

Finding one's voice in losing it. Learner academic writing and medium variation

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Mastering academic writing is not an easy task for learners, especially when the language they have to use is not their mother tongue. Not only do they have to acquire a specialised vocabulary, but they also have to find an appropriate voice, one that will be accepted by the academic community as a whole. It has been suggested in the literature that one of the problems non-native speakers experience in this latter respect is their lack of register awareness (see e.g. Altenberg 1998, Granger & Rayson 1998). This issue will be investigated here through the study of language functions particularly prominent in academic writing, such as expressing one's own opinion, quoting other people's work or concluding a piece of writing. More precisely, non-native learner writing will be examined with respect to medium variation, comparing data from the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger et al. 2002) with native academic writing and spoken interaction from the British National Corpus.

The analysis reveals a clear tendency among non-native learners to produce words and structures that are more typical of speech than of academic writing. To give but a couple of examples, they often use *say* as a reporting verb and prefer amplifying to downtoning adverbs, thereby constructing an inappropriately informal voice. While this tendency can partly be explained by non-native learners' lack of intuition regarding the distinction between casual speech and formal writing (see Lorenz 1999), we argue on the basis of data from the LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) that it is also characteristic of novice writers, whether native or non-native, and that this is part of the process of acquiring an academic voice and becoming expert writers.

We suggest that one way of helping learners to find their voice in academic writing is to show them how to lose it, that is how to turn their **voice** (spoken word) into academic **writing**. To this end, their attention should be drawn to medium variation and in particular to the differences that exist between academic writing and spoken interaction. Some consciousness-raising activities will be proposed that aim to achieve this purpose.

References

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