

# Dissertation: “Danish as a second/foreign language – BA students’ written L2 genre competence. A comparative examination of Danish native speakers’ and German L2(Danish)-learners’ mastery of formulaic language in selected genres”

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## 1 Introduction

This dissertation investigates how BA students with German as a native tongue (L1) write particular genres (abstract, commentaries, press releases) in their second/foreign language, Danish (L2). It focuses on the writing skills that enable such L2-learners to interact in Danish with Danish L1-speakers in a professional and academic way within the linguistic norm. Since only few studies on Danish as a foreign/second language have been conducted so far, writing still remains a field for further research, not least when it comes to learners of Danish with L1 German. For several years now, the University of Southern Denmark has offered Danish as a foreign language to German students enrolled in a Bachelor programme “BA in Modern Languages and Intercultural Communication”. The aim of this programme is to enable L2-students to perform as fluently in Danish as native-speaking professionals. Thus, the aim of the dissertation is to investigate students’ genre writing in L2-Danish in relation to Danish L1-standards as they manifest in three genres: (i) abstract (Bachelor project/Master’s thesis); (ii) commentary, and (iii) press release. The analysis combines research approaches from genre linguistics as well as from research into formulaic language, for example phraseology and/or corpus linguistics (e. g. Stein 1995, Lüger 2007, Fandrych 2008, Lenk 2014, Biber 2006, Wray 2002, 2012, Hyland 2012), where the textexternal rhetorical situation and the textinternal macro- and micro-structures are approached through analyses which, cf. Hüttner (2007), culminate in an *extended genre analysis*, with *co-conventionalisation* becoming the core concept. The major research interest of the dissertation therefore focuses on the following questions:

- (i) What is L2-genre competence compared to L1-genre competence and compared to L2 writing competence, including L2 formulaic competence?
- (ii) To what extent do L2 students (not) meet the requirements of general, academic and LSP genres within the framework of an LSP BA education (CEFR: B2-C1)?

## 2 Theoretical framework

Based upon positions within genre theory, including Bakhtin’s theory of speech genres (Bakhtin 1986), English for Specific Purposes (Swales 1990, 2004, Bhatia 1993, 2010), New Rhetoric (i. a. Miller 1984) and Systemic-Functional Linguistics (cf. Halliday 1994), partly on Sandig’s (2006) approach to stylistics and the genre model developed by Ditlevsen et al. (2007), written L2 genre competence and L2-learners’ formulaic competence are examined in the theoretical part of the dissertation. Genre competence is defined as comprising of four key interrelated *capacities* (Illeris 2011: 64): (i) sociocultural knowledge, insight; (ii) micro- and macrostructural knowledge of language and text organization; (iii) knowledge of speech acts;

and (iv) knowledge of content, which is determined by the readiness for academic reflection, and which entails knowledge about a subject, skills and proficiency in a particular subject. The bi-cultural, bilingual experiences perceived by the L2-learner's through exposure both to L1 and L2 are considered as the most distinct difference between L1 and L2 genre competence, in that such experiences allow for positive as well as negative transfer of linguistic traits and rhetorical conventions from L1 to L2 (Ehlich 2011, Hyland 2012).

In terms of microanalysis, the study argues in favour of *formulaic language* analysis (Stein 1995, Wray 2002, 2012) as an observable instantiation of the L2 writer's mastery of the capacities. The general motivation to focus on formulaic language is due to the assumption that L2-learner's mastery of formulaic language may result in an increased efficiency towards linguistic reception and production as well as in a more fluent and idiomatic language use (Henriksen 2013, Paquot/Granger 2012). Consequently, lexical bundles that are recurrent and exclusively defined by frequency have been studied as well as patterns of utterance. On the basis of Feilke (2012), the latter are defined as accentuating intention and constituting text as well as genre, as expressions on different linguistic levels (word, phrase, syntactic, textual level), which are salient due to recurrent co-occurrence. *Formulaic competence* is operationalised as the ability to apply correct, frequent and (non-)different formulaic language in relation to an L1 norm.

### 3 Data and procedure

First a corpus of texts written by L2-students enrolled at the University of Southern Denmark from 2011 to 2014 was compiled. The Danish L1 text corpus was drawn from texts taken from the internet. The corpus consisted of a total of 436 texts (253 L1 texts – 125,025 tokens and 183 L2 texts – 61,961 tokens). This corpus was divided into three genre sub-corpora. Based on one of Sandig's models (2006: 489), the second research question was then specified as follows:

- What identifies L2 genres as type of action (“Handlungstyp”) compared to L1 genres?
- How is the genre realised as a means of action (“Handlungsmittel”) in the hierarchy of actions and pattern of sequences that may be observed in the L1 and L2 texts?
- How is the genre realised as a means of action (“Handlungsmittel”) in the formulaic language that may be observed in the L1 and L2 texts?
  - Which formulaic language represents x speech act in the L1 and L 2 texts?
  - How frequent is the formulaic language in question used?
  - Which formulaic language is over-/underrepresented in the L2 texts compared to the L1 texts? (Why?)
  - Which formulaic language is morphosyntactically/lexicogrammatically/stylistically deviant in the L2 texts? (Why?)
  - How does it affect the (assessment of) genre competence when L2 students' use of formulaic language is deviant with regard to correctness, frequency, and variation?

