"This is the problem. To make it sound as if it had been written by a native speaker."
Academic writing in English as a Foreign Language

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Preliminary remark

Research project
   „Publish in English or perish in German?“
   Wissenschaftliches Schreiben und Publizieren in der
   Fremdsprache English

Case study
   of a German postdoc biologist and his coming to grips with
   writing scientific English

Outline

- **The internationalisation of science**

- **The dominance of English in scientific communication**

  - More than 90% of all journal publications in the natural sciences

  - Somewhat less pronounced in the social and engineering sciences

  - Rapid increase of English-medium courses at the tertiary level in NNES countries

1 Point of departure: *communicative disadvantage*

■ **Communicative disadvantage in writing up research**

- NNES cannot rely on linguistic intuition and depend on support from NES.

- Acquiring and maintaining advanced English language competence requires considerable financial and time investments.

1 Point of departure: *communicative disadvantage*

- **Communicative disadvantage in getting research published**

  - NNES are often unaware of Anglo-American discourse patterns.

  - NNES may lack necessary genre and register awareness to comply with the norms required in English-speaking journals.

Transfer of German discourse features into English

"English-speaking writers strive to make their texts readable, whereas German writers emphasize content over form. The German reader is expected to make the connections."

(Connor 1996)

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- **Disciplinary cultures**

  - A discipline's epistemology and research paradigms influence writing conventions and language attitudes among their members.

  - Hyland's (2009: 63) continuum of knowledge domains illustrates this point.

SCIENCES	SOCIAL SCIENCES	HUMANITIES
HARDER ←	→	SOFTER
Empirical and objective		Explicitly interpretive
Linear growth of knowledge		Dispersed knowledge
Experimental methods		Discursive argument
Quantitative		Qualitative
More concentrated readership		More varied audience
Highly structured genres		More fluid discourses

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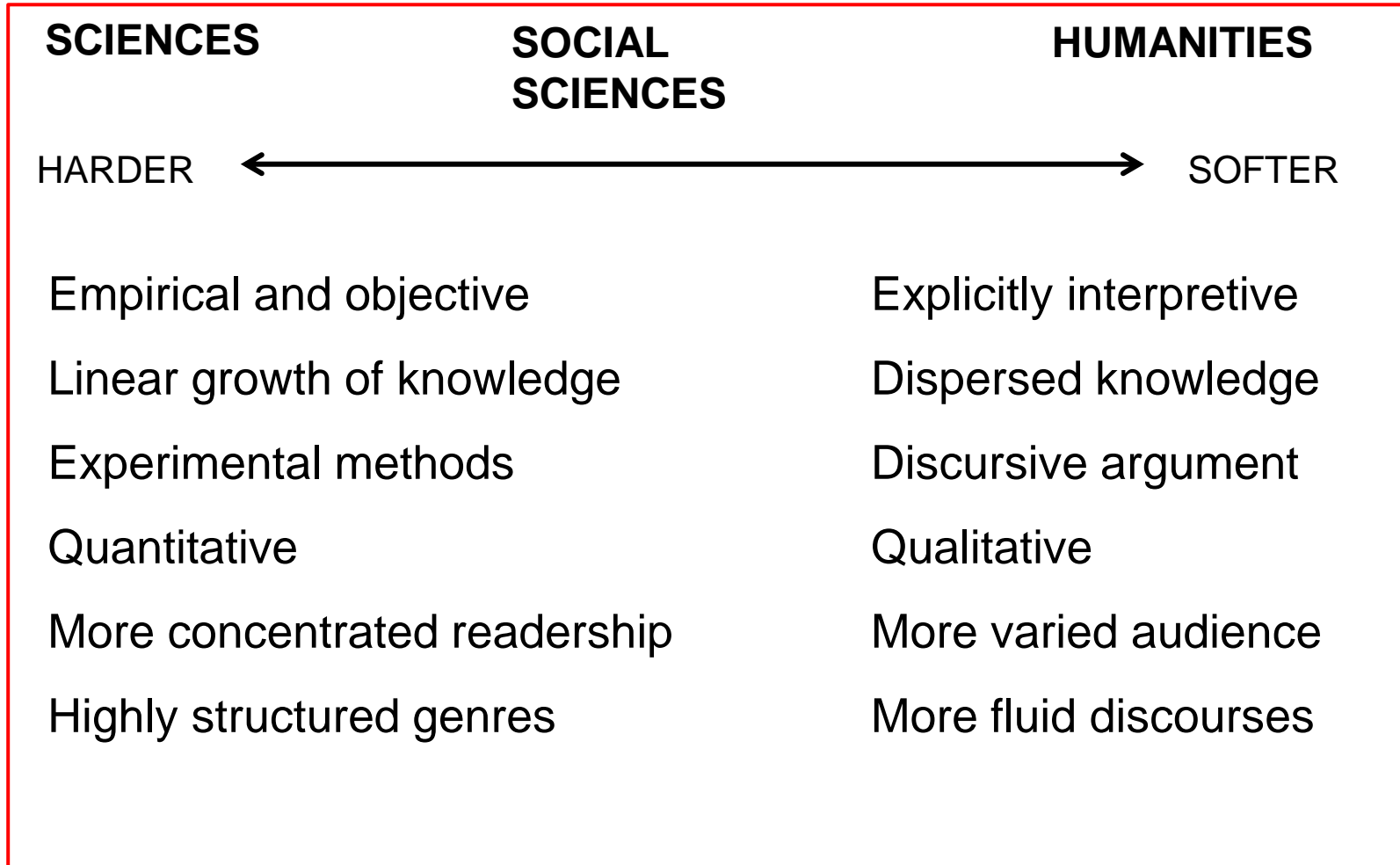
1 Point of departure: *the situation in Germany*

