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**A Comparison of Linguistic Features and Syntactical Styles of Three
Academic Articles and Three Travel Articles**

David Penner

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To “write effectively, one must know rhetoric; that is, know how to choose wisely between ways of saying the same thing” (Martin Steinmann, Jr 279). To better understand the rhetorical effects of linguistic features and syntactical styles, I will analyse and compare the opening sections of three alternatively styled academic articles from my Custom Course Materials package, and three travel articles – two award winning, and one written by Salmon Rushdie.¹ The academic articles include Richard Ohmann’s “Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language,” a personable refutation of the conventional wisdom that recommends moving away from ambiguity, James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” a more formally styled analysis of ideological predispositions in different types of rhetoric, and Anne Beaufort’s highly formalized “Operationalizing the Concept of Discourse Community: A Case Study of One Institutional Site of Composing,” a highly formalized explication of a discourse community’s boundaries. The travel articles include Matthew Power’s 2004-2005 Lowell Thomas Awards gold medal-winning magazine article, "Lost Highway of the Himalaya," an informational, analytical, and humorous account of motorcycling to the Khardung La, Peter Mandel’s 2004-2005 Lowell Thomas Awards gold medal-winning newspaper article, “Big Sky in Botswana,” a dry-witted commentary of a safari in search of a lion,

and finally, Salman Rushdie's, "Taj Mahal," a reflective assessment of why he loves the Taj Mahal in spite of its problems. As the academic articles have been anthologised, and the travel articles have either won awards or they have been written by someone who has won many literary awards, I assume they all contain effective linguistic features. By singling out these features and choosing the ones that are most common, writers will be aided in creating better texts.

The opening section of Ohmann's "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language" is personable (390). By initially explaining the title, the writer shows his interest in dispelling readers' confusion. The *ad hominem* he creates by encouraging readers to question their feelings and refute Strunk and White's advice simultaneously causes them to switch from passive to interactive reading, and coaxes them toward agreement [S-5]². His use of idioms ("to boot" [S-7]), contractions ("doesn't" [S-8]), and the discursive "I," "me," and, "my" keep the tone informal. By stating the questions he will keep in mind, Ohmann indirectly creates a map, and informs readers that they too should keep these questions in mind [S-12]. Humorous throughout, his introduction finishes with a defeated expectation ("my answer to both questions is Yes [sic]" [S-12]). The average length of the mostly compound-complex sentences is 28 words. Most sentences' main subjects are at the beginning; however, Ohmann uses some introductory prepositional and infinitive phrases for clarity and humour ("After [the researcher] develops" [S-2], "In this essay" [S-11], and, "To bring suspense down to a tolerable level" [S-13]). Ohmann sparingly uses nominalizations to refer back to previous sentences ("The *rewrite*" [S-7], and, "in that *difference*" [S-8]), and to substantiate consequences ("There is a *loss* as well as a *gain*" [S-8]). Consistent use of active verbs shows Ohmann's confidence in his subject

(“they *substitute*” [S-6], “the original *conveys*” [S-9], and, “let me *reveal*” [S-13]). He modifies objects for clarity (“*psychological* evidence” [S-2], “*complex* idea” [S-9], and, “*ideological* activity” [S-12]), as well as for humorous purposes (“less *pompous* to boot” [S-7]), and, “[I] feel *uneasy* when... [I] begin exemplifying this *reasonable* advice” [S-5] – this is humorous because Ohmann feels the advice is not reasonable). He sparingly uses adverbs to weaken actions (“it *probably* comes as close as any precept” [S-1], “The original shows – however *inadequately* - a more complex idea” [S-9], and, “we may *inadvertently* suggest” [S-12]). Ohmann does not mention a knowledge deficit, and as his essay is about clarity, he has few modals, and no dangling modifiers. His reported statement, (““the accumulated wisdom of the handbooks.”” [S-2]), mocks E. D. Hirsch Jr., as Ohmann actually refutes what he recommends. Along with nominalization, Ohmann uses cohesive ties to connect ideas from one sentence to the next (“he turns for support to... the... handbooks... The *ones* he chooses are Strunk and White... He reduces *their* wisdom” [S-2-4]). One unique cohesive tie is his use of the title to display the “reasonable advice” he disagrees with. With Ohmann’s personal style, humour, sparing use of nominalizations, and few modals, readers clearly understand the content, and recognize it as applicable not only to academics, but to general audiences as well.

