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IDENTITIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

This article deals with the difficulties encountered by students in academic writing as they struggle to find the means of producing high-quality texts. Studies show that regardless of the discipline, students must create a new identity both as (novice) writers and as competent members of a disciplinary community. When writing in a foreign language, the hindrances increase in number. The article identifies several of the factors which influence the quality of academic texts, which derive from the identity crises faced not only by students but also by professional writers, such as the practices of academic writing, cultural differences specific to academic communities and the challenges brought about by the particularities of writing in native and foreign languages.

Keywords: academic writing; foreign language acquisition.

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1. Introduction

This paper has as its starting point the upcoming doctoral thesis entitled *Use of Chunks in Academic Writing*, which is concerned with how students write academic texts in English and German. Apart from identifying and listing cultural, disciplinary and linguistic differences in academic writing, this paper aims to change the point of view and to focus on the individual and on one's identity as it is expressed in academic texts.

Academic writing is problematic, as learning how to write professionally is a lengthy process. Students must learn not only how to do research or how to structure their ideas, but also how to present their findings, and overall, how to engage in scientific communication with their peers. However, not all students produce texts which achieve the expected results. One identified cause is the writer's identity which may come into conflict with the identity imposed by the academic community. This problem may be encountered by the students who write in a foreign language and it adds to the problem posed by the said foreign language itself. However, even students who write in their native language experience identity crises which influence the quality of their academic texts. Furthermore, scholars may also feel estranged from their true identity as writers and from their own work while following the strict rules of academic writing.

The rules of academic writing are not the same, even though they share several common principles. They differ according to discipline and local/national academic culture. In other words, contexts shape the academic communities and their writing principles, and therefore they influence the academic/writer identity, as well. Lexical constructions differ according to register, genre and discipline, because they are means of achieving not only fluency in written communication, but also of gaining access to the

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linguistic, disciplinary and academic community (Bennett & Muresan, 2016, for instance, highlight the differences existing between academic writing in English and academic writing in Romance languages). But contexts and traditions inherent to academic cultures shape not only language, they influence also linguistic identities. Writers (novice or experts) who produce texts in more than one language, and who engage in scientific communication with more than one community, must juggle with their several identities in order to achieve cohesion.

This paper starts by presenting some of the problems encountered by both students and scholars in creating, reshaping and expressing their identities in their academic texts written in first and second language. The paper then reviews a selection of studies that analyse how learning a foreign language can influence learners' identity and vice versa. Lastly, conclusions are drawn and perspectives for future extended analyses are outlined.

2. Writer's identity and academic writing

Christian Beighton (2020) conducts a study in British universities in order to discover why students cannot obtain the expected results in academic writing. Beighton approaches academic writing from the novice writer's perspective and proposes the term "xenolexia" to define the feeling students get while learning to write in college. The author argues against other terms such as "foreignness" or "academic alienation", but also against the idea that students' writing skills are below academic requirements due to "lack" (of skills). Beighton (2020, 211) opines that student writers experience xenolexia, rather than alienation, due not to a deficit, but to excess: "writers can seek to amputate an important part of their (academic) identity by rejecting practices which they find alienating." Through unfamiliar language and practices, students perceive an external entity which imposes rules (academic conventions) of accessing the academic (writing) community; the said rules cannot be eluded, they must be followed accordingly; those who do not do so are not accepted. Therefore, they feel excluded from the community they want to access, which is perceived as exclusivist, elitist and inflexible (Beighton, 2020).

By following the academic writing conventions, students are forced to acquire a new identity, a process of deconstructing, building, reshaping and hybridising old and new identities. The teachers interviewed in the studies are aware of how their students feel and acknowledge the relationship between what students are and what they are supposed to be, in the sense that academic texts and academic writing impose a new identity to which they might not be attracted. As pointed out by one interviewee, "remarks about boundaries and identity-rejection imply that academic writing conventions express power relations of a unilateral, alienating sort. But ... the extent to which a writer has invested in these relations is important in defining their response to them." (Beighton, 2020, 214) Therefore developing academic writing skills is a much more complex process that gives rise to identity/identities crises and finally to the birth of a new one. Students' (writers') response to these changes and crises is paramount.

