

English academic style manuals: A survey

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey of English Academic Style Manuals conducted between 2004 and 2007, designed to establish whether English Academic Discourse is sufficiently well-defined as a concept to be useful for translation research. Although, with the current emphasis on genre and disciplinary differences, it is fashionable today to speak of Academic Discourses in the plural, the survey revealed a remarkable consensus as regards general principles, methods of textual construction, and the kinds of grammatical and lexical features to be used. This suggests the existence of a common framework underlying all EAD, thereby supporting the claim made by Systemic Functional linguists that there is an ‘essential continuity between humanities and science as far as interpreting the world is concerned’ (Martin, J.R. (1993). *Technicality and abstraction: language for the creation of specialized texts*. In M.A.K. Halliday & J.R. Martin (Eds.), *Writing science: Literacy and discursive power*. (pp. 203–220) Pittsburgh & London: University of Pittsburgh Press).

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1. Introduction

When viewed from outside Anglophone culture - from the perspective of the foreign academic, EFL teacher or translator, say – English Academic Discourse appears to be a relatively easy entity to define. Compared to the plethora of alternative writing styles available to academics in some other cultures,¹ it seems rigidly standardized and rule-bound, monolithic even. This impression is reinforced by the multitude of university courses and style manuals available to teach it, not to mention the rigorous standards imposed by academic journals, all designed to ensure that submitted texts are in line with community expectations. The total effect is of a massive impersonal machine, where individual quirks are ironed out in the quest for uniformity and where there is no place for the ‘personal voice’ of the kind that prevails in more humanistic cultures.

From within English academia itself, however, the picture appears more nuanced. Indeed, the impression of homogeneity has been largely undermined by the large body of scholarship that has been undertaken by descriptive linguists into the way in which academics actually do write in real life. Their work, which includes corpus-based studies, genre analysis, disciplinary comparisons and contrastive rhetoric, suggests a wealth of variation between

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¹ This assertion is based upon an extensive study of academic discourse in Portugal in which I have been engaged. See Bennett, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; McKenny & Bennett, 2008.

different academic genres (eg. Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 2002) and disciplines (eg. Hyland, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Samraj, 2002), and even between different approaches within a single discipline. Indeed, as Flowerdew (2002:29) points out, the indications from this direction are that academic discourse is so varied as to not constitute a single uniform entity at all.

Mention should also be made of another current within EAP that is concerned with ‘*critiquing* existing educational institutions and practices, and subsequently *transforming* both education and society’ (Hall, cit. Harwood & Hadley, 2004:356–7. Original emphasis). Known as ‘Critical EAP’, this approach challenges traditional EAP pedagogy (now redefined as ‘Pragmatic EAP’) on the grounds that it reinforces dominant norms without questioning their underlying values or social effects. Critical EAP has, however, come under fire for failing to offer practicable pedagogical alternatives; as a result, its impact upon the broader EAP community may be somewhat limited.²

The research described in this paper is part of a larger project to determine whether a hegemonic discourse can be said to exist within the Anglophone academic context as a useful concept for translation research. Focusing upon the *prescriptive* tradition, it involved an extensive survey of the mainstream academic style manuals available on the market with a view to drawing up an inventory of characteristic features and assessing their distribution across disciplines and genres. The results would then (in a subsequent study) be compared with findings from *descriptive* linguists into how established academics actually do write in practice.

2. Data sources

The sheer number of books on the market designed to teach academic writing in English is staggering. An on-line search under ‘academic writing’ (performed on 3rd October 2007) yielded 216 hits for Waterstones.com, 2655 hits for Amazon.co.uk and an astounding 11,849 hits for Amazon.com. And even after these lists had been screened to eliminate irrelevant titles and multiple editions of the same work, a Bibliography of Academic Style Manuals compiled from the bestsellers on these on-line lists ran to over 250 titles.

As the main objective of my survey was to determine the features of English academic writing as presented in these style guides, I needed to physically consult as many of these books as possible. This was done at a large branch of a major UK bookshop chain on two separate occasions, firstly in July 2004 (when I was concerned to get a general overview of the kind of advice presented in these books) and then again in August 2007, when, in addition to covering new books that had been published since then, I also wished to focus upon some particular issues that had arisen during the course of work I had done in the intervening period. The data collected was then supplemented by books found elsewhere, such as in university or language school libraries, or owned by myself or by colleagues.

The 41 books that were actively consulted during this survey are listed in the Appendix and summarised by type in Table 1.

3. Method

On both visits to the bookstore, I approached the style manuals with a checklist of features, which (on the basis of my own academic experience) I expected to find mentioned. This was obviously a very crude tool and did not do justice to the nuances found particularly in more recent volumes and in those aimed at more advanced students. It did, however, confirm my hypothesis that English Academic Discourse is a clearly defined entity distinguished by a series of identifiable characteristics, and that there is a broad consensus as to its general principles, methods of textual construction, and the kinds of grammatical and lexical features to be used.

