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SUBJECTIVITY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC COMPARISON OF THE AUTHOR’S PRESENCE IN FRENCH, ITALIAN AND GERMAN RESEARCH ARTICLES IN LINGUISTICS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse, in its written as well as in its oral realization, is characterized by textual norms and conventions that are closely related to the languages and cultures they stem from:

It is common knowledge that the degree of cultural dissimilarity has serious impact on intercultural communication and academic communication in particular. (Vassileva, 2000, p. 25)

These textual norms influence, e.g., the structure of a text, strategies of argumentation, the choice of linguistic means to express different communicative needs, and the degree of subjectivity, i.e. the linguistic presence of the author in his or her text and his or her position toward its contents. The analysis takes into account the hypothesis that, in times of the growing internationalization of science and research and English dominating the academic exchange worldwide as a lingua franca, culture-specific textual norms and traditions might disappear. This would mean that a research article written in German is structured and elaborated linguistically exactly in the same way as an English text or that there exist no differences between German and French or Italian academic texts.
Like every other kind of communication, academic discourse can be described as the social and linguistic interaction between the author and the reader of a text. The aim of the author of an academic text does not consist in presenting research results as an absolute and objective truth, but the text refers to the author who is responsible for the information presented. The linguistic manifestation of this authorial presence – i.e. the expression of subjectivity concerning, e.g., attitudes toward the opinion of other authors, judgments about the methods, and research results of other members of the scientific community – may vary considerably across languages.

In the last decade, academic discourse, and especially the linguistic manifestation of the author in the text, has been the subject of many studies. Nevertheless, in most studies, English has been analyzed as the lingua franca of academic discourse (cf. Hyland, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 1999; with a focus on the authorial presence in his later studies in 2001 and 2002). Also in language-contrastive studies, English usually appears as one of the languages under investigation (cf. Mauranen, 1992, 1993). Few analyses exist that compare more than two languages, and Romance languages, especially Italian, have not yet been analyzed in depth at all (see, however, the comparison of Spanish and English by Moreno, 1997), although there is considerable scientific production, e.g., in French in certain disciplines (cf. the KIAP project, which compares and contrasts research articles in French, English, and Norwegian; Breivega, Dahl, & Fløttum, 2002). The aim of the present study is to close this gap and to establish categories of linguistic structures that help to express subjectivity in French, Italian, and German research articles in Linguistics. On the one hand, we will identify intercultural differences, and on the other hand, we will point out similarities.

Based on an empirical analysis of 20 contemporary research articles in different fields of linguistics\(^1\) in each of the three languages, the study identifies two central communicative needs (or rhetorical moves) of the text type containing the expression of subjectivity and their typical linguistic realizations. The notion of subjectivity may concern, among other things, the author’s linguistic evaluation of the relevance of the scientific inquiry, the quality of the methodological approaches on which other researchers base their studies, the conclusions that other researchers draw from their data, and the judgment of the quality of the author’s own results.

\(^1\) This allows us to cover a wide range of linguistic phenomena of this academic discipline, such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, lexicology, historical linguistics, and dialectology. The academic journals that have been analyzed are the following: *Linguistik Online*, *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik*, *Zeitschrift für Angewandte Linguistik* for the German corpus, *Rivista di Linguistica*, *Rivista Italiana di Linguistica e di Dialettologia*, *Rivista di Psicolinguistica Applicata* for the Italian corpus, and *Revue de Linguistique Romane*, *Revue Française de Linguistique Appliquée* for the French corpus. Some of the journals contain articles in English that have been excluded from the analysis. The articles of our corpus have been published between 2005 and 2007.