

D. Siepmann 'Academic Writing and Culture' [introduction without paragraph breaks].

1. Introduction

For a long time the idea has been around that the 'spirit' of a language exerts a formative influence on its speakers and writers. First voiced explicitly by German philosopher Karl Wilhelm von Humboldt as far back as the early nineteenth century, it may be seen as a natural extrapolation of the view that, as the Count de Buffon had it, 'le style est l'homme même' (Dournon 1994: 394). There is, accordingly, a long tradition of investigating lexico-syntactic difference between languages, a tradition which can be traced back to such 19th century comparative philologists as Friedrich von Schlegel, Franz Bopp and the Brothers Grimm. Cross-cultural difference in thought and writing patterns, on the other hand, has become a serious field of enquiry only in the last twenty years or so. Two opposing positions have emerged, one stressing the universality of academic discourse (Widdowson 1979, Schwanzer 1981), the other postulating the culture-specificity of cognitive and textual structures (e.g. Kaplan 1966/1980, Clyne 1981, 1987, Galtung 1985, House 1997, Kachru 1983). I take issue with the first position here, thus favouring the second. Universalists such as Widdowson (1979: 51 ff.) start from the assumption that, since scientists all over the world use the same concepts and procedures in their work, science constitutes a 'secondary cultural system' which is detached from the primary linguacultures. As a result, he argues, "the discourse conventions which are used to communicate this common culture are independent of the particular linguistic means which are used to realize them." There is little quarrel with the general premise here, yet Widdowson's status as an ESL specialist with, perhaps, little knowledge of foreign languages as well as his overreliance on 'hard' science texts may have led him to jump to a somewhat incautious conclusion. While there are good reasons for positing syntactic and stylistic universals characteristic of scientific discourse – such as passive constructions or nominalisation – such an analysis is far too superficial. A moment's reflection suggests that general cross-linguistic constants of this kind exist in any sub-language. Thus, parodying Widdowson's line of argument, we might say that turn-taking, hesitation and imprecision are universal features of colloquial speech. In fairness to Widdowson, however, it must be pointed out that, when setting up his thesis, he probably had in mind only exact sciences such as physics or chemistry, where there is indeed a greater degree of rigidity in discourse conventions, especially as far as textual macrostructure is concerned. However, other disciplines claiming science status, such as social psychology (see Hutz 1997) or sports science (see Trumpp 1998), have remained averse to abandoning culture-specific patterns. It will come as no surprise, then, that Widdowson's thesis has been challenged and, at least to some extent, disproved by a number of later studies. These show that classification by academic disciplines and text types yields a more subtly differentiated picture of cross-cultural difference. The present article looks at some of the major relevant studies, moving from general assumptions about culture-specific thinking styles (Section 2) to the more specific issues of academic writing (Sections 3 and 4). The concluding sections 5 and 6 discuss issues surrounding the preservation or abandonment of the current plurality of academic cultures and their implications for composition and translation teaching.