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SOME CONCEPTS DIFFERENTLY TREATED IN THE MULTICULTURAL DISCOURSE COMMUNITY (WITH THE SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ENGLISH AND SERBIAN ACADEMIC WRITING)[∗]

Abstract

The paper tries to depict some differences evidenced in the academic writing of the writers from different cultural backgrounds – members of the international discourse community. These differences are usually caused by different cultural inclinations towards certain concepts important for academic writing, such as: academic politeness and persuasiveness, the notion of 'gender-sensitive' writing and the manifestation of the author's presence in the text (the author's self-identification). These are just a few issues tightly connected to the writing habits established within a certain writing culture and commonly shared by its members, although some personal inclinations and preferences cannot be neglected. Nevertheless, some generalization is possible to make, especially when comparing English and Serbian academic writing, i.e. academic articles written by the two groups of writers.

Key Words: Academic Writing, Cultural Backgrounds, The International Discourse Community, English and Serbian Academic Writing

O NEKIM KONCEPTIMA KOJI SE RAZLIČITO KORISTE U MULTIKULTURNOJ DISKURSNOJ ZAJEDNICI (SA POSEBNIM OSVRTOM NA AKADEMSKO PISANjE ENGLESKIH I SRPSKIH AUTORA)

Apstrakt

Autor ovog rada nastoji da predstavi neke od razlika koje se uočavaju u akademskom pisanju autora iz različitih kulturnih sredina, odnosno članova međunarodne diskursne zajednice. Ove razlike su najčešće prouzrokovane različitim kulturnim sklonostima u odnosu na određene koncepte koji su značajni za akademsko pisanje, kao što su: akademska učtivost i akademska ubedljivost, svest o 'rodno obeleženom' pisanju kao i način na koji autor manifestuje svoje prisustvo u tekstu. Nabrojani koncepti su samo neki od prisutnih u akademskom pisanju i zajednički su za pripadnike jedne pisane kulture, mada se lične sklonosti i preferencije ne mogu zanemariti. Međutim, neke opšte zaključke ipak je moguće izvesti, pogotovu kada upoređujemo način na koji engleski i srpski autori pišu svoje naučnoistraživačke radove.

Ključne reči: akademsko pisanje, kulturne sredine, međunarodna diskursna zajednica, engleski i srpski autori

> "Cultures develop writing styles appropriate to their own histories and the needs and values of their own societies" (Čmejrková, 2007, p.75).

INTRODUCTION

The comparison of the differences which can be identified in academic writing conducted by writers of different cultural backgrounds is nowadays one of the well-established research topics among modern linguists (Blagojević, 2004, 2005; Breivega *et al.,* 2002; Clyne, 1987; Connor, 1996; Čmejrkova, 1996, 2007; Duszak, 1994; Kaplan, 1966; Mauranen, 1993; Valero-Garces, 1996; Vassileva, 1998, 2000; Ventola, 1998; Yakhontova, 1997). The differences under consideration are viewed as the consequences of the writing habits which exist within different cultural communities and are caused by different cultural inclinations towards some concepts important for academic writing. In this paper, I intend to discuss some concepts which are easily evidenced in academic writing: the concept of academic politeness, of persuasiveness, of gender, or, better to say, the notion of 'gender sensitivity' in academic writing

and the way academic writers manifest their presence in their texts by means of employing personal pronouns (the opposition in the use of the first person singular and plural form).

One can say that the first two concepts, or the rhetorical strategies by which politeness and persuasiveness are accomplished in academic texts, are commonly shared by all writers within one culture, while the concepts of gender and the author's self-identification vary not only from culture to culture but are often connected to the writer's personal inclinations and preferences, although some common features in respect to the author's culture can still be drawn.

