

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 1

**Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS : Analysis of Elitist, Inaccessible Academic Language in Science and Humanities.**

International Journal of English Learning and Teaching Skills

**Hanan Khaja Mohammad Irfan**

**4th year, Department of Electrical Engineering, Institute of Engineering and Management.**

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 2

## ABSTRACT:

The paper attempts to analyse the existence of explicit elitist linguistic trends when it comes to choice of words, syntax, context, jargon and the overall English language in academic and scholarly works. It further questions the impact such linguistic trends have on accessibility and readability of academic works. The paper intends to analyse the development of formalism and structuralism in academic writing and juxtaposes it with the advocacy of academic simplism. The mode of analysis is data driven, taking into account various respondents from the Indian diaspora to answer their experiences with regards to their participation in academia. Academia is plagued by a quotidian overcomplexity, and technical cant that render an already complicated subject further unreadable for the masses. This paper analyses the public opinion on the same and the reasons behind such self-sabotaging academic practices.

**Keywords:** linguistic trends, jargon, academia, accessibility

## INTRODUCTION

A frequently observed yet seldom discussed point in academic writing is the overwhelming usage of technical and non-technical jargon that is more often than not difficult to grasp by the common public. It is a widely held belief that academic writing is close to being incomprehensible by the layperson who does not have an expertise in the field of research. As such academia, despite its growing progressive overtones tends to alienate the masses. Often times researchers themselves refrain the academic language they wrote their paper in while explaining the subject to their students. As such why has academia been pushed to the margins under the authority of esoteric intellectually elite groups? Recent trends have shown a growing discussion around the conventional academese and orthodox way of writing that eludes majority of readers and its consequences. This paper explores the perceptions around academic writings from experts to laypersons.

This paper researches the reading styles of undergraduate, postgraduate students and research scholars on how they perceive. The respondents were presented with various assumptions about academic writing and asked to answer whether they aligned with their opinions. All respondents are based from non-native English speaking country, India. A total of 578 respondents were surveyed.

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 3

## **WHAT IS ACADEMIA? WHO ARE ACADEMICIANS?**

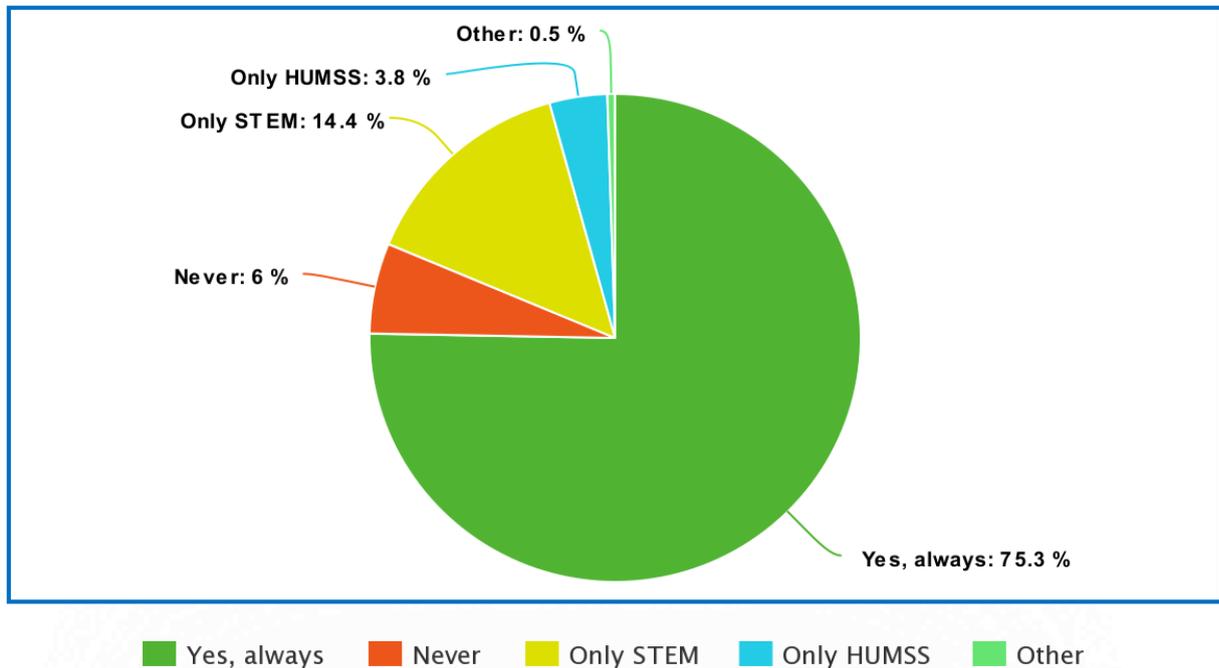
Academia in various fields is a concentration of talent and pursuit of research, discoveries and a multitude of opinions and discoveries. Definitely, “academia” does not define a homogenous set of writings and research but are more diverse than the term could express. Nevertheless, this paper solely analyses the writing style, sentence structure and comprehensibility of the English language used across STEM(Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and HUMSS(Humanities and social sciences) academia.

