

IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: CONSTRUCTING AN INSIDER'S ETHOS IN PROSE ABOUT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Os enunciados em primeira pessoa são freqüentemente tidos como “intrusões deselegantes” no discurso acadêmico em língua inglesa. Neste artigo, a atitude prescritiva em relação a convenções discursivas implícita nesta posição é rejeitada. O uso de enunciados em primeira pessoa na prosa acadêmica sobre as literaturas de língua inglesa é discutido do ponto de vista mais amplo das atitudes relativas a valores sociais característicos de determinada comunidade disciplinar, ou associados a certa concepção da natureza do conhecimento científico. O alinhamento a determinada ideologia do conhecimento e a adoção, ou rejeição, de determinados valores disciplinares são tidos, nesta pesquisa, como representando etapas no processo de construção da identidade no discurso acadêmico. Parte do argumento apresentado nesta pesquisa diz respeito à necessidade de se compreender a escrita acadêmica como um processo complexo de construção da identidade, que se dá mediante resposta ao apelo dos diferentes discursos que circulam no ambiente acadêmico em determinada área disciplinar.

INTRODUCTION

There has been much controversy about the role of the personal in contemporary scholarship (Bérubé, 1996). To what extent can subjective reactions to, and feelings about, one's research object be represented in academic prose? To what extent can the interests of the researcher figure in scholarly writing?

Most contemporary accounts of knowledge have increasingly focussed on the tentative nature of “truth”, challenging conceptions that view knowledge as accumulation of objective facts, independent of the people who make it (Rorty, 1987; Dillon, 1991). The debate about the role of the personal in scholarship represents only one facet of the objectivity versus subjectivity debate of the late twentieth century, which is often framed in terms of two competing theories of knowledge: objective realism (knowledge as accurate *representation* of the real, of what is out there in the world) and social constructionism (knowledge as *construction* of the real through language or discourse).

But how does the debate apply to literature, where the personal or subjective experience has always had a privileged place? Why should the role of the personal be controversial in academic prose about literature? Are there any scholars who would argue for bracketing out subjective experience in prose about literature?

The following fragment, from a manual for novice writers in this area, gives us an idea of the types of attitudes towards discursal conventions that foreground the writer/researcher in prose about literature: “Traditionally, there are restrictions on using I: some teachers forbid it, as an example of inelegant intrusion by the author (...). Too

much use of *I* (especially, *I think, I noticed, I much prefer*, etc.) prevents the essay from attaining [the] level of generalisation [required of an academic essay]" (Fabb & Durant, 1993:85).

The rationale behind such attitude seems to lie in the traditional division between analytical (or logical) exposition and argumentative exposition (academic prose being representative of the former), which is maintained even by theoretical linguists. J.R. Martin (1985:25), for example, who works in the tradition of Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics, differentiates between the two modes, in conceptual as well as in linguistic terms:

Expositions are supposed to be rational. And in our culture, reason and emotion are felt to be diametrically opposed. Intellect must not be confused with feeling, and whenever it is we become suspicious. (...) ...most overt expression of feelings or attitudes in Analytical Exposition is frowned upon; and writers generally remove themselves entirely from the argument by writing in the third person. Hortatory Exposition is less stringent in this respect. Writing in the first person is common, and attitude is expressed, though less frequently than in casual conversation. The reason for this difference seems to be that Hortatory Exposition is often addressed to a specific rather than a general audience (*I talking to you*) and that it is intended to persuade – emotional appeals are just as effective in getting people on side as rational ones, and attitudinal expressions are exploited to this end.(...).

Apart from retaining the Greek contrast between contemplation/reason and action/emotion, on the conceptual level, the author mentions linguistic criteria for the identification of the different modes of discourse: use of the 1st person pronoun (either singular or plural), for example, is a linguistic marker of hortatory/argumentative exposition.

To bring home to the reader the full import of the distinction being drawn by the author, I offer the following examples of different textual genres realizing these two discourse modes: the academic article published in a scholarly journal is a textual genre that represents analytical exposition; an opinion article published in a newspaper is a different genre and represents hortatory or argumentative exposition. Whereas the former, according to Martin, is characterized primarily in terms of the nature of the argumentation introduced (logical/rational argumentation), the latter makes use of argumentation meant to involve the reader emotionally with the subject discussed.

