Approaching Academic Writing as a Persuading Tool

Sarra Mejri,
ISLT-University of Sfax, Tunisia

ABSTRACT

Academic writing is a powerful tool of persuasion in the academic field. This paper is theoretical in nature, and it will focus on the different dimensions and orientations of academic writing in relation to persuasion. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to draw attention to how to write academically and pragmatically in order to impact the reader. Persuading the interlocutor academically is an art that should be focused on in research.

Keywords: academic writing, persuasion, discourse, perspectives, audience

THE SOCIO-RHETORICAL ORIENTATION OF ACADEMIC WRITING

Research on academic writing has shown that it can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual (Burke, 2010, p. 40–41, cited in Al Fadda, 2012, p. 124). Although there has been some overwhelming agreement that the writer's consideration of his (or her) audience exerts an important influence on written communication, it is becoming clear that the term "audience" has multiple meanings in contemporary work on composition: the term no longer means the same thing to all theorists who talk about the process of writing for readers, and various pedagogical techniques—all purportedly aimed at teaching students about audience-are based on quite different theoretical perspectives.' (Kroll, 1984, p. 172). This author surveys (Ibid.) three influential views of the audience, namely the "rhetorical," the "informational," and the "social" perspectives.

The rhetorical perspective considers the act of writing for a reader to be analogous to oratory, i.e., to a speaker addressing an audience that he or she hopes to persuade. According to this view, writers who seek to be successful speakers are called upon to analyze the audience's beliefs, traits, and attitudes, so that their messages can be adapted to the particular characteristics of specific audiences (Kroll, 1984, pp. 172-173). From a social perspective, writing for readers is, like all human communication, a fundamentally social activity, entailing processes of inferring the thoughts and feelings of the other persons involved in an act of communication (Kroll, 1984, p. 179).

One of these key processes is "de-centering," the ability to escape from a focus on one's own perspective, especially to avoid the "egocentric" tendency to impute this perspective to others. The capacity to escape from an egocentric orientation seems important for communication, for if a speaker or writer assumes that others already share his or her knowledge and views, then there is no need for clarity of expression, for elaboration of one's ideas, or for detailed argumentation (Ibid.).

At first glance, boosters seem to contradict such conciliatory and defensive tactics. They emphasize the force of propositions and display commitment to statements, thereby asserting the writer's conviction and restricting the negotiating space available to the reader. But while an apparently risky tactic, boosters nevertheless allow writers to strategically engage with colleagues, effecting interpersonal solidarity and membership in a disciplinary in-group. Although they have received little attention in academic writing, boosters are seen to play an important role in creating conversational solidarity (Holmes 1984).

In science articles, Myers (1989) regards intensifying features as positive-politeness devices, enabling writers to assume shared ground with their readers and stress common group membership. Boosters thus allow writers to negotiate the status of their information, helping to establish its perceived truth by strategically presenting it as consensually given.

Hyland (1998, p. 354) takes hedges and boosters to be a response to the potential negotiability of claims and an indication of the writer's acknowledgement of disciplinary norms of appropriate argument. They work to balance objective information, subjective evaluation, and interpersonal negotiation, and this can be a powerful persuasive factor in gaining acceptance for claims. This account is complicated, however, by the considerable variation in disciplinary knowledge-making practices. The characteristic ways that writers conceptualize problems, generate inquiry, approach their objects of study, and persuade their colleagues are likely to influence the ways they employ hedges and boosters in their discourse.

For Hyland (1998, p. 367), hedges and boosters in the soft disciplines also often carried a strong interpersonal component. Hedges can function as a resource for structuring a relationship between participants and achieving a more receptive reader attitude toward claims. By employing markers of evidentiality with inclusive pronouns, for instance, writers are able to construct a shared context with their readers and draw on assumed beliefs specific to their particular social group. In this way, the writer can signal the status of the information as accurately as possible, given what interlocutors might appropriately assume as rational colleagues. This encourages the reader to participate as an intelligent equal in the reasoning process.

EVIDENTIALITY

Crompton (1997, p. 286) encapsulates the main modal feature of academic writing in the notion of hedging since it accounts for the typical use of impersonal constructions, passivization, lexis expressing personal involvement, other politeness strategies, and factivity in reporting/evaluating the claims of other researchers—these being important issues in academic writing that deserve further research to enhance the teaching of the subject.

