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Knowing Academic Languages

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PROFESSOR GUNNARSSON IS part of an international cluster of language researchers examining the writing practices in academic disciplines. Their inquiry is in part driven by curiosity about the way language works and the form it takes in different settings. Disciplinary discourses have developed their own rarified settings and unusual forms, and are yet near at hand in the university—a tempting site for study. But more pressing is the pedagogic responsibility of composition and applied linguistics to teach students to speak and write for academic purposes in first and second languages.

Other academic specialties have also taken up the study of disciplinary writing, but from different perspectives and different goals. Science studies have looked at rhetoric and communication to understand how sciences have carved out special domains, social authority over those domains, and internal communications within. Critical gender and ethnic studies too have examined academic languages, to uncover how academic writing has created, maintained, and privileged ideologies based on gendered and racial assumptions.

A final cluster of researchers interested in academic language, on which we focus in this essay, is comprised of practitioners within various disciplines concerned with the internal reform of the discourse of their own disciplines. Most are to be found in the social sciences, though there is an occasional natural scientist. These reflective users of disciplinary languages are interested in their fields' ways of making arguments and they open up the stabilized patterns of language use that have constituted a regularized way of doing disciplinary business. Their analyses and findings have deepened our understanding of disciplinary discourse, and some of their work, like the work from science studies as well as critical gender and race studies, has found its way into language based studies of disciplinary language.

But each also pursues this inquiry in relation to issues particular to that field, using the perspective and tools of that discipline. As a result these internal reflections are themselves interesting phenomena to study from the point of view of language studies of disciplines. They show how disciplines look at their languages, what is salient, what is problematic, what tools they bring to bear on thinking about languages, and what disciplinary goals they see achieved through language.

One element these reflective examiners of their own disciplines share is a recognition of the social construction of inquiry, argument, and language. That is, they believe that there are choices to be made about modes of inquiry, modes of representation, and modes of argument, and thus disciplines ought to confront these choices thoughtfully and reflectively. Moreover, these reflective disciplinary language reformers all see some difficulty in the current disciplinary means of formulating argument and knowledge, such that the disciplinary writing somehow needs to be redirected. In pursuing their analyses of their disciplines' languages, they are acting to advance their disciplines through wiser linguistic choices.

While they see language as significant and understand social negotiations go into defining the dominant modes of expression, they are not necessarily thoroughgoing relativists nor do they necessarily have difficulties with the underlying project of their fields. While some see the current rhetoric of their field as misguided or even arbitrary, others see that language choices are consequential precisely because they help us understand phenomena within the existing spirit of their fields. Roald Hoffmann, Nobel winner in chemistry and published poet, provides a clear example of the latter (Hoffmann 1988, 2002; Hoffmann & Laszlo 1991). He argues that our modes of representation embody frozen metaphors that themselves imply theories. Each form of representation has the potential for expressing some aspect of reality, but others also are potentially useful to make salient different aspects. He calls attention to the forms of representation so as to expand our perception of chemical phenomena. He sees representational creativity as strengthening the current project and goals of chemistry by providing a wider range of intellectual tools to be used with greater flexibility.

Anthropology—the End of Colonialism

In the social sciences, however, the examination of language has typically been tied to questions about the very nature of the disciplinary endeavor. Anthropol-

ogy provides a particularly clear example of this, resulting in changes of underpinnings of the field. The problem that instigated the reexamination was the recognition that anthropology's development was tied to political projects of colonialism—gathering information on the colonized to be returned to the dominant colonial center. In the process, the people so described were turned into the “other,” not to be treated as civilized. To extricate itself from this colonial past, anthropology has had to tell new kinds of stories to new configurations of people, while giving new standing to the people represented.

While anthropology has had long interest in the role of symbols, language and communicative practices in the formation of cultures and the distribution of power, it applied that awareness to itself only in passing, occasional experimental texts such as *Naven* (Bateson 1958) and the widely anthologized parody “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” (Miner 1956). In the late 1970's, however, as European colonialism ended, anthropology began reexamining the ethnographic project of the field. The dominance of western authority and knowledge inscribed within ethnography became the central problem to be solved before the field could move forward in building knowledge less tainted by colonial perspectives. Several articles around 1980 (e.g., Crapanzano 1976, 1977; Clifford 1980, 1983; Marcus 1980a & b; Marcus and Cushman 1982) considered the role of writing in the making of ethnographic knowledge. Experiments in reflexive writing put this awareness into practice by creating new forms of ethnography (such as Geertz 1973, 1976, 1980; Crapanzano 1980; Rosaldo 1980). Because of the discipline's long practice in looking at the relations of language and culture and its cosmopolitan perspective, when the lens was turned on their own knowledge producing practice, the scrutiny and debate were intense concerning the production, role, meanings, cultural authority, and power relations instantiated in ethnography.

The discussion eventuated in a 1984 conference (Marcus & Clifford 1985), and a consequent volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) which has become widely cited as a central work in anthropology's reflection on its rhetorical practices. Chapters consider the ethnographer's self portrayal as an authoritative investigator, the power-dominated pastoral mode of ethnography, the culture-laden underlying allegories in narrative accounts, and the formation of others for western academic audiences. The inquiry and debate continued afterwards (see Geertz 1988; Spencer 1989; Roth 1989; Sanjek, 1990).

As a result of this period of intense anthropological self-scrutiny, ethnographies have taken on new forms. Among other concerns, new ethnographies exhibit awareness of the stories they construct, sensitivity to the relation with the

local people who provide information, they are conscious of the traps of considering "the other," and cautious of the systems of authority and domination that support professional anthropology. Also new ethnographies exhibit awareness of the changing global environment, which brings all cultures into contact with all others and reveals all societies as always undergoing transformation. Part of this awareness that no society is an isolated exotic other, is the development of the multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). In short, anthropology became aware of itself as part of the symbolic machinery of intergroup relations and took on responsibility for making its part of those relations equitable.