It can be agreed upon that the ability to have research work published(and to conduct research itself) is a privilege that is limited to researchers, scholars and students from prestigious institutions that are able to provide these opportunities. Especially in a country like India where only 8.15% of the total population is graduate, it can be sufficiently concluded that all academia is no less than like an esoteric group of privileged individuals with access to the best educational facilities. The ability or the privilege to acquire education in turn determines the exposure to sophisticated language and academic jargon and eventually contribute to the same.

Complex language instead of providing brevity and objectivity with its over usage and emphasis has become a tool of obfuscation. With the growth of English as the global lingua franca, the emphasis of selective jargon and vocabulary set places non-native English speakers at an obvious disadvantage. This gap is more wide in STEM education than in HUMSS. For example certain very commonly used technical terms like data have no equivalent in Hindi language.

The respondents were asked “Do you feel academic language (language in research papers) tends to be difficult to understand for a layman?”

Do you feel academic language (language in research papers) tends to be difficult to understand for a layman?"



■ Yes, always ■ Never ■ Only STEM ■ Only HUMSS ■ Other

meta-chart.com

A whopping 75.3% of respondents believed academic writing across STEM and HUMSS is difficult to comprehend for a layperson.

### TRENDS WITHIN THE ACADEMIA

In budding or aspiring research authors, a common practice that is observed and seems to go as an unwritten rule is the overuse of needlessly complex language in order to feign intelligence or the legitimacy of research. The unspoken hint is that, a research that required time and effort of a specialist in the field must have such insights that at the very least flabbergasts the layman with its scholarly revelations. Often, students in an attempt to cover up the lack of detailed research use ostentatious language as a facade to give the impression of technicality. A clarification needs to be made in defense of this paper and enclosed survey results that the critique of complex wording is not aimed for technical terms that are necessary to convey precise definitions and specific terms within any discipline. On the critique is towards the deliberate obfuscation of the content of the research / scholarly work by enwrapping it within complex lexico-grammar .

