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Language variation and change in academic writing: Recent trends through globalisation and digitalisation

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses variation and change in academic writing, integrating different approaches, from English for academic purposes to lingua franca studies and from contrastive rhetoric to discourse analysis, and various comparative perspectives from national to genre/part genre (e.g. research article abstracts or conclusions) or career-specific writings (e.g. BA, MA and PhD theses). It focuses on the interrelated development of discourse as social interaction in the context of technological affordances and societal demands and on the specific applications of the well-known trends of globalisation and digitalisation to non-native academic writing. Of course, the impact of recent changes varies with (sub-) disciplines, genres, and even individual researchers in their construction of careers and identities. The general trends, however, can be observed independently of whether we see them as functional necessity or advancement or threats to established conventions individually. A great number of small-scale empirical corpus studies should be able to provide a detailed mosaic where researchers can collaborate to provide a background for individual academic writers to choose from. Global rhetorical features (like IMRaD) and small-scale usages of pronouns are just examples of current variation and changes that are worth tracing in the wide field of metadiscourse that shapes academic interaction today, for the advancement of science communication and thus of science as a whole.

Keywords: academic writing, technological affordances, societal demands, corpus studies, genre analysis.

1. Research backgrounds and developments

Over the past 50 years, scholarly research in the field of English for Academic Purposes has provided insightful analyses of the rhetorical, linguistic and grammatical features characterising academic prose. It has also offered empirically informed descriptions of the ways in which different disciplinary cultures engage in academic writing practices. If we look at the literature in retrospect, we find early accounts of language use for academic and research purposes in pioneering works such as those of Barber (1962), Connor (1996), Kaplan (1966) and Swales (1984). This seminal research has set the grounds for a large stock of literature that has examined different aspects of academic writing from multidisciplinary perspectives, such as genre, discourse and register, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), contrastive rhetoric and academic ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), to name just the most prolific areas of research. Seminal work in these areas can be found in, e.g. Connor (1996), Hyland (2012), Mauranen (2018) and Swales (2004). Taking a grammatical perspective, research has also provided an important number of corpus-based multidimensional analyses that have claimed that academic prose exhibits economy features at a phrase level that make its discourse style different from those of other written registers such as journalism or science popularisations (Biber – Egbert 2018; Biber – Gray 2012). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to digital media and how new insights into language variation in emerging genres can be gained by comparing online practices with traditional forms of academic writing. This can be seen, for instance, in descriptions of genres such as online registered reports that Mehlenbacher (2019) defines as a rhetorical hybrid of the journal article or, as another example, open access peer reviews that Breeze (2019) describes as having language conventions distinctly different from those of their antecedent genre, the traditional occluded peer review. From a different standpoint, recent genre and rhetorical studies have foregrounded the impact of remediation (or the shift from print form to digital form) on traditional genres that have moved on the web, and the emergence of hybrid research-related genres such as open data articles, video abstracts or open research notebooks, to name a few, that exhibit distinct patterns of language use and writing conventions at the level of discourse pragmatics different from traditional genres such as journal articles, abstracts and laboratory notebooks in print form (e.g. Cavalieri 2020, Pérez-Llantada 2022, Wickman 2016). In sum, this rich stock of research has not only captured a comprehensive picture of diversity in academic writing conventions across English language discourses, academic genres, and disciplinary cultures but

also engaged in the investigation of aspects of language change in relation to genre evolution and innovation in digital environments.

2. Current comparative research attempts and objectives

In this Special Issue of *Token* we build upon this valuable knowledge base to offer critical and reflective views of language variation and change in academic writing conventions in relation to discipline, language, culture and genre-specific diversity. This is in line with previous *Token* volumes on healthcare communication (Bondi – Poppi 2019) or on specialised discourse in general (Cavalieri – Mocini – Turnbull 2020). We also aim to better understand whether traditional language and discourse features merge with new features when new situational and digital contexts arise.

