Word Choice: Global Challenges in Academic Writing

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In this article, Sánchez Martín describes the decision-making process she goes through as she is writing and explores some of the challenges that both second/third language writers and first language writers face in academic discourse. In particular, she describes the lexical and grammatical difficulties the participants of her study have while writing and reaches the conclusion that all sorts of writers, no matter what their first language is, seem to deal with similar problems in their writing.

As I start writing the first draft of this article, I stop for a second and take a deep breath. I know it is not going to be a smooth process; I know I will be stuck on sentences for several reasons and that I will never be satisfied with all the decisions I make throughout all the writing process. Just like when I am playing scrabble with my English major friends, I will have to squeeze my mind and dig into all my linguistic knowledge in order to produce a creative piece of writing. What is it usually that I have to look for in the deepest corner of my mind? What are the linguistic means that are activated in doing so? What sort of skills do I develop in order to successfully achieve my purposes as a writer? And most importantly: do I go through this really complex self-reflexive process because of my personal background and my identity as an international graduate student of English, or do other people deal with similar issues? What makes native and non-native speakers[1] different in terms of their writing skills in an academic context?

Perhaps you who are now reading this introduction have already noticed something that is different about it, and therefore, there could be some chances that you might give up reading my thoughts. In that case, I am asking you for a favor. Some of you may be aware of subtleties related to cultural issues.

But if you are not, I hope you will be ready to activate your cross-cultural sensitivity in order to approach this article. Globalization has brought us together, and thus, intelligibility is not only in my hands, as a writer, but also in yours, as a reader. Any sort of communication exists because there are two sides that mutually collaborate in order to achieve common goals.

The aim of this article is to look at some of the challenges that both international graduate students of English and US-born students of English have to cope with in their academic writing. In particular, I will narrow the focus to challenges related to word choice. By looking at the conscious or unconscious decisions made in terms of word choice, I also aim to contribute to breaking down the barriers that separate the so-called native and non-native speakers by pointing both at similarities and differences that, once identified, can be further explored and that, ultimately, impact the quality of the writing skills of the latter.

Choosing Lexical and Grammatical Words

In the first place, we know that words are not isolated in texts. They interconnect among other words so as to produce coherent and cohesive discourses. We know that there is cohesion in a text because we can make sense out of it thanks to words that semantically refer to other words previously mentioned. For instance, I might say, "**My sister's** name is **Pilar**. **She** has just moved to **the south of Spain**, to a **city** called **Valencia**. **There, she** works as a chemical engineer at **a company which** seeks to promote eolic energy." When we read the second sentence we know I am referring to my sister, Pilar, or "she." Although I use different linguistic items to talk about her, we know I am talking about the same person. The same thing happens to words like "the south of Spain," "Valencia," and "there"; they all refer to the same place even though I use different words in several sentences throughout the text. A text is cohesive if we know how to link sentences. In the same texts, words like "there" and "which" help us connect several sentences.

In this respect, words belong to the syntactic realm of linguistics. For example, determiners always accompany a noun; they do not carry any meaning on their own. However, when they precede a noun, they specify (determine) what noun in particular they are referring to. So, that's why the phrases "my house," "a house," "the house," and "one house" mean different things.

Moreover, words are charged with meaning that is not only denotative (what you read in a dictionary entry) but also connotative (the associations that take place in our minds in order to make sense of a word). For instance, the denotative meaning of the word "sun" according to the *Oxford Dictionary of*

English is "the star round which the earth orbits," but its connotative meaning will be bound to our knowledge of the world, and thus, it is culturally-specific. For example, for many people from different backgrounds, the sun conveys meanings of optimism and happiness because it provides us with light and warmth. However, there are other words whose connotative meaning will vary a lot across cultures. In this sense, who you are as a writer and who you are addressing with your text, as well as the context in which you produce it, will play a huge role when you make decisions on whether or not to use a particular word. To illustrate this idea, I can refer to the fact that I used the expression "international graduate" and not "non-native speaker" previously in this article. Although the denotative meanings of both expressions are not the same (you can be an international student and at the same time a native speaker of English), they are certainly related in this contextual writing situation. I consciously made the choice of using "international" with the purpose of avoiding the stereotypical ideas about linguistic behaviors that are commonly projected in people´s minds when referring to "non-native" speakers. In other words, I believe that "international" may be a more neutral and broader way to address the topic. In this case, word choice is at a high stake as it is fraught with cultural elements.

