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Some Observations on the Academic Writing Style in Economics

Abstract

Numerous studies have demonstrated that academic writing practice is neither uniform nor monolithic and displays a considerable number of differences in many respects. The number of studies investigating different aspects of writing style in economics seems, however, moderate at best. This article aims to discuss the specificity and selected characteristics of academic writing style in the field of economics. The concepts of style and stylistic competence provide the starting point for further discussion of the stylistic features displayed in economics texts. An additional purpose of this article is to shed some light on the extent to which stylistic conventions recommended for academic writers are followed in practice by scholars in economics. With this in view, the author analysed a small corpus of texts written by two renowned American economists. The study yielded interesting findings suggesting the strong authorial identity manifested by both writers and their nonconformity to the accepted standards and conventions of academic writing.

Key words: academic text, authorial identity, convention, economics, style

Introduction

An orthodox view of academic writing, that imposes a set of rigid principles to be followed in composing academic texts, still appears to prevail in textbooks for students and aspiring researchers in the halls of the academe. In particular, it is often proclaimed that academic writing should present argumentation and findings in an objective and formal way, striving to employ such linguistic means as nominalization, lexical density and impersonality, the latter of which includes the use of the passive voice constructions and the avoidance of the first person pronouns. According to Sanderson (2008), the need for impersonality is explained by the main purpose of scholarly communication, which is to convey facts or factual information. Even Einstein (as cited in Hyland, 2018, p. 316) admits that “when a man is talking about scientific subjects, the little word ‘I’ should play no part in his expositions”. Similar observations are easy to find in the literature.

Implementation of these principles varies in many respects across time, space and disciplines, which has been demonstrated in a number of studies (Bazerman, 1988; Hyland, 2002; 2004; 2006; 2009; 2018; Swales, & Feak, 2010; Sword, 2012). Writing style is an important aspect of these differences, and researchers have found that academic texts differ considerably in terms of their linguistic characteristics, for example, sentence lengths or frequency of difficult and rare words measured by different readability scores (Hyland, 2006, p. 25). In addition, academic writers can represent themselves in various ways in their texts and project their stronger or weaker individual authorial identities, which adds to the multitude of other differences that can be found in their writings. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of an authorial identity is the use of first person pronouns, which was widely discussed in both Hyland’s (2002; 2018) and Lehman’s studies (2014; 2015; 2018).

Yet another rhetorical feature also makes an important difference here, namely the extent to which the passive voice is used in scientific and academic texts. The passive voice, as is claimed by Cooray (as cited in Banks, 2017,

p. 2), “helps the writer to maintain an air of scientific impersonality”. Moreover, the researcher just mentioned (Banks, 2017, p. 13) claims that the use of the active voice with the concurrent use of first person pronouns is inversely correlated with the incidence of the passive voice constructions. In other words, the increased use of the passive voice may be linked with the decreased use of the first person pronouns and thereby with the less pronounced authorial identity. In this regard, however, the existing research has focused mainly on interdisciplinary differences, while the question that also seems worth investigating, namely that of intradisciplinary differences, has been left unexplored. The only known exception was Hyland’s study (2018, p. 78), where the author’s focus was on investigating the writings of two linguistic celebrities, Deborah Cameron and John Swales, and on examining how they demonstrated their distinctive identities through their repeated rhetorical choices.

For a similar purpose, I have set myself a goal of examining some aspects of the academic writing style in economics, more specifically the aspects pertaining to the selected stylistic features of the articles written by two renowned American scholars, Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz. I have selected these two scholars largely because of their high academic profile and scholarly achievements crowned by the awarding of the Nobel Prize in economic sciences. These two distinguished scholars also share a relatively common area of interest, namely international economics, international trade and globalization. I presumed, therefore, that their articles might expose more visibly the authors’ rhetorical choices, without being influenced by the field-specific features.

Based on a corpus of twenty academic research articles, this study attempted to examine differences between the texts written by both economists with regard to several categories of rhetorical style and authorial identity. Before discussing the findings of this study, it would appear proper to provide background information on some selected issues of style, stylistic competence and economics.

