From context to text: Investigating structures, functions and forms in today’s research article

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Aspects of context (1)

Surviving and flourishing in a changed research world?

a) A “monoculture” of English
b) Administrative striving for “ranking”
c) Narrowed “key performance indicators”
   i) ISI journals  ii) research grants
d) Insidious effects on local research in local cultures
Aspects of context (2)

- An increasing majority of English-language research speakers and writers are non-native speakers of English.
- Some recognition of the burdens consequently imposed: slower reading/slower writing/more stressful listening and speaking/more time and expense involved.
- The uncertain status of the English-as-a-Lingua-Franca movement.
Some quotations from the field

**Spain** (Pérez-Llantada, Plo & Ferguson, 2011)

- “the dominance of English is the way it is, whether we like it or not”
- ‘Of course it is an unjust advantage. I attend a conference. I read my paper after the native, the native wraps the audience around his little finger, using a joke that I cannot tell. He doesn’t have to prepare. I will never be able to do it like him. I cannot interact.”
On writing

• “Sometimes you want to convey nuances, but you don’t know how to do it”

• “the main difficulties are those of persuading, convincing and clarifying”

• ‘you don’t say what you know, only what you can’
And over to Sweden

Olsson & Sheridan (2012)

- To be able to discuss, both in writing and speaking, in a mother tongue is always better! In English I can never find the right words that easily as in Swedish!”
- “Being European, there is less tolerance for not being fluently speaking, and to have a limited vocabulary.”
- I easily lose many important nuances when speaking and to a larger degree when writing in English. That’s an important problem in my field [humanities] when it many times comes down to nuances, for example in interpretation of texts.
Despite these understandable concerns...

- In this changed world, the basic binary is between senior and junior academics, not between native and non-native speakers of English (Swales, 2004)

- Senior academics know what to do and why they are doing it, and how to do *it in* *grosso modo*, although they may struggle with the finer points (the nuances)

- *Le bon Dieu est dans le détail*  (Flaubert)

The two most-cited papers:

Françoise Salager-Meyer (1994) *Hedges and textual communicative function in medical English written discourse*

Anna Mauranen (1993) *Contrastive ESP rhetoric: Metatext in Finnish-English economics texts*

No evidence of bias.....
So, my focus today is on the research article (in English) 

“the master narrative of our time” (Montgomery, 1996) 

A huge, stable (but evolving) genre, but one differentiated by different disciplinary traditions and conventions: Stylistic variation in: 

- Imperatives 
- Direct quotes 
- “Scare quotes”
Textual topics (the devil is in the details)

- Passivization and lexical valency
- Variation in methods/procedures
- Procedures and purpose clauses
- “Volitional/cognitive” verbs in procedures
- Definite article usage in medicine
- “we” v. the passive
- “Of”-fronting and expanded scope
- Evaluative sentential adverbials and dialogic space
The passive in written academic texts

- For many years, we have known that in academic English around 25% of the finite verbs are in the passive.

- We also know that this percentage tends to be higher in procedures/methods than in other sections of research articles.

- But these bland percentages disguise an important and little known phenomenon.
Huddleston (1971) *The sentence in written English*

- 135,000 words; 27 texts of 5000 words each; 9 from journals; 9 from university textbooks; and 9 scientific journalism.
  (still manual analysis)

- For comparison Hyland’s 1998 science and engineering research article corpus of 120 articles, totaling 475,000 words.
  (now using Wordsmith Tools)

- Main focus: the propensity of transitive verbs to passivize
Huddleston’s findings (percentages of passives)

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Huddleston & Hyland—Passivizing verbs

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## Non-passivizing verbs

<table>
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</table>
• These percentages are equally striking, again given the 25% passive average for transitive verbs.

• Even for those that are 0% in Hyland, it is not difficult to construct passive examples:

The old professor was helped onto the stage. After a long delay, the contract was agreed. The data was entered into a spreadsheet.
Pedagogical outcomes?

Task

So, *statistically speaking*, which of the following would you judge more likely?

1a. The planning office distributes the schedules.
1b. The schedules are distributed by the planning office.

2a. These findings imply a new strain of influenza.
2b. A new strain of influenza is implied by these findings.

3a. The stress test revealed weaknesses in the structure.
3b. Weaknesses in the structure were revealed by the stress test.

4a. The panel attributed the failure to poor planning.
4b. The failure was attributed to poor planning.

5a. The lab has acquired a new electron microscope.
5b. A new electron microscope has been acquired by the lab.
From numbers to explanations: The case of REVEAL

3.a. The stress test revealed weaknesses in the system.
3.b. Weaknesses in the system were revealed by the stress test.

