Experience Day
English language and culture
29 March 2019

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Lecture and tutorial

Title: Talk, and I'll tell you who you are

Lecturers: Tony Foster and Martijn Lemmen work in the Language Section of the English Department. Last year, they published a contrastive grammar of English and Dutch (*English Grammar through Dutch Eyes*) together with other colleagues. They are both particularly interested in legal linguistics.

Bio:
"It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him," wrote the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw over a century ago. Whether Shaw's claim is true or not is less interesting to us than its presupposition: that listeners or readers draw, and more often, jump to all kinds of conclusions about a speaker or writer's identity. Our pronunciation, lexis and grammar can make us seem more or less educated, professional or happy. They can be to our advantage or disadvantage if we want to get on in the world. Indeed, the quotation above is from Shaw's play Pygmalion (you may know its musical adaptation My Fair Lady), about the flower girl Elisa who takes elocution lessons with the linguistic genius Professor Higgins so that she can become "genteel" and "a lady".
After a couple of years of linguistic training, it is possible to conclude whether a language user has another mother tongue, whether they are male or female, and even whether they are lying or telling the truth. You too, as a language student will be trained, to some extent, how to linguistically profile speakers and writers. A sneak preview of your training is offered in our lecture, in which we focus on how lexis, and in particular, grammar can be used to index speakers and writers.
In our wildly ambitious tutorial, we are going to bring into practice what we have learnt during the lecture. We will try to determine whether an author is male or female, rewrite an easy text into something unintelligible (this exercise is particularly useful for those of you who want to become speech writers for a politician), and decide on the author authenticity of a ransom note.

Homework:

Foster, T., Lemmen, M., Smakman, D., Dorst, A.G, & Dol, P. (2018) Proper words in proper places: register and style. In: English grammar through Dutch eyes (pp. 173-186). Bussum: Coutinho.

16.
Proper words in proper places:
Register and style

So far, we've focused on the effect that our grammatical choices have on our listeners or readers' understanding of what we're trying to communicate to them. However, understanding isn't all. In our communication with others, we also want to come across as a likeable, reliable, professional and knowledgeable source of information. We want to be accepted, and one of the ways to achieve this is by adapting not only our lexical choices but also our grammar, to the circumstances in which we're communicating.

In this chapter, we're going to explore **register**, the effects that social distance, mode of communication (written or spoken) and group membership have on our language. Because you probably already have a good command of informal spoken English and because all of us need formal training to be able to write academic course papers and professional texts, we're going to discuss the characteristics of formal written academic and professional Dutch and English. We'll provide you with "Eight Golden Rules" for formal—in this case academic— writing.

16.1 Formal academic writing

If you have no training in medicine, your Dutch doctor will probably tell you that you have a *blindedarmontsteking*, rather than an *appendicitis*; unlike Dutch, everyday English and medical English often use the same words for illnesses. As a beginning language student, you could complain to one of your fellow-students that you haven't yet mastered the "*th*-sound"; your phonetically trained instructor would note that your "alveolar fricative" still needs work. In other words, most social or professional groups have a language of their own. If you want to belong to such a group, you'll need to learn to "talk their talk".

At the breakfast table, would you greet your little brother with a "Good morning, Mr Jansen" and expect to be taken seriously? And would TV chef Gordon Ramsay, who's notorious for swearing to his kitchen staff, hurl such abuse at a member of the British royal family when they dine at his restaurant? Probably not. In addition to the group we belong to, the degree of intimacy or hierarchy between the speaker and listener or the writer and reader very much determines whether they communicate in a formal or informal manner.

In the previous sentence, we deliberately paired *speaker* with *listener* and *writer* with *reader*. Think about this for a moment: the relationship between a speaker and listener is much more intimate than that between a writer and reader. The author of this chapter is sitting in his study at home a few hours before his wife's and his own birthday party. He doesn't precisely know who his reader is, who you are and in what circumstances you're reading his text. If we were in a face-to-face communication about this topic, for instance in a writing class, you'd be able to see from my body language how I feel about my topic. We'd be able to ask each other questions and we'd expect an answer from each other. At the beginning of this paragraph, I asked you to think about what was about to come in the next few sentences. If I'd done this as your teacher in class, you'd probably have complied. Now, you may have closed your book on me and gone out for a coffee instead.

