

What we (think) we know about academic writing, and what the corpus evidence is

Academic discourse has been investigated from many different perspectives, in terms of its lexis, syntax, and rhetorical structure, and with reference to levels of writer/reader expertise, and national and disciplinary cultures. Our understanding of the nature of written academic texts has improved enormously in recent years thanks to corpus linguistic investigations, and older claims are continually being revised as we discover more about the writing produced in specific contexts, for specific readerships and purposes. In this talk I will examine the long-held belief that English academic writing is characteristically 'elaborate', with plenty of subordinate clauses, and compare this with the more recent claim that it is characteristically 'dense', with less subordination and longer noun phrases (see, for example, Biber, Gray & Poonpon, 2011; Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). Our findings from multidimensional analyses of the BAWE corpus show that elaborate, clausally complex academic writing is more likely to occur in some contexts, and dense, phrasally complex academic writing is more likely to occur in others. Moreover there seem to be two very different types of dense academic writing (one associated with the sciences and the other with the social sciences) and two very different types of elaborate academic writing (one associated with the humanities and the other with academic writing for non-expert readers). I will illustrate the talk with corpus evidence and examples of these different writing styles, and consider the implications of these findings for the teaching of English academic writing.