

## PARTICULARITIES OF TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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### 1. Introduction

Languages for specific purposes figure largely in the courses offered by the University Language Centre. As an institution embedded in Ghent University, one of its key goals has always been to support the curricular activities of students and researchers concerning language learning. From this need, several courses have evolved, as diverse as Medical French, Legal English and Economic German.

Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) focuses on foreign language teaching for learners with specific needs, in most cases either for their occupation (Languages for Occupational Purposes) or for their studies (Languages for Academic Purposes). As a language centre, we have mostly committed to the development of task-based teaching materials based on needs analyses of our learners. With this very practical approach, we adhere to a very long tradition in LSP. Most research in this field does not focus on issues such as ideology, but rather on needs analyses and developing didactic materials.

To be able to develop adequate teaching materials for learners with specific needs, language teachers or content developers need specific knowledge and skills in two domains. First, they should acquire expertise in the characteristics of the discourse specific to the field they teach in. This also involves becoming, to a certain extent, familiar with the content of that domain, which can pose problems if this content becomes too technical (e.g. exact sciences). Collaboration with experts in the field is therefore often a necessary prerequisite. To illustrate the detailed description of field-specific discourse, we will focus on the characteristics of juridical French in the first part of this contribution.

Based on this analysis of texts, these characteristics have to be made digestible for students, which is where the linguistic analysis joins didactics. The specific syntax, lexis and discourse have to be translated into exercises making the learners acquainted with those specific characteristics. Moreover, tasks have to be designed to make students apply their knowledge and transfer it to their own language proficiency. In the second part of this article, we will discuss the way the specifics of Academic English can be used to develop teaching materials.

## 2. French for law students

Juridical language seems to evolve less quickly than everyday language, which can be explained in multiple ways. First, law mostly relies on deep-rooted traditions. Second, for a very long time Latin was the language of science in Western Europe, and hence of law. It does not have to surprise that for common issues, which were already established in the juridical language when Latin was progressively replaced by the national language, people did maintain the Latin term. Similarly, we observe that, if at that moment the Latin term was chosen, nowadays this Latin term will not be omitted in favour of a term from the national language. Indeed, it is of great importance for juridical language that every party concerned refers to a concept with exactly the same words to avoid confusion and different interpretations.

Vocabulary is one of the main aspects of teaching French to law students. Indeed, specific terminology is the most obvious difference between juridical and general language. Lexicological elements generally attract most of the learner's attention. First, there is the technical vocabulary (e.g. *statuer* – ⟨pronounce⟩), which we only have to teach to law students because it is not used outside the juridical domain. This kind of vocabulary probably causes the least problems in LSP classes because of its monosemy, exactness and the easy homologation from one language to another (e.g. *un litige* – *a litigation*). Furthermore, the semi-technical vocabulary can be defined as words that mean something else or that have a more restricted meaning when used in a specific context (e.g. *une obligation*: in general language, this indicates something that you are obliged to do while in juridical language this term refers to ⟨a contract⟩ or ⟨an agreement⟩). Finally, every specialized field selects a paradigm of the general vocabulary that is commonly used (e.g. *la demande* – ⟨a claim⟩). Another aspect that characterizes the juridical language is, as mentioned above, the use of Latinisms and archaisms. Latin constructions such as *in casu* and *ipso jure* are used frequently in juridical texts. In combination with the prevalence of archaisms such as *la bru* instead of *la belle-fille* (⟨daughter-in-law⟩), it reflects the conservative character of the juridical language.

In what follows, we will mainly focus on the categories of semi-technical vocabulary and general vocabulary of frequent use in the corresponding field. For both categories we have to study not only the vocabulary on its own, but also its syntagmatic (verbs and collocations) and paradigmatic relations. Examples of paradigmatic relations are phrases of comparing and contrasting, classifying and categorising, exemplifying, and cause and effect.

