

Abs-162

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Investigating Interdisciplinary Discourse: Corpus-Driven Indicators of Emerging Epistemologies

Academic research is becoming more interdisciplinary in scope as collaboration between researchers in different disciplines is increasingly relied on as a route to new knowledge. Such collaborators often need to become familiar with the language used in each other's home disciplines (Committee on Science, 2004) as there is recent evidence of the problems caused by poor communication between unprepared researchers (Adam, 2010). However, while funding agencies recommend linguistic familiarization classes for such researchers (Committee on Science, 2004), there is currently little guidance on the linguistic features to be included in the syllabi for such programs. Furthermore, although much has been discovered about the language of discrete disciplines (e.g. Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2000; 2009) in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the few descriptions of interdisciplinary discourse in the literature (e.g. Samraj, 1995; Teich & Holtz, 2009) do not primarily have a pedagogical focus.

This paper attempts to address this gap by comparing the language frequently used in an interdisciplinary field with the language frequently used in two "contributory" fields in which the interdisciplinary collaborators normally work. In this study, the interdisciplinary field is that of Interprofessional Care, which contains work by researchers from the contributory fields of Medicine and Social Work. We investigate epistemological differences and similarities between the interdisciplinary and contributory fields through an isotextual comparison (Oakey 2009) of three subcorpora containing 100 research articles from journals in each field.

In order to investigate the epistemological contributions of Medicine and Social Work to Interprofessional Care, we use two corpus-driven phraseological features: frequently occurring lexical bundles (Biber et al, 1999; Cortes 2004, Hyland 2008), and collocations of closed class keywords (Gledhill, 2000; Groom 2007). A comparison using lexical bundles reveals differences in the use of fixed lexico-grammatical patterns in the different fields. Collocations of closed class keywords offer a picture of more flexible lexico-grammatical forms. Much more than single vocabulary items, both forms offer insights into the research goals of these fields and the evaluative stances taken by researchers towards their claims.

We use the results of the investigation to address the question of whether each of these fields has its own discrete epistemological profile, or whether one contributory field 'crowds out' the other in the interdisciplinary discourse. The paper concludes by discussing the application of the findings in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs for collaborating scholars.

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