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The typicality of academic discourse and its relevance for constructs of academic literacy

Abstract

Constructs of academic literacy are used both for test and course design. While the discussion is relevant to both, the focus of this article will be on test design. Constructs of academic literacy necessarily depend on definitions that assume that academic discourse is typically different from other kinds of discourse. The more deliberate their dependence, the easier it is to examine such constructs critically, and to improve existing constructs. If we improve our understanding of what makes academic discourse unique, we can therefore potentially improve our test designs. Two perspectives on the typicality of academic discourse are surveyed: Weideman's (2009) notion of material lingual spheres, and Halliday's (1978) idea of fields of discourse. These perspectives help us to conceptualise the uniqueness of a discourse type by identifying both the conditions for creating texts and the way that social roles influence the content

of what gets expressed in a certain sphere of discourse. Halliday's notion of nominalisation takes another step in this direction, but may, like other supposedly unique characteristics, fall short of identifying the unique analytical mode that qualifies academic endeavour.

The paper argues that when we acknowledge the primacy of the logical or analytical mode in academic discourse, we have a potentially productive perspective: first, on how the various genres and rhetorical modes in academic discourse serve that analytical end; second, on how to define the ability to handle that discourse competently; and third, to suggest how such definitions or constructs of academic literacy may be operationalised or modified.

Keywords: academic discourse, academic literacy, language testing, material lingual spheres, test constructs

1. The dependence of academic literacy definitions on an idea of the uniqueness of academic discourse

Several tertiary institutions in South Africa make use of the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), the Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheidsvlakke (TAG), the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS), and the Test of Academic Literacy for Prospective Students of Nursing. The construct of these tests (see Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a; 2004b) is based upon a particular definition of academic literacy. Without a construct - a theoretically defensible definition of what it is that should be measured - the designers of these tests of language ability would have no adequate rationale for what it is that they should be measuring.

It is difficult, however, to problematise such a construct. For one thing, as will be argued below, the definitions used either explicitly or implicitly rely on an idea of the typicality of academic discourse. In those cases where this idea is merely implicit, and never articulated, critical engagement and refinement of the construct can of course find no proper starting point. In those few cases where the definition of the ability to handle academic discourse explicitly relies on an idea of the typicality of academic discourse, one is better able to examine it critically. This paper and its companion study (Patterson & Weideman, 2013) will attempt to show that definitions of the ability to handle academic discourse that explicitly derive from an idea of what academic discourse entails, and how it differs from other types of discourse, are not only easier to engage with critically, but also potentially more useful. The differences among various types of discourse are therefore an important starting point. In agreement with ideas of a differential communicative ability that have been elaborated (Habermas, 1970; Hymes, 1971; Halliday, 1978) and have endured since their emergence several decades ago (Biber & Conrad, 2001; Hasan, 2004; Hyland & Bondi, 2006), the acknowledgement of such discourse variation also signals a potential variation in the ability of the language user to handle each different type of discourse.

If the assumption of a differential ability holds, it has implications for how one would set about improving a test construct. Test developers are constantly seeking to improve their theoretical understanding of what it is that they seek to measure. This is true of the developers of the tests mentioned above; their ongoing refinement not only of these measurement instruments themselves (Van der Slik & Weideman, 2005; Weideman & van der Slik, 2008), but also their concern with the so-called social implications ('impact') of these tests (Rambiritch, 2012; Weideman, 2011c) have been extensively debated and discussed. In short, the construct of a test remains a critically important feature of all language tests (Weideman, 2011c).

This paper seeks to answer the question "how can the test construct of an academic literacy test be improved?" by assuming that such a refinement depends crucially on an idea of academic language as a unique type of discourse. Its premise is that a definition (or construct) of academic literacy starts from an idea of the typicality of academic discourse.

This is the first of two studies in this regard (cf. too Patterson & Weideman, 2013). The first study aims to examine the typicality of academic discourse from the standpoint of the notion of material lingual spheres (Weideman, 2009) that will be more fully discussed below, before comparing that idea to the views espoused by Halliday (1978; 2002; 2003). In the second, further sets of literature, that are also referred to in this first analysis, will be surveyed in greater detail. These deal with a set of potentially even more specific definitions of academic literacy, or, to phrase it differently, the idea that we require a particular language ability to deal with and handle academic discourse. The first study will therefore be concerned mainly with (theoretical) notions of what characterises academic discourse, and the second with the (operationalisable) definitions of academic literacy that either refer to or imply reference to a founding idea of what makes academic discourse unique. In the second study, finally, the current test construct of TALL, TAG, TALPS and similar tests will be further examined and modified, which could have implications for the task types that are used in these language tests.