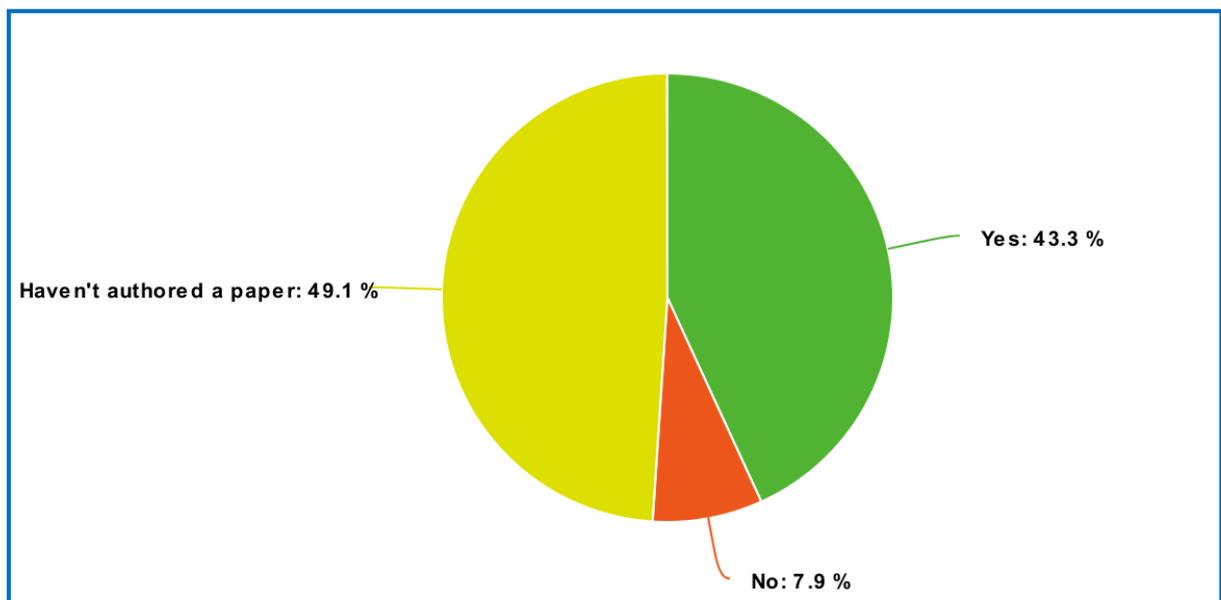
A study conducted by Daniel Oppenheimer of Princeton University , USA titled as “Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Irrespective of Necessity” noted similar tendencies in undergraduate students to ensconce their research in elaborate prose with the underlying assumption of feigning intellect.

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 5

“110 Stanford undergraduates were polled about their writing habits, most of them admitted that they had made their writing more complex in order to appear smarter. For example, when asked, ‘Have you ever changed the words in an academic essay to make the essay sound more valid or intelligent by using complicated language?’ 86.4% of the sample admitted to having done so. Interestingly, several of Oppenheimer’s study conclusions have been repeated in our survey.

On being asked, “Have you ever written a research paper and asked by a mentor/colleague to use more academic jargon/more technical language?”,

Have you ever written a research paper and asked by a mentor/colleague to use more academic jargon/more technical language?”,



International Journal of English Learning and Teaching Skills

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Haven't authored a paper

meta-chart.com

43% of respondents accepted being coerced or advised to change the framing of their research (not the content or concept).

The survey records a highly cynical response towards the academia and the majority of the respondents are of the belief that researchers deliberately complicate their work with the clear intention of making it accessible to a close group of peers. The accusation of gatekeeping knowledge by elite institutions isn’t new and has always been hotly debated.

Often times, students researchers are known to have gone back to their research paper written in simple language in order to refine it and use more complicated language. Nearly two thirds answered yes to the question, ‘When you write an essay, do you turn to the thesaurus to choose words that are more complex to give the impression that the content is more valid or intelligent?’ in the study conducted by D.M Oppenheimer with Stanford graduates.

Steven Pinker of Harvard in his controversial article, “Why Academics Stink at Writing” elaborates how despite the general opinion of the masses that only esoteric academic groups can understand the work produced within their disciplines, in actuality he found the current trend in academic writing to be difficult to comprehend by even seasoned academics. He says the contemporary academia are highly peppered with immense abstractions of concepts, nominalisations of claims/hypothesis, hedging, metawriting that obfuscates instead of elucidates the content of the paper. For example, a paper explaining the method of survey employed read, “Participants read assertions whose veracity was either affirmed or denied by the subsequent presentation of an assessment word.”, which was the “academese” for “participants read sentences, each followed by the word *true* or *false*”. Writings as such add nothing of value to the content of the paper and only suffice to make it sound complicated.

## **RELATION OF INTELLIGENCE AND COMPLEXITY**

On the presumption of intelligence based on extensive vocabulary, Oppenheimer writes, “Intelligence and large vocabularies are positively correlated (Spearman, 1904). Therefore, by displaying a large vocabulary, one may be providing cues that he or she is intelligent as well. . If authors are believed to be writing as simply as possible, but a text is nonetheless complex, a reader might believe that the ideas expressed in that text are also complex, defying all attempts to simplify the language. Further, individuals forced to struggle through a complex text might experience dissonance if they believe that the ideas being conveyed are simple (Festinger, 1957). Thus, individuals might be motivated to perceive a difficult text as being more worthwhile, thereby justifying the effort of processing.”

