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**Academic Writing
in Europe:
Empirical Perspectives**

edited by
Josef Schmied



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Academic Writing in Europe: Empirical Perspectives

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Preface

This volume on *Academic Writing in Europe: Empirical Perspectives* is a summary of my own research and teaching experience based on our recent projects and discussions with colleagues from the Czech Republic, Italy and other countries in Europe as well as China, Malaysia and Armenia.

The need for a comparative approach to academic writing has become evident to me during the development of new MA and PhD programmes in the so-called Bologna process, where academic writing components have to be included. This is not only because more and more students even at postgraduate levels seem to lack the skills that have been taken for granted for a long time at European universities or that were considered part of the autonomous efforts of young scholars themselves and not the responsibility of their teachers. This is also because with the further expansion of English as THE language of science and international cooperation during the last few decades, new challenges and opportunities have arisen for English departments and English graduates. On the one hand, there seems to be a standardising trend in international writing that discourages national styles and traditions in specific disciplines and genres that scholars need to be aware of if they want to be successful in international science discourse. On the other hand, new opportunities have arisen that English departments and English graduates can use to prove their “usefulness” in an ever more utilitarian society and view of universities and maybe even sell their “services”.

In this light, a comparative view across disciplines, genres and national university traditions is useful. English departments may re-adjust their positions in their universities and societies. Many research traditions in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and beyond can contribute to this comparative discussion. An empirical perspective may be even more influential than a theoretical one, since it cannot be misinterpreted as ideological, as its conclusions are based on current evidence and by no means fixed, since the serious discussion has just begun in research as well as in teaching. I firmly believe that the comparative research perspective documented and propagated in this volume will be fruitful for individual scholars, their students and their departments. We first have to take stock of what is happening in a community of practice before we can advise others how to participate successfully in the discipline-specific discourse community. This also has the advantage of combining research and teaching in an ideal way even from a student perspective. Students doing research on academic writing will hopefully be more aware of their own writing process and its products and thus successful novices in the academic English community.

Since this volume is an example of culture-specific writing itself, we refrained from “harmonizing” the volume and changing the personal style of individual authors. Unfortunately, it is too small for a comparative study of European writing, but maybe it shows some interesting differences in structure, argumentation and of course idiomaticity that go beyond individual writers. We hope to continue the discussion with more illustrations and statistics in this series.

Many contributions in this volume were first presented and discussed in the section 70 entitled “Empirical Approaches to Discipline, Culture and Identity in Academic Discourse” that I organized together with my colleague Marina Bondi (Modena, IT) for *The European Society for the Study of English* (ESSE) in Torino in August 2010. We hope that these European discussions will continue during the next ESSE conference in 2012 at Boğaziçi, Istanbul.

I wish to thank all my project collaborators in the Czech Republic, in Italy and other parts of Europe, in particular the Sächsisch-Tschechische Hochschul-Zentrum/Kolleg/Initiative (STHZ/K/I) for many years of continuous support and inspiration.

In particular, I wish to thank Susanne Wagner and Christoph Haase, who have contributed towards improving this volume in content and form.

This volume is only a temporary summary to initiate further debate and development of a fascinating topic.

Chemnitz, April 2011

Josef Schmied

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Academic Writing in Europe: a Survey of Approaches and Problems

Josef Schmied

Abstract

This survey sketches the new understanding of academic writing that has developed over the last two decades, from a text-based to a writer- and reader-oriented perspective, from a prescriptive to an empirical discipline. It sets academic writing in a wider context (like English for Specific Purposes and English as a *lingua franca*) and clarifies the main concepts. From a constructionist perspective, a discourse community develops through common practice, using expected schemata for instance in genres like research articles. They can be analysed empirically in corpus- and text-linguistic approaches, where at least five dimensions can be compared in empirical research: genre, academic discipline, national culture, language tradition, and language features. The problems discussed range from fundamental ones (whether a *lingua franca* like English makes non-native users of English in Europe lose national traditions) to practical ones (to what extent the data available are compatible). Despite the problems, new opportunities arise for English departments in Europe when they include an empirical discourse- and genre-based approach in their research and teaching.

