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Digital academic discourse: Texts and contexts
Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This Special Issue focuses on how digital media – blogs, tweets, and other digital platforms – are used by researchers, and how these new modes of academic communication have impacted writing practices and language uses in the academy. It brings together research in two related areas of scholarship: academic discourse analysis and literacies research. In this introductory article, we first outline the concept of digital academic discourse as we perceive it in the context of our Special Issue and show how it is related to, and at the same time different from, its "analogue" predecessor. We then continue to discuss the practices surrounding the production of academic texts with the support of digital media, followed by an outline of how both digital academic discourse and related writing practices are tied to the networks, communities and spaces in which they take place. Next, methodological issues in the study of digital academic discourse are considered, and the articles in this special issue are presented in connection to the themes outlined above. We conclude by contextualising the studies reported here within current trends in discourse analytical and sociolinguistic research and identify venues for future studies.

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1. Academic discourse and its production: from "analogue to "digital

The study of academic discourse has flourished over the last three decades, especially following the publication of John Swales' *Genre Analysis* (1990). Prior to this book, research into academic texts had largely focused on lexical and grammatical features that distinguished academic prose from other types of text. All of this research was predominantly oriented towards teaching university students to read and write discipline-specific texts in their area of study. A great deal of the subsequent genre-analytically inspired research has appeared in two journals – *English for Specific Purposes* and *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, both published by Elsevier – and, with few exceptions (e.g. Luzón 2013a), *Discourse, Context, and Media* has not been an outlet for such studies. Our Special Issue aims to fill this gap by focusing on academic discourse produced with the support of digital media and by paying attention to the practices surrounding the production of such discourse.

Much of the early research on academic genres explored generic structures and rhetorical strategies in research writing, often together with distributions and characteristics of lexico-grammatical features. Gradually an interest arose in the practices around the production of such texts. Again, Swales came up with an influential new opening: *Other Floors, Other Voices* (1998) introduced a method which he named "textography", an ethnography of text production. This approach probed the institutional practices which shaped the texts researchers wrote, and allowed insights into the disciplinary contexts of writing, including the physical environments of doing research and writing it up. At the same time, the development of corpus-analytical methods, particularly those tackling register variation (Biber, 1988), contributed to a growing body of research in English for Specific and Academic Purposes focusing on the large-scale distributions of lexico-grammatical features (e.g. Biber, 2006, Biber and Conrad, 2009; Hyland, 2004). In a somewhat different line of scholarship, ethnographic approaches were adopted by literacies research focusing on academic writing by students (e.g. Street, 1995) and by researchers (e.g. Lea and Stierer, 2009, Lillis and Curry, 2010). Thus, over the last three decades, the dominant research paradigms that the study of academic discourse has evolved around have been genre analysis, corpus-assisted register analysis, and ethnographies of writing practices.

The rapid development of information and communication technologies over the last two decades has impacted academic discourse, writing practices, and research-related communication in major ways, which have meant the emergence of new forms of interaction, together with new genres. New forms of knowledge creation and self-representation online have meant changing language uses. There is more tolerance towards non-standard language uses in online spaces, where English is typically used as a lingua franca by academics making use of digital media (e.g. Mauranen, 2013, Barton and Lea, 2013). These developments have attracted researchers' attention. The articles included in this Special Issue represent two intersecting areas of scholarship: academic

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discourse analysis and literacies research. The former focuses on the linguistic aspects of academic texts and genres, often in connection to specific disciplines drawing on the work of such authors as Hyland (2004), Myers (1990), and Swales (1990). The latter approaches academic writing as a workplace practice, in the wake of work for instance by Lea and Stierer (2009) and Lillis and Curry (2010).

In this Special Issue, we define digital academic discourse as writing authored by academics and researchers and disseminated online with the support of digital media. Examples of digital academic genres include research blogs and commentary, tweets, wiki pages, and research social networking sites. These "hybrid" genres, as Barton and McCulloch refer to them in this special issue (see also Mauranen, 2013, Kuteeva, 2016), are different from the traditional genres of "analogue" academic discourse which are produced with the support of computers today and disseminated online but show little difference compared to their predecessors in the analogue format (e.g. the research article, the dissertation or thesis, the editorial, the textbook, and so forth). The object of studies included in this issue is limited to text, writing-based medium, and does not include other semiotic resources such as images, video, and so forth. We are aware of this limitation, as the analysis of text alone only covers a fraction of enormous possibilities of digital communication in academia (cf. Jones et al., 2015, p. 5). This was not a deliberate choice on our part, but happened for practical reasons: it so happened that we did not receive any submissions focusing on the analysis of YouTube videos, TED talks, or other similar genres, nor any studies taking a multimodal discourse analytical approach.

