

ACADEMIC REGISTER: HALLOWED TRADITION OR HOLLOW RITUAL?

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Introduction

Academic register has been a personal project of mine for some years. It started when I began my MA, and I discovered that I needed to learn a new way of writing. But why did I need to learn to do this? I had been taught a successful way of writing as a computer consultant: it was what senior management wanted; it was easy to learn and use; it organised your thoughts effectively both for argumentation and presentation – where did it go wrong?

Yet Academia insisted that I learn to do things their way, although the nature of this new register was never exactly defined. It became clear to me that I had to codify for myself the differences between business and academic registers, so I set about identifying what those differences were.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid the active tense. Most especially avoid personal attribution to the self.• Build arguments from the bottom up. State your thesis at the end of the text as conclusions, do not place it at the front.• Support arguments with sources if possible. Do not assume them as givens.• Avoid levity and familiarity.• Use only acceptable idioms.• Provide evidential data in the main text.• Sentences do not need to be short.• Use connectivity extensively.• Use modals – e.g. <i>could indicate</i> instead of <i>indicates</i>.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid the passive tense. Attribution is important – own your decisions• Give instructions not suggestions. (e.g. not "the program may be activated by..", but "activate the program by...").• Place decisions first and arguments after. That way the arguments only need to be read if the decision looks odd.• Avoid stuffiness and standoffishness.• Avoid excessively complex language. Use short words and sentences if possible.• Provide evidential data in appendices.• Avoid excessive connectivity. If necessary bullet-point arguments.• Try to avoid modals. Own your choices.
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Academic Register versus Business Register

I was quite surprised by the answers I found: almost everything that worked in Industry didn't work in Academia, and vice versa.

Academic Register and Business Register

At the time I did this survey I was undertaking evening study for my Masters degree. I was still heavily committed to my non-academic life, so my investigation was largely concerned with how academic register impacted on Industry. It was a small survey, backed up by informal conversations with managers and executives at several levels. The general view was not good. Students came out of University convinced that they had learned a life-skill for

effective writing, and they hadn't. Employers expected graduates to be able to write effectively in a business register, and they couldn't.

It was clear that the more aware students soon adjusted their writing style, acquiring business register by osmosis; but some appeared unable to do so. These people were usually redeployed to areas where writing was not a primary skill, but this raised a further issue: were they being disadvantaged in their working life because business register was too difficult for them, or was it because their ideas of how to write properly had been subverted by achieving academic register?

Was Academia failing Industry by not providing cannon fodder for its war of words, or was Industry expecting the wrong things from their graduate trainees? Phrasing the question in this confrontational way obscured a much more important question: if Industry has evolved a way of writing that is simple, clear, and easy for writer and reader, why is it not used in Academia? After all, both business reports and academic papers are doing the same thing: they both use the same thesis-antithesis-synthesis process; they are both reader-directed, with the writer expected to make the reader's job as easy as possible; and they both need the same argumentation structure, involving marshalling of facts, arguing from them, and producing a conclusion, decision or recommendation. Why are they so different? Or, to look at the question from the position of Academia, what are the features of academic register that particularly fit it for academic use, and which do not apply to business register?

Academic Register – a Survey

In order to identify perceived wisdom on academic register I conducted a mini-survey to assess the reaction to it in my own discipline of linguistics. I was interested in the reaction of lecturers and tutors, the stakeholders for academic register, so I disseminated the survey online to the BAALMail and EdLing email groups. Both of these are active mail lists which are primarily discussion groups for academic linguists.

- Do you think that there is a specific way of writing for academic purposes?
- What do you see as the major single feature of academic writing that makes it different to other forms of writing?
- What do you see as the major single advantage of having a specific style for academic writing?
- Do you think there are any disadvantages?
- At your institution, is there a conversion course or booklet to teach students how to write in an academic style (select one): *course / booklet / booklet and course / Don't know of any*
- What is your subject area?

