

Writing a PhD in the contemporary humanities

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Abstract

This article is based on a case study of a Korean student writing her PhD in English in the contemporary humanities, drawing particularly on postcolonial and psychoanalytic theory. It covers issues of interdisciplinarity in the contemporary humanities, how language use and rhetorical strategies are affected by the questioning of traditional epistemic norms in contemporary theorising, and comments on the role of language proficiency as well as institutional perceptions of the role of language. The tension between traditional macro-structures and possibilities for innovation in the genre 'PhD' is discussed in the context of semi-structured interviews with two supervisors, but the suggestion is that shifts in rhetorical strategy are occurring predominantly at the micro-level.

Background to the case study

There were a number of reasons why I chose to undertake this case study. On the one hand, I was interested in exploring the language issues that arise from the process of putting into rhetorical practice the effects of contemporary critical theorizing, which routinely questions the traditional norms of knowledge-making. The student chosen, whom I shall refer to as SY throughout, was drawing on a wide range of theorists whose work was influential in a number of disciplinary areas, and so was of interest from that point of view. On the other hand, I wanted to explore perceptions of the role of language, and attitudes towards developing language proficiency in English, as an integral part of writing a PhD. Both she, and semi-structured interviews which I conducted with PhD supervisors in areas of contemporary theorising, contributed to my arguments in this respect.

Additionally, SY's profile made her an interesting case study in her own right. She had a political understanding of the neo-colonial role of English and had therefore not put a great deal of effort into learning it in Korea. She contrasted herself with her contemporaries who were much exercised by their TOEFL score and regularly attended language classes and language schools outside the university, in their attempts to improve it. Her political activism during the student movements in Korea in the early nineties, however, led to

her being ‘blacklisted’ for entrance to an MA in Seoul, and so, ironically, she ended up doing one in English. She came to Britain to do an MA in Art History and after successfully completing it, she enrolled for a PhD.

I tape-recorded my consultation sessions with her, photocopied her drafts, and additionally recorded some interviews with her. My interpretations of what is going on in her texts, and what has shaped her attitudes, are based on these interactions.

Interdisciplinarity in the contemporary humanities

Traditionally, the designation ‘humanities’ includes such disciplines as philosophy, literature, history, and art history. However, these distinctions themselves are becoming increasingly blurred in the context of contemporary theorising. Sometimes, the traditional disciplinary designations are themselves contested. This is the case with ‘art history’, the area in which SY was working. The use of ‘history’ is deemed to be problematic because of its associations with the ‘western’ practices of historiography, which are enmeshed with the ‘totalising discourses’ of modernity. The preferred designation for the field is ‘visual culture’. In pedagogical terms, art theorists take a thematic rather than a chronological approach to visual culture across time, for example comparing treatments of the female body by different artists, and analysing how it was seen by onlookers of the time.

This designation ‘visual culture’ is in itself notable, because anthropologists and sociologists also do research in the area. While the pedagogical approaches and research methodologies of the academics involved are likely to be different, the focus on visual culture is viable for all. Anthropologists may be discussing the significance of the contemporary cultural practice of tattooing, for example, and how that may or may not differ from the practices of body art in other cultures, while sociologists (and linguists) may be discussing the prominence of the visual in contemporary society. Visual culture may therefore be seen as a centripetal field of study in the contemporary research world for both the human and social sciences, but with centrifugal strands emanating from it. This situation exemplifies a classic Bakhtinian tension.

The term ‘the human sciences’ used in the continental European tradition, merges the two traditions of the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, it may be said that influences from thinkers in the continental European tradition

have contributed to the increasing interdisciplinarity in contemporary theorising. Such ‘big’ names as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, in the French tradition, as well as Benjamin and Habermas, to name but two in the German tradition associated with the Frankfurt school of critical theory, are not restricted to any one discipline. Indeed, in an institution such as my own, specialising in the humanities, the visual and performing arts, and social sciences, it is noticeable, that students from different departments often make reference to the same scholars. Writing a PhD in the contemporary humanities therefore may be less conceptually bound to a notion of the ‘humanities’ than to a particular set of analytical tools, associated with contemporary theorising. These include: psychoanalytical theories, post-colonial theory, post-structuralist theory, critical theory, performance theory, and feminist theory. What is more, work in any particular ‘field of study’, a designation more flexible than ‘discipline’ and therefore preferable in this context, may draw on more than one of those theorising practices.

