

## HOW TO HELP SERBIAN ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS BECOME QUALIFIED ACADEMIC WRITERS FOR INTERNATIONAL READERSHIP\*

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**Abstract:** Academic writing for international readership is almost always done in English, which in turn, may bring about certain difficulties to non-English academics who are not accustomed to English academic writing norms. Therefore, some linguistic researches, conducted in order to find out the differences between the English academic style and those of non-English ones, are aimed at making non-English academics aware of cross-cultural differences in writing styles and help them modify their own writing style to the requirements of the English academic norms. Thus, in order to help Serbian academics publish internationally, we have initiated a small-scale research by comparing academic research articles written by English and Serbian academics: thirty from humanities (sociology, psychology and philosophy) and thirty from hard sciences (chemistry, geology and environmental pollution). The research presented in the paper focuses the two most important discourse areas in academic articles written by English and Serbian writers: 1. Discourse organization, and 2. The choice of rhetoric strategies. The obtained results have proven that the two groups of writers display different preferences in their writing styles (which will be presented numerically) and on the basis of this fact certain suggestions have been offered, concerning the form that Serbian academic articles should have in order to be published for the international discourse community.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, international readership, non-English academics, writing styles.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing for international readership refers to producing academic texts for readers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Almost as a rule, these texts are expected to be in English, the language which is nowadays generally recognized as the language of research and scholarship, the one in which over 80% of European international research articles are written and published.

Such a role of academic English in the international academic community has a strong unifying force, but at the same time, this might cause the fear among non-English academics that they will not meet the requirements of the academic norms imposed by the English writing culture and fail to fulfill "discourse expectations" (A well-known term, first used by Australian linguist Michael Clyne (1987:76) in his article "Cultural Differences in the Organization of Academic Texts", In *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, refers to the way readers expect a piece of academic writing is to be developed and organized.) of international readership. If these researches presented in an inadequate way, their quality might be diminished, they might even be refused by the international readership, or at least, they may not be accepted the way their authors expect them to be. Therefore, besides being proficient in the English language, modern

academic writers are required some additional qualities - to know the writing conventions of English academic discourse and to use them properly.

In order to help non-English academics be internationally understood and freed from the writing habits which they have acquired within their writing cultures (which is often a potential hindrance to successful international communication), numerous linguistic researches have been conducted. These researches comprise a very large scope of comparison between English and non-English academic writing: German, Korean, Japanese, and some of the Slavonic languages: Czech, Polish, Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, etc. Thus, to assist Serbian academics to publish internationally, a small-scale research has been conducted, aimed at comparing academic research articles of approximately the same length, written by English and Serbian writers: thirty from humanities (sociology, psychology and philosophy) and thirty from hard sciences (chemistry, geology and environmental pollution). (The research was designed this way in order not to investigate the disciplinary differences, but only the ones which originate from the national writing style and are the most striking ones.)

Our research has been based on M. Clyne's idea that 'mastery of discourse conventions appears to be one of the prerequisites to power on the international academic scene.' (Clyne, 1987:239) and on the notion

that the characteristics of one discourse are frequently not distinctively perceived unless contrasted to those of another one. The comparison has included several areas of differences between the two discourses, but this paper will concentrate on two, most apparent ones: the notions concerning text organization and rhetoric strategies which are commonly used by the two groups of academics.

## 2. THE DISCOURSE ORGANIZATION IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN ACADEMIC ARTICLES

Since academic discourse by itself is an abstract phenomenon, contrastive analyses, in order to be valid, should encompass only the same discourse genres, (*Otherwise, the contrasting will be inadequate because of each genre's specific features and extent, as for example: a research report greatly differs from, let's say, a grant proposal, as does a university course book from a research article, although all of them comprise academic discourse.*) which are "...realized in language through schematic structure (how the beginning, middle, and end of text are organized) and the lexicogrammatical structure..." (B. McKenna, 1997: 191). For the purpose of this paper we shall focus our attention on the research articles (*Thus, since academic discourse on its own can be considered as a genre and "at the same time as a social activity within a community...on the same grounds, a research article can be said to constitute a genre within the scientific world with different conventions across different disciplines"* (C. Valero-Garces, 1996: 28)) written by English and Serbian authors with the intention to depict the existing differences within the same type of genre.

The second issue that has to be taken in consideration while contrasting the writings of authors coming from two different cultural backgrounds is the scientific field to which the articles belong, i.e. whether the articles are from humanities or hard sciences. This is a fairly important matter, since the articles from hard sciences exhibit a considerably high degree of uniformity, especially considering the employment of rhetoric sections - the famous Swale's IMRD structure (*I-introduction, M-methods, R-results, D-discussion*) (Swales, 1990) is a request highly respected by English and Serbian authors alike.

On the other hand, academic articles in humanities display greater diversity, not only with respect to the use of rhetoric sections, but with respect to an article's semantic organization, thematic progression, cohesion, the use of rhetoric devices, etc., and this diversity becomes more obvious when research articles written by authors from different writing cultures are compared. For these reasons, it seems that Serbian writers in humanities, rather than those in hard sciences, should be

made more aware of the differences that exist between their way of writing and the one of English academic writers.