The checklist focused upon:

- a) *General Principles*: explicit definitions of academic writing or statements of general principles; references to the need for clarity, economy, objectivity, argumentative techniques, caution about claims (hedging devices), etc.
- b) *Text Structure*: references to the need for planning; advice about how to structure the text as a whole; paragraph organisation (need for topic sentences, number of sentences per paragraph, etc); coherence and cohesion (references to the need for signposting and the use of different kinds of cohesive devices);

² Harwood & Hadley (2004) present the cases for and against Critical and Pragmatic EAP, and suggest an alternative compromise approach, entitled ‘Critical Pragmatic EAP’. See also Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1994:317–8.

Table 1
Works consulted according to Type.

TARGET READER-SHIP	DISCIPLINARY BIAS					TOTAL
	Not Specified	General Arts & Humanities	General Social Science	General Science	Subject Specific	
Undergrad. Students	20	2	1	1	Lit. 2 Geog. 2 Hist. 2 Law 1	31
Graduate Students/Researchers	3		1		Constr. 1 Bus.Man.2	7
Foreign Students/Academics	1					1
Language Teachers	1					1
TOTAL	25	2	1	1	10	40

- c) *Grammatical Issues*: recommendations concerning sentence length and structure; coordination and subordination; active and passive; tense usage; modality, etc.
- d) *Lexical Features*: advice about type of diction to use and avoid; use of technical jargon, etc.
- g) *Other Features*: referencing and citation, avoiding plagiarism, incorporating theory, presenting empirical data, etc.

4. Results

As has already been mentioned, there was a broad consensus amongst the books consulted as to what constitutes English Academic Discourse and its most salient characteristics. There were, of course, some disciplinary and genre differences, but these were minimal when compared with the entirely different approach to academic writing that may be found in the humanities of Romance cultures, for example. In fact, I only encountered one book (Woods, 1999/2006) which took a different approach, and the fact that the author sets out to deliberately challenge ‘traditional’ practice would seem to confirm the hegemony of conventional discourse. This will be discussed in more detail below. In this section, I will look in more detail at some of the claims made in the books, with particular attention to areas of controversy.

a) *General Principles*:

Definitions of academic writing or declarations of the general principles underlying it tended to be found mostly in books aimed at undergraduates rather than at more experienced writers, as might be expected. Of the 20 books that thought it necessary to state these principles explicitly, 16 mentioned *clarity* as one of the main aims and 10 mentioned *economy* or *conciseness*. 7 also claimed *objectivity* or *impartiality* as essential for academic writing (though this aspect is controversial, as will be discussed below in the section on personal and impersonal forms).

16 authors mentioned the need for *rational argument*, with a number of them elaborating this at length. For example, Macmillan and Weyes (2007a:96–7) and Fabb and Durant (2005:67–76) present a number of techniques that may be used to successfully argue a case, while Walliman (2004: 122–7) devotes an entire section to a philosophical discussion of Logic, listing different types of Fallacy and different types of Argument. Fairbairn and Winch (1996:180) warn against the use of ‘dubious persuasive techniques’ such as ‘emotive language’, and Hennessy (2002:90) insists upon the need to avoid ‘false syllogisms, begging the question, sweeping generalizations, emotionally-weighted language and non-sequiturs’.

A number of authors stress the empirical basis of the academic project by insisting that all arguments presented be based upon *evidence* or *facts*. While this tended to be taken for granted by authors operating within the sciences, it is noticeable that the two books directed at literature undergraduates stress the need for close observation of the text (Pirie, 1985:109 and Fabb & Durant, 2005:77–89), while Storey, writing for history undergraduates, insists in his opening pages that a good historian ‘uses *sources* to make inferences about events in the past, and develop sustained arguments and narratives’ (my italics). Several authors (such as Fairbairn & Winch, 1996:174 and Cottrell, 2003: 179) insist on the need to *distinguish between fact and opinion*, while Macmillan and Weyes (2007a: 113) instruct their

readers to *avoid value judgments* of any kind (though this is perhaps also controversial in today's climate, as we shall see below).

Finally, a generalised *caution* or *restraint* about claims made would also seem to be a commonly accepted feature of academic writing style. In some cases, this is couched as a need to avoid generalizations or overstatement (eg. Pirie 1985:110; Greetham, 2001:225), while other authors go to great lengths to teach their readers specific devices to be used to signal *epistemic modality* or for *hedging* their claims (eg. Fabb & Durant, 2005:87–88; Macmillan & Weyes, 2007a: 111; Bailey, 2006:133–135; Jordan, 1997: 240–3).

b) Text Structure:

i) Text planning

Most of the manuals devote a great deal of space to instructing their readers about structuring an academic text, and there is almost total uniformity within disciplinary areas and genres as to how this should be done. All the books insist upon the need for prior planning, and many also cover methods of brainstorming, selecting and ordering information before the writing process begins.

