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Review: Applied Ling/Writing: Ravelli & Ellis (2005)

Editor for this issue: Lindsay Butler <lindsay@linguistlist.org>

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1. Federico Navarro, Analysing Academic Writing

Message 1: Analysing Academic Writing

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From: Federico Navarro <federicodanielnavarro@yahoo.com.ar>

Subject: Analysing Academic Writing

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Federico D. Navarro, MAEC-AECI PhD Grant Holder; Universidad de Buenos Aires; Universidad de Valladolid

INTRODUCTION

Another illuminating title of the Open Linguistics Series, *Analysing Academic Writing*, first published in 2004, was released in 2005 in a paperback edition, certainly more accessible to scholars. The editors, Louise A. Ravelli and Robert A. Ellis, put together a collection of 14 articles covering 280 pages.

OVERVIEW

All the articles contain common threads that give thick theoretical cohesion to the volume. There is, firstly, a common debt to the Systemic Functional framework, although this varies in centrality in each individual author and article. That the overwhelming number of contributions are from the United Kingdom and Australia is no doubt due to the lively position of this tradition in those areas. Regardless of the theoretical framework and methodology, all articles assume and explore the unavoidable bidirectional relation between text and context.

Secondly, academic writing research is inherently linked to the pedagogical practices associated with its teaching, and thus all articles also share a common interest in the applied consequences of their findings. Again, the centrality of the concern about the teaching of academic writing varies within each article. There are, nevertheless, clear common corpora, the articles' third cohesive thread: students' writing, as opposed to expert or "accomplished" writing (cf. Connor 1996). The corpora include pre-tertiary, undergraduate -- particularly emphasized -- and postgraduate writing.

The editors point out the criteria behind the order of the articles within the book. First there's a group of articles that bring theoretical issues into sharp focus. They can be further divided into two subgroups: the first five articles study the negotiation of interpersonal meanings; the following six articles concentrate on the management of textual resources. The final group of three articles is entirely concerned with pedagogically-oriented research on academic writing.

SUMMARY OF ARTICLES

Ken Hyland, author of the recently published *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing*, is placed at the beginning of the book for good reason. Following a strict, elegant and both qualitatively and (especially) quantitatively integrated methodology, Hyland manages again to show how textual, discursive and ideological variables interweave in a systematic way in his article "Patterns of engagement: dialogic features and L2 undergraduate writing".

Hyland examines how final-year undergraduates from several disciplines in a Hong Kong university handle interpersonal resources to construct writer and reader positions within their project reports. In Hyland's terms, the phenomenon of engagement: "the ways that language is used to anticipate possible reader objections, acknowledge their interpersonal concerns, and explicitly mark and bring readers into their texts" (p. 7). If social, disciplinary and genre-specific factors prompt assumptions about how participants' relationships should be structured and negotiated, we must understand how these assumptions are realized through interpersonal features. This is probably Hyland's major claim in his article. He explores how students easily fail to exploit those features and thus points out the importance of bearing them in mind when teaching academic writing.

Susan Hood, in her article "Managing attitude in undergraduate academic writing: a focus on the introductions to research reports", changes Hyland's focus on the reader for an emphasis on the writer when she studies how evaluative stance is carried out in the challenging context of introductory sections to research papers. It is within this section that the writer must evaluate the field of research and his/her own work by means of interpersonal resources. Just as Hyland does, Hood picks two parallel corpora: the main corpus comprises undergraduate student writing while a second control corpus includes expert writing. The corpora are much smaller than Hyland's, justified by Hood's qualitative methodology. She places her article within the APPRAISAL theory (cf., e.g., Martin and Rose 2003).

Interestingly, Hood argues that there is an urgent need for research on what lies between genre and grammar. She attempts to start

answering this claim as her findings show how ATTITUDE differs when evaluating the researched domain or rather other research and sources. Together with Hood, we believe this holistic position has not been widely advocated as it implies more complex theories and explanation, and more hardly applicable results for teaching academic writing.

