BOOK REVIEW


The Brno Studies in English (BSE) is dedicated to publishing theoretical and empirical studies in the Arts and Humanities. Created in 1959, the journal is listed in ERIH (European Reference Index for the Humanities) and SCOPUS (2011), a bibliographical database containing abstracts and citations for academic journal articles. BSE is therefore a very high quality peer-reviewed journal, an authoritative “voice” in its disciplinary domains.

This present issue of BSE contains 01 theoretical essay, 08 empirical studies and a book review. The articles explore academic writing by experts and novices in a mix of perspectives: from theoretical cannons of academic reporting and discipline-specific conventions to cross-cultural sensitivities in text production. The texts analyzed are written by British, American, Spanish, Italian, Czech, Serbian and South African speakers of English. The genres involved are research articles, students’ theses, journal editorials and book reviews. Grounded in the Anglo-American paradigms of academic writing conventions (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993), the papers highlight the growing influence of local/national academic rhetorical traditions on scholarly texts.

The first essay in the issue titled “Written Academic Discourse in English: From Local Traditions to Global Outreach” by Jan Chovanec is unique in the sense that it is both a research paper and a summary of the rest of the 8 contributions. The research part derives from the subtitle of the volume—Written Academic Discourse: Anglo-American
Traditions in the European Context. It is this part of the paper that is my focus here. The thrust of Jan Chovanec’s argument is that the present-day use of English is embedded within multi-lingual and multi-cultural contexts, and genre-based analysis in such settings should go beyond the traditional dominant Anglo-American native English paradigm. In other words, the Anglo-American conventions, although important in our understanding of how academic genres are structured, often tend to underplay the heterogeneity within native and non-native contexts, and mask the situation of scholars working in English non-native countries. Overall, his analysis questions the presumed dominance of the English-only norm for talking genre, and brings to focus the debate on how national rhetorical styles, which often affect strategic choices in crafting academic texts, might contribute to a contextualized genre theory in flux. This is a familiar debate (cf. Bhatia 1997; Dudley-Evans 1997; Lillis & Curry 2010); but one which Jan has restated with vigor and frankness. His arguments, well founded as they are, are also hedged in many ways: ‘native speakership is still very much taken as the benchmark against which linguistic proficiency of non-native speakers is assessed’ (p.7); ‘there is much space for further research in this area, particularly in the “grey zones” surrounding genre boundaries and the extent of genre variability’ (p.12); ‘the pursuit of linguistic research in terms of academic genres across different cultural and national traditions is highly topical’ (p.15).

In the first part of the paper “Local traditions and global discourse”, Jan Chovanec problematises the dominant paradigm of Anglo-American conception of genre studies; and justifiably so because ‘international scholars […] operate] in a situation that may be marked by a sort of “substrate” influence of their native-language background’ (p.6). He then goes ahead to provide pointers
to alternative perspectives, which should include a descriptive, anthropological view aimed at establishing what he calls ‘the essentialist characteristics of the respective cultural traditions that may be postulated to exist either on national or trans-national levels’ (p.6), as well as integrating the explicit teaching of diverse competences of genre knowledge in the target discourse.

Jan Chovanec’s points are bolstered by the common denominator that runs across the rest of the 8 papers in the issue that he summarizes in the second part of the essay titled “Written academic discourse: Anglo-American traditions in the European context”. The quintessence of this summary is captured in this statement of his: ‘academic genres are not static configuration of set lexico-grammatical features but dynamic constructs through which writers participate in the scholarly discourse of their community of practice, project their professional identities, and seek to convince and persuade others of their epistemic claims in the given discipline’ (pp.11-12). This echoes a similar observation by Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995) many years ago that genres are socially constructed and are even more intimately controlled by social practices in the disciplines and in different social contexts. It is precisely because of this fluidity and dynamism that a multi-disciplinary paradigm has to be envisaged and argued for. In this context, Jan’s proposals in the last part of his essay “Expanding the Research Agenda” are most pertinent. This new agenda should incorporate in his words, sociolinguistic, ethnographic, cross-cultural and translatological approaches. It is refreshing to know that this call is already being heeded as we see in Lillis & Curry (2010) whose longitudinal study tracks scholars’ writing and publication experiences from Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, and Portugal, and discusses hegemonic issues for non-native English speaking scholars publishing research articles in English.
Lastly, as part of the package of the new agenda, Jan believes that ‘L2 students [should be tutored] in the style of the Anglo-American academic discourse’ (p.14), but does not see this as perpetuating a cultural imperialism nor as an exercise in polishing one’s text, because as he predicts ‘only a tiny minority of students, after all, will pursue academic careers in later life and will actually write academic papers themselves after graduation’ (p, 15). He concludes on the note that the vast majority would still need these skills to compete in the job market. If one reads a contradiction here, it is because of the complexity of the problem itself. Jan Chovanec’s analyses are pertinent and surely a way forward for genre theorizing and practice in a multicultural academic context.

