

The Difficult Balance Between Author's and Academic Community's Power over Research Articles in Applied Linguistics

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1. Introduction

1.1. Writing research articles as social action

The approach that sees academic writing as an example of social action between scientific communities and individual researchers is based on the assumption that genres are ways in which discourse communities relate (Swales, 1990). In the last two decades or so, this approach has been prolific in the development of new theoretical insights. The concept of genre itself has been revisited and regarded as a social construct (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Following this trend, the genre “research article” (RA) is no longer seen as a piece of writing where research results and new knowledge are presented in the most objective and impersonal way. From this perspective, research articles are reported to be “rhetorically competent products” through which scientific knowledge is negotiated and ratified (Hyland, 1998). Academic genres, like other forms of writing, require writers to consider the expected audience and anticipate their background knowledge, processing problems and reactions to the text (Widdowson, 1984: 220). The modern international scientific community, as represented in impact factor journals, has progressively been biased towards Anglo-Saxon academic conventions and has imposed a series of linguistic constraints on writers of research articles, not only when they write in English but also in their mother tongues. We could argue that to some extent these conventions have become globally accepted if a researcher wants to be considered internationally. In the same way, Spanish academic articles - that were influenced by the French academic style in the past - have also undergone a shift towards English academic conventions from the 20th century onwards (Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza, 2001).

From a critical discourse analysis viewpoint, control over the members of the scientific community is exerted through literacy and researchers who do not follow the rules become outsiders. *Objectivity, precision* and *non-assertive language* are the linguistic rules that scientists must follow if they want their articles to be published and their investigation to be taken seriously. In order to persuade a scientific audience or an academic journal referee, a successful argument depends on linguistic choices which appropriately convey the writer's intention as well as facilitate a smooth exchange of information, all of which create the adequate conditions for persuasion. Academic communication, apart from reporting scientific findings or opinions, also involves the reader's recognition of the writer's intention. Rhetorical patterns contained in research articles are seen by Speech Act theorists as social acts, since scientists perform illocutionary acts by which they express their attitude. In this sense, a scientific text can be seen as a set of illocutionary acts which constitute an argument by justifying or refuting a given opinion. The aim of such argumentation is to elicit a response from the readers that writers hope to convince or persuade. For authors like Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza (2001) and others, this means that language must serve both a communicative and an interactional purpose: a writer not only wants his/her words to be understood (an illocutionary effect), but also to be accepted (a perlocutionary effect). As Swales (1990: 175) observes:

Research articles are rarely simple narratives of investigations. Instead they are complexly distanced reconstructions of research activities, at least part of this reconstructive process deriving from the need to anticipate and discountenance negative reactions to the knowledge claims being advanced.

Following this, the accomplishment of social acts in scientific writing therefore concerns epistemic change: the intention of the writer is to alter the knowledge of the reader in a specific field or matter. In other words, the reader not only has to identify semantic acts of meaning and reference, but also has to be involved in pragmatic interpretation. A scientific assertion, therefore, as part of its essential force, has to persuade an audience; changing "a context in which the speaker is not committed...into a context in which s/he is so committed" (Gazdar, 1981: 69).

1.2. Research article conventions: genre and register implications

Research articles (RA's) can be viewed as a specific genre established by the scientific community as a means of communication and control over its members that is the result of its discursive activity. Following the Theory of Argumentation (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1984) this communicative goal of RA's is related to two functions: *explanation* and *argumentation*: in general, scientific texts attempt to explain a research process but also to argue about reasons, effects and criticism related to that research, challenging the knowledge of the scientific community. Subjectivity, or the inclusion of the scientist's 'self', although primarily related to argumentation is also present in explanations. This distinction corresponds to the

difference that Chafe (1985) establishes between *involvement* and *detachment* and Vassileva (1997) between *commitment* and *detachment*.

