Assertion and Assertiveness in the Academic Writing of Polish EFL Speakers

Jacek Mydla and David Schauffler

Abstract Our experience in Poland is that foreign students of English are influenced by two factors detrimental to their ability to write good academic English. One is rhetorical strategies of their native language; the other is training in academic writing that misrepresents or leads students to misapprehend the contours of academic expression in written English.

In this paper, we mean to address this problem by taking an example of the use of selected pronouns, verbs, and adverbs employed to express assertion of fact, opinion, and assumption in academic writing in the humanities. The verbs *to seem*, *to appear*, and *to prove* are particularly prone to misuse or infelicitous use by Poles writing in English due to influence both from Polish rhetorical habits (in themselves a reflection of culture) and from English language training, which frequently misrepresents the role of the authorial voice in academic writing in English. The function of personal pronouns will also be discussed.

We are not aware of any current research on this area of this topic; therefore, we offer this paper as an invitation for further consideration of the importance of voice and modulation in foreign-authored academic papers. We believe that our remarks can have a wide application, *mutatis mutandis*, for similar problems in other European language communities.

Keywords Academic writing · Assertion · Contrastive rhetorics

J. Mydla (✉) · D. Schauffler
Department of Literary and Cultural Theory, Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia in Katowice, Sosnowiec, Poland
e-mail: jacek.mydla@us.edu.pl; david.schauffler@us.edu.pl

M. Chitez et al. (eds.), *University Writing in Central and Eastern Europe: Tradition, Transition, and Innovation*, Multilingual Education 29,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95198-0_13

1 Introduction

There is an area of composition in a second language that involves neither grammar nor rhetoric as such but rather the semantic domains of words in the first language that the writer may be assuming have more or less exact equivalents in the second language (in this case, English). The use of these words in certain contexts may increase ambiguity that the reader cannot resolve and/or build resistance in the reader that the author is not aware of.

In this article, we concentrate on the use of academic English by non-native-speaking writers in the humanities (e.g., students of literature and culture). We discuss this subject on the basis of problems we have found in English texts written by Polish students. Our considerations are divided into five sections, which address the following issues:

- Basic assertions about the academic use of English in the humanities
- The use of first person pronouns, singular and plural
- The problem of transfer of semantic domain
- Three model or exemplary verbs
- A set of adverbs

We will refer to the context of Polish students of English at the University of Silesia, Poland. The syllabus in English studies includes studies programs at the bachelor's and master's levels (day and extramural modes) in: English literatures and cultures, the methodology of teaching English as a foreign language, and translation studies (combining English and another language, e.g., German, Arabic, or Chinese). In the course of their studies, at both the bachelor's and master's levels, students take courses in English composition, academic writing (and the methodology of academic writing), creative writing, written two-way translation, and written assignments of various lengths and covering a variety of subjects (depending on the studies program). There are also BA and MA diploma seminars in which students write diploma papers of up to 40 pages (an average BA paper) or 70 pages (an average MA paper).

By way of concluding this article, we will present suggestions of how teachers of academic writing in English as a foreign language may deal with problems that have to do with assertion that academic use of English creates for non-native-English-speaking writers.

2 Main Assumption

In this section of the article, we state a set of propositions that will later help us to examine and assess the differences between features of Polish and English academic discourse.

To begin with, we assume that academic discourse is fundamentally argumentative.[1] It is about the presentation of evidence for the acceptance (by the reader or recipient) of a set of propositions. This does not mean that a particular text needs to be argumentative in its entirety, but that persuasion ought not be wholly absent. The goal of the writer is to elicit assent in the target or implied reader. To give this premise yet another formulation: The goal is to propose to the reader a thesis or a "debatable statement"[2] and to offer logically structured argumentation in its support.[3]

3 Discussion

Often, while readily admitting the argumentative purpose of the essay, scholars who do research and publish in the field of academic writing downplay the function or functions of properly handled assertions. For instance, in his otherwise very helpful guidebook for students, Richard Marggraf Turley (2000) stresses the need to tell the reader clearly "what my essay seeks to do" in order to explain, for instance, "my interest in relating literature to the historical period that produced it" (p. 3); in the section of the book attractively entitled "Express yourself," he further stresses the need for "an unambiguous statement of aims outlining the scope of the discussion" (p. 6). Expressing oneself, however, is not what ought to be the prime purpose of essay writing, and of course this is not exactly what Marggraf Turley means. Discursive strategies at work in an essay ought to have the purpose of encouraging assent, i.e., of making the reader think and say: "I see."