By 'gender sensitivity writing' we assume here the author's attitude towards the use of gender indicators in his/her way of writing when certain nouns are not morphologically gender marked (the common characteristic of English nouns, in contrast to Serbian ones), i.e. whether the author uses these indicators, or simply neglects them. Nouns such as *author, writer, reader, student, researcher... (autor/autorka, pisac/spisateljica, čitalac/čitateljka, student/studentkinja, istraživač/istraživačica)*, are frequently used in academic writing and they may properly illustrate the idea whether the authors of academic articles explicitly show their awareness towards gender by using gender indicators either by employing personal pronouns and possessive adjectives – both in English and Serbian (*he/she*, *his/her*, or *on/ona*, *njegov/njen)*, or by using morphologically gender-marked nouns (only in Serbian, such as *autor/autorka, pisac/spisateljica*).

As for the phenomenon concerning the manifestation of the author's presence in the text, the choice between the use of the personal pronouns *I* versus the personal pronoun *We* as one of the way for accomplishing it, ranks among "many aspects of cultural identity" (Breivega, *at al*., 2002, p. 20). However, before discussing the concepts under consideration, the two notions which are of crucial importance for this paper should be clarified, and these are: discourse community and multicultural discourse community.

THE NOTION OF DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

"Discourse community" is a term coined by modern linguists (Herzberg, 1986; Mauranen, 1993; Swales, 1990) to signify a group of people unified by the use of the same genre:

> "Use of term 'discourse community' testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse operates within conventions defined by communities, be academic disciplines or social group" (Herzberg, 1986, p. 1).

Thus, the authors of academic research papers comprise one discourse community, while, for example, the authors of, let's say, course

books, belong to another one. Surely, the boundaries of these communities are never strictly defined, neither is a member of one discourse community prevented from becoming a member of another one. On the contrary: the experiences obtained from one discourse genre are valuable for the authors who want to join another genre community.

However, "discourse community" should not be identified with "speech community", since the reasons for the constitution of the two of them are different. As J. Swales explains, the needs for constituting a group of people into a speech community are socio-linguistic ones, while the needs for constituting a group of people into a discourse community are socio-rhetoric. Thus, he maintains:

> "In a sociolinguistic speech community, the communicative needs of the group, such as socialization or group solidarity, tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics. The primary determinants of linguistic behavior are social. However, in a sociorhetorical discourse community, the primary determinants of linguistic behavior are functional, since a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur. In a discourse community, the communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics" (Swales, 1990, p. 24).

The same author points to another reason which delimitates the two notions: speech communities are *centripetal* – they tend to absorb people into one homogeneous community, while discourse communities are *centrifugal* – they tend to separate people into professional or specialized groups. So, a speech community receives its members by their birth, while a discourse community recruits its members by means of persuasion, training or adequate qualification. From this definition, one can conclude that a discourse community does not recognize national boundaries – it is by its very nature multicultural because it comprises people grouped up around the same type of discourse (whether they create it or consume it), regardless of their cultural backgrounds. However, although unified by the same type of discourse, members of a discourse community often exhibit some differences in writing styles, the phenomenon which may cause misunderstandings among them. Writing styles developed within different writing cultures may seriously harm the unity among the members of a discourse community unless these members are made conscious of the existing differences and willing to accept them in a right way. Thus, writers of academic research papers should know about the differences concerning certain concepts which are commonly employed in academic writing and which have proved to be differently understood by writers of different cultural backgrounds. The understanding of them would greatly facilitate their communication across the multi-

cultural discourse community. This is especially important in the field of humanities and social sciences, so the further discussion will concern solely the academic discourse of social sciences.

THE CONCEPT OF POLITENESS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

The concept of 'politeness' in academic writing, as well as the concept of 'persuasiveness', originate both from the writer's relationship towards the content conveyed through academic writing and towards anticipated readers. Both of these concepts are connected to the academic rhetorical strategies by which the purpose of a piece of academic writing is to be fulfilled – to deliver a scientific truth in an appropriate way to the discourse community. However, as the ideas of 'politeness' and 'persuasiveness' vary from culture to culture, academic writers of different cultural backgrounds show different preferences towards the rhetorical strategies which are at their disposal. Also, the different attitudes towards the use of these rhetorical strategies can be recognized as an area of cultural mismatches, since they are easily transferred from the academic writing in the mother tongue to the writing in the language of the target country[1].

