The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes

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Publication details
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Published online on: 25 Jan 2016

How to cite :- Beyza Björkman. 25 Jan 2016, PhD adviser and student interactions as a spoken academic genre from: The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes Routledge Accessed on: 18 Oct 2023

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PHD ADVISER AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS AS A SPOKEN ACADEMIC GENRE

Beyza Björkman

Introduction

PhD supervision is undoubtedly a critical genre in academic speaking. Lee (2008) lists five main concepts to a “conceptual approach” to PhD supervision: functional, where the focus is on project management; enculturation, where the issue is about the student becoming a member of the disciplinary community; critical thinking, where the focus of the supervision is to encourage the student to critically analyze his/her and others’ work; emancipation, where the onus is put on the student to evolve; and finally, developing a quality relationship, where the student is inspired (Lee, 2008: 270, 271). Whichever approach one may adopt or prioritize and see as the main aim, achieving communicative effectiveness in PhD adviser–student interactions is an important prerequisite.

Much of the research on PhD supervision to date has focused on pedagogical issues such as achieving good supervision and advisory styles (e.g. Gatfield, 2005; Hockey, 1996; Lee, 2008; Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts, 2008; Sinclair, 2004). Some other issues in research on PhD work have been the assigning of PhD topics (Hasrati and Street, 2009), student perceptions and expectations of the PhD experience (e.g. Heath, 2002; Mainhard et al., 2009; Pole et al., 1997) and different types of problem-oriented studies about the PhD process (e.g. achieving balance as the adviser: Delamont, Parry and Atkinson, 1998; problematic supervision: Hockey, 1996 and Malfroy, 2005; joint supervision as a problematic notion: Pole, 1998). Other studies have investigated the effects of supervision on academic career or PhD completion (e.g. Ives and Rowley, 2005; Over et al., 1990; Wright and Cochrane, 2000).

Among the issues that have been researched from a more empirical angle are certain features and sections of PhD theses and PhD writing process in general (e.g. Hyland, 2004; Paltridge et al., 2012; Pecorari, 2006; Shaw, 1991), as well as students’ and professors’ perceptions of the PhD writing process (e.g. Belcher, 1994; Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006), all focusing on the written aspect of PhD supervision. As this volume shows, there is extensive research on other academic speech events, e.g. lectures, seminars and student-group work (see Thompson, this volume); however, the spoken academic genre of PhD supervision has received much less attention from a linguistic point of view.
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(but see Chang and Kanno, 2010 and Vehviläinen, 2009a and 2009b). This is somewhat surprising, considering that there is a large body of research on how to achieve effective PhD supervision (such as the studies mentioned above; see also Pole et al., 1997), and considering that successful supervision is generally seen as one of the critical factors in the completion of a PhD project: “The communication between the adviser and the student is key” (Lee, 2008: 267; Ives and Rowley, 2005). In this respect, taking a closer look at the nature of doctoral supervision and examining doctoral supervision as a pedagogical, spoken academic genre seems necessary. Studies focusing on different aspects of the supervision interactions are likely to provide us with useful insights into these critical speech events, such as the structure of this genre, and other sociopragmatic phenomena (see Turner, Hiraga and Fujii, 1997 for such sociopragmatic phenomena in academic tutorials). Also, the description of such a high-stakes genre as PhD supervision is of relevance to the field of EAP; by means of such descriptions, EAP practitioners can better understand the linguistic and sociopragmatic challenges PhD students face in supervision interactions.

This chapter aims to contribute to the filling of this gap by focusing on the structure of PhD adviser–PhD student supervision meetings. The chapter aims to first provide an overview of the research that has considered the similar genre of tutorials and investigated it for a number of features (e.g. sociopragmatic issues). Following this overview, the genre of PhD supervision interactions will be introduced by means of an investigation carried out in English in a northern European higher education setting. The main data-source consists of six PhD supervision meetings from the Natural Sciences domain at a Swedish university, adding up to approximately seven hours of digitally recorded speech, all transcribed, the transcripts totalling 37,000 words. After the structure of the genre has been introduced, examples will be provided. The focus will also be on the frequency of PhD adviser and student talk across the different types of interaction. Finally, some observations will be provided on expressing disagreement in these interactions.