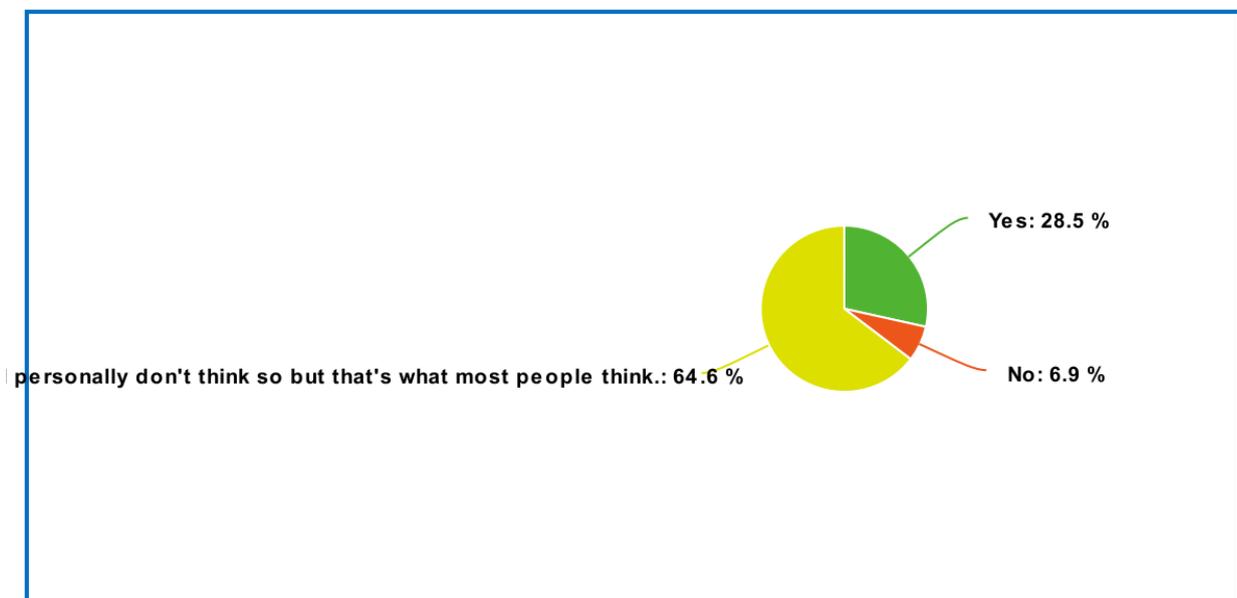
Interestingly, it is genuinely a commonly held belief that “people” relate extensive vocabulary with intelligence but most respondents believe this about “others” and not themselves. The irony is obvious where majority of

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 7

respondents claim not to link lexicogrammar capabilities with intelligence but believe others do. (enter survey)

On being asked, “As a reader, Does a research paper written with complex terminologies subconsciously hint at the author's intelligence?”, majority of respondents i.e 62% claimed that even though they themselves did not hold any such biases, they believed others did.

As a reader, Does a research paper written with complex terminologies subconsciously hint at the author's intelligence?



■ Yes   
 ■ No   
 ■ I personally don't think so but that's what most people think.

meta-chart.com

## INSTITUTIONAL GATEKEEPING

A common accusation against academes apart from professional narcissism and intellectual posturing is the systemic stress on complex language. Several budding researchers and students allege the emphasis of journals/publication houses and even research mentors to frame their research in a language that sounds “academic”. It is not uncommon of to hear of trainings in Academic writing style in several college campuses. One proof of institutionalised emphasis on cumbersome prose is quoted by Oppenheimer as , “Indeed, there is some evidence that complex vocabulary can be indicative of a more intelligent author. For example, Pennebaker and King (1999) have shown that the percentage of long words used in class assignments positively correlates with SAT scores and exam grades on both multiple choice and essay tests.”