As examples of "debatable statements" in the area of literary and cultural studies, we may consider the following:

1. "John Milton's *Paradise Lost* reflects the patriarchal bias of the period or social and cultural milieu in which it was written."
2. "Contemporary popular vampire fiction and film serve as platforms for domestication of otherness and monstrosity."[4]

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[1] Commonly, scholars describe argumentation as the defining feature of one main type of academic writing, namely, the essay, and, more narrowly still, the so-called argument essay (Coffin et al. 2003, p. 22). Neil Murray and Geraldine Hughes (2008, p. 3) name "argumentation" among a number of other "objectives" or "functions": "definition," "description," "classification," "cause-effect," "comparison and contrast."

[2] For the idea of the "debatable" or "thesis" statement see the relevant section at http://wwnorton.com/college/english/litweb10/writing/ "Writing about Literature" (accessed March 31, 2014).

[3] Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore dwell on the paradoxes of academic writing as a process rather than a final product: "Writing requires listening to and being guided by the voices of others, but also it demands your confidence and your willingness to present your own voice, your own perspectives and your own interpretations. … Writing is not just influenced by what we know and what we have discovered about a particular phenomenon, it is also influenced by what we feel, and more particularly, what we feel about ourselves …" (2006, p. 7).

[4] An example from Marggraf Turley's book: "Marriage in Austen's society was perceived as a functional device far removed from an emotional rhetoric." He goes on to improve on this thesis

It is worth reminding ourselves that what makes these and similar statements debatable is an element of dubiousness; they are not—and ought not to be—obvious to readers even if they are familiar with the material (literary or more broadly cultural) to which they refer: the poem in the first case and popular vampire novels and films in the second.

Furthermore, it is necessary to note by way of clarification that our intention is to propose a broad meaning for the term *assertion*. There are, to begin with, different levels of assertion, according to the strength of the statement. To use the language of psychology, we might describe the differences as degrees of certainty in the speaker. We could then represent assertion as denoting a continuum between two extremes: that of absolute certainty (or commitment) and that of absolute doubt. Helpful in this respect is the notion of modality as understood by grammarians:

> From a semantic point of view, in making an assertion such as *It's raining*, speakers express a proposition and at the same time commit themselves to the factuality of that proposition. In ordinary subjective terms, we should say that speakers **know** that their assertion is a fact.
>
> If, on the other hand, speakers say *It must be raining*, or *It may be raining*, they are not making a categorical assertion, but are rather modifying their commitment in some degree by expressing certainty or possibility based on evidence or interference. (Downing and Locke 2006, pp. 379–380; italics and emphasis in the original)

What the notion of modality means for the argument we are advancing here is that assertion is not only—or not really—about knowledge in the sense of absolute commitment (by or in the speaker) to the "factuality of [a] proposition." It is rather about an appropriate level of certainty. In more practical terms, a writer debating the proposition concerning gender bias in Milton's *Paradise Lost* may be making a modest claim on the beliefs of the reader and conclude by introducing various qualifications to the initial proposition, qualifications that will weaken its original "categorical assertion." We can also easily imagine another case, i.e., an essay in which the writer will be making an effort to disprove the proposition that links fictional vampirism and otherness, and will conclude by eliciting this "negative" assertion—doubt or skepticism—in the reader.

What also follows from the premise concerning debatability is that the writer must devise a way or ways of handling assertion. Metaphorically, assertion might be represented as a contract or compact between the writer and the reader; the writer uses verbal (discursive, rhetorical) signals that function as offers of understanding or even companionship (there are varying degrees of familiarity that a given text will seek to establish between the writer and the reader). This kind of discursive familiarity has the obvious goal of eliciting assent in the recipient.