In this paper, I handle, from a discursal perspective, the problematic question of the use of "I-statements" in academic discourse, discussing conventions in the area of literature, against the background of conventions for other disciplinary areas in the academy. One of my main arguments in this paper is that the study of these conventions should be dealt with within the broader framework of the social meanings they embody. But before I introduce discussion of these points, in section 3 below, a number of caveats about academic discourse and discourse conventions have to be made.

1. A SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST CONCEPTION OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Academic discourse is often viewed as a homogeneous entity, characterized by uniform conventions and by consensus on the function of its knowledge-making

activities. No such conception of academic discourse is adopted in this paper: academic discourse is here seen as heterogeneous, as a “site of struggle” (Ivanic, 1998), characterized by competing movements within it, and by a plurality of voices and subjectivities.

If we take academic discourse in the area of literary studies as an example, and focus on the important question of what counts as a persuasive argument in this area, a number of different positions will have to be acknowledged. To some, a persuasive argument in literature introduces claims based on evidence from the text (Langer in Herrington & Moran, 1982:82); to others, texts do not offer stable evidence and interpretations are compromised by the biases and interests of the interpreter. In the area of Cultural Studies, for example, “experiential evidence” is valued, especially when it is derived from groups that have historically been silenced: African-Americans and gay men or lesbians have come to incorporate narratives about their experiences in their scholarship. An example here is bell hooks, who always speaks from a particular position, explicitly indicating to her readers that her claims have to be understood against the background of her experiences as an African-American female academic in mainstream America (hooks, 1994).

The different conceptions of the nature of a persuasive argument in literature will translate into discursive conventions characteristic of one particular position. Whereas the “epistemology of evidence” will favor an impersonal, objective prose, epistemologies which de-emphasize claims based on the “facts of the text” will value the personal, play, invention, the “erotics of evidence” (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1994, quoted in Dubrow, 1996). The metaphor used by Kosofsky Sedgwick highlights a strong involvement between reader and text, and a very special type of involvement, at that, quite in an opposite extreme to that of the distanced, “a-sexual” researcher.

The academy is thus a very complex discourse formation (Foucault, 1987), with competing rules regulating enunciation, reflecting the controversies over its purposes and over its methods. In this vein, Dillon (1991) proposes a definition for academic discourse that highlights its fragmentary nature: “[academic discourse] is socially constructed in particular communities (...) according to the *passions and interests* (...) of its members”. (my emphasis)

Apart from the focus on the fragmentary nature of discourse, the quote is also relevant in this paper on account of its socio-constructivist conception of academic discourse, which contrasts with the so-called rhetorical approach. The assumption of the rhetorical view is that there are appropriate ways of writing, depending on purpose, audience, and occasion. There is no denying that we must take account of our audience or projected readership in writing, to name but one aspect of context. However, too much emphasis on the context as determinative of discourse leaves very little room for invention, or creation. A socio-constructivist approach to academic discourse redresses the balance in favor of agency in discourse: it views academic discourse as operating within conventions, but as allowing freedom for writers to manipulate such conventions.

From this perspective, writing in academia is seen as “an act of identity” (Ivanic, 1998), which requires taking account of the possibilities for self-representation available in a particular disciplinary area, but which may well mean going beyond such possibilities:

[In writing] people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody. (p. 32)

The conceptions of academic discourse and of writing in academia just mentioned are based on a dynamic view of *social identity*, such as described in postmodern accounts of the subject: our identities are the result of linguistic and discursive processes (Hall, 1998). It is through interaction with the different discourses circulating around us that we construct our identities — on the dimensions of race, sex, gender and social class, but also on that of our occupational roles, or professional identities. Equally important is the notion that social identity is not a unitary concept: we participate simultaneously in different social groups and our identities are constituted heterogeneously, reflecting the different roles we adopt in different interactions (cf. Moita Lopes, 2001; Castells, 1999).

