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THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN STUDENT WRITING IN ENGLISH AND IN POLISH

This paper reports on some of the findings of my own semi-ethnographic study designed to qualitatively test the validity of the hypothesis that each academic text is an act of identity in which the writer's *self* constitutes itself and is constituted. This is evidenced by the linguistic choices writers make which are on one hand the unique products of writer's mind, cognition, personality and life history, and on the other hand are influenced by the writer's alignment with the conventions of dominant practices and discourses located in a particular institutional and cultural context. The textual realization of authorial identity becomes even more complicated when academic writers have to write in "the space between" two languages and two cultures which is the case of the research subjects of my study (Polish students in the fourth year of their full-time English Philology studies), who have to write in English as a part of their curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Every academic text is an act of identity in which the writer's self constitutes itself and is constituted. Writers bring their 'autobiographical self' to the act of writing about their interests, values, beliefs and the practices of the social groups with whom they identify themselves, as well as their personal experiences and personalities. By drawing on their autobiographical experience, they constitute the discourse. Yet the choice of language for academic discourse is not an idiosyncratic decision made by the author, but involves the coalition of two aspects of the writer's self: the 'individual self'¹ and the 'collective self'² in the act of writing. This view is in line with the current approach to authorial self-representation in academic discourse, which views 'identity' as a multidimensional concept both socially defined and socially negotiated. The process of identity co-construction is described by two contrasting perspectives: poststructuralists

¹ The '*individual self*' is that aspect of the author's self which is a product of their mind, cognition, personality and life history.

² The '*collective self*' is that aspect of the author's self which is a social construct, constituted in the act of the writer's alignment with the conventions of dominant practices and discourses located in a particular institutional and cultural context.

and sociolinguistic theories, which give an author agency to construct their identity in any way they wish, and social constructivist theories that view authorial identity as determined by the discourses and social practices in which the writer participates (an individual is a 'subject' or is 'positioned' in a particular discourse). The first approach to identity construction, which includes the following anti-essentialist perspectives: *queer theory* (Butler 1990; Bersani 1995), *diaspora* (Hall 1995), *hybridity* (Bhabha 1994), *crossing* (Rampton 1995) along with the theories of Bakhtin (1989), Parker (1989) and Giddens (1995), have liberated the authorial self by acknowledging the significance of the actual writer's voice in academic discourse. Since anti-essentialist frameworks are based on such notions as: *fluidity*, *hybridity*, *fragmentation* and *change*, they have created space to make everybody's voices and interests 'visible' and 'included' (Spivak 1990).

The other view of identity is realized through the works of such social theorists as Althusser (1971) and Foucault (1979) who focus on the critical role of discourses in constructing people's identities. In this perspective, identity is approached as a social construct determined by socio-cultural and institutional constraints, which make writers conform to pre-established rhetorical conventions. As Mauranen observes:

[t]he rhetorical choices and strategies available to a writer are limited by the value and belief systems prevailing in the linguistic and cultural community the text is written in. A writer's notions about what convincing prose or persuasive writing looks like is a product of socialization into his or her native culture's way of perceiving written text. Moreover, written text mediates further socialization in academic institutions in an important way, and part of being an accepted member of various social groups in academic institutions consists in writing texts of certain kinds, or in terms of the sociology of knowledge, of knowing how to write them.

(Mauranen 1993: 4)

In the discussion of discursive *identity* it is critical to mention two other theories: Tajfel's social identity theory and Turner's social categorization theory that center on the ways in which people identify themselves in relation to social groups, categories, or stereotypes. It frequently happens, however, that academic writers do not define themselves in terms of the areas of similarity shared with other group members. Connolly (1991), focusing on the nature of political identity, argues that identity only establishes itself in relation to difference: that is, in order to begin a discussion of identity it is necessary for there to be other identities, other affiliations which are being rejected. Similarity, difference and boundaries between an individual writer and social groups play a critical role in the act of construction of authorial identity. As Ivanič (1998) notes, the problem of identification with one particular academic community is reflected in the process of writing an academic essay, when students on one hand have a sense of belonging to their academic community, but on the other hand identify themselves strongly with other groups from whom their academic community may be

differentiating itself. The boundary that might help to establish their academic identity does not seem possible to be set.