Helmut Gruber identifies an overlap of functions and goals in his interesting article "Scholar or consultant? Author-roles of student writers in German business writing". Gruber goes into the relatively unexplored area of research on academic writing in German, narrowing his focus to students' use of modal verbs and construction at the Vienna Business University. He spots an incredibly intriguing phenomenon: business students are placed in a heterogenic field torn apart between two social and disciplinary forces: on the one hand, the traditional role of the scholar who is interested in "pure knowledge". This is manifested textually, for example, in mitigated claims. On the other hand, the modern consultant role follows pragmatic goals so as to keep the business going. This role is manifested textually, for instance, by means of direct commands to readers. The former is triggered by tertiary education; the latter is constrained by real business world practical needs. Gruber picks the Systemic Functional more canonical view, which understands modality essentially as a grammatical resource (cf. comments in Martin 1999).

Gruber finds that deontic modals (i.e., the modalization of proposals concerning third persons) outnumber epistemic modals (i.e., the modalization of knowledge claims), and that modal constructions are scattered throughout the texts, with no preferred sections. Deontic modals are used to advise the reader what to do in specific situations and thus should be interpreted as manifestations of the consultant role. These how-to-do-it commands are widespread in the text and then cannot be associated with any particular function of the genre's rhetorical structure. As Gruber points out, high frequency use of deontic modals clashes with explicit guidelines from university courses, which in Austria do not wish to fully adopt the real business world rules, whereas students anticipate these rules giving birth to their own heterogenic genres.

A more qualitative, case-oriented, ethnographic perspective is adopted in the following two articles. Sue Starfield, in "Word power: negotiating success in a first-year sociology essay", explores how the complex socio-political context of a South African University is manifested, manipulated and recognized textually.

Ben, a black South African Sociology One course student who spoke English as a second language, managed to get a high mark for his essay creating an effective author-in-the-text. Starfield argues that Ben does so by masking his identity - and the expected performance for black students - and accommodating to the traditional conventions of academic language: explicitly signaling the essay's rhetorical structure, typing the essay -- that is, showing access to a computer and the necessary skills to use it -- using categorical verbs to construct an authoritative voice, etc.

This case study proves that successful students in contexts of unequal power such as teacher-student interactions and contexts of wider socio-political differences - such as black South Africans who do not speak English as their mother tongue - are those who are able to create an 'authority effect' (Bourdieu 1977) manipulating the discourse community's textual resources.

Brian Paltridge, in "The exegesis as a genre: an ethnographic examination", studies the communicative situation where the exegesis genre - somehow similar to and somehow different from the thesis genre - takes place. In this 'textography' (Swales 1998) of the genre, Paltridge pinpoints its uniqueness analyzing key features of the texts: the setting, the purpose, the content, the intended audience, the relationship between the writer and the readers, the discourse community's expectations, the structure and language, etc. These are the relevant aspects according to the ethnography of writing framework (Grabe and Kaplan 1996). Paltridge further argues, consistently with his perspective, that the literacy in the academy is not unique, fixed or monolithic.

The second group of articles, textually-focused, opens up with Ravelli's "Signalling the organization of written texts: hyper-Themes in management and history essays". Ravelli's assumption is that

successful students' writing signals the argumentative development of the text. She focuses on the higher-level structuring via hyper-Themes in first year university essays in management and history.

Hyper-Themes provide a framework for the essays, enabling the writer to connect previous and future points in his/her text. This encapsulation of texts' content, by means of grammatical metaphor, semiotic abstraction or metadiscursive labels, indicates the successful management of the necessary abstraction by those students. In addition, Ravelli demonstrates that preferences vary among disciplines.

Ann Hewings' "Developing discipline-specific writing: an analysis of undergraduate geography essays" also attempts to understand the correlation between the use of Theme and successful academic writing. She contrasts the gradual development of writing skills in first and third-year students of geography. First-year students' essays show unmarked topical Themes among other textual features which reflect the students' lack of knowledge of academic writing in their discipline. In contrast, third-year students widely exploit Theme as a resource for encoding 'angle of the message', that is, for signaling argument development or their view on the topics analyzed.

Hewings, together with Caroline Coffin, further studies Theme in "IELTS as preparation for tertiary writing: distinctive interpersonal and textual strategies". In a corpus of short argumentative essays written by non-native speakers of English who wish to enter Anglo-Saxon universities, the authors examine what is considered appropriate university-level writing. They focus on textual and interpersonal meaning, the former being manifested by means of Theme, the latter concerning evaluation by means of APPRAISAL.

