FOUNDATIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING

Introduction

The aim of this session is to investigate the identifying properties of academic writing; those ‘typical characteristics’ which set it apart from other genres of writing (such as fiction writing, newspaper articles, poems, business writing and so forth). It is these identifying properties which give a genre of writing its textuality.

Textuality relates to the characteristics of a text which make it clear what sort of text it is intended to be. Each type of text has its own typical characteristics; when we read a text we expect to see the appropriate characteristics, and recognising these characteristics allows us to comprehend what sort of text we’re looking at (Trask, R.L. 2007 Language & Linguistics: The Key Concepts, 2nd Editing, Routledge, London). For instance, even without textual cues such as title, cover page, preface or any overt and distinguishing textual features one would probably be able to identify the genre of a text simply by reading it. A novel has certain linguistic features which set it apart from a monograph, a poem, a government report, or a research article. As academic writers we need to have a deep understanding of the characteristics of our genre.

Over the flowing weeks we will learn and put into practice many of the principles of good academic writing. We will discuss many of the rhetorical skills needed to communicate research. By this I mean the rules and conventions of turning meaning into text by understanding good use of grammar, textual connections, text organisation, clarity, and other reader characteristics. These are all important to communicate our research to an audience who understands and expects to have information delivered to them in a particular way.

When we talk about the mechanics of academic writing we sometimes fail to appreciate its epistemological foundations, by this I mean the unique theory of knowledge which gives validation or authority to the methods used to generate knowledge and ultimately to knowledge itself. These epistemological foundations are at once historical, culturally-defined, ideological and institutional. The purpose of this presentation is to explore the underlying historical and philosophical experiences which have inscribed expository writing, giving it its particular characteristics or textuality.

Arguably at present there is a globally dominant model of academic writing which derives from a Western (and Anglophone) Socratic tradition of scholarship. This tradition has a particular genealogy and it is that genealogy I would like to take time to be able to explore in this presentation. By doing so I feel academic writers have a much deeper appreciation for the essential elements of exposition and in doing so will be better writers.

The Idea of Discourse

The concept of discourse will be used to better understand the link between culture and writing. Discourse is a concept that is related to language in its spoken and written form. Yet whilst its principle reference is language, it is not limited to the language system. Discourse also encompasses the extra-linguistic dimensions of communication, or the philosophical dimension of language which is the focus of this session. In this sense discourse is a structured representation or projection of a world which it attempts to ‘describe, express or represent’.
Discourse is also used by us to make sense of our place in the world. Discourse is ‘structured’ in the sense that it is governed by a series of situational rules and practices, or what are termed ‘discursive practices’ which serve to define it and differentiate it from other discourses. It represents a ‘world’ in the sense that discourse is essentially the projection of a reality of the world and one’s place in it. Discourse both reflects and allows us to recognise the social, ideological and institutional context(s) that condition our worldview. In writing, discourse directs a particular account of reality that ‘makes sense’ to and is confirmed by members of that discourse community.

The following section provides a concise description of the most significant intellectual movements that have conditioned Western-Anglophone academic writing. It leads to an analysis of the identifying properties of academic writing (here refer to the framework of discursive, text and stylistic formations).

**The Socratic Model of Academic Writing**

This culturally determined model of writing has had a particular historical trajectory. Its antecedents are generally located in the philosophies of Socrates, his student Plato and the Sophists (the teachers of philosophy and rhetoric).

The Socratic tradition is essentially a method for accessing knowledge. Through most of his dialogues we can see that Socrates didn’t really appear as a holder of knowledge and truth, which he passed in one-way fashion to his disciples (compare this with the image of knowledge established by Confucius). He didn’t regard himself as someone who could solve doubts or resolve debates. Rather than impart knowledge, he maintained a central position by developing a technique through which the individual could awaken to the truth. What was this technique?

The Socratic tradition has five elements: it is dialectical, points to individual liberation, allows for the existence of universal truth, is disruptive, and encourages dialogic complexity. In what follows I will briefly review each of these elements.

Socrates engaged in dialogue with others, challenging their knowledge judgements. The intention of the dialogues was to pose questions and raise doubt out about their definitions and conclusions. In this sense the dialogues took the form of a **dialectic**; a method of argument (or argumentation) based on the idea of several people each putting forward a proposition that the others counter and by this means arriving at an ultimate truth. Scholars have in light of this method labelled Socrates as a sceptic because he neither assumed nor afforded certainty about the truth or falsehood of anyone proposition. Logic - or more specifically the logical relationship between propositions
- seems to have been the guiding criteria which determined truth.

