CHANGES IN FORMAL WRITTEN DISCOURSE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC WRITING AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

The development of new communication and information media (ICT) has a considerable impact on the development of the language system, including written discourse. The purpose of this paper is to describe recent changes in written English, which have been caused by the arrival of ICT. Moreover, it also characterizes academic register and explores implications for the teaching of academic writing at university level.

Keywords

written discourse, changes, academic writing, teaching

1 Introduction

Modern information and communication technologies including the Internet have changed the way of communication drastically. People's communication is much faster in transmission, less carefully planned and often not well conceived. As Crystal (2002) presents it, the Internet is a completely new medium of linguistic communication, taking some of the properties of the two traditional mediums, speech and writing, synthesizing them in a novel way, and adding further properties which were unavailable to either. He calls this new language *netspeak*. Netspeak is neither speech nor writing. It is a medium of language which communicates in unique ways. Furthermore, some ICT media, such as social network facebooks or chat groups, make written speech less structured, more abbreviated in its expressions and less formal. Others, such as eLearning, used in education, tries to motivate and encourage a learner in his/her studies and therefore its content must be more dynamic and *eye-catching* to engage the learner. In general, written speech is tending to become more overtly dialogic.

To sum up, common features of IT discourse of communication are the following (cf. Figure 1):
- dialogic form of communication;
- interactiveness and dynamism of a text (animation and movement; change of size and shapes; icons which attract attention);
- heuristic kind of text (it should make a reader think, be active);

- nonverbal means of communication are substituted by punctuation, repeating letters, non-linear text, altering capitalisation, smileys and other emoticons;
- specific lexis (terms of art), such as *forward*, *tools*, *select*, *freeze*;
- neologisms, for example, *usenet*, *netnews*, *atsign*, *knowbot*, *netiquette*, *netizen*, *e-cruting*;
- acronyms (BCC – blind carbon copy, ISP – Internet Service Provider, 3Com – a data-networking organisation);
- distinctive graphics (special fonts and styles);
- tendency to use lower-case;
- a change of spelling, such as kool (cool) or filez (files);
- a slightly more limited range of punctuation;
- tendency to use an informal style of writing, more friendly;
- tendency to use simpler language;
- tendency to use economical language focusing on key words;
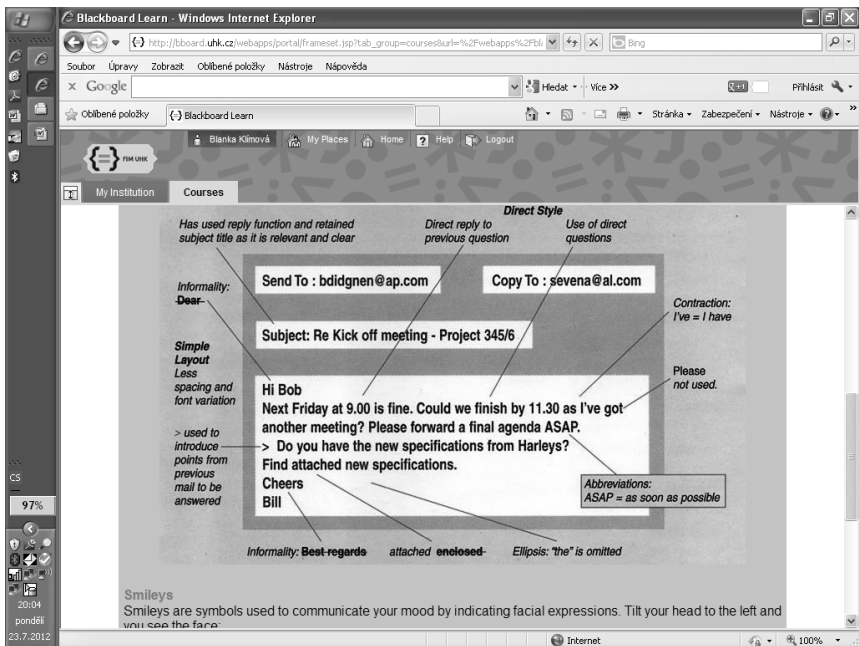- short sentences prevail, consisting of 20 words at most.