This Special Issue is the outcome of a seminar held at the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) online conference in Lyon (France) in post-pandemic 2021. The seminar, organised by the four co-editors of this issue, was intended to encourage lively participation on the part of both speakers and members of the audience with a view to examining critically the topic under discussion (language variation and change in academic writing conventions) and do so from an international (and cross-national) perspective, by this means aiming to bring together insights from as many different European (English language) departments and universities as possible. The call for contributions of the seminar included an invitation to submit empirically informed (i.e. corpus-based and/or discourse-analytical) studies of academic metalanguage usage (e.g. hedging/boosting resources, markers of modality, reader mentions, and writer self-mentions, etc.), and comparative analyses of argumentative structures, research questions/hypotheses, cohesion/ coherence resources, referencing, and other metadiscourse elements. We also welcomed contributions from all sub-disciplines (linguistics, literature, methodology, cultural/area studies, digital humanities, etc.) in order to establish a comparative state-of-the-art evaluation that could also provide guidelines for postgraduate seminars, summer schools, or on-line teaching.

3. From variation to change

This Special Issue addresses two broad topics, language variation and diachronic language change, narrowing them down to the context of academic writing. Broadly speaking, language variation is the outcome of social interactions,

for example, within and across discourse communities that may or may not have the same linguacultural and/or disciplinary backgrounds and scholarly traditions (Connor 1996; Hyland 2012; Schmied 2016, 2018). Thus, variation in this Special Issue specifically refers to linguistic diversity represented by different scholarly writing conventions and academic writing styles. Differences across such writing conventions and styles can be traced from a range of perspectives, but here the two most salient ones are the intercultural rhetoric perspective and the cross-disciplinary perspective. Along with linguistic, culture-specific and disciplinary differences, further evidence of purported language variation in the context of academic writing has been mainly associated with the phenomena of languages in contact and socialisation into other academic practices and, as a result, the widespread use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF hereafter), particularly in the context of the general expansion and development of English-medium scholarly publications. The ELF perspective assumes that there is no universal standard of 'good academic writing' and claims that Anglo-American rhetoric and recurring lexicogrammar represent just one scholarly tradition for textualising new knowledge and structuring academic texts (Mauranen – Pérez-Llantada – Swales 2010: 664).

On the other hand, diachronic change and, in particular, changes that affect the English language system itself, can be defined as changes that are shaped and constrained by the social and technological signs of the times. Here variation is inextricably related to language change and to the impact that the proliferation of English-medium publications has had on writing in English. Focusing on changes at the turn of the 21st century, Hyland and Jiang (2019: 227-230) have explored research articles by carrying out a corpus-based multidimensional analysis of three moments: 1965, 1990 and 2015. The study shows for example that the social sciences seem to be moving towards greater informational focus and a preference for empirical, experimental and data-informed investigations, while the hard sciences are increasing their use of involvement features (e.g. first- and second-person pronouns, modality, evaluative language and engagement markers). Changes may be related to the impact of a wider audience for science in recent years.

4. From multidimensional analyses to small-scale comparative case studies of non-native writing traditions

Using multidimensional analysis, studies with large-scale corpora such as the Longman Corpus of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al. 1999) and the FROWN/FLOB longitudinal corpora have reported "variety-internal

variation or diachronic change" (Leech et al. 2009: 180), specifically variation of American/British English at the level of grammatical and syntactic complexity (Baker 2017). These studies further report that while some written registers like fiction exhibit an increasing use of colloquial linguistic features, academic prose is a "tight-up register" resisting historical change. Diachronically, scientific writing proves to rely more heavily on economy linguistic features for informational purposes (Biber – Gray 2012: 326).