The opening section of Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” is formal (477-478). Heavy use of discourse terminology discourages nonacademic types from reading (“scientism” [S-2], “discursive structure” [S-8], “social-epistemic” [S-14], and “rhetorics” [S-2] - “his term for pedagogical practices and languages about them” [Ellen Quandahl 343]). Berlin also limits readership by referring to ideas that require background knowledge (“Expressionistic rhetoric [opposes] itself... to the scientism of

current-traditional rhetoric” [S-17]). The average length of the mostly compound-complex sentences is 26 words. Berlin’s slight use of introductory phrases (he uses the phrase, “In other words” twice [S-7, 21]), and placement of subjects at the beginning of sentences (“The question of ideology” [S-1], and, “Each of these rhetorics” [S-15]) quickly move readers to the main points of each sentence. Berlin balances nominalization (“imbrication” [S-2], “neutrality” [S-15], and, “appropriation” [S-18]) with verbalization (“foregrounded” [S-6], “problematized” [S-6], and, “situates” [S-6]). Grammatically anomalous strategies include switching from past tense to present tense ([S-1-2-3-5]), and personifying objects (“the discussion... has taken a new turn” [S-5], “rhetoric act[s] as the... arbiter” [S-7], “A rhetoric can never be innocent” [S-10], and, “the rhetoric of cognitive psychology refuses” [S-15]). In one unique modification, Berlin creates an ellipsis by causing the adjectives to function syntactically as nouns (“Most... have acknowledged the role of rhetoric in addressing... claims of value in the *social, political,* and *cultural*” [S-3]); these adjectives, however, do not have the morphological characteristics of nouns, and cannot be inflected as such. Verb modifications add more depth to sentences’ action (“*easily* preempted” [S-16], “*openly* admitted” [S-17], and, “*self-consciously* aware” [S-19]). Berlin uses the discursive “I” only to mention the work of his colleagues [S-12], and to map out his thesis [S-20-21]. The abundant use of absolute claims makes Berlin’s introduction assertive (“Ideology *is* here foregrounded [S-6], I *am* arguing [S-21], and, “a category I *will* call social-epistemic” [S-14]). He uses a modal for politeness (“I *would* like to bring the discussion I began there up to date” [S-14]). Berlin uses no reported statements, but he mentions those who were integral in researching a knowledge deficit (The concept that “a rhetoric can never be innocent [has

been] forwarded most recently by...” [S-11-12]). Berlin uses cohesion to tie one idea to many sentences (“A rhetoric can never be innocent... because it is always already serving certain ideological claims. *This* perspective... Here I merely wish to note that *it*... I have also called upon *it* in my monograph” [S-10-13]). Berlin ties the word, “classroom,” into sentences that express different types of rhetoric (He explains how rhetoric was traditionally used in the “classroom” [S-4], then he addresses the types that “have emerged as most conspicuous” in the “classroom” [S-14], then he proposes the type that he supports in the “classroom” [S-19]). Berlin’s formal opening paragraph contains readership-limiting terminology, grammatical anomalies, cohesive ties, and few introductory phrases.

The opening section of Beaufort’s “Operationalizing the Concept of Discourse Community: A Case Study of One Institutional Site of Composing” is prototypical in all its uses of linguistic features (486-488). By beginning her study with an italicized abstract, Beaufort concisely maps out her purpose, her findings, the implications of her data, and a knowledge deficit. Italicization is significant as “the understanding of a text involves consideration not only of content but also of form” (Dennis R. Klinck 358-359). (As it is a synopsis, I will not analyze its linguistic features.) The title and the opening sentence in the main part of her case study contain no “hooks.” The average length of the compound-complex sentences is 24 words. Her abundant use of abstract nouns makes the text more difficult to understand than one with more adjectivalized concrete terms. Beaufort uses numerous introductory phrases for a variety of purposes: to add information (“Increasingly since the 1980’s” [S-1]), to contrast (“However” [S-3]), to introduce (“In this study” [S-6]), to show uncertainty (“It seems that” [S-7]), to redefine

