Language Across Disciplines

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Towards a Critical Reading of Contemporary Academic Discourse

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To Francesca

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Introduction

Situating our Reading

Our aim in this book is to explore how writers from academic disciplines present themselves and their knowledge claims to their readers, through an analysis of the research article, the genre which perhaps most accurately portrays 'state-of-the-art' academic production in the world today. We are interested in understanding how common lexico-grammatical and pragmatic elements of the texts act to persuade the readers of the knowledge claims the writers bring forth, as well as in seeing how the writers position themselves as they are making these claims.

Further, we seek to gauge how scholars construct disciplinary identity through parameters such as the ways they have of displaying their ideas or assumptions, the forms of argumentation they employ to persuade their readers, and how they represent themselves and others in their texts. We aim to establish the consistency and the effects of such disciplinary identity by looking at differences and similarities in textual behavior across disciplines.

By tracing how research articles within one discipline display common features and recurring patterns which they do not necessarily share with those of another discipline, we hope to arrive at a few hypotheses about what informs the rhetorical devices and strategies of the fields we have chosen to analyze. We take such devices and strategies to be representations of the social practices circulating within the discipline, including the ideological beliefs and epistemological suppositions of its members.

The disciplines we have chosen to analyze are History and Economics. Our choice to focus on these two fields in particular, derives in part from the strategic role and symbolic place they are often seen as having in meta-disciplinary groupings. History is cited as one of the traditional pole-bearers of the 'human sciences' while Economics enjoys the privilege of being considered the oldest-standing member of the 'social sciences'. In the mind set of numerous scholars and institutions, therefore, each of these disciplines is representative not only of a knowledge-formation and epistemological design proper to itself, but bears traits and shares a common object with adjacent fields, representing a much larger area of knowledge. Whether or not this is effectively the case, it is safe to say that as disciplines their importance and centrality is in no way in doubt. They therefore afford an excellent occasion to explore how scholars from each constitute their object of knowledge while persuading their readership of their claims.

Another reason for our choice of these two disciplines is that they, perhaps more than some of their 'sister' disciplines, have undergone significant internal reflection over the past decades. This self-questioning has brought a number of problems to the fore and has undoubtedly contributed to fuelling a dynamic within the fields which has influenced what gets written and how. Problems such as the relation between knowledge construction and ideology, or that between language and the constitution of the disciplinary object of knowledge, are but a few examples.

As for the specific linguistic object of investigation of this work, although we examine numerous textual elements, we are above all interested in those features of language which convey evaluation and stance. Some of the features we investigate – forms of reporting, temporal framing, argumentative roles – have only recently been considered by applied linguistics as integral parts of the writer's persuasive arsenal. Other textual elements, such as adverbs and adverbials of stance, modal forms and the semantic resonance of verbs, which have long been seen as evaluative markers, are analyzed to ascertain how they are indicators of the writer's disciplinary persona.

Undertaking a project of this sort is not, however, without its methodological difficulties. To begin with, it may be asked how we reconcile the fact that we propose to do a critical reading of the way scholars write texts, while we are engaged in writing one of our own? This objection, stated in other terms, poses the problem of whether assuming both 'reader' and 'writer' positions alters or biases the approach we have set out for ourselves?

In response, we take the position that the very idea of a simple division between 'reader' and 'writer' (or hearer and speaker) of texts is for the most part a simulacrum or comforting myth which conceals the intrinsically dialogic nature of writing and speech. As critics such as Julia Kristeva (1980) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) argue, all texts are constructed as a mosaic of quotations and all texts come into being from the absorption and transformation of others. This multiciplicity or polyphony of voices constituting every act of writing or speech, is furthermore impossible to get beyond because it is itself rooted in the heteroglossia at the base of any language (Bakhtin 1973).

A second difficulty we encounter may be stated as follows: to what extent is our proposal of an analysis of academic discourse conditioned by the fact that we too are writing from the position of the academic, and contributing to academic discourse with this very work? Are we not subject to the same social practices as other academic writers? And if we are, then how are we both to persuade our readers through our argumentation and disclose the cultural and epistemological underpinnings of the argumentation of others?

A somewhat symmetrical problem to this regards the fact that we propose to analyze forms of argumentation across disciplines while we are using the methodologies and working largely from the assumptions of a single discipline – applied linguistics. It is legitimate to ask the extent to which our aim to read how other writers operate within disciplinary parameters enters into conflict with our own disciplinary stance and thereby exposes our own disciplinary blindness? Is it not the case that we, just like other scholars, are seeking to demonstrate the truth value of our knowledge claims? And if this is so, how will this influence our argumentation and findings?