Studies with PhD supervision interactions as their focus

The studies available on academic supervision have focused on the master’s level only, and investigated conversational advice sequences in giving and receiving feedback, including student resistance (Vehviläinen, 2009a and b). What has received most attention on the topic of PhD supervision has been pedagogical issues and how to achieve effective supervision. In fact, no single study has focused primarily on the nature of interactions in this spoken genre or the structure of it. It is likely that difficulties in obtaining supervision data are among the reasons behind this lack of research. Not even large spoken corpora have included PhD supervision meetings. The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE; Simpson et al., 2002) has included academic advising sessions, but these events differ from PhD supervision by nature (see Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992 on academic advising session closings). In these sessions, students and their faculty advisers meet to discuss the coming term, the courses they need to take and strategize around other practical issues to plan the term in the best possible way. In this sense, they are meetings of what would be closest to the ‘functional dimension’ in Lee’s framework, which is about managing the project (2008; see Introduction above). Other big corpora such as The T2K-SWAL corpus (Biber et al., 2004), BASE (Thompson and Nesi, 2001), ELFA (2008) and VOICE (2013) all include several types of speech events but not supervision interactions.

There are, however, a small number of studies that are of relevance here. Of importance are studies on tutorials where there are analyses of tutor–student interactions from Higher
Education settings. Although tutorials have a teaching-related function and are in this sense different from supervision meetings, there are enough similarities between these two speech events for us to consider tutorials to be relevant here: tutorials try to “draw out the students’ inner resources” in an effort to “help [them] reach their full potential” (Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003: 21). Turner, Hiraga and Fujii (1997) describe the “salient features” of this genre as:

i. achievement processed by quantity and quality
ii. emphasis on critical analysis
iii. uncertainty as a positive impetus to development
iv. consensus between the tutor and student.

(Turner, Hiraga and Fujii, 1997: 263)

It will be shown here that items i), ii) and iv) represent shared features between tutorials and PhD supervision. In an earlier study on the fine art tutorial (12 video and 20 audio-recorded), Turner and Hiraga (1996) provide a three-phase structure of this genre, made up of items i), ii) and iii) from the above list. In what seems to be a follow-up study, Turner, Hiraga and Fujii (1997) consider the difficulties of pragmatic understanding faced by Japanese students in Great Britain. In this study, the focus is placed primarily on power asymmetries, critical analysis, dealing with uncertainty and verbalisation. The findings reveal that most of the difficulties observed in the data are caused by differing sociopragmatic assumptions by the two academic cultures.

In a later study, Hiraga, Fujii and Turner (2003) report that the main role of the tutor is to encourage the student and help him/her “develop the work” by making suggestions. The student’s role, on the other hand, is to properly explain what s/he is working on regarding the purpose and the expected outcome, and to respond to the feedback (Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003: 21). Hiraga, Fujii and Turner first focus on pragmatic difficulties that arise from the tutor–student power asymmetry and cultural differences, discussing the differences between Japanese and British tutors where the latter group treats students as members of the discourse community, unlike the former group. The study also focuses on the assessment of students’ performance and progress, which seems to be different in the two cultures. While independent evaluation and critique are key to the academic culture in Britain, in Japan, the focus is on “careful execution of documents” (Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003: 32). The study highlights the importance of considering such sociopragmatic assumptions when different academic cultures meet.

One of the few studies on doctoral supervision is by Chang and Kanno (2010), who have investigated the importance of “linguistic competence” across three different disciplines. Although their data is not only from supervision interactions, it includes supervision interactions that took place during shadowing observations of four PhD students in the US, who were all non-native speakers of English (NNSE). The results of the study showed that the importance of linguistic competence varied in the three disciplines. The dependence on language was different not only in these disciplines but also in their sub-disciplines. Also, linguistic competence did not seem critical for the academic performance of these students, and the importance of being a native speaker of English varied in different “community practices within a disciplinary community” (Chang and Kanno, 2010: 688). While these students felt being a NNSE was not problematic in terms of academic success, it could be a setback when socializing with other members of the community. Possibly the most important finding of this study is that the PhD students from other cultural backgrounds were able to use their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as members of their disciplinary
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communities. They did not speak about “otherness” in negative terms. They had gained experience in their academic and professional lives, which had equipped them with the skills they needed to operate in the disciplinary community to which they belonged (Chang and Kanno, 2010: 689).

