

Academic Writing and New Englishes: Unifying the Contrasts

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Abstract

This contribution tries to unify two recent research strands in English linguistics: studies in academic writing and in New Englishes. This is useful because, in line with the prominent theory of social constructionism, discourses in both strands can be seen as practices of communities that negotiate their cultural norms. The relationship between language, cognition, and (national) culture is illustrated on the basis of several models research, and its application in teaching is discussed. A proposed socio-cognitive model offers new insights into old concepts and stimulates exchange in academic discourses between researchers from different cultures.

Keywords: academic writing, New Englishes, social constructionism, genre, models, socio-cognitive model.

Preface

This contribution unites two distinct strands of research specializations: my 30 years of research in English around the world and my 10 years of interest in Academic English, which to some uninformed observer may sound like contrasts. I intend to show however that both strands have a lot in common, since all (but only non-native) users of English are forced to think critically about their personal stance towards their own texts in the world-wide academic discourse today.

I begin with a personal anecdote (as would be expected of an American scholar, who tries to capture the attention of his audience or readership) or a critical incident (as I like to play with intercultural expectations):

During a recent conference in Albania, I met colleagues from South Eastern Europe who seemed to feel offended even at the slightest polite addition to their own presentations. It was one of those “critical” incidents that are so famous in intercultural communication where participants have different backgrounds, expectations and interpretations. Young colleagues from South-Eastern Europe seemed to feel that they had to protect their work, since it was well presented according to all formal criteria; whereas older colleagues from Western Europe seemed to feel that they had to “offer” advice, since they had been invited to the conference. Of course, after a common excursion including lively social

discussions over an extended meal, they were all very keen to discuss research approaches and mutual visits to follow as soon as possible.

So I hope that this incident is a fruitful beginning for a discussion of academic traditions in different academic and national cultures.

1. Introduction

In my title, I am quoting the subtitle “Unifying the contrasts” from Hawkins’ *A Comparative Typology of English and German* (1986). But I am trying to “unify” different contrasts: the contrasts between teaching and research or between students and researchers, the contrasts between socio- and cognitive linguistics, and the contrasts between the research areas of academic writing and New Englishes. I see academic writing as a special case of professional *lingua franca* English (apart from other cases like tourist English) and New Englishes as a special case of English World-Wide (apart from other cases like transplanted varieties in the US and Australia, and creolized forms in the Caribbean and the Pacific).

For a long time, I have been compiling corpora like the Corpus of East African English (between 1989 and 1996, which was part of the International Corpus of English, thus called ICE-EA, Schmied 2008), the Lampeter Corpus of Early Modern English (1993), the English-German Translation Corpus (later integrated into the database of the International Grammar of English, Schmied 2005), the Corpus of Specialized and Popular Academic English (SPACE, Schmied 2007), and the Chemnitz Corpus of Academic English (cf. Schmied 2011). For the compilation of the first and last of these corpora in particular, I have collaborated with colleagues from different parts of the world, for ICE-EA with colleagues from Kenya and Tanzania and for academic writing mainly with colleagues from the Czech Republic and Italy. This collaboration is extremely important because in recent years academic communities have been understood more and more as communities of practice, which are a special case of discourse communities in a wider framework of social constructionism. All these are central concepts that need to be discussed when we try to unify the contrasts between academic writing and New Englishes.

2. Key concepts

One of the basic theories in academic writing is social constructionism (constructivism), which “suggests that knowledge (and even social reality itself) is created through the daily interactions between people and particularly through their discourses” (Hyland 2009: 11). A good standard definition is also available in Wikipedia:

Social constructionism and social constructivism are sociological theories of knowledge that consider how social phenomena develop in social contexts. Within constructionist

thought, a social construction (social construct) is a concept or practice that is the construct (or artifact) of a particular group. When we say that something is socially constructed, we are focusing on its dependence on contingent variables of our social selves.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism (30/6/11)

I apply this concept to discourse communities: writers and readers interact on the basis of accepted institutionalised conventions of metadiscourse. This perspective nicely combines research and teaching (c.f. Hyland 2002) and has been propagated since Swales (1990) started his genre approach to academic writing and Hyland (e.g. 2009) developed it further with author stance and engagement as crucial variables in academic interaction:

Writing is always a personal and socio-cultural act of identity whereby writers both signal their membership in a range of communities as well as express their own creative presence. (Hyland 2006: 35)

In this perspective, academic discourse is not only interaction between writer and reader, but also between writers, not only in direct “response” articles, but in all academic intertextuality from references to the development of concepts and models (see below).

