

# **Academic Discourse**

## **English in a Global Context**

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# 1 Points of departure

In this chapter I want to set out something of an overview, considering what academic discourse is and why it is important. I begin by providing an outline of the concept and go on to look at some of the main reasons for its emergence as an area of research interest. I then discuss the impact and the power of academic discourse, focusing on the contributions it makes to learning, to creating disciplinary approved knowledge, and to establishing academic reputations through publishing. While all these threads will be taken up again and woven into subsequent chapters, my intention here is to sketch out the centrality of discourse to key areas of practice and to show how it contributes to the construction of academic life itself.

## 1.1 What is academic discourse?

Academic discourse refers to the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the academy. Its significance, in large part, lies in the fact that complex social activities like educating students, demonstrating learning, disseminating ideas and constructing knowledge, rely on language to accomplish. Textbooks, essays, conference presentations, dissertations, lectures and research articles are central to the academic enterprise and are the very stuff of education and knowledge creation.

But academic discourse does more than enable universities to get on with the business of teaching and research. It simultaneously constructs the social roles and relationships which create academics and students and which sustain the universities, the disciplines, and the creation of knowledge itself. Individuals use language to write, frame problems and understand issues in ways specific to particular social groups and in doing these things they form social realities, personal identities and professional institutions. As Gee (1996, p. viii) observes:

To appreciate language in its social context, we need to focus not on language alone, but rather on . . . Discourses. Discourses include much more than language. [They] are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles . . . by

specific groups of people. . . . Discourses are 'ways of being in the world'; they are 'forms of life'

In other words, the academy cannot be separated from its discourses and could not exist without them.

Becher and Trowler (2001) call Communication 'the life blood of academia' as both the promotion of knowledge and the establishment of reputation depend on it. No new discovery, insight, invention or understanding has any significance until it is made available to others and no university or individual will receive credit for it until it has seen the light of day through publication. This involves a long process of convincing editors, reviewers and peers to accept a claim as interesting or valid, drawing on approved and familiar discourses to do so. A view must be framed within a context of what is already accepted and using an argument carefully crafted for a particular audience. Ultimately a theory prevails because it is presented in a way which academics recognize as persuasive: knowledge, in other words, is what people can be persuaded to accept (e.g. Rorty, 1979).

Similarly, it is control of appropriate discourses which distinguishes the brilliant student from the plodder. Only through language, whether in the form of a dissertation, viva, essay assignment or unseen exam, can students consolidate and display their learning to university gatekeepers and so progress to graduation and beyond. Discourse, then, is at the heart of the academic enterprise; it is the way that individuals collaborate and compete with others, to create knowledge, to educate neophytes, to reveal learning and define academic allegiances. Its study is therefore a rich source of information about the social practices of academics, students and society itself.

At one level then, the study of academic discourse is interesting for what it can tell us about the accomplishment of academic life. But beyond the university, the languages of the academy have quietly begun to insert themselves into every cranny of our lives in the West, colonizing the discourses of technocracy, bureaucracy, entertainment and advertising. Almost unnoticed, academic discourses have reshaped our entire world view, becoming the dominant mode for interpreting reality and our own existence. We find traces of it not just in popular science periodicals but in the Sunday broadsheets and the TV documentary, it is the language of the pharmaceutical bottle and the toothpaste advertisement, the psychotherapist and the recycling leaflet. It is the carrier of expertise and prestige – the badge of those who possess knowledge and of those who wish to. As Halliday and Martin (1993: 11) put it: the language of science has become the language of literacy.

But this is not literacy only in the sense of how people make use of reading and writing. Although we tend to think of academic discourse

in terms of print texts, the ability to comprehend, and perhaps produce, texts which are written to be spoken, such as lectures, conference papers and class presentations, or to navigate a way through interactive encounters like seminars, supervisions and dissertation defences, involves no small degree of specialist language competence. The part played by talk in the academy, and its significance in education and research, has recently begun to receive considerable research attention.

Following years of neglect, we are now beginning to understand something of the ways that academic speech differs from, and works together with, writing in a range of different academic practices. We are recognizing its important role in educational and research settings and how it varies across disciplines and genres. At the same time, we are also becoming more aware that speaking and listening are collaborative achievements which make heavy demands on researchers, teachers and students alike, particularly those operating in a language which is not their own. Indeed, it is difficult to deny the importance of both modes as the initial difficulties encountered by second language speaking students at university primarily involve speaking and listening (Jordan, 2002) and as non-native English speaking academics are often required to lecture and give conference papers in English.