Figure 1: Model e-mail correspondence in the eLearning Course of Business English

Even though it might seem that the above mentioned new technologies or media have entered the world of language relatively recently, they have hit the language quite rapidly and influenced it extensively. The development and modification of formal written English language challenged by the impact of modern information technologies can be illustrated as follows:

- written discourse is more freely structured and more carelessly done than it used to be;
- there is a greater tendency to simplicity, either of the topic or the sentence structure;
- the written text becomes more dynamic, which is connected to the use of multimedia, graphics and animation;
- under the influence of IT technologies even written discourse has become more and more contextualized (e.g. *on-line chatting* or *e-mail informal correspondence*);
- written discourse has become more fragmented and non-linear;
- some authors of eLearning texts (e.g. Frydrychová Klímová 2011a or Semrádová 2011) say that short sentences should prevail and they should consist of 20 words at maximum;
- new technologies also affect the use of non-standard English, such as the use of contracted forms or a lack of punctuation;
- written discourse is also tending to become more overtly dialogic and multimodal in its nature.

In addition, Mair and Leech (2006) list the following linguistic changes in English which have been caused by grammaticisation (e.g. the use of progressive forms or semi-modals) and socio-cultural (e.g. colloquisalisation of written English) or ideological (e.g. the rise of gender-neutral coordinated pronouns *he* and *she*) factors:

LOSING GROUND	GAINING GROUND
modal auxiliary	semi-modal
infinitive complement	gerundial complement
be-passive	*get*-passive
of-phrase	*s*-genitive
wh-relative	*that* or zero relativisation
gender-neutral *he*	singular *they* or coordinated pronouns (*he or she*, etc.)

The decline of the canonical *be* passive in particular shows that written English has moved closer to the norms of spoken usage since the latter part of the last century. However, in theory, *be* passives need not necessarily be replaced by active paraphrases, but could be being displaced by a rival construction, such as the *get*-passive, which has increased considerably, both in British and

in American English. Another feature of the shift towards the spoken English is the marked increase in the use of contracted forms, both verb (*it's*, *he'll*) and negative (*n't*).

Overall, one can say that there have been noticeable changes in the past 60 years even in a rigidly codified language variety such as written standard English.

2   Academic register

Academic register is sometimes called *English for academic purposes* (EAP), which is one of the branches of ESP (English for special purposes). As Gillett (2004: 11) states: "EAP refers to the language and associated skills that students need to undertake study in higher education through the medium of English."

According to Robinson (1991: 2-5) EAP is distinguished by the following characteristics:

- EAP is goal directed – students learn English because they need it;
- EAP courses are based on needs analyses – which specify clearly what students have to do in English;
- most EAP courses are fixed-term – short professional courses or longer foundation courses – in preparation for academic courses;
- students may need specialist language, but not necessarily – courses are defined by the activities the students will engage in;
- a very high level of proficiency may not be required – students need to succeed in their aims.

This paper examines one of the skills of EAP and that is the *skill of writing*. Hairston (1998) gives the following characteristics of academic writing:

a) Academic papers, articles and books address some significant content and concentrate on one particular topic.

Good writing says something worthwhile to some readers. For writing to be effective, the readers for whom it is intended should find something in it they want and need to know. It must be something interesting, informative, illustrative, or even surprising. You can test yourself in anything you write by asking yourself the four following questions:

1) Does my paper have solid information and specific details?
2) Have I given examples to illustrate points?
3) Have I added something new to the discourse on this subject?
4) Have I gone beyond what I already knew in writing this paper?

To become an expert in any field of study, you require specialisation and focus. Academics often turn their efforts to working on just one key issue.

b) The audience for academic writing is fairly specific.

Tourist guides write for tourists, financial managers write for financial managers, linguists write for linguists and artists write for artists. Of course, within each of these categories, there are further specialisations: applied linguists write for applied linguists, for example.

c) The tone of academic writing is critical and argumentative, and integrates extensive references for support.

To advance a field of study, academics closely examine previous work and make a critical evaluation of it. By scrutinising the studies that have been conducted before, they identify 'gaps' or 'issues' or 'a lack of information' in their chosen field of study. Their own work is then aimed at filling these 'gaps' or solving these 'issues' or extending this field of study. Moreover, academics are often in dispute over fine detail in their specific field. They each put forward a point of view or proposition, and use their writing to support or defend that point of view. This is argumentative writing. Academics usually use the writings of other academics to support their own position. They use their writings to make references to their own findings. They quote some of their statements.

d) Academic writing is dense, structured and utilises a standard referencing system.