Survey Questions

The survey was short and the questions could be answered with short phrases. I was very aware of the FOAGAL factor¹ in the design of the survey, and the need to make the responder's role as easy as possible. The questions were therefore simple and short, and the important ones were open, inviting personalised answers. Personalised answers make analysis more difficult, but they tend to be more honest and are less frustrating for the responder than multiple choice. Open questions allow the survey to be viewed as a conversation between questioner and responder, and not an inquisition.

Forty five linguists responded to the survey, some of them with quite elaborate responses. Analysing the answers proved to be complex and to require some judgements to be made on the data. There is always the possibility that these judgements are prejudiced by expectations, but I tried to approach the responses with an open mind. The fact that the analysis gave some unexpected answers, and made me rethink my investigation, may indicate at least partial success.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 73% say there is an academic register• 16% say no• 11% say yes but not the same register in all subjects |
|--|

Do you think that there is a specific way of writing for academic purposes?

On question one, the closed nature of the question may have rendered it largely useless. 73% said there was such a thing as academic register, 16% said there wasn't, but 11% gave a qualified affirmative. This may indicate that there is a widespread belief in a compromise answer which would have been hidden by the didactic yes or no. In the circumstances, all that can really be said is that academic register is a sufficiently important question for academic linguists to take it seriously, and there is likely to be some dispute as to its nature vis-à-vis other registers.

For questions two to five in the slides that follow I have only listed those answers given in 9% or more of the responses. I also found that multiple answers were given to some questions by some of the respondents. These multiple answers were all given equal value in the analysis: this was a survey of ideas, not a popularity poll.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It's formalised (26%)• Specific lexicon/metalinguage (17%)• It's designed for argumentation (15%)• Use of passive (11%) |
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What do you see as the major single feature of academic writing that makes it different to other forms of writing?

¹ The FOAGAL factor – the point in completing the survey when the surveyed loses patience with the survey and mentally tells the surveyor to “go away and get a life”.

Question two was much more revealing than question one. The leading factor that makes academic register different – according to the survey – is that it is a formalised type of discourse: it has a structure and form which can be identified and taught. This is supported by the second most popular choice, the use of a specific lexicon. A standard formal structure and lexis is, however, a feature of many other registers. For instance, both business register and legal register require standard forms and task-specific language; and, as we will see, they have both shifted their paradigms significantly in recent years.

For the writer:

- Shows membership of academic community (18%)
- Encourages precision and close argument (16%)

For reader:

- Clear and easy to scan (18%)

For reader & writer:

- Creates standard structure allowing judgements to be made on content rather than style (24%)
- There aren't any advantages (9%)

What do you see as the major single advantage of having a specific style for academic writing?

I divided the answers to question three into three types: advantages for the sender or writer, advantages for the receiver or reader, and advantages – or disadvantages – for both. Once again standard formal structure was seen as most significant, an advantage which has implications for both reader and writer. For the reader it facilitates reading shortcuts and scan-reading; for the writer it provides a template, allowing the argument to be formulated without worrying too much about the argumentation. Not all responses given commented on both of these advantages, but a significant number did so.

The other advantage for the reader is clarity. If the writer is constrained to express their argument in a standard way then it is easier to understand that argument. This is obviously related to formal structure, but it seems to be seen more as a task the writer must achieve to meet the reader's expectations of academic register.

There are two advantages for the writer, one of which is related to formal structure: precision is enhanced by a standard way of writing, allowing the writer to concentrate on what they are meaning rather than on what they are saying. Of course, if academic register is not comfortable for the writer then precisely the opposite may be true: it may aid writing for those in the know but hinder those excluded.

Which leads on to the final advantage, which is most definitely metalinguistic: being able to write in academic register is a mark of belonging to the academic

community. Academic register does not need to be easy – in fact, the more costly to learn the better it is as a signal of commitment to the group. This raises the possibility that academic register may not be a tool for effective writing but a deliberate hindrance to it. You have to pay the cost of learning how to write in academic style, otherwise your writing will not be taken seriously by your peers.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excludes the uninitiated from Academia (31%)• Unnatural way of communicating for some (19%)• Disguises poor scholarship (11%)• Impedes originality (9%)• Difficult to learn (9%) |
|--|

Do you think there are any disadvantages?