The more general undergraduate writing books, which focus on simple essays and short dissertations, give the Introduction-Body-Conclusion model of textual organisation, often going into great length about the kind of information that should be included in each section. All agree that the introduction 'outlines the general background and signposts the structure and argument that follow' (Kneale, 2003: 118) and that the conclusion essentially provides a synthesis of what has already been said. As regards the main body of the text, the books generally offer advice as to how to select and organise points to be included, with reference (explicit or implicit) to the need for *coherence*.

The knowledge assumed of the reader varies greatly from book to book, even at undergraduate level. Some authors, such as Rose (2007), who is aiming at the mature student, give very simplistic advice, while others, particularly in discipline-specific works, provide much more complex models. Storey (2004: 72–82), writing for history students, distinguishes between the Analytical and Narrative essay, providing models for each; while in literature, Fabb and Durant (2005: 67–76) offer several different techniques for arguing a case (causation, correlation and coincidence; assembling description or comments; classification; providing contexts for texts; comparing texts; building an organisation around a word). Macmillan and Weyes (2007a:96–7) also suggest a series of different structural approaches (chronological; classification; common denominator; phased; analytical; thematic; comparative/contrastive).

Works aimed at scientists (eg. Barrass, 2002; Kneale, 2003; Levin, 2004) predictably follow the IMRD (Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion) model, at least at undergraduate level, with one or two (eg. Northedge, Thomas, Lane & Peasgood, 1997:221) going into detail about different functions used (i.e. providing a factual account of accepted knowledge; reporting; arguing). Other books (Barrass, 1996; Oliver, 1996; Kneale, 2003) in addition to the essay, discuss the structures of various other academic genres, such as the seminar paper, project or research report, while books aimed at PhD students (Marshall & Green, 2007; Dunleavy, 2003) naturally concentrate on the specific structure of a doctorate thesis.

The general picture that emerges, as regards the structuring of academic texts, is of a remarkable uniformity, which was only broken by a single work, Woods (1999), which introduces alternative models for the sake of qualitative research in the Social Sciences. This will be discussed separately.

ii) Paragraph Length and Structure:

A considerable number of books go beyond the level of the text to give advice about how to structure paragraphs. Some (such as Chambers & Northedge, 1997) limit themselves to commenting upon the length of the paragraph and the need to vary the number of sentences in it, while Northedge (2005:329) also makes the point that there should be only one theme per paragraph. Others (Barrass, 1996:31; Cottrell, 2003: 68–70; Fairbairn & Winch, 1996: 78; Northedge et al., 1997: 245; Dixon, 2004: 141; Fabb & Durant, 2005: 108; Greetham, 2001: 187; Macmillan & Weyes, 2007a: 118; Peck & Coyle, 2005: 129–140, Bailey, 2006: 43–47) etc) go into detail about the paragraph's internal structure. Once more, there is great uniformity concerning the advice given. All the authors agree that the structure of the paragraph should mirror that of the text as a whole, with a Topic Sentence functioning as introduction, giving a general idea of what is to come, followed by a middle section providing supporting evidence or developing the idea further, and a concluding sentence.

iii) Coherence and Cohesion:

Coherence and cohesion are both concerned with the internal organisation of the text, and are therefore closely related to textual and paragraph structure. Coherence is generally manifested through the logical sequencing of

information, but it can be made more obvious through *signposting*, i.e. the use of headings and subtitles, and internal references to indicate the direction that the argument will take. Of the manuals reviewed, Barrass (1996:88), Chambers and Northedge (1997: 165), Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 177), Fabb and Durant (2005: 112), Macmillan and Weyes (2007a: 123) and Northedge (2005: 325) explicitly mentioned the need for signposting (though of course almost all authors implicitly covered this aspect in their sections on text structuring).

Cohesion, for its part, is the network of lexical, grammatical and other relations which link various parts of the text and help organise it. Halliday and Hasan (1976) identify five main cohesive devices in English (back- and forward-referencing, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion), and of these, it is the latter (variously named as ‘logical indicators’, ‘linkers’, ‘connectives’ or ‘transitional words and phrases’) that are given the most attention in these books. Smith (1994), Turley (2000:28–36), Fabb and Durant (2005:112), Northedge (2005:325), Greetham (2001:208), Mounsey (2002:44), Bailey (2006: 138–141) and Soles & Lawler (2005:65) all provide lists of linkers for use in different situations.

