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Afterword

Suresh Canagarajah

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.

(Foucault 1972b, p. 216)

Academic publishing conventions are treated as normative by most scholars. They think of the existing textual and publishing conventions as perhaps the most logical for learned or research discourse. Some scholars talk of these conventions as universally valid for that reason. Others justify them as merely instrumental. That is, these conventions are treated as value-free and neutral, simply a means to an end – presumably the rich and diverse ends of scholars around the world. However, scholars who work from non-privileged contexts almost always realize that these writing and publishing conventions are not innocent. I had to learn this the hard way. After my doctoral studies in the United States, I returned to teaching in my native Sri Lanka, thinking that my training in academic research and writing conventions would help me contribute to the wider scholarly community on local knowledge. I quickly found that an expertise in academic writing conventions was not sufficient for me to engage in publishing. Access to the resources required for publishing according to those conventions was not equally available to everyone. Also, the conventions didn't favour the communication of knowledge that mattered to us in terms of how we wanted them conveyed. Finally, the conventions distorted our voices and identities, and compelled us to write according to an ethos that was alien to us and to our scholarly persona.

Foucault's statement in the epigraph points to the politics of academic writing conventions. Firstly, the conventions are not a neutral medium. They constrain and control the messiness, unpredictability, and complexity of life and experiences. This inevitably leads to some distortions. Not surprisingly,

this distortion is skewed to favour certain social groups. That is because it is the privileged who do the selection, organization and redistribution of these discourse conventions. There is therefore a relationship between the groups that define these conventions, their knowledge and their power; hence, the troubling nexus between knowledge and power, with academic writing/publishing conventions playing a critical role in sustaining this unfair nexus.

I like to add a personal touch and embodied voice in this afterword in support of Julia Molinari's project to democratize and pluralize academic writing. I draw from the experiences of my colleagues and myself in trying to publish from Sri Lanka, which I have narrated more elaborately in my book *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing* (Canagarajah, 2002b).

Consider the requirement to frame one's research or scholarly contribution in terms of the state of the art. The obligatory literature review. It often appears in the beginning of an article, before one develops one's own argument or findings, and is supposed to demonstrate the importance of one's research findings. It is presented as a harmless convention of 'joining the conversation'. How can readers assess if one's knowledge is new or significant if authors don't demonstrate how it fits the current disciplinary discourses, it is argued. In the canonical definition of research articles, John Swales (1990) considers the literature review the burden of the opening move, which he calls 'Create a Research Space'. It involves 'Establishing a Territory' (identifying the body of discourse framing the study), 'Establishing a Niche' (showing a gap in the existing literature), and then 'Occupying the Niche' (showing how one's contribution furthers this discourse). In Sri Lanka, we had many problems in meeting this requirement. To begin with, we didn't have the latest publications in any discipline to be able to review them closely for our articles. Journals and books are expensive, as a few multinational publishers monopolize academic publishing and raise the prices to favour their profit motivation. If journals and books are expensive for libraries in the United States and United Kingdom, they are beyond reach for scholars in the Global South. Therefore, when my colleagues and I submit articles from Sri Lanka, reviewers and editors in the West often turn them back by saying that they are 'inappropriately framed'. What this means is that we failed to start our article by entering the current state of the knowledge as scholars in the West understand it. They compel us to frame our research in relation to a list of publications they consider critical for that area of scholarship.

Even in the cases where we gain access to some of the publications the editors and reviewers helpfully suggest for our consideration, we find that they pose rhetorical and ideological constraints on what we want to write about. Consider

