Teaching academic writing via theoretical linguistics:
Towards authentic assessments in introductory linguistics classes
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In recent years, assessments in higher education have shifted from a traditional "testing culture" (Birenbaum & Dochy 1996) to more practical skills-based modes of evaluation (Reid & Fitzgerald, 2011). Called *authentic assessment,* this type of assessment focuses on measuring students' ability to apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired in class to situations that emulate professional or otherwise "real life" settings (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner 2004). In this talk, I discuss the successes and challenges of teaching an introductory linguistics course whose focus included using linguistics as a tool for improving students' academic writing.

In linguistics, teachers increasingly incorporate real-life applications of linguistics in their lessons: e.g., discussions of possible jobs in linguistics (Mantenuto 2021) and linguistics and social justice (Namboodiripad & Sanders 2020). In my own classroom, I incorporate "linguistics irl (in real life)" components to most modules, including linguistics and law, linguistic creativity in advertising, and semantic/pragmatics in comedy. My challenge as a teacher is that while these sorts of topics are interesting examples of daily linguistic phenomena, they are not really at the same level of authenticity as examples reported in the pedagogy literature: e.g., a diet report in a biology class, or constructing a news show in a journalism class (Mueller 2016). The difficulty of linguistics is that the scope of its application to professional settings is much more limited. The knowledge of social (in)justices surrounding language (e.g., racial bias in speech perception) (Namboodiripad & Sanders 2020) is undoubtedly a major way in which linguistics graduates can be better colleagues in a work environment. Are there other authentic skills that linguistics can teach?

I addressed this pedagogical challenge by designing a course that teaches students to use concepts in linguistics to improve their academic writing skills. The challenge of such a course is that a balance must be struck between descriptivism and prescriptivism, since academic writing advice is often very prescriptive. A major way to address this balance is to present the advice in terms of formal vs. informal register rather than correct vs. incorrect language. For example, after discussing constituency, embedding, and finite vs. non-finite clauses, students learned in a tutorial what descriptively is meant by an "incomplete sentence" in academic writing, and how to avoid them in the context of formal writing. In a semantics module, I taught how the pronoun *they* descriptively takes singular antecedents in English (and the theory behind it). In a follow-up tutorial, students were taught ways to avoid the singular *they* without resorting to the non-inclusive *he/she* should an instructor of a course prohibit it. After learning about binding theory, students learned how coordinated DPs like *My grandmother and myself went fishing* (which violates Principle A) is not a formal alternative to *my grandmother and me* in writing, contrary to common belief. These topics cater well to authentic assessments such as writing e-mails in a formal vs. informal register using writing advice from class, as well as editing texts to fit an academic writing register. In this talk, I will advocate for inclusive assessment designs where native speakers and non-native speakers of English have different tasks.

I show in this talk that it is possible to find harmony between descriptivism and prescriptivism in order to teach students authentic writing skills while keeping the class a true linguistics class.

References

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