

# **CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE IN UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT WITH FOCUS ON THE GERMAN LANGUAGE (KEGA 029EU-4/2016)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the paper is to describe the most important and dominating features of the academic language used in higher education institutions and university settings. Academic language greatly differs from the general or spoken language in terms of various language elements, namely on all the language levels. Academic language requires a precise formulation of facts; therefore, the most distinctive features of this professional use of language used in scientific discourse on the lexical level includes in particular the terminology and definitions, while terms are in this type of text closely connected with designata. On the syntactic level, a significant feature for the university setting is the objective character of the text, which is manifested by means of impersonal constructions used by the author of the text. In the German language, it is in particular the use of the passive voice and passive constructions, verb-nominal constructions, and that of perfective verb forms. On the stylistic level of the academic language, we can observe the tendency to strong formality, which results from the selection of stylistic means and forms.

*Keywords: academic language, university environment, dominating features of academic language, German language*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Academic language, i.e. the language use in tertiary education and university settings, can be considered as the professional language. It serves for the communication in a given field. It differs to a great extent from the general or spoken language in terms of various language elements on all the language levels.

The primary aim of this paper is to deal with the most significant features of the professional language used in scientific discourses in written form at all the three levels of language, i.e. lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels.

Since the academic language is characteristic of a precise formulation of facts, its most distinctive features on the lexical level include in particular the use of terminology and definition, while terms are closely linked to designates in this kind of texts [1].

On the syntactic level, a significant feature of the academic language in university settings is text objectivity, which is manifested in the use of impersonal constructions used by the author of the text. In the German language, impersonal

nature is expressed by means of the passive, passive constructions, verb-nominal constructions, and the German perfectum.

On the stylistic level, a prevailing feature is a strong formality of the text, which results in the selection of stylistic means.

By way of introduction, we have to emphasize that learning the principles of Professional communication is an inevitable condition for a successful career on the labour market in a contemporary globalised world. Mastering a foreign language, and in effect also one's own mother tongue on a conversational level is usually no longer sufficient. It is necessary to be able to strictly differentiate between the current everyday communication, which covers elementary topics, and for which it is not necessary to prepare well in advance, in contrast to academic communication, scientific communication and communication at the workplace. The competence to produce stylistically (including grammar) correct/adequate text (either in written or spoken mode) corresponding to the requirements and its aim, should be one of the desirable outputs from the university studies. Of course, this is also connected with the ability of critical orientation in accessible sources; ability to differ which information is relevant for our purpose and be able to deal with them accordingly.

### **DEFINITION OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE**

By way of introduction to the main part of our paper, we need to define key terms, which will be repeated in this paper. As the title of the paper indicates, one of the key concepts of our discussion is professional language.

Linguists define this concept in various ways. Hoffmann [2], deals with this topic in an entire monograph, defines the Professional language as a set of all means of language used in a specific professionally delimited sphere of communication. The aim here is to secure the communication of individuals, active in a given area of activity. "Fachsprache – das ist die Gesamtheit aller sprachlichen Mittel, die in einem fachlich begrenzten Kommunikationsbereich verwendet werden, um die Verständigung zwischen den in diesem Bereich tätigen Menschen zu gewährleisten" [2]

Hoffmann explicitly refutes the terminology hypothesis, according to which the primary feature of the professional language is terminology, i.e., the use of terms as job and work related expressions used to express relevant concepts. Professional language is not considered a stylistic variant of general language either as in functionalist hypothesis [3]. According to Hoffman, it is a kind of "sublanguage", i.e. a partial language of the general language, in which phonetic, morphological and lexical elements together with syntactic and textual phenomena constitute a functional unity and enable communication within various areas of one field [2]. Beier understands the concept of professional language as a complex area (variant) of language use, which is determined by some specific features of various work-related situations [4]. This area manifests an internal differentiation. Hornung

contributes to the attempts at defining the professional language for temporal components [5].

