Objectivity, Subjectivity and Competing Models of Research
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Abstract
The classical “objective” style of academic writing, with its characteristic features of nominalization and the use of so-called agentless passives, is still dominant in most disciplines. The style is prized because it seeks to bestow on the researcher the aura of a disinterested investigator on a quest for “the truth”. In more recent years, however, we have increasingly seen departures from both the style and the positioning of the researcher as an impartial observer. In this paper, I look at issues of objectivity and subjectivity in research work, arguing that all research is subjective, no matter what research paradigm and measurement instruments are used. Although there are many competing research paradigms, and much of the academy appears to thrive on such competition, I argue that there is no necessity for different approaches to be opposing approaches. I also talk about the destructive phenomenon of “paradigm blinkers” or the inability to see beyond the parameters of a paradigm that rarely questions its own shared assumptions and that treats all other paradigms as worthy only of contempt and summary dismissal.

Introduction
Experienced and accomplished researchers probably have a good “feel” for what constitutes effective academic writing. Novice researchers, either through instruction or through their own reading, also soon develop an idea of the way that research is written about. They can recognize an academic article with little problem, and no doubt have fairly well-defined expectations of the sort of style that is used in normal academic written communication. Those who teach academic writing also have a reasonably clear idea of what it is they are trying to teach. In fact, many articles concerned with the teaching of academic English, as well as the many blogs and other social media sites, simply assume that everyone is in broad agreement about what academic English looks like.

From time to time, however, academic writing can confound the conventions of received wisdom. Here is an example:

It is a fact, an astonishing, almost shocking fact, that Ibsen does exist across cultures, in the sense that his plays are read and performed all over the world. The challenge is how to deal with this fact, both theoretically and analytically. (Frode 2009: 136)

This opening to an article seems to start in the middle of a dialogue, with the “does exist” appearing to contradict an unheard opinion to the contrary. The hyperbolic “astonishing, almost shocking” phrase sounds more conversational than academic and the EAP teacher might see fit to “correct” this in a student’s work. Yet, it occurs in the highly-respected peer-reviewed journal Ibsen Studies a B-ranked journal in the Australia Research Council’s assessment of journals for the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process (ARC 2011).

Now consider a second example, this time from Textual Practice, an A-ranked journal (ARC 2011):

I first became aware of Language Poetry in Duck Soup, Nick Kimberley’s poetry bookshop in London, a small obviously doomed attempt to create the atmosphere of a combined salon, library, and shop after he left the eclectic crowded world of Compendium bookshop in Camden. Nick liked you to sit in the armchair near his desk, drink tea, and bring some conversation and news of writers and London gossip to the overly quiet space. I was always hurrying like the White Rabbit to my next teaching job (I had at least four part-time gigs at the time) and rarely had the money to buy the books I desired and Nick needed to sell. (Middleton 2009: 947)

The chatty, journalistic style of this opening to a research article, with its casual revelations of personal circumstance, is very different from what the EAP teacher might find appropriate as an exemplar of sound academic writing, but again, this is a genuine example of a peer-reviewed article published in a respectable research journal.
These two examples do not occur in journals devoted to science, and it may be that this kind of deviation from a real or imagined norm is more likely to occur in the arts rather than in science. Here, however, is a third exhibit, from a medical textbook:

Finally, we come to an example which is the most puzzling of all, namely to the quartan fever which, in 1936, attacked the chairman of the malaria commission of the Sanitary Council, the late professor Aldershoff. He had never lived in any malarious part of the country, but he had visited the Balkans some sixteen years before. However, we are not going to blame another country for the malaria which occurs here. We always feel hurt when we hear the Germans saying they have no malaria except on the Dutch border. So we will not pay others with the like coin and we shall charge Professor Aldershoff’s quartan to our own account. (Swellengrebel & de Buck 1938)

The tone here, though treating a serious topic, is convivial, almost jokey, once again with a casual revelation of personal feelings.

It is in fact not difficult to find examples such as these, both historically and in recent times. Style in serious research article writing is surprisingly varied and subject to change. Nonetheless, I suspect there are several fields of study and certainly many journal editors who would simply reject any of the examples I have just shown on the grounds of what would be seen as an inappropriately subjective style, reflecting an inappropriately subjective methodology.

There are, of course, many different approaches to research and there are many different opposing approaches to research. It is my view that such opposition is unnecessary, and that researchers from different paradigms can and should all learn from each other. When we pause for a moment to reflect on exactly what it is we are trying to do when we are pursuing research, we can step outside your own preferred research paradigm, in which we and our collaborators and supervisors may feel very comfortable, and look at how other people tackle and talk about the research questions that they have.

