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Gender Identity and Authority in Academic Book Reviews: An Analysis of Metadiscourse Across Disciplines

Abstract

Nonostante la ricerca sul discorso accademico abbia stabilito che esso non é uniforme ma varia secondo le convenzioni disciplinari, il background culturale e professionale e le esperienze degli autori (Crammond 1998; Hyland 2000; Hyland / Bondi 2006; Mauranen 1993; Silver 2006), l'influenza del genere sul discorso accademico é ancora poco esplorata. Benché alcuni studi abbiano sottolineato le differenze stilistiche ed interazionali nei testi prodotti da uomini e donne (Kirsch 1993, Tannen 1994, Herring et al. 1995), in pochi hanno investigato la potenziale influenza del genere nel discorso accademico, considerando il genere insieme alle culture disciplinari, prendendo in esame le interazioni accademiche (Tse / Hyland 2006). Inoltre, le differenze di stile e di posizione tra i due generi sono raramente state discusse tenendo in considerazione l'età, l'esperienza e l'autorità dello scrittore, in una determinate disciplina.

In questo articolo analizzerò quindi l'uso che i recensori uomini e donne fanno delle risorse interattive (transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, code glosses) ed interazionali (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, self mentions) in quattro diverse discipline, prendendo anche in considerazione le possibili variabili dovute all'età, all'esperienza ed all'autorità dell'autore. Il materiale utilizzato per questa analisi proviene da quattro subcorpora del CADIS (Corpus of Academic Discourse), per un totale di 400 recensioni scritte in inglese da autori maschi e femmine.

1. Introduction

Academic writing varies greatly depending on disciplinary conventions and the professional status of the writer, as well as his/her cultural background (Mauranen 1993; Crammond 1998; Hyland 2000; Hyland / Bondi 2006; Silver 2006). Male and female scholars in particular are known to favour different linguistic features when they

express themselves and interact with fellow researchers (Kirsch 1993; Tannen 1994; Herring *et al*. 1995; Holmes 1995). Some authors argue that women's argumentative style tends to be affiliative, polite and personal, while men are more competitive and assertive (cf. Flynn 1988), whereas others claim that the academic writing of men and women is similar rather than different (Lynch / Strauss-Noll 1987). Recent empirical studies have confirmed that gender does indeed influence academic discourse, when it is considered within specific disciplinary cultures (Hyland / Tse 2006). In particular, disciplinary affiliation is known to influence female vs. male rhetorical choices in the domains of philosophy, sociology and biology (Hyland 2004).

Other variables, however, such as the writer's age, experience and academic authority can help explain divergences in writing styles and stance between male and female academics. The importance of taking into consideration such factors when comparing texts has clearly arisen in investigating the writing of expert vs. novice scholars (Frey 1990; Tedesco 1991; Kirsch 1994). The present study is an attempt to further the knowledge of linguistic variation in academic book reviews as related to gender and authors' experience in four different disciplines.

2. *Corpus and methodology*

Following Thompson's (2001) terminology, this paper analyzes writers' use of *interactive resources* (transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, code glosses) and *interactional resources* (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, self-mentions) in academic writing. The book review genre was selected for investigation because of its visibility and evaluative role in disciplinary communication. Book reviews constitute a platform for members in a scholarly community to engage with each other's ideas in a conventional forum. As such, they provide an ideal site for the examination of disciplinary values and rhetorical strategies encoded in the expressive acts of praise and criticism. The book review process is so highly personal in nature that authors often scatter the text with important clues as to their identity. Most reviews are commissioned to well-established scholars who

are recognized as experts in their field. The only exception seems to be in the field of medicine, where the majority of the reviews gathered during the selection process were written by novice scholars. Thus the reviewer's experience and authority seem to be very important factors in his/her selection.

The disciplines covered in this study are applied linguistics, economics, legal studies and medicine, which are all represented in the CADIS (Corpus of Academic Discourse) Corpus compiled at the University of Bergamo. The texts were taken from four subcorpora of English book reviews published in the years 2000-2008 by authors of both genders and different levels of experience. As can be seen below, 40 reviews were selected for each discipline, half by male and half by female authors; an equal number of these were written by novice and expert scholars.

Book reviews per discipline 40			
Male writers 20		Female writers 20	
Novices 10	Experts 10	Novices 10	Experts 10

Table 1. Number of texts in corpus per discipline.

Scholars that have distinguished themselves in their field of study and obtained tenure were identified as 'experts', while those at the beginning of their academic career and lacking tenure were classified as 'novices'. The corpus amounts to 377,318 words and was searched with the aid of Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2004) to identify possible instances of metadiscourse[1] and any co-textual evidence of its pragmatic function. The frequency counts are presented in normalized figures (per 10,000 words) to allow significant comparisons between the various sub-corpora.