The fact that writers and readers aren't in direct communication means that there's a difference between the language we write and the language that we speak. As Turner (1973, p. 8) points out, "writing is a special, careful, elaborated, shuffled, pruned and tidied form of language, very different from the everyday, spontaneous, precarious adventures of speech which make up, and have made up, most of the world's linguistic activity and are in that sense "normal language". It's not that informal language is incorrect, it's just inappropriate in texts that are considered to have been written and edited carefully to be as precise and accurate as possible.

16.2 Eight Golden Rules for formal academic writing

We would like you to think of the following rules as similar to those in games and sports. When you first start playing the game, finding out what the rules are can be quite difficult. Some rules make more sense than others. Some rules are easier to learn than others. Some rules are made explicit while others are strangely elusive and no one seems to know where they came from or why. Most importantly, some rules are hard and fast, while others are more flexible and can be bent or even broken in the right circumstances. As you become a skilled player of the academic writing game, you may start to enjoy the game and you'll gain confidence in applying the rules in such a way that your writing will reflect your personal style, your individual voice.

In formal writing, you should avoid reduced forms such as Dutch *ie* or *d'r* (for *haar*) and contracted verb forms such as English *don't, can't, it's* and *we'll*. These forms are typical of spoken language, because they facilitate the speaker's fluency, and of written texts that aim to read as if you're listening to them (e.g. speeches, but also magazine articles and informal text books). Instead, write out the full forms: *hij*, *do not, cannot* (one word!), *it is*, and *we will*. You should also avoid other abbreviated forms, such as *TV* for *television*. However, it should be noted here that some contractions are more acceptable than others: contracted negations (*can't*, *don't*) are more acceptable than contracted auxiliaries (e.g., *'s*, *'ll*, *'m*, *'ve*). Furthermore, American English writers often use contracted forms even in formal texts.

2 Do not use colloquial or vague language ("Like, you know, stuff and all.").

Avoid colloquial words such as *got, kids, people, ok, alright, thing, stuff, sort of, like, a lot of, a bit*. These are typical of informal spoken language, whereas you're producing a formal written text. They're also problematic because the reader can't ask the writer to explain or be more specific. Therefore, when you refer to *people*, specify exactly who; when you refer to *the past*, specify the exact time, and when you're thinking of writing *all over the world*, specify the exact place. When you write *important thing*, determine whether your *thing* is a *factor, aspect, feature, characteristic* or *influence*. Instead of *a lot of* and *lots of* you can use *many* or *a great number*; instead of *a bit* you can use *slightly* or *rather*.

3 Do not use clichés, especially metaphors and similes (avoid them like the plague).

Although clichés may feel spot on to you, they will usually bore or annoy your reader. Using your own words will most likely improve your word choice and make your text much more specific, as clichés are often archaic and vague. Many frequently used clichés are in fact obscure. To name a Dutch example, many native speakers do not know whether *het scheelt een slok op een borrel* means that it matters little or a lot. And is *spijkers op laag water*

zoeken easy or hard? Remember that if these expressions puzzle your reader, they can't directly ask you what you mean. Therefore, if in doubt leave them out. Better safe than sorry.

> **4 Do not use the words *really* or *very* to emphasize your point (this really isn't very convincing).**

In fact, once you have finished writing, you can actually search and delete all instances of *really* and *very* (e.g., It is very important to realize…). These filler words are typical of spoken language and are usually redundant. Instead, try to find synonyms that carry an element of emphasis: It is *essential/crucial*… Something that is "very important" is *vital/indispensable/critical/fundamental* or *key*. Better still *show*, rather than *tell* why a particular topic or point is important.

> **5 Replace informal words with more formal ones (just take them out and put in new ones).**

In Dutch, formal words generally have a more old-fashioned "feel" to them than informal words. In Dutch, but especially in English, formal words tend to have Latinate (French or Latin) origins, while Germanic words are considered more informal and "down to earth". Furthermore, multi-word verb forms are generally more colloquial than singular ones. Here are some examples of informal words and phrases with their more formal synonyms:

	Informal	Formal
Dutch	krijgen	ontvangen, verkrijgen, verwerven
	dus	derhalve
	accepteren	aanvaarden
	kijken naar	beschouwen, bestuderen
	in de buurt komen van	naderen
English	get	obtain
	see	view, perceive; observe
	look at	examine
	move close to	approach

Table 16.1: Informal words and their formal synonyms

You'll need to consult a thesaurus to find out which synonym is most suitable to your purpose: some forms may be too formal or archaic for a student paper (making you sound

pretentious or fake). If you do use very formal word or phrasings, make sure you yourself know what they mean. Consider these sentences.:

(1.a) Ik ben hierover unaniem.