As regards the other devices identified by Halliday & Hasan, Soles and Lawler (2005:65) devotes a section to the use of repetition and substitution (by pronouns and synonyms), while Bailey (2006: 73–74) concentrates on back- and forward-referencing.

c) Grammatical Issues:

i) Sentence Length and Structure

It is in the area of sentence length and structure that we first begin to see some divergences in the advice offered by the various style manuals. Many authors categorically insist that long complicated sentences should be avoided in favour of *short direct* ones with *straightforward syntax* (eg., Barrass, 2002:59; Fairbairn & Winch, 1996:127; Pirie, 1985:98; Redman, 2001:65; Greetham, 2001:206, Strong, 2006: 157, and Warburton, 2007:71). This may partly be an attempt to compensate for the unnecessary complexity often introduced by inexperienced writers trying to cultivate an authoritative erudite style (and indeed some authors specifically mention this as a factor).

However, other authors link it to the structural and stylistic properties of the English language itself. For example, Dunleavy (2003: 114–115) points out that the inner core of an English sentence is the Subject-Verb-Object unit, and that these three components need to be closely bonded together if ambiguity is to be avoided. Thus, ‘qualifying or subordinate clauses are always best placed at the beginning or ends of sentences, never in the middle, which should be reserved for the core’; and, in order to keep the SVO unit clearly visible, sentences ‘should not get too long and they should have the simplest feasible grammatical structure’. As a guide, he suggests ‘you should never write a sentence longer than 40 words, and you should aim for an ideal sentence length of around 20 words’.

Problems with long sentences usually reflect either the fact that the author is writing unauthentically in a pompous style or trying to do too many things with a single sentence, typically by loading in qualifying clauses beginning with ‘although’, ‘however,’ and so on. A sentence should express a single thought or proposition, not multiple ones (*Ibid*: 116).

Northedge (2005: 327), for his part, analyses the sentence lengths in a model academic article, and concludes that these vary considerably, from 1 to 54 words. The distribution of different lengths was, however, quite even:

Sentence Length	No. of words	Percentage
Very short	1–10	22%
Shortish	11–15	21%
Middling	16–20	19%
A bit longer	21–25	18%
Long	Over 26	21%

He also found that different sentence lengths were doing different jobs within the paragraph. The longer sentences were generally used to present information (such as evidence from research) or explain arguments, while shorter ones tended to appear at the start or end of paragraphs or texts (or even on either side of long sentences) to set up the theme and summarize it afterwards.

Indeed, the practice of *varying the lengths of sentences* is favoured by a number of our manual writers (eg. Hennessy, 2002:131; Fabb & Durant, 2005:93; Chambers & Northedge, 1997:166; Bailey, 2006: 113). Soles and Lawler (2005: 99) specifically advises writers to ‘avoid a series of short choppy sentences’ and suggests a series of

techniques for enlivening the style (subordination to combine several short sentences, parallelisms within a sentence and the device of varying the order of words and phrases within a sentence). While this may seem to contradict the advice presented elsewhere, he does insist that this should not compromise the clarity of the text ('Academic writing should be clear and straightforward, but there is no reason why it should be dull').

The controversy as regards sentence length in academic writing is summed up neatly by Dixon (2004:148–9), in a passage that is also quoted by Warburton (2006: 72).

Academics disagree amongst themselves about sentences. Some favour short ones. Others are quite happy, indeed enthusiastic, about the idea that students should, in the course of their studies, cultivate the art of the long sentence; being able to retain control of one's ideas and language while constructing a complex and involved sentence, making judicious use of commas and semi-colons, they say, is an important academic skill. I prefer brevity. There is no need to adopt a hard and fast rule about this though. Sometimes a long and involved sentence might be appropriate and attractive.

What is particularly interesting, though, is the extent to which the question of sentence length and complexity appears to be unrelated to discipline – at least in the works analysed here. While we might have expected manuals aimed at scientists to prescribe short simple sentences, and those directed towards the humanities and social sciences to prefer a greater degree of elaboration, this is not necessarily the case. Redman (2001) writing for social science students, Strong (2006) writing for law students, and Pirie (1985) writing for literature students, all insist upon simple straightforward sentences, in contrast to Fabb and Durant (2005, *English Literature*) and Chambers and Northedge (1997, *Arts & Humanities*), who advocate a greater variety.

It may be, of course, that the determining factor here is the perceived level of the target readership. All authors agree that *clarity* is a fundamental prerequisite of academic writing in all disciplines, and it is notoriously difficult for novice writers to achieve this whilst handling long elaborate sentences. As Dixon (2004:149) concludes, in the sentence immediately following the quotation given above: "In my experience of reading and marking student essays, /.../ their sentences seem to be too long more often than they are too short".