The Social Location and Purposes of Sociological Writing

Sociology's self-examination took another course, grounded in its disciplinary awareness of the way knowledge arises within societies, infused with that society's ideology, and serving social needs and interests. That is, sociology began to see itself as a social institution through the lens of the sociology of knowledge. Joseph Gusfield (1976, 1981) was the first to develop a reflexive stance towards sociological knowledge as produced for social purposes within social circumstances. He analyzes the development of knowledge as a social drama, beginning with the very definition of certain issues as social problems, requiring research to seek socially desirable answers, yet the published research must hide its dramatic action.

Bennett (1981), through a detailed study of major texts in the history of criminology, finds that when industrialization leads to growth of complex urban societies, oral histories serve to explain and make meaningful the plight of lower class delinquent youth to middle class publics. In complex urban societies increased individualism combines with freedom-restricting criminal punishments to create compelling personal stories. Such stories, however, also require audiences unfamiliar with the lower classes without being repelled by them, ready to be persuaded. Similarly such stories need to find their champions in criminologist story tellers who identify with the people they report on, who are offended by hypocrisy, and who themselves are somewhat socially marginal.

Brown (1977) systematically examines the role of aesthetics in creating persuasive sociological texts. In consequent books (1987, 1989, 1992) he extends his inquiry into unconventional and individually creative elements of knowledge formation in the social sciences. Atkinson (1990) similarly examines the narra-

tive construction of sociological ethnography, focusing on the construction of authority, and the representation of characters and social action. Later he considers how the complexity of life becomes represented within sociological ethnography, including the role of fieldnotes and recording devices (Atkinson 1992; see also Van Maanen 1988, 1995).

The reflexive rhetorical turn has been most vigorously carried out by sociologists of scientific knowledge. The reflexive application of their findings to their own practice has raised skepticism about the validity of socially and contingently constructed empirical work (Woolgar 1988; Potter and Wetherall 1987). This reflexive turn, however, also invited experimental novelty in the expressive forms of knowledge production (Mulkey 1985).

Throughout all these sociological analyses the critique is not overtly political as in anthropology, although it serves to relativize knowledge within social conditions and social purposes. In this respect, it fights an internal battle within sociology between quantitative and qualitative work, suggesting that no fully objective stance can be obtained, from which definitive numbers can be gathered. Even more fundamentally it makes sociological knowledge itself a product of society, embodying social ideology, values, and goals.

Words and Meanings Hidden in Mathematical Economics

In economics, with its close ties to government financial policy and the organization of marketplaces, the debate about the mathematicization of the field took on a different form. Here the criticism is that economics presenting itself as an abstract mathematical field suppresses the important policy debates that lay behind economic assumptions and choices. In demonstrating that economic papers actually made policy arguments no matter how much they seemed to hide the fact, the critiques aimed to re-embed economics in an earlier tradition of political economy.

Although previously some economists showed awareness of the role of language and argument in their field (see Stigler 1982; Klammer 1984), McCloskey's 1985 critique of neoclassical economics in *The Rhetoric of Economics* joined the question of rhetoric, epistemology, and policy within mainstream economic thought. Through a series of analyses of major texts in the development of modern economics, McCloskey argues that scientific method alone does not warrant the major principles of the field. Economists, instead, rely substantially on rhetoric—on creative analogies, thought experiments, aesthetic predilections

for symmetry, quantification, metaphysical propositions and authority—to persuade their readers of the veracity of their claim (see also McCloskey 1990, 1994, 1996). McCloskey's analysis touched off a heated debate concerning methodology and argument in economics. (See for example Maki 1988; Rosenberg 1988; Klamer & McCloskey 1995; Samuels 1990; and Weintraub 2002.)

Disciplinary Concerns, Disciplinary Conceptual Tools, and the Fecundity of Language

There have been other smaller and less influential rhetorical self-examinations in other social science fields, such as psychology. Nonetheless, in each case the analysis has focused on issues salient to those disciplines, using the conceptual tools of the disciplines in order to open up the disciplinary discussion to be able to construct a richer knowledge.

The rhetorical examination of disciplines then is neither a unitary nor a reductive endeavor. It arises within the context of particular disciplinary issues, and is pursued in ways that remain close to the disciplinary perspective. This variety of analysis suggests that there are many ways to look at writing, each uncovering different dimensions embodied in writing. Anthropology's analysis suggests that language can be used to represent peoples and determine intergroup impressions and to wield powers of domination. Sociology's analysis asks us to look at the way in which a text arises out of and speaks to social conditions, events, knowledge, and concerns—and consequently how that text operates as a social fact among its audiences to advance values, goals, and social cohesion and division. Economic's analysis, while it draws on classical rhetoric, does so precisely to reveal that economics deals with issues that belong in the public forum, for the public forum, for which rhetoric developed. In criticizing the limitations of a purely mathematical economics, it returns political economy to its public roots in policy deliberation.

Rather than viewing these disciplinary inquiries into the language of knowledge as parochial instances of language analysis, ignorant of the tools of language studies, we ought to consider them as forays into the many trajectories of knowledge production. These internal critiques of the languages of knowledge embody the concerns that have driven the production of these special discursive domains. In examining the critiques we see the fecundity of the social construction of knowledge languages. This fecundity of linguistic invention does not undo knowledge in relativism but provides probes to new perspectives on

our world and lives. While we in the disciplines of language and language teaching may find surprise to see that the languages we teach escape the terms we bring with our disciplines, this discovery opens our eyes to see how much more there is to teach of language. And in teaching the languages of knowledge we open new windows onto the world for our students and ourselves.

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