The notion of 'politeness' in academic writing, introduced by the Finnish linguist Anna Mauranen (1993), can be recognized in terms of implicit and explicit ways of presenting the research material to the academic readership. Accordingly, the academic rhetoric can be divided into the implicit and the explicit one. For example, the English academic rhetoric is said to be explicit because 'it guides the reader's interpretative processes, so it seems to respect the reader's time and effort, while the implicit (Finnish) rhetoric seems to respect the reader's intelligence, knowledge, ability and privacy' (Mauranen, 1993, p. 257–258).

For each of the two cultures their type of rhetoric is, certainly, 'the polite' one, because both of them appeal to the readers in a positive way – the explicit one by sparing the reader the unnecessary effort, the implicit one by encouraging the reader towards an intellectual effort in order to comprehend the presented material. However, this can be identified as an area of misunderstanding at the international level: the Finns and the Spaniards complain that too explicit rhetoric underestimates the reader's intellectual capacity, and they prefer "reading the between lines". They often dislike 'a marketing type of English rhetoric', while the English writers find implicit rhetoric hard to interpret, especially when the presented material refers to some culture-specific assumptions.

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[1] This issue is given a prominent place in a branch of applied linguistics called *Contrastive Rhetoric,* after Robert B. Kaplan (1966). See also: Ulla Connor (1996) and John Hinds (1987).

As for the Serbian type of rhetoric, it has been noticed (Blagojević, 2004; 2005) that modern writers are gradually abandoning the implicit type of rhetoric – the rhetorical habits that have prevailed for decades in Serbian academic writing – and are approaching the explicit one: the process which is very slow, but which has been at least initiated by modern writers who are constantly exposed to the Anglo-American academic discourse.

THE CONCEPT OF PERSUASIVENESS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

It is assumed that the function of academic articles is not only to convey the writer's ideas and findings, but also to persuade the intended readership into their validity, truthfulness and originality. The second aspect of this function, however, is not accomplished in the same formal way in all writing cultures.

To be persuasive for some academic writers means to show a high degree of authority by means of the frequent use of the expressions with an emphatic meaning, such as 'It is certain that', … 'Obviously', ... 'It is indisputable', etc., because they believe that this is the best way they can evoke the reader's respect and credibility. However, in the English writing tradition this is believed to be somehow too presumptuous a way for persuading the readership and it is feared that this can produce the opposite effect upon the readers from the intended one – the readers might start doubting the writer's credibility and may consider this a sign of the writer's disrespect for the readers who are not left enough space to make their own judgements, but are pushed to support the writer's assertions.

The rhetorical strategy opposite to the previous one comprises the use of hedging devices by which writers express their tentativeness towards the facts they present through their writing. The most frequently used hedging expressions are: 'It might be looked upon' … 'This seems likely to' … 'This could be thought as'…, etc. By these expressions, writers want to present their academic modesty and respect for their readers, indirectly inviting them to have their own opinions. However, this very strategy might be understood by the members of the writing culture which is inclined towards the use of emphatic devices as a sign of the writer's uncertainty and lack of self-confidence. Thus, the contrastive-linguistics research[2] conducted on the material which comprises sixty academic articles from humanities – sociology, social psychology and

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[2] This research is a part of the author's doctoral dissertation *Metadiscourse in academic literature in English and Serbian*, (2001) and the author's two projects, sponsored by the Norwegian Research Council (2002) and the Austrian WUS (2004).

philosophy, written in English by English, Austrian, Norwegian and Serbian writers, fifteen of each, has proved that these academics cherish different inclinations towards the use of the two strategies and has anticipated that this may often cause misinterpretation on the international level.