As this brief literature review reveals, none of the above-mentioned studies focused on the nature of PhD supervision interactions but on various sociopragmatic phenomena in tutorials, which is the closest genre in previous research to the genre of supervision (e.g. Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003) and the everyday operations of PhD students (Chang and Kanno, 2010). The present study has, as its main focus, supervision interactions and will describe the structure of this genre including the different types of interactions observed in the supervision meetings. The chapter will also include some observations on expressing disagreement.

We will now focus our attention on the setting in which this study was carried out.

PhD supervision in a northern European setting

The main source of data in the present paper comes from a Swedish Higher Education setting. Swedish higher education has been one of the most internationalized in continental Europe with over 800 English-taught programs in 2014, following the Netherlands with 1,078 and Germany with 1,030 programs offered in English (Wächter and Maiworm, 2014). With so many programs in English, the country attracts a large number of scholars who choose to continue their careers at Swedish universities, along with PhD students who come to pursue doctoral degrees and post-doctoral studies. Especially at doctoral level, admissions are competitive: PhD positions are actually paid positions, so the students do not pay fees, receive a monthly salary and are almost always provided with office space (Swedish Institute n.d.).

The data for the present study was collected at a large Swedish university (67,000 students and 5,000 staff). The large number of foreign scholars and students in this setting often, if not always, have only English as a lingua franca (ELF) through which they can perform their daily tasks and duties. Doctoral theses are almost exclusively written in English in this setting, and the road that leads to the doctoral thesis goes through the use of English, including doctoral supervision. In fact, this is the situation all over northern Europe: PhDs are internationally recognised and consequently in English (Björkman, 2013). Although the surrounding language may not be English (unlike in Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003, for example), the dominant lingua franca of a typical northern European university is English.

The data in the present paper comprise six digitally-recorded supervision meetings in the domain of Natural Sciences (earth and environmental sciences: geological sciences and geology; physical geography; and biology: ecology, environment and plant sciences). The data is all authentic and naturally-occurring; no part of the data was set up for research purposes. All advisers had between seven to twelve years of experience with supervision, and all students were about half-way through their projects. None of the advisers or students came from a Swedish background. The first languages present in the data were Arabic, Chinese, German, Spanish and Thai.

In Sweden, most PhD students are assigned two advisers, the main adviser and the co-adviser. In most cases, and in all cases in the present data, it is the main adviser that has regular supervision meetings with the student. Supervision meetings often take place in the adviser’s office.

Let us now turn to the findings of the present investigation.
The structure of the spoken genre of PhD supervision

“Genres are social practices, moulded into a particular shape by habitual patterns of use” (Turner, Hiraga and Fujii, 1997). The analyses in the present chapter are based on one domain and university; however, supervision meetings are about critical thinking, enculturation of the PhD student into the research community and emancipation among other things (Lee, 2008). What determines the structure and nature of this genre are the “habitual patterns of use” (Turner, Hiraga and Fujii, 1997) and the functions that must be achieved, rather than the specific setting. So it can be suggested with some degree of justification that the following pattern is representative of a typical supervision meeting. Three types of interaction emerged from the data (Table 27.1). Although there was some internal variation in the order of these interaction types, all supervision meetings included these three types of interaction: social talk (S), which is affective “academic small talk” designed to create an appropriate atmosphere; core interaction (C), which refers to technical talk on content issues; and finally, project management (P), which is talk on deadlines and other practical issues around the project.

