Chapter 19: Writing in an Academic Register

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Abstract

Adopting the conventions and forms of disciplinary academic writing is a core requirement for students to successfully engage in a university's scholarly community of practice. Yet, writing in an academic register for students whose mother tongue is not English can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Chief amongst these problems is first language transfer, the transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate research and the genre and disciplinary requirements of writing a thesis. This study is grounded in Halliday's register theory, a key concept in systemic functional linguistics, and contends that language is functional and registers vary according to the contexts of communication. Consequently, it will be demonstrated how Halliday's notions of field, tenor and mode will be of utility to students engaging in academic discourse. The use of appropriate registers in academic writing will advance student efforts in meeting the requirements of particular disciplinary norms, reduce bias, as well as meet the expectations of academic audiences. A formal, academic register will also impress upon the students, language choices such as hedging, boosters, the use of the passive voice, the avoidance of inappropriate phrasal verbs and colloquial patterning (amongst others) in order to maintain an objective and scholarly authorial identity. Finally, insight into writing in an academic register will enable students to effectively recruit the repertoire of resources, discursive structures, logic, augmentation, citation methods and other discourse features of academic writing.

Keywords: academic register, field, tenor, mode, disciplinary norms, thesis writing

Adopting the genre conventions and linguistic features of disciplinary academic writing is a core requirement for students to successfully engage in a university's community of practice. Yet, writing in an academic register for students whose mother tongue is not English can be challenging for a variety of reasons. A lack of academic writing skills has been identified as a major obstacle to the successful completion of the dissertation, among a range of problems encountered by supervisors and students during supervision (Albertyn, Kapp & Bitzer, 2008; Lessing, 2011). Chief amongst these problems is first language transfer, the transition from undergraduate studies to postgraduate research and the genre and disciplinary requirements of writing a thesis. Much of these issues may be rooted in cultural differences in the definition of knowledge, claims of ownership of knowledge, and what is considered plagiarism. In Africa and the African diaspora, these differences stem from African epistemology which privilege communal knowledge transmission, experiential learning, spirituality and holistic worldviews. Here, knowledge is seen as relational and tied to ethical and moral standards linked to the collective ethic of *Ubuntu.*

Eurocentric epistemology, on the other hand, is individualistic, driven by capitalistic conventions, and is based on written records and empirical verification characterised by universal truth claims tied to objectivity. Indeed, Teffo (2000), Vilakazi (2002), and Seepe (2001) make the point that much of what is taken for education in Africa is in fact not African, but rather a reflection of Europe in Africa. Our curriculum is a site where the English language is sacralised, and the internalisation of bourgeois European values is interpreted as an index of progress (Sheik 2021: 29). This perspective requires us to revisit our pedagogies and harness the cultural assets afforded by indigenous worldviews so as to effectively serve the learning needs of African students by validating their heritage and identity.

Additionally, students coming from a lifetime of exam-based tasks now have to adapt to writing an extended piece of writing in the form of a thesis, that is source-based, and fraught with its own set of conventions, structural requirements and ethical codes of research. The expectation of references to prior research, technical lexis and familiarity with particular argument forms and disciplinary norms instill a sense of anxiety and inadequacy, as, for many students, prior experience has not prepared them for this challenge. Consequently, socialization into academic discourse where English is the dominant language should be undertaken with these factors in mind.

At postgraduate level, competence in academic writing has become a matter of particular concern, since students whose mother tongue is not English,

frequently struggle to meet the requirements of thesis or dissertation writing in English (Han 2014; Strauss 2012; Tang 2012).

Focusing exclusively on the formal features of writing, however, ignores a fundamental purpose of a thesis, that is, to advance a set of ideas and a propositional appeal to logic. These challenges may be categorised into linguistic, structural as well as authorial academic writing issues.

At a *linguistic level*, grammar and syntax errors may be found in the use of colloquial language, concord errors, incorrect verb tense and incorrect use of articles, wrong collocation, ambiguity, punctuation errors and wrong idiomatic expression use are but some of these concerns (Mogadid 2021). Additionally, marathon sentences, sentence fragments, choice of topic sentences, lack of vocabulary or inappropriate use of vocabulary, acronyms, beguile a student whose contact with the target language may only be limited to formal, educational settings.

