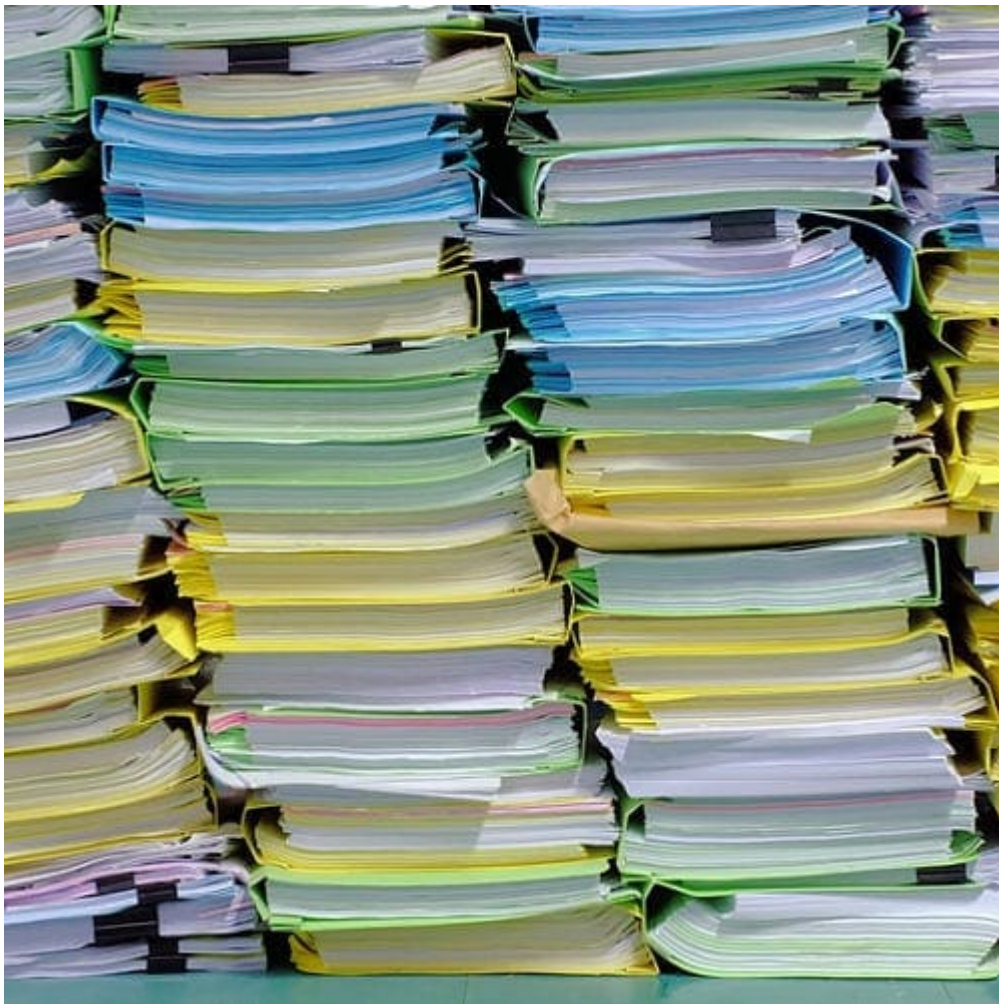# What's wrong with the 'power of writing'? A reflection on language in academic research

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Numerous are by now the accounts that label international academia as 'neoliberal', that is, a system which, these days, almost functions like a firm aimed at increasing productivity and impact. However, hardly any attention has been paid to the language itself that we use to produce, disseminate, and, above all, fund academic research, especially that addressing development and

humanitarianism. In this post I discuss how bureaucratic managerialism in academia is intertwined with the role of the 'power of writing' and the greedy hunt for funding, which, through partnerships with non-academic entities, counters academic complexity by imposing simplistic and standardised language.

> *I propose that these are some of the key issues that often underlie today's [discontent](#) among academics, echoing the "[bullshit job](#)" syndrome, according to which we cease to believe in our own profession.*

With this commentary, I aim to reflect on the peculiar dynamics that, to my mind, lead academic researchers to comply with the power of writing, and often lead research grant funders to prioritise quantity of outputs to the detriment of an in-depth understanding of the research context and its factual history. The so-called ["Research Excellence Framework"](#) (REF) in British academia, for instance, outlines the number, impact, quality, and type of outputs that a piece of research should have to be considered "world-leading". Having policy relevance, showcasing a formal engagement with non-academic institutions, producing measurable impact, and homogenising cultural ways of writing are seemingly becoming far more important than verifying the data we collect in our areas of study, or feeling confident that our personal interpretations are based on a continual contact and empathic engagement with the field (even though there is nothing like rocket science, and objectivity is not even desirable).

Moreover, in the contemporary era, academic researchers working in institutions of the Global North often have to cope with a massive bureaucracy in order to obtain official ethical clearance to be able to travel to 'the field'. Sociological and anthropological research, which are by definition primarily data-driven, have also been put under bureaucratic pressure by evaluation structures like the abovementioned REF. In the wake of these increasingly bureaucratic measures, if the country or subjects of study are not available to the researcher on a daily basis, international researchers (un)knowingly experience the phenomenon of professional '[bunkerisation](#)'. Implemented through a series of forms submitted to

academic Ethics Committees, this ethics clearance is *de facto* aimed at protecting research institutions from reputation-related, financial, and physical risks by keeping fieldworkers distant from the countries they normally work on in times of instability. Against this backdrop, *working on* a country or a topic cannot be but correlated with the importance of *working in* that country, or working among the insights that the topic generates. I want to point out that this is not just a problem for academia: international non-governmental organisations similarly produce policy briefs and reports by paying only *ad hoc*, short-term visits to the field.

