

**THE SEMIPERIPHERY OF ACADEMIC WRITING:  
DISCOURSES, COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICES**

**Karen Bennett (ed.) 2014**

**Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-1-137-35118-0 (xiv + 282 pages)**

**Mariana NICOLAE<sup>1</sup>**

The present book, edited by Karen Bennett, is important from several points of view. It is important for the international community of researchers of English for international scholarly publishing, it is important for each of the 10 national contexts presented in the book, and it is important for its individual contributors as well. It is also important from the point of view of the larger Romanian academic context, which is featured in the volume with a study by Bardi and Muresan. As Swales pointed out (Swales, 2015) the book is surprising and important in that it makes a significant effort to contribute to the understanding of today's academic world, a contribution put forward probably for the first time by a majority of non-native speakers of English, with the exception of Bennett herself and of Burgess. Equally important, it is put forward by a majority of female researchers, a dimension that is particularly relevant for the semiperiphery context.

This book consists of three parts, each investigating a particular aspect of the topic: **Part 1** ("Discourses in Tension") looks at places where the traditional academic practices and principles interact with the mainstream ones established by today's lingua franca: English in Academic Settings (ELFA) and English for Research and Publication Purposes (ERPP). **Part 2** ("Communities in Conflict") is about the way local academics respond to the hegemonic practices imposed by English – some embracing and complying with them, while others resisting what they see as a loss of identity and valuable traditions. **Part 3** ("Publication Practices") presents local publication practices, the way they are influenced by regional and national policies, academic traditions and the important growth of English medium 'national' journals.

Each of the three parts comprises four articles whose authors come from and discuss issues related to the European semiperiphery. The countries are enumerated below in the order in which the respective articles appear in the book (Portugal and

---

<sup>1</sup> Mariana Nicolae, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania.  
mariana.nicolae@rei.ase.ro

Poland appear twice, having two contributors): Portugal, the Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Italy, Turkey, Serbia, Croatia and, again, Poland. The titles, which are clear, transparent and relevant for their content, as well as their authors, are given below.

**Part 1** of the book contains the following studies: “The Erosion of Portuguese Historiographic Discourse” by Karen Bennett, “The Changing Face of Czech Academic Discourse” - Olga Dontcheva-Navratilova, “Academic Discourse Practices in Greece: Exploring the *International Conference of Greek Linguistics*” - Dimitra Vladimirova, and “Teaching Academic Writing for the Global World in Poland: The ELF Perspective” by Anna Gonerko-Frej.

**Part 2** is made up of the following contributions: “Centre–Periphery Relations in the Spanish Context: Temporal and Cross-Disciplinary Variation” by Sally Burgess, “Portuguese Academics’ Attitudes to English as the Academic Lingua Franca: A Case-Study” by Rita Queiroz de Barros, “Changing Research Writing Practices in Romania: Perceptions and Attitudes” - Mirela Bardi and Laura-Mihaela Mureşan, “Looking Back from the Centre: Experiences of Italian Humanities Scholars Living and Writing Abroad” - Raffaella Negretti.

**Part 3** includes the following: “Turkish Academic Culture in Transition: Centre-Based State Policies and Semiperipheral Practices of Research, Publishing and Promotion” by Hacer Hande Uysal, “English-Medium Journals in Serbia: Editors’ Perspectives” - Bojana Petrić, “The Croatian Medical Journal: Success and Consequences” - Matko Marušić and Ana Marušić, “The Academic Weblog as a Semiperipheral Genre” - Małgorzata Sokół.

In her introduction to the book, Bennett explains the “semiperiphery” concept that has been put forward by Immanuel Wallerstein (1984) in his world systems theory to describe countries which are, from an economic and geographic point of view, between the *centre* or rather *core* and the *periphery* of the world system, sharing characteristics of both. The *centre* countries (e.g. UK, USA) are characterized by prosperous institutions, meritocratic cultures based on clear, transparent principles, while the *periphery* ones (e.g. Sri Lanka, Iran) have academic units which are run discretionarily, resources are scarce and researchers lack basic infrastructure, including paper and other consumables. Bennett uses the concept of *semiperiphery* as a category for social and linguistic analysis based on Wallerstein and following Canagarajah’s book, *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing* (2002), which highlighted some of the material and institutional constraints affecting researchers in economically disadvantaged parts of the globe. She rightly considers that the *semiperiphery* is a useful concept for analysis, encompassing countries and academic contexts in which some of the constraints described by Canagarajah still exist, but under a less dramatic form.

In her introduction, Bennett, who is seen by Swales (2015: 80) as a rising star in studies of academic discourse, offers a useful summary of the state of the field, particularly for contexts where studies of academic writing and international publishing have just relatively recently started to emerge, as is the case of Romania. The common issues that researchers need to face and deal with at the semiperiphery of academic writing and international publishing are clearly noticeable across the various contributions, while there are, of course, specific elements as well. While reading Bennett's chapter on the erosion of Portuguese historiographic discourse, I could not help noticing the visible parallel between the Portuguese and the Romanian contexts, given that both languages are Romance languages and their speakers and writers have had to adapt to English not only linguistically, but in terms of knowledge and content structuring as well. Bennett refers to a 2002 and 2008 survey of humanities and social sciences researchers on the differences between using Portuguese and English in the respective fields. She underlines that, despite differences between the "relative merits of the two approaches, Portuguese was consistently described as more complex, elaborate and poetic than English, which was seen as clear, precise, objective, concrete and grammatically straightforward" (p. 14). Such perceptions are shared by Romanian economists, particularly management researchers, who had been mainly francophone in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as reflected by their readings and writings (Nicolae, 2011: 98).

