

# SOME INTERPERSONAL META-DISCURSIVE ASPECTS IN CONTEMPORARY WRITTEN ECONOMICS LECTURES

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## 1. *Introduction*

Written economics lectures have been long neglected as an object of study. Additionally, they have been seen as impersonal, objective and informative, mere depictions of facts that attempt to reduce the multivocality of past knowledge to unified disciplinary paradigms. This implies that the writer is viewed as the expert, distinguished from the novice, and the process of learning is considered a one-way transfer of knowledge. The learner acquires an understanding of the field as a coherent canon (Hyland 2000), in a unilinear progression to current knowledge rather than a rational reconstruction of contested perspectives as in academic professional discourse<sup>1</sup>. Connors represents this dichotomy in the following way:

In most developed intellectual disciplines, the function of texts has always been essentially conservative: textbooks, which change with glacial slowness, provide stability amid the shifting winds of theoretical argument. They serve as sources of the proven truth needed for students' basic training while advanced scholarship extends the theoretical envelope, usually in journal articles. (1986, in Hyland 2000: 121).

On the basis of such assumptions, written economics lectures, as other pedagogic informational texts, are viewed as arranging accepted knowledge in a coherent form and therefore have not been investigated much in their rhetorical structure, in their relationship to other genres and to other disciplines. Research has focussed instead on the oral language of academic lectures (Benson 1989; Flowerdew 1994), exploring the relationship between modifications in oral discourse and their effects on listeners' comprehension of the information conveyed (Dunkel and Davis 1994), topic identification (Hansen 1994), the role of lexical phrases (DeCarrico and Nattinger 1988), asides, anecdotes (Strodz-Lopez 1987, 1991), macro-structure and micro-features and schematic phrasal patterning (Young 1990; 1994), the role of questions and answers (Thompson 1997), together with repetition and reformulation (Bamford 2000) in academic talk. Furthermore, the importance of meta-discursive devices in the

discourse of economics has been underlined across a range of languages (Mauranen 1993; Crismore et al. 1993; Valero Garces 1996; Bondi 1999; Vassileva 2001) and/or genres such as student academic writing (Crismore and Farnsworth 1990; Tang and John 1999), research articles (Meyers 1989; Hyland 1998; Salager-Meyer 1994; Swales 1998), university textbooks (Hyland 1994, 1999, 2000), and historical written economics lectures (Del Lungo 2001, 2002).

My argument, therefore, is that although written economics lectures present empirical evidence or flawless model worlds, they may nonetheless be considered inherently dialogic. Until recently written language has been characterised as detached, decontextualised, autonomous. By contrast spoken language has been characterised as 'involved', that is affecting and affected by the social relations of the interlocutors (Chafe 1982; Tannen 1985) and context-dependent. This view has been challenged, especially by Street (1995) who claims that literacy is shaped by the values and practices of the culture in which it is embedded and thus involves deep dialogic exchange.

Written economics lectures, then, involve communication between individuals who have a certain social relationship with one another as written language is imbued with purpose and interpersonal relationships just as spoken language is. The writer manipulates the text implementing meta-discursive devices to interact with the reader demonstrating how to use genre knowledge, so reading these lectures as purely informational discourse neglects other important relationships in the text and simplifies what is a more complex rhetorical picture.

Given these assumptions, this study aims to explore how economists/writers use language, while creating their lectures, and how they negotiate their economic knowledge in attempting to transgress institutionally sanctified impersonality by projecting themselves in their text (Hyland 2000). Through the analysis of interpersonal meta-discursive devices such as person markers and self-citation, this contribution will investigate how writers on the one hand take a stance towards both the text and the reader while, on the other, show authorial presence and academic prestige with which they try to construct a successful relationship with all their interlocutors. Moreover, the analysis will concentrate on interaction in the texts considered as a result of actions of socially situated writers, who use both the linguistic and the social conventions to achieve an increasing social participation in their disciplinary community. The results of my analysis suggest that contemporary written economics lectures may be classified somewhere between research articles and textbooks.

