Creative-Academic Writing

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Abstract
To some, the genres of academic and creative writing might be regarded as opposites, the 'yin' and the 'yang' of the writing world, as it were. Such a belief might be based on the fact that creative writing in any manifestation (e.g., poetry, fiction) generally has more rhetorical freedom with which to fulfil its primary purpose of telling a story and entertaining the reader, which often involves the use of non-standard English, slang and even taboo words. Such conventions would largely fly in the face of the conventions of academic writing, however, which is largely produced to inform one's reader, demonstrate appropriate knowledge in a field of study and pass a course, and not to entertain *per se*. If we accept such broad differences between the two genres of writing, then it might seem that creative writing is a questionable choice as a means to improve students' academic writing style. However, within the classroom, analysis of literary texts is suggested to be a way in which students can develop their academic writing style and in doing so, come to realise that academic writing can still be *creative*. Therefore, this paper advocates a stylistics-based approach to the teaching of academic writing, using analysis of literary texts as a means with which to help students understand the rhetorical devices that can be used within their essay writing. While previous studies of stylistics, such as Ryder (1999) and Toolan (2000) focus on the linguistic devices used within texts (e.g. semantic roles and lexical choices), notably Ryder's focus on the climax of a Barbara Cartland novel, few studies go one step further, which this paper seeks to do: to discuss how the knowledge gleaned from a linguistic analysis of literature can be applied to students' own academic essay writing.

Introduction
Though academic writing is generally regarded as being largely impersonal in nature, this does not mean that it need be devoid of any rhetorical flourishes, the kind which creative writing generally displays, such as figures of speech. In fact, a well placed metaphor, analogy or turn of phrase can help to illustrate one's point more succinctly and simply add life to otherwise impersonal academic prose. Carter (1997) and Carter and McCarthy (1995) firmly believe that to use 'traditional' academic language (i.e. formal, objective and transactional) throughout one's essay can mean that style and creativity are ignored, yet these aspects are suggested to be equally important for even the most formal of essays. Wyrick (2002: 167) gives students a directive of sorts by

stating that they should 'enliven (their) writing with figurative language'. She states that 'figurative language not only can help you to present your ideas in clear, concrete, economical ways but also can make your prose more memorable' (ibid). In fact, evidence of such style can be witnessed within academic journals, which are particularly renowned for producing largely impersonal sounding prose. The text samples below all derive from the academic journal *English Today*:

> (1a) London today is an enormous *Tower of Babel*
> (2a) *The axe split two ways:* half of us against the death penalty, half for it
> (3a) To really make this notion of *'customer-friendly multilingualism'* work...

Examples (1) and (3) derive from Reinier Salverda's (2002: 17, 21) publication entitled 'Multilingualism in Metropolitan London', with example (1) involving metaphorical usage (*Tower of Babel*) and example (3) using a coined phrase (*customer-friendly multilingualism*). Example (2) is from 'Death Sentences' by Bob Blaisdell (2005: 44) and involves another metaphor (*axe*). If we consider, however, the above examples written in what some might argue to be a more 'academic' manner, what Halliday (1994) refers to as a 'congruent' style, then potential results may include the following:

> (1b) London today has enormous *linguistic diversity*
>
> (2b) There was *great disagreement* in the class...
>
> (3b) To really make *multilingual services work for customers*...

It is difficult, however, to see what, if anything, is inherently inappropriate with the original three examples. The examples fit within the overall context of an academic text (even within the somewhat more confined style of academic journal writing), yet also help to create a touch of rhetorical polish in the process.

That elusive word known as 'style', to which figures of speech of course belong, can never be considered 'right' or 'wrong' from an absolute perspective and as such, it is more a question of appropriate or inappropriate. Context, on several levels, is the determining factor with regard to the potential for inappropriateness within academic writing for the use of figures of speech and other literary devices. Besides the obvious context of the overall stylistic conventions of academic writing as a whole, which do not prescribe against occasional use of figures of speech, 'we have a narrower context which involves the genre of the essay itself and moving on from there, we arrive at what is perhaps the narrowest of all contexts involved with academic writing: *the subject of the essay itself*' (original emphasis) (Baratta, 2004: 281).