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[1] The texts were taken from 17 peer-reviewed journals: *The Modern Language Journal, Language in Society, Journal of Economic Literature, The American Journal of International Law, European Journal of International Law, American Journal of Law and Medicine, American Journal of Medical Quality, BioMedical Engineering Online, Cerebrospinal Fluid Research, AIDS Research and Therapy, Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine, Molecular Cancer, Trials, Parasites & Vectors, Medical Education Online, CytoJournal, Cell Division*. These were accessed by subscription or downloaded directly from the Internet.

3. Results

3.1. Metadiscourse in academic book reviews

As argued by Hyland and Tse (2004), metadiscourse can be analysed in order to understand how writers express their interpersonal standing and orientation towards the text and their readers. Accordingly, the analysis conducted here on the genre of academic book reviews clearly confirms the importance of metadiscourse, with a total of 2,194 instances, i.e. an average of 14 per text. As Table 2 shows, reviewers in general tend to use far more interactive than interactional metadiscourse, the former accounting for almost 60% of features in the subcorpus. In particular, interactive and interactional metadiscourse is much more frequent in the field of law than in the other disciplines. Its presence is also prominent in applied linguistics but quite scarce in medicine. As regards interactive discourse, in all of the disciplines under study transition markers and frame markers are the most frequent devices, whereas among interactional discourse, self-mentions and engagement markers are the most frequent realisations.

Interactive Metadiscourse	AL	EC	LAW	MD
Transition Markers	179	177	316	129
Frame Markers	94	42	76	24
Code Glosses	67	25	51	18
Endophoric Markers	32	22	36	14
Evidentials	12	4	9	9
Total	384	270	488	194
Interactional Metadiscourse				
Self Mentions	108	64	77	45
Engagement Markers	73	70	96	43
Hedges	52	35	72	17
Attitude Markers	31	16	24	8
Boosters	9	6	9	3
Total	273	191	278	116

Table 2. Occurrences of metadiscourse in the four disciplines.

The fact that interactive resources are prevalent is easily explained by the fact that transition markers are the most frequent of all features. Transitional devices act as bridges between parts of the text, helping the reader to interpret ideas as the writer wants them to be understood. Curiously, it is in the field of law that transitional devices are most common, which reveals the intention of law reviewers to make sure the flow of argumentation from one sentence to another, from one idea to another, or from one paragraph to another is clear, with no abrupt jumps or breaks between ideas.

There are several types of transitional device, each leading the reader to make certain connections or assumptions. As can be seen in the following examples taken from the corpus, some (1) help the reader decode the argumentative structure correctly, while others (2) encourage the reader to compare ideas or draw conclusions (my italics):

(1) Especially in the second half of the book, many of the articles are focused on discussing public policy issues and theoretical issues related to them rather than on presenting the results of a single model. *Therefore*, the papers in the volume are much more suitable for browsing than would generally be true of most academic papers. [JEL43(03)05 Male - Expert]

(2) It explains why the construction cost of a municipal golf course is not a benefit, *but rather* a cost to the community, *because* resources used to build it have alternative uses that are sacrificed when the course is built. *Nor* does positive cash flow from a course indicate that golf is the best use of land, *because* an even higher cash flow might accrue from an alternative use, e.g., an oil well or high rise apartments. *Moreover*, cash flow ignores externalities, which presumably are what attract the involvement of a municipality in an otherwise private sector activity in the first place. [JEL43(03)05 Male - Novice]

Another peculiarity is the fact that reviewers in applied linguistics employ the highest number of frame markers, code glosses, endophoric markers and evidentials. Instead of simply moulding the text interactively to guide readers' assumptions, they choose more than their colleagues to highlight the unfolding text and engage the reader explicitly in the

process with the aid of interactional features, as can be noted in the following example:

> (3) *First*, it fills the gap that exists in the literature on teacher- written commentary. *Second*, it pinpoints the issues to which teachers need to attend and the practices they need to employ when providing written commentary on rhetoric and content in students' writing. *Third*, it enables teachers to provide effective written commentary that will allow students to become successful and independent writers. [LIS35(01)06 Female - Novice]

Although book reviews overtly call for interpersonal considerations, the reviewer tends to choose more implicit devices when carrying out his/her evaluation. Being much more face-threatening than their interactive counterparts, interactional devices are less frequent even in book reviews. In all the disciplines considered, self-mentions and engagement markers are the most frequently used, followed by hedges and attitude markers. Self-mentions may be so common because book reviews are the result of an explicit request of a personal opinion on a given book. In particular, reviewers in applied linguistics seem to employ self-mentions much more frequently than other scholars, using first-person pronouns and possessives to mark the author's presence and authority in the text:

> (4) *I* also think that the scale and level of analysis, when one moves from linguistic text to the (literally enormous) Sydney Opera house, might demand some further thinking. [MLJ90(3)06 Female - Expert]

> (5) This, *I* believe, will force *us* to ask what *we* are trying to do. Is the goal of *our* analysis to model what we think politeness is? Is it to predict what others think it is? Why? However *we* answer these questions, unless *we* change the way *we* think about such linguistic phenomena, *I* fear that *we* are not going to stop seeing ourselves in *our* theory, and thus in *our* data. [MLJ90(3)06 Male - Novice]

In all the contexts examined, engagement markers contribute not only by bringing the reader into the text and establishing solidarity among scholars but also by working towards the creation of a shared

evaluative context. It is in the field of law that this device is employed most frequently. The way law reviewers employ engagement markers, such as questions and second person pronouns, can be seen in the following sentences:

(6) How can the ICTY succeed in fulfilling an essentially political function-promoting international peace and security-while remaining appropriately apolitical and thereby ensuring its legitimacy as a criminal court? [AJIL99(02)05 Male - Expert]

(7) If you wish to see why the book is important, all *you* need to do is look around *you*. [AJIL101(01)07 Male - Novice]

Hedges, on the other hand, while still soliciting agreement, achieve this by toning down the author's judgemental authority:

(8) *Perhaps* the greatest strength of the book is the density of poignant and understandable statistics. [AJLM22(01)07 Male - Novice]

Of all the disciplines examined, it is in the medical subcorpus that reviewers are most reluctant to present their viewpoint categorically. This tendency is confirmed by the fact that medical reviewers employ the lowest number of attitude markers in the corpus, once again showing a reluctance to express their stance towards propositional content.

3.2. Gender preferences in the use of metadiscourse

Table 3 offers a quantitative comparison of the male and female sections of the sub-corpus. The fact that the latter is noticeably larger questions the findings of previous studies (cf. Tannen 1994; Herring *et al*. 1995) according to which men tend to write longer texts and contribute more extensively to public discourse by occupying more interactional space and giving more opinions.

	Texts	Words	Sentences	Words/Sentence
Male	80	179,713	7.956	22
Female	80	197,605	9.43	20

Table 3. Size of Male and Female subcorpora.

As can be noted in Table 4, the frequency of interactive metadiscourse is similar across the two gender groups, although women tend to use it more frequently than men in all of the disciplines considered.

Interactive Metadiscourse		AL	EC	LAW	MD
Male	Transition Markers	94	83	145	60
	Frame Markers	45	14	37	11
	Code Glosses	34	10	26	8
	Endophoric Markers	7	13	18	6
	Evidentials	14	7	4	2
	Total	194	127	230	87
	Self Mentions	59	30	41	20
	Engagement Markers	38	50	50	25
	Hedges	25	18	38	9
	Attitude Markers	15	16	14	3
	Boosters	5	3	6	1
	Total	142	117	149	58
Interactional Metadiscourse					
Female	Transition Markers	85	92	170	69
	Frame Markers	50	23	41	14
	Code Glosses	33	15	15	8
	Endophoric Markers	17	10	33	8
	Evidentials	21	2	5	2
	Total	206	142	264	101
	Self Mentions	48	33	36	25
	Engagement Markers	35	46	45	18
	Hedges	22	17	34	9
	Attitude Markers	4	3	4	1
	Boosters	4	3	4	1
	Total	125	105	129	58

Table 4. Metadiscourse across genders and disciplines.

This confirms Tse and Hyland's (2006) findings and Francis *et al*.'s (2001) argument that men and women consider other viewpoints equally, though it seems to indicate that women have a more marked need to support their viewpoint by bringing in examples and referring to other sources. This is particularly the case in applied linguistics, where women employ a higher number of evidentials than their male colleagues:

(9)   *Because of* the nature of the concepts explored in chapters 3 through 6, it seems likely that this work is destined for graduate courses and advanced seminars in the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science. [LIS35(02)06 Female - Expert]

(10)   Perhaps *because of* this lack of data, Iedema presents a rather undifferentiated view of organizational life. [LIS35(03)06 Female - Novice]

(11)   The assertion that learners' use of metaphors in self-reports affords the researcher opportunities to examine both cognitive and affective aspects of learning *is supported by* examination of data from Ellis's own (2002) study of beginners learning German in London. [LIS35(03)06 Famale - Expert]

Male reviewers, on the other hand, use slightly more hedges and engagement markers than women – a phenomenon also noted by Tse and Hyland (2006), who attribute this finding to the more tentative, personalized and engaging writing style often favoured by women (cf. also Flynn 1988; Goodwin 1988; Holmes 1988). Taken as a whole, therefore, the evidence here questions the notion (cf. Lynch / Strauss-Noll 1987; Francis *et al*. 2001; Robson *et al*. 2002) that the writing of male and female academics is similar rather than different. If the experience, authority and consequent prestige of an author are taken into account, even greater discrepancies seem to emerge.

