

Professor Douglas (8 February)

When an uptight register lets its hair down: The historical development of grammatical complexity features in specialist academic writing

Abstract: Using corpus-based analyses, this talk challenges widely-held beliefs about grammatical complexity, academic writing, and linguistic change in English. It challenges stereotypes about the nature of grammatical complexity, showing that embedded phrasal structures are as important as embedded dependent clauses. It challenges stereotypes about linguistic change, showing that grammatical change occurs in writing as well as speech. But perhaps most surprisingly, it challenges stereotypes about academic writing, showing that academic writing is structurally compressed (rather than elaborated); that academic writing is often not explicit in the expression of meaning; and that scientific academic writing has been the locus of some of the most important grammatical changes in English over the past 200 years (rather than being conservative and resistant to change).

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