This, then, would explain Rose's rather extreme suggestion (2007:84) that her readers limit their sentences to 10 words. Writing for mature students that have been outside the academic system for some time, she is obviously not prescribing a norm for academic discourse *per se*, but rather offering a pedagogical tool that is to be refined as the student progresses. We may conclude, therefore, that some of the other authors that categorically insist on the need for short simple sentences are doing the same thing.

As regards the need to *write grammatically*, this is explicitly mentioned in some of the manuals, generally aimed at linguistic neophytes. These include Northedge et al. (1997: 221, 'use complete sentences'); MacMillan and Weyes (2007a: 105, 'writing must be grammatically correct'); Rose (2007:214, 'each sentence must contain a working verb and subject') and Storey (2004: 89, 'avoid verbless sentences'). The fact that this aspect is not referred to more frequently would probably indicate that it is taken for granted at this level.

ii) *Personal versus Impersonal Forms*

The question of personal versus impersonal forms in academic discourse is also a very controversial issue at present. Some authors, such as White (2000:133) consider objectivity to be an essential feature of the whole academic enterprise, necessarily implying the use of the passive voice, 3rd person and other impersonal structures. Macmillan and Weyes (2007a: 105–6) also write: "Above all, academic writing is *objective*, using language techniques that generally maintain an impersonal tone". It must be mentioned, though, that these authors clearly recognise the controversial nature of this assertion, since, in another book of the same year (2007b: 237), after repeating the same definition, they defend their claim, adding:

Some would argue that [the active] is clearer, but their opponents would counter-argue that the use of "we" takes attention away from the action. You may find that grammar checkers in some word-processing packages may suggest that passive expressions should be changed to active. However, if you follow this guidance, you will find yourself having to use a personal pronoun, which is inconsistent with impersonal academic style.

Other authors that favour impersonal forms are Allison (1997:53), who instructs students to use the third person and avoid personal pronouns 'except in naturalist or qualitative research'; Oliver (1996:5), who advises impersonal verbs in the third person 'especially in the natural sciences', and Fairbairn and Winch (1996: 131), who say the same, but add that the 'first person is now acceptable in literary, theological or philosophical essays'. Bailey (2006: 106; 175–6) says

that academic discourse uses the passive more than standard English, but claims that it should not be overused; both have their place, depending upon the focus of the sentence. Cottrell (2003:177) initially recommends the use of impersonal forms, but later qualifies this, explaining that, although the scientific model of writing has influenced all academic writing, this is now changing (ibid. 180) and there are presently alternatives to the scientific model that allow a measure of subjectivity (ibid. 182) and even the use of personal experience (ibid. 191).

The notion of changes taking place in the epistemic framework is also developed by Brown (2006: 96–7), writing within the context of business and management. The traditional method was the 3rd person or passive, she says, and this remains the dominant means of expression, although first person accounts are growing in acceptance:

When social science first emerged, the dominant model was that of the natural sciences. These disciplines mostly used quantitative methods, and research was written up from the perspective of an objective, impartial researcher, emotionally distant from the research.

Using expressions like ‘the research was conducted’ or ‘the analysis confirmed the hypothesis’ suggested that the research had been undertaken in a rigorous manner and that decisions about what to do and what the data revealed were precise and clear. The implication is that the researcher followed defined procedures and protocols, and was able to separate personal values from the activity of researching. When less positivistic research philosophies were developed, and when it was accepted that the totally objective researcher is an ideal rather than a reality, interest moved from the numerical analysis of data to the interpretation of the meaning of the data. The continuous choices needed while undertaking research highlighted the more subjective nature of researching people rather than natural phenomena like light or helium.

There are, however, a great many authors that argue categorically in favour of the active voice. Hennessy (2002:131), Storey (2004:88), Greetham (2001:218), Turley (2000:59), Strong (2006), Dixon (2004:137) and Dunleavy (2003:118) all firmly advise their readers against using the passive on stylistic grounds. Others are less emphatic. Fabb and Durant (2005:94) do not prohibit the passive, merely warning that it ‘should be used carefully’, while Warburton (2007:70–71) points out that, though the active is generally preferable, ‘it is conventional in science to use the passive’.

Dunleavy (2003:114) offers a convincing argument for using the active voice as opposed to the passive:

Using active verbs with real subjects will make your text much more lively, and fits closely with the subject/verb/object focus described above. You should strictly avoid passive forms because they tend to create avoidable ambiguities.

However, he admits that the active voice does bring dangers, such as the lure of *reification* and the *archetypal singular* (ibid: 118–119), not to mention the problem of *personal pronouns* (as Macmillan & Weyes, 2007b: 237, point out in the quotation given at the beginning of this section).