Let us now focus on each type of interaction and see examples from the transcribed data to get a better understanding of how these interactions are different from one another. We will follow the order in Table 27.1 and start with the introduction of a supervision meeting. The introduction of a meeting can be as short as in excerpt (1):

(1)  
1  <Sp> Ok. Yes. </Sp>  
2  <St> Yes I think I’ll show you what I’ve done and then I will show you what is what  
3  I want to do in the next step </St>

In excerpt (1), the student (St) immediately starts discussing the project after the adviser (Sp) initiates the conversation by saying “OK” and “Yes” in line 1. So the student chooses to start with core interaction by telling the adviser what s/he wants them to focus on first (lines 2 and 3). In some cases, there is a degree of social talk before the core interaction starts, such as in excerpt (2):

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Table 27.1 The structure of supervision meetings (sections), the types of interaction in supervision meetings in the present data (A, B and C), and in which section of supervision meetings these different types of interactions typically occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction types</th>
<th>Sections of supervision meetings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>P</td>
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</tbody>
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(2)

1. **<Sp>** First I want to know what is your overall impression **</Sp>**
2. **<St>** From this? (POINTING TO THE PAPER) **</St>**
3. **<Sp>** Yes, do you feel frustrated or **</Sp>**
4. **<St>** Ehhh. It is tough actually it is tough really **</St>**
5. **<Sp>** Hmm uhhuh **</Sp>**
6. **<St>** One one of the reviewer is I feel he is relevant to what we have done **</St>**
7. **<Sp>** Hmm **</Sp>**
8. **<St>** These comment are useful . and critical in the same direction but the other one is really far **</St>**
9. **<Sp>** I think the other one actually this one who recommend for rejection but he also offered several suggestions I think some of his suggestions are quite good and I feel that why he rejected because he thinks this methodology we used to evaluate it's not right (XX) **</Sp>**
10. **<St>** No I think not only that he didn't like the whole idea **</St>**

In excerpt (2) above, the adviser starts the meeting by asking the student’s general reaction to the reviews of a paper s/he had submitted to a journal. The paper got rejected, and the adviser wants to know the student’s “overall impression” (line 1) of what has happened. Although the “overall impression” might not help the student rescue the paper, the adviser still asks this question (line 1), followed by the question “yes, do you feel frustrated” (line 3), probably to achieve an affective tone. The student’s response in line 4, that it is tough, shows us further that this is more social talk than talk about the subject matter. In line 10, the adviser starts talking about what the reviews said, possibly trying to get the student to reflect on it and be critical of his/her own work (emancipation in Lee’s framework, 2008). Line 10 is also when the social talk slowly turns into core interaction, and in the rest of the meeting they talk about the reviews and the revisions that need to be made for the paper to become publishable in a journal.

The next type of interaction is termed core interaction. This term is used to refer to the ‘core’ of the project, which is the subject matter. Excerpt (3) below is from the field of geology, and the student (St) is explaining to the adviser (Sp) what s/he has done to solve one of the problems in the project. S/he starts by explaining the solution for the adviser (lines 1–6), followed by what seems to be an objection from the adviser (“But I think they are very different” in line 7). The student clarifies the issue (line 8–11), which seems to help the adviser understand the method the student has used (lines 9 and 11). In the rest of the excerpt (lines 11–21), we have the student explaining to the adviser what s/he has done about this problem:

(3)

1. **<St>** Yeah exactly so I now pick the whole region and I pick the area (all between)
2. **<Sp>** Ok **</Sp>**
3. **<St>** But not (here) **</St>**
4. **<Sp>** But I think they are very different this a and b **</Sp>**
5. **<St>** No that is what you can see here **</St>**
6. **<Sp>** Oh oh ok **</Sp>**
10 <St> Yeah (that) what you can see </St>
11 <Sp> Oh ok. Oh ok </Sp>
12 <St> Now this is a particle number the particle density of of of the whole region </St>
13 <Sp> Hmm </Sp>
14 <St> And for the four time steps </St>
15 <Sp> Ok </Sp>
16 <St> If you just directly compare it with the old one, this is old one </St>
17 <Sp> Oh yeah yeah yes yeah yeah yeah </Sp>
18 <St> Before I used only one time step now I use four time steps </St>
19 <Sp> Hmm </Sp>
20 <St> So I have more data </St>
21 <Sp> Hmmm yes now it’s the region (you) just (xx) </Sp>