This second order of difficulty is undoubtedly of a structural kind and can not be circumvented or overcome through denials or affirmations on our part. We are using forms of argumentation to state our case and this inevitably has its effect on the thesis we present and how we justify it. We may refer to this dilemma as the 'imprinting' of our ideological position or stance and, whether we are cognizant of it or not, we have to accept that it speaks through us, orienting what we 'see' and the way we tell. There are, of course, from our point of view, ways of presenting and arguing which maintain more of an opening or critical tension for the reader, but this as well is an expression of our ideological position and concerns the way we identify ourselves in the text and project our disciplinary persona. It is therefore largely the reader who has to ensure that the text gets read critically, in such a way that perceived contradictions resulting from our personal and disciplinary bias offer the occasion for greater writer–reader dialogue and open up new possibilities in/from the text.

The problem of the particularity or universality of the voice from which we 'speak' has a bearing as well on our ability to delimit our object of analysis. Although we confine our readings to research articles – and therefore to the written production of specific texts – the very questions we are posing seem to imply a link between the writing of a single text and the writing process *tout court*. We can hardly dissociate our understanding of the writing process from the specific cultural and institutional circumstances in which such a process takes place for us. In this sense we accept the following view of writing expressed by Christopher Candlin and Ken Hyland:

> Every act of writing is [...] linked in complex ways to a set of communicative purposes which occur in a context of social, interpersonal and occupational practices. Equally, of course, each act of writing also constructs the reality that it describes, reproducing a particular mode of communication and maintaining the social relationships which that implies. Writing is also a personal and socio-cultural act of identity whereby writers both signal their membership in what may be a range of communities of practice, as well as express their own creative individuality. (1999: 2)

A Few Thoughts on Methodology

The present study is based on no single methodology or approach. We attempt to adapt our way of reading and the methodologies we employ to the theoretical problems and practical objectives we set out in each chapter. We do, however, largely draw inspiration from the procedures and tools of two approaches – discourse analysis and corpus linguistics – which have become increasingly important within applied linguistics over the last two decades. We shall attempt here to briefly introduce these forms of analysis, above all in relation to how we attempt to employ them in this work.

Discourse Analysis, for most of those who practice it, is taken as deriving its 'specificity' from a combination of models and methods originating in a variety of disciplines, which have as their common scope the analysis of one or more communicative events. The coming together of so many models and disciplines – from pragmatics and speech act theory to conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, from interactional sociolinguistics to narrative theory – which have contributed to the wealth of ideas and methodologies comprising discourse analysis, however, make a simple definition of the approach, or even of what is meant by 'discourse', a somewhat arduous task.

The method most often adopted by important compendiums of discourse analysis to define the approach has been to offer a range of definitions by scholars who identify their work as being of the 'field'. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi Hamilton (2001), the editors of *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, an important and lengthy tome, attempt to derive a common denominator in the definitions of ten discourse analysts found in *The Discourse Reader,* edited by Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland (1999), another important compendium. According to Schiffrin et al., all ten definitions fall into three main categories: (1) discourse is anything beyond the sentence, (2) it regards language use, and (3) it necessarily invokes a broad range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language (2001: 1).

The three categories seem to imply a contiguous or metonymic relationship between language as communicative process and discourse as language use constituted by, but also shaping social, political and cultural formations. The logic linking these two notions can be charted in the work of Brown and Yule (1983). These two early and important discourse analysts, circumscribe language as a means of communication, and make this the founding premise and starting point of their analytic work. For them, the discourse analyst attempts to understand the function(s) and purpose(s) of a piece of linguistic data and how this piece of data is processed both by the producer and by the receiver (1983: 25). He is someone who

> treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse). Working from this data, the analyst seeks to describe regularities in the linguistic realizations used by people to communicate those meanings and intentions. (Brown and Yule 1983: 26)

Through their interest in the functions of language in use, Brown and Yule primarily pose problems regarding the context underlying and informing a discourse. They therefore see an explicit link between discourse analysis and pragmatics. Both fields are concerned with what people using language are doing, and both attempt to account for the linguistic features in the discourse as the means employed in what they are doing (1983: 26). Taking their lead from John Rupert Firth's notion of "context of situation" (Firth 1957a), they develop their ideas about the language event both in the direction of the relations between the verbal and non-verbal action of participants and in the direction of the effects of verbal action (Brown and Yule 1983: 37).

Stemming from a theoretical base not dissimilar from these, a number of discourse analysts develop the idea of language as context-embedded social action (Hymes 1972, Gumperz 1982, Duranti 1997). Since, according to this view, language is the means *par excellence* by which we bring our cultural worlds into existence, differences in language usage and worldview become impossible to separate.

