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SCIENTIFIC WRITING
FRENCH, GERMAN AND ENGLISH COMPARED

Introduction

When I was a child I thought that foreigners would have a difficult task. They first have to translate into the foreign language what they wish to say and then they have to retranslate what the other said to them. Afterwards, in the beginning of my studies in France I had a similar idea in mind. I thought that I would just have to translate into French what I would have said in a German university. But soon I noticed that this was not the case. And then I made a similar experience with papers in English. To make the differences clear is the topic of this article. I shall show in the following to what an extent French, German and English scientific writings differ from each other and what the consequences for the contents are.[1]

1. The French academic paper

I start with my personal experience. When I went to Paris for my studies in 1964 I had already studied 5 semesters in Germany so that I thought I would be qualified to write scientific papers in France if I used correct grammar forms and typical French expressions. Thus I accepted to write a paper on a subject I had been working on in Germany before. I did that in the same way I would have done in my home university using French words instead of my native German. I then gave the draft of my paper to one of my French fellow-students. He read my text and surprised me by saying that he noticed only a few mistakes in grammar, sentence structure and idioms but he added that the paper as such contained illogical flows of ideas which had to be rearranged logically, according to his French tradition.

The French student did the logical rearrangement of my paper in the most classical way he was taught in France.[2] He took a sheet of paper, folded it into two parts, opened it again and wrote in the middle of the left side the word *conclusion*. He then asked me what I intended to say in my paper and urged me to express the main thesis in one sentence. The topic was a New Testament problem, namely whether or not John the Baptist knew that Jesus whom he was going to baptize was the one whom he announced in his preachings. My answer was *no* and consequently the Frenchman wrote down: *John the Baptist didn't know that Jesus was the one announced by him.*

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[1] My subject is consequently relatively narrow as compared with J. Galtung, Structure, culture and intellectual style. An essay comparing saxonic, teutonic, gallic and nipponic approaches, *Social Science Information* (20, 6, 1981, pp. 817–856), but in the parts which his article and mine have in common, we reach similar conclusions, or put at least complementary aspects forward.

[2] See for the procedure M. Morel – D. Huisman, *La composition française en cent dissertations*, Paris: Nathan 1965 p. 6ff (Coll.: les abc du bac) and P. Antes, Brillanz und Begrenztheit französischer Exposés, *Französisch heute. Informationsblätter für Französischlehrer in Schule und Hochschule* 9, 1978, pp. 227–233.

What followed after he had written the conclusion astonished me a lot. My French fellow made three arrows to the right, one pointing to the upper side, the second exactly to the middle at the same level as the conclusion and the third finally towards the lower part of the sheet. I asked him what these were for. His answer was clear: here I'll put the three arguments which will lead to the conclusion on the left. I was surprised because I hade five arguments in favour of my position but I was told that in France there are always three and if my paper was to be made in correct French, then I had to respect the rules. So I dropped two of my arguments by choosing the strongest three of these five. These three were then combined with the arrows, the relatively weakest first and the obviously strongest last. Being so far I was offered to subdivide each of the arguments in elements which make the respective argument more convincing, and once again, it was suggested to follow the rule of three such elements for each argument. Thus having graphically laid out the line of argumentation I was advised to start rewriting my paper.

From the beginning, I had thus clearly in mind what I wanted to achieve and no argument was put forward that might have jeopardized the leading idea of all these arguments. This proof making procedure was prefaced with an introduction which, in a few sentences, had to bring the listener or reader of the paper to the subject to be dealt with by already introducing the three main argument topics without telling what the conclusion would be. That will, so it was hoped, become clear through explaining the arguments where by the end the conclusion was both obvious and imperative. Consequently, such a French paper has a double effect on the recipient. It is brilliant in its argumentation and exciting because the conclusion remains unknown until the end and is then given as the culminating point of the argumentation.

It is striking that the three arguments procedure can often be found in many French papers in academics as well as in politics. The jurists alone have adopted a two arguments system which is as compulsory for them as is the three arguments presentation for all the other humanities. And it is so much felt as a need that a speaker in a summer university in Rouen apologized in 1990 for not having made a paper in three parts, saying that in France too, traditions have been lost so that he dared to present his paper in less than three parts. The excuse may sound ridiculous, but it is not. The fact that he felt the need to apologize showed that, according to him, the rule had, in principle, to be kept in spite of changing traditions. This doesn't want to say that there is no exception to the rule as taught in French schools and universities but it wants to emphasize the importance of the leading idea in arguments used in a French paper.

