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Grammatical Complexity in Academic English and Why it Matters

Presenter: Zelei Lian, Graduate Student, Humanities Lampeter, UWTSD
(Based on research of Douglas Biber & others)



Definition

In the broad field of linguistics, **Grammatical Complexity** can mean very different things. For example, a psycholinguist's understanding of this phrase would be different from that of a typological linguist's. In this research, grammatical complexity is confined and discussed in the context of **second language acquisition (SLA)**, especially in **second language writing**. It means **'the complexity of grammatical structures that directly arise from the number of linguistic elements and their interrelationships within the sentence'** (Pallotti, 2015).

Background

Research on **grammatical complexity** in academic English abounds but **stereotypes** prove hard to disperse.

It's commonly seen to be unnecessarily **complex**, structurally **elaborated**, and maximally **explicit** in meaning.

These specious assumptions in turn inform problematic L2 teaching policies and practices, e.g. undue focus on dependent clause.

Results: Part 1

Casual speech but grammatically "complex"

It was simply one of those things

[where I believe...

[Mike's got to the point

[where he decided enough is enough and not accept

[what she says]]]

Academic writing but grammatically "simple"

A pre-glottalized alveolar stop is usually represented as [ʔ], but the common assumption is that the glottalization may be realized on a continuum of creaky voice to full glottal occlusion on a preceding voiced sound.

• Academic English is not necessarily more grammatically complex than speech.

• Embedded clause alone fails to capture the true grammatical complexity of academic English.

Conclusion

- Synchronically speaking, academic written registers stand out in their reliance on **phrasal complexity features rather than clausal ones**.
- Diachronically speaking, academic English has underwent great **changes**. This is especially true in science writing, where **maximal information compression, rather than elaboration**, is the new norm.
- **Pedagogical implication** for EAP: more attention and practice due to **phrasal modification**

Research Questions



- What are common perceptions/hypotheses of grammatical complexity? Can they be measured? If so, how?
- Which linguistic feature is most/best associated with grammatical complexity?
- Is there significant difference between the language styles of humanities and science writing within the sub-registers of academic English?
- Are linguistic features of academic English resistant to change? How can we map them?
- What are the implications for teaching academic English to L2 learners in higher education?

Results: Part 2

Table 3.8 Statistical comparisons for phrasal modifiers across three general written registers

Linguistic feature	ANOVA statistics	Mean Scores (per 1,000 words)		
		Novels	Newspaper prose	Academic prose
prepositional phrases as adverbials	$F = 7.8; p < .001; \eta^2 = .35$	29.3	35.4	26.9
attributive adjectives	$F = 103.9; p < .0001; \eta^2 = .31$	30.5	49.3	61.3
nouns as nominal pre-modifiers	$F = 271.6; p < .0001; \eta^2 = .57$	14.3	31.2	67.3
phrases as noun modifiers	$F = 206.2; p < .0001; \eta^2 = .50$	14.4	19.1	31.5
other prepositional phrases as noun modifiers	$F = 16.0; p < .0001; \eta^2 = .27$	7.4	15.0	18.4

What sets academic English apart among written registers, is its reliance on phrasal features, especially noun modifiers and nominal pre-modifiers.

Results: Part 3

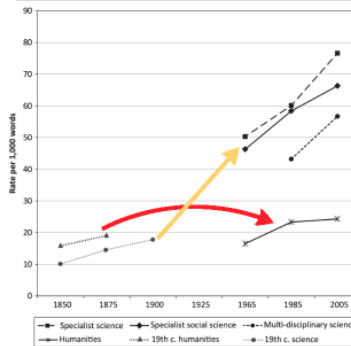


Figure 4.16 Historical change in the use of nouns as nominal pre-modifiers across academic sub-registers

Historically, specialist science writing has seen the most dramatic increase of use and reliance on new phrasal features, e.g. use of nouns as nominal pre-modifiers.

This phenomenon, however, is not evident in humanities writing.

Copus-driven statistical analysis (20th Century Research Article Corpus)

Synchronic analysis
(Longman Spoken & Written English Corpus)

Linguistic features of different registers are compared, delineating academic English vs. other registers, and scientific academic writing vs. humanities academic writing.

Methodology

Diachronic analysis
ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers)

A historical perspective sheds light on how the style of academic English has undergone significant changes, especially in science research writing.

References

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Acknowledgements

Dr Douglas Biber and Betheny Gray for their ground-breaking work on academic English and pioneering design and use of corpora;

Dr Jessica Clapham for assigning this research poster exercise and providing feedback

Note:

Dear Dr Clapham, this appended file exists for the purpose of assignment submission only. My PDF version extracted from Prezi is somehow not recognized by Turnitin, saying it doesn't recognise 'words'. What I have done now is to append this very file to the one-page PDF version, with words (but not charts) copied from the PDF version verbatim. When marking, could you kindly use the PDF version, i.e. Page 1 only? Thanks!

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Background

- Research on grammatical complexity in academic English abounds but **stereotypes** prove hard to disperse.
- It's commonly seen to be **unnecessarily complex, structurally elaborated, and maximally explicit** in meaning.
- These specious assumptions in turn inform **problematic L2 teaching policies** and practices, e.g. undue focus on dependent clause.

Research Questions

- What are common perceptions / hypotheses of grammatical complexity? Can they be measured? If so, how?
- Which linguistic feature is most/best associated with grammatical complexity?
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Linguistic features of different registers are compared, delineating academic English vs. other registers, and scientific academic writing vs. humanities academic writing.

- Diachronic analysis (ARCHER: A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers)

A historical perspective sheds light on how the style of academic English has undergone significant changes, especially in science research writing.

Results 1 (see chart 1)

1. Academic English is not necessarily more grammatically complex than speech.
2. Embedded clause alone fails to capture the true grammatical complexity of academic English.

Results 2 (see chart 2)

What sets academic English apart among written registers, is its reliance on phrasal features, especially noun modifiers and nominal pre-modifiers.

Results 3 (see chart 3)

1. Historically, specialist science writing has seen the most dramatic increase of use and reliance on new phrasal features, e.g. use of nouns as nominal pre-modifiers.
2. This phenomenon, however, is not evident in humanities writing.

Conclusion

1. Synchronically speaking, academic written registers stand out in their reliance on phrasal complexity features rather than clausal ones.
2. Diachronically speaking, academic English has undergone great changes. This is especially true in science writing, where maximal information compression, rather than elaboration, is the new norm.
3. Pedagogical implication for EAP: more attention and practice due to phrasal modification

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