At a *structural level*, challenges with producing a text with coherence and cohesion in an unfamiliar genre of thesis writing and engagement with qualitative, quantitative or mixed method data that align with a particular theoretical inclination may be daunting. These issues are compounded by the requirements of writing in the passive voice, paraphrasing, summarizing and the synthesizing of information amongst other skill sets.

Equally important is the maintenance of a consistent *authorial voice*, with evidence that resonates and support assertions made, rather than contradict or refute what has been said earlier in the text. It is important to note that meaning is not generated independently but in a context with the surrounding text. Hood's (2006) research suggests that student writers often fail to maintain a consistent authorial stance with appropriate linguistic choices that qualify their argument in the text. These writers do not maintain chain reasoning strategies that link ideas logically and reinforce values they have previously introduced in their texts. Instead, they use discordant values that weaken their arguments. This may lead to inconsistent perspectives at odds with, or which may weaken, the research claims already made. On the other hand, experienced writers are able to deliver a more dynamic and focused perspective by using multiple instances of interpersonal resources that accumulate and resonate with one another as the text unfolds (Chang 2010:148).

Moreover, meeting the expectations of supervisors by writing in accepted disciplinary norms, vocabulary, structure and organisation as well as the reporting of knowledge in keeping with scientific standards of reliability and validity require careful scaffolding so as not to cast the student in a deficit

stereotype. How then do we socialize students into the rhetorical, linguistic, social, and cultural features of academic discourse, as well as knowledge of English as used by specific academic disciplines?

Register Theory

Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that all learning is a highly social, collaborative activity in which a learner best acquires new expertise through engagement in the learning community that uses that expertise. With this in mind, this study references Halliday's theory of register to address the gap in second language students' academic capital. Halliday's theory of register is embedded in Systemic Functional Linguistics and explains how language varies in relation to the social purpose it is used for. Halliday defined register as 'a variant distinguished by language use', and 'a set of meanings suitable for a certain language function and the lexical syntactic structures used to express that meaning' (1985/89: 29, 38).

Register theory emphasizes how linguistic choices contribute to the understanding that language use in spoken context differs significantly from written discourses (Zitha & Lambani 2024: 90). Since Halliday has made the case that language is multidimensional (Halliday 2003), to understand 'register' in Halliday's terms is to understand its relationship to such dimensions. As such, Halliday postulates that register consists of three key aspects, **Field**, **Tenor** and **Mode**. Although Halliday's notion of register can be applied to many different types of communication, for the purpose of this study its utility will be concentrated upon academic writing.

Field

The concept of Field in academic writing shapes the content, language choices, and structure of texts based on the subject matter and disciplinary norms. Writing in a Field would entail the use of discipline-specific terminology, adhering to a structure and organisation anticipated by that particular field. An understanding of Field would enable writers to systematically structure a thesis by adopting disciplinary guidelines that enable structural coherence, logical flow, and topic relevance. For example, the Field determines what knowledge domain your thesis is inscribed in and assists in focussing the writers research questions and argument strategy accordingly. Each discipline may use different types of evidence and favour particular rhetorical moves, so knowledge of Field

is instructive in writing a thesis with disciplinary norms in mind. Additionally, the Field outlines the sequence of chapters and the order and format of the front matter of a thesis. These structures are designed to maintain focus, prevent digression and ensure that accepted scholarly conventions are followed. Finally, an understanding of Field is useful in linking the use of academic registers to various forms of knowledge production, e.g. scientific discourse favour writing in the passive voice and the use of technical jargon whilst a thesis on literature may privilege subjective rhetorical moves premised on persuasive appeals.

Tenor

Martin and White (2005: 7) define Tenor as 'how people are interacting, including the feeling they try to share'. Tenor is also used by writers to draw readers to certain points of view about the content (Butt, Fahey, Feez, & Spinks 2012:165). Broadly, Tenor refers to the social relationships between participants in a communicative act, encompassing aspects such as their roles, status, and the level of formality in their interaction. In formal academic writing, this entails the avoidance of colloquial terms, contractions and the use of personal anecdotes that do not meet the standards of scientific reporting. The writer should engage an academic audience by clearly defining concepts, frame arguments logically and ensure the use of peer reviewed and accredited sources to boost credibility. The student's positionality is usually that of an apprentice addressing his supervisor as knowledgeable expert or a scholarly audience. The writer's authority and credibility are also established by the use of the third person. This helps achieve a greater standard of objectivity instead of the first person (I) and the second person (you) in academic discourse, though this trend is increasingly coming into question. Traditionally, though, the passive voice is used 'to distance the writer or speaker from the text, permitting opinions to be presented and generalised without overt attribution' (Reilly, Zamor & McGivern 2005:191).