2.1. The first thing a non-native English academic writer should accomplish when entering English academic discourse is to become acquainted with the notion of the previously mentioned 'discourse expectations', i.e. what an English reader expects an academic writing to be concerning some of the following facts: when the theme of the paper will be introduced in the presentation, how the line of ideas will be developed through the discourse, how strict one should be in employing additional information, etc.

All manuals with instructions for English academic writing constantly start with this crucial information: the main thesis of the article should be presented at its very beginning, always in a plain and straightforward manner. Indeed, this is a requirement which is met by all English academic writers as a rule, but rarely respected by Serbian academic writers.

This means that the mismatch between the two writing styles starts exactly at this point. Relying on the habits acquired within their own writing culture, Serbian writers will be rather negligent of the requirement of English academic norms concerning the introduction of the main thesis in the article: in their academic articles it is often placed far from the beginning of the article and one has to search well in order to 'discover' it, especially because it is frequently not explicitly stated. (Blagojevic, 2004).

2.2. Further, the quality which is also required within an English academic article refers to establishing its unity and coherence. This is achieved by means of developing the ideas through the discourse in a manner of linear progression: the paragraphs throughout the article line up in such a way as to contribute strictly to its coherence. The inclusion of new information which might break the article's coherence is strictly avoided.

This, however, is not the case in the Serbian academic style, in which, as in the academic styles of other Slavonic cultures, there is a greater degree of tolerance to parallel statements. This comes as the consequence of introducing a multiplicity of standpoints throughout the discourse. (Čmejrakova, 1996:145) Also, Serbian academic discourse, unlike the English, which favours straightforwardness and precision in expressions, abounds in digressions, associations and even repetitions which are commonly used as stylistic devices to reinforce the presented viewpoints or statements. (Blagojevic, 2006).

The restriction on adding material which is not strictly relevant to the topic under consideration is another thing which makes a great difference between English and Serbian academic writing styles, the former exhibiting high respect towards this tendency. However, Serbian writers are rather slacken in this respect, which, as a consequence, may divert their readers from following the main line of the ideas presented in the

article and may hinder their discourse expectations.

The enumerated differences in the two academic discourses come from different attitudes towards the text composing process. The English academic style insists on the strict instructions according to which the text should be structured, while Serbian academics argue that academic writing depends on a writer's intuition and talent and support a more flexible way in structuring an academic research article. (*Fortunately, we feel that this tendency slowly decreases, thanks to the first pioneering steps undertaken by means of introducing (however, still shyly) some academic writing courses for university students (The Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, for example).*)

### 3. THE CHOICE OF RHETORIC STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

As previously stated, academic styles vary from one culture to another, and their differences can also be noticed with respect to the rhetorical strategies used by their academic writers. (Connor, 1996). All these strategies have one overall purpose: to persuade the readership in the validity of the particular scientific research and to ensure the author's credibility. However, the very concept of persuasiveness varies from culture to culture and so do the rhetorical strategies based on it: 'A writer's rhetorical strategy can be defined as a writer's path through his or her text, made up of a series of choices. The use of rhetorical strategies depends on the way in which the writer perceives persuasiveness in terms of both form of presentation (order, strategies of development, explicitness, etc.), as well as the arguments chosen, i.e. the content.' (Mauranen, 1993:34) Academic writers have various rhetorical strategies at their disposal which are realized by means of employing carefully chosen words and expressions. Our research has examined four of them, with precisely defined functions:

1. Hedging devices (mainly epistemic modality expressions by which writers limit their certainty in the presented material, and which are, according to the English academic writing conventions, considered to be polite ways of expressing one's thoughts or opinions, such as: *It might be looked upon, ... this seems likely*

*to...*), as in the example:

1. This was because absence from school was held to be aggravated by every fresh demand for juvenile labour, and **seems likely** to grow with the material prosperity of the country, until parents become sufficiently enlightened. (ET1/76)
2. Emphatics (the expressions by which writers express their assertions, strong beliefs in the proposed statements, such as: *No doubt, ...Certainly, etc.*), as in the example:  
2. **No doubt**, some departments had made headway in this regard considerably earlier, while other departments were later starters in the field. (ETE4/p.322)
3. Attitude markers (the expressions for conveying writers' attitudes towards the propositional content, such as: *Most strikingly,.....Surprisingly*), as in the example:  
3. **Unfortunately**, with our data we cannot control for efficacy. (ETE5/p.457)
4. Commentaries (by which writers address their readers explicitly, such as: *I leave it to the reader to decide, etc.*)  
4. But what model of the social are we subscribing to when access to full humanity is indicated by the confirmation of one's purchasing power? (ETE13/p.146)

3.1. By comparing the quantitative values of the items isolated from the articles written by English native speakers and those written by Serbian speakers, we have drawn conclusions about the differences/similarities among rhetorical strategies used in the examined groups of articles, i.e. we could tell, whether, for example, the writers of one cultural background are more inclined towards the use of hedging devices, whether they are inclined towards expressing themselves in a more direct way, etc.