## *2. Corpus and methodological aspects*

The reflections presented in this paper are based on partial results of a qualitative and quantitative analysis of a small corpus of 10 written economics lectures<sup>2</sup>, by different contemporary economists, on various topics of macroeconomics that exemplify academic discourse in this field. All the lectures examined have been expanded and divided into chapters by their authors and are aimed at graduates and professionals.

The lectures present a common macro-structure: that is an introduction, in which the academic/economist announces the direction he will take, a middle, in which the author develops his theses, by formulating hypotheses and creating model-worlds, and a conclusion. Such a macrostructure is repeated throughout the lectures in each chapter. All the texts were scanned to produce a small electronic corpus of about 130,000 words and searched using WordSmith Tools (Scott 1996), a programme generating frequency lists and concordances. Frequency analysis was conducted to provide quantitative data for the interpretation of the relative person markers in the written lectures, whereas semantic and discourse functions of the person markers were analysed qualitatively in the texts.

In a previous paper (Samson 2002) I identified the different personae, that is to say the different roles the writer creates for himself and his readership in the construction of his written discourse. I also argued that it is a meta-discursive strategy enacted while accompanying the reader through the lectures, that proves the author holds a constant asymmetrical position either when addressing graduates or peer readers. As in a study by Bondi (1999), who claims that writers in economic textbooks see themselves as popularizers as well as scientists, researchers and teachers, and that they address and dialogue with a plurality of readers in different ways, economists/writers in their written lectures consider themselves as professional people, researchers and teachers who, having to address more knowledgeable readers and academic/fellow professionals, seem to rely more heavily on interactional strategies.

The lectures can be said to have mainly three aims: a) to familiarise less professional readers with the norms and assumptions of the discourse community whilst updating them with the concepts, the methodology and the practices of the economic discipline; b) to help readers focus their attention on the important points of the issues processed in the texts; c) to try, as in a research article with a peer readership, to emphasize the originality and importance of the writer's economic research, while seeking the acceptance and

recognition of the scientific-academic community (Ivanic 1998: 83). Although it may be surprising to notice interpersonal meta-discursive features in a genre considered to arrange accepted knowledge into a coherent form, in this paper I seek to reveal something of how person markers are used in written economics lectures to express authorial prominence and authority while constructing an interactional relationship with the readers, along the line suggested by Hyland (1998). The second point I explore is the strategic implementation of self citation, on the part of the academic/economist, which may be considered a complimentary aspect to person markers in enhancing both authorial visibility and an authoritative community membership while helping readers to share the knowledge discussed in their texts.

### 3. *Interpersonal meta-discourse*

In the corpus, interpersonal meta-discourse plays an important role in that it concerns the interactional and evaluative aspects of authorial presence, and it expresses the writer's individually defined, but disciplinary circumscribed persona. This is because the choices the author makes, when intervening in the text to convey attitudes to his propositional material, contribute to a high degree of ego involvement and are associated with authorial identity and authority (Ivanic 1998). All writing carries information about the author and the conventions of personal projection, and specifically the use of first person pronouns may be considered a powerful means of self-representation. In particular, research writing involves authors in textualising their work as a contribution to the field and as constructing themselves as competent members of the discipline. In fact, research by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) has revealed how discourse communities are socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work toward sets of common goals. As expected, academics have to say something new while demonstrating solidarity with the community and showing respect for its goals and to its members; this entails a capacity to balance arguments for the originality of one's claims and to display an authoritative persona (Hyland 2000). In other words, to gain acceptance for innovation involves demonstrating an individual contribution to the community and recognition by one's peers.