The most common way to establish a link (or a platform) of familiarity is by means of pronouns. There are two options as to how to "place" assertion by means of pronouns:

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statement because he finds it problematic for a number of reasons. But our point is this: As it is, it illustrates well what is meant by debatability.

1. Author/writer (the *I* option)
2. Reader (the *we* option)

We now proceed to examine both these options.[5]

There is no general agreement as to the use of the first person singular in academic discourse, regardless of the language. Indeed, the users of Polish and English feel that *I* introduces an element of subjectivity, unwelcome in that it effectively weakens the assertiveness of argumentation simply by limiting its range to one person, that of the writer. The introduction of a personal point of view is thus counterproductive; by saying, for instance, "In my opinion…," the writer suggests that the reader is not expected to agree.

Verbs of perception and cognition are especially to be avoided: "I have heard…," "I understand…,", and "I know…," unless of course perception and cognition themselves supply the evidence or have a role to play in the argument (issues raised by "to seem" and "to appear" will be addressed later in this article). Principally, the reader is not interested in the mental processes of the writer themselves but rather in their results. In this sense, academic discourse is anti-Cartesian, as we might put it. The pitfalls of Cartesian solipsism should be avoided at all cost. "I am thinking, therefore I am" is a strong enough statement in its own right, yet at the same time an extreme case of subjectivism.

Is the first person plural an option? One purpose of using it is simply to guide the reader through the text: "In this section, we look at examples of…" or "For the sake of clarity let us assume that…." In this function, the *we* form can be replaced by the *I* form, but sounds more friendly and less solipsistic. The reader guidance includes other formal strategies that a typical academic text requires, e.g., summarizing, paraphrasing, and defining. Another and more significant purpose of using *we* forms is to create a platform of mutual agreement between the writer and the reader: "We know that…" and "We can see clearly now that…." These and similar expressions and phrases invite the reader to share assertion, as it were, with the writer. The writer in a way congratulates her- or himself on having successfully completed the task of reaching the anticipated conclusions.

Problems, however, can easily be foreseen. The kind of imposed companionship or solidarity that *we* suggests may be rejected by the reader; the reader may become excessively suspicious and skeptical. This danger of excessive doubt and skepticism (in the original sense of "suspension of judgement") is greater or smaller in proportion to the cultural sensitivity, as we might call it, of the subject matter in hand. By this we understand the special quality (or set of features) of a problem that causes the reader "to feel strongly" about it. A writer within the area of literary and cultural studies ought to be aware of—and alert to—the fact that the subject matter being

[5] It is fair to state that for some scholars there is no room for personal pronouns in academic writing due to their informality. In *Academic Writing Course* (Jordan 2003), in a section on style, we read: "Personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we* tend not to be used in more formal writing (except in letters, etc.). Instead the style may be more impersonal. An introductory *it* or *there* may begin sentences or even the impersonal pronoun *one*; passive verb tenses may also be used" (p. 92; see also Hartley 2008, p. 3).

addressed is much more sensitive than in the fields of exact science (*Naturwissenschaften*). Issues raised by Milton's representation of gender roles are in this respect very different indeed from, say, questions suggested by irregularities in blood pressure in humans, even though the latter are of far greater practical significance.

The *we* platform in scientific discourse may in most cases be avoided as out of place and an unnecessary encumbrance.[6] But de-personalized discourse in the realm of *Geisteswissenschaften* may be regarded as equally inappropriate, and this regardless of the allure of "objectivity" that some "humanists" still find difficult to resist. To avoid conducting one's discourse *more geometrico* does not have to entail giving up on objectivity. The objectivity of literary and cultural discourse consists in reaching an agreement, a consensus; the objective is the sharing of a belief. If appropriately used, the *we* forms will be helpful in producing this result. In the simplest of terms, two extremes should be avoided. One the hand, the hyper-objectivity modelled after scientific exactness: Axioms and definition generate theorems, and assertion is at best little more than inessential "psychic" accompaniment. On the other hand, the irrevocable *credo* or *cogito* excludes solipsism, which precludes all negotiation.[7]

Let us now take a look at some ways in which habits of presentation (and especially of assertion) in L1 (Polish) may combine with specific problems in semantics and infelicitous translation to exacerbate the foreign student's ability clearly to frame an argument in L2 (English).