Indeed, these are also very controversial in this kind of discourse. Fabb and Durant (2005: 96–7) discuss the alternatives at length:

When referring to yourself as the writer of your essay, it is possible to use a range of forms: ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘one’, ‘the present author’, etc. Traditionally, however, there are restrictions on straightforwardly saying ‘I’. Some teachers forbid it outright, as an example of inelegant intrusion by the author. Mostly, nowadays, though, it is considered permissible occasionally (eg. to emphasise a point you wish to show is personal rather than general). The guiding principle must be this: that the overall interest of your essay lies in how well its combination of observation and argument leads to more general statements, and so away from the particularity of autobiography and personal impression /.../.

‘One’ and ‘we’ in particular should be avoided as ways of referring to yourself. They now seem *archaic* and pompous. /.../ The authorial ‘we’ (eg. ‘we will argue below’) should also be avoided. Apart from allowing in traditionally disliked personal comment, both ‘one’ and ‘we’ produce an effect of generalized response: ‘one’ combines the personal dimension of ‘I’ with the general characteristic of ‘anyone’ (i.e. the writer serves as a norm or representative of everyone else); and ‘we’ (at least in its inclusive use as readers, ‘we feel in this passage’ rather than the authorial ‘we, the author’) suggests a generalised reader-reaction.

As ways of avoiding personal pronouns, the authors suggest the use of adverbials (such as ‘arguably’), the passive, or the personification of the essay itself as an agent (i.e. ‘this essay explains how...’).

The question of personal versus impersonal forms, active versus passive, is clearly a highly fraught area, reflecting the complexities of the underlying epistemic debate about the desirability, and indeed possibility, of achieving objectivity in research. As Levin (2004: 84) points out, the use of one form above another has become something of a personal choice nowadays, and it is no longer possible to make hard and fast generalizations on the issue.

iii) Tenses

Some of the discipline-specific works recommend the use of particular tenses for particular functions. Hence, Pirie (1985:101) writing for literature students recommends the *present tense to discuss texts*, and Storey (2004: 88) recommends the *past tense for history*. As regards more scientific subjects, Macmillan & Weyes (2007a:107) say the *past tense* should be used to describe *methods*, while Allison (1997:92) distinguishes between the *past tense to record past events* and the *present tense when referring to tables, figures, etc.*

d) Lexis:

A number of the authors considered in this survey insist that academic writing is by nature *formal* and *technical*. Barrass (1996:63), Cottrell (2003:177), Kneale (2003:133), Storey (2004:98); Macmillan and Weyes (2007a:108), Bailey (2006:105–106), Jordan (1997:245) and Smith (1994:65) all insist on the need for quite formal diction and the avoidance of colloquialisms, slang, abbreviations and most phrasal verbs. Fabb and Durant (2005:92), without specifically using the word ‘formal’ also insist that academic prose requires ‘a standardised written variety of the language’. As regards technicality, Barrass (2002:63), writing for science students, insists on the need for ‘correct nomenclature’, Redman (2001:65), writing for the social sciences, also advises students to ‘use the technical language of the discipline’, while Dunleavy (2003: 117) claims that academic jargon is unavoidable ‘as it does specialist things, has more precise meanings and allows expositions to quickly reach targeted subjects, which would be hard to reach or cumbersome to define in other ways’.

Many other authors, however, urge the avoidance of jargon and/or pretentious or pompous diction in favour of short everyday words. These include Fairbairn and Winch (1996:127, 140, 147); Hennessy (2002:127–8); Pirie (1985: 96); Storey (2004: 96, 98); Mounsey (2002:42); Rose (2007: 84, 185), and, surprisingly, Strong (2006: 155), who writes for law students, an area notorious for its archaic and specialised diction. He specifically distinguishes between ‘legal jargon’, which is something to be avoided, and ‘terms of art’:

Legal jargon refers to the type of overused legalisms that really add nothing to the discussion. For example, referring to ‘the aforementioned’ or ‘the *res* in question’ is pompous and unnecessary. Just name whatever it is you are discussing. Including unnecessary Latin phrases also puts the reader off – for example, there is really no reason to use the terms ‘*qua*’, ‘*ex ante*’ or ‘*de novo*’. The difference between legal jargon and a proper term of art is whether the word or phrase carries a specific legal meaning or is part of a legal text. If the term has acquired this type of official legal value, then it is usually a term of art.

Later, the same author (ibid: 159) goes on to urge the case for simple language in the following terms:

Some people think that unusual, literary or polysyllabic words impress readers and demonstrate greater erudition and knowledge. Not true. Often big words slow the pace or confuse the meaning /.../ Don’t use a long word if a short one will do.