1. Introduction: Understanding academic writing

Academic writing has established itself almost as an independent discipline in applied linguistics, or at least as a research-led sub-discipline in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). There is much more to it than what was taught 20 years ago: Old essay-writing focussed on language-specific student errors or creative styles; old English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focussed on discipline-specific vocabulary. The understanding of academic writing has changed fundamentally from a formal text-based perspective to a functional perspective that concentrates on the writer and the writing process and, even more, on the reader and the cognitive construction of discourse in a community (cf. Hyland 2010a, Schmied 2008, Thompson 2001). This paradigm shift applies to teaching as well as to research: Text-oriented research would, for instance, measure syntactic complexity by number of words or clauses per T-unit, or the specificity of lexemes in ontological systems. Writer-oriented research has tried “think aloud protocols” or task observations including keystroke recordings. Reader-oriented research has emphasized the mediation between writers/institutions/cultures, and conventions “describing the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow and identifying salient features of texts which allow them to engage effectively with their readers” (Hyland 2010b: 194).

2. Key concepts of academic writing

2.1. Definitions of EAP and related terms

In this survey, I see academic writing as an important, if not the most important, part of academic language behaviour in a discourse community. This discourse community uses English for Academic Purposes in research and teaching/learning, not only in universities in native-speaker cultures but also in universities where English is used as an international language or *lingua franca* at levels of international cooperation, where researchers as well as teachers and students are non-native speakers of English.

Traditionally, discussions of language use have been seen as part of ELT (English Language Teaching), or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). Today these concepts are often seen as a wide field of related terms and acronyms like EAL (English as an Additional Language), EIL (English as an International Language), ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), ESP (English for Special Purposes, or English for Specific Purposes), etc., where overlapping notions are only a matter of perspective. EAP can be seen as the “higher end” of ELF (which, in contrast to “Tourist English”, requires at least B2 in the European Framework of Reference for Languages, EFRL). EAP emphasises the common ground of specialised languages in terms of discourse or pragmatics, whereas ESP tends to emphasise the differences in terms of lexicon and idiomaticity. EAP also adds a theoretical framework to practical “writing classes”, which have spread to universities in native as well as non-native countries, and which can be seen as part of professional writing in the academic world, just like professional writing in the domains of law (e.g. legal correspondence), journalism (e.g. reportage), engineering (e.g. technical reports), marketing (e.g. advertisements), entertainment (e.g. film scripts), and literature (e.g. “creative writing” of novels).

Within this wide field of EAP, at least three levels of communities can be distinguished, and thus three types of EAP defined:

- Student English: The academic ‘novice’ may come from an Anglophone background where English is used for a variety of intra-national functions including teaching at secondary schools. Still, academic writing requires additional training, for it necessitates the independent search for appropriate information, its critical evaluation and media-specific presentation. The traditional genre at this level is the academic essay of 2,000 to 5,000 words (occasionally also a corresponding media-supported oral presentation).
- Doctoral English: In contrast to student writing with its focus on digesting research by others, doctoral students have to develop their own ideas, to pursue their own research agenda and to write up everything in a major contribution, which is the result of some sophisticated innovative Ph.D. project that the writer takes a long time to accomplish.

- (International) Research English: Although the written exchange of research results has a long tradition (in Britain at least since the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in the 17th century), the importance of international scholarly articles has increased enormously over the last decades, partly due to the increasing competition among universities and researchers and partly due to the new electronic media. This has led to the standardization of peer-review procedures and the corresponding discussion of subject- and genre-specific conventions.