The major findings concern the widely spread use of resources which do not match the target academic register, namely an excess of authorial intrusion and a regular use of HEARSAY. We have to pose a question as to whether the cultural background of the writers is homogeneous enough if we select them uniquely on the basis of their mother tongue, as the authors do (cf. similar objections in Taylor and Tingguan 1991).

Both Mary Schleppegrell's "Technical writing in a second language: the role of grammatical metaphor" and Youping Chen and Joseph Foley's "Problems with the metaphorical reconstrual of meaning in Chinese EFL learners' expositions" deal with grammatical metaphor in English as a Second Language as a key feature of academic writing (cf. Halliday and Martin 1993).

Schleppegrell's study departs from the identification of a new profile for second language students in tertiary education in the USA: an immigrant who went to that country as a child or adolescent with undeveloped writing skills in their mother tongue. This means this student cannot realise easily what constitutes key features of academic register.

Schleppegrell claims the necessary teaching to solve this lack is not usually central in English for Specific Purposes instruction, more focused on sentence-level analysis or rhetorical strategies, but not on meaning-making throughout texts. Students need to practice developing and using technical terms with increasing levels of abstraction in their texts, as well as handling overall structuring and evaluation of contents.

Chen and Foley's comprehensive study covers two hundred texts written by Chinese EFL tertiary-level students, mostly in science and engineering. Assuming that Chinese EFL students find putting up with buried reasoning (Martin 1985) one of the most challenging aspects of their expository writing, Chen and Foley attempt to find out if this is prompted by students' mother tongue interference. One particular interference consists of the irregular remapping between grammatical and semantic categories in the complex metaphorical realization. This is manifested, for instance, in the inappropriate choice of a grammatical unit, such as adjectives for nouns or verbs for nouns. The authors, following Schleppegrell's claim, suggest transcategorization exercises should be foregrounded in ESL textbooks.

Robert Ellis, with his article "Supporting genre-based literacy pedagogy with technology - the implications for the framing and classification of the pedagogy", and Helen Drury's "Teaching

academic writing on screen: a search for best practice" open the third group of pedagogically-centred articles, both focusing on how to accommodate current teaching methods to the inevitable rising of technology in the classroom.

If technology is introduced into genre-based literacy pedagogy, Ellis argues, a technical discourse is added to the already complex layers of discourse operating within the teaching and learning process. Ellis warns this extra discourse may potentially dominate the other, more important discourses. Technology provides more detailed interaction with students' particular needs (e.g., selection, timing, etc.); this also means that the student's control over the learning process increases.

Drury also spots the students' closer interaction with the learning process when incorporating technological means. This may constitute a huge disadvantage for students who cannot become available of their own learning needs. Interaction with other students and the teacher, on the one hand, and computer programs specifically designed to help the student find his/her own right learning path (e.g., setting them diagnostic tasks), on the other, are suggestions Drury makes.

Janet Jones' "Learning to write in the disciplines: the application of systemic functional linguistic theory to the teaching and research of student writing" closes this volume with extensive exploration of the applicability of the SFL framework for teaching academic writing. It seems that this theory, which was in fact originally developed closely related to teaching needs (cf. Thompson and Collins 2001), is especially enriching to make students realize how texts relate systematically to their contexts.

FINAL COMMENTS

Analysing Academic Writing is specifically centered on non-expert writing and it is within this scope that it manages to keep a successful balance between theory and practice, between pedagogically-triggered questions and theoretically-based tentative answers. It would have been interesting to see the Systemic Functional framework more integrated with a genre-based approach, that is, with

an account of rhetorical structures, which are in general backgrounded in the articles.

Including both language one and language two writing, and presenting contributions from various countries and research centers, the volume nevertheless keeps its primary focus on English, our lingua franca in academic settings. Nevertheless, the volume would have presented a wider, more comprehensive perspective, had it included some studies on languages other than English.

On the whole, this book gives a clear hint of where research within the Systemic Functional framework is aiming at and convincingly demonstrates how productive this framework is for, precisely, analyzing academic writing.

References after each individual article, authors' short curricula vitae and use of similar section headings constitute paratextual details which assist a smoother reading of the volume.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Federico Daniel Navarro is currently attending PhD courses from the Universidad de Valladolid, Salamanca and León, holding a grant from the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional. His research interests are discourse and genre analysis of Spanish academic writing. He is based at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), where he teaches General Linguistics and does research on the production of the Instituto de Filología 'Dr. Amado Alonso'