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POWER RELATIONS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN DIDACTIC DISCOURSE: A POLISH-ENGLISH COMPARATIVE STUDY

This paper reports on the findings of these aspects of my own semi-ethnographic study which relate to the reader-oriented view of didactic discourse and emphasize the constitutive impact of social context (and the *relations of power* inscribed in it) on the formation of the writer's *self*. Following Halliday's (1978, 1994) approach to "language as a form of social practice" I will argue that *power relations* are a central force which mediates didactic discourse and profoundly affects the way student writers construct their authorial *self*.

KEYWORDS: power relations, reader-oriented writing, academic writer identity, didactic discourse, discourse community

INTRODUCTION

In every kind of text, whether literary or academic, the reader's perspective is critical in the construction of meaning. As Griffith points out, "Whatever readers bring to the text, the text has no life of its own without the reader" (1998: 139). Clearly, it is the reader who reads and interprets the text in order to make it complete. Ellis argues that an interpretation "[i]s a hypothesis about the most general organization and coherence of all the elements that form a […] text" (1974: 202). This "organization and coherence" emerges from a synthesis between a work's rhetorical structure (based on persuasion) and its argumentation (based on logic) to construct meaning.

Because culture influences both writing and interpretation habits in an important way, the rhetorical and argumentative strategies, which are made available to writers, are determined by the value and belief systems prevailing in a given culture. Readers' and writers' understanding of what convincing writing looks like is the outcome of socialization into their native rhetorical and argumentative conventions. In what follows, writers' textual self-representation is determined by how they establish logical connections between ideas and order them into a meaningful argument. What is more, written text mediates further socialization in academic environment

because in any institutional context writer's linguistic and stylistic choices are constrained by the requirements of the discourse community in which the text is written in terms of writing texts of certain kinds. Therefore, writers' rhetorical and argumentative choices are not made out of an infinite range of possibilities, but out of the options supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in which they write.

It is only natural that different preferences for rhetorical and argumentative strategies across cultures evoke very different images of a reader. The digressive and sophisticated Polish rhetoric appears to address a knowledgeable and curious reader. The linear and precise Anglo-American rhetorical strategy seems to be directed at readers who charge the writer with the responsibility to say explicitly why the text should be read, how it should be read and what is important in it.

The different reader images in Polish and Anglo-American writing conventions can also be explained by the dichotomy between writer's and reader's responsibility proposed by Hinds (1987) who divided cultures into reader- and writer-friendly. Apparently, Anglo-American writing tradition subscribes to the writer-responsible culture. Therefore, matters of high importance to Anglo-American writers, such as deductive text organization, careful paragraphing, explicit thesis statement, metatextual cuing and use of concise language, are not relevant to their Polish counterparts who observe reader-responsible writing tradition. The key difference between these two approaches to writing refers to the purpose and the method of communicating content. Polish academic authors, in contrast to their English-speaking colleagues, value the intellectual depth and stylistic creativity of their works more than a clearly structured form. Conversely, Anglo-American writers focus on a coherent and clear organization of a text in order to ensure that its meaning is fully understood. However, regardless of different perceptions of reader's image in Polish and Anglo-American writing cultures, their voice always exerts pressure on the writer and affects the processes underlying the construction of writer *identity*.

The aim of this paper is to raise the issue of the *power relations* that exist between readers and writers in academic context. Specifically, I will argue that the balance of power is with the reader because it is set up by the assessment process which positions the writer to conform to socially and institutionally available possibilities for textual self-representation. In every act of writing, academic authors align themselves with or contest the patterns of privileging[1] among subject positions which are sustained by power relations that exist in their discourse communities.

In order to show how reader's power affects the creation of institutional identities of student writers, the following questions will be addressed here:

[1] *Patterns of privileging* is the idea introduced by Wertsch who argues that "Privileging refers to the fact that one meditational means, such as a social language, is viewed as being more appropriate and efficacious than others in a particular sociocultural setting" (1991: 124).