Style, competence and identity

A considerable number of linguists would probably concur with the view that style is too complex a phenomenon to be forced into a simple definition, with the exception being only for some metaphors alluding to language such as, for example, the dress of thought, where style is the particular cut and fashion of the dress (Hough, 1969, p. 3). In a similar vein, Leech and Short (2007, p. 9) maintain that the word 'style' has a fairly uncontroversial meaning only in its most general interpretation, referring to the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person and for a given purpose.

Leech and Short (2007, p. 31) provide, however, their viewpoint on some significant characteristics of style that most linguists would probably share, namely that:

- style is a way in which language is used, i.e. it belongs to parole rather than to langue, and that
- style consists in choices made from the repertoire of the language, choices made by a particular author, in a particular genre in a particular social setting.

Before considering this issue further, an important distinction should be made between the two common meanings of style, namely editorial and rhetorical style, as explained below:

1. Editorial style pertains to the rules governing conventions of printing and manuscript presentation.
2. Rhetorical style refers to the set of decisions any author makes about word choice, sentence and text structure, while remaining within the rules of grammar (Holcomb, & Killingsworth, 2010, p. 173).

Our focus here is on the second meaning, i.e. the rhetorical style. Stylistic choices are sometimes considered similar to pragmatic choices in that they both refer to specific ways of using language. As Hickey (1993, p. 578) points out, pragmatics coincides with stylistics in that both are interested in author's choices from among a range of grammatically acceptable linguistic forms. Yet

he points to the fact that pragmatics is more concerned with choices intended to perform actions (illocutions), while stylistics aspires to make choices producing effects of aesthetic and affective nature on the reader (Hickey, 1993). This does not mean, however, that stylistic choices are neutral or limited to producing only aesthetic and affective effects on the readers. On the contrary, style is a powerful medium of social interaction, which according to Holcomb and Killingsworth (2010, p. 6), may manifest itself in the following ways:

- Style allows writers to present a self or take on an already established role.
- Style allows writers to assign roles to readers.
- Style is a resource for managing relationships among writers, readers and subject matters (Holcomb, & Killingsworth, 2010, p. 6).

The presentation of self, especially displaying a sense of social belonging to a group of potential readers, brings us closer to a broader notion of authorial identity, which significantly contributes to the effects of credibility produced by the author. In this context, Ivanič (1998, p. 32) rightly notes that “writing is an act of identity” in which authors imitate or challenge dominant practices and discourses.

Lehman (2018, p. 22), on the other hand, views authorial identity as “being formed by writer’s agency and intentionality as well as by the socio-cultural experiences and institutional contexts.” Such an identity is an ever-changing construct being shaped in the process of social interactions and discourses within particular communities.

As Hyland argues (2009, p. 70), identity also refers to the various ‘selves’ writers employ in different contexts and communities, and in their responses to the power relations institutionally inscribed to them. These responses are manifested by pragmatic and stylistic choices made by the writers who tend to conform to the community’s conventions. The authorial identity is manifested strongly by self-mentioning, using the first person pronouns or the active voice rather than passive construction in academic texts.

Worth noting here is also Hyland’s assertion (2002, p. 1091) that the ability of writers to construct a credible representation of themselves and

their work, aligning themselves with the socially shaped identities of their communities, is a central element of their pragmatic competence. Hyland's claim implies that rhetorical choices projecting writers' identity are part of their pragmatic choices resulting from the higher order pragmatic competence of these writers.

Hickey treats pragmatic and stylistic choices on equal footing and considers integrating pragmatics and stylistics into a discipline called pragmatylistics (1993, p. 578). Some other linguists represent, however, a different approach, e.g. Grochowski (2008, p. 46) who, as is also the case with Hyland, argues in favour of a certain hierarchy, where stylistic choices are subordinate to pragmatic choices deemed higher in this ranking.