In contrast to student English, the latter two categories, doctoral and research English, are more specialized in the sense that they (have to) follow more subject-specific conventions. This applies to individual research journals as well as whole research communities, e.g. in literary or social-science academic cultures (with their MLA and the ASA/APA conventions, respectively). Such conventions – together with the specialised terminology and argumentation procedures – have made (even sub-discipline-specific) “specialised” academic writing increasingly an in-group phenomenon. To balance this trend, a new EAP category has gained more and more importance: non-specialised writing for a general academic readership, which can be called “popular” academic writing or Popular Academic English. This has political implications, since societies demand increasingly to be informed about public investment in universities and other research institutions.

2.2. Academic writing in the discourse community

Since I emphasize that the key concepts of academic writing have to be made accessible to students, I will adopt a student perspective in this section. I will use entries in Wikipedia (just like many students do) as a starting point and scrutinize them from a perspective of knowledge transfer to see whether there are any major discrepancies between the popular academic representations of these concepts and my more specific academic conceptualisations. The Wikipedia entry for discourse community is quite specific and very suitable for our purposes – not surprisingly since it is based explicitly on Swales (1990):

A discourse community:

1. has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
3. uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.
4. utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. in addition to owning genres, it has acquired some specific lexis.
6. has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_community (27/03/11)

The advantage of this entry is that it is very broad, but it also fits our concept of academic community very well, especially the emphasis on genres and lexis. The levels I have defined according to practice and expertise as student, doctoral, and research English above, each with specific genres and lexical complexity. The level-specific genres are constructed through university conventions and this construction is in line with current thinking on wider academic perspectives.

Over the last two decades, academic writing theory has been closely associated with social constructionism, and again we can use a well-founded Wikipedia entry as a starting point:

A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by humans. Socially constructed reality is seen as an ongoing, dynamic process; reality is reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of it.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism (29/03/11)

The two concepts discourse community and social constructionism in higher education can be combined in the concept of an academic community of practice:

A **community of practice (CoP)** is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991). CoPs can exist online, such as within discussion boards and newsgroups, or in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practise (29/03/11)

Again, this Wikipedia entry is useful since our academic community is constructed through “sharing information and experiences”, like (sub-)discipline-specific conferences. Nowadays, the “written discussion” in scientific disciplines takes mainly place in academic journals or even on pre-publication servers, since the international academic discourse is accelerated enormously.

Although conference papers and journals are the central spoken and written genres in academic communities today, there are many others. The Wikipedia entry for genre gives a crisp summary:

A text's genre may be determined by its:

1. Linguistic function.
2. Formal traits.
3. Textual organization.

4. Relation of communicative situation to formal and organizational traits of the text (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002: 278-280).
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre> (27/03/11)

This is a good introduction, but for our purposes not explicit and detailed enough, especially since research over the last 20 years has provided us with so many insights into this central concept.

This exercise has shown that Wikipedia can be used as a resource in general (popular) academic discourse to introduce novices to the basic concepts of a field. Of course, this is not the case for all concepts we need for a scholarly discussion of academic writing. The Wikipedia entry for “Academic Writing” itself is little more than a number of lists of genres or key terms that does not really help the novice in the field.

2.3. Genres as expected schemata in communities of practice

Although genres are recognised subcategories of research discourse (Swales 2004), developing an awareness of their conventions is often difficult for students, since genres are abstractions of real texts, and students need to gain experience through repeated exposure. From a cognitive perspective, genres are schemata that help us engage actively in text comprehension as we develop a feeling for relating new information to existing knowledge and previous community discourse. We recognise prototypical genres as unmarked – and some novices’ texts as unintentionally marked in community discourse, which may distract the reader from the intended message of the writer. Thus genres link users to their discourse community and they link texts to each other since real academic discourse is a constant development of intertextuality. For students, this means that they have to learn to select texts for their argumentation from the existing literature, digest them by integrating them into their own writing and continue the academic discourse by “spinning on the yarn”.