There is, however, a general consensus on the idea that each individual is equipped with several identities which means that identity involves *identification*. In identifying myself as a woman, for example, I am identifying myself with a broader category of ‘women’, or at least some aspects of that category. I also identify myself as a native speaker of Polish, a mother, a teacher and a jazz lover. I have to manage all of my identities, because they impact on each other rather than simply add to each other, so the way I enact my identity as a teacher is influenced by my other identities. Therefore, a lasting and unitary notion of identity should be rejected because, as Hyland puts it, “[i]dentifying ourselves and others involves meaning- and meaning involves interaction. Agreeing, arguing, comparing, negotiating and cooperating are part and parcel of identity construction, so identities must be seen as social identities” (Hyland 2012: 3).

This paper will address the question which stimulates my research interests most strongly and pertains to the choices Polish student-authors make to construct their *authorial identity* when writing in English and Polish. Specifically, I am going to discuss the factors which make academic writers solidify or dilute their authorial presence in an academic text and the linguistic methods they use to achieve their purpose.

ACADEMIC IDENTITY IN A SOCIAL-SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

The approach to the authorial identity, I am presenting in this paper, can be supported by Fairclough’s view of the relationships between language and identity. Fairclough takes up the ‘translinguistic’ ideas of Bakhtin and asserts that, “[t]he matching of language to context is characterized by indeterminacy, heterogeneity and struggle” (1992c: 42) which means that it is important not to apply any typology to the analysis of discourse phenomena as it may lead to misattribution of intention and communication failure. Although the influence of rhetorical patterns of a particular culture on academic texts must be recognized, the features of academic discourse cannot be viewed as the static, fixed and unchanging because we will fall into the trap of prescriptivism that comes with such a perspective (as presented, for example, in Galtung’s typology of intellectual traditions or Kaplan’s classification of cultural thought patterns).

It is not difficult to argue that authorial identity is not an invariable phenomenon, but is characterized by a dualism between two central aspects of a writer’s ‘self’, which I call the ‘individual self’ and the ‘collective self.’ The ‘individual self’ is a product of the writer’s mind, cognition, personality and life history. It is given agency by one of its two constituents – the ‘self as performer’, to

construct the writer's identity without constraints (cognitive view of writing). The 'self as performer' is the writer's 'voice', in the sense that the writer's experience, position, opinions and beliefs are manifested by the particular stylistic choices a writer makes to establish authorial credibility, interaction with the audience and to demonstrate linguistic creativity. To a greater or lesser extent, the 'self as performer' is a product of the other constituent of the 'individual self' – the 'autobiographical self', which cannot be traced in any linguistic exponents. Conversely, the 'collective self' is constructed in discourse, because it is determined by rhetorical conventions that follow from the values and ideologies of the discourse communities in which writers participate (social constructivist view of writing). This is the aspect of a writer's identity which undergoes multiple positioning, due to external forces which originate from an author's national and institutional background and which include the following influences: beliefs, values, the worldview and practices of a nation and an institution; social and political history; conventionalized communication styles, as well as the power relations inscribed in them.

Therefore, I claim that discourse characteristics, which reflect writer's identity, are not fixed in any specific way, but they are influenced by both aspects of authorial 'self': the 'individual self' and the 'collective self', as represented in my Figure 1.

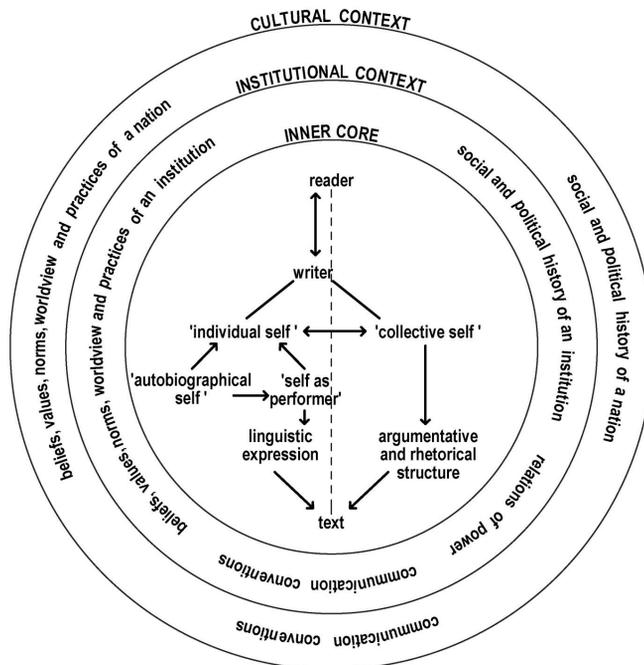


Figure 1. A model of authorial self-representation in academic text.