A similar idea is expressed by Dixon (2004:135–6) in his diatribe against ‘essayese’ (coined upon the phrase ‘academic expertise’), which he defines as ‘a mysterious, over-formal, unnatural and cumbersome foreign language’:

Some of the blame must lie with university academics who, during the course of the twentieth century, conspired to develop an increasingly unreadable prose. More and more, the lively yet precise prose of the great eighteenth and nineteenth century essayists, historians and philosophers was supplanted by a jargonistic, pedestrian and impenetrable sort of specialist discourse.

However, perhaps out of fear of reprisal, he hastily adds:

Most academics these days write extremely well; it is only a minority who produce obscure, jargonistic, pompous, excessively abstract or pretentious prose of the sort that gives all of us a bad name.

The description of bad prose as being obscure, jargonistic, pompous, excessively abstract and pretentious is a recurrent theme amongst these authors. Students are repeatedly urged to *avoid circumlocution and verbosity*, by choosing *precise terms*, carefully defined (eg. Barrass, 1996:65, 2002: 70; Cottrell, 2003: 177; Pirie, 1985: 115; Storey,

2004: 72, 87, 95; Dixon, 2004: 128; Greetham, 2001: 212; Mounsey, 2002: 46; Jordan, 1997:245, and Rose, 2007: 86) and to generally prefer *concrete* terms over abstract ones (eg. Soles & Lawler, 2005: 124; Barrass, 1996:94; Hennessy, 2002:121). Dunleavy (2003: 117), despite acknowledging that academic jargon is unavoidable, sums the issue up as follows:

Do not pointlessly substitute portentous vocabulary for ordinary language words where there is no extra value for doing so. In general, try to write as if you were sitting across the table from someone in your discipline and giving a carefully grammatical oral explanation of your work. Trying for a professional ‘voice’ more strained or more pompous than you would use in such a considered conversation will not make your work seem doctoral. It will make it seem unauthentic, and perhaps ungrounded, since you will be more likely to make mistakes in meaning.

Once more, then, it seems that the overwhelming objective for all these authors is to encourage clarity and precision amongst novice writers, though they try to achieve this in different ways. The apparent conflicts in the advice given in different books may, once more, depend upon the level of the target readership, and also upon discipline. It could be argued that students from the humanities and social sciences are particularly prone to err on the side of obscurity and verbosity, and that this tendency requires correction before a more sophisticated style of writing can be cultivated.

e) Referencing, citation, etc

Another important aspect of academic writing concerns the incorporation of accepted theory and other authors’ findings into one’s text through referencing, citation etc. Consequently, many of the books devote space to the question of bibliographies and literature reviews, how to present quotations and other references, and avoid plagiarism.

As the advice is very consistent across all works, and given that this aspect is not a central issue for the present work, it will not be dealt with in any detail here.

* * *

Finally, before proceeding to my concluding remarks, a note should be made about the one book encountered in the store that allowed for the possibility of a different kind of academic discourse beyond the rigidly standardized prose prescribed in the other volumes. The book in question was *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers* by Peter Woods (Routledge), first consulted in its 1999 edition, and later examined in more detail in its 2nd edition of 2006.

As the title suggests, the book is for social scientists, and aims to take account of some of the developments that have taken place in recent years in the area of qualitative research. As the author explains, these developments have affected not only methodology and approach, but also the very discourse used for presenting findings. The theoretical issues underlying these developments are briefly discussed in an introductory passage entitled ‘The Postmodernist Challenge’ (2006:5–6).

Particularly interesting, to my mind, is the way in which Woods contrasts the conventional and new approaches without coming down categorically on either side. In Chapter 3 (2006: 25–42), he describes the standard approach to organising and presenting data in a way that is entirely in keeping with the advice presented in any of the other manuals examined. Then in Chapter 4 (2006:43–64), he describes ‘Alternative Forms of Representation’, including the use of subjective voices, poetry, performance texts and hypermedia texts, etc. He discusses the stylistic consequences of genre hybridity, polyvocality and emotiveness, including a historical overview of the change in fashion in the social sciences from what he calls ‘windowpane prose’ (2006:43), through the increasing use of the first person by ethnographers to the situation that exists today, in which:

...it has now become the custom rather than the exception for qualitative researchers to include some autobiographical details, in recognition that their ‘selves’ - their personal histories, beliefs and values - are all bound up in the study in some way and that the account is a construction by a particular author. (Ibid)

The chapter on Style that follows (2006:65–85) interestingly resorts to Rhetoric to justify the value judgments he makes about different kinds of writing. Like many of the more traditional manuals, he condemns tactics that are subtly designed to persuade without appearing to or which put ‘spins’ on the text (through over- or under-claiming, ‘straw man’ arguments, utopianism, constructing deficit models, etc), though he lauds other aspects of rhetoric that were conventionally devalued by positivistic science (such as writing for different audiences, the use of metaphor and expressive writing).

