The Third Man: Pseudo-Objectivity and the Voice of Passivity

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ABSTRACT

One of the hallmarks of academic language is the use of the third person. Developed as an academic register primarily in the natural sciences, it is seen as having an air of objectivity. Consequently, it has been mandated in a range of disciplines where the values of objectivity and detachment are less clear-cut. Students are issued with blanket instructions such as, "Never write in the first person." The problem is that sometimes the nature and content of the task is such that the only appropriate and honest voice to use is the first person. I describe a number of cases I have encountered in my work as an academic skills adviser where students have been asked to respond to tasks which call primarily on their personal observations, insights and experiences. In being told to record such accounts in the third person, students are being asked to surrender their position of personal authority. The effect is corrosive; students lose confidence in themselves and their ideas. Potentially rich writing becomes bland and corporatist. I suggest a number of strategies that could give students more autonomy in their use of academic language. The choice of voice should never be totally conventional. There are times when the third person should shut up and let someone else speak.

Keywords*: first person, third person, objectivity, subjectivity*

Introduction

One of the absolute requirements of a university education should be to give students the tools, not just for professional practice in their particular

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field of expertise, but also for the effective expression of their own thoughts, ideas and beliefs. They should be able to analyse and interpret, not only the objective world, but also the world of their own experience. Civil engineers, for instance, should be able to compile a detached, coherent report on, let's say the structural dynamics of a proposed bridge, but they should also be able to talk about its aesthetic qualities and its various social contexts. Someone trained in Business and Economics should be able to objectively count the dollars and cents involved in an organisation's annual report but they should also be able to argue from the position of personal values, as much as from any notion of corporate ethics, about the moral legitimacy of a proposed tax avoidance scheme or some shonky deal that leaves worker's superannuation and long-service leave floating in a shelf company registered in the Bahamas.

Rational enquiry – the cornerstone of the university – encompasses more than mere academic objectivity. It has to encompass the ability to recognise and interpret subjectivity. This, paradoxically, leads to a more truly objective stance. If we simply signify objectivity by the use of various rhetorical devices, while sneaking disguised subjectivity in through the back door, this works against objectivity. However, the admission that sometimes we are speaking subjectively and that that subjectivity can be a valuable source of evidence and authority actually enhances objectivity.

Unfortunately, the tools for exploring the world of subjective experience and generating practice, theory and insights from that experience are often, generally with the aim of schooling them in the canons of professional practice, denied to students. It would be foolish to deny that students want and need to know the standard discourses that apply in the professions they aspire to, but the world of their subjectivity should not be subordinated to this knowledge. They should be given the tools to change and manipulate these discourses in the ways that they see fit, in ways that respond to their own experience.

The Cult of the Third Person

One of the means by which students are denied this ability is through what I would call the cult of the third person. In some quarters, using the third person is seen as the only way to write academic prose. The use of the third person developed primarily in the natural sciences where it can be seen as a means of recording data and empirical evidence that is not contingent on the personal situation of the author. A case in point is the scientific laboratory report. I would see this as a legitimate, academically

appropriate, intellectually useful place for the third person. The writer of a lab report, by depersonalising it, wants to point to the fact that the experiment can be replicated. It doesn't matter if you or I or Blind Freddie does the experiment, the results will be the same.

Even so, the lab report is not the only form of scientific writing and many good writing manuals actively advocate the use of the first person:

> *I herewith ask all young scientists to renounce the false modesty of previous generations of scientists. Do not be afraid to name the agent of the action in a sentence, even when it is 'I' or 'we'. Once you get into the habit of saying, "I found," you will also find that you have a tendency to write, "S. aureus produced lactate' rather than 'Lactate was produced by S. aureus."*
>
> (Day, p.161)

Day's statement about the 'agent of action' in the sentence is important. Sometimes that agent may be the data as in 'the data reveals', sometimes it may be 'we', sometimes 'I'. David Lindsay echoes Day's thoughts on the subject:

> *Many people, when using the active voice, see the use of the first person – 'I' or 'we' – as a problem. They think that it destroys objectivity and that more distant words like 'the author' are somehow preferable…One or two journals frown on the use of the first person but most do not. I believe that the use of the first person and active voice gives a refreshing sense of directness and sometimes avoids the necessity for some remarkable verbal gymnastics.*
>
> (Lindsay, p. 49-50)

And on a slightly more cautious note, Maeve O'Connor says, "Use the first person … for describing what you did – but don't overuse it if the journal or your supervisor has banned it." (O'Connor, p. 96).