Besides the expressions and combinations used in the general language, there are also terminological expressions and combinations proper to LSP (e.g. *le*

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*pouvoir + législative, exécutive, judiciaire*: <the legislative, executive, juridical branch>). Therefore, the vocabulary teaching of LSP must consider both monoverbal lexical units and pluriverbal combinations that correspond to the most significant syntactical and lexical patterns of co-occurrence.

Teaching collocations has multiple advantages, of which the major one is to avoid lexical errors. It also helps to jointly remember words that are often combined (e.g. *le casier judiciaire* – <criminal record>). Furthermore, it deepens the knowledge of words that language learners already know and using the words together remarkably improves linguistic skills (e.g. *rendre un jugement* – <pass judgement on>). On the other hand, it is also important to teach fixed prepositions, both for verbs (e.g. *entrer en vigueur* – <come into effect>) and adjectives and nouns (e.g. *responsable de* – <responsible for>).

Moreover, the teacher should not forget two other important aspects, being syntax and content. When we take a closer look at the syntax of juridical language, we note that it has not evolved as general syntax: a clear tendency towards archaic structures can be observed. Clear and unambiguous phrases not open to interpretation are indeed essential in juridical texts. Once those phrases are found, it is not probable that they will be changed quickly.

To simplify it extremely, we could say that juridical language ignores every rule for writing a legible, understandable, communicative, readers-oriented text. While in general language short, unambiguous sentences are preferred, in juridical language we read sentences that easily form a paragraph on their own. Moreover, word order in those sentences does not always correspond to the standard word order and the reader is frequently confronted with syntagmas that form a unit but are interrupted by other syntagmas or sub-clauses. This certainly disturbs the comprehension of the sentences. Furthermore, we also note a more frequent use of passive clauses, participle clauses, 'négations simples', impersonal verbs, etc. or otherwise stated, of structures that we do not often find in general language and therefore do not master to the same extent, either actively or passively. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these findings.

La procédure revêtant, à l'égard des parties au principal, le caractère d'un incident soulevé devant la juridiction nationale, il appartient à celle-ci de statuer sur les dépens. (Weylandt and Vandembulcke 2008: 144)

- ♦ La procédure revêtant [...] le caractère d'un incident:
  - A *participe présent* with an explaining value (*revêtant*): in everyday language we would say more often: *Vu que la procédure a le caractère d'un incident...*
  - The *participe présent* is separated from its object by a subordinate clause.
- ♦ [...] il appartient à celle-ci:
  - Subject and verb (*il appartient*) are positioned at the end of this sentence, which is rarely the case in general language.
  - *Il appartient à*: impersonal verb.
  - The demonstrative pronoun *celle-ci* refers in number and gender to *la juridiction*. Those internal references can impede the quick comprehension of a text.

**Figure 1: Illustration of difficulties in Juridical French (1)**

Par conséquent, il convient de répondre aux questions posées que la directive 79/409 doit être interprétée en ce sens qu'elle n'est pas applicable aux spécimens nés et élevés en captivité et, dès lors, les États membres demeurent compétents, en l'état actuel du droit communautaire, pour réglementer cette matière, sous réserve des articles 28 à 30 CE. (Weylandt and Vandembulcke 2008: 144)

- ♦ *Par conséquent; dès lors*: linking words that add structure to this long sentence in order to increase its legibility and comprehension.
- ♦ *Il convient de*: impersonal verb.
- ♦ *Doit être interprétée*: passive construction.

**Figure 2: Illustration of difficulties in Juridical French (2)**

To compensate for these characteristics hindering the easy understanding of juridical texts, we notice a more intensive use of linking words. These words add structure to a text and exteriorize the underlying relations between the different arguments and paragraphs of the text. Meanwhile, few people know and understand the vast category of linking words in French, which adds to whether difficulties are experienced when understanding and using juridical French. Figure 2 shows an example of these linking words.