1. How can functional approach (in particular based on Halliday's 1978, 1994 social semiotic model of language use) be applied to analyzing the 'institutional identities' of student-writers?
2. In what ways does social and institutional context (and th*e relations of power* inscribed in it) influence the formation of the student writer'*s self* as revealed in my own semi-ethnographic study[2]?

FUNCTIONAL APPROACH: DISCOURSAL IDENTITY IN A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

Although the relationship between language and identity is not new in sociolinguistic studies (Labov 1963, Milroy 1980, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982), Halliday's (1978, 1994; Halliday and Hasan 1989) social-semiotic approach to the analysis of discoursal identities allows for broader investigative focus than traditional sociolinguistic theories do. Halliday's use of language as an analytical tool in a "social-semiotic perspective" offers an exhaustive explanation for the whole range of authors' stylistic and rhetorical choices viewed as an integral part of writers' social categorization processes.

Since categorization reflects ways in which members of a particular discourse community organize their experience into categories with associated qualities, the analysis of the processes that make individuals consistent or ambivalent in their identification, and how that consistency or ambivalence is revealed in discourse features is central in the studies of writer identity construction. Furthermore, most discourse analysts emphasize "[t]he situated nature of the processes of attribution and negotiations over identities, and consequently reject a conception of identity as a stable feature characterizing individuals or groups independently of social activities and interaction" (De Fina 2006: 354). However, recognizing the critical role of interaction in the processes of identity formation, does not, in my opinion, entail negating the existence of some stable cognitive aspects of identity that determine how categories are interpreted by discourse participants, in particular when it is clear that what is being communicated about category membership is a matter of shared interpretation. Therefore, research on the relationship between categorization, identity and language use should avoid the following traps in its assumptions: 1) that the meaning of categories is constructed only in the process of communication and 2) that interactants are equipped with a limited number of well-defined categories with associated features which they apply in a communicative situation. Indeed,

[2] This study was a part of my PhD research project on "The co-construction of authorial identity in student writing in Polish and English" designed to qualitatively test the validity of the hypothesis that each academic text is an act of identity in which the writer's *self* constitutes itself and is constituted.

individuals do not possess one identity related to the social categories they identify with, but rather form their discoursal selves, which intersect and contrast with each other in various ways, drawing on the social resources that are made available to them in their discourse communities.

The above view is in line with Halliday's approach to discourse as a product of text, interaction and context, which has been manifested by his extension of the term "semiotic" to "social-semiotic" to accentuate the fact that the meaning conveyed by language is not independent, but is determined by social context in two important ways. To explain how meaning is linked to language, Halliday applies two expressions originating in Malinowski's (1935) anthropological work[3]: *the context of culture* and *the context of situation*. According to Halliday, *the context of culture* includes socio-cultural factors which determine meaning along with the linguistic choices that follow from them, and argues that only certain meanings are possible because of a "tyranny" of socio-cultural conventions. *The context of situation*, in turn, refers to the creation of meaning within interaction when interlocutors draw on their cognition, i.e. their internal, mental processes that enable them to make sense of the environment and decide what action/expression may or may not be appropriate.

Although Halliday does not devote much attention to the concept of *identity*, he relates it to the interpersonal function of language, which investigates the impact of speaker/writer on the hearer/listener. Unfortunately, it seems to me that his description of *social identity* is not complete as it limits the term to one dimension: the relations of speakers/writers to their audiences, and is solely concerned with the impact of this interaction on the interpersonal identity which is communicated through language. I am arguing here that there are at least two other aspects that constitute *social identity* of speakers/writers. Firstly, *social identity* is bound with a writer's life history, a sense of their roots, and values and beliefs shaped by their life experience, and therefore, it strongly influences "ideational meaning." Another dimension of *social identity* is a speaker/writer attitude to language use, the stylistic and rhetorical choices they make which create "textual meaning." I assume that all these three meanings conveyed simultaneously in language contribute to the formation of *social identity* of every speaker/writer.

