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Towards Interactive Dynamism: A Recent Current in Academic Writing Studies

Ichiro Koguchi

1. Introduction

Academic Writing is a flourishing branch of EFL studies. A rich variety of approaches have been proposed to study this genre by a number of researchers. Structures, formal features and rhetorical devices, used in research articles, theses, dissertations, abstracts and other ancillary categories, have been extensively explored (e.g., Swales, 1990, 2004; Charles, Pecorari & Hunston, 2009). Thanks to these research efforts, useful study resources have become available both for learners and teachers. In addition to traditional writer's handbooks and style manuals, such as Hacker and Sommers (2012), *MLA Handbook* (2016), *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2019) and Petelin (2022), scholarly guide books on academic writing that draw on specialised research findings have been published and widely circulated. One of the most successful among them is Swales and Feak (2022). Its first edition published back in 1994, this highly acclaimed work has since led to three substantially revised editions. While updating the book, the authors have supplemented it with related publications: a writing resource book comprising extracts from raw data (Swales & Feak, 2000), as well as a series of booklets each targeting a specific category of academic writing (Swales & Feak, 2009; Feak & Swales, 2009a, 2009b). Novice academics are now well-served. It is not impossible even for early-career researchers to produce acceptably "academic" papers by referring to these guidebooks.

While these works cover a range of topics and provide learners and teachers with techniques and data that can meet their educational needs, some of their content inevitably appears challenging while others are more accessible. In fact, Swales and Feak (2022) as a whole will not be a very easy textbook if readers are not given advice from experienced instructors. It is true that the book contains less demanding materials. The units on the structure of a research paper are relatively reader friendly. Of them, the unit on how to write an Introduction to an academic article is particularly lucid as it schematically explains the formal structure of the opening section of a published research paper. The usefulness of the explanation is empirically underpinned by years of research on the functional "moves" of academic articles. A series of shorter columns in the same book called "Language Focus" also include references and tips for improving academic writing skills. Some of them are concerned with clearly definable language features, such as "Mid-position Adverbs" that often characterises formal academic style and "Vocabulary Shift" referring to academic word use distinctive from that of everyday language. These items can perhaps be learned or taught without excessively great effort.

On the other hand, however, the book also offers more challenging topics, e.g. “Evaluative Language” and “Citation and Tense.” These and other similar topics do not cover readily understandable formal features, but they often come with complex linguistic issues, such as those relating to the author’s conscious or unconscious attitudes and their perceptions of the reader. These issues are important and, if handled properly, can contribute to a deeper understanding of academic texts. However, they are frequently difficult to deal with, especially for inexperienced learners.

The current author has published reports on his teaching practices in Academic Writing (Koguchi, 2007, 2022). Some of the topics covered were straightforward items that are less problematic to teach: for instance, articles, collocations, thesis organisation, abstracts and formal language use. More complicated, potentially problematic issues were also discussed: tenses, plagiarism, information order and hedging. However, the overall emphasis of those reports fell on teachability. They were intended to break down complex notions into more elementary units and arrange them in an order suitable for learners to understand with as little effort as possible. The problematic issues of authors’ stance and their awareness of readers did not receive much attention. Rather, academic text was simply viewed as a logical compilation of information.

This tendency is not limited to the current author. As Hyland (2000/2004) points out, until lately many of the studies in English for Academic Purposes regarded texts as “objective, rational and impersonal,” and their principal interest was in providing “students with the generic skills they needed to reproduce” (p. 4) academic texts. The target, in short, was to teach “‘common core skills’ such as describing, summarising, expressing causality, and so on as general principles of a universal academic literacy” (p. 4). Academic writers were expected to bring new ideas and discoveries to their research communities, but on the production level, they were taught merely to flesh out the pre-structured scheme of the research paper using stylised language. This is just like filling out a form or drawing up a CV based on an established template. As this approach was efficient in teaching and effective in improving learner performance, it is no surprise that it was highly regarded and prevalent in practice.

More recently, however, EFL researchers have begun to be aware of a gap in this approach. They have become sceptical about the existing view that academic text is a fairly self-contained, static entity made up of empirical data, logical interpretations and claims. Ken Hyland, probably the most vocal of the proponents of this new school, wrote a seminal book-length study (Hyland, 2000/2004). In its introductory chapter, he contrasts the existing view with the alternative position he is proposing. According to him, the former regards writing as “a means of simply dressing the thoughts that one sent into the world” (p. 6); in other words, it considers texts to be “channels of communicating independently existing truths” (p. 6). This view, according to Hyland, should be replaced by a position based on Social Constructivism that regards knowledge as socially situated.