2. Academic discourse as a discrete material lingual sphere

In the investigation of the typicality of the language used in academic discourse, Weideman's (2009) notion of material lingual spheres provides a possible starting point. In pragmatics, it has always been assumed that language cannot be separated from the specific context and situation in which it occurs, as these have a direct influence on meaning (Weideman, 2011b:22). In the same way, the definition of discourse as a kind of language that constitutes "a form of social practice", suggests that 'language' cannot be separated from 'society' (Foley, 2004:1). If the argument that academic discourse constitutes a specific kind of language, then these observations are directly relevant to the ability to use such a specific kind of language in that sphere, an ability that is indicated by the idea of academic literacy.

In alignment with the Hallidayan notion of systemic/functional grammar (SFG), Foley (2004:2) notes that the language of discourse is largely seen as a "system of multiple systems of choices" and that the different texts that are included in this discourse occur as a "result of the linguistic choices that speakers/writers make." Thus it can be said that language operates within a range of spheres (or areas), where each realm is characterised by a specific kind of language related to the mode of experience that uniquely characterises the typical structure of the societal relationship or mode of endeavour in which that language occurs. Through their linguistic choices, lingual subjects (producers of language) make use of (and move within) these spheres of discourse according to the modally specified environment and typical social context that they find themselves in. There is a distinct difference, for example, between the aesthetically characterised language of poetry (see Weideman, 2011a for an analysis of several typical features of poetry) and that of academic discourse, or between the economically qualified language of a business transaction and scientifically stamped language. Greyling's (1987) study on the typicality of classroom discourse took a similar look at what makes classroom discourse distinct from other discourse types.

These various types of language – poetic, economic, academic, educational, etc. – are clearly different in terms of formal differences that exist on the lexical and syntactic levels (Weideman, 2009:40). However, the point of the preceding discussion is that there are also typical differences – social forms and relationships that bring about different brands of language – that are specifiable, eventually, as material differences. The latter differences relate not merely to the formal (lexically or syntactically distinguishing) features, but also to the content and subject matter associated with a specific material lingual sphere or discourse type (Weideman, 2009:40).

Material lingual spheres are not only closely tied to the relationship between lingual subject (the producer of language) and lingual object (the language or text that is produced, i.e. in speech, in writing, and in gesture, or in combinations of these), but also to the notion of lingual norm (conditions/rules for language) and lingual fact (“actual instances of language that are subject to such conditions”) (Weideman, 2009:41; 2011b:65). Discourse espoused as a material lingual sphere can be defined as “a system of typical lingual norms that regulate typical lingual facts on the factual side of the lingual aspect within the defining and limiting context of a socially differentiated lingual sphere” (Weideman, 2009:192). In other words, language is conditioned not by the factual situation alone but also by normative principles that are logical, aesthetic, social, ethical, legal, economic, technical, or confessional by nature (Weideman, 2009:41). By extension, the idea is that normative types of discourse determine the nature of factual texts, namely the concrete language used in a specific context or situation (Weideman, 2011b:65). Therefore, in order to identify a specific material lingual sphere, one needs to establish whether the language in it is uniquely different from the language of other spheres or discourse types, in being qualified by, for example, the logical, aesthetic, juridical, ethical, confessional, economic, social or other aspects or modalities of experience (Weideman, 2009:52). For example, the language used in a sermon is not only conditioned by the specific context or situation (i.e. the factual situation) in which it occurs (e.g. a church service or the liturgical blessing pronounced at a wedding), but it is also qualified by the confessional aspect of experience, that provides the conditioning normative principle to which the language use in such a context would be responding. Thus, the typical lingual norms and lingual facts are what define and limit various discourse types, which in turn allows for the identification of specific material lingual spheres.