Objective and subjective

The distinction between objective and subjective language testing is familiar. In the objective kind, all examiners should in theory give the same grade, since the test is so designed that there is only one correct or best answer. A subjective test, on the other hand, depends on the marker’s overall assessment of the text that the test-taker produces, and while this assessment is governed by closely-defined criteria, there is no guarantee that all markers will end up awarding the same grade. But in reality, the objective test is no more free of subjectivity that the qualitatively assessed kind, it is just that the subjectivity is hidden away out of sight at an earlier stage of the process, when test items are constructed, choices are made on what to include and what to exclude, on how language is to be categorized for the purposes of the test, on what kinds of performance are designated as suitable for testing and what the “correct” answers are. The difference between “objective” and subjective testing resides only in the point in the process at which subjectivity comes into play.

In the same way, all research is subjective, no matter what paradigm is used. We can follow a very similar argument when we look at inductive and deductive approaches. The point at which subjectivity is apparent will differ, but it is always there. In an inductive approach to research, the researcher will look for a general explanation based on observed data, but what is observed and how it is interpreted will be influenced by the researcher’s personal preferences and theoretical preconceptions. A deductive approach, by contrast, takes a theory or a hypothesis and tests it by looking for data that either support or disprove it, but both the initial drafting of the theory and the “fitting” of the data to the theory is highly subjective.

My thanks to Dr. Nick White, professor of tropical medicine at Oxford and Mahidol Universities, for drawing this example to my attention.
One example of the latter is early research on the derivational theory of complexity. This consisted of apparently impeccably designed experiments in the 60s and early 70s in which the only variables were different transformations of varying degrees of derivational complexity: affirmative (Sonia likes spaghetti), negative (Sonia doesn’t like spaghetti), interrogative (Does Sonia like spaghetti?), various kinds of cleft (It is Sonia who likes spaghetti, What Sonia likes is spaghetti) etc. The researchers found very quickly that there was indeed a measurably different processing time for different kinds of sentences and that this corresponded to the number of transformations from the basic string as outlined in Chomsky's 1965 Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. However, when later researchers used these kinds of sentence not in isolation but in a framing co-text or context, the differences disappeared (Fodor et al. 1974: 369). A negative sentence will be produced in reaction to a perceived assumption or error or misstatement. I will only ever utter a sentence such as It’s not cold today if there is some reason to believe it might have been cold, for example if it was cold yesterday or the weather forecast had predicted cold or some other contextual feature that causes me to remark on the lack of coldness. Even in isolation, a sentence such as A tomato is not a vegetable is easier to process than A tomato is not a desk, simply because we know that tomatoes are often thought of as vegetables, so a real context can readily be understood in which such as sentence is feasible. (See Marantz 2005 for a recent defense of the derivational theory of complexity and a discussion of the data used by linguists and neurocognitive scientists).

Despite the solid reputation enjoyed by methodologies that are based on classic experimental design, that is, set up two scenarios which differ only in one aspect and then find out what differences occur, it is precisely the isolation of individual features, keeping everything constant except the item under investigation, that means all such investigations, especially but not only in the social sciences, need to be critically interrogated. We might think of Piaget's work on child development, all based on laboratory-based, classically-designed experiments, where later workers found that children’s ability to deal with concepts differed dramatically when the task was a naturally-occurring real-life one, and that the difficulty of the experimental tasks correlated less with the conceptual feature under investigation and more with the ambiguities or vagueness associated with the researchers’ instructions to the children (Pinter 2011: 14).

Idealisation and abstraction of data

The “agentless” style, with its invisible researcher, is still highly prized, but, as we have seen, is far from universal. Examples like those given above are increasingly common. The tendency in the social science literature, in particular, is now to acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher and his or her role as both participant and observer in the research process. Fields such as gerontology, feminist studies, queer studies and anthropology more generally are very conscious of the role of the researcher, and research methodologies such as interviews, life stories, observation and discourse analysis often need to be explicit about the way in which the researcher influences the data.

What kinds of data do we deal with in applied linguistics research? We might be working on real-world data, collected in a variety of ways. We might be working by setting up experimental situations, where we try to control all the variables except one. We might be working on the basis of theory or intuition – of what we “know” to be the case. But in all these instances we are changing the data by the very act of investigating it. The observer’s paradox is well-known. Eliminating variables may change the nature of the phenomenon under investigation in ways that cannot be predicted. The theory or the intuition might have a blind spot.

There are many ways in which data are idealized and abstracted in the research process. For example, the way in which we select the data to investigate in the first place, or the criteria we use in deciding which of the many data we have collected we are going to transcribe, analyse,
quote or discard, or the way in which we choose to categorise the data we have before us, or the
relationships we perceive as being instantiated in the data.