However, Crompton is quick to warn against the danger of *hedge* being used as a catch-all term for an assortment of features noticed in academic writing. This author advocates the restriction of *hedge* to designate language avoiding commitment and calls for an investigation of the major kinds of hedge to be found in the target discourse (Crompton, 1997, p. 271).

Crompton (1997, pp. 271-272) reviews a number of definitions of the entry "hedge" in standard dictionaries to conclude that it involves some element of metaphoricity evoking guerrilla-style tactics: no fixed defensive positions, concealment, camouflage, retaining the option of withdrawal, to go aside from the straightway; to shift, shuffle, dodge; to trim; to avoid committing oneself irrevocably; to leave open a way of retreat or escape, the avoidance of personal commitment. This manipulative dimension of hedging has caused many researchers on the subject to be keen for hedging to be included in EAP' programs (Hyland 1994), although *hedge* as a linguistic concept was initially introduced by Lakoff (1972). Despite the negative connotations of the term (Skelton, 1988a, p. 38), and the preference for the more neutral term of "commentative language" modulating propositions, the term "hedge" still has its attraction as a viable term (Crompton, 1997, pp. 272-273).

The main insight is the close nexus between hedging and epistemic modality. According to Crompton (1997, pp. 276-277) argues that one rationale behind hedging in academic writing is emphasized by Hyland (1994, p. 240) to the effect that "academics are crucially concerned with varieties of cognition, and

cognition is inevitably 'hedged"'. He identifies hedging with *epistemic modality* as defined by Lyons 1977, p. 797). This concept can be seen as compatible with the provisionality of knowledge claims described by Myers.

For Hyland (1998, p. 350), hedges and boosters are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements. Their importance in academic discourse lies in their contribution to an appropriate rhetorical and interactive tenor, conveying both epistemic and affective meanings. That is, they not only carry the writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude toward the audience. Boosters, such as clearly, obviously, and of course, allow writers to express conviction and assert a proposition with confidence, representing a strong claim about a state of affairs. Affectively, they also mark involvement and solidarity with an audience, stressing shared information, group membership, and direct engagement with readers. Hyland (1998, pp. 351-352) further asserts that hedges, like possible, might, and perhaps, on the other hand, represent a weakening of a claim through an explicit qualification of the writer's commitment. This may be to show doubt and indicate that information is presented as an opinion rather than an accredited fact, or it may be to convey deference, humility, and respect for a colleague's views (Myers 1989).

These are also often found in clusters: distributional patterns where either hedges or boosters tend to cluster together in 'modally harmonic' combinations (Lyons 1977, p. 807) to express a kind of epistemic concord running through a series of clauses or sentences.

However, hedges and boosters can also be found together in stretches of discourse where writers seek to create different rhetorical effects. It is clear in the following extracts, for example, what propositions the writers consider to be established knowledge, and what they regard as more contentious, the combination of hedges and boosters contrasting the epistemic validity of different parts of an argument to more effectively present their claims.

According to Hyland (1998, p. 362), differences between the hard and soft domains were not only apparent in the large disparity of hedges but also in the type of hedges used. In particular, writers in the hard-knowledge fields made over twice as much use of attribute hedges. These are devices like *about, approximately, partially, generally, quite,* and so on, which differ from other hedges in that they refer to the relationship between propositional elements rather than the relationship between a proposition and a writer. Thus, such devices limit the scope of the accompanying statement rather than cast doubt on its certainty.

In these examples, writers are not using hedges to dilute their certainty or withhold commitment to their propositions. Instead, they are seeking to present a situation in terms of how far it varies from the ways the discourse community conventionally sees the world, either restricting the temporal or qualitative range of the claim or its generalizability. Attribute hedges therefore indicate the extent to which results fit a standard disciplinary schema of what the world is thought to be like, signaling a departure from commonly assumed prototypicality.

For Hyland (1998, p. 363), attribute hedges are an important component of knowledge contexts and the kinds of claims they allow because they directly signal an appeal to such contexts by invoking the cultural understandings of participants. Attribute hedges do not only suggest a certain amount of community agreement on what might reasonably be expected; they also draw on shared standards of permissible imprecision (Channell 1990; Dubois 1987). Grice's maxim of quantity states that writers will present data accurately enough for the purposes they serve, suggesting that choices are likely to be contextually variable. In academic writing, and particularly when used with numerical data, attribute hedges allow writers to draw on unspoken conventions of imprecision.