To sum up, words not only belong to the lexical realm of language but also to syntax and pragmatics (the actual use of language). The following diagram shows the connections between these linguistic sub-disciplines in relation to word choice.
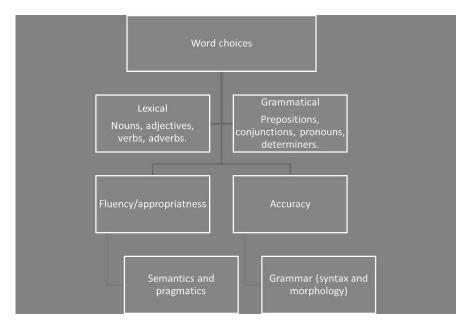

Figure 1: The Relations of Words to Disciplines

The Study

In order to look at these challenges and to establish comparisons as far as decision making processes are concerned, I interviewed writers whose native languages differed, and I answered the questions myself. Because of space limitations, only five participants (including myself) collaborated in this project.

Four of us are PhD students of English at Illinois State University, and the other participant is doing a Masters in Modern Languages, focusing on French in particular. So we are not only familiarized with academic writing, but also we have some metalinguistic knowledge about it (knowledge on how to write, particularly about grammar rules). To put it in a simpler way, we know about writing as a linguistic and communicative activity *per se*. This may be a limitation in terms of the scope of the analysis, but it is not my aim to draw conclusions on the similarities and/or differences among us. In fact, my purpose is just to raise awareness about it and to start a discussion that may be further (and hopefully) implemented in the future.

The participants responded to my questions via the Internet. Three of them replied to a Facebook message, and one of them replied via email. Thus, the features of their writing will attach to the genre conventions of Facebook and email (for instance, Participant 1 uses a smile face to end up her answers).

Another aspect that I should mention is that there are differences in the tone that the participants use in their answers, mainly because of the predisposition by which they approached the interview. In particular, it may seem noticeable that I engage more in finding answers to the questions, which are longer and also include more examples. As I am the writer of this article, my concerns about the topic are probably higher, and thus, I have to reflect on the word choices that I am making as I write. Therefore, agency (who is writing and with what purposes) makes a difference in composition.

My Experience

I often struggle with the spelling of certain words. It is always the same words; I think I have fossilized those "errors," and although I know I have some problems with those words, I keep on making the same mistakes. It happens with the words "especially" and "specially," "emphasize" (or "emphasise") and with the words "analysis," "analyze," and "analyses," for instance. Sometimes, this confusion is caused by the differences between British and American English.

I also have trouble finding collocations (chunks of words that always appear together like "apply for a job" or "keep an eye on someone") in English,

because those types of semantic expressions are very fixed in a language. Moreover, we may have some collocations in Spanish that would perfectly fit in a sentence but that do not exist in English, and that, sometimes, is frustrating.

I constantly do research. I check all sorts of dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, dictionaries for slang expressions, online translators, American English dictionaries, British English dictionaries, Google, webpages that are both in Spanish and English, etc. One of my favorite ways to check my writing is to type a sentence or a fragment of a sentence between quotation marks on Google and see how many results I get. Besides knowing how many people have used that sentence on the Internet in more or less formal contexts (that is why I use quotation marks), I also get further information by looking at who wrote that and in what context. For instance, if I google "I often check dictionaries," there are only seven results for my search, and the first one was written by a Japanese person. In this case, I do not feel very confident with using that particular sentence (although I know is totally acceptable and grammatically correct), but I don´t see many native speakers using it (which is probably because they don´t check dictionaries very often, no offense :p). Anyways, seven results are not enough for me. So what I usually do is to change some of the words whose function and meaning do not affect the grammatical structure of the sentence. For example, in this case I google "I often check webpages". Contrary to what I expect, I just get one result. I am so disappointed and angry. I will have to keep on doing research just for a single sentence that was, apparently, super easy!

Ok, there may be some problems here. Perhaps it is that, as Google suggests, I have spelled the word "webpages" incorrectly. So I google it. Just the word, first between quotation marks and next, without quotations marks. There is probably a lot of variation in this sense, I think. Results for "web pages": 60.700.000. Ok, this means something. Results for "web pages" (no quotation marks): 1,410,000,000. Good, I don´t think 1.410.000.000 people are going to be wrong . . .