O'Connor's advice resonates with me. Firstly, it worries me that a perfectly legitimate linguistic strategy is "banned". But, secondly, I have an obligation to my students to give them the best chance of getting good marks by doing what the lecturer wants. Use the first person, I tell my students, if you think you can get away with it. In not entirely scientific fields, that have less excuse to insist on the impersonal modes, supervisors and journals worship at the altar of science and adopt its sacred rituals and language. Science with its presumed objectivity, its grasp of the 'cold, hard facts', has become the prestige language of the

academy. Its detached, neutral, objective language has been mandated as the ideal language of description. Many disciplines, even in the Humanities, the refuge presumably of the never completely certain or scientific category of what it is to be human, have succumbed to "science envy" and have become embarrassed by the fuzzy, personality inflected language of the first person. This tendency is most acute in disciplines such as Business and Economics, and Psychology which have attempted to put themselves on a firm scientific footing, to distance themselves from the world of human experience and desire in which they are really grounded. Disciplines such as Engineering which have a foot in both camps, the subjective realm of human experience and the objective scientific description of the world, are also caught in this trap, although there is perhaps a more flexible approach to these issues emerging here.

My Thoughts Entirely

From 1999 to 2001, I worked as an academic skills adviser at Monash University in Melbourne. I worked with students across a range of disciplines, but mainly in Engineering, and Business and Economics. Most of my students were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Since that time, I have been working at Mahidol University in Thailand in a similar capacity with graduate students who are obliged to write their theses in English. They face a doubly difficult task. Not only do they have to absorb the intellectual content of their courses but they also have to learn how to write academic prose in a range of registers and contexts and in a second language. Writing in the third person and the attendant range of passive constructions that this demands often causes them to go through intellectual and linguistic contortions and plunges them into a state of confusion and powerlessness. I don't blame them. Much of the time the instructions that they are given are illogical and inappropriate. Often, using the detached, neutral, objective third person simply does not fit the requirements of the task they have undertaken. Because, quite often, we are not being completely and utterly objective; it may be what we are striving for, the light on the hill, but hiding the facts by changing our identities, by transforming ourselves into some other thing, the third person, does not achieve this aim.

The inculcation of the notion that the third person is the hallmark of academic prose strikes many students with all the force of a commandment: "Thou shalt not write in the first person." Often, I find

that they have no real idea of why they are doing it. When I have asked the question, the answers have been that it is "more academic", "more formal", "the *Q Manual* says so", and, once to my delight, that "it is more modest and elegant".

This is what the *Q Manual*, the faculty style manual and the Monash University BusEco student's bible, says on the subject:

> *To present an assignment in an objective manner, it is general practice to use the third person. Using this writing style, you become an observer who uses pronouns such as, "they" and "it". The use of these pronouns, rather than "I" and "we" (first person), is more impersonal, signifying a more objective appraisal.*
>
> (Kimberley and Cotesta, p. 16)

Signifying a more objective appraisal. I find this phrase very interesting. The appraisal is not enacting greater objectivity, it simply signifies, it gives the impression of greater objectivity. But in many reports and essays that students ask me to help them with, the use of third person militates against a greater objectivity. The objective truth of the situation is that often the subjective position and experience of the author is of critical importance. The *Q Manual* does go on to say that the first person may be used when the student is specifically asked for a personal evaluation but this is only with a special dispensation from the priest/lecturer. My point is that students have to learn to decide for themselves what is objective and what is subjective. These are questions that cannot always be ruled on in advance of the gathering of evidence. And my experience is that most students, if given rules, will follow them blindly. You do not become an observer by using the third person. You become an observer by observing.

The Self in Disguise

One of the strategies a writer can use to conform to the demand for the third person and at the same time to preserve the primary source of evidence is to disguise personal experience and transform it into some neutral 'objective' position. In other words, to transform their experience with all the values that it possesses, into a non-existent third person's experience, that is to say into fiction, an area in which, of course, it is a valuable device.