And that, of course, leads neatly into the disadvantages, all of which are metalinguistic. The most common view is that academic register is an exclusion device. If we add this figure to those seeing it as a badge of membership in question three, 50% of the survey saw academic register as a signifier of membership, for good or ill. This is interesting because badges of membership have to be costly to be valuable: they have to be expensive to prove commitment and to exclude freeloaders. In Darwinian terms, a typical costly signal is the peacock's tail: no use except to show that the owner is fit enough to carry around this useless ornament and still survive. Badges of membership are important; but is the way we write a suitable location for a badge of membership?

The second and fifth most favourite answers indicate that academic register is difficult to achieve for some. This could explain why some people have difficulty converting from academic register to business register. Some students take to academic register easily, and some never succeed and drop out of the academic system; but some will finally manage to gain control of academic register, and will cling to it as the salvation that got them their degree. This could, in turn, be because academic register is sold to them as the only way to write – do Academia's claims for academic register need to be referred to the Advertising Standards Authority?

The remaining two answers to question four both take the view that academic register is disadvantageous, even for Academia. One in five of the survey responses seem to be indicating that we should review it and perhaps change it.

Changing the Register

Changing academic register is not such a revolutionary idea as first appears. Business has, during my time in Industry, significantly altered its idea of what is effective writing. Bulleted lists have appeared, report formats have been standardised, and ownership of writing (and ideas) has been encouraged. This

approach has created a new dynamism in business writing, which has been a necessary response to the growth of technology. When I started work, typists did all the typing, and reports were written only occasionally and only by professional report writers. The PC has made many more people business writers, and a new business register to support their writing has evolved.

The old business register had many similarities to academic register – unsurprisingly, as it was mostly a product of graduate writers. The new business register has evolved not just because it advantages the writer but because it meets the needs of the reader. Information is more important than argument, and the level of trust between reader and writer is necessarily high. On page 8, you can see a contents page for a typical business report. The order – conclusions, proposals, problem, current status – is almost the opposite of received wisdom on academic register. This business register may or may not be a good model for academic writing, but it illustrates how far a register can move in a relatively short time.

Legal register is currently undergoing a similar change to that of business register. A recent initiative by HM Treasury has attempted to address the problem of comprehension, and on pages 8 to 10 you can see a summary of their new approach to legal writing, and an example rewrite. This is a first step, but where Treasury leads the rest of Government goes, and where Government goes, the legal profession has to follow. The next few years could be an exciting time in legal linguistics.

One final question that has not been properly addressed is, what is this academic register of which we speak? If we define it as the way of writing for an academic audience, then it is indeed a slippery and changeable thing. On page 11 are three examples of academic writing from different genres. The first displays extensive use of the active voice: “we have demonstrated”, “we showed”, and so on. The second is positively businesslike in its register, using idiom, ownership and answers-first. The last is a fairly standard text from my own discipline of linguistics. Compared to the other two it seems – at least, to me – old-fashioned and stuffy. More problematic for academic purposes, we don’t know whether the writer is reporting on her own or another’s work.

Conclusion

Is academic register a hallowed tradition or a hollow ritual? I would suggest both. It acts as a historical link to the past, theoretically uniting old and new themes into a continuous discourse; it provides a standard template for writing; and it provides a badge of membership of the academic community, an indicator that the user has been initiated. However, it may also fail to

accommodate modern cultural changes; it may stultify imagination; and it may arbitrarily exclude the otherwise capable from academic recognition.

What is needed is not an abandonment of an effective way of writing, but an accommodation of other ways of doing things. It may require more mental effort for examiners and markers but, as academics, we are supposed to be the social group capable of that effort. By accepting a wider range of registers as good academic writing we will open Academia up to a whole new group of people; and, perhaps, open ourselves up to a whole new set of ideas.