It seems reasonable to assume that the real impact of language style and its persuasive power is largely dependent not only on the writer's competent decisions about numerous choices mentioned above, including word choice, sentence and text structure, but also on their decisions concerning other elements particularly involved in constructing the authorial identity.

Leech and Short (2007, p. 39) claim that each reader and writer has a stylistic competence analogous to and additional to the linguistic competence shared (according to Chomsky) by all native speakers-listeners of a language. They also argue that stylistic competence is not, like linguistic competence, a capacity that native speakers possess and exercise unconsciously and intuitively. Only with special training can it be turned into stylistic explicit knowledge and competence. Moreover, both authors (Leech, & Short, 2007, p. 39) claim that unlike Chomsky's ideal linguistic competence, stylistic competence is an ability which different native speakers possess in different measure. This may be due to numerous dimensions of stylistic competence relating to its different aspects such as:

1. genre dimension,
2. human/authorial/individual dimension,
3. group- or team-related dimension referring to a professional group or discipline, e.g. in an academic setting,

4. culture-related dimension pertaining to cultural aspects of a particular writing style.

The above list is by no means exhaustive. More to the point, each piece of writing is usually a mixture of different stylistic components reflecting the authorial preferences of style, genre-specific conventions and contextual factors. The fact remains that in academic texts we often notice certain patterns of unusual regularity that are considered typical of both academic and authorial style.

Needless to say that writing for a general-audience academic journal is quite different from writing for a field-specific journal, notably in terms of stylistic norms and expectations from the editors. These expectations are far from similar in different countries and cultures. As Hayot (2014, p. 38) points out, patterns of academic writing may differ substantially throughout the academic institutions in the world. In France, for instance, academic writing is far less hypotactic – less vertically organized, less structural – than in the United States (Hayot, 2014, p. 38). Consequently, scholar's competence in academic writing also refers to their knowledge of factors that make academic writing acceptable in the eyes of the editors and the academic community. However, the canons of acceptability, at least regarding the use of the passive voice constructions, are changeable and create some confusion particularly among novice writers.

The passive voice and stylish academic writing

The title of this section has been borrowed from Sword's book (2012) where the author discusses at length the recommendations for producing stylish academic prose. According to Sword, who surveyed over 100 guides of academic writing, the following are nonnegotiable principles that all academic writers would be well advised to follow:

1. Strive to produce sentences that are clear, coherent and concise.
2. Keep sentences short and simple.

3. Write in plain English, avoid flowery, ornate, pompous language.
4. Avoid vagueness and imprecision.
5. Avoid passive verb constructions.
6. Create a compelling narrative.

One is tempted to wonder whether those rules are to be followed strictly to the letter. After all, each piece of writing is a unique blend of different rhetorical means reflecting the author's pragmatic intentions, preferences of style and contextual constraints. Yet academic writing is a specific area where impersonal language prevails, and jargon-laden sentences with passive constructions still abound. This is despite the fact that such constructions can make the text more wordy and difficult to understand, especially when used in long sentences. These features of academic discourse are believed to function "as a rhetorical device for the maximization of objectivity" (Lachowicz, 1981, p. 107, as cited in Lehman, 2014, p. 609).

What is interesting is that earlier studies investigating the corpora from the 18th and 19th centuries confirmed that academic and scientific discourse strongly favoured the active voice. The prevalent use of the passive voice was characteristic of scientific discourse later, during the major part of the 20th century. Barber (1962 as quoted in Banks, 2017, p. 1), who investigated the use of passive constructions, found that 20% of non-modal verb forms were in the passive voice, the most common form being the simple present passive which accounted for 25%.

The latest research conducted by Banks (2017) confirmed that the use of the passive voice declined in the period of 1985–2015. The move towards the passive voice in the second half of the 20th century – around 1960s and 1970s – was the result of the increasing demands for academic and scientific discourse to be objective and professional.