This Special Issue seeks to complement studies of language variation and diachronic change from genre and register perspectives by offering the perspectives of English for Academic Purposes and academic writing development. It focuses on writing practices in the non-native European traditions, which has an important potential for examining linguistically and culturally diverse academic writing conventions in this geographic region. Accordingly, all the selected contributions explore patterns of language variation and change involving different academic writing practices. They intend to shed light on aspects of language variation and change, and discipline and genre conventions over time, but all enquiring into the use of standardisation conventions cutting across academic genres and languages for scholarly communication. The contributions of this Special Issue cover a range of (sub)disciplines (e.g. linguistics, literature, cultural studies, philosophy, educational sciences and applied psycholinguistics) as well as both traditional and emerging forms of communication online (e.g. journal articles and abstracts, Masters/PhD theses, online newsletters and monograph chapters, research projects websites and corporate websites). Furthermore, they also enquire into academic writing conventions by putting the focus on language variation across linguacultural backgrounds (e.g. Czech, English, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish). While examining a range of linguistic and discourse features, covering rhetorical move/step organisation of the texts, discourse topicalisation, phraseological features, and interactive and interactional metadiscourse features such as stance and evaluation, all the contributions identify language features that indicate or signal continuity or change. They all report on the main tendencies observed in a period of increasingly international dimension of research and they reflect on how such variation and changes should be taken on board when teaching specialised writing across the disciplines and subdisciplines (as in the widely-used textbook by Swales – Feak 2012). Some of the reported findings further attest to the widespread use of English as an international lingua franca, no longer viewed as a language exclusively belonging to native English speakers, by this means contesting uniform standards in academic

writing practices in English academic writing and, therefore, advocating the diversity of particular academic writing cultures and scholarly traditions.

The corpus-based studies compiled in this Special Issue also showcase the synergies that can be created among interrelated interpretative theoretical frameworks and perspectives (English for Academic Purposes, genre analysis, discourse analysis, intercultural rhetoric and English as a Lingua Franca). In doing so, they offer complementary insights into convergent and divergent academic English language usage across various European traditions, cultural contexts and over time. In this respect, these mutually-informing perspectives may pave the way for cross-regional comparisons in future language descriptions and linguistics research in academic writing. Small-scale comparative corpus studies of relatively simple linguistic and rhetorical features may in the end contribute to a wide mosaic of linguacultural, genre- and discipline-specific analyses that are also presented here to tempt individual researchers to contribute either in their own research or their own writing.

As also claimed in other contributions of this issue, diachronic variation in the use of rhetorical conventions (move/step organisation) may be related to socio-cultural factors such as different intellectual styles and cultural patterns or to the influence (or lack) of formal academic writing instruction. It is also concluded that the observed cross-linguistic variation might indicate not only differences in cultural writing conventions, but also in the relationship between the writer and the discourse community s/he addresses. Most contributions report important findings regarding academic language and discourse variation in the use of recurring phraseological units, frame markers, labellers, self-mentions, stance markers and positive/ negative words, among other features, in traditional genres such as articles, abstracts and theses that rely on well-established academic writing conventions. In turn, these findings also further invite reflection on the use of metadiscourse strategies in web-mediated writing practices supported by Internet affordances (e.g. journal websites and research group websites) that are also explored in the last contributions of this Special Issue. These studies could pave the way to future investigations into similar practices in relation to web-mediated genres and social media (Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), where writers need to interact with diversified audiences.

5. Socio-technological changes: The example of academic reviews

The impact of the digital transition on academic discourse has been profound. On the one hand, this has coincided with the internationalisation

of discourse communities and it has certainly favoured it. International scientific communities thrive on evolving technological possibilities that potentially favour access to knowledge and allow for closer transnational contact. On the other hand, the digital transition has also diversified the forms of academic interaction through new platforms, forms of collaborative writing and multiplying the possibilities of interaction both within the discourse community and across different audiences. Academics now find themselves trying their hand at new communicative environments (such as websites or social media), and at the same time have to adjust to changes in more traditional forms of communication.

A particularly interesting example of the multi-faceted interplay between technological affordances and societal demands can be seen in recent trends in reviews (Schmied 2021). This genre has received particular importance because publications in peer-reviewed journals with high impact factors are considered central for an academic career nowadays. The spoken equivalent to the central journal publication in the written genres is the conference presentation, interestingly also called somewhat euphemistically a "paper". Again, the main quality-assurance mechanism is the peer review. In this case, the review is an evaluation of a promise, since the reviewer does not have to comment on a complete paper but only on a conference abstract or proposal, which might be developed into a much longer presentation by the time of the conference – often months ahead. Here disciplinary conventions have to be distinguished: whereas in social sciences the abstract may be much longer and receive more qualitative than quantitative changes, the humanities may leave more room for review adaptations by the presenter.