Research into academic discourse, in fact, has grown massively since the mid-1960s when Huddleston, Hudson and Winter conducted a British Government funded study into the linguistic properties of scientific English (Huddleston, 1971). Since then, studies of academic discourse have expanded to include student and instructional discourses as well as research papers, to embrace academic speech as well as writing, to address rhetorical purposes as well as syntactic forms, and to incorporate ever larger samples of texts. While Huddleston and his colleagues revolutionized research into academic discourse by turning from intuition to look at real language use, they worked with a database of just 135,000 words compared with modern academic corpora which often exceed five million words (e.g. Biber *et al.*, 1999; Hyland, 2004a). Research, then, has gradually sharpened its focus down to particular genres, and increasingly to genres within specific disciplines, and reached deeper into the communicative purposes of spoken and written texts.

## **1.2 Why this interest in academic discourse?**

It is worth pausing here to consider the reason why academic discourse has recently become such a developing research area. Essentially, this boils down to three major developments which have emerged in the last few decades: the growing diversity of the students who are entering

universities as a result of widening access policies; the increased attention given to teaching and learning by funding bodies; and the emergence of English as the international language of scholarship.

First, many countries in Europe, Asia and Australasia have witnessed a huge expansion of Higher Education in the past 20 years as a result of greater social inclusion policies and the ‘academicization’ of emerging ‘practice-based’ disciplines such as nursing, social work and marketing. In the UK, for example, almost 40 per cent of the eligible age group now attends university compared with just 2 per cent 50 years ago (HEFCE, 1999), creating a student body which is far more diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and social class. While some groups are still massively under-represented, university courses are no longer dominated by white, middle-class, monolingual school leavers in full-time enrolment. This more culturally, socially and linguistically heterogeneous student population means that learners bring different identities, understandings and habits of meaning-making to a more diverse range of subjects. One consequence of this is that tutors cannot assume their students will possess the understandings and learning experiences that will equip them with the literacy competencies traditionally required in university courses.

Second, these demographic and curriculum changes have been accompanied by dramatic falls in central government funding and the corporatization of Higher Education. Increasing reliance on student fees as a source of income, particularly those brought by international postgraduate students, has meant greater competition between institutions, the ideology of students as ‘customers’, and an increased concern with teaching and learning issues. In many countries universities must now undergo regular ‘teaching quality audits’ by funding bodies and so are devoting more attention to the processes of teaching and learning, and investing more resources in the training and formal accreditation of teaching staff. Staff lecturing skills and student writing competencies are often key areas in these evaluation and accreditation regimes and have become central to professional development programmes and of national frameworks for the training of university teaching staff.

The third reason for this growing interest in academic discourse has been the emergence of English as the international lingua franca of research and scholarship. With half the world’s population predicted to be speaking the language by 2050, English is becoming less a language than a basic academic skill for many users around the world. This clearly has implications for Higher Education. Some 1.2 million students now study in English outside their home countries and international students comprise almost 50 per cent of all postgraduates in Britain, contributing £1.5 billion annually to universities and £23 billion to the

economy. There is also evidence that many doctoral students studying in overseas universities are completing their PhD theses in English where they have a choice (Wilson, 2002).

It also, of course, has consequences for academic publishing. More than 90 per cent of the journal literature in some scientific domains (Thompson Corp., 2007) and 68 per cent of the 58,698 scholarly periodicals indexed by *Ulrich's Periodical Directory* in 2007 are published in English. This growth in English medium publications, moreover, is occurring not only in contexts where English is the official language but also where English is used as a foreign language, so that academics from around the world are now almost compelled to publish in English. Depending on one's perspective, English in these circumstances can be viewed as neutral lingua franca, efficiently facilitating the free exchange of knowledge, or as a Tyrannosaurus Rex, 'a powerful carnivore gobbling up the other denizens of the academic linguistic grazing grounds' (Swales, 1997: 374). Either way, the global status of English has come to influence both the lives of scholars throughout the globe and the production and exchange of academic knowledge in the twenty-first century.

Standing alongside these developments, of course, are more enduring reasons for unpacking the black box of academic discourse. Not least of these being its traditional role as a carrier of what counts as legitimate knowledge and as authorized ways of talking about this knowledge. Although Higher Education is stratified by universities with differing status and resources, knowledge is constructed, maintained and transmitted through relatively uniform practices of literacy and pedagogy, and it is to these that I now turn. In particular, I will focus on the role that academic discourse plays in the three key areas of academic practice: education, knowledge and reputation.