There are several interconnected aspects of this argument including as follows:

1. Negotiating the 'individual self' is a central part of the writing process: there is not such a thing as 'transparent author'.
2. Each academic text is an individual utterance which reflects stylistic and linguistic choices made by its author within socio-culturally available subject positions.
3. In each act of writing a writer reproduces or challenges rhetorical conventions characteristic for their discourse community and the intellectual tradition they belong to.
4. A degree of writer's conformity in adjusting to specific rhetorical standards of a particular discourse community is culture-specific (e.g., as demonstrated by new developments in merging stylistic features of the *Hausa* language with English).
5. The 'autobiographical self' influences the 'self as performer'.
6. The authorial self is not a stable entity since the two aspects of writer's identity are multiple and subject to change as the author develops and the context changes.
7. The reader-writer relationship affects both the 'self as performer' and the 'collective self'. A broken line between 'reader' and 'text' in fig.1 indicates potential failure in the interpretation of meaning conveyed by the 'text' and/or lack of clear argumentative and rhetorical structure. For successful communication to occur, a reader and a writer should share similar knowledge about the subject-matter and be acquainted with the cultural and institutional context in which the text is written, including the preferred communication style of a particular discourse community. The 'reader-friendly' attitude of a writer is demonstrated through such aspects of discourse organization as, for example, linearity in form and content development, explicitness and metatextual cuing as well as distribution of salience. This is each author's idiosyncratic decision: to accommodate to or to resist the pressure to meet reader expectations.

On the basis of the analysis of the factors that constitute writer's self-representation in an academic text, it may be concluded that *authorial identity* is a dynamic concept which is socially influenced but not determined.

AUTHORIAL PRESENCE REALIZATION IN STUDENT WRITING IN ENGLISH AND IN POLISH

When writing in English, English Philology students, like any other second language writers, are confronted with the following question:

- Which elements of the authorial ‘self’ should I adopt and which elements should I abandon in order to make myself understood by an English readership?

The situation is complex and challenging because they often do not have an awareness of how to navigate the cultural divide, but are required to write in English as a part of their curriculum. Like other second language writers in English, they are expected to align themselves both with the language behavior of the native speakers and the conventions of their academic discourse community.

The stylistic and rhetorical choices these students make, however, are more intuitive than based on meticulous, analytical reasoning. Therefore, it frequently happens that, although they strive to comply with Anglo-American rhetorical and linguistic standards, they still reveal their cultural background, both in written and oral discourse. Such was the case, for example, when the *New York Times*, in an article about Zbigniew Brzezinski, wrote “When he opened his mouth, 900 years of Polish history came rolling out.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

My study was conducted at two universities in Warsaw and at one university in Łódź, Poland. The subjects participating in the study were Polish students in the fourth year of their full-time English Philology³ studies (the first year of master’s studies) and Polish students in the first year of their full-time Polish Philology⁴ studies at the master’s level. The sample size consisted of 16 student participants and was divided into two groups: a research group and a control group. The terms: ‘research group’ and a ‘control group’ were adopted to describe two groups of subjects in my investigation. The first group consisted of student participants whose authorial identity was researched and whom I called ‘research group subjects’, and the other group were student participants with whom the research group subjects were contrasted and whom I labeled as ‘control group subjects.’

My study cannot be considered fully-fledged ethnographic research mainly because of the writing task assigned specifically for this research project. However, it did draw strongly on the research methods from ethnographic inquiry used by Geertz and Ivanič in the studies upon which this research was modeled. Believing, with Geertz (1973: 5) that, “man is an animal suspended in webs of

³ *English Philology* is a common university department in Poland which combines the study of practical language learning, linguistics, literature and culture of English-speaking countries.