Authority, thus, is partly acquired by speaking and using the codes and the identity of a community member but it is also related to the author's convictions, engagement with the reader, and citation of self. Cherry's (1988) distinction between *ethos* and *persona* and his emphasis on the interrelationship between self-

representation and other aspects of the 'rhetorical context' as he calls it, provide different but complimentary perspectives on self-representation in academic literacy. With its roots in the rhetorical tradition, *ethos* refers to a set of characteristics that, if attributed to an author on the basis of textual evidence, enhance the author's credibility as a valuable member in a particular community. *Persona*, on the other hand, provides a way to describe the roles authors create for themselves in written discourse given their representation of audience, subject matter and other elements of context. *Ethos* and *persona* are not mutually exclusive but interact and overlap.

From this perspective, presenting a discursive self is central to academic writing, since no writing, as Ivanic (1998: 100) claims, is ever 'impersonal' or neutral, it is a particularly salient form of social action for the negotiation of identities, because written text is deliberate, potentially permanent and used as evidence for many social purposes. Thus, writers cannot avoid projecting an impression of themselves and a definition of the situation in relation to their choice of topic, arguments, discipline and readers, with consequently an impression on their discursive purposes. As contended by Goffman's theory of self-representation (1969), authors' discursive choices, and hence the implementation of a specific person pronoun, are constrained partly by the discourses to which they have had access, and partly by what they anticipate will create a good impression in the mind of their readers, especially if the readers exert any power over the writer. Consequently, as Kuo (1999) points out, the strategic use of person pronouns allows writers to emphasise their own contribution to the field and to seek agreement for it. Personal reference is therefore a clear signal of the perspective from which to interpret the statements in the texts as the linguistic choices writers make affect not only the ideational meaning they want to convey, but influence the impression they make on readers whilst negotiating their knowledge.

#### 4. *Person markers: a device for personal prominence*

Among the meta-discourse taxonomies proposed by many analysts, for the purposes of this study I refer to Hyland's (2000) scheme of interpersonal meta-discourse, in which person markers are items of a subcategory of interpersonal meta-discourse<sup>3</sup>. In the corpus, analysed with Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1996), person pronouns are clearly among the most noticeable forms of self-mention and stance found. In fact, as can be seen in Table 1, the lectures are clearly dominated by a high frequency of the first person pronouns: *I* with 4408 instances and *we* with 720

instances. There is also a corresponding high frequency of their respective possessive adjectives: *my* with 84 instances and *our* with 90 instances.

**Table 1:** Frequency of person markers and relational markers

<i>Device</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
I	4408
ME	95
MY	84
WE	720
OUR	90

Examples (1) and (2) below show that person markers are an important indication of how the academic/economist manipulates his text for rhetorical purposes in order to display affective signals which refer to issues that the writer feels as important. They are an element of stance, towards the audience and the text itself, and they are useful for the construction of a credible and engaging colleague/researcher/writer.

First person pronouns are closely related to the desire to identify oneself with one's piece of research. The writer expresses personal responsibility for his assessment of the point in question, and emphasises the necessity for his claim to fit appropriately into the background understandings of the reader, by often displaying subjective evaluation. In examples (3) and (4) the same personal commitment to what is discussed in the lecture is clearly expressed also by the use of *we*. The writers use receiver-excluding *we* to claim their authority due to their position as 'experts' in the field which is underlined by their evaluation of what they consider more appropriate to be discussed or which economic models may encounter difficulties. Moreover, the use of the first person pronoun is a device to persuade the reader and to gain credit for the issues discussed whilst engaging in a social process where the text reflects the methodologies, the arguments and the rhetorical strategies constructed to engage colleagues and persuade them to the claims that are made.