The tendency of writers schooled in Polish rhetorical habits to avoid use of first person pronouns (or equivalent verb forms) in academic discourse may engender a disorienting uncertainty as to the authorship or endorsement of the views being expressed. This difficulty is compounded when other authorities are being quoted or paraphrased, and in some conditions confusion on these grounds may not only alienate the reader's sympathies, but compromise the research value of the whole work. The reader's inability clearly to distinguish between (1) arguments that the writer is advancing, (2) arguments that the writer is citing but not endorsing, (3) arguments that the writer is citing and endorsing, and (4) statements that the writer is stipulating to be taken as matters of fact can lead the reader simply to dismiss the

[6] We exclude from this discussion the obvious and unavoidable use of *we* to denote authorial intent when a paper has more than one author, which is also, of course, the present case.

[7] Worth noting is Toby Fulwiler's (2002) level-headed explanation (and the advice attached to it) placed under the heading "subjectivity": "In many disciplines, your personal opinion may not be worth very much; in others it will be. In the more interpretive disciplines, such as history, philosophy, and literature, you will generally find more room for *personal interpretation* than in the more quantitative disciplines, such as chemistry, physics, and mathematics. (The social sciences fall somewhere in between.) To be safe, whenever you make an academic assertion in any discipline, use the best evidence you can find and document it. But in all disciplines, your own reasoned, and necessarily subjective judgment will at some times be necessary; if it is, just be sure to state it as such ('In my opinion…' or 'It seems to me…') and give the best reasons you can" (p. 59; emphasis in the original).

paper in its entirety as a farrago of unattributable and unsupported propositions, however convincing, on their own account, some of these may be.

The chances for this unfortunate outcome may be increased due to a phenomenon that, while we will only sketch it here on the basis of brief examples of the relation between Polish and English, certainly exists on a wide scale in the relations between any two languages, namely, an insufficient knowledge on the part of the writer of key semantic disjunctions between L1 and L2. Because most students are taught academic English by speakers of their own language, the existence of these treacherous inequivalencies, or the danger to clear argumentation that they pose, may not be adequately addressed in the writing classroom.

Our first set of examples[8] is concerned with three English verbs often used by Poles writing academic English. In the first case, the Polish verb *wydawać się* is translated into English conventionally and in dictionaries using the verbs "to seem" and "to appear." The latter two verbs occur with high frequency in academic papers written by Poles who are unaware, however, that their meaning differs crucially from that of the accepted Polish equivalent. The Polish verb *wydawać się* denotes appearance, but suggests unambiguously that the appearance is trustworthy, if not exhaustive, and that conclusions can be based on it. ("*Wydajesz się zmęczona*." "You seem tired.")[9] While the English verbs may include, depending on context, this sense of the reliability of appearance, they more frequently suggest, as the Polish verb does not, that the appearance of a thing is either deceptive or too incomplete to warrant inference. In academic writing, the very important sense that a statement or state of affairs is incompletely known, but—in the author's judgment—can still be relied upon or taken for as being sufficient, is expressed in English by a series of qualifications, e.g., "It seems evident that…," "He appears clearly to have been…," and "This seems to compel us to conclude…." Such devices are employed to convey a sense of assurance that does not imply a boastful claim to perfect knowledge, but they are generally not employed by Poles, who see no use for them, finding exactly that sense contained in the verb *wydawać się* by itself and therefore, they assume, in its English equivalents. This leads Polish writers to produce English constructions such as the following: "Randall Jarrell appears to be a very controversial poet," "Prof. Smith seems to be unquestionably more correct than Prof. Brown," and "This seems to be an indisputable argument." In these cases and many similar ones, the reader is unable to clearly gauge the relation of the writer and thus, presumably, the intended relation of the reader him- or herself to the statement: Should the verb in question be given the weight of a copula (which in all three examples would very

[8] Examples quoted here and subsequently are all taken from papers written by BA and MA students of the authors and their colleagues at the University of Silesia; irrelevant details of the quoted excerpts have been changed.