Knowledge, in this new view, is not a set of ideas in abstraction; rather it is “embedded” (p. 6) in the arguments and consensuses of the members of a research field. Reality is not a straightforward representation of the world but is “constructed through processes that are essentially social” (p. 6). The way one looks at data is a product of conversations between peers. What is called objectivity is thus “consensual intersubjectivity” (Ziman, 1984, as cited in Hyland, 2000/2004, p. 6).

By logical extension, writing is socially embedded. It is “an engagement in a social process” (Hyland, 2000/2004, p. 12). Specifically on academic writing, Knorr-Cetina (1981) remarks that “a published paper is . . . co-produced by the authors and by members of the audience to which it is directed” (as cited in Hyland, 2000/2004, p. 12). This claim will probably be given a broad consent, considering that in the process of writing an academic paper, the author usually negotiates “agreement among colleagues” (p. 12) and attempts to convince “peers to assent to a knowledge claim” (p. 12). In such processes, academic writers “acknowledge prior work” and “situate claims in a disciplinary context,” while they abide by procedures specific to their research communities and show “willingness to negotiate with peers” (p. 12). Thus this perspective regards academic texts as produced by “writer-reader interactions” (p. 19). The focus has now been shifted to the features of text that indicate “traces of social interactions with others engaged in a common pursuit” (p. 1). While the earlier static, objective view has no doubt contributed to the understanding of the structure and basic features of written academic discourse, the new position will be of interest in a different but equally important sense. It can explicate interactive dynamics in writing, and by doing so, is expected to give us a deeper insight on the nature of academic text and text production.

In the following I shall survey this recent research trend. Reviews of this current are already existent, some available as part of a book chapter or of a research article (e.g., Hyland 2000/2004, 2005). Hyland (2005) is especially useful as it refers to theoretical background including Halliday (1978, 1994), Miller (1984), Toulmin (1958), Grice (1975), Nystrand (1989), Kress and Hodge (1993) and Fairclough (1992, 1995). Some more review work needs to be done, however. A focused attention to the functions of adverbial stance markers, for instance, is called for. Though these are key features to explore authorial stance and reader engagement in academic text, research of them has not yet been highlighted in surveys. In view of this, I shall hereby attempt a literature review of the research of discoursal interaction in academic text with reference to reader engagement features, stance markers and adverbs.

2. Stance and Reader Engagement

Interactive dynamics in written discourse presuppose the author’s positioning of themselves vis-à-vis readers as well as issues in discussion. Such positioning can be defined in terms of two

concepts: stance and reader engagement. Stance is "the expression of the writer/speaker's attitudes, opinions, judgements or feelings" (Charles & Pecorari, 2016, p. 100). Stance also is "a textual 'voice'" including "features which refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments" (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). Reader engagement refers to writers' relationship-making with their readers. Writers recognise "the presence of their readers" and try aligning readers' thinking to their own claims by "pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, [and] including them as discourse participants" (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). Hyland (2005), while observing that "stance and engagement are two sides of the same coin" (p. 176), makes an attempt to define them separately. He sees the former as comprising hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mention, and the latter as constituted by reader pronouns, directives, questions, shared knowledge and personal asides (p. 176). It may be possible, by following Hyland, to regard stance as an author-oriented basis of interactions, and reader engagement as more extroverted linguistic actions. These notions are, nonetheless, fundamentally linked. With this conceptual complexity in mind, the following few paragraphs review two earlier studies on linguistic markers to represent writer stance. It will be shown that these markers form a basis for interaction in text and that reader engagement is functionally supported by stance markers.

Years of study in applied linguistics have explicated discourse markers that represent authorial stance. To pursue the definitive chronological origin of such studies may be futile, but it is possible to observe that by the 1980s, studies of stance had been established as a significant research area among discourse studies. Biber and Finegan (1988) provides a brief history of this research interest by citing representative authors (2). Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed the notion of hedging within their theory of politeness. Theoretically aligned with them, Goffman (1981) indicated a similar interest, especially in his conceptualisation of "footing." Chafe's (1985) argument on "evidentials" can be considered to extend this important strand into a more precise categorisation that covered as many as four "labels." Grabe (1984) then used the very term "stance" in his survey of research in second language reading of his time. With this background, Biber and Finegan (1988) conducted a study on stance adverbials.