It is thus obvious that the specific aim of the professional language also results in specific characteristic features. Most linguists, who explore this phenomenon, identify the same basic properties. However, it has to be taken into consideration that there does not exist a single comprehensive system of the professional language; there are several of them, which are connected with concrete areas of science. Thus we can differentiate e.g. the professional language of natural sciences, (physics, chemistry...), professional language of economics, and the like. Also Esselborn-Krumbiegel expresses similar opinions in this context and points to some deviations of the scientific style according to the discipline, culture, or period of time. Despite that, according to this author, certain stylistic principles can be identified based on representative scientific texts [6].

Professional language is a means of communication, which reflects some thought structures that are determined by methods of the field concerned. It serves for the communication on professional topics, various subjects, operations, processes, procedures, theories, and the like, and it employs the shortest possible and as precise as possible form of language, that is, the term, which provides an unambiguous information about the subject-matter and the content of the term. Professional language is thus linked to elements of thought as well as structures of thought usual in that field.

Despite the fact that the professional language of each scientific discipline will demonstrate some specificities, which are probably reflected in the terminology used, there are some features common to all disciplines. Seresová mentions the following common features [7]:

- application of extralinguistic means (e.g. graphs and tables),
- focus on facts,
- logical nature/ rational approach,
- professional character,
- use of terminology – specific expressions,
- avoidance of emotionality,
- absence of expressive nature,
- application of impersonal constructions,
- selection of lexical means adjusted to the aim and topic,
- neutral lexis and syntax,
- logical text segmentation,
- dominance of the written mode;
- references to works of other authors.

## **LEXICAL LEVEL OF THE ACADEMIC LANGUAGE**

Terminology belongs to principal elements of each professional language, as terms are carriers of the nucleus of the utterance and are the elements constituting the professional language. They can be defined as the language sign, applied for one concept. Thus the term arises when a concept is named, and the concept is an

element of thought. Professional term as an element of thought of some field has some content; this represents a set of features. Every term has to meet some requirements, as for instance expertise, notional, accuracy, unambiguousness, and esthetic, expressive, and modal neutrality [8]. The feature of expertise or professionalism means that the term belongs to a particular professional language and its terminology system. Notionality means that the term represents a language sign of a particular concept, and it is also becoming a basic element of rational thought. Accuracy means that the term is unanimously delimited in relation to other terms. Preciseness involves the quality of the definition or description. Unambiguousness means the fact that the term denotes one particular concept.

If exploring terminology from the aspect of word classes (parts of speech) we can state that the most important word class representing terms is the noun. Noun terms mostly arise in the process of formation of new words, by means of derivation (Wirtschaft – Misswirtschaft), collocating words (Führungskraft, Volkswirtschaft, Betriebswirtschaftslehre) or terminologisation, that is, a word used in the general language becomes a term after some time (Angebot, Nachfrage, Markt, Kulisse).

Schippan [9], an author of an extensive and comprehensive work on trends in the contemporary German language, or the German lexicology, defines terminology as a system of terms of scientific or professional language. At the same time, she mentions characteristic properties of terms, namely clarity, definiteness, and accuracy. They are professional words that are conceptually defined, and they are stylistically neutral. Their meaning can, however, spontaneously vary, which results in homonymy, polysemy, and synonymy [9].

In the context of terms, it can be stated that numerous linguists have been trying to define the term as precisely as possible. Differences in definitions reflect the properties of terms, which are ascribed the greatest importance by the authors. According to Schwarz, the term is a fundamental unit of professional lexis.

### **SYNTACTIC LEVEL OF THE ACADEMIC LANGUAGE**

The language of professional texts differs from that of the general language in syntax. A typical phenomenon, which may be found in professional language, is the tendency to nominalisation, using nouns, which closer denote objects, their properties, processes, or procedures. In this way their meaning is narrowed down, which corresponds to the tendency of the professional language to accuracy of utterance. Frequently, infinitive constructions and impersonal passive sentences are used [10]. The application of these syntactic means in the professional text ensues from the effort for the language economy, the clarity and unambiguousness of the text, and an impersonal approach to professional topic.

Another topic we intend to deal with in the context of academic language is the tendency of the professional language to nominalisation. In this connection, we need to mention in particular two phenomena – namely, attributive nominal groups and verb+noun collocations.