These distinctions derive from the observation (Dooyeweerd, 1955:548, 557) that our experience consists of at least two horizons: a horizon of dimensions (aspects/facets) and a horizon in which entitary structures operate. The latter horizon is made up of concrete things (such as subjects and objects) and observable states and events, which operate as distinctive entities (or individuality structures) because of their differing structures. Thus, it is within the entitary dimension of our experience that we find typically qualified objects, or a uniquely specific type of interaction between subject and object. The aspectual and entitary horizons are related and interdependent: without entities, we would not be able to distinguish the functions or dimensions that attach to them, and without the horizon of aspects, we would not be able to observe and discern the typical qualifying and founding functions of entities. In the conceptual terminology adopted here, we should note, furthermore, that these two terminal (the typical qualifying and typical

founding) functions serve to typify concrete entities, that is, states, events or things; each object, event or state, every instance of language has such a set of terminal (qualifying and foundational) functions.

Since discourse is a socially differentiated form of lingual interaction that of necessity presupposes social interaction, it furthermore varies in terms of typical human relationships that can be differentiated into associational, communal and institutional relationships (see Table 1 below) (Weideman, 2009:193; 2011b:65). Talk between equals in an associational relationship (which has neither authority nor durability – that is, it will not endure if individual members of the relationship change) is different from talk in a communal relationship (which has either authority or durability, but not both), and these are both different to what one would find in an institutional relationship (which has both authority and durability). Discourse between participants in the academe is often institutional in that there is both authority (for example, a lecturer has authority over a student) and durability (an academic institution endures regardless of membership changes). In addition, exchanges amongst students or scholarly colleagues can be characterised as communal because there is durability but not authority. Therefore, communal and institutional academic relationships are mutually embedded and interdependent, with the institutional relationship taking the principal role by virtue of its durability. This interaction of various types of social relationship, the intertwining of communal with institutional or with associational relationships, has a direct influence on the factual language used.

Table 1: Differentiation between typical human relationships

| Relationship | Authority | Durability |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| Associational | x | x |
| Communal | x/✓ | x/✓ |
| Institutional | ✓ | ✓ |
| | | |

In light of the above discussion, it is evident that the typicality of academic discourse is stamped or guided by a specific dimension of experience – namely, the analytical. While each academic field is circumscribed by one or more modes of reality (for example, mathematics is related to an investigation of the numerical and spatial modes, psychology is related to the psychical, or sensitive, mode), academic discourse as a whole is qualified by the analytical (or logical) mode, which is usually historically grounded. In other words, work within every academic discipline, be it within the humanities, the natural sciences, the health sciences, agriculture, theology, and so on, is guided and led by the logical dimension of experience which involves analysis as its defining kernel. In

addition, every academic discipline is historically (or technically) grounded because it draws its formative power from what has gone before. Indeed, Fleck (1979:20), referring to scientific concepts, claims that “whether we like it or not, we can never sever our links with the past, complete with all its errors.” The interplay between these two terminal functions, the analytical mode of experience (the typical qualifying function) and the historical dimension of experience (the typical foundational function), is illustrated in Figure 1 below (Weideman, 2009:42-43).

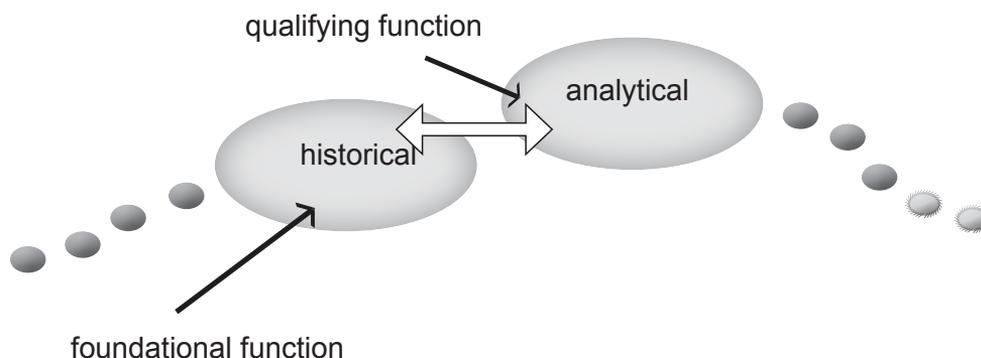


Figure 1: Terminal modal functions of academic discourse (cf. Weideman, 2009:43; 2011c:102)

To put it differently, although the various streams within academic discourse might be conditioned by different aspects of experience (e.g. numerical, aesthetic, economic, etc.), there is one overarching condition that distinguishes academic language from other kinds of language. In simple terms, academic discourse derives its uniqueness from the fact that it is first and foremost analytical or logical and second, that it is the kind of discourse that draws on formative influences on what has gone before – that is, it is historically grounded in a particular style. Academic discourse involves an interplay between these two functions (the historical and analytical), as is shown in Figure 1 above.