All in all, this book is designed to bridge the gap between the hegemonic approach to academic writing, as exemplified by all the other manuals examined in this survey, and some of the more radical approaches that are being

experimented elsewhere (and his own bibliography lists many of these). However, Woods' own prose style and organization are utterly conventional — a fact which, to my mind, merely emphasises the degree to which the hegemonic model is still entrenched in the Anglo-Saxon culture.

5. Conclusions

To my mind, the single most important factor to have emerged from this survey of style manuals is the remarkable degree of consistency that exists as regards the general principles and main features of academic discourse in English. Despite the differences in target readership, genre and discipline, the works analysed all present a very similar picture of what academic discourse is understood to be, within the prescriptive (pedagogical) tradition. This reinforces the claim made by SF linguists that there is 'an essential continuity between the humanities and science as far as interpreting the world is concerned' (Martin, 1993:220) and suggests that English Academic Discourse is sufficiently well-defined to serve not only as a coherent model for foreign and apprentice authors, but also as an entity for translation research.

As regards the *general principles* underlying this discourse, it is clear from the emphasis upon clarity, economy, rational argument supported by evidence, caution and restraint, and the incorporation of accepted theory through referencing and citation, that the scientific paradigm still dominates, even in subjects like literature, history and law. The fact that there is some disagreement about the use of personal or impersonal forms (active versus passive, personal pronouns, etc) does not seriously undermine this; for although it reveals a certain insecurity as regards science's claims to objectivity, the basic tenets of the paradigm are clearly still intact. As we have seen, only one of the works found on bookshop shelves or bestselling lists (Woods, 1999/2006) offers any alternative to this paradigm, and the fact that this does not seriously critique or undermine the mainstream, merely strengthens our perception of the hegemonic status of the conventional approach.

Recommendations regarding *textual structuring, paragraphing, coherence and cohesion* reveal the influence of theoretical work undertaken in the area of Text Linguistics and Discourse Analysis in recent decades. The advice given is highly normative and quite simplistic, and there is very little variation across the manuals reviewed, beyond the obvious differences between the sciences (IMRD pattern) and humanities (IDC). This gives an impression of a somewhat mechanistic approach to textual production, and reinforces notions of English Academic Discourse as a quite monolithic entity that is resistant to deviation. Although this may partly be due to the apprentice status of the general target readership (and manuals aimed at graduate students or which are discipline-specific are noticeably more subtle in their advice), we inevitably conclude that academic writers in English have very little leeway as regards the way they present their findings (at least when compared with the great diversity of models found in some other countries).

On the level of *grammar and lexis*, there is, at first sight, a divergence between those authors that insist that academic discourse is formal, technical and objective (resulting in the extensive use of Latinate vocabulary and impersonal structures) and those that preach simplicity of style (i.e. short direct sentences in the active voice and the use of everyday words). However, once more, this difference may be due to the perceived level of the target readership, rather than to any profound discrepancy in aims. Given the undisputed and overriding need for clarity of purpose and economy of style, many authors evidently feel it necessary to eliminate all tendencies towards 'waffle' at an early stage. As we can see from the discipline-specific books or those aimed at graduates, syntactical and lexical sophistication is not perceived to be incompatible, in itself, with these fundamental aims, when handled by a competent writer; the issue is rather that incompetent writers have a tendency to obfuscate and lose control of their arguments in their desire to sound sophisticated. It is this tendency that lies behind some authors' insistence upon excessive simplicity.

It should also be remembered, though, that the plain style has a long tradition in English prose that stretches back through writers like Quiller-Couch, Arnold and Swift to Francis Bacon, as one of our style gurus (Barrass, 1996:94) points out. In fact, this author quotes at length from Graves & Hodges' famous 1947 work, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, to illustrate his point that good prose is 'cleared of unnecessary ornament, irrelevancy, illogicality, ambiguity, repetition, circumlocution, obscurity of reference'.

The same point is made by another of our authors (Greetham, 2001: 215), who uses an interesting authority to support his call for clarity, conciseness and economy:

In this [i.e. clarity, conciseness, economy] lies the essence of what most of us understand by "style" — what the Reverend Samuel Wesley once described as "the dress of thought: a modest dress, neat but not gaudy".

Here, finally, we find an oblique reference to the historical origins of English writing style. For, as this brief quotation suggests, the virtues that it encapsulates are above all *Protestant* virtues - virtues which are manifested not only textually, but in all aspects of life, from dress taste and social style to financial habits. Hence, Greetham has unwittingly undermined the absolute claims made by most of the other authors in this survey. In highlighting the historic roots of the English taste in written style, he emphasises its culturally contingent nature, thereby leaving the door open for the affirmation of other styles which, owing to a diverging historical trajectory, may embody qualities that are entirely different.

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