Along with genre, register must also be taken into account in the way that Martin (1985) and Couture (1986) describe them: *genre* imposes rhetorical and structural limits from a superior hierarchical order while *register* establishes lexico-semantic and grammatical conventions as a realization of genre. We can therefore speak of a certain homogeneity of discourse in research articles, understanding that writers must not only follow generic rhetorical patterns, but also register conventions, understood as realization of genre, with obvious individual style variations. These register conventions are *objectivity*, (mainly the avoidance of personal pronouns referring to the scientist behind the research) *precision* (adequate and specific vocabulary) and *non-assertive language* (use of hedges when possible, in the form of verbs, adjectives and adverbs) (Alcaraz, 2000: 62), as the three main characteristics that feature the language of science.

As for the third convention, the use of non-assertive language, the origin seems to lie in a typically Anglo-Saxon –mostly British- style in interpersonal scientific written communication (Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza and Zambrano, 2003: 237) which prescribes politeness principles as an obligatory and recurrent feature. Here, the well-known phenomenon of hedging or mitigation devices mean that the main register convention commands a non-assertive style (Salager-Meyer, 1994, 1998a) So, members of academia should *assume* or *suggest*, and instead of saying how things *are*, one should sometimes preferably say how things *might be*.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1992, 1995), one can see scientific genre and register conventions as a power imposition and the way in which the scientific community, (which follows the Anglo-Saxon model of those researchers who operate and write in English speaking settings) exerts control over its members. As van Dijk (1993) puts it, "...genres typically have conventional *schemas* consisting of various categories. Access to some of these may be *prohibited* or *obligatory*." The convention of impersonal reporting remains a hallowed concept for many, a cornerstone of the positivist assumption that academic research is purely empirical and objective, and therefore best presented as if human agency was not part of the process" (Hyland, 2001).

1.3. Inclusion of the researcher's 'self' in written articles

Despite the previously stated register conventions, a trend has been progressively taking shape, assuming that researchers prove their authority in the investigated matter not only through a high degree of persuasion, which is achieved through impersonality and tentative language, but also by a certain degree of ego-involvement (Chafe, 1985). Although impersonality is institutionally accepted, it is constantly transgressed (Hyland, 2001) and its achievement is seen as a myth (Salager-Meyer, 2000). Authority is partly accomplished by speaking as a community member, thus using an impersonal style, but it is also related to the

writer's convictions, and personal presentation of the 'self' is often unavoidable, being an alternative way to attain authority. Negotiability, or the interpersonal relationship which is established between research authors and their audience through the use of personal traits, has been considered by Benveniste (1996) as an oral discourse feature which can be contained in written discourse items.

Campos (2004: 187) in her investigation on how the researcher's 'self' is present in scientific discourse through personal traits, challenging the myth of impersonality, views the researcher as a sender and encoder of a particular message, thus being the centre of the research. Several arguments support this new perspective, following different academic writing manuals:

A. *Impersonality is a means to avoid responsibility.* Martínez (2001) claims that the use of nominalizations creates a certain distance between the sender and the message, whereas the use of personal pronouns makes the author responsible for his/her statements.

B. *Personal traits favour linguistic economy.* Yang (1995) considers that the use of agentive subject-verb structures saves many words since long passive sentences can be avoided. Bobenrieth (1994) even suggests that excessive word use employing impersonal structures can result in a lack of precision, thus threatening an essential characteristic of academic discourse:

C. *Impersonal structures disrupt readers' expectations.* Not finding a clear subject at the beginning of a sentence can disrupt the reader's expectation schemata since actions appear without an agent and the reading process becomes less fluent. Williams (1997) claims that sentences will be clearer if characters are used as subjects and actions are expressed with verbs.

D. *Impersonality does not guarantee objectivity.* According to Williams (1997) passive structures do not make discourse more objective. On the contrary, they bring a false image of depersonalization. Salager-Meyer (2001: 183) also views objectivity in scientific discourse as a myth created by the scientific community itself, the realization of which is "an unattainable ideal".