The notion that Socrates was searching for forms of universal truth is problematic in that ultimately he was encouraging others to awaken. The “truth” in this sense is a subjective truth. The purpose of Socrates was to prompt others to strengthen their self-awareness by connecting to an ultimate reality (in this sense his method was similar to that of Buddhism) by seeing it for themselves rather than being controlled by the discourses of power and subjectivity of others. This is very much a means to individual liberation. Socrates went beyond experiential situations and daily life; his was not a social philosophy of the Confucian style. His mission was to encourage others to seek truth and knowledge within themselves and through this find happiness.

The orientation of Socrates was therefore of a personal standard. He undertook the mission of enlightening and awakening. He wanted to waken the other dialogic to reflect on themselves and their subjectivities. This means that what Socrates wanted was to help one person to liberate himself from his unjustifiable relationship with the city-state or the gods and to discern himself from others. In this way a person could reflect and realise himself and then each could obtain individual liberation.

When we refer to the Socratic tradition as being disruptive we point to Socrates’ tendency to push the process of dialogues by shaking continuously the interlocutor’s feelings of knowledge certainty. Socrates pushed the other dialogists in to the uncertain state of ‘not knowing’. In this sense the Socratic method is disruptive because it seeks to destabilise certainty and authority.

Finally, the Socratic tradition involves dialogic complexity. This means the Socratic dialogues were lengthy, involving several people, who engaged in dispute, opposition and challenge. The dialogues were open structures aimed at facilitating the transition from a state of “knowing” to “not knowing” to ultimately reach truth.

From this discussion we can see that Socrates provided the foundation for a Western intellectual tradition which is both cultural and textual. In the Western intellectual tradition students are encouraged to evaluate whatever it is they experience and form an attitude towards it. Children are encouraged to have strong views and to defend them. Speaking up assertively is interpreted as a sign of confidence and intelligence. However, because people can hold a variety of opinions about the same phenomena, students also quickly learn that making a personal judgement about something necessitates the making of a claim which then justifies the opinion they hold. Freedom of inquiry is a value which underpins an individual’s right to engage in debate. The freedom to defend one’s opinion and to challenge others, regardless of age, gender or status, is thought to be a basic human right. In that sense there is a strong commitment to the ideal of equality. In universities, argumentation is so powerful it is both the dominant mode of engaging with scholarship and of defining the student’s relationship with their teachers. A student has the right, and is in fact encouraged, to question established knowledge and to challenge authority with reasoned argument.

The final element in the composition of academic culture is the promotion of personal inquiry and individual achievement. In Western societies the purpose of education is not aimed at the

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creation of a certain type of society; but rather for the production of an educated individual. From kindergarten to university, personal achievement is the hallmark of educational success.

So if I had to summarize the philosophical foundations of the Socratic tradition as an intellectual movement I would probably include the following characteristics:

1. It is dialectical because it involves logical argumentation
2. It promotes individualism and equality
3. It is disruptive in the sense it seeks to undermine established authority

The Enlightenment

The 18th century heralded in Europe a number of scientific and industrial revolutions which led to a philosophical and social movement known as the Enlightenment. The Industrial Revolution of 1760 and the French Revolution of 1789 in particular transformed the political, social and economic landscape of Europe. Enlightenment philosophers (including Condorcet, Diderot, Hume, Kant, Rousseau and Voltaire) developed a variety of progressive ideas which built upon the Socratic tradition. These critical common secular ideas played a crucial role in the emergence of what we now call “modern societies”. The ideas to which they subscribed included the freedom of thought and expression, the criticism of established religion, the value of reason and science, a commitment to the idea and sovereignty of the nation, and the significance of individualism.

Science, technology and capitalism shaped the way Enlightenment thinkers made sense of the world. The Industrial Revolution harnessed scientific and technological progress and placed the means of production in the hands of capitalists. Science in a sense filled the vacuum left by the turn away from religion and was used as a means to explain the observable entities known directly to experience. Positivism became a doctrine in the philosophy of science and a method for both understanding the world around us and accessing universal laws both in nature and society.

In positivism the methods of enquiry extended the Socratic tradition. An ideology of ‘progress’ crept in to the discourses of the newly emerging social sciences, including psychology, sociology and anthropology. Theories of race and racial hierarchies, for instance, were based on Darwinian notions of natural selection. Science purported to allow us to uncover the “deep structures” or “inner-laws” of social, economic and physical systems.

