English for Specific Purposes 45 (2017) 40–51

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

English for Specific Purposes

journal homepage: http://ees.elsevier.com/esp/default.asp

Is academic writing becoming more informal?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 7 October 2016

Keywords:
Formality
Academic writing
EAP
Diachronic change
Rhetorical practices

ABSTRACT

Informality has become something of a contemporary mantra as, from the denim-clad offices of internet startups to the pages of business reports, we are encouraged to shed old constraints and relax conventions. This paper explores the perception that since informality has now invaded a large range of written and spoken domains of discourse, academic writing has also followed this trend. It asks the question whether academics are now freer to construct less rigidly objective texts and craft a more inclusive relationship with their readers. Taking a corpus of 2.2 million words from the same leading journals in four disciplines at three periods over the past years, we explore changes in the use of ten key features regarded by applied linguists and style guide authors as representing informality. Our results show only a small increase in the use of these features, and that this is mainly accounted for by increases in the hard sciences rather than the social sciences. It is also largely restricted to increases in first person pronouns, unattended reference and sentences beginning with conjunctions. We discuss these results and argue they represent changes in rhetorical conventions which accommodate more obvious interpersonal interactions in the sciences.

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There is a general, though largely unexamined, assumption among those interested in such things that writing in many domains has become less formal in recent years (e.g. Adel, 2008; Fairclough, 2001; Foster, 2005). Observers have noticed a gradual shift away from standard detached and impersonal styles of writing to ones that allow more personal comment, narration and stylistic variation, so that Mair, for example, notes "a trend towards the informal and the colloquial in written communication" (1998: 153) and Leedham (2015) found greater informality in undergraduate essays. This trend towards informality might be seen as part of a contemporary zeitgeist which blurs overt hierarchies and values interpersonal engagement or, alternatively, be regarded as another form of insidious persuasion, what Fairclough (2001: 52) calls "synthetic personalization". It is possible, however, that the informality which has invaded a large range of written and spoken domains once characterized by formality (journalism, business correspondence, administrative documents, etc.) has also spread to academic writing. Indeed, it has been fashionable among applied linguists in recent years to search for evidence of greater interactivity in academic prose and identify the ways that writers craft an inclusive relationship with their readers (e.g. Hyland, 2004).

In this paper we explore this issue and investigate whether academic writing is becoming less formal and, if so, in what ways and in what disciplines. We first attempt to characterize the notion of 'informality' and how it is understood by academic discourse analysts and those who advise authors on academic style. Needless to say, while we know it when we see it, we find 'informality' to be a slippery concept, difficult to pin down with a clear definition. It is typically either defined in contrast with

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2016.09.001
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formality, or in terms of lists of language features which are thought to comprise 'informal elements', such as using imperatives, employing "I" or starting sentences with "but". Focussing on published research articles as the most important genre of academic writing, we then undertake a comparative study of three corpora composed of papers in four fields drawn from three distinct time periods, examining the frequencies of key 'informal elements'.

1. What is informality?

The first place to start is with a definition or characterization of the term, but this is not altogether straightforward. Informality is generally hetero-defined, the Latin prefix meaning "not, opposite of, without" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2010) and demarcated as the absence of formality. It therefore presupposes the existence of formality and a recognized set of practices built on a structure, authority or system. Thus the Cobuild dictionary defines formal speech as "very correct and serious rather than relaxed and friendly" while in pragmatics, formality is associated with 'negative politeness' and the use of distancing behaviour to respect the other's face and their wish not to be imposed on (Brown & Levinson, 1978). More broadly, Heylighen and Dewaele (1999: 1) state that: "A formal style is characterized by detachment, accuracy, rigidity and heaviness; an informal style is more flexible, direct, implicit, and involved, but less informative". In academic writing, then, formality helps to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation by minimizing the context-dependence and fuzziness of expressions, while, in contrast, informality rejects stuffy orthodoxy to project a relaxed and approachable persona.

Questions of formality thus relate to tenor, or the grammatical choices that enable speakers to enact their complex and diverse interpersonal relations by selecting language options which project an appropriate persona and a suitable connection with readers (Halliday, 1985). It is, therefore, associated with concepts like *colloquial language* (e.g. Hundt & Mair, 1999) or language used in everyday conversation by ordinary people, and *engagement*, or how writers acknowledge and connect with their readers (Hyland, 2005). We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that the gap between conversation and academic writing is narrowing, despite the recognition that the latter is often strategically interactive (e.g. Hyland, 2004). Academic genres, in fact, appear relatively resistant to penetration by colloquial features (Seone & Loureiro-Porto, 2005) so that Hundt and Mair (1999: 221), for example, suggest that they reside at the more conservative end of "a cline of openness to innovation ranging from "agile" to "uptight" genres".

A key reason for this is that in research writing adherence to the conventions of formality suggests impartiality, precision, distance and a faux egalitarianism, allowing authors to construct themselves and their readers as disinterested specialists. The search for truth is couched in objectivity and the features of formality serve to minimize the quirks, foibles and interests of individual authors to suggest an anonymous writer conducting democratic interactions with like-minded peers. This is a context in which status, gender, experience and other social characteristics are subordinated to the accurate and detached presentation of information. The conventions of formality mean that, as far as possible, authors leave their personalities at the door when they sit down to write.

As a result, students are frequently cautioned against informality as it conveys impressions of the author that may be unwelcome in academic writing. Style guide advices for undergraduates often point this out:

> In sum, there's a great disadvantage to writing informally in a history or classics class, since it makes you look both casual and rushed, neither of which will help your grade. Conversely, there's a great advantage to writing formally, especially here, since formality forces you into a posture where you appear to create some distance between your own feelings and the cause you're arguing for. That's good in this case, because it puts you in a more objective stance right from the start. Objectivity—or even the mere appearance of being objective—is good in academic writing.
>
> (Guide to writing in history and classics, 2015)

Such advice is also given to research writers, although it is generally expressed more circumspectly:

> Academic writers need to be sure that their communications are written in the appropriate style. The style of a particular piece should not only be consistent, but also be suitable both in terms of the message being conveyed and the audience. A formal research report written in informal, conversational English may be considered too simplistic, even if the actual ideas and/or data are complex.
>
> (Swales & Feak, 2012: 14)

Informality, then, is generally contrasted to what is seen to constitute formality. An influential early example of such a contrast is Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) study of how scientists discuss their work in written and spoken modes. They observe, for example, that interviews with academics are typically littered with controversies, speculative insights, intellectual commitments and social biases. This is what the authors refer to as a "contingent repertoire" where actions are not disinterested responses to the natural world, but the "judgements of specific individuals acting on the basis of their personal inclinations and particular social positions". In contrast, of course, these features are absent in the same academics' research articles which are governed by a more objective "empiricist repertoire":

> Empiricist discourse is organized in a manner which denies its character as an interpretive product and which denies that its author's actions are relevant to its content…it portrays scientists' actions and beliefs as following unproblematically and inescapably from the empirical characteristics of an impersonal natural world.
>
> (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 56)

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