(1) *I* have no doubt that aggregate demand played a role in the initial decline in output in Poland. ... *I* also believe that tight policies may have hastened the process of restructuring and the recovery of output in a number of countries [...] (Blanchard)

(2) *I* argue that only by considering the conflict between investors and management can one explain why companies issue senior debt... (Hart)

(3) *We* discuss those results and present a third decomposition, which

*we* find more reasonable, that uses information from both output and unemployment movements... (Blanchard and Fischer)

(4) *We* consider Diamond-and Ramsey-like models of technological shocks and study the behaviour of output [...] *we* show that such models run into severe difficulties ... (Blanchard and Fischer)

Another repeated strategy used by the academics when deciding to construct a more committed presence in their text is thematizing. This is a significant aspect in the corpus which provides the reader with an interpretative framework and clearly signals the participation of the writer in the research presented. As Hyland (2000) claims in a research on the use of person markers for persuasive purposes, by fronting a clause with a first person pronoun, the information given follows a special focus which increases the writer's engagement with his work.

Examples (5) and (6) illustrate how the authors are involved in showing a knowledge of the theoretical issues of the discipline and the aim of their investigation of specific macroeconomic issues. This is also a demonstration of their genre knowledge, a form of situated cognition, inextricable from the professional writer's procedural and social knowledge (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). Social knowledge refers to authors' familiarity with the research networks in their field. It is the knowledge academics draw on to create an appropriate rhetorical and conceptual context in which to position their research.

(5) *I* share Marshall's view of time as a source of difficulty. (Diamond)

(6) *We* want to know how long typical recessions or expansions last, whether fluctuations in output are largely transitory or largely permanent [...] (Blanchard and Fischer)

As revealed in a previous study (Samson 2002), the use of person markers varies according to the different sections of the lectures and according to the roles the writer adopts while creating his text. Hence in introductions or at the beginning of each chapter where the economist must explain the research he has already done or wants to carry out, authorial prominence is useful to deploy economic knowledge which is embedded in the discipline, as can be seen in example (7) and (8) and to try and boost his credibility as innovator. These are instances that indicate the importance for writers not only to prove familiarity with the disciplinary knowledge and display respect for alternatives but to back their views with a personal commitment where necessary. It also shows the link between social practices and research in which membership is in part a function of the ability to employ the conventions of a community appropriately.

(7) As a contrast with this familiar use of atemporal models with different constraints, *I* want to present a model with explicit consideration of time [...] (Deaton)

(8) The ingredients *I* want to emphasize are explicit treatment of time, [...] but this choice of ingredients raises another issue in Marshall's analysis. [...] *I* will follow a modelling strategy that implies dropping the representative firm as used by Marshall. (Diamond)

In example (9), by contrast, the subjective first person is replaced by the possessive forms which are used to promote the writers' contribution by associating them closely to their work. They collocate most commonly with nouns such as: *starting point/s*, *goal/s*, *approach*, *choice*, *focus*, *model*, *discussion*, etc. These constructions may be considered a way to bind the writer and the reader as co-participants in a sort of debate:

(9) One of *our* main choices has been to start from a neoclassical benchmark, with optimising individuals and competitive markets. As *our* guided tour indicates, this is not because *we* believe that such a benchmark describes reality or can account for fluctuations. *We* are sure that incomplete markets and imperfect competition are needed to account for the main characteristics of actual fluctuations. *We* also believe that [...] (Blanchard and Fischer)

Clearly from the texts examined, authorial presence corresponds to the asymmetrical position the writers explicitly hold throughout the corpus while stating what schematic structure will be followed in the rest of their text (10) which are the goals (11) or the purposes of their lecture. In such instances, the use of person pronouns serves as a textual meta-discursive device for the reader and it often overlaps with the interpersonal function, not only at the beginning of the chapters but also in the discussion sections, in which model worlds are created to illustrate and exemplify the topic (12) and (13).