Although it need not be difficult to read, an academic piece is full of complex ideas. Academic language is relatively more complex than spoken language. Academic language has longer, abstract words, and it has a more varied vocabulary. It uses more noun-based phrases than verb-based phrases. Overall, the language has more grammatical complexity, including more subordinate clauses and more passives. As there are so many ideas and arguments in a single piece, the writing is usually lexically dense.

e) Academic papers are written purely in standard English.

As Klímová (2001) states, in academic writing one must avoid colloquial words and expressions. The style in academic writing is very formal and impersonal. Academic language in general has fewer words that refer to the speaker. This means that the main emphasis should be on the information that one wants to give and the arguments one wants to make, rather than oneself.

f) Academic writing is unified.

It is the responsibility of the writer in English to make it clear to the reader how various parts of the text are related. It is essential to help to navigate the reader through the text by different signalling or linking words. And, to make sure that others can scrutinise the arguments, references are used.

g) Good academic writing is economical.

Writers do not waste their reader's time, they try to cut all excess words clutter from their writing. If one wants to hold the reader's attention, one has to work constantly at keeping one's writing focussed and streamlined.

Nevertheless, most of the above mentioned characteristics have been challenged recently (particularly b-f). As Biber and Gray (2010: 18) claim:

"...present-day professional academic writing (e.g., research articles and university textbooks) is one of the most distinctive registers in English. In its grammatical characteristics, it is dramatically different from all spoken registers and most other written registers. It does occasionally use 'spoken' features (like first person pronouns), but the basic grammatical structure of discourse is nominal/phrasal rather than clausal. Academic writing is certainly complex, elaborated, and explicit, but it does not conform to our stereotypes about these characteristics:

- complex: yes, but not in its use of the traditional measures – cf. 'elaborated' below
- elaborated:
  – in the use of embedded phrases, especially in noun phrases: yes
  – in the use of clausal subordination – the traditional measure of elaboration: no
- explicit:
  – in specifying the identity of referents: yes
  – in the expression of logical relations among elements in the text: no."

Thus, on the one hand, academic writing is dramatically different from speech, but on the other hand, it does not conform to the stereotypes of 'literate' discourse. Rather, it has developed a unique style, characterized especially by the reliance on nominal/phrasal rather than clausal structures.

In addition, other researchers, such as Molle and Prior (2008), who report on their genre-based analysis for a graduate course in English for academic purposes at a public U.S. university, suggest that a reconceptualization of the concept of the whole academic discourse is needed. In their study they challenge Swales's (1990) or Bhatia's (1993) genre analysis of academic texts since they consider academic genres to function as genre sets and systems that involve process and pedagogical genres as well as genres of disciplinary or academic presentations. Thus, genres are becoming multimodal in their character. That means different media and modes are employed in the text in order to construct the meaning of the text, but also to make it more comprehensible and attractive to its recipient. Finally, they claim that academic texts are hybrid in their nature because they do not consist only of one type of style and discourse.

To take an example, students of Management of Tourism at the Faculty of Informatics and Management in Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, might write a bachelor paper on describing and promoting new cycle routes in the East Bohemian region. In the creation of the paper they need to visualize and describe different cycle tours, which also requires an inclusion of maps together with their technical specifications. Thus, such a paper will consist not only of rigid, traditional academic sections, such as introduction, methods and literature, or summary, but would also include passages with technical data and their illustrations. Moreover, the paper has to promote the routes and therefore it must attract the reader by its colourfulness, different letter fonts and playfulness of words, which in turn impact the kind of language used in the paper. On the one hand, the language becomes more poetic in its form; on the other, more technical or descriptive. Furthermore, the audience does not have to be so specific since the cycle routes might interest not only cyclists but also, say, potential investors, conservationists or travel agents.