In projecting an authoritative stance, writers need to display a fine interplay of assertion (e.g., when presenting the main argument and the rationale for the study) and openness (e.g. making room for acknowledging other perspectives and negotiating with readers) (Martin & White 2005:142). An effective strategy to achieve this is by the use of hedging. The Oxford Dictionary defines hedging as:

> To go aside from the straight way; to shift, shuffle, dodge; to trim; to

> avoid committing oneself irrevocably; to leave open a way of retreat or escape (Quoted in Crompton 1997: 272).
>
> If you hedge or if you hedge a problem or question, you avoid answering the question or committing yourself to a particular action or decision (Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary, Sinclair 1987: 677).

Salager-Meyer's (1994:155) taxonomy of hedges is a useful guide to hedging. Shields in academic discourse manifest as 'it would appear', 'probably' and 'suggest' amongst others. Another class of hedges is that of approximators. This can be seen in the use of frequency adverbs such as 'often', 'occasionally' or 'usually' by way of example. A third class of hedges are the expressions of the authors' personal doubt and direct involvement: (we believe etc.). The fourth and final class is that of emotionally charged intensifiers: (e.g. the preliminary findings are 'particularly encouraging').

Hedging is a signifier of caution, indicating a degree of doubt and that the writer's findings are not absolute. This is useful in academic research where making conclusive inferences from complex and uncertain data sets could be misleading if not impossible. Hedging may be used to display not only the degree of confidence speakers have in their propositions but also how much confidence they feel it is appropriate to display (Crompton 1997: 281). Martin and White posit the following rationale for hedging:

> writers should engage their colleagues by displaying respect and due regard for their views and reputations, constructing a subtle equilibrium between 'the researcher's authority as an expert-knower and his or her humility as a disciplinary servant' (13 - 14).

Hedging is commonly used in scholarly writing to appropriately convey the strength of evidence and to acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations.

Propositional meaning can be formulated with different degrees of strength, ranging from very weak, tentative statements to very strong, assertive statements. Boosters is a lexico-grammatical feature in a text that contribute to stating conviction and certainty on the part of academic writers (Vazquez & Giner 2009: 221). According to Hyland, boosters (e.g. definitely …, I am sure that …, we firmly believe …) create an impression of certainty, conviction and

assurance. For Hyland, boosters or certainty markers 'allow writers to project a credible image of authority, decisiveness, and conviction in their views', while hedges help them to 'demonstrate personal honesty and integrity through willingness to address hard realities, albeit behind a shield of mitigation' (1998: 238). Hyland points out that although such assertion of the writer's conviction can be seen as leaving little room for the reader's own interpretations, boosters also offer writers a medium to engage with their readers and create interpersonal solidarity. As Hyland (1998: 368) affirms, 'Boosters are then rhetorical, persuasive strategies which function to mark, or rhetorically manipulate, consensual understandings based on shared community membership'. For these reasons, we must consider boosters in our analysis of the interactional elements influencing the interpretation of propositional information in academic writing. Examples of boosters are as follows:

Adverbs: definitely, undoubtedly, certainly, clearly
Adjectives: obvious, crucial, undeniable, essential
Phrases: it is evident that, there is no doubt that, research strongly suggests that

Different disciplines deal with different data sets and hence, show different amounts of boosters in their discourse. Whereas softer sciences seem to present a stronger need for enhancing the propositional content in the containing statements, harder sciences rely on the exactness of the data used in their research as sufficiently evidential to show the truth of their statements. Boosters will still act as persuasion devices for the discourse. In this manner, boosters will reassure the information conveyed in order to suppress possible alternatives convincing the readership of the truth of the statements (Vazquez & Giner 2009:235).