The following excerpt (4) from the field of physical geography is typical of the project management interactions. We see the adviser asking the student questions about the first draft of his/her paper (lines 1–10), and then reminding the student of another deadline around the expected completion date of the first draft (lines 10–12). There is a slight topic change after line 10 with the focus being shifted to another paper for which the student is waiting for reviews, but the issue is still that of project management and deadlines (lines 13–21):

(4)
1 <Sp> Hmm. Ok if we start if you start writing from August do you think you can
2 finish the first draft in one month or </Sp>
3 <St> after this one </St>
4 <Sp> Yes and then it’s like start from August </Sp>
5 <St> Hmm </St>
6 <Sp> Then you whole August can you </Sp>
7 <St> In the end until end of August</St>
8 <Sp> Hmm </Sp>
9 <St> Yeah I think it can be done by then </St>
10 <Sp> Yeah but I am also think that maybe at that time you will get the previous paper
11 review back then you also need to spend a lot of time on that one and have you checked
12 that status </Sp>
13 <St> I I haven’t checked yesterday I thought to check </St>
14 <Sp> It’s already two months or </Sp>
15 <St> They don’t send the e-mail by decision I expected them to send (e-mail) </St>
16 <Sp> I think they will send e-mail. I think they will send you e-mail </Sp>
17 <St> Yeah</St>
18 <Sp> But if you check you can see that maybe one review already finished another
19 review still waiting for </Sp>
20 <St> Yeah I will I will do it</St>
21 <Sp> Comments so this yeah uh. Hopefully that one will be good luck otherwise it
will be more extra work for that (one) </Sp>

Excerpt 5 below is from the closing section of a supervision meeting. As Table 27.1 shows, the conclusion part can be made up of any of the three types of interaction. Excerpt 5 is the transcript from the last 23 seconds of one of the supervision meetings, where we see social talk with which the meeting ends:
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The adviser asks the student about his/her holiday plans (line 1). We see the student’s response in lines 2, 4 and 6, with minimal responses from the adviser in lines 3 and 5. The adviser ends the meeting by welcoming the student to contact him/her if needed (line 7). It is worth mentioning that while core and project management interaction types seemed to appear in any of the three sections of a supervision meeting (introduction of meeting, the main part, closing), we see social talk only in the beginning or the end of the meetings (see Table 27.1). It is also interesting that social talk was generally linked to project management issues, such as holiday plans leading to a discussion on meeting the deadlines for the revision of a paper.

In some cases, the boundary between core interaction and project management interactions was blurred. In fact, in some cases, the two types of interaction seemed to intersect. Excerpt 6 below is an example of such a case, where the adviser gives the student advice on how to go about the revisions of the rejected paper. This interaction includes sections which could be categorized as core and project management at the same time (e.g. lines 1 and 2; lines 18 and 19).

(5)
1 <Sp> Good so during your vacation you will be here or go somewhere </Sp>
2 <St> I will be here yeah in this town </St>
3 <Sp> Ok </Sp>
4 <St> I might go to (NAME OF COUNTRY) for just visit but I will be around </St>
5 <Sp> Oh ok ok great </Sp>
6 <St> And no plan to travel to (NAME OF COUNTRY) this summer </St>
7 <Sp> Hmm. Yes and if you have anything or any question you just email uh yes </Sp>

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(6)
1 <Sp> because no it’s made some extra work for your schedule you have to be very
2 efficient for this one </Sp>
3 <St> hmm but err </St>
4 <Sp> Hmm and what’s your plan for submission you want to completely change or
5 change some of this that we discussed and resubmit to climate dynamics or </Sp>
6 <St> is it allowed </St>
7 <Sp> of course it is allowed it’s like a new submission but then you have to address
8 all these questions </Sp>
9 <St> Hmmmm really because </St>
10 <Sp> yeah but if you err if you err if you submit to another journal you still have to
11 address some of the important issues like this </Sp>
12 <St> yeah yeah </St>
13 <Sp> because in case it’s it can be sent to the same reviewer and if they saw that you
14 didn’t do any change and just submit again then they will completely reject and </Sp>
15 <St> what other journal we can send it to </St>
16 <Sp> then we talk about this with (NAME OF CO_ADVISER) next time </Sp>
17 […]
18 <Sp> because you have to finish this one as (as/soon) as possible because otherwise I
19 don’t think you can focus on your other </Sp>
20 <St> the other one yeah </St>
21 <Sp> Hmmm </Sp>
The student and adviser continue talking about what type of revisions can be made to the paper for eighteen more turns and end the meeting with the scheduling of the next meeting initiated by the student (line 1) in excerpt (7) below. The meeting ends with laughter, where the adviser says that “hopefully in one or two months” the student will have “[got] rid of [the revisions]” (line 12):