Against today's difficulties surrounding academic jobs, I suggest that

> *academic managerialism increasingly relies on the 'power of writing', to the extent of making the latter a primary criterion for excellence.*

Indeed, theoretical wrapping-up and a high command of English *academicese* problematically trump the importance of ensuring continuity of (both remote and *in loco*) forms of fieldwork and, therefore, the possibility to develop fine-grained knowledge of the places we study.

There is therefore a risk implied by the devaluation of extensive local knowledge: the major focus placed on language combined with the redundancy of new knowledge. This tendency is the reason why we witness such a massive proliferation of publications nowadays. In this regard, the abovementioned English *academicese* at times may ensure acceptance in the publication process by arbitrarily building intellectual authoritativeness, but it is not the language choice that can ensure the quality of field research behind outputs. *Academicese*, in fact, manages to exercise epistemic sovereignty over the researched 'margins' by claiming itself to be at the centre regardless of where it is produced, and therefore building a neo-colonial relationship within the realms of human thinking. To quote Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Dialogic Imagination*, "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others".  In this sense,

*the intentional power underlining our linguistic structures should however not prevail over contents.*

The 'power of writing' is surely not only about *academicese*. The increasing number of partnerships that academic institutions develop with non-governmental organisations and UN agencies is resulting in a push for academics to embrace plain language. The latter still entails structural power, as it simplifies language in order to simplify facts and, in turn, [make management successful](#). On the one hand, NGOs request the use of lay-language in academic outputs. On the other, academic researchers themselves simplify their writing in a way that at times looks like a paternalistic process. In fact, the presumption that non-academics will not be able to grasp complex language – which should not be confused with *academicese*, by any means – is double-edged. I personally interpret it as the emergence of a common knowledge-production culture, according to which academics, people who have seldom been involved in policy-making and practice, are expected to advance concrete recommendations. In short, when I happened to work in the framework of these hybrid partnerships, I realised how NGOs and other non-academic institutions expect me, with little experience of their everyday job, to tell them what to actually do in order to sort out deadlocks and discontents. The evident result is a proliferation of off-the-cuff 'research' which would better be defined as desk-work, from both academic outputs and professional consultancies (a massive financial industry nowadays, [despite its discontents](#)). Paradoxically, most of the research rationales underpinning such research consultancies actually aim to explore field-related people, attitudes, political and economic processes, and expectations.

*In a nutshell, what seems to be happening in this joint writing culture is the replacement of English academicese with English bureaucratese (bureaucratic language), where fixed idioms populate reports produced by short-term field research (idioms such as 'assistance and protection', 'the rights and needs of the refugees', 'best practices', and other set-piece utterances).*

Some scholars have called this phenomenon ["politics of language use"](), which is clearly imbricated with the political rule and its predominant ideology. As such, the rejection of the complexity in writing for development does not encourage a challenge to the emptiness of *academicese*, which indeed fails to bring much-needed complexity into non-academic debates. Similarly, *academicese* does not help us fight the simplistic technocracy of some non-academic systems, as seen in the development and humanitarian sectors. *Academicese*, by definition, does not manage to deliver the important message that, if people are not willing to accept complexity of meanings, they will be unlikely to accept complexity in their everyday work.

If the '[ego-politics]()' of academia have long since been characterised by snooty ivory towerism, the latest trend of resorting to bureaucratic plain language in various research environments unravels a (similarly problematic) paternalistic sovereignty, which will not rescue us from the unbearable lightness of *academicese*. That is to say, this shared writing culture, which devalues fieldwork and makes knowledge redundant, is already gatekeeping non-academic as well as academic research rationales, funding sources, and publication acceptances and rejections.

Linguistic *poiesis* serves as a healthy reminder here. From the ancient Greek *poiéo* (meaning 'to do, to make'), *poiesis* indicates that [language]() can do, create, modify, and destroy. As I have said above, academic and non-academic writing cultures increasingly build on *topoi*, sophistic idioms, fixed structures, and patterns of expression which silently lead us all towards the homologation of mindsets, and to repetitive knowledge production.

> *In the light of this, liberating knowledge production from academicese as much as from bureaucratese needs to be one of our major endeavours, while fighting tooth and nail to defend the empirical inevitability of complexity.*

Contemporary academic managerialism, which does not allow researchers – especially seniors – to develop extensive first-hand experience in the field, may

seriously impinge on the possibility to collect strong empirical evidence and pose the most relevant research questions, which should, in turn, instruct global research funders. Presently, it is the funders themselves who dictate research rationales, and reward *grapho-kratia*, or 'the power of writing'. In this framework, empirical reality risks becoming of secondary importance in today's academic and non-academic production, since wrapping theories or policies around quick field visits at high speed has become key to winning the game of obtaining financial resources. In this scenario, in-depth fieldwork and multilingual skills may at times be valued, but will not make a big difference in attracting sustainable funding. We'll probably be fine as long as our writing complies with the dominant politics of language use: cryptically academic to be able to publish journal articles like hot cakes; or bureaucratic language, bereft of empirical complexity, to boast public engagement and impact. The space for new knowledge dauntingly becomes narrower and narrower.

We therefore need to challenge the problematic sociology of 'neoliberal' academia by resuscitating the primary importance of empirical depth and relevance. It is thus time to drop *academicese* without giving up complexity, and to drop *bureaucratese* without forgetting the fundamental role of research in producing socio-political change.