

Book Review: The Discourse of Peer Review: Reviewing Submissions to Academic Journals, Brian Paltridge. Palgrave Macmillan, London (2017). xiv + 235 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-48735-3. ISBN 978-1-137-48736-0 (eBook). Hardcover €99.99. E-book €83.29.

HENG Kimkong

School of Education, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia

Corresponding Author: HENG Kimkong (kimkongheng@gmail.com)

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Peer review is “the cornerstone of academic publication” and peer-reviewed publication is regarded as “the gold standard of academic scholarship (Tardy, 2019, p. 272). The genre of peer review is usually threatening and mysterious, especially to junior scholars. Navigating the peer review process successfully requires the development of a level of competence in academic writing. To help beginning authors new to the genre of peer review understand the peer review process, Brian Paltridge has written a book titled *The Discourse of Peer Review: Reviewing Submissions to Academic Journals*.

Paltridge is an established author and former editor of *English for Specific Purposes*, an international peer-reviewed journal. He aims to “demystify the somewhat enigmatic world of manuscript reviewing” (p. 29). *The Discourse of Peer Review* is based on an examination of 97 reviewers’ reports written in response to submissions to the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. It is also informed by questionnaire responses completed by 45 reviewers of the journal. The audience of the book, although not explicitly stated, appears to be beginning authors and novice researchers — those not familiar with the process of peer review or how to respond to reviewers’ reports.

The book consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter, while Chapters 2–6 report the findings of the study of reviewers’ reports. Chapter 7 discusses implications of the study, before Chapter 8, the final chapter, summarizes the book and provides key references for further reading.

The first chapter explains the different types of peer review in academic settings (e.g., reviews of research grant applications, promotion and tenure track applications, academic books, book proposals, and journal articles). Then, it outlines the scope and aim of the book, briefly discussing the value of peer review in ensuring the quality and standard of academic publications, as well as criticisms — the slowness, subjectivity, and bias that come with it (see also Smith, 2015).

Chapter 2, taking a genre perspective, discusses the style of reviewers' reports, paying particular attention to their context and content. This chapter is based on an analysis and discussion of results derived from the examination of 97 reviewers' reports, of which nine accepted the article, 22 required minor revisions, 39 required major revisions, and 27 were rejected. The author highlights that across all the reviews, the areas frequently commented on were "the review of the literature, method and research design, presentation and analysis of results, and discussion and significance of the study" (p. 63). In light of this, it is suggested that academic authors, experienced and novice, should pay attention to these areas when writing for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

Chapter 3 looks at the pragmatics (i.e., the relationship between language and context) of reviewers' reports. It examines "the way in which reviewers ask authors to make changes to their submissions and the typical speech acts they use to do this" (p. 87). Reviewers' requests for changes may be classified into four categories: directions, suggestions, clarification requests, and recommendations. However, the data from the reports and questionnaire responses show that reviewers are very often indirect, with the aim of saving an author's face. This causes their suggestions, recommendations, and requests for clarification to become directions. Thus, authors, particularly inexperienced ones, have to understand how to read and interpret reviewers' reports, because what might seem to be a suggestion is most likely a direction to do something instead (see Paltridge, 2015).

Politeness strategies used in reviewers' reports are examined in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of previous work on politeness, including issues of face and gender in theories of politeness. It then presents findings from the examination of reviewers' reports from the lens of politeness strategies. The data shows a range of politeness strategies used by reviewers. They include: (a) expressing approval of what authors have done, (b) using indirectness (i.e., using a suggestion that actually means a direction), (c) using praise/criticism

pairs (or a good news/bad news frame), (d) apologizing, (e) hedging, and (f) taking personal responsibility for comments. Politeness strategies are used to mitigate the face-threatening acts of criticism common in reviewers' reports. Novice academic authors therefore need to understand the 'good news/bad news' nature of reviewers' reports and be well-prepared for criticism of their work.

Chapter 5 explores the evaluative language used and roles assumed by reviewers as they evaluate submissions. The focus of the chapter is on the analysis of stance taken by reviewers in their reports. Four stance makers, such as attitude markers (*unfortunately, surprisingly*), boosters (*definitely, clearly*), hedges (*might, perhaps*), and self-mentions (*I, we*), are discussed in reference to the four categories of review (i.e., accept, minor revisions, major revisions, and reject reviews). The most frequent stance markers are attitude markers and self-mentions, which are used to display the voice of authority and expertise reviewers have on a particular topic. With regard to reviewer roles, the most prominent taken on by reviewers are an evaluator, a commentator, a reviewer, and an editor. The many roles reviewers take in writing reports, Paltridge observes, "can make it difficult for authors, especially less experienced ones, to know how to proceed with their paper" (p. 144) after they have received a reviewer report.

Chapter 6 reports on the survey data ($n = 45$) and follow-up correspondence. It explores how reviewers learn to write reports and the challenges they face in writing reviews. The data reveal that almost 70 percent of reviewers (31 of the 45 respondents) have learned to do reviews by reading reviewers' reports of their own submissions to academic journals. Others (28 percent) have learned to write reviews by simply doing them (see also Paltridge, 2013). The most challenging aspect of writing reviewers' reports is to ensure that comments are both constructive and supportive, that is, "being critical without being negative and unfair" (p. 151). There is however very little agreement on what is the most straightforward about writing reviewers' reports. These findings have implications for reviewer training programs, a topic of discussion in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7, entitled "*Implications for reviewer training*," provides suggestions for reviewer training and development courses for novice researchers. It proposes "an experiential, 'learning by doing' approach to reviewer training, rather than a didactic, information-transmission-style one" (p. 157). The chapter draws upon findings from the analysis of reviewers' reports,

questionnaire responses, and follow-up email interviews. It outlines an example of a workshop and various tasks that aim to help beginning authors understand the peer review process and reviewers' reports. This chapter is particularly useful for those who wish to run reviewer training workshops or courses for research students and early career academics, who are new to academic publishing.