Academic journals and editors preferred the passive voice constructions that were also overtly supported by the academic staff and journal editors until the end of the 20th century. The authors submitting manuscripts for publication were advised to avoid using the active voice, especially the

use of “I” and “we” in their academic research papers. In his essay “How to Write Mathematics”, the mathematician Paul Halmos (as cited in Foster, 2018) described the use of “I” as sometimes having “a repellent effect, as arrogance or ex-cathedra preaching”.

In a letter to the leading science journal “Nature”, Leather (1996, p. 467) maintains that:

“Using the passive voice in scientific writing allows the researcher to stand at a distance from his or her work. By standing at a distance, an unbiased viewpoint is much more likely to be reached. An unbiased viewpoint encourages a world view and an open mind, surely prerequisites for good science”.

He further claims that the use of the passive voice encourages disciplined writing and it is therefore more demanding, while using the active voice is an easy option because authors can just pour out their thoughts. This leads to careless presentation of arguments in scientific texts, particularly in methods and materials sections (Leather, 1996, p. 467).

The situation today, at least with respect to the recommendations of textbooks on academic style, is beginning to change. A shift in consensus among authors, as to the use of the active instead of the passive voice, is becoming more and more noticeable. A considerable number of writing guides now favour the use of the active voice again whenever possible for reasons of clarity and conciseness. As mentioned earlier, however, the scope of implementation of these recommended principles varies greatly across disciplines. The number of studies investigating these aspects of writing style in economics is particularly scarce, hence a closer examination appears to be a useful method for gaining insight into the real application of the advocated principles of style in economics writing.

Economics and economics writing

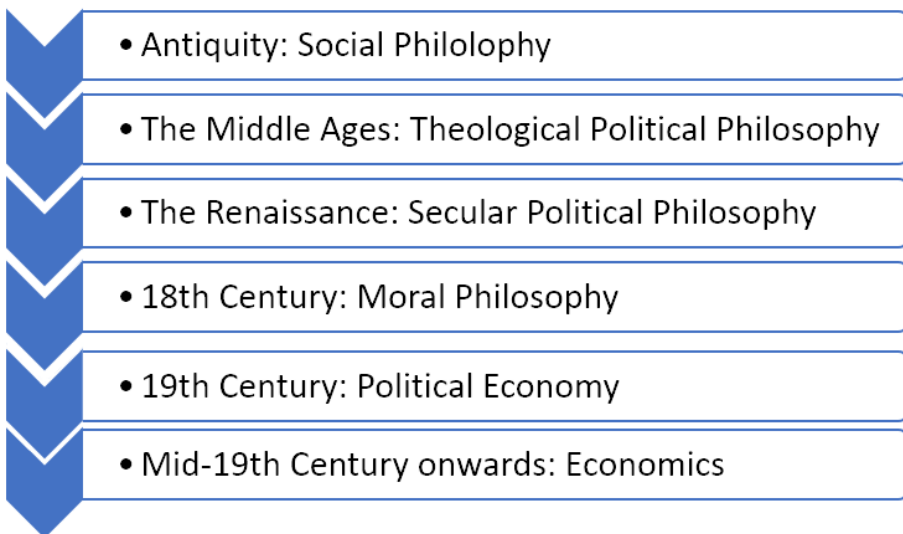
Bannock, Baxter and Davis (2003, p. 114) define economics as “the study of the production, distribution and consumption of wealth in human society”.

Economics pertains to the broad area of social sciences, also known as “soft” sciences, as it deals with the variables that characterize human behaviour.

Economics considerations first originated as social philosophy and had its roots in philosophical and theological reasoning. This historical background provides some elucidation for the rhetorical features of written texts in economics and had its implications for language and writing style. Writings in economics have long been stiff and formal, laden with lofty and high-flown phrases.

The sequential stages of evolution from social philosophy to economics are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Evolution from social philosophy to economics



Source: Resche (2013, p. 55)

Before the economy was considered a specific domain and economics was born as a discipline, thinkers, who reflected on economic issues, were mostly concerned with ethical questions pertaining to wealth, money, just price and usury. Medieval economic thought was mainly scholastic and was termed theological political philosophy. It was only in the 18th century that economic thinking started becoming autonomous.