At my university, I am responsible for Higher Degree Research across the Faculty of
Human Sciences, which includes the fields of education, early childhood, psychology, cognitive
science, medicine and linguistics. Every year, when we have our Research Showcase for our 480
doctoral students, it strikes me that it is very difficult to say with confidence where each
presentation fits in, unless you read the Department of enrolment on the abstract. A depiction
of the situation would be less one of discrete units and more of a compact Venn diagram with
multiple overlaps. But more than this, I wonder whether a Venn diagram, with its boundaries
for each subject (even though they are overlapping boundaries) conveys the full story. Why have
boundaries at all? Not only are the boundary markers between fields an artificial construct, the
very notion of boundary is itself an artificial and probably unhelpful construct. Conventional (or
even unconventional) names for fields may be convenient for bureaucratic purposes but they do
not present the only possible categorization, and more importantly, they are reifications, with no
actual existence as things.

Idealisation and metaphor

Halliday talks about grammatical metaphor, where one part of speech is substituted for
the part of speech that most literally covers the nature of the phenomenon. So a sentence such
as Water freezes at zero degrees has all natural grammatical parts, while a phrase such as Water’s
zero-degree freezing-point changes the grammatical status of each part and, by forming a
nominal group, enables us to say something about it in an increasingly efficient way.
Nominalisation is the most common example of grammatical metaphor and as Halliday points
out, it was essential to the development of science during the Renaissance, when scientists all
over Europe were realizing that a new language was needed so that findings could be discussed
in a way that was both internally efficient and that could define concepts that could then be
used in a more or less generally understood way without everything having to be explained again
from scratch (Halliday 1993: 55 et seq).

But it is not for nothing that Halliday calls this grammatical metaphor. We need to bear
in mind that nominalizations and particularly abstractions do not exist as real-life entities. They
somehow summarise all of our collective experience of performing.

With this in mind, we can perhaps examine anew some of the abstractions we use in
everyday life: love, friendship, patriotism, education, culture, research. In this respect, we might
recall Brian Street’s well-known paper Culture is a verb (Street 1993). We use these reifications
as a convenient reference to phenomena that are merely the sum of our own actual and
vicarious experiences of performance. We use similar abstractions all the time in our work in
applied linguistics: comprehension, identity, translation, autonomy, communication,
conversation, to name just a few. The very word “language” provides another example, and it is
worth remembering what linguists such as Rudi Keller have said about language:

The individual competence of each one of us is his hypothesis of communicating
successfully with others ... this hypothesis must be modified continuously through
success and failure ... The form in which our language exists is the ability of each
individual to communicate with others. ... The individual competence of a speaker is,
in all likelihood, as unique as the individual himself. ... In addition, the individual
competence is constantly in a state of flux. ... Our language exists in no other way
than in millions of individual competences. ... That which is social about our
language is based on the fact that the individual competence of every single one of
us contains hypotheses as to the individual competence of the others. (Keller 1985:
211, 233, 234)
Paradigm blinkers

The history of research is littered with examples of thinkers and scientists failing to see beyond the boundaries of their own disciplinary assumptions. The work of the nineteenth century non-Euclidean mathematicians Gauss, Bolayai, Lobachevsky and Riemann provides one example. Euclid's geometry works only because it describes an ideal, non-real-world system: “In the Platonic theory [at the root of Euclid’s Elements] the primitive geometrical notions are our own creations: we give them an existence either by our definitions or by postulates, which complete the enumeration of the properties we wish to attribute to them without demonstration.” (Zeuthen 1913 quoted in Lachterman 1989: 110). Even though it was known from Euclid’s time that geometry as it was systematised was idealized, it was not until the non-Euclideans began to seriously investigate the implications of the idealization that progress was made that eventually revolutionised the way the physical working of the universe was seen, notably through the theory of relativity and subsequent developments.

Saussure’s hold on twentieth-century linguistics, particularly his distinction between langue and parole was similarly based on an idealization of the data, made explicit in Chomsky’s work where the object of linguistic study is defined as the grammar of an idealized speaker/hearer in an idealized speech community (Chomsky 1965). But where those aspects discarded by Saussure and Chomsky have been taken seriously, some very different views of language have emerged, including those of Voloshinov (1929), Lecercle (1990), Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), and many others.

Conclusion

It is my view that the future of research lies in addressing specific research problems from the points of view and investigative practices of a variety of different paradigmatic perspectives. This is not to say that we can expect all researchers to become expert practitioners of different methodologies with different theoretical and philosophical assumptions. It does, however, imply that researchers need to look beyond their own established field and welcome and integrate the discoveries made through other paradigms. In this conception, multidisciplinarity does not lie in the individual researcher or research centre, but in the ability and willingness of those individuals and research centres to join forces with others in pushing forward the boundaries of what we know.

References

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