

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

“We must conclude that...”: A diachronic study of academic engagement



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 February 2016

Received in revised form 7 September 2016

Accepted 11 September 2016

Keywords:

Academic writing

Engagement

Corpus research

Directives

Questions

Shared knowledge

ABSTRACT

Engagement is the way that writers explicitly acknowledge the presence of their readers in a text, drawing them in through readermention, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge, questions and directives. This is a key rhetorical feature of academic writing and has been a topic of interest to applied linguists for over 20 years. Despite this interest, however, very little is known of how it has changed in recent years and whether such changes have occurred across different disciplines. Are academic texts becoming more interactional and if so in what ways and in what fields? Drawing on a corpus of 2.2 million words taken from the top five journals in each of four disciplines at three distinct time periods, we look for answers to these questions to determine whether reader engagement has changed in academic writing over the past 50 years. Our paper presents, and attempts to account for, some surprising variations and an overall decline in explicit engagement during this period.

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1. Introduction

Central to successful research writing is the creation of an appropriate relationship with readers. The ability to craft a text which establishes solidarity, or at least a disciplinary affiliation, both supports a writer's community credentials and helps to head-off objections to their arguments. Partly, of course, this involves addressing topics of interest to the community and using theories and methods that peers recognise as effective, but it also requires careful rhetorical choices suggesting shared beliefs, experiences, expectations, and values (e.g. [Bazerman, 1988](#); [Swales, 2004](#)). Academic writers, in other words, do not simply produce texts that discuss a common interest in certain aspects of the world but use language to acknowledge, construct and negotiate social relations. Readers not only need to follow an argument set out in a way they expect, but want to feel that they are being taken into consideration too. Writers must make assumptions, both about the nature of the world and about their audience, which means the ways they present their ideas, signal their allegiances, and stake their claims represent careful negotiations with, and sensitivity to, their colleagues.

Following [Hyland \(2001; 2005\)](#) we refer to this dimension of interpersonality as *engagement*. Unlike the more widely discussed notion of *stance*, this is a reader-oriented aspect of interaction which concerns the degree of rapport which holds between communicative participants. It points to the fact that writers seek to write with the interests, background knowledge and expectations of readers in mind and, more generally, indicates their awareness of the community's epistemological and interpersonal conventions. Engagement thus involves connecting texts with readers and with disciplinary cultures. Despite a

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growing interest in how writers negotiate knowledge in locally meaningful ways, very little is known of how engagement has changed in recent years and whether such changes have occurred uniformly across disciplines. In this paper we set out to explore this issue using Hyland's (2005) model of engagement. Drawing on a corpus of 2.2 million words taken from the top five journals in each of four disciplines at three time periods, we seek to determine whether reader engagement has changed in academic writing over the past 50 years.

2. Background: The concept of reader engagement

Engagement is the ways writers rhetorically acknowledge the presence of their readers in a text. Hyland defines it in this way:

This is an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations. (Hyland, 2005: 178)

It therefore turns on the degree to which writers present themselves as sharing, or perhaps failing to share, attitudes and how they manage solidarity and affiliation.

This use of 'engagement' has been developed independently of that proposed by Martin and White (2005) who use the term to refer to the ways writers position themselves to other voices. This is closer to the notion of stance and the resources for conceding, attributing, hedging, boosting and otherwise modalising the status of an utterance. This view focuses on the writer and his or her attitude towards propositions. In contrast, we are concerned with how language is used to head-off possible reader objections and bring them into a text. Engagement in this paper therefore refers to the overt marking of what Thompson (2001) calls the 'reader-in-the-text'.

While the term is relatively new, theorizing about the general notion of engagement is not. Linguists have long been concerned with the interpersonal functions of language and how individuals establish connection and affiliation. Brown and Gilman's *Pronouns of Power and Solidarity* (1960), the extensive *politeness* literature based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) work, Sacks and Schegloff's (1974) concept of *recipient design*, the notion of *relevance* (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) and more recently, the *appraisal framework* (Martin & White, 2005) have all contributed to our understanding of this idea. In academic writing, Myers (1989), Adel (2006), Biber (2006) and Hyland (2001; 2004) have sought to show how interaction is not only achieved by the projection of authorial stance but by language choices which display an orientation and sensitivity to readers. Through engagement choices writers seek to effect interpersonal solidarity and co-membership of a disciplinary in-group.

The notion of engagement therefore takes seriously the Bakhtin-inspired view that all verbal communication is dialogic (Bakhtin, 1982). Even the most "monologic" text involves the speaker/writer in responding in some way to what has been said before on the subject by others and in anticipating in some way how those addressed will themselves react to what it being asserted. Clearly, to be successful, academic arguments must always incorporate the active role of an addressee and be understood against a background of other opinions and viewpoints. A research paper thus locates the writer intertextually within a larger controversy and within a community whose members are likely to both hold a position on the issue under debate and to recognise only certain forms of argument as valid.

To understand writing as dialogic means examining discourse features in terms of the writer's projection of the requirements, perceptions and interests of a potential audience. The notion of audience however is a slippery one in published texts as academic research may have multiple audiences, and be read by specialists, students, practitioners, lay people and interested members of the discipline, hardly a homogenous grouping. Myers (1989: 4) identifies two broad groups who are the target audience of a research article: the *exoteric*, or wider scientific community, and the *esoteric*, individual researchers doing the same work. Respect must be paid to the former while addressing the latter. But while engagement implies the presence of readers as a necessary partner in the act of writing, audience is rarely a concrete reality in academic environments. Essentially it represents the writer's awareness of the circumstances which define a rhetorical context, so that writers *construct* an audience by drawing on their knowledge of earlier texts and relying on readers' abilities to recognise intertextuality between texts. This view highlights the dialogic role of discourse in predicting a reader's reaction and in responding to a larger textual conversation among members of a discipline.

The role of engagement is therefore rhetorical, concerned with galvanising support, expressing collegiality, resolving difficulties and heading off objections (Hyland, 2004, 2005; Myers, 1990). By anticipating their background knowledge, interests, and expectations, a writer can seek to monitor readers' understanding and response to a text and manage their impression of the writer. At root, then, academic engagement is predicated on the writer's awareness that readers can always refute claims, which means readers have an active and constitutive role in how writers construct their arguments. This social constructionist view therefore locates participant relationships at the heart of academic writing, assuming that every successful text must display the writer's awareness of both its readers and its consequences.

3. Studying engagement

Affiliation is, of course, created in numerous implicit ways and is highly contextual. The selection of a particular topic or arcane methodology, referencing certain theorists or approaches, or even the choice of one word over another can all signal insider attachments which may be opaque to the analyst. Nor is it always marked by words at all: a writer's decision not to draw an obvious conclusion from an argument, for example, may be read by peers as a significant absence. It may not always

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