The defining features of a discourse community have been established by Swales (1990: 24-27). If we split up this discourse community into sub-communities, we can present these gradients of popularization like in Fig. 1.

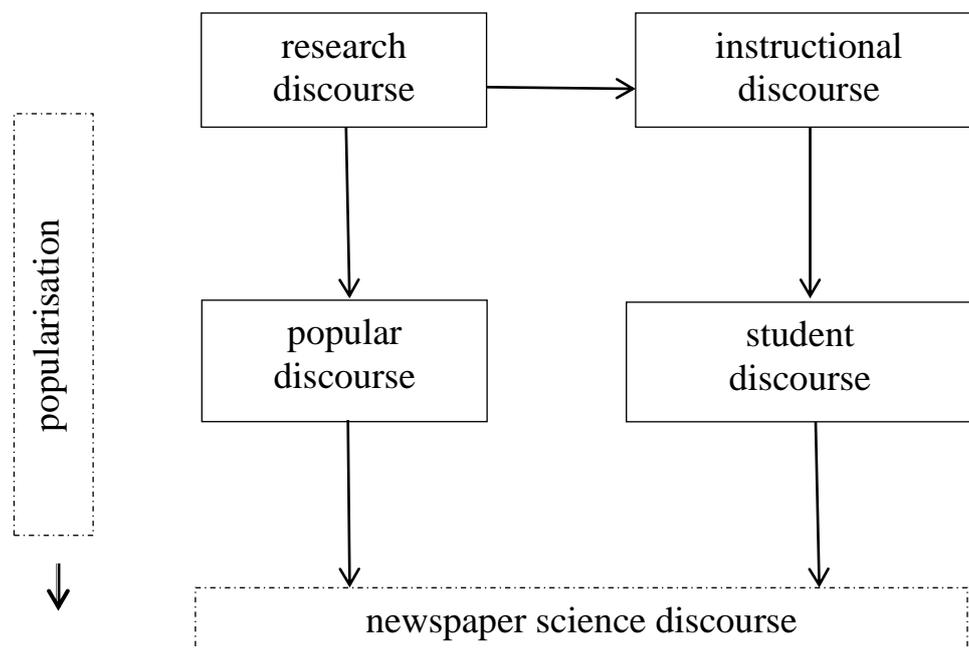


Fig.1: Popularisation of academic discourse from research to media

If we apply this framework to the genres and text types that are used commonly in each of these communities, we receive a network of academic community text types like in Fig. 2:

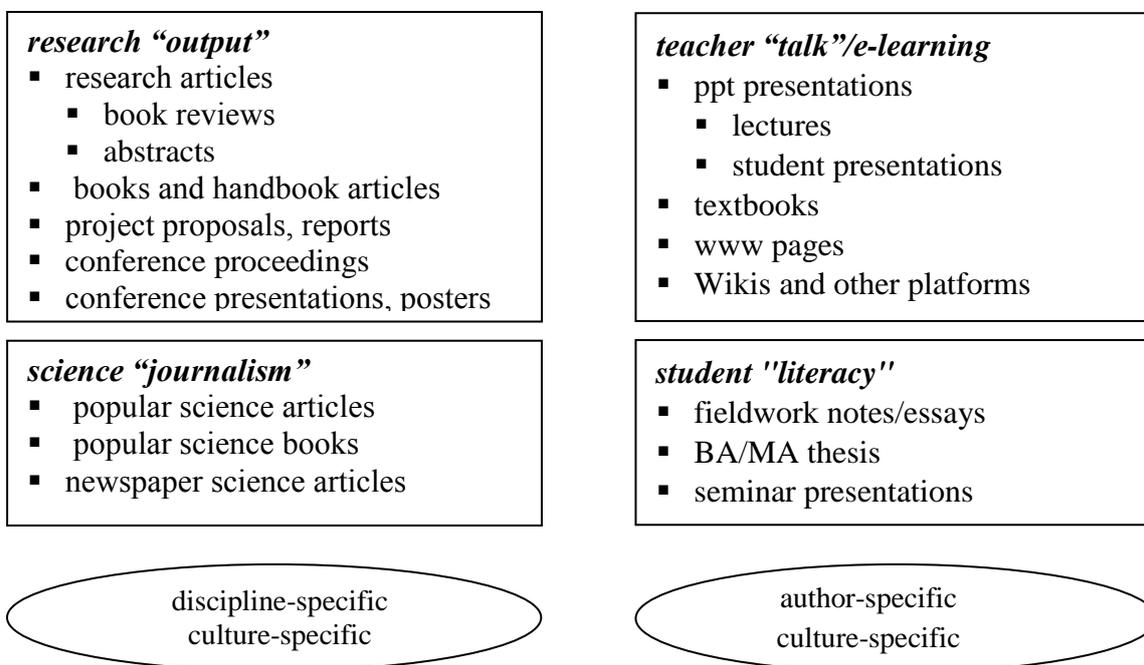


Fig. 2: Academic Englishes according to genre/text-type in community

This diagram (Fig. 2) is of course an abstraction and the reality is not as neat as it may seem. Some issues in this model are.

There are many other genres/text-types that have received attention in academic research recently, like grant proposals (Koutsantoni 2009) and university course descriptions (Gesuato 2011), to give just two examples in the more administrative dimension of the research and teaching areas, respectively.

The model suggests that research discourse is relatively discipline-specific, whereas teaching discourse is more author-specific; however, both are culture-specific in a modern sense of the word culture.

The transition from student “literacy” to (real?) academic discourse by “novice scholars” is not addressed in this model, but we have some interesting research into this level of academic writing (cf. Schmied 2011 or Povolna *fc.*) or even a comparison between novice and mature academic writing (Shaw 2009 or Wagner 2011).

Although “genre” is a relatively modern term in linguistics, in contrast to literary studies (cf. Hewings/North 2010: 47), it is useful because it complements the term “text-type”: whereas genre emphasises the social purpose of a communicative event according to Swales (1990: 58), text-type emphasizes the internal patterning of texts (Biber 1989).

The definition of culture in (socio)linguistics seems unexpectedly difficult. On the one hand, “sociolinguists working on WE [World Englishes] are having difficulties in tackling culture as a linguistic phenomenon or bypass the consequences of cultural contact altogether” (Wolf/Polzenhagen 2009: xiii), on the other hand, much of sociolinguistics “has been criticised for presenting an overly static view of culture as the fixed background against which a communicative event takes place, rather than recognising the role of the participants themselves in constructing the context” (Hewings/North 2010: 46). This seems surprising, since even “Wikipedia” offers an acceptable modern definition of culture:

Arbitrary symbols enforce consensus of perceptions, which not only allows members to communicate about the same objects in terms of space and time (as in hunting) but it also makes it possible for social relationships to be standardized and manipulated through symbols. It means that idiosyncrasies are smoothed out and perceived within classes of behavior. By enforcing perceptual invariance, symbols also enforce social behavioral constancy, and enforcing social behavioral constancy is a prerequisite to differential task-role sectors in a differentiated social group adapting not only to the outside environment but to its own membership.

However, languages, now understood as the particular set of speech norms of a particular community, are also a part of the larger culture of the community that speaks them. Humans use language as a way of signalling identity with one cultural group and difference from others. Even among speakers of one language several different ways of using the language exist, and each is used to signal affiliation with particular subgroups within a larger culture. In linguistics such different ways of using the same language are called “varieties”. ...

The differences between languages does [sic!] not consist only in differences in pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, but also in different “cultures of speaking”.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture> (30/06/11)

In our context, of course, we do not only see cultures of speaking, but also cultures of writing, and both can be integrated into the very modern concept of communities of practice (e.g. Bell 2010). In the following discussions, I intend to show that research into both New Englishes and academic writing is culture-based in this sense that language behaviour is culture-specific: be it in new nations where English users have to adapt conventions of the international (and mother-tongue) varieties to their national needs, be it in academic disciplines where writers have to decide to what extent they can transfer the academic traditions in their home countries and universities to the global academic *lingua franca* English.