But genres also activate situational contexts in academic discourse and help create the role of individual community members in the discourse. The students’ task is then to be aware of the conventions involved in a project proposal or a BA thesis in their specialisation. Genres constitute the discipline as they form a network with “neighbouring” genres. This community of practice forms a network of members, who move “up” from novices to experts in their discipline through producing the expected situated texts in the different types of genres.

There is no conclusive and comprehensive list of academic genres and there is considerable overlap between the subgenres of academic books: introductory, textbook, research monograph, (research) article collection, handbook, encyclopaedia, etc. And even spoken and written subgenres may be related: a conference paper and the related article collection, the key-note (lecture) and the related handbook article, etc.

Thus genres are fuzzy concepts, but they are useful for empirical analyses of stratified data-bases and related interpretations as well as for teaching. The

advantages of genre-based instruction have been described persuasively by Hyland (2004: 10f):

The main advantages can be summarized as follows. Genre teaching is:

Explicit. Makes clear what is to be learned to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills

Systematic. Provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts

Needs-based. Ensures that course objectives and content are derived from student needs

Supportive. Gives teachers a central role in scaffolding student learning and creativity

Empowering. Provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts

Critical. Provides the resources for students to understand and challenge valued discourses

Consciousness raising. Increases teacher awareness of texts to confidently advise students on their writing.

These features make the concept of genre accessible to students and useful, since it allows them to meet the expectations of teachers, editors, and gatekeepers of all types in the academic community. Although it is not a formal checklist, it provides students and teachers with a frame they can use for self-study and for teaching.

3. Approaches to academic writing

3.1. Corpus- and text-linguistic approaches

Students and researchers who intend to study academic writing can choose from a wide range of approaches. Basically, I would like to distinguish between approaches that focus on central formal or functional features across texts, usually in stratified collections of academic texts (that is why I call them corpus-linguistic), and approaches that focus on the special or prototypical interplay of features in texts or text-types (that is why I call them text-linguistic). Of course, ideally both approaches overlap and a combination will provide us with the best insights into this complex phenomenon.

Corpus-linguistic approaches are the standard approach in this volume. This is partly due to the research networks in which this collection has been put together. However it also seems to be the prominent approach of our time, since more corpus collections and tools like AntConc give every researcher quickly a keyword-in-context and statistical survey as a starting point for thought and discussion. Even academic novices at BA level for instance achieve a satisfactory scholarly result. More difficult is the development of a simple formal and functional feature analysis into a factor analysis of multiple dimensions (often called Biber-type, since it has been used extensively by Biber, from Biber 1988 through Biber 2006 to Biber & Conrad 2009).

Examples of text-linguistic approaches can be found throughout the history of the analysis of academic writing. Halliday (1997/2004), for instance, uses different text types ranging from a *Microbiology* textbook to a *New Scientist* article to illustrate answers to the big question “how does the language of science

reconstrue human experience?” (ibid: 49). This may be too difficult for a student discussion and we rather illustrate the text-linguistic approach by discussing examples of student writing from the ChemCorpus (s. below).

The best top-down approaches in text-linguistics would be to use a text-processing system to show the systematic parallel structure of headlines or to devise a hyper-text system to allow the reader to follow the links (cf. Schmied 2005). For our purposes two small case studies may suffice to illustrate the holistic approach.

The first text-linguistic example is a distribution diagram of *may* in some (short) exam texts from the ChemCorpus (Figure 1).

