recognition and reward that scientists ultimately seek. This is where the focus on the referential dimension of academic discourse fades away in favor of writers' "private intentions" and "strategic manipulation" (Bhatia, 1993 in Swales, 2004: 3).

However, in order for claims to gain acceptance, receivers (readers) must be given a chance to take an active part in the construction of knowledge by engaging them as equals via appropriate linguistic forms or codes (disciplinary conventions). The *Discussion* section of research articles is one of the main tools that writers can use to convince readers of the validity and reliability of their knowledge claims, which are often cautiously introduced with the help of hedging strategies in order to avoid possible rejection and negative reactions.

Therefore, mastery of academic discourse for research and publication purposes involves active awareness and knowledge of various intertwined discourse types, which renders academic writing a complex and challenging activity. Given this context, scholars and

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teaching staff must be thoroughly familiar with the particular features of academic writing, which will be covered in the next part of the paper.

Academic writing is a wide term that refers to the act of producing written discourse within the academic environment by all those involved in the academic world, from teaching staff members or senior scientists to novice scholars or students. Thus, various types of texts such as books, chapters, research articles, reports, reviews, editorials but also theses, dissertations or student essays can be analyzed as academic genres or sub-genres. They must each conform to a certain structure and respect conventions and rules that set them apart from other types of written discourse. This section of the paper aims to provide an overview of the most important characteristics of academic writing and of communicating in science in order to provide a clearer picture of the role that texts, authors, disciplines and writing conventions play in the creation of truth, knowledge and the world.

If we were to regard academic writing from the perspective of its communicative goals, the definition suggested by Askehave and Swales (2001) seems to be the most appropriate for covering its two-dimensional character: academic writing is a socially constructed rhetorical artefact designed to present new knowledge and persuade readers of its validity. As a result, academic writers do not focus on propositional meaning only, but also use interpersonal and evaluative meanings in order to initiate the writer-reader interaction required for the acceptance of new claims.

Therefore, the so-called myth of objectivity that scientific writing was formerly believed to possess is also going to be discussed according to the recent findings in the field of academic writing research and the realities of the 21st century. The question of objectivity in scientific writing is fundamental for understanding the real issues that the scientific academic world is currently confronted with.

The first and most obvious characteristic of written academic discourse is the fact that it cannot exist without scientific research, regardless of the field of activity. Consequently, scientific writing and academic research should be viewed as two inseparable entities with closely intertwined features and goals. Some academic genres such as scientific articles cannot be produced in the absence of truly innovative research while others such as books, reviews or doctoral theses also rely heavily on the findings of various types of research activities.

Therefore, scientists and academics must first possess research skills, but also appropriate research tools and equipment in order to successfully carry out scientific investigations in their fields. But, most importantly, they must be able to communicate their research findings through appropriate linguistic and rhetorical devices before these could be acknowledged as such by the relevant discourse community and become new knowledge.

Consequently, a second characteristic of academic writing is the clear distinction between facts, which can be presented with straightforward confidence, and interpretation, which must be introduced cautiously, as it is only inferred or assumed (Hyland, 2007). This is why the scientific knowledge claim is regarded as one of the key elements of academic argument. As Myers (1989) suggested, the construction of academic texts relies on a model centered on claims and denials of claims. By choosing appropriate discipline-specific ways of introducing claims, authors place the focus on themselves, thus stressing the aforementioned

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expressive dimension of academic writing. Furthermore, knowledge claims are usually accepted by a certain discourse community following appropriate interaction between academic writers and their target audience, as members of the respective community. Myers (1989: 30) pointed out that "it is important for discourse analysis and for the teaching of writing to show that, while writing does not involve face to face contact, it is a form of interaction". This observation was made within an analysis of hedging as a politeness strategy in scientific articles and was based on the assumption that "the form of the statement reflects a relation between the writer and the readers, not the degree of probability of the statement" (Myers, 1989: 15).

The interactive characteristic of academic writing, which underlines the previously mentioned persuasive dimension of academic discourse allows authors to negotiate their findings and readers to be active participants in the creation of scientific knowledge (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2002b, 2005b; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Mauranen *et al*, 2010). Successful interaction requires knowledge of the subject matter, the features of the target discourse community, the disciplinary conventions accepted by the community as well as mastery of the language of communication and of suitable rhetorical strategies and techniques (i.e. the literary dimension of academic discourse).