E. *Impersonality does not favour communication with the reader.* Reyes (1998) and Martínez (2001) argue that a text with abundant 3rd person constructions and nominalizations results in a cold and distant message, due to the apparent lack of dialogue with the reader and negotiability between reader and writer is lower. Finally, Alcaraz (2000; 182-185) claims that first person traits can create a positive politeness in scientific texts, whereas impersonalization and nominalization do create negative politeness.

F. *It is impossible to maintain an impersonal discourse.* At times, scientists need to present their personal experiences related to their research and therefore cannot avoid the use of first person constructions. Schapira & Schapira (1989: 434) who

are in favour of personalization in scientific writing, report several cases where scientists have made great discoveries, (e.g. Laennec, who discovered the cause of tuberculosis), thanks to their personal experiences.

All the previous evidence for the positive and necessary use of personalization does not mean that impersonalization has to be avoided in scientific discourse. In this sense, Yang (1995) suggests that passive constructions are effective if used sparingly, since they place the receiver of the action as the subject of the sentence, thus receiving subtle emphasis.

Although many studies have been carried out which analyse scientific writing in different disciplines of RA's in English, there is a lack of contrastive work which compares how different languages and their scientific communities exert control over their members by means of discursive devices, especially those which concern the researcher's self inclusion in RA's through personalization as a means to strive for authority, thus challenging the above mentioned historical scientific conventions.

1.4. The aim of the current research project

This research attempts to investigate academic discourse from a cross-linguistic viewpoint. My aim, in this small-scale study, is to explore the difficult balance between impersonality and personality or inclusion of the researcher's 'self' as a means to achieve authorial power, persuade and be accepted by the academic community, from a cross-linguistic viewpoint. English and Spanish research articles of Linguistics have been examined in two major journals well known to Spanish and English applied linguists.

My two research questions were:

1st) Can personal traits in applied linguistics RA's, which I assume to be an indicator of subjectivity, be used in order to determine the extent to which the academic community's power is challenged by the researcher's self inclusion? By subjectivity I understand the author's self-being present in the narration of facts or results as a means of support to the research through his/her authority.

2nd) The power of which linguistics journal community (of the two analyzed), English or Spanish, is more challenged by the use of subjectivity through personal traits in RA's, and therefore, which individual researchers in both linguistic communities show greater personal authority?

Conclusions have been drawn with the aim of shedding some light on this controversial issue and to find differences as to how the English and Spanish applied linguistics communities exert control over their members by means of discourse, but also to see how individual researchers present the 'self' as a means for discourse negotiability, thus challenging the scientific community's discursive conventions of objectivity and impersonalization.

2. Methodology

Taking the *theory of argumentation* (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1984) and the difference between *involvement* and *detachment* (Chafe, 1985; Vassileva, 1997) as a general framework, twelve research articles belonging to the applied linguistics journals *ReSLA* (Revista de la Asociación Española de Lingüística Aplicada) for the Spanish linguistic community and *English for Specific Purposes* for the English community have been analyzed. They were randomly selected from the period 1998 to 2003, some having a single author, others having several. The issue of NS versus NNS authorship has not been considered in this study. Impersonal versus personal traits have been identified as two basic tools that make the scientific community and the author the two parties that negotiate the discourse, striving for authority from two different perspectives.

Although the use of **passive and impersonal constructions** in English also have the purpose of emphasizing a sentences thematic meaning, they have been considered here as major grammatical devices for showing *impersonal traits* as representation of objectivity and the academic community's conventions. This was the first step in the research. All contain verbal structures and are a means to hide the researcher's 'self':

- **Passive verbal constructions:**

“The evaluation is based on the number of exercises and quality of information devoted to relevant concepts and linguistic items”.

“Las instrucciones para la realización de ambas tareas fueron dadas en inglés y español, para evitar problemas de comprensión.”

- **Impersonal/ verbal constructions:**

“It could be objected that non-professionals were not really writing submission letters”.