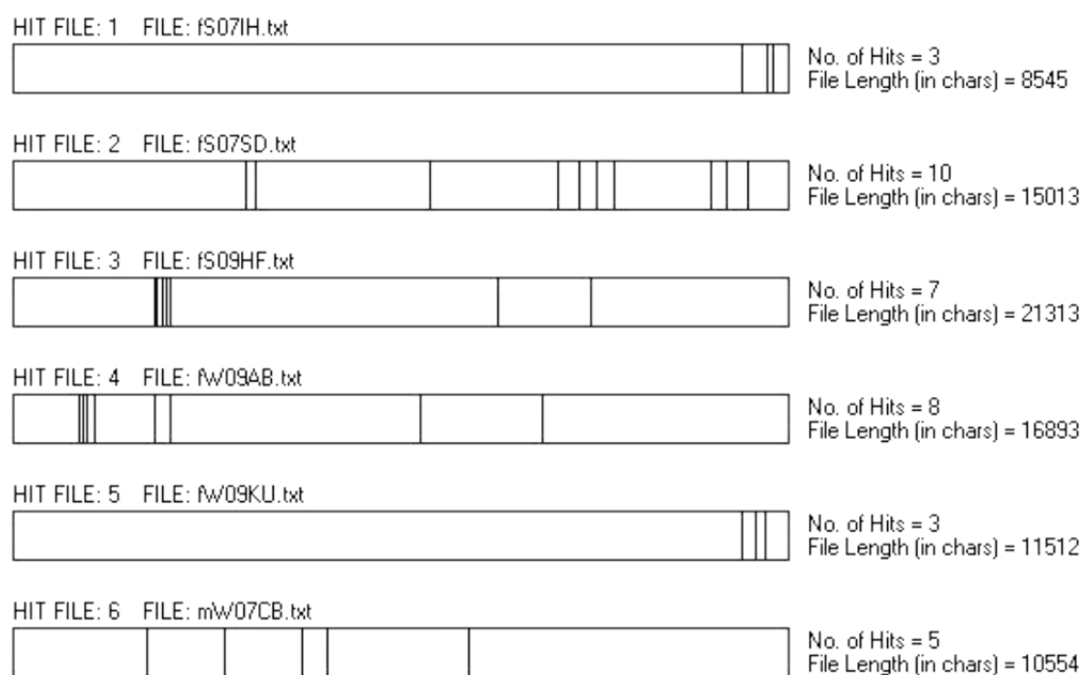


Figure 1: Distribution of *may* in selected ChemCorpus exam texts

The AntConc diagram clearly shows that modal auxiliaries like *may* cluster in specific parts of the text, they can be expected mainly in the second and the last sections, when the secondary literature is discussed critically and when research results are evaluated tentatively.

When we read through the *may* usages in the following examples in context, it is clear that they are all used in epistemic function:

- (1) This *may* lead to temporary or even permanent language attrition (fS07IH)
- (2) These additions *may* take several forms (fS09HF)
- (3) Firstly, they *may* be words that are completely new to English, words that (fS09HF)
- (4) Secondly, they *may* be words new to the BrE variety, but (fS09HF)
- (5) Thirdly, they *may* be words that have currency in BrE, but, in Australia (fS09HF)

- (6) Finally, they *may* also be words that might be unfamiliar to speakers of Standard English (fS09HF)
- (7) For some people it *may* seem that the Australian language travels from its roots, but (fS09HF)
- (8) Many Australian[s] *may* be able to give a few examples, including (fS09HF)
- (9) In return, children *may* also address and refer to their parents differently (fW09AB)
- (10) At home, a child *may* say “mum”, “mom” or “mummy” (fW09AB)
- (11) On the phone with a friend listening you *may* address your mother by saying “mother” (fW09AB)
- (12) When you are at home, talking to another family member and your mother is not present you *may* refer to her as “our mom” or “the old lady” (fW09AB)
- (13) He *may* have caused [caused] offence talking this way (fW09AB)
- (14) In a meeting, for instance, where first names are generally used, the director *may* say (fW09AB)
- (15) In everyday interactions, speech differences *may* also be reflected in people's social networks (fW090AB)
- (16) To British ears a New Zealander's “bad” *may* sound like “bed” (fW09AB)
- (17) the striking usage of ‘be’ which *may* support the creole hypothesis (fW09KU)
- (18) Therefore, a middle way between these hypotheses *may* be advisable (fW09KU)
- (19) I would conclude that AAVE *may* be an africanized language, which means (fW09KU)
- (20) On the other hand it *may* be assumed that the text producer has a supertheme in mind (mW07CB)
- (21) They *may* also be seen as linguistic principles (mW07CB)
- (22) Cohesion *may* well be viewed as a phenomenon of surface structure, i.e. (mW07CB)
- (23) This *may* be done via anaphora or cataphora (mW07CB)
- (24) A specific seme *may* occur throughout the text (mW07CB)