Regarding the use of hedging devices, the research has shown that the English writers use the highest percentage of them in their articles (17.3%), and are immediately followed by Norwegian (16.4%), and then by Austrian writers (11.4%). Serbian writers proved to be less inclined towards the rhetoric strategy by which they express their tentativeness towards the exposed material, (9.5%), even when they write in English. However, the picture is completely different when perceiving the use of emphatics devices – Serbian writers are rather inclined to use the items by which they show their full confidence in the exposed content (2.4%), while Austrian writers, when writing in English, are the least willing to express their self-assurance and certainty in the subject matter they discuss in their articles (1.2%). English and Norwegian writers are somewhere in the middle.

The research on the presence of the two rhetorical devices in academic articles written in English by academics of different cultural backgrounds has shown that there are different preferences towards them, which are, presumably, due to the writing habits and inclinations formed within different national writing cultures.

THE AUTHOR'S SELF-IDENTIFICATION

A national writing culture may also influence the way authors present themselves in their academic texts – the issue which can be considered a sign of cultural identity and viewed, according to Vassileva (Vassileva, 2000, p. 1), as "an exponent of deeply rooted cultural beliefs". Also, "the extent to which authors are present in their texts and the ways in which this presence is manifested are two among many aspects of cultural identity" (Breivega *et al.,* 2002, p. 20).

The idea that different cultures show different preferences in using linguistic devices to express the authorial presence in academic texts has been largely exploited by numerous linguists: Irena Vassileva (2000), Kjersti Breivega *et al*. (2002), Tatyana Yakhtonova (2002), Celene Poudat and Sylvain Loiseau (2005), Svetla Čmejrková (2007), Blagojević (2010), etc. The researches have been focused on the use of personal pronouns – the first person singular and the first person plural – i.e. *I / We* opposition, by which the author of an academic text either openly shows his/her presence in it, (emphatic *I*) or hides it by the shield of "collective *we*", presenting himself/herself as a part of the academic discourse community.

A small-scale research aimed at investigating the differences in self-identification in academic articles of English and Serbian authors (Blagojević, 2010) has shown that Serbian academic writers are less apt to use *'I'* in their academic texts in comparison to English ones. As for the use of the first person plural pronoun, it has been noted that it is three times more frequently used in the academic texts written by Serbian writers than those written by English writers. This result coincides with the one made by Irena Vassileva (1998) who examined the same phenomenon by comparing Slavic academic discourse (Russian and Bulgarian) to others (English, German and French). Bearing her results in mind, it can be said that Serbian writers, similarly to Russian and Bulgarian ones, are more inclined towards the 'collaborative approach' in their academic writing, i.e. the use of *We* pronoun, while English writers show more sensitivity to presenting themselves as individuals, ready for the personal responsibility for their writing. This is also in harmony with S. Čmejrková's (2007, p. 79) findings concerning the same phenomenon in Russian and Czech academic discourse as well as with her conclusion that "the fact that *I* perspective clearly dominates in English and is very rare in Russian corresponds to the general intuition that whereas Western culture tends toward individualism, Eastern culture tends toward collectivism".

GENDER-SENSITIVE WRITING

When discussing gender-sensitive writing, we take into consideration the way academic writers show their awareness of the concept of gender when writing their academic papers. It means that, if they practice gender-sensitive writing, they will, for example, always include both genders when addressing their readers either in a direct or in an indirect way, or they will write the full names of the writers who they cite in their works. By this, they will prevent readers from bewildering whether the cited writer is <u>she</u> or <u>he</u>. As this concept is differently treated among academics of different cultural backgrounds, it will be discussed with respect to the two segments of academic writing:

1. the way the references are written in the texts, and
2. the use of gender indicators.

It is an obligation in academic writing that every citation has to be accompanied by the reference concerning the author of the citation and his/her work. However, this kind of practice is different not only among different cultures, but at the first level, among scientific disciplines: for example, in the so-called *hard sciences*, there is a widespread practice that the names of the authors of a citation are indicated only by means of numbers which are put into square brackets, and later given in the reference list. This is a standard numerical method (IEEE citation and reference style) and is mostly used in Electrical, Computer, and Mechanical Engineering:

As [1], [2] and [3] demonstrate, the natural course of microprocessor will likely lead to computers with...

