Disciplinary Identities
Disciplinary Identities
Individuality and community in academic discourse

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Most applied linguists would agree that an individual’s identity is not ‘fixed’, but is multi-faceted, adapting to and being shaped by particular contexts and types of interaction. In spite of this, little research has attempted to demonstrate how various identities are accomplished through the linguistic choices writers make across a variety of genres. Novice writers are mostly coached to develop their academic selves as though such an identity was a stable target; even critical approaches to academic discourse pit individual identity against a monolithic academic one. In this book, Professor Hyland encourages a more radical engagement with identity. He takes into account status, gender, culture and academic discipline as potential factors in comparing identities, and examines how these interact in a refreshingly wide range of academic discourse types. The book uses, among other genres, student writing, published research articles, book reviews, websites, biographical notes and applications for prizes as data for study. Though he prioritises a corpus-based approach to discourse, Professor Hyland draws on an eclectic mix of methods. He supplements corpus studies, for example, with interviews with individuals whose work is included in the corpus; he draws on perspectives from the study of metadiscourse, systemic functional linguistics and intercultural communication in discussing his results. As with most corpus studies, some of the data come from large, homogeneous groups of writers, but Professor Hyland also focuses on and compares the output of individual writers. He is therefore uniquely placed to consider how facets such as personality and educational background intersect with other concerns such as gender to bring about stylistic variation, and how that variation in turn construes identity.

The book begins with a theoretical approach to ‘discipline’ and ‘identity’, which Professor Hyland examines through the lenses of proximity and positioning. Each subsequent chapter then takes one or more academic text-types and one or more factors affecting identity, using each as an exemplar of how the study of identity might be approached. The final chapter relates the various discussions to pedagogy, considering how the teacher of English for Academic Purposes might negotiate issues of personal and academic identity with students from different backgrounds.
Disciplinary Identities will interest researchers into the language of academic disciplines, adding to the wealth of material on disciplinary differences and how these might be explored and contextualised. It has particular relevance to those involved in teaching English for Academic Purposes, for whom disciplinary discourse and academic identities are matters of everyday concern. It is a valuable addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series.

Carol A. Chapelle and Susan Hunston
Preface

Another book on identity needs some justification. After all, there has been an explosion of talk around the topic in the last 25 years in just about all areas of the human and social sciences. So much talk, in fact, that for many observers, contemporary questions of politics, gender, personal relationships and culture now quickly distil down to issues of identity. Identity is the lens through which contemporary social analysis sees the world, which means that everyone has something to say about it. There is a glut of perspectives and proliferation of definitions. What makes things more complicated is not only that different theoretical approaches generate different understandings of identity, but that these tend to compete with our own folk theories of the self. So while we may refer to our sense of identity as a guiding reference in our lives, the concept is increasingly problematised and disputed among social scientists.

In our everyday lives identity is something that can be stolen, filed away, improved and marketed, and it is widely seen as far more malleable and open to choice today than in the past. Self-help articles, TV make-over shows, advertising campaigns and a burgeoning counseling industry are part of a Zeitgeist which encourages us towards a pick-and-mix view of identity: to believe that we can elect who we want to be through therapy, meditation, appearance or consumption. It is a presumption of modern life that our purchases and possessions express who we are so that exposure to international media and communications technologies mean that we can shop for our identities at a global ‘cultural supermarket’ (Mathews, 2000) which make available a range of identities to be put on and dropped as we like. The mass marketing of lifestyles and of a culture of possibilities persuade us that the self is not a fixed entity but is actively constructed, through consumption and display so that we can all aspire to a more attractive self.

In more exalted domains of talk, social theory itself divides over giving precedence to notions of identity as either the active shaping of a self by creative individuals or its regulation by social and institutional forces, and the more academics debate the issue the more complex it seems to be. Post-modernists suggest that identity has become so important because of the instability and uncertainties created by
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the rapid changes brought about by globalisation. We are constantly confronted with ever-growing social complexity and cultural diversity which, in turn, offers us more experiences and possible identities than ever before, generating a greater concern with our sense of self and with protecting an ‘authentic’ identity in the face of insecurity.

