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Writer Accountability and Discourse Voice in Academic English: A Study of the Verb 'Emerge'

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ABSTRACT

Most research around the world today is reported in English, and when academics put on record their findings and describe how they reached them there is an obligation for them to do so in ways that allow their readers to understand unambiguously. In other words, academic authors should always endeavour to make claims and to report results in an explicit manner, and to avoid, as far as possible, concealment of their own biases and subjectivity. This paper examines instances of the lexeme EMERGE in a small corpus of articles extracted randomly from three journals in the fields of education and applied linguistics. Analysis of the data collected in this way leads to three main findings. Firstly, the grammatical subject of the verb 'emerge' is almost always an inanimate noun denoting an abstract concept, such as 'pattern', 'attribute' or 'picture'. Secondly, statements involving an abstract subject plus 'emerge' often occur when academic writers are either putting forward interpretations of data or reporting results. Thirdly, statements involving an abstract subject plus 'emerge' are almost never hedged. While it is accepted that the limitations associated with this small-scale study of a single verb are very considerable, these findings ha ve implications for academic writers who want to abide by their obligations to make clear statements and to take responsibility for them. It is argued that greater use of 'personal style' (making appropriate use of first-person pronouns), is one way to do this – while using the verb 'emerge' in the ways described above, on the other hand, is indicative of low authorial discourse presence and the concealment of the writer's responsibility for claims and interpretations made.

Introduction

It need scarcely be stated that English is currently the predominant language used by academics when presenting their research findings in speech or in writing, but if evidence is needed, it is apparent, for example, in data provided by Crystal (2012: 93) concerning the percentage of the world's academic journals, across a range of disciplines, published entirely in English. In a related development, outside the Anglophone countries (such as UK, USA and Australia), many universities have begun in recent decades to offer some or all of their academic programmes to students through the medium of English. Coleman (2006) and the collection of papers edited by Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2012) provide examples. University centres helping students to acquire skills in using English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have also been a feature of higher education for at least forty years – with the term 'EAP' being used for the first time in 1974, according to

Jordan (1997: 1). These centres, too, have spread globally, having initially been evident in the countries of Kachru's (1985) inner circle.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, given the ubiquity of academic English in the contemporary world, that many applied linguists have focused their attention on the genre, scrutinizing it, for example, via corpus data (e.g. Thompson and Tribble, 2001; Gilquin et al. 2007) or, like Malmström (2007), considering it as 'discourse'. Malmström (op. cit.: 40) makes a point relevant to the present paper when he argues that "academic discourse cannot be seen as a single and easily identified type of discourse" and that "it is difficult to say exactly what academic discourse is like."

In fact, the notion of 'discourse' is itself a rather slippery one, understood and operationalized in different ways by different scholars. Some writers use it in the Foucauldian sense, characterized by O'Halloran (2003: 12) as referring to "the way in which knowledge is organized, talked about and acted upon in different institutions." Others see 'discourse' as Fairclough (1995), for example, does, as a "way of signifying experience from a particular perspective." Finally, some academics use the term without feeling the need to define it at all: see, for instance, Fisher (2007).

According to Malmström (2007), 'discourse' is a concept which relates both to the production of texts (by authors) and to textual interpretation (by readers). This is broadly Fairclough's view of discourse. Fairclough (1989: 24) argues that discourse is tied up with both "the process of production, of which the text is the product, and the process of interpretation, for which the text is a resource." For Malmström (2007: 44) discourse can be seen as "a certain way of speaking about and understanding the world through experiences we have in verbal communication and social interaction." Yet as we have already seen, when it comes to the exact nature of academic discourse, Malmström (2007: 40) seems less assured, and states that it is difficult to characterise academic discourse with any great precision. Rather than committing himself, he relies to a large extent on other scholars to provide illumination. He cites Elbow (1991: 140) who argues that academic discourse necessarily involves "the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences" and "being clear about claims and assertions rather than just implying." He also refers to the work of Barras (1984: 101) who sees it as a feature of academic discourse that academics often "show that they are aware of different interpretations" even though, in the end, they may well support just one.