### **1.3 Education: discourse, acculturation and learning**

Discourse, and particularly student writing, is at the centre of teaching and learning in Higher Education. While multimedia and electronic technologies are beginning to influence learning and how it is assessed, lectures, seminars and textbooks remain the key forms of knowledge transfer and writing in its various forms continues to be the way in which students both consolidate and demonstrate their understanding of their subjects. But while it performs core gatekeeping and assessment functions, it also helps socialize students into academic practices as they write themselves into their disciplines.

This is what Bartholomae (1986: 4) had in mind when he wrote:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is – or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

Writing as a member of a discipline involves crafting texts in a way that insiders can see as ‘doing biology’ or ‘doing sociology’ and this both restricts how something can be said and authorizes the writer as someone competent to say it. In other words, students learn what counts as good writing through an understanding of their discipline and the conventions and genres regarded as effective means for representing knowledge in that discipline.

*i. Discourses and difficulties*

Academic discourses, however, are not those of the home, the school and the workplace. The particular kinds of literacy practices which hold sway in the university have emerged to represent events, ideas and observations in ways which facilitate efficient, even shorthand, communication among insiders. As a result they often confuse newcomers and force them into roles, identities and ways of writing which run counter to their experiences and intuitions about how language is used and so undermine their confidence (Lea and Stierer, 2000; Lillis, 2001). Many students, and particularly those who are returning to study later in life, who speak English as a second language, or who have not had a smooth uninterrupted path through the education system, often find these discourses to be alien, specialized and privileged ways of writing.

One reason for this is that these discourses force us to represent ourselves in certain ways, causing us to change our normal ways of speaking in order to fit in. Ivanic (1998), for instance, found that many of her ‘mature’ female students felt insecure about their educational identity as the discourse they were expected to use seemed pretentious and false: they did not let them ‘be themselves’. Second language students often experience even greater problems as they encounter writing conventions which can differ considerably from those in their first language. These frequently demand that students are more explicit about the structure and purposes of their texts, more cautious in making claims, clearer in signposting connections, and generally that they take more responsibility for coherence and clarity in their writing (Clyne, 1987).



Students' previous experiences with texts therefore count for little when they arrive at university and their familiar ways of writing are no longer regarded as legitimate for making meaning.

*ii. Abstraction and technicality*

Perhaps most challenging, however, is the ways that academic discourse represents disciplinary realities. Essentially, the process of writing involves creating a text that we assume the reader will recognize and expect and the process of reading involves drawing on assumptions about what the writer is trying to do. But while this anticipation provides for writer–reader coordination, allowing the co-construction of coherence from a text, academic writing disrupts our everyday perceptions of the world and sets up different expectations.

In everyday uses of language we tend to represent things in a certain way, so that events unfold in a linear time sequence and agents accomplish actions. This example is unremarkable:

1. *If you drink too much and drive, then you are likely to have an accident.*

This is what Halliday (1998) has called a 'natural' or congruent representation in that we tend to translate our perceptions of the physical world in the grammatical system of language: we call it as we see it. Academic writing, however, turns our way of expressing meanings on its head though an incongruent use of language, so we are far more likely to find a sentence like this:

2. *Excessive consumption of alcohol is a major cause of motor vehicle accidents.*

Academic discourse thus treats events as existing in cause and effect networks, disguises the source of modality of statements, foregrounds events rather than actors, and engages with meanings defined by the text rather than in the physical context.

The discourses of the disciplines, in fact, work to interpret the world in particular ways, each drawing on different lexical, grammatical and rhetorical resources to create specialized knowledge. Wignell *et al.* (1993), for instance, characterize the sciences as reworking experience technically by establishing a range of technical terms which are ordered to explain how things happen or exist. This extract suggests something of this technicality:

3. *Osmotic tolerance – the ability of an organism to in media with widely varying osmolarities – is accomplished in bacteria*

*with an adjustment of the internal osmolarity so that it always exceeds that of the medium. Intracellular accumulation of potassium ions (K+) seems to play a major role in this adjustment.*

This technicality is then used to create further technicality through defining, classifying and explaining.