The above mentioned macro-functions of language can be used as a powerful framework to investigate academic writer identity in a verifiable and non-speculative way. Specifically, they make it possible to explain all linguistic choices by the function they serve in conveying meaning and how that meaning is dependent both on social context (and relations of power inscribed in it) and individual choice.

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[3] The terms were coined by Bronisław Malinowski (1935) and used in his anthropological research. In linguistics they were first used by Firth (1959, 1962, 1968), whose work was developed by Halliday (1978, 1994; with Hasan 1989).

Indeed, especially in the context of academic writing authors find themselves in a rather restricted position as the possibilities for textual self-representation are rather limited forcing writers to make linguistic and rhetorical choices from culturally and institutionally available resources. These choices are influenced by *power relations* (set up by the assessment process) which position writers to step aside from their own notions about what convincing prose and persuasive writing looks like and conform to the pre-established rhetorical conventions of their academic communities. What the writer (student) assumes about their reader's (teacher's) expectations affects the way they present themselves in their texts. This is the mechanism through which the dominant ideologies and writing conventions of a given academic community position the student writer.

From the perspective of how the writer anticipates the reader's expectations, the discoursal construction of identity raises the question of accommodation, opposition and resistance. According to Chase (1988), when the writer is positioned by institutionally established prototypical possibilities for self-representation, they may respond to the conventions in three different ways: to accommodate, to oppose or to resist them. His framework for three differing approaches to academic writing, although analytically tempting, seems too radical to me because it hardly ever happens that writers accommodate to, oppose or resist academic discourse as a whole. Rather, they choose from a wide repertoire of discourse options which are made available to them in their discourse communities and thereby contribute to reproduction or change in the established "order of discourse"[4] (Fairclough 1992a). As revealed in my study, author's resistance or alignment with writing conventions demonstrates privileging some aspects of discourse over others, rather than the entire dismissal of one discourse and constitution of another.

THE STUDY

The findings of my semi-ethnographic study confirm the reader-oriented view of didactic discourse by revealing the key impact of social context (and the *relations of power* inscribed in it) on the formation of the writer's *self*. Following Halliday's (1978, 1994) approach to "language as a form of social practice" I argue that *power relations* are a central force which mediates didactic discourse and profoundly affects the way student writers construct their authorial *self*. The dynamic view of *identity* I present in my study stresses the tensions which occur when student-writers are expected to align themselves with the rhetorical conventions of the institution in which they write and to meet the expectations of individual teachers.

[4] *Order of discourse* is a term coined by Fairclough (1992a) and refers to the social order across which texts are shifted and transformed in systematic ways.

My study was conducted at two universities in Warsaw and at one university in Łódź, Poland. The subjects participating in the study were Polish students in the fourth year of their full-time English Philology[5] studies (the first year of master's studies) and Polish students in the first year of their full-time Polish Philology studies at the master's level. The sample size consisted of 16 student participants and was divided into two groups: a research group and a control group. The writing samples produced by the research group, which comprised English Philology students, were then compared for the parameters of textual realization of three aspects of writer 'self': authorial, discoursal, and institutional with the samples produced by the control group (which was comprised of Polish Philology students).

The writing task was assigned in the form of a common prompt which seemed to be a logical consequence of my choice of the ethnographic methodology for data analysis. Since a common prompt is a descriptive instruction of a writing task (not a specific topic that might suggest particular answers), it allowed students for spontaneous expression of their thoughts about their personal experience with academic writing. The subjects were asked to elaborate on the relationship between their situation as student writers and the metaphor of Scheherazade's plight outlined in the prompt. The research subjects were asked to write two essays (one in Polish and one in English) and the control group subjects wrote only one essay in Polish.

