

Recenzió

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Douglas Biber and Bethany Gray: Grammatical Complexity in Academic English. Linguistic Change in Writing

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 277 pp.

A recent addition to Studies in English Language, Douglas Biber and Bethany Gray's *Grammatical Complexity in Academic English* uses corpus-based analyses to address dominant assumptions and stereotypes in the field of linguistics. Richly illustrated throughout with textual analyses, it challenges widely held beliefs about grammatical complexity, academic writing, and important linguistic changes in English over the past 200 years. Including both general descriptions of registers and detailed descriptions of particular grammatical features this work will be of interest to discourse analysts, sociolinguists, applied linguists, as well as descriptive linguists, historical linguists and anyone who enjoys reading well written books about serious topics.

The book comprises seven chapters. The first one examines the attitudes towards academic language, attacking the stereotypes labeling it in the most different ways, from obtuse to informational. To highlight what they establish the authors quote renowned writers, especially those who relate to the problem critically: George Orwell, Hughes, Larsen-Freeman, Carter and McCarthy, Pinker, and many others. To provide examples for grammatical characteristics they use sample texts from the most different fields of science and scholarship: literary criticism, biochemistry, history, physics. When defining the locus of historical change in academic writing the authors focus on grammatical innovations that have occurred in the discourse of academic writing. They take a fundamentally new position arguing that the communicative demands of any register – spoken and written – have the potential to facilitate the emergence of grammatical uses associated with those communicative needs; they tend to be used in complimentary situations.

Chapter 2 introduces the corpus-based approach to linguistic analysis, the specific corpora and analytical methods used for the study, including corpus annotation, analysis techniques and quantitative research designs. In the end, it exemplifies the grammatical features that are discussed in the book.

Chapters 3–6 present the major findings of the authors' research: Chapters 3 and 4 the quantitative findings, whereas Chapters 5 and 6 the results of the detailed linguistic analysis. Taken together, they directly challenge many stereotypes about grammatical complexity, historical change and academic writing. To help to find our ways in the given chapters there is always an introduction which offers an overview of the main points discussed.

In Chapter 3 we can also find a synchronic description of the grammatical discourse style of academic writing with the authors' major goal to show that the traditional definitions of

‘complexity’ do not capture the actual complexities of this genre, especially in terms of clausal embedding, which is phrasal in nature. The authors make synchronic comparisons between academic writing and other registers through case studies to demonstrate that this phrasal discourse style is highly distinctive, even within disciplines that represent a wide range of research within academia: science, social science and humanities. They document the distinctive grammatical features of modern academic research writing comparing it to conversation, textbooks, classroom teaching, fiction and newspapers. This chapter demonstrates that the genre of academic writing is an outlier – a register different from all other spoken and written registers.

Chapter 4 continues with the diachronic examination of the same registers and documents the changes academic writing went through over the past 200 years. The authors look into the use of both colloquial and complexity features. Their findings show that academic writing has been quite resistant to change in terms of colloquial characteristics, but significant grammatical change has happened concerning the use of phrasal complexity features.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed linguistic analysis of the historical development and documents significant extensions in the lexical associations, meanings and discourse functions of complexity features.

The functional analysis of the discourse style of academic writing continues in Chapter 6. Analysing the particular phrasal devices the authors turn our attention to the unintended result of grammatical innovations – the loss of explicitness, mainly due to the extremely compressed grammatical structures academic prose heavily relies on, favoring them over more elaborated alternatives.

Chapter 7 is the summary of the most significant themes of the book, offering a discussion of the applied implications. The basic assumptions about complexity, linguistic change, and academic writing are revisited, demonstrating how the analyses presented in previous chapters counter stereotypes. This chapter also discusses the implications that result from the corpus-based findings and theories of grammatical complexity, arguing that grammatical change can emerge in writing, and certain types of linguistic change must be considered in the context of written language.

The main goal of this book, according to the authors, was to show how corpus-based analysis of historical linguistic change in academic writing challenges well established beliefs and stereotypes. The research that provided the findings for this analysis was not restricted to spoken discourse; it also has demonstrated innovations that happened in writing in the last two centuries, concerning mostly the development of phrasal complexity features.

The book contains 48 figures and 32 tables, which offer a quick understanding of the written parts even without reading them. The two appendices contain tables that include the descriptive statistics for the distinctive linguistic features across the examined historical periods. This part is followed by a two-page index with the most important names and entries, whereas the 15 pages of references offer an extremely detailed literature review for the field.