The humanities, like history and philosophy, on the other hand, employ abstraction rather than technicality, moving from instances to generalizations by gradually shifting away from particular contexts. In this example we see how the philosopher begins with a narrative rather than an exposition, providing a fictional scenario that leads logically to a question that he himself has posed, introducing the abstract from the concrete:

4. *Doris has just driven her car into a tree. She's unconscious, slumped over the steering wheel. Perry comes upon the scene. He looks around to see if anyone can help, but there's no one else there. Visions of wrecked cars catching fire and exploding into boiling balls of flame fill his mind, and he feels that he must rescue the driver now or else she'll surely die. So, with considerable trepidation, Perry rushes in and quickly drags Doris free from the wreck, thinking that at any moment both he and she might get caught in the explosion. As it happens, the car does not explode. Soon after, some emergency vehicles screech to a halt. Paramedics jump out. The paramedics take a look at Doris, and they arrive at a chilling conclusion: Perry has paralysed Doris. Is Perry morally responsible for what he has done? (Henceforth, by 'morally responsible' I shall mean 'morally culpable', for other types of moral responsibility will not be at issue). That depends. One thing it depends on is whether Perry acted freely in paralysing Doris. Freedom is what may be called a root requirement of responsibility.*

Wignell (1998) believes that writing in the social sciences contains features of both science and the humanities, turning an initial abstract construal of experience into something more technical.

### *iii. Discourses and deficit*

The complexity of these discourses is not always recognized by tutors and administrators, which means that academic literacy tends to be misrepresented as a naturalized, self-evident and non-contestable way of participating in academic communities. There is a general assumption that there is a single, overarching literacy which students have

failed to master before they get to university, probably because of gaps in school curricula or faults in the learners themselves, and this deficit can be corrected by a few top-up English classes. More widely, the idea that university students can't write is central to official and public debate about literacy, and generic labels such as 'academic English' or 'scientific English' give the impression that literacy can be taught to students as a universal set of skills usable in any situation.

Divorcing language from individual writers and their particular contexts in this way, however, conceals variations in the ways language is used in university settings and allows difficulty to be interpreted as deficit. Students are seen as identical and isolated, trying to acquire a set of skills independently of their identities, purposes and disciplines. Because they are rarely provided with a means of conceptualizing the varied epistemological frameworks of the academy, students are often unable to see the consequences these have for communication or to distinguish differences in the disciplinary practices they encounter at university (Plum and Candlin, 2001).

Such views of literacy and learning echo traditional linguistic conceptions such as Saussure's distinction between *Langue* – or language as system – and *parole* – language as use. This separation of form and meaning also underlies the familiar *conduit metaphor* of language, which suggests that we communicate simply by forming our thoughts into words which others receive and decode just as we intended. Thus our ideas arrive at their destination as they were sent, so writing is transparent in reflecting meanings rather than the way we negotiate and construct meanings between ourselves. Communication is an autonomous system that we all understand and use in roughly the same way with no differences in interpretation or reader positions. In this view, good writing is largely a matter of grammatical accuracy and literacy is presented as a set of discrete rules and technical skills which include decoding and encoding meanings, manipulating writing tools, perceiving shape–sound correspondences, and so on.

In Higher Education, this perception contributes to an ideology which transforms literacy from a key area of academic practice, how we construct ourselves as credible linguists, psychologists or whatever, into a kind of add-on to the more serious activities of university life. English for Academic Purposes, the practice of academic literacy instruction, thus becomes a support mechanism on the margins of academic work. The study of academic discourses, however, restores the significance of social context to our understanding and reframes literacy as a social practice rather than a set of skills. The concepts of *literacies*, referring to language use as something people *do* when they interact with one another, and *practices*, the idea that these language

activities are bound up with routine, everyday activities in the real world, provide ways of re-establishing this link between language and context.

Moving away from literacy as an individual attribute is a central implication of a social literacies view. It helps us to see that texts don't exist in isolation but are part of the communicative routines of social communities. This not only means that genres are related to other genres and the text we hear and read are connected to the texts we speak and write, but that language is intimately related to the different epistemological frameworks of the disciplines and inseparable from how they understand the world. Studying academic discourses and the activities that surround them therefore becomes a powerful tool for understanding the experiences of everyone in Higher Education, whether students or tutors.