FINDINGS

The analyses of the text corpora for the *power relations* that exist between readers and writers, and ultimately construct the institutionally constrained aspect of writer *identity*, yield the following observations:

- At the macro-level of discourse, *power relations* (set up by the requirement to minimize the subjective, personal factor so as to make the claims presented objective) were demonstrated through the presence of the voices of different types of social actors, which led to the dilution of the voice of the 'I-writer';
- At the micro-level of discourse, *power relations* were revealed in two recurring situations:
  a) as expressions of writer subjectivity and transparency, and were signaled by the following linguistic exponents: modal verbs of external constraint, nominalizations, impersonal and passive forms;
  b) as expressions of writer alignment with the rhetorical conventions of a given writing tradition (the way ideas were developed and distributed and how they were introduced and tracked).

[5] *English Philology* is a common university department in Poland which combines the study of practical language learning, linguistics, literature and culture of English-speaking countries.

The comparative analysis of the essays written by the research group in Polish and English did not reveal any data significant for the study, but pointed to some important differences in the samples within and between two groups under investigation. Some of these differences were tracked by the parameters I employed (both at the macro- and micro-level of discourse) to measure the *relations of power* and were revealed in the following areas:

- In the way students establish authority for the content of their writing and present themselves as authors;
- In the extent to which they consider the reader in the act of writing;
- In the way they organize their written work.

At the macro-level of discourse I employed the parameters for social actor representation and observed the differences not between the groups but within the groups:

- A number of social actors in the essays written by the research group subjects ranged from 6 to 10 and from 3 to 12 in the essays produced by the control group subjects;
- Both groups of students expressed *power relations* through the following perspectives: listeners → storytellers; Scheherazade → the king; readers and other recipients of literary products → writers; teachers → student-writers.

These data support the claim that writing is an act of identity which reveals the author's natural habit or characteristic to develop a wide- spread or more concise interpretative approach. Therefore, the ability to reflect, to look at ideas from several points of view, is an individual predisposition of each writer, not a skill to be mastered from observation and practice.

However, the macro-level analysis of the rhetorical structure of the writing samples revealed significant differences between, not within, the groups. All the research subjects followed the strict rhetorical principles for the organization of the written work typical for Anglo-American convention both in their Polish and English texts whereas the essays written by the control group subjects featured the lack of clear thesis statement, arbitrary paragraphing, extensive thematic digressions and the lack of transition signals to guide the reader through the text.

This observation points to a central disparity between Polish and Anglo-American approaches to academic writing which manifests itself in different purposes and organization strategies employed to communicate content. The major goal of Polish academic writers is to demonstrate their knowledge by means of thematic digressions[6] (called 'elaborations' by Duszak (1997)) which function as a form of thematic drilling introduced to clarify and/or broaden already activated meanings. On the one hand they enable writers to look at the issue from different perspectives but on the other, they expand the text and slow down the communication between reader and writer. Along these lines, Duszak argues, "[e]laborations interrupt the

[6] *Thematic digressions* function in a text in a form of reformulations, restatements, amplifications, explications or clarifications of the already activated meaning.

course of argumentation only to show a different path to the same end" (1997: 336). This attitude is at odds with the goals of Anglo-American academic authors who subscribe to linear organizational pattern of discourse which holds the speaker/ writer responsible for providing the clear structure and the meaning of the text. It is only natural that digressions are viewed as manifestations of an unfocused and rambling style in the Anglo-American academic discourse.

The micro-level analysis of the linguistic exponents which were applied to signal writer subjectivity and transparency did not show any differences between the groups:

- both groups of students used modal verbs of external constraint, nominalizations, impersonal forms and passive forms to signal *power relations*.

In the control group of students the number of nominalizations in student essays ranged from 0 to 5; the number of passive forms ranged from 1 to 5 and the number of impersonal forms ranged from 7 to 16. The data elicited from the texts written by the research group of subjects showed that the number of nominalizations ranged from 0 to 5; the number of passive forms ranged from 2 to 5 and the number of impersonal forms ranged from 1 to 5.