Therefore, a thorough contextual awareness is first needed to determine how much is too much with regard to the use of literary devices in one's academic essay. An argument essay, for example, on the subject of capital punishment might be regarded as having less rhetorical freedom than, say, a personal essay on the subject of one's hobbies; however, what is suggested is that within both essays, figures of speech, for example, should not have to be considered off limits.

It is essentially a question of balance and students need to understand that regarding the use of figurative language within academic writing, a little goes a long way. As Wyrick (2002: 167) rightfully states, 'don't overuse figurative language'. Interestingly, Wyrick gives this imperative using a figure of speech, consisting of an analogy, which likens figurative language to a 'spice': 'like any spice, it can be misused, thus spoiling your soup' (ibid). Halliday (1994: 344) also suggests that a balance is needed between the congruent (i.e. a more 'academic' manner in which to write) and incongruent (i.e. metaphorical) because 'something which is totally congruent is likely to sound a bit flat' and the 'totally incongruent often seems artificial and contrived'. Therefore, students must consider the *how*, *when* and *how much* regarding the use of creative language within their essays.

Rationale for the Paper

This paper has been written based on students' questionnaire feedback within my own composition classes, specifically the recurring student belief that writing students will be forced to abandon a more personal style of writing in order to follow the rules of academic writing. Clark (1992) addresses this concern as losing one's voice. Wyrick (2002: xi) further addresses this mindset with a statement made by one of her own Freshman Composition students: 'composition classes are designed to put my creativity in a straitjacket'. However, the belief by Candlin and Hyland (1999: 2) that academic writers can 'express their own creative individuality' suggests that students need not leave their creativity aside when writing academic essays, with Forché and Gerard (2001: 4) further using the term 'creative nonfiction', to describe a writing style within academic essays which is 'at once factual and literary'. Thus, creative-academic writing is not an oxymoron.

Therefore, this paper offers suggestions for a stylistics-based pedagogic approach to academic writing, discussing how students can reveal a more creative style of writing as a means to liven up their essays (Baratta, 2006) and in the process, realise that academic writing need not be entirely impersonal and lifeless.

A Stylistics-Based Pedagogy within the Academic Writing Class

O'Brien (1995) and Carter (1997) detail how since the mid-1980s, language based approaches have become more common in the English classroom in British high schools, with Ellis and Sinclair (1989a) concurring with a language based classroom approach which utilises literature, in particular because of its implications for student autonomy, which is realised by the fact that personal point of view is an integral aspect of literary interpretation. Neman (1995: 212) is in agreement that students need to analyse texts in order 'to enhance their writing' and in fact lists a great many figures of speech such as irony, inversion and parallelism that students can become acquainted with following such analysis.

Language-based approaches such as this are '**student-centred, activity-based** and **process-oriented**' (original emphasis) (Carter, 1997: 3) and it is from analysis of texts that the pragmatic area of discourse stylistics derives, in which students can understand how rhetorical devices are used within a variety of contexts, to include literature. This understanding can then be passed on to their academic composition. The advantages of such an approach are that students' critical thinking skills are strengthened, in part by 'decoding', for example, poetic texts, and a systematic analysis of literary devices reaffirms 'the centrality of language as the aesthetic medium' (Carter, 1997: 6). The sample below from the short story *The Lesson* provides an excellent opportunity for students to understand the importance of context, and how the specific context below allows 'bad' writing to become 'good' writing, by means of various literary devices:

> (4) 'So this one day Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it's puredee hot and she's knockin' herself out about arithmetic. And school suppose to let up in summer I heard, but she don't never let up. And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree. And Miss Moore asking us do we know what money is, like we a bunch of retards.'