Another example of such hybrid, multimodal writing is writing for Wikipedia. Such writing also involves different genre sets, media and modes. In addition, it requires the writer to have good computer and editing skills (cf. Figure 2).
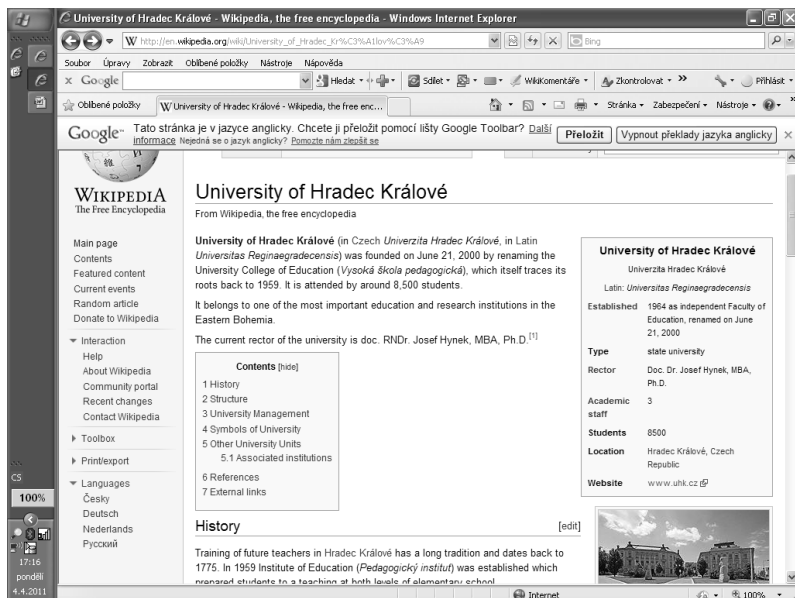

Figure 2: An example of a Wikipedia article

3   Implications for teaching: A specific example of the development of writing skills at university level

Generally, it seems that the skills of writing are the least popular and most difficult skills to acquire. One of the reasons why writing is not easy to learn must certainly be cultural differences in the way academic register is perceived and understood in different countries. Clyne (1987) and Duszak (1994) characterize English as a *low context culture* while German, Czech or Polish belong to *high context academic cultures*. In a nutshell, this means that the English academic texts are perceived as being more clear and easy to understand than German texts which are more complex, full of nominalisations, compounds and modals. However, recent studies prove (cf. Biber, Gray & Poonpon 2011 or Biber & Gray 2010) that academic writing is generally structurally 'compressed', with phrasal (nonclausal) modifiers embedded in noun phrases.

In the Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing are still neglected because writing is still perceived as a linguistic skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools and achieved through the mastering of grammatical and spelling rules. Writing is seen as an individual gift (Čmejrková et al. 1999: 34). In the Anglo-Saxon world, however, writing is perceived as a skill which can be taught, practised and mastered. Czech students also tend to lack experience in writing and therefore the level of their writing is often very poor, even in the native language. This is unfortunately also true for higher education. Gillet (2004) sees writing as the most problematic use of English in Higher Education. Writing tasks vary from writing short answers in exams to writing dissertations and theses, and EAP courses often concentrate on the process of writing – planning, organising, presenting, re-writing, and proofreading. Typical writing skills include research and using sources; writing different text types as well as different genres; and using appropriate style (cf. also Čmejrková 1999).

Undergraduates and even Ph.D. students have problems in writing their bachelor papers, diploma papers and thesis, or even if they are required to write just a short scientific article or review. Therefore, to help university students to improve this skill, one must bear in mind that:

- high cultural and social value is placed on the written version of the language;
- the term *literacy* is almost synonymous with proficiency in the written language;
- key definitions of what is standard language, what is correct and proper and even what is grammar are based on what has been described and codified in the written language (Carter 1995).

At the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Králové, students can enrol in a one-semester optional course on Academic Writing. The course attempts to help both Czech and foreign or overseas students of the faculty. The course focuses on the process of writing from beginning to end, and gives advice on how to write professionally. It shows the component parts of the writing process, that is: envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of a text. In addition, it concentrates on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as citations, compiling a bibliography or using appropriate English. An advantage of the course is also its exploitation. The target group of users is not limited because the course can be exploited as a reference/support course within the framework of any one-year course of professional English. In addition, it can be used as a guide for publishing a scientific article, meaning that teachers at the faculty may also find it useful.

