

## “Academic Writing” – an Ironic Expression in the History of Culture

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**Abstract:** In this article I aim at analyzing the evolution of the terms *academy* and *academic*, starting with their etymology, in order to emphasize a bizarre cultural fact. Taking into account both their Greek origin and a sense of linguistic consciousness specific to some speakers, one could characterize the expression “academic writing” (referring to a certain discipline/course taught in our universities) as an ironical formula in the history of culture, since, originally, Plato’s *Akademia* and ‘writing’ in itself had nothing in common. On the contrary, Plato was against writing in general, as proved by some quotations excerpted from his works.

**Keywords:** academic writing; Plato’s Academy; etymology; irony; ancient cultures

1. The phrase *academic writing* usually designates a course about the rules of elaborating a scientific paper<sup>2</sup>. When writing such handbooks, some teachers prefer such a title: *How to Write a Scientific Paper* (or *a Scientific Text*), taking as a model the famous book *Come si fa una tesi di laurea* (“How to Write a Thesis”), published in 1977 by Umberto Eco, an Italian scholar and professor. Certainly, the prototype is an old one, and we can mention, in this regard, at least Lucian of Samosata (the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.), a Greek author who wrote, among other things, the treatise *Pos dei historian syngraphein* (“How to Write History”).

1.1. But what is the meaning of the word *academic* in the expression “academic writing”? To those who know the origin of the term *academy* and, moreover, have a historical linguistic consciousness, the formula *academic writing* may sound like

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an oxymoron (that is, a conjunction of terms which are apparently incompatible or contradictory; e.g., *silent song*, *voluptuous pain* etc.).

**1.2.** Indeed, there is often a bizarre evolution of certain words, a kind of “ironic” (to some extent) history of them (see Munteanu, 2018, pp. 325-329). For instance, how many of us know that the Rom. *școală* ‘school’ (< the Lat. *schola*, coming from the O.Gr. *skhole*) originally meant (in the Old Greek) ‘spare time, leisure’? For the nowadays Romanian students, the word *școală* suggests anything but leisure or spare time... (And the same goes for the Engl. *school* and the English-speaking students). Similarly, many would be surprised to find out that the Rom. verb *a învăța* ‘to learn / to teach’ comes from the Lat. verb *invitiare*, which signified... ‘to acquire a vice / bad habit’ (since the latter was derived from the Lat. word *vitiis* ‘vice’). Something of the old meaning is still preserved, for instance, in the Romanian saying *Orice învăț își are și dezvățul* (in broad translation: “Any learnt habit can be unlearned”). We could provide many other examples, but, sticking to the field of education, let us mention one more case: the Rom. *a pedepsi* ‘to punish’ (borrowed from the Neo-Greek language). Currently, it seems really odd for a Romanian speaker to link *a pedepsi* to the O.Gr. *paideia* ‘education, culture’ (related to the O.Gr. *paidos* ‘child’), which finally led to the neologism *pedagogie* ‘pedagogy’, as well. However, if we remember that in certain (more or less, remote) times the Romanian education resorted to a... stick as an auxiliary device, then we will no longer be surprised (especially if we are familiar to the story *Domnul Vucea* ‘Mr. Vucea’ by Barbu Ștefănescu-Delavrancea, whose main character was inspired by a real prototype).

**2.** Nevertheless, in retrospect, what is bizarre in associating *academic* to *writing*? In order to better understand this, we need to offer some further clarifications. As known, the term *academy* originates in Plato’s *Akademia*. It was called this way, since the philosophical school of the aforementioned great Greek thinker used to function in the former garden of a legendary Greek hero, Akademos. In the mind of all the people having at least some elementary notions of philosophy (belonging to the so-called “general knowledge”), *Akademia* is associated to Plato. But Plato used to despise writing (as observed in his dialogue, *Phaidros*, and in his *Letter 7*), its only benefit being that of helping us remember certain things (therefore, he would attribute it a mere mnemotechnical role). In his opinion, writing would preserve (“freeze”) ideas and information which had no final character. According to his view, that was not to be admitted.

