

Zelei Lian Research Poster

by Zelei Lian

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Grammatical Complexity in Academic English and Why it Matters

Prensenter: Zelei Lian, Graduate Student, Humanities Lampeter, UWTS
(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 typologist. Linguistic 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 dispense.

It's commonly seen to be unnecessarily **complex**, structurally **elaborated** and maximally **explicit** in meaning. These specious assumptions in turn inform academic L2 teaching policies and practices, e.g. undue focus on dependent clause.

Results: Part 1

Exam speech has grammatically "simpler" than writing.
It was simply one of those things [what he says]
[What he believes].
[What he decided enough is enough and not accept [what she says]]
Academic writing has grammatically "simpler".
A pre-registered shoulder tap is usually represented as [N], but the common assumption is that the globalization may be realized on a continuum of creaky voice to full glottal occlusion on a preceding voiced sound.

Research Questions

- What are common perceptions/hypotheses of grammatical complexity? Can they be measured? If so, how?
- Which linguistic feature is most/least 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?



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

Synchronic analysis
(Longman Spoken & Written English Corpus)

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

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

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

Methodology

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

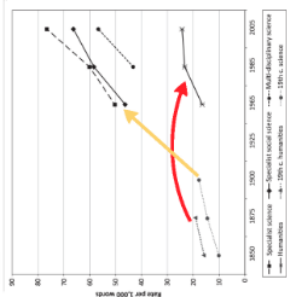
What sets academic English apart among written registers, is its reliance on phrasal features, especially noun modifiers and nominal pre-modifiers.



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

Table 18. Statistical comparisons for phrasal modifiers across three general writer registers

Linguistic feature	ANOVA analysis	Mean Score (per 1,000 words)
Prepositional phrases as adverbials	$F = 24.9, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .21$	Nonregister: 39.4, Academic: 26.9
Attributive adjectives	$F = 20.9, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .18$	Nonregister: 49.3, Academic: 61.2
Prepositional phrases as pre-modifiers	$F = 12.1, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .12$	Nonregister: 33.4, Academic: 32.2
Other prepositional phrases as pre-modifiers	$F = 16.1, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .17$	Nonregister: 7.4, Academic: 8.4



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**

References

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- Staples, S., Gray, B., Biber, D. & Egbert, J. (2023). Writing trajectories of grammatical complexity at the university: Comparing L1 and L2 English writers in BAWT. *Applied Linguistics*, 44(3), pp. 46-71.

Acknowledgements

Dr Douglas Biber and Bethany 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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(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. 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.

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?

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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

References

- Biber, D. and Gray, B. (2016). *Grammatical complexity in academic English: Linguistic change in writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lan, G., Zhang, Q., Lucas, K., Sun, Y., & Gao, J. (2022). A corpus-based investigation on noun phrase complexity in L1 and L2 English writing. *English for Specific Purposes*, 67, pp. 4-17.
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Zelei Lian Research Poster

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

80/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Feedback Marker 1 JJC

This was a very polished, accomplished presentation, which comes close to all that is expected in a research conference presentation. Your delivery combined clear structure, detailed organisation and a high level of critical thinking and argument presented convincingly and in a co-ordinated manner.

Visual elements

Although fairly 'crowded', the poster displays many examples of critical and imaginative thinking. The directionality of the poster is clear.

Content

Your work displays an excellent, comprehensive understanding of the topic. Your poster has excellent visual impact, including use of QR codes and a suitable balance of text and graphics. Excellent delivery skills, fluid speech without unnecessary pauses.

Presentation

You managed to get the main points across within the timescale in an engaging way. Very detailed references and the structure of the presentation is impressive.

You demonstrate thorough knowledge of the background research - well done, excellent work.

Answering questions

Your response to questions from the audience was lucid and linked well to key concepts, theory and

background literature - very impressive work at this level.

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