3.3. *Metadiscourse in expert and novice writers*

There is no doubt that authority is a critical factor in scholarship, especially in publication policies. When writing for academic purposes,

authors engage in a complex process of negotiation, during which disciplinary conventions are applied, appropriate academic credentials are given and authority is established. In view of the pressure to 'publish or perish' that exists in academic institutions, writing with authority comes to play a central role in scholars' careers and inevitably influences every facet of academic life: the very nature of research, the institutional reward system and, ultimately, the availability of funds. Establishing a writing persona and becoming a recognized member of a scientific community are therefore crucial objectives for any scholar. As Kirsch (1993) aptly noted, writing with authority is not a process that only novice writers have to learn, but a process that continues well into postgraduate education and professional life; it involves both compromise and negotiation, two skills that are learned through years of practice.

The discrepancies observed between expert and novice writers in the corpus clearly reflect such learning process. Table 5 shows that novices seem to produce longer texts than experts, thus suggesting that writing concise reviews is a competence acquired in time.

	Texts	*Words*	*Sentences*	*Words/Sentence*
Expert	80	176,309	8,161	21
Novice	80	201,009	9,227	21

Table 5. Size of Novice and Expert subcorpora.

Taking into account not only the experience and authority of reviewers but also their gender (Table 6), further discrepancies that would not have otherwise emerged can be noticed. The competence of male and female expert scholars, which implies several years of academic writing, is the same but men and women seem to reach this through different paths. The first difference is that male novice writers write longer texts than their female counterparts, occupying more interactional space and thus contributing more to public discourse. However, this situation is reversed as the academic position of the two genders progresses. Once women occupy higher ranks, they write longer texts than their male colleagues, contributing even more to their academic field.

	Texts	Words	Sentences	Words/Sentence
Male Expert	40	78,015	3,485	22
Female Expert	40	98,294	4,676	20
Male Novice	40	101,698	4,471	22
Female Novice	40	99,311	4,756	20

Table 6. Size of Male/Female and Novice/Expert subcorpora.

The next two tables summarize the metadiscourse found across the corpus, divided into male and female, expert and novice writers, and by discipline. They provide evidence of how women and men change their writing patterns as they proceed in their career and in each domain.

If we look at the differences between novice male/female writers, it appears that, with the exception of law, the latter use interactive resources far more than their male colleagues, although they tend to produce shorter texts.

			AL	EC	LAW	MD
Expert	Male	Transition Markers	45	47	49	33
		Frame Markers	21	12	17	4
		Code Glosses	17	6	10	3
		Endophoric Markers	6	6	8	2
		Evidentials	3	1	1	1
		Total	92	72	85	43
		Self Mentions	28	18	16	8
		Engagement Markers	25	21	22	10
		Hedges	15	9	12	3
		Attitude Markers	8	5	3	1
		Boosters	3	2	1	1
		Total	79	55	54	23
	Female	Transition Markers	45	43	90	29
		Frame Markers	23	12	23	5
		Code Glosses	19	7	14	3
		Endophoric Markers	6	3	8	4
		Evidentials	2	1	2	1
		Total	95	66	137	42

Self Mentions		27	17	18	10
Engagement Markers		16	24	16	12
Hedges		11	7	18	3
Attitude Markers		9	4	6	3
Boosters		3	9	3	1
	Total	66	61	61	29

Table 7. Metadiscourse in male and female expert writers across disciplines.

Novice	Male	Transition Markers	40	39	93	27
		Frame Markers	24	11	26	9
		Code Glosses	18	4	16	4
		Endophoric Markers	7	7	10	4
		Evidentials	4	1	3	1
		Total	58	62	138	45
		Self Mentions	31	12	25	12
		Engagement Markers	13	15	28	15
		Hedges	15	9	13	6
		Attitude Markers	7	5	11	3
		Boosters	2	1	4	1
		Total	68	42	81	37
	Female	Transition Markers	41	50	80	41
		Frame Markers	27	11	20	9
		Code Glosses	15	8	11	7
		Endophoric Markers	11	6	11	4
		Evidentials	3	1	3	10
		Total	97	76	125	71
		Self Mentions	21	16	19	15
		Engagement Markers	19	21	29	5
		Hedges	11	9	16	5
		Attitude Markers	7	2	3	2
		Boosters	2	1	1	1
		Total	60	49	68	28
		Self Mentions	21	16	19	15

Table 8. Metadiscourse in male and female novice writers across disciplines.

