



Measuring the voice of disciplinarity in scientific writing: A longitudinal exploration of experienced writers in geology



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ABSTRACT

A significant number of studies have examined the features of expert discursive practices in science and academia, and many have focused on what happens to student writers working their way into the academic community. Less attention has been paid to how a scientific writer's voice continues to change after the Ph.D. dissertation. This study examines the shift in experienced scientific writers' disciplinary voice over the ten-year period following the doctoral dissertation. Using genre analysis triangulated with qualitative methods, a set of indexes that convey field geologists' disciplinary practices and concerns has been identified. Using a measure of standard deviation, the study then compares the use of these indexes by six writers from geology over ten years, and finds that disciplinary voice develops in similar ways. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions about how research on voice is useful for studies on second-language writing. In addition, using tools such as standard deviation allows for a closer analysis of the elusive notion of 'voice'.

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1. Introduction

A general consensus today supports the idea that voice is relevant to academic and scientific writing, as seen for example in the high-stakes context of international scientific publishing (Belcher, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Taking the blind manuscript review as an example (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009), the disadvantages faced by L2 writers are seen to stem from the way in which they use—or fail to use—the expected features of voice. Voice is also viewed as very relevant to L2 writing pedagogy. Hyland (2005a, p. 365), for example, has observed that “writers must both present themselves as competent individuals, expressing a textual ‘voice’ or community recognised personality, and engage with readers in accepted ways.” However, the need to display an ‘appropriate voice’ often poses challenges for L2 writers, who not only need to learn the voice of their disciplines, but often also of an L2 culture. As noted by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996, p. 22), for example, “audience and voice are largely culturally constrained notions, relatively inaccessible to students who are not full participants in the culture within which they are asked to write.” Nonetheless, L2 student writers are consistently judged according to the same standards as their L1 peers, as observed in statewide examinations and standardized testing (Zhao & Llosa, 2008) and in the large-scale criteria developed for evaluating essays (Matsuda & Jeffery, 2012). Similarly, Davies, Hamp-Lyons, and Kemp (2003), Jarvis, Grant, Bikowski, and Ferris (2003), Hyland and Anan (2006) and Leki (2006) provide further evidence about how the presence or absence of the features of (L1) voice in L2 writing influence evaluator/teacher attitudes.

Although voice is clearly a central issue in L2 writing research and pedagogy, there have been relatively few attempts to move the discussion of voice beyond a somewhat reductive view as ‘unique authorial presence and opinion’, although recent

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research suggests that voice is actually far more complex (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Hyland & Sancho Guinda, 2012; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Matsuda, 2001; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Prior, 2001; Tardy, 2012; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). This paper will first discuss why a broader definition of voice is not more common in the research literature. It will then demonstrate a method for analyzing voice by presenting results from a longitudinal study of the individual writing strategies of six increasingly experienced scientific writers during the ten-year period following their Ph.D. dissertation. Using standard deviation (SD) analysis, the study looks specifically at how the writers' disciplinary voice changes over time. The results provide evidence as to why further research on individuals' disciplinary voice, using an expanded definition, is both important and useful for L2 writing research and pedagogy.

2. Voice and L2 writing research

Despite undeniable interest among L2 writing specialists, voice remains a contentious topic. Even today, there is far from absolute agreement about the extent to which voice may actually be relevant to L2 teaching needs. An earlier, but emblematic, illustration of this disagreement can be observed in a special issue dedicated to voice in L2 writing research and pedagogy (*Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2001, Volume 10, Issues 1–2) as well as in a later series of articles that build on this earlier exchange (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007, 2008; Stapleton, 2002; Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009).

One criticism often leveled against teaching voice is that it may be less relevant for new or less experienced L2 writers. In response to Matsuda and Tardy (2007), for example, who defend the position that voice is inherent to all academic writing, Stapleton and Helms-Park (2008) concede that while voice is not unimportant, there is concern that new or less experienced L2 writers have other, more pressing issues to attend to, such as grammar, syntax, or vocabulary. In addition, they found that teaching the 'features of voice' (e.g., first person, deontic modals) had little effect on the development of students' writing strategies (Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008).

The reservations articulated by Stapleton and Helms-Park appear to stem in part from their approach to voice, which they described using *a priori* categories based on the Voice Intensity Rating Scale (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Stapleton, 2002), including first person pronouns, deontic modals, and self-generated assertions (Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008, p. 95). It must be noted, however, that such categories isolate the teaching of grammar from its immediate social context. As a consequence, the authors lack a theoretical and empirical basis for describing the situated grammatical and lexical choices reflected in voice. In contrast, Matsuda and Tardy (2007, 2008) advocate an approach to voice grounded in immediate social context. Although their 2007 study was sharply criticized for devising a set of so-called "*a posteriori* categories" (Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2008, p. 96), and admittedly did not establish a correlation between reader reaction and any specific features of disciplinary voice, their subsequent study (Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) considerably extends the strength of their claims. Through surveys with 70 manuscript reviewers, they show that reviewers do indeed rely on a set of ideational and rhetorical categories to build their perception of an author's disciplinary identity and level of experience. Such relevant features, they argue, can only be identified *a posteriori*, i.e., with regard to the specific sociocultural context that creates voice.

A second criticism often leveled against teaching and researching voice is that the way in which a single individual writes should not be taken as a basis for describing writing behavior in general. Swales (1990, 2004), for one, has long argued that it is not what is *unique* to individual writing but what is common to a group of individuals' writing that holds value for L2 writing pedagogy. The underlying position is that a writing research and teaching agenda that focuses primarily on individual variation would be ill-adapted to the specific needs of L2 writers, who need instruction in the commonalities of the new discourses they must learn, rather than in the idiosyncrasies of their users.

Such reservations about the usefulness of voice for L2 writing pedagogy, however, appear to be rooted in how voice is defined. In effect, voice is often equated with 'individuality', 'uniqueness' or 'personal stamp' (Elbow, 1994), and is viewed as an ideal to be attained in scholarly writing. Many writing teachers and researchers assume that L2 student writers must be taught voice (being clear, overt, assertive) and usefully point to specific linguistic markers such as self-mention, boosters, and hedges. However, a number of studies have cautioned against conflating voice with a cultural ideology of 'Western-style' individualism (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). It has been argued that such notions of individualism—which are undeniably Anglo-American—represent but one possible cultural frame among many, all of which construct differing, sometimes diametrically opposed, impressions of voice.

In this paper, I argue for the need to once again move the discussion of voice beyond culturally based notions of 'unique authorial presence and opinion', toward a more expanded social view. Sharing Tardy's (2012) inclusive position that voice encompasses three dimensions — individual, social, and dialogical, I adopt a view of voice as one which naturally reflects the multiple voices ('heteroglossia', Bakhtin, 1981) to which an individual has been exposed in specific situations. Voice is an individual's natural "self-representation" in writing (Ivanič & Camps, 2001, p. 4), the need for which is unavoidable and constant. Using culturally available semiotic resources, people continuously project their self-representation to others through their physical appearance and body language, as well as through their spoken language, word choice and prosody. Writing is no exception to this behavior, and writers clearly portray aspects of their individual and social identity to readers through their voice. People construct the voice they use to portray themselves with using the borrowed and culturally available resources of the community(ies) they have learned to address. Voice is thus an individual's response to social interaction. It is also a sociocultural construct, tied closely to an individual's experience with a community's practices, its semiotic

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