The comments by Elbow and by Barras can perhaps be restated and amplified as follows. Academic discourse (at least with special reference to the social sciences) has the following characteristics (among others): clearly stated claims backed by reasons and evidence; absence of unsupported opinions; and, where appropriate, explicit expression of a range of possible interpretations of phenomena or data. Going a step further, we can extrapolate from this the broad outlines of an attitude, approach or stance that differentiates the academic writer from, say, the writer of poetry or of political polemics: she or he prizes logic over emotion and understands that explanations and theories are provisional and may, in due course, be overturned and replaced by better ones. When viewed from such a standpoint, clear descriptions and explanations are essential to academic discourse, since they allow readers to identify steps in an argument and therefore, in principle, to point out flaws or even to demolish an entire intellectual edifice.

The focus of the present paper is very narrow: it addresses only instances of the verb 'emerge' in academic papers published in a small range of journals. However, although its scope is limited, the paper combines discussion of purely linguistic aspects of academic prose with attention to issues around the notions of the academic writer's accountability for claims and interpretations made. It also focuses briefly on issues relating to 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' that are of profound significance for the conduct and presentation of research across the disciplines. More precise objectives of the paper are set out in the following section.

Objectives

In the present paper I analyse examples of the use of the verb 'emerge' in academic texts from the social sciences. In discussing these examples, I make the assumption (as stated above) that high quality academic discourse is expected to exhibit clarity and rigour. The purpose of the analysis is to examine the extent to which academic writers use 'emerge' (consciously or unconsciously) as a means of concealing authorial agency or drawing a veil over their own accountability for matters such as the interpretation of data and the identification of final results. This statement can be rephrased as the following research question: To what extent do academic writers use the verb 'emerge' to conceal authorial agency when interpreting data or reporting final results?

I shall argue, based on the preceding elucidation of the nature of academic discourse, that when writers do these things they necessarily (but perhaps unintentionally) they fail to abide by the scholarly author's obligation to take responsibility, explicitly in the text, for his or her own claims, theories and actions.

Methodology

In order to carry out the analysis presented here I first collected together 25 articles from three journals of which I happened to have either hard or soft copies to hand: the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (9 articles), *Higher Education* (7), and *Applied Linguistics* (9). The total number of running words in the articles is approximately 150,000. The articles were published in either 2009 or 2010 and so, taken together with the nature of the journals' content, it can be seen that the sample is drawn from relatively recent academic writing in what might loosely be called the social sciences. As the articles were those I could find in hard copy around my office or in soft copy on various disks, the data analysed here might well be regarded as a convenience sample. 77 instances of various forms of the lexeme EMERGE were identified in the collected articles. I also make sparing use in this paper of examples taken from non-academic sources when these seem to be apposite. Quotations from eleven of the collected articles occur in the text of the present paper and it is only for these that full details are given in the final list of references.

Literature Review

It is impossible to pursue objectives of the kind set out above without making reference to the work of Professor Ken Hyland, whose published work on academic

English has addressed several issues and notions which are relevant to the present paper, such as metadiscoursal practices of academic writers, representation of the self in text, and indicators of authorial 'stance' in academic texts. I shall begin this section by noting a few key insights from Hyland's work.

In a paper on "authorial identity" Hyland (2002a: 1092) rightly mentions that the use of first person 'I' in academic discourse is problematic for both novices and experienced writers since it raises issues about "the extent to which one can reasonably explicitly intrude into one's discourse or assert one's personal involvement." Drawing on work by Ivanič (1998) he notes that one aspect of writer identity is what might be called the 'authorial self', manifested in the degree to which academic authors use the first person pronoun in statements that explicitly show authorial responsibility for content or as Hyland puts it (2002a: 1093) to "get behind their statements."

I have invented two examples which, as I understand it, illustrate the kind of thing Hyland discusses.

