



Absent doctors, shy economists and polemic linguists? Writer manifestation in academic texts

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The work reported here is part of a project funded by the Norwegian Research Council, for the period 2002-2004. Professor Kjersti Fløttum from the University of Bergen is project leader. The project title is *Kulturell Identitet i Akademisk Prosa* (KIAP) and has as its main aim to focus on the concept of cultural identity. We investigate whether this phenomenon is primarily linked to the language and thereby the national culture the academic writer belongs in, or whether this writer rather is formed by the disciplinary culture he or she works with. The project is doubly contrastive in that we study texts in three languages - English, French and Norwegian, and three disciplines - economics, linguistics and medicine. The texts we have chosen to look at are research articles, which represent the main channel of distribution for researchers to publish their results. The texts are clearly LSP texts in that they are written by experts and are intended for an expert audience.

The general conception of scientific text as being objective and neutral has been shown perhaps not to give an accurate picture of the situation. In fact, the academic writer leaves quite a few traces of him- or herself in the text, and some of these traces are focused on in our project. The variables we study are all linguistic features which represent reflections of the writer. These linguistic traces may function in various ways in the text. At present I am working on so-called metatext, that is words and expressions that refer to the text itself and how it should be read, rather than contribute to the actual content of the text. It is thus expressions which have as their primary function to assist the reader in the processing of the text. Let me give you a few examples:

- (1) *In section 3 we assume...*
- (2) *The present paper studies...*
- (3) *...later I will briefly discuss...*
- (4) *...as we said above...*
- (5) *We conclude that...*
- (6) *This report summarizes...*
- (7) *Below we discuss these concepts...*
- (8) *In this section, we point out that...*

We see that in examples 1-4 the underlined words refer to the text itself or parts of it. This is metatext. The writer uses these expressions to guide the reader through the text, making the processing of the information a little easier. In examples 5-8, the verbs function as metatext in the sense that they again provide help with the processing by giving explicit clues about what the writer is doing at that particular point in the text.

Through such expressions, then, the writer is clearly present in the communication situation. Even stronger visibility is created through the use of first person pronouns, which is another linguistic feature we look at in the KIAP project. We also study so-called hedging devices, e.g. modal auxiliaries and expressions like *perhaps* and *possibly*, as well as certain value-laden expressions, as for instance *surprising*, *exciting*, *disappointing*. Finally, we study how and to what extent the article writer lets other researchers be heard in the argumentation through bibliographical references to their works.

The texts we investigate have all been stored electronically. We aim for a final corpus of about 450 texts, divided over three languages and three disciplines. At the moment we have about 200 articles which have been prepared for searching. The corpus is not grammatically tagged, but we have tagged it for article sections, and other text signals such as headings. In addition we have tagged examples, equations, figures and tables, so that they may be excluded from our searches. Why that is important may be demonstrated by the fact that in the linguistics articles we often find many examples including first person pronouns. These of course do not refer to the writer of the article, and should therefore not be counted as such. We have also marked the texts according to whether they are single author articles or multi-author ones, and for the single-author ones, they are marked for gender as well. We want to see whether male and female authors are present in their texts to the same extent and in the same manner.

What is special about our project in comparison with previous research is the doubly contrastive approach. Others have primarily studied either language contrasts or discipline contrasts. In addition, this is the first time Norwegian has been included in such a study.

From previous research in this field and a pilot study undertaken, we had some hypotheses about writers in the three languages and the three disciplines involved in the project. We expected linguists to be the most present in their texts and the medical writes the least. As for our language hypothesis, we assumed that English writers would be most visible in these texts and that the French would be the least. Finally, combining the two variables, we expected discipline to be the most important variable, implying that there would be greater differences between disciplines than between languages.

We have so far performed explorative searches for all three languages on pronouns, references and metatext. We have made computerised searches in roughly 180 texts and then manually checked the results to weed out irrelevant hits, as the ones marked with an asterisk in the following:

- (9a) *...using Coleman's now well-known notion of...
- (9b) I will now argue that...
- (10a) *Assume that a country previously in autarky opens up...
- (10b) As previously mentioned, surplus...
- (11a) *...the risk-sharing consumption levels are above the autarky levels...
- (11b) ...as we noted above in our discussion...

Our findings so far indicate that our hypotheses seem to be valid for some of the variables, but need to be modified for others.

For first person pronouns the results show that in terms of discipline, linguists use more than economists and far more than medical writers. As for language, English and Norwegian use such pronouns much more frequently than French. When we distinguish between singular and plural pronouns it turns out that Norwegian writers are frequent users of the plural *vi*, while English authors top the list for singular *I*. The French texts, on the other hand, reveal a certain preference for the indefinite pronoun *on*.

As regards references, the situation is that, in terms of discipline, it is in fact the medical texts which contain the highest number of references. But, the most frequent form here is the kind of reference consisting of just a superscript number or a number in brackets, referring to a bibliographical entry in the references list. This, then, is not really a type of reference that lets other researchers' voices be heard in the text. When it comes to language, Norwegian and English are quite similar, both with more references than the French texts.

As for metatext, I have found that it is mainly present in economics and linguistics texts, particularly the expressions referring to the text and text parts. These are quite frequent in these two disciplines and to a similar degree in English and Norwegian, while French uses it much less. The reason why there is little such metatext in the medical articles is probably that those articles are written according to a highly standardised format, the so-called IMRD structure (Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion). This implies that the experienced reader of medical texts knows very well where the various information chunks are found, and that there is no need to say explicitly that Results are discussed in section x, as economist writers usually tell their readers. The same applies to the use of words like *above* or *previously*.

Even though our project does not really focus on translation aspects, our findings may definitely be relevant to translators and language consultants. Knowledge about how authors in various languages and disciplines are visible in their texts may be useful in a translation situation in order to give the translated text the right flavour, so to speak. In addition, the project will also provide comments on micro-phenomena, e.g. frequencies of individual verbs. In my work on metatext so far I have registered that English economists are frequent users of the verb *report*, while they *discuss* a little less. Norwegian economists on the other hand *discuss* (*diskuterer*) much more than they *report* (*rappporterer*).

We hope that those of you who work with these languages and disciplines will find relevant and interesting information at our web site (<http://helmer.hit.uib.no/kiap/>), which we will update as our work progresses.

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