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ENGAGEMENT IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: A CROSS- CULTURAL STUDY OF RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH RESEARCH ARTICLES

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Summary

This paper analyzes cross-cultural features of engagement demonstrated by native English- and Russian-speaking academics in their research articles (RAs) in linguistics and communication theory. To observe the differences, the engagement features^[1] are identified and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The focus of this research is on the relationship between the use of engagement features and academics' sociocultural environment. A mixed method approach has been applied in conducting this analysis. The research shows that academic discursive traditions are molded by the sociocultural environment, which either creates or removes incentives for a writer to become involved in a dialog with the reader.

We can see that academic encounters in English are more interactive than in Russian because of much more generous use of reader-inclusive pronouns and questions establishing an interpersonal connection between the author and the reader of a RA. The Russian academic discourse demonstrates numerous cases of passive voice and reflexive verbs. In the Russian articles, there wasn't a single use of pronoun *I* (я); instead, the pronoun *we* (мы) was used, expressing collectivity and solidarity. These and other differences in expressing engagement in academic discourse obviously stem from sociocultural characteristics of the language speakers. The analysis of the most typical engagement techniques in academic discourse gives us insights into general communication preferences in this sphere.

Keywords: Academic Discourse; Engagement; Research Article; Sociocultural Environment.

Introduction: academic discourse and its dialogic and culturally specific nature

Academic discourse is a means of communication for those involved in educational and scientific professional domains. The discourse used in professional or institutional settings refers to “all kinds of workplace settings”.^[2] Depending on specific communicative goals, academic discourse can be represented by various genres, such as seminars, reports, or handouts that take into consideration the addressee. By means of this academic discourse, knowledge transfer is carried out, with one communicator delivering the information and the other communicator receiving it.

Academic discourse can be described as dialogic, as academics are involved in interactions with their counterparts, students, or perhaps even with a wider circle of readers. An author’s need to express his or her new perspective in an existing disciplinary field, while at the same time being accepted by the academic community, creates “a dialogic perspective on academic communication as a dynamic network of interpersonal relations”.^[3] Hyland^[4], who discusses how the addressee can be featured in academic articles, refers to Bakhtin’s^[5] notion of dialogicity, i.e., a dialog is always created when an addresser tries to present and support his or her idea. Moreover, a speaker / writer, when constructing discourse, always thinks about potential addressees and takes their characteristics into consideration, while at the same time anticipating their response. Hyland^[6] shows that written academic discourse abounds with various discursive devices (engagement features) that help to establish contact between the author and the reader. He argues that a dialog between individuals is established when authors treat their readers as “real players in the discourse rather than merely as implied observers of the discussion”.^[7] Engagement features help authors build solidarity: authors seek agreement with readers using reader pronouns, directives, personal aides, appeals to shared knowledge, and questions.^[8] Within this theoretical framework, academic discourse can show the way people in a community, in addition to expressing their beliefs and ideas, communicate collegiality, (dis)agreement, and standpoints.^[9]

Understanding that the construction of academic discourse follows certain accepted norms and traditions from the society in which the discourse is embedded, we can suppose that various genres of academic discourse will exhibit culturally specific features. For instance, research articles (RA) written by scholars who are native speakers of English typically follow the IMRD (introduction/ method/ results/ discussion) structure. This structure is far from being typical of RAs written by non-English-speaking scholars. For example, RAs written in Russian have no distinct structure; the conclusion (or discussion) section can be absent as authors want their readers to make a conclusion on their own. The writing styles of scholars from other non-English-speaking cultures may be more narrative, informal or indirect. According to Canagarajah^[10], examples can be found where whole sections may be absent, as it is the case with the methodology section in a RA written in Tamil: “The local audience takes for granted that the author has adopted a reasonably acceptable research procedure within his means”.^[11] These patterns represent socially accepted traditions of knowledge construction.