This is understandable if one considers Lyotard's (1984, 23) account on language and knowledge. For him scientific knowledge is defined by two games "the research game and the teaching game". By this he means that knowledge, in order to be considered scientific, must be shared, debated and validated. In order to do so, the parties involved in this exchange must be equally qualified, to share the means of reasoning and communicating. Sometimes a second party must be created. This is the case of teaching which, if successfully conducted, produces new experts, who in their turn will continue the research game. Novices must gain not only knowledge, but also research skills in order to operate with what they learn, and what is left to be learnt. Lyotard implicitly reveals the importance of academic culture – it provides a strict set of rules and practices which help researchers discover authentic, valid "scientific knowledge" (although the term "authentic" might be inappropriate in the context of postmodernism). Culture, however, seems to have a much more explicit acknowledgement in the case of "narrative knowledge" (Lyotard, 1984, 18), science's counterpart, which nevertheless must also be validated by observing rules and practices, but of a different sort.

Sommers & Saltz (2004) pose the question why some students do produce high quality texts in college, while others do not. After analysing freshmen's texts but also interviewing them, the two authors come

to the conclusion that students' attitude towards writing is a key factor in developing academic writing skills. Successful writing students take two steps in the course of their first academic year. First, they "accept their status as novices" (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, 145) as they understand that college education implies much more than gaining scientific knowledge, and it includes learning how to write texts suitable for academic environment. Secondly, they "see a larger purpose for writing other than completing an assignment" (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, 146), which marks an increase in motivation for both writing and improving their texts.

Petric (2002) also analyses factors which influence the quality of students' academic texts, and shows that the development of their writing skills is influenced by their attitudes towards writing, as a result of their experiences. Again, academic writing is seen as a process, which, this time, is influenced by the way students perceive it and its products. Perception of the writing experience is analysed also in the study conducted by Bekar and Yakhontova (2021). The authors interviewed students who were writing their BA or MA thesis in their native language or a foreign language. Starting from the idea that within academic/writer identity several selves are to be observed, Bekar and Yakhontova (2021) identify four phases through which students go during the writing process: "anxious writer", "supported writer", "independent writer" and "triumphant writer". These four types of writers are shaped by multiple factors, all deriving mostly from the relationship between the students and their supervisors.

However, Pearson Casanave (2002) observes problems of writer identity even among professional academic writers. In the chapter entitled "Bending the rules", she points out how several scholars, including herself, feel the need to go beyond the conventions of academic writing in order to express themselves as writers. Professional writers also want to express their identities more, to "become visible in their writings" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 223) and tend to bend some of the rules of academic writing. Such moves, however, are risky because they lead to "unconventional textual identities" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 224), which are not easily accepted by the academic community, if they truly ever are. Therefore, even those who have gained a place in the academic community feel estranged from their true selves: "At some level, in other words, I worry about telling lies, about myself and about the informants in my research, simply because the language I use and the brevity, linearity, and structure of my prose force fabrication" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 254-255). The writer's identity influences the reader's identity, and considering that part of the readers of an academic text are students, the identities involved in the teacher-student relationship are also influenced, resulting in more complex conflicts.

Several studies reveal the emergence of a new "type" of academic writing among professional writers and students, one less strict and stern. Pollock and Bono (2013) show the importance of borrowing elements from the creative writing genre, namely from storytelling, in order to change the way academic writing is perceived by both readers and writers. The necessity of such a change is derived yet again from writers' identity crises, who need to create a bridge between "producing research reports" and writing. Taylor (2017) also advocates for more creativity in academic writing. Highly influenced by Seamus Heaney's lecture in 1974 on poetry, Taylor (2017) draws parallels between the two genres, underlining the necessity of borrowing some of the "tools" used in poetry in order to humanize academic writing, which, in Taylor's opinion, is "suffering from a lack of feeling in words ... mechanical ... logos-driven and decisively unfeeling" (Taylor, 2017, 37). Finally, Hutton and Gibson (2019), in their study on students' texts, identify a third type, a hybrid form that combines features of academic and creative writing. The "academic-creative hybrid" shows fewer constraints and allows students to discover their writer identity (Hutton & Gibson, 2019). Such students, according to the authors, perceive the writing task "not as repetitive practice in one or another narrowly conceived skill set or form, but as an open-ended exploration of rhetorical features and generative strategies" (Hutton & Gibson, 2019, 106). All these studies highlight the necessity of a change in academic writing that gives writers, both experienced and novice, more freedom for expressing themselves.