Using newly available computerised corpora, these authors extracted stance a large number of adverbials and examined them in an cluster analysis. By this procedure, they made an important discovery that stance adverbial uses included instances in which adverbials' literal meanings and actual functions in discourse are significantly different. Adverbials examined in the study were first prescriptively labelled into six categories in accordance with their literal meanings: *honestly* adverbials expressing the manner of speaking, *generally* adverbials of approximation or generalisation, *surely* adverbials which indicate conviction, *actually* adverbials for emphasis or indicating certainty, *maybe* adverbials expressing likelihood or hedging, and *amazingly* adverbials

for attitudes. The subsequent cluster analysis, which obtained as many as eight clusters in terms of frequencies, found that the discourse functions of the six classes of adverbials often differed from their literal meanings. For instance, *actually* adverbials for emphasis could in some cases signify solidarity; *surely* adverbials assumed a "seclusion" function for avoiding confrontational dispute in a certain cluster. This has proved a noteworthy discovery for later Academic Writing studies.

The same authors then extended this line of analysis in the next year to incorporate a wider range of parts of speech and other linguistic phenomena (Biber & Finegan, 1989). In addition to adverbs, adjectives, verbs and modals were examined, as well as hedges and emphatics. Six manners of stance uses were identified: emphatic expression of affect, expository expression of doubt, facelessness, interactive evidentiality, predictive persuasion and oral controversial persuasion. The range of stance functions, along with the uses of stance markers that often go beyond their literal meanings, thus explored by the authors, contributed to forming a foundation for subsequent researchers to build upon. The findings of Biber and Finegan (1989) also include factors closely related to reader engagement; the stances of interactive evidentiality and two kinds of persuasion carry evidently audience-oriented functions. Although the two studies by Biber and Finegan are not specifically focused on written academic discourse, it can be said that the fundamentals that Academic Writing studies could draw upon were established by these authors.

3. Research Attention to In-text Interactions

As shown above, in-text interactions in academic discourse became frequently discussed in the late twentieth century. But it was not until the year 2000, when Ken Hyland first published *Disciplinary Discourses* (Hyland, 2000/2004), that interactions in written academic discourse were systematically investigated. This book-length study made a significant contribution to renewing the awareness of these phenomena in research communities, and it helped to establish them as a major disciplinary sub-genre in English for Specific Purposes. The book's eight chapters cover a nearly comprehensive range of Academic Writing genres: research articles, book reviews, abstracts, scientific letters and textbooks. Interactive features of academic discourse are explored extensively, and research and teaching of these features are also examined. The book puts forward a number of important insights, but for the purpose of assessing Hyland's overall contribution, we should best turn to Chapter 1, in which he details his research perspective and objectives.

In this introductory chapter, Hyland defines his project: it is an attempt to examine academic text as the outcome of social interactions. He also suggests that the manner and characteristics of such interactions tend to be discipline-specific. Interactions and disciplinarity thus emerge as two main strands in this study. According to Hyland, however, until recently, English language teaching has tended to ignore this disciplinarity side of argument; it has failed to recognise the

fact that academic writing differs from field to field. Research has rather emphasised "common core skills" that are linked to a universal academic literacy. The social aspects of academic interactions have not received sufficient attention either. In contrast, Hyland's new perspective is aligned with Social Constructivism. In his view, knowledge and language are not objective entities but social creations arising from the way researchers think and the manner they compose academic arguments in language. Academic knowledge is socially situated. Knowledge as materialised in a research article is not just a logical string of abstract ideas; it is embedded in the arguments and consensuses of the members of a research field. Knowledge, in other words, is a conversation. Observed facts are not enough to constitute knowledge. It is clear that researchers need principles and theories to organise observations into knowledge. Such principles and theories are products of communication between members of a research field, or a "discourse community." Researchers may aim at objectivity, but in an important sense their objectivity is intersubjectivity created by community members. The persuasiveness of academic discourse, therefore, does not only depend on the demonstration of a fact, empirical evidence or flawless logic. It is also the result of rhetorical practices accepted by members of the discourse community. This implies that the notions of convincing argument, appropriate theory, sound methodology, logic and evidence can be different from community to community.

