



Editorial

Academic discourse as situated practice: An introduction[☆]

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Academic language
Spoken discourse
Contextualization
Positioning
Language norms
Interactional sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

This introduction systematizes previous research on academic language (AL), differentiating between communicative, epistemic and social functions of academic discourse. Pointing to some limitations of existing – mainly register-based – approaches to AL, such as the written language bias, the abstraction from actual language users and contextual realizations, we advocate a practice-based approach to academic discourse. We put forward a concept of academic discourse practices that is grounded in interactional sociolinguistics and ethnomethodological conversation analysis. It acknowledges the situatedness of academic discourse practices, their role in identity construction and stresses the importance of contextualization competence for mastering such discursive demands. Finally, we give an overview of the contributions to this issue and explicate their interrelations.

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1. Introduction

The last decade saw a revitalized interest in academic language (AL), particularly in the context of schooling (cf. the special issues edited by Haneda, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2012). This was triggered by evidence for the decisive role of language in educational achievement as repeatedly provided by large scale international studies (OECD, 2004, 6–7), and by the growing acknowledgment of multilingualism in today's schools and universities. This special issue brings together a set of nine articles that examine and discuss AL as a situated discourse practice. All contributions are based on audio- and video-recorded interactions in educational contexts from primary to post-secondary education. The empirical objective of this special issue is to provide a rich picture of AL in its contextual realizations, institutional embedding and interconnections with community and identity aspects. In addition, the findings of these studies also add significantly to our theoretical understanding of how AL can be conceptualized and what competencies, norms and motivations come into play in its acquisition. The contributions also pave the way for a new explanatory account of the observation that some students do not succeed in managing the discourse practices relevant in educational settings.

In educational science as well as in language education discursive skills are regarded as key competences because they enable students to participate in classroom discourse, i.e., to receptively process and to productively compose oral and written texts across different subjects and disciplines (Quasthoff, Heller, & Morek, submitted for publication; Quasthoff, Heller, Prediger, & Erath, submitted for publication; Uccelli et al., 2014). In this respect, the notion of *academic language*¹ has been applied and discussed in educational science and psychology, sociology, language education as well as linguistics (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Henrichs, 2010; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).² Related terms are *cognitive academic language proficiency* (Cummins, 1979, 1980, 2008) and *academic discourse* (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint Martin, 1994; Duff, 2010; Hyland, 2009).

[☆] Some of the articles in this special issue were delivered in an earlier form at a symposium titled "Negotiating communicative practices in school: The case of academic language" at the 19th Sociolinguistics Symposium in Berlin, Germany in 2012.

¹ In the German-speaking scientific community the term normally used is "Bildungssprache" (cf. Feilke, 2012; Gogolin & Lange, 2010; Gogolin, 2009; Redder, 2012).

² Historically, the current debate on academic language resembles the proliferation of Bernstein's (1964) concept of the "elaborated code", which in the 1960s also served as an explanation of the perpetual reproduction of educational inequality (cf. Cook-Gumperz, 2009). Although only few authors today explicitly refer to Bernstein's research (cf. Gogolin & Lange, 2010, 110; Schleppegrell, 2004, 26–27), it seems legitimate to draw a parallel between the former discussion of codes and the recent debate about academic language.

With a slightly different accentuation, Schleppegrell coined the term *language of schooling* (2001, 2004). All these terms serve to refer to a linguistic register that is assumed to be functional for the purposes of learning, knowledge construction and education.³ As formal education starts in preschool and extends to tertiary education, AL is conceptualized as a continuum (Henrichs, 2010; Schleppegrell, 2004, 2012), ranging from precursory forms (e.g., narratives, cf. Scheele, Leseman, Mayo, & Elbers, 2012; show and tell in elementary school, cf. Kern, Lingnau, & Paul, 2015) to scientific language (Halliday, 1993).