Ehrgangova and Keníž [10] claim that attributive nominal groups contribute to text condensation. The following two groups can be differentiated:

- Complex adjectival groups with an adjectival attribute which agrees with the noun it modifies in terms of syntax; these are syntactically identical with the corresponding phrases in the Slovak language and are translated in a similar way, e.g. *Eine schwerzulösende Aufgabe* – *ťažko riešiteľná úloha* (hard-to-solve task).
- Complex adjectival groups (adjective+noun) that are translated into Slovak by means of the relative clause, e.g.: *die zwischen der Unternehmungskultur und der Personalpolitik zubestehende Identität* – *identity, which has to exist between the corporate culture and the personnel policy* and groups with the attribute that does not agree in form with the noun of the phrase, e.g.: *Die wichtigste Aufgabe der Banken besteht darin, die Kreditgeschäfte durchzuführen.* – *The most important role of banks is in the implementation of credit deals.*

The verb-noun collocation is understood here as a collocation of the noun and a function verb. The most important feature of these collocations is that the noun carries the lexical meaning. The original meaning of the verb has been weakened or completely lost and the function verb has become the carrier of grammatical, i.e. morphological and syntactic functions and simultaneously the carrier of categorical meaning, for instance in the following type of collocations: *Entscheidung treffen* – *urobit' rozhodnutie* (make a decision), *Kritik üben* – *kritizovat'* (criticise), *zur Verfügung stellen* – *dat' k dispozícii* (give at one's disposal) and the like. Verbo-nominal collocations are also carriers of specific semantic and communicative functions. The main semantic function of verb-noun collocations is their ability to express duration, beginning, or the conclusion of an action, express the change in the state, etc. Verb+noun collocations with function verbs *kommen*, *gelangen*, *geraten*, *finden*, *erfahren* and the like may be used instead of passive constructions with the notional verb, e.g.: *zur Anwendung gelangen* – *angewendet werden*, *in Armut geraten* – *arm werden*, *zum Einsatz kommen* – *eingesetzt werden* and the like. Another semantic function of these constructions is their ability to replace non-existing notional verbs, and in this way enrich the vocabulary. Some verb—noun collocations can be replaced with a one-word equivalent of the notional verb, others cannot (Seresová 2009): *in Frage kommen* does not mean *fragen*; *in Angriff nehmen* is not identical with the verb *angreifen*, but *Diskussion führen* – *diskutieren*, *Anordnung geben* – *anordnen*, *Geltung haben* – *gelten* and *Arbeit leisten* – *arbeiten*.

Several types of infinitive construction are characteristic for the German specialized text. The most important include the following [10]: infinitive constructions, expressing possibility (*Bei hoher Nachfrage* – *insbesondere, wenn*

*sie über dem Angebot liegt – sind hohe Preise zu erwarten und umgekehrt.); infinitive constructions expressing necessity (Darüber hinaus sind die Produktförderung in einer internationalen Umgebung und zu guter Letzt die zentralisierte oder dezentralisierte Überwachung eines multinationalen Marketingprogramms zu bewältigen.), and infinitive constructions which replace the conjunction dass.*

As mentioned earlier, characteristic features of the German professional text on a syntactic level include passive sentences, one of the most important means of professional language, which serve to express an impersonal nature of the text. In contrast to the German specialized texts, in the Slovak language this passive meaning is expressed by means of the reflexive pronoun “sa”:

*Die Tauschhandlung wird in zwei voneinander getrennte Verkauf- und Kaufakte zerlegt; die besonderen Vorbedingungen des Naturaltausches können entfallen.*

*Výmenný proces sa rozloží na dva navzájom oddelené akty predaja a nákupu.... (The exchange process is divided into two separate acts of selling and purchasing...)*

The German passive sentence can be translated into Slovak also as a passive sentence:

*Als Wertübertragungsmittel dient das Geld z. B. bei Schenkungen und Darlehen, bei denen kein unmittelbarer Tausch vorliegt, wenn das Geld nicht als Gegenwert für Güter und Dienstleistungen hergegeben wird.*

*...ak peniaze nebudú vydané ako protihodnota za tovary a služby (unless the money is used as a counter-value for goods and services)*