In the second essay, Savka Blagojević and Biljana Mišić Ilić compare the use of interrogatives in English and Serbian academic discourse from a contrastive pragmatic approach. As the authors contend, while research on interrogatives has received considerable attention in academic writing, few studies on this phenomenon have included other languages such as Serbian. Their study is empirically strong. It uses data from well-sampled corpora of academic texts by native speakers of English and Serbian in the “soft” (Sociology, Philosophy and Psychology) and “hard” (Chemistry, Geology and Ecology) sciences, and compares results with data from Hyland (2002, 2004, 2008). The study provides statistical data on the use of interrogatives in academic texts in the two contexts, with the “Hard” sciences registering very low figures (p.29). This is understandable because Chemistry and Geology academic writing do not necessarily engage in the kind of dialogic interaction that we would normally see in Linguistic papers, for example (cf. Hyland 2004). Probably, an important finding in this preliminary analysis is our understanding that Serbian academics tend to use more
interrogatives than their English colleagues. And we understand that since there are more interrogatives in the Serbian language itself, Serbian writers transfer these to English.

The third contribution is a study of lexical bundle as they occur in a 254,000-word corpus of 15 MA theses written by Czech students in fields of linguistics, methodology and literature/cultural studies at Masaryk University in the period from 2005 to 2008. In this essay, Olga Dontcheva-Navratilova explores a total of 3 to 4-word lexical bundles, which she classifies into three main types, namely “referential bundles” (e.g. at the end of, at the beginning of), “discourse organisers” (e.g. on the other hand, in addition to the) and “attitudinal bundles” (e.g. the fact that, it is possible to) (p.40-41). Her analysis is focused on two levels: identification of the structure of these recurrent words as verb and noun phrase complements, prepositional phrase structure and other expressions (p.44), and their functional role in text. As one would expect, the findings suggest that Czech students do not frequently use lexical bundles. On account of the difficulty involved in the acquisition of these recurrent expressions, the author concludes that ‘there is an indispensable need to find effective ways for including overt instruction in discipline- and genre-specific bundles in courses of English for academic purposes’ (p 56). This pedagogic dimension makes Olga’s study even more relevant for L2 students, because lexical bundles are definitely a key element in the mastery of disciplinary discourse for novice writers (cf. Yorio 1989).

The fourth paper by Maurizio Gotti investigates cross-cultural aspects of academic discourse or identity traits that might be found in texts written by scholars from different backgrounds. The paper is a strong statement in favour of an exploration of the “other paradigms” already espoused by Jan Chovanec. According to Gotti, ‘globalising trends
commonly rely on covert strategies meant to reduce participants’ specificities, they hybridise local identities in favour of Anglocentric textual models (p.60). The study is based on a corpus of academic discourse, comprising English and Italian texts and contains texts from 4 disciplines: Law, Economics, Applied Linguistics and Medicine, that span a 30-year period (from 1980). From the corpus of 12 million word, the study uses a total of 2,738 texts (from 635-739 per disciplinary area) (p.62). These texts represent the following 4-genres: journal editorials, book reviews, research articles and legal articles. Two interesting findings are made in this survey. First, the communities (professional, ideological etc.) to which people belong shape their thinking and the way they write. Second, scholars from non-native English settings often face considerable challenges as multi-lingual scholars: responding to international norms and at the same time expressing their own identity.

“A Contrastive Study of Generic Integrity in the Use of Attitudinal Evaluation in Research Articles Written for Different Audiences” is the fifth paper in which Enrique Lafuente Millán analyses attitudinal markers in research articles written by English and Spanish academics in Applied Linguistics (AL), Business Management (BM) and Food Technology (FTech). A corpus of 72 articles in English is compared with a parallel corpus of 36 research articles in Spanish, yielding 591,665 words. Although real textual examples of attitude markers and/or evaluation are not used to illustrate the analysis, the paper is rich in statistics. A number of variations in the use of attitude markers are reported between the three disciplines, which the author interprets as a reflection of epistemological tendency in the disciplines. For example, while attitudinal markers in BM articles in journals published internationally tend to be frequent, they are relatively less frequent in AL papers, and
even far less in FTech articles. Since this is a comparative study, the main difference between English and Spanish in terms of use of these features is even more significant. In this respect, Enrique Lafuente Millán concludes that evaluation is context sensitive, noting that attitudinal evaluation in international research articles focuses to a greater extent on stressing the value of one’s work than it does in local Spanish papers. He notes that ‘this difference is more apparent in the more urban and competitive cultures like BM and FTech, where contextual differences (impact, competition, rewards, etc.) lead writers to be more assertive and promotional when addressing an international audience’ (p.94).

