Disciplinary differences in the use of English

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Disciplinarity

Each discipline has different goals and different **ontological and epistemological** assumptions

**Ontology**

A set of assumptions about the nature of reality and existence

**Epistemology**

A set of assumptions about how knowledge is obtained
Bernstein (1999) classified disciplinary knowledge structures as **hierarchical** or **horizontal**

**Hierarchical knowledge structures**
Progress by integration of new knowledge with existing knowledge

**Horizontal knowledge structures**
Progress by introducing new perspectives that do not need to be coherent with existing perspectives
Disciplinary knowledge structures

Hierarchical knowledge structures can be viewed as developing an agreed “language.”

Horizontal knowledge structures can be viewed as introducing new “languages.”
Progression in knowledge structures

Martin (2011)

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Disciplinary knowledge structures

- Hierarchical knowledge structure
- "Warring triangles"
- Horizontal knowledge structure

- Physics
- Biology
- Linguistics
- Sociology
- History
- Literary studies

Adapted from Martin (2011) and Wignell (2004)
Kuteeva & Airey (2013) show a disciplinary bias in attitudes to English language use based on Bernstein’s knowledge structures.
English language PhD theses

Salö (2010:24)

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Teaching in English

Adapted from Bolton & Kuteeva (2012)
Everyone is a language teacher!

Northedge (2002) claims that the fundamental role of a university lecturer is to introduce students to the specialist discourse of the discipline.

Building on this, Airey (2012) argues all teachers are to some extent language teachers even in monolingual settings.
Disciplinary Literacy

The goal of any degree programme is the development of disciplinary literacy.

Airey (2011b)
What is disciplinary literacy?

*Disciplinary literacy refers to the ability to appropriately participate in the communicative practices of a discipline.*
Disciplinary Literacy

Disciplinary literacy is developed for three sites society, workplace and the academy.
Disciplinary Literacy Triangle

Society

Academy  Workplace
Disciplinary Literacy Triangle

Each of these sites places different demands on language:

- Society
- Academy
- Workplace
International and local

Each site has the potential to be divided into an international and a local form.

Creates different language demands

The **international forms** will almost certainly involve some **English**, whilst the **local forms** probably involve **one or more other languages**.
Disciplinary Literacy

- Academy
- Society
- Workplace

L1
L2
L3
In the Nordic countries the concept of **parallel language use** is widespread.

Two or more languages used alongside each other at universities.

Does parallel mean doing everything in all languages?

What do we want students to be able to do in each language?
Summary

Each discipline has its own knowledge structure. These knowledge structures do not appear to be language-neutral.

Each discipline fosters a unique form of disciplinary literacy for three sites: Society, Academy and Workplace.

The demands placed on language in these three sites are very different.
Conclusion

A top down, “one-size-fits-all” language policy that deals with language in anything more than a ”general recommendations” sense will be problematic.

Need locally decided, disciplinary-specific decisions about what to teach in which language(s)
Questions?
References