Rhetorical practices in the contemporary humanities.

Very little work has been done in applied linguistics on the rhetorical structuring or rhetorical features of texts in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, where complex theorising such as that in post-colonial and psychoanalytic studies is drawn on. Such texts have, however, achieved a certain notoriety. Paltridge (2001: 126) in his discussion of the disjunction between published guides for PhD students and actual texts, refers to a paper by Hodge (1998) which talks of the ‘postmodern turn’ in the ‘new humanities’ and social sciences. The title of Hodge’s paper ‘monstrous knowledge’ seems to epitomise the layperson’s perception of contemporary theorising. The tendency is either to feel intimidated by it or to demonise it. There is no doubt that such discourses do create difficulties with using language, particularly in writing. In their book on writing at university, Creme and Lea (1997: 32) give the following quote from an English literature tutor:

One of the problems with ‘poststructuralist’ theories in the humanities is that writing such theory takes you away from where the students are. Students exposed to these discourses begin to parrot these discourses. We do need to find ways of introducing students to these discourses without their parroting it in their own writing.

While this quote refers to undergraduate writing, negative comments about published poststructuralist discourses, such as that they are deliberately

obfuscatory are legion. Filmer et al. (1998: 25) include this perception in their discussion of the linguistic difficulty of contemporary social theory as follows:

it is appropriate to note that social theory is often linguistically difficult material. Indeed, difficulty appears to have increased as the turn to language has advanced. Concepts can sometimes appear infuriatingly inconsistent in their definition, or lack any grounding in recognizable social reality. The reasons for this are complex, sometimes lying in the writers' personal confusion or their need to look impressive, at other times in the sheer novelty of the ideas themselves.

The 'turn to language' they refer to involves a change in the conceptualisation of language. As they state, (Filmer et al., 1998: 24):

If there is one key development that stands out above all others in more recent trends in social theory, it is the change that has occurred in the view of language. Broadly speaking, there has been a shift from seeing language as referential (that is, that it refers to a reality existing beyond language) to seeing it as representational and constructive of reality. That is to say, the perception has increased that language is the means by which humans socially construct their worlds.

The notorious complexity of contemporary theorising, I submit, however, is not just a question of 'difficult' or innovative theory, or of pretentiousness, but a result also of its rejection of European Enlightenment values, and the rhetorical practices it brought in its wake, such as clarity of exposition, and the importance of logic and definition.

Critiquing the legacy of the European Enlightenment

The epistemic spaces of contemporary theorising are NOT clearly defined, but transitional or porous. Often it is the movement between the experience of crossing boundaries rather than the experience of spatial or temporal fixity that is the focus not only in terms of specific topics analysed, but also of the conceptual endeavour itself. Lexical markers such as 'post' in post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism, along with 'inter' as in interdisciplinary, signal this concern not to fix or clearly define, as would be the concern of traditional epistemology.

What unites contemporary theorising practices, in general terms, is the fact that they are critiquing the legacy of the European Enlightenment. They take their cue, in different ways, from aspects of what the Enlightenment

project stood for. This may be a case of general disillusionment with its optimism and teleological belief in the perfection of the life of humanity, as a result of the power of reason to master nature. It may also be a case of seeing the universalist assumptions of Enlightenment thinking as an act of ‘violence’, creating a dualistic ‘west and the rest’ (Hall, 1992), an expression which also encodes the hierarchical dominance of the west and its ‘others’. The ubiquity of lexical markers such as the collocation ‘totalising discourses’, the concept ‘otherness’, and ‘others’, as well as the temporal notion of ‘post’, is symptomatic of the pervasiveness of the overall critique. However, there is also a single word, which embodies the critique of Enlightenment thinking, and that is ‘occidentalism’ (e.g. Venn, 2000). This refers to the formation of modernity in terms of how the dominant western philosophers, scientists, and political thinkers construed the world. It also acknowledges that their dominance would not have been possible without the power politics of colonialism and slavery. Chambers (2001: 1) points to the shift away from the ‘occidental humanism’ of modernity, and the implications for changing ‘modalities of thought’ which that shift entails:

If the epoch of modernity can be characterised as the epoch of occidental humanism, of a world centred on the continual confirmation of the observing subject, then it might surely also be legitimate to consider what occurs to the authority of critical languages, historiography and the Western disposition of knowledge and power in the light of the questioning and dispersal of that particular historical arrangement. ... More immediately, and more incisively, postcolonial studies have extended a firm invitation to occidental culture to review not only its manners, but also its modalities, of thought.

Changing the epistemic subject

One change in the ‘modalities of thought’ emanating from post-humanist and post-colonial theorising revolves around the concept of the ‘subject’. Effectively, the dominance of assumptions derived from the Cartesian rational ‘cogito’ is the focus of critique. An early critique of this ‘objectivist’ subject comes from Horkheimer (1937) one of the Frankfurt school theorists. He states (quoted in Hanssen, 2000: 6):

The thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object coincide, or consequently the starting-point for attaining absolute knowledge. Such an illusion about the thinking subject, under which idealism lived since Descartes, is ideology in the strict sense, for in it the limited freedom of the bourgeois individual puts on the illusory form of perfect freedom and autonomy.

From a different perspective, the feminist epistemologist Code (1995: xiv) berates the 'epistemic subject' for its 'monologic isolationism', 'whose monologues have been spoken from nowhere, in particular, to an audience of faceless and usually disembodied onlookers'. Her concern is for a more intersubjective focus, for the acknowledgement of other kinds of knowledge, other than the 'exact sciences' whose dominance in 'rhetorical space' she sees as problematic. She is not disputing the achievements of the exact sciences, merely asserting the need for similar recognition of 'the affective aspects of cognition', and 'its cooperative, interactive aspects' which 'monologic epistemologies' mask. The use of the word 'rhetorical' in this conception of rhetorical spaces relates to the persuasiveness of what have become dominant forms of knowledge. The desire is to open up new rhetorical spaces, dependent on a new kind of subjectivity, which would also accrue persuasiveness.

While the concern in Code's book is not with the different rhetorical strategies or rhetorical features that come with opening up new rhetorical spaces, but more with the opportunity to talk about things left out of account in scientific rationality, new rhetorical strategies are emerging. Ivancic (1998: 304) provides a useful dualistic structure of contrasting rhetorical moves which she relates to 'ideologies of knowledge making'. Those on the left concur broadly with the 'feminist', subjective and intersubjective, as well as co-operative 'rhetorical spaces' that Code and the other contributors in her edited collection aspire to, while those on the right are more closely associated with the traditional epistemology of the scientific, rational, objectivist, autonomous, 'knowing subject.'

One specific rhetorical feature associated with the left-hand moves is the use of the pronoun 'I' which, while its use can still be problematic, may stand metonymically for an 'embodied' rather than an ideal/rational subjectivity. Its use is therefore of epistemological relevance rather than simply a feature of more informal style in academic writing as Chang and Swales (1999) suggest. By comparison with Newton's rhetorical struggles (Bazerman, 1988) which may be seen as helping to embed the ideal/rational epistemic subject in conventional rhetorical practice, the use of 'I' may be seen as, at least in part, a specific rejection of the possibility of that subject.

a. dismissing established authorities	↔	revering established authorities
b. subjective	↔	objective
c. recognizing personal experience as relevant	↔	impersonal, dismissing personal experience
d. constructive	↔	positivist
e. organic, open ended, provisional, exploratory	↔	linear, conclusive, expository
f. committed	↔	neutral
g. co-operative	↔	competitive
h. accessible	↔	exclusive
<i>relatively oppositional</i>	↔	<i>relatively conventional</i>

Figure 1: Ivanic's (1998: 304) table showing ideologies of knowledge-making in higher education.