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The sample for this study consists of twenty journal articles published in the 90's in periodicals of high repute. The criteria adopted in the constitution of the sample of articles are described in Balocco (2000). It suffices to say here that the articles come from periodicals listed on the *1994 Arts & Humanities Citation Index* (Garfield, 1994), on the *Master List of Periodicals of the MLA International Bibliography* (1995), and on *A directory of scholarly journals in English language and literature* (Lee & Johnson, 1990). This is a canonical or mainstream sample, as it features articles characterized by traditional patterns of logical organization of ideas and a positivistic evidentiary practice, based on the "facts" of the text. No occurrence of articles featuring patterns of narrativity, juxtaposition of ideas and an evidentiary practice based on personal experience or anecdotes was observed. Such patterns would seem to characterize so-called *new-historicist* criticism, which seems to develop on the margins of traditional discourse conventions in literary research.

The theoretical framework is based on studies of evaluation in text by Hunston (2000), within the tradition of Hallidayan systemic functional grammar. The author argues that every bit of information that enters a text must be evaluated on three dimensions: a) as to its informational status (evaluation of status); b) as to its value to a particular discourse community (evaluation of value); and c) as to its relevance to that community and to the argument being constructed in the text (evaluation of relevance). In this research, we have adopted Hunston's analytical categories for the study of evaluation of status. The research consisted in qualitative analysis of relevant fragments from the sample of articles, identifying the linguistic resources for the establishment of the informational status of utterances, apart from their sources of information, and establishing correlations with rhetorical activities in academic discourse.

3. WRITER VISIBILITY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Davies (1988:175), in an article entitled "Presenting writer viewpoint in academic discourse", discusses the wide range of options open to writers to either maintain a balance between self focus and visibility, or to maintain focus on the research and relative invisibility. The author places the different options along a continuum of visibility, ranging from a personally visible position (*I propose that...*), at one extreme of the scale, to an invisible position at the other extreme (*There appear to be several competing explanations for...*), and a number of intermediate positions in-between the two extremes.

The author's study is based on analyses of a *corpus* of published articles, and first draws attention to the notion that I-statements often occur in formal academic writing¹. Another contribution of the article is represented by the author's argument that different choices along the scale of visibility may be accounted for in terms of the different discourse roles adopted by the writer. Yet, a systematic study of such roles is beyond the scope of her article.

We need to turn to a more recent study, by Giltrow (1995:247), who also acknowledges the occurrence of I-statements in academic discourse and tries to account for the factors that motivate their choice:

(...) contrary to many people's ideas about prohibitions against *I* in formal academic writing, the first person occurs frequently in published scholarship. Yet we will also see that the scholarly genres' use of references to the thing being written/read is a clue to the limitations those genres impose on *I/we*.

Choice of I-statements, says the author, is common when the writer adopts the role of "discursive-I" (Giltrow, 1995:247). In such cases, choice of the first person pronoun co-occurs with discourse verbs (*I intend to begin; I want to suggest; I will be arguing that; I shall focus upon...*; etc.), which indicates the writer has taken on her role as "text-constructor" (Hunston, 2000), organizing the text, announcing the aims and objectives of the research, among other roles related to the management of information in a text. The following example suggests that Giltrow's claim is valid for prose in the area of literature:

Example 1: I hope to offer a new description of *My Antonia*, one built upon a striking affinity between that book and Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Story-teller".

This is paragraph one of an article about Willa Cather, in which the writer announces her research, introducing her topic (Willa Cather's *My Antonia*) and defining her focus (a reading of the novel in the light of Benjamin's notion of storytelling). In these activities the writer is signalling her discourse to her readers, thus playing the part of "text-constructor".