In humanities, however, the author's surname, accompanied by the year when the book was published and its page are given immediately after the citation:

"Teachers of reading are generally in no doubt that the world is an important language unit unlike linguists who have few difficulties in arriving at a suitable definition. However, it seems that 'there is an apparent contradiction in the attitude of the teacher toward the word as a unit of language and that of a linguist'" (Weaver, 1967, p. 267).

However, there is a common practice that the first name is given by its initial letter, which means that the reader cannot tell the author's gender. In the case we paraphrase the author's words, and put his/her name in the initial position of the sentence, or in parenthesis, the author's first name might be fully given, although it is not a rule at all:

M. Rampton (1990) argues persuasively that the notion of 'native speaker' and 'mother tongue' are no longer relevant in a multilingual world.

Leonard Bloomfield (1933), the most noted of the structural linguists, had a great deal to say about the psychological aspects of language learning.

It is not possible to compare the frequency of the words which are morphologically gender marked in academic texts written by Serbian and English writers because of the peculiarities of the two languages. Namely, apart from several cases, such as the nouns *actor/actress*, or *waiter/waitress*, etc., most English nouns do not possess suffixes which serve as morphological gender markers. However, the Serbian language is much richer in this respect, as in the words such as: *učitelj/učiteljica, čitalac/čitateljka*, etc. That is why it is impossible to make a comparison in this respect, as the common platform of comparison, or 'tertium comparationis' cannot be established. However, since personal pronouns and possessive adjectives are possible to identify in both languages, gender denoting signals can refer to these words. Their presence/absence in academic texts written by Serbian and English academics can indicate whether their writers have shown a certain degree of gender sensitivity or not.

It is well known that, for a long time, writers in English speaking countries have been encouraged, and moreover, strongly recommended to use gender denoting signals while writing their term papers or essays. This comes from the positive attitude in these countries which promotes the idea that gender should be explicitly expressed in academic writing, as in the following example:

"A writer's development of an appropriate relationship with *his or her* readers is widely seen as central to effective academic persuasion as writers seek to balance claims for the significance, originality, and correctness of their work against the convictions and expectations of their readers..." (Hyland, 2002, p. 215).

Sometimes, feminine gender is favoured, such as in the writing of Adrianne Rich:

"The poet today must be twice-born. *She* must have begun as a poet, she must have understood the suffering of the world as political, and have gone through politics, and on the other side of politics *she* must be reborn again as a poet" (Rich, 1993, p. 21).

However, in Serbian academic practice, there is a great diversity. This can be illustrated by the research[3] recently conducted at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. The research examined the type of instructions that the students were given while getting ready to write their term papers. In 100% of the cases, these instructions did not include the concept of gender sensitivity. Thus, when writing in their mother tongue, Serbian students of pedagogy, sociology, history, etc. commonly use the masculine gender.

The matter was slightly different at the Department of the English language, where the students have a good insight into English academic discourse and an idea that the presence of gender indicators in academic texts should not be neglected. However, most of the examined students, (in our research it was 212 out of 248) are pretty uncertain whether to use signals which display gender sensitivity, or not, so they stick to the safe ground and avoid using them. Instead, they use either impersonal '*one*' or plural form of the nouns, the where personal pronoun '*their*' successfully hides the gender. The same counts for Serbian academics.

So, in this respect, Serbian academic writing cannot be included in norm-developed type of writing, which presupposes the inclusion of gender indicators. However, since the discussion on this subject has been initiated, it might undergo some positive changes.

CONCLUSION

The paper has tried to shed light on some concepts commonly evidenced in academic writing of scholars of different cultural backgrounds, such as the concepts of politeness, persuasiveness, the use of gender markers and the concept of the author's self-identification, which, when misinterpreted, might turn into a potential hindrance to international communication among the members of the same discourse community.