Academic writers have several available resources for appropriate text production. The concept of metadiscourse proposed by Hyland (1998, 2005a, 2009b; Hyland and Tse, 2004) in the fields of Discourse Analysis and English for Academic Purposes was described as "a set of features which together help explain the working of interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users" (Hyland, 2009b: 125). Therefore, metadiscourse views communication as social engagement and analyzes discoursal features which help writers negotiate the reception of texts. These features, which can be used to organize texts, create writer-reader interaction and express attitudes towards both the content presented and the target readers were divided into interactive and interactional resources or devices, where

"The former are concerned with ways of organizing discourse to anticipate readers' knowledge and reflect the writer's assessment of what needs to be made explicit to constrain and guide what can be recovered from the text. The latter concern the writer's efforts to control the level of personality in a text and establish a suitable relationship to his or her data, arguments and audience, marking the degree of intimacy, the expression of attitude, the communication of commitments, and the extent of reader involvement." (Hyland, 2009b: 128).

Therefore, metadiscourse aims to comprehend the interactive and interpersonal resources used by academic writers in specific texts, which means that author familiarity with the expectations of the members of the discourse community they are addressing is essential for establishing appropriate rhetorical strategies. According to this model of metadiscourse in academic texts, interactive resources include transitions, which express semantic relations between main clauses (in addition/but/ thus/ and), frame markers, which refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages (finally/ to conclude/ my purpose here is to), endophoric

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markers, which refer to information in other parts of the text (noted above/ see Fig/ in section 2), evidentials, which refer to the source of information from other texts (according to X/ (Y, 1990)/ Z states), and code glosses, which help readers grasp functions of ideational material (namely/ e.g./ such as/ in other words), while interactional resources refer to the following categories: hedges, used to withhold writer's full commitment to propositions (might/ perhaps/ possible/ about), boosters, which emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition (in fact/ definitely/ it is clear that), attitude markers, used to express the writer's attitude to propositions (unfortunately/ I agree/ surprisingly), engagement markers, which explicitly refer to or build relationships with the readers (consider/ note that/ you can see that), and self-mentions, which make explicit reference to author(s) (I/ we/ my/ our) (Hyland and Tse, 2004: 169)

According to the literature, academic writing also seems to be characterized by the following duality. First of all, it is an institutionalized process in the sense that writing cannot take place outside the confined space of research institutes, higher education institutions or certain companies, as only members of such entities have access to the tools that enable them to carry out research and consequently publish it. The research activities and the writing process associated with them must therefore conform to the norms and conventions of the institution in which they take place. Generally, the main goal of this resulting academic output is to increase the national and international prestige and value of the respective institution, which is usually reflected in positive evaluations and high academic rankings.

However, academic institutions, although often regarded as sole entities, can only function through the endeavor and cooperation of individual members. Universities for instance can only reach top rankings if their staff members obtain outstanding internationally acknowledged teaching and research results. Consequently, as also summarized by Bhatia (2004), a professional has to juggle several identities simultaneously in the same piece of discourse: a professional identity within the respective discourse community, an organizational identity within an institution or organization, a social identity as part of one or several social groups plus an individual identity that reflects his or her self-expression. Experienced academic writers are usually able to effortlessly negotiate all these aspects and thus achieve multiple goals.

This 'institutional-individual' duality renders academic writing an essential link within the academic cycle of publication, credibility, recognition and reward put forward by Latour and Woolgar (1986). Valuable academic writing published in prestigious journals or publishing houses brings credibility, recognition and reward, i.e. prestige but also further funding and support to both individual scholars and the institutions they are affiliated to. Powerful institutions will then attract new and valuable professionals who can contribute to the achievement of institutionalized goals, at the same time gaining personal credit and reward.

The analysis of the social and individual dimensions specific to the construction of academic discourse is one of the issues covered by genre analysis, which pays attention to the "tension between the socially constructed discourse forms and the private intentions of those who have the ability and the socially assigned power to exploit such social constructions to achieve private ends" (Bhatia, 2004: 202). This twofold interest is characteristic of genre

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analysis, which assumes that "conventions of writing are embedded in the epistemological and social practices of communities" but are also used to express the goals and private intentions of authors, as well as their relationships with readers (Hyland, 2013: 97). The presence of private goals and intentions and the interactive nature of academic writing were also identified in other bibliographic resources such as Bhatia (2004, 2008, 2012), Hyland (1998, 2005b), Salvager-Meyer (2000), Hyland and Salager-Meyer (2008), Hyland and Tse (2004) or Gosden (1992).

