

Narrating selves in academic writing

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Abstract

In teaching academic writing the goal is to help students write research texts that are generally acceptable by the professional audience. This requires learning of many skills, not the least of which is being in charge of the many different 'voices' (sources) in the text. To reach this practical goal we have experimented with conceptual tools borrowed from literary narratology to visualize the interplay between voices.

To begin with, the students must be able to separate the individual voices. For this, a "comics strip method" was used. The next step is to find out how to strengthen the student authors' own voices. This will get much easier when completing the first step has already lined out the spans of text that do not represent the student's own voice.

The narratological "toolbox" (i. e., concepts like 'voice', 'implied author', 'narrator' etc.) is easy to grasp and to operationalize. It just remains to be seen whether this kind of analysis will ultimately lead to a practical synthesis—that is, whether it will help the students find their own voices in the end.

1. Overview

The art of being in charge of the many different "voices" (sources) in the text is one of the biggest hurdles in learning to write acceptable research texts—in any language; in the present case we are actually talking of Finnish students learning to write in Finnish but the method and tools are general enough to apply to any linguistic framework.

The authors' interstitching and commanding the external voices with their own voice is here called "narrating the author's self". This is where the authors must openly take the responsibility of their texts.

The 'author' here is specifically the intratextual or **implied author** (Booth 1961). We must make sure the students understand that research papers (should) have an objectified, neutral, and detached authorial voice—not the subjective and emotional one they most easily borrow from fictional literature—while simultaneously reminding them of the necessity of utilizing many other voices since research by its very nature is always built on top of other people's work.

2. The concept of 'voice'

We use the concept of **voice** borrowed from literary narratology to describe the way multiple texts integrate as one. We are thus explicitly only interested in the authors' selves as inner-world, or textual, constructs—as the (implied) authors.

Voice integrates conceptually the aspects of narration and intertextuality: composing one's own text while always relying on several distinct pre-existing texts.

The concept is ultimately based on Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on poetics, especially on Dostoyevsky's novels (Holquist 1985). From the point of view of teaching academic writing, voice has the advantage of being a down-to-earth, easily accessible concept. It is easy to demonstrate in action (see section 3) instead of requiring extensive forays into narrative theory.

Voice also underlines the fact that academic texts *always* exploit other texts, other writers. The guiding force of the author is much more to orchestrate these voices into a coherent whole than to create an autonomous text by themselves.

3. Voices in academic writing

In research literature there are many competing ways of defining voice (cf. Aczel 2005) but generally it can be defined so that it is:

- easy to operationalize (for the teacher), and
- easy to grasp (for the students).

The first step is for the students to be able to separate the individual voices. For this, a "comics strip method" was employed as shown in Fig. 1.

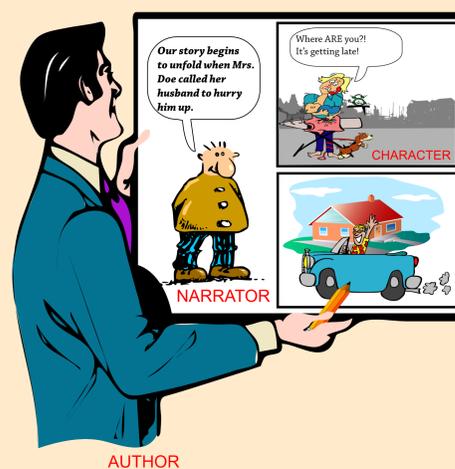


Figure 1: Voices illustrated as a comic strip and as text.

(The "comic" looks rather rough at the edges as it is built using existing clipart from Corel ClipArt gallery etc. and not drawn by an artist for the purpose.)

In the picture, the "same" story is told in two different ways: first using a comic strip, then using a "book format". The students are advised to:

- concentrate on the differences between the narrative modes, and
- using the picture as a model, imagine their own text as a comic.

For most students, the relationships existing between the textual and the graphical+textual formats are well known and thus easy to focus. (This might however be culture-specific, and the typographical aspects should also not be forgotten.)

The main point is that when everything in someone else's voice is relocated into a speech bubble, what remains is attributable to the students themselves. The actual narrative role will still be ambiguous but this is irrelevant to the task at this stage; see however section 6.

4. How beginning students orchestrate voices

In principle only the following techniques of 'voice control' are widely used by beginning students:

- direct quotations (in quotation marks text or as their own indented paragraphs);
- paraphrasing the quote in student's (more or less) own words;
- using *according to X* structure (Finnish *X:n mukaan*);
- using a neutral discourse verb like *says* (Finnish *sanoo*).

One easy way for the students to learn how to bring their own self in is to encourage them to use modal adverbs. It

is already much more elaborate, interpersonality-wise, to write "as X boldly claims" than "according to X".

(However, students often pick up the first adverb teacher suggests them and use it throughout!)

Highlighting the different voices on paper makes it much easier for the student to see how much of text is someone else talking. This is the first step of putting more of the writer's self in it.

5. Illustrative techniques in text-writing practice

The students were advised to think of the text as a comic strip where

- the external voices were represented by speech balloons;
- the narrator's voice by caption boxes; and
- the (implied) author as the artist outside the panels.

In classroom practice a simple underlining or highlighter can be used if working with paper. However, if possible, using a word processor in a computer room is recommended, because thus there are many more ways of highlighting the text dynamically, and also it is much easier to make changes if needed—say, the group disagrees over whose voice is heard in a specific span of text. For presentation purposes simple HTML+CSS formatting provides a viable solution.

This technique has been well received by several groups of students, and just by itself it seems to help the students visualize the quantitative proportions of the voices. For the teacher, the comics strip method (section 3) is directly translatable to narratological terms and thus facilitates fine-grained textual analysis.

6. "Self" in academic writing

The skill of producing a textual self that is acceptable for the register and genre is a necessary one for any academic student. However it is also one of the most difficult ones because mere visualization techniques do not suffice here.

This is because when we reach this level we must be able to differentiate between the different roles the author's "self" can take, that is at least between the *narrator's* voice which can be pointed out in the text and the *(implied) author's* voice which is always "behind the curtain" but sets the general "mood" of the text towards other voices by arranging them.

For this we have been borrowing some ideas presented by Ivanič (1998) on author's identities but with a distinctly narratological point of view. This is an ongoing work and we have only just scratched its surface. What we can, however, say for certain now is that the first stepping stone should always be identifying the *external* voices. What remains in the text after them belongs to the different manifestations of the student author's self.

References

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