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Rhetorical Aspects of Cross-cultural Academic Communication

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Introduction

My interest in the field of academic discourse rhetoric stems from observations related to the problems non-native speakers of English encounter when attempting to publish in international, English-medium journals. This issue became even more prominent in the 1990s with the advance of the new technologies, on the one hand, and the onset of globalization combined with political changes, on the other, which led to the opening of a number of countries to the world, Eastern Europe and China being just the most obvious examples. As a result, scholars who had previously been confined to their own country or region, endeavored to join the Western academic community. The mandatory prerequisite,

however, was and still is, not only excellent knowledge of English but also knowledge and awareness of the expectations of the respective, subject-specific discourse community, as to the structure of an academic article or a presentation. As it turned out, it was exactly the rhetoric of knowledge representation that became the stumbling block for scholars coming from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. From a theoretical viewpoint, at that time, it was a recognized fact that rhetorical structure in general is unique for each language and is also driven by the respective culture. Scientific discourse, however, was believed to "be independent of different languages and different cultures" (Widdowson, 1979, pp. 109–110).

Academic discourse rhetoric across cultures

In order to test the assumption that scientific discourse is universal and language- and culture-independent, I looked at the rhetorical structure of several languages (English, Russian, Bulgarian, French) from the point of view of the Speech act theory combined with the strategies for discourse production following van Dijk & Kintsch (1983), to find out that universality is observed at the higher levels of discourse organization, but when specification strategies start to operate, culture-specific features come to the fore. These are due to established norms supported by intertextuality, as well as to historical cross-cultural influences of larger languages on smaller languages (for details see Vassileva, 1995; 2002a). The diachronic study of economics journals in Bulgarian, Danish, English, and German published between 1900 and 2000 (Shaw, & Vassileva, 2009) demonstrated both similarities and differences in article structure, focus, perspective, format, among other features, in the course of the development of the discipline over that century.

Another focus of interest in my research was the phenomenon of hedging, starting with a contrastive analysis of the use of hedging devices in English and Bulgarian articles (Vassileva, 1997). This topic was further explored from a more general perspective including not only the notion of hedging (expressing detachment), but also the notion of commitment (through boosters), as it seemed that the overall expression of the author's ethos could be better elicited by looking at both ends of the cline "whose end points are complete commitment and complete detachment" (Stubbs, 1986, p. 6). Thus, based on Speech act theory, the study (Vassileva, 2001a) aimed to establish the degree to which 'commitment/detachment' is employed in English, Bulgarian and 'Bulgarian English' academic discourse in linguistics. 'Bulgarian English' was included in order to establish the possible socio-pragmatic failures which "stem from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour'" (Thomas, 1983) and resulting in deviations due exclusively to transfer of rhetorical strategies. The results showed many more differences than similarities, namely:

> To begin with, Bulgarian and especially BE show a higher degree of commitment and hence – a lower degree of deference towards the discourse community both in terms of quantity (the overall number of hedges and boosters) and in terms of quality (the degree of commitment and detachment implied in the linguistic means of expression). Secondly, some differences are observed in the means of expressing boosting in the three languages […]. Thirdly, there are also noticeable differences in the distribution of the hedges throughout the research article. As regards Bulgarian English, the evidence supplied above does not point undeniably to the presence of native language transfer but rather it seems to stand on its own in showing deviations from both the English and the Bulgarian standards. (Vassileva, 2001a, pp. 98–99)

At the turn of the century, it was observed that, in contrast to the growing number of studies on academic writing, *spoken academic communication*, unfortunately, remained insufficiently investigated despite the intensification of face-to-face interaction due to increased mobility of scientists all over the world. Therefore, I embarked on this topic, starting off with a contrastive study of the realization of speaker-audience interaction in English and 'Bulgarian English' (Vassileva 2002b). This, as well as my subsequent research was based on recordings of conferences and investigated speakers' strategies of persuasion and interaction with the audience when using English and German as conference languages (Vassileva, 2003; 2005; 2006; 2009). Conference presentations were analyzed in view of the employment of the most salient linguistic means of realization of speaker-audience interaction, namely: *'I' perspective*, *'We' perspective*, *'You'perspective*, *Rhetorical questions*, *Extratextual reference*, *Jokes*, *Story-telling elements*, *Deixis*, *Personal reference* and *Reference to other participants*. A detailed analysis is offered of the use of the 'I', 'we' and 'you' perspectives in the various types of micro-speech acts established in presentations: *Analysis/Argumentation*, *Conclusion*, *Aims/Advance Organisers*, *Terminology/Procedure*, *Personal View*, *Exemplification*, *Personal Experience*, *Reference*, *Focusing*, *Back Organisers*, *Self-reference*, *Permission*. The results were also compared to those found in research articles.