Cultural differences present in academic discourse have attracted researchers from various cultural backgrounds. In Europe, for instance, there are three major centers, at the University of Bergamo (Italy), the University of Bergen (Norway), and the University of Zaragoza (Spain) that study how academics construct their scholarly identities through written language. In addition, these research centers examine the ways in which writers engage readers in the subject matter.^[12]

The research group *Interpersonality in Written Academic Discourse* (InterLAE), based at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, emphasizes “the growing awareness of the critical importance of interpersonal aspects in academic communication”.^[13] This group has studied interpersonal rhetorical

features used in RAs and abstracts from different fields of knowledge, applying interdisciplinary, intercultural and intergeneric perspectives of analysis. The texts they examine are either written in English by scholars working in Anglophone institutions and Spanish institutions, or in Spanish by Spanish scholars. The group has found that there are culturally distinctive features of RAs written by Spanish authors in Spanish compared with those used by their English-speaking peers. The team also discovered that Spanish scholars are usually less interactive with their readers and do not make explicit connections between various parts of their research through the inclusion of an extensive review of the pertinent, previous literature, nor do they cross-reference their material. As Lafuente-Millan et al.^[14] state, “What is more, they do not tend to emphasize to the same extent as their international peers their role as authors, their stance and the critical role of readers in the acceptance or rejection of the new knowledge being communicated”.

Another prominent project is being carried out in the *Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes* (CERLIS), at the University of Bergamo, Italy, which focuses on how the process of globalization and the use of English as a lingua franca affect written and oral academic communication worldwide. This project examines the ways in which numerous social factors (e.g. professional, ideological, or ethno-geographic) are reflected through various “socioculturally-oriented identity constructing factors and textual variation in academic discourse”.^[15] The project has analyzed identity markers found in the linguistic corpus of academic texts in English and Italian. The resulting data show that “academic discourse is not at all uniform but varies according to different factors, such as language competence, professional expertise, gender and generic conventions”.^[16] The findings also indicate that factors such as age, experience, and academic standing are perhaps more important in establishing an author as a respected scientist than gender or native language and culture.^[17]

The work done by the *Cultural Identity in Academic Prose* (KIAP) research group is especially relevant to this paper, as this organization investigates the discursive construction of identities cross-culturally. Researchers based at the University of Bergen, Norway, examine the ways in which cultural identities are revealed in professional discourses. Their research relies on various approaches, one of which is the study of interpersonal features of discourse construction in RAs. The interaction between the author and the audience is realized through academic voices, representing “the *self*- and the *other*- dimensions”.^[18]

KIAP’s findings indicate that cultural background seems to be of great importance for representing the author’s research and voice in the RA. The group has found that English-speaking cultures, described as low-context^[19], tend to lay out arguments explicitly instead of relying on implied information, which is commonplace in high-context, for instance, French-speaking cultures. They also argue that authors from individualistic cultures use more first-person singular pronouns, as compared to authors from collectivist cultures in which plural ‘we’ is more common, even in single-authored articles. Hofstede^[20] is the first one establishing individualism / collectivism as a dimension applied to reveal cross-cultural differences. The distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures is based on the nature of the relationship between an individual and a group. Triandis^[21] describes collectivism as “a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives...; are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives”. Individualism represents a social order in which individuals consider themselves independent of collectives and are usually motivated by their own preferences, needs and rights.

Studies devoted to the analysis of academic discourse are not limited to those conducted by the above-mentioned research groups. However, a review of the literature on academic discourse

and its connection with cultural context shows that little research has been conducted on the culturally-specific properties of Russian academic written discourse. Indeed, only a few publications are devoted to this field of research. Lipaev's^[22] dissertation is a case study of the role of pedagogical discourse in a rural school, while Melnikova's^[23] dissertation analyzes the role of metaphor in pedagogical discourse. Although there are a few RAs about academic discourse at the university level^[24], there is a dearth of current research studying the dialogic (engagement) qualities of academic discourse within Russia, and there is virtually no research about the culturally specific features of Russian academic discourse and how these might differ from the characteristics of English academic written discourse.