The comparison of English and Serbian academic articles from the two scientific fields have proven that the two groups of writers display different preferences towards the use of rhetorical strategies in their writing, and these differences can be assigned to the different cultural assumptions which underlie academic writing styles of the two writing cultures.

The obtained data are shown in the following tables:

Table 1: Number and percentage of rhetorical strategies identified in English and Serbian articles from social sciences

Type of strategy:	ET/social sciences		ST/social sciences	
	No. of items	%	No. of items	%
For hedging	449	0,61	186	0,51
For emphasizing	73	0,10	79	0,20
For expressing attitude	196	0,27	107	0,35
For giving comments	12	0,02	14	0,04
Sum:	730	1.00	386	1.00

Table 2: Number and percentage of rhetorical strategies identified in English and Serbian articles from hard sciences

Type of strategy:	ET/hard sciences		ST/hard sciences	
	No. of items	%	No. of items	%
For hedging	456	0,46	179	0,51
For emphasizing	62	0,13	144	0,33
For expressing attitude	225	0,28	46	0,14
For giving comments	66	0,13	22	0,02
Sum:	808	1.00	391	1.00

Thus, on the basis of the obtained data, we may notice the following:

1. Concerning the hedging devices used by the two groups of writers, it is proved that English academics, regardless of the scientific field, display a preference towards these devices, which is especially high in social sciences.
2. However, the percentage concerning the use of emphatics among English academics is strikingly lower than among Serbian ones, which indicates that they are not much inclined towards expressing their self-assurance and certainty in the subject matter they discuss in their articles.
3. A more striking difference is noticed in relation to expressing the attitudes towards the material conveyed in the articles: in contrast to English academics, who are rather reluctant to explicitly express their attitude towards the content they deal with, Serbian writers tend to show their attitude toward the propositional content.
4. However, the percentage which indicates the usage of commentaries in the articles is approximately the same for both groups of writers, regardless of the scientific field, and is thus not statistically important.

The results of our research which show different preferences among English and Serbian academics may prompt Serbian academic writers to try to adapt their writing style to suit English academic norms and inclinations, when entering international discourse community. This may protect them of being misinterpreted by the international readership and contribute to the quality of their research papers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Although writing for academic purposes includes many different factors, the paper has presented only some of them which proved to be significantly different in academic writings of English and Serbian academics. Thus, to help Serbian academics become qualified international writers, the paper has offered some of the most prominent characteristics of English academic discourse which have been shortly systematized and contrasted to the ones of Serbian academic discourse in order to draw the conclusions which will be relevant to Serbian academics when trying to write efficiently for international readership and help them become qualified writers for international readership.

As Dudley-Evans (1991:50) has noticed, the socialization into the academic community is not easy even for native speakers of English, because they also have to learn to write in the appropriate academic style, i.e. 'to learn the 'specialized literacy' required in the academic community in order to present the findings in such a way that their importance would be appreciated by that community'. This means that Serbian and other non-English academics have to make double efforts when trying to publish their research papers for international readership, because they have to learn not only to write in the appropriate academic style, but to adapt it to suit English academic norms.

A writing experience in the target language and a systematic and close inspection of academic articles written by English native speakers are valuable factors that contribute to efficient writing for international readership. However, linguistic researches in this area can contribute significantly and considerably enhance the writer's discourse organizing qualities, as well as rhetoric and strategic competence employed in academic writing.

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## APPENDIX

### Corpus

#### Articles from social sciences:

1/ English academic articles are taken from:

*The British Journal of Sociology*, London School of Economics and Political Science, editions from 2000 – 2003.

- *Culture & Psychology*, Sage publications, editions from 1997 – 2002.
- *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Sage Publications, editions from 2000 – 2005.

2/ Serbian academic articles are taken from:

- *Teme, časopis za društvene nauke, [Topics, journal for social sciences], University of Niš, editions from 2003–2008.*
- *Sociološki pregled, Sociološko društvo Srbije, [Sociological Review, published by Sociological Society of Serbia], Belgrade, editions from 1998–2004*
- *Psihologija, Društvo psihologa Srbije, [Psychology, published by Psychology Association of Serbia], Belgrade, editions from 1999–2007.*

#### Articles from hard sciences:

1/ English academic articles are taken from:

- *Analytical chemistry, American Chemical Society, Washington, editions from 1999–2005.*
- *European Coal Geology and Technology, Geological Society Special Publication, London, editions from 1998–2003.*
- *Environmental Pollution, Elsevier Science, Great Britain, editions from 2001–2007*

2/ Serbian academic articles are taken from:

- *Hemijski pregled, Srpsko hemijsko društvo, [Chemical Review, published by Serbian Chemistry Society] Belgrade, editions from 1998–2006.*
- *Geološki anali balkanskog društva, [Geological Annals of Balcan Association], Institut za MKPG, editions from 1999–2004.*
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