

Book reviews in time

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Abstract This paper focuses on the issue of whether or not academic writing changes over time. We examine a selection of book reviews written by five authors over a 20–25 year period. The data show little evidence of change for each of the authors as measured by readability scores and grammatical features. These findings are in line with earlier ones that suggest that academic writing styles are fixed fairly early on and do not alter much with time.

Keywords Academic writing · Longitudinal studies · Book reviews · Aging

Introduction

Book reviews play an important part in academic communication but not a lot is known about how academics write book reviews, or indeed, whether or not authors change in the ways that they write book reviews over time. In this study we set out to see if we could throw some light on this situation. We wished to see if we had changed in our ways of writing book reviews over time—as judged by our written texts.

Hartley and Cabanac (2015) outline two principal methods used to study writing over time: *cross sectional*—where writers at different ages are compared (e.g., see Pennebaker and Stone 2003), and *longitudinal*—where the same writers are studied at different points in time (e.g., see Hartley et al. 2001; Hartley and Cabanac 2015). Both kinds of study have

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disadvantages: cross-sectional studies require their readers to assume that *different* people in different age groups are all very similar in every respect—*except age*: longitudinal ones require their readers to assume that the *same* participants *differ only in age* and nothing else. Few of these longitudinal studies mention other changes in, for example, life styles, or even the tools that writers use over time—from pen/pencil to typewriters, word-processors and possibly voice-activated computers (e.g., Hartley et al. 2001).

In an earlier article Hartley and Cabanac (2015) traced the first author's writing style in academic books and journals written over a period of 40 years. The authors were interested to see whether or not Hartley's writing style had changed during this time-span. They did in fact find one or two differences: it appeared that the readability of Hartley's dozen or so textbook chapters remained relatively stable over time but that chapters written in the later years were somewhat easier to read than those in the earlier ones. Furthermore, the styles of the titles used for chapters and articles remained much the same over this period of time but, again, in the later years, there was an increase in the numbers of titles written in the form of questions.

Cross-sectional studies have not looked so much at writing styles over time as they have at changes in vocabulary. New computer-aided techniques have not only allowed researchers to count sentences and different parts of speech but also to examine the grammar and the vocabulary of texts. Pennebaker and Stone (2003), for instance, examined the vocabulary used by over 3000 individuals ranging in age from 8 to 85 when describing emotional or superficial events. They found that aging was associated with a greater use of positive emotion words and a lower use of negative emotion words and, further, that there was a lower use of self-references and references to other people as their participants got older.

In a second (longitudinal) study reported in the same paper, the authors examined the works of ten prominent authors over time. In this study there were four novelists, four poets, and two playwrights and an equal number of men and women. Each of the authors contributed approximately 9,03,000 words to the analysis. Here six of these ten authors displayed later writing patterns similar to those shown in their early texts and one showed the reverse.

In this article we report on the writing styles of five different academic writers writing book reviews over time. We chose book reviews because they are a standard genre, often fairly short and reasonably accessible for a variety of readers. For each of our five authors we examined a selection of book reviews written across periods of 20 years or so, and each published within a particular journal. And, in order to standardise our measures, we used the same measures for each author. These, basically, were a selection of some of the spelling, grammar, and readability measures available on Microsoft (Version 8).

Results

Table 1 shows the results that we obtained for each author and summary—median—data are given in Table 2. It can be seen that Reviewers 1 and 5 were fairly consistent in the lengths of their reviews over time, but that other reviewers were more varied. Reviewer 2 got more consistent after an early wobble, Reviewer 3 gave more attention to a book that he disliked, and Reviewer 4 seemed to write longer reviews as time passed. Nonetheless, despite some variations in length, most authors were reasonably consistent on other measures—such as the number of words per sentence, the percentage of passives, and readability and grade level scores.

