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The Semiperiphery of Academic Writing. Discourses, Communities and Practice

Karen Bennett (ed).

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The Semiperiphery of Academic Writing: Discourses, Communities and Practices, edited by KAREN BENNETT, focuses on academic practices in the European “semiperiphery”, that is, in geographically and economically peripheral countries to the European centre, taking a much welcome critical approach.

The book comprises 12 chapters divided into 3 even parts. In the introduction, the editor discusses the significant role of academic practices in this “buffer zone” and the inevitable tensions created especially as a result of increasing pressures to publish in English and adopt centre norms and values. The four chapters in Part 1 “Discourses in tension” deal with the conflicts created when traditional academic styles prevailing in local, national language contexts are influenced by other dominant, international, writing models. KAREN BENNETT’S chapter focuses on the epistemological and ideological implications of the pressure on Portuguese historiographers to publish in centre journals. This has also brought about changes in Portuguese academic discourse style, putting it at risk, as revealed by her study on distinguishing discourse features of traditional Portuguese academic discourse in texts submitted for translation into English within a 5-year span. In the second chapter, based on a corpus of English-medium chapters and journal articles published by Czech linguists, OLGA DONTCHEVA-NAVRATILOVA shows how their discourse has undergone changes, especially as regards their citation choices and their construction of authorial presence by means of personal and impersonal structures. Overall, Czech linguists seem to be gradually turning more global, adopting conventions prevailing in Anglophone publications and abandoning discursive practices characteristic of Czech academic discourse. In the third chapter, DIMITRA VLADIMIROU explores the International Conference of Greek Linguistics as a semiperipheral space of academic communication. Her analysis reveals that locality plays a relevant role in the semiperiphery, as

attested by the number of linguists choosing to communicate in Greek in such a forum, by the high proportion of Greek-medium sources referenced and by the construal of collective identities through personal reference choices in her corpus of Greek articles published in one of the conference proceedings. Closing Part 1, ANNA GONERKO-FREJ reports on the answers provided by Polish students to a questionnaire on their perceived problems with English academic writing. Whereas they seem to be aware of the differences between English and Polish academic discourse, in line with the findings reported by cross-cultural research, they do not acknowledge them as being the expression of different cultures. GONERKO-FREJ sees the solution to the tension between the two academic cultures in the adoption of an ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) approach to teaching English academic writing, focusing on globally effective rhetorical choices enabling (Polish) writers to express their own voices and ideas rather than seeking to imitate Anglophone models.

Part 2 “Communities in conflict” focuses on further tensions that arise within particular disciplines, especially in the humanities, when publication practices in English are imposed. In the first chapter SALLY BURGESS approaches academic writing practices in a semiperiphery context par excellence, the Spanish one. She shows how institutional policies in this context are promoting core Anglophone research publishing practices, already dominant in urban disciplines, such as chemistry or physics, also in rural ones, such as history. This has triggered different reactions by humanities’ scholars, including that of resistance, contesting these impositions coming from core science and pursuing publications in their native language or in other languages. RITA QUEIROZ DE BARROS’ chapter also focuses on the research publication practices of humanities scholars, but in the semiperiphery context of Portugal. Her study shows lower rates of publication in English than in Portuguese by scholars at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon and their attitudes towards the use of ELF. Whereas a high proportion of the respondents would positively regard English as the language of publication and teaching in higher education, this is hardly seen as achievable, mainly due to the perceived Portuguese scholars’ and students’ low proficiency in English. Based on interview and textual data, MIRELA BARDI and LAURA-MIHAELA MURESAN analyse the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian scholars at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies towards using English as the medium of research publication. Their answers highlight their view of writing for publication as

a complex, multi-level task. They tend to adopt an attitude of acceptance and their textual practices attest to it, complying with the norms of international high-stake English journals. In the last chapter of this second part RAFAELLA NEGRETTI recounts the experiences of three interviewed Italian humanities scholars working in the centre, as they had to reconcile discursive and cultural differences as well as to undergo epistemological changes when pressed to publish in English to pursue an academic career outside Italy. The three of them share a far from uncritical attitude of acceptance, showing awareness of the ideological, social and professional implications of adopting English Academic Discourse in their publication practices.

In Part 3 “Publication practices” the focus moves to the analysis of publication decisions taken by scholars and also journal editors, paying special attention to their goals and motivations. HACER HANDE UYSAL’s chapter depicts Turkish scholars’ publication practices in a Turkish-medium university and in an English-medium one. She shows how the adoption of centre-oriented approaches to research has increased publication output – though not necessarily quality. The scholars’ survey answers indicate how state publication policies are differently implemented locally. In the next chapter, BOJANA PETRIĆ focuses on English-medium publications in Serbia. She analyses the attitudes of their editors as regards the motivations for using English and the nature of their journal. Whereas the reasons for using English are varied, the most widely reported one is that it allows making the research of Serbian scholars noticeable to an international audience, these journals thus having a centrifugal force. Also varied are the views on the nature of their journal. PETRIĆ underlines the idea that national/international should be regarded as a cline and that such publications can be seen as a translocal phenomenon enabling knowledge flows between local contexts and beyond them. MATKO MARUŠIĆ and ANA MARUŠIĆ describe their experience as editors of an English-medium journal in Croatia seeking to gain visibility and recognition by adopting centre practices. They highlight its lights, pointing out the interesting roles and varied editorial tasks undertaken, but they also stress its shadows, when conflicts and tension arise as a result of the enforcement of centre publishing values in a national context in which different academic practices may be expected. In the last chapter, taking a different perspective on the semiperiphery, MAŁGORZATA SOKOŁ argues that the academic weblog can be considered a semiperipheral genre. Her study of weblogs by Polish academics shows that they are rather stabilized in terms of structure and

have a common communicative purpose, sharing knowledge and information as well as educating. The academic weblog encodes conflicts as they mix the public and the private, the individual and the communal as well as the personal and the factual domains. Web-mediated communication poses numerous challenges to the academia, which will have to reconcile traditional, long-established media of scholarly exchange with emerging, web-based ones.

KAREN BENNETT closes the book by highlighting the high degree of consistency reported within the European semiperiphery in her concluding chapter entitled “Combating the centripetal pull in academic writing”. Numerous tensions between traditional and modern writing styles, values and epistemologies, between hard sciences and humanities, between local and global practices seem to originate as a result of the embracement of centre-oriented English academic practices, especially as promoted by state policies across the European semiperiphery, but also, as pointed out by BENNETT, as a result of their equation with modernization and progress. There are, thus, centripetal forces leading to the assumption of dominant centre academic practices, which have significant implications for national language-medium journals and national specialized academic discourses as well as for epistemologies and for the decisions taken by scholars within particular disciplines. Nevertheless, some centrifugal forces also seem to be at stake in the European semiperiphery as reported in several of the chapters, showing scholars’ and journal editors’ concerns with the adoption of dominant values and practices.

The book focuses on the European semiperiphery, but it also stems from that semiperiphery and, thus, plays its role “simultaneously sanctioning the values emanating from the centre while refreshing it with new perspectives brought from outside” (page 3). Indeed, new perspectives from outside are brought about by its contributors, especially as they draw on sources beyond centre high-profile journals. This is crucial if, as stressed by BENNETT, we want to stop or combat the centripetal forces driving us to homogenized, monolingual, empiricist, centre-oriented academic practices.

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