I feel so dumb (would "silly" be better? Would people use them in different ways? What would change?) for not having spelled the word right, so I check if it is something I made up or if there are some reasons for me to have spelled it like that. I google "webpages" and I get 16.100.000. Ok, now I am confused. Oh, Wikipedia says that you can spell it either way!

Alright, so I have two options: "webpages" or "web pages." Actually, there is another one. I have noticed, while doing research, that what people use most of the times is "websites". And that would be totally perfect. Why? Why? Why? I know this word, of course I do. Why was that other word ("webpages") so embedded in my mind? Well, there is a very simple explanation. In peninsular Spanish, the word that everybody uses is "página web" (I believe that "sitios web" is mostly used in Latin American countries).

This makes me think about the words "sitio web" and "página web" as the perfect examples of both code-switching and code-meshing. How interesting! (And I am using this expression here because I would have done that in Spanish, and I know people in the UK say it, although I asked an American friend of mine if people in the USA use it or not, and his concise answer was "no!"). Digressions apart, using "web page" was an example of code-meshing because I am mixing up two linguistic (cognitive) structures even though there is just one language, English. And "página web" is an example of code-switching because the expression is composed of/by (I would have to google which preposition goes with "composed") two words from two different linguistic systems, Spanish and English. (By the way, "composed of" got 73,200,000 results and "composed by" got 23.800.000 results).

My troubles with the sentence I started doing research about ("I often check dictionaries") are not over. How can a simple sentence cause me so much trouble? Is it because I am a linguist that I pay so much attention to these aspects?

Anyway, there is more to look at in the sentence. I still find it awkward that there were only seven results in my search for "I often check dictionaries." What else could be the reason for the problem? The frequency adverb "often," maybe. I still remember being taught those adverbs in school, in high-school, in the languages academy and in college. What a surprise that I still don´t feel 100% sure about the fact that there are rules when using them. Moreover, the number of results I got in Google do not show very well defined patterns of use (586,000 results for "I often check it" and 210.000 for "I check it often"). It seems to me that the first option would be a better choice. My research would continue with changing the adverb to "barely" or "usually" to see if the pattern is repeated. In fact, "I usually check it" is used 3,410,000 times, whereas "I check it usually" is only used 42.100 times. This makes me think that perhaps, I should have used "usually" instead of "often" in my sentence. They pretty much mean the same thing. So I google my sentence again "I usually check web pages," and . . . NOOOOOOOO! Just one result again! At this point I don´t care anymore about the sentence. I google "check web pages" and I get 1.220.000 results. That´s more than enough.

However, I think, native speakers (aha!) would have probably said something else instead. I will just ask my friends on Facebook.

Great! I am done with a sentence. The process would be the same for other "problematic" aspects. I actually randomly chose that sentence, which unexpectedly made me think about things that were apparently easy for me. I guess I have done too many discourse analyses. (By the way, notice that my friend, a "native" speaker of English says "web pages" in her message. Is it because she was influenced by what she saw that I had written in my first message? If that is the case, I win!).

Cris Tina Sánchez Martín   6:19pm
Hey people, I am writing an article. Does this sound super weird to you? "I often/usually check web pages"

Katy Stein   6:21pm
In what context?

Cris Tina Sánchez Martín   6:21pm
I am talking about my resources, what I look at when I am writing

Katy Stein   6:23pm
Yeah, that sounds fine. Maybe specify what type of web pages

Cris Tina Sánchez Martín   6:24pm
ok, perfect, thanks! haha! this is for the Grassroots article by the way 🙂

can I get a screenshot of this and put it there?

Figure 2: I Facebook My Friends To Ask Them About My Word Choices

Do I Proof-Read My Writing?

I revise my writing all the time, not only after having finished the paper or essay. I often ask people who are around (or on Facebook) about grammatical issues or issues of appropriateness, but unless I have to submit what I have written to an official institution, such as a committee that is going to decide if I get a scholarship or can present at a conference, I do not usually ask people to read my final draft for me. Mainly because I have done so much research already that I don´t think it will make a big difference.

If someone revises it for me, I will always try to ask someone who is culturally-sensitive and ideally someone who knows Spanish, so that they can help me with semantic issues, because those are the hardest to cope with.