The 19th century was marked by the recognition of economics as an academic discipline known as political economy. The shift from the term ‘political economy’ to ‘economics’ in the 20th century was also connected with the increasing influence of mathematical language and methods on economics. However, economics is still regarded as being part of the hybrid disciplines employing language and means typical of other fields and methods from mathematics, statistics, psychology and sociology.

According to McCloskey (1998, p. 11), modern texts in economics are obscure in style and this is explained by the necessity to defend scientific ethos. McCloskey refers to the words of St. Augustine who viewed the obscurity of the Bible as having “a pragmatic function in the art of winning over an alienated and even contemptuous audience” (Bruns, 1984, as quoted in McCloskey, 1998, p. 11).

McCloskey (1998) further claims, “Scientists, including economic scientists, pretend that Nature speaks directly, thereby effacing the evidence that they, the scientists, are responsible for the assertions. (...) Any first-person narrative, on the other hand, may prove unreliable.”

Not surprisingly, most economics journals require writing in the passive voice, and even if their editors do not expressly require that, they still require using the pronouns “we” even for single-authored papers (Berlatsky, 2016). Whether these recommendations are implemented in practice is another matter. I ventured to explore this issue in a comparative study of a small corpus consisting of twenty articles in economics written at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries by P. Krugman and J. Stiglitz.

The selected features of Krugman’s and Stiglitz’s articles

Twenty papers written by P. Krugman and J. Stiglitz have come under scrutiny using the following software programs:

<https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer.php>

<https://www.webpagefx.com/tools/read-able/>

with the purpose of analysing the following characteristics of these texts:

- Overall readability (Flesch Reading Ease Index, based on a scale of 0–100. A high score over 50 means that the text is easy, while low scores indicate that text is complicated to understand).
- Percentage of sentences in the passive voice.
- Average number of words per sentence.
- Percentage of difficult and rare words. This calculation is based on the linear word scale ranging from common to rare words, which gives an approximation for how well a word may be understood by the general public.

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results by authors, papers and text features

Article numbers, author's initials and titles: K for Krugman's article S for Stiglitz's article	Flesch Reading Ease Index		% of sentences in the passive voice		Number of words per sentence		% of difficult words in texts	
	Krug- man	Stiglitz	Krug- man	Stiglitz	Krug- man	Stiglitz	Krug- man	Stiglitz
1K: The prices: cost of globali- zation. 1S: The origins of inequality and policies to con- tain it.	39.1	45.2	3.4	5.8	25.46	22.13	18.01	18.32
2K: Confusions about social se- curity. 2S: Symposium on bubbles.	57.2	40.7	4.3	7.2	20.08	24.88	15.17	18.05
3K: The new eco- nomic geography now middle-aged. 3S: Equilibrium wage distributions.	40.6	52.3	5.1	3.3	21.75	20.40	20.64	15.83
4K: Will there be a dollar crisis? 4S: Where modern macroeconomics went wrong?	50.1	41.0	4.1	7.0	21.29	22.56	16.33	20.39

5K: The profession and the crisis. 5S: The Revolution of Information Economics: the past and the future.	54.1	42.8	4.0	5.6	21.83	20.90	14.71	24.07
6K: Agglomeration, integration and tax harmonization. 6S: The invisible hand and modern welfare economics.	48.1	43.9	4.0	6.1	20.92	14.82	19.25	21.73
7K: And now for something different: an alternative model of trade. 7S: Alternatives to debt-driven growth.	50.0	40.1	2.6	2.4	16.47	22.76	18.55	19.64
8K: Debt, deleveraging and the liquidity trap. 8S: Structural transformation, deep downturn and government policy.	34.9	44.3	3.9	6.3	22.44	15.35	18.41	21.29
9K: Revenge of the optimum currency area. 9S: Macro-economic management in an electronic credit/financial system.	52.1	43.2	3.4	6.0	18.13	22.35	18.7	18.26
10K: The road to global economic recovery. 10S: Countering the power of vested interests: advancing rationality in public decision-making.	65.7	41.0	2.2	6.1	16.82	20.92	12.97	21.59
The mean	49.19	43.45	3.7	5.58	20.52	20.71	17.27	19.92