(7)  
1 <St> Hmm yeah ok do we now have schedule for meetings </St>  
2 <Sp> yes weekly I don’t know if you still can come </Sp>  
3 <St> yeah </St>  
4 <Sp> Today is Friday right </Sp>  
5 <St> yeah </St>  
6 <Sp> then ten o’clock every Friday </Sp>  
7 <St> ten o’clock every Friday </St>  
8 <Sp> yes but do you think next Friday you already can make some plans </Sp>  
9 <St> plan </St>  
10 <Sp> yes </Sp>  
11 <St> yes I can come next time this plan with what we exactly we will change </St>  
12 <Sp> (then we can) hopefully in one or two months you can get rid of this </Sp>

This chapter does not have as its primary aim to be quantitative by nature or include calculations of statistical significance. However, some insight can be provided into the genre of supervision meetings with percentages and some quantification on adviser and student talk time with respect to the three types of interaction, as well as the ratio of each type of interaction in the data. For reasons of brevity, we will first look at two meetings in detail (see Table 27.2) by different adviser and student pairs; however, we will discuss the general trends present in the data for all six meetings that have been analysed with percentages.

Table 27.2 includes some information on the nature of this genre which deserves to be discussed in more detail. Although the table includes two meetings only, the remaining four
meetings showed a very similar pattern. In general, core interaction dominated in the data with at least 70 per cent of all talk being on the technical details of the project on the subject matter. Project management interactions follow up with 15–25 per cent of the meetings spent on discussing deadlines and other practical matters around the PhD project. Social talk, as mentioned earlier, almost always seems to be linked to scheduling and other project-related matters. Nevertheless, it can be referred to as a type of ‘academic’ small talk designed to achieve an appropriate atmosphere. The percentage of social talk is the lowest across the three types of interaction with less than 4 per cent in all the supervision meetings in the data.

Equally interesting is the ratio of adviser and student talk in each type of interaction. The adviser and the PhD students seem to say equally as much in core interaction, with an average of 52 per cent adviser and 48 per cent student talk. We will return to this in the final section of the chapter. The situation is different in the project management interactions: the advisers have considerably more talk time than the students with at least 68 per cent in all interactions. Finally, in the social talk, the students seem to say more than the advisers, the adviser talk making up an average of only 19 per cent of the interactions. This low percentage may at first seem surprising; however, this is a consequence of the advisers asking brief questions to initiate small talk with the students, which the students answer in detail (see Excerpt 5). It is most likely that this is related to the power asymmetry in such interactions: PhD students cannot take the liberty to initiate small talk with their advisers and opt for topics that may not be related to their projects.

**Reporting on an interesting pragmatic phenomenon: expressing disagreement**

Turner and Hiraga (2003), in their discussion of the British academic context, state that the students are treated as participant members in the discourse community from the beginning of their studies, despite the institutional power that the tutor has. This is said to be quite typical of the Western academic culture and is manifested in the present data when expressing disagreement. The students seem in control of their projects and reject suggestions by the adviser when they feel the adviser may be missing a point or simply making a suggestion that is not relevant. They seem to have good scholarly judgment and display good knowledge about their projects. An example of this is in Excerpt 2 where the student questions the adviser’s judgment when it comes to the reviews of the paper (line 14). One would perhaps expect the PhD student to simply rely on the adviser’s evaluation of the reviewer’s comments (lines 10–13), but the student says “No I think not only that he didn’t like the whole idea” (line 14). Another example is in Excerpt 3, where the adviser questions a step in the student’s solution to a particular problem by saying “But I think they are very different this a and b” (line 7). The student says “No that is what you can see here” without a pause or hesitation, which is an indication that s/he is sure of the method. There are many instances of the students expressing disagreement in the data. Another example is in Excerpt 8:

```
<Sp> Hmm. instead of boundary layer these classification they just take height one
kilometer two kilometer three kilometer but it I think it’s more appropriate to divide it
into boundary layer and above boundary layer. It is more meteorological term. People
will understand this. </Sp>
<St> No no. […] They are not like pressure level when you have the (xx) model
where there is a pressure level. The particles are more random and they can be
```
anywhere. What I do is I say ok [...] you will get this position where it is and you will get this height it is height in the surface for instance and you will get height of the boundary layer at that point and the height of the troposphere </St>

