

Russian-Like Discourse in English Essays

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Abstract

The paper presents part of the research results revealing specific features of English discourse produced by Russian natives, and is a further development of the 'Russian English' issue investigated by the author recently. Russian accent in English discourse is considered as an EFL genre-teaching challenge.

The paper presents the typical Russian English users' discourse deviations of a multiple character, including specific choices, applications and avoidance of vernacular linguistic, stylistic, structural and other variables.

The methods used encompass contrastive analysis, discourse analysis, as well as compilation and analysis of a self-made corpus of Russian natives' English written samples of essays. The present paper focuses on the results of Russian students' essays analysis only.

Keywords: discourse analysis, discourse genres, Russian English.

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Introduction

Discourse competence is a priority component of communication competence in EFL acquisition. According to R. White's definition, discourse competence is "the user's knowledge of rules of discourse, of how spoken and written texts are organized, and might influence whether they are considered to be well formed" (White, 1997). Recognizable and distinctive patterns of text organization are known as genres. Paltridge identifies genres as communicative events, that is ways in which people communicate with each other (Paltridge, 2012, 62). Genre texts may vary in their typicality, a text may be a typical example of a genre, or a less typical one (Paltridge, 2012, 64). Mastering the typical ways genres are organized at the discourse level is an important target, especially in EFL learning. As Swales justly stated, genres provide a frame enabling people to communicate successfully in particular situations (Swales, 2004).

One of the genres taught to EFL students is the essay. Learning to write essays in English, students explore the prototypical features of a particular genre, acquire skills in structured writing, cohesive and logical narration, and in syntactic organization of discourse.

The research undertaken was aimed at identification of typical and functionally meaningful Russian English discourse features. It was undertaken to find out if the Russian English discourse of the essay genre has the expected qualities of the corresponding English genre canon or not, and to reveal repeated and widely spread characteristic Russian English discourse qualities.

Methodology and Procedures

The theoretical framework of the research was made up by the genre theory of discourse (J. Swales), and contrastive analysis (R. Lado).

The methods applied were content and genre analysis, written discourse analysis, as well as field notes. The focus of attention was on the structural and syntactic features of English essays produced by Russian natives.

The contingent of informants, chosen for this research, were Russian native learners of English of both sexes doing their Bachelor's course. The researcher's selection of Russian EFL learners' essays were gathered and investigated (40 samples). The data were received at the Moscow Institute for tourism industry named after Yu. Senkevich over the period of 2013-2015. First, distinctive general features of English written discourse were summarized, including the characteristics of the essay genre. Then the samples of Russian students' essays in English were analysed for the particular features of the researcher's interest. The size of essays was one page (1800 symbols maximum).

Findings

As it was discovered, there are certain general differences between modern written English and Russian discourse. English texts are normally distinguished with laconism and prevailing simple sentences, as against long compound sentences in

Russian (Семенов, 2008). There is strong evidence that English written discourse is biased toward subordinating syntactic connection rather than coordination, as it is the case in Russian, where subordination occurs not so frequently as in English (Бархударов, 1975, 207). There is a stable avoidance of word repetition in written English. As a result, special word substitution means are used as anaphoric reference, like *one(s), such, so, do(es), this/that/it, these/those, the former, the latter* etc. There is a specific feature of *nominalization* in written English, marked by both English native and Russian researchers (Paltridge, 2012; Узленко, 2002). As Paltridge has it, “there is a high level of nominalization in written texts; that is, where actions and events are presented as nouns rather than verbs” (Paltridge, 2012, 137). As a rule, written English discourse is well structured and organized, which is facilitated by specific signposting insertions, such as *apart from that, first, second, finally* etc. There are additional qualities in English discourse determined by a particular genre of the essay. They are well known and encompass coherence, logic, being concise, and persuasive etc.

According to the previous longitudinal and wider-based research of the author, Russian natives’ English discourse errors are the most spread in written genres. These errors imply violations of L2 rules of layout, structure, register, discourse strategies and linguistic markers stereotypically applied by ENL users in the genre under investigation. Thus, the average percentage of student informants who made discourse errors in written genres was 48%, as compared to only 20% in oral conversation samples. Similar discrepancy goes for syntactic errors, as 66% of the informants committed them in writing, while 40% in speech. The individual peak counts (the top number of errors of a particular type throughout the samples of one informant) also showed that discourse error peaks ranked second (grammar error peaks ranked first). To be more exact, discourse errors, alongside with grammar errors, accounted for top individual scores of 27% of the informants (Bondarenko, 2014, Part 5.2). These data suggest that English discourse poses a serious challenge to Russian learners.

The investigation of Russian essays in English revealed the following deviations:

1. Structural deficiency was demonstrated in 21% of works. There was no conclusion, or a conclusion was not related to the title, the thesis statement was poorly made, the topics declared in an introduction were dealt with only partially etc.

2. English supra-segmental linking words appeared not quite homogeneous from pedagogical perspectives. Signposting link words (*first, besides, finally etc.*) were used by the majority of the informants quite appropriately, whereas connecting link-words were often missing where they belonged, were misused or replaced with particular substitutes of the students’ choice, the most common of them is ‘what about’:

E.g. ***What about*** *Russia, it is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country* (instead of ‘As to Russia...’).

The example below also looks foreign, because its writer used the Russian-like links and structure in English discourse.

E.g. *The gala dinner was very nice. **And** the dishes were very well cooked, **and** the restaurant service was perfect* (instead of 'Both the dishes were cooked well and the service was perfect').

This is a syntactic calc from Russian («И блюда были вкусно приготовлены, и обслуживание было безукоризненным»), and cannot but produce syntactic and semantic dissonance in English. The above examples show that some text markers must be harder for Russians to assume than others, and, hence, need more instructional attention.

