METADISCOURSE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SPEAKER IDENTITIES IN L2 ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONAL TALK

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is concerned with non-native (L2) speakers’ linguistic self-expression in academic settings where English is used as a lingua franca. Linguistic self-expression is the projection of the speakers’ subjective perspective in discourse through the positioning of self and others towards the content of the talk and the interlocutors. It is here taken to be equivalent to the discursive construction of a speaker’s identity in communicative interaction (cf. Benveniste, 1966/1971; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Research into the nature of L2 English in lingua franca (ELF) settings has typically examined accuracy and non-native-like usage in the areas of pronunciation, morpho- and utterance syntax as well as interactional characteristics of L2-L2 talk with respect to form-function pairing, rhetorical style, meaning negotiation, turn taking, repair, topic management, lexical creativity and accommodation strategies (e.g. Andersen, 2001; Firth, 1996; House, 1999, 2002; Meierkord, 1996, 2004; cf. also the overview in Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). Most of the studies to date have investigated dialogic and highly interactive discourse with more or less equally distributed speaker rights. In these data, the authors generally find that lexicogrammatical choice seems to be related to speakers’ attempts to increase communicative effectiveness with regard to comprehensibility and the pursuit of communicative goals in the face of limited proficiency in their L2 English and reduced linguistic and cultural common ground between the interactants.
The present study is concerned with monologic academic presentational talk by students and scholars in L2 ELF settings, i.e. situations outside a native-English-speaking context where the participants do not share a first language (L1). The focus is on metadiscourse\(^1\) (Crismore, 1989; Hyland, 2005a) as the repertoire of linguistic means that express non-propositional, interpersonal meanings in discourse and thereby serve to bring the speaker to the forefront of the discourse as an identifiable, individual person. This study is thus concerned with the linguistic construction of a speaker identity (or speaker persona) in discourse. The projection of viable speaker identities and an adequate positioning of the speaker’s self in his or her discourse is a central task to be mastered in order to be admitted to professional discourse communities or other communities of practice. Linguistically this is achieved through controlling the frequency and manner of self- and audience reference and the communicative context in which this occurs, thereby producing discourse which is coherent with the register and the genre (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) as part of the community-specific requirements of speaking.

In interactions in ELF settings the construction of an adequate speaker identity in discourse is a potential trouble spot because L2 speakers bring ‘different’ Englishes to the situation. The speakers’ language repertoires may differ in terms of the lexicogrammatical forms they have at their disposal and in terms of form-function mappings. That is, L2 speakers use roughly the same linguistic system, but the linguistic forms may be invested with different semantic and pragmatic meaning potential for each individual speaker. As a consequence, L2 speakers may choose the same linguistic structures in a specific situation, but they may do it for different communicative reasons. This difference is caused by speakers’ different L1s, their differently diversified learner varieties and their socialization in different sociolinguistic and cultural contexts. An additional factor may be the awareness of being in an ELF situation. At present, it is not at all clear which communicative conventions, including ways of positioning oneself and others in one’s talk, are operative in ELF settings. On each occasion, it is possible that speakers transfer (parts of) the conventions associated with their L1 culture into the ELF interaction; it is possible that they orient themselves towards the communicative conventions of the inner circle variety of English they have acquired in formal L2 training; it is also possible that they orient themselves to what they perceive to be the conventional norm in the culture in which the interaction takes place or to the expectations they assume the other interactants have of which conventions apply. In sum, the difference in linguistic forms, the difference in form-function mappings, and individual assumptions about what is the expected way to carry out a specific type of interaction in an ELF setting results in a much reduced common ground between the interactants, even though they are, on the surface of things, using the same language and operate under the assumption of mutual intelligibility.

\(^{1}\) Also referred to as ‘discourse reflexivity’ or ‘metalanguage’ (cf. e.g. Mauranen, 1993; Sinclair, 2005).