Studies of academic discourse have been steadily expanding in scope. Hyland^[25] names three main reasons for the growing scholarly interest in academic discourse. Firstly, with academic mobility programs on the rise and increased intercultural exchange, the diversity of students has made it necessary for university staff and academics to be aware of varieties of academic discourses. Secondly, more attention is being paid to teaching and learning in order to attract fee-paying students, who have become an important source of revenue to contemporary universities. Finally, as English has become a lingua franca of the academic community and knowledge of English a basic qualification for modern academics, much is being said about how the use of English affects discourses within local and international academic domains. Hyland argues that in order to grasp the essence of academic discourse, it is essential to focus on three key areas of the academic world: "education, knowledge and reputation".^[26] It is significant that all these changes in educational domains affected academic publishing, most of which is presented in English to be heard at the international level. The push to publish in English has revealed many differences in how academics from different cultures construct their discourses and engage in professional discussions.

Scholars who study academic discourse focus on various aspects. For instance, it is scrutinized from the general discourse theory perspective, paying attention to how academic discourse can be improved in terms of cohesion, coherence and information organisation^[27], ways of combining academic and other professional discourses.^[28]

Where researchers perceive academic discourse to be a dialog between the author and her audience, they often examine markers of modality, stance, and engagement^[29] and explore the ways that authors voice their opinions, making them heard by the audience while at the same time establishing one's identity in a globalized academic environment.^[30] This has become especially important as publishing has grown more competitive and authors must strive to interest editors and then readers in their ideas. Through engagement techniques, authors successfully manage to:

acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations.^[31]

Engagement is expressed through various markers. Hyland^[32] identified markers of engagement such as reader pronouns, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, directives, and questions based on his interaction model between authors and writers. Using these tools, academics further explored how interpersonality (contact between authors and readers) can be established in academic discourses. Researchers have found that scholars writing in English^[33], Italian^[34], Spanish^[35], and Russian^[36] express their ideas and establish a relationship with their readers differently. For instance, scholarly texts in English may address or acknowledge the target audience more directly than articles written in other languages.

These differences stem from writers' sociocultural backgrounds, which are reflected in their

thought patterns and language use. This idea that sociocultural practices affect the way language is used^[37], is certainly not new. It has long been established that the presentation of ideas in written and oral discourse is culturally predetermined.^[38] Digression to extraneous information often happens in Italian, Spanish, Latin American and German discourses.^[39] Regarding the last one, Clyne^[40] indicates that linearity– the English ideal of academic written discourse– “is not a prerequisite of academic writing in German”. East European and Russian academic discourses usually feature an absence of concluding (rounding off) information.^[41] The linear / non-linear approach to presenting information can be explained by the form / content distinction.^[42] Form-oriented cultures, including many English-speaking cultures, usually present information in linear structures, which might seem “dubious and unprofessional” to those cultures accustomed to a content-oriented presentation of ideas, where the reader is supposed to “make an effort to understand the text produced by the knowledgeable, and therefore, authoritative person”.^[43]

This takes us back to contrastive rhetoric theory, which stresses the necessity of studying texts in the contexts in which they were written. Kaplan^[44] claimed that logic–the basis of rhetoric– is connected with cultural thought patterns and evolves out of culture: “Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture”.^[45] Having compared the rhetoric of written essays of students, who were native speakers of English, as well as speakers of Asian, Semitic, Romance languages and Russian, Kaplan discovered differences in how they structured their essays, in directness, in digression, and in paragraph order. Although Kaplan’s research was later criticized for using the essays in English as a benchmark to measure certain qualities (for example, their directness) in other languages without trying to grasp the reasons behind differences in rhetoric^[46], it gave rise to further cross-cultural studies on second-language writing^[47] and literacy practices in connection with academic cultures.^[48]