“Hay que tener en cuenta que las oraciones que son gramaticales en español no lo son en inglés y viceversa.”

I have chosen **personal pronouns** as the grammatical device that best represents *personal traits* or manifestation of the author's 'self', either in the subject, object or possessive form, singular or plural:

- **I/me/my:**

“In my opinion, such an attempt can only lead to loosing sight of the very essence of the hedging phenomenon...”

- **Yo o forma verbal/me/mi:**

“Mi estudio se centra en el análisis de las pruebas de gramaticalidad.”

We/us/our :

“*Our analysis* of the genre moves and definitions *was refined* based on feedback, discussion and consensus with the lecturers and their students.”

Nosotros o forma verbal/nos/nuestro:

“En la segunda parte se da cuenta de *nuestro* estudio: participantes, pruebas utilizadas, resultados y análisis estadístico”.

However, the strict analysis and comparison of personal versus impersonal traits only shows how *objectivity* and *subjectivity* are represented in research articles, but does not demonstrate anything about the difficult balance of authority between the two parties, since the use of personal pronouns does not guarantee any challenge to the academic community’s power. A deeper layer of analysis was therefore necessary as a second step in the methodology; a step in which the communicative function or interpersonal relationship of academic discourse is taken into account by means of specific functions accomplishing the argumentative purpose. This deeper layer or progressive line of analysis has been achieved by studying the illocutionary acts associated with every personal trait, taking the verbal constructions linked to each personal pronoun as a basis for identification. I have used two ad hoc *sets of functions*, extracted from the corpus itself, as tools to establish this difference between **illocutionary** and **non-illocutionary force** (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1984) of discursive devices, one representing the direct relationship between the researcher and the facts, the other representing the researcher’s narration of the facts. I have named the first set of functions CHALLENGING and it takes account of ad hoc *specific functions* in the texts, such as Affirming, Stating, Suggesting or Criticizing:

STATING:

“*I would like to briefly discuss* some ideas the EST teachers can find useful when dealing with fiction stories.”

“Comparando las oraciones 3a y 3c *vemos que* en español *hay* un movimiento del verbo...”

CRITICIZING:

“*We also differ from* Bhatia in that the only examples resembling his move Soliciting Response were sentences like...”

“Además, *y en contra de Gass (1994), tenemos que señalar* que las pruebas utilizadas no parecen ser fiables...”

AFFIRMING:

“*Our analysis revealed that* it is frequently used in binary phrases mainly with two nouns but also with two verbs...”

“Por lo tanto, *podemos concluir que* en aquellas lenguas en las que la flexión es fuerte, como en español,...”

SUGGESTING:

“*Our analysis suggests* that when teaching the Letter of Application...”

“...entonces *podríamos afirmar que* ambas pruebas evalúan la competencia lingüística de los participantes de forma distinta.”

All these functions have to do with the research itself and the new findings and knowledge that derive from it. The other set of *ad hoc* functions represents the relationship between the scientist and the narration or explanation of the research, and has no illocutionary force. I have named it:

NON-CHALLENGING and it takes account of *specific functions* such as Explaining, Describing, Narrating, Quoting, etc.:

DESCRIBING:

“*In our corpus*, the first NP is always ‘myself’, but it is possible this slot could be filled with another item...”

“En este trabajo adoptaremos la clasificación de Vendler (1967), que distingue cuatro tipos de verbos o predicados verbales...”

NARRATING:

“*We sought the cooperation of* two subject-matter specialists, a practice highly recommended in all kinds of LSP-related discourse analysis...”

“Para verificar nuestras hipótesis, *examinaremos la adquisición* de las tres propiedades sintácticas..”

EXPLAINING:

“*I chose this book because* its scientific content touches on aspects pertaining to a wide variety of fields.”

“*Si comparamos los dos grupos, nos sorprende* que los principiantes realizaran ambas pruebas...”