When we transfer these concepts to New Englishes, it is predictable that culture figures prominently, but social constructionism does not occur in the standard textbooks (e.g. Wolf/Polzenhagen 2009, Schneider 2007 and 2011), although of course all cultural symbols including language are clearly constructed by the respective communities. The issue of community is mentioned in broad, general terms as speech community, but not really as discourse community and not as community of practice either. This is interesting because the larger (and diffuse) speech community may decide in the long run whether

language forms are consciously accepted as appropriate, but they usually do not set the usage norms even as tentative proposals; this can only be done by smaller communities of practice like examination councils, newspaper editors and government publishers.

A community of practice (CoP) is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991). CoPs can exist online, such as within discussion boards and newsgroups, or in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice (30/06/11)

Since the concept of “community of practice” is restricted to a common domain or area of interest, it is actually much more manageable than a “speech community”, which is occasionally even taken as comprising all English language speakers and users. This smaller concept of community makes it much easier to discuss issues of language change and attitudes, since they can really be influential in language matters deciding on lexemes, phrases and even entire genre conventions.

Thus maybe these relatively new concepts can be transferred from academic writing to New Englishes?

3. Models and theories

When we talk about language and text academically, we need, as in all-academic discourse, abstractions to summarize the individual endeavours of drafting interpersonal behaviour. For a long time, models and theories have been developed in cultural approaches to the study of language. Before we discuss specific conceptual models, let us briefly clarify the concept of models again, using Wikipedia:

In the most general sense, a model is anything used in any way to represent anything else. Some models are physical objects, for instance, a toy model which may be assembled, and may even be made to work like the object it represents. They are used to help us know and understand the subject matter they represent. The term *conceptual model* may be used to refer to models which are represented by concepts or related concepts which are formed after a conceptualization process in the mind. Conceptual models represent human intentions or semantics. Conceptualization from observation of physical existence and conceptual modelling are the necessary means human employ to think and solve problems.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conceptual_model (30/06/11)

One of most controversial models (Fig. 3) in linguistics has been Kaplan's cultural thought pattern (1966 and 1987). Despite the criticism, Kaplan can be

credited with sparking numerous research projects in contrastive rhetoric, argumentative discourse structures, etc. (cf. Connor 1996). In our debate it is important, because it links explicitly academic writing with non-native English styles (Kaplan analyses 500 international student essays). But he distinguished those “cultures” on the basis of vague traditional notions (like semitic and oriental) without paying attention to the different status of English in countries like India and China.

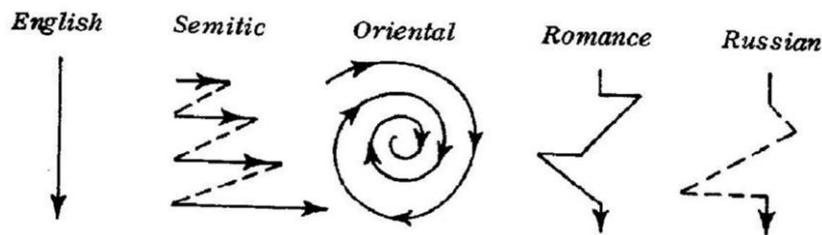


Fig. 3: Kaplan's (1966:15) cultural thought patterns

This was achieved by a more widely accepted model of Englishes (Fig. 4) proposed by Kachru in 1982, now almost 30 years ago:

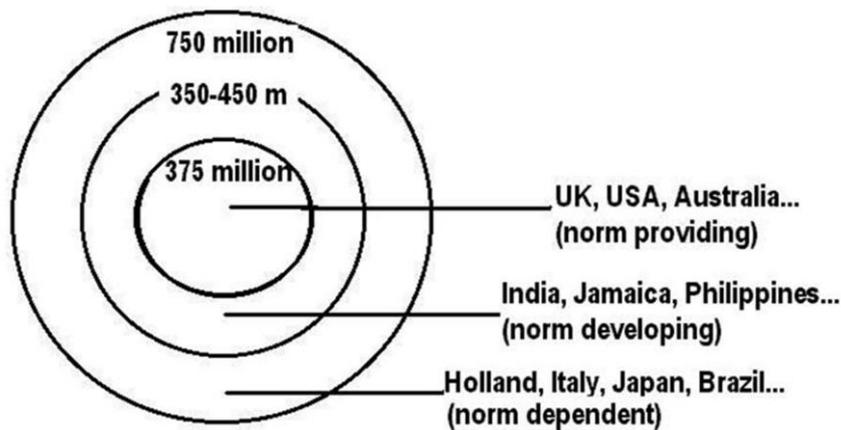


Fig. 4: Kachru's model of concentric circles: inner, outer/extended, expanding (Crystal 1995: 107)

This model of concentric circles is useful in my discussion of English world-wide and academic writing, because it makes a relatively clear distinction between second language countries like India, Jamaica and the Philippines that are expected to develop their own norm and countries that only use English as an international language like China, Germany and others who are called “norm dependent” and fall outside the circles. Of course, it is extremely controversial if we apply this general model to academic writing as a special case of *lingua franca* used by specialists with near-native proficiency.

More than 20 years ago, I also developed a model which I called “Life-cycles of African Englishes” (Fig. 8.2 in Schmieid 1991: 195), which emphasized that the introduction of a second language variety can be accepted or repressed by a “New English” nation, so that either African mother tongue varieties or African international varieties develop. Today I would see this as an interesting, but maybe too categorical model (either mother tongue or international language), because in Africa even today there are many more interim phases than end phases where English has been completely adopted or completely deinstitutionalized. This is partly because of the globalization of the last 20 years due to the recent political and communication revolutions.

Over the last decade, Schneider has developed a “dynamic model of post-colonial Englishes” (2007: 55), which offers a unified account of developments in America in the 18th century and the New Englishes in the 20th (in Schneider 2007:56 and Schneider 2011:34). This has been discussed by Schneider and others over the last few years in great detail. Although this is a very valuable socio-linguistic model I think it is possible to add a cognitive dimension, so I propose a socio-cognitive model of New Englishes, which deals in more detail with the critical interaction phases in the cognition of the language users (Fig. 5).

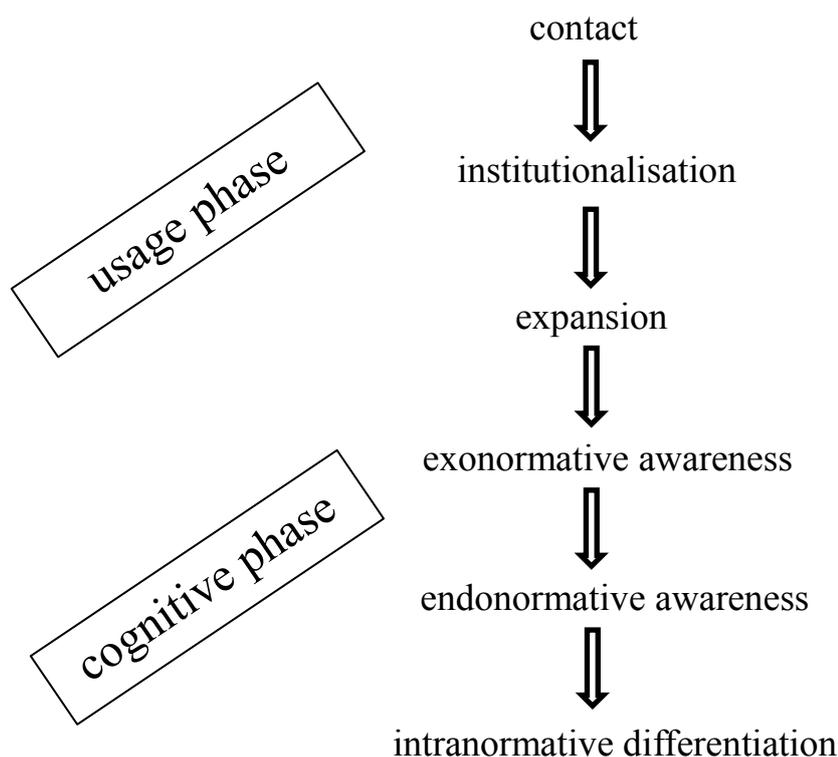


Fig. 5: Schmied's socio-cognitive model (2011)