Taking authorial responsibility ('personal style')

In this paper I shall argue that Nixon's theory is deeply flawed.
The results I have obtained do not, in my view, support Hypothesis 1.

Concealing authorial responsibility ('impersonal style')

It is argued that Nixon's theory is deeply flawed.
The results that emerge do not support Hypothesis 1.

Hyland's (2002a) paper concerns student writing, and among other things leads to the conclusion that students in his data tended to avoid asserting their own responsibility for statements and chose instead to conceal ownership of their own views and positions. However, as we have seen, Hyland also notes that these issues are problematic for all academic writers and not just for students, who may avoid the use of authorial 'I' for all sorts of reasons: for example, because they have been taught that an impersonal style is required in academic discourse or because as relative novices they feel it would be impertinent to assert claims or generalizations too forcefully.

Hyland (2002b: 353) makes an important point when he differentiates between academic writers who "use the first person when they are presenting their claims and bottom-line results" and those who "adopt a less personal style to help strengthen an impression of objectivity by subordinating their own voice to that of their results." Hyland's views here show close interrelation with those of Malmström (2007: 47) when discussing the notion of 'discourse voice' as experienced via academic texts. He sees this as "pertaining to how…'visible' or 'present' (or conversely 'invisible' or 'absent')" the author is at particular moments in the discourse. I hope to show that, in some cases, academic authors use the verb 'emerge' when (consciously or unconsciously) concealing their own accountability for particular statements or interpretations. At such moments authorial 'I' is not evident and the writer himself or herself is 'invisible' or 'absent'.

All these issues also show strong connections to Hyland's view of metadiscourse. Hyland (2015) argues that one aspect of metadiscourse is the way authors assiduously monitor the possible reactions of readers as they create their texts. For example, academic writers make use of hedging devices that, as Hyland puts it, "withhold complete commitment to a proposition." Hedging may take place when writers are somewhat unsure of the propositions they advance or when they do not wish to make it easy for readers to show such propositions or claims to be false. Yet a Popperian reading of the progression of scientific knowledge might suggest that it is better for academic authors to make assertions boldly (thus leaving them open to the risk of refutation) rather than weakening their claims through the use of such words as 'may' and 'might' and 'possibly'. As we shall see below, I think that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the verb 'emerge' is sometimes used in a similar but slightly different way by academic writers. That is, authors occasionally make use of it when disguising their own influence on results or their own intellectual work in reaching particular interpretations of data.

My comments above are in line with arguments put forward by Hyland (2005: 176) in relation to authorial 'stance' in academic writing. As Hyland puts it (loc. cit.) an academic writer's 'stance' relates to the way she or he conveys judgements, opinions and commitments. It also, he goes on to say, concerns the ways in which such writers "stamp their personal authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement." In my view, in many cases the verb 'emerge' occur precisely in stretches of text in which the writer is trying to disguise his or her involvement. Examples are given later in this paper. For further discussion of the concept of 'stance', see Hunston (2011), chapter two.

Finally in this brief review of scholarly literature relevant to the present paper, I should like to consider the notions of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. As Phillips (1993: 58) observes, over many decades it has been the case in the academic discussion of the reporting of research that "the term *objective* is commendatory, whereas *subjective* carries negative connotations." It is still possible, for a researcher who is active in the social sciences, such as Davies (2012: 750), to declare that "Using 'I'…goes against the grain of academic writing" as does. Yet many of those who think deeply about what research is, and how reliable (or 'objectively true') its findings can be, would agree with Eisner (1993: 54) who argues that "knowledge is always constructed relative to a framework, to a form of representation, to a cultural code, and to a personal biography." Personally I find the Eisner view here persuasive, and for that reason I consider that academic writers should seek to be as open as possible about how personal factors (including political beliefs) might have influenced their research and their findings. In part that might involve using the first person ('I' or 'we') when reporting research and when advancing findings. Certainly it should entail the clear and unambiguous presentation of claims (without undue hedging) and explicit statements of authorial responsibility for such things as interpretation of data and exposition of results. An excellent paper arguing that researchers should declare and assess their personal biases through "a reflexive approach" is offered by Greenbank (2003).