The outcomes of the investigation of conference paper presentations confirmed the hypothesis that there exist culture-specific patterns of author representation and author-audience interaction that account for considerable variations in the type and frequency of the linguistic means employed for the realisation of that interaction. To begin with, both German and Bulgarian authors use half of the number of interactive means as compared to Anglo-American

speakers. Approximately the same is observed in written German, whereas written Bulgarian comes much lower on the scale of discourse personalization. Besides, the data demonstrates that in conference language native speakers of English resort to more personalized means of argumentation, while speakers of German and Bulgarian rely more on logical argumentation.

Speaker variation is most noticeable in German English presentations, followed by German, which is close to English, while Bulgarian English demonstrates the lowest degree of speaker variation. Both German English and Bulgarian English show the typical features of highly developed interlanguages, that is, both native language transfer and target language overgeneralisation are observed, as well as deviations from both the native and the target language. The latter are, surprisingly, much more pronounced in GE than in BE despite the greater closeness between English and German as compared to English and Bulgarian, so that it could tentatively be suggested that Bulgarians using English as a conference language have, to a large extent, mastered the Anglo-American standard of interpersonal communication in academic discourse. The deviations that are observed both in GE and in BE could hardly be expected to hamper cross-cultural comprehension, but rather to fail meeting the expectations of the English-speaking discourse community.

Bulgarian linguists who use English as a means of international communication employ far fewer means of direct speaker-audience address and, despite the similar internal distribution of those means, still demonstrate a high degree of variation in their use in individual micro-speech acts. Most of the 'deviations' from native speaker standards can be traced to native-language rhetorical patterns of discourse organisation and presentation since the Bulgarian standard of academic writing seems to resist to comply with the tendencies

dictated by the Anglo-American rhetoric. This standard has formed over the years under the dominant influence of Russian, French and German, where there is a relatively stable tendency of avoidance of scientific discourse personalisation.

The study of conference presentations rhetoric was logically followed by my research on the discourse of conference discussion sessions and was based on recordings of conferences in English and German. The focus was on the ways and means of realisation of conference discussion sessions interaction in terms of argumentation strategies used by discussants, and their communicative effect. The analysis was methodologically based on classical rhetorical theory combined with more modern views on rhetoric. Since the conference discussion session usually consists of pairs of questions/statements and answers, the following types of questions/statements were identified in the corpus: *Expressions of appreciation and agreement; Requests for further information or clarification; Statements; Suggestions for ways of solving a problem; Critical questions.* The types of answers, respectively, were: *Clarification; Confirmation/agreement; Reformulation; denial; Attack; Submission; Avoidance; Questioning the question.*

The analysis showed that from the three main types of argumentation (epistemic, deontic, and ethical), it is epistemic argumentation that almost totally dominates conference discussion contributions. This is not surprising, since scientific discourse in general reflects the natural striving of science for the truth and for explanations of phenomena. Deontic argumentation is occasionally observed in suggestions where speakers usually propose alternative, allegedly better ways and means of solving a particular problem. Ethical argumentation is extremely rare, since it presupposes the categorisation of a claim on the scale of 'good – bad' and this kind of personalized evaluation clashes in principle with the universal assumption of the objectivity of science.

As to the rhetorical topoi linguists make use of in discussion sessions, the whole variety of them is presented in the corpus. The correlation between the topoi based on logical generic premises and those based on conventionalised conclusions is approximately 2:1, that is, since, contrary to natural sciences, linguistics is a 'Geisteswissenschaft' that does not always operate with strictly measurable, tangible and therefore verifiable matter, it has to rely on logic for securing successful argumentation. The very fact, however, that in yet one third of the cases topoi from the authority or from the person are brought in to support speakers' claims, contributes to the relatively high degree of subjectivism in argumentation.