Scholarship and the writing of scholarship reflected the philosophical changes which were occurring at this time. Some of the great 19th-century European social theorists such as Emile

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Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber all sought to explain social life by recourse to the historical evolution of ideas, and economic and political systems.

So if I had to summarize the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement I would probably include the following characteristics:

1. It is radically secular.
2. It seeks to explain social, political and economic life as historically evolving using tropes of ‘primitive to advanced’; tradition to modernity; undeveloped to developed.
3. Uses science and the doctrine of positivism as a method to understand the world and access its universal laws.

The critique of positivism in the social sciences: the 1980s

In some disciplines in the social sciences a resistance was developing to positivism. The history of the discipline of anthropology has been defined more by breaks and ruptures than by a clear, progressive movement from one stage to the next. In the mid-1980s anthropology, for instance, witnessed a crisis which eventually called into question the epistemological foundations of the discipline.

A critique of many of anthropology’s long-standing assumptions, in particular its claim to objectivity, arose from scholars working within the discipline – most notably North Americans such as Clifford Geertz, George E. Marcus, James Clifford and Michael M.J. Fischer. The work of these scholars marked anthropology’s entry into the current post-modern, constructivist phase in the evolution of the discipline.

The critique of the positivist canons of anthropological theory and method has had two foci. The first relates to the question of self-reflexivity, in particular the recognition that the researcher is an interacting, conditioning force in the interpretation of cultural forms. It was argued that ‘culture’ cannot be, as was previously imagined, objectively captured by a detached, politically neutral and authoritative ‘scientist’. Rather, representations of social life were recognized as being filtered through the perspective and biases of the ethnographer. In this regard, the researcher and researched are implicated in a dynamic relationship and the ethnographic text, in turn, is conditioned by the nature of the relationship forged between researchers and researched. This recognition has led to an understanding that cultural representations are both partial and relative; they are shaped as much by the lived experience of the ethnographer as those who are being studied.

The second focus of the critique of anthropology was the challenging of the validity of the positivist paradigm used to create textual representations of social and cultural forms. Much of the ethnography undertaken until the mid-1970s was done with an unquestioning commitment to science and
objectivity. Stockton comments that anthropological writing of the time was embedded in a ‘social scientific methodology that presupposes a knowing subject [the ethnographer] who is capable through observation of translating human practice [culture] into a rational series of de-temporalized and abstract rules’ (2002 p.1104). The approach taken by those conducting positivist ethnography was characterized by Universalism, that is the desire to expose the universal laws that supposedly govern social life. In addition to this there was a commitment to the experimental structure of the natural sciences; the writing of synchronic studies which depict isolated, timeless and unchanging peoples and societies; and an attempt, this time borrowed from sociology, to apply a ‘rigorous’ qualitative analysis through the conversion of qualitative data into a ‘more legitimate’ statistical form in the pursuit of measurable frequencies and probabilities. The positivist paradigm, however, has now given way to new models of truth and method upon which to ground alternative, more transparent claims to ‘partial truths’.

Essentially, there have been three primary consequences which have since come to shape the discipline. Firstly, with the collapse of the natural-scientific structure of positivist ethnographic research, the literary dimensions of the text have become more important. Rather than appealing to the rhetoric of scientific authority, contemporary ethnographic writing is now more likely to employ the genre of narrative as a means to persuade the reader of the authority of the text. This effectively means that the ethnographer employs personal, political and representational practices to strengthen the validity of textual representations of cultural forms. Blurring the boundaries between social science and literature in such a way is inherently a creative endeavour and has strengthened claims that ethnography is an ‘artistic’ pursuit.

Second, the literary or narrative turn in anthropology has opened a space to explore the predispositions, personal experiences and emotions of the researcher and write these into the text. A pivotal element in the critique of anthropology has been the recognition that the researcher is an active participant in the setting and context of the social phenomenon they are studying. Reflexivity - or the adoption of a dialogical mode of ethnography which probes the relationship between researchers and researched - has now become one of the central tenets of anthropology. In short, ethnography is as much a process of Self-exploration as it is Other-exploration.

Finally, the critique of anthropology has seen the emergence of diachronic studies which link the lives of the subjects being studied to broader global processes of social, economic and political change. The project of embedding subjects in a ‘world system’ - and similarly of adopting a more literary style in the writing of ethnography - necessitates the admission and transcendence of multiple disciplinary discourses. Literary and cultural studies, philosophy, history, economics and other disciplines are legitimate sources from which to draw understandings and ‘construct’ an interpretation of cultural forms.