A French academic paper, consequently, needs to follow a clear construction plan and its writer is somehow an „intellectual artisan".[3] He or she is strongly advised to clearly arrange the order of the chapters[4] in the line of the leading idea which should be noticed in all the arguments put forward.[5] Therefore great attention is

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[3] The term "intellectual artisan" is used in Michel Beaud, *L'art de la thèse. Comment préparer et rédiger une thèse de doctorat, un mémoire de DEA ou de maîtrise ou tout autre travail universitaire*, Paris: Ed. la Découverte, nouv. éd. 1993, p. 107.

[4] Very impressiv in this respect is the advice of an order plan in M. Beaud, *L'art de la thèse…*, p. 77.

[5] Cf. M. Beaud, *L'art de la thèse…*, p. 69.

given to introductions and conclusions so that consistent argumentation is maintained through all the chapters.[6] What is not in line with that should be left aside.[7]

Brilliance, so it was stated, is due to this direct line of argumentation and makes the difference to the German scientific writing. Not telling the conclusion up to the end renders the French paper distinct from the English one. The next two paragraphs will develop this in greater detail.

2. The german academic paper

The preceding paragraph made clear that an academic paper in French needs to be deductively constructed so that three arguments, each subdivided into three again, will directly lead to the conclusion as the culminating summary of the arguments put forward. All what will be said must consequently serve this one and unique purpose, namely to achieve the goal prefixed as the starting point in the preparatory reflections concerning the arrangement of the paper. What is opposed to that or only in a broader sense related to the theme of the paper must be left aside. The exclusive interest in the conclusion renders the French paper so brilliant because of crystal clear logic. Yet, it also shows the limits of such an enterprise with regard to the complexity of many subjects.

The fact that most subjects are embedded in a wide range of closely interconnected problems is the basis for many German academic papers. The more the speaker wants to show competence in the field, the more the paper makes clear how many problems the author is aware of. It is complexity rather than simplification that matters. With regard to my paper on John the Baptist mentioned above this would also include a reflection on Jesus and his own knowledge about being the one announced by John the Baptist. To discuss John's and Jesus' knowledge about Jesus would lead the German to the conclusion that John's eventual knowledge is part of the whole range of knowledge problems related to Jesus' mission. Consequently, many papers use a lot of time to say what they don't want to discuss. They thus mention the problems they have in mind with regard to the complexity of the subject but leave them undiscussed while indicating in footnotes where information for each of the problems can be found. While the French single the subject out and deal with it exclusively the Germans often wish to say that to deal with the subject alone must be justified in front of all the problems involved. It is obvious that such a German approach can hardly be followed by the French who would object that all this complexity has nothing to do with the subject under investigation. On the other hand, the Germans feel themselves misunderstood if their French counterparts refuse to answer to the German objections. Such complexity can also be indicated by questions which sound rhetoric to the French but are serious in the Germans' minds although no answer is given in the debate. In the case of the John-Jesus example such a (rhetoric) question would be: *One might ask whether John's knowledge is not even more problematic if one takes into consideration that Jesus himself might not have known to be the one announced by John.*

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[6] Cf. M. Beaud, *L'art de la thèse…*, p. 104–105.
[7] Cf. M. Beaud, *L'art de la thèse…*, p. 78.

To keep all eventualities in mind before reaching a conclusion, sometimes produces sentences which may sound very strange to those who are unfamiliar with this type of thinking. This is the case if one of my New Testament professors discussing what was historic in the Resurrection of Christ made the following statement in his lecture: "If Jesus' tomb was empty and if it was entered, and in particular by the ladies mentioned in the Gospels, then it seems highly plausible that Mary of Magdala's becoming frightened was historic." In a similar way, the famous German Orientalist Freytag wrote, in the 19th century, about death among the Arabs the following sentence: "The Arabs thought – presumably in large numbers already before Mohammed – that nobody will escape from death."[8]

The complexity approach has a long tradition in German philosophy, in particular in Kant and Hegel. It goes there along with an interest in general statements instead of personal experience and case studies. Consequently, one often finds general statements in introductions. Günter Lanczkowski is a good example for that. In his book on Holy Scriptures the first sentence of the Foreword is: „Since, in a short essay, Adolf von Harnack asked the question, how Scriptures have become 'Holy Scriptures', to encourage modern religious studies research, the problems of phenomenological understanding of holy scriptures have, several times, been a subject for investigation on behalf of famous scholars..."[9]

Complexity and general statements are characteristic of the German approach and different from both the French and the English.