Recent technological affordances have made the review process cloud-based. Many conferences use general submission systems (e.g. the free Easy Abstract from the Linguist list), which also include a "review facility". Some conferences make all texts available (to conference participants) counting on inspiring constructive and fair academic online interaction even before and after the conference.

The social demands of open science have diversified the review process, as not only conference advisors but theoretically all interested self-appointed specialists can contribute openly online. This allows the author to choose from more diverse evaluations while at the same time often making the assessment of these evaluations more difficult, so that a self-critical confidence rating in addition to other standardised ratings may be helpful. The open review process may be expanded in related online genres like

rebuttals, that allow presenters to comment on reviewers' comments and appraisals, which allow authors to indicate how useful they find reviewers' comments.

Both technological and societal changes have made the review process more accessible and more transparent. Interactivity in the review process has thus created new opportunities and new conventions. Now new open online text types like "How to write constructive online reviews" or even "Criticising with Kindness" or "Mistakes Reviewers Make" can be found.[1]

It remains to be seen whether open reviews are "the solution" to several issues in academic writing today: they may help solve the current problem of finding peers who are willing to sacrifice some of their precious research time to support the careers of their colleagues by evaluation and thus improving their academic output (especially in conference papers and journal publications) and they may also make academic evaluation more transparent, from power-conscious gate-keeping to the functional development of genres. However, it also remains to be seen whether academic writers will be sufficiently rewarded for contributing to improving others' academic texts instead of developing their own and whether they will always provide constructive criticism instead of fighting "Wiki wars" at a professional level. In any case, open science solutions have the potential to bring more social interaction between academic professionals and the general public, but at least between research novices and research experts – which is another important development worth following.

6. Diachronic perspectives through socio-technological and personal career developments

The diachronic comparative analyses or diachronic studies included in this Special Issue also shed important light on the potential of the language of stance to express authorial voice and to construct an academic identity in relation to researchers' professional development over time. All diachronically oriented contributions reflect on the impact of social factors on the construction of culturally and disciplinary defined academic identities, by considering socio-political changes (like the Bologna process introducing BA and MA studies everywhere to harmonise higher education in the EU or the spread of English-medium instruction within the process of

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1   See, for example, https://iclr.cc/Conferences/2020/ReviewerGuide.

internationalisation and marketisation of EU universities [Bowles – Murphy 2020]), the growing status of English as an international language and the size of the national and international discourse community typically correlating with an orientation towards competitive or collegial community dynamics.

The findings of several contributions strongly suggest that the process of integration of local European academic discourse communities in the global scholarly exchange has resulted in considerable idiosyncratic variation in the discourse of L2 scholars. Integration deepens gradually through the functional expansion of scientific writings from digesting science at the beginning of a career, to developing one's own identity through theses writing up to (post-)doctoral levels and contributing to the global advancement in the (sub-)discipline through international research journals and conferences at professional level. Throughout this process, tendencies emerging within the local academic discourse communities interact with changes taking place in international discourse communities, thus leading to multifarious academic identities and considerable diversity in the expression of stance and the construction of authorial voice. These divergences have gradually given rise to hybrid, 'glocal' academic discourses bearing the signs of the dominant Anglo-American academic discourse conventions and of local L2 academic literacies (Dontcheva-Navratilova 2014).

On a more fine-grained level, variation and change might be the outcome of changing scholarly practices, for example, a scholar's expertise, affiliation with local or foreign universities, preferred context of publication, changes in research methodologies or increasing use of open access. Yet all diachronic studies comprised in this volume point to a movement from diversity in rhetorical choices and language means for the expression of stance and voice towards gradual conventionalisation and standardisation over the last three decades. This tendency towards convergence seems to respond to the requirements of the highly competitive research marketplace (Cheek – Øby 2019), where scholars strive to boost their credibility by enhancing the replicability of their research and the informativeness and surveyability of their academic texts. Together with this general trend towards a greater role of promotional elements in academic writing, the studies included in this Special Issue also show convergence towards a more stable generic structure in traditional research genres in the humanities, along the lines of the standards developed in the sciences (Bondi 2022). These findings could further pave the way to carrying out future research on writing within and across the boundaries of academic conventions.