Academic writing conventions, however, are constructed not by one general unitary community, but by each and every single cultural smaller community from all over the world. Clyne (1987) conducted several studies in which he compared academic texts written by both English-speaking and German-speaking authors. His conclusions underlined differences between the Anglo-Saxon and the German

academic registers. German texts are less linear than their counterparts due to a large number of digressions. Clyne's study shows also that digressions behave differently in German and English academic texts. If digressions in English texts are the result of a poor structuring of the texts, in most of the German texts they have specific functions such as adding new information, clarifying theoretical or historical background, or engaging in polemics with other authors. The large number of digressions and their different size make German texts more asymmetrical than the English ones, as well as more discontinuous. Furthermore, English academic texts belonging to German-speaking writers preserve the same characteristics which define the German academic register.

In a study that analyses the English, French and German academic work of professional writers, Siepmann (2006) opines that different educational systems will give birth to cultural differences in academic communities and, therefore, in academic writing. He notices differences in academic writing on structural and linguistic levels. For example, English academic writing prefers a "linear structure" where the "the main point is usually made at the outset of the argument", while German academic writing prefers a "spiral-like structure", where "theoretical exposition prepares for the main point to be made at the end of the argument" (Siepmann, 2006, 142). Also the use of metalanguage differs, in the sense that it occurs less in German academic writing than in English, where it occurs in certain parts of the text. Another example is the relationship between writer and reader in respect to knowledge: in English academic writing, the writer has the responsibility of sharing knowledge, since it is assumed that the reader knows less; another responsibility of the writer is to get the reader's interest in the text by showing its value; while in German academic writing, the reader is responsible for seeking knowledge, since it is assumed that the writer and the reader share this knowledge (Siepman, 2006). Considering the author's responsibility in English academic writing, the use of "authorial self-references" and a "cooperative writing style" are evident, while in German academic writing such self-references are less frequent, "impersonal constructions" and "inclusive *we*" being preferred, resulting in an "author-centered writing style" (Siepmann, 2006, 143).

Pearson Casanave (2002) describes professional academic writing as a game where, again, one's identity is defined in terms of pertaining to the community of academic writers. She opines that this identity is one to be built in time, therefore a process which involves initiation, e. g. graduating school, where the "graduate student" identity is formed, followed by the transition towards "novice ... specialist" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 208). Again, the concept of identity is linked to perception - how one is perceived by the community, and only then how one is perceived by themselves. Pearson Casanave (2002) conducted a study focussed on how multilingual scholars write, and how multiculturalism affects their identity as writers and academics. Her observations in Japan on scholars who professionally write in both Japanese and English (as second language) comprise three main ideas: the interviewees perceive writing as something which defines their professional lives; all of them underwent a process of transition from "simple writing life as graduate student ... to a complex writing life as a university teacher and researcher" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 212), a process which challenged their capacity of managing time and stress but also their social skills in relation to third parties who were in "positions of power"; all interviewees saw academic writing in Japanese and English as two different cultural contexts; if in the U.S. they had to write to an international audience, which involved an international collaboration with other scholars, in Japan academic writing meant "belonging to the right institution or association and knowing the right people, at which point opportunities became available to present and publish without severe criticism" (Pearson Casanave, 2002, 212). The author concludes that bilingual writers learn to play two writing games because they find themselves in different academic settings or communities, which have their own distinct rules; therefore, it is understandable the difficulties these writers face when building their (one, unique and consistent) scholarly identity (Pearson Casanave, 2002). From a pedagogic point of view Pearson Casanave (2002, 217) concludes that teaching academic writing should be conducted not through learning the rules from textbooks, but by exposure to "local practices of writing" and to the multitude of such practices, which differ from a cultural context to another.

Zawacki & Habib (2014) also analyse how cultural differences in academic writing are perceived by writers, focussing however not on scholars, but on students. In their study they interviewed students

with of different nationalities enrolled in American universities. Many of the interviewed foreign students stated that writing in English meant for them losing the beauty, richness, complexity and culture of their native language. They face the challenge of switching from a “rich” and “abstract” writing style, specific to other academic cultures, to a “simple” and “direct” one, specific to American academic culture (Zawacki & Habib, 2014).

3. Identities in SLA/FLA

Ellis (2015, 248) sees social identity from a postmodern point of view, where “identity” is not a construct belonging to each and every single individual, but continuous processes shaped by the relations in which the individual engages: “our social identities do not constitute fixed traits, but rather exist in a state of flux as they are discursively constructed through participation in interactions with different people in different contexts”. Therefore, the social identity from the postmodern point of view is “multiple and non-unitary, ... complex and inherently subjective, ... dynamic” (Ellis, 2015, 248-249); they are also subject to conflicts. Ellis also mentions the concept “transnational identity” as something belonging to multilingual learners, or “fluid identities” (Ellis, 2015, 250); several studies showed that multilingual learners have and juggle with several identities, especially in multicultural, multi-ethnic or multiracial communities, in the sense that members of different social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds develop a common identity that represents a certain community, not the communities from which the members belong (Ellis, 2015).

