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Involvement and detachment in writing:
The effects of task setting and intertextuality

Speaking is typically characterised by linguistic markers of 'involvement' (e.g. 1st-person pronouns), and writing by 'detachment' (e.g. passives), as noted by Chafe (1982). However, differences between speech and writing should not be understood as a dichotomy, but rather as a continuum along which texts, whether spoken or written, vary.

Sometimes the degree of 'writtenness' or 'spokenness' varies inappropriately─a phenomenon often witnessed in foreign language learning. Research on the SWICLE (e.g. Altenberg 1997, Ädel 2003), the Swedish subcorpus of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE; Granger 1998), has shown that learner writers, instead of a detached, 'writerly' style, e.g. (1), tend to produce an overly 'involved' style, e.g. (2):

(1)   *Although the question of abortions cannot be regarded in just black or white, the reasons in favour of this issue clearly overweigh those against and the right to abortions should   therefore be defended and supported.* (USE)
(2)   *Personally I think it is a woman's right to have one, if she feels she can't afford bringing it up or if she already has five children. However, I don't think abortions […].* (SWICLE)

The reason for the SWICLE writers' overuse of involvement features is claimed to be poor awareness of register (Altenberg 1997). However, through inter-corpus comparison, I will show that, instead, it is primarily due to 'task setting' (time available) and 'intertextuality' (access to secondary sources). I connect the findings to previous observations that, in language production, the amount of time available and the possibilities for interaction profoundly influence the linguistic output (Chafe 1986).

I compared markers of involvement/detachment in the SWICLE, split into timed vs. untimed essays, and the USE corpus (Axelsson 2000), of untimed English essays by Swedish speakers with access to secondary sources. Thus, the corpora differed precisely in task setting and intertextuality. This three-way comparison showed that—with great statistical significance—the learners exhibit more involvement in timed than in untimed essays, but less if they have access to other texts.

I will also address the important question of corpus comparability, especially in the ICLE, and discuss implications for testing practices in language teaching.

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