After these concepts have been presented as culture-based, i.e. dependant on writing habits established within a particular writing culture, they are discussed in respect to the writing preferences which prevail in

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[3] This was an informal type of a research comprising 30 teachers and 248 students from different faculty departments, conducted from May to June 2009 by the author of this paper.

English and Serbian academic articles in the following way: 1. the explicit type of academic rhetoric which is tightly connected to the concept of politeness is more evidenced in English academic writing than in Serbian, in which the implicit rhetoric is commonly used, 2. while English writers prefer the use of hedging devices in their writing, Serbian writers are rather inclined to use the emphatic expressions, 3. unlike English writers, Serbian writers are reluctant to use *I* pronoun in their academic texts – they use "collective *we*" pronoun three times more frequently than their English colleagues, 4. Serbian academic writers, unlike English academic ones, are still unwilling to use gender indicating markers, although some positive tendencies have been noticed in their recently written academic texts.

By displaying these findings and referring to the writing habits of other academic writers (Austrian, Norwegian, Russian and Bulgarian), the author of the paper has tried to draw the attention of the scholars who prepare themselves to write for international readership to the concepts which are treated differently by the members of the multicultural discourse community. By understanding these differences, they may arm themselves with the sufficient amount of knowledge which can facilitate their academic cross-communication and make it more successful. This paper is meant to be a contribution to this process.

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SOME CONCEPTS DIFFERENTLY TREATED IN THE MULTICULTURAL DISCOURSE COMMUNITY (WITH THE SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ENGLISH AND SERBIAN ACADEMIC WRITING)

Summary

The paper has discussed some concepts which are differently treated by the academic writers from different cultural backgrounds. These differences are usually caused by diverse attitudes and cultural inclinations towards certain concepts important for academic writing, such as: academic politeness and persuasiveness, the notion of 'gender-sensitive' writing and the manifestation of the author's presence in the text (the author's self-identification).

The concept of academic politeness refers to the way academic writers present their material to their readers, i.e. whether they explicitly lead readers through the text, facilitating text comprehension and respecting readers' time, or leave this task to readers themselves, respecting their capacities to comprehend and interpret the text on their own. Therefore, this concept is connected to the explicit and the implicit type of academic rhetoric – the first, commonly used by Anglo-American academic writers, and the latter, mostly used by Serbian academics who generally prefer implicit, 'poetic' type of rhetoric, although they are more and more inclined lately towards the use of the first type of rhetoric, the explicit one.

Academic persuasiveness is also based on the conventions which exist within different writing cultures, since the notion of persuasiveness for some academic authors means the exhibition of authority achieved by employment of emphatic devices, as it is the case with the Serbian academic writing, whereas the academic writing of Anglo-American academics does not support this attitude. On the contrary, these writers feel that the use of the expressions of strong assertions may produce on readers an opposite impression from the expected one.

When discussing the way an academic writer indicates his/her presence in an academic text, there is an option between the use of the pronoun 'I' and the pronoun 'We', so called 'I'/'We' perspective. This notion is often considered as a sign of expressing cultural identity in academic writing. The researches in this field have proven that Serbian academic writers, in comparison to the Anglo-American writers, are less ready to use the pronoun 'I' and are more inclined towards the 'collaborative approach' in their academic writing: they use the 'We' pronoun in order to present themselves as members of an academic community.

'Gender-sensitive writing' assumes the use of language indicators by which academic writers denote gender in their texts, the practice which is common in the Anglo-American academic writing. However, Serbian academic writers are not among those who respect this kind of writing convention, although there are certain tendencies in favour of it, as noticed in resent academic texts produced within Serbian writing culture. The widespread use of gender-indicators in this written practice is not possible to achieve unless Serbian academic writers start to appreciate gender-sensitive writing more and stop to consider it a mere convention of peripheral significance in their academic texts.