Cultural differences in rhetorical traditions have become especially obvious in the context of globalization when, according to Shea^[49], international students from different cultures appear in the same (usually American) university classroom. She points out that American academic writing follows the Socratic tradition according to which the main idea, a concluding point in a way, should be stated at the beginning: “Stating one’s opinion first and stating it directly are not necessarily rhetorical strategies shared by all cultures, but it is perhaps the most important, and most widely accepted and taught, component of Western rhetoric”.^[50] The conclusion, which often provides guidelines for further research, is also very important in Western rhetoric. But Chinese students ascribe a different function to their conclusion, in which they may finish their essay with a proverb or another question. Shea notes that Chinese students may never voice their opinion and focus on both sides of the argument, which may have its roots in the Confucian tradition of peace and harmony, which plays a very important role in Asian cultures. The classical Chinese pedagogical tradition of writing does not stress the importance of expressing one’s opinion, but instead focuses on expository and argumentative writing styles.^[51]

Organization patterns, argument development, as well as relevance and uniformity of formal structures^[52] may reveal culturally specific preferences of research presentation. In this paper, engagement construction is examined as a dimension that brings to light a number of differences in how authors establish contact with their audiences in Russian and English RAs. Dimensions such as collectivism / individualism are also studied. Since the 1950s, extensive research on individualism / collectivism has shown this dimension to be a valid measuring tool in understanding cultural behavior. Contemporary research in this area has established a connection between the individualism / collectivism pattern and occupational plans and work values^[53], reward allocation^[54], implications for investment^[55], and education.^[56]

Therefore, the analysis presented in this paper uses both discursive and cultural dimensions to reveal culturally preconditioned characteristics of engagement construction in academic discourse. The objective of this research is to establish a connection between academic discourse, a means of communication in educational and scientific environment; cultural dimensions, which are aspects of cultures “that can be measured relative to other cultures”^[57]; and the use of engagement markers that link the author and their reader(s). Engagement markers are discursive devices that help authors involve their readers in the information transmitted and thus enhance the writer-reader interaction. The use of these markers can vary depending on communicators’ cultural^[58], gender^[59] and professional differences.^[60] Taking into consideration the reviewed literature in these academic fields, I hypothesize that the authors (native speakers) of RAs in English and Russian, affected by local sociocultural environments, have different ways of expressing engagement.

Methodology

This paper attempts to uncover cross-cultural features of engagement within Russian and English academic written discourse. The methodology followed is based on methods applied by Hyland^[61] in his extensive study of engagement features in academic discourse. Before the analysis, a text corpus of RAs of 220 pages in each analyzed language was compiled. Then, engagement features in Russian and English RAs were selected manually and classified according to their type. Finally, the findings were analyzed by means of a comparative analysis of engagement markers used in RAs by Russian- and English-speaking authors.

The RAs in Russian were written by Russian-speaking linguists in a well-regarded, peer-reviewed journal whose title is *Vestnik Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni Pushkina* (2012). This journal translates into English tables of contents, authors’ names, and titles of their RAs, as well as abstracts and keywords, an indication of the attempt to attract a wider, not just Russian-speaking, readership. The Russian authors are linguists from various parts of the country. Most of the authors happen to be female, as the majority of Russian academics engaged in studying linguistics, literature or foreign languages are women. Altogether 28 RAs in Russian were analysed (220 pages excluding references).

As the current paper claims to analyze the engagement features in English, no distinction is made among British, American, Canadian or Australian English. This research does not attempt to ignore the differences existing in these varieties of the English language, but the journals analyzed have a truly international status, with editorial boards comprising English-speaking academics from different countries. For instance, the editorial board of the *Journal of Pragmatics* comprises academics from the USA (18), the United Kingdom (9), Australia (2), New Zealand (1), and Germany (6), as well as academics from Belgium, Italy, Israel, Netherlands, and Switzerland. The *Journal of Pragmatics*, published by Elsevier, is located in Amsterdam with offices in the United Kingdom, the USA and other countries. It would be inaccurate to describe the discourse of the RAs published in this journal—and others like it—as British or American English, and thus, no distinction is made.

There were a few difficulties when trying to find equivalent material for research in English: many authors who write within the field of linguistics or intercultural communication are non-native speakers of English, and many RAs have two or more authors. To overcome this obstacle, RAs published by native speakers of English were selected from a variety of sources. The RAs analyzed were from 12 publications, including *Written Communication Journal*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse Studies*, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, *Journal of*