All *may*s in this list are used to indicate tentative expressions, but even within this semantic space of cautious meta-discourse, we recognise a few patterns:

- *may* is serialised to list possibilities (*Firstly* to *Finally* in (3) – (6) in fS09HF),
- *may* collocates with verbs of thinking/seeing (*assumed/seen/viewed* in mW07CB),
- *may* is used with primary auxiliaries, especially *be* to express passive,
- *may* often precedes *also* (four times by three different students), which could be an advanced learner habit.

The second text-linguistic example is the introductory paragraph of a final exam essay (on a language variation project) to illustrate how inherent lexical structures could be made more explicit. First, we discuss the original text, then we construct a new text version that is explicit and systematic according to our principles:

Language never stands still. It varies over time and is in a constant process of change, even though these processes might not be obvious. In many cases, linguistic variation is a result of internal linguistic factors. However, since the middle of the 20th century, many studies on language change have acknowledged that extralinguistic factors might have a considerable impact on the innovation and spread of new linguistic variants. Although these so-called sociolinguistic studies focused in the beginning predominantly on the category of social class, the awareness grew that it might in fact be the correlation of a variety of extralinguistic factors, such as age, ethnicity, and gender, that served best to explain the mechanism of linguistic variation and change. The subsequent chapters will focus in particular on the category of gender, as according to Labov (1990), the findings concerning the linguistic differentiation between men and women belong to the clearest and most consistent results of sociolinguistic research in the speech community. The first chapter will consider a number of methods and approaches that are commonly used to carry out sociolinguistic studies and obtain reliable results. As the argumentation will specifically deal with Great Britain, the correlation of social class and gender will need to be considered in particular. The second chapter will then discuss several generalizations that were made concerning gender-specific differences. The last part will finally present a number of phonological and grammatical variables that might be included in the study to analyse and reveal gender-based differences in linguistic variation. (fS10SK)

Apart from a “philosophical-essayistic” beginning, the text (fS10SK) consists of two parts: first, a discussion contrasting two approaches to language variation and change, and then a list of the sections that sketch the outline of this exam paper. The first part contrasts (through *however*) the traditional 19th century diachronic approach to language change with the modern sociolinguistic one since the mid-20th century. A further contrast is established between the old intra-linguistic and the new extra-linguistic factors, the latter expanding from social class to other variables like age, ethnicity, and gender. These contrasts can be made much more explicit in the re-written version (S10SK2) through the different type of contrasts: *intra-* vs. *extra-linguistic*, *19th* vs. *20th century*, *however* and *although* and the implicit *initially* vs. *grew*, as marked in the text below. Such lexical patterns in texts can be supplemented by grammatical patterns (like the *will* constructions above).

The second paragraph of the re-written text below is more clearly structured through lexical repetition of *section* and the near-synonym *part*. However, the contrast of the topics in the three sections (*methods and approaches*, *generalisations*, and *variables*) is not as clear as it could be. Most other changes in this introduction are simply structural simplifications that help the reader process the text more easily (*concerning* as a preposition). The reduction of tentativeness (i.e. auxiliaries, esp. *might*, the most “careful”) may also be a point that has to be considered systematically at this advanced level of academic writing, since novice writers have to learn to develop their own stance. Such key concepts or guidelines can be deduced from this text example by the students themselves, so that (hopefully) they will be able to transfer their knowledge to similar texts later.