REVEAL occurs 90+% in the active (3.a), but why?

1) REVEAL is a “strong” verb (think of “revelations”); it tells the reader to pay particular attention.
2) In the Hyland data, in the active it is associated with short subjects. Examples:
Examples of “reveal” in the active

Recent research has revealed...
Genetic studies have revealed...
The qualitative data revealed striking differences...
Analysis reveals...
The above equations reveal...
The resulting structure reveals..
This argument reveals something about the concept of truth
The four finite uses of passivized REVEAL in the small Hyland corpus (80 articles)

1) The cubic of the stationary curvature in spherical motion will be revealed by letting...

2) The social relativity of the ideal feminine physique embraced by Hanna and most of the other female participants is readily revealed by historical comparison; for example, ...

3) Based on this approach, the kinematic meaning of induced construction parameters in spatial motion are revealed (sic).

4) ...the invariants of axodes are derived and their kinematic meanings are revealed.

(Usually, light NPs before heavy ones; exceptions (1-3) lead to the passive; in 4), it is probably parallelism)
General observations on method/procedure accounts

- In the Anglophone world, it all started with Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

- An empiricist to the end—his final experiment

- “I am building in the human understanding a true model of the world, such as it really is, not as man’s reason would like it to be.”
Other earlier thoughts on method

1763 “By different methods different men excel; But where is he who can do all things well?” (Charles Churchill)

1903 “Sociology is the science with the greatest number of methods and the least results” Jules Poincaré

1925 “The greatest invention of the nineteenth century was the invention of the method of invention” (Whitehead)

1894 “You know my methods, Watson” (Sherlock Holmes)
Methods then are important as routes to invention and discovery

But descriptions of methods have been seen as ..... Dullsville....
• After all, methods are ‘easy’; ‘written first’; ‘based on templates’

• After all, they are just part of ‘normal science’

• After all, they are not cognitively or rhetorically challenging like introductions and discussions; also they are *uninterestingly unevaluative*

• After all, they are often written by junior members of research teams
So...

- Recent discourse-analytic research has tended to neglect methods. (Largely focussed on personal pronoun/passive alternants: Tarone et al., 1981; Lassen, 2006; Fløttum et al., 2006; Giannoni, 2008)

Yet:

1) Method descriptions are not always easy; like abstracts, ‘you will have to rewrite such summaries repeatedly before they are both clear and succinct’ (Bem, 1987: 179).

2) Methods are the epistemic centers of disciplines (Smagorinsky, 2008).

3) There are claims (e.g. Swales 2004) that there is more variation in Methods than in Intros, Results & Discussions.
1) Not so easy, in particular…

- Boundary-stretching methods can be problematic:
  
a) moving into inter-disciplinarity (Myers, 1990; Blakeslee, 2001; Barton, 2004);

b) The method is new or controversial (Paul et al. 2004);

c) The paper is essentially a “methods paper” (Methods papers are more cited, Fogel, 1998)
2) Method as epistemic center

1) Methods and procedures determine the ways in which the other sections are constructed and shaped;

2) If ideas and insights originate, methods procreate (i.e. give corporeal substance to those ideas)

3) The methods produce certain kinds of data and in certain amounts so that certain claims can be made
2) cont. A view from medical research

“If the abstract is of interest, the editor next looks at the methods section of the manuscript before deciding whether to reject the paper or pass it on to the screening editor on duty for that day. The screening editor decides whether the manuscript should be sent out for external review”

(E. Langdon-Neuner (2008: 84) reporting on her study of editors at the British Medical Journal)
2) Cont. A view from educational research

“As a reviewer I may find an opening theoretical gambit to be compelling, but if I can’t reconstruct the author’s means of collecting, reducing and analyzing data, then I will have little faith that the construction of results follows responsible and consistent treatment of evidence and will not likely recommend the paper for publication”

Peter Smagorinsky (long-running editor of Research in the Teaching of English), 2008: 408.
2) cont. Anxiety about methods, especially qualitative ones

- Google Scholar results (as at 7 March 2012)

R. K. Yin: *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*

Y. S. Lincoln: *Naturalistic Inquiry*

J. W. Cresswell: *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*
2) cont. Heavyweights of our time?

J. Rawls: *A Theory of Justice* 37274
J. H. Holland: *Adaptation in natural and artificial systems* 32004

P. Bourdieu: *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* 21691
N. Chomsky: *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* 17998
Disciplinary variation in methods

• All RAs have introductory and concluding material, but not all have methodological material (humanistic essays, theory papers, certain analytical papers, definitional papers)

• Disciplines vary in the amount of detail expected (what to include & what not to include)

• Disciplines vary in what needs to be included (equipment? statistics? sources? permissions? sponsorship? inclusion criteria?)
3) cont.