Hyland (1998, pp. 363–364) advocates a close nexus between modal choices and authorial involvement in

knowledge construction. Another possible explanation for the wide differences in the use of hedges and boosters between different disciplines is that the distribution of these forms embodies very different assumptions about the role of human actors in the construction of knowledge.

An important aspect of the positivist-empirical epistemology typically found in the hard sciences is that the authority of the individual is subordinate to the authority of the text. Writers generally seek to disguise both their interpretative responsibilities and their rhetorical identities behind a screen of linguistic objectivity. A prudent scientist avoids using features that reveal either a personal involvement in the rendition of findings or a commitment to that reading. Lab experiments are believed to produce accurate depictions of the real world, and their textual representation is best designed to be faceless and agentless, claiming an appearance of objectivity and neutrality.

Impersonalization strategies such as the use of passives, nominalization, and objective theme selections have been well documented in the literature and appear to represent the rhetorical face of science (Swales 1990). Together, these features help reinforce the predominant view of science as an impersonal, inductive enterprise. In other words, they contribute to the ideological representation that scientists discover truth rather than construct it, minimizing the role of socially contingent factors in scientific research practices.

Hyland (1998, p. 366) further asserts that the strategic management of evidentiality and affect appears to work quite differently in the soft disciplines. Not only did the papers in philosophy, marketing, linguistics, and sociology contain almost one and a half times the number of hedges and three times the boosters, but writers in the soft disciplines were also more likely to stress subjectivity when modifying statements. This is partly conveyed by a more frequent use of cognition verbs, which carry a greater sense of personal conjecture to the modified statement:

STANCE

As for discourse stance markers, they refer to how writers' use language to express their attitudes toward the information conveyed (Berman & Ravid, 2009). In contrast to oral colloquial conversation, where stance is typically subjective and involved (e.g., *Let me tell you something!*) and often expressed through non-linguistic means (e.g., gestures, intonation), academic discourse stance is encoded linguistically through a variety of later-acquired forms and functions used to express the characteristically assertive yet epistemically cautious attitude most typical of expository writing. Following Berman and colleagues (Berman, 2004; Berman et al., 2002) and focusing on stance markers that are salient in academic persuasive writing, Uccelli et al. (2013, p. 41) pay special attention to *epistemic markers*: markers that signal the writer's belief about the degree of truth, reliability, or possibility of a given statement (e.g., *it is possible, might be*). and *deontic markers*: markers that signal an attitude that conveys a judgmental and categorical perspective (e.g., *should not, it is wrong*).

Uccelli et al. (2013, p. 41) inventory some of the discourse markers most frequently used in academic writing. They categorize them as either organizational or stance markers. In academic writing, organizational discourse markers contribute to the cohesion of a text, functioning as explicit guidelines for interpreting relations across sentences and discourse fragments (Givón, 1992; Vande Kopple, 1985). Within the field of adult academic writing, extensive research on textual analysis has identified a repertoire of organizational markers characteristic of academic discourse. Drawing from Hyland's (2005) prior work on experts' academic argumentative writing, Uccelli et al. focus on what he calls *interactive meta discourse markers*—that is, words and phrases used to explicitly mark the coherent organization of the information in a text to guide readers. The subset that is relevant for the analysis of written essays produced by still-novice learners of academic discourse includes frame markers (e.g., *first, second; one reason, another reason*), code glosses (e.g., *for example, in other words*), transition markers (e.g., *however, consequently*), and

conclusion markers (e.g., *in conclusion, in sum*).

OTHER CONVENTIONAL DIMENSIONS

Voice/academic honesty

Al Fadda (2012, p. 124) Academic writing is expected to address an intellectual community in which students engage in active learning. Some basics or rules must be established. Using information to one's advantage is a key part of learning. Success at the postgraduate level depends on the students' ability to access, evaluate, and synthesize the words, ideas, and opinions of others in order to develop their own academic voice. When presenting what they have learned, it is therefore vitally important that students are able to show clearly what they have drawn from others and what is their own (Bristol Business School, 2006, p. 3).