Changing rhetorical practices

Newton's decision to rhetoricise his experimental results as a geometric proof epitomises the rhetoricisation of rational argument, constructing a conceptualisation of the rational and autonomous 'cogito' on the one hand and the scientific demonstration of proof, or the convincing display of an argument, on the other. These rhetorical struggles of an earlier age are our contemporary taken-for-granted conventions. The pedagogical touchstone in academic writing of the 'topic sentence' for example, may be seen as a rhetorical effect of the generalising, position of an ideal observer who was dictating the boundaries of what was surveyed (cf. Turner, 2003) The development of an argument may be conceptualised as creating a pathway, from a particular vantage point, through a specific (disciplinary) landscape, providing the reader with a clear view of what's on either side of the path, and why that particular path was chosen or created. However, with new epistemic assumptions, changes to rhetorical practice are also underway.

One conceptualisation, which implies a different kind of rhetorical practice, as well as a shift in consciousness, is that of 'doubleness'. This comes from conceptualising the experience of the 'other', i.e. those who have

been marginalised or ‘silenced’ by Eurocentric dominance. Work by the social scientist Paul Gilroy (1993) for example, documents evidence of such ‘doubleness’ in a counter-modernity developing alongside the Eurocentric narrative. Europe’s ‘others’ are simultaneously conscious of being part of a European-generated modernity, and of their own rootedness in a vernacular culture, under threat of extinction by Eurocentrism. Attempts to express ‘doubleness’, of semantic necessity, are going to have to move away from a strict linearity of thought which has become conventional.

By contrast with the broadly social scientific concern with documenting the evidence of ‘doubleness’, a more literary concern with giving expression to the feelings and experience of being ‘other’ or ‘subaltern’, has arisen in fields more traditionally associated with the humanities. The writer Toni Morrison is a particularly good example of this concern, as she has both written literary fiction (1987) and contributed to theorising (1992). She also features in an edited collection by Paul Gilroy (1993) and therefore signals the interdisciplinary interest in her work, and the lack of a clear-cut divide between the humanities and social sciences in this area of work. Morrison is responsible for a key term for the process of giving voice to experiences and feelings which have been made invisible or silenced, namely ‘rememoration’. The process of ‘remembering again’ is similar to the therapeutic process of ‘working through’ and psychoanalytic theorising is central to research which takes on board the complex task of giving voice to what has been, historically, socially, and politically, as well as psychically, silenced. This task also challenges conventional expression.

Putting new conceptualisations into rhetorical practice

In her PhD, SY was working substantially with the above kinds of theorising. However, their influence is not only relevant in terms of the conceptual content she is researching and arguing, but also in terms of how that conceptual content affects her rhetorical strategies. I’d like to suggest that the notion of ‘enfolding’, as a contrasting rhetorical strategy to the ‘unfolding’ of expository prose, is illustrative of how language is used in postcolonial and psychoanalytic discourses. Conceptually, this may be related to the understanding that there is always already a reference point, there can be ‘no originary statements’, as Foucault (1984) expressed it in his inaugural lecture. As a result of this ‘modality of thought’, the ‘clarity’ of exposition, of stating, as it were, ‘this is the case’, becomes impossible. A concern with effects rather than causes, and the dismissal of monocausal assumptions, also make

for complex enfoldings, such as multiple embedded clauses and pre-modifications. Some background to the layering of ideas that SY was working with and excerpts from her texts will serve as examples.

In brief, SY is researching the role played by the work of two Korean artists working in the 1980s in Korea in opening up a space for working through suppressed feelings in the Korean psyche. She locates the background to this suppression in the post-colonial context of Korea, after the defeat of Japan, as well as in the neo-colonial context of South Korea under American economic domination and military presence. Despite the public face of South Korea as a fast-growing ‘Tiger’ economy, she suggests that ‘a culture of unease and grievance has been pervasive at the sub-national realm of society, has been suppressed by domestic politics and unrepresented on an international level’. This ‘unease’ erupted in popular insurrectionary movements in the 1980s and 1990s, the social context background to her study.

