

## ACADEMIC REGISTER: HALLOWED TRADITION OR HOLLOW RITUAL?

### [SLIDE 1 – Introduction]

Academic register has been a personal project of mine for some years.

It started when I began my MA, and I discovered that I needed to learn a new way of writing.

But why did I need to learn to do this?

I had been taught a successful way of writing as a computer consultant:

it was what senior management wanted;

it was easy to learn and use;

it organised your thoughts effectively both for argumentation and presentation –

where did it go wrong?

Yet Academia insisted that I learn to do things their way, although the nature of this new register was never exactly defined.

It became clear to me that I had to codify for myself the differences between business and academic registers,

so I set about identifying what those differences were.

### [SLIDE 2 – Academic Register versus Business Register]

I was quite surprised by the answers I found:

almost everything that worked in Industry didn't work in Academia, and vice versa.

At the time I did this survey I was undertaking evening study for my Masters degree.

I was still heavily committed to my non-academic life, so my investigation was largely concerned with how academic register impacted on Industry.

It was a small survey, backed up by informal conversations with managers and executives at several levels. The general view was not good.

Students came out of University convinced that they had learned a life-skill for effective writing,

and they hadn't.

Employers expected graduates to be able to write effectively in a business register, and they couldn't.

It was clear that the more aware students soon adjusted their writing style, acquiring business register by osmosis;

but some appeared unable to do so.

These people were usually redeployed to areas where writing was not a primary skill, but this raised a further issue:

were they being disadvantaged in their working life because business register was too difficult for them,

or was it because their ideas of how to write properly had been subverted by achieving academic register?

Was Academia failing Industry by not providing cannon fodder for its war of words, or was Industry expecting the wrong things from their graduate trainees?

Phrasing the question in this confrontational way obscured a much more important question:

if Industry has evolved a way of writing that is simple, clear, and easy for writer and reader, why is it not used in Academia?

After all, both business reports and academic papers are doing the same thing:

they both use the same thesis-antithesis-synthesis process;

they are both reader-directed, with the writer expected to make the reader's job as easy as possible;

and they both need the same argumentation structure, involving marshalling of facts, arguing from them, and producing a conclusion, decision or recommendation.

Why are they so different?

Or, to look at the question from the position of Academia, what are the features of academic register that particularly fit it for academic use, and which do not apply to business register?

In order to identify perceived wisdom on academic register I conducted a mini-survey to assess the reaction to it in my own discipline of linguistics.

I was interested in the reaction of lecturers and tutors, the stakeholders for academic register,

so I disseminated the survey online to the BAALMail and EdLing email groups.

Both of these are active email lists which are primarily discussion groups for academic linguists.

### **[SLIDE 3 – The Survey]**

The survey was short and the questions could be answered with short phrases.

I was very aware of the FOAGAL factor in the design of the survey, and the need to make the responder's role as easy as possible.

The questions were therefore simple and short, and the important ones were open, inviting personalised answers.

Personalised answers make analysis more difficult,

but they tend to be more honest

and are less frustrating for the responder than multiple choice.

Open questions allow the survey to be viewed as a conversation between questioner and responder, and not an inquisition.

Forty five linguists responded to the survey, some of them quite elaborately.

Analysing the answers proved to be complex and to require some judgements to be made on the data.

There is always the possibility that these judgements are prejudiced by expectations, but I tried to approach the responses with an open mind. The fact that the analysis gave some unexpected answers, and made me rethink my investigation, may indicate at least partial success.

#### [SLIDE 4 – Question 1]

On question one, the closed nature of the question may have rendered it largely useless.

73% said there was such a thing as academic register,

16% said there wasn't,

but 11% gave a qualified affirmative.

This may indicate that there is a widespread belief in a compromise answer which would have been hidden by the didactic yes or no.

In the circumstances, all that can really be said is that academic register is a sufficiently important question for academic linguists to take it seriously, and there is likely to be some dispute as to its nature vis-à-vis other registers.

For questions two to five in the slides that follow I have only listed those answers given in 9% or more of the responses.

I also found that multiple answers were given to some questions by some of the respondents.

These multiple answers were all given equal value in the analysis: this was a survey of ideas, not a popularity poll.

#### [SLIDE 5 – Question 2]

Question two was much more revealing than question one.

The leading factor that makes academic register different – according to the survey –

is that it is a formalised type of discourse:

it has a structure and form which can be identified and taught.

This is supported by the second most popular choice, the use of a specific lexicon.

A standard formal structure and lexis is, however, a feature of many other registers.

For instance, both business register and legal register require standard forms and task-specific language;

and, as we will see, they have both shifted their paradigms significantly in recent years.

### [SLIDE 6 – Question 3]

I divided the answers to question three into three types:

advantages for the sender or writer,

advantages for the receiver or reader,

and advantages – or disadvantages – for both.

Once again standard formal structure was seen as most significant, an advantage which has implications for both reader and writer.

For the reader it facilitates reading-shortcuts and scan-reading;

for the writer it provides a template, allowing the argument to be formulated without worrying too much about the argumentation.