Recontextualisation (Bauman and Briggs, 1990, Linell, 1998) is another defining feature of digitally mediated discourse, and academic discourse is no exception. For example, when it comes to hybrid genres, such as research blogs, scientific knowledge is often recontextualized for diverse audiences through rhetorical strategies used to tailor information and to engage the reader (Luzón, 2013b). The hybridity of research blogs stems from combining elements of public and private discourses, popularized discourse, and different genres of specialist discourse, such as research papers, peer reviews, book reviews and editorials. This hybridity is also connected to the dialogic and heteroglossic character of texts (Bakhtin, 1981) in online spaces– responding to previous texts, creating conditions for new texts, and linking different texts through hypertext (Androutsopoulos, 2011). For example, research has shown that blog posts and commentary are often written in such a way as to elicit dialogue and debate between different participants, resulting in multi-layered communication involving both research-related and opinion-based matters. The kind of interaction taking place online is partially determined by the features of the medium, as it involves a "polylogue" between different participants who express their agreement or disagreement both with the blogger and with the other commenters responding to one or to several previous comments (Bolander, 2012, Luzón, 2013a, see also Bondi, this issue). Thus, we can argue that, compared to its analogue predecessor, digital academic discourse is characterized by a more explicit writer-reader interaction and an increased degree of dialogicity which is both supported and induced by the online medium.

2. "Digital in academic discourse and writing practices

To this day, the vast majority of ESP research on academic discourse has focused on the end product, and above all on the published research article (RA). A similar approach has been taken to its digital extensions. For example, Perez-Llantada's (2013) analysis of the Article of the Future promoted by Elsevier showed little difference between the traditional RA and its online version, with the exception of recently developed online part-genres such as research highlights, graphical abstracts, embedded videos and other features promoted by the publisher, which might be changing writers' perceptions of RA online. Overall, this line of research has adopted a basically structuralist approach and focused primarily on analysing text. Focusing on a less explored genre, Hyland's (2011) study of academic homepages on university official websites vis-à-vis personal homepages showed how researchers self-consciously manage the impression they give of themselves online. By analyzing text, design and hyperlinks, Hyland demonstrated how individual academics are positioned by corporate discourses but at the same time carve a sense of self and assert professional credibility online. His analysis goes beyond text to include other semiotic resources and to show how seniority, gender and disciplinary membership permeate institutional representations of academics.

ESP genre research has paid relatively little attention to the practices surrounding the production of texts despite attempts like textography (Swales, 1998) and despite the opportunities opening by the use of digital media. A notable exception is McGrath (2016), investigating the online co-authorship and revision of an RA in pure mathematics via the Polymath 8(a) open-access research blog. The significance of this study lies in revealing how an analysis of discussions on a research blog can provide insights into a discourse community's engagement with article construction and the RA as a genre. It also showed that feedback on the article from non-experts was explicitly elicited and facilitated by the open-access blog.

Other branches of research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have been laying more emphasis on language practices than on products (e.g. Pennycook, 2010, Canagarajah, 2013), and this has included approaches to digital media. For example, compared to ESP/EAP genre analysis, literacies research and other branches of discourse analysis have embraced the impact of digital media to a greater extent, investigating online language uses (e.g. Barton and Lee, 2013) and digital discourse practices (e.g. Jones et al., 2015). However, these research traditions have not paid much attention to academic and research contexts. Our Special Issue brings together these two lines of research – ESP genre analysis and literacies – in an attempt to draw connections between academic discourse, its supporting digital medium, and the context in which it is produced.

Jones et al. (2015, p. 3) define digital practices as "assemblages" of actions involving the use of digital tools which are aimed towards achieving social goals, enacting identities, and reproducing social relationships. This line of thinking draws on the understanding of practice in literacies studies (e.g. Barton, 2007) as a matter of the concrete, situated actions that people perform with particular mediational means (e.g. written texts, computers, mobile phones) in order to enact membership in particular social groups. In this context, the word "practices" is usually used in the plural to refer to concrete events (cf. Pennycook's, 2010 notion of language as practice). Barton and McCulloch (this issue) give an example of "the digital scholar" (Weller, 2011), comparing the process of writing a book in 2010, which involved accessing e-books and journals, setting up Google alerts to track relevant online conversations, and bookmarking sources with Mendeley, to writing one in 2004, when few of these platforms were available. How do such technological shifts influence academics' writing practices?

In this Special Issue, Hynninen adopts Barton's (2007) definition of practice to examine collaborative writing by a group of computer scientists. Her study takes into consideration not only the writing trajectory (i.e. planning, drafting and revising) but also the social activities involved in organizing the writing and supporting activities such as consulting others (cf. Gimenez and Thondlana, 2012). Hynninen found that various digital tools were used in addition to those needed for the actual writing of the paper, which was supported by a cloud-based collaborative writing programme Overleaf. A number of other tools also come in to support

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