(1.b) I am unanimous about this.

(2.a) De automobiele bekwaamheid van haar echtgenoot was omgekeerd evenredig aan zijn inname van alcoholische substanties.

(2.b) Her spouse's vehicular control was inversely proportional to his imbibement of alcoholic beverages.

In (1.a)-(1.b), the person who tried to use the expensive-sounding words *unaniem*/*unanimous* was laughed at because *unanimity* takes at least two people who can agree with each other. Sentences (2.a)-(2.b) are problematic for two reasons. Firstly, very few readers will understand that what they mean. And when they've finally found out that someone's husband was "too drunk to drive", they'll wonder why the author used such formal language to describe such a lowly situation.

> **6 Do not use direct questions or direct commands (Why not? Because I said so!)**

As we pointed out above, the relationship between writer and reader is a distant one. The writer can't see how the reader reacts to direct questions or commands. Consequently, there's very little point in using them. However, indirect questions and commands do occur, mainly where the writer wants the reader to pay special attention to what follows:

(3.a) Het is de vraag of evolutie op dezelfde manier gedoceerd moet worden als wiskunde en scheikunde en aardrijkskunde: als de vaststaande waarheid.

(3.b) The question is whether evolution should be taught in the way arithmetic and chemistry and geography are taught: as the settled truth.

(4.a) Het valt te bezien of mediation een succesverhaal zal worden.

(4.b) It remains to be seen whether the introduction of mediation will be a success story.

Indirect commands or commands phrased with modal construction also occur:

(5.a) Het is belangrijk op te merken dat de validiteit en deugdelijkheid van een argument twee verschillende grootheden zijn.

(5.b) It is important to note that to say an argument is valid and to say it is good are two different things.

This rule is closely connected to Rule 6. Leaving the reader alone as much as possible also means that you do not "shout" at them, either through your punctuation or through your choice of words.

(6.a.) Dit is gewoon niet waar!!!

(6.b) But this is simply not true!!!

(7.a) Dit is gewoon belachelijk.

(7.b) This is simply ridiculous.

(8.a) Deze mensen zijn overduidelijk idioten.

(8.b) These people are obviously idiots.

(9.a.) Ik ben het totaal niet eens met deze bewering.

(9.b) I totally disagree with this claim.

Note that three dots […] are also considered inappropriate in formal texts. Rule no. 7 also entails not offending the reader by using sexist language like sexist *he* (best use the neutral plural *they*), swearwords or taboo language, and language that perpetuates stereotypes or generalizes individuals on the basis of their gender, race, religion, age or other social denominators.

Formal writing tends to be more objective and impersonal. The focus should be on the contents, not on the person of the writer or reader. This is why writers should avoid saying *I*, *we* or generic *you* (to refer to unspecified persons). Many established writers who are confident that the reader will know them and respect their ideas do in fact use these personal pronouns, but we advise you not to. One way of avoiding personal pronouns is to make the research or pieces of writing the subject of the sentence:

(10.a) Dit onderzoek laat zien dat er een dringende behoefte is aan sociaal beleid dat leeftijdsdiscriminatie tegengaat.

(10.b) This research shows that there is an urgent need for social policies to overcome age discrimination.

(11.a) Deze nota zal aantonen hoe corpora ingezet kunnen worden in het taalonderwijs.

(11.b) This paper will show how corpora can be used in language teaching.

(12.a) Figuur 1 toont in welke mate de gebruikelijke inname van voedingsmiddelen afwijkend is van de aanbevelingen uit de voedingsmiddelendriehoek.

(12.b) Figure 1 shows the extent to which usual intake of food deviates from the recommendations in the food pyramid.

(13.a) Hoofdstuk 5 zal het voortplantingsgedrag van de Tasmaanse duivel behandelen.

(13.b) Chapter 5 will deal with the reproductive behaviour of the Tasmanian devil.

In (10.a)-(13.b), it's almost as if the parts of a text, figures, tables and examples have generated themselves, replacing the human agents who produced them. In the following sections, we're going to explore two more constructions that allow us to eliminate the human agent and make our text more impersonal: passive voice and nominalization.