I will stop on Bardi and Muresan's chapter not only because it refers to the Romanian context, aiming to give "a voice to researchers at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies" (p. 122), but also because it is considered by Swales (2015: 81) "one of the most impressive as it describes the current 'state of flux' (p. 121) in Romanian academe and, particularly, how ministerial expectations for publication in center journals run up against linguistic and material realities." In other words, the study describes the divide between the realities of the internationalized and globalized world of academic research and the Romanian institutional incapacity of realistically evaluating the necessary stages of development in order to generate internationally valuable knowledge and to grow performant generations of researchers. The findings Bardi and Mureşan present in their study derive from the innovative staff development programme at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the EDURES<sup>2</sup> master programme. Their findings also underline the strong need for collaboration in today's academic world, a world which is still divided and fragmented in the Romanian context. Scholarly publication requires strong collaboration among researchers, reviewers and researchers' home academic institutions. There is a strong need for institutional support in training and/or developing researchers in internationally accepted practices and standards or, in the words of the authors, "collaboration needs to run

---

<sup>2</sup> EDURES = English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics ([www.edures.ase.ro](http://www.edures.ase.ro)).

through the whole research and drafting process” (p. 130). Bardi and Muresan use Lillis and Curry’s (2006) category of “literacy brokers”, who “are expected to contribute to structuring the information and to provide comments and feedback on the text as a whole” (p. 130).

The study explores and reports on the respondents’ struggles to publish internationally from various perspectives. The authors used questionnaire and interview data which provided insights into the respondents’ perceptions of scholarly publication. What is more, they analysed the textual practices of their respondents and offered evidence of drafting strategies and progress made over the last few years. They also underline the openness of researchers to use the pressures and challenges of publishing internationally as a learning opportunity:

*Targetting one of the top quality Anglophone journals was a personal challenge. I could have satisfied evaluation criteria by publishing in an internationally indexed but less reputable journal. I wanted to learn from the experience of dealing with the reviewers’ comments – I was simply curious* (p. 123).

Bardi and Muresan categorized the challenges faced by their respondents into three major areas: linguistic/rhetorical/structural; methodological/discipline-related and institutional (p. 126). The cautious conclusion offered by the authors of Chapter 7 (“Changing Research Writing Practices in Romania: Perceptions and Attitudes”) is that “the role of English as a gate to international participation seems to be accepted, and most respondents prefer to build on this reality rather than contest it for ideological reasons.” (p. 147). Romanian scholars “tend to have a rather pragmatic attitude towards their own progress as members of the international academic community” (p. 147) and they choose to ‘comply with the requirements of academic writing’ in English (p. 145).

Their data and interpretations recall findings from other contexts presented elsewhere in the book, thus highlighting the common pressures and challenges of publishing internationally. This generalized phenomenon, well documented by the research in the field and in particular by many valuable contributions to the book, deserves to be further explored by researchers at the semiperiphery, Romanian researchers included.

The book offers a Conclusion section, written by Bennett and entitled “Combating the Centripetal Pull in Academic Writing”. She underlines the consistency of the experiences described in the various local contexts presented in the book and explores the forces at play in the field of academic writing and publishing – both the centripetal and the centrifugal ones, with their various consequences. Her closing paragraph offers a generalized view of the situation that the actors in the field, caught up in their current activities and political challenges, sometimes tend to neglect.

*It is thus becoming imperative to decentralize the system in order to break this iron bond between knowledge, language and capital. While we cannot really hope to return to the ideal of disinterestedness that once motivated the quest for wisdom, a step in the right direction might be to loosen some of the straps that currently hold this configuration in place, giving a voice to the figures on the margins that are currently being silenced because they speak in the wrong language or discourse, or because they haven't the funds to participate. In this process, as in so many others, the semiperiphery is likely to prove crucial. (...) Any new paradigm that arises to challenge the one that is currently dominating the centre of the system is likely to have at least some of its roots here (p. 246).*

This review would not be complete without mentioning the impressive and very useful Bibliography that is given at end of the book.

---



---

### *References*

---

- Lillis, T.** 2015. Book Review of the Semiperiphery of Academic Writing: Discourses, Communities and Practices. Karen Bennett (ed.)", in *Journal of Second Language Writing* Volume 30 (2015) pp. 84–86, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2015.10.002>
- Lillis, T. and Curry, M. J.** 2006. Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: Interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written Communication*, 23, 3-35.
- Nicolae, M.** 2011. *The dynamics of leadership theory and practice in the context of Romania's integration in the European Union*, Ph.D. thesis, Bucharest University of Economic Studies
- Swales, J. M.** 2015. Review of the Semiperiphery of Academic Writing: Discourses, Communities and Practices. Karen Bennett (ed.). In *English for Specific Purposes* Volume 39 (2015) pp. 80–82, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2015.02.003>
- Wallerstein, I.** 2004. *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

### *The Author of the Book Review*

**Professor Mariana Nicolae** is head of the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, director of the Master in International Business Communication ([www.mibcom.ase.ro](http://www.mibcom.ase.ro)) at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies ([www.ase.ro](http://www.ase.ro)). She strongly believes in creativity and internationalization in education, research and academic management, as well as in the need for coaching and mentoring.