(“Or to put it another way” [S-8]), to verify (“Of course” [S-14]), to add (“And,” and “Furthermore” [S-15, 16]), and to direct readers’ focus (“But the real pragmatic issue remains” [S-18]). The main subjects are after the introductory phrases, which may frustrate readers who quickly want to understand the main points of the sentences. Adding to the abstractness, nominalizations are evident throughout the section (“information-processing” [S-1], “composition pedagogy” [S-2], “negotiations of meaning” [S-3], “dialogic situated interactions” [S-4], “constraints” [S-7], “writing practices” [S-8], and, “rhetorical act” [S-16]). Other terms prolong readers’ swiftness of comprehension (“salience of social context” [S-1], “situated cognition” [S-3], “rhetorical space connoted by social context” [S-4], and, “operationalizing” [S-17]). When readers process too many abstractions, concepts become harder to visualize. Beaufort uses past tense to refer to previous research, and passive sentences to focus on research content - not the researchers themselves [S-3, 4]. Beaufort uses many modifiers to create complicated noun phrases (“specific writer-reader pair” [S-3], “dialogic situated interactions” [S-4], and “wide-ranging material spaces” [S-5]). Beaufort similarly uses the discursive “I” to note her thesis (“I am particularly concerned with that mid-space... referred to increasingly as *discourse communities*” [her italics] [S-6]). Beaufort does not use modals in any significant way. Short of reporting statements with direct quotations, she paraphrases others’ research and cites those who have looked at discourse communities in various social contexts [S-9-12]. As her sentences are complex, Beaufort uses the word, “context” as a cohesive tie in five of the first six sentences. This gives readers a continuous focal point. Beaufort’s idiomatic “hook” at the end of her introduction refreshingly contrasts with the standard formalities she employs up until that

point (“But the real pragmatic issue remains: how to help writers recognize what aspects of social context must be reckoned with in composing something, and when they are in, as McCarthy put it, “strange lands.” [S-18]). Compared to her case study, Beaufort’s introduction is very abstract; to match her complicated topic, she uses introductory phrases, lists, nominalizations, and complex modifiers.

Mathew Power’s “Lost Highway of the Himalaya,” published in National Geographic Adventure, is compelling (43+). The adjective filled autobiographical opening section balances information and analysis with colourful visualizations and humour. With anecdotes, such as why elephants must dangle reflectors from their posteriors and why women do not wear helmets in Delhi [S-15, 18], Power supports the belief that “if the reader doesn’t [sic] like the opening to your story, he or she isn’t about to venture inside”(Stephen G. Bloom qtd. in Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan viii). Alliteration “bind’s the [title] into a unit” that foretells mystery (Wilma R. Ebbitt and David R. Ebbitt 17), alludes to a popular movie (Lost Highway), and reveals the writer’s local knowledge of colloquial terms (“Himalaya,” instead of “Himalayas”: from Capeller’s online Sanskrit-English Dictionary, *hima* means, “snow,” and *alaya* means, “house”). After narrating his difficulties in leaving Delhi (searing heat [S-1], sweat drenched clothes [S-2], and disconcerting engine troubles [S-4]), Power maps out a plot by explaining to readers where exactly he is going, why, and how [S-5-7]. The average length of the compound-complex sentences is 26 words, but with more common words, adjectives, and adverbs. There are also many introductory phrases that allow readers to envision the setting before the action takes place (“The mercury has topped 90 degree at 6 a.m. when I leave Delhi,” [S-1], and, “I haven’t even reached the city limits when” [S-

3]). As active verbs create a clear and interesting story, Power uses nominalization only to refer back to previously mentioned subjects (“I will cross the great Himalaya... in an *attempt* to reach the Khardung La” [S-7]). The present tense with references to the past and future, just like in real life, help readers feel they are in the author’s moment of experience (“My... motorcycle *is* loaded down with enough gear for a *month-long* trip” [S-2], and, “The plan... *is* to *ride* north” [S-5]). This tense also helps to relate facts that are relevant to the date of publication (“the border road through Kashmir *is* open, and free from Pakistani shelling” [S-6]). Power involves readers by directing their thoughts (“Imagine a city where every driver is a New York cabbie” [S-17]). Most nouns contain an active, attributive modifier (“the sun is a *wavering* molten penny” [S-1], and, “a *sputtering* auto-rickshaw” [S-3]). Power is careful not to use the experiential “I” too much as it obviates readers’ feeling that it is their trip (“The plan... *is*” [S-5], and, “Driving in Delhi” [S-12]). By not using modal expressions, assertions are bold (“The road through Kashmir *is* off the scale” [S-9]); however modals become necessary when facts are difficult to verify (“It *is perhaps* the greatest feat of road-building ever undertaken” [S-10]). As this story is Power’s own account, there are no instances of reported statements. Along with nominalizations, he uses cohesion to connect subjects (“The road through Kashmir... *It*... runs straight through one of the most politically charged conflict zones... I decided to wait to tell my mother about *it* until I got back” [S-9-11]). There is no reference to a knowledge deficit. Humorous analogies, such as “a citywide *Ben-Hur* chariot race,” and “every driver is a New York cabbie” help readers to envision the scene, but do nothing to suppress the idea that travel writing “reproduces the ‘foreign’ world as an object of Western knowledge” (J. Pratt qtd. in Holland and Huggan