Topoi from the contrast deserve special attention not only because they account for approximately one third of the corpus, but also because they can predominantly be observed in denials. In general, the predominance of question types 'requests for further information' and 'criticism' points to the natural striving of science for the truth, but is this always the only driving force behind scientific confrontation? Both explicit and implicit denials are of the "contrastive" type and belong to what Martin (1992, p. 147) calls "dismissal genre" that involves recasting another's work in one's own terms […] and then rendering it absurd with respect to one's own 'in-house' criteria." Besides, for the reasons already mentioned, in the humanities it is even easier to play down the discourse of other scholars. Especially in cases where there is a preliminary conception that there could not possibly be any common ground to be found, where the participants see themselves as worriers whose mission is to fight for the only cause, their own cause, the discussion turns into a battlefield and remains a battlefield, only to take other forms, through other media of academic communication. Thus, one could, to my mind at least, hardly speak today of the academic discourse community as one consisting of like-minded peers.

The final observations made in the studies above instigated further research in the field of confrontation in academic discourse (Vassileva, 2010; 2012; 2014a) that was based on corpora of academic book reviews in German and English with an outspoken negative character, meaning that the book is eventually not recommended to the readers. An attempt is made to explicate the argumentation strategies used by review writers within the classical Aristotelian framework and the degree to which criticism is based on objective logic or on subjective personal evaluation. The data demonstrate that the most frequent ground for criticism is theoretical deficiency or failure. Discrepancies between the aim(s) of the respective study/coursebook and their realization come next, followed closely by problematic choice of methodology and errors in analysis, and recommendations for improvements. Then comes erroneous and/or imprecise use of terminology and, finally, discrepancy between title and content. As to the rhetorical topoi linguists make use of in reviews, it should be noted here that the corpus does not represent the whole variety of them. The correlation between the topoi based on logical generic premises and those based on conventionalized conclusions is approximately 50:50, that is, topoi from the person and from the authority are brought in to support reviewers' claims, which contributes to the relatively high degree of subjectivism in argumentation as compared to the discourse of conference discussion sessions discussed above.

Another aspect of academic discourse rhetoric that has been in the centre of my research is the expression of author identity through the use of first personal singular and/or plural pronouns (Vassileva, 1998; 2000; 2001b; 2002c; 2014b). These studies are based on comparable corpora of research articles in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian, as well as articles written by Bulgarians in the respective foreign languages. In terms of *cross-cultural influences*,

two tendencies are observed: to a certain extent in French, but especially in German (in both cases due most probably to the impact of English), there is a gradual change from the 'we' to the 'I' perspective. However, this appears to be a subconscious rather than a conscious process, as a questionnaire distributed among native speakers shows. The Slavic languages, on the other hand, seem still to be resisting this trend, although English has become the dominant language in Eastern Europe, too. The reasons could be traced in earlier, historical cultural influences, as well as in local standards and traditions. As a result, one may expect that the 'we' perspective would sound rather self-confident and presumptuous ('everyone / the group thinks like me') to an outsider of such a culture. In other words, the supposedly self-effacing and impersonalizing effect of the collective 'we' may cause exactly the opposite reaction. On the other hand, the allegedly committal and responsible 'I' in English could seem intrusive and even condescending ('I know everything') to a speaker of a language that favours 'we' in this case.

Some explanations may also be found in Clyne's (1993, p. 14) distinction between "individualistic vs. collectivistic" oriented cultures. From this perspective, the Russian and Bulgarian discourses favour the 'collective approach' resulting in 'collective responsibility', which is not difficult to explain in view of the long-standing and powerful influence of the communist ideology. This ideology aims at suppressing the individual in favour of the community. All these considerations support Fairclough's (1992) claim that it is dominant ideologies that shape and determine modes of discourse. This observation does not apply to German, however, since no differences in this respect have been noticed between texts produced by linguists working in (former) East and West Germany (as the corpus includes both) – there the comparatively equal distribution of the 'I' vs. 'we'

perspectives points to a recent tendency towards personalization. One could assume, then, that cultural traditions can be more powerful than ideologies, especially in the case of "pluricentric languages" (Clyne, 1996) functioning in societies with different dominant ideologies. On the other hand, small and homogeneous cultures seem to be more coherent, so that 'collective thinking' tends to prevail over 'individual thinking', which is related to the striving towards preservation of cultural identity and independence.