Substantial work has been done to define more precisely the core of AL (Uccelli et al., 2014) and to determine the linguistic skills which should become integral parts of educational curricula (e.g., Feilke, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Vollmer & Thürmann, 2010). In contrast to existing research which mainly focuses on structural aspects of written AL (cf. Brisk, 2012; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Crosson, Matsumura, Correnti, & Arlotta-Guerrero, 2012; Gogolin, 2009; Halliday, 1993; Ortner, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004; Uccelli, Dobbs, & Scott, 2013), our special issue takes a *practice-based approach* (Hanks, 1996) and aims at illuminating how *the actors themselves* instantiate and interpret, acknowledge or suspend linguistic norms and expectations for communicative practices in educational settings (Heller, 2015). In doing so, the *socio-symbolic functions of academic language* (cf. Section 2.3; see also Morek & Heller, 2012), mostly overlooked in previous research, are taken into account: the use of AL is linked with certain discursive identities (Preece, 2009; Rampton, 2006) which may be more or less compatible with social identities (Kotthoff & Spreckels, 2007) or milieu-specific practices and positionings (Bourdieu, 1991; Lareau, 2003; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Solomon & Rhodes, 1995).

This introduction sets out, first, to systematize the existing research on AL, differentiating between communicative (Section 2.1), epistemic (Section 2.2) and social (Section 2.3) functions of academic discourse. In our critical review of the existing body of research, we discuss some shortcomings and limitations of current approaches to AL. Two aspects in particular will be emphasized: first, we question the abstraction from actual language users and from contextual realizations that underlies register-based approaches to AL; second, we stress the need to acknowledge the interconnections between AL and issues of positioning and identity. From our perspective it is therefore necessary to develop an understanding of AL as *situated practice*, i.e., as locally occasioned talk or text above the sentence level. In section 3 we thus put forward our notion of *academic discourse practices*, a concept that is meant to take into account the institutional and contextual situatedness of academic discourse practices, and which acknowledges their role in positioning practices and identity construction. Methodologically, our understanding of academic discourse practices is grounded in interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2006) and ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995; Stivers & Sidnell, 2013). Our final section discusses how future research on the learning and teaching of academic discourse practices may benefit from such a socially situated concept of language learning (Section 4), directing attention to students' *contextualization competencies* and to the empirical examination of practices and norms of academic discourse.

2. Mapping the field: conceptualizations of 'academic language'

'Academic language' and related terms have been of interest to scholars from sociology, psychology, educational science, second language acquisition and foreign language learning. They approach AL on the basis of their own methodologies and disciplinary cultures and also pursue distinct research questions and agendas. In the interest of systematization, we will distinguish three different functions of AL which we will explain below:

- AL as a *medium of knowledge transmission* (communicative function);
- AL as a *tool for thinking* (epistemic function);
- AL as a *ticket and visiting card* (socio-symbolic function).

This suggested differentiation has of course only heuristic value: in actual oral and written discourse the functions occur in parallel and overlapping ways; yet the studies reviewed in the following often foreground specific aspects of AL.

2.1. AL as a medium of knowledge transmission

A substantial body of research has focused on the linguistic structures of AL and their functional value for academic communication, i.e., for transmitting complex knowledge. Above all, this approach is put forward by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978). Building on this perspective, Schleppegrell notes that the features of AL "are not just devices used to exclude the uninitiated, but are functional for the purposes for which these [academic, V.H. & M.M.] genres have evolved and which they serve." (2001, 454). To examine such relationships between linguistic forms and functions AL is construed as a *register* by a number of scholars (e.g., Cummins, 2008; Gantefort & Roth, 2010; Gogolin & Lange, 2010; Lengyel, 2010; Lesemann, Scheele, Mayo, & Messer, 2007; Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

Halliday (1978) uses the term 'register' to refer to the relationship between language (and other semiotic forms) and features of the context. He proposes that the use of a certain register is functional for the activity at hand. In this sense, registers are defined as "varieties according to use". However, as we will discuss below (Section 3.1), in such a register-based

³ It is important to note, however, that academic language occasionally intersects with language for special purposes, but basically operates as a communicative interface across different domains and between everyday language and specialist varieties (Ortner, 2009).

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