Another feature of academic writing is the maintenance of interpersonal distance between the reader and the writer. Failure to maintain a critical distance raises questions about the reliability and validity of the research, raising doubts about the objective stance of the writer. Credibility is achieved by citing scholars from peer reviewed scholarly works rather than citing personal experiences in the first person. Impersonal scripts such as, 'this study concludes' is preferred to 'I conclude', for example. This enables the presentation of information as objective and unbiased rather than as subjectively based on personal opinions.

The linguistic dexterity needed to be able to quote, paraphrase and summarise unsurprisingly result in students incorporating longer chunks of

source texts into their writing (Keck 2014: 120). It is also a widely observed problem that writers may be too dependent on source texts and fail to achieve a distinctive voice of their own. Students, for example, may struggle to connect their thoughts with those of the cited author and as a consequence fail to reach a proficient level of source integration (Davis 2013:127). Citations are significant markers in establishing a credible authorial voice by consistent source attribution and situating a writer's work 'within a larger narrative' (Hyland 1999:345). They permit readers to verify sources used and draw inferences about context and background, aligning a writer's thoughts with peers and experts in his scholarly community. The use of citations is also an indication that the text in question is based on credible research drawn from thought leaders in the discipline. It is also significantly implicated in avoiding plagiarism.

Another element of citation use in authorial voice is what is termed citation presentation, which includes three presentation options: direct quotes, summaries of an individual source, and generalizations of two or more sources (Hanks *et al.* 2024:4). While the social sciences and humanities tend to include quotations, research papers in the hard sciences rarely incorporate direct quotes, whether as fragments or clauses (Hyland 1999:346), indicating a difference in disciplinary preferences in the use of citations.

Writing summaries of research notes is an important skill for postgraduate students as it enables them to engage critically with existing literature, synthesize information from a variety of sources, and integrate sources into their own study. By condensing information into a concise form, students demonstrate their ability to extract key points without losing the essence of the original text. Summaries also enable the core requirement for students to make the shift from consumers of research data to creators of research-based knowledge (Hood 2006:39), indicative of both a reflective practice and judicious presentation of source documents. Moreover, it is also a critical step in avoiding plagiarism.

One must also be wary of how meanings can change during the process of summarising. Supervisors must avoid representing the task of summary writing simply or fundamentally as one of reduction of content, as an exercise in discarding and omitting (Hood 2008:163). Consequently, bias in interpretation of a text and being faithful to the meanings engendered in the original source warrants more scrutiny than is generally assumed and cannot be taken at face value. The task needs to be explained instead in ways that explicate the different meaning relationships that adhere between changed wordings. Successful summary writing requires an awareness of the demands of the task

and scaffolded support to develop the required linguistic resources (Hood 2008:363).

Postgraduate students whose mother tongue is not English also find it challenging to develop the intertextual skill of paraphrasing (Yamada 2003: 248). Paraphrasing is defined as recontextualizing source information in one's own writing whilst crediting the original author. In academic writing, paraphrasing entails reconceptualizing the source text coherently with the writer's own authorial intentions. By adding one's own authorial intention and persuasive power, paraphrasing, to a certain extent, 'almost invariably demands a refraction or distortion of the original meaning' (Orellana & Reynolds 2008: 61). This is driven by the fact that paraphrasing involves inferential thinking in order to produce new textual meanings and is therefore invariably implicated in degrees of subjectivity. If all paraphrases involve some modifications in that the original proposition is recontextualized, students need to learn to do it properly. Keeping the same sentence structure and changing only a few words is tantamount to plagiarism. Supervisor should encourage peer review and critical discussion of paraphrased texts, checking if the recontextualized text does not incorrectly attribute ideas to the original author (Shi *et al.* 2018: 42).

A key contributor to our understanding of the discourse structure of introductions to research is Swales (1990; 2004), who pointed out that introductions are always marked with an evaluative authorial voice. In his CARS (Create a Research Space) model for introductions, Swales (1990; 2004) describes three major moves, 'Establishing a territory', 'Establishing a niche' and 'Occupying the niche' and steps for presenting those moves that include such active rhetorical actions as claiming, reviewing, counter-claiming, questioning, indicating, and announcing. Accomplishing these discursive activities rests heavily on the author-writer's manipulation of language resources that create a convincing stance through a balance of assertion and concession. Swales notes that authorial comment is more frequent in the Introduction and Discussion sections than in other parts of a research paper (i.e., the Methods or Results sections) (Quoted in Chang and Schleppegrell 2011:141).