5). Power also encourages this idea with his Americanisms (“1,500 *mile* journey” [S-5], and, “the Khardung La; at 18,380 feet” [S-7] - in India, “nobody remembers miles anymore - it is viewed as an archaic measurement” (United States Metric Association). To create a compelling and informational story for National Geographic Adventure’s mostly American audience, Power’s article combines an alliterative title, laughable personal hardship, active verbs and nouns, limited use of “I,” present tense with reference to the past and future, and humorous analogies.

Peter Mandel’s Boston Globe article, “Big Sky in Botswana” is descriptive and witty (“Everyone is kind (I will see about the lions) except for the customs guy at the airport” [S-4]). The alliterative title states the article’s setting; however, “Big Sky,” does not adequately foretell the author’s adventure. Mandel begins with his problems at immigration. He resourcefully maps out his article within his conversation (““Why are you here?” he keeps asking, even when I tell him it’s for a six-day safari” [S-5]). The average length of the sentences is 14 words – much less than the academic articles, and “indicative of the idiosyncratic nature of [a newspaper’s] discourse practices” (Beaufort 497). The complementary mix of short and long sentences [S-12-15], and simple terminology sets a faster pace than other articles. The conventional lack of opening phrases places main subjects closer to the beginning of sentences. In spite of his maresh attitude toward fragmented sentences (“Camping in tents with a guide from this big tour company” [S-7]), dangling modifiers (“Also in the group is Louise from Dublin who spots our first impala, a suede-soft female who hops into the air when she sees us and disappears” [S-23]”), and mishandled quotation marks (“My trip is run by CC Africa, I say” [S-6]), Mandel wins a gold medal. This shows that some linguistic features, such as

an adept use of cohesion, are more important than proper grammar. Mandel connects the beginning of the article (“I will see about the lions” [S-4]) to the end (“It is Wolfgang who, in our last half-hour, notices the shapes... ‘Lion,’ whispers Louise.” [S-103-109]). He also awakens readers into comparing later moods with previous moods (“Andreas is *whistling* as we drive deep into some scrubby woods. He is still *whistling* as we pull to a stop” [S-26, 27], and later, “[Hyenas will] be around looking for scraps as soon as it's dark. We start detecting sounds... A campfire is crackling, and Andreas has stopped *whistling*. [S-46], and when they see the lion, “Andreas lets out his *whistle*, soft and long” [S-111]). Mandel finishes the article by entertaining the customs officer’s question one last time (“Why did I come to Botswana? Now I know” [S-114]). Present tense, and the lack of nominalizations create a narrative mood. Besides an avid use of modifiers to note his surroundings, he devotes many predicative adjectives to describe the other tourists [S-22-25]. This strategy reflects how travel writing is “addressed to those who do not plan to follow the traveler... but who require the... scandals of the literary form *romance*” (Paul Fussell qtd. in Holland and Huggan). Accordingly, there is also very little factual information about Botswana, and no reference to a knowledge deficit. Mandel does not use the experiential “I” until his fifth sentence, which demonstrates that he also wants to make this the readers’ experience. Mandel does not require modals, as observational descriptions are more certain than analytical ones. Used anecdotally, his reported statements help readers feel they are overhearing the conversation (“Why are you here?” he keeps asking” [S-5]). For the Boston Globe’s Sunday readership, humor, a brilliant use of cohesion, and an observational, narrative style obviate the need for perfect grammar and much information to create a gold medal-winning article.

The final travel article, “Taj Mahal,” did not win an award, but the author, Salman Rushdie, has won many, including the 1981 Booker Prize for Midnight's Children. His gift for peeling back the layers of something, and exposing its soul is very evident in this article. While revealing his disillusion with the Taj Mahal’s “image-saturated” commercialization and oppressive past, he integrates facts, history, legends, and information about what readers might expect if they visited today. He sets the tone with his first words (“The trouble with the Taj Mahal” [S-1]); this strategy contrasts with other travel articles that begin with the traveler’s troubles. His statement that it is figuratively “almost” impossible to see the Taj Mahal foreshadows the trials he goes through before he is able to appreciate it - the mausoleum has become a routinization of charisma. Using all types of sentence structures, Rushdie’s ability to harmonize linguistic features accounts for his longer than average sentences (30 words per sentence). In sentence 11, the action (“jostling” through the crowds to finally coming upon “the *thing-in-itself*”), the mood (enduring frustration to feeling “utterly overwhelmed”), and the sentence structure (A probability statement, followed by a compound-complex sentence with interrupting elements, and finishing with two absolute modifiers) unite to create a gestaltic impression. Similar to Power, Rushdie uses introductory phrases to set up images before revealing sentences’ action (“Like the Mona Lisa, like Andy Warhol’s silk-screened Elvis, Marilyn, and Mao, mass reproduction has all but sterilized the Taj Mahal” [S-4]). There is no common pattern to the location of main subjects within sentences, and nominalizations are evident, but not overly used (“disenchantment” [S-9], “overexposure” [S-10]). To go along with the dark mood of the first section, Rushdie uses passive verbs (“has become so overlaid” [S-1], “the Taj... had been all but