Table 1 Data for each of the 5 reviewers

<i>Reviewer 1. John Cowan (in the British Journal of Educational Technology)</i>						
Review year	1991	1995 ^a	2000 ^b	2005 ^a	2008	2015
Words	489	523	570	595	647	371
Paras	7	6	4	7	7	4
Sentences	21	19	20	26	28	12
Sentences/para	3.0	3.1	5.0	3.7	4.0	4.0
Words/sentence	23.2	27.5	28.5	22.8	23.1	29.0
Passives (%)	28	10	10	7	10	8
Flesch reading ease	58.4	25.2	42.5	34.1	39.1	31.0
US grade level	10.8	15.9	14.4	14.1	13.3	16.1
<i>Reviewer 2. Cynthia Deeson (in the British Journal of Educational Technology)</i>						
Review year	1988	1996 ^c	2001 ^d	2004 ^c	2008	
Words	132	481	295	361	377	
Paras	3	8	4	6	6	
Sentences	6	20	14	19	17	
Sentences/para	2	2.5	3.5	3.1	2.8	
Words/sentence	22.0	24.0	21.0	19.0	22.1	
Passives (%)	66	20	21	31	11	
Flesch reading ease	12.1	32.0	42.3	47.6	40.7	
US grade level	17.1	13.5	12.5	11.3	13.0	
<i>Reviewer 3. Eric Deeson (in the British Journal of Educational Technology)</i>						
Review year	1995	2000	2005 ^f	2010 ^g	2014	
Words	313	242	756	372	704	
Paras	4	5	18	4	5	
Sentences	11	12	34	12	25	
Sentences/para	3.6	2.4	1.8	3.0	5.0	
Words/sentence	25.6	20.1	22.1	31.0	28.1	
Passives (%)	0	8	2	8	0	
Flesch reading ease	55.1	44.4	46.6	41.6	37.4	
US grade level	11.9	12.0	12.1	15.1	15.0	
<i>Reviewer 4. James Hartley (in the British Journal of Educational Technology)</i>						
Review year	1990 ^h	1997 ^h	2001	2006 ⁱ	2009 ^j	
Words	538	351	353	508	818	
Paras	11	6	5	7	20	
Sentences	25	18	16	25	41	
Sentences/para	3.5	3.0	3.2	3.5	3.7	
Words/sentence	19.8	19.5	22.0	20.3	19.0	
Passives (%)	36	27	25	20	14	
Flesch reading ease	45.1	34.2	39.6	34.8	34.6	
US grade level	11.8	13.3	13.2	13.4	13.1	
<i>Reviewer 5. Peter Thomas (in the Bulletin of the British Ecological Society)</i>						
Review year	1988	1994	2002	2006 ^k	2010	2015
Words	252	183	266	215	423	341
Paras	2	2	2	1	2	1
Sentences	10	6	11	9	14	14
Sentences/para	5.0	3.0	5.5	9.0	7.0	14.0

Table 1 continued

Words/sentence	25.2	30.5	24.1	23.8	30.2	24.3
Passives (%)	30	30	36	22	28	7
Flesch reading ease	40.9	20.0	34.3	42.1	51.5	39.7
US grade level	13.2	18.0	14.1	13.3	13.5	13.7

^a Two editors^b Three authors^c Review of two books together (one edited)^d Two books by the same female author^e One book by two female authors^f Negative review^g Edited text^h Edited textⁱ Female author^j ambivalent review^k Edited collection**Table 2** Median data for the five reviewers

	JC	CD	ED	JH	PT
Words	547	361	372	508	258
Paras	6.5	6	5	7	2
Sentences	20.5	17	12	25	10.5
Sentences/para	3.8	2.8	3.0	3.5	6.3
Words/sentence	25.1	22.0	25.6	19.8	24.9
Passives (%)	10	21	2	25	29
Flesch reading ease	36.5	40.7	44.4	34.8	40.3
US grade level	14.3	13.0	12.1	13.2	13.4

Discussion

The overall results (Table 1) suggest that each reviewer was reasonably consistent over a twenty-twenty-five year period in the ways in which they wrote their reviews. Actually this is not strictly true: the data show that the *outcomes* of the ways that these reviews were written were consistent—the data say nothing about how the reviews were actually written—honed and polished over time or completed in one sitting, for example—a point developed in Hartley (2016). In point of fact, although there are myriad texts and articles on ‘How to write a book review’, there are few accounts of how particular reviews have been written (but see Hartley 2010 for an exception).