⁴ *Polish Philology* is a common university department in Poland which combines the study of literature and linguistics with other disciplines relevant to literature and linguistics.

significance he himself has spun”, I took culture to be those webs, not an exercise in experimental science in search of a law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

First the ‘thick description’ proposed by Geertz, that views culture as a semi-otic concept, was applied to describe students’ written work in order to find out what kind of themes will emerge during the analysis of the writing samples. Students’ responses to my questionnaire-based questions were also examined for indicators of reoccurring themes. Later the subjects’ responses were typified and categorized according to the reoccurring themes. My questions were subject to modification and alteration as the study progressed. Then the data gathered was coded according to the reoccurring themes, and four aspects of the authorial ‘self’ as outlined by Ivanič (1998) in *Writing and Identity* were used to provide a framework for investigating the role of identity in the Polish students’ writing in Polish and English.

This study sought to understand how the authorial identity of the research group of students (English Philology students) is affected by writing in “the space between” two languages and two cultures and specifically how subjects’ acquisition of cultural and linguistic knowledge of the second language is reflected in their writing in both languages.

DILUTION OF FOCUS AS A LINGUISTIC MEAN OF AUTHORIAL PRESENCE REALIZATION

There exist several linguistic possibilities for direct or indirect indication of authorial presence and/or absence. Vassileva (2000: 47, 48) in her study (2000) of authorial presence in English, German, French, Russian and Bulgarian discourse proposes the following classification:

- means of direct indication of authorial presence (the first person singular and plural pronouns)
- means of indirect indication of authorial presence and/or discourse depersonalization (passive constructions, impersonal or/and reflective constructions, ‘hedges’ and the so-called ‘generic forms’, e.g., ‘one’ in English)

In my study I have identified several perspectives that help solidify or dilute authorial presence in an academic text. Two aspects of the writer’s identity reflected in the text corpus - ‘discoursal self’⁵ and ‘self as author,’⁶ have been

⁵ ‘*Discoursal self*’ is the persona the student-writer adapts when writing – the ‘voice’ they want their audience to hear (Ivanič 1998) and can be traced in linguistic exponents.

⁶ ‘*Self as author*’ refers to the student-writers’ willingness to make claims and/or their reliance on external authorities to support those claims (Ivanič 1998) and can be traced in linguistic exponents.

realized by the means of different linguistic exponents and, ultimately, have established diversified discourse characteristics.

As I have observed student writers frequently position themselves (or are positioned), maybe by rhetorical convention or their own choice, to step aside and assign the narrative voice to actions. In the Anglo-American tradition of academic writing this tendency is in line with the main objectives of expository writing: to secure objectivity and to present information in a sequenced order. Although the other kind of academic writing, argumentative writing, allows students to take their stand on an issue, they are still required to apply particular structural patterns (a block pattern or a point-by point pattern) to organize their writing and to employ the 'I' pronoun with caution. Griffith in her instructional book on academic writing meant for American college students offers the following advice: "[t]wo suggestions, that pertain to the use of 'I' in your essays. First, use 'I' helpfully and sparingly. Second, find your teacher's preference about the use of 'I' and write accordingly" (Griffith 2006: 234). In the same vein, another authority in the field, Hacker, argues that "[w]hatever the discipline, the goal of academic writing is to argue a thesis and support it with appropriate evidence" (Hacker 2007: 57), which requires a standardized type of writing to accommodate to the dominant values, practices and discourses of the institution and forcing the writer to hide their personal voices. Personal accounts, of mature students⁷ in particular, testify to the way they feel alienated and devalued within the institution of higher education. One of the mature students interviewed by Karach described how her and other students' life experiences, their multicultural backgrounds, which constitute their identity, consciousness and influence them in how they relate to the surrounding world, are devalued in their college writing. "[w]e find our knowledge continues to be devalued in higher education, and excluded from the shallow definition of what constitutes worthy knowledge" (Karach 1992: 309).

Although there is a major disparity between Polish and Anglo-American approaches to academic writing which pertains to the purpose and the method of communicating content, the tendency to hide the authorial voice of 'I-writer' is common in both traditions. Polish writers dilute the focus mainly by the means of thematic digressions which Duszak (1997) calls elaborations. In the Polish academic tradition digressions from the main track of reasoning are not only justified but even encouraged as "products of an inquiring mind" (Duszak 1997: 323), which reveals the main purpose of Polish academic texts: demonstration of the author's knowledge. This attitude counters the objectives of an Anglo-American academic writer, who wants to establish a successful communication with the reader and views digressions as signs of "an unfocused and rambling style"

⁷ *Mature student* is a person who begins their studies at university or college a number of years after leaving school, so that they are older and more experienced than most of the people they are studying with.