Mode

The third dimension of context is Mode. In academic writing, mode is typically characterized by a formal, written medium that is carefully planned and non-interactive. Mode is related to textual meta-function in that it refers to the organisation of meaning into a coherent text (Butt, Fahey, Spinks & Yallop

1995: 14). Similarly, Halliday (1985: 12) defines Mode as 'the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, and its function in context, including the channel used and the rhetorical mode adopted'. In academic writing, Mode may be conceived as the way ideas are organised in the text. Mode also refers to the use of cohesive devices such as conjunctions and referencing to ensure clarity and flow between ideas. A critical aspect of Mode is the presentation of information in a logical sequence with clear headings and subheadings to guide the reader through the thesis. This takes us to a consideration of genre.

Genre is a term for grouping text together, representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations. Each genre has a specific purpose, an overall structure, specific linguistic features, and is shared by members of that culture (Hyland 2009: 15). Texts belonging to a genre are conventionalized, to differing degrees, in terms of sequencing, of layout, of phraseology, and there are expectations of, and constraints on, the structure and linguistic expression of such texts. These expectations can vary from one disciplinary community to another.

Writing in a Register

Whilst disciplines are defined by their writing, it is a matter of how they write than simply what they write that makes the difference between them. Disciplinary variation is noticeable in appeals to background knowledge, different means of establishing truth and different ways of engaging with the reader (Hyland 2013:6). One must take cognisance of how tenuous claims to truth may be. Textual representation is always filtered through acts of selection, foregrounding and symbolisation; reality is seen as contracted through processes that are social, involving authority, credibility and disciplinary appeals. Objectivity then becomes consensual intersubjectivity.

Postgraduate students should then appreciate that writing in an academic register is invariably a process of selection sanctioned by an academic community who operate in the filter bubbles of particular genres. Hansen postulates that a novice in a discipline needs primarily to learn to think in the way that is 'sanctioned' by the disciplinary community (1992: 207). The persuasiveness of a text does not depend upon the search for absolute truth, empirical evidence or impeccable logic, it is, ultimately, the result of effective rhetorical practices accepted by members of that community.

Implicit in writing in appropriate academic registers is the recognition

that language is not simply a set of discrete, decontextualized rules but a social and cultural phenomenon that reflects the values and beliefs of a particular community or culture. For students whose mother tongue is not English, writing in an academic register is almost like learning a new language. Students are required to master new lexicon, structures, and genres while acculturating to new ways of thinking and engaging with encoding and decoding textual material.

Consequently, writing a thesis requires a student to situate his or her work in a greater discursive context. In parallel to understanding the expectations of disciplinary genres, several critical questions must be mediated: what counts as knowledge, what kinds of arguments carry weight and don't, what procedures are common to the disciplinary community? All of this epistemological and social information is encoded in complex ways into the register(s) of the discipline (Hall & Navarro 2011: 11). Lea and Street's academic literacies model can also be insightfully modelled onto writing in an academic register:

> An academic literacies model is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context… it views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities (Lea & Street 2006: 369).

This resonated with Halliday's theorization of register in terms of both field and tenor, focusing attention to the power relations between student and supervisor and the way knowledge is mediated in that tension. Writing then is essentially a social process in which supervisors should engage students in a supportive and scaffolded manner, free from the hyperbolic lamentation of deficits in students whose mother tongue is not English.

Indeed, writing pedagogy for postgraduates should gravitate more towards viewing student experiences, culture, linguistic preferences and identity as assets to build upon, rather than as problems or learning deficits in monolingual contexts of English. The first step is to better understand the experiences and abilities of the growing population of students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds at our universities. The challenge for supervisors is to find ways to leverage the language learning tools and cultural assets students bring with them. We need to ask ourselves the question, are there other skill

sets, other attributes of students' experiences, including experiences with and in other languages, that may assist them towards developing incremental competency in writing in an academic register with confidence? Halliday's concept of register is useful in helping supervisors provide explicit instruction about the distinctive features of academic writing, rather than limiting feedback to correcting grammar at the sentence level.

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