16.3 It's nothing personal: passive voice

Our experience of teaching the passive voice to high school students is that they thought it was very complicated. This is because many grammar books teach the passive from a syntactic point of view: they require the learner to be able to parse ("*ontleden*") sentences, to remember from their Dutch classes such terms as *subject*, *direct object* and *prepositional phrase*. We'd like to take a more semantic, meaning-focused approach. We've found that our method is even easy for seventh-graders (*brugklassers*) to learn.

Try to think of a sentence with a transitive verb as a very short scene from a movie consisting of only two frames. We've made a short movie inspired by Bob Marley's reggae song *I shot the sheriff*. Our movie has only two actors, a cowboy and a sheriff, and its story is very simple: the cowboy fires a gun at the sheriff (don't worry: the only damage done is a hole in the sheriff's bullet-proof vest). The only decision we need to make is how we're going to sequence our frames. Here are the director's alternatives:
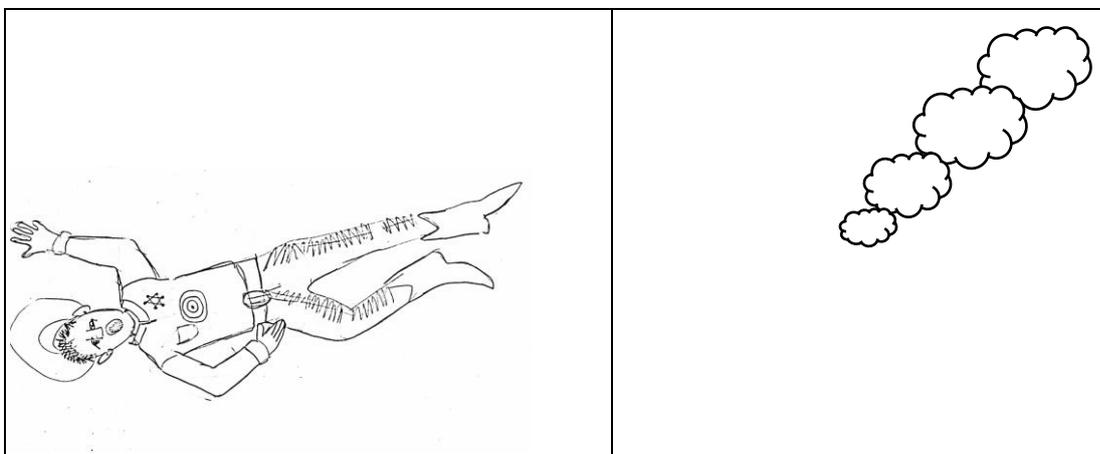
#1:
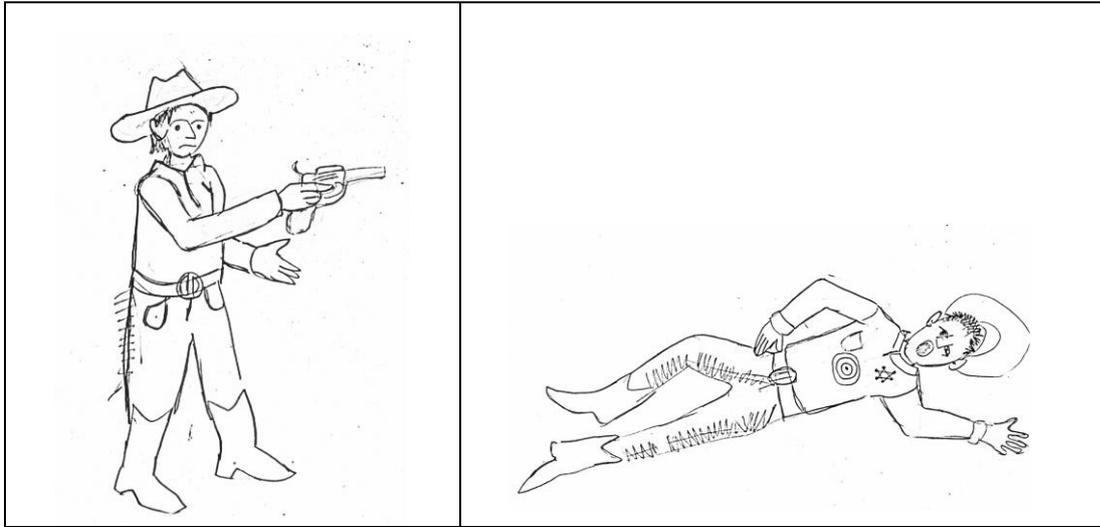
#2:
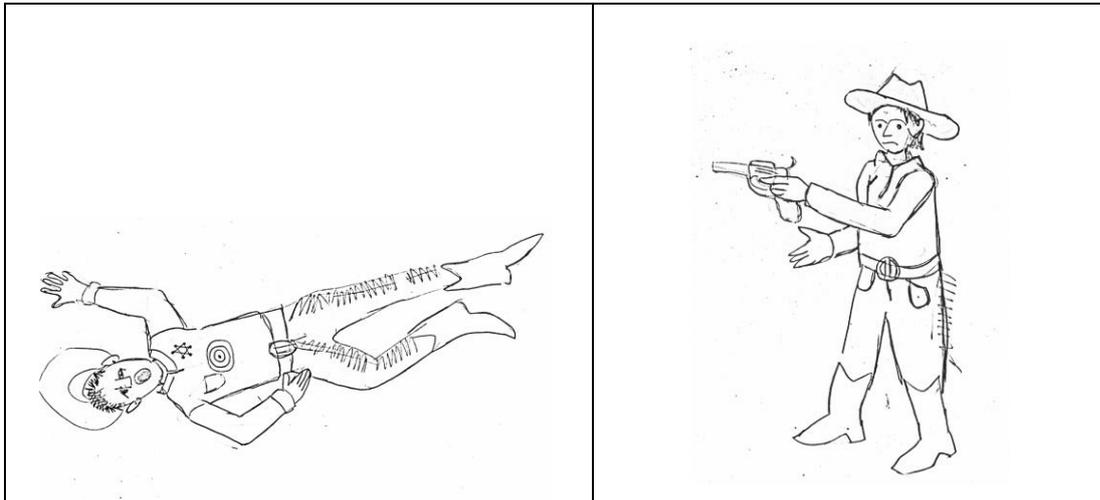
#3