These data show that although the student writer is not expected to write for experts on their subject but for a general audience who includes their writing instructor and sometimes classmates, they are still positioned to remain hidden behind facts. Therefore, the application of nominalizations, passive and impersonal constructions allows academic authors to diminish the subjective, personal element in the text and to attach more value to factual features of the subject being discussed and ultimately to maximize the objectivity of an academic text.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

- The dilution of the voice of the 'I-writer' through the presence of the voices of 6 different types of social actors:
  'a specific writer', 'every-writer', 'every-student-writer', Scheherazade, different sorts of audience (the king, teachers, readers), 'we-student-writers'
- The pattern of a recurring sequence (the phases of the identity change):
  Scheherazade/every-student-writer → every writer
  The Author never makes a direct comparison between the situation of 'I-writer' and Scheherazade's plight. The authorial identity 'travels' through different stages (e.g. Scheherazade → every-student-writer → every-writer; Scheherazade → specific writer).
- The choice of the particular rhetorical organization which reveals the author's alignment with a given writing convention:

The essay exhibits most of the characteristics of a five-paragraph academic essay typical of Anglo-American writing convention[7]. The Author follows rhetorical principles for the organization of an academic essay according to Anglo-American tradition (marked in the text as 'rhetorical function'), but she also makes her own stylistic choices (marked in the text as 'identity management function') in different parts of the text.

MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

- Linguistic exponents employed as expressions of writer subjectivity and transparency:

  a) modal verbs of external constraint – 10

  The Author uses several oppressive and directive modal verbs (e.g. 'have to', 'had to', 'should not') to signal 'power relations' between every writer and a student-writer and their audiences (readers, teachers). In the Author's case the power relation is set up by the assessment process. Her readers (teachers) are in a position of power over her. What she assumes about her readers' (teachers') expectations affects the way she presents herself in her texts.

  b) nominalizations – 2

  c) impersonal forms – 5

  d) passive forms – 5

  The Author frequently positions herself (or is positioned), maybe by rhetorical convention or her own desire, to step aside and to give priority to the actions rather than to the subject(s) responsible for them. To dilute the subject she uses nominalizations, impersonal forms, passive forms and thematic digressions. It allows her to keep some distance between the identity of 'I-writer' (which she never introduces explicitly) and the identity of 'every writer' and 'every-student-writer'.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of my study have confirmed the research assumption that academic writer identity is not only an "effect of discourse" (and of *relations of power* that exist in it), but is also preconditioned by people's "continuous sense of the self" (Fairclough 2003: 160). It means that the same emphasis should be given to agency and social

[7] *Academic essay*, according to Anglo-American standards, features a linear organizational pattern and holds the writer responsible for providing the structure and the meaning of the discourse. The key to good organization is to clearly state the thesis statement in the introduction, to outline the main points of the paper by subordinating supporting ideas to the main claims, and then to restate the exposition in the concluding paragraph.

structure in the analysis of writer identity because these two notions both "have 'casual powers' …and that the relationship between the two is dialectical" (Fairclough 2003: 225). Therefore, the research objective determines how the agency-structure interaction is investigated. For the purposes of this article, I have focused only on one aspect of writer identity explored in my study, namely on how prototypical possibilities for self-representation, which are available to writers in the social context of writing, contribute to the creation of their *social* (or *institutional*) *identities*.

Within Halliday's conceptualization of language as social semiotic, *social identity* is a part of interpersonal function of language which suggests the existence of the constraints put by the reader on the writer's agentive endeavors in expressing their voice. This view has been confirmed by the findings of my study. The data elicited from the analyses of the writing samples for the *power relations* that exist between readers and writers have shown clearly that *power relations* are a central part of academic writing for both groups of students under investigation. They refer to fixed, pre-discursive roles assigned to readers (teachers) and writers (students) which contribute to the creation of *institutional identities* of student-writers and can be identified linguistically.

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