For instance, I have looked at numerous essays and reports over the years from Masters students in Marketing, Accounting, Business Administration and related areas where they are called upon to do a case study of a particular organisation and an issue within that organisation such as personnel policies, use of information technology, or some aspect of marketing or business administration. Many international students I see have worked in a particular organisation for a number of years before taking up their courses here. Naturally, they turn to what they know, to what they have experienced, to write their pieces. One such student had worked at the Bank of Thailand for a number of years in the personnel department. She was, in any terms, an authority on the subject. Her personal experiences in the company were the basis of the essay. She adduced a number of theories on human resource management but most of the direct data in the report was derived from her own observations gathered in the course of her working life, together with backup documentation revealing the company's policies and operational procedures. In the essay, her unique and privileged position of authority was the very thing that she had to undermine because of her attempts to conform to the third person. She had to disguise herself as somebody else. If I hadn't gone over the essay with her, I would never have known that the writer of this report had worked in the organisation. The whole essay worked to undermine and hide its central authority. ("Human Resources in The Bank of Thailand"). In an essay such as this, the simplest, most intellectually honest and most apt formulation would be to say: "I worked at the Bank of Thailand for four years and made the following observations."

The justification for the third person here is that it is needed to follow the format of a professional company document. But many types of communications take place within organisations and many of these demand that the author speak from a position of personal authority. To enshrine the formal organisation report as the supreme, indeed often the only model, denies students the chance to fully investigate the range of communication strategies that they need to become competent in. It limits not only their academic development but also their professional development.

As an aside here, another thing I find particularly galling in the injunctions handed out to Business students about the third person is that one of the favoured sources of evidence in many a third person report is a quotation from business and economic gurus who are often completely egocentric and never stop talking about themselves.

The confusion emerges further in the following examples. An engineering student was asked to write an account of his holiday work in a sawmill in Malaysia. These are some excerpts:

> *"During the period of training, the author worked as an assistant engineer in the workshop"; "Everyday the author would follow one of the skilled workers to patrol around the factory"; "the author learned how to communicate"; "Consultation had been done"; "the author learned how to take data"; "One very good experience was when the author works together with a skilled worker in piping." "It seems easy to the author in the beginning, but during the work, the author began to realise the difficulty."*
>
> ("Work Experience")

And so on. The student told me that one of the things he had constantly been told was that you can never use "I" in any engineering report. This is not surprising given that a Monash Engineering web page on report writing issues this completely unqualified blanket instruction, "Never write in first-person" (Seidel). One size fits all. When this author ie. me, asked the other author what he thought the reasons for this instruction might be in this particular case, he replied helplessly, "I have no idea."

Even when students are asked for a personal response, the weight of instructions on using the third person intimidates them. Students in an Engineering Communications course that I am associated with were asked to write a short piece called "My Career Goals". Most of them, mercifully, had no trouble with it, but I did notice this sentence as an example of the problems I am talking about: "It was found that I wanted to be a civil engineer." The student had managed to talk about himself but he had to construct a fictional observer to do so. This sentence carries the weight of passivity of the third person constructions that the student has been schooled in.

Another discipline that suffers from what I have called "science envy" is psychology. Science envy has definite resemblances to Sigmund Freud's famous idea. Many disciplines envy the powerful tool of science – objectivity. However, as many have rightly argued, objectivity is not the only tool worth having. Freud may no longer be fashionable in this discipline but at least with Freud we know that he is somehow at the centre of his psychological scheme. We know which couch his patients had to lie on. So we can say something about his own psychology which

then gives us a basis to judge the truth claims of his work. However, psychology, in its modern empirical form, tries to replicate the methods of the laboratory report in situations where it is absurdly inapplicable. To conform to the third person students have to contort themselves in ways which are possibly psychologically damaging:

> *The collection of data for this case study is done through five observations for an extended period of time. The objects of the observation are two people who are in a romantic relationship for six months… In most of the observations, the observer did not involve in their conversation. In addition, all of the observations were done while the couple is among their friends. However, the observations were done without the knowledge from both of the participants in any possible situations therefore it is assumed that the conversations and arguments happened naturally. Note-taking was done after each observation and was written in narrative format.*
>
> ("Body Language")

This is an extract from a psychology report on the nature of body language. The student had chosen to watch and record the body language of a particular couple as the basis of her report. As laid down in the instructions on proper scientific writing in the Monash psychology web page, third person and passive constructions, "signifying objectivity", are used ("Report Writing Hints"). There are the normal grammatical errors that an ESL speaker would make, but otherwise it follows all the rules. But the signifying of some remote objectivity is essentially false. The writer of this report was not spying on the couple with a telescope or hidden behind a screen as a birdwatcher might be, or observing these creatures under glass as an entomologist might. She was their friend – this is what gave her the privileged access to their situation, this is how she was able to report on their body language. She was not a distant voyeur. Yet nowhere in the report, except for the elusive statement that "the observations were done while the couple is among friends" was this ever explicitly acknowledged. She could have been anyone.