The multi-layered issues involved here make also for complex writing. The following excerpt from her text gives a flavour:

In other words, I discuss the “voice-symptomatic” (un)consciousness with which the sexual slave women spoke in South Korea during the 1990s which appears in the site of contestation within/beyond the “ideological” consciousness and the state of knowledge determined by the ideologically organized normative discursive performative relations between Japan and Korea and its postwar political and economical relations.

The sentence flows until the second use of the relative pronoun ‘which’ whose antecedent is unclear. The fact that it is the second use also sets off metaphorical alarm bells in English academic prose, which prefers simplicity rather than multiple embeddings, on the whole. The clause beyond the second ‘which’ is also particularly complex, both semantically and structurally. Every thing mentioned is modified in some way. The ‘site’ of contestation is placed ‘within/beyond’ an ideological consciousness and state of knowledge, which in turn is ‘determined by’ relations between Japan and Korea, which in turn are qualified by one adjectival phrase and three adjectives, all running before the noun: ‘ideologically organised’, ‘normative,’ ‘discursive’, ‘performative’. While the piling up of these theoretically resonant terms serves the function of displaying her familiarity with the field, it is also a means of ‘enfolding’ the multiplicity of possible explanatory backgrounds into the text. However, doing this in one sentence or clause, works against the interests of a specific analytical focus. Such a focus, following one particular

train of thought at a time, is the preferred rhetorical strategy of traditional academic discourse in English.

One micro-level rhetorical shift, which has become quite widespread in contemporary theorising however, is the use of opposites separated by a slash, as in ‘within/beyond.’ Another example comes from Venn (2000: 12, note 1) in a discussion of the post-colonial theorist Spivak’s role ‘inside/outside’ the academic world:

[Apart from the work of Hall, one should mention] Spivak’s strategic use of Marxism and deconstruction to maintain a critical distance from the hegemonic discourses of modernity whilst locating her work ‘inside/outside’ the academic world.

This splicing strategy goes against conventional logic, but may be seen as a way of rhetoricising the understanding of ‘doubleness’ mentioned above. It may also be seen as an example of epistemic ‘undecidability’, a term prevalent in contemporary theorising. Another way of conveying this sense of conceptual ambivalence is to try and make one word display two meanings at the same time. This is what Derrida does with the use of the term ‘différance’, combining the French words for difference and deferral.

In the spirit of conceptual ambivalence, SY was keen not only to find possible plays on words for herself in her work, she sometimes resisted my attempts to redress what I perceived to be tautologies. In the following extract for example, I suggested that the last line didn’t need both ‘dissolution’ and ‘blockage’ and that ‘dissolution of the unnatural border’ would convey her meaning.

Concerning what makes the unknown meaning of the forgotten surreptitiously come back to us, what I’m suggesting here is the thinking qualitative space to this cultural specificity rather than quantitative one which dismisses the differential, self-reflexive questions that awaits the dissolutions out of the blockage of the unnatural border.

However, SY said she’d like to keep both in and ‘the reader could choose’ which they preferred. This resonated for me with Hinds’ (1987) distinction between writer-responsibility and reader-responsibility for texts, where the latter was a tendency in East Asian cultures. It may therefore be that she is importing a tacit understanding of textual practice in her first language. When I mentioned this to her, however, she was not aware of doing so. It may be that both the influences of textual practices in her L1, and the influences of

tolerance for ambiguity and resistance to ‘totalising’ claims in her theoretical discourses, played a role.

A larger problem with the above extract lies in its convolutedness. She begins as if to emphasise a point. The problem is that this point doesn’t arrive. Not only do the multiple embedded clauses get in the way, but the language she uses in ‘the thinking qualitative space to this cultural specificity rather than quantitative one’ doesn’t make sense. Her struggles over such expression relate partly to the nature of psychoanalytic theorising which is often concerned with the revealing of processes embedded in other processes. This can result in sequences of noun phrases linked by prepositions, as in the following phrase, also from her text: ‘an affective space of expansion of our cognitive capacity’. An alternative source of difficulty is the need to express psychic processes that are working in different directions simultaneously. For example, there is the process of ‘rememoration’, that is, remembering something that has been repressed, the process of dealing with what’s remembered, and the process of transforming the experience into a future ‘becoming’. ‘Becoming’ in psychoanalytic discourse is also a theoretical term. The following phrase is an example of this kind of process, also as expressed in her text: ‘the artist’s preservation of the unsaid and altering the culminated state of trauma’.