Once this view has been accepted, language can in no way be taken as a neutral medium for the transmission and reception of pre-existing knowledge; it rather becomes the key ingredient in the construction of knowledge. Academic study, which is based on classifications and the building of knowledge and interpretations in and through discourse, is very largely a process of defining boundaries between conceptual classes, labeling those classes and establishing the relationships between them. (Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 4) Discourse, then, has to be situated institutionally, socially, politically and culturally, not only because it is constructed by, but because it is constitutive of, social practices.

The importance of discourse analysis for our work can thus be seen on different levels. In one sense, it provides an interpretative space or logic which allows us to justify our reading of one research article in relation to others and questions how aspects of the argumentational framework of an article may relate to suppositions of the disciplinary culture or those of the wider national-cultural and scientific community. Analytic tools typical of discourse analysis such as the notion of genre, or steps and moves within genre, provide structural and functional guidelines with which articles may be read and compared. On another level, discourse analysis, which stakes its claim on the multiplicity of ways texts may be read, lends support for our interest in exploring some of the pragmatic functions and argumentative roles (e.g. inference versus contrast versus concession and contrast positions) found within the texts.

The Use of Corpus Linguistics

The other approach we make considerable use of, above all in the more comparative chapters of this work, is corpus linguistics. This area of research exploits recent possibilities offered by computer-based technology.

On one level, corpus linguistics is founded on an extremely simple procedure: the collection through computers of samples of language in use. The computer corpus, as it is called, can be defined briefly as "a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research." (Sinclair 2004b: chapter I) The novelty permitted by electronic corpora and by the corpus access programs linguists use to 'dialogue' with them, is the amount of language potentially available for analysis and the facility with which queries regarding elements and use of the language gathered within any corpus can be made.

On another level, the use of programs which interface and investigate the corpus, and above all the inferences applied linguists make about what is observed, pose questions of approach and methodology which, of course, go well beyond the simple and efficient gathering of texts.

Although we make considerable use of the corpora we have gathered, our work does not foresee what is often called a "corpus driven" approach (Sinclair 1991). We prefer to counterbalance discourse-based and corpus-based analyses in such a way that they establish a form of 'constructive dialogue'. Our approach normally consists in either using the corpus to gain a global idea of what the most common lexical-grammatical elements may be and afterwards performing an extensive contextual reading of the items where they appear, or vice-versa, beginning with a reading of selected articles or article sections, in order to ascertain what we should be looking for and then consulting our corpus.

More specifically, our use of corpus-based analytic tools revolves principally around the listing and investigation of the most frequent words and word patterns, largely to understand how they collocate. Since our focus is to understand the semantic scope of these terms and how they interact with other textual elements, we usually extend the parameters of our reading of the occurrences so as to reestablish contact with pragmatic and inter-sentential argumentative constructions. When contrasting Economics and History, we also make use of keyword possibilities Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1996) provides. This is a contrastive feature which calculates the difference in frequency of use of commonly occurring terms across two comparable corpora. The higher the keyness indication, the greater is the difference in frequency across corpora (disciplines).

Corpus Construction

We have compiled three corpora and distinguished a number of sub-corpora for the present work. In chapter II, which attempts to find a relation between how certain historians theorize their field and the strategies they employ in writing in or on their field, we have made use of a corpus of History research articles coming exclusively from university presses based in the United States – the HUS corpus – and have then modeled a sub-corpus of article openings – HOPUS – from it.

The HUS corpus is composed of research articles from three academic journals – *American Quarterly, Journal of Social History, Journal of the*

History of Ideas – and contains approximately 1,850,000 words. Since our interest in this corpus is in identifying the extent to which members of the same discipline may condition each other's writing within a national or geo-cultural context, articles coming from academics whose institutional affiliation was outside of the United States were omitted. All the journal articles appeared from 1998 to 2001, and no journal was taken for less than a full year running.[1]

The HOPUS sub-corpus is a collection of all the article openings. By 'opening' we mean all text up to the end of the second paragraph, including titles and introductory citations. For the sake of comparability, we decided a paragraph division would best allow us to analyze argumentational differences across the articles and journals, while maintaining a homogeneous organizational standard throughout. We recognize, however, that this distinction is somewhat arbitrary and derives more from the practical necessities of standardization and comparability than from the rhetorical-functional layout of the individual articles themselves.