For the reasons sketched out above, therefore, this highly selective literature has concluded with what I consider to be an explicit expression of my own views on subjectivity and objectivity in research (or, at least, on research in the social sciences) and

on the use of first person pronouns in academic writing. In my view the reader is now able to understand from what intellectual standpoint I address issues surrounding the use of the verb 'emerge' in academic prose.

Findings

As explained above, the purpose of the present study is to seek answers to the following research question: To what extent do academic writers use the verb 'emerge' to conceal authorial agency when interpreting data or reporting final results? I shall do this by examining the 77 instances of various forms of the lexeme EMERGE found in the small corpus of journal papers I assembled.

Here I present three main findings, based on this data. Firstly, the grammatical subject of the verb 'emerge' is almost always an inanimate noun denoting an abstract concept, such as 'pattern' or 'attribute'. Secondly, statements involving an abstract subject plus 'emerge' often occur when academic writers are either putting forward interpretations of data or reporting results. Thirdly, statements involving an abstract subject plus 'emerge' are almost never hedged. I shall deal with each of these findings in turn.

If we exercise our intuitions about contexts in which the verb 'emerge' is used, it may well be that we first think of cases in which an animate noun is its grammatical subject. In such cases a person or living thing comes out into view: "*She emerged from the sea, blue with cold*" (Cambridge Dictionary online). However, in academic writing instances of this sort are very rare indeed. Examination of the data in my small corpus shows that the verb 'emerge' almost never has an animate noun as grammatical subject. Instead, the grammatical subjects associated with 'emerge' are typically inanimate singular or plural nouns denoting abstract concepts, such as 'category', 'factor' or 'differences'. Here are examples from the corpus of journal articles I assembled.

Early intentions **emerge** as a good predictor of later outcomes (Croll 2009: 409).
In the accounts given by GRT children a picture of the intersection of different communities **emerged** that encompassed their experiences of life within and outside the school (Myers & Bhopal, 2009: 418).
The GRT community that **emerged** in our research exhibited strong local, socially negotiated attachments to particular spaces (Myers and Bhopal 421).
Specifically Sweden, where no student admitted copying with high frequency, and Ireland and the UK, **emerge** as the least prone to having a very regular propensity towards cheating (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010: 678).
Analyzing the percentages of students that claimed to have never copied, once again the Scandinavian, the US and British Isles, and the New Zealand blocks, **emerge** here as having the 'more honest' undergraduates (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010: 677).
In a two-way ANOVA, with respondents' sex and occurrence of first-degree medical relatives in the respondents' family versus not as the two factors and respondents' age as the dependent variable, a significant interaction effect of these two factors on respondents' age **emerged** (Voracek et al., 2010: 743).

Even from these relatively limited data, a picture begins to **emerge** of how RAE results could help to inform the development of research strategy at an institutional and department level (Reidpath & Allotey, 2010: 794).

Indeed, the message **emerging** here is that the university itself must start to speak for these community stakeholders, and encourage government and other actors to imbue them with legitimacy, resources and urgency (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010: 585).

…looking for 'category sets which **emerge** from the exploration of our data' (Byrne 2002: 100, cited in Sealey, 2010).

Of all the attributes recorded in the database, just one **emerges** as shared among all but two of this particular group of women: their classification by 'marital status' is single or widowed (Sealey, 2010: 229).

When collecting these data, I also noticed that many instances of 'emerge' occur when writers are either presenting interpretations of data or reporting conclusions. Here are some examples:

New categories **emerged**, changed and were refined as the data were scrutinised many times over for patterns and linkages (Sim & Print, 2009:387).

In many ways the picture that **emerged** of GRTs in the borough was ambiguous (Myers & Bhopal, 2009: 424).

A far more complex picture of how GRT 'community' materialised in daily life also **emerged** (Myers & Bhopal, 2009: 431).