## **1.4 Knowledge: discourse, persuasion and truth**

If we reject the idea of language as a transparent medium of communication, then discourse begins to take on a far more prominent role in the ways academics construct knowledge. To a large extent, academic discourse has evolved as a means of funding, constructing and evaluating knowledge. Robert Merton's view that the goal of science is to add to a body of authorized knowledge has been enthusiastically adopted in the humanities and social sciences, and it is this purpose which most clearly distinguishes academic discourse from other kinds of communication. But while the pace and reach of this enterprise has both accelerated and globalized, exactly what we understand knowledge to be has also changed. The confidence of an earlier age, which saw knowledge as the understanding of independently existing truths, and texts as merely the ways of reporting them, now seems almost naïve to many observers.

### *i. Knowledge and language*

A realist model, which sees knowledge as emerging from our direct access to the external world, through experiment, induction, observation and falsifiability, turns out to provide less reliable bases for proof than we commonly suppose. We do, of course, rely on induction in our everyday lives. So we usually believe that the bus we take to work will arrive at 8.30 tomorrow if it has arrived at 8.30 every day for the past week, but taking the same bus over a longer period is likely to undermine our confidence in this schedule. This is because induction offers probabilities rather than proof, and by moving from observations of

actual instances to general statements about unobserved cases, scientists introduce uncertainty. Popper's alternative of 'falsification', which puts theories through experimental testing and replaces those that are defective with more verifiable ones, is no more reliable. It is just not possible to conclusively falsify any hypothesis because the observations that form the argument for the falsification must be expressed in the language of some theory, and so will only be as reliable as that theory.

The problem for scientific views of knowledge, then, is that nature cannot speak to us directly and interpretation of events in the natural or social world always depends on the assumptions academics bring to the problem (Kuhn, 1970). That is, all reporting occurs within a pragmatic context and in relation to a theory which fits observation and data in meaningful patterns, so there is no secure observational base upon which any theories can be tested. As the Nobel physicist Stephen Hawking (1993: 44) notes:

A theory is a good theory if it is an elegant model, if it describes a wide class of observations, and if it predicts the results of new observations. Beyond that it makes no sense to ask if it corresponds to reality, because we do not know what reality is independent of a theory.

In other words, there is always going to be at least one interpretation for research data and the fact that we can have these competing explanations shifts attention to the ways that academics argue their claims. We have, then, to look for proof in the textual practices for producing agreement.

## *ii. Discourse and constructionism*

Social constructionism is one of the oldest and best known approaches to conceptualizing academic discourse. Writers like Geertz (1983) and Bruffee (1986) have encouraged us to see texts as disciplinary practices; that is, writing and talk which is embedded in the activities of individuals acting as members of social groups. This moves us from focusing on the individual speaker to look at the collective. Kuhn (1970: 201), for example, observes that scientific knowledge is 'the common property of a group or else nothing at all'. Academic knowledge is no longer something 'out there', but seen as a product of the situations in which it is created, rooted in disciplinary argument, affiliation and agreement-making.

The social constructivist position suggests that knowledge (and even social reality itself) is created through the daily interactions between people and particularly through their discourse. It takes a skeptical

stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge and, in opposition to the theories of positivism and empiricism which underpin the natural sciences, questions the idea of an objective reality. It argues that everything we see and believe is actually filtered through our theories and our language, sustained by everyday social processes of research and communication, which are culturally and historically specific. In other words, academics work within communities in a particular time and place, and that it is this intellectual climate which determines the problems they investigate, the methods they employ, the results they see and the ways they write them up.

Texts, in other words, can never be regarded as accurate representations of what the world is like because this representation is always filtered through acts of selection, foregrounding, and symbolization. Reality is constructed through processes that are essentially social and involve crafting texts in ways which will be persuasive to readers. Academic discourse therefore does more than report research that plausibly represents an external reality: it works to transform research findings or armchair reflections into academic knowledge. This knowledge, then, is not a privileged representation of reality, but a conversation between individuals, although we should not be seduced by this to an idealist view that denies existence itself. Scientists and sociologists need a sensory experience of the world in order to make claims about it. It is just that their experience of this world *under-determines* what they can know and say about it, and as a result they must draw on their cultural resources to organize what they know. We cannot, in other words, step outside the beliefs or discourses of our social groups to find a justification for our ideas that is somehow 'objective'.