The German passive sentence, however, can be translated into Slovak by means of the sentence with an active verb construction:

*Es kann davon ausgegangen werden, dass es günstig ist, wenn die Aktivitäten nicht erwerbswirtschaftlichen Organisationen an Bedürfnislagen ihrer „Marktpartner“ orientiert sind, bzw. diese überhaupt erst systematisch in Erfahrung gebracht werden.*

*Môžeme vychádzať z toho, že... (We can start from the assumption that.../Our starting-point may be...)*

## STYLISTIC LEVEL OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

As indicated in the introduction, academic writing comes into being in university and scholarly settings. It includes not only texts produced by university students (texts of various genres), but also texts written by members of academic staff and scholars, whose responsibility is to disseminate scientific findings. Despite the fact that every human being has their own characteristic way of expressing ideas, there are some rules in use, which need to be observed in the course of academic text production. Since it is a scholarly

text, its author has to use a clear language with focus on facts, by means of which findings are communicated. In academic language conversational or poetic way of expressing ideas is unacceptable, likewise ironical comments or elements of humour. Sentences have to be formulated in a clearly, concisely, and have to capture the author's intention, that is his or her ideas. Staroňová describes the written academic discourse as follows [11]

- “scientific argumentation
- clear and comprehensive structure to support readability
- text segmentation into paragraphs
- clear sentence structure
- scientific citation, paraphrasing, and summarisation
- avoiding repetition of the same idea
- correct spelling and grammar
- explanatory notes (in footnotes)
  - no personification
  - application of professional language – defining concepts
  - stylistic use of one tense only
  - tables, diagrams, and other visual elements.”

Daniel Cassany characterises academic texts as referential and representative and emphasises that their role is to operate as a repository and disseminator of new findings. Like any other text, also the academic text must be adequate, coherent, cohesive, and correct, it means the features of situationality, coherence, cohesion, and correctness have to be manifested in it [12].

Coherence is the text property owing to which the reader perceives the text as well-formed, content-rich, and adjusted to some situation. For the text to be coherent it should stick to one topic and all the elements creating the text should develop this topic. In other words, the text is coherent if each of its parts constituting it is linked to the central topic. Coherence is a magnitude, which enables the reader to understand and interpret the content of the text in parts or in its entirety. This depends on, among others, also from the arrangement of ideas that cannot contradict the real life [13].

Apart from the adequate observation of rules, the text author has to bear in mind that the sentences that make up the utterance are not isolated and separate units; instead, they are interlinked or interrelated via various mechanisms.

Cohesion is a text property, through which utterances (sentences) of some text are adequately (correctly) connected to one another from the lexical and grammatical aspects. From this point of view, text can be viewed as cohesion in case successive utterances (sentences) are correctly interrelated or interlinked by means of morpho-syntactic, lexico-semantic, or even phonetic connectors.

Stylistic means of the German professional text express its focus on facts, clarity of expression, efficiency, impersonal communication, accuracy, neutrality, and text economy. It means the text contains a lot of nouns, abstract expressions, foreign words, and the like. In these professional texts we can find a very small

number of phraseologisms, and if these are found, they always fulfil a particular terminology role, i.e. they represent a term, for instance *in die roten Zahlen geraten – dostat' sa do straty, do mínusu* (to get in red figures).

### CONCLUSION

Scientific writing, i.e. using the academic language is an inevitable tool for each researcher, member of academic staff, or a university student. In academic environment, scientific and publication activities are required, which necessitates a compact processing of the topic. Problems need to be at first properly understood, and an adequate scientific text is then composed.

Each text type, either in oral or in written form, has its own specific features. The German academic language, which is discussed in the present paper, is a complex language system with numerous specific elements and features, through which it differs from the general language. The main aim of academic, i.e. professional language is to mediate the information needed to the recipient. When using the professional language, the style of communication as well as language means used in the professional language correspond to this aim. An author of the text has to be familiar with all the specificities of the professional language, including for instance the use of terminology and syntactic or stylistic means, so that the author was able to produce the kind of written discourse that meets all the requirements placed on a quality professional text used in academic environment, while maintaining the authenticity of the utterance.

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