ELF, ACA:DEMIC WRITING, AND THE SEMANTICIZATION OF THOUGHT

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Abstract

This paper takes the view that varieties of writing represent agreed ways of mediating content that are recognized by discourse communities such as the academy who constitute their expectable readerships. These mediations make use of language-specific default affordances that are not only syntactic but also pragmatic and represent thinking for speaking categories (Slobin 1996) which, I argue, have greater explanatory power than the more abstract concept of virtual English (Seidlhofer 2011). In this context, I make a few preliminary comments on what appear to be the pragmatic affordances identifiable in parallel English texts generated by two native Chinese and a native English student writer faced with the same academic task, and make some consequent observations about teaching academic writing.

Keywords

indexicality, pragmatic strengthening, thinking for speaking, virtual English

1 Equal disadvantage

In River of Smoke, the recently published second novel in a yet to be completed trilogy which explores British, Chinese and Indian experiences of the production of and trade in opium in mid-nineteenth century Asia, Amitav Ghosh imagines a meeting on St Helena between Napoleon and a Parsi opium trader, Bahram Modi. Modi answers the former Emperor’s question about the use of language amongst the various nationalities involved in the opium trade in the following way:

Even though many Chinese spoke English with ease and fluency, they would not negotiate in it, believing that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin they reposed far greater trust, for the grammar was the same as that of Cantonese, while the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindustani – and such being the case, everyone who spoke the jargon was at an equal disadvantage, which was considered a great benefit to all (2011: 183).

Perhaps surprisingly, references to pidgins are rare in the ELF literature. This presumably reflects the fact that, unlike pidgin lingua francas, the basis of ELF is a fully formed language with a pre-existing sociolinguistic character, which, so the argument runs, is adapted by lingua franca users for their own ends. As part