3. The relevance of the idea of “field of discourse”

If one examines how these kinds of distinctions relate to the ideas of others, the work of Halliday is immediately relevant. Halliday (1978:122) defines ‘text’ as the “linguistic form of social interaction” which is “embedded in a context of situation.” The environment, or “context of situation”, in which language occurs can be structured in terms of a

“field of significant social action, a tenor of role relationships, and a mode of symbolic organization” (Halliday, 2002:55 emphases in original; cf. 1978:33, 143-145, 221-223; also Doughty, Pearce, & Thornton, 1972:185-186). This notion clearly correlates with the concept of typical and material lingual spheres discussed above.

Firstly, the “field of discourse” alludes to both the actions of participants in a particular context or situation, as well as the subject matter, which in turn determines the vocabulary and grammatical patterns that are used (Halliday, 1978:221-223). Secondly, the “tenor of discourse” refers to the participants in the language situation as well as the nature of their relationships, both of which have a direct influence on the mood (for example, the declarative mood for statements, or the interrogative for questions, etc.) and modality (the “assessment of the validity” – the appropriateness or relevance of what is said) that are selected by the speaker (Halliday, 1978:222-223). For Halliday (1978:223), the ‘tenor’ can also determine the key of assertions (forceful, hesitant, brusque, and the like) and the manner in which attitudes and feelings are expressed. Finally, the “mode of discourse” includes both the selection of the medium of communication (either written or spoken) and a specific rhetorical mode (for example: didactic, imperative, persuasive, descriptive, etc.) (Halliday, 1978:223). In addition, Halliday (2002:57) observes that the “selection of cohesive patterns, those of reference, substitution and ellipsis, and conjunction, tend to be determined by the symbolic forms taken by the interaction”, though his expectation (with Hasan) that such patterns of formal structures will characterise typical differences is one that probably cannot be met (cf. Weideman, 2011b:83; Halliday & Hasan, 1976:4,332).

In terms of Halliday’s notion of language as social semiotic, the semiotic structure of situation can be outlined as follows:

Table 2: The social context as a semiotic structure (Halliday, 2002:55)

| Semiotic structure of situation | associated with | | Functional component of semantics |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| field (type of social action) | “ | “ | Experiential |
| tenor (role relationships) | “ | “ | Interpersonal |
| mode (symbolic organization) | “ | “ | Textual |

The third category in this system is especially important, as it relates to the “particular semiotic function or range of functions that the text is serving in the environment in question” (Halliday, 2002:57). Semiotic functions include rhetorical modes, or concepts, such as didactic, expository, descriptive and persuasive¹ (Halliday, 2002:57).

1 It is noteworthy that Hyland (2011:177) found that academic texts are primarily *persuasive*, a quality that they probably share with all texts that include argument as an essential foundational and rhetorical feature (e.g. legal papers of many varieties, marketing material, sermons, political speeches, opinion pieces, etc.).

Furthermore, the textual component has an ‘enabling’ function in that it is only “through the encoding of semiotic interaction as text that the ideational and interpersonal components of meaning can become operational in an environment” (Halliday, 2002:57, emphasis in original). In other words, the textual function does not merely establish links amongst sentences in the situation; text is the expression (encoding) of ideational and interactional meaning, and through that, it is also concerned with the “internal organisation of the sentence, with its meaning as a message both in itself and in relation to the context” (Halliday, 2002:92). That is, it is an information unit with an interplay between what is given and what is new (Weideman, 2011b:45).

The notion of genre warrants further examination, as it appears to be closely related to what Weideman (2009:40) terms material lingual differences – the variable content and subject matter associated with a specific material lingual sphere or discourse type, as discussed above. Halliday (2002:44) defines “generic structure” as the “form that a text has as a property of its genre” and it is the generic structure that will determine the length, the kinds of participants, and the purpose of a text. Moreover, the various genres of discourse are the “specific semiotic functions of text that have social value in the culture” (Halliday, 1978:145). Genre is also closely connected to the notion of register, which can be defined as functional variation in language – namely that language is used in different contexts, thus inducing a range of registers, or a varied linguistic repertoire (Halliday, 2003:195, 298; cf. 1978:110) in that “genres are realised through registers, and registers in turn are realised through language” (Martin, 1985:250). The reason for this is firstly that genre restricts the ways in which “possible combinations of field, mode, and tenor variables” may be used by a certain culture or customary style of doing things (Martin, 1985:250). Secondly, genre abstractly represents the verbal strategies used for accomplishing different social purposes (Martin, 1985:250-251). In an academic culture², therefore, genre specifications and conditions would be of service to the analytical ends and purposes of academic discourse (cf. Carstens, 2009).