the example when I first wanted to publish about publishing inequalities as shaped by material inequalities and unequal access to scholarly resources. ‘Publishing on publishing’ was not a thing in any discipline at that time in the 1990s! There was no literature to review. So I started off with a personal narrative on how I returned from the United States with a knowledge of academic conventions, but couldn’t adopt them because of material inequalities in Sri Lanka. I cited from news media and popular journals that had reported on the dire academic conditions for scholars in the Global South. I also didn’t know under which discipline a publication on academic publishing would fall. So I sent the article to a journal on writing scholarship. The reviewers turned back my submission saying that the focus of my argument was not clear because it was not framed in terms of any existing scholarly literature. What they forgot was that there was no scholarship on such a topic at that time. Finally, on the suggestion of the reviewers, I tried to frame my article on the studies in writing scholarship on the differences and difficulties for second-language students. However, I realized how this literature distorted my argument. My article was not about language differences. It was actually about material differences that exceeded language or cultural diversity. Framing publishing inequalities as a linguistic or cultural problem can actually end up blaming the victim. It will appear as if scholars in the periphery are unable to publish simply because they adopt grammatical or discursal conventions that are different. If they only learn the proper language and conventions they will be successful, it might be interpreted. In that sense, this would not be the problem of the publishing industry, but of the individual scholars. Thus, framing local knowledge in terms of publications available in the field involves filtering out the critical edge in our argument, distorting the significance or compromising our positions.

If we adopt a longer historical lens on academic writing conventions, we will find that they have not been static, absolute or universal. They have been changing in relation to material conditions, even in the West. In the earliest scientific publications in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* in the seventeenth century, the research articles started with a ‘Dear Editor’, written in first person, and narrating the experiment that the scholar undertook (see Atkinson, 1996). The writing adopted a narrative and temporal progression. There was no literature review to speak of, because it took many more years for findings to sediment into established knowledge and states of the art. The bulk of the articles at this time related to methodology, as research instruments were not universal or universally accessible. In what Shapin (1984) calls ‘communal witnessing’, the authors had to narrate the assembling of the

research instrument and experimental procedures so that they could satisfy the empirical requirement of making their research visible for replication. As research progressed, literature review became more critical to demonstrate one's own unique contribution. The methodology section became reduced in significance and space as instruments and methods became standardized.

The literature review is now undergoing further changes. John Swales (1990) observes that the explosion of journals and disciplines has created some confusion about what exactly is the state of the art. There are multiple conversations going on from different theoretical perspectives on the same topic or subject. Furthermore, the disciplinary discourses are more layered, with bodies of work or states of the art on every subtopic or sub-discipline. The confusion is quite evident in novice scholars even in the West. They often cite the publications they are most familiar with or have immediate access to, unaware of the pedigree of a term, construct or paradigm. Swales (1990) and Bazerman (1988) therefore observe a structural change underway in the genre of research articles. They observe that literature review is now not limited to one place in the article (i.e. in the opening section, as it was traditional), but occurs in more diversified manner at different points in the text as relevant to the ongoing discussion. That is, authors see the need to bring up a relevant body of literature as it pertains to the subtopics or themes both in the framing section and the concluding discussion on the significance and interpretation of their findings.

What this example of the literature review suggests is that genre conventions have continued to change in relation to material and historical conditions. Not only did the academic writing conventions evolve under different conditions at different historical periods, it is still changing. This illustration of the trajectory of the literature review is one among many genre conventions I can suggest for their diverse realizations and evolutions over time. Such examples demystify academic publishing conventions. There is nothing universal or absolute about the academic genre. It has changed before, and it is still changing in relation to diverse social and historical conditions.

Other conditions such as technological, rhetorical and epistemological shifts are also initiating dramatic changes in academic writing currently. However, it is important for all of us to engage in these changes to nudge them in favour of greater democratization and inclusivity in academic communication and publishing. We cannot treat such genre changes as impersonal, neutral or automatic. Foucault would remind us that there is always a politics in knowledge construction, even if the social players, media, and platforms are different. It is

for this reason that books such as this that theorize diversification and chart new ways forward are much needed. I am in solidarity with scholars like Julia who are working to diversify academic writing so that all scholars can have a voice, share knowledge more equitably, and conduct a healthy and fair exchange of knowledge. If there is one thing that the recent pandemic teaches us, it is that any activity that doesn't assume human interdependence is going to be costly for all of us. Monopolization of knowledge, isolation of certain communities from networks of knowledge production, and deliberate or unwitting distortion of knowledge that favours one's own values and interests will have dire implications for our collective human future. Let us work towards more open and fair scholarly exchanges through academic publishing.