Not all responses given commented on both of these advantages, but a significant number did so.

The other advantage for the reader is clarity.

If the writer is constrained to express their argument in a standard way then it is easier to understand that argument.

This is obviously related to formal structure,

but it seems to be seen more as a task the writer must achieve to meet the reader's expectations of academic register.

There are two advantages for the writer, one of which is related to formal structure: precision is enhanced by a standard way of writing, allowing the writer to concentrate on what they are meaning rather than on what they are saying.

Of course, if academic register is not comfortable for the writer then precisely the opposite may be true:

It may aid writing for those in the know but hinder those excluded.

Which leads on to the final advantage, which is most definitely metalinguistic: being able to write in academic register is a mark of belonging to the academic community.

Academic register does not need to be easy – in fact, the more costly to learn the better it is as a signal of commitment to the group.

This raises the possibility that academic register may not be a tool for effective writing but a deliberate hindrance to it.

You have to pay the cost of learning how to write in academic style, otherwise your writing will not be taken seriously by your peers.

#### **[SLIDE 7 – Question 4]**

And that, of course, leads neatly into the disadvantages, all of which are metalinguistic.

The most common view is that academic register is an exclusion device.

If we add this figure to those seeing it as a badge of membership in question three, 50% of the survey saw academic register as a signifier of membership, for good or ill.

This is interesting because badges of membership have to be costly to be valuable: they have to be expensive to prove commitment and to exclude freeloaders.

In Darwinian terms, a typical costly signal is the peacock's tail:

no use except to show that the owner is fit enough to carry around this useless ornament and still survive.

Badges of membership are important;

but is the way we write a suitable location for a badge of membership?

The second and fifth most favourite answers indicate that academic register is difficult to achieve for some.

This could explain why some people have difficulty converting from academic register to business register.

Some students take to academic register easily,

and some never succeed and drop out of the academic system;

but some will finally manage to gain control of academic register, and will cling to it as the salvation that got them their degree.

This could, in turn, be because academic register is sold to them as the only way to write –

do Academia's claims for academic register need to be referred to the Advertising Standards Authority?

The remaining two answers to question four both take the view that academic register is disadvantageous, even for Academia.

One in five of the survey responses seem to be indicating that we should review it, and perhaps change it.

Changing academic register is not such a revolutionary idea as first appears.

Business has, during my time in Industry, significantly altered its idea of what is effective writing.

Bulleted lists have appeared, report formats have been standardised, and ownership of writing (and ideas) has been encouraged.

This approach has created a new dynamism in business writing, which has been a necessary response to the growth of technology.

When I started work, typists did all the typing, and reports were written only occasionally and only by professional report writers.

The PC has made many more people business writers, and a new business register to support their writing has evolved.

The old business register had many similarities to academic register – unsurprisingly, as it was mostly a product of graduate writers.

The new business register has evolved not just because it advantages the writer but because it meets the needs of the reader.

Information is more important than argument, and the level of trust between reader and writer is necessarily high.

On page 8, you can see a contents page for a typical business report.

The order – conclusions, proposals, problem, current status – is almost the opposite of received wisdom on academic register.

This business register may or may not be a good model for academic writing, but it illustrates how far a register can move in a relatively short time.

Legal register is currently undergoing a similar change to that of business register.

A recent initiative by HM Treasury has attempted to address the problem of comprehension,

and on pages 8 to 10 you can see a summary of their new approach to legal writing, and an example rewrite.

This is a first step, but where Treasury leads the rest of Government goes, and where Government goes, the legal profession has to follow.

The next few years could be an exciting time in legal linguistics.

One final question that has not been properly addressed is, what is this academic register of which we speak?

If we define it as the way of writing for an academic audience, then it is indeed a slippery and changeable thing.

On page 11 are three examples of academic writing from different genres.

The first displays extensive use of the active voice:

“we have demonstrated”, “we showed”, and so on.

The second is positively businesslike in its register, using idiom, ownership and answers-first.

The last is a fairly standard text from my own discipline of linguistics.

Compared to the other two it seems – at least, to me – old-fashioned and stuffy.

More problematic for academic purposes, we don’t know whether the writer is reporting on her own or another’s work.

Is academic register a hallowed tradition or a hollow ritual?

I would suggest both.

It acts as a historical link to the past, theoretically uniting old and new themes into a continuous discourse;

it provides a standard template for writing;

and it provides a badge of membership of the academic community, an indicator that the user has been initiated.

However, it may also fail to accommodate modern cultural changes;

it may stultify imagination;

and it may arbitrarily exclude the otherwise capable from academic recognition.

What is needed is not an abandonment of an effective way of writing, but an accommodation of other ways of doing things.

It may require more mental effort for examiners and markers

but, as academics, we are supposed to be the social group capable of that effort.

By accepting a wider range of registers as good academic writing we will open

Academia up to a whole new group of people;

and, perhaps, open ourselves up to a whole new set of ideas.

**[SLIDE 8 – Thank you]**