Finally, it is quite obvious that the content of LSP also plays an essential role. This is one of the principal challenges for the teacher starting in LSP. On the one hand, teachers who are initially confronted with this task do not yet have the subject matter knowledge they need to develop didactic materials whereas their students are schooled in the subject. Before starting, the teachers will have to assess the content of that specific field. Only after having studied this, they can embark on developing didactic materials.

On the other hand, this characteristic has as a consequence that every novice teacher will have to complete this training period, which makes the outset of a new LSP course much harder. Nevertheless, we cannot be deceived to want to know it all. Very often a basic knowledge of the specialized field is sufficient to teach LSP in this field.

### 3. English for Academic Purposes

One of the most frequently taught subdivisions of LSP is Languages for Academic Purposes and courses and textbooks for diverse levels, skills and languages abound. To be able to communicate successfully in an academic setting, both students and researchers need to know the underlying rules of academic discourse. This is a problem not only for non-native speakers, but also for non-trained native speakers, who often struggle comprehending academic language because of an insufficient exposure to academic discourse. Since it is clear that a low proficiency level of academic language leads to lower academic performance, there is an unmistakable need for academic language training.

In this subdiscipline, English is evidently the most popular instructed language. According to Benfield / Feak (2006), at least half of the articles in international peer-reviewed journals are written by non-native speakers. In a short analysis of the editing process of two important medical journals, they concluded that no major differences could be found in eventual acceptance rates. However, they did find an important difference in the number of revisions required for texts by non-native speakers. For these texts, the editors and the reviewers made more explicit comments in order to make the text easily readable (Benfield / Feak 2006).

Luckily for teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), research (e.g. by John Swales / Ken Hyland) has pinpointed many characteristics of English academic discourse. Unfortunately, many textbooks still fail to incorporate the results of this empirical research into EAP didactic materials. For example, although corpus-based studies describe hedging as an important feature of academic discourse, many EAP course books and style guides give the contradictory advice to avoid typically hedging expressions (Harwood 2005).

These scholarly descriptions of typical features of academic English are indeed not easily translated into easy-to-use didactic materials. In what follows, we will give three illustrations of this process, of which two can be situated on sentence and paragraph level, namely the use of passives and personal pronouns. A third illustration will treat the development of the introduction section of a research article.

Many students have resolute ideas about what academic writing should look like. Surprisingly, many of these pre-conceived ideas are contradictory. Some students state that passive constructions are to be avoided in order to create fluent texts; whereas others have heard that passive sentences are a typical feature of academic discourse and they are to be used frequently. It is evident that these students have not been taught to adapt their writing to genre conventions or to context choices. This is a typical example of how the variety that exists in academic writing is often ignored in EAP textbooks (Harwood 2005). It is interesting to build awareness of in which situations passive sentences are preferred; for example when the focus lies on the action or the result, to avoid criticism, or because of the information pattern of the paragraph. By choosing authentic uses of either active or passive voice in journal articles, students can discuss their different functions (see Figure 3). Although some students find it hard not to be taught hard and fast rules, through guided exercises and building up in difficulty level, they will become aware of differences and as such also learn to read texts in their own field paying attention to these features. An interesting consolidation exercise could be to mark all the passive sentences in a text by a seminal native speaker author from their field and compare this analysis to a text of their own writing.

- Are the following sentences written in the active form or in the passive? Should they be rewritten? Why? Rephrase the sentences you disapprove of.
1. People assume that these phenomena occur rarely.
  2. It should not be denied that mistakes have been made.
  3. This novel has often been critically regarded as a post-modern narrative.
  4. Cultural historians of madness, including Foucault and Sass, have noted that the Enlightenment marks a boundary between distinct periods of attitudes towards, and treatment of, madness.
  5. It is a great help to have a name for a newly achieved schema. That way, we can address and retrieve that what we have discovered when needed.
  6. It has been noted by Burbidge, Hyer and Wemmerloy, and Selim et al., that it is often important in practice to be able to reassign parts to different machine types in order to create better cell system configurations.
  7. Scholars have called the period when the body-mass index begins to increase after reaching a nadir in early childhood an adiposity rebound.