This model uses the traditional phases of contact, institutionalisation and expansion and adds two awareness phases after that: This model avoids the term “nativisation” and replaces it by “exonormative awareness”, which is the first step towards “endonormative awareness”. First, language users must become aware of the differences between their own language usage and the usage of native speakers (or other codified language models in general). Then they must become aware of the internal differentiation of language according to addressees, subcultures or media. Only on the basis of this cognitive phase can we truly expect an intranormative differentiation to develop as an accepted part of (sub-) variety development.

Let me summarize the advantages of the five successive models presented here briefly. Kaplan combines language, culture and cognition for the first time. Kachru suggests the circles which distinguish varieties as core and periphery and as norm-providing, -developing and -dependent. Schmied 1991 adds the option of cycles and suggests the development towards either a native or an international variety. Schneider includes most varieties in his model, which is based on an American model which started as early as the 18th century, but it requires English-speaking settlers for the early and advanced stages of variety development. Schmied's socio-cognitive model finally adds the dimension of awareness and thus unifies socio- and cognitive linguistics.

This is in line with similar approaches proposed recently. Wolf/Polzenhagen (2009:64) discuss „cultural models“ in their “cognitive sociolinguistic approach” to New Englishes, although they do not mention the relationship to Schneider's (2007) model explicitly (and they do not apply it to academic writing).

The socio-cognitive dimension of awareness is particularly important to New Englishes and academic writing, where the users of English have no native speaker intuition and where they may consciously or subconsciously deviate from the codified (native) norms. There are obviously no native-speakers of academic English, since academic conventions are acquired relatively late even by native speakers of the every-day English – and only by a minority. Linguistic choices have to be made much more carefully by non-native than by native users of English and they include the cultural dimension, which is often so controversial. It is the cultural dimension that distinguishes non-native academic writing and non-native varieties of English from native writing and varieties, since English users have to decide more or less consciously whether the English words, phrases or text-conventions are adequate. Non-native writers may even doubt whether a non-native language can ever express complex cultural and academic thoughts in the same way as a native language – but this is again a different controversy (Thielmann 2009).

The purpose of this summary or juxtaposition has just been to illustrate how fruitful the “unifying” view may be. It seems that the socio-cognitive model suggested here is not only suitable for entire language varieties, but also for subsystems. This has been suggested for complex national varieties like South African English, where not only White and Black South African English, but maybe even Cape and Natal and Transvaal English etc. have gone through the processes of usage and cognitive phases of recognition separately (van Rooy/Ter Blanche 2010). This model may even apply to national sub-systems: academic English (like Black South African Academic English) may develop national forms in similar phases as New Englishes (like Black South African English in general). In such smaller varieties, it will be much easier to follow the processes of exonormative and endonormative awareness for instance, since the functioning of academic communities of practice can be observed more easily in utterances by decision makers and gate keepers (like conference organisers and journal editors). However, with the current trends of globalisation in academic publishing and cooperation we have both centrifugal forces that support national, culture-specific tendencies, and centripetal forces that support uniformity, maybe in an Anglo-American or Western style. On a European level, national sections of continental organisations like the national associations of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) may be the appropriate forum to discuss and study such developments. Before we can discuss this in the cognitive phase we need a thorough usage description in the previous phase.

4. Cultural dimensions in language

Therefore, we have to go back to the basics and discuss the cultural, socio-cognitive dimensions of language again and to demonstrate how linguistic choices enable English language users to express their own culture:

Most language users know that pronunciation is relatively individual and may express more intra-group identity than culture in the widest sense, because it must ensure simple intelligibility and needs more standardization than the other parts of a language.

Grammar only shows relatively few cases of cultural influence, although modality in particular in combination with politeness and user identity is a clear case of cultural patterning.