In Excerpt 8, the adviser tells the student about a “more appropriate” approach when going about one of the steps (line 2), because people would be familiar with what is a “more meteorological term” (line 3), and that “people (would) understand” it (lines 3–4). The student, sure of his/her method, rejects the suggestion (“No no” in line 5) and explains in the rest of the turn why the adviser’s suggestion does not work and why his/her approach works (lines 6–8) (see Björkman, 2015).

Concluding remarks and implications

Although this chapter has focused strictly on northern Europe, the description provided is likely to be representative of universities with English-medium instruction at doctoral level. English is the dominant lingua franca of such academic activity (e.g. Björkman, 2013), and advisers and PhD students from different L1 backgrounds use English as their vehicular language. Academic culture surely plays a role where PhD students from different academic cultures and backgrounds may experience hardships, such as when developing critical thinking (e.g. Lee, 2008), but it is suggested that the supervision meetings described here will be similar to any supervision interaction in the Western academic culture. Also, the difference between academic cultures is likely to be present not in the types of interactions presented here but in the sociopragmatic structuring (Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003).

In the Western academic culture, the PhD student becomes a participant in the disciplinary community from day one, and power in terms of institutional status becomes less important (Turner and Hiraga, 2003). This was manifest in the data in two ways: the ratio of adviser and student talk across the different types of interactions, and in the expression of disagreement by the students. The results here show that while the adviser did most of the talking in the project management interactions, the adviser–student talk times were almost equal in the core interactions, which are about the subject matter. This suggests that while the asymmetry in power in terms of institutional status may play a part in project management where the adviser adopts the role of the decision-maker, such power asymmetries are less of an issue in strictly content-related talk where the adviser and student can be more ‘equal’. In core interactions, the power asymmetry in terms of institutional or academic status was for the most part not overtly visible, where the students seemed to reject suggestions made by the adviser without any noticeable hesitation when they felt it was necessary to do so. In fact, it is possible that there is knowledge symmetry in the students’ favour: midway through their studies, PhD students are supposed to know more about the details of their projects than their advisers (see also Björkman, 2015).

Also relevant to the discussion of power here is linguistic competence. There are situations where the adviser may be more fluent in English (such as in Hiraga, Fujii and Turner, 2003) and may exercise more power in the interactions, which may also be reflected in the talk time. In this data, however, the linguistic competence of the adviser and students seemed quite equal, which again may indicate that power asymmetries become less visible. A speaker with less proficiency is not likely to be able to exercise power and therefore would not dominate in interactions. On that note, linguistic competence did not seem critical in the present data (see also Chang and Kanno, 2010). There were several nonstandardnesses in both the advisers’ and students’ turns (e.g. Excerpt 6,
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lines 1–2: it’s made some extra work for your schedule), which did not seem to disturb communication. This is typical of ELF settings.

This chapter focused on the PhD supervision genre and included observations on expressing disagreement. There are other pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic phenomena to consider in supervision interactions, such as expressing linguistic stance towards one’s own and others’ research, and general issues around power asymmetries and intercultural competence. The field of EAP would certainly benefit from studies describing such phenomena. By means of such descriptions, EAP practitioners can better understand the linguistic and sociopragmatic challenges PhD students face in supervision interactions and incorporate appropriate materials in course design. It is hoped that this study has sparked some interest in this high-stakes academic genre.

Related chapters

28 PhD defences and vivas
29 Genre approaches to theses and dissertations

References