There are several themes that **emerge** from a close reading of this material (McCaig & Adnett, 2009: 232).

Context **emerges** as a very important factor in influencing the decision to cheat (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010: 693).

A similar pattern **emerged** when considering only first-degree relatives active in the fields of medicine (Voracek et al., 2010: 743).

Female students are less prone to commit fraudulent acts—whereas age **emerges** as a negative relevant determinant (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010: 692).

It is also apparent that in cases of the kind shown in both sets of examples above, hedging is exceedingly rare. We do not find academic authors preceding 'emerge' with modal verbs such as 'may' or 'might', or in other ways indicating the possibility, rather than certainty, that something emerged. Instead, the texts in the corpus generally contain straightforward unhedged declarations such as 'A emerges' or 'B emerged'.

Also noticeable in the data is the fact that several sentences involve 'a picture' that 'emerges' or 'emerged'. This seems to be evidence of a semi-fixed phrase or chunk (Howarth, 1996; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992) used by academic writers. When I conducted a further search for variants of this phrase, I found that most examples identified via Google Scholar appear to emanate from academic texts in the scientific and medical fields. See examples below:

The picture that emerges from this set of experiments is that cytochrome b5 perturbs one layer of lipid around the hydrophobic segment of the protein (Freire et al., 1983).

The picture that emerges is that RNA silencing is an evolutionarily conserved gene-regulatory mechanism with many species-specific variations (Meister and Tuschl, 2004).

The picture that emerges from these findings is strikingly consistent with statistical decision models that have been developed during the past 40 years in mathematical psychology (Smith and Ratcliff, 2004: 161-162).

However, it must be noted that 'pictures' also quite often 'emerge' in my data from journals in the social sciences.

Discussion

Verb meaning, like word meaning generally, is essentially fuzzy. As Aitchison (1997: 65) notes, "woolly boundaries and fuzzy edges are the norm" and the related phenomenon of polysemy has also in recent decades been much discussed by lexical semanticists and computational linguists (e.g. Riemer, 2005; Copestake and Briscoe 1995). Numerous scholars and lexicographers have offered definitions of the term 'polysemy'. For example, Liddicoat and Curnow (2004: 45) state that it refers to a situation where "a word has two or more related but distinguishable meanings" – and they offer the example of the English word 'chip', which can variously mean 'a bit of wood', 'a piece of cooked potato' or 'an internal component of a computer'. These senses are distinct yet share at least one common semantic factor: they all relate to a small piece of something. Something similar can be said about the verb 'emerge'. As will be seen below, emergence can be literal and seen by the eyes of an observer (as in a mouse emerging from a hole in the skirting board) or abstract and arising from thought (as in a particular insight emerging from consideration of a theory). These senses of 'emerge/emergence' are discrete, although they both evoke the image of something (X) coming out from something else (Y).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding issues of fuzziness and polysemy, in considering examples of 'emerge' in academic writing, both within and outside my small corpus of journal papers, I have identified three main categories. These are: (1) literal, where the verb 'emerge' is used to denote that something comes into view which was previously hidden from sight; (2) general statements about the world, where the verb 'emerge' (normally in the present simple tense) is used to describe a state of process that happens habitually or naturally; and (3) glossing over author accountability, where the verb 'emerge' is used when describing the results of research or the interpretation of data. As will be apparent from the preceding section (Findings) it is type (3) which is of most interest here. Below I give an example for each category, but first I would like to explain why not all 77 instances of 'emerge' are listed in this paper.

> Multiculturalism **emerged** in the mid-1960s as a response to the struggle of the African-American civil rights movement in the United States (Resnik, 2009: 219).
> In its place has **emerged** a competitive global hierarchy that 'league-tables' countries into economic winners and economic losers (Hay, 2009: 290).
> One significant aspect of economic globalisation to **emerge** in recent years – glaringly ignored in Federal Labor's policy documentation – is the differential pattern of economic development that advantages some communities while forcing others into decline (Hay, 2009: 299).