7. Globalisation and the debate of English native-speakerism

It is widely accepted that academia is one of the domains in which English has expanded and become the main lingua franca of international scholarly communication. The predominant role of English was initially viewed as a source of tension with scholars having to choose either English or their national language for publishing their research work. Such a role was triggered by national and supranational research and internationalisation policies in higher education and research institutions, which made non-Anglophone scholars in Europe and elsewhere gradually shift to English-only for research publication purposes. In other words, publishing in English was seen as a policy-imposed necessity rather than as a personal opportunity to share their work in the globalising research world (Ferguson – Pérez-Llantada – Plo 2011; Pérez-Llantada – Plo – Ferguson 2011). Notwithstanding this imposition, research has concluded that academic English is perceived not as a 'language for identification' but as a 'language for communication' insofar as it provides them global access, greater visibility of research and possibilities for international collaboration.

The shift to English for research publication purposes brought about an important language phenomenon that has conceptualised academic discourse as a linguistically diverse discourse. Intercultural rhetoric and linguistic research over the past decades have provided compelling evidence that while the syntax of the L1 English texts is very simplified, with short sentences and straight argumentation, the syntax of the texts written in English by non-native English scholars may be syntactically dense, with greater use of coordination, subordination and complementation constructions. This suggests that the English of L2 writers maintains conventions of the native language and culture of the scholars (Berns 1995: 6). Academic language variation has been traced through comparisons of academic texts written in English by non-native English scholars from different linguacultural backgrounds. At present, there is substantial empirical evidence of language variation in L2 English academic texts, for example regarding aspects of authorial identity, stance and audience engagement. Pragmatic features of the texts also differ significantly across academic English varieties. At the same time, different academic Englishes are shown to share common trends. This Special Issue further attests to the fact that in academic writing there is room for shared normative conventions, whether based on Anglo-American conventions or determined by general evolving features of an international discourse community, as well as for writing conventions that

are more typical of the scholars' L1 epistemological and rhetorical traditions. Academic Englishes have been described in the European context and elsewhere (e.g. South America, Africa and Asia) and research concludes that academic English needs to be dissociated from its native linguacultural roots, and decentralised from the Anglo-American English (core) variety (Mauranen – Pérez-Llantada – Swales 2010). Academic English as a lingua franca contests standardisation, it observes no national boundaries and it has no definite centres. It is part of transcultural flows, with scholars using English in their own ways, constructing their own identities and conveying authorial positioning in very diverse ways.

It is also worth recalling that while these varieties of academic English were initially considered to be "defective forms of English" (Greenbaum 1996: 17) from the perspective of peer reviewers and journal gatekeepers (cf. Gosden 2003), current ELF research very convincingly argues that they are not. They are an entirely natural development of the widespread use of English in academia, a parallel phenomenon to that of World Englishes (Mauranen 2018). Supporting this claim, empirical research has shown that academic communication relies on the use of 'good English', not necessarily Anglo-American English, and that non-canonical grammar usage in journal articles, as long as it does not impede clarity and intelligibility of content, does not hamper acceptance for publication in journals (Rozycki – Johnson 2013; Hynninen – Kuteeva 2017). In other words, from the initial views of academic Englishes as variants or deviations of Anglo-American standards as a result of first language influences and incomplete English language competence set against English native-speakerism, the current view of academic English diversity in scholarly writing practices is one that acknowledges the plurilingual and multicultural diversity of scholarly communication in the age of globalisation (Sano 2002: 49). Today, increasing digitalisation of scholarly communication practices leads to increasing societal demands (and pressure) to reach non-specialised, diversified audiences through open science policies. Open science[2] has become a key driver, aiming to promote public communication of science so that research has a *de facto* impact on society and other science stakeholders (Bartling – Friesike 2014). Considering

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this, it seems reasonable to predict further English language variation and change over time. In fact, this has already been traced in emerging genres that support social accountability of science by relying on dissemination in social media, such as homepages, podcasts, tweets and blogs.