abandoned” [S-6]). Jaded sounding modifiers assist Rushdie’s rhetorical purpose (“*chocolate-box* images” [S-2], “*myriad* hawkers” [S-11], and, “the *familiarity-breeds-contempt* problem” [S-8]). When he begins to describe the Taj Mahal, however, his descriptions resonate with force (“The building itself left my skepticism in shreds” [S-16], and “it simply obliterated the million counterfeits of it” [S-18].) This matches my own descriptions in an e-mail, “I’ve never seen such symmetry. It’s like I was standing on a chessboard with this dazzling, ivory queen in the middle” (Penner). As in travel articles by other writers, Rushdie uses the experiential “I,” but to involve readers, he also uses, “you” (“When you arrive at the outer walls” [S-8]). Uniquely, Rushdie uses modals to show hope - hesitancy toward total disillusionment (“the Taj Mahal is *almost* impossible to see” [S-1], “mass reproduction has *all but* sterilized the Taj Mahal” [S-4]). Rushdie reports his friend’s words to support his point about the extent of the Taj Mahal’s commercialization (He “told me that he had decided to leave the Taj off his itinerary because of its overexposure” [S-10]). There is no map to follow, although in the first sentence, Rushdie challenges readers to try to “see” the real meaning of the Taj Mahal. Climactically, Rushdie reveals his interpretation with beatific imagery (the Taj Mahal “remind[s] us that the world is real, that the sound is truer than the echo, the original more forceful than its image in a mirror [S-17]). With a distinctive tone, skillful merging of linguistic features, the use of “you” to involve readers, the use of modals to show hope, and intelligent, emotional analysis, Rushdie beautifully expresses his true feelings towards the Taj Mahal.

All writing has in common, “the writer’s attention to whether their words will achieve with readers the specific goals the writers seek” (Richard Gephardt 293). Even

though the opening sections of the academic and travel articles each present a different style, they possess similar linguistic features that are beneficial to remember. Titles are important indicators of a text's style. According to my analysis of average sentence length in academic articles, articles with longer sentences are less complex. A balance between writing clearly and being concise is essential. Introductory phrases and nominalizations, although useful, lead to abstraction. In academic articles, powerful, present tense sentences with few modifiers and modals are desirable. Past tense is good for referring to past research, and the passive voice is useful when naming agents that would limit the understanding of complex points. In travel articles, modifiers are more desirable. Present tense in narration transports readers to the time and location of the story. Writers must involve their audience: Ohmann appeals to readers' feelings, Power limits his use of the experiential "I," and directs readers to imagine, Mandel also limits his experiential "I," and places readers within his conversations, and Rushdie uses the experiential (?) "you." Readers like to read about other people's problems: Berlin feels uneasy, Power's and Mandel's troubles are farcical, and Rushdie's are internal. Humor helps readers to continue reading. Well placed "hooks" are effective, even in formal writing. When descriptions contain actions, they are easily visualized. Reported statements support writers' claims, and the use of a map is essential to guide readers. Use cohesive ties skillfully and humorously to connect ideas and sentences in readers' minds. As "every tool carries with it the spirit by which it had been created" (Werner Karl Heisenberg), linguistic features help writers produce magnificent writing.

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¹ A greater measure of uniformity can be reached by looking at the same section in each article. More than other parts of the article, I believe the introduction, up until and including the paragraph with the thesis, provides a good indication of a writer's style.

² For consistency and clarity at the expense of standard MLA format, all references to sentences are denoted by "S-" inside of square brackets. All analysed quotations are separated with ellipses. All italics within analysed quotations have been added to highlight the linguistic feature in question. All other quotations (those not analysed) are cited in standard MLA format.