This student had come to me for help with the grammar and structure of the report. I encouraged her to transform it, to acknowledge and use her personal involvement with "the objects of the study" as a source of authority and strength in the writing of the report. She seemed to go away with a sense of the possibilities that this advice might be able to transform the report into something stronger and truer.

The effect of this constant harping on the use of the third person as the only appropriate way to write academically is to tell students to always distrust their personal insights and experiences. Certain forms of evidence and argument become unavailable to them. No wonder there's trouble with plagiarism. I have had students who have reeled with surprise and amazement when I have let it be known to them that sometimes they can have an idea of their own, that it doesn't necessarily have to always come out of a book or a journal, that they can and should say "I think". Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not uncommon. A colleague of mine at the Language and Learning Services Unit at Monash University, Tim Moore, recently conducted an informal survey among teaching staff about the use of first and third person. This was one of the responses: "I have had similar experiences with students responding in hushed and almost frightened tones: 'you mean we're allowed to say "I think" on essays?" (Peel qtd. In Moore)

What did Descartes say? "It is thought that the thinker thinks therefore it seems that the thinker is?" I don't think so. "I think, therefore I am."

What is to be done? As academic skills advisers we are placed in the dilemma that grammarians have always faced. We describe the practices of academic language, but then we prescribe what we describe. Even if the prescription is not the cure. Speaking personally, I have reluctantly advised students to continue with the use of third person in situations where I feel it is quite inappropriate. This is simply because I know that their lecturers get upset if they don't follow the rules. What I should do is get in touch with the lecturers and point out why I think the rules are wrong. This is a course I intend to follow more in the future. At the least, I think lecturers should be encouraged to allow students to, with the necessary guidance, use their own judgement to work out the appropriate voice for each occasion. Students need to define what their authorial position is for themselves, rather than just being given one that they must adopt, come what may.

Another strategy is to ensure that there is at least a space in the curriculum for the analysis and interpretation of subjectivity. I jointly teach in a course called Engineering Communications at Monash. The course, designed by Roger Hadgraft, my co-teacher, aims to give students the skills to communicate in a range of contexts and situations that they might encounter in their professional lives. One of the important elements of the course is the keeping of a journal, which is designed to encourage and record personal reflection about their activities. A journal such as

this could have a useful place in any number of courses. It could definitely be taken up in a course on Business Communications, for instance.

Conclusion

In Carol Reed's film *The Third Man* Orson Welles plays the morally vacuous eponymous anti-hero. He is the detached, objective observer, a position which is illustrated in the climactic scene where he and the Joseph Cotton character are perched on top of a Ferris wheel overlooking Vienna. Orson Welles, The Third Man, comments that from this vantage point, one he has sought throughout the film, the people down below look like ants and that they are as expendable as ants. The mandating of a so-called "objective" language in situations where it is not appropriate to the demands of the problem leads to a similar attitude. It reaches its apogee in the Newspeak of politics and business which revels in the neutralising bureaucratese of expressions such as "downsizing" and "collateral damage". As the French social theorist Alain Touraine has said there is a "real danger" of a "complete dissociation between system and actors, between the technical or economic world and the world of subjectivity." (qtd in Freadman, p.1). This dissociation gives rise to what John Ralston Saul calls "The Unconscious Civilisation", where because the subjective life goes unexamined, we fall increasingly under the sway of corporate blandishments and lose our sense of ourselves.

As academic skills advisers, one of our jobs is to help students to write in "appropriate academic language". My feeling is that ossified formulas such as "Always use the third person" make students lazy and unthinking. Even more insidiously, constant injunctions to avoid the first person have a corrosive effect on their trust in their own intellectual capacities. We need to ask them to find the right language for the task. Sometimes it will be first person, sometimes, second, sometimes third, sometimes all of them. But whatever the case, students should not be pushed into some narrow, rule-bound corner which distorts their intentions and methods.

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