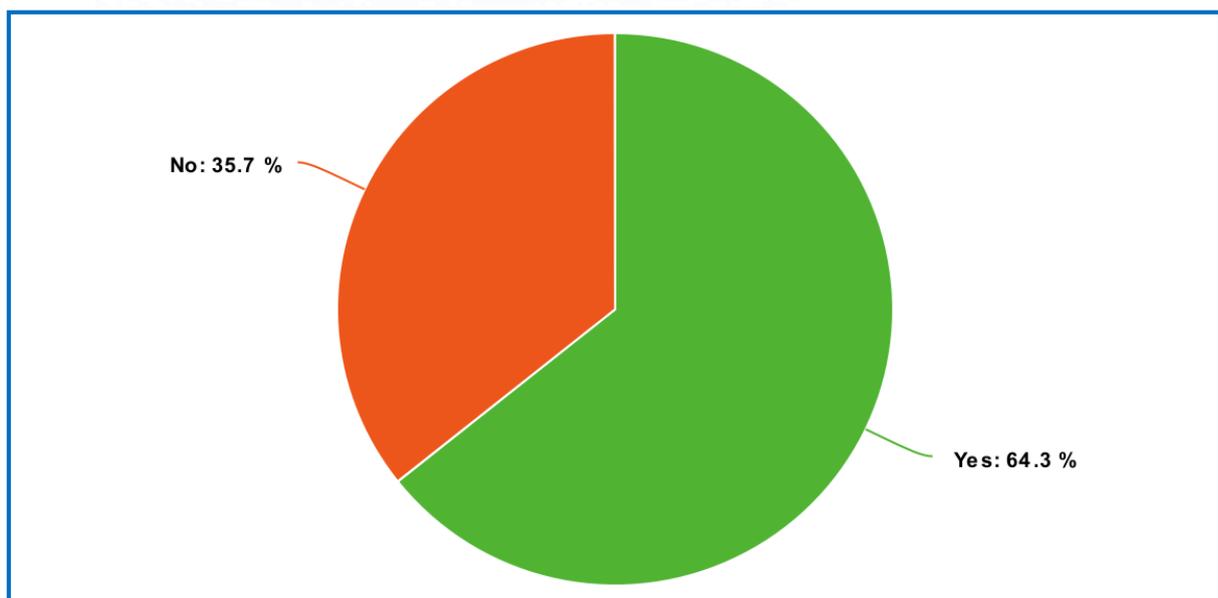
## Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 8

Another infamous experiment probing the unwritten rule of publication houses' preferential treatment of complex jargon is the hoax of physicist Alex Sokal. Sokal, a professor in New York University and University college of London conducted a hoax which included submitting a research paper titled, ""Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative [Hermeneutics](#) of Quantum Gravity",<sup>[3]</sup> to the magazine *Social Text* spring/summer 1996 "[Science Wars](#)" issue. It proposed that [quantum gravity](#) is a social and linguistic construct and as confessed by Sokal three weeks post publication of the research that it was constituted of sheer gibberish with relevant sounding terms conforming to biases of the publication had been stringed together.

Even though the primary aim of Sokal's hoax was to demerit scientific relativism advocated by postmodern cultural theorists, it proves an important point that a paper pandering to the unwritten biases and standards of the publication, if they sound academic enough, have a high chance of publication despite its lack of merit.

When asked, "Have you ever felt or been told, academic jargon can increase the chances of publication of your work?", 64.4% of the respondents accepted the belief in said trends.

Have you ever felt or been told, academic jargon can increase the chances of publication of your work?



■ Yes ■ No

meta-chart.com

The gatekeeping of journals is spoken of in hushed tones and the inaccessibility it leads to the common masses has created the belief that that academic works are not meant for non-academicians.

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 9

## **LAZINESS OF ACADEMIA**

One of the earliest critique of fancy English in professional scenes came for George Orwell who in his essay, “Politics and the English language” has outrightly claimed such writing to be “bad English”. Orwell claims the emphasis on “pretentious diction” is nothing more but an attempt to veil “a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements”. He criticizes the use of translingual words to give an impression of grandeur to one’s writing. It is interesting to note here that elaborate prose indeed isn’t just used to feign intelligence but is a direct manifestation of elite education received which must be reflected in sophisticated vocabulary. Any language skills that are acquired and comprehended post elaborate refinement in elite academic institutions is indeed inaccessible and gatekeeping in its nature, be it intentionally or unintentionally.