(10) *We* start the chapter by studying the optimal allocation of resources, the optimal consumption and investment decisions that would be chosen by a central planner maximizing the utility of the representative individual in the model (a problem first analysed by Ramsey 1928). *We* then show [...] (Blanchard and Fischer)

(11) *My* goals in the next chapters will be to examine the mechanisms which can explain these evolutions [...] (Blanchard)

(12) *I* turn now to a simple model where firms have different (and stochastic) experiences [...] (Hart)

(13) *I* include EBRD forecasts of output for 1996 when available, so that Fig. 1.1 gives the behaviour of output ... GDP is normalised to be equal to 1 in year 0, the year before transition. With these preliminaries out of the way, *I* return to the behaviour of GDP as shown in Fig. 1.1. (Blanchard)



In the introduction sections, the person pronoun collocates with verbs which indicate both the organisation of the issue presented, hence creating a text frame, and personal prominence and commitment to what the reader expects to find ahead in the text. Whereas in the middle sections, in which the economists discuss and develop their issues by presenting figures, equations, etc., and building model worlds with the intent of making their argument understandable, the person markers are followed by verbs which direct the attention of the reader on what will follow – through which the author maintains his contact with the reader – or verbs referring to an immediate mental process of visual perception of non-linear texts such as graphs, bar charts, percentages, etc. and to the experimental activity. The most frequent verbs in these two sections are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Verbs in introduction/middle sections

analyse	examine	present
assume	explore	return
consider	extend	see
demonstrate	focus	show
develop	include	start
discuss	introduce	study

It is interesting to notice that the verb tenses occur mainly in the present indicative or past tense. There are no instances of present progressive which would project the writer's participation in a more direct way, giving the academic presentation a narrative exposition that would move one's attention from what is argued or claimed to the performance of the activity itself.

Doubtless, then, the choices made by writers in these economics lectures convey a specific aspect of professional academic discourse which indicates an awareness of the conventional socio-discursive practices. For instance, the strategy to use recurrently self-mention with parallelisms and repetitions, at the end of the chapters or in the conclusions, when the writer summarises his research and viewpoints by emphasizing his contribution (14), becomes an explicit persuasive device, as when the writer takes full responsibility for his claims, by using a possessive form while manifesting all his deference in front of the disciplinary community (15):

(14) *I have developed in this book a way of thinking about transition. I have argued that the two central mechanisms shaping transition have been reallocation. I have shown [...]* (Blanchard)

(15) *These lectures reflect my attempt to think about behaviour of an economy over time... They also reflect my attempt to think coherently about micro and macro [...]* (Diamond)

As I have mentioned earlier, the use of possessive adjectives contributes to associate the writer more closely with his work, but it may be seen as a further element which distinguishes economics written lectures from textbooks as already fore-grounded by the highly frequent use of the first person singular pronoun.

##### *5. Self-citation: a complimentary self-evidence booster*

As to the second point, I will briefly discuss the other rhetorical feature which frequently occurs in my corpus – self-citation – which is perhaps the most obvious form of self mention. It is another strategy used by academics/economists to demonstrate their authority in the economic field, as it refers to their earlier research, and its implementation in all the lectures underscores the resemblance between written economics lectures and research articles. Obviously, the reasons which motivate academics to cite their own research are several but I take it to be an important way of demonstrating their disciplinary credentials and credibility. Self-citation can, in fact, be seen to underline the links between the academics/economists and their fellow professionals, which means that a text, as Hyland (2000) points out, is a multi-layered hybrid co-produced by the authors and by the members of the audience to which it is directed. In other words, the meaning of the lectures is socially mediated and influenced by the community to which the writers and the readers belong. As I have discussed, the academic tries to account for the information and knowledge he has already acquired from the cultural community, and to move beyond given knowledge by breaking a consensus even if on a rhetorical plane. Those that successfully manage both impulses that is, on one hand, respect the norms of the disciplinary community while, on the other, introduce innovative concepts or ideas which may be in contrast with the general disciplinary consensus nevertheless represent a novelty which is most appreciated in the academic context (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). An example of this can be seen in (16) where the academic states he has been researching the topic for a long time. This means he has already acquired a certain knowledge (17) which allows him to dissent authoritatively with existing economic models and propose new ones.