A further resistance on SY’s part arose from my frequent suggestions of shorter topic sentences. She would say things such as:

Oh, but there are so many possibilities - I can’t just say that

Or:

I don’t want to give the impression that I have absolute knowledge, or that there is just one possibility.

Such justifications for resisting the conventional rhetorical preference for short and (rhetorically speaking) powerful topic sentences, providing an overview of what’s to follow, or at least giving a good indication of what is to be elaborated upon, show her internalisation of the critiques of ‘occidental’ discourses discussed above, and her desire to resist their rhetorical preferences.

Sensitivity around language

I would not like to suggest that the language in SY’s excerpts above is only an effect of rhetorical strategies changing to meet the demands of new

conceptualisations. There is clearly a major problem with language proficiency here. However, this problem does not stem, as is often the case, from difficulties with her understanding of her disciplinary discourses. She is making her own, original analysis of a particular context, and is fully able to elaborate, orally, on any issue demanding clarification. This situation in itself exemplifies the fraught interrelationship between language proficiency and academic competence that often arises in the PhD context. It is this interrelationship that I deal with further in this section.

The issue of language appears to be a socially sensitive one in L2 PhD students' dealings with their supervisors. SY says she feels fortunate that her supervisors (she has 2) are not 'patronising', that they are genuinely interested in her project. Nonetheless, I find that she somewhat resents the supervisor who has suggested she sees me, and venerates the other one who 'never mentions my language'. Another student I have worked with changed his supervisor because, as he put it, talking of the supervisor, 'he only wanted to correct my grammar mistakes, and not discuss my ideas.' This particular student had already published academically in Japan and I believe felt that his status as an academic was not being recognised.

The demand for recognition of their intellectual skills, and the hierarchisation of them over their language skills, especially in the case of students from East Asia throws up a number of different problems. On the one hand, there may be a clash of cultures regarding the role of writing. Ballard (1996: 163) for example has drawn attention to the fact that:

[W]riting in many societies is regarded as the public record of appropriate behaviour, rather than as a vehicle for the analysis and extension of knowledge.

This may help to explain why some students do not always fully acknowledge the importance of the role of language and writing in intellectual activity. On the other hand, while the role of language in the 'analysis and extension of knowledge' is taken-for-granted, this role tends to be invisible (cf. Turner, 1999a, 1999b). So, when attention is drawn to language, when it becomes visible, it is seen as a problem, a matter for remediation. The remedial discourse, in turn, appears to undermine the intellectual abilities of students, and thereby is enacted a vicious circle. Students may avoid going to language classes, because they're seen as remedial, and beneath their dignity, but their language skills are intrinsically necessary to the quality of their writing. One possible outcome, as Ballard (1996) also discusses, is a situation whereby

students write something that is linguistically reasonable, but at a very simplified intellectual level. This is of course not possible at PhD level.

SY is aware of the linguistic simplicity/intellectual depth dichotomy. She has told me of her disappointment on witnessing Korean academics speaking in English that they tended 'to talk only of very simple ideas.' She is determined not to compromise her own intellectual investment in her work. However, she still seems to underestimate the amount of intellectual energy she needs to put into getting the language right. She tells me she does not feel 'creative' when she's editing, it's just drudgery. She belittles the importance of the editing role. I am sure she would ideally assign it to me, again underestimating how long it actually takes me to read her work and determine where it would be useful to make comments for future re-working. Nearly every sentence needs adjusting and the deixis is such that there are several interpretations open to me of what she means. There is also a confusion here, between editing and language proficiency. Her work needs development, particularly at clause level and at the micro-level of linguistic expression.

