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Is conversation more grammatically complex than academic writing?

PLENARVORTRAG/KEYNOTE SPEECH

Abstract

The stereotypical view of academic writing is that it is grammatically complex, with elaborated structures, and with meanings expressed explicitly. In contrast, spoken registers, especially conversation, are believed to have the opposite characteristics. The present talk reports the results of corpus-based analyses that challenge these stereotypes; the study uses corpus-based analysis of present-day and historical registers to investigate the differing kinds of complexity, elaboration, and explicitness found in spoken and written texts.

On the one hand, the results show that conversation is structurally complex and elaborated, to an even greater extent than academic writing for some grammatical features. At the same time, the corpus findings show that academic writing does not make extensive use of the structures that are stereotypically associated with complexity (especially dependent clauses). Rather, the grammatical complexities of writing tend to be phrasal rather than clausal, resulting in a compressed rather than elaborated discourse style.

After contrasting the complexities of present-day conversation and academic writing, the talk goes on to briefly trace the historical development of these discourse styles, showing how academic writing has evolved to become increasingly 'compressed' over the last three centuries. The most dramatic changes have occurred in the last 100 years. Many of these historical changes have resulted in a loss of explicitness, again challenging the stereotypical view of writing as being maximally explicit in meaning. In particular, almost all the phrasal modifiers that are common in academic writing are associated with inexplicit meaning relations among elements in discourse.