Halliday’s (1978:110; 2002:254) concept of the semiotic structure of situation, while providing a conceptual framework for the representation of the social context as the semiotic structure in which meanings are exchanged, deals primarily with the factual side of the lingual dimension of our experience. It is thus an incomplete framework for the examination of exactly that which makes academic discourse different from other types of discourse. In addition, the notion of ‘generic’ structure is also not wholly adequate for this distinction, as academic discourse covers an immense range of genres and these genres, or rhetorical modes (cf. argument, exposition, narration/narrative, elaboration, etc.), occur generically across a wide range of discourse types, such as in legal discourse, or political discussion, or even in fiction (Halliday, 2002:44). What is needed is a framework that can encompass academic discourse in its entirety so that typical and recurring features will emerge and may then be identified.

² One should perhaps associate the undefined term ‘culture’ with ‘style’, which is a formative, historical moment. Philosophically, the ‘formative’ is sometimes referred to as the cultural modality.

4. 'Register' as a notion of lingual 'resource'

We therefore return to the notion of material lingual spheres as a framework for the investigation of what makes academic discourse different from the language of a business transaction, for example, or from any other type of discourse.

These spheres are integrated with many typically different concrete situations that we encounter every day, and, if we refer to Halliday's conceptualisation, these different situations all have their own particular language register. The understanding of 'register' as "a type of language or a style appropriate to the occasion" correlates with the notion of material lingual spheres as a "set of specifying, typical properties determining the language used in a special context" (Weideman, 2009:49-50). It would appear, then, that 'register' corresponds more closely to the lingual norms that regulate discourse (discussed above). In that sense, register can be defined as a (normative) lingual resource that conditions factual texts. Texts, in turn, may be defined as the interactive, factual lingual objects that occur in discourse.

It is again important to note that the traditional classification and distinction of language as either formal or informal does not provide a basis for material/typical distinctions. After all, the language of a business letter and an academic textbook may both be referred to as formal, although this formality is achieved differently in both typical and material ways. The problem with categorising discourse as either formal or informal, slang or jargon, etc. is that a hierarchy is established and one type of discourse may be deemed to be more important or possessive of a higher social status than another (Weideman, 2009:42). Therefore, to characterise academic language simply as 'formal' would be to ignore all the other intrinsic and overarching features of this specific discourse. It does not adequately reveal the typicality of this kind of language. In addition, vocabulary in isolation, or those lexical features that attach to such distinctions as formal or informal, slang, jargon, and so forth, cannot be used as a criterion to distinguish between different material lingual spheres, although they may in part be helpful in identifying the subject matter and language register (Weideman, 2009:51). Halliday's notion of nominalisation as a distinctive and defining feature of academic discourse, however, may enable us to conceptualise the evident link between academic discourse and the lexicon that accompanies it (cf. Coxhead, 2000 and similar efforts to create an "academic word list"). In the next section, this concept is therefore examined more closely.

5. Halliday's notion of nominalisation

According to Halliday (1978:202), scientifically qualified language³ displays a high degree of nominalisation (the formation of a noun from a verb or adjective).

3 The limitation of 'scientific' to only the natural sciences is outmoded and reveals a typically modernist bias. The use of this term should rather encompass academic discourse in general.

Even though one would imagine that precision and comprehensibility would be a necessary requirement in the formulation and expression of academic language (in both its written and spoken discourse format), Halliday (1978:202) observes that nominalisation can in fact often obscure ambiguities. Hartnett (2004:183) concurs with this observation, stating that “[n]ominalisations can mislead by de-emphasizing or hiding relevant information, [thus] obscuring what is harmful to the position of the writer.”

