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Research cultures and the pragmatic functions of humor in academic research presentations: A corpus-assisted analysis☆

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Abstract

Based on a corpus of English, German, and Polish spoken academic discourse, this article analyzes the distribution and function of humor in academic research presentations. The corpus is the result of a European research cooperation project consisting of 300,000 tokens of spoken academic language, focusing on the genres research presentation, student presentation, and oral examination. The article investigates difference between the German and English research cultures as expressed in the genre of specialist research presentations, and the role of humor as a pragmatic device in their respective contexts. The data is analyzed according to the paradigms of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS). The findings show that humor is used in research presentations as an expression of discourse reflexivity. They also reveal a considerable difference in the quantitative distribution of humor in research presentations depending on the educational, linguistic, and cultural background of the presenters, thus confirming the notion of different research cultures. Such research cultures nurture distinct attitudes to genres of academic language: whereas in one of the cultures identified researchers conform with the constraints and structures of the genre, those working in another attempt to subvert them, for example by the application of humor.

Keywords: Humor; Spoken academic discourse; German for academic purposes; English for academic purposes; Research cultures

1. Introduction

This study examines and compares the application of humor as a pragmatic device in research presentations by presenters from different academic environments, namely an English-based research culture on the one hand and a German-based one on the other. It analyzes data from a corpus of spoken academic language compiled for the project *Gesprochene Wissenschaftssprache kontrastiv* 'Spoken academic discourse in contrast' (GeWiss), a European research project involving researchers from Germany, Poland, and the UK. By adopting a corpus-based contrastive analysis, the aim of the project is to examine three genres – specialist research presentation, student presentation, and oral

Abbreviations: BASE, British Academic Spoken English; CADS, Corpus-assisted discourse studies; EAP, English for academic purposes; EXMARaLDA, Extensible Markup Language for Discourse Annotation; GAP, German for academic purposes; GAT2, Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2; GeWiss, Gesprochene Wissenschaftssprache kontrastiv; LSP, Language for specific purposes; MICASE, Michigan Corpus of Spoken Academic English.

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examination – thus contributing to research on spoken academic language, an area still in its infancy (see Flowerdew, 2002; Hyland, 2009; Limberg and Geluykens, 2008; Nesi, 2003).

In an article describing the development of German as a language for academic purposes (GAP), Schiewe (2007) characterizes modern GAP as remote from everyday language, with a high level of abstraction, theory-based terminology, and an increasingly formalized, compact nominal style.[1] English, on the other hand, has a reputation for being less formal and more reader- and audience-friendly (Galtung, 1985; Mair, 2007). This implies that different language-based research environments have produced distinct academic styles (Auer and Baßler, 2007). In one of the first contrastive studies analyzing academic texts in English and German, Clyne (1987) stated that different societies develop specific approaches to knowledge, research, and science. Clyne's study, which examines academic research articles, comes to the conclusion that the German academic style shows some peculiarities which contrast with academic writing traditions in the English-speaking world: a lack of linearity and a particular attitude towards knowledge that can potentially lead to the production of reader-unfriendly texts. According to Clyne (1987: 238), the German tradition tends to idealize knowledge: ''Consequently, texts by Germans are less designed to be easy to read. Their emphasis is to provide readers with knowledge, theory, and stimulus for thought. . . . In English-speaking countries, most of the onus falls on writers to make their texts readable, whereas it is the readers who have to make the extra effort in German-speaking countries so that they can understand the texts, especially if the author is an academic.'' Although these results have been contested by recent studies (Busch-Lauer, 2005; Fandrych and Graefen, 2002), Clyne's general observations tend to be confirmed by the experiences of researchers working in more than one academic culture and also by those explicitly analyzing it, for example Ventola (2007): different rhetorical traditions or discourse patterns apply in different academic cultures and may ''sometimes operate as a barrier to the exchange of scholarship between two related cultures'' (Clyne, 1987: 211). This can also pose substantial difficulties for L2 speakers from a different academic culture. In a globalized environment where English has become the dominant academic lingua franca, the differences between academic cultures are perceived mainly as differences between English-based academic culture and ''the others.''[2]

1.1. The research presentation as a genre of spoken academic discourse

Members of academic disciplines communicate in discourse communities (Hyland, 2009; Swales, 1990) – networks of scholars and researchers who subscribe to a conventionalized use of language and professional practices in order to achieve complex goals in the realms of research and teaching. To become a member of a discourse community, students of an academic discipline need to acquire ''a specialized literacy that consists of the ability to use discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions'' (Berkenkotter et al., 1991: 191). This literacy encompasses various spoken and written genres (Swales, 1990), broadly defined as ''frames for social action which offer users guiding principles for achieving particular recognized purposes by means of language'' (Hyland, 2009: 26).

Whereas considerable research has been conducted on written genres of academic communication, genres of spoken academic discourse still seem to be under-researched (see Flowerdew, 2002; Limberg and Geluykens, 2008; Nesi, 2003). This paper endeavors to contribute to this particular field of study by focusing on research presentations, which, according to Hyland (2009: 86), are key research genres for the dissemination of academic research. Research presentations can range from extended, invited research seminars and keynote lectures on the one hand to shorter, strictly timed parallel papers at conferences on the other. Scholars may present the final, already published results of their research to draw attention to their books or articles, but they also present work in progress, hoping to receive feedback. Research presentations are also an opportunity for researchers to make themselves known personally to people who have previously only read their work. This can be of considerable importance for those who are looking for a job (Kotthoff, 2002). Thus, the research presentation serves a number of purposes, and the self-presentation of the researcher is a vital component in all of them.

Ventola (2002) underlines that researchers who present at conferences or research seminars are acting within certain pragmatic constraints. In Ventola's approach, combining genre and register theory based on Halliday's framework of functional grammar (Halliday, 1994), these constraints are defined by field, tenor and mode. The *field* is normally the

[1] Schiewe emphasizes, however, that this has not always been the case: towards the end of the nineteenth century, a literary-scholarly form of German was used, for example by eminent writers such as Sigmund Freud or Jacob Burkhardt, which addressed the scholarly communities and the educated public alike. According to Schiewe, attempts to formalize the humanities and the social sciences in order to make them appear more ''scientific'' since the 1960s have been responsible for the loss of these qualities in GAP.

[2] These developments are cause for concern to many German scholars and researchers who acknowledge the necessity of a global academic lingua franca but fear the loss of linguistic domains for languages other than English (Ammon, 1998; Debus et al., 2000). For researchers working in both the German- and the English-speaking academic communities, it is apparent that publications in languages other than in English are infrequently cited.