- Disciplines vary in the prominence of methods in the final product (placement, font size etc). (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995)

- Disciplines (and sub-disciplines) vary in their titular nomenclature and in their expectations for named sub-sections

- Disciplinary gatekeepers vary in the attention paid to methods
Disciplinary variation: Linguistic and discoursal correlates

Method Section Features:

Clipped <-> Intermediate <-> Elaborated
Features of a Clipped text:

1. Avoids named sub-sections
2. Uses acronyms and citations as shorthand for procedural descriptions
3. Assumes background knowledge of the general methodology
4. Uses on occasion a running series of verbs in a sentence (e.g."...collected, stained and stored")
5. Avoids definitions of terms and examples
6. Offers few "how" statements, such as "by + verb-ing"
7. Provides few or no justifications for methodological choices
8. Uses very few (if any) 'volitional' or 'cognitive' verbs; i.e. "we analyzed" rather than "we decided to analyze"
9. Offers few reiterations of the subjects/objects of the research, but focuses on technical processes
A Constructed example: How (odd) it looks

Methods

- Methods of collection were essentially those of Sinclair\(^1\). Items were tagged with a modification of Biber\(^2\), data-based, and then subjected to a KWIC concordancer. Collocational outcomes were derived by adapting procedures from Stubbs, Partington, and Kerans\(^3-^5\). Statistical procedures utilized the Wordsmith package\(^6\) while Thurston & Candlin\(^7\) provided a basis for the collocational line displays used in the DDL experiments.
Elaborated methods sections:

1) Recognize a need to provide background knowledge
2) Frequently contain sub-sections
3) Use descriptions rather than citations to indicate the various aspects of the methodology adopted
4) Tend to have one finite verb per clause
5) Provide definitions, examples and illustrations as seems necessary
6) Include justifications and rationales for details of the procedures adopted, sometimes placed in the marked pre-subject position via a purpose clause
7) Often contain one or more of *by+V-ing* "how statements"
8) Contain one or more of 'volitional verbs', such as "*We decided* to focus on...‘, as opposed to “*We focussed on...”
9) Tend to have a wider range of linking phrases (logical, temporal and spatial) at the beginning of sentences
# 6. Pre-subject Purpose statements

Sandra Thompson (1985):

a) Initial and final purpose clauses function differently.
b) Final clauses offer ‘local’ purposes; initial clauses offer solutions to anticipated broader problems.

Michel Charolles (2005)

a) Initial purpose causes are framing adverbials
b) They potentially have more extended propositional scope than final clauses
A short extract from Systematic Botany

- To detect groups among the specimens and extract the variables that best diagnose these groups, we used principal components analysis (PCA). Before conducting the analysis, we standardized all measurements so that each variable would have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. For the PCA, we included only continuous characters. To avoid weighting characters, we excluded characters that are probably genetically redundant, as revealed by high values for the Pearson correlation coefficient between all possible pairs of characters. (Naczi, Reznicek & Ford, 1998: 435)
• Why did you preface a lot of your sentences with the purpose of what you are doing?

• Oh I think primarily most scientists are going to read this and are going to say "Aah but did they think of?" or "Aah, but did they consider?", so we just put up front the fact that we are aware of criticism, potential criticisms and problems and dealt with them. You know we typically had such good arguments for things, so we put them up front and brought them out ourselves, rather than waiting for someone else to do it. Ah, it's a way of anticipating and avoiding criticism from reviewers.

• It's a conscious or semi-conscious policy?
  Semi-conscious, I’d say
Examples from Hyland’s Science and Engineering sub-corpus (120 Ras)

1) **To determine** the relative amount of the protein associated with 93D we measured the fluorescence intensities of ...

2) **To determine** whether the pale plants lacked components of the thylakoid membrane, we assayed the accumulation of ...

3) **To determine** which member of the STAT family generates the LIF-regulated complex detected in ES cells, we examined..

4) **To determine** whether this mutation prevented NY-Y binding to the Y box, gel shift assays were performed.
The Hyland science/engineering sub-corpus (N = 120 RAs)

To determine... 22
To test... 14
To obtain... 15
To illustrate... 10
To understand... 7
To achieve... 6
To evaluate... 6
To reduce... 6
Hyland’s engineering/science sub-corpus of RAs

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<th>initial</th>
<th>final</th>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>obtain</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“(in order) to test” as the odd man out. Initials

this hypothesis (5)...
this possibility...
this sequence...
whether this region of...
them under the same experimental conditions
the hypothesis that...
the possibility that...
the performance of...
the validity of...
if SKIAN can...