By deciding which of the two frames comes first, the director can manipulate the viewers' point of view. In scene #1, our attention is immediately drawn to the cowboy holding a smoking gun. We imagine there's just been a shooting. This promises to be an action-packed western. Who has he shot? What's going to happen next? In scene #2, the first thing we see is the sheriff lying down, shot. So far, our attention and sympathies lie with him. Is he hurt? Who shot him? Is he still in danger? Like scene #2, scene #3 opens with the sheriff, but the second frame shows us that the shooter has disappeared. We don't know who he is. Are we going to find out? Or is about the effect the shooting has on the sheriff's life?

16.3.1 When to use passive voice

What has all this to do with active and passive voice? What if we need to describe our scene with language rather than images? We then need language that allows us to mention the cowboy or the sheriff first, depending on what we want the reader to see first. This is where active and passive voice come in handy. In semantics, we call the person performing the action the **agent**; in our scene, the cowboy is the agent. The person undergoing the action is the **undergoer** or **patient** (an appropriate term for our sheriff). Active and passive voice are the language user's camera lens. If we want to draw the readers' attention to the agent, i.e. the cowboy, we use active voice. This allows us to put the agent at the beginning of the sentence, in subject position. This is how we'd describe scene #1:

    (14.a) De cowboy heeft de sheriff neergeschoten.

    (14.b) The cowboy shot/has shot the sheriff.

To describe scene #2, we'd use passive voice, which allows us to put the undergoer in sentence-initial subject position:

    (15.a) De sheriff is neergeschoten door de cowboy.

    (15.b) The sheriff was shot/has been shot by the cowboy.

You'll be happy to know that we even have a linguistic equivalent for the dust clouds in the second frame of scene #3:

    (16.a) De sheriff is neergeschoten.

    (16.b) The sheriff was shot/has been shot.

The phrases with *door/by* in (16.a)-(16.b) aren't obligatory. In fact, they often disappear—especially if it doesn't matter who agent is, or if he's always shot by the same cowboy, of if the speaker wants to hide the agent's identity.