### 4 Findings

The corpora were studied with regard to text length, number of sentences and words. Then the type-token ratio was determined, which revealed a notable grading of the genres in the L1 corpus in contrast to the L2 corpus. The abstract was the most complex genre in terms of length of text, sentences and words. The press release was the second most complex, and

the commentary the least complex genre. The L2 press releases are shorter and contain fewer sentences than both all the L1 genres and the L2 abstracts and comments; whereas the average word length, in contrast, is greater in the L2 press releases than in all the other genres. With regard to the length of text, sentences, and words, the L1 and L2 commentaries show more similarity than the L1 and L2 abstracts. The least similarity is found between L1 and L2 press releases. With regard to the *type-token ratio*, the L1 texts can be graded as above in terms of genre, and interlinguistically similar, with L2 commentaries closest to the L1 norm, the abstracts less, and the press releases least close.

The corpus tool *PhraseContext* (cf. Mortensen 2006) was used to study the most frequent lexical bundles in the total corpus and according to genre. The results reveal more recurrent language means in the L2 corpus and an overuse of a few frequent bundles. The latter tendency can be observed in all L2 genres, but the abstracts differ from the other two genres in that there is less recurrent language in the L2 abstracts than in the other texts, thus also less recurrent language than in the L1 abstracts. In contrast to the quantitative characterisation and the type-token ratio, which shows the most similarity between the L1 and L2 commentaries, the lexical bundle analyses reveal that the abstract is the genre where the two corpora have the most recurrent language means in common, whereas it is confirmed that the press release is the genre that shows the greatest difference.

When comparing the macrostructural patterns of sequences and hierarchies of moves in the three L1 and L2 text genres, it can be detected that the L2 abstracts display approximately the same sequencing as the L1 abstracts and only deviate in optional sub-moves. The L2 commentaries and press releases have in common that prominent paratexts are not or only to a lesser degree realised, namely in the comments, the headline, and in the press releases, the marking of the sender and the boilerplate.

In the commentary genre, this leaves a disparate impression of the emphasis of the genre's intention, which, however, may be interpreted as an explicable expression of the situationally diverse settings that the writers are placed in. Furthermore, this spurs speculation whether or not the L1 and L2 comments should be perceived as realisations of different sub-categories of the commentary as a genre. In contrast, the press release appears to be the only genre in the corpus in which individual students display alienation from genre patterns and uncertainty about the communicative situation when it comes to marking of journalistic sender or application of academic genre conventions. The analysis of the macro- versus micro-structural level, however, emphasises that the L2 students in general do not lack knowledge of the genres' intentional and macro-structural levels, but, in contrast, knowledge of how the genres' intentions and (sub-)moves are most adequately represented. The students do not lack textual, text organisational metaknowledge about the genres, but linguistic productive skills on the micro-level.

A schematic overview of variation, L1- and L2-equivalence, L2-intralinguistic characteristics, and lexicogrammatical, morphosyntactic and stylistic characteristics on complexity continua shows to what extent the L2 texts deviate from the L1 standard.

With regard to variation, the dissertation demonstrates that the L2-students employ fewer variants than the L1 writers, in particular in the press releases, but in the commentaries as well, while in the abstracts, this depends on the type of utterance. Although there are fewer variants in a number of utterances than in the L1 abstracts, the L2 writers employ more variants in the majority of utterances. While there seems to be a didactic task of reduction in L2 abstract language, the reverse is true for the commentaries and the press releases in as far as

an extension of students' language seems mandatory in comparison to the L1 norm. The rule that L1 transfer (interference) is the primary source of L2 deviation applies to all three genres, but it seems first and foremost to apply to the press release, depending on the immediate input in the situation.

Collective problem areas of L2 texts are use of hypotaxis, filling in the syntagma, tenses, modality, and explicitness. Problem areas that are collective, but of a different nature just occurring in the abstract are the filling in of clause scheme, voice, valorisation, and mediation. A specific problem in commentary and press release is mood, while in abstract and press release it is the low-frequency subject-related or academic discourse-related vocabulary. Finally, the abstract is characterised by specific problems referring to coherence and synthetic syntax.

The status of the abstract as the most normative genre of the three is confirmed. It is also demonstrated that the L2 genres are characterised by the grading of the L1 genres, i. e. by a difference of complexity where *higher order*-problems are slightly more characteristic of the abstract, followed by the press release, and *lower order*-problems are slightly more characteristic of the commentary than of the two other genres. The capacity for self-positioning, which is closely connected to the understanding of recipient and of the writer-recipient relation, is emphasised as an act that is contingent on these problem areas as an essential expression of the L2 students' genre competence.

## 5 Implications

The following general, collective and fundamental implications of the findings relating to L2-didactics and -acquisition can be derived from the study: (1) Language is learned most efficiently in connection with its function; (2) Grammar should not be isolated from lexis; (3) Patterns of utterances should be acquired as units, and (4) L2 is acquired most efficiently through contrastive analysis. Moreover, genre didactics may include progression at the microstructural level, i. e. a progression in terms of patterns of utterances, and may take into consideration affective elements, such as the students' courage to employ, not the forms of first choice, but of second or third choice instead. Finally, patterns of utterances may be combined with a traditional systematic framework of lexical didactics, i. e. an input-intake-output model that progresses from recognition/identification to exercise and proper application.

The validity of the findings may, to a certain extent, be limited due to a product analysis instead of a process analysis, a synchronous instead of a longitudinal examination, and to the relatively limited data in terms of corpus linguistics. Future research might focus on an examination of L2 students' socialisation to writing in their L1 context and in a longitudinal study that tracks L2 learners' development from first L2 contact at the university to BA, possibly master's level.

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