Furthermore, the reviews listed in Table 1 were written towards the ends of their authors’ academic writing lives (with the exception of Reviewer 5). So it is likely that these methods that worked for them had been acquired through earlier practice and variation. Unfortunately we do not have any very early book reviews from our authors. But we do know that these reviewers were trained in academic writing at school, in undergraduate

Table 3 The median data for the book reviews and their theses for three of the respondents

	JC		JH		PT	
	Revs.	Thesis	Revs.	Thesis	Revs.	Thesis
Sentences/para	3.8	5.7	3.5	3.0	6.3	3.8
Words/sentence	25.1	27.6	19.8	28.9	24.9	22.2
Passives (%)	10	30	25	23	29	28
Flesch reading ease	36.5	39.7	34.8	28.9	40.3	43.0
US grade level	14.3	14.3	13.2	16.1	13.4	11.7

classes and postgraduate research before becoming reviewers. It is well possible, then, that the academic writing styles required for different tasks are relatively fixed by this period.

In an attempt to throw some light on this issue we examined extracts from the PhD theses that were available for three of our authors. These data, shown in Table 3, are insufficient to allow any conclusions on the matter—but they do not contradict the idea that academic writing styles are established relatively early.

Nonetheless, each author was surprised by the results for their book reviews. Three reactions were as follows:

JC: Over the years I would have said that I had:

- Written less about my own reactions to a text
- More frequently summarised what the text contains
- Been more specific about what different readers may find that will be of interest to them
- Been less reluctant to criticise

JH: I imagined my reviews would be much the same, although now easier to read. So I was a bit disappointed but not that surprised. I was astonished by the consistency of the numbers of words per sentence and the number of sentences per paragraph. And the (apparent) levelling off of the Flesch scores was pleasing.

PT: Before discussing these results I would have laid money on my reviews having changed over time... I expected that....

Are different sorts of books reviewed differently?

With only 5 or 6 reviews to compare for each author it was not possible to assess whether or not variations in styles might occur when reviewing different kinds of books. An original text might be reviewed differently from an edited collection of previously published papers, and/or an edited collection of new ones. Short texts may be reviewed differently from magisterial tomes, and e-books differently from conventional ones. Texts written by males or females might be reviewed differently by reviewers of the opposite sex. In this study our authors reviewed both edited collections and individually authored texts written by males and females, but the numbers were far too insufficient to detect any differences in the styles of their reviews in these respects.

Another variation in book reviewing occurs when reviewers review *several books* on a single theme, rather than a single text. However, we have no examples of this practice here (although Reviewer 2 did review two books together once). Nor do we have an example of where a reviewer is: (1) one among several reviewing the same text(s) on a particular theme—say a set of introductory textbooks on academic writing—or (2) one where other reviewers also review the same text for a journal’s special feature.

It is possible that writing styles may differ when writing a negative review compared with a positive one. However, 90 % of the reviews studies here were positive in tone. Negative reviews are generally rarer—and often stand out because of this. Perhaps a related concern here is when male authors scorn female ones and vice versa—again a feature not found in this study.

Finally, of course, it is perhaps worth noting that many book reviews typically begin with a startling opening sentence and/or end with a flourish. Such sentiments often seem to be written in a form of code: what is said is not always what is meant. Thus the opening phrase, ‘I hoped that I would learn...’ might convey the sentiment that ‘I didn’t learn much about...’. Hartley (2006) lists other examples. However, there were few, if any, such opening and closing remarks in the reviews that we studied here.

Conclusions

What then can we conclude? It appears that there is no real support for the notion that academic writing changes with time: indeed, it seems safer to say that the authors of this paper have remained fairly stable in this respect over a period of 20 years. Academic writing styles thus seem to be fixed at a relatively age and perhaps the more interesting questions are still how, when, and why does this fixation happen!

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