(10 of 14 are clearly anaphoric, typically using THIS + Summary Word) (Wulff, Römer & Swales, 2012)
Examples of “to test” in final position

a) Plasmids were amplified in E. coli and then transformed back into ... to test the specificity and reproducibility of the interaction.

b) In contrast to the surface coil experiments, we did not have access to experimental results to test our predictions. Rather, the ...results should be interpreted...

c) The sinusoidal signal of 50 Hz with maximum peak voltage of 150 V was applied to test devices.
Initial purpose clauses. A learning curve?

Interview with botanist continued

JOHN: Right. So this is something that graduate students have to learn?
TONY: I think so

*Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student papers (MICUSP)*

*To test: Initial 25; final 35.* yes and no?
# 8. Volitional and cognitive elements in a text from our field

A four-paragraph procedure section:

Para 1. Corpus construction (S1-S6)
Para 2. Corpus construction (S1-S4)
Para 3. Interview procedures (S1-S4)
Para 4. Definition of the key concept (S1-S9)
S1. The corpus for this study was constructed with a number of aims in mind.

S2. ..., we wanted to cover... in order to...
S3. We also felt it prudent to include...
S4. We eventually settled on the following: ...
S5. We then decided to ....
S6. In each case we chose...
S1. The **choice** is a delicate one: on the positive side it **allows us**...; on the downside, **it does not permit**...

S2. **While we believe** that..., confirmation (or otherwise)...

S3. **We had one further requirement** for...

S4. These **we identified** as...
Para 3--Skeletalized

S1. This procedure allowed us...
S2. As it happened, we finished up with...
(S3. In two..., no (tokens) ...were found...)
S4. We therefore decided...
S5. In one..., we conducted a second interview...
S6. This was a chance not to be missed.
And the source?

John M. Swales, Ummul K. Ahmad, Yu-Ying Chang, Daniel Chavez, Dacia F. Dressen & Ruth Seymour

Consider This: The Role of Imperatives in Scholarly Writing

Summary of disciplinary variation in procedures (research to date)

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<td>phonetics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>linguistics</td>
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Variation in the Definite Article in research articles

*The* is always the commonest word, but...

In Hyland (240 articles from 8 fields)  *the* = 6.9% of the words

In Pharmacology (33 articles)  *the* = 4.7% of the words

In **Noun + of + Noun** contexts, useful probabilistic guide is to use a definite article before the first noun (Swales & Feak, 2004)

*The administration of this university* is top-heavy.

*The addition of glucose* increases energy.

*The regulation of airline traffic* is a federal responsibility
In the life sciences, phrases more likely to lack the definite article, especially in Methods, include:

- activation of
- addition of
- administration of
- analysis of
- application of
- differentiation of
- formulation of
- inhibition of
- regulation of, etc
Administration of this drug is straightforward. 
Addition of digestive enzymes is usually recommended.

Regulation of the beta-blocking regime followed standard procedures.

- The definite article tends to be dropped in general procedural routines;
- The definite article tends to be kept for specific conditions.
We v. the Passive in Methods Sections


**Generalization I:** Writers of astrophysics journal papers tend to use the first person plural active *we* form to indicate points in the logical development of the argument where they have made a unique procedural choice; the passive seems to be used when the authors are simply following established or standard procedure, as in using accepted equations or describing what logically follows from their earlier procedural choice. (original emphases)
A stunning form-function hypothesis:

ACTIVE → NEW STUFF
PASSIVE → OLD STUFF

However, it has a) been surprisingly little investigated and b) has proved hard to validate and/or refine.
1) Many methods sections are entirely in the passive as far as researcher actions are concerned (e.g. Lassen, 2006)

2) Many methods (at least today) consistently use *we+active* for researcher procedural actions.

In effect, we need Methods that have a large majority of passives (standard procedures) and a small proportion of marked *we-actives* (innovations).
Giannoni’s 2008 study of methods in biological and medical RAs

Passives 27.6 per 10,000 words  
We-Actives 2.8 per 10,000 words  
so far, so good then

The verbs we might expect to signal innovation might be:

we developed  we created  we instituted  
we extended  we introduced  we modified  
we refined  we adapted  we adjusted
However, here are Giannoni’s active verbs (N =>1):

- used 16
- computed 5
- obtained 4
- observed 3
- tried 3
- adjusted 2

- calculated 2
- compared 2
- described 2
- estimated 2
- explored 2
- removed 2
- stratified 2
And when you do find alternants? (Hyland, 2002) on directives in *Applied Linguistics*

**Procedures and Corpus**

(S1-S2—descriptive)

S3. The disciplines *were chosen* to obtain...