**2.1.** For complete clarification, I think we should insist on the paragraphs in which Plato discusses these issues. For instance, in the dialogue *Phaidros*, he narrates the following mythological “happening”. He tells us that the Egyptian god Theuth (worshipped for having discovered the numbers, geometry, astronomy etc.) went to the king Thamus in order to present him, among other things, the letters: “The story goes that Thamus said many things to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts, which it would take too long to repeat; but when they came to the letters, «This invention, O king», said Theuth, «will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered.»” (*Phaedrus*, 274e; see Plato, 1925). The king gives Theuth the following answer: “«...and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding...»” (*Phaidros*, 275a).

**2.2.** In a long letter (seemingly, an authentic one), Plato synthesizes his philosophical conception. He also refers to the problem of writing, convinced that writing fixes or makes firm what cannot be fixed or made stable: “...and for this reason, no man of intelligence will ever venture to commit to it the concepts of his reason, especially when it is unalterable – as is the case with what is formulated in writing.” (*Letter 7*, 343a; see Plato, 1966).

**2.3.** However, even his work (unlike other cases from the ancient times) came to us in a complete form precisely because it was preserved through writing. Still, one can immediately notice the importance which Plato gave to orality, based on the fact that his (preserved) work is mostly made of “dialogues”, that is, long conversations, on certain topics, between his characters, the main one being his magister, Socrates (who left to posterity not even a written line, preferring to teach his philosophy orally).

**3.** As a matter of fact, good memory and oratory were highly appreciated in the Old Greece. That is why, this ancient country favoured the naissance and the development of *rhetoric*, i.e., that particular “discipline” (*techne rethorike*) whose task was to elaborate an efficient and persuasive discourse. Later, the Romans will continue this “art” (*ars bene dicendi*, as they used to define it in a concise manner). It is true that even the discourses of the great orators (such as Demosthenes or

Aeschines), before being delivered in certain occasions (especially, during trials), were firstly written by the so-called *logographers*, but what really counted was the oral presentation of arguments in a logical, rigorous order.

4. In a very interesting book, *Scriere și oralitate în cultura antică* ["Writing and Orality in the Ancient Culture"], Andrei Cornea, a classical philologist, proved that, in the ancient world, the Western culture highly appreciated orality (in accordance with "the organicity principle"), whereas the Eastern / Oriental culture paid more attention to writing (according to "the list principle"). That is why, the Jews, for instance, used to write down all the information. Moses (who admitted that he was not endowed with the gift of oratory) provides his people with the *Decalogue* (*The Ten Commandments*, transmitted to him by God) in a written form, on stone tablets. After interpreting the Pharaoh's dream (predicting a seven-year drought), Joseph saves the Egyptians from starvation, for he is also a very good accountant (or bookkeeper). The *Old Testament* itself contains a minute history and a very exact inventory of the Hebrew tribes (see Cornea, 1988, pp. 11-29). The various types of alphabets seem to support the distinction between *the organicity principle* and *the list principle* and, implicitly, the difference between the two cultures. The Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Chinese ideograms and the Babylonian cuneiform characters prove the preoccupation for noting the information only, and not the pronunciation, as well, specific to the languages of those peoples. On the contrary, the Greek alphabet, a phonetical one, proves the concern to render the exact pronunciation of the Greek language of the ancient times. According to Andrei Cornea, this is supplementary evidence for the importance which the Old Greeks gave to orality.

5. At this point, one can understand why associating the determiner *academic* (evoking Plato) to the noun *writing* might have seemed inappropriate to the ancients. However, *academy* and *academic* have other meanings nowadays. We, the modern ones, link these terms to the French Academy (founded in 1635), whose task, from the very beginning, was to improve the French language. The Romanian Academy (founded in 1866, following the French model) had initially a similar aim: to develop and preserve the *literary* variant of the Romanian language (seen as a historical language). Such an *exemplary* variant was achieved mostly thanks to the writers' efforts (especially *through writing*). In time, since the academic community was constituted by scholars or men of science, the determiner *academic* began to signify, most of all, 'scientific'.

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