What is perhaps worse, however, than her own underestimation of how much she should concentrate on her language, is the attitude of her 'favoured' supervisor. He has suggested merely that her language needs 'a bit of smoothing'. This implies light editing, along with some proofreading, and skirts around any notion of the need for improved language proficiency in English. My interpretation of the situation is that he can see the originality of her analysis and her control over the relevant disciplinary theorising but he badly underestimates the amount of language work necessary. He exemplifies a 'treading on eggshells' attitude to the issue of language here, which I suggest is an effect of the deficit discourse language issues are unfortunately embedded in. Supervisors may feel inhibited about referring to a student's language proficiency because by definition s/he has passed the language requirement on entry hurdle. The institutional deficit discourse therefore sets up an ethos whereby language becomes a kind of taboo topic.

Institutional expectations of language

The University of London regulations for PhD candidates state that 'the thesis shall be written in English and the literary presentation shall be satisfactory'. The use of the word '*literary*' in this formulation would suggest attention to the language for its own sake, and that at this level, the language itself should be particularly polished. The fact that supervisors also apparently

find no paradox in referring students to a language class for PhD students, despite the fact that they have sometimes already written MA theses in English, would appear to support this. I have frequently been asked by supervisors what the provision is for PhD students, and been told how keen they are that their student(s) should attend language classes.

Students' perception of the situation seems to be different, however. In my experience, supervisors' enthusiasm for their students to have language classes is matched by students' perplexity. They fail to understand why they are still being asked to improve their language competence. SY is one such who expressed surprise at the fact that, having successfully completed her MA, she was still being urged to seek help with her English while working for a PhD.

I would like to suggest that the two contexts of MA work and PhD writing do have a differential bearing on the L2 writer's situation. In the PhD context, individuals are much more isolated, working for long periods of time on their own, doing lots of reading, and usually, not enough writing. This was confirmed by SY who felt she had lost the rhythm and fluency of writing in English that she had had on the MA, when she was submitting essays at regular intervals. Such regularity maintains the facility of writing as a skill, dependent on routine practice. However, the task of PhD writing is very different. It is not framed by the template nature of an essay. The material to be worked with is much broader in scope, and by definition (given the stress on the PhD as an 'original contribution to knowledge') uncharted territory. The amount of concomitant language work therefore is immense. However, the degree to which writing a PhD involves honing and refining one's written language is often underestimated and the language work itself, undervalued.

Another factor, which I feel is an important, although under-acknowledged one, contributing to the difficulty of L2 PhD students, or indeed any student, arises when they are working with more than one language. This brings the cross-cultural dimension into play, which especially when the research is not in a language-related area, can leave the student under-resourced. This is often the case as regards translation skills. The issue of translation may not loom large for such students in the overall scheme of things, but as soon as they want to quote from a source in their own, or a language other than that of the thesis, their translation skills are often put to the test. I have read so many quotations which have simply been translated word for word, usually undermining the relevance of the particular quotation chosen in the first place. This was a problem for SY, who is also working with

source texts in Korean and conducting interviews with artists and critics in Korea. There is therefore scope for PhD preparatory courses, where students know they will be transporting data from their own, or even another, language into their PhD in English to include awareness building from applied linguistic areas such as cross-cultural pragmatics, contrastive rhetoric, or translation studies.

The PhD as genre

Studies of PhD writing in applied linguistics have usually hailed from the area of ESP, and as is dominant within that tradition, the PhD is seen as a genre. Johns and Swales (2002) note the increased ‘discoursal attention’ (2002: 14) paid to this genre which 3 years earlier Dudley-Evans (1999) had claimed to be ‘neglected’. While this increase indicates a shift of focus away from the published article, the generic macro-structures revealed from genre analysis on scientific articles in particular, continue to orient much of the discussion and analysis, whether it be for the thesis as a whole or a specific chapter (e.g. Hewings, 1993; Ridley, 2000).

Allison et al. (1998) and Paltridge (2002) strongly maintain the need to focus on macro-structural analysis, not only of individual chapters, but of the PhD as a whole in order to enhance the pedagogical benefits for intending PhD students. Paltridge provides an overview of 4 main macro-structures, adding traditional complex, topic-based, and compilation of research articles to the traditional (simple): Introduction, Literature Review, Materials and methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion.