(16) *I have been researching the inadequacies of conventional approaches to the modelling of time since 1968. My dissatisfaction with treatments of stability led me to think about price adjustments in realtime [...] (Diamond)*

(17) *This book [...] builds on my research carried out since the early 1990s. (Blanchard)*

Another function of self-citation is to demonstrate not only one's inherited culture and the 'cutting edge' of one's research, but also rhetorical timing, as contended by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), in which matters of content – background knowledge and surprise value – influence the selection of the topic that requires an appropriate moment in the community to be well received. In (18) for instance we read that the economist thinks it is the appropriate moment to discuss his research since his conclusions could be irrelevant in a few years.

(18) In these chapters *I* try to tell the story of the most recent burst of research. [...] *I* do not know whether now is the best time to try. [...] But the story as it now stands is a good one; a great deal has been learnt that we did not know before, [...] So the tale is worth telling, even at the risk that the conclusions will be transparently wrong only a year or two from now. (Deaton)

Quite clearly, as appears in these examples, research in economics as in any other field does not occur in a social vacuum; it always has to be contextualised in accordance with the issues of the discipline. Self-citation therefore is an important way of building authorial authority and fitting one's research in the framework of the disciplinary community.

## 6. *Concluding remarks*

I have tried to show that in written economics lectures person markers and self-citation are significant meta-discursive devices that writers use to promote their academic and professional identity. The use of these forms of self mention is very important for the relationships the writer tries to build with his different interlocutors. If addressing less knowledgeable readers, graduates for instance, the function of the first person pronoun is mainly that of an expert authoritative lecturer who, by using the first person pronoun in repeated patterns, informs and takes into account the need to involve and make his text interesting to the reader. By contrast, when addressing peers/professionals the use of person markers and the emphasis of self-citation, in points of the lectures that the writers think are best to boost their presence and research contribution, have more the function of enforcing their credibility and role as scholars, while helping them to be accepted as members of the disciplinary community.

The presence of these features in specific sections of the lectures suggest that the author has the possibility of manipulating his discursal choices, which, however, appear to be

constrained by the norms and the social practices of his discipline. This is one of the aspects that differentiate the main features and partly the aim of written economics lectures and economics textbooks. Another aspect that differentiates these two genres is, as we have seen, the high frequency of the first person pronoun singular as a characteristic feature of research articles that demonstrates that the lectures may be classified as a hybrid genre.

To conclude, although we do find some similarities between the two educational text-types, in the dialogues at various levels in economics textbooks the writer negotiates the right to speak both of and for the discipline, constructing a coherent and authoritative picture for learners, with a relatively uncontroversial representation of its central features for peers. On the contrary, in my corpus the negotiation of current knowledge is carried out through the presentation of contested perspectives, which suggests that, though in a monologic form, lectures are dialogically dynamic, and combination of self-citation with person markers is an important way of creating one's voice, nevertheless this has to be shaped according to shared social practices.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This view of pedagogic texts as repositories of codified knowledge reflects Kuhn's belief that such texts are conservative exemplars of current disciplinary paradigms. Brown (1993) refers to this as canonising discourse. The canon represents as conventional wisdom what any competent member of the discipline would accept as uncontroversial.

<sup>2</sup> The written economics lectures analysed are comprised in:

Blanchard, O. (1997). *The Economics of Post-Communist Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blanchard, O. and Fischer S. (1997). *Lectures on Macroeconomics*. London: MIT Press.

Deaton, A. (1992). *Understanding Consumption*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Diamond, P.A. (1994) *On Time. Lectures on Models of Equilibrium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hart, O. (1996). *Firms, Contracts, and Financial Structure*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hyland adopts a modified version of the meta-discourse scheme by Crismore et al. (1993). This distinguishes textual from interpersonal dimensions and recognises more specific functions within them. This approach characterises the needs of writers to address conditions of adequacy and acceptability which are the heart of academic interaction.

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