3. The english academic paper

While the Germans – as Lanczkowki's example has shown – prefer general statements to start with, English editors suggest to answer the following question in the Introduction: Why did you start?[10] Indeed, this was how Harold Coward in the Preface of his book on *Sacred Word and Sacred Text. Scripture in World Religions* started writing: "Very early in life, even before I began to go to school, my mother told me Bible stories, especially the parables of Jesus. These spoken words had a deep and transforming effect upon my consciousness. For me as a young child those experiences of hearing the word of the gospel provided the basis of my life to this day. Later in Sunday school, university, and seminary I studied the word as a written text. I learned to approach the Bible as literature, to examine its historical context,

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[8] It is my translation. The original text reads: "Nach Meinung der Araber, welche sich auch wohl bei einem grossen Teile derselben schon vor Mohammed fand, kann kein Mensch dem Tode entfliehn." It is in Freytag's "Einleitung in das Studium der Arabischen Sprache", p. 218, quoted in G. Jacob, *Altarabisches Beduinenleben nach den Quellen geschildert*, Berlin: Mayer & Müller, ²1897, p. 139.

[9] It is my translation. The original text reads: "Seit Adolf von Harnack in einem knappen Aufsatz die Frage: <Wie sind Schriften zu 'heiligen Schriften' geworden?> als Anregung für moderne religionswissenschaftliche Arbeit aufwarf, sind Probleme der phänomenologischen Erfassung heiliger Schriften mehrfach Gegenstand von Untersuchungen namhafter Forscher gewesen..." G. Lanczkowski, *Heilige Schriften. Inhalt, Textgestaltung und Überlieferung*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1956, p. 7.

[10] Cf. D. Lindsay, *A Guide to Scientific Writing. Manual for students and research workers*, Melbourne et al.: Langman Cheshire 1984, ²1989, p. 4.

its literary sources, its structural forms, its canonization and interpretation. While intellectually stimulating and enlightening, this academic analysis of the Bible sometimes led to a dimming of the transforming power of God's word in my life. It was when I began to study the Hindu religion and its experience of Hindu scripture, the Veda, that I became resensitized to the spiritual power of my own Christian scripture..."[11]

The next steps, according to David Lindsay, should be the following:[12]

– Materials and methods (What did you do?)
– Results (What did you find?)
– Discussion (What does it mean?)
– Acknowledgements
– References
– Summary

This procedure alone shows how different this approach is from both French and German papers. From the beginning it is important to develop a serious of logical scientific statements, because correcting illogical flows of ideas is impossible. Therefore hypotheses are needed to be proven or refused. Consequently, the hypothesis must be formulated and then comes the proof or the rejection so that in conclusion the answer is clear. As in the French case, here again, the whole procedure is a clearly constructed series of arguments with a clear goal of results. Unlike the French paper, however, the English informs the listener or the reader what will be achieved and once the work done, it will be said that this goal has been reached. No surprise in the result because the paper says from the beginning what it is going to do, it shows how the results are reached and it concludes stating that the whole enterprise was successfully carried out. Introduction and conclusion are, consequently, interrelated. One cannot be without the other, be it presented in a deductive or an introductive way.

An English paper should – according to Lindsay – have a clear structure answering to a series of questions which help to provide sufficient segmentation for the presentation. This order of questions is not irrelevant to the contents of the paper and gives it its typical English structure form which differs from French and German forms of papers.

Conclusion

The different academic traditions of the French, the German and the English systems presented here above make clear that each of them has an impact on the contents of the presentations. The French is the most constructed plan which necessarily leads to the conclusion as a consequence of crystal clear logic in presentation without any previous announcement of its result. The German paper pays tribute to

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[11] H. Coward, *Sacred Word and Sacred Text. Scripture in World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1988, p. IX.
[12] D. Lindsay, *A Guide to Scientific Writing…*, p. 4.

complexity and wishes to come to general statements. The English paper expresses a hypothesis which, with a series of questions, will be accepted or rejected in the conclusion but the results are indicated from the beginning in order to facilitate the control of the demarche. The adoption of each of these languages, consequently, is not only a language problem but implies a way of thinking imposed by the different presentation forms in their respective academic tradition. This means that not all what can be done in German for instance can be repeated in French or English. So the adoption of the language has concrete consequences for the contents to be dealt with.