A student must be honest about how much ownership he or she can claim over the ideas formed, the answers found, and the opinions expressed (Bristol Business School, 2006, p. 3). The student must follow certain rules to ensure good academic writing, including punctuation guidelines. (Tardy, 2010, p. 12).

Strategies of Academic Writing

Abdulkareem (2013, p. 1553): In many studies, there is an emphasis on effective strategies that are used to improve students' performance, such as critical thinking, paraphrasing, and mind mapping. Moreover, these strategies can be considered a measurement of students' writing abilities that can be analyzed and modified during the process of teaching academic writing.

Academic writing as a special genre with its own conventions.

Bowker (2007, pp. 2–3): is formally different from other writing genres. Indeed, citing the work of other authors is central to academic writing because it shows you have read the literature, understood the ideas, and integrated these issues and varying perspectives into the assignment task. Academic writing is a special genre of writing that has its own set of rules and practices.

1. These rules and practices may be organized around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, in addition to ensuring that ideas are supported by author citations in the literature.
2. Further, academic writing adheres to traditional conventions of punctuation, grammar, and spelling.
3. Finally, in contrast to many other personal writing contexts, academic writing is different because it deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life, as well as exploring alternative explanations for these events.

The horizons of expectations of the publishers and editors

Whitaker (2009, p. 2) laments the exacting nature of the requirements for the acceptability of academic papers, a phenomenon he describes as a specially-designed torture instrument.

According to Lund (2017, p. 15), articles to be submitted to academic journals are expected to be original, written by the stated authors, and not to have been published elsewhere. They must not be currently being considered for publication by any other journal and will not be submitted for such review while under review by this journal. The article must not contain any libelous or other unlawful statements or any materials that violate the personal or proprietary rights of any other person or entity.

Other considerations, according to Anderson (2009), include all types of plagiarism, including various forms

of self-plagiarism (p. 29), using inappropriate data, authorship problems, and Salami publishing (p. 31). Lee (2008, p. 43) lists other ethical issues such as multiple submissions, redundant publications, data fabrication and falsification, improper use of human subjects and animals in research, and improper author contributions.

Furthermore, Newman (2017, p. 11) warns against publishing reports of no scientific interest, out-of-date work, duplications of previously published work, and incorrect or unacceptable conclusions. The ethical issues involved in academic writing encompass (Newman, 2017, p. 80) scientific misconduct (especially the falsification of results or images), different forms of plagiarism with different degrees of severity. Morton (2007, pp. 34–41) further adds the question of the choice of journal and the impact factor, paper submission procedures, conflicts of interest, the acquisition of permissions, peer review and manuscript management, acceptance to publish and copyright, print and online production, post print policy, and institutional repositories. Morton (2007, p. 42) concludes that the path to publication is not always easy, but it is hopefully useful to understand some of the considerations of publication and remove some of the mystery that can arise from the process.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Towards this end of checking egocentrism, Kroll (1984, p. 180) stresses the need for students to experience writing as a form of social interaction. From a social perspective, students have far too few opportunities to experience the social dimensions of writing because the process of writing is typically a solitary enterprise, because writing tasks can often be perceived as mere exercises, and because written products are often seen only by a teacher/judge. For these reasons, the essentially social nature of writing may easily elude our students, some of whom appear to view writing as a mechanical task with no more social implications than completing a set of arithmetic problems (Ibid.).

Advocates of the social perspective on audience argue that novice writers need to experience the satisfactions and conflicts of reader response, both the satisfaction that comes from having successfully shaped the reader's understanding and experience and the conflict that arises when a concept that seemed clear to the writer baffles the reader, or when a phrase that held special meaning for the writer evokes no response, or when an omitted detail—clear enough in the writer's mind—causes the reader to stumble (Kroll, 1984, pp. 180–181).

Fresh perspectives from the social and psychological sciences have been partly responsible for this renewed interest in the concept of audience, providing new ways to view the act of writing for readers. However, this author warns against swinging from neglect of the audience to overemphasis, forgetting in our new enthusiasm the old lesson that writing involves a delicate balance among several elements of communication, of which the audience is but one (Kroll, 1984, p. 184).