It will be seen that examples of this kind do not fit into any of the three categories I describe below. They do not involve 'literal' emergence into view (as in "She emerged from the sea") and they do not occur within what one might call 'general laws' (as in "Grizzly bears emerge from hibernation in early March"). They do show some similarity with category three below, but examples of category three involve the interpretation of an author's own research data or the reporting of findings. In my view, this is not so in examples such as those shown above. However, given the 'fuzziness' described earlier, separating out a finite number of categories based on sense or use is intrinsically difficult.

Here are the three categories which my analysis of the data produced.

1. *Literal*
   A badger <u>emerged</u> at the entrance to a sett, twirling its nose to test the air like an expert sommelier (Barkham, 2014).
2. *General Statement*
   The reader should know that the sex ratio of butterflies (including skippers, Hesperiidae) at emergence from the pupa is almost always approximately one-to-one,
   except that males <u>emerge</u> a day or more before females (Scott, 1974).
3. *Glossing over author accountability*
   Context <u>emerges</u> as a very important factor in influencing the decision to cheat (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010: 693).

Category 1 is unproblematic here and will not be discussed further. Examples of the category 2 type differ from those in category 3 because the author is stating something which is accepted as a 'fact' (at least until a scholar respected in the field is able to demonstrate otherwise). Category 3 examples involve the use of the verb 'emerge' to make statements (in fact, claims) which are certainly not yet accepted as 'facts'; indeed, they are often claims being made for the first time. Nevertheless, they are, as we have seen, generally made without hedging. Consider the following variations on the quotation from Teixeira & Rocha (above) which have been produced by the present author:
   Context seems to be a very important factor influencing the decision to cheat.
   It is possible that context should be regarded as an important factor influencing the decision to cheat.

Alternatively the two authors could have introduced themselves into their text, thus signalling to the reader explicitly how this claim comes about:
   In the view of the present authors, context seems to be a very important factor influencing the decision to cheat.

I have argued here that interpretations of data (whether quantitative or qualitative) and the conclusions that are drawn at the end of a research project do not simply 'emerge' (that is, appear automatically, and in the same form for all observers). Rather they are made to 'emerge' by the specific researchers or scholars involved. When authors do not make this explicit in their texts they seem (almost certainly unthinkingly) to be doing three things: making the claims seem incontestable; hiding their own role in causing certain

conclusions or interpretations 'emerge'; and concealing authorial responsibility for a particular written claim or claims.

Limitations

The much-admired novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817) famously characterized her own work as being carried out on a very small scale – as though on "a little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" – and as producing "little effect after much labour". Given that this research involves a small corpus of texts, a single researcher, and consideration of the use of just one verb in academic writing, it is clear that its limitations are severe. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study of the verb 'emerge' does have wider implications for the practice of academic writing and that it has relevance to 'big picture' issues such as the nature, place and linguistic expression of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' in research.

Conclusion

This small-scale study of the verb 'emerge' in academic writing has yielded the following main conclusions. The verb 'emerge' is often used when academic writers report interpretations of their data or when they present results or conclusions. In these contexts, the grammatical subject of the verb is normally an inanimate abstract noun such as 'evidence', 'theme' or 'pattern' and hedging is only very rarely found. Instead it is simply and confidently stated that 'evidence emerged' or 'a pattern emerges'. In other words, categorical statements are made by authors but with low or no authorial discourse presence. I have argued here that in using 'emerge' in this way academic writers conceal their own role in *causing* certain results or interpretations to 'emerge' and I have suggested that it important that writers should abandon such practices and, instead, make explicit their own involvement and personal biases in reaching and putting forward those results or interpretations.

Further research could focus on other verbs which occur with high frequency when academic writers interpret data or present results using an impersonal style. There might also be consideration of whether similar phenomena (involving low authorial discourse presence) are observable in other major languages used when reporting research. Finally, research based on a larger corpus of academic writing might well produce more reliable and more insightful results.

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