Apart from Google, I USUALLY look at other WEBSITES like online translators. I use a database (linguee.com) that allows me to see the context in which a particular expression is employed and that consists of a corpus compiled by official documents from European Institutions, basically. Thus, they are very reliable. The problem with it is that once I have checked that the linguistic expression was appropriately used, I have to look for an American context in which it is used, as well.

The Participants' Responses

Note: To maintain accuracy of my participants' responses, I have included them directly without grammatical editing. Thus, these answers represent their exact responses, reflecting the context/situation of the interview.

1. *Do you usually have to face challenges regarding word choice in your academic articles (papers)? If yes, could you describe them with some examples? Would you say that those challenges relate more to lexical or grammatical words?*

> **Participant 1:** I think usually challenges arise when I am thinking about a thing visually in mind (like drawing a map or chart of ideas) then I get stuck when I suddenly have to verbalize it. Also sometimes [. . .] I have a hard time find that subtle counterpart in the other language too fully represent that idea. I usually go online and use either freedictionary.com and iciba.com and even urbandictionary.com to figure out what I am trying to articulate. I think most of my linguistic challenges come from attempts to use idioms.

> **Participant 2:** Yes, I often face challenges with word choice in my academic writing. Usually these challenges stem from trying to adapt my language to an academic tone. Also, sometimes academic words are so "loaded" that I might have to go back and review some readings to make sure I'm talking about the right thing in the right context. So, most of these concerns are "lexical" then.

> **Participant 3:** Yes, sometimes I do face challenges while writing my academic papers, most of them are lexical ones. In different cases, I used to think that an English word means always the same as it's morphological equivalent in French (ex.: the French word: "librairie" means "bookstore", and what we call "Library" in English is "bibliothéque" in French). Or, when constructing a sentence containing a word that I don't know, unconsciously I use the French equivalent of it at the start and before I write it I pay attention to the fact that the word I'm using in the sentence is not English but French (ex.: Using the word "connaissance" for "acquaintance").

> **Participant 4:** Yes, problems regarding word choice are often present as I write academic papers. I would have to say that these problems stem from my limited vocabulary. My papers typically become pedantic and repetitive without the use of a Thesaurus. It might be embarrassing for an English major to admit, but that is my primary challenge regarding word choice within my own academic writing. I even had to use a thesaurus to answer these questions. Embarrassing, I know.

2. *How do you solve these challenges? Do you use any sources (bilingual/monolingual/ online dictionaries, other websites…etc.)? Do you proof-read your papers?*

Participant 1: I definitely proofread my paper but I make the same mistakes any other person would make. Usually typos, missing words or things like that. Mostly caused by my mind moving on faster than my fingers can type and thus I end up leaving out some of the words :)

Participant 2: I solve those lexical challenges by referring to readings that might elucidate the concept for me. In case I don't want to deal with that, I'll usually consult Wikipedia (and then Wikipedia's sources) to get some information. As far as proofreading goes, I must confess that I am horrible at that step. Reading my own writing is rarely helpful—I can't see any of my own mistakes. Sometimes I use the old proofreader's trick and read backwards, but this doesn't always help me. To really effectively proofread I'll need to leave the work alone for at least a week and then come back to it. The most effective method is, of course, having someone else read it for me.

Participant 3: To solve this kind of problems, I search on Google and choose sites that are often efficient like Reverso. However, I always start with Google Translate, because when I type the Arabic or French equivalent of the word I'm looking for in English, Google Translate offers a variety of different meanings and different words [. . .]. When I choose the most accurate word, I first test it by inverting languages on the language bars to choose this time English as the source language and French then Arabic as the target language, and see if I'm satisfied with the different meaning of the English word [. . .]. I do proofread my papers more than once: after finishing each paragraph I read it again before moving on, and when I'm done writing I read the whole paper.

Participant 4: As I am writing I am also constantly checking a thesaurus in order to avoid repetition. The thesaurus that is coupled with Microsoft Word is typically extensive enough to fulfill my shameful vocabulary problem [. . .]. What I must always consider is my personal writing voice. I may utilize a thesaurus in order to expand the vocabulary of my work, but I must be careful not to deviate from my established writing voice. For example, I have to avoid dropping scholarly language in the middle of a more informal piece. During my proof-reading process is when I typically locate places in which I have been repetitive in my word choice. It is then I begin replacing words and phrases with the help of a thesaurus. But, because my writing style is somewhat unique in the fact that I write in spurts (short but quick regurgitation of ideas often interspersed by small breaks that give me time to think about what to write next, while also re-reading what I have already written), I am constantly proof-reading my work as I write.