**Figure 3: Authentic examples of active and passive sentences from academic texts**

Also for personal pronouns, it is clear from corpus-based studies that there is much field-specific variety. Hyland discusses how personal pronouns feature less in texts from engineering and hard sciences than in the humanities and social sciences, which he attributes to a claim of a stronger identity in the latter (Hyland 2002: 353). Furthermore, he discusses instances in which personal pronouns are typically used (Hyland 2002: 355):

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- ♦ explaining what was done (I have interviewed ten teachers from six schools.)
- ♦ structuring the discourse (First, I will discuss the method, then present my results.)
- ♦ showing a result (My findings show that the animation distracted the pupils from the test.)
- ♦ making a claim (I think two factors are particularly significant in destroying the councils.)

In our view, it is necessary to confront students on the one hand with field-specific differences and on the other hand with the functions of a language element. In an EAP course, this can be achieved by giving some well-chosen instances of personal pronoun usage and a few brainstorm questions (see Figure 4). Through discussion and comparison with their own writing style, students build a better awareness of different linguistic means.

Discuss the use of personal pronouns in research articles using these questions. The examples below can help you in your discussion.

1. Are first person pronouns *I* and *we* used in research articles in your field?
2. If they are, in which parts of the article and for which purposes are they used?
3. If they are not, how is their use avoided?
  - Since most readers of this review can be expected to be familiar with earlier editions of the text, **I** will summarize the differences between the new edition and the second.
  - As **we** will see in chapter 6, ego-identity is probably involved in all or most emotions.
  - In fields where imperatives were present in the main text (five out of ten), **we** recorded interviews with the authors of one of the articles.
  - **We** defined obesity as a Body Mass Index score of 1,64 or greater (95th percentile).
  - **We** have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness, such as courage, future-mindedness, and optimism.
  - **We** especially acknowledge our editor for his enthusiastic advocacy and stoic patience.

**Figure 4: Discussion on personal pronouns in an EAP course**

Another example on the text level can be the normal development of the sections of a research article (introduction, methods, results, discussion). The typical strategies used to develop these sections are described in detail in the literature. Building on the influential work of Swales / Feak (2004), several analyses have for instance been made of the different building elements of an introduction section. Swales described three sequential steps in detail (1) framing the research space, (2) highlighting a need and (3) presenting your research (Swales / Feak 2004: 244).

The first exercises of a course unit on introductions could consist of examples from a text in which students need to recognize the different strategies. Depending on the proficiency level of the learners, this can be done in a more or less guided way. For each of these specific strategies, a specific language focus could be added, for example the use of quantifiers in the second move (e.g. 'However, only *few* studies have focused on ethnic populations in the US.'). It is important to choose examples from actual research articles, because the learner needs to become acquainted with authentic examples of academic discourse. The teacher can search these examples in databases and using concordance programmes. That way, also the broader context of a word or a phrase (of which the importance was discussed at length in the previous part) can be taken into account.

Once the strategies and the typical language elements are presented, the students can adventure on writing a part of an introduction for their own research. Moreover, besides this rhetorical consciousness, they have built up a vocabulary to talk about the targeted genre. This will enable them both to give detailed and relevant feedback on each other's texts and to step back from their own texts to face these as their readers will.

#### 4. Conclusion

To conclude, teaching LSP should always be based on actual characteristics of the tasks students will have to perform in real-life situations. LSP teachers will have to familiarize themselves with this specific real-life context before starting. In this article we have given a short overview of the particularities of Languages for Specific Purposes in general and for juridical French in particular.

Furthermore, we have tried to show that corpus-based research provides a good basis to start working on course materials, and that translation to the class context is difficult but indispensable. Only then can the learner be intrinsically motivated to learn a new language.

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