### *iii. Discourse and community*

The real issue for those studying discourse is that because writers can only guide readers to a particular interpretation rather than demonstrate proof, readers can always reject their interpretations. At the heart of academic persuasion, then, is writers' attempts to anticipate possible negative reactions to their claims. To do this they must make use of the persuasive practices of their disciplines, encoding ideas, employing warrants, and framing arguments in ways that their audience is likely to find most convincing. The notion of community is therefore central as knowledge is community-generated and community-maintained.

This brings us back to the orientation to literacy I discussed above in relation to education. Just as academic literacies are not something that students simply add onto their home literacies when they get to university, academics only reach some consensus about knowledge through

the discourses of their disciplines. Physicists don't write like philosophers nor lawyers talk like linguists. They acquire the specific ways they need to engage with other members of their discipline through participation in its discourses and practices. Persuasion is essentially a demonstration of credibility involving control of research methodologies and the ability to employ community approved argument forms. Persuasion in the academy, just as in any other area of life, involves using language to relate independent beliefs to shared experience.

Academic discourses, then, are closely bound to the social activities, cognitive styles and epistemological beliefs of particular disciplinary communities. The ways community members understand knowledge, what they take to be true, and how they believe such truths are arrived at, are all instantiated in a community's discourse conventions. These conventions connect texts with disciplines through linguistic choices which galvanize support for the writer, express collegiality, and negotiate disagreement. In practice, this means that claims for the significance and originality of research have to be balanced against the convictions and expectations of colleagues, taking into account their likely objections, background knowledge, rhetorical expectations and processing needs (Hyland, 2004b).

Research into a range of academic genres describes something of how writers in different disciplines represent themselves, their work and their readers in very different ways. In the sciences, for example, we find reporting which emphasizes the authority of scientific procedure and avoids the presence of the researcher. This represents the apex of what Foucault (1972) characterized as the neo-classical search for a univocal discourse, a one-to-one correspondence between words and categories of things which began with the rise of science in the eighteenth century.

But language, as we noted earlier, can never be divorced from those who use it: it can never say everything that needs to be said nor ever fully elaborate its context. Writers must assume readers will possess some background understandings and beliefs, while readers must always integrate linguistic and contextual assumptions to recover relevance and meaning from a text. The protracted disputes over legal contracts, for example, illustrate the difficulties of establishing fixed meanings from even the most explicitly written texts. Simply, the relative impersonality of scientific discourse is not an absence of rhetoric but simply a different kind of rhetoric. While it might seek to remove the author from the text to give priority to the unmediated voice of nature, it is like other persuasive discourses in that it shapes observations and data to produce arguments which are recognizable and meaningful to disciplinary insiders.

Academic discourses, however, not only work to construct knowledge within academic communities, but to sustain the prestige of these communities with outsiders. On one hand, such discourses carry enormous cultural authority in the wider society about what the natural and human existence are really like: they answer our questions about the world, explain its intricacies, satisfy our curiosities, and improve our futures. They are the guarantors of reliable knowledge, and we place our trust in their unbiased and uncorrupted representations of reality and our faith in their practical effects. On the other hand, these discourses also represent a constant quest for disciplinary status and prestige. Academic disciplines are not uniform or stable but sites of competing individuals, theories and methodologies as alternative perspectives slug it out for recognition and ascendancy. The prestige of a field, and perhaps its independent existence, is often contingent on persuading powerful bodies in the non-academic sphere to provide recognition and resources. Academic discourses are central to this endless struggle to attract more students, more research funding, and more institutional respect within a context of ever-shifting fortunes.

Academic discourse is, therefore, not only central to the ways knowledge is agreed and disseminated, but to what this knowledge is, how it is changed, and how it is recognized in the outside world. The idea that facts are rhetorically constructed by social communities is now no longer controversial, and research has moved to understanding how individuals use discourses to create, sustain, and change these communities. Stubbs (1996: 21), puts this at the heart of social research:

The major intellectual puzzle in the social sciences is the relation between the micro and the macro. How is it that routine everyday behaviour, from moment to moment, can create and maintain social institutions over long periods of time?

The study of academic discourse and the ways that individuals use language to align themselves with particular communities; to display their competence; to persuade others to accept their ideas; and to ring fence and protect their interests, is a key dimension of this research.

## **1.5 Reputation: discourse, authority and reward**

A third dimension of academic discourse I want to mention here is the power it wields in the career of individual academics. While academic ideologies may claim that research is driven by the disinterested pursuit of truth, individual academics generally put peer approval and institutional recognition high on their list of motivating forces. As Becher and Trowler (2001: 75) observe:



The main currency for academics is not power, as it is for the politician, or wealth, as it is for the businessman, but reputation.