On account of the communal nature of academic knowledge and discoursal interaction, it should be understood that placing focus on individual actors alone is not sufficient for analysis. Actions are not always motivated by personal intentions. Environments surrounding individuals must also be considered. Actors are not present in a vacuum free from human relations and power. They are situated in the real world. It is a common understanding that social factors such as power relations often determine individual actions. Critical perspectives are therefore called for to examine who has the power to decide truth or reality. Even natural scientists are not acting in purely objective manner. They are required to present their research in ways that are regarded as convincing by the authorities of the science community. Only then, can they establish their claims as credible. Peer review is an example of this political process. Hence the way academic discourse is composed and presented is not just the consequence of individual choice. Social, ideological forces direct academic writers' behaviour.

With this wider concern in mind, Hyland (2000/2004) advances a valid framework for analysing academic texts. Texts, in his view, comprise discoursal activities that aim at achieving agreement between writers, audiences and discourse communities. By analysing such interactive activities it can be shown how writers persuade their peers of their understanding of reality. With this perspective, Academic Writing studies in the early years of twenty-first century were able to explore the dynamism of interaction occurring in the text. This is both a break from the tradition and a continuation. While exploring schematic structures and language patterns in academic text,

Swales (1990) and the first 1994 edition of Swales and Feak (2022) were already mindful of interactive factors such as hedging and tense choices. It is more appropriate to say that interaction is now fully under conscious consideration. Thanks to Hyland's and other pioneers' work, subsequent researchers have produced studies in this area with more confidence and clearer perspectives than ever before.

4. Research in the Current Century

Studies on the interactive dynamics of written academic discourse have now become in full swing. Hyland himself has published important pieces. Hyland (2005) directly discusses the two aspects of discoursal interaction: stance and reader engagement. As already mentioned, each is subdivided into compositional elements. Stance, a more writer-oriented concept, includes hedges, boosters, attitude markers and the rhetoric of self-mention. Engagement, on the other hand, materialises in such features as reader pronouns, directives, questions, shared knowledge and personal asides. Hyland also points out that stance markers' functions share in those of reader engagement. Hedges, for example, indicate the writer refraining from complete commitment, but they also allow readers to take issue with the writer's claims. Boosters express certainty, but in some cases, they can emphasise information shared by community members. Some stance markers can thus direct readers' interpretation to their own claims.

Engagement markers address readers as participants in the writer's argument, evoking their solidarity with the writer. At the same time, these markers actively guide readers along the writer's claims. Reader pronouns, that is, the second person pronoun *you* or inclusive first person pronoun *we*, are clear devices for engagement. As personal asides are often direct or indirect addresses to readers, they orientate readers' attention. Appeals to shared knowledge are not very noticeable from the surface meaning of text, but careful reading will find that adverbials such as *obviously* and *of course*, as well as other vocabulary items, can bear this function. Directives of various kinds are purposefully used to guide the reader's understanding. Questions, whether direct or rhetorical, invite audience response and engagement. With numerical evidence from corpora and close reading of the discoursal context of each item, Hyland (2005) successfully sheds light on a range of techniques used by academic writers. The article also provides data on discipline-specific frequencies in the use of stance and engagement markers.

Hyland (2005) is comprehensive in its scope. Within its limited length, this article discusses many of the fundamental assumptions, research methods and objectives of the author's approach to stance and engagement. Prior to this, Hyland wrote pieces focused on particular aspects of in-text interaction (e.g. Hyland, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). This 2005 article, in turn, shows an overall picture of the arguments the author has developed in the preceding years. In this sense, the article is just as useful for the reader to become acquainted with the essence of discoursal interaction as

the book-length study of five years before by the same author. Hyland's account is augmented by other scholars. Biber (2006), for instance, is another attempt to categorise and define stance markers. Discussing speech as well as writing in academic registers, this article appropriately supplements Hyland's arguments. Studies on written academic interactions have further proliferated, some with more specialised targets. A good example is Charles (2009), which takes up adverbs as markers of stance and reader engagement.

Charles investigates the interactive functions of three adverbs: *only*, *merely* and *simply*. By their restrictive nature, each of these adverbs can set forth contrast between two notions; they can place a restricted element side by side with a non-restricted, wider element. The latter can appear in the text or just be implied. This use suggests that the writer entertains a wish, conscious or unconscious, to exert influence over the reader and guide their understanding in a particular direction. The reader is led by a restrictive adverb to the interpretation that the significance of the item modified by the adverb is limited and there is or may potentially be a more appropriate element to consider. In addition, stance can be indicated by these adverbs, especially when they signify or imply the author's value judgement on the issue discussed. More specifically, *merely* and *simply* can operate effectively when the author wishes to claim that the problem discussed remains unsolved or the solution proposed is less satisfactory if compared to other methods that are potentially applicable but not adopted in the study.