Another characteristic "habitat" of I, according to Giltrow, is where the writer takes on the role of researcher, making assumptions (*We have made the usual*

¹ But see also Coracini (1987; 1991), in a study of academic articles in French and Portuguese.

assumptions about the role of...), criticizing statements (*In our opinion, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons...*), making statements, and placing knowledge claims within established intellectual frameworks (*So far as we can tell, this is roughly compatible with...*). Giltrow refers to these uses as instances of the “knowledge making-I”. In all such cases, first person pronouns co-occur with verbal processes denoting research activities. Prose about literature also features such “knowledge making-I” statements, as the following example demonstrates:

Example 2: I will be arguing that Cather aims to achieve in *My Antonia*, through her simulation of oral storytelling and the attack on novelistic values she simultaneously conducts, the kind of literary and cultural renovation Benjamin has in mind. My point is not that Cather's book is interesting insofar as it resembles Benjamin's admirable essay, but that the affinities between the works encourage us to identify with new clarity *My Antonia's* interests and purposes, to see that the beauty it achieves and the pleasures it generates at once pay tribute to a vanishing, heroic way of life and yield an engaged and pointed cultural analysis. While the strength of my claim that Cather covertly conducts the kind of argument with the novel that Benjamin articulates in "The Storyteller" will finally depend upon the reading I am about to offer (and while one of this century's great leftist intellectuals may seem like a strange companion for a writer who in all likelihood voted for Wendell Wilkie), we have not sufficiently recognized Cather as a cultural critic or historian.

This is a fragment from the same article, paragraph number six, in which the writer establishes her argument, taking on the discursual role of researcher in the business of putting forward a knowledge-claim.

In the examples considered, 1st person pronoun co-occurs with verbs that refer to some discourse action (in the case of the “discursive-I”), or with verbs denoting research activities (in the case of the “knowledge-making I”). But I-statements also occur characteristically with verbs of cognition (*I think, I believe, I suppose*) in ways which are similar to modal expressions:

Example 3: I think, then, that it makes sense to claim that Cather renders the contrast between Jim's life in the country and his life in town as a contest between their characteristic narrative forms. The developmental action of Book Two unfolds as a struggle, between story and novel, to possess Jim Burden, as he learns, for all the rebelliousness and reluctance his grounding in story produces, to do the proper thing.

Example 4: Readers will now, I hope, be prepared to see the close of *My Antonia* by the light of the story - as Cather's invention of the kind of ending a novel committed to the values of storytelling might have.

In both cases, the function of the I-statement is to modalize the assertion where it occurs, or tone it down. In this sense, I-statements are equivalent to other expressions which “reduce the applicability and generality of assertions” (Giltrow, 1995:312):

Example 5: Antonia's oddly beautiful story of the tramp's leap into the threshing machine seems to me similarly instructive, summing up, both in the way it creates meaning and in the kind of meaning it creates, the nature and possibilities of storytelling within *My Antonia*.

Example 6: We are frequently alerted to the specific quality of voices - Jim's grandfather's pronunciation of "Selah" from the psalms, the force his customary silence gives his prayers. The book is rich in what might be called the material culture of storytelling, like the Christmas tree that resembles the "talking tree of the fairy tale", with "legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches."

Example 7: Cather's tramp, we might say, creates a kind of grisly beauty by vanishing. The curious articles he leaves behind (...) are plausibly emblematic (...) but not conclusively explicable: they thus represent, one might suggest, the distinctively untrammelled kind of meaning that stories like this one generate.

Example 8: (...) - there is presumably no practiced reader who feels inclined to condemn Antonia - (π 25)

Example 9: Most striking to me is the "gestural" quality of meaning in this story.

Example 10: (...)The making and appreciation of this moment represents (...) a kind of counter-maturity to that sponsored by the novel and the town — maturity as it might be experienced under the guidance of the story.

Example 11: The contest between story and novel that unfolds in Book Two produces, then, a kind of stalemate.

The examples feature different grammatical resources used to modalize statements: modal auxiliaries (*might*); modal adverbs (*presumably*, *plausibly*); prepositional phrases (*to me*); and hedges (*a kind of*). In all such cases, the validity or generality of the assertion is reduced by explicit codification of these assertions as positions of limited or contingent knowledge, as opposed to assertions that are taken to be universally true.