[9] It might be noted in passing that the verb *wydawać się* is treacherous also because Poles tend to use the "to be" infinitive (Pl. *być*) after it (as if mimicking the English "to seem to be"), e.g., "*Wydawał się być zmęczony*." ("He seemed to be tired."), which is incorrect. See the entry for *wydać* in *Słownik poprawnej polszczyzny* [Dictionary of Correct Polish Usage] (1995) Warszawa: PWN.

likely have been the intention of the Polish-speaking author), or should the reader expect a counter-proposition, confirming that "things are seldom what they seem"?

A different effect, though it is an example of the same problem, results from difficulties in the relation between the Polish verb *udowodnić* and its standard English equivalent, "to prove."[10] Once again, convention and dictionary practice make this translation an almost automatic one for students; however, they may remain unaware, first, that while *udowodnić* can sometimes be taken to express the hard sense of the English word "to prove," both its etymology and its semantic field are centered on the notion "to adduce evidence," and this is a far less forceful concept than that conveyed by the English verb, and, second, that by custom, writers of formal English eschew use of the verb "to prove" unless they are discussing matters of historical or scientific fact or are engaged in overt polemics. "To prove" is a word treated with great caution in papers written in the fields of literary and cultural studies, and even the social sciences, when statistics or physical evidence are not at hand, and the unexpected appearance of this verb to assert value judgements or critical opinions where English typically uses "to suggest," "to demonstrate," "to argue," "to show," etc., may easily startle a reader and put her or him off the writer's argument.

Examples of statements exhibiting this infelicitous use taken from Polish students' papers are as follows: "Prof. Miller's analysis proves that John Donne is unquestionably a master of allegory." "This opinion proves how much Spencer influenced Milton." "Dreiser's socialism is proved by the remark of Prof. Curtis, that…." Here the likelihood of psychological resistance on the part of the English-speaking reader is very high; a categorical statement of proof in matters that, regardless of evidence, are not thought to be subject to "proof" of any kind sounds at best like a coarse misuse of language or, worse, an unwarranted claim to certainty which vitiates the author's academic credibility. A negative reaction of this kind could be entirely avoided, however, were the author to use instead of "prove" such common English constructions as "goes to show" (for the first two examples given above) or "testified to" (for the third).

The cases of verb employment cited here, unlike those of the use of personal pronouns discussed earlier, reflect no important difference in rhetorical strategies between L1 and L2, but show how minor differences in meaning between translation-equivalent words or phrases, when not fully understood, can exacerbate the problems a writer has with meeting the rhetorical expectations of the L2 readership.

A more clearly rhetorical problem with the transfer of L1 strategies to L2, which will also serve as our second example of difficulties we witness in the case of Polish-to-English writing, concerns the use of adverbs, specifically adverbs of manner. Here we refer to a habit that is exceedingly common in Polish formal writing of establishing a convivial spirit of solidarity between author and reader, which serves a purpose similar to the use of the first person plural voice. This habit is to litter the text with hortatory adverbs, giving exuberant advice on how it is to be read. Some

[10] Here we address only the meaning of the verb "to prove" that denotes establishment beyond question of matters of fact.

indication of this habit is provided in the examples already made, and we may adduce a few more: "Hawthorne is indisputably a great master of ambiguity," "Prof. Davis undeniably shows how well Lowell understood Freud," and "Prof. Black magnificently describes the unparalleled qualities of this passage." The infelicity here has not so much to do with exaggeration or overstatement (though it takes this form), but with the fact that English-speaking readers, especially in an academic context, are not receptive to advice about how to read a given argument: A bald exhortation to share the author's opinion, however warmly it is expressed, is likely to arouse suspicion and resistance and thus create an effect just the opposite to that which was intended.