Halliday (1978:202) observes that the non-nominalised form of the sentence would have to be used in order to resolve these ambiguities. The counter-argument, of course, is that the knowledge that the language user – in this case an academic or aspiring academic competent to handle academic discourse - has of the field as a whole would also assist in making the meaning explicit. In fact, Hartnett (2004:184) makes the point that

The ideational uses of nominalisation have interpersonal effects. Any overall recommendation to avoid the standard terminology in a field, to dismiss it as mere insider jargon meant to impress, misses the point that insiders need their own efficient jargon and standard technical terminology [...] Technical jargon creates a field. Because using and understanding nominalisation presupposes a knowledge of the field, [it] distinguishes the expert from the uninitiated. [...] Heavy nominalisation makes a text sound authoritative, formal, impersonal and prestigious.

Nominalisations, however, do not only appear in academic discourse; they are found in various other fields such as law or administrative organisations (Hartnett, 2004:174). Thus, it appears once again that one needs to go further than the formal distinctions provided by Halliday in order to conceive of academic discourse as a typically distinct lingual sphere.

6. Definitions of academic discourse and academic literacy

How do we discover the common characteristics that will further our understanding of what constitutes academic discourse? This study does not assume as starting point that academic discourse is a “single uniform and monolithic entity, differentiated merely by specialist topics and vocabularies” and it thus acknowledges that academic discourse may vary across disciplines and fields (Hyland & Bondi, 2006:7). These various academic disciplines, each potentially with their own specific standards, practices, and rhetorical context, are sometimes conceived of as ‘subcultures’ or ‘tribes’ (cf. Hyland 1998:20; Clark, 1962; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Livnat, 2012:21). However, there must be some degree of commonality that applies to all types of academic discourse which then allows one to perceive of this kind of discourse as typically academic. It is this notion that is sought in order to subsequently examine a definition of academic literacy that currently forms the test construct of academic literacy tests such as TALL, TAG, and TALPS.

The challenge of finding a generally acceptable definition of what is it that constitutes academic discourse is demonstrated in the 'critical' features that commentators such as Flower (1990), Suomela-Salmi and Dervin (2009), Gunnarsson, (2009), Hyland (2011; cf. too Hyland and Bondi 2006) and Livnat (2012) identify. All are either circular in that they define academic language with reference to the academy or its professional context, or miss the unique feature they set out to identify by enumerating functions of language that are shared across many discourse spheres. In the case of Flower's (1990) conceptualisation, for example, one may remark that the language used in a business plan or newspaper is not academic, yet it also requires an integration of fact and opinion, is concerned with genuine problems and issues, and is written for a specific purpose to an imagined audience. These features are neither limited nor exclusive to academic discourse, and thus cannot define it. Thus, they cannot be singled out as distinctive features of academic discourse alone.

Many of the definitions therefore imply, but underemphasise the importance of the analytical or logical mode of experience that guides and stamps academic language. Hyland (2011:177), for example, holds up the persuasive mode of academic discourse as its defining feature, but this so-called primary quality does not set it apart from other types of discourse (cf. the persuasiveness of legal papers, marketing material, sermons, political speeches, opinion pieces, and so forth). The counter-argument, of course, is that if the analytical modality characterises academic language, we must acknowledge its occurrence, in the form of distinction-making through language, in other spheres of discourse as well. It is indeed so that expressing political opinion or comparing different products in a marketing brochure depend on distinctions and comparisons. Yet in the latter, the analytical is not the guiding or characterising function of the discourse, but rather subservient to juridical or journalistic acts when public opinion is expressed in the first case, or to the economic or commercial intent of marketing material in the second example.

We therefore concur with Snow and Uccelli's (2009:112) observation that "[d]espite the frequent invocations of 'academic language' and the widespread concern about its inadequate development, there is no simple definition of what academic language is", as the above discussion shows. Snow and Uccelli (2009) have examined and tabulated a long list of features, including Hallidayan concepts such as nominalisation, in order to reach a better understanding of academic language in comparison to colloquial language. Their long list of the characteristics of academic language demonstrates a particular problem with the current conception of academic discourse: "dozens of traits have been identified that contrast with primary or colloquial language and that might function as markers of academic language, but it is unclear that any of them actually defines the phenomenon" (Snow & Uccelli, 2009:121). The characteristics often are, to echo a distinction referred to earlier, formally defined features rather than typical ones. Snow and Uccelli (2009:121) observe that

[a]ny of these traits might be present in casual spoken language: Is it their co-occurrence that defines some language as academic? Is it their frequency? How, if at all, do these various traits relate to one another? Are some particularly

crucial and others merely epiphenomena? Are some causes and others consequences?