That the lexicon displays cultural variation seems elementary, since culture-specific vocabulary must be rendered either in lexemes or in paraphrases anywhere in the world.

On the pragmatic level, cultural conventions are not always followed consciously, although, for instance, interrogative imperatives (“Would you mind opening the window?”) are a famous case of English politeness.

Finally, the presentation of information and argumentation is usually something that language users are not very much aware of, but which is extremely important in academic writing and speaking. Old concepts like theme,

rheme and focusing or (in)directness may be analysed again from this cultural perspective.

Of course, there are many culture-specific elements in forewords and dedications, but whether the presentation of academic information is completely “objective” and not “culture-subjective” again has been an issue for a long time.

In particular the contrast between the German and the English tradition have been debated by specialists between the two academic worlds (Clyne 1987:238):

Knowledge is idealised in the German tradition; consequently texts by Germans are less designed to be easy to read. Their emphasis is on providing readers with knowledge, theory and stimulus for thought [...].

In English speaking countries, most of the onus falls on writers to make their text readable.

In German-speaking countries, the readers have to make the extra effort, so that they can understand the text, especially if the author is academic.

Just as it is the readers' responsibility to understand the German text (to gain *Verständnis*) rather than of the writer to make it understandable (*Verständlichkeit*).

This issue has been taken up and debated further by Nkemleke (2011:136):

... so-called bulldozer tradition of high Germanic scholarship (Elbow 1998: 149):

‘Give no prominence to your own ideas. Emphasize the collecting and integrating of the ideas and conclusions of others. Or if you want to say something, avoid saying it until you have demonstrated that you have summarized and shown the shortcomings of previous works in the literature. Cite everything- sometimes even your own ideas under the guise of someone else’s.’

5. The teaching of cultural variation in academic writing for non-native users of English

Finally, I would like to summarize the options to integrate the socio-cognitive concepts that I have presented here from a research tradition into the existing teaching structures, including the option for international cooperation. In our existing M.A. structure, we have several modules that are well suited to include (more of) these ideas: in the specialization “English as a global language”, students have to take the basic course “Using and learning English world-wide”. This provides an opportunity to compare current practice and norms in countries of their specific interests. It is also possible to combine this option with the TESOL module to develop special skills in the new and expanding area of language services: culture-specific text presentation may be seen on one level with media-specific and audience-specific text optimisation.

Maybe more important for international cooperation is the proposed new module on “English as an international academic language” in general and “academic writing” in particular. This module would include elements from the European Passport and the European Language Portfolio. Such a portfolio could include students' own text productions, which would not only be useful for presenting their achievements to future employers, but in electronic form it could

also be used as a mini-corpus to analyse idiosyncratic usages. This may be taken as a basis for increasing consciousness, self-assessment and (possibly) self-correction.

In the concrete classroom situation, I could imagine structuring exercises including group work and detailed discussions among students from different academic backgrounds and disciplines if possible. As a simple starting exercise, students could mark key phrases in the argumentation structure and discuss methods by which this argumentation structure could be more or less highlighted and visualized. From a functional sentence perspective, students could also mark theme and rheme and compare the structures used by experienced writers with their own writing. Another structuring exercise could be the creation of mind maps for academic genres or text types, which shows not only that categories are sometimes not as clearly defined as students wish, but it may also initiate critical debates to increase the awareness among novice users and experts alike.

Additional elements in this module could be placements and internships with language service providers or partner universities, but also small “business” assignments from other faculties or university professors. Modern eJournals provide relatively easy opportunities for editorial work on a shared working platform.

Traditional linguistic concepts could be put to practical application. This may include student tasks to simplify sentence structures and complex noun phrases through hypernyms or superclasses in an ontological hierarchy with necessary modifications. It may also mean that students apply their concepts of hedging to control all stance features in a text extremely carefully. It implies raising students’ awareness, for instance, in coherence where they can follow up the hypotheses whether there is a movement from more explicit to more implicit cohesive devices with increasing professionalism of the writers.