It is to be noted that the foregoing problems are not the result of students ignoring or failing to incorporate the advice of their teachers. In our experience, teachers at all levels of the English and academic writing programs in Polish schools and universities fail themselves to be aware of these and similar problems. Rather, they enthusiastically pass on to students advice on the writing of texts in English that reflect their own convictions that come from the Polish language about successful rhetoric and continue to grade students' English-language papers according to criteria that are often inappropriate to English-language academic texts. A final problem with rhetorical strategies can be noted in this regard, and this one has almost entirely to do with faulty pedagogical methods. This is the encouragement that students receive to bridge sentences and paragraphs with linking adverbs, almost solely on the grounds of "smoothness" or a vaguely conceived "fluency" and entirely without regard to the fact that these linking terms set up a specific relation between the statement that precedes them and that which follows. Students will, therefore, in good faith, use "moreover," "thus," "furthermore," "in connection with which," "therefore," and other such expressions interchangeably, with no apparent awareness that each differs materially from the others and signals to the reader a particular expectation of the relation between the antecedent and consequent statements.

Because the rhetorical values of Polish are founded upon different circumstances and principles than those of English, it is difficult for Polish students to absorb the idea that a more or less direct "translation" of their own stylistic habits into English might have unexpected, indeed inimical, effects upon the reception of their text. One category of such effects that we have outlined in the foregoing remarks is the uncertainty, estrangement, or even dislike that an English-speaking reader may feel when confronted with a paper in which a clear line of argument is not posted by conventional markers of authorial viewpoint and attitude towards the subject, towards the sources engaged in during the discussion, and towards the reader.

Aesthetic principles—among which we include rhetorical habits—may be the most powerfully cathected and strongly held of the manifold interests that people absorb from their own culture and upbringing. We propose that they are therefore a singularly difficult obstacle to confront, both for students themselves and for their instructors at the level of advanced second-language learning, when the writing of academic papers in the target language is addressed. Though the particular cases discussed above and the advice appended below are based upon our experience with

the relative characteristics of Polish and English, we are sure that the issues touched upon here are relevant to all L1 backgrounds.

Polish students of English copy into their academic papers strategies proper to the way the Polish language is used in academic discourse. However, by calling such strategies "proper to the language" we do not mean that they are always felicitous and never unambiguous. On the contrary, as we have seen, some fixed expressions and phrases through their common use have the tendency to "disappear" before the eyes of the reader. Their conveyance into another language, here English, brings them back into view often with the result of exposing their infelicity and ambiguity.

Typical of the use of Polish for academic purposes are strategies of avoiding or shifting assertion away from the first person singular. Polish writers of English tend to overuse passive and non-personal forms of verbs. The writer sits awkwardly between the subject matter in hand and the reader. Assertion is supposed to "take care of itself." The writer may feel that the burden of asserting is too heavy to carry; the reasons for this kind of avoidance may be largely cultural (and this applies, as we have suggested above, in the case of many other European languages whose speakers are tasked with composition in English). Furthermore, the relation that Polish students writing in their own language have to the sources they cite, and the clarity with which they distinguish their own argument from the arguments made by the authorities quoted, differs markedly from the customary relation that obtains in English academic writing: Poles will often quote and then paraphrase a given authority and fail to give their own comment on the paraphrased argument, leaving the reader uncertain about its relation to the author's argument and therefore all too often about the nature of the author's argument itself.

4 Conclusions

Our considerations have allowed us to formulate some suggestions that academic writing teachers who have encountered the issues identified above may find helpful:

Identify assertion strategies native to the students' language. Use translation to see if and to what extent they can be transferred into English. Examine the results for their clarity and whether or not they violate the usage of the equivalents in English.

Work out means of teaching students proper (i.e., L1-to-English) ways of placing assertion in the second language (English). Help students to become familiar and comfortable with these. Show to students where in their texts there is room for assertiveness.

Insist on clear distinctions between the student writers' opinions and opinions found in sources or elsewhere. Make sure that students do not confuse primary with secondary sources. Help students to see that statements in secondary sources are not "holy writ" but are debatable.

Insist that students come up with their own debatable statements about the material in hand.

Practice striking a fine balance between the three options discussed in our paper. Absolute consistency may not be possible or indeed welcome. Flexibility, in the sense of keeping a careful eye on the subject matter and the kind of handling it requires, comes before consistency.

Encourage students to err on the side on direct speech rather than indirection in their academic use of English. Accustom students to the idea that academic writing, like any other use of language, entails personal responsibility and that there is no point in shirking it.

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