Many of the questions that Snow and Uccelli (2009) have raised are precisely what this present study aims to highlight and investigate.

In sum, none of the above definitions succeeds in pinpointing a defining feature of academic discourse that distinguishes it from other kinds of discourse. Some of the definitions mentioned above do refer to the fact that academic discourse is historically grounded, by linking its typicality to the disciplinary culture or style, for example Becher and Trowler's (2001) 'tribes', a culture or style that varies over time. Several definitions also suggest the significance of analytical and logical thinking but this aspect is not emphasised as a defining feature. Therefore, in light of the above discussion, what then is it that makes academic discourse distinct from other types of discourse? A preliminary conclusion could be:

Academic discourse, which is historically grounded, includes all lingual activities associated with academia, the output of research being perhaps the most important. The typicality of academic discourse is derived from the (unique) **distinction-making** activity which is associated with the analytical or logical mode of experience.

As one reviewer has pointed out, this tentative (and indeed broad) definition may not yet be what test developers want; we agree that it would no doubt need improvement and substantiation, as will be indicated in the recommendations for further research. Nonetheless, we consider it to be at least a step towards an understanding of the typicality of academic discourse, which, as has been argued, is critical for the revision of our idea of what constitutes the ability to use that kind of language competently.

7. An idea of typicality can inform a definition of academic literacy

If our preliminary conclusion above is correct, the designers and developers of the tests of academic literacy referred to in the introduction would do well to focus their assessment of the ability to handle academic discourse on those task types and subtests that explicitly seek to test how we express distinction-making through language. There is no space here to examine how that conclusion impacts on course design as well, though we are of the opinion that it is equally relevant. For test design, however, an examination of the breakdown of the current definition (Weideman, 2007:xi-xii), which informs the specification of subtests and task types in current tests, shows that several of its components indeed refer explicitly to that analytically qualified kind of lingual expression. So, for example, the sixth component is concerned with the ability to "distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments, cause and effect, and classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons".

Comparing, contrasting, classifying and categorising are all part of our analytical ability to identify and distinguish; logical concept formation is indeed characterised by abstraction and analysis (Strauss, 2009: 12-14). The seventh component, articulated in the definition as the ability to see sequence and order, similarly depends on logical analysis, defined as identification and distinguishing. The argumentative character of academic language is referred to in the latter component as well as in three other components of the construct. One of them deals with the ability to understand how academic texts develop logically and coherently, and another with the knowledge of what counts as evidence, or what inferencing and extrapolating involves.

The kind of argumentation being referred to in this instance is unlike that found in other kinds of discourse, since it is stamped by the analytical dimension of experience, or, to phrase it another way, by the process of theoretical abstraction that uniquely characterises it. Academic argumentation is neither of a juridical, nor of a political, promotional, ethical or confessional kind, but is of service in this case to the overriding analytical ends to which it is put. The same applies to that part of the definition of the ability being measured by these tests which refers to our understanding of the communicative functions of academic language (such as defining, exemplifying, concluding, etc.). Though, as general communicative functions ("speech acts") they may occur also in other kinds of discourse, they are in this instance communicative acts that support the analytical character of academic discourse.

A similar observation can be made when one considers those dimensions of the construct that deal with the command of academic vocabulary, the interpretation of metaphor, or the ability to handle genres (including the understanding of the graphic or visual presentation of academic information in graphs, tables or figures). Though there may be vocabulary, metaphorical expression or genres in common with other discourse types, it is the analytical qualification that characterises such academic expression.

If the typicality of academic discourse is derived from the unique distinction-making activity associated with the analytical or logical mode of experience, then that aspect needs to take precedence. While distinction-making and analytical or logical thinking are part of this particular definition, there is a possibility that they are not yet sufficiently foregrounded as the most important aspects of academic literacy. If constructs depend on ideas, as has been argued here, then this foregrounding should be extremely important.

In the second study referred to above, we would therefore pay particular attention to (a) how, in the tests referred to in the current paper, the analytical characteristic of academic language is either foregrounded or de-emphasised; (b) what might need to be added, in light of some further sets of comments in the literature, to the construct as it is currently defined; before (c) further possible task types or modifications to the design of and specifications for these tests of academic literacy are suggested. That might be a productive way of demonstrating our thesis that the definitions of academic literacy underlying such tests can be further refined by a critical theoretical engagement with them, as we have attempted here.

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