Chapter III and Chapter IV make use of a corpus we have compiled in History and Economics (HEC), which attempts to arrive at a representative sampling of journals in English of the two fields without placing national or geo-cultural limitations on our choice. The two sub-corpora in History (HSC) and Economics (ESC) of the HEC have been compiled so as to be representative and comparable in size and text-type. Each of the two contains approximately 2,700,000 tokens, and each is comprised of articles downloaded electronically from a panorama of academic journals from the years 1999-2000.

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1 Very little was eliminated from the downloaded journals with the exception of indexes, abstracts and other short pieces of text such as captions and acknowledgements, which are of no interest for this study.

A number of criteria were employed both in the selection of the journals and in the quantities taken of each. The greatest factors conditioning the composition of the sub-corpora regarded maintaining a relatively equal distribution of tokens across disciplinary subdivisions, so as to preserve a representative and hence comparable composite of each. Although the identification of the journals was inevitably oriented in part by exogenous factors such as reparability (only readily available e-texts were used), recourse was made to disciplinary experts who indicated the most representative journals from the set available. The journals comprising the History sub-corpus are: *Labour History Review (LHR), Journal of Interdisciplinary History (JIH), Journal of European Ideas (JEI), Journal of Medieval History (JMH), Journal of Social History (JSH), Studies in History (SH), American Quarterly (AQ), Historical Research (HR), Gender & History (GH). The journals comprising the Economics sub-corpus are: European Economic Review (EER), International Journal of Industrial Organization (IJIO), International Review of Economics and Finance (IREF), European Journal of Political Economy (EJPE), Journal of Corporate Finance (JCF), Journal of Development Economics (JDE), Journal of Socio-Economics (JSE), The North American Journal of Economics and Finance (NAJEF).*

As opposed to the HUS corpus used in chapter II, in the HEC corpus we attempt to take journals from different country sources so as not to privilege any one national culture or language. Additionally, for reasons of homogeneity within the genre considered, we removed all articles which weren't considered research articles. This includes review articles, special inaugural addresses, introductory presentations, round table debates, etc.. The numbers of articles comprising the corpus from each journal is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Number of articles by journal

HISTORY		**ECONOMICS**	
Journal	N.Articles	Journal	N.Articles
AQ	30		
JSH	14	EJPE	63
LHR	16	IJIO	56
JIH	19	IREF	46
HEI	21	JCF	35
JMH	41	JDE	43
SH	27	JSE	46
HR	39	NAJEF	23
GH	51	EER	66
TOTAL	258		378

A number of criteria were employed both in the selection of the journals and in the quantities taken of each. The greatest factors conditioning the composition of the sub-corpora regarded maintaining a relatively equal distribution of tokens across disciplinary subdivisions, so as to preserve a representative and hence comparable composite of each.

The sub-corpora which focus their attention on research article openings (HOSC + EOSC) have been extracted from each of the two disciplinary sub-corpora of full texts. The sub-corpora of article openings contain 89,597 words in History and 103,036 in Economics.[2]

The HECM corpus in use in chapter V (see Table 2) is a slightly modified version of the HEC used in chapters III and IV. An extra journal was added in History – the *American Historical Review* – and two journals were added in Economics – the *Journal of Economics and Business* and the *History of Political Economy* – so as to have a total of 10 journals for each

[2] The discrepancy in the two sub-corpora results from our attempt to keep the two full-text sub-corpora as quantitatively similar as possible.

field.[3] The total number of words of the ESC is 2,619,557,[4] and that of the HSC is 2,542,702.

Table 2 - Number of articles by journal

HISTORY		**ECONOMICS**	
Journal	N.Articles	Journal	N.Articles
JSH	14	EJPE	63
LHR	17	IJIO	63
JIH	19	IREF	47
HEI	29	JCF	35
JMH	42	JDE	48
SH	33	JSE	46
HR	39	NAJEF	25
GH	51	EER	44
AQ	32	HPE	20
AHR	30	JEB	45
TOTAL	306		436

Book Outline

Chapter I aims to situate our work within contemporary research on academic discourse in applied linguistics and adjacent fields. We outline the salient ideas which have contributed to establishing a consolidated theoretical base of reflection on academic discourse, and provide an understanding of how our own analysis seeks to position itself vis-à-vis the research being done. From this initial critical reading a number of key concepts arise which we attempt to define and contextualize, in order to make them functionally useful to us in our work. Among these, the

3 The decision regarding the new journals to be included in the corpus was based on problems of sub-discipline distribution. The addition of the *History of Political Economy*, which may seem peripheral to the field, can be justified in the need for one or two non-standard sub-disciplines for Economics to balance those used for History.

4 It was necessary to randomly reduce three of the economics journals.