A simple exercise is, of course, to ponder on the differences in titles and compare critically the simple and transparent titles in popular science articles with the original research articles but also with the catchy tabloid titles in journalistic writing. Finally, students need a well-guided, scaffolded approach to writing popular academic and even newspaper texts on the basis of scientific academic texts. The emphasis must be on writing freely first and reediting carefully later according to the guidelines agreed on in the discussions before.

The final emphasis in this argumentation must be that students have to get to know or even feel the discourse conventions and use these concepts creatively and practically. This includes not only surfing the corpus but also reading the original text documents and discussing specific features not only in person but also in electronic form like discussion boards etc.

The culture-specific dimensions added to the concepts of academic writing here hopefully add to the attractiveness of the area to students, since we are not discussing categories like right or wrong, but preferences like more or less conventional according to specific traditions and cultures. Thus we add a new dimension to the old discourse on teaching culture and/in/through language (Hall

2002). The socio-cognitive perspective can also be seen as an expansion of the popular intercultural perspective, which has entered the well-established communicative approach to language teaching and learning recently. As an overall teaching concept, the following “philosophy” of intercultural communicative language teaching could be used (Fig. 8). The advantage of this framework is that it summarises the argumentation presented here. Culture in Language is so central that all language work must be culturally oriented. Knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness are necessary to achieve the aim of intercultural competence, also in the specific domain of academic writing. Both the teaching and, I like to emphasise, the learning approach should be exploratory and discovery-based, which is compatible with the text-based, corpus-linguistic approach advocated here. The outcome of this philosophy should be language users that are very aware of adopting contextually, especially culturally, appropriate practices.

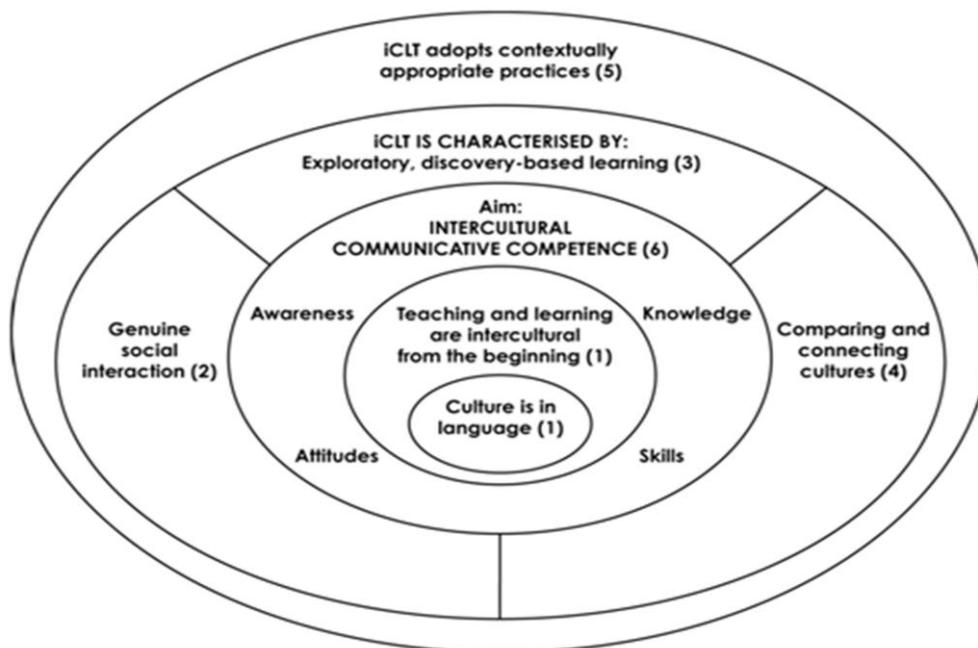


Fig. 8: Model of intercultural language teaching (Rivers 2010: 23)

6. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that it is fruitful to unify the contrasts, not only between teaching and research but also between socio- and cognitive linguistics and academic writing and New Englishes, which stem from different academic traditions. A socio-cognitive model for both fields allows us to explore language variation from different perspectives in different academic discourse communities. This article ends with a plea to discuss and harmonise these traditions, so that European institutions can profit from each other's traditions and experience in teaching and research.

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