Source: the author's own calculations

The results shown in Table 2 reveal no highly significant differences in the text features of the articles written by the two economists. Only the percentage

of the passive voice does differ considerably. The frequency of occurrence of the passive constructions in Stiglitz's papers is about 50% higher on average than in Krugman's papers. This might be partly explained by Krugman's double authorial identity, namely as an academic and journalist. Krugman has been publishing in "The New York Times" on a regular basis for years. His journalistic style of newspaper articles is certainly more accessible and appropriate for the general public, which may also be reflected in his academic papers in terms of the lower frequency of using the passive constructions.

With regard to the reading ease, sentence length and difficult lexis, both authors seem to produce a similarly readable and comprehensible prose. What is particularly noticeable, compared to the other studies mentioned earlier, is that the mean results in the use of the passive constructions found in the articles by both economists are strikingly low in comparison to other findings that indicated a much higher percentage of passive voice constructions (25–28%) in scientific and academic texts (cf. Banks, 2017).

Clearly, this also runs counter to the recommendations of the many economics journals and editors still requiring the extensive use of the passive voice constructions in the manuscripts submitted for publication.

It should be noted, however, that this analysis has been carried out on a relatively small corpus of texts. This research and its results are therefore presented with all the provisos that such a small corpus requires. It is certainly imperative that further studies based on a larger corpus and with a broader range of measurable characteristics should be conducted.

Concluding remarks

Intradisciplinary differences in style, as illustrated by the selected data extracted from texts in economics written by Krugman and Stiglitz, are not significant and these data seem point to some degree of homogeneity of their writing styles. They both write in comprehensible and understandable English, which is confirmed by Flesch Reading Index displaying a relatively small

number of difficult words in texts and also a small number of words per sentence. The latter is almost in line with the recommendations of the Plain English Campaign, suggesting that clear writing should have an average sentence length of 15 to 20 words (cf. Plain English Campaign).

Significant intradisciplinary differences between the two economists could only be observed in regard to the frequency of use of the passive voice constructions. The lower frequency of the passive voice constructions observed in Krugman's texts may seem to be indicative of this author's greater desire to represent himself and to reveal stronger authorial identity in his texts. In addition, this may also signal Krugman's predisposition to use the less rigid and less conventionalized journalistic language in his academic writing.

The relatively low frequency of use of the passive voice in the economics texts is negatively correlated, as mentioned earlier, with the use of first person pronouns. Although the instances of first person pronouns have not been quantitatively evaluated, their occurrences in the texts by both academics were clearly visible and this would seem to suggest stronger and more prominent authorial identity of both Krugman and Stiglitz. This may also point to a high level of confidence allowing the authors to express themselves authoritatively, which is in line with their high professional profile in the economic sciences. One cannot but suspect that their rank, profile and high achievements in economic sciences allow them to flout some still recommended conventions of impersonal academic writing.

Conventions and practices regarding the use of the passive voice and first person pronouns in academic writing have considerably changed throughout the last decades. Even Nature journals now prefer authors to write in the active voice, as explained in the latest guidelines for the aspiring authors (cf. Nature journals guidelines).

The changes occurring nowadays in the academic writing style are not confined, however, to the issues discussed above. According to Hyland (2018), something close to a full-blown paradigm shift in the approach to academic writing has occurred during the last thirty years. This shift is

particularly visible in several spheres such as corpus analyses, new approaches to teaching academic writing with the focus on social participation and identity, and the growth of non-native practitioners in research and publishing in the English language.

It can be speculated that the digital revolution we are witnessing now will bring about even more changes, further reshaping academic writing practice and style in many respects.

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