Interpreting the Results

All writers have to face challenges related to word choice, and thus, they all go through some sort of research process. So there is consistency, in this sense. However, the participants in this study face diverse challenges, and as a consequence, they have to sort them out in different ways.

Participants 1 and 3, as well as myself, stated that one of the difficulties that they (we) encounter as writers relates to idioms and collocations. This is due to the fact that their (our) first language is not English. Sometimes, these participants have to deal with the linguistic phenomena of code-switching and code-meshing. Moreover, as far as grammatical aspects are concerned, they feel much more insecure about accuracy issues than native speakers. The question here is to ask ourselves to what extent a preposition or the use of determiners, for instance, affect the intelligibility of the text.

However, in terms of appropriateness, it seems like all the participants had similar attitudes towards how to decide whether or not to use a word. For Participant 4, looking for synonyms is always a task that goes along with the writing process. Participant 2 also affirms that the tone of the writing piece can also be problematic and that "loaded" words, those whose meaning can have several connotations provoke challenges, as well.

Spelling issues also affect most of the participants no matter what their first language is. Participant 1, for instance, when asked about how to solve the challenges, focuses on the reason that caused those challenges/problems and says that because she thinks faster than she writes, she makes spelling mistakes "like everyone else."

Other challenges related to word choice are the tone and the semantic load of the words or expressions used, as Participant 3 states. For Participant 4, using a wide range of lexical items becomes a writing challenge, as well.

The different issues that participants have to face in writing determine the extent of the research process that each participant goes through. The exhaustiveness with which a participant carries out his/her research process directly relates to their personal background, in particular to their field of expertise, but it is mainly related to their involvement in the writing situation. In this sense, the amount of time and effort that a writer will put on his/her work would depend on factors such as the purposes of the piece of writing and especially on the audience. Moreover, as Participant 4 and myself explained, doing a lot of research while writing means that the proof-reading part of the process is going to be less important than for those writers who do not do so much research before finishing the first completed draft of what they are writing. However, in my case, having someone proof-reading my writing is essential if I am submitting the piece I wrote to an institution or to someone who has to assess the quality of my writing. In that sense, the contextual

situation will determine how far the research process goes, but the audience is the factor that will promote a more or less detailed revision process.

As Participant 2 said, "Maybe for the purposes of academic writing, I am technically 'non-native' like everyone else." One of the most important factors that determines the degree of writers´ confidence is the audience. Although as I stated in the introduction of this article, I think I will never be 100% satisfied with my writing, and probably the participants in this study won´t either, being aware of the readers´ allowances is a major concern for any writer. In other words, knowing that the readers´ attitudes towards the text are not going to become personal before, while, and after dealing with a text is a vital element that influences how we, writers, approach our tasks. From my personal experience, predicting the readers´ reactions to my (multicultural) text is one of the most important steps in the writing process. Thus, I truly believe that because I do so much research to fulfill the readers´ expectations, to the point that the boundaries between grammatical correctness and real language use are so fuzzy they do not seem to exist, sometimes it is up to you, reader, to be more or less tolerant towards writers and to invest more or less energy in approaching intelligibility from a more inclusive or narrower perspective.

Note: Perhaps you have noticed some discrepancies within my article, such as typography in numbers. After having revised my first draft, I realized that several issues related to my cultural background were still present in the text. However, I decided to ignore them and use these discrepancies in order to illustrate how my writing can adapt to different codes and, at the same time, keep it intelligible.

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Endnotes

[1] The native/non-native dichotomy has been revisited by Brutt-Griffler, Janina, and Keiko K. Samimy (among others) in "Transcending the nativeness paradigm." *World Englishes* 20.1 (2001): 99-106.

Cristina Sánchez-Martín is a PhD student of English at Illinois State University. She has been learning several languages throughout most of her life, and she has also been in contact with peoples from different cultures. Therefore, she believes in the power of linguistic interactions to mediate among people, and most importantly, she thinks that challenging widespread linguistic misconceptions is the first step to promote equal relationships among languages and cultures.