8. Linguistic and discourse variables in national, disciplinary, and genre contexts

The analysis of patterns in academic genres in this Special Issue focuses on research articles, because this is seen as the central genre for research development today. Four articles follow the "national" development over the last 30 years by Czech (**Dontcheva-Navratilova**), Italian (**Bondi – Nocella and Diani**), and German (**Ivanova**) linguists in English. They concentrate on global rhetorical structure and interactional features, such as self-mention and evaluative markers, as they are seen as most important for impact in readers. These diachronic comparisons are complemented by studies on the personal career development of an individual linguist from Poland as reflected in the structure and stance marker choices in conclusions of research articles and book chapters (**Warchał**), on the parallel development of the early career genre of English MA theses in the fields of Linguistics and Cultural Studies from Germany with a focus on evaluative that-complement clauses (**Schmied – Ivanova**) and on the comparison of the use of frame markers by non-native (ELF) writers with a comparable corpus by Anglophone writers (**Guziurová**). Finally, the latest developments in identity construction in European research project websites (with parallel company websites) adds a new multimodal dimension to the discussion of variation and change in academic writing (**Lafuente Millán**). The articles pay special attention to the variation and change in texts written by non-native linguists in English, with occasional comparisons to other languages (like Italian; see **Diani**), other subdisciplines (like cultural studies; **Schmied – Ivanova**) and native English writings (**Guziurová**). Of course, even as a group the articles in this Special Issue are only a small contribution to the wide multidimensional genre mosaic of academic writing today.

The variables analysed in these genres often include a wide range of linguistic and discourse features, especially global rhetorical structures, such as steps and moves, and various metadiscourse features, such as writer-reader interaction through pronouns, frames and evaluative markers. Our focus is on explicitness and transparency, or addressivity

and interactivity, which may be increased or reduced, depending on many individual choices that come together as varying patterns in the academic communities studied in the small-scale case studies here. The focus is not on the "accurate" distinction between specific and generic usage of determiners or the flexibility of idiomatic expressions found in many non-native, SciELF contributions, even in this Special Issue. Whether the few cases where such variation has an impact on readers are more relevant than pragmatic metadiscourse choices is arguable. The patterns observed are interpreted as legitimate diversity in international academic discourse rather than as deviation from a traditional or native norm (cf. Schmied – Hofmann – Esimaje 2018). The patterns found often display predictable variation; some changes point towards more uniformity, which may indicate new disciplinary genre conventions, others may still be within the usual fluidity or hybridity of genres. However, diversity and change are a decisive feature of academic writing and only constant, critical, empirical analysis may show new patterns in the constantly changing technological and societal contexts.

9. Further research and developments

In putting together this selection of contributions, with different explorations of discourses pertaining to a specialised domain of language, we also invite readers to reflect on the important implications for teaching academic writing across languages, writing cultures, modes and media that they pose. Both the empirical (corpus-based) data on language variation and the diachronic analyses of academic writing can provide better instructional support to researchers across the disciplines previously mentioned. The attested linguistic variation deems it necessary to acknowledge the role of ELF as a language variety or rather, varieties or "similects", as Mauranen (2018) conceptualises them, that are closely tied to the rich repertoire of linguistic and cultural identities reflected in English academic writing practices. At the same time, the outcome of the diachronic studies strongly suggests that EAP practitioners need to take on board the increasing use of digital resources for text composing, by this means taking a proactive stand and raising students' awareness of emerging digital writing practices. Indeed, the fast-changing technological scenario brings in new language and communication needs, and therefore, new learning needs. This should prompt reflection on possible ways to address emerging and evolving forms of communication that will very likely reflect language variation and change.

We hope that readers find this Special Issue[3] inspiring and relevant in order to better understand current trends in the rhetorical and linguistic analysis of academic writing and, more broadly, aspects of language variation and change from a diachronic perspective. After all, even though technological affordances and sociocultural changes may be drivers of change, in the end it is up to academic writers and their identities to decide whether they find trends functionally convenient in their discourse communities and follow them or whether they see such trends as unnecessary universals and reject them. In any case, it is important to be aware of variation and change in academic styles and their implications, and we hope to make an informed empirical contribution to this debate to raise critical awareness in general and to empower non-native English, multilingual academic writers in particular to find their place in their local and international discourse communities.

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