Hyland (1998, p. 358) takes hedges and boosters to be interpersonal aspects of language use, complex textual signals by which writers personally intervene in their discourse to evaluate material and engage with readers. The indicators of involvement versus detachment signal the presence of individual researchers deciding to represent themselves more or less explicitly in their writing, either adopting a clear authorial presence or linguistically suppressing this identity. Hyland concedes that these choices are to some extent influenced by individual personality factors, such as self-confidence and experience, but he places a heavy premium on arguing that all acts of communication occur in social contexts and carry the imprint of those contexts. In academic writing, in particular, the choices individuals make are socially shaped and constrained by the possibilities made available to them by the discourse conventions of their disciplines. Hedges and boosters are politeness devices employed to smooth the threats said to be inherent in the routine interactions of academic knowledge-making. Building on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, Myers

(1989) suggests that presenting, denying, and evaluating claims in academic writing constitute "face-threatening acts, or impositions on the self-image of readers, which have to be mitigated by various rational strategies.

Hyland (1998, p. 352) attributes to hedges and boosters the potential to draw attention to the fact that statements communicate not just ideas but also the writer's attitude toward them and to readers (Halliday 1978). He takes these considerations to be an important dimension of academic discourse and a principal way that writers can use language flexibly to adopt positions, express points of view, and signal allegiances. They also represent a major contribution to the social negotiation of knowledge and writers' efforts to persuade readers of the correctness of their claims, helping them to gain community acceptance for their work as a contribution to disciplinary scholarship and knowledge.

Hyland (1998, p. 353) cites Myers (1989) as suggesting that academic writers employ hedges to minimize the potential threat new claims make to other researchers by soliciting acceptance and challenging their own work. Equally, however, engagement in disciplinary forums involves norms of interpersonal behavior underpinned by the sanctions inherent in a system of academic recognition and rewards that hinges on publication (Hyland 1997). Writers may thus find it easier to satisfy disciplinary gatekeepers when negotiating peer-review procedures by observing community expectations concerning collegial deference and limits on self-assurance.

In addition to softening interpersonal imposition, hedges have also been seen as a way of anticipating the possible negative consequences of overstatement and the eventual overthrow of a claim (Salager-Meyer 1994). By limiting their commitment with hedges, writers offer an assessment of the status of a claim, attesting to the degree of precision or reliability that it carries. Hedges imply, then, that a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, and they allow readers the freedom to dispute it.

Cross-disciplinary variations in the use of hedges and boosters are acknowledged by Hyland (1998, p. 360). Indeed, Hyland (1998, p. 361) avers that the soft-knowledge areas, however, are typically more interpretative and less abstract. Research is often influenced by contextual vagaries, there is less control over variables and a greater diversity of research outcomes. Writers frequently draw on out-of-discipline research, and there are fewer unequivocal bases for accepting claims. With the exception of philosophy, readers in the soft disciplines are themselves often more heterogeneous, with different academic or professional backgrounds and more varied purposes for reading. This means that writers in soft fields can generally take less for granted, and while a paper must carry conviction, it must also appeal more to the reader's willingness to follow the writer's reasoning.

Research cannot be reported with the same confidence as shared assumptions and so has to be expressed more cautiously, using more hedges. Writers must rely far more on focusing readers on the claim-making negotiations of the discourse community, the arguments themselves, rather than relatively unmediated real-world phenomena (MacDonald 1994).

Notwithstanding all the merits of a modal approach to hedging, Crompton (1997, p. 277) cautions against a number of caveats. First, the forms that have been identified as hedges have other functions too, although the absence of a satisfactory definition of the function(s) of hedges makes the precise "otherness" difficult to determine (Hyland 1994, p. 243). The second problem is that of possibly overlooking hedges that appear in forms that have not yet been identified as hedges. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 146) argue that hedging is "a productive linguistic device" and "can be achieved in an indefinite number of surface forms". Moreover, Hyland (1994, p. 243) refers to hedges taking "unpredictable forms, for example, by referring to the uncertain status of information". An allowance must also be made for cross-generic variations. Writers in the soft fields relied more on personal projection, while scientists and engineers tried to portray their evaluations impersonally, constructing a context in which claims appeared to arise from the research itself

(Hyland, 1994, p. 243). Hyland construes these disciplinary preferences for mitigation and assertion not merely as obedience to arbitrary conventions but as rational attempts to make the best use of linguistic resources to effectively interact with colleagues and secure agreement for one's arguments (Hyland, 1994, p. 243).

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