The outcome of academic activity takes obviously more-or-less tangible expression in the form of grants, discoveries, patents, theories and insights, but these are merely the means to the end of professional recognition.

*i. Discourse and reward*

Clearly academic discourses have enormous relevance to the ways individuals construct themselves as competent academics, build professional visibility, and establish reputations. This is because discourse is the interface between the individual and the discipline. It is the mechanism which both creates knowledge and distributes credit: the system of publication. A paper is judged as a contribution to a particular field by an audience of colleagues who are potentially in a position to make use of it. If editors, referees, proposal readers, conference attendees and journal readers regard it as original and significant, allow it to be published, cite it in their own work and develop it further, then the writer receives the reward of recognition.

But this is not the end of the matter. Academics who excel in getting their research into prestigious publications and seen by a wide audience are often eventually appointed to key positions, gain access to economic resources and occupy major gatekeeping roles. Not only do they achieve social power in their disciplines, but tend to form an elite as they exercise influence in setting standards, directing strategies and determining what is considered good work or important topics. They may also gain greater influence as spokespeople for their colleagues, attract commercial consultancies and are more likely to become members of government committees and grant bodies which decide the fate of funding applications and research contracts. The system of reward and the system of communication are therefore one and the same, which helps explain the emphasis placed on the ownership of ideas in the academy and the protection of intellectual property enforced by the heavy punishments meted out for plagiarism. Reputation is the symbolic capital of the academy (Bourdieu, 1991) and it is jealously protected.

Hagstrom (1965) has suggested that this system resembles a form of barter, where a contribution of information is exchanged for recognition. Latour and Woolgar (1979), however, give this market metaphor a modern capitalist twist by seeing publication as just one element of 'credit' in a cycle of moves designed to maximize credibility. For them,

a successful publication may help a researcher gain credit which can be converted into a research grant to finance equipment and recruit colleagues, this in turn generates more data which can be converted to arguments, fresh publications and so on. Credibility thus helps academics to progress round the cycle:

For example, a successful investment might mean that people phone him, his abstracts are accepted, others show interest in his work, he is believed more easily and listened to with greater attention, he is offered better positions, his essays work well, data flow more reliably and form a more credible picture.

(Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 204)

While persuasive, however, this view perhaps overstates the researcher's autonomy and largely ignores his or her interactions with the political and economic forces which increasingly encroach on university life.

The fact is that a great deal of knowledge in the modern university is produced under arrangements which constrain both choice and curiosity. Discovery, application and use have become ever more closely connected and standards of social utility appear, at least to some observers, to be replacing traditional values of academic knowledge based on truth (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). This was becoming apparent even 50 years ago, as President Eisenhower warned in 1961:

The free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity.

(Quoted in Redner, 1987: 15)

Much of the 3 per cent of GDP that Western countries spend on scientific research flows into the universities (Bridgestock, 1998). The hard knowledge disciplines have been particularly successful in articulating research with the priorities of government, military and business elites, but the humanities and social sciences have also been sucked into the commercial web though their involvement in such areas as political advising and image production.

So while success is largely measured by the capacity to write papers valued by colleagues, the rewards of this may be both more tangible and more influenced by outside forces than the market models suggest.

## *ii. Reputation and competition*

Because reputation is translated into concrete consequences of various kinds, and because both material and symbolic capital are extremely

scarce, academic publication is fiercely competitive. This institutionally sanctioned competition is generally believed to stimulate the advance of knowledge, but it is now inseparable from the process by which prestige and credibility are assessed. Bourdieu sees it like this:

The scientific field is the locus of a competitive struggle, in which the specific issue at stake is the monopoly of scientific authority, defined inseparably as technical capacity and social power, or to put it another way, the monopoly of scientific competence, in the sense of a particular agent's socially recognized capacity to speak and act legitimately in scientific matters.

(1975: 19)

Speaking legitimately involves publication and so links discourse and competition. Publication comes to equal 'productivity' and is used as a crude measure of worth, with institutions conferring promotion and tenure on the length of personal bibliographies.

Discourse is, in other words, both the stick and the carrot which propels academics around the treadmill of applying for grants, presenting research at conferences, communicating with colleagues, and writing for publication. As James Watson, Nobel laureate and a member of the biology establishment, spells out:

It starts at the beginning. If you publish first, you become a professor first; your future depends on some indication that you can do something by yourself. It's that simple. Competitiveness is very dominant. The chief emotion in the field.