What does all this mean in academic writing?

What I have tried to demonstrate is the genealogy of the currently dominant model of academic writing. The movements described above comprise the underlying historical and philosophical
experiences which have inscribed expository writing, giving it its particular characteristics or textuality. As I had mentioned writing is a cultural product, intimately connected to an intellectual heritage.

I feel that this intellectual heritage has shaped academic writing in the following way.

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Discursive formations are those properties that characterize most forms of academic or expository writing. These properties are most directly linked to the philosophical foundations of the Socratic and Enlightenment traditions. Text formations relate to the textual and linguistic conventions inherent in most forms of academic writing. Stylistic formations are often governed by disciplinary norms. Those disciplines which have experienced a critique of objectivity often allow license for a more literary genre or sensory style of writing. So if, for instance, we consider the discipline of anthropology we can see that there is the possibility of using genres of writing which are more typical of fiction writing. We can detect a different textuality than that which defines more conventional forms of academic writing. Disciplinary expectations are important in conditioning the type of writing you are able to produce.

The figure below is an attempt to identify the more conventional or generic properties that provide academic writing its textuality. It’s limiting in that it does not take in to account all possible properties; but it is a good basis for you to begin to explore your own style of writing.
Conclusion

The aim of this lecture has been to give you a better understanding of the historical and cultural dimensions that underpin academic writing models. The Socratic tradition informs how we construct and present knowledge, but it is just one model. Learning the expectations encoded within this model allows us to engage in scholarly discussions, especially in writing and publishing. Understanding the philosophical or epistemological foundations of the Socratic tradition places us in a better position to be able to appreciate and learn the linguistic complexities of academic writing.
Graduate Research School Writing Seminar 5th February 2018

Dr Michael Azariadis
Introduction

Textuality.

- The characteristics of a text which make it clear what sort of text it is.

- The identifying properties of academic writing, those ‘typical characteristics’ which distinguish it from other genres of writing.
Writing & Culture

- Consider the link between culture and text production in academic writing (epistemology)

- Is there a globally dominant model of academic writing?

- The concept of Discourse encompasses the extra-linguistic dimensions of communication

- ‘Discourse is a structured representation or projection of a world which it attempts to describe, express or represent’ (Thompson 1981, p.133)
The Socratic Model of Academic Writing

The Socratic tradition has five elements:

- It is dialectical
- Points to individual liberation
- Allows for the existence of ‘Universal Truth’
- It is disruptive
- Encourages dialogic complexity
The Enlightenment

- Freedom of thought and expression
- Criticism of established religion
- The value of reason and science
- Sovereignty of the nation
- Individualism

All of which contributed to the dominance of science (positivism), technology and capitalism

The subsequent development of social science disciplines such as sociology, psychology and anthropology
The critique of Positivism

Anthropology in US the 1980s – Geertz, Marcus, Clifford, Fisher, Crapanzano and others.

- Self-reflexivity
- Challenge to positivism/universalism
- Emphasis on the literary dimensions of the text
- Emphasis on diachronic studies which embed research subjects into a ‘world-system’ (micro-macro approach)
Discursive formations are those properties that characterize most forms of academic or expository writing. These properties are most directly linked to the philosophical foundations of the Socratic and Enlightenment traditions.

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- Dialectical (argumentation): Argumentation focused, based on evidence and logical reasoning.
- Problem & goal oriented: Writing is goal-oriented, seeking to solve a problem.
- Evidence based: Writing relies on evidence, data, and research.
- Logical: Reasoning and arguments are clear and logical.
- Conceptual: Writing engages with ideas and concepts.
- Defining: Writing is clear and precise in defining terms.
- Analytical: Writing is analytical, breaking down ideas into components.
- Concise: Writing is brief and to the point.
- Formal in register: Writing follows formal academic register.
- Recognized linguistic units, patterns or construction: Writing uses established linguistic patterns.
- Grammar: Writing is grammatically correct.
- Two-way distinction of voice (active & passive): Writing alternates between active and passive voice.
- 1st or 3rd person narrative: Writing uses first or third person narrative.
- Strategies for cohesion and unity: Writing uses strategies to maintain cohesion and unity.
- Transitions: Writing uses transitions to connect ideas.
- Punctuation: Writing is punctuated correctly.
The identifying properties of academic writing

- Logic
- Cohesion
- Evidence
- Argumentation
- Concise
- Formal register
- Active & passive voice