The excerpt is awash with non-standard grammar (e.g. a double negative, missing copula verbs); dialectal lexis (*puredee*); slang (*nappy-head*); swear words (*shit*); and perhaps for some, blasphemous language, most of which might be considered 'bad' in the context of academic essay writing. However, by critically analysing the text sample, students will come to realise that in the context of young working-class African-American girls, annoyed by a teacher's attempts to instruct them on a hot summer day, the overall language used is good, very good in fact, as it helps the reader to be in on the picture, so to speak, by hearing authentic language (e.g. the use of the *Ebonics* dialect), and by the use of such language, the story sounds more real. The swear words also help to communicate the frustration and anger that young children

would arguably feel on being given a school lesson when they're supposed to be on holiday instead. The relevance that this excerpt has for the academic writing student is that it brings to light the aforementioned importance of context as a starting point from which to determine one's rhetorical choices, as context plays a significant part in determining what devices can, and should, be used to improve style. This is the first step, then, regarding literary analysis within an academic writing class: to identify the rhetorical devices which are used within a given text(s).

While it could be argued that swear words and non-standard English grammar would not have a role to play within academic essays in the first instance, this is not always the case. Within the Linguistics department, for example, I have come across essays written on the subject of taboo words, discussing their history and frequency of use. In such essays, I have read through a variety of 'bad' words, such as *fuck*, *twat* and *wanker*, but within the context of a linguistic analysis, these words are not bad at all. Likewise, a study of dialects would necessitate giving the reader examples of such dialects (i.e. via the use of non-standard English grammar). Granted, the essays written within a given Linguistics department may constitute quite a narrow context, *but it is a context nonetheless*, and in such essays, the focus indeed allows for the rules of academic writing to be broken.

The next sample of literature consists of the poem *Dream Deferred* by the African-American writer Langston Hughes. This particular poem is useful for classroom analysis of stylistic devices as it contains a great deal of them: rhetorical questions, similes, an extended metaphor and arguably personification, as an abstract concept (i.e. a dream) is treated, to an extent, like an animate object, as only animate objects can 'dry up'.

> (5) What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> Like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore--
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over--
> like a syrupy sweet?
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
> Or does it explode?

An important point to be made about any literary analysis is that the goal is not solely to identify various rhetorical devices (e.g., similes); as mentioned above, this is just the first step. The next step involves the writing student *seeing the rhetorical devices in action* and considering their effect on his/her perception and understanding of the text. Neman (1995: 213) concurs, stating that the analysis of quality literary texts means that the

'material *comes alive* (my emphasis) for our students when we teach it as a way of enhancing particular essays'. In other words, by analysing literature, students can become more aware of the effect that literary devices have upon the reader and how they make the writing more interesting. In turn, this can lead to students doing a bit of 'rhetorical experimentation' within their own academic writing. Below is an excerpt from my proposed 'rhetorical pyramid' (Baratta, 2004: 282), in which I illustrate how certain rhetorical choices within a student's essays, more than just figures of speech, might be considered.

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SWEAR WORDS
RACIST LANGUAGE

S L A N G
INFORMAL LANGUAGE
ITALICS/**BOLDFACE**

FIGURES OF SPEECH

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The idea is that the bottom level of the pyramid consists of the more traditional and 'safer' rhetorical choices, hence it being the bottom, and therefore wider, level of a pyramid. As the choices become increasingly non-traditional and/or controversial, the pyramid levels become increasingly smaller, the implication being that the more controversial the choices are within academic writing, the less frequency with which they should appear. The old adage once again of 'a little goes a long way' definitely fits here. (ibid)

It is acknowledged that some of the choices within the pyramid are not of course figures of speech, such as italics which are more an orthographic feature. However, the approach adopted here with regard to one's language use within academic writing is a broad one, and not tied merely to figures of speech. While racist language may seem to be the most potentially offensive subject, its inclusion is again determined by the purpose of the essay and what the writer's purpose is in using such language. To use racists slurs as a means to help illustrate the pain caused by them, within the larger context of a Sociology essay on race relations, would not be tantamount to sounding like a racist. Once again, it is a question of determining the overall context of one's essay (e.g. genre, purpose, audience and even the academic department in which it is written) as the main criteria in then choosing appropriate language.