The CHALLENGING set of functions is expected to determine which personal traits are a real challenge to the power of the scientific community as they are a symbol of the struggle for epistemic authority by opposing the conventions of impersonality and objectivity.

3. Results

The results are shown in the following tables:

Table1. Comparison of **Impersonal versus Personal traits in English and Spanish RA's** from my corpus.

RA	ENGLISH				SPANISH			
	<i>Impersonalization</i>		<i>Personalization</i>		<i>Impersonalization</i>		<i>Personalization</i>	
	Passive	Impersonal	I	We	Passive	Impersonal	I	We
1	52	24	49	14	8	61	1	46
2	28	15	26	11	22	52	0	11
3	50	29	0	15	6	19	1	23
4	19	28	0	8	5	70	0	27
5	39	6	1	0	2	39	0	9
6	45	11	18	35	5	46	0	43
Subtotal	233	113	94	83	48	287	2	159
Total	346 (66.15%)		177 (33.84%)		335 (67.54%)		161 (32.45%)	

According to this data, the use of impersonalization is very similar in English and in Spanish RA's. English articles show an abundant use of passive constructions and less abundant use of impersonal constructions, whereas Spanish articles show the opposite. This corresponds to the traditional English and Spanish academic styles, cited by many authors. Spanish RA's also show a very similar percentage of personal traits when compared to the English examples. One thing I have observed is that these occurrences change dramatically among the different RA's analyzed, ranging from none or very few personal pronouns in some of the articles to several or many in others. Also, Spanish personal pronouns are primarily represented by the plural first person, irrespective of the fact that they were written by one or several authors whereas the English personal pronouns correspond exactly to the fact that one or many researchers wrote the article. However, these aspects stand out within the scope of the present research, and will have to be analyzed in further projects. It would seem that Spanish and English RA's present the same amount of objective and subjective traits, though as I said in the Methodology section, a deeper layer of analysis was needed to unveil the argumentative or challenging functions versus the explicative or non-challenging ones, all associated with personal pronouns.

Table 2. Illocutionary acts: *personal traits inserted in power challenging and power non-challenging functions.*

Research Article	ENGLISH (Personal traits associated with a function)		SPANISH (Personal traits associated with a function)	
	Challenging power	Non-challenging power	Challenging power	Non-challenging power
1	16	23	11	31
2	9	24	1	10
3	3	12	7	15
4	0	8	0	26
5	0	1	1	8
6	24	22	15	25
Total	62 (40.78%)	90 (59.21%)	35 (23.33%)	115 (76.66%)

These results, in contrast to that which the previous tables seemed to demonstrate, show that English RA's have a greater number of challenging verbal functions (40.78%) in comparison with the Spanish RA's (23.33%), just over half the English figure. Non-challenging verbal functions are comparatively much more frequent in Spanish RA's (76.66%) than in English RA's (59.21%), where they seem to be more balanced with the challenging functions.

4. Discussion

The above data show that the distinction between verbal constructions with or without illocutionary force as based on the *theory of argumentation* (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1984) and the difference between *involvement* and *detachment* (Chafe, 1985; Vassileva, 1997) has proved very useful to demonstrate whether there is a real challenge to the community's academic conventions when writing scientific articles.

Although Spanish RA's contain more personal traits than the English in this corpus, the majority belong to non-challenging functions without illocutionary force. This makes the text more fluid interpersonally, since the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the reader. However, s/he does not really take any responsibility for the research and therefore does not make a real challenge to the power of the scientific community. Additionally, challenging functions represent a relatively low and unbalanced percentage (23.30%). In contrast, English RA's show a high percentage of challenging verbal functions with a clear illocutionary force (40.78%) versus the number of non-challenging functions (59.21%). This can be interpreted as a higher degree of inclusion and responsibility by the researcher over her/his work in English RA's than in the Spanish.

Therefore, our 1st question could be answered by saying that personal traits alone are useful to describe the interpersonal relationship between author and audience. However, they seem to be poor indicators of the researcher's personal involvement in the work and need to be associated to argumentative functions to show whether there is a real challenge to the power of the community.