Table 16.2 summarizes this section:

Use passive voice	Example
If it's not important who performs the action	Het werkstuk moet voor 5 uur worden ingeleverd. The essay must be handed in before 5pm.
If it's always the same person performing the action	Het afval wordt op maandag opgehaald. The garbage is collected on Monday.
If you want to hide the agent	Er zijn fouten gemaakt. Mistakes have been made.
If you want to emphasize the undergoer/patient	My VW was given a good service. Mijn VW heeft een goede beurt gekregen.

Table 16.2: When to use passive

16.3.2 How to make an active sentence passive

Making an active sentence passive simply requires that you move the patient to the beginning of the sentence and the actor to the end of the sentence. The patient can be the direct or indirect object of the active sentence. The choice of which object is moved to the beginning of the sentence depends on which object you want to draw the readers' attention to. The tense of the active finite verb is assigned to the passive auxiliary, the original main verb becoming a past participle. In short:
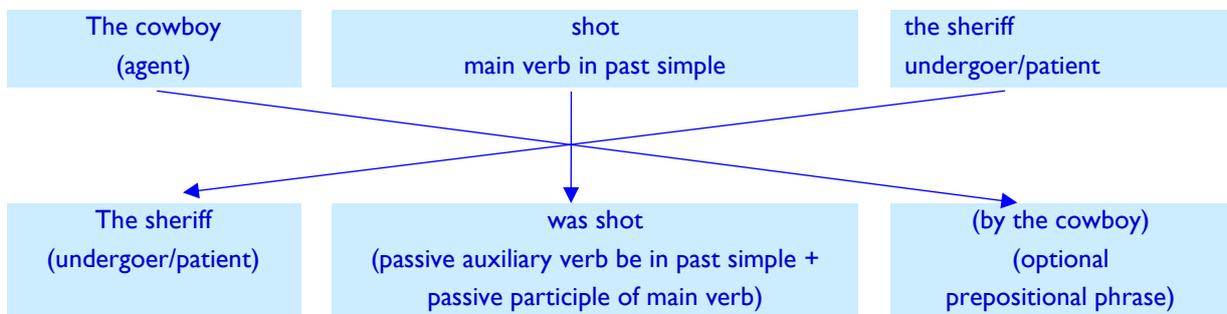

Figure 1: Making an English sentence passive

A difficulty in the translation of Dutch passive verb groups to English is that English only uses the passive auxiliary (*lijdend hulpwerkwoord*), which is a form of *to be*. In Dutch, there are two passive auxiliaries: *worden* for imperfect/simple (*onvoltooide*) finite verbs, and *zijn* for perfect (*voltooide*) finite verbs. Here are the most important Dutch passive verb groups, with their English equivalents:

Dutch	English
De sheriff wordt neergeschoten.	The sheriff is shot.
	The sheriff is being shot.
De sheriff is neergeschoten.	The sheriff has been shot.
De scheriff werd neergeschoten.	The sheriff was shot.
	The sheriff was being shot.
De sheriff was neergeschoten.	The sheriff had been shot.
De sheriff zal neergeschoten worden.	The sheriff will be shot.
De sheriff zal neergeschoten zijn.	The sheriff will have been shot.

Table 16.2: Dutch passive verb groups translated

16.4 Nominalization

Actions and processes are normally expressed by verbs, characteristics and qualities by adjectives, and people, objects and other entities by nouns. However, Dutch and English are very productive in turning verbs into nouns; *beschikken* becomes *beschikbaarheid, interfere* becomes *interference*, and *argue* becomes *argument* or *argumentation*. You can do the same with adjectives: *beschikbaar can be turned into beschikbaarheid, and applicable* to *applicability*. This means you take something that is an action or quality and present it as an entity. Often a very abstract entity, but an entity nonetheless. We call this nominalization.

Nominalization is best avoided when you're discussing actions for which there are good verbs. Compare the nominalizations in (17.a)-(17.b) with their more natural counterparts:

(17.a) Wij zullen binnenkort overleg voeren om tot een wijziging van de transferdeadline te komen.

(17.b) We will conduct consultations to effect a change of the transfer deadline.

(18.a) Wij zullen binnenkort met de clubs bespreken of we de transferdeadlines kunnen veranderen.

(18.b) We'll soon meet with the clubs to see if we can change the transfer deadline

It's because they obscure who does what and take away everything concrete and specific language that some people hate nominalizations (check out Helen Sword's Ted Ed Talk on "Zombie Nouns" before you continue reading). So why are we including these dreadful zombie nouns in this chapter as a feature of academic writing that you should know how to use?