The following extracts, from the sample of articles of this research, illustrate how a new temporal framework is inaugurated in such discursual contexts, which contrasts with the generic or timeless temporal framework of most academic discourse:

Example 12: Cather is, I am suggesting, especially concerned with

Example 13: The making and appreciation of this moment represents, I am arguing, a kind of ...

Example 14: The notion of the counter-novel I have been advancing will, as I suggest below, ...

In all such examples, the progressive aspect functions as a deictic element which anchors the discourse to a specific reading position, contributing to highlighting its contingent character.

I-statements, or self-reference, may thus be seen as part and parcel of hedging strategies in academic discourse. In the next section, we turn our attention to the factors that motivate choice of hedging in academic discourse and discuss the problematic question of the extent to which literary studies follow the general conventions for hedging.

4. HEDGING IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Much has been written about hedging in academic discourse. Myers (1989), for example, argues that modalization is a criterium in the identification of propositional claims:

... if an important statement seems to be made without modification, one can probably assume that it is not the main claim of the article, not the statement that is to be taken as new knowledge.

Myers' claim foregrounds pragmatic aspects of the use of modality, and refers to an institutional attitude, in academic discourse, which favors the public demonstration of "modesty" on the part of researchers.

Bazerman (1981:378), in a study in which he contrasts academic writing in the areas of biology, the social sciences, and literature, argues that the literary critic's *ethos* has a predominating function in literary studies. To the author, a critic's persuasiveness depends at least in part on the critic's ability to construct an authoritative voice, demonstrating to have more "insight" than his readers, and thereby convincing them of the plausibility of his arguments:

(...) the literary critic (...), who has the least responsibility to establish certainty, must take on the most demanding role: appearing to have insight greater than that of his readers. Since his contribution cannot be measured in terms of a claim to be judged right or wrong, the quality of his whole sensibility is up for judgement.

In this research, we accept Bazerman's argument that the attitude of coding propositions with the maximum degree of certainty is valued institutionally as a rhetorical strategy of persuasion in literary studies. However, we would like to argue that other institutional attitudes towards information need to be recognized in this area, given its characteristics as a disciplinary domain where different conceptions of text and different reading traditions co-exist.

5. IDENTITY IN LITERARY STUDIES

Analyses of the sample of articles gathered for this study seem to suggest that, through strategic uses of modalization and of visibility in discourse, writers adopt the

social values of different reading traditions. In some articles, writers introduce an "authoritative" or "definitive" reading of the text, demonstrating to be in control of the "facts" of the text. In articles where this strategy is adopted, absence of hedging correlates with writer invisibility: there is emphasis on exteriority, or on the text itself, on its formal, objective characteristics. Authors do not inscribe their presence in the text, but would rather code the author of the literary text, the text itself, or even characters as the sources of propositions:

Example 15: If Newman's relationship with his father and the drudgery of his trips from the city is that domestic plot, Teddy and Ralph and the blank letter push at the boundaries of the bare, impressionistically rendered action and demand a larger reading of the story. [Text 20]

In this short extract from an article by Lasher on Bernard Malamud's short story *The Letter*, the characters are coded as the ones who trigger the symbolic reading suggested by the author: *Teddy and Talph demand a larger reading of the story*. By removing himself from the scene, and codifying the characters as the source of information, the writer's strategy is to introduce a reading based on the "authority" of the text.

The strategy of *textual objectification* contrasts with *rhetorical self-staging*, a positioning strategy which foregrounds, not the text, but the reader in transaction with the text. Here, the writer is inscribed on the textual scene:

Example 13 (repeated for ease of reference): The making and appreciation of this moment represents, I am arguing, a kind of ...

Example 7 (repeated for ease of reference): Cather's tramp, we might say, creates a kind of grisly beauty by vanishing. The curious articles he leaves behind (...) are plausibly emblematic (...)

Here writer visibility correlates with a prose marked by its tentativeness and hedging. The full range of resources for modalization are recognized in the examples: a modal auxiliary (*might*), a modal adjunct (*plausibly*), and the progressive aspect.