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Appendix 2 – Tax Law Rewrite: Report and Plans, 2005/06

Rewrite Techniques

We use a number of techniques when rewriting legislation. These are all different ways of making the legislation easier for the reader to understand, while preserving its technical effect.

Structure

By far the most useful of these is to establish the best structure for the legislation. As time goes by and legislation is amended, its structure begins to creak and it is often possible to improve it considerably by taking it apart and setting it out in a better order. This process involves the detailed analysis of all the existing legislation on a particular topic, as well as any relevant extra-statutory concessions and other non- statutory material. We then reconstruct the propositions in the most logical order. This initial analysis is usually much harder and more time-consuming than first expected.

This reordering at a detailed level is complemented at a higher level by the reordering of material within the Acts and between Acts.

Drafting style

We use colloquial English wherever we can, adopting shorter sentences in the active, rather than passive, voice. We replace archaic expressions with more modern ones, taking care not to change the law inadvertently by rewriting words or expressions that have a well understood meaning. We harmonise definitions across the Acts where possible, and then make it easier for the reader to find defined terms. We group similar

rules together in one place, and make greater use of signposts to guide the reader to other relevant provisions. And we continue to explore other techniques for making legislation more accessible.

These techniques include:

- the use of shorter subsections and sections as well as shorter sentences;
- method statements;
- formulas;
- the use of tables where appropriate;
- the use of abbreviated references to Acts;
- the use of lettered conditions;
- the use of informative labels for definitions wherever possible;
- our attempt to achieve gender neutral drafting so far as it is practicable to do so at reasonable cost to brevity and intelligibility; and
- the use of non-statutory explanatory materials such as Explanatory Notes and Tables of Origins and Destinations.

We remain willing to consider new techniques and to develop existing ones if we can improve the legislation still further by doing so.

Format and Layout

We have always recognised that the way the text is presented on the page can make an important contribution to the overall clarity of the legislation. But we also acknowledge that any decision on the format of Bills remains a matter for Parliament. In February 1998, partly as a result of our work, a working group was set up under the chairmanship of the Clerk Assistant, House of Lords, to review the format of the statute law. This working group recommended a new format for all public Bills, which drew heavily on our research. Their recommendations were considered by both Houses in 1999 and accepted.

The new statutory format now applies for all public Bills and has been used for all our rewrite Bills. It incorporates many — although not all — of the new features developed by the project. We are pleased that our work has been influential in contributing to this significant improvement.

Minor changes

To achieve our overall aim our rewritten legislation has to be not only clear, but also technically accurate. It must reproduce the effect of the existing legislation, except where we can make a minor change in the interests of further simplification. The Project Team is responsible for the overall accuracy of the rewritten legislation. Accuracy is assured largely by exposing the draft clauses to the close scrutiny of a series of internal and external experts through our extensive consultation processes.

The minor changes in law or in approach that we propose typically involve correcting small errors, legislating an extra-statutory concession, or dropping material from the existing legislation which is no longer necessary. We aim at every stage of the consultative process to identify clearly all such changes and to highlight any issues that may arise. In this way we seek to ensure that each minor change is fully examined before Parliament is asked to enact it.

It is difficult to define in precise terms what constitutes a “minor change” for the purposes of the project. The project’s Steering Committee have suggested that we should take a reasonably bold approach in the first instance, in identifying and proposing such changes as part of the project’s work. All changes are subject to the thorough and open consultative process through which our product is scrutinised; those

which go too far can be (and are) challenged by users and rejected. Ultimately, the rewrite Bills are considered by Parliament and it is for Parliament to decide what is acceptable and should be enacted.

TAX LAW REWRITE: BEFORE AND AFTER EXAMPLE

Re-structuring material; shorter sentences; colloquial language; definitions; signposts; lettered conditions; gender-neutral language.