Examples from Students' Essays
Seeing examples of previous academic essays and the ways in which they use various rhetorical devices also ties in with a stylistics-based approach. What now follows are samples of students' essay writing taken from university courses that I taught in both the UK and in the USA.

Sentence Fragments
Below is an actual excerpt from a previous student's essay, which focused on the aftermath of 9-11. The excerpt breaks grammatical rules by employing several sentence fragments which begin the essay.

(6a) *9-11. Terror. Death. Destruction.*

The national mood in the USA immediately following 9-11 was one of isolation and emotional detachment, and the student uses sentence fragments as the linguistic means to rhetorically capture such a mood. Indeed, Neman (1995: 244) states that there is an 'effectiveness' within 'the occasional chosen fragment', and the use of fragments in example (6a) would appear to be warranted by the subject of the essay in which they are used. Consider, however, a potential alternative:

(6b) *9-11 was a day of terror, death and destruction.*

Example (6b) does not have the same impact as (6a), even though it is grammatically perfect. Therefore, the use of sentence fragments, while much more common in creative writing, cannot be ruled out within academic writing. Moreover, considering the fact that example (6a) is the actual opening of the student's essay, it works very well to create an effective opening 'hook', with Wyrick (2002: 83) stating that 'the beginning of (an) essay.....must catch the reader's attention'. The use of sentence fragments arguably does this better than complete sentences. Therefore, grammatical rules can sometimes be broken in academic writing for stylistic effect. This is a point with which Carter (1997: 5) agrees, saying that literary analysis can help students to develop their language awareness, 'and careful analysis of the linguistic choices shows how rules are broken for creative purposes'.

Similes
An example of a simile within a student's academic essay is seen in example (7), where it is used to communicate the student's grief following the death of his close friend in a car accident:

(7) Losing a friend is *like waves crashing against rocks*

Obviously, waves crashing across rocks are not really unpleasant (especially if you live in a beach house) and losing a friend is *nothing* like 'waves crashing against rocks', as there's obviously no noise or water involved. However, if students attempt to visualise waves crashing against rocks, they can subsequently visualise what the writer had in mind. It is said that a picture speaks a thousand words and this includes mental pictures too, the

kind that are generated from a few well-placed figures of speech. Of course in a completely different context, waves crashing against rocks could paint a more positive, though no less descriptive picture:

The roar of the plane's engines was like waves crashing against rocks.

(Baratta, 2004: 282)

Metaphors

An example of a metaphor is provided below, within an extended passage of text. As Elbow (1998: 18) states, 'metaphors make a big difference':

> (8) The leaflet has been produced to a professional standard. The graphics and text are informative and appealing. The 'product' is effective in that it provides an adequate amount of information without overloading the reader. By offering a 'taste' of the University and contact information it would encourage a prospective student (the main target audience) to find out more.

> In the sample above, the student is discussing a leaflet used to advertise the University of Manchester to prospective students. The word 'taste' shows that the student is communicating in a manner that she possibly feels more comfortable with – in this case, a metaphor. By using quotation marks around the word, the student is also suggesting that she is aware that the word represents a figure of speech and she might even be claiming its use as her own (e.g. along the lines of 'this is my expression – I chose to use it'). The student could have used the word 'idea' or 'glimpse', but instead chose to use the arguably more expressive word choice of 'taste'. (Baratta, 2007: 24)

Italics

The example below demonstrates how italics can make for good style and in effect result in a case of 'less is more':

> (9) Unlike their Anglo-American counterparts, Mexican-American children *are* poor.