The writer can use this kind of evaluative stance to influence readers. This is not readily noticeable at first glance but still powerful in leading readers in the direction the author wishes them to take. Charles refers to a sentence extract: ". . . *we must note that these equations only apply to the restraining forces*" (p. 157), and comments that ". . . *these equations* would be expected to apply elsewhere too" (p. 157). This interpretation implies that "*these equations*" might be regarded as applicable to several different kinds of forces, but in reality, they apply only to "*the restraining forces*." The use of *only* serves both to acknowledge and to counteract the reader's expectation of a wider applicability the equations. The reader's view that the equations apply to several different forces is modified so as to agree with the writer's claim that the equations apply to the restraining forces only. The writer of the extract assumes the position of authority over the reader, since the writer is tacitly shown as a particularly insightful member of the research community. From this position of power influence can be exercised.

Charles's discussions on restricted adverbs are supported by numerical data from corpora and close reading of extracts in their original context. She further examines a variety of combinations that these adverbs take with other vocabulary items. A restrictive adverb can be used with a negation (*not* or *no*) and followed by an element of wider scope such as *but . . . also*. Other combinations, too, are examined, such as those of an adverb and a contrast word (e.g. *however, yet*), and of an adverb and a marker of reason or consequence (e.g. *as, since*). As discussed above,

Biber and Finegan (1988) demonstrated that adverbials as stance markers can function beyond their literal meanings. In a similar vein, Charles's discussion sees that restrictive adverbs' semantic operations are not limited to their literal meanings in a subtler, more complex way. While inheriting from preceding studies, Charles (2009) explores further potentialities of this approach.

5. Future

The current survey has traced the development of the studies of interaction in academic writing up until the first decade of the twenty-first century. Studies have been continuing since, producing research achievements year by year. The final section of this article will briefly consider the future of this ongoing field. It discusses two roads that this approach can take: chronological investigation and educational application.

One of the pioneers of this approach, Ken Hyland, recently published a book chapter (Hyland, 2019). There he sets out a new project in the study of interaction in academic writing: investigation of changes over time in the use of interactive markers. Stance and reader engagement have tended to be studied as if they were timeless, permanent features of academic text. This is certainly a naïve attitude and should be corrected by adopting a chronological perspective. Indeed, Hyland (2000/2004) has briefly considers the history of modern scientific discourse, tracing the establishment of the empirical method of argument in natural science from the mid seventeenth century, when the Royal Society was formed in London. In his 2019 study, then, Hyland looks back on the past half century and examined chronological shifts in the use of interactional markers. His analysis demonstrates a slow but steady decline in the overall frequencies of markers. While variations in the degree of decrease are observed from discipline to discipline, and among different categories of markers, they are so limited that they cannot influence the overall trend. Hyland says that there may have been "a shift in argument patterns in academic writing," and such this shift may have "gone largely unnoticed" (105). To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of academic writing, and to relativise the privileged status of present-day academic discourse that researchers may tend to endorse uncritically, such an analysis as done by Hyland will continue to be valuable for a foreseeable future.

Another point to consider is educational application. Thanks to studies in interaction, the nature of academic writing is now much better understood than before. However, whether this research achievement can be translated into teachable materials is another matter. On one hand, schematised teaching of Academic Writing is effective but has obvious limitations. Any approach to correct its weaknesses should be welcome for teaching practitioners. Insights into discoursal interaction can be a breakthrough. However, interactions are complex linguistic phenomena and perhaps not readily applicable to practical teaching. To create teaching materials that can deal

with these complex features in a reader-friendly manner should require a great deal of effort. Also, for teaching practitioners to achieve visibly positive effect in student performance may take years of work. The recipient side, too, has a challenge. For the vast majority of learners, language teaching is expected to guide them through the most efficient way possible. If it takes much more time than they wish to spend, even a very good teaching method would not be acceptable for learners. University students in current times usually are not allowed the luxury of spending as much time as they like in studies outside their specialised discipline. Efficient, as well as effective, ways to utilise the research results of applied linguistics are called for, none so greatly as in the field of discoursal interactions.

That said, a future path lies where there is a will. By taking such demanding tasks squarely, research will advance and teaching improve. Second language teaching is a challenging field, but it is always worth doing one's utmost to engage in this important area of academic study.

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