

Roles and registers: linguistic variation in university writing

Abstract

The texts university students write as coursework are often described simply as 'essays' or 'reports', but these broad categories mask wide variation in what university tutors expect from their students, in different disciplines and for different writing tasks. Drawing on findings from a new multidimensional analysis of the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus, this talk will discuss the way certain linguistic features, particularly those expressing stance or facilitating the compression of information, cluster in certain types of proficient student writing and are largely absent from other types. In the talk, extracts from BAWE assignments will be used to distinguish between genres that are often given the same broad labels. For example, although most types of 'reports' are information-rich, student report genres in the sciences tend to compress information by using strings of common concrete and quantity nouns (e.g. *metal foil strain gauges; pipe wall speed; unit length box*), whereas the informational load of report genres in the social sciences is increased through use of attributive adjectives, long abstract nouns and nominalisations (e.g. *disintermediation; intercommunication; self-actualisation*). Likewise, although most types of assignments known as 'essays' contain evaluative language, argumentative essays in the humanities tend to feature stance adverbials and stance nouns to express criticality (e.g. *arguably the most important*), while assignments written from a more personal 'everyday' point of view, such as reflective pieces, tend to feature stance verbs, not nouns. The more that we know about the distribution of such features across different types of texts, the more aware we can become of subtle disciplinary and generic writing strategies, and the better we can tailor writing instruction to student need.