(Duszak 1997: 323). The Anglo-American student writer is expected to dilute the focus for the sake of securing objectivity in the presentation of knowledge, to discuss, reinforce or challenge concepts or arguments in an unbiased manner. Therefore, nominalizations, passive and impersonal forms are frequently applied by academic writers to depersonalize the text.

The abundant use of nominalizations, passive/impersonal constructions and thematic digressions is one of the obvious features of academic discourse as they are believed to function “as a rhetorical device for the maximization of objectivity, both in the sense of minimizing the subjective, personal-human factor, and of attaching more weight to the external one: the concrete-the established factual features of the objects under study” (Lachowicz 1981: 107).

In contrast to the scientific writer, the student writer is not expected to write for the experts on their subject but for a general audience who includes their writing instructor. Nevertheless, the student writer is still positioned to remain hidden behind facts, well known truths or voices of external authorities and is expected to keep their personality as inconspicuous as possible.

It seems that every author, regardless of the writing convention they subscribe to, is confronted with the serious decision whether to diminish or to enforce the strength of their presence in the text. The data obtained from the analysis of the text corpus and the answers elicited by the interview questions on digressiveness have revealed both the correlations and the differences between the research and control groups in the application of linguistic means employed to dilute the focus. Both groups of subjects used the following linguistic means to depersonalize the text: nominalizations, passive and impersonal forms, and thematic digressions. However, the participants of these two groups differed in the number of linguistic means they applied to depersonalize the text. In the texts written both in English and in Polish by the research group of students the sequence of the most frequently used linguistic means was as follows: passive forms, impersonal forms, nominalizations and the least frequently used thematic digressions. What is more, the total number of all the linguistic means used to dilute the focus was much lower in the texts written by the research group of students in both languages than in the texts written by the control group students in Polish. In the writing samples of the control group the following sequence of the most frequently employed linguistic means has been observed: impersonal forms, thematic digressions, nominalizations and the least frequently used passive forms.

It would be very convenient as an analytic procedure to rely on the global counts of linguistic features, but in order to obtain more credible results pertaining to the dilution of focus in the academic text I concentrated on local types of analysis of each individual text. This allowed me to notice differences in the choice of linguistic means within each group of subjects.

First of all, the in-group discrepancies in the use of thematic digressions have been observed in both groups. Three out of eight students from the re-

search group used two or three thematic digressions in their writing and three out of eight students from the control group applied one or none. These findings support the results of Salski's (2007) analysis of *Autobiography* papers written in English and in Polish by trainee teachers of English and/or Elementary Education in Poland and in the USA and remain in opposition to Contrastive Rhetoric claims that the extended digressiveness in the texts of nonnative academic writers result from transfer of the conventions of their native writing culture.

Further, the number of nominalizations, passive and impersonal constructions employed to dilute the focus revealed significant differences within two groups under investigation. In the control group of students the number of nominalizations in student essays ranged from 0 to 5; the number of passive forms ranged from 1 to 5 and the number of impersonal forms ranged from 7 to 16. The data elicited from the text corpus of the research group of subjects demonstrated similar discrepancies in the application of nominalizations, passive and impersonal constructions within this group of subjects. The number of nominalizations ranged from 0 to 5; the number of passive forms ranged from 2 to 5 and the number of impersonal forms ranged from 1-5.

Although the student writer is not expected to write for the experts on their subject, they are still positioned to remain hidden behind facts. Therefore, the application of nominalizations, passive and impersonal constructions allows academic authors to diminish the subjective, personal element in the text and to attach more value to factual features of the subject being discussed and ultimately to maximize the objectivity of an academic text.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the major discrepancies in the choice of linguistic means have been observed not between the groups but within the groups, the findings of my study confirm the hypothesis that *authorial identity* is a dynamic concept which cannot be determined entirely by any socio-cultural or institutional factors, but is unique for each writer and can be negotiated, questioned and changed. Whether in their mother tongue or a foreign language, an academic writer's stylistic and linguistic choices reveal the interweaving influences of the rhetorical convention of a given discourse community and the writer's own 'voice' in the sense of their experience, position, opinions and beliefs.

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