Academic communication in multimedia environment

The *Academic Communication in Multimedia Environment* Bulgarian-German project (see Vassileva et al., 2020; Vassileva, 2020; Vassileva, & Chankova 2020a; 2020b) focuses on the perceptions of academics of the new ways in which research can be done in the multimedia environment and how that environment influences information exploitation habits. The implications of the digital environment on knowledge production, transmission, and consumption in the social sciences, along with corollary issues such as the users' digital literacies are discussed. The users' perceptions of their use of multimedia environment are detailed. Two questionnaires with a similar structure were the method of gathering the data used for the studies, namely questionnaires that were run with students and scholars. The studies aimed at fleshing out how the new digital environment has influenced the formation of new habits in searching for, collecting, consuming, and evaluating information and whether and to what extent the learning process (for the students) and the research process (for the academics) change under that influence. The results echo a tendency of mistrust of the merits of the digital

environment on the part of the scholars and the rather slow adoption of its affordances for professional aims.

The experiments also involved practical tasks given to students, which they completed while their actions were recorded via the screen-capturing software Camtasia in order to gain insight into the students' habits in information collection and task performance for academic purposes. The results reveal that students seldom use scientific outlets of information, even for academic purposes, and they tend to copy and paste information as found, with no reference to the source, into their papers. The need to investigate further the habits fostered by the use of the multimedia environment in learning and research is heightened by various corollary issues which the experiments helped uncover: casual plagiarism, the need to educate students in the affordances of the multimedia environment, and not least, the need to reveal ways to incorporate the multimedia environment into academia.

These results provoked a study of Bulgarian scholars' attitudes towards plagiarism (Vassileva, & Chankova, 2019) whose outcomes are rather worrying: lack of knowledge of what constitutes plagiarism, reluctance to combat it, lack of regulatory mechanisms at institutional level, lack of punishment, ignorance as to the existence and implementation of digitally based plagiarism-capturing software, among others.

Conclusion

Concerning the role of English as the international language of academic communication, the question is what to do in order to use English as a real lingua franca, that is, as a means of academic communication that would facilitate – and not hamper – such communication. Generally speaking,

there are three main positions concerning the use of English as the international language.

First, English could be used, like Latin, as a neutral, universal language devoid of any culture-specific rhetorical features. Here we clash, however, with the native speakers' claim that this would 'spoil' the language and reduce it to a computer language.

The second option is to use English so as to maintain its culture-specific rhetoric. This, however, would inevitably place non-native speakers in a disadvantageous position, as they would be forced to behave in ways alien to them, thus losing their cultural identity. Moreover, such a position is often accused of being culturally imperialistic.

And the third possibility, which I would plead for, is to use English in such a way as to maintain the cultural specificities of the producer of scientific discourse, in other words, to be tolerant to cultural variations, thus avoiding the danger of the scientific community becoming uniform. This would mean that Western members of the academic discourse community should be made aware of the existence of other, different cultures, respectively – rhetorics, and learn to be tolerant towards their specificities. Secondly, however, speakers of other languages who use English, German or French for international communication should be taught how to do it in a way acceptable for the intended audience, while at the same time preserving their cultural identity. This delicate balance may be secured by providing teaching materials for academic writing courses based on careful contrastive analyses of the respective similarities and differences.

The affordances of the internet may be expected to both alleviate and further complicate cross-cultural academic communication, depending on the extent of scholars' abilities and desire to adapt their behaviors to the new media. Last but not least, the latter issue has

been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic which has left research and educational institutions with no choice but to go online. These developments will unquestionably call for rethinking academic discourse rhetoric both in terms of discipline specificities and cross-culturally.

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