The strategies of *textual objectification* (minimal writer visibility; no hedging) and *rhetorical self-staging* (maximal writer visibility; hedging) link up with two different conceptions of the nature of literary criticism: whereas the former strategy foregrounds a conception of reading as rigorous and objective scholarship (cf. Fabb & Durant, 1993), the latter introduces reading as contingent and as dialogic interaction.

6. DISCOURSAL CONVENTIONS, DISCIPLINARY VALUES, AND IDEOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

Ivanic (1998) claims that, in the study of identity in discourse, a distinction should be drawn between *persona* and *ethos*, two dimensions of identity, along the following

lines. Whereas the former has to do with a writer's views about her social role in the institution in which writing is produced (for example, a teacher-researcher addressing her peers; or a student addressing her tutor), the latter refers to more personal aspects of a writer's identity, for example her attitude toward disciplinary values and beliefs about ideologies of knowledge-making. Thus, a predominance of abstractions and categorical assertions in academic discourse correlates with a positivistic conception of knowledge-making. As to disciplinary values, systematic use of expressive devices in literary-critical discourse (metaphors, allusive language, turns of the phrase, repetition) links up with a writer's belief that a critic's skillful use of language is valued in literary criticism.

Writers, we have argued, use hedging and visibility/viewpoint strategically in literary studies in the construction of a specific type of relationship with their readers. Adopting Ivanic's conception of *self as author* (or writer's *ethos*), we would argue that some writers introduce their reading as definitive, and thereby discursively construct an *ethos* of insightfulness and perceptivity which far outplays their audience's. Others, by contrast, by inscribing in their text the contingent nature of their reading, reveal understating of criticism as humanistic debate, and discursively construct an *ethos* for themselves as scholars with a disposition for dialogic interaction.

7. THE ROLE OF THE PERSONAL IN NOVICE WRITER'S TEXTS

Given the argument that discursival conventions embody social meanings (ideologies of knowledge-making, and disciplinary values), how can novice writers construct an *ethos* of insiders in the area of literary studies (which often correlates with a confident tone), without neglecting their social role in the institution where writing is produced?

According to Hyland (2000), constructing "an appropriate persona and an appropriate attitude" is a central issue in academic discourse. To the author, this translates as "a careful balance between modesty [a modest *persona*] and perceptiveness [a confident *ethos*]". Two comments need to be made about Hyland's statement. In the first place, it applies to academic discourse in general terms: although the author is concerned with issues relating to disciplinary discourse, in the context in which this statement is introduced, *persona* and *ethos* are discussed in general terms, as if academic discourse were a homogeneous entity. Second, the author does not seem to be concerned with drawing a distinction between the writing produced by specialists and that produced by novice writers — two different genres with significant textual differences.

As far as *persona* is concerned in novice writer's discourse, Hyland might be right in recommending a measure of modesty, inasmuch as students' target audience is often their tutors, who are in a higher position with respect to knowledge. However, *ethos* in prose about literature does not necessarily have to link up with the confident tone of much literary-critical discourse, which often translates as *textual objectification*. Novice writers must be aware that different reading or critical traditions favor different

discourse conventions and that personal intrusions and personal narratives are allowed in some contemporary critical modes.

If much writing produced by novice writers in this area favors *textual objectification*, this can be accounted for in the following terms: novice writers construct their identities and their discourse as a result of being exposed primarily to critical texts informed by a conception of criticism as rigorous and objective scholarship. This balance needs to be redressed in favor of critical texts informed by a conception of reading and criticism as dialogic interaction. Contact with, or exposure to, this type of text/discourse would enhance novice writers' perception of the different possibilities for self-representation available in this disciplinary area, apart from unmasking or "de-naturalizing" (cf. Fairclough, 1995) the association of particular discourse conventions with literary criticism in broad terms.

This would result in an increased awareness that discourse conventions are socially motivated: they are relative to a specific culture (a given knowledge paradigm), to a particular historical moment and tied to a given disciplinary subculture (a specific reading or critical tradition). If we encourage our students to appreciate the social motivation of discourse conventions, their choices will be informed by an understanding of their relationship with the disciplinary discourse they are bidding entrance into and within which they are negotiating an identity for themselves.

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