In the sixth contribution titled “Local Disciplines, Local Cultures: Praise and Criticism in British and Spanish History Book Reviews”, Rosa Lorés-Sanz sets out to explore explicit evaluation acts in 60 History book reviews in English and Spanish, by addressing three basic questions: (1) which entities are usually evaluated in the genre in English and Spanish?; (2) Which aspects of these entities are critically assessed in both context, positively or negatively? And (3) which divergences, if any exist between both linguistic and cultural contexts? Since evaluation acts may involve more than one lexeme, her data was manually searched to identify target features, i.e. “critical acts” — positive or negative remarks on a given aspect of the book under review. The paper noted similarities in the use of evaluation acts in both contexts, but significant differences in the distribution of positive and negative evaluation acts. In both English and Spanish book reviews, positive evaluation acts far exceeded negative evaluations acts, but negative evaluations are almost non-existent in Spanish texts. Again, in book reviews written in English, both author and the book are evaluated, whereas in those written in Spanish there is a tendency to evaluate the book critically.
and not the author. These differences are attributed to differences in national cultures in both settings, and to what the author refers to as ‘national culture’ and ‘national science’ (p.112). The former refers to different ways that people in each setting express themselves generally, and how these might affect academic writing, and the latter refers to the local disciplinary community, whose common set of conventions conditions the production of academic texts which emerges in it’ (p.112). The results of this study provide the reader with a deeper understanding on the phenomenon of evaluation in Spanish and native-English cultures.

The next paper by Pilar Mur-Dueñas is a comparative study of the use of topicalisers in articles written in English by American-based scholars and those written by Spanish scholars in Spanish. ‘Topicalisers are initial-sentence rhetorical devices with the aim of drawing the reader’s attention to a particular point, indicating a topic change, an introduction of a related topic and/or a re-elaboration of an already introduced topic [e.g. with regard to, with respect to etc.]’ (p.127). The study is based on three sub-corpora (516,626-word) of articles in Business Management. The first corpus consists of papers written in English by American scholars and published in international journals. The second consists of papers written by Spanish academics and published in international journals. The third consists of papers written by Spanish academics in Spanish and published locally. The study found that Spanish scholars tend to use many more topicalisers in the articles written in Spanish; but when they write papers for international publication, they are cautious not to over use these forms. It is evident that this study adds to our knowledge of intercultural rhetoric between English and Spanish academic discourse.
The eighth essay by Renata Povolná investigates discourse markers in a corpus of 15 MA theses of Czech students of English in the fields of linguistics, methodology and literature and culture studies. The database is 254,000 words. Basically two questions are addressed in this study: (1) Are there any preferences in the selection of discourse markers with regard to the three academic areas? (2) Are students able to use discourse markers appropriately? Overall, this is a study of coherence: how MA students use this important rhetorical feature (e.g. therefore, thus, although, however) to organize their texts, engage readers and express their attitudes toward stated claims. The author classifies discourse markers under “Casual” and “Contrastive”, although these features defy a binary classification (cf. Crismore & Farnsworth 1990; Hyland 1998). Renata’s findings emphasize two points. First, ‘causal and contrastive relations [in students’ text] tend to be frequently expressed overtly in novice academic writing, in particular by certain paratactic markers, such as therefore and thus when expressing causal relations, and but and however when expressing contrastive relations’ (p.146). Second, Czech students use a limited repertoire of discourse markers, and use some of them wrongly.

The last but not the least contribution to this issue by Josef Schmied is entitled “Academic Knowledge Presentation in MA Theses: from Corpus Compilation to Case Studies of Disciplinary Conventions”. This is a comprehensive corpus-based survey of modalities, personal pronouns and cohesive devices in 100 MA theses from 18 disciplines (over 4 million words) in the “hard” and “soft” sciences in the ZAMA Corpus from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This investigation presents an interesting contrast to the previous papers not only because it brings in a non-European experience in academic writing among “semi-experts/novices”, but also because it is indeed highly
multi-disciplinary, and explicitly foregrounds the gender parameter. The three categories of analysis (modals, pronouns and linkers), carefully chosen to correspond to three key-aspects of knowledge presentation in academic discourse (writer’s commitment, reader’s involvement and discourse about the on-going discourse respectively), provides an overview of academic writing practices of students in South Africa. As the author concludes this ‘first analysis of the three complex meta-linguistic features is a promising start to a more sophisticated analysis that seeks to measure the relative influence of the independent variables discipline, gender and language background on some of the key features illustrated here’ (p.163). The data analyzed is extensive and for want of space one can understand why the study emphasizes breadth over depth. Yet, it successfully captures the densities and complexities of students’ academic writing from a non-native English speaking perspective.

All in all, the articles in the BSE contain exciting new research in academic writing from a genre-based-corpus-perspective. They provide a critical mass of empirical evidence that should constitute the basis of discussion on theorizing genre in a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic academic world.

References


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