In economics and medicine, the marked difference in the use of transition markers and evidential suggests that in these disciplines female reviewers tends to convey a composed, reasonable, scholarly persona that does not press arguments too personally or directly, supporting her viewpoint by means of examples and reference to other information sources, as in the following examples:

(12) *As Sadler argues*, this raises a question of how one does define disorder. [PEHM2(09)07 Female - Novice]

(13) *Finally*, it is worth noting that the volume includes three appendices that provide a state-by-state guide to court decisions and funding formulas, which will be extremely useful to researchers. [JEL 43(03)05 Female - Novice]

This characteristic becomes less prominent as young women advance in their careers. In all disciplines (except applied linguistics) such discrepancies in the use of interactive resources diminish with experience. In the law, the use of transition markers, frame markers and code glosses by expert scholars is much higher for females than males, which indicates that in this discipline women demonstrate their expertise by constructing arguments clearly, in a less personal or challenging way than their male colleagues.

As regards the use of interactional features among novice writers, the situation is much more varied and changes depending on the discipline. There is a clear tendency by novice male scholars to use interactional features more frequently than females; this may mean that even in the early stages of their careers, men opt for an assertive, challenging style that allows them to present their views forcefully and to bring readers to accept their criticisms of the reviewed book. In applied linguistics, expert males use a higher number of self-mentions and hedges while in the medicine and the law there is a discrepancy in the use of self-mentions, engagement markers and attitude markers. Interestingly, the situation is reversed in economics: novice women are the ones who use self-mentions and engagement markers more frequently, adopting a highly personal style, as can be seen in the following passage:

(14) In conclusion, even if *you* read the entire contents of this volume it is perfectly likely that *you* will be less confident than *you* were to begin with of an answer to the book's primary question of where agricultural policy reform in the WTO is heading. However, *you* will be far less likely to believe a confident answer that *you* hear from someone else, and far better armed to challenge their assumptions. *You* will also have learnt answers, or at least partial answers, to many other interesting questions, and *you* will have asked yourself many more that had never previously occurred to *you*. [JEL43(04)05 Female - Novice]

This tendency is confirmed by Tse and Hyland (2006), who noticed that expert male reviewers, unlike their female colleagues, tend to use a higher number of engagement markers. Turning to the way expert male/female writers use interactional markers, the situation changes once more, depending on the discipline. In applied linguistics, expert men clearly use more self-mentions, engagement markers and hedges, with a more involved, personal and combative rhetoric. In economics, law and medicine, instead, the situation is reversed: expert women adopt 'a masculine writing style' (Tse / Hyland 2006: 191). It is interesting to note that in most of the disciplines considered, women do not initially favour a personal, combative rhetoric, but eventually adjust to the writing style used by their male colleagues. In (15), for example, an expert female writer expresses her judgment rather assertively, relying on the communicative force of hedges and boosters:

(15) This paradox is, *of course*, at the heart of Gender and Human Rights and, at this historical moment, at the heart of women's international human rights. [AJIL99(04)05 Female - Expert]

8. Conclusions

The present study moves from the assumption that gender is, to a large extent, a socially and culturally constructed category that shapes how women and men interpret their experiences. It assumes that gender does contribute to – but does not totally determine – how women develop their writing and research experiences. The analysis carried out

in this paper reveals that in the fields of applied linguistics, economics, law and medicine, differences between genders are present in the overall distribution of metadiscourse, confirmed that gender does indeed influence academic discourse, when it is considered within specific disciplinary cultures, but also highlights the fact that variations linked to the author's gender are not as relevant as the discrepancies between expert and novice writers. In particular, the analysis has revealed that writing with authority is a skill that is learned through years of practice and the discrepancies observed between expert and novice writers in the corpus clearly reflect such learning process. The present study provides evidence of how women and men change their writing patterns as they proceed in their career and in each domain and further underlines the fact that metadiscoursal resources are extremely important for a scholar attempting to establish his/her writing persona, to gain authority and become a recognised member of a specific academic community.

Although further research into the interactions between discipline, gender and authorial status is necessary to confirm the evidence collected so far, it is clear that all these factors are important sources of discourse variation.

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