The demand for increased clarity is often misinterpreted as a demand for “dumbing down” of complex and layered theories and discoveries; that the accusations of professional narcissism and gatekeeping arise from anti-intellectualism and that it would be extremely difficult to reduce papers on complex ideas to simple language.

Here it is interesting to note both Orwell and Pinker claim the contrary. Academic writing has been normalized to the extent that it has become the easy way out for several scholars. Steven Pinker calls this the “cognitive blindspot” which disables academicians from noticing the epistemic limitations of their audience. The years of intense “brain training” and the complacency with not having to explain their written abstractions has worked against academic whereby now they find it difficult unpack their own ideas in simpler terms. As such academic jargon instead of being a tool of precision and uniformity of written ideas has come to act as a cushion made up of intellect-presuming-words or terms that are rarely used in daily conversation or even lectures to students surrounding the core concept.

Orwell further elaborates that this is type of writing is easy because it tends to provide a readymade set of stale metaphors, complex phrases and translingual terms that can be included in your work as and when required. In formal writing a person is more likely to say , “*In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that*” than to say *I think*. To further prove the obfuscation and intellect-posturing of modern English irrespective of utility, Orwell translates the following lines,

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

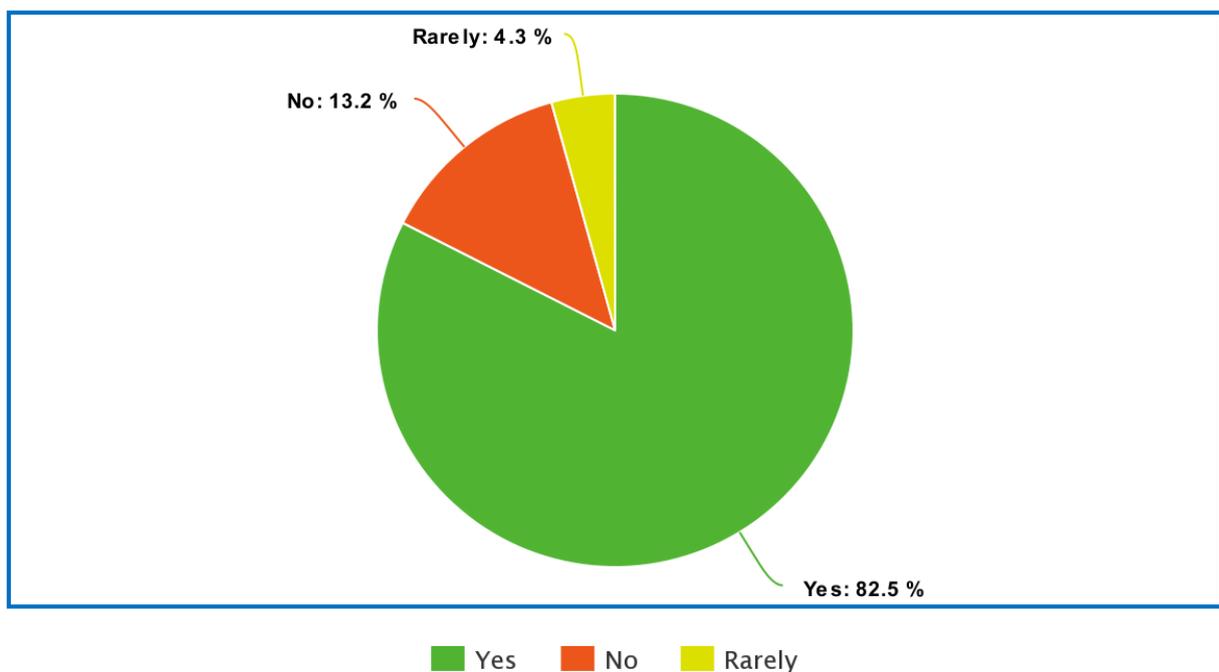
Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 10

into modern English:

“Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

When asked, “Do you feel at times academicians deliberately use complex wordings when simpler sentences could have sufficed?” a surprising 82% respondents replied in the affirmative.