However, authorial intentions and the means employed to express them in writing vary according to discipline, the expectations of the disciplinary community, disciplinary culture and possibly national culture or mentality. As far as the disciplinary field is concerned, writing in the soft or hard sciences involves not only the use of subject-specific terminology but also diverse rhetorical devices. The differences between writing in the humanities vs. sciences are related with the ways in which knowledge is created and presented in these two distinct environments. While science data are able to speak for themselves in a text, in humanities, careful interpretation and arguing are required, therefore language itself, i.e. the rhetorical choices of the authors and their position in relation with the audience represent domain-specific writing tools and can thus be regarded as data (Gnutzmann and Rabe, 2014).

Also, new information is not typically discovered in the humanities, but rather deduced, interpreted, evaluated or re-evaluated from a different angle, which makes it less quantifiable or palpable. At the same time, the lower risk of replicating research results and refuting findings in subsequent studies allows writers in the soft sciences to increase their degree of commitment through the use of the first person pronoun *we*, while the possessive adjective *our* (*our data*, *our results*, *our findings*) is preferred in the hard sciences for its reduced degree of commitment (Millán, 2010). The concept of facts as data vs. language as data suggests that the commentative language occurring in the humanities is associated with hypotheses, probabilities and evaluation rather than certainties or descriptions (Skelton, 1987).

The fundamentally different ways of creating knowledge in the hard and soft sciences also influence the style and tone of academic discourse as writers in the hard sciences usually assume a less personal style by downplaying their role in the research in favor of the issue or phenomenon studied, thus leading to the impression of objectivity (Hyland, 2001; 2002c; Millán, 2010). On the other hand, writers in the humanities and social sciences seem to be more explicitly involved and to assume more personal positions signaled by the use of interactional markers and overhedging compared to those in the science and engineering fields, who prefer fewer hedges, weaker claims and directives as the most frequently occurring interactive features (Hyland, 2005b).

Such rhetorical choices may also be connected with the individual character of soft science research, which is usually carried out by individual scholars who must then assume sole responsibility for their written statements. On the other hand, hard science research projects frequently involve teamwork, multiple authors and thus a possibly lesser degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition or to newly introduced information. Exact roles are usually distributed within such a research team so that the person in charge of writing the

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article may not have been the one who designed or conducted the experimental research outlined in the paper.

Also, the more frequent use of self-references and self-citations in the humanities and social sciences compared to science and engineering represents another disciplinary difference (Hyland, 2001, 2003). By assuming an appropriate degree of authorial presence, successful academic writers signal their membership to a certain discourse community and gain identity, credibility and authority in their field (Millán, 2010). This observation highlights the importance of writing as an insider of the community one wishes to address, and of selecting the most appropriate rhetorical strategies for this purpose.

Besides the expectations of target readers as member of a certain discourse community, interpersonal discourse strategies may also be influenced by the writer's cultural background since discourse patterns are thought to be culturally determined (Salager-Meyer, 1998), as well as by individual factors, such as seniority or language proficiency, which may influence the degree of confidence and directness with which authors choose to present their work (Crystal, 1988; Burrough-Boenisch, 2005; Hyland 2002a; 2005b; 2011; Millán, 2010; Moreno *et al*, 2012; Johns Ann M, 2013).

In conclusion, although academic writing has been regarded as impersonal and objective, recent research shows that several rhetorical strategies such as the use of personal pronouns, citations, self-references, boosters or hedges are employed by writers in order to successfully support their claims and convince readers of the validity, relevance and usefulness of their findings, especially within the current academic, social and economical context which stresses the importance of publishing in international journals for increased visibility, prestige and subsequent funding. Thus, the format and structure of academic texts such as research articles suggest that knowledge and facts are presented objectively for the sake of the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of truth, while pragmatic text analyses are able to reveal different purposes and a possible "guided objectivity" when linguistic and rhetorical resources are skillfully exploited by experienced professionals.

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