- Studies of scientific English seldom take local/national academic landscape into consideration (such as academic bilingualism and socialisation):

Sources: DAAD, Hochschulkompass	German	English
Bachelor's	7144	133
Master's	6029	685
PhD	unknown	324

- International journal articles have become the essential indicator for research assessment and career prospects.

- What ***problems and obstacles*** do non-native researchers encounter in their preparation of research articles in English?

- What ***strategies and resources*** do they deploy in order to overcome these problems?

- How does immersion in a disciplinary culture influence the ***attitudes*** of researchers towards English and German as scientific languages?

- On the basis of the research results, what ***recommendations*** can be made for the use of English and German in academia, in particular with regard to academic writing and publishing?

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1st *phase: pilot study*

- 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted
- Selected researchers were invited to participate with regard to

  - Academic seniority, discipline and varying levels of publishing experience in English
  - Aim: cross section of scientific disciplines, career levels and publishing experience

2nd phase: current research project

- 19 additional interviews were conducted

- Focus on 4 disciplines (i.e. biology, mechanical engineering, German linguistics, history)
with 6 interviewees each

- Aim: find out how disciplinary cultures
relate to the research questions

- A two-year project funded by

The interviewee's background:

- Natural scientist with a stay of 2 years as a postdoc in the US
- Reads and writes almost exclusively in English
- Preconception that *international science is English*:

Well, obviously you try to get your articles published in an international journal. That is just what is required, I'd say, because these journals are reviewed and [...], well, that has to be the goal, to get published in a reviewed journal. Hence this is in English. That's the way it is. I don't think that nowadays there are any discussions about that anymore.

(translation from German)

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Preconceptions about the
discourse style in the natural sciences:

- Facts only – writing is merely the textualisation of objective, language-independent results.

- Opposition between sober, functional style in the natural sciences and "prose" or "flowery" style in other disciplines

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Writing Strategy: Translation

Words: The interviewee uses the bilingual dictionary LEO to translate German words into English.

> Most of the time I look for a specific word. Basically, I have a German sentence. I'm able to figure out what most of that is in English. But then a word is missing and [...] it's just faster to look it up in LEO, just this one word I want, rather than choosing another construction to circumscribe it in order to avoid this word.

Sentence by sentence: The interviewee does not translate into English from a German source text but sentence by sentence.

> And then I conceptualise it [the idea] in German, in my head as it were, think of what I want to say and translate that sentence by sentence into English, while I'm writing.

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Great difficulty in devising and improving drafts:

> For me, personally, that [writing in English] is extremely **stressful**. I really loathe it. Having to phrase everything in English is really **stressful**.

> And ... that's what is **stressful** about it, that ... you have few options. I mean, I already write the best I can. That means that the final product is the best I can deliver in English and if somebody then says 'improve your language' that's where I reach the end of the line, you know? I just don't have any options left.

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The interviewee's view of linguistic correctness:

And that is what I hold the school system responsible for, that you don't experience something like **just talking away** in school. That you learn the grammar as precisely as possible and who knows what, this 'past tense' and 'future' something. But at the end of the day nobody cares about that. If I can use one past tense, the one everybody uses [...] then that'll fit somehow. Everybody knows what is meant.