(Cited in Judson, 1995)

Competition is increasingly important with the growth of commercial incentives and with the emergence of a corporate 'accountability culture' where universities, departments and individual academics themselves are measured and graded by their research outputs.

Competition, of course, is not only a mechanism for driving research and allocating rewards, but also has the effect of creating and maintaining institutional hierarchies. It is the nature of competition to create winners and losers and so to define who might speak with credibility and public authority. Hierarchical relationships within disciplines are then, at least in part, directly related to one's control of physical and rhetorical resources. As a consequence, a small elite of physical scientists (Mulkey, 1976) and social scientists (Becher and Trowler, 2001) enjoy a disproportionate share of grant resources and peer recognition. This may not only be beneficial to the elites themselves, but can have advantages in terms of funding and prestige for the particular universities who employ them and for the disciplines they work in. Every field needs its illustrious figures, its Durkheims, Einsteins, Wittgensteins

and Darwins to define its identity, develop its agenda and capture the imagination of the wider public.

The negative impacts of competition, however, are also all too apparent, with most academics able to recount an injustice where research funding or publication had been denied them due to the partiality of referees from an opposing camp. Less common, but nevertheless well documented, are cases of obstruction by senior figures. Among the most celebrated is Isaac Newton's suppression of the scientific discoveries of John Flamsteed and Stephen Gray (Clark and Clark, 2001). In more recent times, academic advances have often been delayed by the entrenched orthodoxies of leading figures. The theory of stellar degeneration and 'black holes', for example, was delayed for 30 years by the authority of A. S. Eddington, the leading theoretical astrophysicist of the time, who sought to protect his own cosmological theory. Similarly, virtually all the key pioneers in cancer research met resistance from authoritative figures (Kelves, 1998).

Competition, the driving force in knowledge production and individual reputation, is clearly not an unmixed blessing, but while it has always been with us, it has never been fiercer. Participation in the global exchange of information is now a prerequisite for promotion and job security for a growing number of academics around the world, and this increasingly has to be done in English. Visibility is all important and statistics show that academics all over the world are ever less likely to publish in their own languages and to find their English language publications cited more often. There were over 1.1 million peer-reviewed research articles published globally in English in 2005 and this number has been increasing by 4 per cent annually despite falling library budgets and an increase in journal prices of 300 per cent over the rate of inflation in the 20 years up to 1995. This growth of publication, however, has been outstripped by submissions, with many journals rejecting over 80 per cent of the manuscripts they receive. All this, moreover, at a time when the price of failure has never been greater.

## **1.6 Conclusions and caveats**

My main purpose in this chapter has been to underline the centrality of academic discourse and to show how it is used to construct knowledge, disciplines and the professional careers of academics themselves. I hope to have persuaded you that to understand the full complexity of these discourses we have to see them as part and parcel of institutional and community practices: they are situated activities which regulate meaning-making in complex ways and represent particular social relations and ways of seeing the world.

In covering so much ground, however, I have necessarily taken a few liberties. Such a broad sweep can only offer a rough sketch rather than a faithful likeness, so much of the variation between disciplines and between forms of knowledge, for example, has been glossed over. There are considerable differences between disciplines which I have not adequately represented here, while disciplines themselves are less homogeneous categories than I may have implied, containing myriad sub-groups with opposing allegiances and competing agendas. Discourses are used in different ways to represent different ideological approaches and even in applied linguistics, for example, there are fundamental distinctions in methods, concepts and forms of argument between, say, cognitivists and post-modernists. Nor has justice been done here to the fact that both disciplines and knowledge change, and in the longer term both are transient. Just as disciplines come and go, socio-political circumstances change, and new demands impact on the universities and its discourses.

It might also seem that I have been guilty of attaching too much importance to academic discourse. After all, being a successful student, publishing academic, influential researcher, and so on, involves other competencies. Craft skills, network participation, wide reading, analytical and critical abilities, diligence and brilliance no doubt take individuals a long way. Ultimately, however, the picture I have painted is essentially accurate: in the context of what we do in the academy we are defined and judged by our control of academic discourses. Qualifying detail needs to be filled in, however, and much of this will be found in the chapters which follow. First, I turn to the ways that we understand and study academic discourses by looking at the main theoretical and methodological perspectives brought to bear on them.