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Phrasal intertextuality: The responses of academics from different disciplines to students' re-use of phrases

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Abstract

There is a recognised need for student writers to develop an awareness of the role of phraseological constructions in their reading of academic texts and in their own academic writing. However, there remains a suspicion that phrasal re-use from texts is a form of plagiarism, since it involves copying and using other people's words. This paper reports on a study which aimed to explore the boundaries of acceptability for phrasal re-use through a survey of 45 academics at two UK universities and follow-up interviews of eight respondents representing a range of discipline areas. We found there was broad agreement among participants about the conditions for acceptable re-use of academic phrases, but rather less agreement about which phrases met these conditions, though one category of phrases appears to be generally acceptable. In addition, there was recognition that phrases could be useful to help students' thinking, and to help their writing by providing a scaffold of support, a means of organising ideas and an improvement in writing style. However, there was some disparity in tutors' views of these phrases if they were identified by text-matching software. The study implies that more awareness of re-usable academic phrases would be useful to L2 writers.

Keywords: Academic phrases; Phrasal re-use; Intertextuality; Plagiarism

Introduction

The phraseological aspect of language has been well-established by means of intuitive methods (Bolinger, 1976; Pawley & Syder, 1983) and by corpus-based investigations (Altenberg, 1998; Biber, 2009; Sinclair, 1991). These studies suggest that speakers and writers are able to draw on a store of pre-constructed phrases which can be retrieved from memory without needing to be assembled each time (Peters, 1983). Fixed and semi-fixed phrases have been shown to play an important role in academic writing (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2008; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). As a result, novice writers need to learn to develop their use of these phrases effectively (Flowerdew & Li, 2007). This is particularly important for non-native speakers who typically possess a limited repertoire of these phrasal sequences in English (Howarth, 1998; Pawley & Syder, 1983). There is thus a widely accepted need for EAP tutors to teach these

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phrases and for their students to develop strategies to enhance their competence in this area (Cortes, 2013; Hyland, 2008).

Indeed, a legitimate strategy suggested for second language writers is to develop their phraseological competence by picking up generic academic phrases in academic texts and re-using them in their own writing. Swales and Feak (2012), for example, suggest that a useful strategy for non-native novice writers is to search for phrasal constructions and adapt them for their own writing. Furthermore, in a recent study in Sweden, Pecorari and Shaw (2012) found agreement with this strategy among several university teachers, none of whom had English as their L1, when discussing extracts of written English by non-native students. These teachers agreed on the "value of copying phraseology, where it was appropriate to do so," thereby "raising the quality of their students' textual output" and assisting them to "acquire the register of the discipline" (pp. 154-155).

However, such learning strategies would seem to sit uncomfortably with the kind of guidance given to students by universities: for example, the definition of plagiarism given by the University of Manchester (2014) is "presenting the ideas, work or words of other people without proper, clear and unambiguous acknowledgement." Furthermore, one scientific journal editor has termed the "misappropriation of language from other authors" as "linguistic plagiarism" and has argued that re-use of "eloquent phrases"[1] from published papers is morally wrong (Williams, 2007, p. 2535). There would thus seem to be an important question around whether phrasal re-use is acceptable in academic writing and, if it is, at what point such practice is deemed to be acceptable. This paper reports on a small-scale study which set out to explore the views of experienced academic writers on the legitimacy and the value of phrasal re-use by novice writers.

The specific research questions which guided this study were as follows:

Q1a. Is re-using phrases considered to be acceptable by academics?
Q1b. If so, what determines acceptability in phrasal re-use?
Q2a. Can phrasal re-use be of value in the development of academic writing?
Q2b. If so, how can useful phrases be learnt?
Q3. How does phrasal re-use interact with plagiarism?

We set out to answer the first two questions (Q1a and Q1b) by means of a survey of 45 native-speaker academics at two UK universities. Follow-up interviews with eight of the survey participants allowed us to explore these questions at greater depth. The interviews also allowed us to elicit the academics' views on the value of re-using phrases in the development of academic writing (Q2a), how they might be learnt (Q2b), and how phrasal re-use interacts with plagiarism (Q3).

Literature review

We have used the term *phrases* to refer to recurrent combinations of words. In fact, there is a very wide range of terms in the literature reflecting both the significance and the complexity of the area. Wray (2002, p. 9) found over fifty terms to describe the phenomenon of what she calls *formulaic language*. Terms used by different researchers include: "prefabricated patterns" (Hakuta, 1976), "phraseological units" (Ginzburg, Khidekel, Knyazeva, & Sankin, 1979), "speech formulae" (Peters, 1983), "multi-word patterns" (Sinclair, 1991), "lexical phrases" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), "multi-word items" (Moon, 1998), and the term "formulaic sequences" is used by Wray (2002) herself.

Early observations about the phraseological nature of language were mainly concerned with speech production. For example, Bolinger (1976) argued that although speakers have the potential to be creative, much of the language that is produced has probably been produced before by others. Similarly, Pawley and Syder (1983) argued that the majority of a speaker's output consists of memorised sequences and that only a minority of lexical combinations are "novel creations" (p. 205), and it is this that permits a speaker to achieve a "native-like fluency" (p. 208). Later, with the ability to identify recurrent patterns in very large corpora of spoken and written English using specialised software, it became evident that a significant proportion of language consists of recurrent combinations of words. In one study, Erman and Warren (2000) concluded that slightly more than 50% of discourse is composed of phraseological elements of various kinds, and in other studies even higher estimates have been given (e.g., Altenberg, 1998).

[1] Unfortunately, Williams does not attempt to explain what eloquent means so his advice to writers aspiring to submit papers to his journal, many of whom are non-native speakers, is not particularly helpful.