> Italics relate to style as they are an effective way in which to emphasise a word or expression within an essay. The use of italics above is also a way in which the writer reveals her opinion simply by emphasising the word 'are'. It is her way of saying, 'I believe that compared with non-Hispanic Americans, we Mexicans are poor indeed'. In other words, the use of italics can be a more subtle way to reveal personal opinion on a given matter; try

reading the sentence without and then with the italics and see how your perception changes. (Baratta, 2007: 25)

Inversion
An example provided by Neman (1995) is given below, a passage from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young* Man, in which inversion is used.

(10) But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish and touched with the
wonder of mortal beauty her face (Modern Library edition, 299)

Such an example can encourage students to use inversion in their own essays, as a student in a previous Freshman Composition class did, seen below in example (11):

(11) Just when it seemed safe to play basketball again, my back started to act
up. It was something that had been ignored but now the pain was
unbearable. The issue could no longer be avoided. *Back to the doctors I went.*

Based on discussions with my writing students, many have declared that the inversion used in example (11) is effective because the OSV word order used in the last sentence is one traditionally associated with the literary world, such as *it is you I love*. However, the message produced in the final sentence in example (11) is anything but romantic, quite serious in fact, thus the inverted syntax helps to create an overall ironic effect, thus producing two figures of speech in the space of just one sentence – inversion and irony. To have instead used SVO word order as English of course does, would have resulted in *I went back to the doctors*, which is arguably less effective, if for no other reason than it lacks the subtly ironic tone of the inverted sentence.

Rhetorical Questions
The use of a rhetorical question as seen in another student's essay can be found in example (12). The essay's purpose was to compare and contrast men and women.

(12) *Why do you think God put men and women together?*

The rhetorical question works nicely and Hinkel (1997: 8) states that 'a writer who uses rhetorical questions seeks to solicit information with and agreement from the audience'. Such is the effect here, in that the student seemingly implies that putting men and women together was a questionable choice! By analysing rhetorical questions in action within literature, students can

experience their effects firsthand, which are largely to make the reader think about, question and ponder the subject matter.

Informal Expressions
Finally, the use of an informal expression is seen in the excerpt below which now concludes the analysis, taken from an essay on the subject of computer mediated communication:

> (13) Something that struck me throughout the exchange was that written words carry a great deal more power than spoken words. Once said, spoken words are forgotten, even though the content is usually remembered it is rare that the exact words are. However, when words are written down they can be looked at time and time again, and almost become 'cringe-worthy', seeming more and more unnatural every time they are read.

The word 'cringe-worthy' is predominantly used in spoken English. The student's use of quotation marks around the word could suggest that she is indeed aware that she is using a spoken, rather than written, style of English. Ivanic (1998:141) says that 'writers can use inverted commas to signal ownership'. Commenting on her own student's use of inverted commas around the expression 'cohab-free' (meaning 'single') written within a Sociology essay, Ivanic states that such use of inverted commas is the writer's way of saying, 'this is mine, and it's partly me' (page 151). While a more formal word choice might have been 'unnatural' or 'uncomfortable' as opposed to 'cringe-worthy', an important factor is that the use of the expression cringe-worthy was not prescribed against by the lecturer; therefore, allowance was given for a relatively informal expression within an otherwise academic essay. This in turn supports the suggestion that academic writing can allow for a more personal style of writing, as opposed to automatically prescribing against it.

Conclusion

In closing, this paper has hopefully demonstrated that creative language seen within a variety of rhetorical and orthographic features has a role to play within academic writing. Its usage can help to enliven students' essays and on a more basic level, can arguably create a sense of enjoyment for the student, who does not have to feel obliged to write entirely in a more congruent manner. Therefore, creative-academic writing is more than just the title of this paper; it is also a rhetorical reality.

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