I therefore step into this minefield with some trepidation, and my only excuse for doing so is to offer an argument for a largely new view of identity and to address a specific context where the discursive construction of identity has been relatively neglected: the university. In academic contexts identity has often been regarded with some ambivalence: seen as either a contamination of scholarly objectivity or a source of creative subjectivity. Certainly, many students, teachers and researchers feel estranged by the literacy conventions of the academy, and writing as an academic often means the construction of individuals by texts, rather than the other way round. But while they may seem constraining and unfamiliar, these discourses are also enabling, allowing individuals to connect with others and participate in new communities. If writing is an act of identity, then it is important to see how this is so and the options open to us as writers.

This volume is, then, an elaboration of these ideas. In it I draw on a range of genres and language features to focus on the ways that identity is implicated in academic writing. Putting these two concepts together draws attention to the fact that identity is, above all, about how we create meanings while engaging with others. It points to the fact that we use language as the raw materials for the presentation of ourselves to the world and that what we say and write aligns us with or separates us from other people and other positions. So while often experienced as something private and personal, identity is very much part of our participation in the routine social encounters of our everyday lives. Here, then, I set out to offer what is a novel, and I hope interesting, approach to understanding the various ways our participation in academic communities influences the performance of identity and how this performance helps to shape academic communities.
Acknowledgements

This book argues for a social view of writing and itself is the product of a social process, involving exchanges over many years with colleagues, friends and students. Although the book deals with academic discourse, disciplinary writing and interpersonal aspects of language, all themes I am fairly familiar with, it does so from a perspective that is new to me. Wading into an unfamiliar literature and field of understanding is not possible without substantial help, and I would like to acknowledge those who have contributed to this journey.

First and foremost I would like to acknowledge the series editors, Susan Hunston and Carol Chapelle, for their painstaking critical reading of my drafts, and particularly to Susan for her intelligent suggestions, penetrating questions and sound advice. The final text owes a great deal to her critical good judgement and sense of reader awareness. I also want to thank Maurizio Gotti, whose invitation to give a paper on identity at a conference in Bergamo in the summer of 2008 got me started on this, and John Swales, Vijay Bhatia and David Block for their texts and conversations, which kept me on the path. I would also like to acknowledge the support, encouragement and photocopied articles I have received from friends and colleagues while writing, particularly Lillian Wong and Carmen Sancho Guinda, and my collaborator on some of the work discussed in these pages, Polly Tse, for her relentless enthusiasm about academic writing. I should also mention Fiona Hyland who has always helped and supported me in my writing.

I am also grateful to John Swales and Debbie Cameron for making their texts and thoughts about writing available to me for the study which appears as Chapter 7. Thanks, too, to those who gave me permission to use extracts from their websites: Ian Howarth, Professor of Astronomy at University College London; Dr Cian Dorr, Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Oxford; Mark Colyvan, Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Sydney Centre for the Foundations of Science and Dr Greg Restall of the Philosophy Department, University of Melbourne. Finally, I would also like to thank publishers for permission to reprint previously published
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Notes on corpora and abbreviations

One main source is the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), a collection of 152 transcripts (totalling 1.8 million words) of various academic spoken contexts from large lectures to dissertation defences. A discussion of its creation and categories along with full online access to the corpus can be found at http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/. There are additional examples of academic speech from the John Swales Conference Corpus (JSCC), a collection of transcripts from an academic conference held in honour of John Swales hosted by the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan in June 2006. JSCC contains both lectures and question-and-answer sessions, amounting to around 100,000 words and is available at http://jscc.elicorpus.info/. Written corpora are described in the text, but examples in the first three chapters are from the ‘Hyland corpus’ – a 1.4-million-word corpus of 240 research articles. The corpus consists of three papers from each of ten leading journals in eight disciplines, nominated by expert informants as among the leading publications in their fields and selected to represent a broad cross-section of academic practice from engineering, social sciences, the science and humanities.

Disciplines from these and other corpora are abbreviated following text and interview examples as follows:

AL applied linguistics
Bio biology
BS business studies
Comm communications
CS computer science
Econ economics
EE electrical engineering
IS information systems
ME mechanical engineering
Mk marketing
Phil philosophy
Phy physics
PA public administration
Soc sociology
SS social sciences
TESOL teaching English to speakers of other languages