Do you feel at times academicians deliberately use complex wordings when simpler sentences could have sufficed

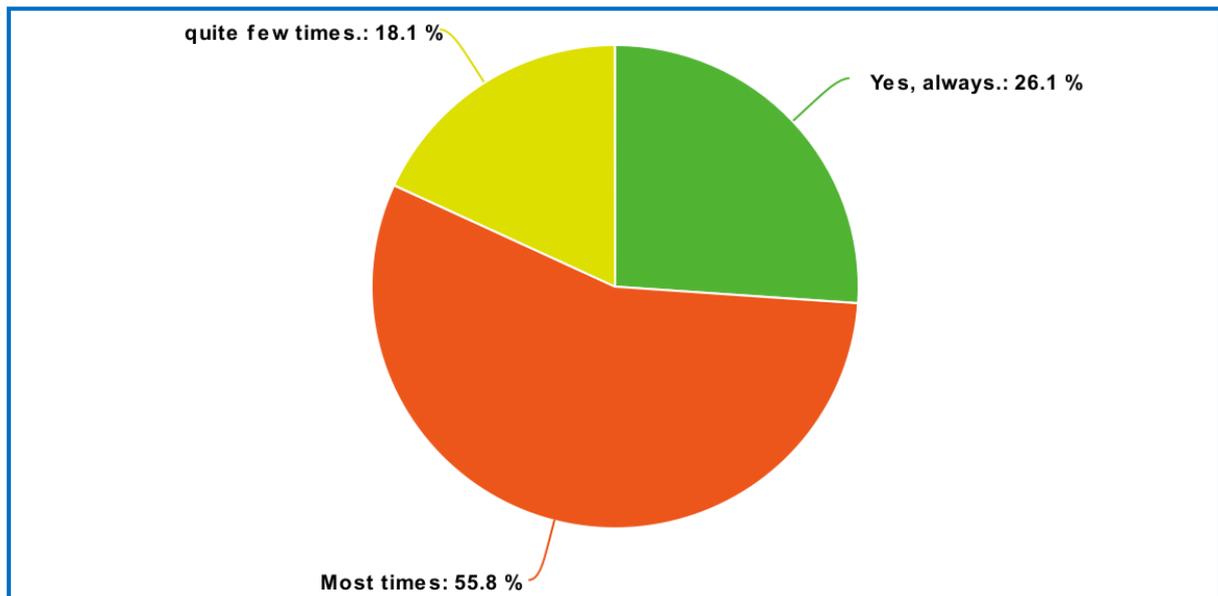


meta-chart.com

The commonly held opinion is that ‘academics write for academics’. A research paper is often written in manner that alienates any reader that is an ‘outsider’ or hasn’t been at least a student in the field concerned. It is often assumed an “outsider” has no business reading highly technical papers if they are not associated with the discipline.

Do you feel you are unable(find it difficult) to read research works in fields you do not have educational background in?

Do you feel you are unable(find it difficult) to read research works in fields you do not have educational background in?



■ Yes, always. ■ Most times ■ quite few times.

meta-chart.com

## CONCLUSION

Foremost, it should be accepted that academic knowledge is far too important to be left to an esoteric group of people many of who have had the privilege or education and exposure due to their socio-economic loci. Knowledge is meant for dissemination and contemporary trends have hindered this goal of academia. Once that is agreed upon, it would be only logical to have a layperson judge academia in order to gauge its accessibility and permeability among the masses. Academic is by nature bound to be technical and hence the language should serve as a roadmap to navigating those theories instead of acting as a labyrinth. It would be unfair to not credit the many voices within academia itself speaking against such elitist linguistic trends. There has been significant movement against such cumbersome usage of lexicogrammar in academia and stress on simplification of knowledge.

Running head: Analysis of Epistemic Gatekeeping Engendered by Abstruse Academic Cant in STEM and HUMSS 12

**REFERENCE:**

- 1) George Orwell, Politics and the English Language.
- 2) Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly DANIEL M. OPPENHEIMER\* Princeton University, USA
- 3) Why Academics Stink at Writing ,By Steven Pinker
- 4) <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/>
- 5) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/12/11/why-inaccessibility-detweiler/>