In the course of the semester students usually have five assignments. They are as follows: a summary of a lecture/seminar; an argumentative essay without bibliographies and references; two essays including bibliographies and references and writing an entry for Wikipedia (cf. also Tardy 2010). All students' assignments/essays are submitted via the on-line course on the set date given to them by a teacher. As a rule, their essays are evaluated within three days. They are usually evaluated according to Bacha's (2001) – Jacobs (1981) model. (For more information cf. Frydrychová Klímová 2011b.)

The on-line encyclopaedia Wikipedia represents both a great opportunity and a great challenge for academic writing classes at the faculty. Students exploit it not only as a reference source for general information but actively collaborate in its expansion in their final assignment (cf. Figure 3). Writing for Wikipedia thus promotes the use of critical thinking skills. When collecting information for their articles, students must, for instance, use these skills in order to conduct reliable and valid research. Moreover, students are exposed to autonomous learning. They can, for example, choose their Wiki topic, seek information and knowledge independently from their teacher or decide when and where to start. On the other hand, such approaches to learning make students more responsible for their learning and learning outcomes.
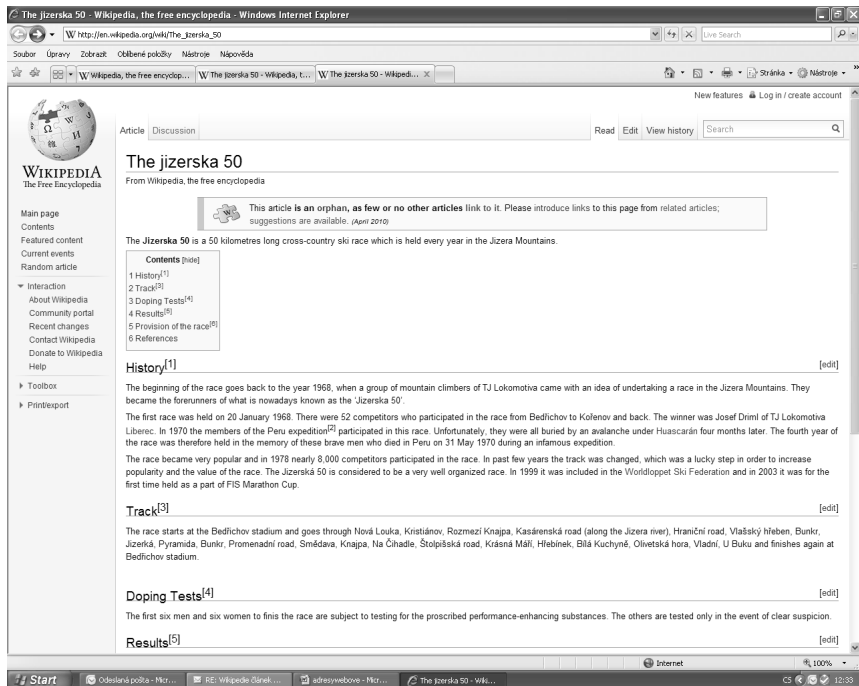
Figure 3: An example of a student's product for Wikipedia

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, formal written language is becoming increasingly more heterogeneous and blended in its discourses and mixing of modes. Undoubtedly, this is being caused by a wish to reach ever more heterogeneous and diverse audiences and to fulfil as many goals as is feasible in a piece of writing. Moreover, there is a tendency for its comprehensibility to affect wider audiences and to put a message across with the help of different media and modes (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). However, in contrast, due to its *compressed* discourse style (using phrasal modifiers embedded in noun phrases), academic writing is much less explicit in meaning (cf. Biber & Gray 2010).

All the above mentioned changes should be integrated into the teaching of formal written English and teachers of English should regularly include a piece of writing into their classes. As students' reflections on the course of Academic Writing at FIM indicate, writing might be quite useful for them:

"Thanks to the subject of Academic Writing, I found out that I need to improve my knowledge of English, mainly in the area of writing articles. I learned how to write references and bibliographies, which will help me later with my dissertation and other essays. I enjoyed the lessons, particularly the work with texts and in pairs during which I learned how to identify errors in the texts. At first, I was afraid of the subject since it is not easy for me to write essays in English, but later on I was enjoying it. That is why I am really happy that I could attend this course."

"…Personally, I learned how to think when writing a text, how to outline its structure and start to write afterwards. Moreover, the classes are conducted in English. I practised vocabulary and grammar and I learned the rules of written speech in English. I considered the course to be very beneficial."

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