3. A wrong word order in collocations with the first person singular pronoun produces an unwelcome effect as it violates the unwritten ethic conventions and sounds unusual to a literate ESL and ENL user:

E.g. We will need tickets for me and my assistant. I and my friend

It is more common communicating in English to place self second.

4. Such a feature of English written discourse as **nominalization** is not always observed by Russians when there is an alternative choice of a verb or a noun structure in the same context. The small-scale quantitative analysis of 40 essays showed that Russian informants preferred verbal structures to noun structures in about 40% of cases of alternative mini contexts.

E.g. *If we want **to self-improve**..... (cf: If we want self-improvement.)*

After the story ended (cf: At the end of my reading).

This result, to some extent, echoes the conclusions of the Russian researcher Uzlenko about the prevailing verbal type of Russian thinking in contrast to the nominative pattern of English natives' cognitive process. Her study, based on animal associations in Russian and English folklore, revealed that the dominant associative construct of Russians for animals is predicative, whereas for English natives it is nominative, that is animal associations of Russians concern what animals do, not what they are like (Узленко, 2012).

5. English written discourse must be rather lexically dense, it tends to be more dense than oral one. It implies the ratio of content words to grammatical or function words within a clause. The lexical density of English native discourse mentioned by Paltridge is 7 (Paltridge, 2012, 136-137).

The quantitative analysis of informants' essays allowed to judge about their average lexical density, which equaled 6.4, thus, approaching the normal ratio. The calculation of sentence types dominant in Russian English discourse revealed the following: Three kinds of sentences were counted, they were simple sentences, compound sentences with coordinative syntactic connection and complex sentences with subordinating or both subordinating and coordinative connection. The results are shown below.

In 93% of samples the **compound sentences** made up the smallest share, most of them characterized by asyndeton. Compound sentences accounted for 8 to 30% of all sentences in each essay sample (the top and the lowest figures were discarded as incidental). Compound sentences were not used at all by 11% of informants, whereas zero usage was not registered for either simple or complex sentences.

57% of informants chose **simple sentences** as the prevailing type. Their number ranged from 18 to 62% of all the sentences per sample. Besides, 33% of the samples had more than half of their total sentences as simple sentences, which made that Russian English writing meet the requirement of laconism.

39% of samples used **complex sentences** as the predominant type. The quantity varied from 25 to 82% of this sentence type per sample. The high percentage of samples (77%) appeared to have less than half of all their sentences as complex sentences. It proves that Russian users of English underestimate subordinating syntactic connection or are not competent enough in using it. Anyway, as a result, the overall impression from the text may be a syntactic foreign accent.

6. Wrong punctuation. Most Russian users of English persistently abuse three marks, a semicolon, a dash and a comma. The semicolon and the dash are often combined with the omission of the copula verb, another typical syntactic error of Russian native speakers.

E. g. The tour price - \$15 per person. Complimentary: one person for every 20 paying persons.

The above Russian-like syntactic structures reproduce the Russian syntactic patterns and are quite appropriate in similar instances of Russian contextual writing, but look foreign in English.

The comma, on the contrary, was not used when it was required according to English rules of punctuation, for instance after modifiers of time preceding the subject of a sentence, or before 'and', or as a substitute for a non-repeated word (underscore shows the omission of the comma):

- (1) In 1940_ he joined the army.
- (2) After the graduation_ I'm going to set up my own business.
- (3) We visited Prague, Budapest_ and the Athens.
- (4) Some people prefer fantasy literature_ I - historical novels.

The punctuation mistakes in the above sentences can be explicated by the untoward impact of Russian punctuation practices, as modifiers of time, place or manner of action at the start of a sentence are not usually separated by the comma. Besides, it is never applied in the position of example 3 in Russian. As to a zero substitute (4), Russians use the dash in this function instead of the comma, which was transferred to English written discourse. It is also worth mentioning some typically Russian inaccuracies in writing numbers, for example *25 780 visitors; 9 000 000 people*

(instead of 25,780; 9,000,000), which occurs owing to the difference in English and Russian punctuation rules.

To put it honestly, punctuation sinks into secondary importance in EFL teaching in Russia, especially at non-linguistic institutes and universities, because of time shortage for this discipline, and in view of more vital and formidable instructional objectives.

7. The research data showed the latest tendency of replacing capital letters with small ones by Russian English users in a most unjustified and inexplicable way:

E.g., *europaean, russian, the internet, i mean.*

One of the explanations of this feature of Russian English written discourse may lie in the considerable influence of the Net communication which has worked out a lingo of its own, simplified and suitable for fast exchanges and online chatting. As Russians spend a lot of time on the Net, they cannot help being affected, transferring this effort-saving tactics on to English business discourse. As such innovations have not become common practice yet, especially with ENL and advanced ELF users, they strike as improper and foreign.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the investigation of discourse peculiarities of World Englishes and may lead to similar studies of other English discourses.

The Anglophone community has their own particular written genre qualities, or canons, that must be explored and mastered by EFL learners. The present paper revealed inconsistencies of Russian users of written English in the genre of essay from the structural and syntactic perspectives. The most salient of them concern preference for the improper type of sentences, a narrow range of sentence types used, wrong punctuation, inadequate compositional and content structure. Such English discourse strategy as nominalization has turned out to be foreign to Russian linguistic mind and is not always applied in the contexts where it can.

Discourse errors are not on the surface, are harder to interpret and can be construed by cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and cross-communicative interference.

The discovered deviations do not correspond to the English expected canons, they cannot be justified as register variants and may be a kind of manifestations of a Russian accent at the discourse level.

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