BEFORE:

Section 730A of ICTA - Treatment of price differential on sale and repurchase of securities

- (1) ..this section applies where —
 - (a) a person (“the original owner”) has transferred any securities to another person (“the interim holder”) under an agreement to sell them; [and]
 - (b) the original owner or a person connected with him—
 - (i) is required to buy them back in pursuance of an obligation imposed by, or in consequence of the exercise of an option acquired under, that agreement or any related agreement, or
 - (ii) acquires an option to buy them back under that agreement or any related agreement which he subsequently exercises;

Section 730B - Interpretation of section 730A

- (3) In section 730.. “securities” has the same meaning as in section 737A.

Section 737B - Interpretation of section 737A

- (1) In section 737A . . . “securities” means United Kingdom equities, United Kingdom securities or overseas securities;

AFTER:

Clause 545 - Meaning of “repo”

- (1) For the purposes of this Part there is a repo in respect of securities if conditions A, B and C are met.
- (2) Condition A is that a person (“the original owner”) has agreed to sell the securities to another person (“the interim holder”).
- (3) Condition B is that the securities are UK shares, UK securities or overseas securities.
- (4) Condition C is that the original owner or a person connected with the original owner —
 - (a) is required to buy back the securities by the agreement or a related agreement,
 - (b) is required to buy back the securities under an obligation imposed as a result of the exercise of an option acquired under the agreement or a related agreement, or
 - (c) exercises an option to buy back the securities which was acquired under the agreement or a related agreement.

Appendix 3 – Sample Academic Texts

In the physical sciences we see extensive ownership of the text by use of the first person plural pronoun.

We have demonstrated the high-fidelity preparation of a QD spin state via laser cooling [optical pumping (12)]. Using the Pauli blockade strength of the corresponding optical transitions as a means to infer the electron spin state, we showed that spin cooling due to spontaneous spin-flip Raman scattering can dominate over the heating introduced by hyperfine-induced spin-flip or cotunneling events. This allowed us to cool the spin temperature of an electron from 4.2 K (determined by the heat bath) down to 20 mK. By controlling the relative strength of these processes via gate voltage and magnetic field, we can tune the system from the regime of an isolated artificial atom to that of a quantum-confined solid-state system coupled either to a charge or a spin reservoir.

Mete Atatüre *et al*, Quantum-Dot Spin-State Preparation with Near-Unity Fidelity. In *Science* Vol 312, 28 April 2006, p551

In this text from the discipline of computer studies we see both ownership and personalisation (I used to think..., I came to the conclusion...)

Anne Keegan and I identified four essential roles on a project:

- the management of the relationship with the customer
- the management of the input of resources
- the management of the project process
- the management of the delivery of the project's product and benefits

I used to think that all of these roles were the responsibility of the project manager. However, as a result of the work I did with Anne Keegan (2000, 2001), I came to the conclusion that the project manager's primary responsibility is to manage the project process.

Professor J. Rodney Turner, Operational control and governance of projects. In *Project Manager Today* April 2006, p20

In this linguistics sample we see a traditional use of Academic Register, which raises an important issue: who actually did the work here? Is this primary or secondary reporting?

The findings from the case study reported here are based on analysis of secondary data from an ESRC-funded project focusing on classroom assessment which aimed to explore opportunities for and instances of negotiation of meaning and form.

Audio data from four guided group work sessions in the Literacy Hour, each lasting approximately 20 minutes, were transcribed and analysed; for three sessions video data were also available. The sessions selected were from two classes at Key Stage 1 containing a high proportion of EAL learners; in each class one session was led by the Class Teacher (CT) and one by the Language Support Coordinator (LSC) (Table 1).

Instances of negotiation of meaning were explored using Pica and Doughty's (1985) *Interactional modifications in the negotiation of meaning* and the data were analysed for clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks and self- or other-repetitions.

Catriona Scott, Interaction in the Literacy Hour: a case study of learners with English as an additional language. In Srikant Sarangi & Theo van Leeuwen (eds), *Applied Linguistics and Communities of Practice*. 2003, Continuum, London, UK.