Miller and Kubota (2013) place the new tendencies in SLA/FLA research in the context of poststructuralism. They argue that the focus on identity “is an aspect of postfoundational inquiry which rejects the modernist notion of fixed objective and universal truths, and acknowledges the fluidity and plurality of language, culture and identity, while problematizing how knowledge, including the sense of self, is constructed in power and discourse” (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 231). Therefore, this approach in SLA studies is concerned with the manifestations of one’s identity, rather than external factors which determine one’s identity. The authors see identities as “constructed in discourse and within relations of power” (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 232), and since power is not static, but dynamic, conflicting identities arise. When extending this understanding to SLA, the authors argue that within the identity of a learner, changes take place. Such changes do not involve the creation of a new identity which is then added to the previous one, but they are seen as processes “of creating something new, a *third space* or hybrid identity” (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 232).

SLA researchers such as Miller & Kubota (2013, 233) analyse FL learner identity by acknowledging “power relations, social contexts and discourse”. Hence the two writers mention a series of identity types: heritage learners, gendered learners, racialized identities, noting that one’s cultural/ethnic background, gender, race have their influences on learner’s identity Miller & Kubota (2013, 244). Multilingual learners and non-native teacher identities are other types of identities on which researchers have focussed. As an example, they quote several studies such as those conducted by Lee, McMahill or Ibrahim, which proved how learning a foreign language changes one’s identity: Jin Sook Lee found in a study on college students belonging to ethnic minorities in the US that learning their heritage language helps them build a new identity, distinct than or complementary to the American one (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 237); Cheiron McMahill found out that Japanese women develop an empowered identity while learning and speaking English (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 243); Awad Ibrahim found out that African male immigrant students developed a type of “black” identity specific to the American continent, by learning an English variety used in hip-hop music (Miller & Kubota, 2013, 245).

For Duff (2012), identity is “crucially related to one’s core self (or senses of self)” (Duff, 2012, 415) even though, “traditionally was understood in terms of one’s connection or identification with a particular social group, the emotional ties one has with that group, and the meanings that connection has for an individual” (idem). Also, there are “multiple possible social groups or roles that individuals such as language learners may identify with at any given time and how language (or discourse) itself works to construct those same identities situationally” (Duff, 2012, 416). Indeed, there is a plethora of internal and external factors which shape the learner’s identity; studies conducted in SLA, FLA and

heritage language learning but also in first language literacy show that learner's identity influences the learning process, but also vice versa, the experiences and knowledge gained while learning a language shapes one's identity.

4. Conclusions

Building on the literature on the interdependences between writer identity and various academic communities, this study illustrates how one's identity is influenced by the academic community and the rules it imposes on academic writing, but also by the process of learning and using a foreign language or more. Each social group develops its own culture with its own conventions, and its own language with its own rules of speaking and writing. In other words, each community develops a certain identity and its members must share this identity if they want to be accepted and integrated. Such is the case of the academic communities all over the world, which share a set of principles, but nevertheless tend to differ from one another in terms of practices (as seen in the case of American versus Japanese academic settings, or in that of Anglo-Saxon versus German). Novices must learn to meet the standards of the community/communities to which they strive to adhere.

As shown in the quoted studies, not only students but also professional writers sense a threat against their identities posed by strict rules. Their work in a discipline or another, gains the "scientific work" status only when it is shared with the rest of the members, after being analysed, scrutinised and eventually validated. However, they must present themselves and their findings in a manner considered appropriate by their peers. Over the past years, some scholars have started to advocate for a change in academic writing and encourage their students but also their peers to borrow "tools" and techniques from creative writing, be it poetry or prose, so that means writers can engage not only with their readers, but also with their true selves.

Finally, each discipline has its specific linguistic means of doing academic writing. Students face problems understanding and using metalanguage and special formulaic patterns when writing, regardless of the language they use (their native language or a foreign language). The quoted studies invite teachers to approach academic writing courses in a holistic manner, by focussing less on how to cite and paraphrase, or how to structure each paragraph of a text, and more on practising the use of language in scientific written communication, and on encouraging students to find their own identity as writers, and members of the academic community.

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