Well, aside from the fact that it is rather silly to hate grammatical constructions, talking about abstractions and generalizations is simply something that academic writers often want to do, intentionally, not by accident. In addition, nominalizations allow you to manipulate the

order of information in the sentence (often in combination with a passive), to leave out personal pronouns, and to create cohesion between sentences:

(19) When he heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway, Tony immediately decided to hide in the broom closet. **This decision** turned out to be **his saving**, as zombies soon swarmed the campus and consumed all of his esteemed colleagues. The unwarranted **consumption** of his colleagues left Tony in a state of great despair. For years, he dared not venture outside. Fortunately, the **discovery** of a vaccine put an end to the zombie apocalypse. To this day, it remains a mystery who should be thanked for this great **achievement**.

16.5 Being confidently uncertain: hedging

According to the English poet Oscar Wilde, only two things in life are certain: death and taxes. This uncertainty doesn't become less with education. In fact, the more we learn, the more we discover how little we know and how momentary our current knowledge is. This might depress those looking for absolute truths, but not us students and academics. Not knowing is our reality, and this can be frustrating but also quite thrilling.

In order to communicate what we know—and what we don't know—we need subtle linguistic tools that allow us to make suggestions rather than claims and to signal that we realize and that our readers should realize that our claims are seldom absolute. Fortunately, such tools exist in academic language. We call them hedges, defined by Lakoff (1972, p. 195) as "words whose job is to make things fuzzy or less fuzzy".

Like the passive and nominalizations, hedges get their fair share of hate-mail. Holdridge (2016) calls them "the linguistic equivalent of your unreliable ex. It avoids committing." Hedge-haters feel that using hedges is deceptive and cowardly, because you do not say what you really want to say. The authors of this grammar adapt the more positive position taken by Skelton (1988, p. 38) that "without hedging, the world is purely propositional, a rigid (and rather dull) place where things are either the case or are not. With a hedging system, language is rendered more flexible and the world more subtle".

There are two types of hedges. Hedges of the speaker are called **shields** (authors can hide behind them), while hedges of the proposition are called **approximators** (as they approximate, or come close to). Sentences (20.a)-(20.b) are examples of shields; (21.a)-(21.b) are approximators:

(20.a) Ik vermoed dat de maan toch niet van groene kaas is gemaakt.

(20.b) I suspect that the moon is not made of green cheese after all.

(21.a) De maan is wellicht toch niet van groene kaas gemaakt.

(21.b) The moon may not be made of green cheese after all.

Hedging is achieved by different lexical and grammatical means. Lexical hedging can be done by choosing tentative verbs such as *suspect*, *suggest*, and *supports* rather than *prove*:

(22.a) De data ondersteunen de conclusie dat de maan niet van groene kaas gemaakt is.

(22.b) The data support the conclusion that that the moon is not made of green cheese.
Another form of lexical hedging is the use of approximators such as *unlikely* and *rarely*:

(23.a) Het is onwaarschijnlijk dat de aarde dit jaar zal ontploffen.

(23.b) It is unlikely that the earth will explode this year.
Grammatical hedging can be done by using modal verbs of probability (see section 12.2.1), futurity (see chapter 11), and conditionals (see chapter 14).

Beginning writers tend to either make bold claims that are impossible to prove or go overboard on hedging and make their writing overly cautious. One clear piece of advice is not to hedge universally true facts ("Evidence suggests that Julius Caesar is dead"), although in some cases the facts may not be as clear as you think ("Shakespeare is assumed to have been born on 23 April 1564."). Carefully consider which claims you are making that your readers will question—those are the ones you should hedge. Claims that are unproblematic, and claims that are supported by unwavering evidence can best be presented with confidence. If you've done the work to back up your claims, there's no need to hide behind a hedge.

16.6 Summary

	Formal written	Informal written	Formal spoken	Informal spoken
Contracted verb forms	x	✓	✓	✓
Colloquialisms	x	✓	✓	✓
Use of first person	Limited use	✓	✓	✓
Direct questions	Limited use	✓	✓	✓
Direct commands	Limited use	✓	✓	✓
Exclamations	x	✓	✓	✓

Table 16.3 Features of formal and informal spoken and written register