SY’s thesis had six chapters, which conform broadly to the topic based macro-structure. However, her titles related more to theoretical concerns, or debates in the field, rather than a set of topics which were subjected to the same methodological approach. They had somewhat poetic titles, such as ‘the vision of haunting’ as well as stark theoretical topics, such as ‘silence, subaltern speech, and the intellectual’. It is notable, however, that she had no concluding chapter. When I asked her about this, she said she didn’t want to give one, as that was against the spirit of open-endedness, which was germane to her theorising.

In semi-structured interviews with two internationally renowned professors, I asked their views on the possibilities of ‘new’ rhetorical practices in PhD writing, emanating from contemporary theorising. Both gave examples

of ‘innovative’ PhD structures, but pointedly emphasised their risks. One gave examples of two theses where he had been the external examiner. In one thesis, there were only two theoretical chapters and the rest was a shot-by-shot analysis of a very unorthodox film. In the other, he had been invited to listen to a certain kind of music while reading particular parts of the thesis. He wanted however to stress the orthodoxy of the genre, talking of it as ‘a ritual performance.’ He said:

most of the theses that I see are five act, five-act tragedies really (laughs) you’ve got the five chapters and the introduction and the conclusion really - it seems to be the standard form.

Interestingly, the second professor also stressed, as he put it:

the ‘bogstandard’ PhD thesis, of which the psychology thesis is the best example. There’s an introduction, there’s a hypothesis, there’s a review of the literature, there’s an experiment, there’s the findings, there’s the discussion, there’s a conclusion. You may want to say that’s a very confining structure. I would say that a PhD thesis is a kind of apprenticeship.

To illustrate his point further, he gave the example of Picasso’s early line drawings, which showed his complete mastery of the technique, before he then went on to subvert it. It might be extrapolated from this, that students who want to flout the conventions, should do it after they’ve got the PhD, and not with it.

Examples of unsuccessful submissions were a CD ROM with various hyperlink pathways through it and a thesis written partly in the form of a play, partly as a professional narrative, and partly quasi - therapeutic. The CD itself was not disallowed, but it had to be accompanied by an overall conspectus of the thesis. As the supervisor put it: ‘there had to be a thesis, an argument which had to try and convince the readers.’ Of the second, he said it had not succeeded in making a convincing argument. Both professors made the point that if a student was choosing the path of innovation, then s/he had to do it brilliantly.

One supervisor made a particularly categorical remark about the responsibilities of a doctorate. He stated:

A doctorate is a public activity. There’s no such thing as a private doctorate, and if you cannot communicate your ideas to others and convince others in a

public space, it's no good saying 'I'm an unrecognised genius'. It's your responsibility to make yourself intelligible.

Another issue that both supervisors brought up is the risks that attend the supervisor as well as the student, if a thesis is submitted which doesn't make the grade. The external examiner has also got to be convinced. Obviously, finding the right external examiner for a thesis is important, but this process is inherently risky. What these interviews suggest is that the PhD is an inherently conservative genre, with risk factors that are likely to perpetuate its conservatism.

A further interpretation of the above supervisors' remarks, together with the literature already available on the macro-structure of the PhD is that the PhD has a life of its own as an institutional rhetorical practice. Both the suggestions, that it is a 'public' act, and a 'ritual performance', particularly reinforce this. I'd like to suggest therefore that writing a PhD is writing a particular socio-cognitive genre (cf. Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995) which is institutional as much as it is enacting the epistemological values of its disciplinary discourses.

Micro-level rhetorical changes and language

While there are limits to attempting to enact rhetorically in the PhD some of the critical/epistemic values that are espoused in the theoretical discourses drawn on here, it is nonetheless the case that, at the micro-level of textualisation, deviations from the norm are occurring. I have attempted to show some of these new or emerging micro-rhetorical features in my discussions of SY's texts and their relatedness to theoretical constructs, in post-colonial and psychoanalytic theorising, in particular. In writing a PhD in the contemporary humanities, therefore, I'd like to suggest that it is predominantly at the micro-level rather than the macro-level that changes are occurring. I'd further like to suggest that, with the complexity of theorising, the importance of exquisite language proficiency looms larger.

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