S4. The journals *were nominated* by...and articles *were selected*...

S5. From ..., *I randomly selected* ....

(S6-descriptive)

S7. Eight *were randomly selected*...
S8. By selecting texts..., I was able to interview...
S9. I interviewed...
(S10-S12-descriptive)
S13. The students’ views were collected...
S14. In both cases, I was keen to discover...
S15. All ... were taped and written up..and were subsequently checked..
S16-19-five procedurals in the past passive (were searched, was based, were made, were consulted, were carefully examined)
A final look at Swales et al. (1998)

S1. This procedure allowed us...
S2. As it happened, we finished up with...
S3. In two of the remaining fields, no imperatives were found at all, and in three others...
S4. We therefore decided...
S5. In one..., we conducted a second interview...
S6. This was a chance not to be missed.

? In author/researcher-saturated texts, the passive alternant may be selected for negative statements
Of-fronts as framing devices (?)

A paper on student use of ‘scare quotes’

Concordance lines were included if they contained quoted material without named sources within the sentence (or in the 2 immediately preceding sentences). Of the 104 instances in the economics sub-corpus, 49 were excluded if they were technical terms, foreign expressions (e.g. “force majeure”), proverbs, or obvious colloquialisms.

49 of the 104 instances in the economics sub-corpus were excluded if.....
Some examples from Hyland (n = 27)

a) Of 83 cells so treated, 72 (86%) had a marked decrease in the lamellae...

b) Of the remaining sample of 35 participants, 15 (43%) were enrolled in the English programmes...

c) Of the 70 executions, 18 occurred in England.

d) Of particular interest to our analysis is McCracken’s meaning transfer model, which posits...
Seven of the 207 data sets were excluded due to...

Of the 207 date sets, 7 were excluded due to...
Of the 18 executed soldiers, 28 percent were white, 56 percent were African Americans, and 17 percent were Mexican Americans. As with the aggregate ETO data, soldiers of colour were over-represented. Another striking facet of the data is how many executions stemmed from some aspect of sexual encounters the military considered potentially disruptive to discipline and/or morale, including the murder of a pimp. Table 2 reports that 12 of the 18 crimes were rape or murder, or a combination relating to a sexual encounter.
A final topic: The interesting case of “interestingly”

According to most dictionaries, *interestingly* is a manner adverb, as in:

“She talked *interestingly* about her time in Kabul”.

But in academic and research English, *interestingly* is nearly always a sentence-initial disjunct.

“*Interestingly*], Swales failed to appreciate this distinction.”

52 tokens in MICUSP; 1627 in the academic section of COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English)
A MICUSP example

This increasing population of international students, especially from Asia, in the United States faces special challenges in terms of adaptation to a new living and learning environment at host universities and colleges (Perrucci & Hu, 1995). In addition to academic pressures, many international students tend to experience a variety of adjustment concerns, including language difficulties, insufficient financial resources, social integration, challenges in daily life tasks, homesickness, and role conflicts (MallincKrodt & Leong, 1992). Interestingly, several studies suggest that students from Asia have more difficulty adjusting to life in the United States than international students from non-Asian countries (Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998). [MICUSP, edu.G1.05.1]
So what would you say the following disjuncts express?

a) **Unfortunately**, Sinclair disliked the term ‘metadiscourse’.

b) **Fortunately**, Sinclair disliked the term ‘metadiscourse’.

c) **Surprisingly**, Sinclair disliked the term ‘metadiscourse’.

d) **Not surprisingly**, Sinclair disliked the term ‘metadiscourse’.

e) **Interestingly**, Sinclair disliked the term ‘metadiscourse’.
P R R White (2003)

Two kinds of heteroglossic text:

a) dialogically contractive (restricting other positions and alternative voices)

b) dialogically expansive (entertaining other positions and alternative voices)
Final thoughts

Most recent studies of academic discourse have focussed on evaluation, criticism and author identity.

Well and good, but important basic form-function aspects have been neglected.

I join a small minority also interested in the ‘nuts and bolts” that hold discoursal edifices together.

This minority includes David Banks, Shirley Carter-Thomas, Trine Dahl, Kjertsi Fløttum, & Elizabeth Rowley-Jolivet.