Well, if I give the manuscript to somebody here in the institute who isn't a **native speaker** I might as well just do it myself.

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The interviewee's view of English:

> I find that English is somehow suited to be a world language. I'm really not a linguistic genius and if I can manage that [publishing in English] there has got to be some advantage to it. I reckon it is much harder for non-Germans to learn German, because the language is considerably more complex. I think English is a fairly simple thing.

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In a nutshell…

- The interviewee exhibits an ***ambivalence*** with regard to English: On the one hand, he thinks that English is a "simple" language, on the other hand he considers writing in English extremely "stressful"***.***

- This ambivalence may stem from the belief that the natural sciences are to a large extent language-independent and that language correctness is relatively unimportant. However, these assumptions clash with the linguistic demands made by international English speaking journals.

- The interviewee is, without any doubt, a writer of scientific English who is deeply – negatively – affected by being a non-native speaker of the language.

5 Native and non-native speakers

"A native speaker is traditionally considered to be a person who, having acquired a language in infancy, has expertise and intuitions about its grammaticality, uses it automatically, accurately and creatively, and identifies with a community in which it is spoken."

(Cook 1998: 227)

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5 Native and non-native speakers

Critique

1. The traditional distinction between native speakers and non-native speakers (NNS) of English is collapsing.

2. We need to get rid of this discriminatory division and replace NNS with English as a lingua franca (ELF) speakers.

3. The more valid distinctions are between senior researchers and junior researchers.

(Swales/Feak (2009: xi)

5 Native and non-native speakers

Critique

1. The traditional distinction between native speakers and non-native speakers (NNS) of English is collapsing.

➤ None of the 36 interviewees in our corpus has questioned the distinction between native and non-native speakers. For them the difference is real.

5 Native and non-native speakers

N = 36	Being a non-native speaker: advantage or disadvantage?
27	See clear disadvantages for non-native speakers
4	See slight disadvantages for non-native speakers
1	Neither advantage nor disadvantage for non-native speakers: sees it as a "challenge"
1	No disadvantage because interviewee doesn't mind
1	No disadvantage any more after "assimilating to English"
1	No disadvantage, but doesn't give any reason
1	Doesn't explicitly refer to the question but focuses on a possible language-independent distinction between people who "enjoy writing texts" and those who don't

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5 Native and non-native speakers

Naturally, native English speaking academics can face writing problems too, but other things being equal (such as in particular comparable educational and academic background) it is the native English speaking academics who are in a better position.

5 Native and non-native speakers

Critique

2. We need to get rid of this discriminatory division and replace NNS with English as a lingua franca (ELF) speakers.

➢ ELF is a "'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom **English is the chosen foreign language** of communication."

(Firth 1996: 240)

➢ **In scientific communication English is a foreign language.**

5 Native and non-native speakers

3. The more valid distinctions are between senior researchers and junior researchers.

➢ Our data do not provide any evidence that for senior researchers the distinction between native and non-native is not valid any more.

➢ One professor feels no disadvantage any more after "assimilating to English", one postdoc is similarly confident and one PhD student thinks that being a native speaker doesn't save much time in writing.

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6 Summary

- The native/non-native distinction exists in people's (especially non-native academics') minds.

- Academic English is rooted, like all scientific languages, in the ***general language***. This provides NES with a linguistic advantage.

- Inner Circle NES scientists and publishers set the (language) standards in international academic publishing (e.g. gatekeeping).

6 Summary

- NES and NNES academics are not on equal footing: Writing academic English is not just about practice. *Linguistic distance* between L1 and L2 and *language learning aptitude* are also important factors.

- It is often considered to be politically incorrect to question the quality of NNES academics' English language proficiency.

- However, only by recognizing the NES vs. NNES distinction will it be possible to improve the situation of non-native English speaking academics.

- Developing and maintaining *academic biliteracy* can be advantageous for NNES but at the same time requires them to spend more time away from research-related tasks.

7 Outlook

- How does immersion in a disciplinary culture influence interviewees' perception of problems, their use of problem-solving strategies and attitudes towards scientific languages?

- What similarities and differences are there between disciplinary cultures such as biology, mechanical engineering, German linguistics and history?

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The end …

Man ist erschöpft nach seinem englischen Vortrag und
dann kommt die anstrengende Diskussion hinterher.

(German professor from PEPG corpus)

You feel worn out after a presentation in English, and
then follows the exhausting discussion.

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