The volume concludes with an eleven-page concluding chapter that provides an overview of each of the previous seven chapters. It also offers suggestions for further reading and research in the area of peer review and scholarly publication. In particular, the author briefly reviews three books which provide advice on academic publishing such as Curry and Lillis's (2013) *A Scholar's Guide to Getting Published in English*, Liebowitz's (2015) *A Guide to Publishing for Academics*, and Paltridge and Starfield's (2016) *Getting Published in Academic Journals*. Other similar books co-authored by Swales and Feak (e.g., Swales & Feak, 2000, 2011) are also mentioned. Toward the end of the book, Paltridge highlights the role of scholarly publication in contributing to the growth of an academic discipline. He argues that beginning researchers, regardless of their language backgrounds, need support and guidance to understand the process of getting published and to succeed in academic publishing (see Hyland, 2016 for a discussion of the myth of linguistic injustice in academic publishing).

The book, taken as a whole, has many strengths and interesting features. One of which, as the author himself mentions, is the type of data on which the book is based. That is, the data such as reviewers' reports and questionnaire, as well as email responses from reviewers, are "often extremely difficult to obtain" (p. 28). Various aspects including discourse features of peer review are explored throughout the book. The brief history of editorial peer review and its process outlined in Chapter 1 is interesting. Readers may also find the "event sequence" (p. 33), or steps in the peer review process, as well as the types of comments across all of the reviewers' reports presented in Chapter 2 engaging and informative.

The findings regarding the use of indirect speech acts and the indirect nature of reviewers' reports discussed in Chapter 3 may be very useful for beginning authors. They may come to understand that reviewers are usually indirect when they ask for changes to be made to submissions, that is, their suggestions are in fact directives. Reviewers also employ a number of politeness strategies to mitigate criticism in their reports, as discussed in Chapter 4. Thus,

beginning and less experienced authors have to bear in mind that disagreement or criticism in reviewers' reports should not be read or viewed as criticism, but rather as requests for improvement.

A point worth highlighting in Chapter 5 is the subdued use of boosters and hedging in reviewers' reports. This suggests that reviewers, as "the real arbiters of a manuscript's success" (Leki, 2003, p. 105) or gatekeepers of the journal (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019), have a high level of certainty in their judgements and wish to appear so. This has implications for inexperienced academic authors. They should take reviewers' reports seriously and revise their manuscript thoughtfully in response to reviewers' comments, if they wish to be published. Chapter 6 and 7 are more practical in that they respectively look at how reviewers learn to write peer review reports and offer practical recommendations for the development and conduct of peer review training programs.

Despite its compelling overview and revelation of the occluded high-stakes genre of peer review (Swales, 1996), the book is, as acknowledged by Paltridge, limited to the analysis of reviewers' reports, as well as questionnaire and interview responses from reviewers of a single English-medium journal. This is a limitation that prevents the generalizability of the findings presented in the book. There are several typographical errors (see pp. 9, 61, 154) and two rather confusing paragraphs about the frequency counts of speech acts (p. 76), which should have been presented in tables for ease of understanding, as has been done effectively in other chapters. Several extracts from the data are somewhat surprisingly repeated to support the author's interpretations, an issue some readers might find less appealing.

These minor shortcomings aside, the book offers a wealth of information, qualitative data, and practical suggestions for understanding the genre of reviewers' reports and conducting reviewer training. Readers will find the book highly readable due in part to its accessible style and the richness of direct quotations from the multiple data sources. The empirical findings and pedagogical recommendations presented in the book will appeal to a range of audiences, particularly research students, early career academics, and researchers engaging in scholarly publishing. Overall, the author succeeds in presenting his original research and achieving his aim in writing the book. That is, to demystify the occluded genre of reviewers' reports and help

beginning authors understand the process and expectations of peer review and academic publishing.

Having reviewed the book, I wish to briefly comment on the issue of publication in Cambodia. It is commonly known that many publications of research papers and books in Cambodia do not go through a rigorous peer review process. The relative lack of peer review and sound editorial work before a manuscript is published has undermined the quality of work published locally. This has caused many problems, including the lack of trust in the quality and value of local publications.

In the academic community, peer-reviewed publications are highly valued because, through peer review processes, the quality and credibility of scholarship are enhanced. To regain trust and confidence in locally published work in Cambodia, it is important that each manuscript is subject to scrutiny and peer review before it is sent to the printing house. The promotion of peer review practices is crucial and requires concerted efforts from all relevant stakeholders, particularly the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, academic institutions, and authors or researchers themselves. Readers and consumers of published materials also have an important role to play in promoting refereed publications. They can question or complain about the quality and credibility of any published work that may not have undergone rigorous peer review, rather than uncritically accept anything that is released.

In the current context, peer-reviewed publications should be seriously encouraged and promoted in Cambodian higher education institutions, especially in universities where scholarly research and publication should receive greater attention and investment. The establishment of peer-reviewed academic journals, as in the case of *Insight: Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research*, is an important first step in promoting research and peer-reviewed publications. Any major public or private university in Cambodia that does not have a recognized outlet for peer-reviewed publications should endeavor to establish one. This will enable the practice of peer review to become a norm and locally published work will receive greater merit and acceptance. Perhaps at this stage, effective policy and support mechanisms from the education ministry are needed to promote and institutionalize peer-reviewed publications in the Cambodian higher education context.

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