The second research question can be answered more interestingly if we suggest a CDA approach, following the perspectives put forward by van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough (1993, 1995) who see genres as social constructs, thus being the product of two competing forces, in this case, the author and the academic community. Here, one could say that, at least in this corpus, English RA's show a greater challenge to the power of the scientific community. Their personal traits are stronger in argumentative functions, whereas the Spanish traits show a lower challenge, their personal traits being associated to explicative functions and never to argumentative ones.

Another aspect that is worth mentioning is the fact that a great variation in personal traits has been observed in all the different RA's, and this opens up a new area to be able to continue with this research and investigate personal styles, as well as the

issue of NS versus NNS, and how these aspects influence the final outcome. In other words, personal traits contain varied personalizations in the form of pronouns (*I, we, my, mine, us, our*, etc. in English and *yo, nosotros, nuestro, mi*, etc. in Spanish) which are interesting enough to be studied in further research. Another specific aspect to be studied is the degree of parallelism in the use of personalization in both languages and their different type of subjective involvement in the discourse. In other words, do authors from different languages and cultural environments use personalizations in relation to rhetorical functions similarly? What, if any, are the differences and their cultural implications?

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that, apart from issues which require more research, the Spanish authors seem to challenge less the academic community, represented by the linguistics journal *Resla*. This could also be interpreted as a documentation of difference in the tolerance of diversions over the convention of impersonality by the Spanish editors. The English editors, on the other hand, represented here by the journal *English for Specific Purposes*, seem to tolerate more diversions from this convention, especially through the researcher's self inclusion within argumentative functions. From the viewpoint of social action this means that, for the sampled years -1998 to 2003- and circumscribing the results to the analyzed corpus, researchers who write in English within the field of applied linguistics demonstrate a greater challenge to the power of the international community. In order to confirm whether or not this is a homogeneous trend in English and Spanish written RA's, a larger corpus in applied linguistics would have to be analyzed, as well as other disciplines and genres on a cross-linguistic basis.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH ARTICLES USED AS CORPUS

English corpus:

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- Moreno, A.I. 2003. Matching theoretical descriptions of discourse and practical applications to teaching: the case of causal metatext. *English for Specific Purposes* 22, 265-295.

Spanish corpus:

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ABSTRACT

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Precision and objectivity through impersonalization, together with non-assertive language, have been the main conventions that writers of academic articles have had to strictly follow, if they wanted their texts to be accepted by the scientific or academic community and thus, be published. The rationale behind these principles is that what counts in scientific research is not who investigates but the results of the investigation. The academic community imposes these discourse constraints as a means for researchers to attain membership and authority, negating any individual impulse for self-description of subjective convictions. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, one can see this phenomenon as a power imposition and the way in which the western, mostly Anglo-Saxon, scientific community manages to exert control over its members nowadays. As van Dijk (1993) puts it, "...genres typically have conventional *schemas* consisting of various categories. Access to some of these may be *prohibited* or *obligatory*." The convention of impersonal reporting remains a hallowed concept for many and therefore best presented as if human agency was not part of the process" (Hyland, 2001). A recent trend has been developing which assumes that scientific texts entail a high degree of persuasion, and this is achieved through tentative language, generally in the form of hedging, but also through a certain degree of ego-involvement (Chafe, 1985). This paper attempts to explore this difficult balance between objectivity and authorial power as a means to achieve authority, persuade and be accepted by the academic community, from a cross-cultural viewpoint. A corpus of English and Spanish research articles of Linguistics have been examined, analyzing impersonal and personal traits, as well as rhetorical functions with illocutionary force, as tools that make the academic community and authors strive for authority in these two languages. Conclusions have been drawn, with the aim of shedding some light on this controversial issue and to look for differences in how the English and the Spanish scientific or academic communities exert control over their members by means of discourse.
